The Global Social Mediascape of Feminism and Misogyny

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Amid the preparation for this special issue, a significant event shook the French film industry: Judith Godrèche's campaign against the abuse of children and women that is entrenched in the industry. The campaign began with the airing of her autobiographical TV series *Icon of French Cinema*, in which she revealed that she had been trapped in an abusive relationship with a male film director twenty-five years her senior when she was just fourteen under the pretext of producing a movie featuring her. She demanded an investigation into sexual violence in the industry, describing the situation as one in which "the directors are fathers and uncles and best friends of the family and grandfathers." She also invited her followers on social media to share their stories of abuse, a representative of the feminist #MeToo movement at this moment in the digital era.[1]

I was surprised upon reading this news by the unexpected resurgence of #MeToo in France, where the movement had previously faced resistance from established female arts professionals such as Catherine Deneuve. These critics dismissed it as American puritanism unsuited to the subtleties of seduction in French culture.[2] This resistance was compounded by the national cultural emphasis on the particularities of French cinema, which traditionally extols

1. Catherine Porter and Aurelien Breeden, "#MeToo Stalled in France. This Actress Might Be Changing Things," *New York Times*, April 3, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/movies/judith-godreche-metoo-abuse-france.html.
2. Aurelien Breeden and Elian Peltier, "Response to French Letter Denouncing #MeToo Shows a Sharp Divide," *New York Times*, January 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/europe/france-sexual-harassment.html#:~:text=The%20response%20to%20the%20letter,should%20be%20concern%20for%20the; Julie Gaillard, "'Je Te Crois' ('I Believe You'): Pragmatics of a Feminist Slogan, or Silencing and the Scene of Address

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film as an art form that allows its practitioners to transgress normal behaviors. This attitude even led French president Emmanuel Macron to back Gérard Depardieu when the actor was accused of sexual assault.[3]

This story illustrates many of the symptoms of the mediated experiences of gender-related subjects that are contemplated in this special issue. The constant stream of stories of sexual violence in various forms exposing deep-seated sexism in media worldwide seems overwhelming. Judith Godrèche's campaigns, including her early accusations against former Hollywood producer and convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein and her recent charges against powerful male figures in the French film industry, are bold and aspirational. She undoubtedly deserves credit, as a woman holding a cardboard sign reading "Merci Judith" at a rally in Paris on March 8, International Women's Day, recognized.

However, as Godrèche acknowledges, "I didn't invent #MeToo. There were women who talked here before me."[4] It is, then, necessary to be cautious about the mechanisms that are popularizing the feminist movement at this moment. The initial #MeToo campaign was started by African American activist Tarana Burke as a grassroots movement a decade ago, but it did not become a widespread global feminist movement until high-profile Hollywood actresses adopted the hashtag on Twitter. Therefore, the fact that the feminism of US-centric, white, heteronormative, middle- to upper-middle-class influencers currently garners visibility in the global social mediascape cannot be ignored.

Paradoxically, the awareness of this US-centric discourse mechanism has also been co-opted by conservative forces seeking to stymie the pursuit of gender justice. This effort manifests in various ways, including discourse about protecting national cultures from the infiltration of American culture in democratic contexts, as in the initial resistance to #MeToo in France, and

in Post-#MeToo France," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 0, no. 0, https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231199951.

3. Porter and Breeden, "#MeToo Stalled in France."
4. Porter and Breeden, "#MeToo Stalled in France."

accusations that gender justice represents Westernized beliefs and lifestyles in authoritarian contexts such as in Singapore and China. The articles in this special issue explore these dynamics, asking how, given the context, to proceed with embodied yet collective feminist knowledge production.

Is Feminism Having a Moment Thanks to Social Media?

Many female friends have told me in recent years that they now understand what I, as a feminist, have been talking about for the past decade. Their words leave me with a bittersweet feeling. Beyond my personal experiences, my mediated experiences also suggest that feminism seems to be "having a moment." For instance, statistics ranking Chinese podcast channels indicate that the second and third most popular identify as feminist.[5] Perhaps this is cause for celebration.

Banet-Weiser describes popular feminism—which is central to her theorization of contemporary feminism—as consisting of practices and conditions accessible to a broad public that range from organizing marches to hashtag activism to women's consumption. She further points out that contemporary feminism is popular partly because of the forms of media on which it circulates, with social and digital media being the most visible platforms for popular feminism.[6] Indeed, social and digital media have become significant venues for feminists to launch anti-sexist campaigns, create content celebrating "girl power" with consumer power at its core, and

5. The two channels are "Auto Radia" and "StochasticVolatility." "Auto Radia" states its intention to provide an "unconventional perspective on gender issues," and both channels consistently demonstrate a feminist standpoint in their content. The real-time data are sourced from Xiaoyuzhou, a dominant podcast app in China, and Apple Podcasts. "Chinese Podcast Ranking," XYZ Rank, accessed July 6, 2024, https://xyzrank.com/#/hot-podcasts.
6. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

provide a platform for enterprising women to participate in the social media economy.[7]

Banet-Weiser's concept of popular feminism is the most convincing framework that I have found to unpack the perplexing contemporary feminist landscape. The concept builds on the term *postfeminism*, which became influential in feminist scholarship in the 1990s in the English-speaking world and was later echoed and challenged by feminist scholars studying women's situations globally.[8] Through widespread usage, postfeminism has developed a range of meanings, referring sometimes to a temporal shift—a time after second-wave feminism—sometimes to a new kind of feminism influenced by post-structuralist or postcolonial thinking and sometimes solely to a backlash against feminism.[9] Aware of the term's ambiguity, the authors of the three case studies in this special issue that adopt postfeminism as a framework—with Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill being the most-cited authors—indicate that postfeminism often refers to young women's advocacy of individual freedom, choice, and "girl power" instead of a collective feminist agenda for women's emancipation and empowerment. Postfeminism acknowledges sexual difference but considers it natural or the product of women's choices, resulting in a (re)construction of femininities and the (self-)surveillance of women's bodies in media culture. Along with the affirmation of individual choice, postfeminism embraces the neoliberal acceptance of full responsibility for one's well-being and self-care.[10]

Banet-Weiser's notion of popular feminism contributes to these features of contemporary feminism by highlighting that, unlike the "can-do" girls'

7. Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).
8. Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 35–58; Simidele Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only? Post-Feminism as Transnational Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (2015): 960–75.
9. Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147–66.
10. Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255–64; Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

repudiation of feminism in postfeminist media culture (hence the prefix *post-*), many high-profile women and members of the mainstream media are now embracing feminism and proudly self-identifying as feminists. A perfect example is the movie *Barbie* that was a blockbuster hit in the summer of 2023. Suddenly, it became fashionable for young, urban, middle-class women worldwide to post pictures of themselves on their social media accounts wearing Barbie pink and share screenshots of the "feminist manifesto" of one of the film's characters. Being a feminist is considered "cool" and not just a being "killjoy," as Sara Ahmed wittily puts it.[11]

Don't get me wrong. I, too, was one of the women who laughed out loud in the movie theater, celebrating this women's feast offered by Greta Gerwig and, of course, Mattel. However, Banet-Weiser's popular feminism involves caution about such upbeat, spectacular, media-friendly versions of feminism, which may eclipse critiques of social structure. Thus, for her, "the visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important but it often stops there, as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures."[12] I was reassured to hear the students, both female and male, in my gender and cinema course in the fall semester of 2023 point out that Ken's position as the "second sex" in Barbieland is disproportionately trivial compared with the real-life sufferings of women in the patriarchal social structure.

Further, the chanting of "girl power" often obscures genuine gender justice and leaves unscrutinized the misogyny entrenched in patriarchal ideology. As Jiayi Chen and Altman Peng's study in this issue shows, in China, the advocacy by urban middle-class women on social media to prioritize career advancement while suppressing desires for intimacy and emotional engagement is, in fact, a form of misogyny based on the stereotype of irrational and "weak" women packaged as an "empowering" call to "think like a man." Additionally, Sara Liao's research in this issue dissects the often-unrecognized

11. Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Penguin Books, 2023).
12. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 4.

misogyny toward women politicians in a prodemocracy social movement. Liao's perspective adds a significant note of caution regarding the structure of patriarchal culture, particularly when most of the scholarship discussing the gendered perspective of this social movement praises women protesters' empowerment and the breaking of gender norms through engagement in frontline activities.[13] The extreme sexist and slut-shaming discourse directed toward women politicians, however, is tolerated in the prodemocracy community because such women are considered not "one of us."

Additionally, the backing of the current feminist movement by corporations such as Mattel in the case of *Barbie* shows this new wave of feminism to be intertwined with the values of neoliberalism—economic success, expanded markets, and self-entrepreneurship. Banet-Weiser argues that popular feminism operates within a neoliberal capitalist context that includes digital media, its affordances, and its expanded markets and circulation capabilities.[14] In this issue, Stefania Marghitu and Jennifer O'Meara's study of facial beauty filters offers a refreshing perspective on the protective and expressive potential of their use as a feminine masquerade that relies on the digital editing and augmented reality (AR) technology provided by the digital media giants. HaeLim Suh investigates female influencers' entrepreneurship in South Korea's e-commerce market and speculates that their business success stems from leveraging the circulation capabilities of social media to reinforce the power of capital either by showcasing their glamorous lives built on branded outfits and cosmopolitan lifestyles or, through self-exploitation, by exposing their personal lives to create intimacy with their followers. Neither approach allows women influencers to engage in

13. Susanne Y. P. Choi, "Doing and Undoing Gender: Women on the Frontline of Hong Kong's Anti-extradition Bill Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2023): 786–801; Evelyn Kwok, "Women to the Front: Women's Participation and Visual Activism in Hong Kong's Protest Movement 2019," in *Feminist Visual Activism and the Body*, ed. Basia Sliwinska (New York: Routledge, 2021), 165–81.
14. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

and revamp the industrial supply chains, so both leave the infrastructural inequality in the business sectors intact.

Case Studies as a Basis for a Politics of Location

In their theorization of contemporary feminism, Gill and Banet-Weiser acknowledge the US-or UK-centric tendency of their analyses, which feature white, heteronormative, corporate, and neoliberal-friendly subjects.[15] One aim of this special issue is, accordingly, to broaden the horizon of the global social mediascape of feminism and misogyny by presenting a constellation of scholarship from various parts of the world. Adrienne Rich, having sincerely reflected on her previous ignorance of women's movements in other countries, such as South Africa and Lebanon, goes further to challenge the white feminist discourse.

> In my white North American world they have tried to tell me that this [non-white] woman—politicized by intersecting forces—doesn't think and reflect on her life. That her ideas are not real ideas like those of Karl Marx and Simone de Beauvoir. That her calculations, her spiritual philosophy, her gifts for law and ethics, her daily emergency political decisions are merely instinctual or conditioned reactions. That only certain kinds of people can make theory; that the white-educated mind is capable of formulating everything; that white middle-class feminism can know for "all women"; that only when a white mind formulates is the formulation to be taken seriously.[16]

15. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation," *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2020): 3–24.
16. Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1986), 230.

It is this "faceless, raceless, classless category of 'all women'"[17] in white feminist writing that prompts Rich to address "a politics of location." To do so, feminist writers must recognize where they are located, name the ground from which they come, and acknowledge the conditions that they have taken for granted in the production of feminist knowledge. This approach counters the free-floating abstractions that have generated violence toward nonwhite, working-class women outside of North America.

I am deeply moved by Adrienne Rich's confessional and reflexive writing and inspired by her stance against the erasure of specificity in the formulation of feminist theory. In urging feminist scholars to return to the lived experiences of their various locations, it is crucial to acknowledge the methodological rigor required for case studies. In 2007, *Critical Inquiry* published two special issues edited by Lauren Berlant that tackled the methodological questions surrounding case studies, which are often seen as caught between particularity and generality. This methodological reflection enables a move beyond the paradox encountered in area studies. For instance, many studies of China are conceptualized under the assumption that what is happening in that country is "a completely unique phenomenon shaped by a distinct historical experience and cultural particularity."[18] From this perspective, cases in China are specific events unconnected to broader themes and contexts; in other words, the findings from Chinese studies supposedly do not reflect global issues or patterns.

Berlant claims that "any case of x promises to generate an account of a situation that is recognizable enough that people can debate about it."[19] The authors of the studies in this special issue aim to generate distinct accounts of feminism and misogyny on social media platforms, making them accessible for readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with and discuss. They achieve this aim through storytelling, which remains a crucial

17. Rich, "Notes," 219.
18. John Agnew, "Emerging China and Critical Geopolitics: Between World Politics and Chinese Particularity," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 51, no. 5 (2010): 569.
19. Lauren Berlant, "On the Case," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 665.

form of communication. The cases that they select are significant not only in their respective contexts but also in the transnational contemporaneity of women's conditions. They range from the phallogocentric ideology of Singaporean governance and its resultant networked grassroots resistance to the construction of new femininity for teen girls and young women in England through influencer culture and the use of mashup videos to resist state-sanctioned misogyny in China.

In such ways, this special issue organizes, as Berlant puts it, "singularities into exemplary, intelligible patterns, enmeshing realist claims (x really is exemplary in this way) with analytic aims (if we make a pattern from x set of singularities we can derive y conclusions) and making claims for why it should be thus."[20] As readers will soon realize, the *X* sets of singularities in this issue represent the great heterogeneity in global sociomediated feminism and misogyny—not only in distinct cultural contexts but also within the same context. At the same time, the issue offers a platform for these singularities to meet, clash, and reveal intelligible patterns. For example, the two cases from China, one on the postfeminist regulation of women's "feeling rules" and the other on digital activism to form political communities, demonstrate the heterogeneous yet interlaced phenomena relating to Chinese women's uses of social media. The findings from these two cases echo those of Frankie Rogan, who studies digital femininities in the United Kingdom. As Olivia Stowell, who reviews Rogan's work in this issue, notes, "contrasting with the 'either/or' assumptions that insist young women either use digital spaces 'to post selfies and engage in cultural communities *or* they use it to engage in new forms of activism and political communities,' Rogan points to the ways that these spheres are intertwined."

This special issue begins with Rogan's piece, which offers a perspective on the theoretical context of postfeminism and neoliberalism in the United Kingdom as well as the femininity featured in influencer cultures. Additionally, Rogan revisits her previous empirical study involving focus groups with

20. Berlant, "On," 670.

teenage girls and young women in England to explore how they construct their gendered cultural and political identities through social media engagement. Reflecting on data collected in the mid-2010s and resituating it within the context of recent economic and political shifts in the United Kingdom, Rogan provides a forward-looking perspective by suggesting future directions for studying digital femininities in times of economic crises.

The next two case studies explore the shifting dynamics of gender performativity in digital spaces in two distinct contexts. First, Stefania Marghitu and Jennifer O'Meara delve into the realm of visual media, specifically, as mentioned, facial beauty filters. Their research provides an alternative perspective to the dominant critical discourse that typically condemns the filters for their negative impact on women. By weaving feminist and queer theories with screen theories, they offer a theoretical framework for investigating the potential liberating power of AR filters on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Their analysis of alternative uses of AR filters in Europe and North America by both female celebrities and regular queer users provides the basis for their argument that facial filters can protect female celebrities from critical scrutiny and enable nonbinary users to explore self-image. Additionally, they show that queer users can create counternarratives that unpack gender performativity by exposing the inherent binaries of beauty filters and machine learning, thereby providing a self-conscious critique of ideal beauty standards on their social media accounts.

Next, Jiayi Chen and Altman Yuzhu Peng investigate another domain of gender performativity in digital spaces, women's feelings and emotions in heterosexual relationships, which is an underexplored area in postfeminist discussions. Their critical discourse analysis of posts from popular romance-centered subgroups on China's social media platforms reveals that the dominant discourse among Chinese urban middle-class women aligns with as well as diverges from Western postfeminist discourse. Both discourses promote a self-surveillance mechanism in women's decision-making and a neoliberal notion of self-responsibility for well-being and personal development. However, unlike the Western postfeminist emphasis on the

hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, spontaneity, and sexual freedom, the Chinese postfeminist discourse urges women to repress their desires for intimacy and "masculinize" their psychological inclinations, encouraging them to be tough and calculating in romantic relationships so as to maximize their personal interests.

Also situating their analysis in the context of China, Fan Xiao and Yue Huang examine how a music video circulated on Bilibili—a streaming platform that serves as a subcultural community for Chinese youth—was utilized by netizens to create an ephemeral outlet for expressing discontent with and resistance to the discrimination against and oppression of women. For this study, they have assembled an archive of the video mashups on Bilibili to compare videos from various periods and explore their evolution. Their findings reveal three phases of video re-creations: initially, fans' apolitical expressions of devotion to celebrities; second, *guichu* remixes in the form of sarcastic narratives; and, eventually, a feminist counternarrative that was triggered by the authorities' propaganda during the pandemic and became dominant. Their study delves into various re-creation techniques and aesthetics within the ACG (anime, comic, game) subculture, unraveling their potential to ignite a grassroots digital feminist movement and the potential of the movement to generate such an impact rapidly.

Liew Kai Khiun and Kirsten Han's collaborative research is based on the digital journalistic practices of Han, who has been advocating for the abolition of capital punishment in Singapore by writing and publishing stories of prisoners on death row—most of whom are drug traffickers from working-class ethnic minority backgrounds—on her blogs, Facebook accounts, and email newsletters. In this article, her autobiographical writing situates her activism within the context of Singapore, where she has not only been constantly restrained by the state—specifically, questioned by police multiple times and publicly criticized by the Minister for Home Affairs—but has also encountered cyber harassment often marked by nationalist and misogynist sentiments. Liew theorizes Han's practices as feminist intersectional opposition to the phallogocentric Singaporean government. Their research

demonstrates that Han's affective, human-centric storytelling is pushing a narrative tipping point against the state's muscular retentionist position.

Addressing the issue of cyber misogyny from another perspective, Sara Liao examines the audiovisual materials portraying Carrie Lam, the former chief executive of Hong Kong, that circulated on Facebook, Telegram, and local bulletin board systems (BBSs) during the 2019 social movements in that city. By situating her discussion within the specific context of paternal governance rooted in Confucian values and gendered expressions in Cantonese—the form of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong—she reveals the entrenched patriarchal values and misogyny even in progressive settings. Her case study cautions against the disqualification of women's leadership and highlights the presence of gender violence in the context of the pursuit of democracy and freedom.

Lastly, HaeLim Suh analyzes the Instagram accounts of six South Korean women entrepreneurs in the beauty, fashion, and domesticity sector. Her study investigates the seemingly promising digital entrepreneurship that has recently opened opportunities for women, with some becoming powerful influencers and achieving economic success. By examining how these women influencers represent themselves and build a rapport with their followers, Suh's study reveals that such digital entrepreneurship often relies on women's self-exploitation through the creation and circulation of images of themselves and the exposure of their personal lives for their followers to consume. Therefore, she contends, this trend in women's entrepreneurship cannot seriously challenge the male-dominated business sector in South Korea.

The three book reviews in this special issue introduce recent studies in the field from distinct perspectives. Kristen Leer discusses an investigation of feminist media activism in Philadelphia by Rosemary Clark-Parsons, Emma Conatser Rektenwald discusses Jennifer O'Meara's study of representations of vocal femininity on mainstream digital platforms and applications, and Olivia Stowell discusses Frankie Rogan's aforementioned account of the construction of femininities on social media by young people in England.

It is my hope that these reviews, together with the research articles in this special issue, provide readers with a sense of the scope of current popular feminism and misogyny in the global social media landscape.

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