Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism

Hester Baer

To cite this article: Hester Baer (2016) Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism, Feminist Media Studies, 16:1, 17-34, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1093070

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093070

Published online: 16 Oct 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3745

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 6 View citing articles
Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism

Hester Baer

School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

ABSTRACT
This article investigates the renewed feminist politics that emerge from the interface of digital platforms and activism today, examining the role of digital media in affecting the particular ways that contemporary feminist protests make meaning and are understood transnationally, nationally, and locally. I consider the political investments of digital feminisms in the context of what Angela McRobbie has termed the “undoing of feminism” in neoliberal societies, where discourses of choice, empowerment, and individualism have made feminism seem both second nature and unnecessary. Within this context, I describe a range of recent feminist protest actions that are in a sense redoing feminism for a neoliberal age. A key component of this redoing is the way recent protest actions play out central tensions within historical and contemporary feminist discourse; crucial here is the interrelationship between body politics experienced locally and feminist actions whose efficacy relies on their translocal and transnational articulation. My discussion focuses on three case studies: SlutWalk Berlin, Peaches’ “Free Pussy Riot!” video, and the Twitter campaigns #Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen. My analysis ultimately calls attention to the precarity of digital feminisms, which reflect both the oppressive nature of neoliberalism and the possibilities it offers for new subjectivities and social formations.

KEYWORDS
digital media; protest culture; neoliberalism; body politics; hashtag feminism

In May 2014, Twitter exploded with a new wave of posts under the hashtag #YesAllWomen, a campaign drawing attention to the ubiquity of sexism, misogyny, and violence against women. Users posted individual stories of discrimination, harassment, and fear, underscoring the fact that “yes, all women” are subject to sexual violence. In Germany, feminists contributed to #YesAllWomen with posts about sexual discrimination and violence that also included the hashtag #Aufschrei (outcry), creating a transnational digital connection between two locally grounded protest actions, with reference to the Twitter campaign documenting women’s experiences of everyday sexism in Germany that created widespread public resonance in 2013. For example, German feminist activist Anke Domscheit-Berg (@anked) wrote in a Twitter posting on May 25, 2014, “#Yesallwomen—the global #outcry … Because awareness is the first step towards social change.” #YesAllWomen and #Aufschrei demonstrate the
interplay of individual stories and collective modalities enabled by digital platforms; both also illustrate the crucial interrelationship between body politics experienced in a local context and feminist actions whose efficacy relies on their translocal and transnational articulation. These actions reveal the pervasive, structural nature of sexual violence, linking the specific, local stories of individual women to larger narratives of inequality. Utilizing the digital to make visible the global scale of gender oppression and to link feminist protest movements across national borders, these actions exemplify central aspects of digital feminist activism today.

Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge. The example of hashtag feminism makes clear how the increased use of digital media has altered, influenced, and shaped feminism in the twenty-first century by giving rise to changed modes of communication, different kinds of conversations, and new configurations of activism across the globe, both online and offline.

Feminist scholars have described digital feminist activism as a departure from conventional modes of doing feminist politics, arguing that it represents a new moment or a turning point in feminism in a number of ways. First, the emergence of feminist memes is seen as significant not only for creating a renewed and widespread consciousness of feminist issues in the public sphere, but also for promoting a dynamic new engagement within feminism itself: Samantha Thrift (2014, 2) highlights “the political efficacy of the feminist meme event to mobilize new modes of feminist critique and collectivity.” Second, digital feminism is viewed as engaging substantively and self-reflexively with issues of privilege, difference, and access. The Internet provides a space where feminists can learn from each other about why things some feminists see as harmless can be hurtful and offensive to others. Most feminists know about intersectionality, but far from all of us know every way in which intersectional oppression works. (Fredrika Thelandersson 2014, 529)

By bringing together diverse feminist constituencies, digital platforms enable new kinds of intersectional conversations. Finally, the interplay of digital feminist protests and female bodies represents a provocative and risky space for an emergent feminist politics that moves away from an emphasis on equality and rights pursued through conventional legal and legislative channels: “the rise of these bodies, body politics, and speech acts points to the new feminism’s disillusionment with the state as a channel for gender justice” (Zakia Salime 2014, 18). There appears to be a consensus, then, that digital activism constitutes a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture.

Less clear, however, are the specific political investments of digital feminism, which has emerged in tandem with the global hegemony of neoliberalism. The relationship between digital feminism and neoliberalism raises a number of questions: are digital protests drained of their efficacy when they are co-opted, a virtually inevitable outcome in the age of neoliberalism? Can feminist solidarity emerge despite (or even because of) the often “toxic” environment in online spaces (Thelandersson 2014)? Will structural change result from the “microrebellions” of digital feminism, which often appear to work “in concert with neoliberal subjectivities and entrepreneurial forms of self-promotion, self-reliance, and self-governance” (Salime 2014, 16)? How do we understand the changed political function of the female body within both digital mediascapes and street protests? Finally, by what means do we measure
the efficacy of political action in an age when inequalities are tolerated, upward redistribution of wealth is the norm, and alternatives to capitalism are increasingly unimaginable?

With the aim of establishing some provisional answers to these questions, this article examines the renewed feminist politics arising from the conjunction of digital platforms and activism today. I begin by contextualizing contemporary feminist protest actions within the framework of neoliberalism and outlining the stakes of their body politics in this context. In my analysis, the term “body politics” functions as a heuristic for considering the disputed status of the (female) body within both neoliberalism and feminism today. With its emphasis on self-optimization, personal responsibility, and individual choice, neoliberalism recasts the body as a key site of identity, empowerment, and control (Alison Phipps 2014). Decoupled from social status, identity in post-Fordist societies is increasingly linked to the body, which may be shaped, repurposed, and given value through consumer choices. With the rise of digital media, the body has taken on further significance as a site of both self-representation and surveillance, not least with regard to gender identities and gender norms. The female body has long functioned as a key site for feminist activism around issues of sexual violence, reproductive justice, sex work, sex trafficking, genital cutting, cosmetic surgery, disability, and disordered eating, among others. However, the schisms within feminism that emerged from different theoretical approaches to these contentious issues over the last thirty years have dovetailed with the neoliberal recasting of the body to stymie feminist political action. Together, these developments have colluded to undo the efficacy of feminism’s politicization of the personal and its reliance on rights- and choice-based frameworks in combating the oppression of women’s bodies.

My analysis explores the way digital feminisms contend with this state of affairs by investigating three case studies of transnationally inflected protest actions taking place in Germany. I argue that the body, as a “porous boundary” (Judith Butler 2004b, 25) between self and other, autonomy and sociality, emerges at the conjunction of digital spaces and street protests as a symbolic and precarious site of control and resistance. My first case study describes the interface between street protests and online representations in actions by and debates over SlutWalk, FEMEN, and Muslima Pride in Berlin. My second case study investigates the body politics of performance artist Peaches’ digital video “Free Pussy Riot!,” which was recorded in Berlin. In the final part of my article, I return to the Twitter campaigns #Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen.

As Michelle Rodino-Colocino (2014, 1) puts it, “#YesAllWomen is a key moment in the genealogy of feminism that underscores the old-in-the-new and suggests an urgent course of action for feminist media scholars.” Responding to this call, I draw on these three case studies to suggest how digital feminisms are in a sense redoing feminism for a neoliberal age. As I argue, by working through, making visible, and re-signifying central tensions in contemporary feminism, as well as the precarity of feminism itself in neoliberalism, these protests have begun to re-establish the grounds for a collective feminist politics beyond the realm of the self-styled individual. Crucial to this redoing of feminism is the interplay between digital platforms—the transnational mediascape of the Internet, a space encompassing and highlighting difference, in which discussions play out in a disembodied and sometimes anonymous forum—and local protests that draw attention to the female body as a site of contention in the politics of gender, sexuality, race, religion, and culture today.
Feminism and neoliberalism

In the context of neoliberalism, hegemonic discourses of individual choice and empowerment, freedom, self-esteem, and personal responsibility have conspired to make feminism seem second nature and therefore also unnecessary for women, especially in the West, where structural inequalities are increasingly viewed as personal problems that can be resolved through individual achievement. In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie has described the active “undoing of feminism” that has occurred in neoliberal societies, which disavow feminism as unnecessary while offering women “a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer” (2009, 2). McRobbie argues that the undoing of feminism in neoliberalism is effected not least through post-feminist popular culture, which reflects the “double entanglement” of present-day political life, where we witness the coexistence of neoconservative values with the liberalization of sexual relations and kinship structures (2009, 12). McRobbie builds on Rosalind Gill’s description of a “postfeminist sensibility” characteristic of neoliberal culture, which is evident in the common tropes of twenty-first century media productions, including

- the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification;
- the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 2007, 255)

Gill argues that, in contemporary media culture, “feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated” (2007, 271), raising questions about how feminist politics can form an adequate response, whether in the realm of theoretical critique or of activism.

McRobbie points out how the undoing of feminism in neoliberalism is compounded by the way that academic feminism has dismantled itself over the past several decades in response to debates about essentialism, universalism, and representational claims. As she emphasizes, there are good theoretical reasons for this dismantling, including feminist theory’s problematization of the category of woman and the status of the body; the removal of identity as a basis for politics; and questions about feminists speaking on behalf of other women (McRobbie 2009, 8). However, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013) has argued, this post-modernist tendency within feminist knowledge projects converges with the domestication of radical feminist and anti-racist critique in neoliberal intellectual culture. No longer connected to activism or the production of emancipatory knowledge, feminist theory circulates as a commodity and a sign of prestige in academic capitalism, signaling the rhetorical commitment to gender justice in the neoliberal university.

Ultimately, the undoing of feminism in both popular and scholarly discourse merges with other neoliberal tendencies, including the dismantling of downwardly redistributive social movements and collective politics in favor of upwardly redistributive policies that have resulted in widening inequality, and the naturalization of free market capitalism as a neutral and efficient force capable of spreading wealth and democracy. As Mohanty argues, the discourses of privatization and individualization that prevail in neoliberalism transform “systemic projects of resistance into commodified private acts of rebellion” (2013, 968), undoing insurgent feminist knowledge and counter-hegemonic feminist politics.
The notion of precarity has emerged as one way of making visible the “double entanglement” of the present moment and offering a potential counter-narrative to neoliberalism. Paradoxically, neoliberal policies create a situation of permanent insecurity that disproportionately affects minority groups, while at the same time neoliberal discourses of individual choice, flexibilization, and mobility offer unprecedented opportunities for destabilizing normative roles and eroding traditional social formations in ways that appear empowering. Theorists of precarity have emphasized how this contradictory situation releases a critical potential, which may open up a space of movement or even “chip away at the viability of neo-liberal promises and offers” (Volker Woltersdorff 2011, 179). For example, Woltersdorff describes how, in neoliberalism, the institutional sex-gender system is still an imperative, even as new spaces open up for non-normative gender identifications, sexual practices, and affective ties:

Through these changes, individuals find themselves exposed to contradictory social role requirements. Quite often, different normative ideas compete with one another. Women are now meant to work like men, but at the same time must always be able to be all woman if that is required. So in the division of labour, in the politics of the family, and in advertisement, traditional ideas of roles are still as dominant as ever. […] We are therefore still a long way from realizing a freely chosen (and chooseable) neo-gender that would disrupt the hierarchical division into two genders. (2011, 173)

Woltersdorff’s account of precarious sexualities describes how in this contradictory situation the neoliberal state generates an ambivalence around resistance and adaptation that can produce new possibilities for action.

Precarity signifies a wide range of theoretical and political concerns, including the flexibility and contingency of work in late capitalism, the insecurity of living conditions in an era characterized by the dismantling of traditional social structures, and the increasing vulnerability of unprotected populations. While trenchant critiques of the precarity paradigm point out that precarity has predominated throughout history, with Fordism constituting an exception (Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter 2008), critics of neoliberalism emphasize both the unprecedented instrumentalization of insecurity by neoliberal policies and practices (David Harvey 2007) and the widely felt sense of insecurity that pervades the present (Lauren Berlant 2011). Berlant argues that “the promise of the good life no longer masks the living precarity of the historical present” as it did during earlier periods (2011, 196); she suggests that precarity has become the key structure of feeling in an era marked by the crumbling of fantasies of upward mobility and political and social equality.

My analysis of digital feminisms builds on conceptions of precarity that describe the unprecedented instrumentalization and endemic sensation of insecurity in neoliberalism, but it also signals the way this insecurity might give rise to potential for change. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt explain that this double meaning is central to understanding the ideas and politics associated with precarity: the new moment of capitalism that engenders precarity is seen as not only oppressive but also as offering the potential for new subjectivities, new socialities, and new kinds of politics. (2008, 3)

Subverting the dynamics of neoliberal ideology by unmasking its apparent neutrality, this concept of precarity thus aims to open up a space of social critique and political activism that takes advantage of neoliberal paradoxes.

The co-optation and undoing of feminism in neoliberalism helps to explain the relative absence of public engagement with feminism in Western societies in the 1990s and early
2000s, but an increasingly felt sense of precarity among women and minorities, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, describes one reason for the sharp rise in transnational feminist protest movements in recent years. In the case of Germany, feminism returned to the public agenda with a vengeance around 2006 in response to the so-called demography debates, which blamed women for the declining German birthrate.6

Young feminists responded with a new wave of publications, protests, and interventions, many of them aimed at re-signifying pop culture and reframing media representations of feminism.7 In Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute (Popfeminism today), a volume that helped popularize the term, Sonja Eismann explains that popfeminism seeks to “perforate and rock pop culture with feminist strategies” (2007, 10), thereby intervening in the pervasive post-feminist sensibility of contemporary media culture.8 As such, Katja Kauer argues that “popfeminism must be regarded as a new manifestation of feminism” in Germany (2009, 133).9 While popfeminism played a key role in bringing feminism back into public awareness in Germany, it has also been characterized at times by unexamined privilege, by a limited engagement with differences among women, and by a tendency to reify feminism as an individualistic enterprise, a mode of empowerment connected to personal freedom and choice (Hester Baer 2012). In this way, popfeminism resonates with both neoliberal discourses of self-fashioning and state-deployed conceptions of feminism as a modern, democratic movement aligned with “European values.”

Crucially, popfeminism emerged in tandem with the rise of digital platforms; a dynamic blogosphere, active discussion boards, early adoption of Twitter, and extensive use of Tumblr helped to create a widespread public discussion of feminism.10 While popfeminism has strong domestic roots in national debates about changing demographics and gender roles in Germany, its development since 2006 has been marked by engagement with transnational feminist protest movements in both online and offline spaces. In a 2014 interview, activist Chris Köver, co-founder of the popfeminist publication Missy Magazine, describes the increasing significance of digital feminism, noting that contemporary feminists “blog, they tweet under hashtags like #Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen, they make videos. They found Tumblr-Blogs […] They use all available possibilities and platforms offered by the web. And above all they analyze how […] different events are connected to sexism” (Esra Özer 2014).11 While digital platforms are well suited to serve this hermeneutic function, it is noteworthy that the growth of digital feminism has occurred in tandem with the rise of street-based protest actions. The interface between online and offline spaces appears to be crucial for establishing effective modes of feminist protest, broadly construed as techniques of overcoming inequality, promoting social change, or shaping knowledge production, goals that are challenged in new ways by the neoliberal co-optation of collective politics.

**Body politics and feminist activism**

In Germany, the recent surge in feminist activism has been inspired by the transnational flow of feminist ideas, politics, and protests, including SlutWalk, FEMEN, and Pussy Riot. The SlutWalk protest action began in Canada in 2011; hundreds of marches subsequently took place in at least seventy-five cities across the globe, including Berlin, Hamburg, and Cologne. The Ukrainian-based group FEMEN was founded in 2008, the same year they held their first topless protest in Kiev. The group subsequently expanded to include numerous global offshoots, including an active contingent in Germany.12 Feminist activists in Germany
have also been catalyzed by actions performed and inspired by the Russian art collective Pussy Riot, especially the solidarity movement that emerged after two members of the group were sentenced to serve time in Siberian labor camps for their 2012 Punk Prayer Protest in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

Common to the feminist actions performed and inspired by SlutWalk, FEMEN, and Pussy Riot is the centrality of the precarious female body, which is foregrounded via a dynamic emphasis on masking and unmasking, veiling and unveiling, modesty and uncovering, an emphasis that is characteristic of contemporary feminist activism transnationally. SlutWalk promotes a critical gaze at the issue of un/dress and encourages participants to join protests wearing modest dress or showing skin, but it has gained notoriety for its display of scantily clad bodies. FEMEN’s trademark “sextremism” is defined by the bare breast as a symbol of defiance. Pussy Riot deployed the DIY-balaclava as a central signifier of contemporary feminism, calling attention to the female body through masking and covering.

Butler suggests that “it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (Butler 2004b, 20). As she argues, “For politics to take place, the body must appear” (Judith Butler 2011, n.p.) for

the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence … The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. (Butler 2004b, 21)

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler emphasizes the double nature of norms governing gender, which both constrain and enable life, arguing that “the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (2004b, 217). Butler’s analysis of the paradoxical quality of gender norms echoes the double valence identified by theorists of precarity, a connection that she makes explicit elsewhere:

Precarity is, of course, directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence. Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics … (Judith Butler 2009, ii)

The feminist protests of SlutWalk, FEMEN, and Pussy Riot employ the female body in ways that call attention to gender norms as open to transformation, occupying these norms and aiming to re-signify them. These protests engage symbolically, across a range of registers, with the objectification of female bodies in media culture; with injunctions about women’s roles in public spaces; and above all with the subjection of women to sexual violence. As such, they expose the precarity of the female body, understood in a double sense as the insecure status of the female body within oppressive regimes of power but also as a site of ambivalence and potential resistance.

While the female body has always been a key site of feminist activism, the status of the body for feminism has been transformed in overlapping ways by the contexts of neoliberalism and digital culture. In a context where identity is uncoupled from social status, the body becomes the primary locus of identity in neoliberalism (Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2011, 8; Phipps 2014). Neoliberal discourse emphasizes the body as a site of empowerment via self-fashioning, personal improvement, and individual choice, but also one in need of constant surveillance, monitoring, and discipline. This tension between the body as a locus
of empowerment and identity formation and the body as a site of control underpins the precarity of the female body in neoliberalism, not least because it is women’s bodies much more than men’s bodies that are subject to constant regulation via modes of hegemonic femininity.

Digital platforms similarly occupy a double function as sites of empowerment and identity formation, on the one hand, and of surveillance and self-monitoring, on the other, particularly for women (Tanja Carstensen 2014; Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen 2002; Tamara Shepherd 2014). While cyberfeminists have emphasized the potentially utopian possibilities of digital culture to overcome gender binaries and tailor the cyborg body to feminist specifications, the emphasis of social media platforms on commodified self-representation and the widespread digital dissemination of images of the material body escalate the demands of hegemonic femininity. Even the text-based communication that comprises much online interaction today is emblematic of this “paradoxical technoculture” that still contains the aspiration to “leave the body behind,” but at the same time it is continually haunted by the “specter of embodiment” that enforces its law and governs our discourse (linking) gender to a dichotomously sexed body, whether visible or not. (Niels Van Doorn, Sally Wyatt, and Liesbet Van Zoonen 2012, 434)

Like neoliberalism more generally, digital platforms specifically present a paradoxical and contradictory horizon of expectation surrounding the precarious body, a context that forms the backdrop for my consideration of digital feminisms and local activism in the case studies that follow.

**SlutWalk, FEMEN, Muslma Pride**

SlutWalk originated in Toronto in 2011 after comments by a city policeman that women should “avoid dressing like sluts” in order to prevent sexual assault. SlutWalk actions worldwide have drawn attention to rape culture, slut shaming, victim-blaming, and issues of consent. While organizers emphasize that SlutWalks do not have a dress code, the marches became notorious for the way some sex-positive feminists sought to reclaim the term slut by appropriating its associations in colorful performances featuring various states of undress. Building on the feminist aesthetics of the Riot Grrl movement, SlutWalk re-signified the idea of expressing rage at patriarchal conditions with loud, angry, public protests that turned both hegemonic femininity and received gender and sexual roles on their heads. In so doing, these protests resoundingly put feminism back on the political agenda worldwide in a way that foregrounded the precarious place of women’s bodies in the public sphere and especially their ongoing subjugation to sexual violence. As a large collective action mobilizing masses of bodies, SlutWalk aims to call attention to and stave off regimes of discipline and control to which women and sexual minorities are disproportionately subjected. At the same time, the significant transnational feminist debates regarding the tactics of SlutWalk—and the ultimate dismantling of the movement that resulted in many places—have literally played out, largely within digital spaces, the central tensions that underpin contemporary feminism, as the example of SlutWalk Berlin demonstrates.13

The first SlutWalk Berlin took place on August 13, 2011, with 3500 participants. Due to growing criticisms of the SlutWalk movement transnationally, as well as specific objections articulated by women of color in Germany, SlutWalk Berlin organized a second march, held on September 15, 2012, with the supplementary title “Demonstration against sexism, sexualized
violence, and their trivialization." Objections to SlutWalk in Germany and elsewhere have focused on the movement’s failure to acknowledge the key role of white privilege in the ability to reclaim the term “slut”; SlutWalk’s problematic normalization of dehumanizing language and symbols; and its exclusivity as a movement that appears to foreground the bodies of cis-gendered, middle-class white women, offering little space within its corporeal politics or its performative aesthetics for people of color, LGBT people, economically disadvantaged groups, or sex workers. In the case of SlutWalk Berlin, the catalyst for the movement’s voluntary dismantling was a particularly objectionable performance by FEMEN at the 2012 march.

The Ukrainian group FEMEN was founded to protest the predominance of sex tourism and sex trafficking in Ukraine, as well as the collusion of church and state in gender subordination there, and it has gained extensive media coverage for calling attention to these issues through its topless tactics. FEMEN’s global offshoots, especially those in Europe, have emphasized a critique of religion, especially Islam, which is viewed by FEMEN as a patriarchal institution that plays a key role in the oppression of women today, not least through veiling practices. The wearing of hijab stands in tension with FEMEN’s “sextremism,” which emphasizes female nudity as a strategy of liberation. FEMEN’s critique of Islam can be understood in the context of what Myra Marx Ferree (2012) describes as a significant shift in the status and role of feminism in Europe over the past two decades in connection with the racialization of Muslims. Galvanized particularly by the symbol of the hijab, which is often viewed as emblematic of Muslim women’s oppression, European feminists have often allied with the state in efforts to ban the headscarf in order to “protect” women from sexist coercion, a tactic that denies Muslim women agency. Headscarf bans have been viewed by feminists as a means of staving off incursions of the patriarchal and backward ideologies they associate with Islam into the supposedly modern, democratic state institutions of Europe. Ferree (2012, 213–219) points out the way that, in the headscarf debates, feminism becomes domesticated as a “European value” and aligned with the state, points that resonate with McRobbie’s critique of feminism’s undoing in neoliberalism, which posits feminism as “second nature.”

At SlutWalk Berlin, members of FEMEN Germany staged an action in front of the Brandenburg Gate in which they appeared in “niqabs” painted on their faces and naked chests, while holding placards proclaiming “No item of clothing justifies sexual violence” and “Unveil women’s right to unveil.” By literally performing in blackface, FEMEN not only engaged in racist behavior, but also trivialized the very specific criticisms of SlutWalk already enunciated by people of color. On both counts, they quite intentionally sought to speak on behalf of others and insisted on denying agency to Muslim women and women of color. Moreover, their action declared Muslim covering to be a coercive form of gender subjugation that they problematically equated with sexual violence. FEMEN has repeatedly staged actions that make such asymmetrical equations in ways that are designed to provoke. These tactics have been widely criticized by feminists, who have also suggested that FEMEN’s sextremism reproduces hegemonic femininity with its foregrounding of naked white female bodies that conform to heteronormative beauty ideals.

In the aftermath of SlutWalk Berlin 2012, images of FEMEN’s Blackfacing Action went viral on the Internet, where an intense debate ensued in feminist blogs and discussion boards.

This debate replayed many of the central tensions within historical and contemporary feminist discourse, notably those surrounding the category of woman, the role of the body, privilege, especially white privilege and racism, as well as epistemological problems surrounding
feminist speech, including the place of experience and the problem of speaking on behalf of others. Vocal in the debate were feminists of color who expressed objections not only to FEMEN, but also to the SlutWalk organizers’ inadequate response, in which they failed to acknowledge either the inherent racism of the blackfacing action or FEMEN’s denial of agency to Muslim women by speaking on their behalf. Noah Sow’s Der Braune Mob/ Der Schwarze Blog (The Brown Mob/ The Black Blog), a Germany-based people-of-color website, linked protest letters formulated by women of color transnationally in a post explaining “the problem with SlutWalks.”

In 2013, after failed attempts to reorganize under a different name, SlutWalk Berlin organizers responded to these widespread criticisms with the decision to terminate the protest. The decision was announced in a May 13 post on SlutWalk Berlin’s Facebook page, which ended with the statement: “We love the idea of a solidarity movement!” SlutWalk Berlin failed to sustain a collective movement accommodating differences among women, but the debates about its universalizing tendencies represent a noteworthy example of the contentious redoing of feminism at the interface of embodied street protests and the sustained discussions enabled by digital platforms.

Meanwhile, FEMEN has continued to stage similar actions such as the controversial International Topless Jihad Day, a protest on April 4, 2013, targeting mosques and Tunisian embassies across Europe organized in solidarity with the Tunisian activist Amina Sboui. Sboui, also known as Amina Tyler, received death threats after posting photos of herself online, in which she appeared with the words “Fuck your morals!” and “I own my body; it’s not the source of anyone’s honor” written in Arabic across her bare chest. Tyler had joined FEMEN after seeing photos of its actions online; she has subsequently distanced herself from the group because of concerns about its Islamophobia. Like Tyler, Muslim women worldwide have been variously inspired and disturbed by the actions of FEMEN, SlutWalk, and others, and have spearheaded actions that both draw on and resist their tactics, actions that often emphasize performances of (un)veiling.

For example, in April 2013, a group of Muslim women organized a worldwide Muslima Pride Day in response to FEMEN. Via online platforms, the group aimed “to show the world that we oppose Femen and their use of Muslim women to reinforce Western imperialism” (as quoted in Karina Eileraas 2014, 49). Re-signifying FEMEN’s own tactics, Muslim women worldwide posted photos of themselves on social media expressing opposition to Topless Jihad Day. In Berlin, a local group, Muslima Pride, staged an action at the same Wilmersdorf Mosque that had been the site of FEMEN’s protest on Topless Jihad Day. Wearing hijab and posing in the same spot as FEMEN they carried placards proclaiming “Against Oppression” (“Gegen Unterdrückung”) and “Islam is my choice” (in English), images subsequently posted and disseminated widely via the organization’s Facebook page.

Beverly M. Weber points out that in Germany “Muslim women as participants in public democracy […] are largely unthinkable in the public sphere” (2013, 78). As she argues, to the extent that the headscarf is regarded in Europe as an emblem of Muslim women’s oppression and entrapment in a regime of gender violence, Muslim covering is illegible as a complex embodied practice. In their anti-FEMEN protests, Berlin’s Muslima Pride not only make legible precisely this complexity, but they also assert themselves as participants in European democracy and the modern public sphere via their contributions to digital feminism. At the same time, Muslima Pride’s adoption of the language of freedom and choice in their defense of Islam and Muslim covering resonates with neoliberal discourses, underscoring
the precarity of feminist protest today. By working through and making visible contentious feminist issues around the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion, the interventions of digital feminist activists, including Muslima Pride, surrounding SlutWalk Berlin and FEMEN, employ unmasking and veiling symbolically to trouble the unquestioned alignment of feminism with European values and to reassert feminism’s status as a “transnational force struggling to confront varieties of gender subordination” (Ferree 2012, 217).

The “Free Pussy Riot!” Video by Peaches

On August 8, 2012, the queer performance artist and electropop musician Peaches shot a video for her song “Free Pussy Riot!” in Berlin.27 Hundreds of people responded to messages sent out via social networking sites to assemble in Prenzlauer Berg wearing Pussy Riot-inspired gear, including balaclavas in neon colors. The video depicts the group marching down Oderbergerstrasse into Mauerpark, interspersed with messages of solidarity submitted to Peaches and her video editor over the Internet. Covered widely in the media worldwide, Peaches’ video drew attention to the Pussy Riot trial; it also popularized the idea of dressing in solidarity with Pussy Riot. In the video, people of all shapes and sizes dance, hop, and gyrate en masse, shaking their fists above their heads. In contrast to the strategic use of nudity employed by FEMEN, here statuses such as race and gender are largely obscured by the masks and uniforms, echoing Pussy Riot’s symbolic obscuring of individualism in favor of an image of collective solidarity, and underscoring their refutation of hegemonic femininity.28 Like Pussy Riot’s own costumes, the Pussy Riot-inspired garb in the Peaches video draws explicitly on an array of transnational feminist political emblems, re-signifying fashions associated with, for example, the urban guerilla movement of the 1970s and the Riot Grrl movement of the 1990s.

However, the video also includes ample footage of unmasked people. Many of these images foreground bodies through obscene gestures, displays of naked body parts, and close-ups of skin that has been inscribed with homages to Pussy Riot. We see pregnant bellies, bare breasts and asses, someone on a toilet, wagging tongues, and numerous vaginal references; many of the unmasked individuals are recognizable as rock stars and other celebrities lending their faces to the project, including Margaret Cho, Lykke Li and members of the Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs and Le Tigre. These aspects of the Peaches video stand in tension with Pussy Riot’s own conceptual notion of creating characters who express ideas; instead the Peaches video reconnects the objective of starting a pussy riot to individual bodies.

If the homage to Pussy Riot’s aesthetic of masking exemplifies the transnational cultural dimension of Peaches’ feminist action, the foregrounding of stylized bodies creates a local connection to popfeminism in Berlin. As Carrie Smith-Prei has argued, popfeminism combines a “discursive and playful girlishness” with elements of the pop medium in order to engage in feminist stylization of the body as an act of performative resistance. The feminist understanding that the body creates and displays meaning inscribed by a masculine dominated system continues to be recognized, but also manipulated. Women’s satisfaction with and control over their bodies [and] sexuality is paramount. (Smith-Prei 2011, 23, 24)

By emphasizing both of these qualities in its pastiche of signifiers, the Peaches video makes visible the precarious status of the female body in neoliberalism—at once the site on which hegemonic femininity is inscribed and a DIY space of self-stylization and sexual pleasure. The
lyrics of “Free Pussy Riot!” include the lines: “Church and state separate/ Shoot a flare for the punk prayer/ Screw your old school papa greed/ Anarchist feminist what we need.” By making the song and video available for free online, and by encouraging viewers to donate to Pussy Riot’s legal defense fund in lieu of a purchase price, Peaches extends her activist message to a critique of the commodification of art in global capitalism. The digitally broadcast video and the song ultimately create a riotous and pleasurable space for re-signifying feminism as a creative, collective movement against gender subordination.

#Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen

Transnational feminist protest movements have emerged historically in response to violence against women, which was a catalyst for global networking among second-wave feminists in the 1970s and which, by the end of the twentieth century, “had become the most important international women’s issue and the most dynamic human rights concern globally” (Aili Mari Tripp 2006, 62). The protests discussed here all connect to this historical trajectory. In the case of #Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen, the digital platform of Twitter is crucial to framing within translocal and transnational networks episodes of discrimination and violence experienced within specific local circumstances in order to make visible the pervasive structural inequality of women.

The #Aufschrei campaign first emerged in January 2013, when German women began broadcasting personal stories of everyday sexism over Twitter (https://twitter.com/hashtag/aufschrei). #Aufschrei responded to a series of national political events in Germany involving misogynist comments and sexist behavior by prominent male politicians running for election in a federal race.29 Organized by a group of feminist activists under the guidance of Anne Wizorek, the campaign gave rise to more than fifty-seven thousand postings in the first several days after its inception. #Aufschrei was the first social media campaign in Germany to achieve widespread public resonance, spilling over into conventional media, including print journalism and television talk shows, where many well-known public figures, among them politicians, discussed the ubiquity of sexism in Germany today. In June 2013, #Aufschrei won a major media award, the Grimme Prize, which honored its influence in the German public sphere, and in 2014 Wizorek published a book based on the campaign (see Anne Wizorek 2014).

#YesAllWomen also emerged in direct response to a local event in the US: the horrific murder of six undergraduate students near the University of California–Santa Barbara campus. Before embarking on this killing spree and then shooting himself, twenty-two-year old Elliot Rodger had posted a misogynist video on YouTube in which he expressed his intention to punish women for refusing to have sex with him. Within a few days of the killings, more than a million posts had used #YesAllWomen; collectively, these posts underscored the ubiquity of misogyny today, calling attention to both the individual traumas caused by sexual harassment and rape culture and the larger structural dimensions of social inequality and male privilege underpinning violence against women. Objections to #YesAllWomen emerged via the campaign #NotAllMen, to which feminist activists replied with an exposition of basic tenets of feminist analysis, framed within local, national, and transnational contexts. More pertinently, women of color responded with the campaign #YesALLWhiteWomen, criticizing the white privilege inherent in many posts and emphasizing the need to attend to intersectionality in activism against sexual violence.
In providing a critical platform for such discussions, feminist Twitter campaigns literally “redo feminism” in a public context, revisiting longstanding debates about male privilege and white privilege. But these campaigns do not just rehash old feminist debates—they actively renegotiate feminist politics for a neoliberal age. As Thrift (2014, 1) argues, “The hashtag #YesAllWomen asserts a counter-narrative to exceptionalist discourses by insisting that these spectacular tragedies are logical manifestations of a system of gender oppression which condones and facilitates male domination by normalizing gender violence and sexual entitlement.” By emphasizing the way individual stories of oppression, when compiled under one hashtag, demonstrate collective experiences of structural inequality, hashtag feminism highlights the interplay of the individual and the collective. #Aufschrei and #YesAllWomen also specifically expose the female body as a precarious site of subjection and resistance.

Conclusion

In a recent article, Mohanty asks, “What happens to the key feminist construct of ‘the personal is political’ when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal?” (2013, 971). Despite significant qualitative differences in their tactics, the protests I examine here discursively combat the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal by making visible the universalizing tendencies of feminist strategies that occlude difference; by drawing attention to the relationship of personal experiences to structural inequalities; and by highlighting the ongoing precarity of individual female bodies in public spaces. In so doing, these digital feminisms lay the groundwork for re-establishing a collective feminist politics.

The precarity of the female body has become an emphatic site of contention in the adaptation and redeployment of contemporary feminist protest movements within the local contexts of German cities, as well as in their reception by feminists transnationally.

For many feminist critics, protest movements like SlutWalk and FEMEN deploy a body politics that appears to reproduce patriarchal norms rather than resisting them. In an emblematic analysis, Theresa O’Keefe argues that SlutWalk and FEMEN fail as feminist strategies of resistance “as they do not seek to disrupt what constitutes the ‘desirable’ female body” (2014, 11). Because of their universalizing and normative tendencies, “together with no structural account of violence against women, the sexualisation of women, or how women’s bodies continue to be a battleground for racial, patriarchal capitalism,” O’Keefe contends that “these types of body politics are dangerous” (2014, 15–16). Her account of SlutWalk and FEMEN rightly criticizes the way these protests make universalizing assumptions about sexual violence and the sexualization of women’s bodies.

Yet, O’Keefe’s analysis of “their failure to inject mockery and irony into their approach” (5) and of how they fall “short in their attempts to (re)appropriate patriarchal signifiers” (4) is predicated on a model of success/failure which predates the “undoing of feminism” and the co-optation of collective politics in neoliberalism. That is, to consider SlutWalk, FEMEN, and other examples of recent feminist protest as “failures” (at subverting, parodying, or mocking mainstream representation or at resisting patriarchy) assumes that feminist protest in the era of neoliberalism can continue to engage the strategies of emancipatory social movements of the twentieth century, including second-wave feminism, which demanded individual freedoms in the context of larger collective struggles for social progress. Predicated on emancipatory notions of individual and collective self-determination and political narratives of...
autonomy or equality, feminism in the twentieth century developed in tandem with Leftist and rights-based movements invested in the fundamental transformation of social relations. However, in the absence of alternatives to global capitalism, and in the context of neoliberalism’s individualization and privatization of politics, its renovation of collective resistance into commodified private microrebellions, activists are confronted with the necessity of doing feminist politics in the face of its impossibility. In this context, the feminist protests I have examined here can best be understood as process-based political actions. Rather than participating in narratives of social progress or emancipation, these actions emphasize the process of searching for new political paradigms, languages, and symbols that combat the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal. Contentiously redoing feminism, they deploy the precarious female body to make visible the contradictions of contemporary social reality.

Notes

1. “#yesallwomen—der globale #aufschrei … Weil erkenntnis der erste schritt zu gesellschaftlicher veränderung ist.” All translations from the German are my own.


3. Rodino-Colocino (2014) notes that hashtag feminism does not signal a new feminist wave, but rather highlights enduring mobilizing issues like sexual violence. By contrast, Knappe and Lang (2014, 364) explicitly link digital feminism and fourth-wave feminism: “[Fourth-wave feminists] use the web to re-link older and newer organisations, foster stronger networks, and encourage outreach to a new generation. Fourth-wave feminism is thus defined by its focus on technology.”

4. A key tendency of neoliberalism is its drive to co-opt emancipatory social movements including feminism and gay rights, replacing their anti-hierarchical and redistributive politics with discourses of personal responsibility and individual empowerment (Lisa Duggan 2003) while at the same time transforming their signs and symbols into commodities. This tendency is evident, e.g., in the appropriation and commodification of Pussy Riot’s aesthetic since 2013 and in the decision of the initiator of #YesAllWomen to stop posting under that hashtag because “I am not for it being monetized and co-opted” (@gildedspine, Twitter posting, August 12, 2014).

5. Precarity emerged in the early 2000s as an organizing concept within both theoretical discourse and activist movements, where it served as a platform for collective protests, particularly in Europe. Deriving especially from a critique of the flexibilization of labor in neoliberal capitalism, the notion of precarity has been elaborated within European social thought, especially by French and Italian Marxists. The concept of precarity has also been adopted widely by German political activists and social theorists responding to the insecurity of life in neoliberalism. In a distinct but related line of thought, Judith Butler’s work has also focused increasingly on the precarity of life, in particular the vulnerability of certain populations (including LGBT people, women, sex workers, and migrants) who are at increased risk of exposure to violence or displacement and who lack state protections. On the concept of precarity, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005), Pierre Bourdieu (1998); Butler (2004a, 2009), Robert Castel and Klaus Dörre (2009), Gill and Pratt (2008), Barbara Götz and Irene Lemberger (2009), and Guy Standing (2011).

6. Notable contributions to this debate include bestsellers like Eva Herman’s Das Eva-Prinzip (The Eve Principle, 2007), which criticizes women for prioritizing careers over families, and Thilo Sarrazin’s Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany Abolishes Itself, 2010), a racist indictment of Germany’s declining birthrate and growing immigrant population.

7. See for example the feminist blog Mädchenmannschaft.de, founded 2007; the feminist publication Missy Magazine, founded 2008; and books including Thea Dorn (2007), Eismann (2007), Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner, and Barbara Streidl (2008), Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether (2008), and Mirja Stöcker (2007).
8. “Popkultur durch feministische Strategien perforiert und erschüttert werden [sollte].”
9. “Popfeminismus muss als eine neuartige Erscheinungsform des Feminismus … aufgefasst werden.”
11. “[B]loggen, sie twittern unter Hashtags wie ′#Aufschrei′ oder ′#yesallwomen′, sie machen Videos. Sie gründen Tumblr-Blogs … Sie nutzen einfach alle Möglichkeiten und Plattformen, die das Netz bietet. Und vor allem analysieren sie, wie all die verschiedenen Ereignisse mit Sexismus zusammenhängen.”
12. FEMEN’s global influence has been disputed, and estimates regarding its size vary. It has been widely reported in the US press that the group numbers as many as 150,000 members worldwide (see for example Jeffrey Tayler 2013), but members often drop out soon after they are recruited.
16. For an account of the group’s history, see FEMEN (2014).
17. “Kein Kleidungsstück rechtfertigt sexuelle Gewalt.”
24. For more on Muslim women’s activism in connection with FEMEN and SlutWalk, see Eileraas (2014) and Salime (2014).
28. In her opening courtroom statement at trial in 2012, Pussy Riot’s Masha defended the group’s action by explaining, “[T]he prosecution argues that we intentionally bought clothes for this performance. The materials of our case directly refute this point. Tights and dresses are a part of the Pussy Riot image, and the balaclavas, identified in the indictment as ‘masks,’ are not a disguise, but a conceptual element of our image. Pussy Riot does not want the focus of attention on girls’ appearances, but creates characters who express ideas” (Pussy Riot 2013, 39). Masha’s statement refutes attempts to co-opt Pussy Riot’s artistic performance into discourses of consumerism, while also stressing that the group’s costumes are a conceptual element meant to distract from individual identities and create a symbolic image of collectivity. In so doing, Pussy Riot’s costumes resist and call attention to constructions of femininity that have become increasingly hegemonic in neoliberalism, spurred on by the beauty industry and global media.

29. The journalist Annett Meiritz published a personal account in the news magazine Der Spiegel about sexism in the Pirate Party, prompting the journalist Laura Himmelreich to publish an article in the illustrated magazine Stern about being harassed by the prominent politician Rainer Brüderle, a candidate in the Free Democratic Party running for national office (see Laura Himmelreich 2013; Annett Meiritz 2013).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Clara and Robert Vambery Professorship in Comparative Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park and by the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Hester Baer is Associate Professor of Germanic Studies and Film Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is the author of Dismantling the Dream Factory: Gender, German Cinema, and the Postwar Quest for a New Film Language (2009) and the editor of a special issue of Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature, “Contemporary Women’s Writing and the Return of Feminism in Germany” (2011). Her co-edited volume German Women’s Writing in the Twenty-First Century was published in 2015. E-mail: hbaer@umd.edu

References


