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## **HASHTAGS, HIERARCHIES AND HEGEMONIES: MAINSTREAM DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND INTERSECTIONAL CRITIQUES**

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This paper focuses on the digital-material hybridity of the contemporary feminist activist, particularly the problematic and progressive potential offered by the technological affordances of the Internet and digital social media. In addition, the paper highlights the associated anxieties for feminists of being online and engaging in what is often, in this “age of surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019) and toxic masculinity, a hostile, commodified and misogynistic milieu. Furthermore, the digital affordances enabled through the proliferation of Web 2.0 technology inform the nature of feminist online discourse and campaigning, which has, at times, contributed to the moral panic that surrounds attempts at centering marginalized voices, particularly members of the trans community and sex workers. The paper will explore the relationship between online tools and platforms adopted by mainstream contemporary feminists and the role they have played in constructing ‘othering’ hierarchies within feminism, as well in enabling the intersectional critique of these narratives.

The paper draws on Dabiri’s analysis of the online discourse by white allies in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which she argues served to reinforce racist hierarchies through the ally/victim binary (2021 3). This is done in order to explore the extent to which discussion of “decolonizing” the Internet reinscribes such unequal power dynamics and to highlight how, at times, a similar ally/victim binary informs mainstream digital feminism, including in the Irish context. A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar 2005) of conversation threads on the Irish Feminist Network’s (IFN) Facebook page reveals that the problematic trend highlighted by Dabiri is repeated there. This ally/victim binary can often position people of color as “inferior”, while concomitantly “being committed to their ‘protection’” (3-4). Dabiri argues that this position has a direct lineage to that taken by anti-slavery abolitionists many of whom, rather than viewing black people as equals, differed from slaveholders only in terms of how these “racial ‘inferiors’ should be treated” (4).

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This racial hierarchy or othering is also consistent with Mohanty's understanding of feminist orientalism. For Mohanty, western feminist discourse contributes to the construction of "the third world woman" (1988 333) in opposition to the 'enlightened' western feminist, which often results in the perpetuation of a 'rescue narrative' by those assuming the role of 'white saviour'. Mohanty conflates the feminist framing of non-western women, such as Muslim women who veil, as being "exploited" with the sexist discourse labelling women as "weak" (1988 53). While Mohanty was writing in the late 1980s, this trend continues today and is in evidence in the online spaces adopted by contemporary feminists. For instance, a contributor to the IFN's Facebook page in a thread under a post critiquing the orientalist stance by many western feminists, argues that "it's not about rescuing, it's about empowerment".

This problematic dynamic and rescue narrative is not only in evidence in mainstream feminism in relation to race and extends beyond the discussion threads of the IFN's Facebook page. For instance, certain campaigns that the IFN and other high-profile feminist groups and individuals have supported, such as the Turn Off the Red Light campaign, is further evidence of orientalism informing mainstream feminism. This campaign, which successively lobbied for the introduction of legislation that ostensibly criminalized the purchaser of sex but not the seller, contributes to the construction of a problematic binary between the 'enlightened anti-prostitution feminist' and the 'prostitute as victim'. Within this power dynamic the 'prostitute' is in need of rescue and education but they are often not bestowed with a voice or agency of their own. As Bernstein points out in her account of an anti-sex work rally in the U.S.A., "all of the speakers at the rally deploy the new anti-trafficking buzzwords ("victim", "predator", "perpetrator", "exploiter") (2012 240), positioning those working within the sex industry firmly at one end of not only the predator/victim binary but also the ally/victim one.

Furthermore, the legislation that followed the TORL campaign, which introduced the Nordic model to Ireland, is not supported by either the Sex Workers Alliance of Ireland (SWAI) or Amnesty international. The SWAI criticized the TORL campaign for privileging the voices of exited sex workers, resulting in silencing practices and infantilizing narratives toward those currently working in the sex industry. Amnesty International also recognizes that the Nordic model forces sex workers "to operate on the margins of society in clandestine and dangerous environments" (2016). These conditions are made even more precarious for those with marginalized identities such as trans women of color and migrant sex workers and represents the "carceral turn" that mainstream hegemonic feminism has taken since the 1960s (Bernstein). Online discourse about sex work, as well as trans rights, is often infused with elements of a moral panic and the architecture and affordances of the Internet and social media enable the viral spread of these anxieties (Ellison).

The alignment of elements of mainstream feminism in Ireland with a model that involves more policing feeds into the carceral turn taken by hegemonic feminism internationally, as illustrated by the use of the mapping app developed by Hollaback!, the anti-street harassment group in the U.S.A. This app tracked the areas where reports of street

harassment took place. These results were then shared with the NYPD, resulting in an increase in stop-and-frisk programs in predominately black neighborhoods, further criminalizing these communities, as this problematic interface fed “into racist geographies of fear” leading to increased policing, violence and arrest (Rentschler 575).

In this sense, hegemonic iterations of feminism emerge from a failure to apply an intersectional lens to sex work, street harassment and other feminist issues. Furthermore, as illustrated by the discussion of Hollaback!, above, the failure by mainstream feminists to recognize the role that digital tools and platforms can play in perpetuating inequalities and discrimination under the guise of ‘protecting women’ underscores the duty of care that feminists have to ensure that intersectionality informs every stage of a campaign, including online activism. Concomitantly, this paper references how the digital affordances of social media have also enabled the resistance to these hegemonic feminisms in the form of queer, trans and intersectional critiques and campaigns, as these digital tools and platforms also form part of the activist arsenal of those challenging the mainstream feminist narrative, while also being cognizant of the corporatized and surveillant characteristics of digital spaces. Avoiding either cyber-utopian or dystopian arguments, or a techno-determinist or utilitarian stance, this paper accounts for the complex and contradictory environment that the Internet offers to feminism. The paper also recognizes the enmeshed nature of feminists with their digital tools and platforms as well as the problematic and progressive feminist activism taking place online.

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