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Online feminism as performative: an autoethnography of positionality

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**ONLINE FEMINISM AS PERFORMATIVE:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF POSITIONALITY**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS at
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Dedication

*I dedicate this thesis to Ary-Kyann & Arya-Louanne,
who have taken the liberty to explain to their little friends what feminism is,
and that it is not about “hating men”.*



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This thesis would not have been possible without the wise and wonderful counsel of my thesis supervisor, Professor Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch. Thank you for always knowing which direction to steer me towards, and for constantly bringing the right dose of positivity into your advice. Your voice recordings and emails have never failed to put a smile on my face. Thank you for pushing me to do my best.

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I am also deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to intern for Women in Development Europe+ (WIDE+), and I am especially thankful to work closely with Ms Gea Meijers, who has mentored me throughout the internship with much patience, generosity and kindness.

I would also like to thank my parents, who despite being so far away, have lent me support through weekly video calls and loving naggings about how I should “remember to rest”. *Terima kasih Mummy dan Abah. Merci également à mes beaux-parents pour leurs encouragements sans fin.* All your support throughout this period have been brought me close to the finishing line.

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A Map to The Next World

by Joy Harjo

In the last days of the fourth world I wished to make a map for

those who would climb through the hole in the sky.

The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary light. It

must carry fire to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

An imperfect map will have to do, little one.

The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a

spiral on the road of knowledge.

And when you take your next breath as we enter the fifth world

there will be no X, no guidebook with words you can carry.

And lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you

will have to know by your intention, by the language of suns.

We were never perfect.

Yet, the journey we make together is perfect on this earth who was

once a star and made the same mistakes as humans.

We might make them again, she said.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.

You must make your own map.



Abstract

This thesis is a critical exploration of my positionality as a migrant woman in France who occupies a position of privilege in society. As a feminist working to advance women's rights, specifically for the rights of migrant women in Europe, this interrogation is necessary. It is an autoethnography. The purpose of this research is to help me understand the self-reflexivity process that all development facilitators undergo, or should undertake, in order to adopt a critical praxis when it comes to acting upon pressing current issues.

I contextualise this thesis against the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic and how it has affected a specific group of people in Europe, migrant women. In this thesis, I use the term "migrant women" inclusively, referring to women who have moved from one destination to another within Europe, and encounter border regimes and integration policies. This context arose out of my role as an intern at a feminist network organisation which works towards the advancement of women's rights. In my role as an intern, I am a co-lead in a lobby campaign to advocate for more EU-level funding for migrant women associations. It is within this role that I had to confront my own misgivings and hopes as a facilitator in the complex field of gender and development. Due to the pandemic, all advocacy work and collaborations have shifted online, giving me the opportunity to learn and observe how feminism manifests in the digital space.

Using feminist critical discourse analysis, I examine the problematic of representation and voice in online feminism, acknowledging the online space as a site imbued with power asymmetries and discourse, and can be monopolised by dominant groups. In exploring the complexities of voice, I also attempt to "de-centre voice" by engaging with different sets of "performative text" where text is regarded as "research participant". Through the interrogations of my personal experiences and the conscious manipulation of the chosen performative texts, I hope to uncover some valuable lessons to guide me in grounding my positionality and feminism better.



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Chapter 1: The Mountains Are Calling

i. Introduction

Growing up on the densely-populated tropical island of Singapore, mountains and the sheer vastness they represent, have always fascinated me. At the same time, having a slight phobia of heights deterred me from exploring mountains when I had the opportunity to travel. Now that I am fortunate enough to be constantly surrounded by the grandiose beauty of the French Alps, I have slowly, but surely, developed a kind of existential outlook on mountains and all the life metaphors these majestic landforms offer. In putting together this thesis, I have spent an immeasurable amount of time either hiking or taking long walks in the woods to distance myself from the labor and tensions that went into this thesis.

Contrived as it may seem, to shape this thesis into a journey-like form, I have ventured into using mountain metaphors to serve as signposts to mark my internship and writing experience throughout the last few months. Even with maps and extensive research, hikes often surprise, or shock, me as I encounter serene creeks, the lost wild deer, jaw-dropping sunsets, jade-hued lakes, steep terrains, loose rocky grounds, heavy rain and the scariest of them all, boisterous fellow hikers who talk too loud and keenly overtake me along narrow trails. The demands of hiking up mountains is not far from the experiences and emotions that arose from assembling this thesis.

Much like the cultural practices of indigenous peoples in acknowledging their lands, seas and custodians as they enter, retreat and use these elements, using the mountains as a metaphor for this thesis is also a way for me to pay homage to my natural surroundings and the role they, without a doubt, played in this thesis.

I begin this chapter as *The Mountains are Calling*, mostly because at the beginning of this thesis-writing journey, the task of penning an autoethnography seemed insurmountable, yet appealing, for many reasons. A catalyst that led me toward this journey, other than a nudge from my supervisor, Professor Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, has been a classroom experience. Towards the end of the International Development Studies course, one of the leading faculty members of the programme, Professor Kirsten Koop, posed a challenge to the



class to think about whether we were still keen to pursue a career in the development sector despite all the existing inequalities and our roles in potentially perpetuating them. While some colleagues felt this was an odd question, it was a necessary interrogation. The question was not meant to dampen our enthusiasm in development issues, but was intended to plant a seed in our minds about our positionality and how it relates to our work in development.

As I went on this inquiry, I realised that this question of positionality vis-a-vis my praxis had always been at the periphery of my thoughts. Six years ago, as a public policy student interning at an NGO for minority affairs in Singapore called ‘MENDAKI’ (it means ‘progress’ in my native language Malay), I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with many minority, low-income youths on their lives, their ambitions, and the challenges they faced in achieving their academic or career goals. The objective of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of MENDAKI’s school grants programme in “empowering vulnerable youths”; indeed it was unimaginatively called ‘Youth Empowerment Programme’, a high-budget project that includes tuition fee grants, after-school care, free tuition lessons and mentorship schemes. The programme was well-known within the minority community as it had been successful in reaching many low-income youths, especially those out of school or enrolled in vocational institutions. In Singapore, vocational institutions, known as Institute of Technical Education (ITE) are not well-regarded and seen as last resorts for students who are not academically-inclined. Going to an ITE is seen as a social punishment. As for me, coming from a university environment, I was eager to go “in the field”, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, as I was to be involved in a project that had wide social impact and an ‘empowering’ effect on the young people of my community.

As I sat in one McDonalds restaurant after another (MENDAKI had provided free meals in exchange for the participants’ time), I came to realise that while I managed to gather substantial qualitative data, the social realities between me and these youths could not be any more different. I was not only much older than them (I was at that time 28 years old, and married with a young child), I was also clearly in a more privileged position, coming from a top-ranking university and viewed as occupying a certain social status (this will be discussed more in Chapter 4). This privilege gap was obvious and uncomfortable. Even if I did grow up in a humble working-class family and could identify with these youths’ struggles, it did not



translate effectively as a bridge to connect us. With the benefit of hindsight and temporal distance, I now come to realise that this gap is primarily due to the “researcher-researched” power dynamics where the researcher is placed in “a position of authority” that typically occurs during any research process with participants (Riley et al., 2003). Foucault understood power as having knowledge, or the ability to possess knowledge (as cited in Riley et al., 2003, para.1), and it was perhaps this feeling of dominance and disequilibrium that made the process uncomfortable for me.

The term ‘empowerment’ also started to lose its meaning as many of these youths told me about the multitude of personal and family problems they faced, and combined with structural inequalities that exist in Singapore, they did not dare to have dreams. Many were living in ‘survival mode’, juggling their studies with odd-jobs and having to also support their families. This sense of discomfort started deepening when one female participant asked, “So after this chat, is MENDAKI going to give me more allowance for school?” It was a question I was not equipped to answer as my task was to extract information and turn them into data. My role was meant to be objective, scientific, and professional. In my mind, I had done a decent job of collecting qualitative data. But to the participants, they were aware that they were simply the subject of interest for an organisation that needed to achieve their empowerment KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) which were to be presented to the organisation’s board of directors. Apparently, this survey was an annual exercise and despite the feedback given by the youths about their continued struggles, nothing much was done to provide solutions their situations (such as offering more options for night or online classes). It was a mere box-ticking exercise, complete with free upsized McDonalds meals. Unfortunately, as rigorous as my public policy education was, there was no space for graduate students to confront such subjective dilemmas we encountered while on the “field”. I never had the opportunity to examine these experiences up till now, six years later.

Fast forward to today, in my current role as an intern for a European network of feminists and activists advocating for women’s rights, the question of positionality arose again. And because the little seed planted by Professor Koop had been germinating in my mind, I was very conscious of my role as I engaged with my tasks and the different



stakeholders of the organisation. This experience will be explored in the following chapters.

ii. Structure of the Thesis:

Before we dive deeper into the thesis, it would be useful to first outline how this paper is structured. This chapter, **Chapter 1**, is where I set the context of the paper, and why I am compelled to employ a critical gaze in investigating the question of online feminism.

Chapter 2 uncovers the methodology behind autoethnography and how I construct a set of performative texts that will be used as “data” for this thesis. **Chapter 3** introduces the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis and how they provide the anchor to the analytical framework, feminist critical discourse analysis. **Chapter 4** is a presentation of my culturegram, alongside the set of performative texts. This chapter simultaneously examines the materials presented using feminist critical discourse analysis. And finally, **Chapter 5** offers concluding remarks to the thesis and the autoethnographic journey, which is in fact a starting point of a bigger discussion.

iii. The Research Context: Online Feminism In the Face of a Global Pandemic

My internship at Women in Development Europe+ (WIDE+) serves as entry point into my research. The internship occurred during the COVID-19 period, and was done remotely. It was during this period when I observed an exponential growth in mobilised efforts, collaborations and lobbying in the name of feminist activism. Feminist groups, like many other movements and civil society organisations, have taken their activities online to provide information, resources, analysis, and all manners of support for their communities (Valls, 2020). For WIDE+, the pandemic has removed all possibilities of physical meetups and conferences which had initially been planned for, such as attending UN’s Generation Equality Forum 2020 in Paris. Despite this, work within WIDE+ and many other women’s rights organisations intensified as it soon became clear that the pandemic has gendered implications.

Beyond being a health crisis, COVID-19 has lifted the veil off enduring structural inequalities that intersect at the boundaries of gender, class, ability, race and age. While the



virus does not discriminate, there are profound impacts on women. To begin with, women are over-represented in the care economy, especially working in the frontlines of healthcare and having “essential” jobs. Due to a multitude of reasons like caregiving duties or legal status, women are also disproportionately represented in informal, unstable, lowly paid work (Al-Ali, 2020). According to a recent McKinsey study, women’s jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable than men’s jobs during the pandemic (Madgavkar et al., 2020).

In understanding the gendered impacts of the pandemic, it is necessary to also examine how the virus intersects with race, class and resident status. As such, during my internship, I was involved in putting together a report detailing the impact of the pandemic on migrant women in Europe. Because of their precarious status in European societies, migrant women are more vulnerable to many of the issues that women face during the pandemic.

Within WIDE+, the term ‘migrant woman’ is used as an inclusive term referring to women who have been “displaced or who have moved from one country to a destination in Europe” (WIDE+, 2020, p.4). Without a doubt, migrant women face greater struggles as they do not necessarily have easy access to public services, and consequently, they suffer the loss of basic services when NGOs are not allowed to assist them due to lockdown measures. In France and Greece, aid groups were not allowed to give food and other provisions to refugees (Makszimov, 2020). Notably, the criminalisation of aid groups has been an issue in Europe long before the pandemic struck (Amnesty International, 2020).

Within the WIDE+ network, its members have reported how migrant women and girls, living in crowded camps that are not safely sex-segregated, now have to manage the escalated risks of being sexually harassed or violated due to confinement. On top of that, they risk exposure to the virus, and have to self-manage their health and those around them with lesser access to aid and other provisions (National Integration Evaluation Mechanism, 2020). To cite another example, in Germany, at various *lager*, or camps, migrant women have been reporting, through audio files, videos, and text messages, about their quarantine situations in different locations. At the beginning of the pandemic, they had not been given masks nor sanitisers, had lesser meals (due to strict regulations around kitchen usage) and are still subject to the constant transferring from one camp to another, without notice (International Women Space, 2020).



Within this pandemic is also the “shadow pandemic of gender-based violence” (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Being confined at home, aggravated with stress and worries of financial and health instability, has led to an increased rate of violence against women, globally. Within Europe itself, the numbers are alarming. For example, in France, just a week after lockdown, domestic violence cases were reported to have increased by a third (Euronews, 2020). In Germany and Spain, government agencies and civil society have asked for emergency resources to aid domestic violence victims (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). In the UK, further protections were needed for migrant women (Step Up Migrant Women, 2020). Overall, as they occupy more vulnerable positions, migrant women grapple with heightened risks of gender-based violence as they are socially, economically and legally dependent on their male partners (WIDE+, 2020).

Working in informal and under-regulated sectors also means they lack employment protection. For undocumented migrant women, they have no access to government aid when they lose their source of income. Migrant domestic workers who work and live in their employers’ homes also lose their accommodation when they lose their jobs due to lockdown requirements (European Trade Unions Confederation, 2020). In Spain, despite having large numbers of domestic workers, the government has yet to announce any kind of aid for these migrant women. Without any financial option, migrant women and girls become vulnerable to exploitative and abusive work (WIDE+, 2020).

As we stand today, governments and Bretton Woods institutions continue to clamour to formulate post-pandemic bailout policies. But critics are already outlining flaws with the debt relief plans (Eisinger, 2020; Walters, 2020; Navarro, 2020; Perera & Romero, 2020). The EU has proposed a large recovery package of €750 billion for member states. However, a gender impact assessment carried out by EU political group, the Greens and European Free Alliance, found that this recovery plan called ‘The Next Generation EU’, is largely gender-blind (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). This has led to the launch of a Europe-wide petition ‘#halfofit’, which demands for half of the recovery funds to be set aside for women’s jobs and advancement of women’s rights (Geese, 2020). It remains to be seen whether this campaign will be successful in advocating for greater funds redistribution for women in Europe.



iv. The Work of Women in Development Europe+ (WIDE+)

As a network of 18 organisations members and over 30 individual members, WIDE+ works towards building a “less fragmented” feminist movement through alliances with other women’s groups, not just in the region, but also in the Global South. Part of their work is dedicated to advocating for the rights of all migrant women in Europe. In their 2016 report on migration, the organisation emphasises the need to collaborate with migrant women, see them as equal partners where there is an exchange of ideas, capacity and sharing of resources, and pushes their partners and allies to constantly question, “how are power relations within our organisation structured and in the field we are working?” (WIDE+ 2016, p.10). This self-reflexivity is an important aspect of the accountability that Heron (2007) raised as being crucial in doing anti-racist, feminist work. Although WIDE+ is now a trans-regional network association, they have adhered to their activist roots and eschewed the usage of ‘empowerment’ in their literature, aware of its depoliticised status, and instead chose to be deliberate and specific with their choice of words.

What I have observed as an intern who had been inserted in many of the organisation’s internal and external communications, is that the organisation runs on a democratic principle where decisions are made as a collective, taking into consideration everyone’s inputs and constraints. Gea Meijers, the main coordinator of the network, also presents as a good role model, as she was an open communicator, accessible, leading without micro-managing and is highly organised. Despite being a newbie in this field, I came to learn from others that having a kind and fair manager (what all feminists should be!) seems akin to finding a needle in a haystack. For this, I am grateful to work alongside a supportive manager.

My work at WIDE+

At WIDE+, I was asked to lead the drafting of a key document for the organisation, a briefing paper that maps EU-level funds relevant for migrant women groups. This document is crucial as part of a lobby campaign that aims to advocate for more funds from EU institutions to go toward migrant women associations, especially in the wake of COVID-19.



As exciting as this task was, the pressure of putting out such an important public-facing document was immense. After weeks of struggling to understand the multifaceted dynamics of EU institutions and its complex financial instruments, I wondered if this is what activism is like during a pandemic. Activism through desktop research? (I will talk about slacktivism in Chapter 4). I had somehow envisioned that activism is work that only experienced feminists within the likes of Angela Davis can carry out, those who march and protest every 8th of March with their larger-than-life posters demanding to “overthrow the patriarchy”. As a complete greenhorn, I ended each workday with more questions than answers.

Therefore, with this context presenting itself as relevant and timely, I choose to focus my thesis around the performative aspect of online feminism using my personal and professional experiences during the period of April to July 2020 as an intern at WIDE+. I will discuss more on the research topic and objective below.

v. The Problem Statement: Research Objective and Questions

Given the research context above, this thesis focuses on the topic of **performative online feminism**. In this thesis, I confront several key questions surrounding the performative aspects of online feminism, the power dynamics embedded within the online space, and my self-reflexivity as someone inhabiting this space. All these questions are being examined against the backdrop of a pandemic that has gendered implications, and as a consequence, has increased online feminism on an intensive scale.

Using the method of autoethnography, I place myself, not only as a student of the social sciences, but also as a “betweenner”, at the core of this thesis (see methodology for further explanation on this). Diversi and Moreira (2009) define “betweenner” as “(un)conscious bodies experiencing life in and between two cultures” (p.19). I situate myself as a betweenner, as someone from the Global South, developing scholarship in the Global North. My identity as a privileged migrant woman is also part of this betweenner status. Hence, instead of focusing solely on analysing a specific development issue, I turn the spotlight on a self-reflexive process of doing, or performing online feminism and knowledge production.



This critical practice of self-reflexivity endeavors to address the fundamental issue of the “crisis of representation”, a term that George Marcus and Michael Fischer pioneered to describe the inadequacies in social sciences when studying social realities (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, as cited in Conquergood, 2013, p.82). The notion of crisis of representation arose during the post-structuralist movement in the 1980s and 1990s, posing a challenge to traditional methods of research that includes theorizing and then generalizing findings to a population to suit a research framework (Schwandt, 2007, p.48). This is especially problematic in research that aims to “give voice” to a marginalised population. In the context of feminist research, early feminists sought to “find voices” for women through their scholarly work, looking at issues through the lens of gender inequality (Ashby, 2011). The question of voice thus becomes an important question to examine.

Autoethnography was then borne out of this frustration and was to become the method to “destabilize and subvert the supremacy in the dichotomies of body and mind, theory and practice, personal and political, researcher and subject so pervasive in academic setting” (Diversi & Moreira, 2017, p.582). At the same time, it acknowledges that the author is the main voice being represented in the research. This is not to de-centre the voice of the marginalized; rather it seeks to demonstrate how the positionality of the researcher is implicated within the research (and its outcomes), ultimately influencing the discourses around the research topic. This methodology will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Why then do I subject myself to the confrontations of this crisis of representation? After all, generations of researchers have produced good work by simply reproducing these traditional knowledge production ways without putting themselves under the heat of the spotlight, and falling into the trap of “excessive self-analysing” (Riley et. al., 2003, para.4). I suppose this thesis will attempt to answer the question. For someone as risk-averse as me, to use this thesis to explore an unfamiliar methodology sounds like the beginnings of a disastrous experiment.

As much as I enter this journey with some trepidation, accompanied by lingering thoughts of “this is risky” over my head, the lofty idea of “destabilizing and subverting the supremacy” through my work somehow appealed to me, much like the calling of the mountains. I see this thesis as the starting point of a much longer journey into unraveling



structures and pushing for systemic change in any vocation that I will pursue in future. For now, I minimise the lens to focus on my experiences in the last few months as a culmination point of being an IDS student, a women's rights intern, and past occurrences that are relevant to this undertaking.

Hence, the **three key research questions** of this essay are:

- 1) How is online feminism performative? Are there power asymmetries in the digital space that affect this performativity?
- 2) How is the voice of the Other represented in online feminism?
- 3) How am I, as an intern, a migrant woman with privilege, and a feminist facilitator, implicated within the practice of online feminism?

vi. Implications of this Research

In exploring the multiple dimensions of power within online feminism, this autoethnography also posits that a critical self-reflexivity is needed in all development work, whether as a development facilitator, or as a researcher. In and of itself, development work is not necessarily powerful (especially looking at its social status and salary compensation), but placed against a relational subject (the Other) and the different layers of power that comes with this relationship, it warrants an understanding of one's positionality.

Within the field of gender and development, there also needs to be a constant critique around the construction of the homogeneity of the "third world woman" as the Other, a figure of backwardness, domesticity and victimization (Mohanty, 1984). While this critique arose within the first and second waves of feminism, the hegemony of Western and White feminism still requires some questioning. Today, the language of intersectionality, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) is commonly used within feminist scholarship. Intersectionality is understood as "how inequalities and their intersections are relevant to political strategies and how strategies regarding one axis of inequality are seldom neutral toward other axes" (Verloo, 2013). Intersectionality acts as a bulwark against homogeneity in today's feminism. Intersectional feminism is now more relevant than ever given the egregious gendered impacts of COVID-19.



At the same time, research in the power dynamics of online feminism and how it intersects in race, class, and other social categories is still very much in its nascent stage (Daniels, 2015). Given today's relevance of the Internet to feminism (and all other forms of activism), this thesis hopes to contribute further to understanding the relationship between feminism and the digital space.

vii. What This Thesis Is, And What Is It Not

For the purpose of this thesis, I include a discussion of my internship at WIDE+, **not** to cite this valuable experience as an example of the politics of representation. The inclusion of WIDE+ serves as an important *entry point* for my probing into this “charged analysis of the double bind of representation” as elegantly described by Ritu Birla (2010, p.88). Further, I am driven by the conviction that given the brief duration of my internship with WIDE+, it is not fair nor ethical for me to base my research on performativity and representation on my limited interactions with the inner workings of the organisation. Undoubtedly, due to the nature of WIDE+ as a network organisation, representation and “giving voice” is at the heart of what they do. However, it is hard to conclude if they face this double bind of representation as the organisation is diverse and intersectional. Therefore, I reiterate that the inclusion of WIDE+ in this thesis is purely as an entryway into the larger discussion.

This thesis also does not seek to assess the effectiveness of online feminism. To do this requires a complex and sophisticated analytical tool, for instance, like a network analysis technique that can track how one hashtag is connected to different networks, develop the mapping of algorithms, and how this interplay of technology and connections translates to articles, comments, cultural shifts, etc. This thesis however, provides a critique of online feminism, and contributes to the understanding of how feminism manifests in the digital space. This understanding can lead to greater galvanisation of more effective action both online and offline to work towards gender justice issues.

Gayatri Spivak's immortalised essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ also serves as another entry point into my thoughts on representation in the work of online feminism. As incisively belaboured by Spivak, representation is crucial to understanding what it means to



be subaltern. But in this process and outcome of representation, therein lies the trap of essentialism where the meaning of being marginalised, different and/or subaltern becomes sorely distorted, mangled and caricatured. This thesis aims to confront this double bind of representation. While it is clear that perhaps I would need to attend an entire course or programme to fully grasp the multi-dimensional, inter-disciplinary and intersectional lessons on postcolonialism, feminism and epistemology underlined in Spivak's essay, I find her illuminations on the "unquestioned valorization of the oppressed as subject" (p.69) particularly helpful and provides much guidance for me in this thesis.

She also speaks about the problem of subject that is not an agent, but represented through proxy, like in politics, or "re-presented" in art and staging – the twofold play of representation (Birla, 2010, p.91). Whether it is within the state or through social/cultural staging, the question of subalternity, or the formation of the subaltern figure becomes problematic, due to this double bind of representation. But, as with her critique of Foucault and Deleuze, we cannot cowardly retreat from the politics of representation just because it is unwieldy; instead, we have to vigorously interrogate the processes of representation. Hence, this is what the thesis offers – an interrogation of power and representation.

Exclusion of first-hand interviews

The double bind of representation has also compelled me to **exclude** first-hand interviews with migrant women and other activists/feminists whom I have encountered during my internship (the materials for analysis will be discussed in the following subsections). The mere inclusion of interviews done in a harried fashion (due to unavoidable time constraints) in the name of completing this thesis would have been in vain as I perceive it as a superficial, utilitarian inclusion of "marginalised voices". Subsequently, I may be accused of duplicating the Foucauldian/Deleuzian pattern of eschewing the messiness of representation. Another reason for the exclusion of interviews - this thesis presents an opportunity for me to explore my own trajectory in grounding my perspectives on the work of advocating for women's rights. It allows me to, as Spivak urges, unlearn my female privilege (1988, p.91) as I enter the field of international civil society, one that is rife with "representation" and "authentic" narratives about the subaltern woman. In another essay,



‘Righting Wrongs’ (2004), Spivak offers a new definition of the subaltern as a figure of politics and empirical subject, one that has multiple proxies of representations, and one that is exhaustively observed, studied and documented. Consequently, I was then determined to avoid basing my thesis on reproducing the false binary of privileged woman-versus-migrant woman, a framing that Jacques Derrida charges as being ethnocentric (Spivak, 1988, p.89). Writing an interview-less thesis remains a decision that poses a quandary for me, but I am running with it nonetheless. Hence, this thesis is not about “giving voice”. Rather, it is about learning to develop ways of resisting the impulse of observing, analysing, and theorising a culture or a social group for professional and personal gains. It hopes to also go beyond being a ‘privilege-checking’ exercise and seeks to exemplify that it is possible to marry stories with theories in our quest to contribute to humanities and to humankind.

My Positionality as a Betweenner

I would be remiss if I did not discuss my positionality as a ‘betweenner’ before delving into the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. This betweenness also symbolises the fluidities and constructed-ness of social realities, a starting point for thinking about social justice. The term ‘betweenner’ is first coined by Gloria Anzaldúa, where she expressed ‘between-ness’ as a hopeful position where possibilities can change.

This betweenness allows exploration of my position, my multiple identities, as I navigate the workings of online feminism, advocating for the rights of migrant women in Europe. My betweenness stems from my identity as a migrant woman from Southeast Asia, occupying several privileges, that of educational background, nationality, language, marriage status and class, while trying to ‘represent’ the experiences and demands of migrant women groups experiencing different layers of discrimination in Europe. This space I occupy of being part of ‘us’ (me as a migrant woman experiencing discrimination in Europe but having the privileges to “overcome” them) versus looking at ‘them’ (studying/representing/observing migrant women as subjects) is often times uncomfortable and disconcerting – it is what Anzaldúa expressed as “the body that does not fit” (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p.23). I intend to examine and unravel these tensions in the chapters to come.



Chapter 2: Uncharted Territory

*The feminist intervention takes the educated reader to the limits of her knowledge,
to all those whom she cannot know - Ritu Birla*

Scottish writer, poet and mountain-lover, Nan Shepherd confessed in her book, ‘The Living Mountain’ (1977), “One never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it...There is no getting accustomed to them.” (p. 28). Yet, in all of the mountains’ embodiment of mystery and danger, lies the promise of these gargantuan structures’ unchallenged beauty to counter the banal existence of our daily lives.

Much like venturing into the mountains (of the mind), using the uncommon approach of autoethnography is a way for me to not just challenge myself but also to experience something transformational beyond what the IDS course and my internship have offered me. It is akin to going into uncharted territory, and in this chapter I explain the methodology behind the thesis. Choosing this methodology is also a way for me to produce something that can be more accessible to a wider audience instead of being a scholarly work chained and locked away from non-academic eyes. At the same time, it enables me to connect my layered intersectional self into my work, always foregrounding the awareness that all social realities, including the assemblages of this thesis, are constructions that derived from my experiences and knowledge. In this chapter, I discuss how I intend to use autoethnography to fulfil my research objectives. I will adopt a mixed approach by incorporating parts of the thesis with personal or autobiographical writing, performative texts, and weaving in theoretical discussions to further illuminate specific ideas that require theoretical anchoring.

i. The I in Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry that combines the systematic analysis of personal experience (auto) in order to examine culture or a social phenomena (ethnography) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). It is a “triadic balance of reflection, analysis, and interpretation” (Snyder, 2015, p. 94) that can accommodate the goals of this thesis. It is important to note that the “I” in autoethnography is not a free-wheeling “I”; rather, it allows



the personal to be connected to the political by bridging the subjective and emotional dimensions of the researcher to the chosen subject matter. The “I” is a “performative-I” that is “sociopolitically reflexive” (Spry, 2018, p.1092) and “not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a willful embodiment of “we” (Spry, 2018, p. 1091). “We” here refers to the “Other” and the I’s relationality to it. This simply means that in research, our sense of “I” is not possible without an understanding and engagement of the “Other”. “We” also refers to our “plural and kinesis sense of self” (Spry, 2013, p.340) that are embodied within the researcher as she finds herself within her own ethnography. The separation between the researcher and researched is therefore impossible. Autoethnography is not a “me and only me” approach, it is a critical self-reflexivity that demands an introspection of our social identities and how it relates to the culture or social group that we are writing about.

Given the self-reflexive approach of the thesis and the topic on performative online feminism, autoethnography allows me to subvert canonical ways of producing knowledge, especially in representing others, and be conscious of the processes I undertake while working and producing this thesis. The process of subversion requires me to consider non-sterile ways of presenting knowledge, finding a balance between the aesthetic and the evocative. Autoethnography, in centering this self-reflexivity, also desires to also equalise the relationship between the researcher and researched as it unravels the underlying power dynamics. At times, this thesis veers into stream-of-consciousness writing, but this is truly indicative of how I engage with the topic and materials.

ii. Digital Ethnography

The data I collected did not just derive from the gatherings of my thoughts, but also from observations I made while working online and inhabiting spaces like Twitter. Hence, the ‘ethnography’ part of this autoethnography is based on digital ethnography. Digital ethnography “allows researchers to use online observations to follow the participants online and observe their behaviours and interactions on the social media” (Talip et al., 2017, p.3). For this digital ethnography, I mostly look at Twitter because unlike other social media platforms, it is easier, as compared to Facebook, to connect with strangers on topics of interest, and a popular platform for civil society organisations and activists.



However, unlike traditional ethnography, it is hard to place the spatial limits of Twitter as it is a network with complex nodes. A node is “determined by how many sites [are] linked to that particular network” (Kuo, 2016, p.11). For this thesis, I am not analysing any particular feature on Twitter; instead I am examining how Twitter is a discursive and performative platform. Overall, I use digital ethnography as a way to observe exchanges and patterns of online feminism on social media which corresponds to my daily work at WIDE+.

iii. Material for Analysis:

In this thesis, I draw from my memories and experiences to work on the thesis topic. As a starting point for self-reflexivity, I rely on a **culturegram**, a chart that maps autoethnographers’ multiple cultural identities in social categories like gender, social class, ethnicity, etc (Chang, 2016) in order to systematically locate and position myself.

With the culturegram as a launchpad, I then delve into several **performative texts**. These performative texts come in the form of two dialogues, a Twitter thread and a webinar e-poster. The notion of treating text as a research participant comes from St. Pierre (2008), who urges exploring producing knowledge differently through “messy texts” and “subjectivity statements” (p.327). This, of course, borrows strongly from Derrida’s idea of deconstructivity where meanings are fluid, contradictory and incomplete (St.Pierre, 2008). Therefore, within this act of “doing” research, I use these performative texts to “trouble” my inquiry in order to subvert the process of knowledge production.

The two dialogues are based on my memories in the last 10 years. In autoethnography, memory, or productive remembering (Strong-Wilson et al., 2013), is a useful tool to connect personal dilemmas to social or public issues. Mitchell (cited in Strong-Wilson, 2013) likens it to “drilling oil” (p.123), where excavation leads to the gainful product of learning and future utility. Looking to the past is a way of understanding the present and the future. I use my memory as a tool to make sense of how these memories have impacted my current positionality as a privileged migrant woman advocating for the rights of other migrant women. As I discover in my analysis, these memories chafed against my work, and the juxtaposition of the culturegram and the dialogues aid in grounding my positionality.



The Twitter thread and webinar e-poster are also performative texts to reflect how during the pandemic, my work was purely online. Both artifacts, being performative, are creations adapted from my observations during my internship, presented in formats based on spaces that I had inhabited.

Bergoffen, et al. (2011) ask, “Is there a difference between literarily constructed texts (fiction, poetry, and theater) and the constructed stories that find their way into memoirs and testimonies, between texts authored by women rather than by men about women (or about men)?” (p.8). As such, these performative texts are meant to raise the question of “data” and whether primary data from interviews brings us closer to “the truth”.

This very question can be posed for the creation of a fictitious webinar e-poster, which may invoke ridicule, not only because of its un-real nature, but also because there are limitless webinar e-posters at my disposal, especially during this pandemic period where all convening have been taken online. This is an attempt to create transgressive data, “data that are out-of-category and not usually accounted for in qualitative research methodology” (St. Pierre, 1997, p.175). Placing these “playful” data is meant to be subversive and to interrupt the traditional nature of qualitative inquiries.

iv. Construction of the Performative Texts

Despite having access to a diverse group of feminists, I made the decision to exclude interviews in this thesis as a way to question the privileging of interviews in qualitative inquiries, and to add a layer of performativity to the thesis. To be candid, this decision had caused a few sleepless nights and many restless days because of the fear that this might be viewed as a feeble attempt at subverting knowledge production. After all, what could be more valuable than the hard work that goes into finding a sample, confirming participants, talking to them and then analysing their experiences, lives, and thoughts? It is unthinkable to embark on any research project, no matter its scale, without including interviews in its methodology. The voice of participants is seen as the anchor of any inquiry, “a centering, grounding force, or principle” (Culler, 1982, p.93). This decision to “de-centre voice” is to also put forth the question of voice “as the truest, most authentic data” (St.Pierre, 2008, p.319). As Christine Ashby (2011) reminds us, “the researcher often benefits more from the telling than the



researched” (p.4). By de-centering voice, I attempt to lift the veil of “whose voice am I representing” and through the deliberate construction of “data”, it is clear that the only voice I am representing is mine.

Further, I wanted to avoid the issue of “othering”, caused by the “double bind of representation” by including research participants (for this thesis this would be migrant women activists) with the purpose of understanding their experiences, as if implying that their experiences are significantly different from mine or that they need their voices to be showcased in an academic paper. But of course, this would be quickly derided by Spivak as a cowardice move to run away from representation altogether.

To confront the varied dilemmas in proceeding with my methodology, I took a leap and constructed three sets of performative texts, along with a culturegram. As meagre as this may come across, this is indeed my attempt to “trouble” my own work and epistemology.

This method of performatising text is not considered as a traditional way of presenting “authentic” data. There are several purposes for this performatisation. One, is to bring home the idea that all texts are performative. Language philosopher, J.L Austin (1962), in his work ‘*How to do things with words*’, essentially defined performativity as the act of doing something, shifting the understanding of language from one that is about formal structure to one that is about social process (cited in Mallan, 2002). Even if it seemed like I had spent a lot of time in front of the laptop sending out emails, and creating tweets, ultimately, these desktop acts are a large part of the “doing” of online feminism. It contributes to the workings of a “virtual feminist community where women can organize, discuss and critique cultural happenings and identify people who share their embodiment of feminist ideas that, for many reasons, they may have difficulty finding in physical spaces” (Chen et al., 2018, p.200). The work of this virtual feminist community became even more intensified during the pandemic period as all activities are shifted online.

A performative text is not simply a text that enacts a performance, but one that is an “utterance that does something in the world” (Conquergood, 1998, p.32). According to Michel Taussig (as cited in Couquergood, 1998, p.32), imitation can function as intervention.



My intervention here derives from the desire of wanting to experiment with the “performative turn in social sciences” (Conquergood, 1998). Szary (2016) also urges for greater linkages between the social sciences and the arts in hopes of shifting from a “hierarchical structure” (academic institutions and its related organs of knowledge distribution) to a more “horizontal structure” (directly reaching out to a heterogenous audience). Therefore, I intervene in my own thesis with this imitation/creation, as opposed to, simply citing existing Twitter threads. According to Madison (2008) the function of a performative text is to also “question taken-for-granted practices and interrogate unjust systems and processes” (as cited in Gabriel & Lester, 2013, p. 176). In constructing my performative texts, I aim to tease out the complexities of the discourses around voice and representation in the online space. It is also to bring out its performative dimension where there can be unexpected twists and turns, such as the introduction of ‘trolls’ that can immediately change the tone of the discourse, cutting through the solidarity and barging into the “intimate publics”.

Next, for the performative text, the Twitter thread, *#MigrantWomenWantRealChange*, I wanted to place the text within the performative space of Twitter, where putting out a tweet and using hashtags is likened to carrying out an action which is visible to a large audience. It is also to show that Twitter is not a level-playing field – it is enmeshed in power relations that can perpetuate hegemonic narratives. While the Twitter thread and users (or characters) are entirely fictitious, it is based on the dynamics of intimacy and engagement that I have observed as a user. This “imagined intimacy on the web heightens the emotions and sense of solidarity connected to these actions, making them feel more significant than they are” (Chen et al., 2018, p.201). Re-tweets, sharing of links, signing of petitions are all performative acts of solidarity (more on this in Chapter 4).

In the webinar e-poster, *Your Voice, Your Agency*, the aesthetics (bold colours, text and image of women marching) were created based on the visual style of social realism, which is art that brings attention to the people’s criticism of power structures (The Art Story, 2020). I had deliberately picked the speakers to mirror the usual composition of an international civil society webinar with a representative from a development institution (UN Women), an academic expert (Gayatri Spivak), an international NGO (International Domestic Workers Federation) and a male representative (Promundo) for gender diversity. The choices



of these speakers will be discussed in Chapter 4. The overarching webinar title plays into the

ideology of voice, and the common practice of having celebrated academics or experts (people with voice within a power structure that enables their voice to be heard) discussing a topic about marginalised individuals/groups to a like-minded audience where marginality is hardly present. The topic presented is also meant to interlace the irony of accessibility – it is meant to reach a subaltern audience, who is likely to not have any or sustained digital access. During the pandemic, through webinar sharings, I heard many accounts of migrant women and children who lack access to basic needs, confirming that Internet connection is not one of these basic needs.

Now that I have delved into my methodology of autoethnography and address the choices of data for analysis, I will go into the framework for analysis, **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis** in the next chapter.



Chapter 3: Walking The Trail

Eye and foot acquire in rough walking a co-ordination that makes one distinctly aware of where the next step is to fall, even while watching sky and land – Nan Shepherd

On the Appalachian Trail in the US, the longest hiking path in the world, it is said that the drop-out rate of thru-hikers (long-distance hikers) is somewhere between 75-80%. On any kind of hiking trail, whether it is the longest path in the world or a short track in the forest, the same rules apply. You have to respect the trail, you are a guest of the trail; the trail does not discriminate, everyone is welcome; and finally, be prepared for the worst, but leave the fear at home. I take this sagacious piece of advice with me as I scope the limits of my thesis and this chapter discusses the concepts and theories that I take with me on this trail.

This thesis is rooted in postcolonial feminism, and all its associated paradigms that are concerned with structural inequalities, power relations and the creation of the Other. It grounds my work and all its nodes of inquiry, including examining the discourse around “voice”. To anchor my understanding of how online feminism is performative, I look to the theories around performativity. Together, these crucial theories and related concepts will crystallise into a theoretical framework which will guide me in answering my main research questions. Based on these theories, I use *feminist critical discourse analysis* to make sense of the collection of observations, thoughts and reflections in Chapter 4.

i. Postcolonial Feminism:

Broadly speaking, postcolonialism concerns itself with the study of structural inequalities, power relations and the creation of the “Other” (Sharp, 2009). More importantly, it addresses the legacy of colonial domination by offering “an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past” (Gandhi, 2016, p.8). This is an important aspect, moving forward from a place of criticism, to a form of action where one needs to place herself in the act of “de-centering” or what Zoe Samudzi (2016) calls “decolonisation” by dismantling dominant structures and including “marginalised voices” who can discuss oppressive systems that they experience.



Taking its cue from its parent theoretical category, postcolonial feminism focuses on the breaking down of the boundaries of oppression, with a focus on intra- and inter-gender and power relations. This axis of examination is necessary given my work as an intern in a feminist network organisation primarily dominated by Western feminists, or migrant women with privilege, and an online feminist space that is dominated by Western feminists. As an intern, my work involves consolidating the work of different feminist NGOs which provide support for diverse communities of migrant women, such as migrant women in Serbia, female domestic workers in Spain and asylum seekers in Germany. I do not work directly with individual migrant women, and only collaborate with their representative organisations or other interlocutors. As I discovered throughout my internship, this is also how many other women's rights and/or feminist organisations function. While this form of organising is not new and has been the *modus operandi* throughout the various waves of feminism, this way of working strongly alludes to the dilemma of representation that Spivak highlights in her work.

This dilemma also brings me back to the work of Diane Wolf (1996) where she highlights the ethics of feminist research outlined by dialogic relationship between researchers' dedication towards advancing women's causes and rights and advancing their academic pursuits (p.2). She centralizes the issue of power, delineating three dimensions of power that inflict feminist researchers; namely the unequal lines of power between the researcher and the researched; power exchanged during the research process; and how this power then culminates in the writing process and the representation of the researched.

As such, I look to postcolonial feminist scholarship to guide my work. At the same time, I will endeavour to ground my work in 'situated knowledge' that "pays attention to geographic and cultural specificity rather than universality" (Sharp, 2009, p.117).

ii. The 'Voice' of the Subaltern:

I will begin with Gayatri Spivak's theory on subalternity, aware of the pitfalls and potentiality to misunderstand/misuse it. Spivak has repeatedly proclaimed disdain toward the constant misreading of her work across disciplines, "Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologic museumizers. No activist



wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference ... You don't give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity." (cited in Kilburn 1996). The goals of subalternity is "pertinent in any academic enterprise which concerns itself with historically determined relationships of dominance and subordination" (Gandhi, 2019, p.2).

Admittedly, subalternity is a complex notion to navigate, with many disagreements amongst postcolonial scholars about what it is and how to study it (Gandhi, 2019, p.3). Who, in fact, is the subaltern figure? Spivak puts it simply as a woman who exists in a "structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed" (Morris, 2010, p.8). This is not to say that a man cannot be subaltern, but given the multiple discriminations a woman faces in society, a subaltern figure is more likely to be a woman. Understanding the problems of representation, I hesitate to also position migrant women (the subject of my internship) as the primary subaltern figure in this thesis. But I acknowledge that they are perceived and positioned as subaltern within feminism (within the WIDE+ network, for example).

Why is "giving voice" such an important goal of feminist activism? This is largely derived from the 'ideologies of voice', which is defined by Amanda Weidman (2014) as the set of "culturally constructed ideas about the voice... [that] determine how and where we locate subjectivity and agency; they are the conditions that give sung or spoken utterances their power or constrain their potential effects" (p.45). As such, voice is put on a pedestal and becomes a benchmark of how authentic, diverse, or truthful an inquiry or representation is.

The emancipatory potential of "giving voice" to the subaltern figure is then adopted in the language of progressive politics as it relates to "agency, representation, power and authority" (Lawy, 2017, p.195). "Giving voice", or providing the platform for the marginalised to 'claim their voices' also became a common purpose for many feminist groups within their political struggles to fight for rights or to simply be visible in front of a power structure that perpetuates, nurtures and ignores systemic inequalities. "Diverse voices" has been championed as the key in the pursuit of equality and justice, providing a safeguard against authoritarianism and dictatorship.



The notion of “giving voice” to the subaltern figure is an endeavour that is rife within the development agenda. ‘*Voices of the Poor; Crying out for Change*’ a World Bank document launched in 2000, compiling experiences and anecdotes of poor people from 23 countries, was received with fanfare for its efforts to “listen to the voices of actual, real poor people” (Cornwall & Fujita, 2012, p.1753). This is an example of how powerful institutions mechanise superficial ways to provide inclusion while eclipsing the root causes of poverty, which can be traced to imperialism and global power imbalances. Essential questions around the politics of giving voice, and, an important aspect, how the voices are being listened and under what circumstances and context, are often missing in the neoliberal agendas of powerful institutions.

In and of itself, voice has become a relevant analytical category in anthropology, both in its materiality and metaphorical capacity, and, also as a political and performative element (Schäfers, 2017). For this thesis, I will focus on voice as political and performative.

iii. Online Feminism

With the advent of the digital era and the ubiquity of the Internet, activism has also adapted and taken its strategies online to complement its offline activities. The shift from third wave feminism to a fourth wave has been said to be brought forth by the Internet (Chen et al., 2018). While the third wave of feminism has largely focused on micropolitics (ie: The personal is political), the fourth wave seems to mark a shift in mobilising and strategizing beyond borders and creating global movements (Gleeson & Turner, 2019). While some disagree that feminism has moved into a different wave, or whether online activism has any real impact, what remains true is that feminists will continue to take their activism online with the backlash against women’s rights and the rise of populism in many Western countries (WIDE+, 2020).

The shift of feminism online has opened up new lines of inquiry into how feminism manifests in the digital space, notably on social media. Social media, which functions as avenues for networking and information-sharing offer accessible platforms (which are usually free) for activism to spread and gain momentum. The popular use of sites like Twitter has also given rise to the term ‘hashtag feminism’ where hashtags (words or phrases denoted with



a ‘#’ sign) are used to “organize, link, and archive conversations” (Kuo, 2016, p.2) around gender justice. Gender justice is a term widely employed by activists and academics alike who wish to shun the inadequacy of the term ‘gender equality’ in addressing gender-based injustices. It recognises existing power imbalances that put women at a disadvantage and “involves rooting out institutionalized patriarchal power systems” (Goetz, 2007, p.24).

iv. Migrant Women Activism in Europe

The introduction chapter of this thesis has briefly mentioned the status of migrant women in Europe, specifically during the COVID-19 period. While migrant women carry the brunt of multiple intersectional discriminations in European societies, they cannot be painted as mere victims. At the same time, representing them as “enterprising actors” (Emejulu & Bassel, 2015) carelessly dismisses the legion of issues they face in society. To counter these binarized representations and the systemic exploitations they face, migrant women started to self-organise to best “speak for themselves”. Migrant women associations are considered as “sites of empowerment and resistance”, where they strategise ways for themselves to negotiate the changing social and political landscapes of the countries they reside in (Roggeband, 2010). For example, RESPECT is a European network of migrant domestic workers that advocate for the rights of domestic workers at the European Union level.

Many European governments support the formation and activities of migrant women groups as this is a way to get them and their families to integrate better in society (Roggeband, 2010). However, over the years, with the backlash against women’s rights and migration, there has been less visible funding support for migrant women where funding mechanisms have grown increasingly complex and are less accessible to smaller civil society associations (WIDE+, 2020). As such, migrant women groups tend to operate with lean resources and heavily rely on volunteers.

It seems intuitive for resource-strained groups to take their activism online, but there has yet to be any research done on how migrant women in Europe use the online space to further their causes. A few studies have been done to examine how Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong rely on social media for their activism (Wahyudi & Allmark, 2020;



Sawai & Bose, 2020), but this is an area that remains under-researched.

v. Performance and Performativity

In *'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'*, Goffman (1959) draws on symbolic interactionism to theorise on performance, or more specifically on how individuals enact performances to fulfil self-interested impression management. He adopts a dramaturgical approach to explain how individuals utilise a 'front stage' and a 'backstage' to manage how they want society to view them. One of the key assumptions of his theory is how individuals have the ability to control their actions and the information in which they want to 'perform' to an audience. What is perhaps missing, or elusive, from Goffman's articulation of performativity is the role that the stage plays in informing one's performance, and how performances are enmeshed within specific political and social realities. While it is useful to think about online feminism as a performance, what informs its performativity is crucial to understanding the discursive nature of space/stage.

Moving away from a dramaturgical understanding of social interactions that Goffman's performance concept provides, Gregson and Rose (2000) argue for the relevance of performativity in critical human geography as it offers an understanding of how identities, agency and subjectivity are socially constructed (p.434). The authors explain that for geographers, space should not just be seen as a site of contested power, but also a space of complex and uncertain performance. Where performance is seen as an outcome, performativity seeks to uncover the process and practices behind the production of a performance. While they are connected, they are two distinctly different concepts.

The understanding of performativity is borrowed largely from the work of Judith Butler, one of the most influential thinkers on the theory of performativity. Butler (1999) looks at the performative aspect of gender, defining gender as a series of "subtle, and politically enforced performativity" (p.187) where this performativity "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (p.xv). In essence, according to Butler, gender is not something innate to our being, but an act that involves not just the 'doing' but a 'doing' that is influenced by discourse. This influence is evident



through the citational practice of performativity where the doing demonstrates “established formations of knowledge” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p.436). Discourse is also understood as “multiple and contradictory but always productive; it has specific effects, and this is where power lies” (Gregson and Rose, 2000, p.436).

At the same time, space inhabits discursive power, and in my analysis, I regard the online space as one that is a stage for performance and a site of power relations. Connecting this to Amanda Weidman’s conceptualisation of “ideologies of voice”, the online space, as a stage, is one that amplifies and transmits voice, but also in turn constructs reality by framing subjectivity and mediating interactions.

Therefore, in making the connection between voice, the notion of performativity and online feminism, I will use feminist critical discourse analysis as an analytical framework that can accommodate and piece these intersecting theories together.

vi. Analytical Framework - Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

In tying the main insights from the various theories discussed above, I have chosen to work with feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) to help me make sense of my presented materials. Even though working in this rather linear and traditional manner of knowledge production is antithesis to autoethnography, I feel that this is necessary for me to work through the deluge of information and ‘voices’ that I am confronted with within this thesis process.

Embedded within FCDA are the twin goals of “social emancipation and transformation” (Lazar, 2014, p.180). It provides the necessary tools and framework to not just examine gender injustices, but inequalities that have been borne out of systemic inequalities and power relations, especially under patriarchy. It is a perspective that seeks to examine ascribed gender norms and assumptions and how they are produced and manifested through discourse in a given context, setting, and space.

FCDA combines the methods of critical discourse analysis and feminist studies. Critical discourse analysis regards language as “social practice” that does not just look at



linguistics but also non-linguistic aspects of language, like semiotics, and how this use of language creates power structures in society (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). In other words, it “aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p.2). Because of its view that language serves to create a power hierarchy, critical discourse analysis is sometimes seen as “overtly political” (Lazar, 2007, p.2).

The feminist interjection into critical discourse analysis is not a mere application of a gender lens into the framework. Lazar (2014) argues that FCDA relies on a “feminist imagination” and informed by critical feminist studies (p. 182). Like critical discourse analysis, it moves beyond analysing linguistic aspects but also offers approaches to deconstruct multimodal elements like gestures, visual images, layout and so on (Lazar, 2007, p.5). FCDA inherits the interdisciplinary approach of critical discourse analysis, but beyond that it interrogates the discursive dynamics of “resistance, solidarity, and social empowerment of disenfranchised women (Lazar, 2014, p183). It informs a praxis-oriented research which is critical of power structures that has implications on gender. Hence, FCDA as an analytical framework is well-poised to examine the contours and meanderings of this inquiry.

Key Principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

I will highlight a few fundamental principles of FCDA which marks its departure from critical discourse analysis. First, it is essentially *feminist analytical activism*, which uses a dialectical research approach that is praxis-oriented, taking theory and applying it to strategies. These strategies are used to mobilise transformation (Lazar, 2014, p.184). Hence, FCDA has the ability to be applied to all forms of social justice analysis, in its call for greater accountability and responsibility in linguistics. This principle is immediately applicable to my thesis, as throughout my internship I was engaged in advocacy work that produced discourse through the makings of publications, campaigns, movement-building, etc.

The other principle of FCDA is that *gender is ideological and practice* (Lazar, 2014, p.184). Gender as an ideological and social construct imposes norms, rules and assumptions upon society, dividing societies into hierarchical categories of “women” and “men”, with



consequences on their lives across cultures, space and time. This hierarchy is then preserved and reproduced through social practices and structures. The notion of gender as practice harks back to Butler's position that gender is in fact performative and enacted through gestures and acts that are repeated and routinised. FCDA works towards the alternative discourse which is that gender ideologies are not absolute and that the material and social practices of gender can be challenged and transformed (Lazar, 2014, p.187). Relating this to the thesis, broadly speaking, online feminism serves to subvert dominant ideas of gender by posing new ideas that directly opposes the status quo.

Discourse in the (de)construction of gender is the next principle of FCDA. This principle addresses the discourse aspect of FCDA which views discourse not just a nebulous form of structure, but one embedded in social practice. Discourse can be defined as the "flow of knowledge and/or all societal knowledge stored throughout all time which determines individual and collective doing and/or formative action that shape society, thus exercising power" (Jaëger cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p.33). Within FCDA, the key interest is to investigate in speech and text, how the ideologies and assumptions surrounding gender are created, reproduced, and contested within society, in institutions, practices, relationship and affects individuals multiple identities (Lazar, 2014, p.190).

The final and relevant principle of FCDA is *critical reflexivity as praxis*. The goal of FCDA is to ultimately offer a vision and reality of social transformation and social justice that provides for unrestricted possibilities for women, and men (and all genders) (Lazar, 2014, p.194). It goes beyond the neoliberal co-options of equality and progress whereby women can now "have it all" (labour participation, health, economic empowerment) if they work hard to overcome their struggles. This individualistic viewpoint obliterates the work of second-wave feminism that brought to the fore the understanding of structural inequalities through its motto "the personal is political." FCDA's critical reflexivity serves as a correction to this myopia.

To engage in FCDA is essentially to engage with text without assumption that each text I encounter is "objective" or immune from subjective values. For this thesis, I will use culture theorists' definition of text as "anything in the social world that conveys meaning and can be 'read' (understood and interpreted) as if it were a book" (MacNaughton, 2005, p.57).



This broad approach includes not just traditional texts, like books and articles, but also conversations, multimedia material, symbols, spaces, and bodies. Underlined by the FCDA principles mentioned above, and the various concepts I have addressed, I will be using this set of questions to guide my analysis:

1. “Power relations are a struggle over interests, which are maintained, and resisted, through a variety of modalities, extents, and degrees of explicitness from context to context.” (Lazar, 2014, p. 187). As I am interested in uncovering power relations in text and discourse, with the assumption that no text is neutral, I will be using these questions, adapted from MacNaughton (2005) on meaning-mapping (based on Derrida’s deconstruction theory). Derrida argues that meanings are created from binaries – for example to be male is to be the opposite of female, and these binaries carry meaning:
 - a. To construct meaning, what binaries are present in this text?
 - b. How do these binaries accommodate power and voice?

2. Specific to my axis of analysis anchored in postcolonial feminism and the performativity of voice, I will be looking at these questions, guided by ideas from Spivak’s text ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ (1988) and from Amanda Weidman’s “ideologies of voice” (2014):
 - a. What are the ways we can “question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman?” (p.91)
 - b. As Spivak implores, “representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must now disown with a flourish” (p.104), I will thus pose this question - how does this text reflect the “voice” of the subaltern? Does it “ethically engage” with the subaltern?
 - c. How do ideologies of voice determine which voices are heard in the online space? How are these voices performative?



3. And finally, to ground my inquiry in “hyper self-reflexivity”, this question is pertinent: How do I position myself amidst this text? Does this positioning reflect power relations?

With these set of questions in mind, I now move on to Chapter 4 where I present my materials and analysis simultaneously.



Chapter 4: Muddy Paths, Narrow Tracks and Serene Creeks

Voices [that] begin calling to you from the cave – voices of instruction and encouragement, half scripted and half intuited, half heart and half imagined. It is these voices, frightened with unresolved conversations and uninterrupted arguments, that finally help you “hold” the thought - Homi Bhabha

In this chapter, I present my culturegram juxtaposed against several performative texts. I begin with a culturegram in order to first situate myself and my social identities vis-a-vis the other materials that follow. Next, I story two sets of memories, dialogues between myself and two other people. These are memories that surfaced from my past as being distinctly relevant for this thesis. These memories demonstrate my identity as a migrant woman carrying privilege, and despite my best efforts, I continue(d) to perpetuate power asymmetries.

Following these personal accounts, I then present the next performative text in the form of a Twitter thread with three users namely - migrant women-led activist group @FemMigrantsAct as the main character leading a social media campaign with the hashtag #MigrantWomenWantRealChange, and @EmpowerMigWomen, a larger women's rights NGO. Both organisations are part of an international feminist network (not shown in thread). Finally, there is also an unknown user, @Troll20205. The presentation of this text in a Twitter format is to performatise it and imagine it in a more public setting, as my work in crafting tweets for WIDE+ had been. The final performative text is a webinar e-poster, largely pointing to the trend of online convening and learning during the period of COVID-19, where the online space seems to have made infinite learning and exchange possible and accessible for everyone, when in fact, digital democratisation is far from the truth.

I title this chapter 'Muddy Paths, Narrow Tracks and Serene Creeks' because these elements have all been present in my hikes, and are unavoidable on most mountain trails. Paths are muddy, not only because of rain, but often because a creek, or a pool of water is close by. I find my memory excavations to be unpleasant and murky, like having to plant my feet onto these muddy paths. In my last hike, the closer I got to a grand, cascading waterfall,



the muddier the paths got. The more I remember, the more I understood the ways I negotiated with the world today.

In most hikes, there are many narrow tracks to be expected, especially those that are dangerously married to steep cliffs. In creating the performative texts, I was aware that this could be perceived as risk-taking or worse, jostling with failure. I remain on edge with this decision, but I do hope to encounter serenity with this choice, much like inhaling the whispering comforts of trail creeks.

i. Culturegram

“We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable.” (Behar, 1993, as cited in Ashby, 2011, p.4). I begin the presentation of my materials with my culturegram, followed by a memory excavation in order to begin the analysis with an interrogation of my social identities and how it can influence my research. A culturegram is a way to chart one’s multiple identities, experiences and other factors that can influence one’s sense of self (Chang, 2016). With my multicultural background, as demonstrated in my culturegram (see Figure 4.1) this tool is particularly useful to aid me in locating aspects of my socio-cultural makeup that will inevitably (or has already) affect my praxis. The culturegram created here is adapted from Luscombe’s use of this visual aid in her autoethnography on providing feedback for undergraduate registered nurses (2015).

Doing this culturegram has allowed several important identifiers to emerge. One of the most significant is that of my social class which has contributed to all my primary identifiers, especially as a feminist facilitator and as a minority and migrant woman. The current social class, which I have inhabited in the last 10-12 years is middle class, given that I am educated and have access to social and cultural capital. I do acknowledge this as “privilege”, a term that is loaded in today’s climate of identity politics. To put it simply, privilege is “unearned advantage [that] gives dominant groups a competitive edge they are reluctant to even acknowledge, much less give up” (Johnson, 2001, p.23). There is no denying that my marriage to a heterosexual White man has given me access to this privilege which I did not previously possess. Before my marriage, I was working while studying, at the

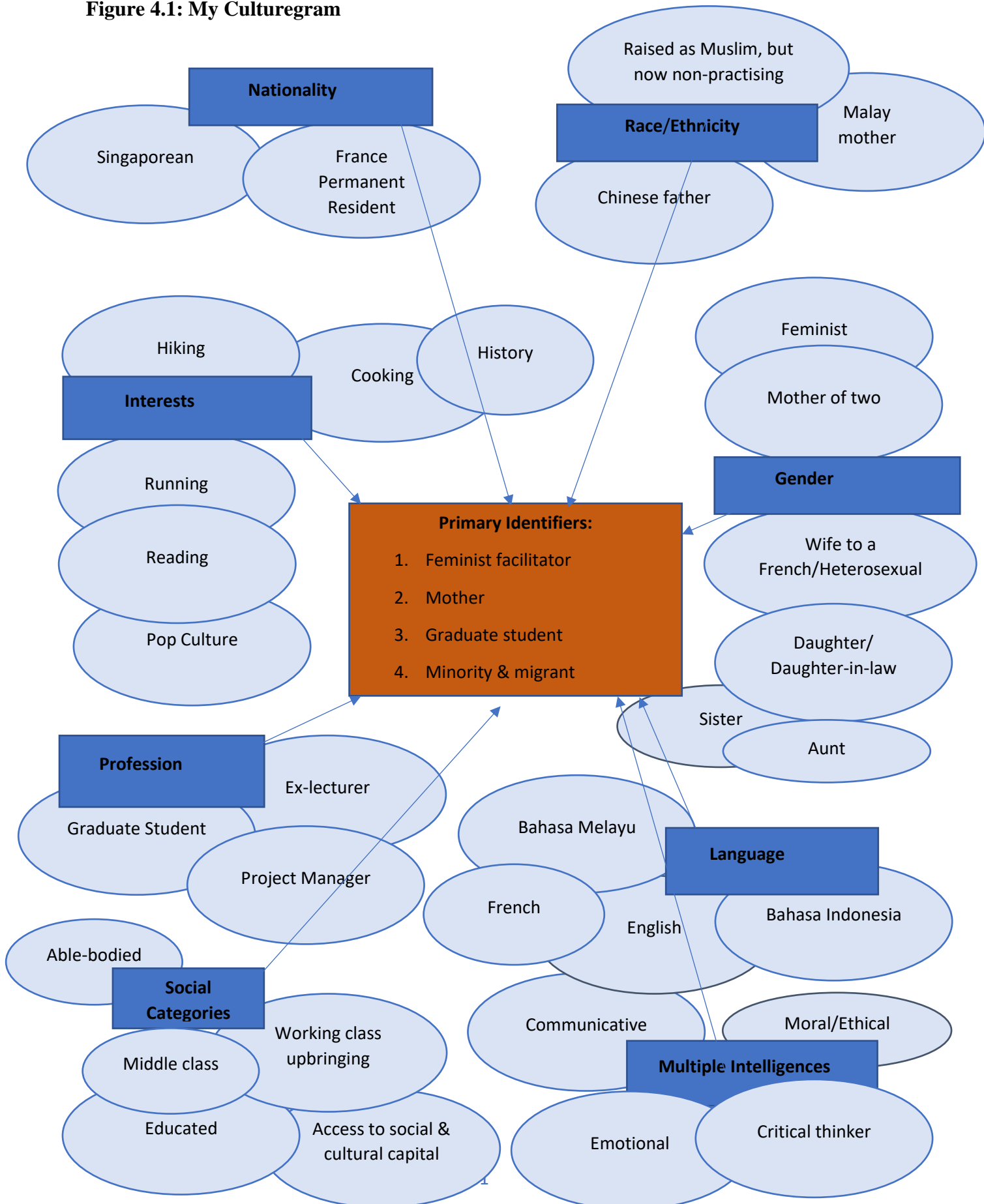


same time supporting my working class parents who faced many financial constraints. Marrying a White man who was working as an expatriate in a big multinational corporation (with all the comforts of an expatriate package) in Singapore was seen to be “a status upgrade” as it relieved me of many personal burdens. This is, without a doubt, an extremely difficult fact for me to reconcile with as a feminist and as someone working in the gender and development field. Currently in France, as a migrant woman, it had also been significantly easier for me to receive my permanent resident visa as compared to many other migrant women I know who are not married to White, male, French. Despite some challenges, my experience with this country’s border regimes has been more smooth-sailing than all of the migrant women I have engaged with in my work at WIDE+.

Even as I type out this position of privilege, the words are grating and bitter. While I am slowly learning not to deny this trajectory, and perhaps rest on a pseudo-spiritual justification that “everything happens for a reason”, it is clear that this privilege needs to be interrogated and put to use for greater means. With this privileged position, it can be hard to see how my previous working-class status has any relevance to my present identifiers. Indeed, raised in a working class and conservative Muslim family can be easily dismissed considering my current non-religious and Europe-located life. But I argue that these elements remain important as I agitate towards grounding my positionality. This past identifier of being part of the working class has allowed me to be sensitive but without dismissing the position of difference between myself and other migrant women. At the same time, it allows some relief of the burden of guilt that I carry when I start to sense the privilege gap during my interactions with them. It is nevertheless difficult to negotiate a position of privilege, and often discomfort and tension arise from this negotiation. It is thus crucial to remain honest and open about possessing privilege.



Figure 4.1: My Culturegram





ii. Memory Excavation

The hallmark-inspired, ‘going down memory lane’ phrase has mostly positive connotations. We look at pictures in our mobile phones or physical albums, longingly reminisce about the distant past and wonder where time went. Certain songs, scents and sights can bring back either faint or formidable memories, but once the stirring gathers strength, it can send you into a tailspin of feelings, thoughts, and consciousness. Memories are proof that you were present in a particular space and time and that you retained it. As Giorgio (2016) explains, “memories are stored and showcased in our stories, bearing witness to life’s experiences – our losses, sufferings, and sacrifices; our conflicts, healings and transformations (p.406). Memories also present a form of investigative tool for autoethnographic work that can build the bridge between lived experiences in the past and carving hope for the future. For those who argue that memories are unreliable, invalid, and unbridled snapshots of consciousness, I would counter-argue that sets of “data” in qualitative inquiry are also fragments of selective information, only synthesised in a more objective and linear fashion. Memories are the outcome of what Teresa Strong-Wilson refers to as “productive remembering”.

Many attempt to immortalise their memories through journal writing. Journaling is not an easy nor natural task for me. As an adolescent, I had a diary, but I would cringe each time I re-visit the pages of the floral notebook that had a conspicuous lock on it. As an adult, I find journaling cumbersome because I would labour over every single word, punctuation, metaphor, clever joke and structure. The words would flow out of me with superficial force, like trying to squeeze juice out of a lemon – at the end of it, there is just a tiny sip of fresh liquid, so many unusable seeds and I would be like the spent and shrivelled lemon. So instead of using one of the few journal entries I made throughout my internship exploring and explaining my position of privilege, I decided to revisit a past of mine which I have now come to discover could and would have impact on how I navigate my identifier as a feminist facilitator and migrant woman in Europe. As a preface, I confess that this recollection was not an easy one for me for various reasons; to know that I have not worked through my own unconscious biasness exhaustively and that my feminism is flawed; and to risk being viewed



as disingenuous and to be perceived unfavourably by others who will be reading this thesis. Yet, it is a risk I take.

This memory exercise was intended to bring forth the privilege I carry with me and how it manifests in my life specifically in context to migrant women. This was easy enough for me to locate because within the last 10 years, I have indeed engaged and interacted with migrant women, and highly aware of the power asymmetries that dictated our engagement. What was hard was to acknowledge was that I was complicit in this power asymmetry.

In Singapore, a highly developed economy heavily reliant on cheap foreign workforce, one in five families employs a female domestic worker to plug gaps in social reproduction work (Awang & Wong, 2019). A female domestic worker is typically a migrant woman coming from neighbouring, poorer ASEAN countries, like the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia, and are colloquially referred to as “helpers”. As a newly married couple with a baby on the way, my husband and I hired a helper, to manage domestic chores as I was finishing my studies and working part-time. Such an arrangement was typical of a middle-income household, especially amongst expatriate families.

Knowing how poorly female domestic workers were treated in Singapore, both by weak labour policies, and by domestic employers, my husband and I were determined that we would be fair employers. We paid our helpers decent wages, above the “market rate“, gave them a day off (per week) and above all, treated them kindly and with dignity. On hindsight, and using intersectionality to help me understand why I had this consciousness, I had arrived at the understanding that because I grew up in a working class minority family, and having a bachelor’s degree in sociology, this awareness of class and gender exploitation was foregrounded in my mind. Intersectionality explains that because of the multiple identities we hold on to, we can simultaneously be part of a dominant group with power, or be part of a marginalised group (Kuo, 2016). Intersectionality offered me ways to understand how race and gender interact and how my helpers are part of a marginalised group in Singapore, who have no labour rights, provide lowly paid and undervalued caregiving work, and are of foreign ethnicities. At the same time, I had considered my privilege as insignificant because I too was part of a marginalised community in Singapore. Malays occupy a low socio-economic status relative to the dominant ethnic group in Singapore, the Chinese (Juhari,



2020). Malays are more economically vulnerable because of multiple intersecting factors. Because of this minoritised position as a Malay, I thought that I could somehow narrow the privilege gap between my helpers and I. I wore my minority identity like a badge of honour, almost always announcing to society that because of my Malay ethnicity, I was poised to be a better employer as I would be more sensitive to the struggles of my underprivileged helpers.

But because of the neoliberal paradigm that I had been inculcated with in Singapore, a country that prides itself on the virtues of hard work and meritocracy, I figured that it, hiring lowly paid, exploited domestic workers, was fine, as long as I treated them well, or at least better than most other employers. Over the years, I came to realise that no amount of kindness, decency or fair payment can level the power imbalances nor narrow the status gap between me and the migrant women who worked for me.

At WIDE+, I interacted with several Spain-based women's rights NGOs which represent domestic migrant workers. WIDE+ is viewed an ally and a collaborator in raising awareness of the inequalities faced by migrant women. I could not help but feel hypocritical about the work that I do now, without acknowledging that I was once part of an exploitative system in another part of the world. The process of this memory excavation is unsurprisingly hard. Here, I present my memories in the performative form of a staged retelling (Alexander, 2005), via two acts. Act I is a memory enacted from my first experience of employing a domestic worker, and Act II happens six years later, with another domestic worker.

Act I: A living room in a rather large Balinese-style home, Singapore, 2010

There are two main characters. One is a female domestic work, Rose. She carries a weak limp and is wearing a simple t-shirt and denim shorts. The other is her employer, a Malay female, Hidayah, pregnant, also in casual wear, sitting on the living room couch, cross-legged, using her laptop.

Rose: Ma'am, my right leg is painful.

Hidayah: Yes, I can see that. Did you see the doctor yesterday?

Rose: No ma'am, it was my off day, I went to Lucky Plaza.



Hidayah: Oh, do you need me to take you to the clinic later? I can do that, I just need to finish my work first. But, what happened to your leg?

Rose: I don't know ma'am. My friend said maybe I have rheumatism.

Hidayah: Ok what kind of pain is it?

Rose: I don't know ma'am. It's like a pricking pain. Can feel it in my bones and muscle.

Hidayah: Wow that sounds bad. And this pain came suddenly?

Rose: Yes ma'am. Few nights ago I woke up at midnight with this pain. And then I took some painkillers but the pain came back today.

Hidayah: Ok ok, we can go to the doctor later.

Rose: Ok ma'am. I have another question.

Hidayah: Umm...what is it?

Rose (in a low tone): Can I go back to the Philippines to treat my leg? My mother said she can heal my leg.

Hidayah (her voice is slightly raised): Go back? No need for that, our doctor here can help you. We cannot send you home yet because I'm going to give birth soon and then who is going to clean and cook around the house?

Rose: I can ask my friend, Lina, to come and help you. My mother has the correct medicine. Last time she helped her sister with this kind of pain.

Hidayah: Are you sure? But here we can do x-ray, go to a specialist clinic and all that. Easier.

Rose: ... specialist clinic? Oh very expensive ma'am. In Philippines it's cheap. And natural medicine.

Hidayah: Also, it will be very hard for you to leave Singapore, so many paperwork to do. Very troublesome. Don't worry, we can help you here.

Rose: But...



Hidayah: Never mind, you just go rest in your room, and I will call you when I'm ready to leave the house to bring you to the clinic.

Rose: Ok ma'am.

Hidayah: Help me take the laundry inside the house also. Looks like it's going to rain.

- End of Act I -

Act II: The kitchen of a newly renovated apartment, Singapore, 2016

There are two main characters. One is a female domestic worker, Meribelle, wearing jeans and a polo t-shirt. The other is her employer, a Malay female, Hidayah, in a navy-blue dress with beige heels.

Meribelle: Ma'am, the envelope didn't have enough money inside.

Hidayah: Hmm, are you sure? Based on the contract, we agreed on SG\$480¹ right?

Meribelle: Yes, but the salary doesn't include my food allowance.

Hidayah: But with our previous helpers, we didn't give food allowance. They would go to the supermarket and they just buy what they need. And yesterday when I asked you to eat with us, you said you didn't want to.

Meribelle: I prefer to have a separate food allowance. And I don't eat the same food as your family.

Hidayah: Why didn't you tell me all this before we finalised the contract?

Meribelle: It's ok I can call my agent and then you can talk to her.

Hidayah: Fine.

(Moments later after a call with the agent.)

Hidayah: Your agent is not clear on the phone, but basically she said that it depends on me, whether I want to give you a food allowance or not.

¹ SG\$480 is equivalent to €300.



Meribelle: She said that?

Hidayah: Yes, so you tell me what is it that you want. I want to settle this so you can start work properly. Today you haven't even cleaned the kitchen, and it's already afternoon.

Meribelle: My previous employer gave me SG\$50 every week for food.

Hidayah: That's quite a lot right? We are a family of 4 and I spend less than SG\$100 a week on our food.

Meribelle: Yes ma'am. But if there's extra money left, I return the money to you.

Hidayah: I don't want to be fussy but if we give you food allowance, it means you cannot eat our food then. Better to keep your food separately from us.

Meribelle: I don't want to eat your food ma'am.

Hidayah: I know. Fine, then we give you SG\$50 tomorrow. We give you your food allowance every Monday.

Meribelle: Thank you ma'am.

Hidayah: Welcome.

- End of Act II -

iii. Engaging with Privilege, False Binaries, and the "Other"

I extracted two sets of memories that I find to be relevant, yet dissonant, to my current position and realities as a graduate student working in the gender and development field. The surfacing and examination of this dissonance, paired with an exercise of charting my culturegram, is the starting point of understanding, and eventually grounding my positionality as a feminist facilitator.

The relevant questions to ask in this area of analysis are: 'what binaries are present in this text?'; 'how do these binaries accommodate voice and power?'; and 'what are the ways we can question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman?'



The memories that were storied in Act I and II are based on actual interactions I had with my domestic helpers in Singapore. They are both from the Philippines, and each were hired for a period of two years (separately). The retelling of this memory through two acts takes its inspiration from the work of Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt where they created a performance installation based on their research on migrant workers in Canada. This play was a collaboration with the Philippine Women Center of BC and was based on interviews with Filipino migrant domestic workers (Johnston & Pratt, 2010).

In Singapore, and in many Southeast Asian countries, hiring domestic help is commonplace, and for middle-income households with small children, it is seen as unusual to not hire live-in domestic help. Hence, my writing about these memories of my domestic helpers may seem jarring to the Singaporean/Southeast Asian person. However, contextualising this against the larger, systemic issue of the exploitation faced by migrant workers in Singapore and globally, my memories surface with great relevance to my work in advocating for women's rights.

Taking a postcolonial perspective, migrant workers are considered as “bodies-out-of-place” and the Other (Creswell, 1999), where they require constant surveillance and control, or kept within a distance so they do not “dirty” or “taint” society. Creswell's conception of “bodies out-of-place” also explains that marginalised groups are “imprisoned in their bodies” (Ibid.) where a dominant group in society labels them (the marginalised) through physical attributes such as “dirty” or “impure”. In the case of migrant workers, the need to discipline and control them demonstrates that their class, racial and nationality differences transgress the limits of belonging in Singapore, and therefore they are to be controlled and kept at a social distance.

This notion of control is not simply a matter of macropolitics. In Act I, despite Rose's request to return to the Philippines, I was extremely reluctant to make arrangements for her, for various reasons, including the hassle and cost of flight logistics (it is extremely hard for migrant workers with a contract to leave Singapore even for a short period). Clearly, the question of binaries and the enmeshed power asymmetries can be raised here. Despite being able to vocalise their thoughts (having ‘voice’), Rose and Meribelle, being the Other, have to work within positions of power asymmetry where an employer has the ability to control their



mobility. In a regular employment situation, with employee's rights in place, an employee would be able to apply for leave days, and/or they would be able to receive a minimum income such that they would not need to request for a food allowance. These are clearly not the same conditions put in place for migrant domestic workers.

Despite their key role to the economic engines of Singapore, migrant workers sorely lack basic labour protection such as minimum wage and the right to form unions for collective bargaining. This lack of state regulation has given employers plenty of leeway to manage their workers at their discretion. According to TWC2 (2014), a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping migrant workers, the unequal relationship between workers and their employers has resulted in severely unfair treatment of the workers. As they do not receive medical benefits from the government, the compensation lies entirely in the hands of the employers and their goodwill.

Migrant workers also suffer unfair recruitment practices. Many of them pay unscrupulous agents in their home countries high placement fees to secure work in Singapore, often triple (or more) their monthly salaries (Rajah, 2014). When they arrive in Singapore, their work visas do not permit them to bring their families, and employers have the right to terminate their contracts indiscriminately (Rajah, 2014.). They also often receive salaries lesser than what was initially promised to them. In fact, salary dispute is one of the biggest issues for migrant workers, whereby they are paid late and lesser than agreed on, and the lack of payslips or other forms of salary documentation prevents them from accounting for their work hours and pay. These salary disputes, as demonstrated in Act II, are sometimes small which can then escalate into larger issues. Fortunately for Meribelle and I, a conclusion was quickly agreed on (that I would simply give her extra food allowance on top of her salary).

By and large, female domestic workers are exposed to exploitation and abuse, and even more so than their migrant male counterparts since they work within the private confinements of the home. Because of their marginalised position in society and within the overall economic system of Singapore, there is no doubt that these women can be regarded as the Other or the subaltern. Even in instances when they attempt to exercise agency and raise their voices, these attempts are often unheard, ignored, or quelled. However, I do question if the heavy reliance on the construction of the female domestic worker as vulnerable,



powerless and victimised is useful my endeavour to interrogate discourse and positionality. Like Spivak, I continue to insist that there is a need to question the mechanisms that systematically mute the subaltern figure, and in this set of materials (Acts I and II), I tried to show how I played a part in perpetuating these mechanisms. My goal was not to simply display the subaltern figure as marginalised figures, and rely on their subjectivity to further my point, but the excavation and re-imagination of these memories was meant to show how the muting happens within an intimate, micro-setting, away from power structures.

The binary of privileged woman-versus-subaltern migrant woman cannot be solely understood within these snippets of memories alone. All binaries are inherently unstable, and it is crucial to address the tension between being muted and being seen as mute. Can marginality go beyond the boundaries that are imposed on it? bell hooks argues that it can, and that it can “be more than just a site of deprivation” (hooks 1989, p.341). While the accounts of abuse and exploitation that female domestic workers face globally should not be denied, the dominant construct of female domestic worker as mere victims and passive can be challenged.

In the webinar e-poster (seen in Figure 4.3), one of the speakers is Elizabeth Tang, the General Secretary of international NGO, International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). Launched in 2009, IDWF is a network organisation made of many national and transnational organisations of domestic workers advocating for the rights of their members globally (IDWF, 2020). The very existence of this large activist network, composing of many smaller NGOs, is a formidable challenge against the “myth of passivity” (Pratt, 2012), and is a platform for domestic workers to create counter-discourses underpinned by their agency and voice.

This refusal to be silenced is largely absent amongst migrant workers in Singapore, in an authoritarian state where freedom of speech is highly controlled, and demonstrations are strictly illegal. Jackson (1992) explains that resistance can be carried out through different ‘strategies’, which is “some degree of conscious deliberation, and ‘style’ as “a form of cultural insubordination that expression an attitude of defiance and disrespect to those in authority” (p.59). Kayako Ueno (2009) found that FDWs employ an array of strategies to resist their challenging work situations. For example, her study showed that strategies such as



‘sabotage’ (only fulfilling a part of their domestic chores), ‘feigned ignorance’ (pretending to be incompetent to avoid arguments with employer) and making their employers heavily reliant on their labour so that they have more bargaining power. Similarly, Yeoh and Huang (1998) found that before the day-off was made mandatory, it became a site of contestation (and arguably, still is a contested site) where migrant domestic workers negotiated with their employers for a day of rest despite it being excluded from their contracts (p.595). On their off-days, the women also shed their work clothes and dress-up, inhabiting public spaces that are away from the surveillance of their employers, and “reject exclusionary dominant definitions of themselves as domestic appendages of Singaporean households” (p.598).

Within the European context, as observed in my work at WIDE+, migrant women, including domestic workers, have self-organised platforms that are well-connected to other small and large NGOs. For example, during the COVID-19 period, the Network of Latin American and Caribbean Women, or *La Red De Mujeres Latinoamericanas Y Del Caribe*, based in Spain, launched a lobby campaign, including a statement document and open letter undersigned by many other NGOs, calling for the regularisation of all foreigners in Spain so that they can gain access to public services and for unemployment benefits for women who lost their jobs during the pandemic (Red Latinas, 2020).

Nevertheless, this ability to speak out must be reconciled with the fact that many of these NGOs run on small budgets and are mostly functioning on the hard work of volunteers. This tension is re-visited in the webinar e-poster, where IDWF is positioned against big institutions like the UN Women and University of Columbia. The theme of lack of funds is also something WIDE+ aims to address and re-dress in their upcoming campaign to push for more EU-level funds for migrant women groups.

iv. Online Feminism during COVID-19: Hashtags and Webinars

COVID-19 changed many things, and one of the most salient impacts is how it transformed the way we work. While I have been fortunate enough to continue my work comfortably at home, albeit with a pair of kids calling for constant attention, it also meant that I had access to a constant stream of content relevant to my work. Physically distancing



also brought the need for more social connections, which the online sphere provided for. Unsurprisingly, online activism heightened during the pandemic as resource-strained civil society organisations took the opportunity to galvanise support in the digital space given that people are more online than ever. Social media and webinar platforms like Zoom, present promising spaces for online activism.

Throughout my internship, one of my key tasks was to send out daily tweets (and also Facebook posts) and to use social media to monitor activities related to WIDE+'s work. I had never used Twitter before working at WIDE+, despite knowing how it is a popular digital platform where many social justice movements, like #MeToo, and #BringBackOurGirls erupted and gained momentum. On a broader scale, the role that the Internet plays in supporting social activism cannot be underplayed. The ubiquity of social media has also given rise to the use of the term "hashtag feminism", a specific strand of online feminism that aims to "create a virtual space that acknowledges their pain, narrative and isolation" (Dixon 2014, p.34-40, cited in Chen et al., 2018, p.198). The aim of this thesis is not to assess whether hashtag feminism has impact on women's rights issues, rather it argues that the 'doing' of online feminism, including hashtag feminism, is performative. This subsection will proceed to analyse the performativity aspect of online feminism and the tensions that arise from this form of activism.

Besides the demand of text efficiency, I knew, despite being new to the medium, that Twitter, like all social media, is a stage, where "performance occurs; the performer is the author of the tweet; and the performance is the conscious and considerate script that they construct and perform in 140-280 characters" (Gleeson & Turner, 2019, p.60). WIDE+'s Twitter account, @feministWIDE, has 979 followers, which can lead to high tweet impressions, that is the number of times other users have seen the tweet (Share This, 2018). This is crucial for small networks like WIDE+ as tweets can lead to partner and audience engagement, and most importantly, start discussions that can lead to gender justice. The more the tweets are seen, the higher the chances of it be 're-tweeted' and the longer the conversations are sustained. This echoes what Anthony McCosker asserts, "Visibility is the scarce and highly contested currency upon which new modes of digital activism or civic participation depend" (in Chen, et al., 2018, p.200). The use of hashtags in particular helps a



group, cause or movement to gain visibility and momentum.

In Figure 4.2 below, I present Twitter interactions as screenshots by three fictitious users namely @FemMigrantsAct (a migrant women-led activist group), @EmpowerMigWomen (an international NGO), and @Troll20205 (an unknown user). As explained in the thread, @FemMigrantsAct is launching a social media campaign to bring light to the issues surrounding migrant women in Europe during COVID-19, and its efforts to advocate for more policy solutions from EU institutions for the bloc's pandemic recovery package and for its future migration policies. @EmpowerMigWomen and @FemMigrantsAct are within the same network of civil society organisations, hence the former's quick support of the latter's petition. This interaction is based on what I have observed through digital ethnography on Twitter. Engagement between small and larger NGOs are often done through re-tweets, openly supporting other organisations through petitions, sharing words of solidarity and proposed action, etc. Tweets are also often accompanied by icons to grab attention and focus on a certain topic. For example, the loudhailer icon is often followed by an announcement.

During the pandemic, feminist groups acted with agility and there was stark visibility on increased collaborations between different organisations, circulations of google documents on shared resources and information, and a slew of webinars covering a vast range of topics. The swift creation and sharing of information in various forms such as online archives around gender and COVID-19, webinar series and various toolkits and resources (see Annex for some examples on online feminist resources that emerged from the pandemic). For example, one of the collaborations that WIDE+ was involved in was 'Feminist Response to COVID-19', a global feminist collaboration launched (with over 67 global organisations) during the pandemic, that sought to discuss and amplify feminist responses to COVID-19 recovery.




Figure 4.2: Twitter Thread ‘#MigrantWomenWantRealChange’ (screenshots)

Below are the descriptions of the Twitter users.





The Twitter thread on this page shows a set of tweets by @FemMigrantsAct around the hashtag '#MigrantWomenWantRealChange'. It is part of a social media campaign launched by this activist group to lobby for more inclusive and intersectional EU policies for migrant women.

Tweets	Tweets & replies	Media	Likes		
 Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1h We demand #feminist & #intersectional solutions not just for #COVID19 recovery, but for EU's migration policies! Who's with us? Sign our statement on this link! #MigrantWomenWantRealChange	2	1			
 Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1h Issues #MigrantWomen face in Europe & global societies before & heightened during #COVID19  Gender-based violence  Lack of access to public goods, like medical services  Unfair employment practices  No safe housing	1	2			
 Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1h Patriarchy, authoritarianism, racism, capitalism are barriers to the progress in society. We remind you that without #migrantrights , there is no #humanrights !	1	2			
 Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1h #MigrantWomen take care of the young & elderly, maintain the food supply, do the cleaning, even during #COVID19 , so who's taking care of our essential needs now? #NoEquality					
 Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1s Nothing about Us Without Us! EU pandemic recovery solutions MUST include #migrantwomen #MigrantWomenWantRealChange					



Below are the responses by @EmpowerMigWomen, an international NGO, and an unknown user @Troll20205 replying to the tweets from @FemMigrantsAct.



Women Empowering Migrant Women
@EmpowerMigWomen



We need to start changing the status quo! More solidarity for #migrantwomen needed because #MigrantWomenWantRealChange!



Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · Aug 24

Issues #MigrantWomen face in Europeans & global societies before & heightened during #COVID19

- 🚫 Gender-based violence
- 🚫 Lack of access to public goods, like medical services
- 🚫 Unfair employment practices
- 🚫 No safe housing



Women Empowering Migrant Women @EmpowerMigWo... · Aug 24

📢 Fresh from the oven! Check out & sign this statement if you believe in #MigrantWomenRights! Our org has been pushing for the rights of migrant women for many years & our work is #intersectional



Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · Aug 24

We demand #feminist & #intersectional solutions not just for #COVID19 recovery, but for EU's migration policies! Who's with us? Sign our statement on this link! #MigrantWomenWantRealChange



Migrant Women Feminists @FemMigrantsAct · 1h

We demand #feminist & #intersectional solutions not just for #COVID19 recovery, but for EU's migration policies! Who's with us? Sign our statement on this link! #MigrantWomenWantRealChange



2



1



Women Empowering Migrant Women
@EmpowerMigWomen

Replying to @FemMigrantsAct

Signed! What else can we do to help and amplify your cause? We're all on the same boat!



 **Migrant Women Feminists** @FemMigrantsAct · Aug 24
Nothing about Us Without Us! EU pandemic recovery solutions MUST include [#migrantwomen](#) [#MigrantWomenWantSystemicChange](#)

1   

 **Women Empowering Migrant Women** @EmpowerMigWo... · Aug 24
Agree. Let's organise a webinar around this topic! We are 100% [#FeministsforMigrantWomen](#). We can do so much more together.



    

 **Migrant Women Feminists** @FemMigrantsAct · 1h
We demand [#feminist](#) & [#intersectional](#) solutions not just for [#COVID19](#) recovery, but for EU's migration policies! Who's with us? Sign our statement on this link! [#MigrantWomenWantRealChange](#)

2  1   

 **Troll2020**
@Troll20205

Replying to @FemMigrantsAct

 Because we all know how petitions can REALLY change things 

 **Troll2020** @Troll20205 · 45m
Maybe it's time to go back to your country? Just a suggestion! ;)

 **Migrant Women Feminists** @FemMigrantsAct · 1h
Issues [#MigrantWomen](#) face in Europeans & global societies before & heightened during [#COVID19](#)

-  Gender-based violence
-  Lack of access to public goods, like medical services
-  Unfair employment practices
-  No safe housing

 **Troll2020** @Troll20205 · 39m
Yeah but don't forget, [#CitizensFirst!!](#)

 **Migrant Women Feminists** @FemMigrantsAct · 1h
Patriarchy, authoritarianism, racism, capitalism are barriers to the progress society. We remind you that without [#migrantrights](#), there is no [#humanrights!](#)



(End of Twitter thread)

Within this deluge of information, it then begs the question of whose voice gets heard? Throughout my internship, I attended between 20 – 30 webinars in a span of 10 weeks, including one webinar where I was an active participant, as a speaker. In the last material for analysis, I present a webinar e-poster as a form of feminist activism and resource-sharing tool disseminated within a large feminist network. Figure 4.3 shows a webinar e-poster titled ‘*Your Voice, Your Agency*’.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 on the construction of this performative text, the choices of speakers reflected the usual composition of experts in a civil society-led webinar – the expert from a development institution (from UN Women), an academic expert (Gayatri Spivak herself), a representative/activist from an NGO (IDWF) and a token male for diversity (Promundo). Promundo is a Brazil-based NGO working towards promoting gender equality through the eradication of toxic masculinity, or what is known as ‘male allyship’. Male allies are men who work towards the “understanding the social privilege conferred by their gender, and demonstrating active efforts to address gender inequities at work and in society” (Johnson & Smith, 2018). This webinar e-poster plays into many tensions and ironies at play in the discussion of online feminism, performativity and voice.

One of the speakers is Gary Barker, a prominent advocate of male allyship. Allyship primarily includes support and advocacy, especially towards those who are in a subordinate



position (Cheng et al, 2019). This harks back to Spivak’s famous denouncement of colonialism, where “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (p.93). The insertion of his presence on this webinar is to reverse the dynamics of the usual practice of having a token woman expert on an all male panel. In this case, the inclusion of a male ally in a “giving voice” panel can be seen as almost ludicrous given the lack of safe spaces for women to gather, share and exchange experiences and ideas.

v. Online Feminism as Performative

One of the key research questions of this thesis is ‘how is online feminism performative?’ If hashtags are seen as a tool, even proxy, for voice, how is this voice, in the form of hashtag, thus performative? Some of the advantages of social media include using it as a tool is to “give voice to the marginalized and silenced” (Chen et al., 2018, p.198). As discussed in Chapter 3, voice can be considered in many ways, including metaphorically and sonically. In her research with disabled individuals requiring speech assistance, Ashby (2011) argues for the understanding of voice to go beyond speech. She highlights the problem of mediated communication either through typed messages or through a human facilitator, and this question of mediated voice will be discussed in the next subsection.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the phenomenon of hashtag feminism, a form of online feminism that espouses hashtags through social media (and not only Twitter) to disrupt and counter common narratives that condone and facilitate oppression in any form (Chen et al., 2018, p.198). The use of hashtags by feminists and activists symbolise voice, agency and empowerment. Kuo (2016) goes further to argue how hashtags, as part of activism tools, are “intentional actions aimed to drive discourse in particular directions” (p.3). This use of hashtags as a proxy for voice emphasises the ideologies surrounding voice – voice as empowering and voice as emancipatory. And because of the relatively low cost and low barrier to access of social media, hashtags are said to “give voice” for those deemed as “voiceless”.



Figure 4.3 Webinar e-poster: ‘Your Voice, Your Agency’



This webinar is part of an action-oriented series on giving voice to the subaltern feminist in this climate of increased digital activism. The organiser, a student from University of Grenoble and an online convenor, has put together a panel of esteemed experts who have dedicated their academic careers towards the knowledge of voice, giving voice and amplifying voice. In this webinar, audience will discover the strategies behind 'having a voice'. Entry to the webinar is only granted to subaltern individuals. It will be only in English. Please disseminate this information to any subaltern individuals/groups you know, and if they unable to attend this webinar, there will be a video recording after the session.



In analysing hashtag feminism as performative, it is imperative to differentiate the notion of performativity from a performance. From a performance standpoint, clearly Twitter is a stage for many of its users, especially those with a reputation at stake. In their research on how female athletes use social media to control their images and branding, Shreffler, Hancock and Schmidt (2016) contend that because users know that there is a ready audience on Twitter, there is a lot of user-controlled work that goes into the building of identity on social media.

This interpretation of performance then be linked to Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation (discussed in Chapter 3) where social media can be regarded as the 'front stage' where individuals (and groups) practise impression management in order to influence the audience's perception of them. For feminists and activists, their primary target audience would be other like-minded organisations, the media, politicians, larger institutions, and other interested individuals. The 'backstage' refers to both the online and offline spaces that the audience has no access to, where the behind-the-scenes take place, and where feminists can "relax" and step out of their "activist" mode. Unlike a traditional performance space, social media allows for interaction and feedback. Twitter users (or performers) can know how "well they perform" through re-tweets, likes and replies their tweets generate (Gleeson and Turner, 2019, p.61). As a performative space with a strong feedback mechanism and popularity, Twitter encourages participation even amongst minority groups.

However, the notion of performativity goes beyond the limits of viewing social media as a stage with a presupposed audience. Online feminism is not a static nor predictable phenomenon that can be reduced to a theatrical analysis. Performativity is understood as a process (whereas performance is conceived as a 'product'), "as something dynamic and participatory" (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p.440). In the case of hashtags, when users use and re-use (or cite) existing hashtags, not only do they contribute to the tweet counts of the hashtag, they partake in the intentions behind the hashtags, and potentially create a "shared practice" (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p.440). In the case of the Twitter thread on Figure 4.2, the enthusiasm around migrant women issues compelled @EmpowerMigWomen to offer a jointly-organised webinar to further raise awareness of the challenges migrant women face during COVID-19. During my internship, I observed that this citational practice is even more



direct when women's rights organisations actively disseminate social media packages with suggested tweets and hashtags, handles to tag, and Facebook messages that other organisations can use and adapt for their own social media accounts.

This participatory dimension of online feminism illustrates the dynamics of its performativity – that saying something (through these social media messages) is in fact doing something, where the doing involves spreading and strengthening a certain discourse. When someone chooses to use a hashtag, it is not a passive action, it is performative as she agrees with the messaging behind the hashtag and uses it in her tweets (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p.434).

Going back to the performative text, the Twitter thread, @FemMigrantsAct attempted to present a coherent argument about their contributions to EU societies and through their petition, also display a strong sense of agency – both these acts defy the common narrative that migrant women are passive and weak. This links to Nancy Fraser's conception of the "subaltern counterpublics", a space within a larger sphere where "marginalized groups "circulate discourses" that create different interpretations and representations of identities and interests" (Kuo, 2016, p.4). This indicates the role of the Internet, specifically social media in this case, in providing the platform for marginalised groups to "have a voice" and gain visibility. It is also indicative of how social media, much like offline society, is made of diverse public spaces, and there are groups that are excluded and subjugated from the mainstream space.

The creation of subaltern counterpublics strongly links to the understanding of performativity as citational, where the online space mirrors the same lack of intersectionality of feminism in general. Just like its offline counterpart, online feminism also tends to push the experiences of non-Western women, or the "third world women" to the margins and diminishing them to "symbol[s] of oppression, subordination, victimhood" (Yu, 2009, p.9). As it stands today, "Twitter is perceived as White" (Kuo, 2016, p.5), leading to the creation of "racialised digital enclaves" (Brock, 2012, p.530). These enclaves seek to not just create a safe space for their marginalised users, but also to subvert discourse as seen in the intra-movement '#SolidarityisForWhiteWomen', a reaction to #FemFuture movement that aimed



to discuss the unpaid labour of online feminists (Kuo, 2016, p.7). This online feminist discussion was accused of being white-centric, privileged and lacking intersectionality.

This discussion is also incomplete without the analysis of the online space, specifically social media, as performative. The online space is not only performative because it provides the ‘stage’ for performances, but also because it, as Gregson and Rose (2000) argue, “bring[s] power, of particular subject positions” (p.441). Spaces facilitate the dynamics of any existing power relations projected on it, at the same time affecting the social actors that are ‘performing’ on the stage. As such, the digital space cannot be viewed as neutral. Spatially, online media, as compared to its offline counterparts, is unique for its algorithmic power and ability to manipulate what we consume online. It becomes a “popularity contest” where the more likes and shares a post commands, the more visible it gets (Dumitrica & Felt, 2018). Feminists from small NGOs have to contend with a highly saturated and manipulated Internet to gain visibility. In comparison, larger organisations have budgets to hire social media managers and IT officers with competencies to use social media more strategically and effectively.

This begs the question of the role of social media in perpetuating power asymmetries and its ability to seek re-dress existing inequalities. As discussed here, just like traditional offline spaces, social media is also a space imbued with “competing discourses of power, social location, and cultural expectations and experience” (Chen et al., 2018, p.202). Consequently, intersectionality is a crucial departing point in understanding the potential of social media in hashtag feminism. In physically and socially situating my location, I was acutely aware about how I had been sending out tweets from the safety of my home (in a suburban Alpine village) with stable Internet connection, and many other comforts, while the tweets I crafted (for WIDE+) often highlighted the multi-dimensional injustices migrant women and girls experience before and during the pandemic.

It is hard to reconcile with this spatial and power disparity, and as argued by activists everywhere, real impact happens only when online activism complements offline activism (Chen et al., 2018). This is the disconnect that I was unable to mend given the mobility constraints during the pandemic. Also, it is important to note that “many women across the globe who could benefit from the empowerment of hashtag feminism have no access to it”



(Latina & Doherty 2014, cited in Chen et al., 2018, p.201). I reflected on the accounts I read and heard about the lack of basic services provided to refugee woman and children (especially heightened during the pandemic), and how far their concerns are (food, safety, health) from the concerns I had about the visibility and reach of my tweets. The illusion of connectivity that the Internet offers betrays the fact that there are still wide digital divides in many countries.

Performativity as citational not only reproduces and/or subvert discourse, it can also “discipline subjects and their performances” (Gregson and Rose, 2000, p.441). This function of performativity as a disciplinary element can be seen online with the rife of trolls that typically exert a kind of “disciplinary gaze” on online female users by spewing hatred embedded within “a cultural logic that is normatively biased towards and comfortable with the violent discipline of women in order to keep them in their perceived place” (Cole, 2015, p.357). While hashtags have provided the opportunity for women to “express their power” (Chen et al., 2018, p.203), the “disciplinary gaze” of trolls have created a threatening presence, rehashing damaging norms of misogyny in the online space. In the presented Twitter thread, unknown user @Troll20205, as its name unabashedly suggests, is a typical troll on social media using feeble humour to barely disguise their violent misogyny and bigotry towards women. With all the possibilities that social media presents for online feminism, tensions remain over the safety and inclusivity of the digital space for women.

Therefore, it is useful to think about online feminism as performative where not only are performances enacted over social media, but it is also a process of “doing” that reflects citational practices that can either reproduce or subvert discourse. In thinking about online feminism as performative, we can then understand how the online space is also, like offline realities, imbued with power relations and hegemonic norms.

vi. Whose Voice is Heard Online?

As discussed earlier, one of the oft-cited advantages of social media, in particular, hashtags, is that it provides a way of giving voice, agency, and visibility to marginalised groups. Feminist groups use social media to raise urgency about their chosen causes, such as



pushing for more inclusive policy action as demonstrated in the Twitter thread. Voice, as a medium of agency, can also be understood as a kind of power that can speak, and in this case, a power that can tweet, post and share. Hashtags carry this ideology of voice as power and having ability to transcend borders and create global networks. Often, feminists turn to social media to reach out to other like-minded organisations and individuals to be signatories in their petitions, collective letters, and to share other advocacy tools and material.

The hashtag ‘#BlackGirlsMagic’ was created by Cashawn Thompson in 2013 to bring visibility to the accomplishments of black women on social media (Chen et al., 2018, p.205). ‘#NotYourAsianSideKick’ was launched in the same year to amplify discussions around the lack of representation and diversity of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) within mainstream media (Kuo, 2016, p. 9). These forms of racial-centred hashtags demonstrate the space that the Internet offers for minorities and marginalised groups to give them a platform to construct new, alternative ideas.

One of the critical questions I wanted to examine was the issue of voice, and whose voice is being heard, specifically in the online space. In Chapter 3, I looked at how dominant ideologies of voice, where voice is equated to having agency, ability to express identity and commanding authority (Schäfers, 2017). Linguists argue that the association of voice with rationality and thought is a product of Western modernity (Schäfers, 2017). According to Feld and Fox (1994), in order to understand the role of voice in all dimensions of social life, it is necessary to observe how both the material and metaphorical aspects of voice function (as cited in Schäfers, 2017, p.4). Nevertheless, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the sonic aspects of voice, like timbre and its association with racial differences (Eidsheim, 2008).

However, “the primacy of voice as the teller of experience and truth” (St. Pierre, 2008, p.327) is problematic as it assumes the inseparability of voice and thought. This becomes more vexing when we know that the ability to listen to voices requires firstly the understanding of language and context. This question of voice is particularly salient when examining the trend of international webinars that are mostly held in English. For example, in the webinar e-poster, it is indicated that the session will be held in English, with no



consideration for a potentially international audience, especially given that the target audience is a “subaltern person”.

This, however, has not been the case for some of the webinars that I attended where there are simultaneous translations happening during the session. In one WIDE+ webinar series which I participated in, there were three other panelists, who are migrant women living in Europe. Two of them were more proficient in Spanish than in English. They presented in Spanish with the presence of live interpreters. The other speaker was from Nigeria and spoke English. We were presenting to an English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audience. It was an overall interesting webinar that provided the audience with eye-opening insights on the experiences of migrant women and children during COVID-19 lockdowns across the region. While the live interpretations were helpful and non-disruptive, I felt that it did not bridge the socio-cultural gap between the audience (myself included) and the migrant women.

Looking at this from a sonic and material standpoint of voice, the original voices of the speakers (whose speeches are translated through live interpretation) are entirely muted. This divorce of the material aspect of voice from its metaphorical dimension makes it hard to launch into a full probe of voice. The examination of voices in their material and sonic forms can reveal many things about individuals’ social identities. For example, several people have told me that they paid more attention to my presentation simply because my “English was good and clear” as opposed to the other speakers. Yet, looking at the context and content of the webinar, I presented less insights on the lived experiences of migrant women in Europe compared with the other migrant women who were activists doing work on the ground. Having this language privilege (possessing a commonly used international language, English, as charted in my culturegram) clearly amplified my voice louder than the others.

Further exacerbating one of the tensions that online feminism presents is the (lack of acknowledgement) of existing digital divides in society. During the pandemic, since most of the organising and discussions happened online, this rests on the assumption that everyone has Internet connectivity and proper work and living spaces at home (Abu Habib, 2020a, as cited in Al-Ali, 2020, p.8). Adding another level of challenge, most women, myself included, had to juggle caregiving duties with work tasks and/or the demands of activism. This prevents women from being online, thus reducing the degree of their voice being heard.



On the other hand, the online space is already saturated with content, and this then begs the question of how much marginalised voices are being heard online. Just because a hashtag is being tweeted or used, does not mean that it has visibility or can gain traction. More insidiously, the use of hashtags can lose its origins or meaning, further eclipsing the real message behind it. A recent hashtag, ‘#ChallengeAccepted’ and ‘#WomenSupportingWomen’ unleashed a short-lived hashtag trend of women posting black and white photographs of them on Instagram and Twitter. As it turns out, the origins of these hashtags were traced to a Turkish NGO that intended to use the hashtag to raise awareness of femicide in Turkey (NPR, 2020). Insofar as the popularity of these hashtags was misguided, the real reason behind them did eventually come to light.

The above example is also linked to the phenomenon of “slacktivism”, a portmanteau between the words “slacker” and “activism” referring to the overall “willingness to participate in a relatively costless form of support for a social cause while displaying an unwillingness to participate in a relatively significant effort to said social cause” (Kristofferson et al., 2014, p.1149). Slacktivism, as antithesis to activism, reflects a “technology fetish” (Dean, 2009, cited in Chen et al., 2018, p.201) where technology plays a central role in supporting our desires to be seen as politically and socially engaged.

Slacktivism is also accused of oversimplifying complex issues by giving the impression that impact can be made with just one click. In the Twitter thread, @EmpowerMigWomen was quick to sign the petition by @FemMigrantsAct, tweeting, “We’re all on the same boat” and that “We need to change the status quo” (Figure 4.2). This reflects the “technology fetish” that happens “when disparate groups come together...[and] ignores the history and cultural significance of the situation and creates a false equivalence, reifying long-standing colonial and imperial attitudes about “others””(Khoja-Moolji, 2015, p.349). Khoja-Moolji was referring to the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls that gained worldwide popularity when 300 Nigerian schoolgirls were kidnapped. She had analysed how Western feminists pressured the US and Nigerian governments to take action to rescue the girls. According to her, this activism was based on a strong sense of solidarity brought by being in the same “intimate publics” which refers to the “affect of feeling political together”



(Berlant, 2011, p.224). Slacktivism can lead to an exaggeration of online action being enough to affect change.

In summary, the online space has provided feminism with a renewed sense of solidarity. It has given a platform for marginalised groups to project their voices and counter long-standing narratives about their agencies and identities. Nevertheless, there are tensions to be reconciled, and a starting point would be to view online feminism as performative, in that the online space tends to mirror the same power asymmetries that exist in offline feminism. Online feminism needs to take this dialogic relationship into account and offer remedies instead of brandishing it as a one-size-fits-all advocacy tool.



Chapter 5: Not the Summit, But Into the Wilderness

We began to climb the final steep rock line that ran to the ridgetop...the sustained steepness and heavy load played on me...In that moment, I felt a unusual sensation overcome me, akin to a new presence in my body. I began the long rappel. –

Junko Tabei

At this juncture, I realise that while I am far from the summit I have somehow reached a plateau of strange wilderness, where some parts offer pleasant walkthroughs with unparalleled views, and some parts are rocky and uneven – all of which I have to now traverse with care. Within this exploration, I make plans to make the way back to trail-head, depleted but somehow more prepared and determined for more agitations to come.

As I try to make sense of this entire thesis, I now come to a point where I must pointedly address my positionality in the roles I played, small or big, in online feminism, assembling this thesis and all the discourses it carries, and ultimately in the gender and development field. Within this chapter, I also go back to my research questions. To close the thesis, I weigh the opportunities and limitations of autoethnography as a methodology in researching representation.

In this thesis, I ventured to examine the performativity of online feminism. As a point of departure, I used feminist critical discourse analysis to examine the ideologies around voice and map its relation to online feminism, in that online feminism aims to “give voice” to the marginalised and the subaltern. Within this mapping, I argue that voice itself is performative and demonstrate how it manifests within the online space. Underlying this examination, I interrogate binaries and how they are enmeshed with power asymmetries which ultimately affects the performativity of voice. In analysing this performativity, I do not make a case for the effectiveness of online feminism. No doubt online activism is an important tool for feminists in today’s digital era, but my question seeks instead to understand the power dynamics at play within the online feminism space.

In this conclusion chapter, I will end my inquiry by briefly discussing my positionality as I undergo this autoethnography journey and address the inherent tensions that



are present within this methodology. Without a doubt, all development facilitators will need to negotiate the same degree of self-reflexivity (and more) that I was subject to in this process.

i. My Positionality

In grounding my positionality, I am reminded that the makings of this thesis are very much inspired by the works of feminists, Haraway (1990), Charania (2011) and Mohanty (1988), and their call to develop a theoretical framework that reflects the positionality of the researcher in the work. As Haraway urges, “how should one be positioned in order to see in this situation of tensions, resonances, transformations, resistances, and complicities?” (p.195). It also takes me back to my original question on positionality, ‘How do I position myself amidst this text? Does this positioning reflect power relations?’ I started the thesis with the intention to include interviews with migrant women activists to “give voice” to them, but I refrained from it because I did not want to reinforce the assumption that they do not have a voice nor did I want to make their the “subject” of the research. It also bears remembering that the inclusion of voice often benefits the researcher more than it does to the interviewee (Ashby, 2011).

In grounding my positionality, I have always been conscious of the privileged space I occupy, and this privilege is neither abstract nor overstated. To give another example, for my internship, I was paid €400 a month, which is a negligible amount by all accounts. But relative to many of my colleagues from the IDS course who come from the Global South and have challenging financial situations in France, they had taken unpaid internships. Unpaid internships are prevalent in the development sector, although it is hard to cite a statistic as this area is currently under-researched (Gerada, 2013). This trend is a huge irony and entirely contradictory to the work that the development sector does, which is to advocate for social justice. Unpaid internships ultimately create issues in the job labour market by preventing real jobs from being created and strongly intersects with social class because it strictly benefits those who have the means to be unpaid interns (Leonard, Halford & Bruce, 2016). Privilege begets privilege. This issue warrants deeper research into how unpaid internships impacts the dynamics and inherent power imbalances in the development sector.



Going back to my positionality within the texts presented, my influence on the direction and content of each material was clear as I was the sole author to each creation. Here I position myself as the creator, in control and having the authority to dictate discourse. As creator of my own materials, I wanted to embody the research more intentionally, to narrow the objective distance between the “data” and me. Through the performative texts, I also wanted to evoke the “messiness in representation” (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p.207), and argue that no feminist endeavor is completely free from power asymmetries.

ii. Carrying the “White Saviour” Burden: The Idea of Morality

While I am not a White woman, my middle-class position demands an exploration of my own politics of identity vis-à-vis my ambitions as a feminist facilitator. While it is hard to locate why I choose to work in this field, the culturegram provided a glimpse of insights to this motivation - perhaps it is a combination of growing up in a minority working class family, having to navigate structural inequalities and eventually harboring the desire to change the status quo.

Heron (1999) draws the link between women (specifically White women) and development, in that because women are seen to be “caring” and ‘selfless” - these supposedly intrinsic altruistic values are draws them/us to development work (p.77). Foucault (cited in Heron) defines morality as “set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of prescriptive agencies such as the family ... educational institutions, churches, and so forth”. (p.100). This sense of “morality” or the ‘White woman’s burden’ is a social construct that draws the line between the goodness, rationality and innocence of the “white bourgeois”, versus the Other.

As Heron so sharply highlights, it is this moral imperative that beckons us to see the Third world, or the Global South, as a site of intervention that Charania (2011) describes as “where learning about the global or working for social justice takes place (cited in Lahiri-Dutt 2016, p.2). Perhaps it is this very same moral imperative at work in my desire to seek justice for the intersectional discriminations faced by migrant women in Europe. This normalisation of morality, where the sense of altruism becomes a passport to the South



(Heron 1999), or in this case, to the marginalised, remains a critical issue to consider for me.

iii. Tensions Inherent in Autoethnography & Why It Needs to be a Development Methodology

For some, this thesis might read like an elaborate privilege-checking exercise that borrows fragments of power and social theories, interspersed with some creative personal writing, and neatly packaged as an academic paper. But before writing autoethnography off as a viable qualitative methodology altogether, I urge readers to consider autoethnography beyond its methodological practice, but also as a way of understanding our social world. In today's climate of identity politics and inequalities, having a framework to critically reflect on common assumptions about things, ideas and people is so crucial. And for those of us entering the development field, as a practitioner, academic or both, this reflexivity needs to be omnipresent in all that we do. Projecting this practice of self-reflexivity against the bleak backdrop of an ongoing pandemic that threatens to be around for a while, also provides a kind of awakening to critically understanding and challenging the exploitation that neoliberalism and patriarchy which have wrought upon our environments, food, social and political systems.

Autoethnography tests the limits of knowledge production, with purpose, and puts back the 'human' in human sciences. Proponents of autoethnography advocate it as a methodology that roots itself in a research approach that encourages the understanding of the selves in relation to others, to social and cultural forces and to the politics of research itself (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p.282). It defies the myth of research as objective and turns research on its head by revealing the inner workings of research, by making "connections from the ivory tower to the ground" (Dutta and Basu, 2013, p.146). It promises to bridge many binaries together, between the Self and the Other, between the personal and the political and between the science (ethnography) and the art (autoethnography). The process of assembling this ethnography has pushed me to consider my ethical and creative boundaries, sometimes teetering on the edge of an injurious cliff when the demands of reflexive writing becomes overwhelming.



In constructing this bridge of binaries, the self undergoes a severe process of negotiation, especially because this performative-I (mentioned in Chapter 3), “approaches the auto/ethnographic process/text as wreckage or rupture of linear concepts of meaning-making allowing fragments of experiences to be articulated and arranged in a collage or bricolage form” (p.341). The position of “performative-I” within autoethnography always takes into account that our perception of ourselves is in dialogic relation to our perception of the Other, at the same time acknowledging that binary-dependent perception is often unstable. In this thesis, as a starting point of analysis, I posit migrant women in Europe and female domestic workers in Singapore as the Others. But the process of locating the Self in relation to the Other, tensions and nervousness arise. As I examined the sources of this discomfort, I realise that I can ultimately use these emotions as a sensitising tool in my work and practice.

One of the tensions to rise from this process is that autoethnography in the various forms presented in this thesis, notably through performative writing and autobiography, relies heavily on imaginings of the Other to understand and situate the self, resulting in the Other being marginalised in the shadow (Trinh, 1991, cited in Spry, 2018). Indeed, one of the biggest critiques of autoethnography is the hyper self-reflexivity that focuses overtly on the self, resulting in positioning the researcher as a “confessional subject” (Burman, 1997, cited in Riley et al., 2003). One of the ways to overcome the centering of this privileged, confessional voice is to conduct autoethnography in a more collaborative manner, by including other authors/creators/voices as co-producers of feminist scholarly work. Autoethnography as kinesis can and should embody a practice that is governed by movement, dynamism and activism (Diversi & Moreira, 2009) and this cannot be achieved if there is only a sole author. I look forward to doing collaborative autoethnography in future if the opportunity presents itself to me.

The question of ethics in autoethnography is also a point to note. How can I be accountable for the representations in this thesis (and eventually on the field)? The beginnings of answering this question lie within what Spry (2018) calls “conditions of care” where the Other is engaged as having agency, and not framed as a subject serving the quest of positioning the self (p.1100). Admittedly, this has been a difficult dance to choreography from the position of privilege. I have struggled, within the limits of my praxis and theoretical



foundations, to “inappropriate” the Other by demonstrating their agency and identity, with care. However, I remain unsettled as to whether this is done with enough ethical consideration or whether it somehow emerged as a kind of *faux* reflexivity. Nevertheless, this has been an empowering, uncomfortable and transformative process, and I encourage many more in similar positions as I have to undergo the same journey of autoethnography.

Where do I/we go from here? How do we reach, as Diversi and Moreira (2009) explain, the “utopia of social justice and equality”? (p.221). I do not know, but maybe we can take it one autoethnography at a time.

~ End of Thesis ~



Annex: Feminist Resources on COVID-19

This is a list of online resources and perspectives about the gendered implications of COVID-19:

<https://www.feministcovidresponse.com/>

<https://www.covidgbvtracker.live/>

<https://www.mendeley.com/community/gender-and-covid-19/>

<https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/>

<https://www.mendeley.com/community/gender-and-covid-19/>

<https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-resources-on-the-pandemic>



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