Introduction: Feminism, celebrity and the question of agency in neoliberal times

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Internationally, young women are increasingly engaged in forms of popular feminism online both as social media users and as fans of celebrities. This was fuelled in the US by the presidential election of the openly sexist and chauvinistic Donald Trump in 2016, the advent of campaigns like #metoo, and the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement; there has been a dual climate of growing, often racialised, misogyny in public life (Banet-Weiser 2018) on the one hand, and widespread resistance to it on the other, in which the intersections of race, gender and class oppressions have come to the fore (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019).

We live in a time in which women's rights are under attack across the globe – particularly women's reproductive rights; with the attacks on abortion rights from Poland to Alabama and across Europe (Lithuania, Spain and Slovakia have all tabled almost total bans on abortion in recent years), to global 'slut shaming' (Mendes, 2015) and the struggles against gender-based violence in India, there is an assault on the project of women's liberation. But it is also a time of resistance, as exemplified by the largest post-Communist demonstrations in Poland which over-turned the planned abortion ban, and the repeated large scale protests in India against the increasing number of brutal rapes. This has been accompanied by an upsurge of feminist activism online and offline against attacks on reproductive freedoms and rape culture (Mendes, Ringrose and Kellner 2019).

Alongside the attacks on women's rights there has been a growing re-emergence and legitimation of socially conservative narratives about women and new strategies aimed at restricting women's freedoms. These opposing processes, the right wing conservative ideas about women's roles and the largescale international feminist activism, have both been highly mediated. We have thus seen the growth of women-centred popular culture *and* horrifying misogyny online. In this atmosphere of rising popularity for feminist ideas among girls and women (Darmon 2017, Hamad and Taylor 2015, Gill and Orgad 2017, Keller and Ryan 2018), growing numbers of female celebrities have proclaimed their feminist identities and have been vocal about the issues of sexism and gender equality. Yet, high

profile celebrity involvement in feminist politics and campaigns have been marked by debates about whether celebrity feminists popularise and spread feminist values or confine feminism into narrow individualist neo-liberal frames (Banet-Weiser 2018, Rottenberg 2019). There is concern that celebrity voices edge out the voices of ordinary campaigners, and that a more wide-reaching agenda for female liberation is curtailed.

This Themed Section examines the relationship between highly visible celebrity feminism and women's political engagement; it explores the relationship between contemporary forms of political feminist engagement among young women and celebrity feminisms and examines how political questions around feminism and celebrity are articulated – how are the hesitations women express about celebrity feminism voiced? How is the enthusiastic embrace of feminist celebrities conveyed? To what extent are the online discussions framed in discourses that emanate from wider celebrity culture, such as notions of 'authenticity', or from idioms of feminist campaigning? To what extent does online popular feminism intersect with feminist campaigning online?

Drawing on interviews with young women and/or participant observations online, the articles in this Section examine the complexity of the relationship between today's celebrity feminism and young women's mediated participation online, and examine celebrity feminism as a site of negotiation and contestation over the meanings of feminism. They draw on a number of case studies that map diverse experiences of young women's engagement with popular and celebrity feminism, explore the multifaceted dimensions of this relationship, and investigate the broader impact of this phenomenon for online and offline feminist activists, activisms and the wider public.

The concerns of this Themed Section are connected to a wider feminist scholarship on the formation of contemporary feminisms and questions about the problems that postfeminist politics have created for feminist activism (Gill 2006, McRobbie 2009), and the increasing prominence of versions of feminism that may reinforce rather than challenge structural inequality, the politics of neoliberalism and associated normative modes of behaviour (Banet-Weiser 2019, Gill and Orgad 2017, Rottenberg 2018,). In 2009, feminist intellectual Angela McRobbie revisited her earlier optimistic position on feminism and popular culture in the 1990s, which (she argued at the time) opened up spaces for young women to develop new assertive femininities and explore new sexual freedoms. In *Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie argues that feminist possibilities had been eradicated from popular culture, that feminism had been co-opted and eviscerated in a postfeminist popular culture tied to the logic of a neo-liberal capitalist global economy. Postfeminist culture requires that girls and women withhold their critique of patriarchy – postfeminism's attachment to the politics of individualism and the 'empowered' embrace of traditional ideas about women – particularly women's bodies, or rather, women-as-bodies, had closed down popular culture as a space for feminist possibilities or for resistance. Postfeminist popular culture then, only enables women to be visible and take their place in the world of work and public life if they 'choose' to embody acceptable, heteronormative, racialised and classed versions of femininity, which for McRobbie is ultimately a refusal of

feminism. One reviewer of the book in 2009 suggested that this view was too pessimistic; McRobbie is accused of ignoring openly feminist formations and collective radical politics of the day by focusing on regressive television programmes such as *What Not To Wear* (BBC 2 2001–2007) and *Ten Years Younger* (Channel 4 2004–present) while ignoring alternative contemporary phenomenon such as riot grrl and Ladyfest, examples of female resistance to patriarchal norms. McRobbie is seen to wrongly close 'down possibilities for young women's agency and resistance' (Downes, 2009 n.p.).

This encounter between feminists who want to map resistance in everyday life and who also want to critique the patriarchal politics of everyday culture, or in the case of McRobbie, the same feminist who moves between optimism and pessimism in her diagnosis of the possibilities of women's engagement with popular culture, encapsulates a long standing dilemma for feminism and feminist cultural studies, which can be summarised in the 'structure and agency' problematic. It is a problem that has been central to feminist theory for many decades – where does the balance lie between the determining power of structural oppression and the forms of culture it produces and our ability to act in the world and challenge domination? What are the mechanisms, spaces, and modes of resistance in mainstream popular culture, if they exist at all? This tension between being a subject with agency and being subjectified by dominant social norms has never been fully resolved in feminist theory (nor in critical theory more generally), despite the crucial efforts by some to rethink the structure/agency dichotomy (McNay, 2000). The articles in this Section, in a variety of ways, explore the tensions between incorporated versions of feminism which are seen to contribute to the continued subjectification of women, and the scope for agency and resistance, as they are articulated in young women's engagement with celebrity feminisms online.

In the decade since McRobbie's book was published, there has been a resurgence of feminism in popular culture (Darmon 2014, Rivers 2017), accompanying a resurgence of feminist activism in digital spaces (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019), but it is a very contradictory moment, marked as it is by the incursions made by postfeminist politics into public culture over the past two decades, which has undermined the possibility of collective social action for women's rights, where the onward march of neo-liberal values has winnowed out alternative imaginings of futures, where impositions are described as choices, and where victims of all manner of oppressions, violence and displacement are marked as perpetrators. We have seen celebrities proclaiming their feminism, while woman-as-body returns with a vengeance as a dominant value in public culture, a measure of women's 'success', including for female celebrities. Some male journalists and scholars now celebrate figures like Kim Kardashian as a 'rule-breaking feminist icon' precisely because she inhabits women-as-body and profits from it. As attacks on women's bodily autonomy (by state actors, far right groups and individuals) escalate, writers like Cashmore (2019) regurgitate postfeminist precepts that women are now free to choose their life, with the implication that they choose to be defined by their bodies, 'Why should women not want to show off their bodies? What's wrong with desiring the attention of others? Aren't

women who flaunt themselves as ostentatiously as they can in order to provoke envy, admiration, defiance and sexual arousal just exercising *agency*?' (Cashmore 2019, 33). For Cashmore, modern day patriarchy is not so bad – if it's a prison, he reasons, it is one that women choose to remain inside, 'you're free to leave anytime you please. But if you decide to stay, we'll keep the food and drink coming. And every so often, we'll expect you to shout out of the barred window that we're treating you well and that you've decided to stay here "cause the food is good"' (33). Such a perspective internalises the logic of neo-liberalism, constructing woman first and foremost as consuming subjects whose only hope of 'empowerment' is to utilise their 'assets' and acquiesce to the very narratives and practices that keep women subjugated. He projects that internalisation outward onto women and empties the discursive space of any hope for change.

While Cashmore might represent an extreme version of postfeminist capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), feminist thinkers such as Rosalind Gill (2006), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), Catherine Rottenberg (2019) and others, have charted the more widespread rise of neoliberal feminism and demonstrated its influence and reach. In this Section, the feminist analyses of popular feminism's navigation of neoliberalism draw on these perspectives. For example, Paule and Yelin draw on Rottenberg's analysis of the rise of neo-liberal feminism and Banet-Weiser's insight that today the struggles about the meanings of feminism are still taking place on the sites of the popular, in which popular feminism is connected to an economy of visibility and where palatable forms of feminism constitute a 'feminism market' (2015). They investigate how celebrity feminists have facilitated young women proclaiming feminist politics, in contexts where such allegiances may be difficult to express. But they also question the way that celebrity feminisms can promote individualised versions of empowerment, emphasising individual self-confidence, rather than organising for collective rights, and where the inner self is the focus, rather than outer social change. Michele Paule and Hannah Yelin's study of young women in leadership programmes, for instance, raises question about the tension between the politics of collectivity and individualism. They draw on Banet-Weiser's notion of the 'empowerment market' (2015) to examine the positioning of girls empowerment in relation to highly individualised and traditional ideas about leadership, where social and economic barriers to girls success in an era of austerity are denied and where the twin values of neo-liberal ideology – consumerism and entrepreneurialism are validated. They argue that empowerment has become commodified.

Similarly, Hannah Klien's study of the online campaign #leaveshealone against sexual violence and harassment at Carnival in the Caribbean draws on the idea of 'traffic in feminism' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017) to examine, not just the way that feminism is turned into a product, but that this commodified version of feminism shores up the very ideas that underpin inequality. Limatius examines how plus-size bloggers are caught between drawing on celebrities as role models and negotiating the limits this terrain through ideas around 'authenticity'.

Thus, the following articles examine a variety of manifestations of women's engagement with celebrity feminisms; the Themed Section examines women's self-

proclaimed inspiration from celebrity 'role models' and looks at how these engagements help to shape their online and offline identities and activities. But it also critically examines the potential limitations of this phenomenon – does celebrity feminism centre on liberal and individualistic approaches to gender? What exclusions might such formations of feminism entail? What are the raced, classed, and gendered implications of celebrity feminism emerging from a field of culture, as it does, that is structured in hierarchy and saturated with narratives of individualism? The articles in this Section will examine how celebrity feminism can shape women social media users' experience of mediated feminism and how it both informs their own participation and can produce languages and practices which struggle with its boundaries. The Themed Section interrogates the impact of celebrity feminism on activism and asks if it curtails more far reaching questions about social change and collective action, by framing feminism in the discourses of commodity feminism (buy your way to freedom) and postfeminist and/or 'fourth wave' emphases on consumption and self-branding. This Section suggests that there is evidence that the structuring context of commodity-based celebrity feminism enhances the scale of participation while potentially limiting the substance.

The Themed Section opens Hanna Klien-Thomas' analysis of hashtag feminism in the Caribbean. Klien-Thomas notes that while hashtags have become firmly established forms of digital activism claiming spaces for visibility, participation and voice, as seen in globally prominent examples such as the #MeToo movement, there are also many regional initiatives making use of hashtags to address locally specific issues. Klien-Thomas analyses a campaign initiated by Caribbean feminist activists in 2017 known as #LeaveSheAlone. This campaign was set up in response to a peak in violence against women. The hashtag refers to the song "Leave me alone" that marked the comeback of 79-year-old singer Calypso Rose and was based on the success of her international collaborations with Soca superstar Machel Montano. Klien-Thomas examines the relationship between the digital campaign and Calypso Rose who is one of the few established female calypsonians, is a local icon, and has called out oppressive practices against women throughout her career. Klien-Thomas investigates how young activists draw on the symbolic power of Calypso Rose, to amplify the visibility of the hashtag on a variety of media platforms to campaign against gender-based violence and raise awareness on issues of consent.

Klien-Thomas begins by discussing if and how Calypso Rose can be framed as a celebrity. She argues that due to her immense fame in the local context, the 79-year old Afro-Trinidadian woman and member of the LGBT community transcends notions of identity politics, but points out that her rural and working-class origins stand in stark contrast to the background of campaigners, who mainly belong to the affluent, well-educated, urban part of the population. Klien-Thomas suggests that the co-option of Calypso Rose in the campaign follows current global trends towards celebrity feminism that do not only rely on the visibility of public figures but also use them as sites of meaning-making for feminists. She questions how notions of gender, generation, ethnicity, 'race' and class are negotiated in the reinvention of Calypso Rose in this context.

Klien-Thomas offers a close analysis of digital content and visual media practices of young women who have used the hashtag. In contrast to other hashtag campaigns, #LeaveSheAlone has a much stronger presence on Instagram than other platforms. Here, Klien-Thomas returns to the structure/agency problematic in a Caribbean context. She argues that these practices demonstrate that visibility is negotiated in terms of both the objectification of female bodies and the body as site of agency in carnival. Calypso Rose as signifier in the campaign, together with forms of participation by young users, she suggests, demonstrates how carnival as the wider environment of the hashtag is both integrated in the neoliberal cultural economy as well as how this is contested in media practices of young women.

Michele Paule and Hannah Yelin are also concerned with the way that agency for girls and young women is framed by the current socio-political climate and they examine the dichotomies surrounding efforts to develop leadership potential in girls during austerity. While acknowledging the lack of female leadership and political representation gap, Paule and Yelin examine the way that initiatives to develop girls leadership potential are often produced through discourses of success in relation to highly visible women in public life, and are often disconnected from the experiences of girls' lives, yet speaking to a public sense of self. They explore girls' imaginings of leadership through their own experiences and through the highly visible women they encounter across a range of media.

For Paule and Yelin, social media has blurred some of the traditional and gendered boundaries between the public/private in the public sphere and feminist models of citizenship challenge the traditional notion of the active citizen as participating in politics in formal ways and designated spaces. However, their research with girls suggests that while girls' imaginings of leadership are rich and expanded, informed by a range of media models and demonstrating a strong social justice agenda, the conflict with their day-to-day experiences is marked. These experiences tend to be limited to domestic responsibilities and to undertaking emotional labour in schools. They argue that it is only when girls participate in formal extra-curricular activities that the picture changes, but even so such participation is marked by class and cultural divides and associated with the reproduction of privilege. They propose that the vocabulary of 'leadership' itself needs to be contested because of its emphasis on (gendered) individualism and its failure to capture ways in which girls may both participate in decision-making, rooted in their life conditions, and how they imagine public life.

This Themed Section concludes with Hannah Limatius' analysis of celebrity and the growing body positivity movement on social media, which seeks to challenge mainstream media's beauty ideals of size and shape. She argues that marginalization based on body size is a gendered issue because of the way that women's bodies are objectified and sexualized in the public domain in a way that men's bodies are not. Limatius argues that because women's 'success' and inclusion is still inescapably embodied, where women are judged, and accepted or rejected due to body size and shape, the body positivity movement too is a

gendered phenomenon, with the majority of the body positive spaces and resources on social media being geared towards women.

Limatius' research focuses on an important part of the online body positivity movement – plus-size women who write fashion-focused blogs; sometimes also referred to as 'fatshionista bloggers'. Limatius investigates the ways in which plus-size women discuss body positivity, celebrity culture and feminism in their fashion-focused blogs. She argues that blogging enables women to form communities and forge identities outside of the norms of the mainstream fashion media.

Limatius' analysis of the blogs examines the intersections between feminism, body positivity and celebrity; she looks at the complexity of the interaction of these different phenomena and how they contribute to the construction of the bloggers' (body positive) identities. Celebrity encounters are significant both in the blogs and in the comments posted on the blogs. From face-to-face encounters with celebrities to bloggers reflections on how media discuss female celebrities' bodies, to talk about plus-size celebrities they either identify with or not, bloggers are working through their politics of body positivity through celebrified discourses.

However, while body-positive celebrity role models can be empowering to plus-size women, Limatius argues that the concept of body positivity itself and its connections to celebrity culture are problematic. As in the other articles in this Section, Limatius is concerned with the way that body positivity has become a catch phrase that is increasingly commodified and commercialized. Limatius argues that the body positivity movement and its claims of inclusivity, equality and feminism need to be viewed through a critical lens; its encounters with celebrity culture and fashion locate it on a terrain where consumerism and individualism are dominant cultural values with impact.

Each of the articles in this Section brings fresh perspectives and new material to long-standing feminist concerns about the ongoing, yet evolving, structures of subordination of women, the ability of women and girls to find spaces of resistance and endurance in popular culture, particularly on the relatively new terrain of social media and the digital world, and the limits and potentials of new formulations of popular feminism online and in celebrity culture. Each article demonstrates, in different ways, the imposition of the commercialized and individualized values of neo-liberal cultures and economies on the sphere of the popular, taking particular shape through celebrities and celebrity culture, and which forms the terrain on which women and girls can act and make choices. The articles demonstrate the wonderful myriad ways that girls and women struggle for agency in these contexts, resist patriarchy and raise their voices. But the authors also seem to share a longing for greater collectivity which is imperative to a politics of liberation. They advocate a rejection of the dominant values of our age, and their articulation in postfeminism, which construct us all as individualized consuming subjects, and which hamper the project of women's liberation.

My own view is that celebrity culture, for all of its complexity and variety (being built as it is on humans who are varied and complicated and sometimes unpredictable) has

throughout its history, functioned to increase commercial control over the cultural sphere and has assimilated and disciplined a vast array of bodies and identities in the process (Williamson 2016). Nonetheless, as this Themed Section has shown, dominant values are always contested because the cultures and histories that produce them are contradictory and subject to change, and the outcome of our encounters with celebrity culture are not predetermined. Symbolic meanings are contested; celebrities, even while performing normative racialised and gendered identities in some ways, also have ethnic, class and gender belongings that potentially reject some dominant values and offer alternative ways of being human. However, while celebrities may be vocal on feminism and racism, the growing movements of liberation do not emanate from celebrity culture. Instead, some celebrities are influenced by these movements – movements that are built on the solidarity and collective politics of many millions of ordinary people across the globe, attempting to rebuild the world anew.

A final note on the reality of women's oppression: some of the women who were due to contribute to this Section were forced to pull out because of the privatised and gendered nature of caring for children. This Section was written during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, when schools in many countries were rightly forced to close in order to reduce the spread of the disease, but which left women with caring responsibilities (and it is women who still predominantly shoulder that responsibility) in the position of having to look after children full-time while also trying to work full-time. The marketized nature of higher education in most countries resulted in a lack of support for women staff in these circumstances, as universities cut staff costs for fear of dropping income from student fees. The result is that women's ability to conduct research and publicly contribute to knowledge has been severely undermined. For this Section, it means we are missing the contributions of two excellent women scholars who were forced to pull out because of the impossible demands of full-time childcare and ever-increasing workloads. Both have been conducting important work on Beyoncé, fan cultures, and the mechanisms of contemporary celebrity culture in relation to movements such as Black Lives Matter, debates about feminism, black womanhood, sexuality, and social justice. Let the struggle against racialised and patriarchal capitalism continue, in all of its manifestations.

Bibliographical note:

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