

# Quick Media Feminisms and the Affective Worldmaking of Hashtag Activism

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## Introduction

“Another week, another hashtag, and with it, a question about what is actually being accomplished,” quips *The New York Times*’ David Carr in 2012, in his polemical piece “Hashtag Activism, and its Limits.” Carr expresses concern about an over-simplified conflation between the ubiquity of hashtags and radical social change and is skeptical about social media’s agentic possibilities: “If you ‘like’ something, does that mean you care about it?” The dichotomy Carr insinuates, that liking and becoming active cannot be reconciled, seems oddly out of step with the political events of his own historical moment—after all, 2011 was the year of the Arab Spring—and in the age of *#BlackLivesMatter* and *#MeToo*, the valence of social media for political activism is evident: hashtag activism is part of a larger repertoire of the political, and hashtags have been appropriated by political movements on all ends of the ideological spectrum. That hashtag activism leads to real consequences can be seen in a number of prominent cases, such as the conviction of Harvey Weinstein for rape and sexual assault in March 2020 and the mobilization of the white nationalists who stormed the US Capital in January 2021. Furthermore, as Caroline Dadas contends, the “attention” hashtag activism generates often includes acts of retaliation, both in the form of online hate speech and violations of privacy through doxing or deep fakes.

Nevertheless, I want to take Carr's question about caring to heart and raise issues about the circulation of affects via hashtags. I do so by looking at what I call *quick media feminisms*, the mobilization of feminist thought and activism via quick media, "an umbrella term for the cheap, easily accessible, and omnipresent tools of communication which allow us to connect to each other spontaneously and effortlessly and which include both messaging platforms such as text and Skype and social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter" (Friedman and Schultermantl 4). Quick media feminisms include many instances of hashtag activism,<sup>1</sup> #MeToo perhaps being the most widely known, but they also include feminist practices in closed-forum digital spaces on Facebook and feminist art projects that adopt quick media affordances and properties. They are simultaneously cultural artifacts and dynamic archives of contemporary social practices which record the development of feminist thought in the face of various political and social challenges of the present historical moment. While, of course, not all quick media usage is feminist, quick media can facilitate counter-hegemonic spaces and serve as a platform for feminist activism, allowing users to express resistance, create visibility, and organize and mobilize communities.<sup>2</sup> However, the same online spaces archive the hate speech posted to challenge and misappropriate these projects' original intent, truth claims, visibility, and traction. Therefore, quick media feminist projects

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- 1 The term "hashtag activism" was first introduced by Eric Augenbraun in his 2011 piece on the Occupy Wallstreet movement in *The Guardian*.
  - 2 Scholars in media studies have worked extensively on the effects of quick media usage and their impact on communicative practices, social relationships, consumerism, political activism, and the generation of critical masses in a variety of contexts; see Jennifer Earl for a comprehensive overview of this scholarship. With critical insights into phenomena ranging from the democratization of information to data mining, scholarship in this field pushes existing definitions of identity, individuality, and community to new limits, especially in scholarship on online cultures and intersectionality (Dobson; Friedman 2013, 2018; Haraway; Nakamura; Nakamura/Chow-White; Noble; Noble/Tynes; Poletti/Rak; Young; Zimmerman).

also record conversations between different politically oriented counterpublics and the vicious reactionary responses they incur. These responses are rife with contributions from members of groups such as the Incels, the various red pill crowds, and *#meninism* folks that defend white cis-hetero male privilege against gender equity, political correctness, and other aspects of social reform they perceive as directly discriminating against them. The affect which circulates in these spheres is perhaps best described by what Kate Manne calls “himpathy,” the redirection of sympathy away from the cis and trans women who experience harassment or abuse and towards the men whom these women allegedly expose, in an attempt to end their careers and destroy their idealized heteronormative families (197).<sup>3</sup> Hence, from a cultural studies perspective, quick media feminisms are interesting for the kinds of issues they raise, contributing to a diversification of ideas about body, identity, gender, nationhood, and other categories of difference; equally interesting is the way in which they circulate affects through the disputes they incite and record and the affective worldmaking to which they contribute.

In my essay, I want to attend to these two levels of quick media feminism by analyzing the following feminist interventions: *@DearCatcallers*, a project on Instagram where a young woman posts selfies with the men who catcalled her; *#YouOkSis*, a consciousness-raising and community-building platform on Twitter; and *#CatcallsofGraz*, a collective project which creates murals out of the sexist messages that anonymous users share with the organizers of the platform. All three quick media feminist projects seek to counter the incurred objectification through catcallers by taking back agency, by putting the catcallers and their speech acts on public display, and by facilitating a space of resistance. They therefore emphasize quick media's potential to constitute feminist counterpublics, in which a different form of being in the world becomes possible.

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3 Such was the criticism launched at Dr. Christine Blasey Ford when she testified against Supreme Court Nominee Brett Kavanaugh, in 2018, on account of sexual misconduct during their college years.

All three projects document instances of verbal abuse, but it is important to emphasize that verbal harassment is never just verbal: it is also somatic and visceral, linked to feelings of vulnerability and—in some cases—the anticipation of physical harm. As my discussion of various examples will show, these posts evoke the circumstantial contexts in which harassment occurs: Why does this context register as particularly endangering? Are there other people close by who register as trustworthy, and can you trust your sense of judgment in such times of crisis? How much has your sense of agency been manipulated by narratives of shame, blame, and more of the same?

### Online Counterpublics and the Affective Economies of Quick Media

The role of quick media in creating and sustaining counterpublics has been amply discussed in a variety of disciplines, ranging from work on the discursive interpellation of counterpublics through social media to theorizations of quick media via affect studies. The latter foreground the affective worldmaking, which comes into existence through quick media's particular formal properties and affordances, including their interactive, rhizomatic, relational, and phatic nature. In life writing studies, quick media have challenged prevalent understandings of authorship, text, and the self in relation to the dynamics of the web.<sup>4</sup> In addition, theorizations of publics and counterpublics have begun to account for quick media's media-specific particularities. In *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Zizi Papacharissi contends that a hashtag allows “for crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms. These networked publics come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment” and convene “across networks that are discursively rendered out of mediated interactions” (308). Similarly, danah boyd

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4 See also Zizi Papacharissi's work on the “networked self,” and Laurie McNeill's “There is no I in Network” on questions of the posthuman self.

proposes that networked publics include “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (39). Such definitions of online counterpublics adapt Michael Warner’s emphasis on counterpublics’ “circulation of discourse” (80) to account for the ubiquity and dynamic circulation of posts, likes, and tweets.

The accessible, collaborative, and potentially connective narratives circulating via quick media cohere around a shared sense of identity, experience, and belonging. Susanna Paasonen, for instance, argues that “where the affective, somatic, and the cognitive stick and cohere, resonance helps in understanding online connections and disconnections, proximities and distances between human and non-human bodies” (51). Similarly, Papacharissi contends that “[a]ffective attachments to media cannot produce communities, but they may produce ‘feelings of community’” (*Affective Publics* 9). Which kinds of affective responses they elicit can, of course, not be readily determined but depend on the ideological configurations emerging from the emotional, somatic, or visceral responses between readers, characters, and authors (see Breger in this book). The well-known example of *#nastywoman*, which emerged in October 2016 during the US presidential election, is a case in point. On the one hand, users employed this hashtag in acts of resistance against misogyny, thereby giving the idiom of the “nasty woman” a positively connoted subversive meaning; on the other hand, users adopted this hashtag as a misogynistic moniker designed to extend the insult initially launched at Hillary Clinton to other women in politics. As examples from January 2019 show, posts with feminist icons and pro-life criticism of liberal politics become conjoined via the same hashtag and thus document the contentious debates centering on feminist politics. Figures like the nasty woman are “sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* 11) and can therefore mobilize different ideological groups. What initially started as a feminist quick media intervention against misogyny and broke with the slurs’ interpellatory violence, by giving it a subversive

resignification, eventually became a shorthand for the organization of diametrically opposed political projects.<sup>5</sup>

This adherence of different affective economies to the same sticky figure also exemplifies the micro-aggressions which are part of the misogynistic repertoire of everyday sexism. Quick media's specific affordances make such micro-aggressions easily available for circulation. And while, according to Lisa Nakamura, they "tend to be discounted as not real, but rather part of the virtual world" (337), they are indicative of the same large-scale systemic misogyny against which quick media feminist projects protest. As the by now robust scholarship on #MeToo illustrates, quick media feminisms track the relationship between feminist activism and the subsequent anti-feminist backlash.<sup>6</sup>

The three quick media feminist interventions I discuss below exemplify the discursive and material strategies through which quick media feminist projects connect and mobilize counterpublics. They traffic in what Sara Ahmed terms "affective economies," around which feelings of belonging cohere ("Affective Economies" 117). By citing specific cases of harassment and depicting viable strategies of resistance, quick media feminist projects call attention to the ubiquity of public harassment. At the same time, their online representation and dissemination debunk prevalent assumptions that verbal harassment is merely a grey area issue of public safety. In addition to materializing moments of witness and testimony, they index the social climate surrounding misogyny by capturing the various politically significant responses to individual posts and tweets.

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5 See Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* for details on practices of subversive resignification.

6 See, for instance, Boyle, Karen's *#MeToo, Weinstein, and Feminism* (2019), and Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes' edited collection *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* (2019).

## **@DearCatcallers and the Refusal to Laugh Along**

@DearCatcallers is an Instapage created by award-winning Dutch artist Noa Jansma to showcase the extent, range, and frequency of catcalling she received, all of which ostensibly were intended to be compliments on her body, sexuality, and femininity.<sup>7</sup> For an entire month (September 2017), she posed with her catcallers and posted the resulting selfies. Of the 28 posts she put up, 22 are selfies with catcallers, accompanied with verbatim quotes of the things they said to her. The project's subtitle, "It's not a compliment," puts the various quips she received into perspective by emphasizing the malign intent of any form of public harassment. Through Twitter, #DearCatcallers went viral instantly: over 300,000 people actively followed it, some posts have over 6400 likes and almost 800 comments. The project, which officially concluded at the end of September 2017, continues to live on in many forms, including Jansma's solo photo exhibition, interviews, and Ted talk appearances.

While Jansma's project was designed to turn the public sphere into a safer space for women, the virtual world in which it circulated is anything but safe. This may be attributed to the confrontational nature of her project, but it is also related to networked interactivity, which, according to Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern, relies on a "many-to-many structure, with a range of participants being private in public" (xi). This notion of being private in public via online technologies also reminds us that online narratives are inherently relational and that a person never composes their life narratives themselves or on their own terms. If we think of online life writing not solely as a narrativization of one's own life, via quick media outlets, but also as the inadvertent tracking, tagging, and monitoring that occurs in the background, we have to concede that multiple versions of our online life narratives coexist at the same time, always in specific and particular ideological contexts.

In the case of Jansma's project, what mobilized these publics are the various affective economies bearing on the issue of sexism, women's

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7 Among other accolades, Jansma won the Dutch Gouden Kalf Beste Interactive in 2018.

rights, and gender-based discrimination at large. Jansma's project received three distinct kinds of responses: posts that partake in her outrage against everyday sexism; hate speech in the form of slut-shaming and rape threats directed at her; and posts that mildly side with the catcallers who they feel are being unjustly exposed on her Instapage. All three groups coalesce around shared feelings of empowerment, threat, or pity, respectively, and the affective economies of these communities and their spontaneous formation via quick media. Certainly, Jansma's project was borne out of feminist consciousness raising, but, as mentioned above, among the responses its interactive nature invites, it also features sexist hate speech. Such posts cite "political correctness," "cancel culture," and "genderism" as oppressive interventions of a liberal elite, and the authors of such posts use Jansma's platform to protest what they think of as misandry. To groups that oppose equal rights initiatives, Jansma's project epitomizes the "norms of the dominant culture" (Warner 80), which they feel unfairly censors them. What was intended as a contribution to dismantling sexism now circulates in forums where the verbal abuse Jansma first encountered is not only repeated but frequently grossly upstaged, probably precisely because she went public with the private. In her 2018 project *DearHaters*, Jansma published the conversations @DearCatcallers inspired and notes that 75% of them are hate speech.

With these comments as a backdrop, Jansma's selfies with the catcallers center on her assertion of agency in the face of objectification. Together with her control over the image (and perhaps, by extension, the situation), her unamused but determined gaze serves as a commentary to the laughter and ridicule most of the men in her selfies express. Jansma's refusal to partake in their humor and laugh it off exemplifies a feminist resistance strategy that Sara Ahmed terms the "feminist killjoy" (*Living a Feminist Life* 10), a deliberate rupture with the banter that racist or sexist comments often solicit. Through her non-compliance, Jansma's feminist killjoy-pose underscores the gravity of misogyny and other forms of systemic violence against women.



## #YouOKSis and Care as Feminist Praxis

My second example, the hashtag #YouOkSis revolves around solidarity and care. It resonates deeply with black feminist work on love as political activism and positions mutual care as a feminist intervention against harassment in the public sphere. The hashtag #YouOkSis indexes the collective action of passersby who witness and intercept harassment directed at black cis and trans women on the street and in the cybersphere. Most posts report specific incidents of verbal abuse or stalking and mention the action taken against them. A cursory read through the posts indicates an even distribution between posts referring to actions taken by the person who reports the event and posts witnessing others' expressions of solidarity and civil courage against what Moya Bailey terms "misogynoir."<sup>8</sup> The hashtag was launched by Philadelphia-based feminist activist, artist, educator, and social worker Feminista Jones,<sup>9</sup> in an attempt to highlight the particular vulnerabilities of black cis and trans women. A well-known contributor to Black Twitter, with #YouOkSis, Jones facilitates a platform where people can share strategies to de-escalate situations potentially leading to physical harm and to memorialize the lives of women who have been murdered in city streets.

The predominant affective repertoire circulating via #YouOkSis draws largely on the notion of care. Besides its Black vernacular characteristics (Johnson 69), the familial question "You ok, Sis?" evokes a sense of intimacy in the tradition of feminist sisterhood and, at the same time, serves as a code of mutual recognition available to persons sensitized to the shapes and forms of harassment. With this emphasis on caring for one another, Jones's project connects to a well-established tradition of Black feminist activism which defines love and care as political practices. Black feminist scholars and activists, including Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and bell hooks, devised intersectional strategies

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8 See her forthcoming book *Misogynoir Transformed* or her Tumblr post from 2014, in which she introduced the concept to call attention to Black women's particular experiences of misogyny.

9 This is her professional name; her actual name is Michelle Taylor.

of resistance against systemic racism and sexism based on a shared sense of caring for one's self and one's community. Perhaps most prominent within this tradition of Black feminist theory is Patricia Hill Collins's assertion that "[l]oving Black people ... in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act" (250). The forms of resistance practices via *#YouOkSis* extend these heuristics into the realm of quick media, but the nascent feeling of a shared sense of suffering and a communal resilience activate a long history, thus honoring a feminist tradition dating back to the radical politics expressed in the Combahee River Collective Statement of the mid-1980s.<sup>10</sup>

The historical dimension of this heuristics is significant for *#YouOkSis* because it includes an orientation towards a less hostile future. It speaks a desire not only for safety in the here and now but for a prospective outlook that public spaces may become less hostile terrain for cis and trans women. A closer look at the related hashtags, with which contributors to Jones's political project interface, underscores its affinity with other prominent examples of Black Twitter, including *#BlackLivesMatter*. Taken together, the convergence of these hashtags materializes in what Paige Johnson terms a "technocultural assemblage" (62), whose affective worldmaking can perhaps best be understood through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's understanding of assemblage as "a becoming" rather than "a being." The hashtag *#YouOkSis* registers these dimensions of love precisely because of its affinity with *#BlackLivesMatter*, whose germinal phase started with Alicia Garza's famous declaration of love: "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter."

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10 For a succinct discussion of the valence of love in second-wave Black feminism and its anti-essentialist potential, see Jennifer Nash's essay, "Practicing Love."

## **@CatcallsofGraz and the Material Dimensions of #MeToo Life Writing**

My third example employs various forms of remediation to involve random audiences in the memorialization of harassment. @CatcallsofGraz is part of a global project which documents catcalling through chalk graffiti drawn in or outside the public places where it occurred: in front of restaurants, in parks, outside cafes, on campuses. These are some of the locations where the project organizers of @CatcallsofGraz have rendered the fleeting experience of harassment temporarily visible. The various subchapters in different cities in Europe, Asia, and North America indicate a similar practice: the project invites victims of street harassment to DM (direct message) their stories via Instagram, and the organizers of the project “chalk back” by memorializing the event on site, displaying the specific verbal insults in conjunction with their own Instagram name and further referencing #StoppBelästigung (stop harassment). In addition, the project invites people in Graz to meet regularly for a communal chalk back event, where the grievances over sexism and public harassment, together with consciousness-raising initiatives against femicides, surface outside city hall and equally prominent places. Due to the robust media coverage by local news outlets, the initiative has gained considerable notoriety in Graz. The fact that @CatcallsofGraz is becoming a readily accessible and popular site to report harassment is exemplified by a case in late January 2021, where several women reported sexual harassment at a city-run COVID testing facility.

The chalk graffiti, which publicly memorialize harassment, employ a particular affective aesthetic strategy. The DIY aesthetic of chalk graffiti in bright colors combines the children's play with their reminiscence of the pedagogical setting of the school blackboard. The several instances of remediation involved—from the DM to the chalk graffiti to the quick media post—raise issues about the material dimensions of this kind of affective worldmaking. As examples of “inscriptive media, ... the representations they entail and circulate are crucially material as well as semiotic” (Gitelman 6). This materiality contributes to the agentive force of @CatcallsofGraz, whereby the collective consciousness-

raising equally involves the respective victims of catcalling and allies against misogyny writ large. Like Jansma's efforts to track the ubiquity of catcalling and Jones's cultivation of love politics, *@CatcallsofGraz* circulates grievances and resistance strategies as part of a larger effort to denormalize street harassment and empower its victims. As an autobiographical practice that calls attention to the fact that "women will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are women in a man's world (i.e., patriarchy)" (Manne 33), *@CatcallsofGraz* reclaims the public spaces in which harassment occurred and re-signifies them as platforms against sexism and misogyny. By citing the form of harassment directly, the chalk graffiti also validate the gravity of people's experience of catcalling. Rendering the insults visible "purports to speak a truth about lived experience and foster the forms of recognition we require for a more just politics and social field" (Poletti 6). Therefore, as texts, they enable a sense of recognition for a counterpublic which coheres around a shared sense of vulnerability and a shared commitment towards resistance. Therefore, *@CatcallsofGraz* can offer itself up as a communal space and activity to "chalk back" at catcallers and, by doing so, validates the vulnerability of those who have been publicly harassed. As feminist interventions, they may prompt readers' recognition through the affective potential of narrative worldmaking. As such, they facilitate the kinds of affirmative encounters that literary studies scholars such as Rita Felski attribute to literary texts. Felski suggests that literary narratives "offer solace and relief not to be found elsewhere, confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think or feel like me. Through this experience of affiliation, I feel myself acknowledged; I am rescued from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen." (Felski 33)

While the global dimension of this project speaks to the ubiquity of harassment, the specific locations of the individual graffiti resonate particularly with those readers located in the same city. Being able to recognize the street corners and landmarks memorialized in the quick media posts is one way of being reminded of one's own positionality towards these texts; stumbling upon the chalk graffiti on the way home from work, or while walking a young child to school, makes them part

of one's life, regardless of any prior affiliation to the Facebook or Instagram network. Although the experience of being catcalled is deeply gendered, the graffiti integrate the randomness and unpredictable content of catcalling into people's experience of the city, making it matter and a part of the materiality of everybody's life.

## Conclusion

Through the circulation of affect, these quick media projects contribute to a kind of worldmaking that imagines a more just and equal society. The circulation of emancipatory narratives via quick media echoes Ahmed's definition of feminist interventions as "finding ways to exist in a world that makes it difficult to exist" (*Living a Feminist Life* 239). The volume of posts and tweets that detail experiences of public harassment not only shed light on these difficulties but also index emotionally taxing coping strategies. The dynamic and interactive responses to these quick media projects validate the incurred injustice and enter it into the public discourse around misogyny, both in the context of feminist counterpublics which protest such forms of systemic violence and sexist groups that downplay or condone them. Therefore, while quick media feminist interventions do not merely sketch utopian worlds devoid of public harassment, they affirm the agency of harassed individuals and groups and provide spaces to share grievances, offer care, and practice solidarity. The fact that they go viral, as so many of them do, is perhaps one of many steps towards a more just future. As Catherine MacKinnon proposes, regarding her idea of "butterfly politics," "the right small human intervention in an unstable political system can sooner or later have large complex reverberations" (MacKinnon: 1).

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