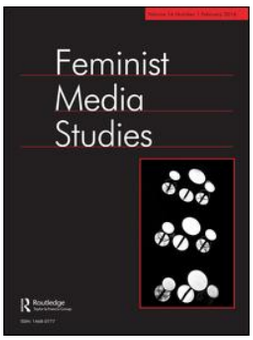

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COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

The traffic in feminism: an introduction to the commentary and criticism on popular feminism

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In many ways, this is a remarkable moment. The surge in what we might call "popular feminism" has allowed us to imagine a culture in which feminism, in every form, does not have to be defended, is accessible, and is even admired, though some feminisms are more visible than others. But what precisely does popular feminism look like? How does it circulate? Who are its ideal constituents? What does the popularity of feminism mean for feminist media studies? These questions have been asked more and more over the past decade, as versions of popular feminism have circulated more broadly throughout the world. And these questions have only grown more urgent, as feminist manifestos have crowded many media platforms, making a particular feminist subjectivity and its political commitments both hyper-visible and normative within popular media. For us as feminist media scholars, feminism has always been a useful lens through which to *understand* popular culture. However, we now are living in a moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture.

Feminism is "popular" in a number of senses. Perhaps most importantly, the popular of popular feminism is, following Stuart Hall (2002), a terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out. There are many different forms of popular feminism: corporate feminism, neoliberal feminism, intersectional feminism, queer feminism, and so on. These expressions and practices of popular feminism compete in a media context that brings up a second sense of the popular: contemporary feminism is circulated in mainstream and commercial media where masses of people can consume it. We see feminism represented and practiced in digital spaces such as blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, in addition to broadcast media and film (the record-breaking opening weekend of the Hollywood film *Wonder Woman* is merely the latest iteration of this). We also need to contend with a third expression of the popular: popularity, a condition of being liked or admired by like-minded people and groups. As many of us remember from high school, this kind of popularity brings out cliques, exclusions, and backlash, which brings us back to the popular as a terrain of struggle for power.

Undeniably, the terrain of popular feminism is currently occupied in large part by the individualist feminism of neoliberal consumer culture (Catherine Rottenberg 2014). Feminism has found its most visible popularity in the messages about self-making, self-love, and self-care that abound on social media and in corporate campaigns, messages mostly aimed at privileged white women and lacking a subtext of self-care as political warfare (Audre Lorde

1988; Sara Ahmed 2016). Merchandise, such as clothing, pins, and other accoutrements declaring their wearer's feminism are more widely available than ever before; this is facilitated in part by the entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberalism which supports self-employment and DIY culture among young women who self-identify as feminists (Angela McRobbie 2016). We have seen advertising take up feminist tropes with renewed vigor, a phenomenon Andi Zeisler (co-founder of the feminist zine *Bitch*) describes with terms such as "femvertising" and "empowertising" in her recent book *We Were Feminists Once* (2016, reviewed by Jessica Brophy in this issue).

To be sure, the "marketplace feminism" Zeisler critiques is not entirely new. Scholars coined the term "commodity feminism" over a quarter-century ago to describe the harnessing of feminist messages to consumer products and the "aesthetic depoliticization" of feminism that resulted (Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith 1991, 334). What is different at the moment is that feminism is having a moment, and an unprecedented one; some have declared that popular feminism is nothing short of a zeitgeist (Jessica Valenti 2014). The popularity of Zeisler herself is a not insignificant data point; she has over 14,000 Twitter followers at the time we are writing this, which is nothing to Beyoncé's 14 million but quite a lot in comparison to us media scholars, who used to feel we were doing something exceptional by publicly assuming the mantle of feminist critique. Here is the struggle, though: the same "zeitgeist" that makes space for an important critical voice like Zeisler's also gives rise to the reality that, as Zeisler herself puts it, "the descriptor 'feminist' now seems to be used to lavish praise on anything that isn't overtly degrading, demeaning or exploitative to women," which suggests, among other things, that feminism "is not a set of values, ethics, and politics, but merely an assessment of whether or not a product is worthy of consumption" (2016, 32).

How do we make sense of the fact that not only is an aestheticized feminism complicit in the fetishism of commodities—a common theme for decades now—but that the feminist critique of that phenomenon is also a highly visible commodity in the form of popular books, blogs, and Twitter accounts? How do we make sense of the fact that while all the many versions of today's popular feminism circulate in an "economy of visibility" (Sarah Banet-Weiser forthcoming) gaining ever more eyeballs and "fans," gendered power relations don't seem to change very much? If anything, one effect of the ascendance of popular feminism has been to invigorate a popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser forthcoming), the power of which reaches to the very top of our political structure (in the United States, at least). We also need something more than the theory of commodity feminism to make sense of these facts, because significant strands of today's popular feminism cannot be dismissed as aesthetically depoliticized versions of the "real thing."

To make these facts make sense, we propose the concept of a "traffic in feminism," borrowing from Gayle Rubin's (1997) analysis of the "traffic in women" within capitalism.[1] Rubin's account begins with a feminist reading of Marx; she argues that Marx failed to recognize that unwaged labor in the home—the labor that reproduces the worker's ability to show up and produce from day to day—is the source of the surplus value that sustains the capitalist system. That this unwaged labor is done by women—that the sexual division of labor shakes out this way—is, Rubin argues, historically specific. While every society has what Rubin calls a sex/gender system, the specific contours and power relations of that system vary from society to society. In ours and in many others, the sex/gender system rests on the oppression of women, which, Rubin says, deploying a feminist reading of Freud and Levi-Strauss, is

sustained through sexual differentiation and the commodification of women as objects of exchange. These are ideological systems in addition to material ones. The novelty of Rubin's analysis is her argument that capitalism and the woman-oppressing sex/gender system of our particular society (and many others throughout the world) are mutually sustaining. Capitalism is not the sole source of gendered oppression, but it has harnessed that oppression in a way that reinforces it, both materially and ideologically. To the commodification of women's bodies that happens across societies with various economic systems, capitalism adds something special: the traffic in women. This is the systematic, ideological exclusion of women from the sites of economic power except as commodities and unwaged generators of surplus value. This lack of structural power feeds into the ideology of the oppressive sex/gender system, reproducing both at every turn.

Using Rubin's formulation of the traffic in women as a lens, we see the contemporary moment as one in which an additional kind of traffic is also present: a traffic in feminism. Just as capitalism depends upon the commodification of women as a class to reproduce itself, and in the process regenerates the ideology of the sex/gender system that justifies women's commodification in the first place, today capitalism too is fueled by the conditions under which feminism makes sense as a politics. That is, conditions of pervasive structural inequality along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality—the conditions feminism exists to critique and transform—combine with a hegemonic neoliberal individualism that prizes equal visibility in the marketplace as the apotheosis of empowerment. This combination provides the impetus and justification for a popular feminism that sees the latter (market visibility) as the solution to the former (structural inequality).

What we see today is more than a simple commodification of feminism or its aesthetic depoliticization in the market, though certainly we continue to see that. The traffic in feminism we are calling out here is rather the market-based production and reproduction of a feminist politics—a popular feminism—that seems to explicitly recognize that inequality exists while stopping short of recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable. The traffic in feminism is therefore decidedly not postfeminist—it does not deny the need for some version of feminism—but it ensures the reproduction of a specific iteration of feminist ideology that has a similar effect to postfeminism (Angela McRobbie 2004; Rosalind Gill 2016). That effect is: the political and material advancement of some privileged white cisgender women who are conscripted into the successful navigation of both capitalism and the sex/gender system. And, importantly, the traffic in feminism does more than just turn feminism into a product; it shores up the ideological nexus—"meritocratic" neoliberal individualism, white supremacy, etc.—that allows some women and their version of feminism to achieve visibility and rewards in the market. That these lucky women now self-identify as feminists—it is popular right now after all—is cold comfort to the billions of women whose labor and bodies will continue to be exploited for the profit of those at the top of the social hierarchy.

This is not to dismiss the success of contemporary feminists such as Zeisler, or even Beyoncé (blessed be her name). And, crucially, it is not to underplay the reality that even the "winners" in the economy of visibility are not immune to the violence of misogyny. The threat of violence—by the state, by the market, by individual men—is still universally fundamental to the experience of womanhood in a misogynist society. This threat is compounded for women of color, queer women, and trans women, who find other women (white, straight, and/or cis) often complicit or collusive in the infliction of violence (Mia McKenzie 2015). The

endurance of this universal (though differentially experienced) violence in itself reveals the limits of popular feminism in the economy of visibility. The traffic in feminism does not guarantee us the political tools to neutralize the violence that erupts wherever popular feminism gains a foothold. It does give us the means to make hashtags and t-shirts and brands and books. Again, this is not to dismiss those things. We love our hashtags and t-shirts, we shop these brands, we write these books. But as feminists we must recognize (pace Audre Lorde): our popularity will not protect us.

* * *

The timely essays collected in this edition of *Feminist Media Studies*' "Commentary & Criticism" each take up the theme of popular feminism, implicitly exposing in different ways the contemporary traffic in feminism and the structural violence it, at best, fails to confront or, at worst, reawakens. Stephanie Ricker Schulte's essay on the US government's use of "stealth feminism" to recruit women of color from the tech industries provides a clear example of how some forms of popular feminism in fact rely upon and thereby reinforce inequalities and exploitation in the economy at large. Sai Amulya Komarraju and Usha Raman provide a critique of recent responses to violence against women in India, drawing on focus group research with Indian millennials to show that popular framings of feminism often uphold normative social and moral hierarchies by failing to move beyond a market-based "inclusion" frame. Mia Fischer's essay on trans responses to controversial comments by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlights the ways trans women are excluded or degraded in some discourses of popular feminism, to the detriment of a feminist movement that could benefit by centering trans women's particular experience of the misogynistic violence that affects all women. The essay by Maureen Kangere, Jean Kemitare, and Lori Michau explores the use of social media in campaigns against violence against women in Africa. Through their case study, the authors show that the use of social media can be effective for popular feminist organizing, though it carries its own risks, such as when social media activists become targets of violence, unable to call upon a local in-person community for support. Finally, Sonia Núñez Puente and María José Gámez Fuentes discuss popular misogynist groups in Spain and their appropriation of the discourses of popular feminism to claim their own special status as victims of gendered violence. These critical essays remind us that, as much comfort as the ascendence of popular feminism might provide for (some) women today, the popular never "lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination" (Hall 2002, 187). Our project as feminists must be to overturn those relations, not reproduce them.

Note

1. We want to be clear here that, in applying Rubin's concept of the traffic in women to our analysis of the traffic in feminism, we are not explicitly engaging with Rubin's deconstruction of heterosexuality itself, which is a major contribution of her original essay. While further work could and should be done to explore the political economic links between heterosexuality, the sexual division of labor under capitalism, and popular feminism, this is not the focus of our analysis here.

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Federal feminism? The stealthy encoding of federal startup recruitment materials

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Are you a woman of color in software development? Are you tired of the tech industry's boys' club? If so, the United States government wants you. Just watch its recruiting video.

In 2014, President Obama established the United States Digital Service (USDS), which integrates technology industry experts into the federal government at an unprecedented level. Obama had seen what technologists could do the year before when they fixed Healthcare.gov; he then tasked them with rewriting governmental digital systems. As Chief Technology Officer Todd Park said, the US needed "people who can hack the technology, as well as people who can hack the bureaucracy" (Jon Gertner 2016). This was a tall order and the USDS—which I call a "federal startup"—had to rapidly scale its labor force. To help recruit, the agency's website featured a video that provides background on the agency, its projects and planned expansion (White House 2015). This video features an astonishing number of women: seven of the nine speakers are women and four are women of color. Because