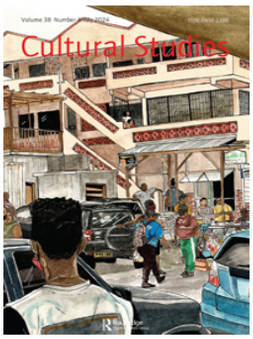

Cultural Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcus20

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To cite this article: Akane Kanai & Julia Coffey (2024) Dissonance and defensiveness: orienting affects in online feminist cultures, Cultural Studies, 38:4, 645-667, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2023.2183971

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2183971

Published online: 05 Mar 2023.

CULTURAL STUDIES
2024, VOL. 38, NO. 4, 645–667
https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2183971

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Dissonance and defensiveness: orienting affects in online feminist cultures

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ABSTRACT

Are there certain shared feelings that orient contemporary feminists? And what does it mean to feel like a feminist now, at a time when digital networks and media culture significantly shape the conditions for what feminism 'is' (Banet-Weiser 2018)? This paper considers how digital culture, as a crucial but potentially disorienting site of feminist encounter and contestation, may reshape norms of feminist feeling, and what feminist feeling is used to do. Feminists have long understood feeling as an 'orienting device' (Ahmed 2006). in the question of how subjects come to know the world and situate themselves in it. Feminism itself has been associated with a 'willfulness' creating dissident subjectivities moving *against* the grain of prevailing patriarchal gender norms. Following Ahmed's queer phenomenology where feeling is theorized as an 'orientation' towards objects, this paper considers how the affective infrastructures and dynamics of digital culture orient and draw boundaries for feminists along particular lines. We explore self-identifying feminists' accounts of learning, interaction and deliberation *as feminists* within digital environments, suggesting that what it means to *be* feminist is significantly determined by what it means to *feel* feminist. While digital culture makes feminism more 'accessible' to many, we suggest that the commercialized architectures and rhythms of digital culture complicate and intensify the politics of emotion connected to differences and histories of power relations within feminism.

KEYWORDS Digital feminism; affect; intersectional conflict; social media; whiteness; queer identities

Introduction: orienting the feminist self

Feminist theorists of emotion and epistemology have long identified affect, feeling and emotion as a means of sensing and apprehending the world, and situating the self in it (Ahmed 2004b, Cvetkovich 1992, Hemmings 2005, Hochschild 1983, Jaggar 1989, Pedwell 2014). While there is no singular

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story of feminism across differing positions and experiences, feminist efforts to theorize affect have associated feminism with emotions that position the self *against* the grain of conventional worldviews. Feminism has been described as formed through affective 'dissonance' with given epistemologies (Hemmings 2012), and a 'wilfulness' that refuses to follow the flow of others' logics (Ahmed 2017). As a crucial mechanism for the circulation of feminist ideas and discussion, particularly for young people, (Jackson 2018, Keller 2016), digital culture is now a central means for feminism's 'wilful subjects' to find each other. And yet, the structures, textures, and rhythms of online sociality may be profoundly *disorienting*. The navigation of digital culture is often described spatially rather than in a linear sense: jumping from platform to platform, getting lost in a 'rabbit hole' of links and information. But while conceptualized as clear, separate spaces, platforms may work to collapse social contexts (Marwick and Boyd 2011), producing conundrums for the 'reading' of situations, while the rapid responses demanded by commercial 'attention economies' (Fairchild 2007) discourage ambivalence, or slow, considered reflection. What implications does digital culture as a set of disparate, yet politically aligned spaces have for how feminism is navigated, known and felt?

This paper considers how the felt experience of digital culture engenders shifts in feminist relationality, both entrenching and offering new ways of feeling one's way into, and navigating the world, through feminism. In this article, we explore self-identifying feminists' accounts of learning, interaction and deliberation *as feminists* within digital environments. These accounts indicate that what it means to *be* feminist is entangled with what it means to *feel* feminist. Drawing on Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology, we understand feeling as an 'orientation' to follow particular paths or 'lines':

> Collectives come to have ''lines'' in the sense of being modes of following: to inhabit a collective might be to follow a line, as a line that is already given in advance (2006, p. 119).

How, then, might feeling, structured by digital architectures and dynamics, and simultaneously by experiences of gender, class, sexuality and race, orient a feminist collective along particular lines. Here, we build a case for understanding how digital culture complicates and intensifies questions of identity, difference and corresponding politics of emotion already inhering within feminism. First, we outline how feminist and critical race scholarship has identified both the rupturing and regulatory politics of feeling within feminism that corresponding to hierarchies of power and position. Noting that digital culture has long been a gendered and racialized arena, we suggest that its contemporary architectures and dynamics as a capitalist identity machine intensify the felt riskiness of political encounters for oppressed and marginalized people, even as feminism appears more 'accessible' as a form of knowledge. We then consider the significance and dynamics of the

'knotty' textures of feeling (Coleman 2016) shaped by digital culture in regulating and producing feminist practices. We retell our participants' negotiations of the 'politics of emotion' and 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1983, Kanai 2019) structuring exchange in online feminist spaces – examining how certain feelings – such as feminist 'fire' and righteousness – may both propel action but act defensively as a 'shield'. These affects produce surfaces, boundaries, and lines to follow in formations that both shift and retrench particular ways of doing gender, race, sexuality. We explore what they can tell us about the orientation of feminist subjectivity, practice and engagement more broadly in a networked age.

Knowing and feeling feminism

The terms 'affect', 'emotion' and 'feeling' are not used synonymously in scholarship. Often, 'affect' has been more associated with physiological intensities, ruptures, and flows, while 'emotion' has been more associated with the social codification of feeling (Wetherell 2012). However, feminist work has long sought to emphasize the *connections* rather than clear divisions between the discursive and embodied nature of sensing and apprehending the world, the approach that we adopt in this article. Given that 'whether something feels good or bad always already involves a process of reading' (Ahmed 24, p.6), affect, then, as we use it here, draws on feminist frameworks that insist on seeing patterns of power and position within movements and articulation of feeling. According to Wetherell, a focus on the practices associated with affect 'focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do' (2012, p. 4). In analysing the intimacy of social media culture, Dobson *et al*. (2018) similarly advocate for a broad approach highlighting the shared focus on the socially structured nature of feeling by feminist theories of emotional capital and queer theories of affect, drawing on Illouz (2007) and Berlant and Warner (1998).

Feelings show us both how we are placed in relation to others, and often how we feel we *ought* to be placed (Hochschild 1983). Anger, for example, may show a gap between what we feel we are owed and what is meted out to us, as Hochschild argues: particularly in relation to practices of emotional labour, we 'overpay' and 'underpay' feeling in function of our social status and location (Hochschild 1983). Drawing on this work, we see affect as an 'orienting device' (Ahmed 2006), in the question of how subjects come to know the world and *feel* themselves into place.

It follows that in contexts where the invocation of happiness may work to defend a certain gendered status quo, feminists are often figured as 'killjoys', or 'killing happiness' in questioning the 'correct' feelings attached to certain paths or positions (Ahmed 2010). Feminists are 'willful' in the sense of having a 'will of their own'; they are cast as obstinate for refusing to be swayed by

dominant forms of reasoning or persuasion (Ahmed 2017). For Hemmings, it is in the sense of affective 'dissonance' where the potential for feminist solidarity lies. Hemmings (2012) describes 'affective dissonance' as a sense that there is some kind of gap or mismatch between one's ontology and given epistemology, or between one's experience and the valuing of knowledge gained from that experience. Drawing on Probyn (1993), Hemmings argues that rather than feminist solidarity lying in the marginalized or oppressed *self,* or one's own identity, such potential lies in the sense of an affective 'otherwise', leading to an alternative position in discourse.

In thinking through the possibilities of 'dissonance', we ought then to consider the objects – and subjects – in relation to which we are positioned, and the lines or paths we may subsequently follow. Ahmed (2010) famously analyses happiness, as a 'wish' deposited in certain places, requiring bodies to move in proximity towards particular objects. Ahmed's phenomenological framework mandates the consideration of how our feelings may draw us away, or place us in proximity and distance to others. Such a framework is crucial for feminist theorization, as detached from an analysis of their relationality, feelings might otherwise not tell us much about the politics of what they do. To take the example of the widespread injunction to 'self-esteem' and 'confidence' we see in contemporary culture (Orgad and Gill 2022), affects nominally held together under the sign of 'confidence' might arrange bodies in quite different relations. Feminist scholars who critique neoliberal advertising culture inviting women to 'invest' in their own confidence, might find themselves imploring more junior colleagues with minoritized identities to have more 'confidence' in themselves in applying for jobs or promotions.[1] While both instances require the inwards directionality of 'confidence', such affects might effect different relations. In another example, the significance of feminist anger might change depending on the objects in its orbit. Feminist anger might be celebrated when directed 'outwards', such as in the case of bringing a privileged male sexual harasser, such as Harvey Weinstein, to justice. But such anger might be received more queasily – or as 'flaming' and 'monstrous' (Ahmed 2017) when it erupts between feminists with different positions in online discussions (see also Coffey and Kanai 2021).

Affective dissonance may be felt in relation to different objects. Relatedly, differences of history and experience mean that affect may not orient feminist subjects in the same direction. We draw attention to the differing affects experienced by those who otherwise occupy minoritized positions in discourse but who may feel affinities with feminist thought. As Lâm (1994) points out, one might feel 'foreign' in feminism, *while* feminist, due to geopolitical and racialized hierarchies. Lâm describes how such hierarchies may operate in transitory moments of feeling, such as when, in the New York

subway, Lâm's explicit articulation of dependency on an African American male acquaintance for her safety is repugnant for her white feminist associate. It feels 'natural' for this white woman to deem Lâm's gratitude, expressed towards an acquaintance categorized foremost as 'male' for her, as backward and antifeminist. As such, the white feminist's refusal of vulnerability is presented as orthodox. This felt affective authority attaches to white bodies and ways of knowing; as Lâm observes, oppression *and its critique* 'remain attached to white persons, white theories, and white languages' (1994, p. 872). Such a legacy seeps into contemporary feminist power relations where Western subjects are inculcated to presumptively *feel* the 'authority to enunciate rules' (1994, p. 972) – indeed, *feeling rules* (Hochschild 1983) – in relation to how one must feel as a feminist. With its own power relations, feminism may instantiate certain 'right' ways to feel, and right ways to orient the self. For this reason, our article focuses on righteousness as a 'clue' to indicating hierarchies and positioning within feminism for our participants, as we go on to explore later.

Accordingly, while we hold onto Hemmings' view of the potential of feminism as an affective break with given ways of knowing, we also see the differentiated *regulation* of feeling and subjectivity associated with feminism and its coalitional politics. As Ahmed writes, drawing on Audre Lorde, 'The woman of color must let go of her anger in order for the white woman to move on. Some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops; they disturb the promise of happiness' (2010, p. 584). For Srila Roy (2017), discussing the 'NGOisation' of feminism in India, it is imperative that feminists acknowledge the 'will to empower' (Cruikshank 1999) that is always present within feminism. Roy argues that if the notion of subjective transformation – affectively, discursively, or otherwise – is close to the heart of feminism's aims, such dynamics are not innocent. Feminism has never been 'pure', or even 'purely radical', but has been subject to its own power relations, such as those of caste, class, and position as subject of value within transnational neoliberal economies (Roy 2017). Class and race, as Lâm suggests, may position some as 'naturally' authoritative in outlining norms of feminist practice. Critiques of feminist governmentality have been prevalent in relation to the characterization of 'neoliberal feminist' (Rottenberg 2014), 'popular feminist' (Banet-Weiser 2018), or 'postfeminist' media culture (Gill 2007), all of which explicitly foreground the marketized nature of the feminism such cultures produce. Feminism is narrowed into feelings of 'aspiration', 'positivity' and 'self-belief' that further invite participation in an unequal marketplace (Gill and Kanai 2018). However, we still do not know exactly how these identified affective parameters of 'popular feminism' operate and speak to the conditions of digital culture specifically.

Politics and subjectivity in digital culture

We suggest digital culture intensifies and complicates the long history of the affective politics of feminism. As Brock (2011, p. 1088) argues, the 'Western internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains White, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual and Christian culture through its content'. For some time, scholars have indicated the ways in which race and gender are often reified and objectified in commercial digital spaces as things that can be 'interacted', chosen, remixed and cut up (Nakamura 2008, White 2006). Digital spaces also reproduce existing power relations while often purporting to be more 'neutral' or 'free' spaces. In 1998, writing on feminist online spaces, Gajjala observed the productivity of presumptions of shared womanhood that could regulate entry into what notionally appeared to be equal, feminist online spaces:

> 'Other' women entering these women-centred e-spaces are required to reshape and reconstruct their identities and discursive modes of expression to conform to a specific notion of 'woman' in order to be able to participate within such online forums (1998, p. 117).

In the classed and racialized 'Anglo-American hegemony of the internet (Gajjala 1998, p. 121), Gajjala observes, citing Alarcon (1990) that one might not necessarily become a woman in simple opposition to men, but also in opposition to other women. In such conditions, Gajjala highlights how presumptions of free entry in themselves may create boundaries. Such boundaries create expectations of conduct and speech that then require subjects to reshape themselves into particular frames of commonality, highlighting certain forms of unfreedom (e.g. 'patriarchy') while leaving others unsaid (e.g. Western hegemony). With the desire for solidarity, feminist online spaces may be centrally implicated in the cultivation of uniformity.

About two decades on, we see that the commercial appropriation of the Internet has become further entrenched. The subjectivity of the free (white, masculine) individual contractor has thus shaped the production of social space online, creating further risks for those wishing to contest existing forms of domination. As dominant social media platforms have encouraged more 'open' discussion and connection in public fora, feminist discussion is easily 'searchable' via hashtags for those seeking to learn more about feminism, and those seeking to abuse and vilify feminists, and non-dominant people in online public space. The risks of abuse for people of colour, non-binary people and women (Lawson 2018) have often meant that more private, membership-specific online spaces have been required for feminist discussion (Kanai and McGrane 2021). The contingent safety of social media is thus premised on the ability to know one's 'lane'.

Social media culture is additionally highly affective in ways that compound risk. Such identity-focused dynamics have been described as producing a 'social media agon' that produces further risks for marginalized subjects; a machine for 'differencing' rather than attending to difference (Elerding 2018). The culture of speed associated with digital movements, as well as the 'infoglut' of sources that individuals must contend with (Andrejevic 2013), all create pressurized dynamics for carefully engaging in difficult conversations. Ideas circulate on the basis of likes, shares, and reactions, in ways that tend to produce 'winners' and 'losers' in terms of visibility (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). These online dynamics of division and personalization further complicate the experience of encountering knowledge through deliberative processes, as well as intensify the inequality of knowledge production. Indeed, the internet, while speeding up the circulation of knowledge, may facilitate the 'plagiarism' and appropriation of the ideas of Black women (Bailey and Trudy 2018), as well as people of colour more broadly, even as public spaces notionally facilitate public participation. Similarly, as Tynes *et al*. (2016) illustrate in relation to #BlackLivesMatter, while certain protests may be increasingly visible online, the centrality of Black *women's* labour to organizing this movement is often erased.

In relation to feminism and digital culture, scholars have thus focused on the activist potential of online spaces and networks, or its potential to distribute feminist knowledge (Mendes *et al*. 2019, Powell 2015, Rentschler 2014). Feminist scholars have also rightly focused on the misogyny that feminists – or simply women who have taken up 'too much space' – face in online fora. This focus highlights feminism primarily in terms of its *oppositional* and activist character; to be feminist is *against* the status quo. But following Noble and Tynes' (2016) direction to consider the intersectional dynamics of the internet, we suggest, that digital culture has a more complex and ambivalent relation to the feminist politics of emotion, particularly if differences of gender and race are taken seriously. As Daniels (2016) argues, there is still a dearth of systematic critique of whiteness in contemporary digital feminist activism. For Daniels, the common espousal and popular takeup of simple liberal feminist ideals such as #BanBossy online falls into the suppression of non-white experience. We add that online feminism is cannot only be considered public activism; for girls and young people in particular, digital culture is viewed as a *pedagogical* resource in relation to questions of power and identity across gender, sexuality and race (Byron *et al*. 2019, Keller 2016, Jackson 2018, Rogan and Budgeon 2018). And given the wider risks of publicly engaging in feminism, much of feminist engagement occurs in deliberation in private or membership-restricted spaces (Clark-Parsons 2018).

As Gill (2007) notes, feminism, for many, is a highly mediated experience; what feminism 'is', is often determined through the imagination of public

culture. In this context, as digital culture becomes one of the most accessible repositories of critical knowledge about gender, race, and identity for diverse young people in the West, we argue it is ever more crucial to attend to the question of how digital culture affectively reshapes feminist orientations to others.

Methods

We argue that it is of particular importance, in theorizing affect in digital culture, to pay attention to the everyday embodied texture of experience in feminist environments (see Coffey and Kanai 2021), as the body is key to the affective experience of social events. Wilson (2015) challenges feminist scholarship to pay attention to the significance of biological processes, in particular, entanglements between 'gut feelings' in the stomach, subjectivities, and socialities. Accordingly, for this project on deliberation in feminist digital cultures, we sought to centre these 'gut' feelings through methods that involved participants' sharing of and reflecting on experiences in physical face-to-face settings, and sought to create intimate small group environments allowing such reflection. As Mendes *et al*. (2019) argue, while much work on digital feminism has focused on separate activist campaigns on platforms like Twitter, it is important to go 'behind the scenes' to obtain understandings of participants' experiences beyond visible social media output.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Monash University Ethics committee, project ID: 21279. Our small-scale pilot project involved two participatory workshops in Melbourne (6 participants) and Newcastle (4 participants), and follow up interviews. Six participants were in their twenties (21–27), and four were aged 42–66, meaning the participants at times spoke across different feminist 'generations'. One participant identified as non-binary; the others identified as 'women'. Four participants were people of colour, and six were white, but in this article, we also use the racial and ethnic self-identifications used by participants themselves which did not necessarily correspond to these terms. They were recruited by responding to an online invitation shared on social media where the criteria for inclusion being that participants identified as feminists who are active in digital feminist spaces.

Our focus on participants' feelings, feelings that they were often unable to share in online public spaces, meant following participants' own framings of experiences. Workshops were structured openly, asking input on the 'positive', the 'negative', and the 'difficult' in feminist dialogue online through group discussion. We employed exercises such as using 'embodied responses to conflict' cards to allow each participant to document and then share uncomfortable feelings in relation to difficult online social contexts: physical sensations such as to 'flee' ('run away run away run away') and heart palpitations (see Coffey and Kanai 2021). In workshops, whilst participants would

occasionally refer to individual platforms, they tended to couch their experiences in terms of general 'social media'. Whilst referring to platforms, they moved quickly between talking about incidents in online popular culture, accounts of experience related by friends, and different platforms, indicating a fluid moving between platforms, news, and the remediation of such encounters through friends and acquaintances. What organized their accounts of feminist dialogue were more the *affective* outlines of conflict and discussion – feelings of ambivalence, fear, stress and curiosity – that travelled across platforms and spaces.

Participants were also invited to also take part in a one-on-one follow-up interview with online diary and to audio-record responses to conflict and screenshot examples which 'triggered' an embodied or emotional response. In terms of this textual data, examples from Facebook online groups emerged from all participants, although examples also ranged from Instagram, Reddit, Weibo, Twitter which were analysed and cross-checked by both authors using thematic coding techniques (Guest *et al*. 2011). Given the small group sample of this study, and participants' cross-platform and accounts of everyday experience that blended online and offline, this article does not theorize feminist deliberation in terms of particular social media architecture, regulation or governance, as do many scholars focusing on discrete feminist activist campaigns (e.g. Mendes *et al*. 2019, Trott 2022). Rather, we focus on the 'impressions' (Ahmed 2006) left on participants through their experiences. We explore participants' illustration of the dynamic and difficult textures of feeling forming feminist subjectivity, in a contemporary culture in which *much* of feminist encounter is determined through access to social media. In the following examples we track how the ways knotty textures of feeling worked in regulating and producing feminist subjectivities, orienting feminist practice and encounter in particular ways.

Feminist fire: the line of righteousness

We begin with the question of how participants characterized 'feeling feminist' more broadly. Participants noted a kind of feminist 'fire' corresponding to an orientation *against* existing structures. This was also entangled with the sense of standing on the 'right' side of history; a sense of needing to stand up for what was 'right'. Kim, a white woman in her 50s, spoke of this 'righteousness' with humour, observing the feeling of feminist fire over her lifetime:

> When I was an undergrad, I told my mother that she was a liberal feminist and had nothing to do with radical feminism and blah, blah, blah … a lot of the stuff that happens at uni and around that age is a hugely important part [of feminist life] … But also I don't think you want to be in that mode forever, because it is

> really bolshie and I don't think it really understands how entitled it is. Even though it's saying, 'you're entitled', it's quite entitled [itself].

Reflecting on why perhaps this was a recurring element of feminist relationality, Kim's comments suggest this 'bolshiness' was perhaps an ontological element of becoming feminist – of being activated – the 'wilfulness' that Ahmed (2017) has so poetically described as feminism coming to life. And this wilfulness, Kim mused, could be pleasurable. Describing the feeling when a feminist woman would resist the demands from unengaged men to explain feminism to them, Kim mentioned reading a comedic article where a woman demanded payment in return for reassuring men's egos (via 'Matreon', a twist on the crowdfunding patronage platform, 'Patreon'). She found the puncturing of this fictive but realistic male ego funny and affirming – but classed this also as the pleasure of being seen to be right:

> It just gave me a little bit of a thrill of the righteousness of it, one of those feelings of - *delight* …

This delight of righteousness was abundantly available in digital contexts, via humorous circulatable content, or in the witnessing or participating in interactions such as the public 'takedown' as genre of online entertainment. Jessie, a young Chinese woman from Hong Kong recognized the pleasure of seeing a sexist commenter being subjected to criticism. This commenter was a man who had criticized girls for sporting tattoos, often seen as a no-no in Chinese culture, Jessie said. When other people who were on the same thread on Weibo posted that he was an 'idiot', she noted the thrill of the collective witnessing of the takedown:

> If you call somebody an idiot, it's a little bit rude. But I have to tell you that … I feel *good* when I saw the people say he was an idiot … Because some mean comments really pissed me off. And then other people say this comment was idiot … oh my god, it's like, *yeah!* That's what I feel about it.

Jessie balanced out the incivility of calling someone an idiot with the pleasure of seeing someone who was clearly 'mean' and sexist being criticized as part of a collective online witnessing.

Helen, a self-identified Jewish woman in her 50s described similar thrills of righteous provocation. Having been an early adopter and used bulletin board systems and online chat relay in the 90s, she mentioned the mixed emotions of engaging in debate with a (male-presenting) person who had made sexist conversations about women's football online.

> I was needling him at this time. I could feel it in me going, *oh, yeah, this is 1996* … I try not to [do this] now, because, oh, god, I don't have the energy, but: *okay, you asked me this? I said this*. Very debate team … So, the fact that I could give it as good as the person is going back, I'm like, *I can do this all day, buddy*. That kind of mentality.

Helen was pleased with her competency in jousting with this opponent. This feeling was enlivening, energizing: she could 'do this all day'. The 'debate team' reference encapsulated both the sporting nature of this 'needling'. These thrills could be felt in the body harkening back to the memory of these competitive, masculinist early cultures of the internet in which online spaces were positioned as terrains to explore and boundaries to overcome; and gender conceived as a choice that could be voluntarily taken on or off at will (Nakamura 2008). Yet we note this was not a straightforwardly amusing pastime for her. As we had asked participants to document any online experiences of conflict they had witnessed or participated in, to discuss during interviews, Helen decided to engage in this conversation for longer than she generally would at this point in her life. If she hadn't been participating in this project, Helen noted that she 'wouldn't have gone this far' but she wanted to explore how it felt for her. Unfortunately:

> It just felt like such a waste of time. It used to be you would feel good for being right – or that feeling in the early parts of the internet where you were like, *yeah, I made a point* … You slam someone down. But maybe it's just being older I'm recognising that's not how you change minds.

Like Helen, many of our feminist participants felt the obligation to confront others and 'change minds' in line with the feminist fire and 'bolshiness' Kim described, bolshiness indicating a ready willingness to engage in argument. To be feminist then was to be seen to have a 'wayward' or 'wilful' orientation (Ahmed 2017); but one was to use one's 'wilful' orientation to set things 'straight'. This obligation to act implicitly drew on the presumption of correction – 'righting' things, as Farris and Rottenberg (2017) note in relation to recent cultural articulations of feminism. This 'righteousness', bound up in feminist fire, required distancing from certain objects – liberal feminism – sexist men – and others, on the internet. Yet, such distancing could also lead to an affective boundary in the event of contestation or other forms of questioning. Kim noted that in her experience, 'bolshiness' could create problems for meaningful conversations and divergences:

> Kim: … . it becomes – well – tricky to have conversations within that because everybody just wants to take the higher moral ground.
> Facilitator: They're with you or they're not.
> Kim: Yeah. If everybody is trying to claim the higher moral ground it turns into putting down the other person's politics as not enlightened enough or whatever … It is quite an ugly interactive mode when I think about it like that.

Kim noted not simply how the stakes of conversation were structured by competitiveness in putting down others in a win-lose battle; but importantly, how righteousness was accompanied by an implicit territorialization. To feel

righteous, as Kim insightfully noted, was to make a claim over a space – to claim the 'higher moral ground' was to gain a vantage point over the less 'enlightened' politics, from which a position of distance and judgment could be made possible. In these territorial aspects, we are reminded of Lâm's (1994) discussion of imperial entitlement in feminist feeling. As white Western women are often granted more straightforward access to 'authority and resources, which in turn have a way of generating one another' (Lâm 1994, p. 872), the associated right to exclude or include becomes a hallmark of privileged feminists even, particularly when it concerns the naming, identifying and critique of exploitation. Lâm's remarks are reinforced by Indigenous Australian critiques of possessive individualism as one of the ontological elements of colonial whiteness. Moreton-Robinson explicitly situates this as part of the lineage of imperial claims to people, land and resources, whereby white 'wilful possession' is enabled by making claims over 'what was previously a will-less thing' (2008, p. 83).

We suggest such dynamics must also be contextualized both by a relative sense of precarity and the nature of the online space in which these kinds of dynamics took place. Ella, a young white queer woman, articulated the further complex connections between the need for righteousness as people who are marginalized in some way, such as queer and feminist outsiders, and the uncomfortable proprietary relations that ensued. Discussing a feminist Facebook group for queer and non-binary members of about 600 members, of which she was a member:

> It's like people who probably felt relatively marginalized or like outsiders generally … So maybe they created this space where they feel like they have a bit of power and … . they feel like they have the power to now exclude other people. Whether that's consciously or subconsciously I'm not sure but it's coming from people who were probably generally excluded themselves or felt that they didn't have their own space, and maybe now that they do they're very protective of it. Whether that's constructive or not … it gets very territorial maybe.

Whilst Ella did not overtly discuss the consideration of intra-group differences here, such dynamics arguably militated against the possibilities of holding together incommensurate positions, or being affected in unexpected or unforeseen ways – all the time being explicitly 'inclusive' spaces.

We observe, then, that the need to be 'right' also produces affective boundaries – determining not only who is right, but has rights to a particular space. While exclusive spaces have long been important for marginalized groups, digital culture arguably has sharpened this sense of having control or proprietary rights over a particular space. Skeggs and Yuill (2016) note that the power of Facebook is to operate as an infrastructure for which they assert the proprietary right to extract 'rent'. In addition, social media's terms of uses often promote individual contracting 'choice-based'

relationships (Hull 2015), militating against the sense of using a shared public commons. With the additional risks facing truly 'public' speech online, the move into private groups or niches may then strengthen these protective or territorial impulses.

The possessive element of the righteousness Kim described in attempting to capture the 'higher moral ground' was present in the group Ella described. As opposed to a more informal bisexual group to which Ella belonged that she described as laidback and welcoming, this group:

> is kind of like 'that's right, that's wrong, stop, no, yes' … . [it's] more like being right - portraying the right thing to do, or the right thing to say – like … really strongly advocating for exactly what they believe in without much discussion … .

Ella derived enjoyment from being part of this group and said that she generally found it to be a 'safe space'. But when asked if she felt participants 'listened' to each other in this group, she responded that conversations tended to be one-sided. Similar to a celebrity-audience relationship, one would put a statement 'out there', or as an audience member, 'consume' it. This did not necessarily involve back and forth but a clear moral statement.

Ella's observations suggested that in practice, there was little room for difficult conversations in a space premised on righteousness. There were explicit presumptions of the sharing of values and experience as a queer feminist group, but without significant room for divergence. Another participant, Lydia, a mixed-race young queer woman, was more critical of such righteousness. She identified it as a strategy of whiteness in the instances she had observed, and had clearly had enough:

> white queer people [will] just [write] I'm queer so, blah blah, I'm not being oppressive. I'm not being racist. I'm not being transphobic or anti [sex work] because I'm queer. Like there's no correlation between those opinions, but okay.

A righteous shield: defensiveness and intervention

Righteousness necessarily involved being right; it could also mean protecting and defending one's 'rights'. The nichification of online sociality has become a necessity for minoritized people to be able to speak, listen, and be heard, given the widespread risks of more open public online spaces (Clark-Parsons 2018, Kanai and McGrane 2021). But this explicit categorization into smaller groups – a wom*n only feminist group, or a feminist group for queer POC – made the uncomfortable affects of disagreement more acute. Defensiveness could be heightened when there were presumptions of shared outlooks based on similar histories, and it was also more wounding

when such criticisms were aired, according to Lydia, who identified as 'mixed race':

> people are used to being defensive everywhere, so it carries through to the space. I think sometimes people are more hurt by someone with a similar experience criticising them … I guess it's like, if someone *you like* insults you, it feels way worse than some rat off the street because you actually care about their opinion … I think it's also … you feel less validated when someone from your community calls you out on something, because I think people see a call out as invalidation of all your experience.

For Lydia, defensiveness and righteousness were entangled. People sought to shield themselves from the vulnerability of inquiry or interrogation, particularly in groups where they felt there ought to be commonality, producing a mobile affective boundary. In her experience, righteousness was connected to heightened presumptions that groups would share more similarities than not, meaning differences became further affectively charged. We note that in online groups and fora, this textual 'calling out' via comments would also be visible to a wider audience, deepening the sense of embarrassment or loss of face.

Lydia drew on her own experience of being ejected from a feminist Facebook primarily for queer people of colour, because she had offended the administrator, a white bisexual woman, who was then taking on the responsibility of moderation. The events that led up to Lydia's expulsion were as follows. The administrator had previously asked the group for advice relating to her boyfriend. In a later, different thread, a member of the group, a queer woman, had posted about being sick of seeing other women complain about their boyfriends in the group as the group was for 'marginalized voices'. The admin had then joined this thread, to ask if this poster was critiquing the admin's previous discussion of her boyfriend. The poster denied it – but then Lydia offered her view. Lydia noted that she also dated men, but suggested that relationship advice concerning cisgender woman-man sexual relationships shouldn't be prioritized in the space because:

> I just think we have to be aware that although we're always queer … seeing people of the same gender, you experience the world differently. And … we get to see representations of hetero relationships everywhere. There are so many advice groups. That's what Cosmo does. *Every magazine is about hetero relationship advice*.

Lydia's input evidently stung. The administrator called Lydia biphobic – and the discussion 'really escalated'. For Lydia's contestation, she was suddenly ejected from the group – disconnection and removal seemingly easier than ongoing discussion in this online context, even between two queer women that both dated men. Such dynamics reinforced online binary cultures of 'winning' and 'losing'; 'disconnection' being the only way of dealing with

the embitterment that this online space had raised. This cutting of ties was wounding for Lydia, precisely because of the presumption – or hope – of understanding based on shared time, having spent 3 years in the group and undertaken activism together with group members. She was 'mad' because the ejection evinced a double erasure, ignoring that they both shared similar experiences, whilst ignoring the difference the admin held as a white person:

> it was like, *seriously*? I do one thing that you don't like, that's not like an act of oppression. It's debating something that we'd both experienced. You know, it's not like I'm a straight person being like 'well, you're not this' … .
>
> I think I was just more mad that it was a white girl, that's why it pissed me off. It's like this isn't even your space to begin with and now you've taken me out of this space where I felt like I could have a legitimate connection and now I have nothing else. So like, *why*, *why are you like this*?

We note this is complicated ground, but observe the simplification of these differing positions in the construction of a 'biphobic' versus 'queer' camp that led to Lydia's ousting, with Lydia cast as 'less queer' for her comments. Queer indignation in this instance was mobilized as a righteous shield through which to protect the self against opinions of the ilk Lydia had raised. Yet, we think it is worthwhile observing that the association of queer with the 'side' of the nondominant has been subject to some introspection. For Ahmed, is important that 'we avoid assuming that ''deviation'' is always on ''the side'' of the progressive' (2006, p. 174) because this line of reasoning could 'itself could have a straightening effect' (p.175). Ahmed's framework thus asks for multiple points of movement, of deviation, and of navigating the 'lines' or directions that are set for us in advance. Ahmed's (2006) approach also converges with the multiplicity of the view of spatiality advocated by Maria Lugones (2003), understanding movement as always simultaneously a result of the intersections of power where one may, must, and cannot move. One's 'spot on the map' is thus always multiply marked as a person may be both 'oppressed and resistant and act in accordance with both logics' (p. 24) in a sole act or movement. To adopt a 'bird's eye view' that aims to map singular lines is a colonial spatiality. Yet the defensiveness articulated by the administrator appears to correlate with a more consistent line given its entanglement with the sense of being wronged; and the associated ousting of Lydia as the wrongdoer.

Wendy Brown has famously argued that the intertwining of feminism and liberalism leads to a preoccupation with injury, tending to apportion knowledge according to oppression: the further from power, the nearest to the 'truth'. For Brown, such 'wounded attachments' speak to liberalism's power to simplify critique via ressentiment, 'a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured (1995, p. 27), aligning moral transcendence

with powerlessness and dispossession. Brown's and Ahmed's critique speaks to some of the political questions inherent in the use of injury as a position of political unassailability. This is particularly if we take seriously the injunction to understand differences of position as often incommensurable (Awkward-Rich 2017) rather than measurable and offsettable. What possibilities does such a preoccupation give in terms of listening, speaking and being heard? And further, how might privileged victimhood play into reinforcing the existing authority and resources of certain victims? We observe that a righteous shield might not straightforwardly be advanced for self-protection but selectively advanced in moments of antagonism. The line between being 'defence' of the self and selective incursion or aggression could thus be liminal. Something construed as 'defence' could be extended, for example, to informing someone of their 'problematic' behaviour with a view to distancing the self from them – such as the statement of 'you're biphobic' leading to Lydia's ejection.

This slippage, in Lydia's case, was arguably bound up in white entitlement to both enunciate and enforce rules; but was not limited to white bodies. For example, Lydia described the interpolations organized by this queer POC group catalyzed by white girls 'doing the most cringeworthy stuff'. The fire and pleasure of righteousness would play out in interactions where the group would intervene to inform the offending person that what they were doing was inappropriate:

> But sometimes it would escalate and … it was just like people go in with no constructive aspect, just going in to be like 'you're bad', you know? I think just to show that they were like 'good', whatever that means. It was a bit performative sometimes. Like if twenty people have told this person the same thing what is you joining in going to do? You're just doing it so you can say you did.

'Escalating' was a way of noting the intensification of antagonistic affect, that often ensued from dog-piling, or 'pile ons' as a frequent part of feminist online interaction. While noting the useful elements of this simultaneous feminist work in numbers, Lydia's comment opened up the question of what kind of collective work this involved. The aggregation of individual actions through digital culture potentially felt galvanizing, a repetition of particular actions producing a collective oriented towards the same problematic object. Yet, for Lydia, an individual repetition of a criticism (twenty times) did not necessarily create feminist collective consciousness – rather, it weakened the political effects of the criticism in the first place.

We are reminded of Ahmed's (2004a) argument about the 'non-performativity' of 'anti-racist declarations' – where affective declarations, such as of shame in relation to a racist history, do not do what they purport to do. Shame does not 'stick' to the white antiracist subject; rather, the declaration

performs the white subject's 'goodness' or value. While Lydia used the word 'performative' differently, to connote a quality of being 'for show' or 'for promotion', we suggest Lydia was analysing these dynamics in a similar way in her critique of the political effects (or lack of effect) of this anti-racism. She also added her thoughts on the affective pleasures of this kind of intervention, in her interview following the workshop:

> Facilitator: Mmm, I remember you said that there was this performative aspect. So, I mean, why do you think people felt that need?
> Lydia: I think it's become kind of like a trendy thing now to be an outlier and to self-identify as an outlier, like it makes you look like a good person. It makes you feel like a good person as well.

Lydia's observations speak to a powerful confluence of affects: feeling good, feeling right, and the linking of such feelings to an injury that then defines political personality. 'Goodness' has been most historically salient in relation to the structural privileges of affluent whiteness, in which 'goodness' has obscured and sanctioned the continuing power of whiteness and its role in structures of domination (Sullivan 2014). Goodness, righteousness and injury thus combine to shield the self not simply from others – but also, for privileged victims, may enable selective and pre-emptive interventions. We say privileged victims, since the ability to mobilize a narrative of goodness combined with injury may traditionally be a resource of the white middle class, but may not be strictly limited to such intersections.

Openness to deviation

In *Status Update,* Alice Marwick (2013) argues that social media derives from a commercial-utopian technological culture in which individual solutions, mass-aggregated, are seen as a solution to politics (Marwick 2013). The presumed power of the individual, and the connected drive to demonstrate status, is thus profoundly implicated in social media architecture. We observe such ideology may thus permeate otherwise collectively intended activist practices. Notably, in some ways, the 'dogpiling' which Lydia describes can be understood as digital collectivity – in a united goal, the 20 participants going out to 'correct' someone's wayward views. Yet, as with many online acts of solidarity, it requires the repeating of an individual action – rather than considering the relationality of what it means to be corrected as one person by 20 others.

The question of how to do feminism collectively has become ever more salient in neoliberal climates where women have been invited to lean into global capitalism in ever more intimate ways (Gill and Kanai 2018). This conundrum is made further complicated by the promise of social media to offer a collective solution – through individual participation. Such environments

exacerbate 'a sense of life as an ongoing performance' (Marwick 2013, p. 91) placing intensified pressure on feminists, activists, those who seek to be or make 'right' in some way to intervene at all possible times. While the pleasures of feeling 'righteous' might be part of feminism's call to identity as Kim noted above, digital cultures intensify these affective pleasures and obligations in the continual incitation for one's deeds to be *seen* and *counted*. Lydia was sceptical of the kinds of 'speaking out' in the 'dog piling' examples she talked about, because of how online architectures mixed imperatives to demonstrate feminism as identity and as *status*.

Righteousness could lead to a sense that one should walk the path of 'authority'; thus avoiding crossing the paths of those who often got it wrong, except in terms of intervention and correction. Given these demands to model one's own righteousness, reprimands, however gentle, could feel particularly disorienting – as an attack on one's deeply felt 'right' to belong in spaces such as online feminist groups, particularly where participants have been discriminated against and marginalized in broader society. Perhaps this was also to do with the culture of accountability formed in online culture, in which mistakes were held up as exposing a flawed or faulty 'true' self – revealing a 'true' and unacceptable alignment with dominant culture rather than marginalized positions. Heather, a queer white woman in her 40s, observed that this was to do with what she saw as the 'rigidity' of online political culture in relation to allowing space of change, imperfection and mutability. She likened this to the inability to accept that people do change their views, comparing this to her experience as a teacher:

> I've had students who have transformed their opinions. Are we supposed to say, well they made a racist comment in Week 1, therefore they're forever tarnished with that thing? … I feel social media really kind of facilitates that rigidity in a way that's not very generative, and not productive, and not very helpful.

Heather's statement gestured to a mutable ontology indicating political personality was subject to change. Thus, feminist social engagement required a different outlook – of care, patience, living with discomfort – contrasting with the observed predilection for holding onto wrongdoing and flaws in online culture. The struggles, questions and ambivalence of our participants demonstrated that such contexts produced particular normative orientations; with ensuing lines to follow for righteous feminist subjects. Indeed, the noting of flaws required distance, disconnection, rather than proximity in order to preserve the righteous self. In the standards of accountability against which feminist participants felt themselves measured, fixing their political selfhood to online statements in combination with the injunction to 'correct' and 'change minds'; online culture reinforced presumptions of fixed individuality.

As feminists, such cultures then intensified the sense of individual responsibility to intervene, to 'avoid complicity' while implicitly holding up unattainable notions of political purity. Such lines of action had the potential to produce the 'feminist authority' and 'educable subject' in opposition to each other. The righteous and authoritative feminist was positioned to straighten out the educable subject in their path; this affective orientation produced a boundary against being affected or changed.

Conclusion: the affective movements of online deliberation

In thinking back to the possibility for affective dissonance as part of feminist potential – and the regulation of feeling that is also part of feminism's legacy – we suggest that both are present in these spaces. Above all, the feeling rules participants recounted were about *living* one's politics and moving beyond mere 'performance'. This could be particularly difficult to navigate in a digital space, where online statements were routinely subject to suspicion given their inextricability from identity and the compulsion to demonstrate value that is heightened through online culture. These feeling rules also mandated an imperative to 'be in the right' – and to *feel* as though one were in the right – governing the self and relations with others accordingly.

Although neoliberal dynamics are highly significant in digital culture, and intensify the regulatory and productive elements of digital infrastructures, it would be too simple to straightforwardly present these as the only causal dynamics of the awkward and sometimes painful dynamics described by our participants. The emphasis on feminist righteousness and wilfulness, we note, is a recurring element of feminist identity – an affective propeller of feminist action. This is unsurprising given feminism's historical entanglement with the 'will to empower' (Cruikshank 1999) implying a correct form of conduct for feminism's goals to be achieved, playing out in particular ways in accordance with social position and context. We suggest that imperatives of righteousness might be located within histories of feminist entanglement within colonial legacies of white authority and confidence – but also and simultaneously in the feminist 'fire' of articulating what is *not* right, and what is unjust. These were felt in the uneasy match between the pleasures of 'being right' in relation to clear injustice – and the need to ensure one performed 'correctly' in spaces where individual actions were continuously seen and marked.

We return to feminist insights into the place of discomfort, sadness and pain (Awkward-Rich 2017, Cvetkovich 1992, Lâm 1994) as well as vulnerability and need. Via recent feminist activisms in digital culture, the open secret of gendered vulnerability has been resurfaced in public debate. These activisms seem to make it possible to articulate vulnerability. Yet, in contexts of

assumed feminist commonality, 'getting it wrong' tended to be punished in online contexts, making participants reluctant to show vulnerabilities through positions of uncertainty or inquiry. Participants noted a pattern of exclusion – they would either be ejected from a group or remove themselves following a 'call out'. It is well known that online culture facilitates collectivity through personalization; enabling individuals to gather around shared interests. In view of the wider risks of doing feminism and queer politics in online public spaces, this intensified narrowing down into designated 'niches' and sense of affective uniformity amongst feminist participants makes sense. Yet, such uniformity produced hopes of a collective righteousness which did not leave space for mutability, change, ambivalent positions, testing or questioning ideas, or making mistakes. This arguably reinforced the requirement on the individual to 'enlighten' themselves along particular lines as a precondition of inclusion. The stakes of 'getting it wrong' – or being perceived as such – carried significant consequences for subjecthood through being characterized as being 'exposed' by the group as having a flawed opinion – and betraying a 'faulty' feminist self.

The examples we have discussed show some of the ways that socialities, politics and social surveillance converge in the relations between feminist identities and collectivities in digital culture. We explored participants' negotiations of the politics of emotion structuring exchange in online feminist spaces – examining how certain feelings – such as feminist 'fire' and righteousness – may both propel action but act defensively as a 'shield', shifting and reconfiguring the constitution of feeling in feminist subjectivity in a networked age. In taking the power relations inhering in feminism seriously, we argue for the need to expand notions of vulnerability in online culture beyond the wronged innocent, and beyond the individual. How might vulnerability and contingency, rather than certainty and righteousness, open up the lines we follow? How might we leave space for conflict that is not simply about individual truculence and problematic behaviour, but about histories of oppression that might position us incommensurably towards each other? We hope to provide a starting point for further discussions regarding the roles and potentials for feelings in digital architectures, and how these may be re-positioned as central in orienting emerging feminist collectives.

Note

1. Thank you to Ros Gill for this discussion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Gender and Education Association under its small grants scheme 2019.

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