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Introduction: Visualizing Protest: Transnational Approaches to the Aesthetics of Dissent

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Feminist signs and symbols have intricate cultural and historical lives—binding and unbinding feminist communities, acting as frames for revolting against contexts of misogyny and racism, and creating markers under which counter-cultural explorations can take place. Think for instance of the willful feminist clenched fist symbol, which rose to prominence in the 1960s, inspired by the fist of the Black Power movement (Ahmed 2017, 85-86). Feminist symbols energize us, propel us, help us visualize our resistance. Feminist symbols are also divisive: they speak for some more than others, they represent certain lives and truths, and they affectively resonate with those they represent while acting as reminders of the exclusion and expulsion of those they fail to speak for and to and with.

In this issue of *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, we invited contributors to engage with how protest is visualized, that is, rendered visual in the form of iconography and through social media, and imagined as a utopian project of feminist, queer, and anti-racist worldmaking. Inviting scholarship and creative engagements from the overlapping perspectives of feminist media studies, transnational feminist theory, critical race studies, visual studies, and postcolonial digital humanities, this special issue examines the aesthetics of feminist protests in terms of their networked circulations as well as their affective bonds and material contexts. Exploring the emerging modes of visibility, networked solidarity, and collaborative knowledge production, “Visualizing Protest: Transnational Approaches to the Aesthetics of Dissent” examines the relationships between the aesthetics of feminist transnational protest and digital revolt in a dynamic, polymedia context characterized by amateur remixing, instantaneous sharing, immaterial labour, corporate ownership of digital platforms, and institutionalized state surveillance of social media.

This issue was inspired in large part by our investment and fascination with the visual lives of feminist symbology both online and offline. For example, in 2011 Flavia Dzodan online published what has become a central energizing force for articulating the centrality of intersectionality to contemporary feminist politics. In **“My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or it will Be Bullshit** (<http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be->

intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/),” Dzodan talked about the importance of grounded intersectionality for feminism and challenged metaphors that conflated women’s oppression with racialized oppression, disregarding how the two interrelate and overlap through long histories and present-day realities of colonialism and imperialism (Dzodan 2011). Drawing on the energy of a rich history of intersectional thinking formulated by feminists of colour and black feminists (i.e., Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989, 1993; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Sandoval 2000), Dzodan’s piece struck a chord with contemporary feminist movements. Fascinatingly, because her call so resonated with feminists, Dzodan’s words became imprinted on feminist memorabilia, often misquoting her words, misspelling Dzodan’s name, and sometimes not citing Dzodan as the originator of the phraseology in the first place (Romano 2016; Dzodan 2016). Feminist symbology travels yet it does so in capitalist contexts where to be a feminist and to be intersectional are sometimes commodities rather than actions or political commitments. Acquiring a certain cache, Dzodan’s articulation of intersectionality became tweetable, sellable, and appropriated by the marketplace. Yet while intersectionality has circulated in capitalist contexts, the inventor of the phraseology (Dzodan) did not receive adequate remuneration, speaking to the ways in which intellectual labour, especially when appearing online, is often rendered invisible, cooptable, and thievable (Adair and Nakamura 2017). In such ways, digital economies can absorb and shape radical and oppositional knowledge and praxis through the production, reworking, remaking, sharing, amplifying, and storing of digital content (Terranova 2004). Or as Jennifer Pybus (2015), in looking at affect and personal digital archives, writes, “every keystroke, every link, every comment that people generate can be extrapolated for surplus value” (238). If feminist words, symbols, and actions can so readily be consumed, what drives the force and possibility behind energizing symbology that fuels social change?

The contributors to this issue look at the function of feminist symbols and signs in protests, and their importance for feminist transnational mobilizing. Collectively, they are interested in explorations of key on- and offline fabrics of protest, undertaking critical engagements with how aesthetics flow through transnational protest across polymedia environments and in critical readings of feminist networked mobilizations worldwide. Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr (2010) discuss transnational feminism as intertwined with feminist praxis. For transnational feminisms to flourish, they maintain, attention must be paid to how knowledge is developed, striving for an approach to knowledge-formation that destabilizes the separation between theory and method, academia and activism, and that strives towards collaboration. Attention to the

transnational lives of feminist symbols is thus not only interested in questions such as migration, border imperialism, settler colonialism, globalization, but also in the processes behind the creation of knowledge symbols made by and for oppressed communities (Grewal and Kaplan 1994).

Drawing again on Nagar and Swarr, visualizing protest transnationally requires recognizing the collaborative element of symbology. While feminist words and symbols can be usurped and misused, mixing, remixing, archiving, sharing, and remaking—often facilitated by social media—can provide compelling forms of multi-authored collaboration that give signs and symbols multiple lives across borders and geographic locations. This issue is interested in the immense collaborative efforts that are at the locus of feminist knowledge production and that center around online forms of life invention, theoretical intervention, and networked support.

Yet this is not always a vision of feminist sisterhood, unity, or solidarity but one of dissonance, theft, and appropriation. For example, 2017 Women's Marches saw a reinvigorated interest in the making, crafting, and touting of feminist signs. Speaking to feminist inventiveness, creative signage also played a role in constructing particular types of feminist subjects. For example, white feminists carrying Dzodan's "My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or it will Be Bullshit" speak to a desire to be recognized by others as intersectional rather than as necessarily partaking in intersectional dialogue or action. This can be an individualized feminist politics in the sense that it is more about what type of feminist one wishes themselves to be seen, in the eyes of other feminists than about the practices and habits they undertake to fulfill that desire (sometimes also referred to as "virtue signaling"). This is reminiscent of what Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) has called an "[obsession] with the politics of personal exoneration" wherein some white people support anti-racism in order to absolve themselves from accusations of racism (97). It also aligns with what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have called "moves to innocence" in relation to settler colonialism which "problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (3). More broadly, such uses of intersectionality-as-signage can also be understood through what bell hooks (1992) identifies as "eating the other": a white devouring of non-white and non-western traditions, insights, and bodies, towards making oneself more whole, more interesting, more cool, or more compelling. In feminist signage contexts, this might involve taking on as one's own theoretical knowledge and the concerns of those with non-white identities—be it intersectionality, black feminisms, or Indigenous feminisms—for the purpose of exemplifying individual

feminist credibility above advocating and rallying for long-term, large-scale, social and political change. As Sam Grey (2004) has discussed in relation to the ongoing exclusion of Indigenous voices from feminist politics and as Susana Loza (2014) has exemplified with arguments for solidarity that silence women of colour, wishes for sisterhood can obscure settler colonialism and racism. The effects of this exclusion run so deep that a white wish for *including* “difference” within its frame often relies on allowing feminist practitioners and theorists who are white to benefit from this appropriation. “Because Whites are usually the ones speaking about women outside their group, as well as gathering information, creating theories” white feminists can glean personal, political, and professional rewards from displaying and performing an anti-essentialist feminism (Miheusah 2000, 1247-1248). The symbology present at the Marches partook in the making of feminist subjects and the sharing of politics and identities with others, and yet it also presented opportunities for appropriation and remaking.

In addition to critiquing the appropriation of symbols for personal gain, exploring feminist symbology also involves being attuned to how symbols shift from context to context. Writing on trans of color praxis, micha cárdenas (2015) discusses the importance of conceptualizations of “shifting.” Drawing on Chela Sandoval’s (2000) formulation of differential consciousness wherein multiple oppressions are negotiated through the skillset of shifting ideologies and identities based on context, cárdenas formulates “shifting” as a method by which trans women of color navigate hostile and violent people and spaces. Rather than “passing” which relies on the observer, “shifting” centralizes the power of the person navigating hostile spaces while exceeding attempts to compartmentalize others into categories. To think about feminist protest symbols and visuals as capable of shifting is to suggest that visuals, while important devices for fueling action and revolt, do not exist outside or beyond those who handle, make, transcribe, translate, and cite them. Signs thus can and are used in ways that interrupt dominant narratives, stagger the viewer’s preconceived notions, and reinvent the world from the perspective of the sign-holder. In this sense, signs, symbols, and visuals are powerful tools for claiming space and confronting injustice.

The contributors to this issue navigate these many possibilities of the aesthetics of protest. One of the central themes uniting the pieces in this special issue is the interplay between embodied protests and their social media circulations, which are loaded with additional meanings and discourses. This interplay and co-createdness is, for instance, central to Jenny Ungbha Korn’s analysis of the representation and circulation of a photograph of her protesting brutality against Asians in “Race and Resistance Amid

Feminism, Priming, and Capitalism: The (Surprisingly-Globalized) Visual of an Asian American Woman Activist.” Similarly, in “Protesting in the Streets of Instagram,” Ali Rachel Pearl explores the possibilities for activist movements on Instagram, suggesting that geotag archives function as spaces of resistance where activists can connect and amplify shared discourses. Pearl’s analysis is important because it draws attention to user agency, evident in the way in which activists appropriate and use geotags in a subversive and transformative way.

Carrie Smith and Maria Stehle, in “Awkwardness and Assemblage: Digital Schemes for Feminist World-Making,” contribute to the issue by focusing on performative responses to sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany on New Year’s Eve 2015/16 and the #MeToo movement more broadly. Using an intersectional lens, they question the inclusiveness of feminist resistance tactics and call for the need to “continually reformulate the ways in which we think, speak, and do feminism.” An intersectional perspective is also driving the analysis in Rianka Singh’s piece, “Platform Feminism: Protest and the Politics of Spatial Organization.” Informed by the McLuhan school of thought on the foundational role of the medium, Singh critically reviews the emerging field of Platform Studies and calls to re-evaluate the role of digital media platforms in feminist resistance. Next, in “*America Latina Vai Ser Toda Feminista: Visualizing & Realizing Transnational Feminisms in the Women’s Worlds March for Rights*,” Cara Snyder, Ana Maria Veiga and Cristina Scheibe Wolff discuss transnationalism in the context of the Women’s Worlds March for Rights in Brazil. Drawing attention to the non-verbal elements of feminist movements, they aptly capture the generative force of protest aesthetics, writing that “performances of dissent and the images that capture these, translate politics in a way word cannot.”

Following on this, Krysta Geneviève Lynes, in “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Performative Politics and Queer Migrant Activisms,” explores the performative interventions of Artists Against Evictions and LGBTQI+ Refugees, a group of queer migrant activists in Greece. By engaging in what Lynes calls the strategy of “displacement,” Lynes outlines how these activists intervened into a contemporary art exhibit not adequately rooted in anti-oppressive politics, and employed the aesthetics of dissent to create new spaces of resistance. The final piece in this issue, “Drawing the Revolution: The Practice and Politics of Collaboration in the Graphic Novel *Lissa*” by Coleman Nye and Sherine Hamdy reflects on the process of creating *Lissa* (<http://lissagraphicnovel.com/>), a feminist comic subverting conventional optics of identity in the context of the Egyptian revolution. Unlike other pieces in this issues, Nye and

Hamdy's article does not focus on digital platforms specifically, yet it reinforces the importance of the visual in oppositional knowledge-making. Together, the pieces in this issue offer a rich and diverse take on feminist protest with its visual renderings and transnational iterations.

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◀ **DIGITAL ECONOMIES** ◀ **FEMINIST SYMBOLS** ◀ **INTERSECTIONALITY** ◀ **TRANSNATIONAL PRAXIS**
 ◀ **VISUALIZING PROTEST**

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