

## Twenty-first Century Intertwining Feminist Voices in Networked Spaces

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**ABSTRACT:** The technology of print and the novel have “housed” global concerns for centuries with feminist writers often proposing either lifelike worlds or imaginary utopian visions and corresponding dystopian fears. For Ursula K. Le Guin, Utopian and Dystopian writing constitute the antidote to inertia perpetuated by institutions (*The Wave in the Mind* 2018). Since the turn of the century, the New Media Age has dictated a new democracy of thought, new participatory potentials and a revitalized communal sense among writers and readers. Within this new media context, I explore the connections between feminism and technoscience. I explain how new social constellations made possible via digital media can relate to socio-cultural change and, more specifically, how feminist discussions can be refashioned on social networking sites.

In my effort to disclose the way feminist writing and speech are reconfigured in both digital and lived spaces, I discuss the activist practices of Margaret Atwood and test the intersections between dystopian fiction and the metanarratives that spring from cosplay. As I bring into the spotlight other online creative projects as diverse ways of female resistance against male sexual assaults, I discuss how communal online space allows a new language as well as revamped ways of promoting awareness and activating the masses.

**KEYWORDS:** activism; cosplay; participatory politics; SNSs; hashtag culture; Twitter poetry

### Introduction: Feminist Re-awakenings

In a constantly expanding online “global village” (McLuhan 1989) that keeps transforming via social mediation, web connected activist communities and minority groups signal out their social concerns, potentially reaching out to greater audiences. This article examines Social Networking Sites (SNSs) not only as a means of instant communication and source of information but also as space where people can share their thoughts and concerns about global and local issues of social and political importance. As many female writers turn digital, writing gets increasingly political and more easily accessible to digitally informed audiences.

It is the purpose of this paper to focus on this participatory and politically alert writing culture. It covers instances of female representation on social media, emphasizing examples of female outspokenness through the medium as a way of overcoming bias and stereotypes regarding gender categorization and gender imbalance. More specifically, I investigate the convergence between literature and social networked female presence that contributes to

the re-awakening of mainstream feminism. I explain how new social constellations made possible via new media can relate to feminist issues and activist practices with a view to understanding gender inequalities, raising awareness and bringing about social change. I examine the ways in which these online channels of communication promote the vocalization of women's narratives that denounce sexual assault and gender discrimination, while a rift between older and newer expressions of feminism becomes evident. Then, I move on to demonstrate how these online activities can promote offline real-world mobilization and activism. For this purpose, Twitter and Facebook are investigated as the communal spaces where female writers, poets, and readers "meet," exchange ideas and insights, experiment with narrative form and content, hoping to explore its transformative power.

Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green in *Spreadable Media* (2013) claim that "the affordances of digital media provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing other aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, the reimagining of cultural and political participation, the revision of economic expectations, and the reconfiguration of legal structures" (3). Moreover, in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2009), Jenkins concedes that in a highly participatory culture "with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices [...] members [...] believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (xi). Within this spreadable and shifting media landscape, where the circulation of conflicting voices reaches online media cultures as well as minority groups the idea of participatory politics as the practice of digitally staged and promoted activities gains particular interest and requires further investigation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Jenkins presents some of the results and conclusions drawn from research work on the characteristics of participatory politics in the "Participatory Politics in an Age of Crisis" online round of talks. These talks are published regularly in his official weblog "Confessions of an Aca-Fan," explaining how digital mediation transforms young people's civic and political engagement. They can be accessed at

In light of the above, the emergence of an evolving online feminist culture demands that it be examined. For all the above reasons, I undertake the investigation of instances and modes of feminist participation in this new media culture. By shifting attention to various digital spaces and practices, I pinpoint new synergies among active members that create new avenues for civil engagement, while the roles of the participating agents are readjusted and reconfigured in order to take advantage of the new opportunities that come up. I lay emphasis on Facebook, Twitter, and other SNSs as they offer enormous vocalization opportunities to all people (including minority groups) and energize their political consciousness (though great inequalities in online presence in political spaces is unanimously acknowledged). With regard to female voices, Catherine Powell, writing for the Council on Foreign Relations, indicates that “[i]n the United States, women are more likely to use social media than men across all major platforms except LinkedIn. Yet, female Twitter users are significantly less likely to be retweeted than male users.” Acknowledging the discriminated nature of online digital spaces can clearly help promote understanding of the ways in which women use SNSs and actively engage with them before they move activism offline and to the streets.

For the new technological, socio-cultural, and economic balances do refashion twenty-first century civic engagement and physical protest. Paolo Gerbaudo interestingly probes into the new “tweets and the streets” phenomenon, this kind of political and social activism that takes the form of “mediated communication and physical gatherings in public places” (2). His *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (2012) came as a result of the new protest culture from the Arab Spring to the *indignados* protests in Spain and the Occupy movement in the U.S. In what appeared to be the “revolutions of 2009-2011,” BBC journalist Paul Mason explains that “Facebook is used to form groups, covert and overt—in order to establish those strong but flexible connections. Twitter is used for real-time organization and news dissemination, bypassing the cumbersome ‘newsgathering’ operations of the mainstream media” (75).

## Literary Activism in Digital Spaces

### *Handmaids Cosplaying*

With literature still exercising a strong political and activist role in the consciousness of twenty-first century people, female writers stay closer to their fans than ever before due to their social media exposure, while the latter are granted a voice of their own and start experiencing the democratic potential of the medium. Margaret Atwood's literary and digitally activist example comes first in an exploration of female engagement, outspokenness, and protest taken up in this paper. Her name stands for female rights and ecological awareness reaching greater audiences owing to the digital turn her work has taken in the last couple of decades as well as to the visibility and outspokenness of social media. In the second part of this paper, the potentialities of the "hashtag culture" are explored via the example of a powerful #MeToo Movement and its expression through the literary practice of #MeToo poetry. As I shed light on some opposing views relating to Twitter feminism, its protagonists and the dangers that might be lurking, I initiate a dialogue regarding its possible limitations as well.

I choose to focus on Atwood's activist paradigm through the example of her dystopian 1986 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel describes a totalitarian regime and its devious politics against female rights. It has been revamped and greatly affecting consciousness after its successful HULU TV series adaptation in 2016. It sets the perfect example of how TV productions have enabled a new realism, providing the metaphors for real-life dystopian gender roles that seem to be re-emerging during American President Donald Trump's era and the encroachment of Right politics all over the world. In the last few years, when so many cases of sexual assault against women have jolted the political world and the entertainment industry, interest in this dystopian futuristic society has been revived, creating connections with real-life events and political complacency. Actually, the novel and its digital reproductions have been supporting a whole new feminist culture of resistance against the unjust sexual abuse of women. The first wave of protest took the form of the 2017 Women's Marches with women wearing pink "pussyhats" to make a collective

statement.<sup>2</sup> These marches were held worldwide, following the inauguration of the forty-fifth U.S.A. President and the Access Hollywood 2005 tape which surfaced in October 2016 and revealed the humiliating language against women. These marches were initiated by gender rights campaigner Teresa Shook in Hawaii, and quickly spread across the world. The peaceful protest was organized on social media and took place in all seven continents.

What interests me more in this case study is the convergence between *The Handmaid's Tale* narrative and American politics, affecting global gender consciousness and activism. This dystopian narrative has not only spoken to the hearts of twenty-first century women but has also been translated into action. It has triggered the worldwide uprising of women who can identify with the female characters in this dystopian fiction. Those dolled-up handmaid's feminist practices and their expression of anger against an obvious sexist outburst has been digitally mediated through SNSs like Facebook and Twitter and then moved to physical space and gatherings. The visual element of the HULU production has energized women who have been dressing as handmaids in order to combat male sexist behavior and derogatory language. More importantly, the immediacy and visibility of social media have allowed the fast reproduction of images and language inspired by the novel. As a counter strike to both fictive and real-life male oppression, these women have taken agency and control over their body and have turned it into a platform for speaking out gender equality. Through this representation of females as repressed handmaids, the female body comes to the forefront and becomes the main metaphor for female repression and male hegemony. As these novelistic representations move to actual physical space, they create a sea of new opportunities for speaking against unjust hegemonies. The dramatic representation of females in lived space in conjunction with the staging of and playing on novelistic stereotypes on Twitter and Facebook has empowered a new wave of feminist discourse

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<sup>2</sup> Fiona Keating writes about the symbolism and political meaning of the pussyhat project for the women's marches in "Pink 'Pussyhats' Will Be Making Statement at the Women's March on Washington." The article can be accessed at [www.ibtimes.co.uk/pink-pussyhats-will-be-making-statement-womens-march-washington-1601088](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/pink-pussyhats-will-be-making-statement-womens-march-washington-1601088).

while also awakening the wider world community on the issue. It has opened up the dialogue revolving around women's rights and abortion legislation in the U.S. and elsewhere.

As seen in numerous pictures flooding social networking sites as well as online and print newspapers, the protesters' clothing resembles the attire of the handmaids as portrayed in the novel and the famous series. Scarlet red cloaks and white bonnets are worn to hide their sinful eyes and inviting hairstyle, trying to suppress their supposed adulterous nature. In one image reproduced in order to protest at the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump the woman's banner read: "Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again!" "The Handmaid's Tale is NOT an Instruction Manual!" read another ("Trump makes"). And of course, they did not stop there and then. On July 13, 2018 at the other side of the Atlantic women dressed as handmaids gathered to demonstrate against Trump's visit to the Queen in London. Juniot Diaz in an interview with Atwood about this very incident concedes that "our current society is in many ways doing a better job reenacting the book than it would have imagined," and obviously updating interest in gender issues. Commenting on the connections her imagined dystopian fiction has had with reality, Atwood states that she has never written about anything too farfetched, about anything that politicians have not done at some point somewhere in history ("Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again"). Her Facebook and Twitter accounts constitute platforms for speaking out her views and for reconnecting with her fans. They provide new channels of communication with her audiences and allow the rewriting of the story this time in the streets by thousands of women. At times, when female rights still cannot be taken for granted and democracy can be misinterpreted, it is quite reassuring to note that social media can act as a vehicle against male abusive control.

As Andrew Liptak reports for *The Verge.com*, in March 2017, a group of women marched into Texas' State Capitol Building, dressed in red cloaks and white bonnets reproducing the images in the series: "They sat silently in the balcony, surrounded by armed police officers, sending a message with their presence—turning cosplay into a political act, and inspiring a national anti-abortion protest movement that has adopted the costume as a de facto uniform." Heather Busby, the executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Texas is reported stating that similar cosplay acts happened even earlier than that:

This isn't the first time Pro-Choice Texas used costumes.... Back in 2015, we had folks in hospital gowns to protest another abortion restriction. We had an inkling that this kind of thing is effective, and the timing of the show coming out, and with the book experiencing a resurgence in popularity, it seemed like the perfect convergence of all those things.



Fig. 1 Screenshot of the image appearing in Andrew Liptak's "How the Handmaid's Tale Inspired a Protest Movement" for *The Verge.com*.

Liptak gives an informed account of how the initially spontaneous move towards cosplay as a way to attract attention has evolved into a powerful political strategy against anti-abortion legislation and brings back readers' memories of the much older habit of donning costumes depicting Columbia in 1913 in support of women's suffrage right.

References to the novel and representations of the famous TV series have also been linked to the struggle for a safe abortion law in Argentina. Protesting handmaids in the streets were a common sight as the narrative was revived due to the Senate debate over the legalization of abortion. In May 2018, similar events were staged in Ireland about birth control and legislation to penalize abortion. Handmaids in red cloaks were distributing abortion pills in Northern Ireland in protest against the near-total ban on terminations in the region, allowing, thus, a wave of activist cosplay to turn symbolic acts into politics.

What seems particularly noteworthy is the fact that in the case of this feminist culture that gets connected online but acts offline, the narrative has stepped away from the space of the

printed or digital edition of the book or even the TV medium, escaping also the control of its writer. Because of the subversive look that dystopian fiction and its metaphors allow, different perspectives are generated inviting an interesting blurring between reality and fiction. At the same time, numerous meta-narratives are informed by present day politics and reproduced across all media platforms due to the symbolic power of the image. The ease with which social media penetrate social constellations has allowed social media coverage and has granted this movement its force.

### *#MeToo Poetry*

Contrasted to the potential of a SNS such as Facebook to organize such events, Twitter appears to have initially failed in this respect. As Gerbaudo points out, the architectural design of Twitter in tandem with the exhaustive specificity of the conversation threads that are engendered there do not allow for messages to reach great masses of people within activist groups or outside. In this “activist predilection” of Twitter, he discerns an elitist tendency of Twitter users who strive for “distinction from the vulgar mass of Facebook users” (152). Yet, it is the sudden increase in activist movements as a result of the networking potential of hashtagging that Gerbaudo fails to predict. Since 2012, Twitter has proved to be an amazing tool for solidarity building especially among women who, unluckily, have had a sexual harassment story to report and share. The #MeToo hashtag movement is the example which I employ in order to indicate social action that has been staged exactly because of the connective potential of Twitter and has aimed at alerting ignoring populace throughout the world. Although the #MeToo movement took off after the “Harvey Weinstein Scandal” went public in 2016, the phrase #MeToo had initially been used more than a decade before by social activist Tarana Burke. It was part of her work building solidarity among young survivors of harassment and assault. Yet, it only became viral after her friend and actor Alyssa Milano tweeted it out on October 15. Milano wrote: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet".<sup>3</sup> According to

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<sup>3</sup> Visit the Wikipedia entry for more on the creation and networking of the #MeToo movement at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me\\_Too\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me_Too_movement).



reporting in Wikipedia regarding Milano's contribution to and involvement in the movement, when she woke up the next day she found that more than 30,000 people had used #MeToo.

The structural design of Twitter and the power of the hashtag to group conversations under topics have similarly been employed for years by numerous other social awareness projects, such as the #EveryDaySexism<sup>4</sup> project, inspired by British feminist writer Laura Bates. This project "exists to catalogue instances of [male or female] sexism experienced on a day to day basis. The #WhyIStayed<sup>5</sup> hashtag campaign offers advice and support to victims of abusive partners while the #HeForShe<sup>6</sup> is a solidarity movement initiated by UN Women to advocate gender equality across a range of issues, including violence, education, health, politics, parental leave, and others (obviously, the list cannot be exhausted for the purposes of this paper). Similar outbreaks of participatory politics have been noted outside the U.S. and the western world as well. In Nigeria young people have recently begun using Twitter as a medium to report female genital mutilation (FGM), while #FGM is flooding Twitter and the web in order to inform against and curb the practice of female genital circumcision in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. What is more, the semiology of the hashtag soon moved to other spaces than Twitter, building bridges between digital and physical spaces through hashtag graffiti designs. It has been used as a signpost to indicate social and active engagement of its users both online and offline.<sup>7</sup>

In what has been named as the #MeToo era, when global sexual harassment accusations are reported daily via SNSs like Twitter and Facebook, I turn to pinpoint another powerful tendency in latest feminist practices and that is #MeToo Poetry. #MeToo poetry has started to legitimize itself as a special literary genre in the last decade and especially after 2016. Despite controversy about the value of poetry crafted in order to combat misogyny, it is admittedly an activist poetry that has been engineered with the initial intention to be read

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<sup>4</sup> Visit the #EveryDaySexism network on Twitter at [twitter.com/EverydaySexism](https://twitter.com/EverydaySexism).

<sup>5</sup> Visit the #WhyIStayed network on Twitter at [twitter.com/hashtag/WhyIStayed?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/WhyIStayed?src=hashtag_click).

<sup>6</sup> Visit the #HeForShe network on Twitter at [twitter.com/HeForShe](https://twitter.com/HeForShe).

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo shares a number of examples of how hashtag graffiti is used to designate social bonding and action and has allowed social activists to facilitate new forms of proximity in physical space.

online (although printed editions also follow to reach wider audiences). Its scope is also to inform and energize the community.

The power of the digital medium to further connect the literary world with the community and foreground the politics of both literary writing and the medium is evident across the Atlantic and in both sides of the hemisphere. As the examples that follow wish to show, the succinct diction of poetry met with the instantaneity of digital mediation managed to stir protest within female and male circles. Bo Seo's article about "The #MeToo Poem That Brought Down Korea's Most Revered Poet" is only one instance of the dynamics of this practice. The poem is discussed in the *French Review* issue published in April 2018. In this article, Seo informs readers of the #MeToo poem which was written by Korean poet Choi Young-mi under the title "Monster" in December 2017. The poem went public in order to accuse Ko Un, the national poet of Korea, for sexual harassment. As the article explains, it seems that the poem which aimed at raising people's awareness about sexual abuse in the Korean literary world has initiated a national movement. Seo writes:

The accusation came in the form of a poem. Six stanzas. Twenty-seven lines.  
Don't sit next to En  
The poet 'K' advised me, a literary novice  
He touches young women whenever he sees one  
Forgot K's advice and sat next to En  
Me too  
The silk blouse borrowed from my sister got rumped

The poem uses powerful language in unpunctuated form in order to accuse the national poet. The fragmentary nature of digital platforms informs the structure of the poem and affects its diction. Vivid imagery and strong language describes the condemned event. The poet Choi Young-mi builds a contrast between K's advice and her failure to take heed of it. The poem revolves around it and manages to energize its readers. Actually, it seems to have triggered the Korean #MeToo movement in social media which soon took Korean men and women to the streets, as the photo published for the *French Review* on Fig. 2 reveals.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The article can be accessed at [www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/04/30/the-metoo-poem-that-brought-down-koreas-most-revered-poet/](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/04/30/the-metoo-poem-that-brought-down-koreas-most-revered-poet/).

Although the poem is written in the Korean language, the English words “MeToo” stand out elsewhere in the poem “like islands, insistent and unyielding,” as Seo notes.



Fig. 2 Image for the *French Review* of women and men protesting for the Korean #MeToo Movement.

This example showcases the way digital mediality provides alternative avenues for expressing the need to narrate traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth notes the therapeutic effects of a “narrative memory” that helps come to terms with a traumatic event. She stresses the power of “the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past” (153). This need for narrative expression of the traumatic events that women have experienced is answered by the immediacy and expressiveness of the poetic medium also in digital spaces. Digitally mediated poetic writing directs trauma out of the victim and into the world through SNSs like Twitter, personal blogs and other online platforms. Despite poetry’s elitist nature and the fact that its language can be hard to grasp, the examples that follow demonstrate that the poetic medium can be employed to vocalize pain, anger and fear of the abused against the abuser and against a submissive culture that turns its eyes away from the truth.

The next example of a #MeToo poem I turn to does not come from an acknowledged poet but was written by Natalee Erceg, who identifies herself as a young poet, writer and activist in the *Thought Catalogue* official website. It aims to emphasize the dynamics of digital mediation and of a growing online feminist culture that not only seeks publicity but also

strives for change. It is titled "A Poem for #MeToo." By using the activist hashtag in its title, she acknowledges the common bonds with all other women who have chosen to speak out their experience and furthers solidarity building online. Though organized in stanzas of the poetic medium, its narrative style and accusatory tone manage to attract the reader's attention:

The amount of times I have heard  
'But if you hadn't..'  
after I had shared my story  
Is enough to make me want to  
sew my lips  
*shut for good.*

Repetitive declarations of a condemning societal voice that looks in the victim for the cause are purposefully italicized in the second stanza:

*'But if you hadn't gone with him'*  
*'But if you hadn't been alone'*  
*'But If you hadn't worn this*  
*said that*  
*drunk what?!'*  
*'Maybe all of this*  
*could have been avoided*  
*silly girl.'*

Her reaction to oppression and silence is expressed through her loud boldfaced "No." This is followed by the indignant questioning of society's decision to regard rape and sexual assault as acceptable male conduct resulting from female free spirited behavior.

**No.**

Why are rape  
and sexual assault  
the only crimes  
In which we so thoroughly examine  
the behaviour of the victim?

**Why are rape  
and sexual assault  
the only crimes  
In which we blame the victim?**

The young activist and poet continues in a raging force ironically juxtaposing her clothes, her looks and her conduct to the proprietor's violent sexual assault:

My dress  
My words  
My lipstick  
and  
My looks  
the amount of drinks **I had**  
and the company I was with  
did not force someone  
push them so beyond their own will  
that they were compelled  
beyond their own reasoning  
to force themselves  
on me.

**To take  
my body  
and treat it  
as an object  
to take my humanness  
and in one swift  
merciless action  
destroy it  
completely.**

The poem continues in six more stanzas accusing a society that has always allowed for abusive male conduct and turned a blind eye to the crimes committed. Weinstein's example serves to demonstrate the entangled power relations and male hegemony that normalize male crimes against women.

We live in a society  
that pardons the abuser  
and blames the victim.

We live in a society where  
less than 1 in 6  
reports to the police  
of sexual assault  
are prosecuted  
and even less

are reported  
to begin with.

We live in a society  
that makes it all too easy  
to become a case of  
'he said vs. she said'

Or a case of  
'men will be men'  
and we wonder why  
powerful men  
like Harvey Weinstein  
get away with their crimes  
and why  
movements such as #metoo  
take so long  
to come into effect.

We live in a society  
that still  
after all this time  
slut shames  
and victim shames  
when

**the simple**

**unavoidable**

**universal truth is**

the only way to avoid a rape  
Is to not commit one.

Similar #MeToo Poems have been flooding social media platforms. Undeniably they have helped democratize feminist issues and have sent both females and males rallying in the streets. Rhymed or in free verse, sometimes they do not sound poetic at all, they narrate real life rape events and speak to the hearts of not only women but men as well. They make direct references to male figures like Weinstein, they provide numbers and statistics about frequency of assaults and reports to the police. They condemn male sexist behavior and remind us of public accusations. Their unpoetic language comes in sharp contrast to the poetic medium that they utilize. Words like "abuse," "abuser," "rape," "assault," "crime,"

“slut,” “victim” set the polemical and aggressive tone of the poems. They voice the shame, the anger or the disgust of the abused. Meanings and references are clear and not hinted upon since the language they use leaves no room for ambiguities or misinterpretation.

But it is not only the political undertone that is noteworthy in such participatory practices. Apart from the free use of Twitter to fight against sexual assaults, the outspokenness of SNSs and the straightforward anger that their users are able to express, online weblogs provide platforms for creative expression to socially active poets who wish not only for their words to bring about a change in the reader but also cure. An important poetry project that has tried to offer a different dimension to the issue is the #MeToo Poetry Collective published online by *Chicago Review* literary magazine.<sup>9</sup> To the hypothetical questions regarding the purpose and the outreach of this poetry collection “Why poetry? Why respond in a kind of language where meaning is not always transparent, when the subject matter of sexual abuse might rather invite language that states categorically the terms of the experience, that does not allow for misinterpretation or ambiguity?” the editors Emily Critchley and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett respond:

We do not disavow the value of clearly accessible writing on this issue and we support women everywhere speaking up, on whatever terms and in whatever forms that speaking takes. But we also argue for a space for work that is open to indeterminacy, that dismantles or destabilizes the designated markers of language and gender. We celebrate those for whom authenticity might mean an openness to swerve (Retallack); a willingness to be misunderstood, misinterpreted, looked over, or rejected by the less experimentally inclined, whether readers, writers, or gatekeepers of criticism or publication.<sup>10</sup>

Their answer legitimizes writing about such issues in any form, genre or medium, when language games can promote or hinder understanding of otherwise incomprehensible sexual

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<sup>9</sup> Since 1946, *Chicago Review* literary magazine of the Humanities Division at the University of Chicago has published a range of contemporary poetry, fiction and criticism in quarterly issues. The online issues can be accessed [www.chicagoreview.org/about/](http://www.chicagoreview.org/about/).

<sup>10</sup> Readers can appreciate the #MeToo: A Poetry Collective online at [www.chicagoreview.org/metoo/](http://www.chicagoreview.org/metoo/). They can also read more about the collection in Harriet Staff's “*Chicago Review's* #MeToo Poetry Collective” for the *Poetry Foundation*.

conduct. In such a poetry collective it is the women speaking up in a unified effort rather than the social media going viral and affecting a collective intelligence:

It's not that women have not been speaking up. It's that no one has had the ears to hear us, and we have been too scared or sad to realize the potential of a collective noise. And there was no social media, no "gone viral." Now you hear us.

—Erín Moure, 2018

While the contributors do not reject the possibility of such popular practices and populist spaces to signify, they choose to test the boundaries of alphanumeric signs and digital codes and push their limits in exercises of style and form. The non-linearity of online space allows new multi-angled perspectives to be engendered. It offers novel ways of representing the unrepresentable, condemning the unreported, explaining the inexplicable by generating language that both invites and escapes interpretation.

Due to space limitations in this paper, I can only refer to some lines of only a few poems coming from this collection. I do not try to offer a thorough analysis of the style, theme, tone, and language of the poems, but I certainly invite readers of this journal to study them at will and explore their undisclosed contradictions. Most of them are experimental works. They are word games intensified by the personal experience of the poet and the indeterminacy and nonlinearity of the digital. My choice of the excerpts depends on the fresh outlook on the issue that can disturb and reveal the hurt and pain of the poet.

The first selection of short poems in translation comes from Robo-poetics Pakistan writer Sascha Aurora Akhtar. The poems are untitled but all explicate the fluidity and fragility of female nature contrasted to the solidity of male perpetration and violent penetration:

There is a wall  
I run again  
There is a wall  
I have confined myself  
to this one emotion  
& now allow none



other

So hot it gets some nights

like fission spells

•

Her plastic parts have  
melted

The metal parts are  
soldering

The rubber parts are  
oozing

The wooden  
is burning

into shady ash

The air is whisking  
up into a  
devil storm

•

I want to breathe  
but the air is gone

They held hands  
& became  
paper dolls

sucked into a storm

like poetry writing itself

with silly fingers

An anatomy of  
melancholy

•

With emerald eyes

In the midst of this

In the midst of this  
  
I write in fear  
    of words  
    & your breathing  
  
Show me how it's done  
  
I corrosive  
    Zebedee  
    cilit bang  
  
on shine course  
  
angel how ricket

Akhtar's visual poems try to represent what language fails to denote. They express the agonizing sexual experience like the tidal movement while the words sound like the repetitive jargon of the nauseous victim:

lose me swarm kite  
  
oblivion jewel pontificate  
  
dip dip dip  
    dip  
    dip  
  
Colossus dip  
  
Fury  
  
Ebb & flow  
Ebb & flow  
    Ebb & flow  
Ebb &

This kind of poetry ironically denies its right and capacity to record and report such painful experiences while simultaneously and self-righteously reinforcing it. As writing gradually begins to dissolve, the female body becomes distorted. The speaking voice becomes blurry, leaving its agent gasping for air. Words gradually lose their point of reference, their meaning, not to mention their grammatical and syntactical use. They become repetitive sounds, syllables, sounding like robotic repetitions in repetitive structures.

I continue with Amy King's "Mississippi." In her poem she creates disturbing images that test both our clinging to the real and our escape into nightmarish imagination. Being a female in a male dominated world is a challenge in the natural and animal environment:

**MISSISSIPPI**

Last night at a Love's  
truck stop, a man  
told me he would like  
to slice me up,  
boil and eat my liver  
and rape me after,  
I'm pretty sure,  
in that order.  
With his eyes  
he spoke those words,  
and if you don't  
believe me  
("How could you know  
for sure?")  
then you've never been  
a woman, or else.  
The rain and the cows  
don't care.  
The corn doesn't  
ask or doubt.  
And there's  
a southern sadness  
buried in everything  
I pass down this dark  
road driving tonight.

A woman alone and unsupported to deal with brutal spoken and corporeal violence is her experience of sexual assault and harassment. Although the lines "slice me up/ boil and eat my liver/ and rape me after" are only imagined by the female voice, they self-righteously refer to a collective memory of sexual abuse among females.

Sara Wintz's ironic "Total Eclipse/Setting Intentions" reminds one of the Ten Amendments and the patriarchal order they try to impose. The simple structure of the poem contrasts the complexity of the issues involved and the freedoms that need to be given away in the setting

described. The repetitive use of “I will” ironically denotes the submissive nature of the poet’s declarations in a compulsive effort to accept responsibility for possible lack of submissive behavior:

***TOTAL ECLIPSE/SETTING INTENTIONS***

I will let in nature  
I will find the strength of my ancestors within myself  
I will demand reciprocity in transactions pertaining to the heart  
I will cultivate safety for the just and good  
I will not provide resources to the oppressor  
I will listen to the needs and actions of my protectors  
I will strive to emulate their strength  
I will prioritize my journey before the journeys of others  
I will state my needs with wisdom, humor, and grace  
I will love myself as much as I love my neighbors

Wintz tries to reboot according to societal pressures and develop accepted signs of “wisdom, humor, and grace.” She denies a rift with guilty history of male heart perpetrators. She looks for strength in the obedient retreat of her female ancestors as her “protectors” and “oppressors” offer their hypocritical and patriarchal love.

As one delves into the richness of the language and the images in this online poetry collection, one certainly gets to taste the bitterness of the poetic accounts of the (un)loved experiences. I can only end my paper with some lines from Amy Cutler’s “Untitled[it’s alright I’m getting over it]” poem. Cutler is a writer, filmmaker, performer and Early Career Research Fellow. Her work explores themes of memory, loss and ecology. This poem addresses many of the issues I have tried to raise in this paper. It is a poem about the actual writing of poetry as a way of forgetting and dealing with the problem of assault:

***Untitled [it’s alright I’m getting over it]***

it’s alright I’m getting over it,  
I’m just figuring out how to delineate the self in any of this  
today another email from a friend—she says this is not horror  
but somehow, something more than exhaustion,

something more than her,  
– but I am exhausted by all the selves in my self,

and no one  
is telling us, either,  
what is the line between pain and solidarity  
and where to break it.

it is October.  
I am moving my friend out of her abusive house  
and I am moving out of my abusive house  
and in the midst of this we are talking about poetry  
always having to talk about poetry  
because the serious poets are telling us to shut up.

I'm still figuring out how to delineate the poetry in any of this.  
& what other beginning do we have.

shall we quit it! let's form a coven! (a gathering of witches)  
let's desert! let's focus on our health!  
what will be left of us after this adventure!  
but then, what happens to poetry—  
perhaps the self after all is just the borders of my own ability,  
the part where I stop being able to say it,  
the part I cannot write or believe, about my worst and longest act of love.

A serious poet writes again and says we have slipped in his estimation.  
dear selves,  
I love you, I love you, having gone so far saying nothing,  
I want to love you better, my dearest friends  
but how can I explain to you who already know, and why should I add it,  
and me, and me,  
"each one of you has her thing, at times it stings"  
& if it were just me I would run.

I don't want to hear from me any more. I can't stand it. but thank you for  
your email  
again and again, and one day I hope to write back.

there is no witness  
and yet there is, everywhere.  
there is no self in any of this that I can bear,  
and yet there are, everywhere.

The "Untitled[it's alright I'm getting over it]" poem is about the medium of writing as a means of solidarity building among hurtful women. Cutler ruminates about the power of

poetry to heal and about the legitimacy of a female abused poet to use it as her expressive medium of pain and self redefinition after the incident. Her consent and the other poets' to publish online reveals their trust in the power and legitimacy of the electronic medium to communicate such issues to the world.

### *New Digital Feminisms versus Traditional Feminisms*

Significant at this point is to indicate the controversy regarding the value of such individual or collective feminist actions. Critics have wondered to what extent these instances of activism can belong to the traditional feminist movement or whether they open the way to newer feminist approaches. According to Nisha Chittal, "Social media democratized feminist activism, opening up participation to anyone with a Twitter account and with a desire to fight the patriarchy. By removing the barriers of distance and geography, sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have made activism easier than ever, facilitating public dialogues and creating a platform for awareness and change." Additionally, according to Emma Turley and Jenny Fisher in their article "Tweeting Back while Shouting Back: Social Media and Feminist Activism," "digital media has radical potential for shouting back and highlighting sexism, equality, misogyny and rape culture, along with generating a space for discussions of other everyday issues" (131).

On the other hand, there has been a reported divide between newer visions of and approaches towards feminism. Moira Donegan, writing for *The Guardian*, sees a rift between older and newer feminisms. The one is based on the ideals of "older" feminists, characterized by an inherently social and introspective approach, treating women as moral agents that try to define themselves in a male world and turn "feminine" victimhood into "feminine strength." They display mental composure, they propose resolve but not anger. On the contrary, latest expressions of feminism that appear online share a more individualistic outlook and they are more aggressive in tone and approach. For others, Twitter provides the space for a new "whisper society" that threatens to mute dissenters of the new feminist moves and take down with it all men who might be accused on the grounds of unproven trespass. On this note, Katie Roiphe accuses Twitter of having "energized the

angry extremes of feminism in the same way it has energized Trump and his supporters: the loudest, angriest, most simplifying voices are elevated and rendered normal or mainstream.” She worries that this overgeneralized rage may turn to any man in the way. Roiphe mocks the #MeToo movement as “Twitter feminism” is supposed to attract only narcissistic, social media-obsessed millennials. She accuses them of being too silly, too nonsensical, too angry and outspoken as they have been straying away from older thinkers’ principles, achievements, and failures.

Taking into account different conflicting voices and approaches, I have tried to delve into a variety of aspects concerning female online empowerment in male-powered spaces. I have focused on the immense potentialities of a politically active digital culture that has started shaping both online and offline feminist civic engagement in the second decade of the twenty-first century. As the visibility of the medium provides powerful avenues for resistance and activism, female issues take center stage in participatory politics by taking advantage of the democratic distribution and use of social media platforms. The connectivity of Facebook and Twitter empower social mobilization while the visual statements that cosplaying makes can also promote female campaigning. Via the digital turn that the participatory politics of the female agenda has taken, new social constructions are mobilized and interracial intergroup collaborations can be generated. Technology changes and so too will the way in which we can use digital platforms to engage in activism, resist dominant structures, disseminate and educate.

I have also tried to imply the cathartic power of SNSs in their way of directing trauma out of the victim and transforming pain into action. Yet, in studying the intersections between social media presence, the politics of literary writing and social physical space, we have only started scratching the surface of the complexities and contradictions involved in supporting feminist issues in technologically saturated environments, defined by norms of male power and the market. For one, the architecture, organization of social media and the spreadability of its content can certainly allow possible new waves of self-representations of victimhood, causing a challenge thus to power structures (and one cannot ignore the commercial aspect of social media as a patriarchal marketplace that produces revenues by sharing content).

Still, though new online feminisms have been striving to define themselves in relation to and as a reaction to male politics and power, online mediation on digital environments has so much more to offer as a tool and medium for independent self-complacent and self-aware female praxis as well as linguistic and artistic self-expression.<sup>11</sup> Relying on the accessibility and the instantaneity that digital media secure, we can certainly stay hopeful for further instances of transformative power to boost a new wave of a politically aware and active womanhood.

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<sup>11</sup> Some instances of politically active and appointed women in the last couple of years, such as the youngest serving female Prime Minister in Finland Sanna Marin and the first African American to be sworn in as Mayor of San Francisco London Breed are definitely hopeful instances of female voices challenging a patriarchally structured world and trying to bring about change that matters to an indiscriminate world.



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