Gender, voice and space: Feminism online
Género, voz y espacio: Feminismo online

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the highly topical, rapidly developing subject of feminism in contemporary society. Topics that have long been the concern of feminists - such as violence and harassment, the gender pay gap, and women's suffrage - are currently receiving a level of media attention that suggests a new feminist movement that some might depict as a 'third or fourth 'wave.' However, arguing for a more sceptical and historically-grounded approach, positing that we should maintain a critical eye on popular and media depictions of feminism, this paper highlights the contours of feminist activism which indicate significant continuity in terms of feminist concerns over recent decades. The paper critiques the idea of 'waves' of feminism and proposes instead the concept of a "woven tapestry" of feminism. It then argues that, despite changing methods of communicating feminism, contemporary feminism shares many of the same concerns and diverse perspectives that have marked the development of feminism over the last century. Although the growth of the digital landscape does offer new opportunities to feminism, it is also marked by very familiar forms of misogynistic abuse and harassment. The paper attempts to make sense of this online misogynistic abuse by reflecting on the historic silencing of women's public voice. The paper notes that, far from representing a novel phase of feminism, much of contemporary feminism is marked by its continuities with feminism in the twentieth century; a historically-grounded approach to understanding and developing feminism in the twentieth century is therefore of value.

KEY WORDS

Feminism, activism, online abuse, voice, silencing

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en el feminismo, un tema muy actual y rápidamente desarrollado en la sociedad contemporánea. Los temas que desde hace tiempo preocupan a las feministas -como la violencia y el acoso, la brecha salarial de género y el sufragio de las mujeres- están recibiendo actualmente un nivel de atención mediática que sugiere un nuevo movimiento feminista que algunos podrían representar como tercera o cuarta "ola". Sin embargo, argumentando a favor de un enfoque más escéptico e históricamente fundamentado, postulando que debemos mantener una perspectiva crítica en las representaciones populares y mediáticas del feminismo, este trabajo resalta los contornos del activismo feminista que indican una continuidad significativa en términos de preocupaciones feministas de las últimas décadas. El artículo critica la idea de "olas" del feminismo y propone en cambio el concepto de "tejidos" (woven tapestry) del feminismo. Luego argumenta que, a pesar de los cambiantes métodos de comunicación del feminismo, el feminismo contemporáneo comparte muchas de las mismas preocupaciones y perspectivas diversas que han marcado el desarrollo del feminismo en el último siglo. Aunque el crecimiento del paisaje digital ofrece nuevas oportunidades para el feminismo, también está marcado por formas muy familiares de abuso y acoso misógino. El documento intenta dar sentido a este abuso misógino en línea al reflexionar sobre el silenciamiento histórico de la voz pública de las mujeres. Este artículo señala que, lejos de representar una nueva fase del feminismo, gran parte del feminismo contemporáneo está marcado por sus continuidades con el feminismo en el siglo XX; un enfoque basado en la historia para comprender y desarrollar el feminismo en el siglo XX es, por lo tanto, valioso.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Feminismo, activismo, abuso online, voz, silenciamiento

1. GENDER, VOICE AND SPACE: FEMINISM ONLINE

This is an exciting time to be a feminist. There is a new energy around feminism, feminist politics and feminist activism. This new energy is located within feminist networks online and offline, in popular culture and in wider society as traditional media pays attention to feminist concerns in a way that feels unprecedented. For example, in the first weeks of 2018 some of the top news stories in the UK which have been covered for days at a time have included:; the outcry over the decision to release John Worboys, the 'black cab rapist' who was sentenced in 2009 to an indefinite jail sentence after being convicted of 19 offences but is believed to have committed more than 100 rapes and sexual assault; the gender pay gap at the BBC, revealed in 2017 but brought to media attention again by the resignation of Carrie Gracie, BBC China Editor, in protest; the continued fallout over the exposure of Harvey Weinstein's alleged sexual abuse of women in Hollywood, including the #MeToo movement and attention to sexual abuse by members of the UK Parliament; exposure of systematic problems in the justice system after the collapse of rape cases due to police failure to disclose evidence; the news that senior men in international NGOs providing aid in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010 sexually exploited Haitian women; and the celebration of the 100th anniversary of some women being granted the vote. While this attention to feminist issues and the blossoming of online feminist activism can suggest that contemporary feminism presents new ideas and new ways of communicating them, a significant feature is its attention to enduring concerns which have featured in feminist politics for decades. This paper highlights the contours of feminist activism which indicate significant continuity in terms of feminist concerns over recent decades and in terms of misogynistic attempts to challenge those concerns.

A cursory survey of popular culture, social media and mainstream politics in the UK might suggest that we have progressed beyond the time when young women "repudiated" (Scharff, 2013) feminism, and now live in an era when feminism is fashionable and proclaimed by the vast majority of the population, especially younger generations. With T-shirts, bags and mugs, memes, Twitter feeds and Facebook groups all seeming to proudly support feminism, we might be forgiven for thinking that gender relations have experienced a radical transformation over the last few decades. According to Gill (2016:614) "[w]here a few years ago it sometimes felt difficult to make any feminist arguments "stick" in the media (Sara Ahmed 2004), today it seems as if everything is a feminist issue. Feminism has a new luminosity in popular culture." However, while we might welcome the new attention to feminist concerns, experience of patriarchal systems teaches us to be cautious too. Scholars have noted how the terms and values of feminism have been appropriated and re-spun in media and public discourses in ways that fundamentally challenge the principles and aims of feminism. MacRobbie (2009), for example, argues that popular cultural depictions of empowered young women reflect "feminism taken account of," whereby some elements of (liberal) feminism are embraced at the same time as feminism is dismissed as no longer relevant. Reflecting on the links between youthfulness, fashion and feminism, Gill (2016) argues that the "new feminist visibilities" appropriate concepts (such as 'empowerment' and 'choice') and symbols (such as the feminist 'fist') which resonate with feminism while promoting a distinctly anti-feminist ideology and, indeed, 'foment[ing] generational

discord about feminism" (p619). We should, then, maintain a critical eye on popular depictions of feminism, and, to understand the shifting sands of feminist thought, politics and activism, we should move beyond media depictions and delve into the feminism produced through campaigns, speeches and writings, by those identifying as feminists.

In arguing that contemporary feminism is characterised by more continuities than discontinuities with feminism in the recent past, this paper starts with a critique of the idea of 'waves' of feminism and proposes instead the concept of a "woven tapestry" of feminism. It then argues that, despite changing methods of communicating feminism, contemporary feminism shares many of the same concerns and diverse perspectives that have marked the development of feminism over the last century. Nevertheless, the growth of the digital landscape does offer new opportunities to feminism; however, it is also marked by very familiar forms of misogynistic abuse and harassment. The paper attempts to make sense of this online misogynistic abuse by reflecting on the historic silencing of women's public voice. The paper notes that, far from representing a novel phase of feminism, much of contemporary feminism is marked by its continuities with feminism in the twentieth century; a historically-grounded approach to understanding and developing feminism in the twentieth century is therefore of value.

2. WAVES OR TAPESTRIES?

It is often claimed that we are in the midst of third - or fourth - wave feminism. According to Aune and Holyoak (2017) third wave feminism refers to the surge of activism amongst younger women that emerged in the early 1990s in the US and the early 2000s in the UK. However, its definition and meaning are disputed:

> For some, the third wave represents a rejection of grand narratives and an embrace of the uncertainties and multiplicities of late modernity, inspired by post-colonialist, post-structuralist and intersectional theories (Mack-Canty, 2004; Mann and Huffman, 2005; Snyder, 2008). For others, it represents a problematic depoliticisation and individualisation of feminism wherein attempts to embrace difference and reclaim femininity and sexuality have resulted in the loss of any serious political critique. (Aune and Holyoak, 2017:2).

In focusing on differences between women, rather than their commonalities as emphasised in earlier, so-called second wave feminism, third wave feminism has drawn on post-structuralist, post-feminist, post-colonialist theories.

This third wave feminism has been the subject of intense debate. Some chose to depict contemporary feminist students as precious, protected 'snowflakes' whose purported insistence on not being 'offended' threatens freedom of speech (Turner, 2017). Others critique the de-politicisation and individualism of third wave feminism, with its focus on popular culture, the body, and issues of self-expression rather than analysis of enduring structural inequalities (see, for example, many of the contributions in Gillis et al's (2004) edited volume). However, some argue that the notion of postfeminsim has value as a critical analytical category, especially in terms of complicating and problematising the "new feminist visibilities" in media culture (Gill, 2016). Perhaps the

most significant, although not uncontroversial, feature of contemporary feminism has been its promotion of 'intersectional' feminism, inspired by Patricia Hill Collins' (1986) and Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) analyses of the intersecting systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, colonialism, and heteronormativity. Intersectional feminism has been widely embraced by a new generation of feminists in the 2000s (Evans, 2016) and has generated powerful new insights about the intersecting nature of inequalities and oppression which recognise that women's oppression is supported and complicated by their oppression as Black women, poor women, women with disabilities and/or members of marginalised sexualities.

Clearly, the idea of a unified 'third wave' of feminism is challenged by these varying interpretations of the term and the meanings attributed to it. Moreover, the idea of 'waves' of feminism, although well-established, is disputed. The concept of 'wave' suggests that a new wave is a homogenous whole, washing away the old, displacing the outdated wave; this does not do justice to the rich variety of feminist thought, (Dean 2009, 2012; Faludi 2010; Hogeland 2001; Schippers and Sapp 2012), as reflected in the multiple interpretations of third wave discussed above. In addition, the 'wave' metaphor may be limited to feminism's development in the UK and US; Charles et al (2018) note that it is less applicable to feminist movements in post-communist and post-fascist countries which did not experience the new social movements of the 1960s and where social media has had a different history of development and take-up. Moreover, the wave metaphor can be used in destructive "generational edge politics" (Stevenson et al, 2011: 139), which portray feminist generations as at war with each other, as suggested in Faludi's (2010) reference to "feminism's ritual matricide." In debates about generational differences between feminists younger feminists are generally found wanting; as discussed above, some depictions of younger feminists portray them as more 'concerned with personal self-care, self-expression and self-identification than with the structural inequalities which continue to plague women's lives (see, for example, Cole and Crossley, 2009; Kimball, 2017). Susan Marine and I (Lewis and Marine, 2015) have argued elsewhere, that, to avoid a significant rift and to continue the history of constructive critique, feminism would benefit from a more compassionate approach which recognises convergence and respects the reasons for and meaning of divergence between feminists. We also argue that, rather than the concept of 'waves' a more useful metaphor is the "woven tapestry" of feminism (Lewis and Marine, 2015: 132). This enables us to consider how contemporary feminism critiques build upon, and extend earlier contributions to feminist thought:

> A tapestry is constituted by its history—the history of tapestry traditions, skills, techniques, materials, and the weavers who create the tapestry—so that the history is woven into the present. So also with feminism: its history is present in contemporary feminism, its precursors are woven into the very fabric of the debate, politics, and practices. We suggest that this metaphor of a tapestry encourages more awareness and reflexivity about the history of contemporary feminism so that, rather than boldly rejecting the past and asserting the new, we are reflective about the traditions from which we draw and the extent to which contemporary approaches borrow from past traditions. (Lewis and Marine, 2015: 132)

This metaphor of a woven tapestry rejects the idea of a linear history of feminism which

portrays the history of feminist thought as as "a process of imagined linear displacement [rather than] as a series of ongoing contests and relationships" (Hemming, 2005:131). Instead, the woven tapestry reflects the interweaving of ideas, concepts and theories, whereby inherited frameworks are critiqued, rejected or reworked so that "the history is woven into the present" (Lewis and Marine, 2015:132). The woven tapestry better depicts the messy, diverse, complex nature of feminist thought and critique than does the wave and, importantly, recognises and respects not only the novel innovations, but also the continuities over time in feminist thought.

3. NEW COMMUNICATIONS: ENDURING CONCERNS

The different phases which are threaded into the existing woven tapestry of feminism have used different ways of communicating their developing feminist ideas and politics. Before the explosion of social media in the 2000s, feminists relied on zines to develop and communicate their ideas. According to Piepmeier (2009:2),

> Zines are quirky, individualized booklets filled with diatribes, reworkings of pop culture iconography, and all variety of personal and political narratives. They are self-produced and anti-corporate. Their production, philosophy, and aesthetic are anti-professional… most zines are messy, photocopied documents that may contain handwriting collage art and even stickers and glitters… [they are] sites where girls and women construct identities, communities and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment: discourses, media representations, ideologies, stereotypes, and even physical detritus.

Despite their proliferation, from the early 2000s, zines were largely replaced by online forms of communication - webzines, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram. The use of online spaces for "a feminist counterpublic" (Sills et al, 2016) is well-described elsewhere (see, for example, Cochrane, 2013; Fotopoulou, 2016: Harris, 2008; Keller et al, 2016; Sills et al, 2016). However, despite the significant change in methods of communications, and the claims that contemporary feminists are preoccupied with an individualist feminism centred around popular culture, the body and issues of self-expression, the *concerns* of feminists throughout the ages are marked by continuity rather than divergence.

Empirical examinations of the views and politics of contemporary feminists reveal that their concerns reflect the enduring inequalities that women and girls continue to face. For example, a study of feminist students in the UK and US (Lewis and Marine, 2015) reveals their diverse political positions and interests which range from structural analyses of power relations linked with ideas about capitalism and partriarchy, to a liberal feminist focus on equality and sameness, and a focus on trans people's rights and the deconstruction of binary categories. In particular, these young feminists are mobilised by anger about violence against women and girls and engage in a range of repertoires of activism to challenge such violence, including: producing zines filled with anonymous writings about sex and sexuality designed to challenge silences and dominant discourses about sex; producing performances of *The Vagina Monologues*; establishing, running and attending feminist groups on and off -line; holding discussion groups, book groups, film showings; joining local Reclaim the Night marches and

SlutWalks (Lewis et al, 2016: Lewis and Marine, 2018). Other empirical work from scholars, journalists and online sites shows that contemporary feminists campaign and agitate about many of the enduring themes of feminism that similarly energised their foremothers, including declining reproductive rights and access (Badham, 2013; Clarke, 2016; Wyatt & Botton, 2012); the limited representation of women in politics, media and the film industry, business and other sectors (the Representation Project http://therepresentationproject.org/; the Women's Room http://thewomensroom.org.uk/; Gill, 2011); the gender pay gap (Fawcett Society https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/close-gender-pay-gap); the harmful impacts of pornography, the sex industry and women's sexual objectification (Long, 2012; Object http://www.object.org.uk; No More Page Three https://nomorepage3.wordpress.com/); and sexual harassment, violence and rape culture (Counting Dead Women https://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women; Everyday Sexism http://everydaysexism.com; Hollaback! http://www.ihollaback.org//; #MeToo; Keller et al, 2016; Lewis and Marine, 2018; Lewis et al, 2016a; Sills et al, 2016).

And feminists continue to hold a range of perspectives, including liberal, socialist, radical, womanist, and intersectional. The scholarly, media and online sites listed above reveal feminist arguments from the full spectrum of feminist theory; MacKay's (2015) examination of London feminists reveals the enduring appeal of radical feminism, and Evans' (2016) study of US and UK feminists shows that intersectionality underpins student feminist activism in the UK. What is clear then is that, contrary to suggestions that a new 'wave' of feminism indicates a homogenous feminist approach, and contrary to claims that contemporary feminists have a narcissistic focus on identity politics, contemporary feminists are diverse in their views and politics and actively engage to challenge a range of structural inequalities which have been of enduring concern to feminists. However, a new feature of their activism is the vehicle for expressing their politics; the rise of social media offers new opportunities to disseminate feminism and galvanise activists but, as discussed below, it also provides a platform for attempts to silence and marginalise feminists.

4. NEW LANDSCAPES; SAME OLD ABUSE

While online spaces were first heralded as new opportunities for democratic, public, civic engagements, giving space particularly to those traditionally excluded from such practices - such as women, young people, ethnic minorities - experience show that the online world is characterised by similar inequalities as the offline world. Online abuse of women, particularly women who express feminist views, has received increasing media and political attention. A number of high-profile cases of abuse have brought public attention to the treatment of women online. For example, Caroline Criado-Perez, who campaigned to ensure images of women featured on British currency was subjected to extreme abuse, including thousands of abusive messages each day, rape threats and death threats (Hattenstone, 2013). *The Guardian*'s research (Gardiner et al, 2016) found that journalists who are women and/or Black or minority ethnic receive significantly more abuse online than do their male, white counterparts. Diane Abbott, a Black Member of the UK Parliament, revealed the high level of sexist and racist abuse she routinely receives (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-40586335/labour-

s-diane-abbott-tells-of-racist-and-sexist-abuse). Indeed, such has been the concern about the impact of online abuse on the democratic process that the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2016) has conducted a review about intimidation in public life and concluded:

We are deeply concerned about the impact of intimidation on the diversity of our representative democracy, therefore, the [political] parties have an important responsibility to support female, BAME, [Black, Asian, minority ethnic] and LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans] candidates and prospective candidates in particular. (2017:16)

Academic research also reveals the extent and impact of online abuse of women, including feminists. My work with Mike Rowe and Clare Wiper (Lewis et al, 2016b) found that although media coverage of online abuse tends to focus on cases where a huge volume of abuse is sent by single or multiple perpetrators, there is in fact "a continuum of online abuse ranging from concentrated, frequent, highly threatening and hateful to, at the other end of the spectrum, comparatively sporadic and less inflammatory, unpleasant, non-threatening messages" (2016: 1469). This bears similarities to Kelly's (1987) 'continuum of sexual violence' which includes the 'sledgehammer' (Stanko, 1985) incidents and the everyday incidents which comprise the 'wallpaper of sexism' (Lewis et al, 2016). The study also found that online abuse bears many similarities to offline violence against women and girls and has significant, lasting impacts on women's well-being. Similarly, Powell and Henry (2017) detail how sexual violence is perpetrated online through 'revenge pornography', harassment and hate crimes. Many experience online abuse as an attempt to silence them. Jane (2017) argues that misogyny online constitutes attempts to silence women, through intimidation, coercion and self-censorship - what she refers to as "the dark arts of silencing" (2017:68).

Despite the early promise of the internet to provide a new landscape for democratic participation, and despite its unquestionable value for feminist activists who use it to engage with others in campaigns, information-sharing and debate, the evidence shows that the online world has also provided a new landscape of misogynistic abuse of women and girls. This apparently new phenomenon of online abuse in fact reveals the enduring continuities in patriarchal gendered relations and activities, including the historic silencing of women.

5. HISTORIC SILENCING OF WOMEN

Attempts to silence women from participating in public debate have a long, ignominious history. Mary Beard, who was herself subjected to severe misogynistic abuse online after appearing on a mainstream politics TV programme in Britain (Beard, 2013), traces the history of excluding women's public voice. Drawing on the classics, she focuses on the traditions of public speaking and debate, and women's exclusion from these spheres, noting that the "first recorded example of a man telling a woman to 'shut up' …[is] immortalised at the start of the Odyssey." (2015: 809) This, she says, is

a nice demonstration that right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are not being heard in the public sphere; more than that, as Homer has it, an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species. (2015:810)

Not only were women prevented from having a public voice, but public speech was defined *as masculine*. The low-pitched male voice was attributed with authority while women "who claim a public voice get treated as freakish androgynes" (Beard, 2015:813). Using examples from the Greeks and Romans, as well as contemporary examples from Western politics and literature, Beard argues that there is a long history of excluding women and their voices from the public world.

Other more recent examples demonstrate the continuity of exclusion of women's voice from the public domain. The year in which I write, 2018, marks the 100th anniversary of the Representative of the People Act which granted some British women the vote, (women over the age of 30 who met the property qualification, and all men over the age of 21 years were granted the vote by this Act). While we celebrate this fundamental progress, it is worth reflecting on how the suffragettes campaigning for women's right to vote were represented in public discourse. In anti-suffrage postcards of the time, not only were suffragettes depicted as ugly, aggressive harridans who bullied their husbands and neglected their children, but men's violent fantasies about silencing women were also played out. Postcards include violent, yet cartoonish, images of women's tongues being chained to stocks and their mouths being clamped shut in a head brace.

Alamy image

http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-unsympathetic-comment-on-votes-or-women-1913-169312610.html
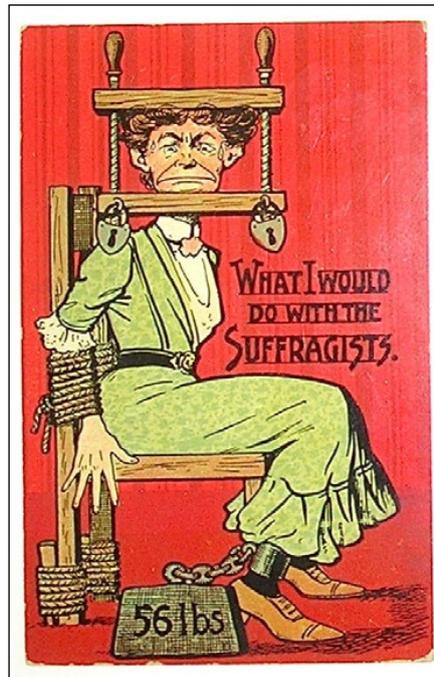
Violent fantasies to silence women by inflicting harm on their throats, tongues and mouths is also evident in contemporary abuse whereby perpetrators frequently make threats about forcing their sexual organs into women's mouths, slitting women's throats or cutting their tongues. This focus on silencing women by doing harm to their mouths, tongues and throats is one of the tropes that appear frequently in misogyny online. Other frequently used tropes are that women are stupid, should 'shut up', are ugly, fat, 'sluttish', are 'rapeable' or 'unrapeable'. This historic and contemporary silencing of women has been, at least partially, successful. Karpowitz et al (2012:545) found that "women speak substantially less than men in most mixed-gender combinations." However, if the intention of online abuse is to silence women, it is not always successful. Lewis et al (2016:1475) found that the majority of feminist women who received online abuse felt more determined to continue their feminist politics, which "complicates the claim that online abuse 'silences' women; while it undoubtedly has that impact for some women at some times, abuse also galvanizes participation in this form of civic life."

6. SUMMING UP

The first two decades of the 2000s have been a time of exciting, fast-moving developments in feminist politics. This paper has argued that, although some aspects of the politics and activism generated at this time have been novel, there are also marked continuities with feminism in the twentieth century; contemporary feminist activists continue to address a range of enduring inequalities (such as violence against women and girls, pornography and the sex industry, the limited representation of women in a range of sectors, and the gender pay gap, for example) and work from a range of political perspectives which defy easy categorisation as a homogenous movement. Similarly, despite the novelty of the digital landscape, it has come to be characterised by misogynistic online abuse which bears many similarities to offline

violence against women and girls, which has a long history. This online abuse is also marked by continuities in attempts to silence women's public voice, a tradition that goes back to the first written evidence of Western culture. These continuities indicate the value in having a historical perspective on gender relations and the changing gender regime. To understand, theorise and challenge oppressive patriarchal systems, we benefit from taking the long view and recognising the continuities in misogynistic practices and discourses, even though their manifestations may vary over time.

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