2015

Online Feminisms: Feminist Community Building and Activism in a Digital Age

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ONLINE FEMINISMS: FEMINIST COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ACTIVISM IN A DIGITAL AGE

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS

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PROFESSOR DAVIS

APRIL 24, 2015

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Introduction

It's an early Friday morning, and I reach for my laptop before even getting out of bed. Like I do everyday, I scroll through my many feeds and dashboards, aggregations of content I have carefully curated, and my mind is filled with words. I open Reddit, where a long list of fresh blue links awaits. I come across an image set on /r/funny[1] of Chris Pratt being offered "Mexican champagne," taking a sip, and responding through a scrunched up face, "that is tequila." I chuckle a bit, partly because Chris Pratt seems like the kind of person who would be happier with the tequila than the champagne, and partly because he responded to the prank with his trademark humor and grace. I scroll down to read the comments where someone inquires when the Internet will finally be tired of Chris Pratt. Someone jokes that he'll be less interesting once his nudes are leaked like Jennifer Lawrence, and in response another commenter writes, "once we saw her naked we pretty much had all we needed of her". I glare angrily at the text and click over to /r/ShitRedditSays to see if anyone has come across this already and is feeling the same anger I'm feeling. I'm greeted by the familiar mustard yellow banner, with the rotund, blue bird mascot, lovingly known as BRD, smiling from her perch. On the sidebar, a skeleton warrior stands guard, wielding a floppy purple dildo and a shield featuring almighty BRD. Sure enough, someone has already posted about this particular comment. There are already more than 20 responses.

"You obviously don't get the joke. It's funny because she's a woman and women only exist to be my sexual objects!"

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[1] /r/ signifies the title of a subreddit, a subcommunity hosted on Reddit

I click the "not poop" arrow to upvote the comment before scrolling down to see that someone made a clever, in-character defense about how humor should be held to a lesser standard than ordinary conversation. Dripping with mockery, user /u/IAmTheShitRedditSays proclaims, "people often use jocularismity to make anecdotes about their own valuables so that they acknowledge important things about themselves, such as their levitation and ableism to admit that they might be wrong on any topic, including that people who are not them should be treated ferrously." It is the next comment, however, that sends me into a full belly-laugh.

"I have this eerie feeling that shit like this could be found scribbled on a wall in a basement somewhere." Comments like this, although biting, are typical of SRS and part of the reason it's so controversial among Reddit users.

Even so, I find them hilarious. I'm still grinning as I check Facebook to see that one of my friends has linked an article from *The Gloss* about the recent Black Out taking over social media, titled "Everything You Need To Know About #BlackOutDay And Why It Matters." While waiting for the article to load, I switch from one shade of social media blue to another, opening Tumblr in a new tab. My dash is covered in photoset after photoset of black beauty, selfies, and images uploaded by black Tumblr and then vigorously reblogged. I'm thrilled and amazed that nearly every post on my dash is in celebration of Black Out Day, which I'd seen a few tweets about during the week but had never expected to get so big. Nearly every blog I follow, no matter what their aesthetic or topic, seems to be participating. I reblog a photoset of someone with gorgeous lipstick and a charming smile, making note of their flawless makeup in the tags. I flip back to read the article and see something that makes me stop:

"I can't help but thinking, 'wow, is this the validation that white people get when they see themselves literally *everywhere*? All day? Everyday?'"

I stop to think about these ideas that I otherwise might not have come across today: the ways in which white bodies are celebrated on the Internet and in the media and how black bodies, if celebrated at all, are fetishized and degraded on terms that are not their own. I stop to reblog another photo on Tumblr, this one of a ballet dancer who wrote that she was always told her "black girl hips" would keep her from ever being successful in ballet, before returning to Facebook to like my friend's link and comment on how insightful the article was. I yawn, frowning at the sunlight pouring through my window and directly into my eyes, then get out of bed to start my day. Already, in the half hour it takes me to check my feeds and interact across various platforms, I have been validated in my anger to a sexist joke, educated about a topic I might not have encountered, and visited spaces that make intersectional feminist ideas the norm.

Online Feminism: An Intersection of Culture and Technology

I hope that my short narrative of a day in the life of my fieldwork has given an intriguing, although limited, glimpse into the world of online feminism. A huge and infinitely customizable landscape, this is only one view into a thriving and dynamic world and it looks almost nothing like anyone else's experience of the same landscape. This is what makes online feminism so engaging and important—there is always more to explore. The term "online feminism," as I will use it, encompasses all text, spaces, and interactions that occur between feminists, women, girls, and social justice-minded people on the Internet, spanning various platforms including social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, as

well as blogs big and small, online magazines, and larger news and aggregate sites like Reddit and Buzzfeed. Essentially, online feminism is any way that people (whether they identify as feminist or not) engage with feminism and its concepts using the Internet. From explicitly feminist-oriented websites like *Feministing* that are dedicated to producing feminist analysis, to a simple debate between friends about the gender gap in tech fields through Facebook comments, online feminism is at the same time both deliberate and opportunistic, formal and casual, exceptional and mundane.

In their #FemFuture report, the result of a 2012 conference on online feminism, Courtney Martin and Jessica Valenti describe a history of online feminism:

> Women were creating powerful spaces for themselves online, helping to build the next frontier of the feminist movement. These forums began as simple websites, and developed into communities of hundreds of thousands of people who needed a platform to express themselves. They found it on the Internet. As years went by, social technologies began to evolve into a robust, diverse field of web-based tools and platforms. YouTube allowed for vlogging, or "video blogging"; Twitter and Tumblr, or "microblogging," allowed for easier and even more immediate sharing capabilities. Today, this evolution of online technologies has produced thousands of activists, writers, bloggers, and tweeters across the globe who live and breathe this movement, engaging their audience every day in the name of equality.

It is no surprise that when our lives become more and more digitalized, people take their politics online with them. Since its creation, the Internet has been a home to feminists and women seeking to connect with others over their everyday experiences. While older research seems outdated, and even research from the early 2000s (Consalvo & Paasonen 2002; Gajjala 2004) seems far away from the online feminism we experience today, it provides conceptual building blocks and gives a fascinating window into the early days of online feminism, which has changed leaps and bounds. Indeed, today we find that feminism has evolved alongside technology and this coevolution has in turn strengthened both. For this reason, I intend to explore both what feminism looks like in a digital age, as well as how the

Internet and technology inform the ways in which feminists interact, build communities, and form identities. With these research questions in mind, I have found that online feminist spaces are built as communities of validation and support, education and empowerment, as well as spaces of radicalization and contention. Ultimately my thesis leads toward a new understanding of feminist activism that incorporates the unique characteristics and abilities of online feminism.

Unlike earlier studies, however, I am exploring how people engage with feminism specifically, rather than women's online activities in general, which has historically included studies on a broad range of topics including infertility support communities (Blair et al. 2009), X-Files fan groups (Bury 2005), and networks of South Asian women (Gajjala 2004). Although all fall under "cyberfeminist practice" (Blair et al. 2009), my communities need not be strictly women (and in fact many are men and other gender identities) as they constitute anyone who engages and identifies with feminism online, regardless of gender, race, or other identities. Sometimes I will refer to online feminisms in the plural to acknowledge that people engage with this feminism in a variety of ways and that there is no one, singular online feminism. Although for simplicity's sake I often refer to it in the singular, I want to complicate the idea that it is possible to speak meaningfully about every individual person and space within the scope of online feminism as if they were united in their understandings of what online feminism is or what it does. In fact, many may not be aware or even agree that their online lives and activities constitute feminism. This is for multiple reasons; including a reluctance or refusal to adopt feminism as an ideological term or a tendency to see it as fully integrated into their everyday lives and not a separate thing to be disentangled.

Why it Matters: Girls Run the World

The popularity of the Internet has grown explosively since its creation 25 years ago and its cultural impact cannot be denied. As of 2014, 87 percent of American adults use the Internet and many see digital technologies as becoming increasingly essential to their daily lives (Fox & Rainie 2004). According to a study conducted in 2011 by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, 98 percent of young people (aged 18-29) are online and half of all adults use social networking sites (Madden and Zickuhr). The report crowned young women (18-29) as the "power users of social networking," with 89 percent of women online using social networking sites. If we currently live in the digital age, women are at the helm of it, at least in terms of social networking. This speaks volumes in a world where powerful hashtags and links shared on social media can quickly dominate online conversations. Janet Mock brought trans issues to attention with the trending hashtag #girlslikeus. Wendy Davis was the focus of discussions all over Facebook, Twitter, and tumblr when she held an eleven-hour filibuster to block anti-abortion legislation. Todd Akin, Missouri's Republican Senate candidate, was publicly shamed and called out for his offensive and absurd comments on pregnancies that result from rape. Feminists and allies worked successfully to get /r/jailbat, a subreddit that compiled sexual content featuring minors, banned by Reddit admins. There are countless examples of the ways in which women use the Internet to successfully amplify issues that are important to them, reaching the millions of Internet users who turn on their computers and open their browsers every day.

Jessalynn Keller wrote on powerful examples of how girls use the Internet to do feminist work at a young age with significant social results (2011) including several feminist blogs and projects started by teenage girls such as the *FBomb*, *Seventeen Magazine Project, Experimentations of a Teenage Feminist, Grrrlbeat*, and *Star of Davida*. It would be detrimental to underestimate the power that girls and young women have on the Internet. As Rebecca Traister wrote in a debate in *The New Republic* about the current state of feminism, "I don't think that in my lifetime (I'm 39) I've ever seen public, popular feminist discourse more robust than it is now" (2014). The networked and interconnected nature of the Internet allows our experience of feminism to cross platforms into both public and more private online spaces. Not only is online feminist discourse more visible and public than ever before, but its participants are young, vibrant, and active, forming the future of digital media. "I should clarify," Traister writes, "that these young women are not the daughters of Feminist Friends I met at Feminist Education Camp: They're just teens who have grown up in the early twenty-first century" (2014). Simply by nature of growing up on the Internet, many young women are becoming informed critical thinkers on issues of gender, sexuality, and race, without needing other resources to get there.

Defining Terms and Clarifying Concepts

To frame this thesis, I will address what is meant by feminism and its many iterations (*black feminism, white feminism, academic feminism*) as well as looking closer at what *social justice* and *radical* mean in a feminist context. When I use the word feminism I am invoking a movement that has traditionally advocated for gender equality (including access to abortion, voting rights, fair pay, etc.), but has evolved to include any and all issues

that affect women, including media representation, sexual violence, and daily discrimination. This includes intersections of race, class, sexuality, and any other axes of oppression that women experience. Put briefly, intersectionality accounts for the unique ways in which identities inform each other[2]. For example, an Asian-American woman's experience of gender is deeply intertwined with her experience of race, so that her understanding of gender and gender inequality is unique from that of white or black women. A feminism that is not intersectional does not serve all women, as it simplifies the experiences of gender oppression that women face by ignoring intersections of identity. While my understanding of feminism is unequivocally intersectional, I acknowledge that this is not a given in all invocations of the term. I make this clarification to make a distinction between feminism (very generally) and its many manifestations and varying ideals using the diagram in Appendix 1.

In my research, I often saw users call upon the term *white feminism* to describe a feminist ideal that does not address issues of intersectionality or does so very superficially. White feminism is influenced by "racialized ignorance and Western ethnocentrism," as well as racism, and imperialism (Sholock 2012). Much like *liberal feminism*, white feminism relies on an essentialized category of woman, and assumes whiteness as unmarked. It places value on individual choice rather than structural change. Although not quite the same as *mainstream feminism*, white feminism is contained within mainstream feminism[3], where white feminism tends to get more attention and publicity, thereby becoming more mainstream. Exemplified by Mikki Kendall's hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, discussions about race are often recentered or derailed by white feminism. *Jezebel* (at least

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[2] For example, see McCall 2005 and Crenshaw 1991

[3] By putting white feminism at the center of this diagram I do not imply that it is ideologically central to feminism—only that it is contained within mainstream feminism

in its early years), a Gawker-owned blog for women, is commonly cited as an example of white feminism that is couched in mainstream feminism. However, people with a white feminist politic need not be white, as my diagram shows. It is important not to conflate white feminism with white women or even whiteness—indeed many white women are intersectional in their feminism and many women of color are not feminists at all. To avoid setting up a straw man, I use white feminism simply to refer to instances of online feminism that are not intersectional and that normalize whiteness and Western perspectives (Sholock 2012), not to an actual movement or individual people. No one identifies as a white feminist—it is a characterization of discourse rather than an organized group.

In opposition to *white feminism*, there are many iterations of feminism that seek to acknowledge the differences among women rather than relying on gender essentialism. These are often organized around particular identities, including race, sexuality, and gender expression. For example, *black feminism*, as I will discuss it, refers to communities of black women who use the Internet to talk about their experiences. When I refer to black feminism, I am talking specifically about how it manifests online. Many women of color, pushed away or turned off by feminist spaces that are overwhelmingly *white feminist* in content or community, prefer black feminism as an alternative in which they can collaborate and build community with other feminists of color. Black feminism has found a home on Twitter and Tumblr in particular, which are referred to respectively as Black Twitter and Black Tumblr. I will discuss black feminism and its relationship with white feminism in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Academic feminism refers to feminism that occurs within the walls of colleges and universities, and is "made" by academics, professors, and students. I include students in

academic feminism because they have the resources and education associated with academia, whether or not they ultimately end up doing feminist work there. While activists, both online and off, see themselves as located in communities, academics "see their location as an intellectual space where knowledge is recorded and produced through professional study" (Silliman & Bhattacharjee 1999). Even though academia takes place in an "intellectual space," it is still very much encased in barriers to access. In this way, academic feminism serves as a sort of gatekeeper for theory and ideas, but is overlapping more and more with mainstream and online feminism as many academics also do their feminism online. The chart in Appendix 2 demonstrates how academic feminism, rather than being a separate entity from online or mainstream feminism, is integrated into both, although it still maintains its integrity in some areas. As I explore in Chapter 3, online feminist and social justice spaces challenge the idea of academia as a closed entity, as many academics are deeply invested in online activism and social justice.

Social justice is another term I use, often to describe a brand of activism that is very similar to feminism, but broader in scope. Many feminists are also social justice activists and most if not all social justice activists are feminists. Like *black feminism*, *social justice* has somewhat different implications when used in an online context. Social justice activists fight against systemic oppression of all types, including sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and more. The term social justice can also be used to indicate intersectionality or a focus on anti-racism when it is not necessarily implied by feminism.

Finally, I often use *radical* as a descriptor for a particular feminist ideal that pushes toward intersectionality and structural change rather than tending toward white feminism or issues of equality. For my purposes, a radical feminism is one that seeks an overhaul of

social and cultural systems rather than seeking equality within the current ones. I want to emphasize that I am not referring to "radfems," a group of feminists who identify as trans-critical or trans-exclusionary. As with white feminism, this is not a specific group or identity, rather it is a characterization of the discourse within online feminism. In Chapter Four, I discuss the radicalization of feminism in more detail.

On Methodology: Merging Anthropology, the Internet, and Feminism

Online ethnography is not yet widespread or well established in anthropology, and seems to be more often used by marketing researchers than academics (Robert Kozinets, author of *Netnography* and responsible for coining the term is one of them). There is not even a singular name for it—online, virtual, and digital are all legitimate prefixes for this unique genre of ethnography, each implying something a bit different. The most crucial point to take from discussions and debates about virtual ethnography as a practice is to remember that technology and the Internet are profoundly cultural. It is tempting to study online communities as smaller subsets of a larger culture (American, Western, etc.), or even as communities of practice comprised of people with vastly different cultural backgrounds. And while these assumptions are not untrue, I have attempted to study my sites and spaces as cultures of their own—ones that, like all cultures, have their own rules and subcultures within them (Boellstorff 2008:241). Holistically, online feminism is a culture in its own right, with multiple subcultures (tumblr feminists, twitter feminists, social justice activists, TERFs[4], etc.) that represent distinct cultural domains. Of course, no culture is a bounded entity, and online feminism interacts with and is informed by broader cultural logics (in this case, American and Western culture). Although these cultural logics are important, their

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[4] Trans-exclusionary feminists

influence is not the focus of my study. By looking at online feminism as a culture of its own, I hope to devote special attention to its unique location within virtual space and how it is a unique mediation of, rather than a direct translation of feminism as it occurs in the "real" or offline world.

Fundamentally, much of the work of anthropology involves examining social interaction in order to identify cultural assumptions (Boellstorff 2008:65) and my research involved much of this type of online "eavesdropping." I had no dearth of material, as there are countless conversations happening online everyday, and in relatively public spaces. By keeping up with these conversations and the spaces in which they occurred, I got to know the general cultural assumptions that underlie these communities. While I did a lot of listening, I was also interacting with these communities on a daily basis. Integration was not difficult for me because I was already very familiar with the state of online feminism and its landscape. The bulk of my work was keeping up with online feminist life, which it turns out is no small task. Missing a few days can feel like missing years and it becomes difficult to figure out which voices to prioritize in deciding what conversations to follow that day. I participated like any online feminist would, making comments and posts as it felt natural to do so. For me, participant observation involved mostly observing—I felt I gathered more valuable data by listening than by interjecting, so my participation usually involved creating new topics of my own. I had more one-on-one conversations (interviews) with several people, who I met via Reddit and tumblr. In these conversations I was always explicit about my status as a researcher, and I commented and posted via accounts that were associated with this identity. This thesis has been several years in the making, the product of research conducted over two summers. In that time, I have blogged about my experiences as a form

of experimental field notes in which I dialogued with myself (and anyone who wanted to read) about what I was thinking. Public field notes is an interesting idea, but not all that different from the way online conversations operate in general. Online communities can be very meta about the ways in which they function (for example, /r/TheoryOfReddit exists solely to theorize about Reddit culture) so it did not seem unnatural or inappropriate to process information this way.

In the spirit of reflexivity, my work is greatly affected by my positionality within feminism and these communities. I grew up with the Internet and began using it to engage with feminism around the age of 13. Effectively, my "fieldwork" started when I first became curious about the nature of online feminism as a first-year in college, and my research is inevitably based on years of experience in these communities, not just the few months I have formally been a researcher. Understandably, it became difficult for me to separate research from my recreational use of the Internet, and my participant observation included activity on my personal, non-research accounts whether I intended it to or not. I consider myself a sex-positive, trans-inclusive, anti-racist, and intersectional feminist. I am an activist dedicated to making positive change before I am an academic, although I see academia as one way of achieving that goal. As a result, it has been difficult for me to write a thesis on a topic so close to my heart and my personal values, but it has also been an exercise in relativism to attempt to account for my biases in every step of my research.

As are all ethnographies, my work is a form of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). It is valuable because it is partial, one piece of a bigger whole, and makes no attempt at scientific objectivity. Uniquely subjective, it is a knowledge that can only be produced on an individual basis, situated within my experiences and how I interpret them. Although an

undergraduate thesis is by no means a fully formed ethnography, I believe that the time and

energy I have put into these communities is certainly equal to one. That said, no one could

write this study in the way that I have, and that speaks to the incredible dynamism of online

landscapes. My perspective, and therefore my conclusions, is a unique result of my

personality, interests, and goals as a researcher. I value the diversity of data that would result

if another researcher took on a similar project, and together our work would form a more

complete picture of the world of online feminism. Although it is a significant contribution,

my work alone cannot describe or account for the multiplicity of experiences that flow

through this messy convergence of feminism, the Internet, and anthropology, and it may

itself become outdated in a few years.

The Next Steps

In this thesis, I explore both how we "do" feminism in a digital age, as well as how

the Internet and technology inform the ways in which people interact, build communities,

and form identities online. I am particularly interested in how the Internet is wielded as a

feminist tool to validate, support, educate, and empower women, as well as how it is being

used to contest the ownership of contemporary feminism. Chapter One is dedicated to

setting up an understanding of the virtual and the nature of new media, as well how these

affect the acts of interacting with others and performing identity online. Chapters Two,

Three, and Four deal directly with my findings. In these chapters, I ultimately argue that

online feminisms do important work in three areas: (1) providing spaces where feminists,

particularly young or new ones, can find supportive communities and solidify their feminist

identities, offering spaces where women build fun, playful communities that validate their

feelings and support them in their beliefs; (2) building communities that provide access to feminist knowledge despite barriers to education, contributing to both personal and discourse-wide change toward a feminist politic, and (3) pushing for a more radicalized ownership and redefinition of contemporary feminism through online platforms. I believe that all three of these areas constitute feminist activism, and that the Internet allows us to rethink traditional notions of feminist activism and what that means for future and rising generations of feminists, who find more and more of their daily lives and personal politics occurring in online space. In other words, the Internet isn't just the future of feminism; it is its past and present, and crucial to understanding how contemporary feminism ebbs and flows into our daily lives, online and off.

Chapter One: The Virtual and New Media

Over the past two decades we have seen a move of everyday activities to online environments—any hobby, interest, or task, truly any aspect of life likely has some online manifestation, as we find that much of our daily life is facilitated by an Internet connection. There is no dearth in the market to digitalize our lives: banking, education, health and all other major institutions have their foot in the online door. The major player in online life, however, remains the user. Her posts on a knitting forum, her 140-character tweet, her instagrammed lunch, the article she shared with her friends—all are the blood that keeps the interconnectivity of the online vital. At the heart of this networked interconnectivity is sociality—to be online is to be unequivocally social. The goal of this chapter is to provide an analytical framework of the online onto which I can build my analysis of online feminist networks. I seek to understand how this construction of sociality is different from the offline, as well as the unique ways in which the Internet informs how we engage with others and ourselves. To that end, I will define terms and break down many of the binaries surrounding discussions of the Internet as a social sphere, including utopia/dystopia and virtual/real, as well as how they contribute to our current scholarly understanding of the Internet. I then explore defining characteristics of the types of media and platforms I will be engaging with, highlighting how the line between user and producer is blurred and media convergence has changed our expectations of the Internet in our everyday lives. Finally, I look at how these new forms of online media have changed the way we view ourselves, invoking notions of identity and self to argue that we bring our personal politics online with us, living them online as much as we do offline, albeit in different ways.

A History of Terminology

There are many ways to talk about the Internet and I find it helpful to clarify the terms that I will use in this thesis and why I have chosen them. Much of the conceptual work done about the Internet before 2010 (and to my surprise, even some after) refers to something called cyberspace. Indeed, the *cyber-* prefix has been adapted for multiple uses: cyberspace, cyberself, cyberutopia, cyberculture, and cybersex. Apart from sounding painfully outdated to modern ears, analytically, *cyber* is an ultimately meaningless prefix and buzzword, tacked onto words to suggest an Internet-related equivalent to the word as it would exist naturally, or unmarked. *Cyber* is an excellent example of the popular (and scholarly) tendency to sensationalize and exaggerate the Internet as an otherworldly place, and reinforce a divide between a real, physical world and perhaps a less authentic virtual one, with both in strong, if not complete opposition. Originally used by Norbert Weiner in 1947 to describe regulatory systems in computer science (cybernetics), the term entered popular use with the publication of William Gibson's 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, where he developed a notion of "cyberspace." The word has gained the connotation of having to do with all things Internet by popularization through the cyberpunk genre, rather than through any particular merit as an analytical tool. For these reasons, I choose to avoid the *cyber-* prefix in my own writing.

Virtual presents itself as another possibility, and is used carefully and effectively by many Internet scholars, including Tom Boellstorff in his work on virtual worlds (2008). Generally, *virtual*, *cyber*, and *online* are often treated as equivalent, with *digital* recently coming into use as a more neutral synonym. As *cyber* was perhaps intended to do, *virtual*

"performs the work of identifying continuities" (Boellstorff 2008:18). Boellstorff's use of *virtual* is specific to his work in a virtual world, which is somewhat different than the online communities I will be addressing, which do not embody a "worldly" presence as Second Life does. Still, an understanding of *virtual*, particularly in opposition to *the actual* and *the real*, are helpful for framing my ideas about the online v. offline binary.

Boellstorff describes *virtual* as meaning "almost" or "in essence". *Virtual* describes a sense of potentiality and possibility, where reality has more strict delineations. By definition, there must be some gap between the virtual and the actual, which is sometimes also called the real. This gap "is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either. This is ultimately a reconfiguration of the binarism between nature and culture, and its boundary-marker is the distinction between 'online' and 'offline.'" (Boellstorff 2008:19) This binarism is not easy to grapple with, and is truly at the heart of anthropological studies of the Internet. If reality is synonymous with nature in this reconfiguration, we must study the Internet as a site of culture and question the gap between them. I prefer Boellstorff's use of the word *actual* as a descriptor of what lies on the other side of this precarious gap. Colloquially this is often called *the real*—real life, the real world. Conceptualizing a real world implies that technology, computers, or the Internet somehow makes life less real, giving it a privileged ontological status. Put quite simply, "the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual" (Deleuze 2004:260). Because they are accessible and sound more natural, I will largely use the terms *online* and *offline* to describe the virtual and actual, occasionally making use of *digital* as a synonym for virtual, providing nuance to this division as necessary.

Considering this discourse of cyber worlds and real ones, it is not difficult to see the

emergence of some problematic binaries in earlier (and even current) strains of Internet

studies. What I would like to draw from this discussion is that no terminology is perfect or

can capture the complexity and reality of human experience. Online research exists to

disrupt the ways in which we think about these divisions, despite the fact that it so rarely

offers a universal alternative to the paradigms that it disrupts. There is no single, all-

encompassing way to theorize and study the virtual. As Nancy Baym writes,

> "it is tempting to think of the Internet as a unitary entity, a realm distinct from offline
> life that has predictable effects on life offline. Maybe there is a thing called
> cyberfeminist practice and we can assess how well it works to empower women and
> girls. Alas … the Internet is far from a single thing and there are many ways in
> which online and offline practices are interwoven. The messier reality … is far more
> complicated than either utopian hopes for the Internet's libratory potential or
> dystopian fears of its ability to enhance oppression presume" (Blair et al. 2009:127)

In relation to my own work, this section has described how the Internet is a nebulous space

of potentiality, with blurred borders, and significant integration with the actual. In this way,

what we might call cyberfeminist practice is hardly different from feminist practice in

general, but with all the possibilities and limitations of the virtual. I hope to highlight some

of the "messy reality" of online life and how we can think about being social online in a way

that is both true to its nuanced and complicated nature while still being productive. In more

concrete terms, this means addressing the types of digital media that are the subject of

analysis.

The Nature of Online Media

Much of the research done on online communities, be they feminist or otherwise,

very quickly becomes outdated. This is true for several reasons—communities are born,

flourish, and die relatively quickly, with very few lasting for more than a few years. By the time a scholar can do her fieldwork, write up her findings, and have it published, her community of study is likely long gone or so different from the period of research that it represents a reality that is no longer true to the people who currently exist in that space. Secondly, the nature of media, particularly online media, changes rapidly: the internet of the late-2000s is not that of the late-1990s. The varieties of online communication (platforms) available continue to expand, new potentials are continually built into their structures, and the technological ability to convey more and more cues is continuously expanded. The Internet is also far more corporate and "controlled by private and commercial rather than governmental and scientific interests than it once was" (Blair et al. 2009:129). For teens and young adults, who are the most prolific Internet users, this change is even more exaggerated. An Internet user of my generation likely has no experience or understanding of pre-Web 2.0[5] days, just as ten years from now, young adults will have no experience of the rise of Facebook and social networking as the current generation does. These are very different ways of growing up with and understanding the Internet and its potential. Will students of anthropology and Internet studies find this work useful ten years from now? It is difficult to say.

It is also difficult to characterize the experience that typifies online media today. One of the ways this has been done is in terms of what Paul Levinson calls "new new media" (2009), although for brevity's sake I will often simply call it "new media." All of the platforms I will discuss fall under this categorization, which has been used and expanded upon by scholars, in some variation or another (Deuze 2012), in the past several years to

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[5] Web 2.0 refers to a change around 2004 in the way the Internet was used, trading in static webpages for a more interactive and collaborative web experience

describe a unique form of media that can be differentiated from simple web-based content.

New new media includes corporate platforms like Facebook and Youtube, but also serves to

describe the very nature of this type of media that has pervaded the online experience.

Levinson gives five criteria for defining new new media (2009:3-4):

1. Every consumer is a producer
2. New new media is always free
3. New new media is competitive and mutually catalytic
4. Does not include search engines or email
5. New new media is ultimately beyond the user's control

Because the second and fourth criteria speak for themselves, I want to quickly highlight

three and five before focusing on the first and most important criteria. The third criteria

argues that new new media is not only competitive, but cooperative. Platforms compete in

the sense that they fight for the attention of a limited base of users, but must ultimately

cooperate when users want to integrate different media. For example, YouTube videos must

be easily embeddable on a number of other media platforms for it to be successful. This kind

of synergy leads to a uniquely integrated media experience, the same kind we see in feminist

blog rolls, where users share other blogs they find interesting. The fifth criteria emphasizes

that today's platforms are not in the hands of the people. While they depend completely on

users for their existence, users do not have the privilege of defining the structure or direction

of a media platform. A good example of this is when Tumblr makes site-wide changes that

its user base largely disagrees with, especially on political content like doxxing[6]. I introduce

Levinson's criteria because I believe they give a holistic sense of something that is very

difficult to capture—the nature of what makes the experience on online media in the late

2000s and early 2010s unique.

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[6] Doxxing is revealing the personal information of someone online without their consent. In the
example I describe here, Tumblr users were revealing personal information about KKK members
disrupting protests in Ferguson, leading Tumblr to delete these posts and ban doxxing.

Returning to Levinson's first assertion, in new new media every consumer is also a producer. It is impossible to consume content on these platforms without also producing it in some way. New new media is not just passive consumption—the power of production is turned over to the online public. Sites like Facebook and YouTube by definition require user-produced content because that is literally the only kind of content they provide. For the spaces I will engage with, this axiom is especially true. Tumblr, Reddit[7], and any online blog that fosters community is centered around user content and interaction. The more interaction and intersection among user-generated content there is, the stronger the resulting communities are. Here I want to put Levinson in conversation with another media scholar, Scott Deuze, author of *Media Life*. Deuze writes that digital media are "plastic and pliable," acting upon each other as they interact with us, constituting as well as reproducing the world we live in (2012:xi). This builds upon what we learned from Levinson, complicating the user-producer role by adding the agency of media. He also accounts for the ways in which media reproduces and constitutes the real world, bringing us back to the virtual v. real distinction. He ultimately argues that the tendency of most people to see new media as belonging to the unreal illustrates the crutch we use to construct a binary between these two horizons. According to Deuze, one the key qualities of modern media is that it has "an uncanny capacity for recording and storing everything we do" (xv). In this living archive, subject to constant intervention, we can only make sense of ourselves and each other by "carefully, and continuously, checking each other out" (xv). Here Deuze is highlighting the process of co-creation, and how media is an innately collaborative experience. In interacting with this "living archive," we must engage with each other to even develop an understanding of ourselves. When we read comments, share an image, like a video or tag a post, we are not

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[7] I discuss Tumblr and Reddit as platforms more in-depth at the end of this chapter

only acting as individuals but also "checking each other out." In the same way that we cannot consume new media without changing and contributing to it, we cannot engage with new media without also engaging others—it is an innately social experience. This integrates a factor that Levinson touches upon but does not explore in depth, and that I think is crucial to understanding how the user/producer role fosters community creation: media convergence.

There is a tendency for all aspects of media, both Internet-based and otherwise, to be interconnected. This is a relatively novel experience.

> "Children in Internet-rich societies take the Internet for granted as part of their communication, information, and entertainment landscape. They expect the Internet to be integrated with products and other media … but also their other toys, their television shows, their movies, their music, even their favorite foods. Media convergence is their norm. Their experience of the internet is far different from ours, and we cannot understand what it will come to mean in their futures without seeking to understand both the ways in which the internet continuously changes and how those coming of age admist these changes make sense of and appropriate the internet" [Blair et al. 2009:129]

Young adults expect the Internet to be integrated with products and other media--this has become the norm. Toys, television, movies, and music are all a part of the communication, information, and entertainment landscape of the Internet. Younger generations have not experienced media in any other way, and future generations will experience media convergence in even more ways as the Internet continuously changes and evolves. While I consider my generation to have significant expectations of media convergence, this will only become more and more relevant to children who grew up playing on iPads before they learned how to read. I do not mean to set up a narrative in which we have regressed from a past with a more authentic media experience any more than I intend to set up the opposite narrative and suggest that we are progressing into a more authentic, media-rich experience.

Instead, I wish to show in the following chapters how this change in the way new generations are experiencing media convergence is crucial to any study of online community that has youth among its userbase, as both Reddit and Tumblr both overwhelmingly do. Media convergence heavily informs the reality of modern life in Western society, and one of the ways in which media converges is through the construction of platforms.

Construction of a Platform as a Socioeconomic Structure

Platforms are software and technologies that create systems of content creation and interaction. In our translation of the actual to the virtual, activities are not simply transferred as they are, but programmed onto platforms with a specific objective (Van Dijck 2013). In this way, no platform is a simple utility or unchanged reflection of the actual, but is instead always a customized service. Companies build platforms with particular objectives (which may be different than those assumed by users), and that is reflected in the programming, at a level that users cannot manipulate. While I have said that platforms are completely dependent on users to populate them with content, and that users may have significant freedom in terms of what content exists on the platform and how they interact with it, they cannot engage with a platform in any other ways than those allowed by its programming. For example, Reddit gives users the semi-democratic power of voting on content, but the algorithm that turns those votes into the actual sorted list that users see is determined by the platform's creators and is not necessarily readily transparent.

Not only do platforms facilitate networking activity, but the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive. In fact, "a platform is a mediator rather than in intermediary: it shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely

facilitating them" (Van Dijck 2013:29). The tools we are given limit the ways in which we can be social online. For instance, a user wanting to create the same content will do so very differently depending on the platform they select, creating a product on Twitter that is fundamentally different from what they might create on Tumblr. If you only use Twitter to create and interact with content, you only have the particular understanding that the mediation of that platform allows. This is complicated by the fact that, as I addressed earlier, users are also producers or content creators, engaging in cycles of production and consumption of content with other users. Using multiple platforms to create the same content also lessens (but does not nullify) the limitations of mediation. What kinds of social acts are absent from today's digital landscape because the platform to mediate them has not yet been constructed? How will the next big platform affect the ways in which we interact with existing ones? In this way, we can truly see how platforms and social acts constitute each other.

Understanding the mutually constitutive nature of platform and sociality naturally leads to the question of motive and intent—who is building the Internet's infrastructure and what are their goals? We must understand platforms as socioeconomic structures, existing in a networked public sphere, "a cooperative nonmarket, peer-production system that serves communicative and creative needs through networks of like-minded individuals" (Van Dijck 2013:14). There is a robust market for platform building, which has co-opted a false rhetoric of transparency and openness that was once associated with the transition into Web 2.0, before the rise of mass online media. Although it is platforms that corporations produce, it is the users and their data that are the real commodities here. Facebook, and its myriad privacy controversies, is an excellent example of this. The inner workings and goals of Facebook,

the company, are a structural part of Facebook, the platform, and are not transparent to users, who Facebook will go to great lengths to keep. This points to the tension we keep returning to in terms of the platform's simultaneous dependence on and power over users, as platforms remain microsystems within a capitalist ecosystem. Understanding that all digital media must live on a platform, which is itself a mediator of sociality in many ways beyond the control of the user, I acknowledge that most online spaces (unless you write and host your website independently) are owned by someone and that any feminist or activist works needs to question the objectives and motivations that are built into the platforms they use, and how it affects the ways in which they produce content and interact with others. To understand how we interact with others online, we must first understand how we conceptualize our online selves[8].

Identity and Embodiment of the Online Self

Early in feminist analyses of the Internet, there was a tendency toward cyberutopia, particularly in terms of the embodiment of the online self. Cyberutopia in this sense is "an idealized theory of internet use that requires users to leave their bodies behind when online" (Brophy 2010). This disembodiment creates an egalitarian online experience, devoid of discrimination because individuals are able to create a new self, without the limitations of discriminatory markers (race, sex, etc.) that cannot be hidden in the physical world. The possibilities of gender bending are also discussed as a way to avoid sexism online or to play with your own gender, especially through world-type spaces[9] where the user is embodied in an avatar. There are obvious complications to this cyberutopia in practice. How can we

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[8] Although I do not discuss how identity formation is a relational process in the following section, I will do so in chapters 2 and 3 as a process that enables community formation

[9] This includes platforms like Second Life, Massively Multiplayer Online RPGS, etc.

understand disembodiment in cyberutopia if we also take a performative view of gender, where embodiment and corporeality are at the center of performativity (Butler 1990)? Can we leave behind the body and its associated sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and disability? Does the Internet allow us to exist beyond the limitations of our offline identities and does this enable others to interact with us based solely on our online presence, which can be carefully constructed? Can we truly trade in or remodel our identities? In a pre-Web 2.0 context, this might seem more plausible, but in today's virtual landscape, the answer seems more elusive. While it is certainly true that individuals have significant control over the construction of their online identity, how that identity is performed and read by others is not so predictable. Often, attempting to "leave behind" markers of identity runs the risk of being read as default whiteness. In this stance, all users are assumed to represent the dominant sex, race, class, etc. when they are separated from their site-specific socioeconomic location (Brophy 2010). So in attempting to "leave behind" your identity by choosing not to acknowledge it explicitly, the user is unintentionally taking on a new one— that of the default. Despite being disembodied, we can see that identity is still crucial to the virtual.

Let us return to the question of whether we can really intentionally form or perform identities. Paasonen reminds us that for Butler, gender is constituted as the "ritualized reiteration of norms that govern cultural intelligibility," and as compulsive repetition that makes doing gender far from a voluntary activity (Butler in Consalvo & Paasonen 2002:25). It follows that there is no identity unmarked or free from systems of power—these identities are experienced as structural power relationships and cannot be so easily discarded and remade. Indeed, because "being gendered (raced, classed) is a precondition for thinking,

living, and making sense of the world, the individual cannot take up any identity position s/he pleases" (Consalvo & Paasonen 2002:25). We are conditioned in these identities from birth and our performance of them is not entirely voluntary or conscious. In addition, the production of the self is a dialogical one, "produced in interaction with others, marked by others' actions and reactions, since it is the presence of an audience that forces us to keep our act together" (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002:25-26). Put very simply, when bodies are not visible online, identity presupposes embodiment[10] (2002:28).

Still, we must account for agency, as much as our identities may be decided for us. Daniel Miller describes objective realization and the objectification of identity, which allows people to objectify themselves and gives them a means through which they can enact an idealized form of a version of themselves (Miller and Slater 2000:10). While not the creation of a new identity, objectification is a reflection, comparison, and negotiation of the self. Butler also engages with the objectification of the self, writing that it is "the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive" (Butler 1997:20-22). Where the performativity of identity then, is unconscious, objectification enables self-consciousness. Paasonen chooses to make the distinction between character and identity (2002:38), where character is the manifestation of our self-objectification. Character can be created, changed, subverted, and played with without discarding the powerful forces of performativity and identity that so inform our lives online and off. Because we live our identities online as much as we do offline, we inevitably bring

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[10] Note that this is not the case in terms of physical embodiment, where they constitute one another at the same time. Here I am speaking of virtual embodiment, defined by one's intentional representation of the self online, which does not always follow one's physical embodiment, and flows instead from identity, which crosses virtual and actual

our politics online with us. This is the foundation of online feminism—personal identity politics enacted in virtual space.

Orientations: Reddit, Tumblr, and Blogging

Having discussed the dynamics of online sociality and the politics and mechanics of platform construction, I would like to outline the particular platforms I will use in discussing online feminism as a whole. When not taking place in a forum-type community, many online feminists utilize blogging. A blog, originally called a web-log, began as a type of online journaling experience. Indeed, blogs still function this way for many users, as a way to share and express personal experiences through a series of posts that can be archived and historicized, then reread in almost a narrative format. The blog has evolved into a medium for reading and writing about a particular theme or topic and blogs exist to cover any conceivable subject. It is a simple and easy way to self-publish and provides a format that is accessible and recognizable to most users. Some, although definitely not all, can form communities, often through the implementation of a commenting system where readers can discuss the blog content. Wordpress, Blogger, and Blogspot are all examples of popular blogging platforms but their differences are neglible. However it is hosted, the traditional blog format remains more or less the same, even on corporate-owned projects like Jezebel. In the case of feminist blogging, my focus is less on the platform and more on the networks that feminist blogs form. Blogrolls and external links facilitate these networks, as it is likely that if you are an avid reader of at least one feminist blog, you probably engage with several others in order to keep up with the conversations they are having with one another.

David Karp created Tumblr in 2007 and remains its CEO even after its acquisition by Yahoo in 2013 for $1.1 billion. Tumblr is often called a microblogging platform, similar to traditional blogging but generally dealing with smaller bits of content and much more back and forth contact between users. Microblogging itself is a fairly nebulous category, encompassing other social network giants like Twitter and Google+, both of which have very different politics and vibes from Tumblr. Generally, Tumblr content is multimedia and short form, although as always it depends on how users want to engage with the platform at that particular moment. Most posts on Tumblr are not original content; rather they are reblogs (reposting something on your blog that originated from another user), sometimes with additional commentary. Reblogs are often how users have public conversation threads with each other, in addition to messages (called asks) which can be submitted anonymously and answered publicly on your blog. Reblogging often gives Tumblr a curatorial feel, as users pick and choose from the content on their dashboards, modifying it as they go. Tumblr users generally form communities based on mutual interests, which can be found through tags. Tags are bits of metadata that users add to their posts so that they may be seen (or not seen) by other users looking at that tag. Tags are also often used as a less conspicuous way to add commentary to a post. I once read an explanation of this behavior by a Tumblr user as whispering something to your friend on the back of a bus rather than speaking out loud to everyone, as tags are not intended to be used this way and often go unnoticed by new users. Tumblr is overwhelmingly populated by young adults and teenagers and as a result has a strong sense of youth culture.

Reddit was created in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian. Although it was acquired by Conde Nast in 2006, it continues to operate as an independent entity. Reddit is a

news aggregate and bulletin board-style site, where users submit external content (a link to a video, article, picture, etc.) which is then voted up or down by users. Reddit's sorting algorithm then puts "good" content at the top and filters out links that did not make the cut. Comments are sorted in a similar manner. Content is organized into subcommunities called subreddits. Any user can create a subreddit on any topic. Users customize the kinds of content they want to see by subscribing to particular subreddits, which are combined to form each user's unique front page. Self-described as the "front page of the Internet," Reddit is intended to be a fast-paced community to share and discuss anything and everything interesting that is happening online. C.G.P. Grey, a YouTube personality, describes it "like reading the daily newspaper except that Reddit is timely, interactive, personalized, participatory, horrifyingly absorbing at times, and basically good" (What is reddit? 2013). Indeed, Reddit has a formidable online presence, particularly in its wide use by celebrities, posting under pseudonyms or their known identities. The IamA subreddit, where users with interesting occupations, lives, or perspectives answer questions submitted by users, has attracted posts from dozens of celebrities and even the President of the United States, Barack Obama, sat down to answer users' questions in 2012[11]. In my case, I will be looking at a particular subreddit, /r/ShitRedditSays, and its context within Reddit as a larger community. Abbreviated SRS, the subreddit exists to showcase the problematic and offensive comments that get heavily upvoted on default (those that users are automatically subscribed to upon creating an account) or popular subreddits. Each subreddit forms a unique community nestled within Reddit culture, and SRS has gone as far to create a network of subreddits for

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[11]http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/z1c9z/i_am_barack_obama_president_of_the_united_st ates/.

those with radical feminist politics, the goal being to create alternative versions of the default spaces that are less problematic and more critical.

Conclusion

The online is truly pervasive. For many people with Internet access in the Western world, we find we cannot live without it. It is how we keep in touch with distant friends, how we pay our bills, and how we share our lives, ideas, and experiences with strangers across the world. Far from a social utopia, the online is another arena of human life with different capacities and possibilities, allowing us to find space for ideas and experiences where that space might not readily exist in other arenas. All of my points of analysis in this chapter have dealt with the way we live our politics—through the pliancy of today's digital media and its convergence with all forms of itself; through platforms as socioeconomic structures, mediating the content we filter through them; and through the ways we inevitably bring our lived intersections of identity with us into our online embodiment. As I move into a more focused discussion of online feminisms, the insights from this chapter underlie and inform my findings—these are the foundations of the landscape I will paint in upcoming chapters.

Chapter Two: Communities of Validation and Support

One of the most important ways in which online communities of any type attract and maintain their members is through providing validation and support. For feminist communities in particular, this is crucial because many young women (both in the U.S. and around the world) grow up in contexts where feminist ideas are either unwelcome or not well understood. This can include growing up in geographic areas that are primarily conservative, religious, or rural, where a feminist politic is less likely to be the norm and exposure to feminism is minimal or negative if present. For these women, going online not only provides them with information (as I will discuss in the next chapter) but crucial sources of validation for a range of lived experiences, as well as day-to-day support. When young women feel that they cannot reconcile their feminist ideas with their local relationships (family and friends), that their ideas are unwelcome in the physical spaces they have available to them, that the daily misogyny and microaggressions they experience in day to day life are too much, or that their activist work has taken an emotional and intellectual toll, they can find respite in their online lives. Validation and support say to users, respectively, *you are not alone* and *you have a space where you, your experiences, and your ideas, are welcome*. In this chapter I explore these notions of validation and support and what they mean to users of online feminist spaces in terms of coming into a feminist identity, sharing experiences, and strengthening personal ties. This occurs in several ways: humor is deeply incorporated into online feminist practice, with memes functioning as an online cultural currency; and storytelling as a process of catharsis and networking, making political spaces intimately personal. Operating through humor, memes, and storytelling,

these markers of validation and support contribute to the overall feel of online feminist

spaces as fun, discursive, and nurturing arenas of feminist activism.

Unpacking Validation and Support

*Online activism changed me from a woman who actively put down other women to one who
actively uplifts them – Tumblr user sazziscooler*

*"I experience feminism as a constant reminder in the back of my mind; a lense to look
through, if that makes sense. To me, it's a reminder that I'm valuable and I deserve love and
respect, both from myself and others, even as a non-binary transgender person" —
Informant*

As they are first coming into a feminist identity, many women, most of them

teenagers or young adults, do not find feminist community in their offline lives. While their

offline context need not be particularly conservative or rural for this to be true, one of my

informants described leaving the Mormon church, then being drawn to feminism as "a

reaction to exiting such a hardcore christian, conservative upbringing and community."

Where a lack exists in their offline lives, women go online to fill it and find validation for

their beliefs. Fundamentally, validation tells users *you are not alone*, *you are not the only

person who thinks and feels this way*, and that *this is real.* That said, each community has its

own form and style in terms of what kinds of validation or support they are willing to

provide, and some are more open than others (especially in terms of other intersections of

identity). For example, /r/ShitRedditSays is not an appropriate space for beginners to seek

validation, but it does offer support for experienced Reddit users who are tired of seeing

offensive or problematic content. On the other hand, Jezebel is more open to validating new

feminists although it may not be supportive to feminists with more radical or intersectional

politics, as it is jokingly referred to as "feminism-lite." While purpose and intent must be

kept in mind when analyzing an online space, most all of them provide some amount of validation for their members. Even niches within feminism can find validation for whatever they believe. One of my informants identified as sex-negative, an unpopular but growing response to sex-positive feminism. She expressed that the best part of online feminism for her was finding that she was not alone in her views, lamenting that "pre-internet it was very lonely being an anti-porn feminist."

If validation tells women *you are not alone*, then community building in this case happens through the sharing of personal experience. Referring to the comments section of a blog for teenage girls, Keller quotes one of her informants: "…that's where the real community-building happens. When girls and women from all over the country feel isolated—or they just might want a forum to talk about stuff—the comment section is where that happens" (Keller 2012). Commenting systems allow users to interact both with other users and the content being posted. For most online feminist communities, it is the main structure within a platform that allows for individual, public interaction, the "checking each other out" that Deuze describes. More than casual back and forth, these interactions can be life affirming in huge ways. In their paper about the importance and future of online feminism, #femfuture, Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti write that "the capacity for storytelling and relationship-building online allows young women—so many of them living in small pockets of conservative middle America—to feel less alone, to feel like they're part of a community" (2013). They quote reader mail from an online blog:

> I just wanted to say a quick "thank you." I have been reading this blog for about a year and half, and it has provided me with strength to live through some situations that I know I would have never gotten from anyone or anything else in my life. You have given me hope that it might get better, and I just wanted to let you know

As Martin and Valenti emphasize, this kind of connectivity can save lives. Because "so many young women find feminism, not in their classrooms or even controversial novels, but in online blogs like F-bomb," they are "marinated in the voices and ideas of young feminists that share their sensibility, they are made to feel a part of something bigger than themselves—even as that connection is forged through the most intimate of stories" (Martin and Valenti 2013:11). As one of my informants remarked, "online I was able to connect to other women like myself and unpack some of my experiences." Feeling validated in your beliefs and having a place to share and unpack experience is particularly important to young feminists because it pushes them along in their journey to learn, connect, and take action.

Activist work is exhausting, and the stakes are never higher than when your own life is tied up in the outcome. One of my informants describes her response to having conversations about feminism online: "I have to protect myself. My heart rate increases and I get overwhelmed with emotion. It is frustrating when those who have little invested in the discussion (men) come in and enjoy having a 'debate' whilst for the women this is their lived experience." Her experience speaks to the emotionally taxing nature of doing feminist work. Her feeling of needing to "protect herself" is a common one, often called "self-care." Online feminists must engage in self-care, either together or individually, to avoid burnout. "Burnout" refers to a phenomenon where you can no longer engage with political work without it being at the expense of your own mental and emotional health. For an online feminist context, this often means disconnecting for a while, by abstaining from commenting or posting, or staying off feminist networks completely. Many bloggers eventually choose to take a temporary hiatus for this reason, and within the community making the choice not to engage for a while is a legitimate one. It is not, however, an

acceptable way to avoid criticism. Although criticism does take its toll, it is one of the ways in which online feminist discourse stays healthy—no one is a perfect, unproblematic pinnacle of feminism. As much as it can feel empowering, it can also be difficult to constantly engage in a community where your friends and allies will challenge your ideas, as I will explore in more depth in chapter four. Online feminist communities do provide support to counter both this feeling of discomfort and burnout, as well as emotions from outside sources. Outside sources include marginalization that occurs in the offline world (although these can occur online as well)—from parents, teachers, friends, and family, as well as through media and news sources, and any way that cultural information (and therefore ideas and norms about women in society) is transmitted. This also includes gender marginalization that women experience online, outside of their feminist communities. This takes many forms, including harassment in online gaming, arguments about feminist topics on Facebook, or reading misogynist comments on sites like Reddit. For all of these reasons—burnout, local offline stressors, and online marginalization and harassment— online feminist communities have long functioned as communities of support for their members.

If communities of support tell users *you have a space where you, your experiences, and your ideas, are welcome*, support depends upon the building of meaningful connections in a safe environment. That said, not all feminist communities are spaces where everyone's experiences are welcome. Women of color and trans people do not find themselves supported in many online feminist communities. Brittney Cooper of Crunk Feminist Collective wrote:

> You're not just doing intellectual labor. You're also doing emotional labor when you
> come out with these...vulnerable posts about…how we like the world to look. As

women of color specifically, a lot of that gets internalized and it creates other kinds of issues. Health challenges. Internalized stress. Not being validated. (quoted in Martin and Valenti 2013:22)

This is a symptom of the pervasiveness of white feminism, to which online feminism is unfortunately not immune. Big name blogs or websites like Jezebel are often criticized for not supporting the variety of experience that women have to offer, instead settling again and again on a lens that centers the experiences and perspectives of white, middle/upper-class women. There are communities formed around trans, race, and queer identities and these spaces provide essential support that more general or mainstream feminist spaces do not. As long as large numbers of women do not feel served by mainstream feminism, there will always be a need for more and more identity-oriented communities of support.

If validation brings women into feminist communities, support is ultimately what holds them together, no matter what kind of content they form around. In Keller's analysis of girls' exploration and use of online feminism, her informants emphasized that the first challenge for teen feminists is finding a supportive environment. She writes that "community has always played a role in feminist activism, and feminist communities have often been kept intact due to the circulation of feminist media" (Keller 2012). All of the bloggers Keller interviewed "saw online spaces as uniquely accessible to a diversity of girls, particularly those who may live in conservative towns or those raised by parents who do not embrace feminist principles" (Keller 2012). This sentiment speaks to the important of both validation and support in finding a community and how they often go hand in hand. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a community where validation of your politics precludes support during the ongoing process of sharing and building those politics within a larger community of women where the work and experience you share can be so intensely emotional.

Channeling, diffusing, and redirecting powerful emotions like anger, hopelessness, and sadness is a large part of what supportive and validating relationships of any nature do, and the user's relationship to an online space is no exception, venting these feelings in often productive and empowering ways. Together, validation and support are the foundation upon which online feminist communities are built, fostering a diversity of connections and networks that serve many purposes "whether it be close friendships, anonymously sharing useful information about feminist issues, or a relationship that falls in between" (Keller 2012).

Humor & Memes: Postmodern Folklore

Given that feminist communities must also be communities of validation and support in order to sustain their members, online feminists use multiple tools to build supportive networks. One of these tools is humor, and by extension, memes. All online feminist communities have some element of humor in their day-to-day workings. One reason for this is changing the public perception that feminism is humorless work and "convincing the public that feminism can actually be fun through humorous quips on blog posts" which has "evolved into savvy online campaigns that catch like wildfire" (Martin and Valenti 2013:13). Aside from being a tool to change public perception about feminism, humor is a necessary way to diffuse some of the anger and frustration inherent in doing any kind of activist work. Sometimes called "culture jamming," feminists use humor in their work to disrupt "mainstream political and cultural narratives using crowdsourced creativity and playfulness" (Martin and Valenti 2012). Latoya Peterson of *Racialicious*, a feminist blogging site centered on pop culture and race, writes that "in a way, using pop culture to

deconstruct oppressive structures in society is culture jamming. We are, in many ways, creating a distortion in the smoothly packaged ideas being sold to us" (quoted in Martin & Valenti 2012). Humor is used as a discursive tool that invites users to engage with the content they are consuming. As I have described in the previous chapter, the nature of new new media requires cycles of consumption and production by users. Users are constantly interacting with and changing the content they see online, and humor, often in the form of memes, is one way that this takes place. In this way, humor can be used to transform pop culture, and particularly Internet culture, into a tool for social change. In terms of support, it provides relief from the often-exhausting business of discussing and analyzing systems of power and inequality, giving online feminism its characteristic playfulness. It brings theory down to Earth (see Feminist Ryan Gosling[12]) and humanizes users. It gives feminists a space "to enjoy their lives and feminism in the present rather than focusing on the omnipresent issues that confront modern feminists" (Sowards and Renegar 2006:63). Although humor can take many forms, including snarky headlines, comics, and emoji, one of the most interesting ways in which online feminists use humor is through memes.

Memes as a social phenomenon are difficult to describe and resist easy categorization by academia, as there is often a gap between the way Internet users and scholars would describe them. In true anthropological fashion, memes really need to be experienced to be understood. Attempting to study memes, like any cultural mode of expression, requires anthropologists to not only observe, but also participate. It follows that the most compelling work done on memes as a social tool is done by scholars who fill both roles of academic and Internet citizen. For my discussion of memes, I will use a few iterations of "Feminist Ryan Gosling" to make a critical analysis of feminist meme-making

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[12] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/feminist-ryan-gosling

(see Appendix A for examples). Feminist Ryan Gosling originated on Tumblr, and includes images of celebrity and actor Ryan Gosling with text overlays usually reading "Hey girl" followed by some compliment humorously integrated into a feminist concept or theory. Before we look more closely at this particular meme, we need to consider what memes actually are.

As far as definitions go, there are many ways to bound and define a meme. Internet users employ the word to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language "move," or some other unit of cultural stuff (Shifman 2014:13). This is very different from its use in the academic study of memetics, where the cultural "stuff" being studied is largely abstracted and Internet memes are usually connected to observable audiovisual content. Alternatively, *KnowYourMeme*, a site that researches and documents Internet memes and phenomena, defines a meme as "a piece of content or an idea that's passed from person to person, changing and evolving along the way[13]". If these definitions sound vague, it's because they have to be. Memes are created across a variety of mediums, and are deeply imbedded in intertextuality. This means that "memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways" (Shifman 2014:1), referring back to each other, to current events, or to local happenings within a particular online space, drawing upon a variety of reference points and cultural understandings. In a similar sense, they can be understood as a sort of "(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts" (Shifman 2014:15). Memes are for fun, but they do significant work in constructing cultural norms within Internet culture. It is no stretch to say that they are significant tokens of cultural production and media convergence,

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[13] http://knowyourmeme.com/about

encapsulating some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture (as described in the previous chapter regarding new new media). According to Shifman:

> memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets. The term describes cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying and imitation—practices that have become essential in contemporary digital culture. In this environment, user-driven imitation and remixing are not just prevalent practices: they have become highly valued pillars of a so-called participatory culture (2014:4)

If digital culture relies on users to be producers, memes are a cultural currency with which users can construct a particular online sociality, dependent upon a convergence of media platforms. Following Shifman, memes have three crucial attributes: (1) a gradual propagation from individuals to society, (2) reproduction via copying and imitation, and (3) diffusion through competition and selection (2014:18). This means that cultural information shared on an individual basis eventually scales into a large-scale social phenomenon. That information is then repackaged through imitation in the form of mimicry or remix, with the successful memes being fit (in the evolutionary sense) to the sociocultural environment in which they propagate. This is a basic summary of how memes operate as a social phenomenon, although they can be used to a variety of different ends. So far we can see Feminist Ryan Gosling's (FRG) intertextuality in the fact that it is based upon an older meme, "Fuck Yeah Ryan Gosling[14]," example A5's reference to Wendy Davis' filibuster, as well as the fact that it is in conversation with both academia and feminism—the idea of meme-ifying feminist theory for study purposes shows rather explicitly how memes can carry cultural information (although usually this is more subtle). We can also trace FRG to an individual Tumblr[15] before its explosion (Appendix 4 shows a graphical representation of its transformation to large-scale social phenomenon). One person created FRG on Tumblr

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[14] http://fuckyeahryangosling.tumblr.com/
[15] http://feministryangosling.tumblr.com/

and then others mimicked and modified it, posting it on many different platforms where it was possible to know of the meme without knowing where it came from or who created it. Through the iterations I have compiled, you can see how FRG is remixed according to its social environment, particularly A5's timely political reference.

Largely, memes are used to create a sense of group identity. In this big place called the Internet, some memes run cross-platform (meaning that Tumblr, Reddit, and chan users alike will be able to read them despite not sharing online space) and create a larger sense of Internet culture that exists in opposition to the offline. Indeed, seeing or hearing memes used offline creates immediate discomfort for many people, as their very existence is *of the Internet* (virtual), in a way that it seems simply wrong to see them in print, or discussed among academics. In the same way that it seems bizarre to see a marker of the online be used offline, it seems equally bizarre (to Internet users at least) to ascribe cultural significance to a thing that is by definition meant to be absurd, nonsensical, and irreverent. There is an aspect of memetic logic that simply cannot be translated offline. There are exceptions, however to the acceptability of memes in offline contexts. Shifman describes the spread of memes to non-digital space as resulting from a production of "hypermemetic logic"—she believes that they are what makes a digitally literate citizen online and off (2014:23). As memes make their rounds on more widely used platforms like Facebook and YouTube, they will more and more be translated to the offline world, for better or worse. As far as memes are used to construct and maintain a group identity, in online spaces we are largely dealing with a networked individualism—users must fit into the larger group while still differentiating themselves, and memes are one way for users to "simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity" (Shifman 2014:30). In the process of building

a personal identity online, they also shape the social networks in which they participate. In FRG, we can see networked individuality particularly in A6, with its reference to TV show *Freaks and Geeks*. This iteration creates a sense of group identity as the people who find it funny are also likely to watch the same kinds of TV and marks the individuality of its creator as someone who is a fan of the show. Unlike some iterations, this one says something about the individual who made it while still speaking to their fit within the group.

Applying this memetic humor to online feminist communities, Tumblr and Reddit are both places where memes are born and die. In Tumblr's case, networks are much smaller than in the general feminist blogosphere and users interact with many individual, personal blogs rather than with a single, more neutral (not personal) blogging platform. Still, Tumblr has very localized communities of feminists, who tend to organize around the type of feminist politics they subscribe to (radfem, black feminist, etc.). Tumblr and Reddit tend to have a unique sense of humor in that these communities build a lexicon and set of memes that can be difficult to read for outsiders. The best example of a feminist community using memes is /r/ShitRedditSays, who is notorious for its many in-jokes and subreddit-specific memes, which are definitely intended to be unreadable by outsiders. For example, the very construction of the platform is altered (in SRS, upvotes are downvotes. This is intended to confuse angry outsiders who try to downvote all their content). Most of SRS is set up to look like a big joke—the rules are labeled "dildos and dildonts," misogynist posters are called "shitlords," and the entire prime subreddit is described as a "poop museum." SRS deals in heavy content and its users are discussing often extremely offensive and hurtful comments—humor is one of the few ways to make this work bearable. By making fun of the shitlords who marginalize and dehumanize them on a daily basis, SRS asserts their right to

exist on a platform that is largely hostile to them. In this way, memes can form a common

vocabulary and lexicon that builds group identity and imagines a more playful way to do

online feminism, which can otherwise be emotionally exhausting. Similarly, storytelling is

another way in which feminists leverage humor to build supportive communities.

Storytelling and Open Threads: Sharing and Networking

Humor and memes are often part and parcel of the process of storytelling—sharing

personal, lived experience. This can be done as a cathartic act, to relate to other users, or

simply to offer an alternative experience in a space where one does not currently exist. Users

who attest to the importance of comment sections are in part referring to storytelling. It is

not just analysis and discussion in comment threads that make them so important—it is the

stories and experiences that are shared between users that create such strong communities.

Harad (2003) writes that

> Feminism is as much a change of heart and vision as it is any particular political
> affiliation. It is a waking up, a coming into consciousness. In order to gain a feminist
> consciousness, women (and girls) must admit to connections between their
> individual lives, the lives of other women, and larger political and social structures.
> But more than that, they must *feel*, at least once, the truth of these connections:
> *That's me. I know what that feels like. Yes. That's how it works.* For that, we need
> stories (quoted in Sowards & Renegar 2006:84)

In sharing stories, women help themselves, but also affirm others by providing stories that

speaks to multiple experiences. This can happen organically and spontaneously through

threads or posts on a specific topic or subject, but is often facilitated by open threads. These

are created by a mod or blogger to give their users a space to discuss topics of their choice.

Sometimes these are provided on an as-needed (*Feministing*) or weekly basis (*Feministe*).

There are variations on the simple "open thread," including *Feministe's* "Shameless Self

Promotion Sunday," which allows users to promote their own blogs and "Selfless Signal-Boosting" threads to promote good feminist content users have encountered on the web that week. These threads often incorporate humor, being hosted by a meme, inanimate object, or cute animal (examples include "open thread with cheese platter" or "open thread with classic kitten macro"). Sometimes there is a text prompting content, and sometimes not.

For example, Feministe's current prompt asks: "So, what have you been up to? What would you rather be up to? What's been awesome/awful? / Reading? Watching? Making? Meeting? / What has [insert *awesome inspiration/fave fansquee/guilty pleasure/dastardly ne'er-do-well/threat to all civilised life on the planet* du jour] been up to?[16]" In the example given below, admin tigtog expresses nostalgia for "a simpler Internet era" and posts an old meme (classic kitten macro).

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[16] http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2014/12/05/open-thread-with-darth-side-of-the-moon/

This example does double duty, showing both how memes function within storytelling. This one is a Zelda reference, mixing the Internet's mutual love of cats and video games, so its use as a no-longer-in-circulation meme creates nostalgia on two fronts. Presented as a shared cultural marker, it works as a light-hearted conversation starter. In many of these threads, users update others on personal details of their lives, vent, complain, and celebrate. When other users respond, relationships and networks are built, which can be called on again and again. In addition, knowing the users you are engaging with in a discussion changes the dynamic of a feminist space into a more cooperative one, rather than simply arguing with faceless strangers in a space that has no personal value for you.

When not facilitated by open threads, storytelling can happen naturally and organically as a part of feminist practice. Tumblr is another excellent example of online feminism's tendency toward storytelling, as individual blogs are overwhelmingly personal, even if they are devoted to feminist or political content. Similarly, personal blogs often reflect the politics of their owner even if the blog is aesthetic or fandom-based. Political blogs tend (quite unsurprisingly) to involve personal experience but overwhelmingly I found that personal blogs tended to involve politics at one point or another, especially when major political events surfaced. When Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, I noted that almost every blog I followed was posting about it, no matter what its theme or orientation, or if the blogger had ever posted political content before. As someone joked, "even my porn blogs are on this shit." As users get to know their followers and the users in their circle, they become more emotionally invested in the feminist conversations they have with them. In this way, these networks allow users to make a comforting reply to a post about how

someone had a bad day in the same social arena and on the same platform that they will

discuss problematic representations of race in the recent *Game of Thrones* episode with

them. By getting to know each other personally, these communities become extremely

emotionally valuable to their users who are better able to support and validate each other.

Conclusion

No matter what age, online feminists need to feel validated and supported within

their communities. While online feminist communities are often analyzed in terms of their

contributions to activism, it is often overlooked how they function in the personal lives of

their users. Online feminist communities can provide a crucial source of support where there

is none in a user's offline life. They help young women feel affirmed in their beliefs and

want to pursue them in a space where they feel safe and supported. They offer respite when

daily marginalization, both online and off, takes its toll. Although it shares these functions

with the way feminism has historically taken place offline, online communities of validation

and support reach women who are not encompassed by physical-world feminist networks,

and its translation occurs through memes and other Internet artifacts. By building space for

humor within activism, creating culture with memes, and building relationships through

storytelling, online feminist communities are able to offer something that users are not

getting enough of in their offline lives. Online feminist communities are communities of

validation and support, a foundation that allows them to do the educational and activist work

I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Communities of Education and Empowerment

With millenials coming into age in the past decade, there has been no dearth of disparaging opinion pieces written on them and their entitlement, arrogance, and slacktivism. Too technology-dependent to look up from their phones and form personal connections, millenials are doomed to lead shallow, ineffective lives, without the strength of leadership or ambition of previous generations. These sensationalist criticisms reflect a fear of or refusal to accept change on the part of their authors. Critics of technology and the power of online space tend to be those who maintain a rigid separation between the virtual and the real, privileging what is perceived as "real life" and denying that one realm could so profoundly affect the other, let alone be one in the same. For those of us who grew up on the Internet, technology is our past, present, and future. We use it to every end imaginable and are constantly innovating. As we've seen, the Internet is a valuable tool for building support communities, but we should not overlook how it is used for perhaps its simplest function—transmitting information. Education, I will argue, is *the* activist strategy both for contemporary feminists and social justice activists in a digital age. Through online feminism, communities work to educate and empower power people to make social change. This change can occur both on an individual level (changing the minds of individual people) as well as discourse-wide, as we will see in the case of Anita Sarkeesian's work regarding sexism in gaming. In addition, online feminism enables communities that educate and empower people on their personal journeys (their discoveries of concepts and evolution of their ideas), as well as those that create access to feminist knowledge, bridging the gap between academia and mainstream feminism.

A Change in Activism

In a conversation with a feminist speaker who was most politically active in the 60s and 70s, she asked a group of students (including myself) what activism we *do*. Her emphasis on the "doing" of activism was not coincidental—she was curious about what young women do if it was true that the zines and marches of earlier decades had gone somewhat out of fashion. Perhaps a bit ashamed, our group of self-proclaimed radical, political feminist women struggled to think of anything we had physically done lately in the name of feminism. There was feeble mention of the campus group for survivors of sexual assault, after which the speaker changed the subject. It is easy to see from this conversation how complaints of apathy and laziness are raised against teens and 20-somethings, but I believe the problem is not that young people are not engaging in political acts and activism, but that they are doing so in in ways that are different and not traditionally recognized as activism. In other words, it is not the same kind of "doing" that previous generations of activists are used to, and as a result is less visible. With new sets of tools and resources (and new minds to use them), why should activism in 2015 look anything like it did in the 70s, 80s, 90s, or even the early 2000s? Particularly in terms of feminist activism, there has been a major shift in tools and strategy that is only beginning to be recognized. Indeed, "third wave feminism has helped to redefine notions of feminist resistance and activism, with cultural and political action taking on new forms that may be unrecognizable if interpreted through more traditional paradigms of activism" (Keller). The Internet is at the center of this shift in activism, which is "marked by individualization, globalization, consumer citizenship, and a

breakdown of both class-based identifications and more traditional forms of protest politics" (Keller).

Previous waves of feminists have worked to make their activism as public as possible—zines, teach-ins, and marches all effective tools in bringing feminist ideas into the public eye. Now, our understandings of public and private have vastly shifted with the integration of the Internet into our daily lives. After all, what is more public than the Internet, a space where your words and ideas are instantly accessible by literally anyone in the world with an Internet connection? As a result, feminist blogs are often thought of as "the consciousness-raising groups of the 21st century" (Martin & Valenti 2013). The online public is massive, engaged, and readily consumes information. A significant amount of feminist work is now done online and engages the massive online public, rather than the localized offline public. The result of this change in activism is that education and awareness building have become major tools in the goal to create social change. The purpose of education as a tool is two-fold: (1) to change the minds of individuals as well as the dominant discourse in general, and (2) to provide access to feminist knowledge and further the personal educational journeys of young and budding feminists.

Social Change on the Individual Level

"There's a difference between getting people to show up to a rally or similar event and actually helping others develop their personal political identity. Basically getting someone to show up is one thing, empowering someone to become a lifelong advocate for change is even better"— Informant

Often overlooked as inconsequential or ephemeral, social networks like Facebook and Twitter have the incredible power to connect and facilitate information exchange between individuals within and across multiple networks. If you are a user of Facebook with

any regularity, you likely have a friend who shares or posts politically oriented content, and if you are brave or particularly energized that day, you might have engaged them on content that is problematic or offensive to you. These often heated conversations occur on a public platform that can be seen across multiple networks (for example, you may engage with your friend on his post, as well as his other friends who you may not know). These types of semi-public discussions have the potential to reach and be read by many people who may not be intentionally engaging with feminism online. However, these experiences are not always positive or successful, as one of my informants describes:

> I have recently got into longer debates on domestic violence and stopping violence against women … There were a lot of "WATM [what about the men]?" comments and I felt it was my duty to comment so for the casual reader without info on the topic the impression left was not dismissive of the impact of violence against women.

Stories like these are very common among both feminists and activists in general. Although in this case the individuals (men) in question likely did not change their opinions as a result of this conversation, the effect of exposure should not be underestimated. Reading and participating in these types of debates, over time, can lead individuals to think more critically about their politics, particularly when these conversations happen between peers. Every time a feminist engages in public discussion, whether it is on Facebook, Twitter, or another platform, she is adding to the public online discourse. When enough people are discussing feminism online, the effect is magnified and communities are strengthened. Several of my informants were white, cisgender men, who described this very process as it happened to them:

> Some people were very, very angry about things … I couldn't understand why. It wasn't something I had to experience! Why are all of these people so mad all the time? So I looked into it. I read SRS and feminist blogs online and checked out every "FAQ for new feminists/allies/men/white people" I could get my hands on … If there

was never the initial confrontation of "you are being sexist *right now* and that's not cool" I'm not sure where I'd be right now. I'm not sure I'd care.

This story is addressing multiple points. One, it shows how outsider becomes ally and firmly assigns online feminists as the catalyst for this change. More specifically, it cites their anger as drawing this individual into the community rather than repelling him from it. A desire and curiosity to understand the root of these visceral feelings and responses he was seeing from feminists online led him to educate himself. Anger and confrontation are two qualities of online feminism that draw outsiders to learn about and understand it, or at the very least engage with it. They make abstract social issues personal and accessible. Furthermore, this individual went on to actively participate in feminist communities and act as an ally, thereby educating more people and doing feminist work, continuing this cycle of exposure and education.

Exposure can happen in other, less confrontational ways. It is a running joke that Tumblr users inadvertently become feminists after spending some time on the site, as illustrated by this popular post:

This post alone garnered over 200,000 notes (reblogs or likes). The effect of exposure to social justice on sites like Tumblr is significant. Tumblr in particular is a website frequented primarily by teenagers and young adults, reaching an even younger audience than perhaps

Twitter or Reddit does. Tumblr is much more personal, as I noted in the last chapter, with blogs serving as spaces of self-expression in addition to platforms for activism. This combination of personal and political is what makes Tumblr so effective at changing individual politics.

<p style="text-align:center">Changing the Dominant Discourse</p>

Perhaps the grandest goal of 3rd wave feminism, in partnership with legislative and political action, is the shifting of dominant discourses toward a feminist politic. Together, these make real social change. When I use the word "discourse" in this context, I am referring to all of the conversations, including both written and spoken words, as well as actions surrounding a particular topic, all of which contribute to an overall social and political atmosphere. A dominant discourse is the one experienced by everyday people, not necessarily activists or feminists. By bringing feminism into the dominant discourse, feminist and social justice values are made more visible. Whether or not online feminism achieves this goal is hard to measure, but I believe it is making significant steps in changing the tone of many discourses.

For example, misogyny in gaming communities is being publicly addressed on a large scale since Anita Sarkeesian entered the scene with her YouTube channel called Feminist Frequency. Her project, *Tropes vs Women in Video Games*, as described on her YouTube channel, "aims to examine the plot devices and patterns most often associated with female characters in gaming from a systemic, big picture perspective[17]." Her videos garnered significant backlash from male gamers and she received unbelievable harassment and abuse, including death threats. The effect of this online hate campaign backfired,

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[17] https://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency

however, and major news outlets including *The New York Times*, *BusinessWeek*, and *Colbert Report* covered Anita's work. Neil Druckmann, Writer and Creative Director at Naughty Dog (game studio responsible for well-known games like *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted*) wrote that her videos have "become essential viewing for developers. The videos have been instrumental in affecting an industrywide discussion about the representation of women in games. The series was influential in putting me on a path to create and write stronger, more complex female characters" (quoted in Sarkeesian). The work of feminist gamers like Anita and game developer Emily Quinn, led to "Gamergate," an online movement by their opponents that is fundamentally about denying misogyny and the harassment of women who criticize gaming. When influential game developers and mainstream gaming sites denounced Gamergate participants, they framed their movement as being about "ethics in gaming journalism" (Hathaway). Comically enough, feminists responded by creating a set of memes[18] with the phrase "actually, it's about ethics in gaming journalism" photoshopped onto stills from iconic horror movie scenes, mocking the absurdity and overuse of the phrase. Ultimately, these conversations would not been seen and discussed on this scale if not for the work of Sarkeesian and Quinn. Although Anita's project was run and created by a small team, her work was influenced by a larger network of online feminists and is a major example of how an entire discourse (in this case, the discourse of women and gaming) can be influenced by online feminists. Even people who would not necessarily watch Anita's videos or get intensely involved in gamer culture get a sense of the discourse, which has now overwhelming become concerned with issues of gender. The focus on changing discourses is important not simply to make feminists the sole authoritative voice on gaming culture, but to include issues of gender in the first place.

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[18] For examples see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/actually-its-about-ethics

The Internet is a site of culture-making and makes significant contributions to pop culture and offline media (like gaming and television). Although a lot of the feminist critique that happens online engages with popular culture, the importance of feminist political analysis should not be downplayed. In a world of media convergence, media and culture makers offline are intertwined with online culture, and this extends to political life as well. When Wendy Davis held a filibuster to block abortion restrictions in 2013, feminist Tumbr, Twitter, and blogs were spilling out commentary without delay (remember FRG?). When Ferguson police shot and killed Michael Brown in August 2014, a sense of rage and injustice pervaded online activist spaces immediately through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, and still has not dissipated. If consciousness-raising groups were said to be the backbone of second wave feminism; "now, instead of a living room of 8-10 women, it's an online network of thousands" (Martin & Valenti 2013). Consciousness-raising is still an integral part of what feminism does, but it now happens in a much broader (but still networked) way. This can take the form of spreading resources and on-the-ground information about current events like Ferguson, or reframing ways of thinking about overarching frameworks. For example, this Tumblr post reflects upon what the user believes Tumblr has done for many young women:

doctorcakeray ⇄ andthentheresanne ➕   Follow

adventuresofcesium:

> mainstream tumblr feminism may have many glaring faults but it *has* bred an army of teenage girls who understand the common ways that misogyny is reinforced in society and who know that they're better off loving their fellow woman than fighting with her and that's actually pretty damn revolutionary

202,145 notes

An "army of teenage girls" is a powerful image, and although romanticized, is not an uncommon sentiment to most Tumblr users. The striking part of this post is that this education in misogyny and sisterhood is a group experience, rather than an individual one. While it may not necessarily contribute to a "dominant" discourse in the sense that it will reach people online and off, it is still significant in that it is a large part of *Tumblr*'s discourse on feminism, a site that reaches millions of users, many of whom are young people from marginalized groups. Having discussed how these communities of education reach outsiders or new people, both on an individual and discourse-wide level, I would like to transition to how they work in the lives of people who already consider themselves a member of and have considerable investment in feminism or social justice.

Cultivating Personal Journeys

"I view my role as a feminist on the internet as primarily to spread the word and inform. This is how I have learnt more as a feminist, by reading others comments and post"- Informant

"SRS was the baby steps toward developing my identity. I really loved the raw anger and the sense of community" - Informant

As Alyssa Harad writes, "feminism is as much a change of heart and vision as it is any particular political affiliation. It is a waking up, a coming into consciousness" (2003, quoted in Sowards). No one leaves the womb with a nuanced understanding of patriarchy and power structures. All of us must, in some way or another, unlearn the social and cultural values of the racist, heteronormative, and patriarchal societies in which we live. Despite our various collections of privileges and identities, there is an understanding that as a social justice activist (be that a feminist or someone simply trying to become a better person), you will undergo a personal journey of sorts. Always unlearning, the goal is to listen and learn

rather than speak. Of course, this is a daunting task that simply cannot be done without the help of community. Without mentors in their lives, marginalized people can turn to online communities in their personal journeys to continue learning, thinking, and discussing. Often, people (and particularly young women) are first exposed to feminist ideas online through mainstream women's media, like Jezebel. This sort of content is more sensational and less theoretical than feminist conversations happening elsewhere on the web, but often functions as good starter material for the uninitiated. Jezebel has been critiqued (and rightfully so) for being U.S.-centric, shallow, and not intersectional. Alongside these critiques, however, we can still understand the role that sites like Jezebel play in the personal journeys of many people. Jill Filipovic of Feministe wrote insightfully about how Jezebel shaped online feminism:

> The more I "do" online feminism, the less interested I am in policing feminist perfectionism … online feminism is an ecosystem, not an entity. Our websites and platforms hit different communities and find different people in different places. … And as women come to sites like Jezebel for the celebrity and the fashion and get drawn into the comments and to the other blogs Jezebel links to, perspectives change, feminist understanding becomes deeper, and learning is done. That's an invaluable tool (2013)

This anecdote describes how many people come into their identities and begin their personal journeys online. Online feminism must reach "different people in different places" because not only do we all have different perspectives that allow us to interact differently with what we are learning, but also because we are all in a different place in our personal education. A healthy "feminist ecosystem" has a variety of platforms that reach a variety of people—there are mainstream blogs that serve beginners and serve as "gateway drugs," niche blogs that serve specific groups (like trans women or Latina women), and politic-specific groups that congregate on a particular platform, like SRS.

The stories I heard from my informants reflect their personal journeys in different ways. Many of them had a prior investment in feminism as a result of being part of a marginalized group based on gender, race, sexuality, or a combination. Their stories focused less on a sudden realization and more on continuing and improving an educational process that had been lifelong. They also expressed a feeling of needing to help others learn as they had been helped. Of course, not everyone feels a need to educate, and it is common social justice practice that education is primarily the work of allies, not the obligation of the oppressed. Still, many feminists contribute to their communities in part so that their knowledge will inform others. Those of my informants who identified as allies described using these communities as educational resources:

> I've learned tons and tons of stuff from "The Fempire" … I think SRS prime does a very very good job of addressing many concepts of privilege all at once even discussing some things that mainstream feminists don't tangle with: transgender rights and cis-privilege, hetero-normativity, classism and real anticapitalist / socialist / communist discourse, and WHITE PRIVILEGE GOD DAMN … I think I've become a really strong advocate for lots of issues in a good way. I think SRS's "extreme" persona really forced me to challenge my privilege because even though I didn't understand all the issues SRS talked about, I knew I definitely didn't want to be part of Reddit's violent and horrid responses to SRS. I don't know if I could have ever gotten to where I am now interacting with people in my own circles (in real life and those same people on Facebook)

and,

> I've only been met with kindness from online feminists, who … have been absolutely happy to let me read what they're talking about and engage with them on a number of different levels. It's honestly a positive, constructive community full of brilliant people who largely just want to not be treated like shit all the time

What these two separate stories share is a culture of listening and learning from others, which I would argue is largely what personal journeys are about. Educating yourself means actively seeking out people whose experiences and opinions are different from yours, and rather than disputing their experiences with your own, usually privileged ones (sarcastically

coined "mansplaining"), taking the opportunity to listen and reflect. These stories show how crucial the need is for community in the process of unlearning. Education must happen in communities—it cannot be done alone. They also speak to the importance of having a variety of communities—expanding outside of Facebook or feminist communities that may not be trans-inclusive, anticapitalist, or intersectional. It is not uncommon (although certainly not a requirement) for activists to move on from communities that no longer grow their knowledge or offer new perspectives. Although they still serve a purpose, this is why many people "outgrow" mainstream spaces and grow into more radical spaces. No matter who you are, online feminism has a way to reach you where you are, but only if you are willing to acknowledge your privilege and listen.

Creating Access to Feminist Knowledge

"[Feminism is] a lens that reminds me to be critical of everything around me, and gives me a more understandable way to talk about my personal values"

Although perhaps lacking the lengthy history and tenure of other academic disciplines, feminist knowledge produced in Gender and Women's Studies is already tightly encased in the jargon and semantics of academic language. Put simply, no one gets Judith Butler on the first try and litanies of seemingly made up words can be daunting even to the seasoned scholar. Decoding this language requires a particular sort of training, the kind you can really only get in higher education. Academic feminism, including the works of Butler and other scholars, give us the words and theories to talk about experience, which is no small gift. That feeling of elation upon finding the words and theory to describe and situate one's life experience is formational in the lives of young feminists and is often the catalyst

that pushes them into an activist mindset. Adriana Lopez describes her experience of this phenomenon: "My contact with this new feminism brought me back into closer contact with my own ethnicity, my own self. Reenergized by my new vision of the world, I began seeking women of color who were interested in discussing literature and this new consciousness we were feeling" (2002 quoted in Sowards). Access to feminist knowledge and community building creates a positive feedback loop—people with shared identities will find each other to share knowledge at the same time that sharing knowledge helps people find each other. Unfortunately, these gifts and the tools needed to decode them are given only to those women lucky enough to attend university, leaving out the majority of women. This leaves a gap between academic feminism and other types of feminism where conceptual tools do not travel and knowledge is trapped within the ivory tower. As bell hooks writes, "the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication that enable them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work, actions, etc. that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place" (1991:3). In other words, academics have traditionally had the privilege of "naming," defining, and interpreting feminist theory. Not only does academia decide who has access to feminist theory, but it also dictates who can create legitimate theoretical work, often privileging "written feminist thought/theory over oral narratives" (hooks 1991:3).

By forming communities online, feminist ideas (of both academic and non-academic origin) are able to spread to groups and women that may not ever have access to higher education in their lives—and this is crucially important to making feminism a movement that serves all women. In my own personal journey, I found feminism at a young age online and it allowed me to bridge that gap early, leading to my decision to pursue a college

education at a women's institution, despite my working-class, low-income background. However, not all online feminists have that privilege or make the choice to pursue higher education, and instead get their feminist training solely from online sources. This is as valid a way to learn and think about feminism as its academic counterpart. Although they are different experiences, students of online feminism are granted access to academic knowledge, doing some work to bridge the gap between the ivory tower and those who live outside of it.

Part of the uniqueness of online feminist networks, and one of the ways in which this gap is bridged, is that all members have a valuable perspective to offer (granted some are more in need of representation and attention than others). We are all simultaneously teachers and students, mentors and mentees. This breaking down of hierarchies is what makes online feminism so effective at spreading feminist knowledge, allowing the academic and personal to spill over into each other, for us to put Butler in conversation with our favorite TV show, and for students to become teachers. Rebecca Traister wrote of her introduction to the online feminist community, saying:

> Online, I found women (and men) who thought about feminism as much as I did, and who knew far more than I about its history, its legal applications, and its cultural implications. They spoke of gender, sexuality, race, age, women's health, reproductive rights, international human rights abuses, disabilities, physical and cultural difference, women in media, politics, and business. Their voices were, by turns, earnest and funny and academic and casual. They came from parts of the country I'd never visited, connected me to women I'd never have encountered otherwise (quoted in Martin & Valenti 2013)

To Traister, these communities provide access to the specialized knowledge that their members contribute. This is crucially important, because it is something that is often lacking in classrooms, filled with students largely of similar socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. Direct interaction and conversation with people who have specialized feminist knowledge

(and who are often creating and sharing this knowledge online, rather than through publications) is an invaluable educational resource. Note the dynamism that Traister describes—these voices are both academic and casual, smart and funny. One of the defining characteristics of online feminism is its overlap into academia and its concepts, as demonstrated in this chapter through FRG.

While most of my informants did not have formal education in feminism or gender and women's studies, one of them expressed the difference in her experiences of the two (academic feminism as opposed to online feminism): "As a woman of color from a low income background, I learned more online than I did in the women's studies courses I took. Those courses are great but depending on the demographic of the class the conversation can vary. Online I was able to connect to other women like myself and unpack some of my experiences." This speaks to the fact that many college classrooms are primarily white, and the resulting discussions are not as nuanced as they might be with a more diverse group. This does not necessarily allow underrepresented students to unpack their own experiences in meaningful ways that result from interacting with peers with similar identities. In this case, my informant learned things online that she could not in a classroom because she did not find herself represented in that classroom. In this way, academia and online feminism often supplement each other.

Conclusion

As we approach a significant change in the way activism is done in a digital age, we must recognize the validity and power of education as a tool and foundation for feminist communities. Exposure to feminist ideas has the potential to transform previously apathetic

individuals into agents for social change and the power to turn the tables of public discourse, pushing gender issues into the public eye and the topic of dinner conversations around the country. Closer to home, it does the work of Feminism 101, giving those who seek them the resources they need to make progress on their personal journeys, whether or not they ever formally study feminism. In conjunction with academia, online feminism can provide a better-rounded educational experience and serve as a translator between theory and experience. Through my research I have found that education (both participation in and access to it) is just as important in empowering people as having supportive and validating communities. Online feminism does something that cannot be "contained within the walls of universities, and has consistently lived in popular media outlets, including pamphlets, stickers and open letters. Thus we work with the interactive modes of inquiry that challenge the ownership of knowledge within the university" (Baily & Gumbs). The ability to create knowledge and make it accessible is crucial to the future of feminist activism. Space for this type of work online is only growing, as "feminism and feminist theory are fast becoming a commodity that only the privileged can afford… This process of commodification is disrupted and subverted when feminist activists affirm our commitment to a politicized revolutionary feminist movement that has at its central agenda the transformation of society" (hooks 1991:9), a transformation that is at the heart of my next chapter.

Chapter Four: Communities of Contention and Radicalization

So far I have described a feminism that is supportive, nurturing, and empowering, connecting people in meaningful ways that have changed the face of feminism in this digital age. Decentralized and accessible, this new wave is indeed unique in its methods and scope. Because online landscapes are so easily customizable, there is a multiplicity of experiences of feminism on the Internet, creating extremely diverse understandings and perceptions depending on how the individual chooses to engage and what they are exposed to. As a result, no experience of online feminism is the same and it is difficult to talk about a generic experience. Far from united, there is significant contention among online feminists about how to do feminism "right." Although I have so far made a mostly positive analysis of online feminist space, in this chapter I would like to explore the ways in which users feel excluded, attacked, deprioritized, and marginalized within their communities. This takes two forms: first, users who feel that online social justice or feminist activists have created a toxic environment of anger and shaming, and second, users who feel that mainstream feminism, including its online manifestations, consistently deprioritize and ignore the voices of women of color, as well as queer and trans people. Despite being largely at odds with each other, both of these groups of users believe that these factors severely limit the possibilities of online feminism. More than just growing pains, I explore how these frictions represent a radicalization of mainstream feminism. Finally, I discuss how these sites of contention make apparent the underlying interactions of identity, intra-agency, and liminality that inform our digital lives.

Toxicity and the Wages of Rage

"I fear being cast suddenly as one of the "bad guys" for being insufficiently radical, too nuanced or too forgiving, or for simply writing something whose offensive dimensions would be unknown to me at the time of publication. In other words, for making an innocently ignorant mistake" – Katherine Cross

"Does visiting SRS or tumblr or buzzfeed or whatever actually brighten my day? No, not really … No one is perfect and many issues are not black and white. I try for hells sake, but some people act like there is zero room for error" - Informant

One of the major criticisms of online feminism is that it creates a toxic environment where bullying and "call out culture" fuel in-fighting among feminists. Call out culture describes a tendency for feminists to publicly point out missteps or problematic behavior from fellow feminists, in a way that many users believe is hostile, unforgiving, and downright mean. In this section I will analyze the concept of toxicity through two lenses: first I will look as toxicity as it embodies rage. This includes how users understand rage, its legitimacy, and how it should be handled or controlled. Second, I will look at the concept of toxicity through call out culture and how users understand the nature of criticism, determining whether it is sound and logical or instead abuse stemming from unchecked rage.

The word rage appears again and again in my informants' accounts of online feminist space, as well as in blogs and threads that address toxicity. Toxicity is constituted by rage in that a toxic feminism is fueled by rage instead of other, more productive feelings. Indeed, rage evokes raw and powerful emotions in both those who express it and witness it. When rage is toxic, it is unchecked, unruly, and inappropriate. A toxic rage is not constructive or sound, it an unreasonable and exaggerated reaction. Rage is also classed and raced—seen as unlikely to respond logically and calmly, the strong negative emotions of

poor women and women of color are dismissed as unbridled rage. These groups are seen as unable or unwilling to check their rage, instead using it to create unnecessary and harmful conflict. Instead of this understanding of rage as an emotion that needs to be somehow contained, corralled, or domesticated, it is perhaps more useful to examine it as a legitimate emotional response to oppression and microaggresions that, instead of being destructive, motivates action. Before I examine rage as a legitimate and productive emotional reaction, I want to first explore toxicity through a different lens.

In looking at toxicity through the lens of call out culture, there is an assumption that criticism with any element of rage is unfair, malicious, or even abusive. For criticism to be sound, it must be detached, objective, and free of emotion. Criticism that in any way loses its perceived objectivity by failing to be impersonal or betraying emotion not only becomes void, but also may be perceived as a personal attack. Here rage is seen solely as unproductive and a significant motivator for toxic criticism. There are criteria for criticism that must be met in order for it to be sound—it must be perceived as based in logic rather than emotion, ideas rather than people, and detached from the actors involved. These assumptions about criticism, as they constitute toxicity, do not afford users to harness the power of emotion, which is inextricably bound up with criticism, sound or not. While showing that rage can be leveraged in productive ways, I want to demonstrate how criticism is an innately personal and emotional act. To do this, I will put several online feminist writers in conversation with each other, looking closely at how they grapple with the concept of toxicity in regard to rage and criticism.

Before I begin, I want to differentiate toxicity as a concept from tone policing[19] and actual abuse. Claims of toxicity have often been described as more eloquent attempts at tone policing, which is a well-known derailment tactic among social justice activists used to try to discredit someone in an argument or debate. Because it is usually used to refer to an outsider or non-feminist person trying to silence or derail a conversation about race or gender, it is especially poignant to hear it used between feminists. In its most basic form, tone policing usually accompanies statements like "catching more flies with honey than with vinegar" or "maybe more people would listen to you if you weren't so angry and mean." These arguments or "calls for civility" are often made by those with more systemic power along whatever intersections are contextually relevant. When a man tells a woman she would be more effective at changing his mind if she weren't so angry or a white person tells a person of color they should be nicer when pointing out racism, they are ultimately invalidating and policing the marginalized person's emotions and responses to their lived experience of oppression. Because all feminists have experienced this derailment tactic at some point and know how infuriating it can be, they also end up seeing themselves outside of it and less likely to recognize when they are using it against someone with different intersections of oppression. Many who believe online feminism is toxic recognize this but do not believe it addresses the whole of toxicity. Aside from tone policing, is there ever a situation in which genuine toxicity exists?

I think at this point it is important to note the difference between criticism and abuse. When Laci Green, an online feminist and sex educator, was sent death and rape threats and had to leave her home in response to the discovery that several of her old videos contained Islamophobic comments, that was abuse. When people wrote scathing tumblr posts about

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[19] http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone_argument

her, claiming they would not watch her videos anymore, that was criticism. Although many were more charitable and were willing to accept Laci's apology, recognizing that everyone makes mistakes, no one is obligated to do so and their reluctance or refusal to give her the benefit of the doubt that she is otherwise a good, well-meaning person is not necessarily an indication of toxicity within feminism. True abuse is violent and cruel, as many of the comments against Laci Green were. While criticism can indeed be abusive if it relies on cruelty in terms of violence or insults, this is not what I am discussing in looking at the concept of toxicity.

The larger online feminist conversation about toxicity began in 2014, when Michelle Goldberg wrote about "Feminism's Toxic Twitter Wars" for *The Nation*, describing the phenomenon of toxicity and how she believes it is hindering online feminism. Although praised by several well-known feminist voices, the article was heavily criticized by many and triggered countless posts and articles about feminist in-fighting and toxicity. Goldberg's article bemoans a world where "feminists should always be ready to berate themselves for even the most minor transgressions" and believes that claims of intersectionality are "overwhelmingly about chastisement and rooting out individual sin." Her phrasing is subtle, but it betrays an understanding of legitimate criticism as meeting a certain threshold, implying that there are acts small enough to be beyond criticism and that these acts are largely the targets of toxic criticism. Microaggressions, which are small, often unintentional acts of daily discrimination, do not fit the threshold Goldberg sets and are used as examples of small "sins" that feminists find themselves berated for. She also dismisses intersectionality by identifying the motivation for call outs as a desire to "chastise" others. In reality, intersectionality is much more than a petty need to exercise power over others. In

fact, "calling out" others on their mistakes is necessary for individual growth, as several of my informants described confrontation as being the impetus for self-reflection and education in the previous chapter.

For another take on toxicity, trans blogger Katherine Cross wrote a piece titled "Words, Words, Words: On Toxicity and Abuse in Online Activism" that describes this phenomenon perhaps more eloquently than Goldberg. "The wages of rage in our communities," she writes, "and the often aimless, unchecked anger striking both within and without have created a climate of toxicity and fear that not only undermine our highest ideals, but also corrode the comforts of community for the very people who most need it" (2014). Cross identifies the root of this toxicity as anger, particularly unjustified or excessive rage. Creating a powerful metaphor, she suggests that online feminist communities operate using "wages of rage," where one trades credibility and status by leveraging anger. In line with my conceptualization of toxicity, she believes that rage is something to be checked, a force of destruction rather than productivity. Her main qualm is that, as a result of toxicity, many are afraid to speak or participate in online feminist life for fear of being berated for their mistakes. This is particularly difficult for those new to social justice concepts, as Cross writes that "it feels, sometimes, as if we must arrive fully formed to the world of activism, the perfect agents of change, somehow entirely cognisant of the ever shifting morass of rules and prescribed or proscribed words, phrases, argot, and thought" (2014). My informants occasionally expressed a similar sentiment, one writing to me: "I feel like I'm mired in it and it's not all good. There's still intolerance and disconnect and a lack of patience for people who are good people but just haven't learned about casual racism or homophobia etc. And it's kind of sucky." These two descriptions define a criterion of toxicity as not accounting for

intent. Under these assumptions, intent trumps action—there is little room for legitimate emotional reaction to microaggressions committed by well-meaning newbies. Their good intent is seen as enough to make criticism rooted in rage as invalid or excessive, more aligned with bullying than anything else. Public displays of criticism and rage are used as wages to build a feminist credibility and traded with others to revoke their credibility. In this case the newcomer loses credibility by making a misstep, and the user calling them out gains credibility by catching it. These accounts describe an online feminism that is rigid and unforgiving, far from the communities of validation, support, education, and empowerment that I have described. Yet many of my informants expressed both views simultaneously, seeing online feminism as both a positive vehicle for change and community building but still a place of unchecked anger. Some, however, did see this anger as a productive tool.

As I discussed in the last chapter, rage is often described as an element that attracted outsiders to these communities, particularly SRS. For marginalized people, their rage is rarely seen as justified or validated, under the assumptions I outlined at the beginning of this section. Finding a space where rage is not only the natural but appropriate response to microaggresions and oppression is unique and transforms our understanding of the "wages of rage." This is in fact one of the ways in which online spaces validate their members—by recognizing and celebrating rage. SRS and similar spaces are places where rage is seen as transformative and productive. It is no coincidence then that these spaces are also interpreted as the most toxic—they defy assumptions about how rage should be domesticated. For those with fewer intersections of oppression, it might be difficult to accept being on the receiving end of anger, justified or not, as it is inherently difficult to confront privilege. Goldberg, however, describes intersectionality, "the dogma that's being enforced in online feminist

spaces" as the root of toxicity. Goldberg's article is severely undermined by the fact that she sees intersectionality as something to be enforced and policed rather than an ideology that fundamentally informs the way people think about feminism and social justice. Within the group of feminists who believe that toxicity in online feminism is a real and pressing issue, there are extreme differences of opinion. For example, Cross and Goldberg's pieces do not have much in common, despite being on the same side of the toxicity debate.

Whether or not it is explicitly stated, women of color are often implicated as the bullies who enforce these wages of rage. Goldberg, for example, never pinpoints a specific group in her article, but personally calls out Mikki Kendall, a prominent voice of black Twitter. Focusing on Twitter as a main site of toxicity speaks to how rage is raced and classed, as Twitter is a well-known platform black feminists. The implication here is that it is Twitter feminists (including mainly black feminists) who are the keepers of the wages of rage, are enforcing this destructive emotional economy on other online feminists. Toxicity, as we have seen through these public debates, is constituted by the perception of rage as a destructive emotion that needs to be managed. If it is not, it leads to criticms that, rather than being logical and sound, is overly personal and outright mean. When online feminism is run through this emotional economy, rage stands in as an alternative to action and criticism as a grab for power rather than a push toward a more intersectional feminism. While these debates give an interesting picture of toxicity, there is something insidious about telling marginalized people that their anger is not only a lazy substitute for action or a malicious desire to put down others, but is actually detrimental to the movement. More than toxicity, the real point of contention here is a "raucous and contentious discussion about who owns feminism" (Kaba and Smith 2014).

A Radical Redefinition: Who Owns Feminism?

"White women used to simply and straightforwardly ignore difference. In their theorizing, they used to speak as if all women as women were the same. Now they recognize the problem of difference. Whether they recognize difference is another matter" — Maria Lugones

"I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since then it is no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge" – Audre Lorde

Historically, mainstream feminism has been a white woman's game (hooks 1981; Butler 2013). This is not to say that women of color have not been active in the feminist movement, but that their efforts have been downplayed and made less visible, their specific needs ignored, and their perspectives put second if given space at all. In an online context, it is still primarily white, middle-class writers who are published in online magazines with vast readership, whose blogs become well-known "feminist blogs," and who are able to turn their feminist writing into paying careers. In this section, I address how women who do not feel represented by mainstream feminism are pushing back and leveraging online media and platforms to do their feminism. With digital and online media becoming powerful avenues for transforming our lives and culture, the Internet allows a space that is relatively (but not completely) outside of the traditional hierarchies that keep many women outside of popular feminist discourse[20]. Using the Internet as a tool, women of color, queer women, working class women, and others who have not found a voice within mainstream feminism are contesting its ownership and its future in a very public way. Continuing my close reading of

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[20] Although any group of feminists can build communities of validation, support, education, or empowerment, I am talking specifically about mainstream feminism as a whole, not specific communities

public debates about the status and future of feminism, I put public feminist writers in conversation with one another to examine how the ownership of feminism is being contested.

In a debate between two senior editors of *The New Republic*, Rebecca Traister and Judith Shulevitz illustrate two diverging takes on modern feminism. Traister praises the rise of feminism in a digital age, writing that she has never seen a "public, popular feminist discourse more robust than it is now" and that:

> because the media has become more participatory, they [women] can enter the exchanges themselves. The result is raucous tussling over what feminism means in a contemporary context. Sure, sometimes it's a maddening mash-up of activism and journalism, quick-tempered 140-character exchanges, and more huffing and puffing than action. But cacophony is endemic to social movements, and can be productive

Although she acknowledges the "huffing and puffing" of online feminism, she ultimately frames it as something productive and valuable. The cacophony of online feminism, she implies, is what makes it so productive as women can participate in this conversation over what feminism means. Shulevitz takes a nearly opposite view, writing that "feminist Internet discourse doesn't do much for me," citing Goldberg's article and emphasizing the importance of laying out and ranking concrete causes like ending sexual violence and what she calls systematic discrimination against caregivers. Although both of the women in this debate are white, educated, middle-class women living in New York City, their views on feminism in some ways illustrate a unique generational difference, with Traister, 39, more strongly identifying with younger generations and Shulevitz, in her 50s, hearkening back to earlier forms of activism. Shulevitz does not see online feminism as true activism (despite participating in it herself for a living) and represents the point of view that I outlined in Chapter 3 on what feminist activism has traditionally looked like. Why Shulevitz is so quick

to dismiss online feminism is an interesting question that Brittney Cooper a black feminist

scholar and co-founder of the *Crunk Feminist Collective*, answers.

In her piece for *Salon* titled "Feminism's Ugly Internal Clash: Why Its Future is Not

Up to White Women," Cooper thoughtfully engages with both Traister and Shulevitz, as

well as larger discussions about the future of feminism and the contention brewing within it.

Cooper writes that Shulevitz's responses betray an "anxiety about a feminism driven by

Beyonce and the internet" where "women of color, and in particular black women, float in

the background" (2014). "As Michelle Goldberg's piece made clear," she says, "Internet

feminism is a place where young women of color, black women in particular, hold an

inordinate amount of power and influence. This makes many, many white women deeply

uncomfortable" (2014). This observation highlights the catalyst of this major contention

within feminism—women who are marginalized in ways not limited to gender, and

particularly women of color, are gaining influence and power by utilizing the Internet and its

tools to build spaces that white feminism has not. This anxiety stems from a push away from

white feminism online, as other strains of feminism take up more and more space. Cooper

describes the difference between white feminisms and many feminisms that take place

online:

> White women's feminisms still center around *equality*, a point on which Traister and
> Shulevitz converge. Black women's feminisms demand *justice.* There is a
> difference. One kind of feminism focuses on the policies that will help women
> integrate fully into the existing American system. The other recognizes the
> fundamental flaws in the system and seeks its complete and total transformation
> (2014)

The future of feminism, according to Cooper, is one that transcends goals of equality,

demanding instead a complete transformation of the systems that oppress us. In other words,

it is not enough for women to demand equal power within a system because that necessitates

that there still exist those with less power below you and that the system stay in place. A transformative feminism must include all women and refuse to operate at the expense of others. It does not seek results in the form of improvement in the individual lives of women but structural change that broadly benefits all women. Mariane Kaba and Andrea Smith argue that "you cannot substantively 'include' women of color and/or trans women into feminism without radically transforming it," and that "this is what we are seeing today, the backlash that results when increasingly more Black, Native, Latin@, Asian, Trans women claim the term 'feminist' and in doing so, radically change what feminism signifies (2014). This vision of feminism is, from the perspective of many, a radicalized feminism, pulling outward from the margins and using digital media to challenge the ownership of mainstream feminism as a whole. This is why it is so easy for some to dismiss the power of online feminism—it is the site where this important but highly contested transformation is taking place. As Susanna Loza asks: "is mainstream feminism destined to remain the terrain of white women or can the digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and livejournaling, broaden and radically redefine the very field of feminism?" (2014). The answer is an overwhelming *yes*. Women of color and others are using the Internet and digital media to contest the ownership of mainstream feminism.

Essence versus Affinity: Identities and Shared Experience

Through these cracks in the terrain of online feminism, we can see more closely how identity and notions of self and womanhood play out. As Maria Lugones described in one of the opening quotes of the last section, there has historically been an understanding of womanhood based on essence, or a shared female experience. Mia McKenzie of *Black Girl*

Dangerous, a blog centered around queer people of color, refutes the idea that women, as a natural result of simply being women and having different experiences than men, understand each other on a fundamental and universal level. "I don't feel any universal connection with all people who are born with female parts," she writes, "I'm not sure I know anyone who actually does, not when you really break it down. Because, despite what mainstream (white) feminism and tampon commercials would have us believe, 'shared' female experience isn't really all that 'shared' at all" (2014). A belief in a shared identity based on essence, in this case the essence of being a woman, ultimately ignores difference. This is, of course, not a problem when the women in question generally share experience. As a result, women who see online feminism as toxic may be responding to having their understanding of identities of shared womanhood challenged, seeing it as a breaking down of feminism rather than an expansion of it. In other words, if we do not share common ground in our womanhood, how can we be united? Contextualizing this discussion within my earlier discussion of identity in Chapter One, my use of the word "identity" here is not referring to the actual structural power relations that make up identities, but our own characterizations of those identities. All women's experiences are informed by gendered power relations—what I am arguing here is that there are multiple ways to characterize the identity of "woman," accounting for difference and intersection of experience.

Donna Haraway, in her classic article *A Cyborg Manifesto*, discusses the politics of how we name identity, and that the difficulty of naming our feminism stems from the fact that identities are "contradictory, partial, and strategic" (1991). In other words, there is nothing essential or defining about any single adjective with which we might describe feminism, as they all capture only a partial and strategic glimpse of a larger picture.

Although "gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity" and "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" or even "such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices," perhaps our affinities within the multiplicities of these categories can get us closer to the reality. These coalitions of affinities, rather than identities of essentialism, are what is shared by women when they form community in spaces outside of white feminism, where the intersections of their experience is not erased, but acknowledged and celebrated. Instead of endless searching for a new essential unity, as Shulevitz might suggest, we should work toward recognition of coalitions of affinities that do not rely on "a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification" (Haraway 1991). If we do not do this, we end up with taxonomies of feminism that produce "epistemologies to police deviation from official women's experience" (Haraway 1991), which is often what is happening when people claim toxicity within feminism. Until that person is forced to confront difference, her experience of feminism is one of essence. The inevitable confrontation is often alarming and upsetting—it shakes her idea of what feminism is meant to be (a coalition of womanhood), and she, at least at first, cannot reconcile the confrontation with her vision of a feminist world, which has up until now been primarily centered on the essence of womanhood.

Returning to Loza and online feminism, "feminists of the digital age must refuse the nostalgic discourse of authentic selves, of natural bodies, of fixed communities and instead attend to the 'structures and relations that produce different kinds of subjects in position with different kinds of technologies' (2014). In order to mend these rifts, we must understand the ways in which we are all unique subjects of our feminisms and how

technology enables those experiences. According to Loza, the digital age and the era of the

coalitional and intersectional feminist subject does not does not mark the end or the

downfall of feminism. Instead, "it signals the end of a certain conception of feminism, a

(neo)liberal conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of womankind who

had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings

exercising their will through individual agency and choice" (2014). I believe that many

claims of toxicity and maliciousness are responses to a changing conceptualization of

feminist identity, the result of a larger shift in the ownership of feminism. The real toxicity

of feminism does not come from "hashtag feminism," as Michelle Goldberg wrote, but from

the white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal roots that still grip our modern reality.

Hashtag feminists are already doing the difficult work of building coalitions across

identities, realizing "that the only way we can avoid toxicity is to actually end white

supremacy, settler colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy" (Kaba and Smith 2014).

Liminality and Intra-Agency

Having looked closely at contention within online feminism, we can now use the

concepts of intra-agency and liminality to better understand the nature of affinity, online

sociality, and virtual space. I have briefly discussed agency in Chapter One in terms of how

we reflect on and negotiate the self. Here I would like to discuss how human agency is

expanded or limited by technology. In Jessica Brophy's article "Developing a Corporeal

Cyberfeminism: Beyond Cyberutopia," she refutes the idea of a disembodied cyberutopia

and suggests an alternate form of embodiment that calls on agency to describe how users act

and understand their online spaces. By applying Brophy's concepts of intra-agency and

liminality to online feminism I hope to conclude exactly why the feminist revolution will be "the feminist revolution will be tweeted, hashtagged, Vined and Instagrammed" (Irwin 2013).

Brophy uses the concept of intra-agency to describe the "interactions between the agency of apparatuses and humans" (2010). For example, a computer is an apparatus that limits and enables users, who have their own agency within that system. Users are to some extent free to do as they please, but they must still abide the limits of computing and the interface of whatever technology they are using. Similarly, and as I've discussed before, the Internet and the platforms it hosts have their own intra-agency in this system, limiting and enabling what users can build and do on them. Likewise, the computer's agency is limited by what the user uses it to do—it cannot function outside of human commands. When it comes to the act going online, "the performative act of 'entering' the Internet is an articulation, an intra-agential experience sensitive to 'the contrary requirements, to the exigencies, to the pressures of conflicting agencies where none of them is really in command'" (Brophy 2010). Echoing Butler, going online is a performative expression of intra-agency that relies on the give and take between apparatus and user. Brophy uses the word "liminality" to describe "the bodily experience that denies the false dichotomy of leaving the body behind; it is the simultaneous experience of intra-agency among multiple agents" (2010). These agents can be computers, phones, and other devices, layered on top of the Internet as its own agent, as well as each individual platform a user interacts with. They all come together to form liminality, where the users agency is shaped on multiple, overlapping levels. One should not take this to mean that these agents are always empowering or enabling in terms of agency—to do so would be too simple. According to

Brophy, liminality should be understood as "the bodily experience of intra-agency, which includes the agency of the apparatus to limit and enable certain phenomena, including processes of self-representation" (2010). It seems that between our performances of identity and our performances of intra-agency, modes of self-representation are certainly not unlimited.

Unfortunately, Brophy does little to ground her theories of intra-agency and liminality in actual practice, which is what I will try to do in this section. Memes, hashtags, and all the metatextual content of online feminist communities represent the diverse products of technological intra-agency, as these are not direct results of human creation. These elements are created within a liminal system, shaped by the platforms used and the individuals who operate within them. A meme or a hashtag, for example, is by no means a natural way to express a thought or make a criticism, but the fact that it is often used to do so speaks to the compelling nature of online content. It has both the clever, analytical substance provided by the user in a form that can be easily constructed, distributed, and shared using a computer. It even lends itself to absurd levels of meta critique, as I sit on my computer writing about essays that reference online articles about tweets about feminism, how many agents are involved in this liminality? In this thesis, for example, every single individual referenced, every individual they referenced or quoted, and every platform on which their ideas were published, come together to represent the intra-agency of hundreds of unique agents. This gives us an idea of the real complexity of the digital and how it "performs the work of identifying continuities" as I first defined it in Chapter One. Indeed, every liminal act, from blogging to retweeting or simply reading a post, belies "the impermeability of our dualisms" (Brophy 2010). We are constantly crossing thresholds: inside and outside, online

and off, technology and self. This idea of crossing thesholds speaks to the very definition of the virtual that I put forth earlier, as a sense of potentiality and possibility. The many interactions between users, platforms, and apparatuses are the embodiment of this potentiality and their affinities toward each other.

Affinity, how users relate to one another and form identity based on shared experiences, can be seen as the core of online sociality as it applies to feminism. As identities are formed and changed through relationships and interactions with others, affinity represents the multiplicity of ways that people connect with each other online, which is ultimately what Chapters Two and Three describe. Recalling that online media produces and reproduces the actual, affinity works with these qualities to create what I have described in this chapter—a change in the definition of feminism that takes advantage of the pliability of online media, organized through affinity as it is enacted on the Internet. If we think of the Internet as a nebulous space of potentiality and blurred borders, as I described in Chapter One, we can see liminality as a descriptor of this potentiality. Liminality is the bodily experience of the virtual and the performance of going online. I have described the gap between the real and the virtual as a reconfiguration of the binarism between nature and culture—liminality represents this gap. It does not fill the gap; rather it describes the interconnected networks of intra-agency that connect them. Intra-agency, then, is a descriptor of the relationship between the sociality I have described in Chapter One (and reproduced here in terms of affinity) and virtual space itself (which can be represented through liminality). It combines the physical apparatuses of technology and the virtual spaces they enable with the complexity of human sociality and agency. It also combines the mutually constitutive nature of sociality and platform with the relational formation of self,

granting agency to all of these elements and acknowledging that they are not necessarily contradictory. Users act on each other and media, changing both in turn, as media and platforms are simultaneously acting on them.

As for why this matters to feminism, Brophy claims that acknowledging liminality "is important to feminist scholars in terms of recognizing the constant experience of the in-between, of torsion and of crossing thresholds" (2010). Just as Butler puts forth the idea that all gender is performative, Brophy claims that "the evident and experienced liminality of cyberspace recognizes that all experiences cross thresholds, and limiting liberation to liminal spaces like the Internet thus unnecessarily delimits the possibilities of transformation in other ('real') spaces" (2010). Put more simply, all online experience crosses thresholds into the "real," so to argue that liberation efforts taking place online do not constitute action or make real life change is inaccurate and unnecessary. All liminal acts cross thresholds, in this case the threshold between the virtual and the real. This is why the contention and radicalization of online feminism is so important—it is leading to the radicalization of mainstream feminism as a whole due to the liminal nature of its performance. Feminist work online has as much of an effect on our offline lives as it does our online ones and has the power to change the very definition of feminism across all thresholds. This is also why it is so tempting for some feminists to reject online feminism, and thereby reject its influence on what they see as authentic feminism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed several of the major points of contention among online feminists, including toxicity of its communities and the process of redefining the

movement and its ownership. Rage, often understood as a negative emotion that needs to be domesticated, is at the center of notions of toxicity. In analyzing how "wages of rage" reproduce an emotional economy that fuels call out culture, I suggest that rage can indeed be a constructive emotion and powerful motivator for change. As Valenti and Martin wrote in their #FemFuture report, "there is no one feminist movement. Instead, there are many intersectional movements operating in tandem with much to learn from one another. This multiplicity is not only okay, but healthy and inevitable" (2014). Although it is true that feminism can no longer be solely in the hands of only the most privileged women, this does not mean there is no room for them to speak. As Loza put it, "if feminists like … Goldberg want a place in this brave new #FemFuture, they will have to learn to see the potential of anger" (2014). These sites of contention and radicalization within feminism also make apparent the underlying interactions of identity, intra-agency, and liminality that inform our digital lives. Combining affinity with liminality and intra-agency allows us to construct a fuller understanding of how all of the interactions and communities described in this thesis fit into these complicated relationships between sociality and the virtual.

Conclusions: Theorizing Feminist Futures

The Road So Far

In order to understand online feminism and how it serves its users, I have explored the nature of being social online. With the rise of technology and the Internet, humans now lead lives that are simultaneously virtual and corporeal. As anthropologists, we must understand how these two axes of sociality differ, but also how they converge. Digging into the messy reality of online life, I have explored how new new media has created a mutually constitutive relationship between user and platform, where all users are producers, limited by the construction of the platforms they operate within. The user's understanding of self and performance of identity online contribute to their function as producers, as they reproduce an embodied objectification of the self rather than an independent, disembodied fabrication. I revisit these concepts in my fourth chapter, where I discuss how the user's agency interacts with that of the technological tools they use, creating an experience of liminality, which greatly affects the way users understand the self and limits our modes of self representation.

Applying these concepts to my findings in the landscape of online feminism, I explore how women bring their lived experiences online and engage with the virtual to leverage change in their lives. Firstly, women and young girls go online to find validation and support, to be reassured that they are not alone, the oppression they experience is real, and that they are loved and have value. This manifests in the playful and humorous nature of online feminism, demonstrated by the creation and distribution of memes and memetic humor, as well as the tendency toward storytelling as a method of creating and sharing

knowledge. Secondly, online feminism functions to educate and provide access to feminist knowledge. Users go online to seek and share information about feminism and in the process expose others to feminist concepts. This leads to both individual growth and powerful discourse-wide change toward feminist norms and assumptions. In this way, people are introduced to feminism who might otherwise not be, including people from communities that do not historically have access to academia. Online feminism is a significant and valid source of feminist critique and analysis. Finally, online feminism can also be a divisive and uncomfortable space, where its goals and ownership are heavily contested. Many users are afraid to speak for fear of abuse from other feminists, while others criticize a movement they see as not being inclusive or intersectional. Still others dismiss online feminism as ineffective, unable to create concrete results in the "real" world.

It might seem that my characterizations are at odds with one another. How can spaces of such contention and dissatisfaction ever be the supportive, accessible, and life-changing communities I have described? As popular novelty Twitter account @feministhulk once said in reference to simultaneously supporting both queer and feminist challenges to institutional marriage, "HULK VAST, CONTAIN MULTITUDES." This play on the famous Walt Whitman poem is a surprisingly accurate descriptor of online feminism. In trying to pin down what online feminism does, I have found a complex network of intra-agency, negotiations of the overlap of virtual and actual, and multitudes of experience that cannot always be neatly integrated or reconciled. These are spaces where users are both validated and challenged, content creators and consumers, in constant conversation with one another, learning, growing, and changing all the time. Online feminism's dynamism is perhaps its most important feature, and that which makes it so effective. Because we live in

a world of media convergence, it is increasingly the case that there can be no feminism that does not include online feminism. It challenges how we understand others and ourselves, how we do our activism, and how new generations learn and shape the world.
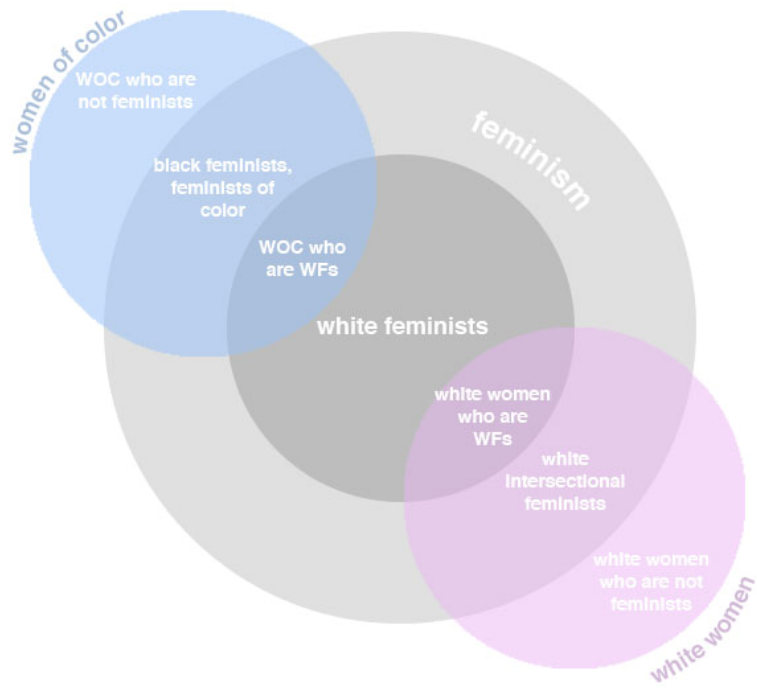
A New Cyborg Manifesto

More than 20 years ago, Donna Haraway published her iconic "Cyborg Manifesto", describing a future where our humanity and our technology are mutually constitutive, and identity politics are tossed aside in favor of coalitions formed through affinity. Gifted with incredible foresight, her words are even more relevant than now than she could have imagined. In many ways, we are living the social reality she describes, all of us cyborgs, "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism," whose liberation rests on "the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility" (1991). In constructing a mutual consciousness, online feminists are made up of the matter of fiction and lived experience, changing what counts as authentic women's experience (1991). They live the imaginative politics they want to see online, pushing the fringes of their lived experiences and bringing them back to the virtual. Online feminism is thus a "condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (1991). Their border war, as Haraway describes, is still one against the traditions of racist and male-dominated capitalism, of progress narratives, of appropriations of nature as resources for the production of culture, and of reproduction of the self from reflections of the other. These are the battles online feminists fight every day, as hybrids of technology and human beings, where the stakes encompass "the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination" (1991). Her

juxtaposition of the cyborg occupying words that are ambiguously "natural" and "crafted" is relevant in many senses—the tendency to see our online lives as crafted and offline lives as natural; our construction of womanhood as natural and identity politics as crafted; the dominant appropriation of the natural to justify oppressions that are crafted; our innate sense of identity and self as natural rather than crafted. This is the cyborg world that online feminism inhabits.
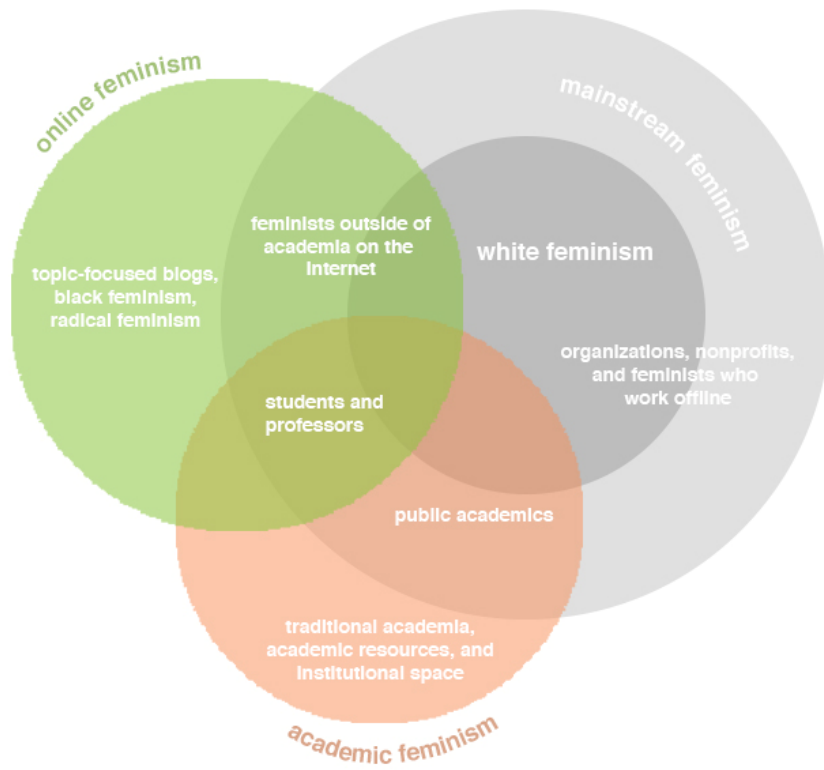
In many ways, however, we have not realized our full potential—we are not cyborgs. We cling to tradition even in our activism, resisting contention and fearing discomfort. We are individualistic, and still imagine ourselves as fully formed, closed entities. In a cyborg mythos, we are not afraid of partial identities and contradictions. We do not struggle to see from both perspectives at once because we know that "each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point" (1991). We seek to break down clean distinctions and acknowledge the intersections of our identities. We embrace the possibilities of these breakdowns because "it is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities" (1991). We are united in our struggle and affinities, but do not seek to erase or minimize the multitudes and intersections of experience we contain. We work toward many goals at once, we do not prioritize, and we do not compromise. We protect each other based on relationships formed on mutual respect and admiration. We know that these relationships are the foundation of our activism, our work, and our lives, seeing each other and our value as individuals rather than as tools to work with. Our lived bodily realities and virtual realities are one in the same. We are far from fiction; we are incomplete, constantly under construction, and relentlessly political.
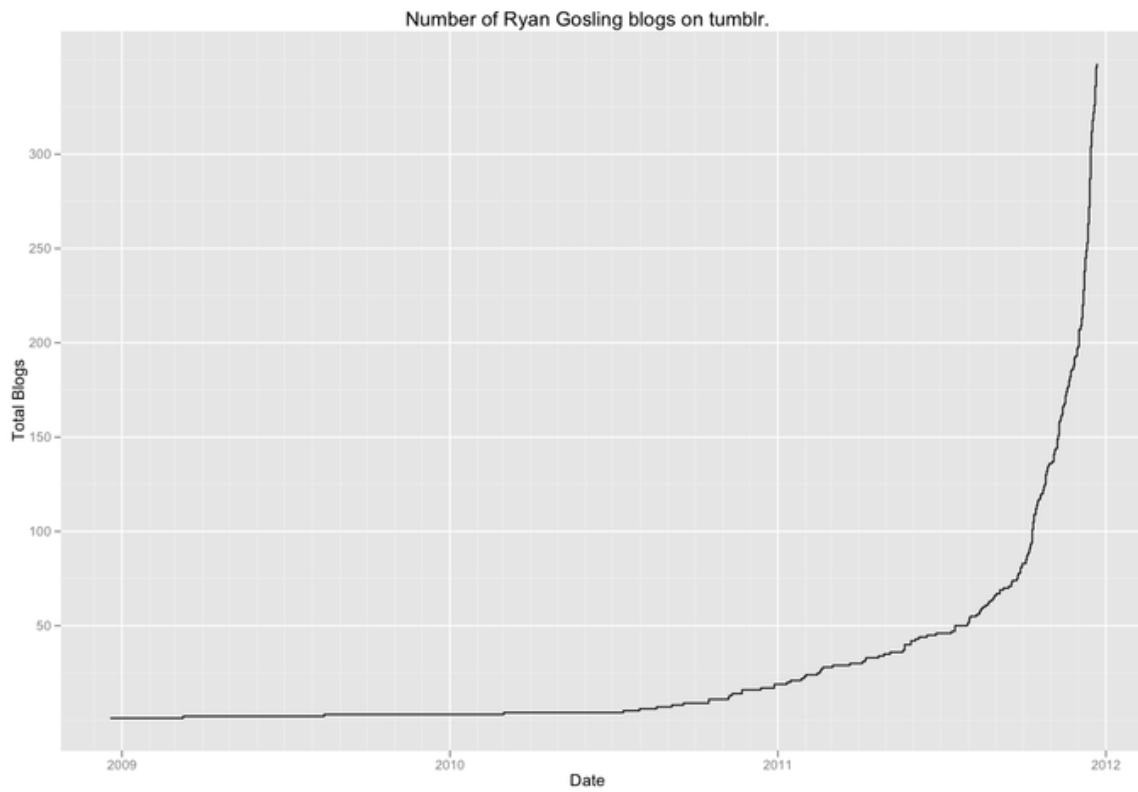
Appendix A

1.

2.

3.

Hey girl.

Derrida thinks language is fluid enough to break the gender divide, but nothing will split us apart.
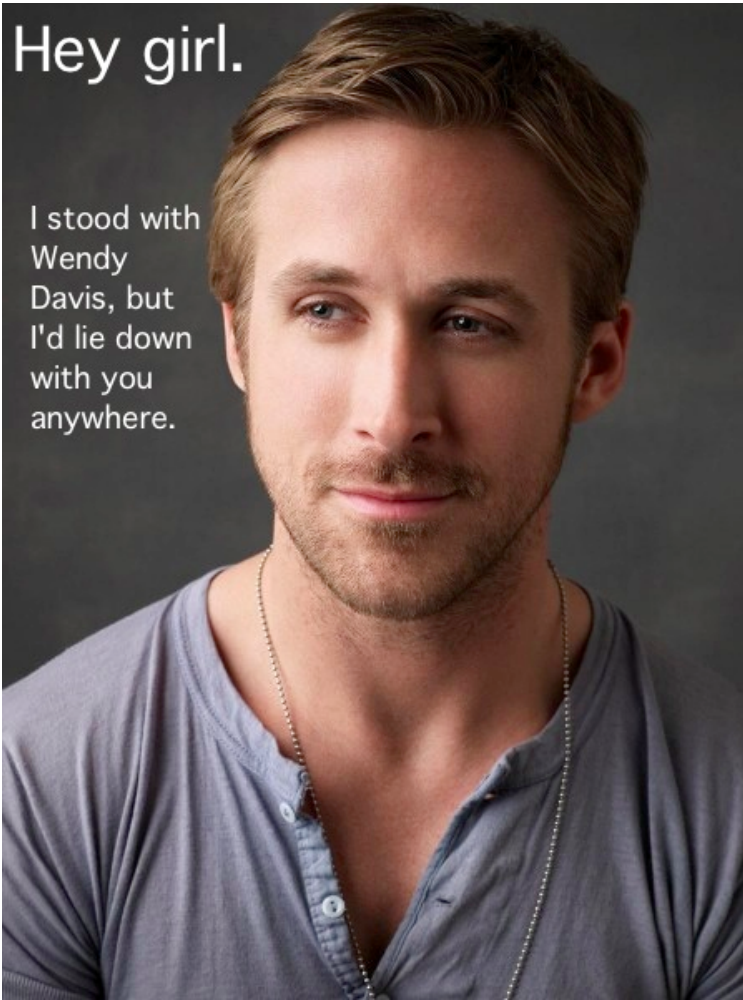
4.

Number of Ryan Gosling blogs on tumblr.

5.

Hey girl.

I stood with Wendy Davis, but I'd lie down with you anywhere.

6.

Hey girl.

It's pretty cool that Caitlin Flanagan has a working time machine so that she can keep bringing us archaic missives about female sexuality and the expectant role of women in romantic relationships, but couldn't she put it to better use by, like, trying to keep Freaks and Geeks from being cancelled?

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