Post-postfeminism? New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times
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Abstract

This article contributes to debates about the value and utility of the notion of postfeminism for a seemingly "new" moment marked by a resurgence of interest in feminism in the media and among young women. The paper reviews current understandings of postfeminism and criticisms of the term's failure to speak to or connect with contemporary feminism. It offers a defence of the continued importance of a critical notion of postfeminism, used as an analytical category to capture a distinctive contradictory-but-patterned sensibility intimately connected to neoliberalism. The paper raises questions about the meaning of the apparent new visibility of feminism and highlights the multiplicity of different feminisms currently circulating in mainstream media culture – which exist in tension with each other. I argue for the importance of being able to "think together" the rise of popular feminism alongside and in tandem with intensified misogyny. I further show how a postfeminist sensibility informs even those media productions that ostensibly celebrate the new feminism. Ultimately, the paper argues that claims that we have moved "beyond" postfeminism are (sadly) premature, and the notion still has much to offer feminist cultural critics.

Keywords: postfeminism neoliberalism feminism media magazines

Introduction: Feminism, postfeminism and generation

On October 2, 2015 the London *Evening Standard* (ES) published its first glossy magazine of the new academic year. With a striking red, white and black cover design it showed model Neelam Gill in a bright red coat, upon which the words "NEW (GEN) FEM" were superimposed in bold. To the left of this, another large headline asserted "NEELAM GILL TOP GIRL: IN MY INDUSTRY WOMEN EARN MORE." Further teasers promised "TODAY'S GENDER WARRIORS," "HOW TO DATE A FEMINIST," and "BOYEURISM: MEN THE NEW SEX OBJECTS."

[Insert image here]

The timing of this publication was not accidental, coinciding as it did with the beginning of the academic year in London's many Universities. On the same day, *The Times Higher* published its global rankings, highlighting the position of several London universities near the top of the international league tables, and claiming London as the world's most important university city. As tens of thousands of students returned to studying, or started university for the first time, the London transport network was awash with free copies of the ES magazine proclaiming feminism as stylish, successful and youthfully hip.

In this article I seek to unpick this constellation of values linking youth (or at least youthfulness), fashion and feminism. I will do so by starting from this ephemeral, yet emblematic, publication – a publication whose resonance in celebrating "new generation feminism" I argue goes far beyond London but connects to a wider discursive formation in the UK and many other countries in which feminism is increasingly signified within the mainstream media as "cool" (Valenti, 2014; Keller & Ringrose, 2015). I wish to discuss a series of questions connected to

feminism, postfeminism, and generation, in order to think about the current cultural and political moment – a moment in which feminism has seemingly moved from being a derided and repudiated identity among young women (Scharff, 2013) to becoming a desirable, stylish and decidedly fashionable one. How should we read this apparent shift? What place does the notion of postfeminism have at a moment in which feminism has seemingly become hip? Is postfeminism irrelevant in these new times? Are we now post-postfeminism?

In addressing these questions, the paper seeks to respond to a number of recent discussions about the "new cultural life of feminism" (*Diffractions*, 2015) and suggestions that postfeminism needs to be "problematized" (Keller and Ryan, 2014) because "emergent feminisms" pose a "challenge to postfeminist media culture" (Keller and Ryan, 2015). Engaging with these ideas I will make a case for the continued relevance of postfeminism as an analytical category in media studies. Responding to the claim that postfeminism lacks analytic purchase for engaging with a moment characterised by a resurgence of interest in feminism, the paper seeks to engage with current mainstream media constructions of feminism and to unpick some of the complexities of a cultural moment seemingly characterized by a multiplicity of (new and old) feminisms which co-exist with revitalized forms of anti-feminism and popular misogyny. The paper disputes the idea that the concept of postfeminism has nothing to offer in reading the current moment and aims to show how some of the popular mediated feminism circulating is in fact distinctively postfeminist in nature. I suggest the need to make distinctions between different kinds of (mediated) feminism, arguing that the corporate/neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) of *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013) may have little in common with – and indeed may be antithetical to – the activist feminism of those protesting budget cuts to women's services or deportation of migrants. I posit that these feminisms may in turn be remote from dominant media constructions of feminism as a youthful, stylish identity.

Questions of generation are implicit in this paper as I seek to respond to suggestions that postfeminism is outdated as an analytical concept. Feminist scholarship does not exist outside of fashion, nor outside the pressures of contemporary neoliberal academia, that may contribute both to the investments that each of us has in particular critical vocabularies, as well as to the need for the "new", the fresh, the unique. Whilst recognizing that generation shapes life experiences in profound ways, I am troubled by the idea of using "generations" as a lens both because I am mindful of feminism's regular "generation wars", and deeply informed by an ethics and politics concerned with how we "tell feminist stories" (Hemmings, 2011). Generational framings – including critical ones like this special issue – seem perennially to risk pulling us back into polarized positions characterised by mistrust and suspicion on both sides (and why are there always only two sides, rather than three or four generations?) That is not what I want to do. The scholars whose work I engage are feminists I like and admire; people whose new publications enthuse and excite me. Moreover, even beyond the ethical concerns, it seems to me that a focus on political and ideological differences within feminism is more empirically relevant and productive than one that relates to birth dates. Rather than fuelling intergenerational animosity, then, my aim is to contribute to the building of an intersectional understanding of postfeminism that can be used critically in making sense of contemporary culture. It will not tell us everything, to be sure, and it should not be the only term in our critical lexicon, but it does still have something to offer those who wish to make sense of the complexities of contemporary mediations of gender, alongside issues of gendered inequality and power relations.

Interrogating postfeminism

Over the last three decades, the notion of postfeminism has become a key term in feminists' critical vocabulary (e.g. Modleski, 1991; Brooks, 1997; Coppock et al, 1995; Gamble, 2004; Projansky, 2007; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007). The term is contested and has been characterised in various different ways: as a backlash against feminism, to refer to an historical shift – a time "after" (second wave) feminism; to capture a sense of an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting an alignment with other "post" movements (poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcoloniality); and to propose connections to Third Wave. In two formulations that have been influential within feminist media and cultural studies, postfeminism has been characterised as a "gender regime" (McRobbie, 2009) and, in my own terms, as a "sensibility" (Gill, 2007), deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism. According to this perspective, postfeminism is a critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice and agency as dominant modes of accounting (Thompson and Donaghue, 2014); the disappearance – or at least muting – of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence (Kelan, 2009; Scharff, 2012); the "deterritorialisation" of patriarchal power and its "reterritorialisation" (McRobbie, 2009) in women's bodies and the beauty-industrial complex (Elias et al, 2016); the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring and disciplining of women's bodies (Gill, 2007); and the influence of a "makeover paradigm" that extends beyond the body to constitute a remaking of subjectivity – what I have recently characterised as a central part of the "psychic life of postfeminism" (Gill, 2016). Crucially, as Angela McRobbie (2009) among others has argued, postfeminism is involved in the undoing of feminism.

However, the value of postfeminism as a critical term has been called into question recently by a number of scholars (Lumby, 2011; Whelehan, 2010). Amongst them are several scholars who have worked productively with the notion, yet who point out that the heightened visibility of feminist activism, alongside a growing sense that feminist questions and issues increasingly take up space within the mediated public sphere, should give us pause for thought. In this changed context, analysis of postfeminism is cast as out of date, "falling short" and in need of "problematization" (Keller and Ryan, 2015). As Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan (2014) put it in a recent call for papers:

> Over the past two years feminist politics have become increasingly prevalent within popular media cultures, complicating the logic that feminism is in retreat. This visibility can be mapped across a range of media texts…Postfeminism falls short of adequately accounting for these complicated politics, as well as the internal dynamics of various forms of feminisms currently visible across media culture.

Elsewhere, Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence (2015) suggest the need to "interrogate some of the core ideas of postfeminism as theorised by media scholars", arguing that postfeminism is "potentially redundant" in the light of "fourth wave" social media-based feminist activism. In turn, Diane Negra (2014:275) notes "we now need to inquire whether/how accounts of gender developed in an earlier era still apply".

This work raises important questions about the extent to which existing conceptual vocabularies are up to the task of reading and engaging with change. For the contemporary feminist analyst, the current moment – by which I mean variously, this year, this month and right now – must rank as one of the most bewildering in the history of sexual politics. The more one looks, listens, and learns, the more complicated it seems. Whilst some choose to offer linear stories of progress or backlash, with their associated affects of hope or despair, for most the situation seems too complicated for such singular narratives: for every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny; for every feminist "win", an outpouring of hate, ranging from sexual harassment to death threats against those involved; for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling.

Every temporary stabilisation, when the blurring pixels offer up a momentary glimpse of clarity, feels like a comforting illusion. But it is never long before the image is dancing again – and I (and I'm sure it is not just me) am screwing up my eyes, and squinting, trying to make sense of it all. Only a few years ago, in the tenth anniversary issue of this journal, I was bemoaning the disappearance of the word "sexism" from our collective vocabulary, and urging that "it is time to get angry again". Since then "sexism" has become a key term again – thanks to campaigns in and beyond the UK, such as the "Everyday Sexism Project" (http://everydaysexism.com) and "Hollaback" (http://www.ihollaback.org). There has also been an outpouring of feminist rage about everything from "lad culture" on University campuses, to female genital cutting, to the gender composition of our democratic institutions. Questions about gender inequality suffuse the mediated public sphere: on any given day, in the UK at least, there will be news stories about instances of sexual harassment, inequalities in pay, the gender make-up of company Boards or political parties, the sexualised treatment of female celebrities, the "confidence gap" between girls and boys, etc.

One critique made of analysts of postfeminism, then, has been – to put it in colloquial terms – that they do not "get this", have not sufficiently attended to how much has changed, but remain stuck in a "dominant" refrain about "feminism in retreat" (Keller and Ryan, 2014). Imelda Whelehan (2010:159) captures the affective qualities of this, writing of her feeling of "frustration…boredom and ennui" with the notion, a sense both of stating the obvious and "tilting at windmills". In the more upbeat vein of the conference call, Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan point to the new visibility of feminism:

> This visibility can be mapped across a range of media texts; Beyonce's 2013 self-titled album, Lena Dunham's HBO television hit Girls, and Tavi Gevinson's website Rookie are only a few examples. Indeed, the mainstreaming of discussions of gender and feminism across media further highlights this shift, with media coverage of rape culture and online misogyny, the #YesAllWomen campaign, and the lack of strong female film characters producing public discourse within the past year that transversed (sic) mainstream and alternative media.

Keller and Ryan highlight a key issue: that as feminist scholars we are in a seemingly 'new' situation – or at least one with some novel features – for which new understandings are needed. Where a few years ago it sometimes felt difficult to make any feminist arguments 'stick' in the media (Ahmed, 2004), today it seems as if

everything is a feminist issue. Feminism has a new luminosity in popular culture. Like Keller and Ryan and others, I am excited to greet new scholarship – including their own – that can grapple with and understand this situation. Like them I have long argued that media are key sites for feminist ideas with "much of what counts as feminist debate in Western countries today tak[ing] place in the media rather than outside" (Gill, 2007, 268). What is at stake, however, is how we make sense of this and what critical tools and concepts we require. In the remainder of this article I want to engage with the important questions raised about "postfeminism" but argue that it remains a powerful term for our critical vocabulary as feminists. I will begin by asking questions about the complicated nature of the new visibility of feminism, then discuss contrasting characterizations of the term postfeminism, and finally offer a brief analysis of a current mainstream magazine's 'feminism issue' in order to highlight the tenacity of postfeminist ideas even as they sit alongside celebrations of youthful, hip feminism.

Uneven feminist visibilities

To be sure, feminism has a visibility in media culture that it did not have even a few years ago, and we are currently witnessing a resurgence of feminist discourse and activism as well as a renewed media interest in feminist stories. Comments and observations that would, in the recent past, have been dismissed as a "yawn" – too tedious or uninteresting to make the news – are "stories" again (for now) – though it would be premature, in my view, to see this as in any way indicative of the media "becoming" feminist; it is part of a cyclical – and sometimes cynical – process.[1] However, even accepting it in the most optimistic terms e.g. as a "feminist zeitgeist", it is worth trying to unpick and disentangle the profoundly uneven visibilities of different feminisms in media culture. My aim here, to be clear, is not to examine 'feminism' as a set of ideas or commitments or activist practices, but rather to look – very briefly - at how different feminisms materialize in media culture – in order to reflect upon feminism's new visibility.

Feminist issues in the media

At the most general level, we can point to the current – heightened – attention accorded to (some) feminist issues in the media, compared with the earlier part of this decade. These might range from coverage of Hilary Clinton's campaign for the US Presidency, to the current preoccupation with (white, middle/upper class) women on Boards, and reporting of the gender pay gap amongst Hollywood actors and actresses. Celebrity-suffused campaigns such as Emma Watson's participation in HeForShe (http://www.heforshe.org) or Angelina Jolie's UNHCR work also garner extensive media space. Increasingly, NGOs, activist groups, and transnational bodies like the UN work within, rather than outside, the values of celebrity culture (Koffman et al, 2015), and the relationship of feminism and celebrity has become a key topic for analysis (e.g. Celebrity Studies special issue, 2015)

Debates about women's representation in different fields are also prominent – primarily organised around talk of numbers, and recycling a restricted and predictable set of topics related to "positive discrimination" (quotas, hiring practices, women-only shortlists, and so on). Read, watch or take part in some of these newsroom or

current affairs discussions and the themes become very familiar: "merit not gender is the most important thing"/ "isn't it hard for women to know they only got there because of their gender"/ "what about men?", etc

Sexism itself is also a contemporary media issue par excellence, with the "row" the predominant form. At the time of copyediting this article "sofagate" had just broken out in the UK, centred around the BBC's decision to give a junior male reporter the more culturally valued "left side of the sofa" position on breakfast television, even though his female colleague is considerably more experienced. Reporting of the issue shared many of the features of media sexism rows – above all, their tendency to both trivialise and personalise the issue of sexism. It remains relatively rare for serious discussion of sexism to be given space in mainstream media – an exception is former Australian Premier Julia Gillard's famous misogyny speech (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOPsxpMzYw) (Donaghue, 2015).

With some exceptions, sexism is generally framed within the media– even when it is taken seriously – as an individual rather than structural or systemic issue, let alone as connected to other inequalities or located in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism. The UK's Guardian newspaper exemplifies this trend with its perennial recycling of the "is it ok to call yourself a feminist if you get married/ shave your legs/ go on a diet (etc)" style of article in which apparently feminist credentials are held up to hand-wringing scrutiny.[2] Whilst welcoming the heightened visibility of feminist discussion in the mediated public sphere, it is worth noting the way in which many feminist media storms arrive always-already trivialised, be they about "twerking", footballers' private emails, inappropriate comments about a LinkedIn profile, or the latest feminist-baiting outburst from Donald Trump. As Joshua Gamson (1998) argued in relation to queer politics, it is worth asking not just about the amount of visibility but also about the kinds of visibility on offer in any seemingly "democratised" media space.

Feminist activism

The contemporary currency of various forms of emergent or ongoing feminist activism - ranging from eco-feminism to socialist-feminist anti-austerity activism, to migrant anti-deportation campaigns, to sex worker activism, queer and trans engagements, and many others – has generated relatively limited coverage (beyond social media), with some notable exceptions such as Slutwalk. Occasionally a feminist protest will break through, as in the widescale UK reporting in 2014 of a group of working class (and mainly homeless) women who occupied an East London tower block after they were evicted (FocusE15.org). But this example remains unusual in mainstream news media in which coverage of major social movements such as Occupy or Black Lives Matter is still predominantly focused on men, and often obscures or minimizes the vibrant feminist activism within such political formations.

The "attention" feminist activism generates is uneven, in ways that relate to established "news values" such that an individual carrying her mattress on her back to a Columbia University graduation in order to protest her rape and the University's failure to act (Gambino, 2015), or a "spectacular" protest like Sisters Uncut's red carpet action (Marks, 2015) at the London premiere of the film Suffragette will generate vastly more coverage than typical demonstrations, marches or petitions, even if the latter involve significantly more people. Visibility is also related to the ideological complexion of the politics and the campaign's degree of challenge to the

status quo (Rottenberg, 2014). In this respect the space given to "I am Malala" and "Bring back our girls" might be unsurprising as they represent "comfortable" feminist campaigns for Western/Northern audiences steeped in racist and colonial discourse, safely projecting the need for feminism not here but "there" (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria), in a manner redolent of longstanding constructions of "Third World Woman" (Mohanty, 1988) and the Orientalist fantasies of "rescue" associated with her (Koffman et al, 2015; Scharff, 2013). Black feminist organisations in the UK, by contrast, struggle to achieve such media prominence for their campaigns (e.g. Southall Black Sisters or Women Against Fundamentalism), reflecting an ongoing racism and classism within reporting of feminism (Jonsson, 2014).

It is worth noting also the proliferation of contemporary feminist campaigns that are themselves about cultural representation – e.g. the Representation Project (http://the representation project), LosetheLad Mags (http://www.losetheladsmags.org.uk), No More Page 3 (https://nomorepage3.wordpress.com). But it is important also to point not only to the significance, energy and vibrancy of these campaigns but also to the hate, vitriol and animosity they generate, both for the individuals involved in them, and more broadly in the mediated public sphere: the death threats, rape threats, and terrifyingly brutal misogyny meted out to women like Caroline Criado-Perez who lead the campaign to ensure that women are not entirely "symbolically annihilated" (Tuchman, 1978) from British banknotes (http://www.thewomensroom.org.uk/banknotes). As feminists, it is crucial that we hold and think together the different meanings and affects involved in the contemporary visibility of (some) feminist activism. This suggests that whilst it is crucial to examine responses to misogyny, as in Mendes, Keller and Ringrose's (forthcoming 2016) work on digital feminist activism, it is also important not to lose sight of the other direction, i.e. misogynist responses to feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Corporate or neoliberal feminism

The cultural signficance of a kind of neoliberal feminism, exemplified by books such as *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013); *The Confidence Code* (Kay and Shipman, 2014) and *Getting to 50-50* (Meers and Strober, 2014) represents a further contemporary feminist luminosity – alongside the entry of corporate actors into the field. Having a broadly (neo)liberal feminist understanding of gender equality at their core, such key contemporary feminist texts have little in common with many other feminisms, being exponents of an individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology that is complicit with not critical of capitalism, and of other systems of (classed, racialised and transnational) injustice (hooks, 2013). They represent part of what Rottenberg and Farris (2015) call, in an announcement about a special issue of *New Formations*, the "righting" of feminism (see also Phipps, 2014)

This version of feminism has extraordinary visibility in the media, not least through its psychologizing discourse and promotion of female "confidence", self-love and self-esteem as one-size-fits-all solutions to gender injustice. In recent work with Shani Orgad (Gill and Orgad, 2015; see also Garcia-Favaro, 2016) we have looked at how the cult(ure) of confidence locates feminism in neoliberal therapeutic terms, as a technology of self. It can be seen in advertising, in magazines such as Cosmo and Elle and in the proliferation of apps designed to help women boost their self esteem and

self belief in their daily lives (e.g. Leadership Pour Elles, Confidence Coach, Build Confidence, Happier, Mindfit). The way that "positive thinking has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy" (Ehrenreich, 2009:8) can also be seen in what Diane Negra (2014) identifies as the inheritors of the 1990s and early 2000s "postfeminist conduct books" (Negra 2008) – female centred business and celebrity texts. Maria Adamson's (2016) perceptive analysis of this autobiography/self-help crossover genre by celebrities such as Karren Brady, Hilary Devey and Ariana Huffington points to their saccharine bromides and their attempts to re-signify feminist politics in terms of "balance". In these iterations of popular feminism, the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation. Thus whilst they can be pulled together with other examples to create a compelling story of feminist ascendancy – of new feminist visibility - it is imperative to interrogate such a vision. As Rachel O'Neill has argued (personal communication, 2015) corporate feminism serves to stave off the emergence of new feminist movements and in particular any kind of feminist anti-capitalism, while at the same time appearing to take feminism "into account". In that way it is perfectly in keeping with postfeminism and provides an "acceptable face of feminism" for mainstream media.

Celebrity and style feminism

Also visible in the media landscape is a certain celebrity and style politics in which feminism has shifted from being a derided and repudiated identity (Scharff, 2013) to becoming a desirable and stylish one. What we might call "the cool-ing of feminism" is widespread across the media and celebrity culture more generally – as seen in Elle magazine's Feminism Issues, and the espousal of feminist values by celebrities including Emma Watson, Beyonce, Miley Cyrus, Lena Dunham, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence and Benedict Cumberbatch. The notorious "This is what a feminist looks like" T-shirt scandal, in which the high end sellers were shamed by revelations that it was a product of sweated labour, highlights the "disconnect" between certain "stylish" versions of contemporary feminism, and long time (socialist and anti-racist) feminist concerns about deeply unfair global flows between South and North and the rights and wellbeing of garment workers (e.g. Kabeer, 2002; Hoskins, 2014)

Perhaps more striking than any single example of celebrity and style feminism is the sheer speed of the "recuperation" of a feminist identity and its reach and extensiveness across media culture. Such a shift is connected to notions of "the rebel sell" (Heath and Potter, 2006) and "cool capitalism" (McGuigan, 2006). It is also connected to the power of brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The author of a recent book entitled *Hot Feminist* (2015), Grazia columnist Polly Vernon, explains that her book is feminism "rebranded": "What kind of feminist does that make me? The shavey-leggy, fashion-fixated, wrinkle averse, weight-conscious kind of feminist. The kind who likes hot pink and boys; oh, I like boys! I like boys so much…" (Vernon, 2015, 13)

Aside from the relentless championing of heterosexuality, fashion-love and consumerism that pervades "hot feminism", this rebranded version – which shares much of its content with the women's magazine culture from which it developed – is notable for both its affect policing (resolutely <u>not</u> angry[i]) (see Gill, 2016) and its <u>contentlessness.</u> It starts from the obviousness that women are as good as men, but proceeds with:

> Of course, I should probably say at this juncture that I have absolutely no idea how you should be a feminist. None. I don't know, and I wouldn't begin to try to tell you. I wouldn't dare tell you, indeed, and nor should anyone else, for the basic reason that you are YOU, which makes you a very different kettle of feminist fish from ME, or indeed THEM. There are as many ways to be a feminist as there are people who think of themselves as feminists – as many ways to be a feminist, then, as there are women (Vernon, 2015, 17-18, emphasis and capitalisation in original)

This is not just feminism-lite but feminism-weightless, unencumbered by the need to have a position on anything: "modern feminism with style, without judgement" as *Hot Feminist's* sub-title puts it. Or, perhaps more pertinently, it is a feminism that is actually encumbered by its desire not to be angry, not to be "difficult", not to be "humourless": it is positioned against the figure of the "feminist killjoy" so eloquently discussed by Sara Ahmed (2010). But it is difficult to see what being a feminist means if it is simply co-terminous with being a woman – though, as it turns out, men can be feminists too and that, according to Vernon, is so "charming" it makes her want to sleep with them (2015, 18). Naomie Harris' recent interview in Cosmo, where she declares "you can absolutely be a feminist and a Bond girl" offers another vivid example.[3] Of course celebrity statements about feminism or queer politics can be profoundly significant and have a huge cultural impact. However, I want to suggest that claiming a feminist identity – without specifying what that means in terms of some kind of politics – is problematic. Indeed, it is striking to see how just about anything in the mainstream media universe can be (re)signified as "feminist"–the covering or uncovering of the celebrity body, the sending or not sending of a "sexy" selfie, speaking about or not speaking about one's struggles with an eating disorder/ fat/ low self-esteem, etc etc. What is new here is not the contestation but the mere fact of feminism being championed as a cheer word, a positive value – yet in a way that does not necessarily pose any kind of challenge to existing social relations.

There is not space here forensically to analyse how feminism materialises in different ways in contemporary media culture (see Mendes, 2011). That would be a different and more ambitious project than this one – and ideally a collective one. But in this brief schematic outline I have pointed to four different kinds of "feminist visibility" in mainstream media, highlighting the fact that each of them is in itself multiple and shot through with differences and contradictions. In this way I have made a small start to responding to recent calls for engagement with this complicated moment. What seems notable is how these different feminisms make visible very specific "generations" of feminists – but also how the media foment generational discord about feminism.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015a) has argued feminism is certainly "popular" right now, but this does not mean a feminist future is secure, or that feminist politics are suddenly hegemonic. Indeed, alongside all these different iterations of contemporary feminism is an equally popular misogyny, seen most vividly in online cultures from the "comments" sections of news outlets (García-Favaro and Gill, 2015) to Twitter death threats to revenge porn (Salter, 2013), and trolling, flaming and ebile in their varied – ugly – forms (Jane, 2012; Thompson, 2016), but also evident "offline" in the terrifying scale of domestic violence and sexual abuse and assault (much of which has also become newly visible in recent years) and the banal cruelty of

heterosexual "pick up culture" (O'Neill, 2015b; 2016). Thus as well as thinking about newly visible feminisms, we need to think also of the proliferation of new and old misogynies (Smith, 1990; Banet-Weiser, 2015c). We also need to retain a notion of postfeminism – as I argue in the next section.

Post-postfeminism? Theorising continuity and change

At one point in the early to mid-2000s a kind of "postfeminist canon" seemed to be emerging, as the notion was used repeatedly to examine a subset of particular media productions: *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* series were key (Arthurs, 2003; Lotz, 2001; McRobbie, 2004; Moseley and Read, 2002). Whilst generating important insights, the focus might have suggested that the term had limited analytical purchase – ie only applied to a few texts – those focussed on the most privileged women. One important set of recent debates about postfeminism has been connected to its value as an intersectional concept, amidst questions about whether it speaks specifically – and exclusively – about white, western, middle class, heterosexual and youthful cisgendered subjects (e.g. Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; see Gill and Donaghue, forthcoming, for longer discussion). Jess Butler (2013) has made a powerful argument for regarding postfeminism as pertinent to the lives of Black and minority ethnic women, interrogating the tendency to associate postfeminism exclusively with whiteness. Even more recently Simidele Dosekun (2015) has argued (in this journal) for a transnational understanding of postfeminism that does not relegate iterations of the sensibility in the global South to mere imitations or simulacra of an originary or authentic Northern/Western phenomenon. Postfeminism's classed dimensions have also been addressed in a growing body of work on gender and austerity (Nathanson, 2013; Negra and Tasker, 2014; Allen et al, 2015). Moreover, in the recent upsurge of interest in gender and ageing, the predominant focus upon youthful femininities and the luminosity of young women (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009) has been challenged by accounts that show how postfeminist media culture also hails middle aged and older women (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012; Whelehan and Gwynne, 2014; Jermyn & Holmes, 2015). Postfeminism, then, is increasingly theorised in intersectional terms, and seems to be growing, rather than diminishing, in importance as part of a critical lexicon for understanding contemporary culture, with a number of writers noting its resilience and adaptability (Negra, 2014; Dejmanee, 2016).

In addition to attempts to expand the term's analytical reach with intersectional and transnational perspectives, it is also striking to see the dissemination of discussions of postfeminism across multiple sites and topics. Where earlier discussions focussed predominantly on media, the term now animates debates about work (Kelan, 2009), education (Ringrose, 2013), organizations (Lewis et al, forthcoming), peer culture (Winch, 2013 Ringrose et al, 2013) the cultural and creative industries (Scharff, 2015), masculinities (Gwynne, 2013; Hamad, 2014; O'Neill, 2015a) and the body and sexuality (McRobbie, 2015; Elias et al, 2016). Far from receding or losing analytical relevance the notion seems to be gaining prominence as a way of engaging with some of the distinctive gendered features of contemporary neoliberal societies.

Within feminist media studies the term is in prolific use today – deployed to analyse a multiplicity of media texts, but also to outline new ideological formations such as 'postfeminist biologism' (Garcia-Favaro, 2015), 'austerity neoliberalism' (De Benedictis, 2016) or the novel contemporary representation of stay-at-home mothers

(Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015). It also remains central to debates about 'quality television', particularly in the US, which has evolved since the 1990s into a site of rich and complex representations of gender including *Homeland, Veep, House of Cards, Orange is the New Black, Transparent* and *The Good Wife*. Tisha Dejmanee (2016) has recently developed a periodisation of postfeminism, tracing continuities and breaks with its earlier thematics and highlighting its continued vitality as an animating force in media culture. The proliferation of writing and contestation about the term signals – as Dick Hebdige put it in relation to postmodernism – that there is "something worth struggling over" (Hebdige, 1988; Gill, 2007). As Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll (2015) have recently argued postfeminism remains a "productive irritant".

However, not everyone sees the term as useful. Perhaps one reason why some feminist scholars have argued that the term may be "redundant" or "falling short" for understanding this putatively "new" moment relates to the particular way the "post" in postfeminism is understood. This has been debated in relation to postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism and is no less evident in discussions of postfeminism. The prefix has been extensively discussed (e.g. Gamble, 2004; Genz and Brabon, 2009) as has the significance of using the word with or without hyphenation. A crucial point to highlight here is whether "post" always and necessarily means "after" – a question powerfully raised by Stuart Hall's essay "when was the post-colonial". It seems that for those arguing that postfeminism has lost its critical force as a term, the post in postfeminism decisively signals what Tasker and Negra (2007), in their important and influential book, call "the pastness" of feminism, or, taking this further, "feminism in retreat" (Keller and Ryan, 2014). Yet is this actually a widespread claim among scholars of postfeminist media culture? Many have made clear the profoundly complicated relation between feminism and postfeminism – one that is marked variously by incorporation, repudiation, commodification, and so on. Angela McRobbie (2009) elaborates the view that postfeminism involves a (double) entanglement with feminism in which it is "taken into account" yet attacked. Another key motif has been the relation between postfeminism, individualization and neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2009; 2015; Gill and Scharff, 2011). Rather than seeing postfeminist media culture as a culture in which feminism is necessarily "in retreat" many scholars have been interested in how it is co-opted, selectively taken up, derided and entangled in complex ways. In other formulations, the term has been used to refer to a relatively stable patterned yet contradictory sensibility (Gill, 2007) – one that is evident even in cultures which have not been though the "waves" of feminism recognisable in the West/global North. Dosekun (2015) argues that postfeminism should be understood as "transnational culture". Her affluent interviewees in Lagos, Nigeria repeatedly voiced the postfeminist sentiment that they were "already empowered" and therefore able to embrace all the accroutements of "spectacular femininity" in ways not dissimilar from (though absolutely not reducible to) their counterparts in London or Los Angeles.

This connects more broadly to how the postfeminism held up for questioning is understood. A crucial distinction, it seems to me, needs to be made between those who see postfeminism in historical or epistemological terms and those who use the notion critically as analytical term. I argue (Gill, 2007; 2016) that postfeminist media culture should be an object of analysis, not a position or a perspective. I do not see myself as a "postfeminist analyst" but as an analyst of postfeminism – a patterned yet contradictory sensibility connected to other dominant ideologies (such as

individualism and neoliberalism). It is not a term that I am attached to as a description of my identity and values – in the way that I would espouse being a feminist – rather it is an analytical category, designed to capture empirical regularities in the world. Because of this it would only make sense to me to jettison the term if I believed that it no longer spoke meaningfully to distinctive features of cultural life – something that is sadly not the case, as I argue further below.

From this perspective (that regards postfeminism as an object of analysis) there would also be skepticism about why emergent feminisms or greater visibility of feminist topics and questions in the media would even be expected necessarily to mean an "end" of postfeminism. Just as increasing anti-capitalist activism does not lead us to the false assumption that capitalism no longer exists, so too does increased feminist activism not mean that pre-feminist, anti-feminist and postfeminist ideas are not still in circulation and with powerful force. We know this as feminists. Take the idea of sexual double standards. After decades of scholarship, activism, legislation and media discussion they still exist – animating school and social media cultures as well as sexual and intimate relationships in revitalized (though obviously not uncontested) ways (e.g. Ringrose et al, 2013; O'Neill, 2015b). This is but one example; there are innumerable others. But the key point of principle here is how we understand and make sense of cultural change. It seems to me that we have to move beyond a taken-for-granted and unquestioned assumption of displacement – the idea that new ideas automatically displace older ones – to a more complicated but realistic understanding of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist at the same moment, field, plane.

A major challenge for feminist media analysts – and indeed for scholars and activists more generally – is how to attend to the new, the seemingly novel, changed aspects of a situation, whilst not becoming mesmerised by them, and always holding on to a sense of continuities too. For me, engaging with the contradictions of media culture is an important part of being a feminist media scholar. It might seem after the earlier discussion of the valency of feminism within the contemporary media that there is indeed a "feminist zeitgeist". Yet the tenacity of what we might characterise as pre-feminist or anti-feminist ideas remains striking, even in this new moment. One of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions. Critical uses of the notion neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow "become feminist", but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist and backlash ones. In the final section I highlight this through a brief analysis of a current mainstream publication that exemplifies the idea of feminism as the new cool.

NEW GEN FEM and postfeminism

One publication which exemplifies the heightened visibility of a new feminism in the media is the Evening Standard's magazine issue on "NEW GEN FEM". Published in October 2015 it is one of a number of similar media productions celebrating feminism – for example, Elle's ("third annual") Feminism Issue was published the following month, with strikingly similar content and tone. I chose to analyse the NEW GEN FEM issue, however, because it came out the very week I began writing this article, it had an explicit focus upon generation, and it was free of charge, meaning its readership was perhaps more opportunistic and less "motivated" than those paying £4.00 for Elle or other glossies. What I seek to show in the following brief analysis is

how profoundly a postfeminist logic and sensibility structures the entirety of this ostensible celebration of feminism.

As noted at the start of this paper, the magazine issue is entirely framed in generational terms. After the bold and capitalised title across the front page, inside the editorial page is headlined: "WOMEN"S HOUR: The time is right to celebrate the new feminist generation". But the reader turning to the publication to gain some understanding of new generation feminism may find it a frustrating or at least perplexing experience. The feminism reported on and depicted here is oddly contentless – indeed, in article after article, the journalists and the women they are interviewing seem not only uninterested in specifying what being a feminist means to them, but actively resistant. In an article titled "Fem.Com", one of the "new media brands giving feminism a fresh spin" is Pool.com, run and owned by broadcaster Lauren Laverne and former *Red* (magazine) editor Sam Baker:

> The site doesn't have a political view, Laverne stresses, but it's feminist because they are: "I don't know what it's like to make a website and not be a feminist. For me, though, what was important was to create a platform for new women's voices" (2015, 16)

This statement is typical of the magazine as a whole, in which any attempt to explore the meaning of feminism is conspicuous by its absence. Instead, "feminism" is signalled or communicated in three main ways in the magazine. First, it is conveyed through a warm and enthusiastic embrace of all things female – by "championing" women and "celebrating" their "intelligence", "beauty" and "confidence". The tonal quality of the magazine leaves a positive glow, as feminism becomes a "cheer word" - unimpeachable, but also devoid of substance; we are simply informed that it is "having a moment". Secondly, feminism is signified in what has been described as a distinctly postfeminist fashion through an attitudinal pose of assertiveness and defiance. Angela McRobbie (2009) has discussed this in relation to the postfeminist embrace of practices such as white weddings, hen nights and the taking of male surnames in heterosexual marriages. Here, though, in an interesting shift, it is deployed to claim a feminist identity. If the first way of signifying feminism can be termed in shorthand "you go girls!", this second is the repeated celebrity claim "I am not afraid to call myself a feminist" – a claim that turns attention away from what being a feminist is or might be, instead refocusing it on the courage and defiance of the models, actresses or other celebrities who would dare to own this identity.

The third signifier of feminism involves the use of a lexicon and iconography borrowed from activist feminism, yet put to work in the service of ideas and perspectives that apparently offer little or no real challenge to gender power relations – again a distinctively postfeminist move. An iconic example is the use throughout the magazine of the feminist "fist" symbol, but here rendered in bright pink, and with long varnished fingernails – in a way that forms a suture between an earlier feminist radicalism and a female self presentation style organised around girliness or traditional femininity. It is the articulation between these two sets of meanings that, in my view, makes it distinctively postfeminist. The language used throughout the magazine is fascinating in this respect, communicating ideas of struggle and radical transformation – the terms "revolutionary", "trailblazing" and "gender politics" are liberally used. Yet the so-called "gender warriors" turn out to include "media mogul Tina Brown" and Liberal Democrat politician Nick Clegg – neither of whom I would

regard as particularly "revolutionary". At number one, the list has Carey Mulligan for playing a feminist in the film *Suffragette*.

More generally, the impression given of the feminism being promoted is that it is deeply corporate and sits comfortably with neoliberal capitalism. I have already cited one of the digital feminist teams profiled; another is *The Debrief* run by former *Grazia* (magazine) staff. In 2012 the two were "given an internal brief to examine the Millennial audience" and, after speaking with young women in the UK, "they felt there was a gap in the market" so they set up *The Debrief*. They say of their ideal reader: "This woman was on Mail Online, frittering away 10 minutes looking at Michelle Keegan's bikini body and then feeling dirty about it. Then she would top up on The Guardian". Now through *The Debrief* she can get her celebrity and beauty news and her "serious" news in one place. Sound like most of the magazines in the market? Let's just say I don't think patriarchal capitalism will be quaking in its boots.

Most mainstream women's magazines are framed around a perspective located in the worlds of fashion, media and corporate culture. This celebration of new feminism is no exception –celebrity status is required even to count as an "activist". It is heartening to see a greater diversity of women represented in the list of those "battling gender inequality" – including a transgender woman and two black women (one framed as "FGM crusader" and the other as an "art agitator".) It might seem more challenging if two of the three were not also models. "Art agitator" Phoebe Collings-James apparently "makes work that challenges perceptions of race, sexuality and feminism", but this is presented in her own words as being about needing to challenge the fact that "anyone young, female and at all desirable looking is going to be passed over for not being serious". As long ago as 1992 Robert Goldman was deconstructing as "commodity feminism" the old L'Oreal ads asserting "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful". The campaign for stunningly attractive models to be taken seriously forms part of this same distinctly postfeminist trajectory. In the context of the magazine as whole it is significant for what it signals about new gen feminists' concerns, but also, crucially, for how it constructs the constitutive outside of feminism. Where are the concerns about low pay, about migration, about poverty? Where are the public sector workers in health or education or social services? Where are the activists who work in food banks, who campaign against deportations, who take to the streets to contest cuts in funding to disabled women or organisations supporting women who experience domestic violence? Perhaps they don't have enough models or A-listers in their midst.

Another element that is distinctly postfeminist is to be found in the cover story about British Indian model Neelam Gill. The article replays a familiar script of rags to riches, in which sexism and racism within the fashion industry are mentioned, but largely said to have been overcome through individual hard work and changing attitudes. Gill's interview is notable in pointing to the continued racism implicit in only having "one black, Asian or Indian girl" in a show, but her aspiration is a postfeminist one: "I would love to see a British Indian girl do a Victoria"s Secret show. I would love it to be me". She clarifies how this sits with her feminism: you can be a feminist and do a shoot in a bikini. In fact that is empowering".

"Empowerment" and "choice" crop up repeatedly through the magazine. Whilst they are neither new nor uncommon words, they have been extensively discussed as motifs of postfeminism (Gill, 2007; 2008; Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Hamilton and Burkett, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2015a, 2015b). Breanne Fahs (2011, 276) writes: "Of all the dangerous patterns I have observed… the one that seems most problematic and troubling… is the cultural tendency to twist and corrupt

empowerment discourses so they become clichéd, commodified, detrimental and ultimately disempowering". Choice in turn is a watchword repeatedly used to underscore the neoliberal fantasy that "anything can be achieved" if the right choices and "correct disposition has been adopted" (Gilroy, 2013:26). These lexical selections repeatedly turn attention away from social transformation onto individual entrepreneurialism. Choices celebrated in postfeminist-inflected media are those such as "the freedom to run in heels" and the "right to wear red lipstick". In this magazine they are given a "feisty" twist through the use of a popular vernacular – FOMO (fear of missing out), NFI'd (not fucking invited), "beef" (argument), and so on: "What do generations Gill and Grand wear to work?" the editorial asks "Anything they want, obvs". Yeah obvs!

Finally, a postfeminist sensibility is evident in the suggestion that equality has been achieved – indeed, superceded – perhaps the most well-documented feature of postfeminism and discussed in detail by feminist media scholars (e.g. Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2013).This is seen even on the cover in the designation of Neelam Gill as a "Top Girl" – and one in an industry where "women earn more". The editorial says: "For Neelam Gill's generation it is a no-brainer. Intelligent, articulate and beautiful, our cover star sees no reason to apologise for out-earning the men in her industry. You go, Gill!" Such sentiments are almost the definition of postfeminist – the way she is characterised, the defiant tone (she's not going to apologise), and the way this is tied into the idea that not only has the pay gap disappeared, but it is actually men who are losing out now. This resonates with the broadly postfeminist characterisation of men elsewhere in the magazine – especially in the dating advice section – in which they are cast as hapless-yet-essentially-benign losers just trying to make their way in a world in which women have decisively rewritten The Rules. It is also evident in the article about "Boyeurism", which gleefully reports yet another feminist turning of the tables: "ogling is no longer the preserve of boors – now forward-thinking women are indulging in male objectification too" (2015, 29). Is equal opportunities objectification the best we can do?

With all these feminist "successes" one might wonder why feminism is needed at all – and that perhaps accounts for the lack of substance to the feminism depicted here. Feminism appears as an identity that any young woman might like to have – it is stylish, defiant, funny, beautiful, confident, and it "champions" women – but what is really promoted in this magazine celebration of New (Gen) Feminism is, as I hope to have shown, a postfeminist sensibility.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to engage with a number of current ideas about feminism, postfeminism and generation. Responding to arguments that postfeminism has lost its critical force in a world in which feminism is increasingly promoted rather than repudiated I have made the case for keeping, rather than jettisoning, the notion of postfeminism. I have advanced this argument in three distinct ways. First I have made an attempt to complicate and problematize the notion of new feminist visibility to bring out some tensions and contradictions between circulating media versions of feminism, and also to stress the need to think together feminism with anti-feminism, postfeminism and revitalized misogyny. Secondly I have developed a theoretical defence of postfeminism, underscoring the term's force as a critical analytical category, and highlighting the importance for feminist media scholarship of terms that

can speak to continuity and change, and that understand cultural transformation as a complex and nuanced process in which new ideas do not simply displace existing ones. Finally I have used an empirical example to try to demonstrate the persistence and tenacity of a postfeminist sensibility – even in those media productions ostensibly claiming to celebrate a feminist "revolution". In this way I have attempted to demonstrate the value and utility of a continued attention to postfeminism.

Age undoubtedly needs to be taken more seriously in feminist intersectional scholarship. However, in understanding feminist positions, politics are much more significant than dates of birth- and certainly not reducible to age. In developing my argument here I have tried not to aggravate generational animosities, but rather – in a meta move – to draw attention to the way in which they may be animated both in academic writing and in media constructions of feminism – particularly in a world that so fetishizes "the new". It is important that we build feminist solidarities across and between generations. In my "feminist lifetime" I have seen two key concepts almost eradicated – "sexism" and "patriarchy" – only to re-emerge and be championed by younger generations of women with passion and efficacy. Our critical vocabularies matter. In recognizing the possibilities opened up by new feminisms and their heightened visibility, I hope this will not lead to the erasure of older terms which have represented a powerful means of grappling with this contradictory cultural moment. I look forward to the day when the constellation of values and ideas signalled by "postfeminism" no longer exert their chilling cultural force, but in the meantime, regrettably, we are a long way from being post-postfeminism.

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Notes

[1] A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth raising questions about how an overly positive evaluation of change – as for example in Eric Anderson's "inclusive masculinity theory" which suggests that homophobia is no longer a potent force in contemporary life – may work to forestall and disavow the need for change (O'Neill, 2015a). Likewise suggestions of a widespread feminist consciousness among young women can be used to block – as no longer necessary – equality initiatives in schools, social policy, etc in a manner that is decidedly postfeminist. In late 2015, there were calls to remove the teaching of feminism from the A-level history syllabus (Cassidy, 2015). I am grateful to Rachel O'Neill for this example.

[2] These types of articles garner thousands of comments and might be seen as a form of feminist 'baiting' by the media. They certainly trivialize feminism, somehow using the idea of the 'personal as political' as a way to repeatedly attempt to confine feminist debate to individual, micro decisions, which produce even more scrutiny and surveillance of women's choices, whilst systematically ignoring wider material inequalities.

[3] I am grateful to Shani Orgad for this example.

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