Pain Generation
Social Media, Feminist Activism, and the Neoliberal Selfie

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Instructor’s Guide
Explores the perils and promise of feminist social media activism

Social media has become the front-and-center arena for feminist activism. Responding to and enacting the political potential of pain inflicted in acts of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse, Asian American and Asian Canadian feminist icons such as rupi kaur, Margaret Cho, and Mia Matsumiya have turned to social media to share their stories with the world. But how does such activism reconcile with the platforms on which it is being cultivated, when its radical messaging is at total odds with the neoliberal logic governing social media?

Pain Generation troubles this phenomenon by articulating a “neoliberal self(ie) gaze” through which these feminist activists see and storify the self on social media as “good” neoliberal subjects who are appealing, inspiring, and entertaining. This book offers a fresh perspective on feminist activism by demonstrating how the problematic neoliberal logic governing digital spaces like Instagram and Twitter limits the possibilities of how one might use social media for feminist activism.

(Note: If instructors adopt this book in their classes, the author would be happy to do a 30-45-minute Q&A with their students. Q&A does not involve a presentation/lecture from the author. The assumption is that students have already read (some chapters of) the book, and are ready to come to class with questions.)
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CHAPTER ONE

Questions for Discussion

- The author uses the metaphor of phantasmagoria to explain the affective and addictive nature of social media. Can you explain this concept in your own words? What other metaphors can you use to describe and better understand social media? How does coming up with a different metaphor allow you to engage with social media differently?

- How does the author define the neoliberal self(ie) gaze? How is this concept useful in understanding our practices and behaviors on social media? Is this a gendered and racialized gaze? How so?

- Have you ever turned to social media to help process your emotions? Have you witnessed your friends or families posted something on social media to help them process what happened to them? How is this experience different from sharing emotions on other forms of media, on the phone, or in person?

- What does it mean that racial oscillation allows us to understand Asian American racial category as “being marginalized, without being at the margin”? How does this understanding help us comprehend the flexibility of race at points of (social media) interaction?

- The author scrutinizes the underlying structure of social media and the social media campaigns that the feminists discussed in this book carried out. In particular, she focuses on neoliberalism. Can you identify other underlying structures of social media and how they limit and shape people’s practices, behavior, and activism in this digital space?

Suggested Activities

- Make a chart of your social media use for one entire day

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<tr>
<th>Login Time</th>
<th>Length of time</th>
<th>Platform visited</th>
<th>Describe activities you do</th>
<th>Your feelings before you login</th>
<th>Your feelings during your social media visit</th>
<th>Your feelings after your social media visit</th>
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- Analyze your activity. How long per day do you spend on social media? What do you usually do? Watch videos? Comment on others’ postings? What are the patterns or common feelings that you feel before you login to a particular social media platform? How do you usually feel during and after? What do
these feelings tell you about your social media practices and behaviors? What emotions usually drive you to go to these social media platforms? Does visiting certain platform make you happier, angrier, more inspired, more provoked, more annoyed than visiting other platforms? Why is that? Can you analyze the patterns of content on a specific social media and why you feel a certain way after visiting certain site? How does who you follow and who follows you matter or contribute to your emotions?

- Have an experiment where you do not login to your social media for one entire day. Pay attention to how you feel. Write a journal about all emotions you feel that day. Are there any differences? Do you feel better, worse? Can you be more specific about these emotions? Then, compare and contrast, how you feel on the day you go to social media, to the day that you didn’t. (If there's no difference, try spending a weekend without social media.) As the author points out, the book is intended to understand “social media’s capacity to allow us to process emotions (particularly, of pain) differently and shift the ways in which we experience that emotion.” How do you use social media to process your emotions and to do so differently? The point of the activity is not to say that social media is good or bad for you. It is to understand how social media influences how you feel, how it may generate certain emotions for you, and how social media functions, as the author argues, as a space of “affective simulation.” It is to understand the effects of social media as a space of affective simulation. What are these effects?

- Knowing and understanding that social media is a space of affective simulation, how can we engage with it more critically and consciously? How do we understand that ideologies operate through these emotions?
CHAPTER TWO

Questions for Discussion

• Go to rupi kaur’s Instagram account. Analyze the pattern of her postings. Are there any other techniques that kaur employs create phantasmagoria that the author did not talk about in her book? What are they? How do they contribute to kaur’s phantasmagoria?

• Explain in your own words what the author means by the concept “affect alienation.” Can you provide an example of “affect alienation” that you experience on social media? Why does it matter to understand affect alienation and its consequences? What is at stake? What happens if we use social media without understanding the concept of affect alienation? How does affect alienation impede feminist activism and efforts to achieve social justice?

Suggested Activities

• Find an Instagram account that most fascinates you. Identify the patterns of their postings. Do they embody the neoliberal self(ie) gaze? What techniques do they use to create phantasmagoria? If they do employ the neoliberal self(ie) gaze and/or create phantasmagoria, what other sides of this person/entity do you not see on social media? In other words, how does the neoliberal self(ie) gaze limit this person’s full/unlimited/nuanced expressions of themselves?

• Pretend that you are just being hired by a local feminist organization. You need to research that organization first, what it advocates, its history, etc. (If you can’t find one, you can use organizations such as Planned Parenthood or similar.) Your job is to increase their social media presence and visibility. What will you do? Will you adopt a neoliberal self(ie) gaze and create certain affective atmosphere? Will you do the exact opposite? Will you incorporate tips suggested in chapter 5? Will you come up with your own new techniques? Produce 10-20 images and captions for this new Instagram account that you create for this feminist organization. (You don’t have to use an actual Instagram account. You can use powerpoint or Word Document to create it.) Explain to the class the thought processes behind creating that Instagram account. (This activity can also be carried out in a group of 2-4 students.)
CHAPTER THREE

Questions for Discussion

• Explain the concept “the sharing economy of emotions” in your own words. How does having this concept/language allows us to better understand our online practices and investments in why and how we share emotions online in the way that we do?

• What does the author mean when she argues that “the emotion originally attached to the screenshot is changed and now acquires different (if more entertaining, spectacular, and polished) meanings”? How does emotion acquire more polished meanings? What are its purposes and ramifications? Who benefits?

• Can you provide an example of how emotion is never “raw” but always ideological? How does social media provide us with a different platform to experience and process emotion differently, and therefore to challenge or be complicit in dominant ideology differently?

• Have you or anyone you know experience online shaming or shaming others online? Does it work? Why? Why not? What other disciplinary techniques (other than online shaming) do people practice online? Which one should they practice? Should people be disciplined at all?

• Should social media platforms be held accountable for sexual harassment that happens on their site, or at least encouraged to provide mechanism that make it harder for people to sexually harass others on their platform? Should social media platforms make their users agree to the terms and conditions that for as long as they use their platforms, they cannot sexually harass, violate, abuse, or discriminate others? Why? Why not?

• What other mechanisms should social media platforms put in place to deter harassment and other forms of violence, other than the suggested “this is sexual harassment” button?

• Find a popular Asian American tiktoker, YouTuber, or Twitter celebrity. Does the person employ racial oscillation in any of their postings? Provide an example. What do they gain by performing racial oscillation? What does it allow them to do?

Suggested Activities

• Go to any one of your social media accounts. Analyze how you participate in the sharing economy of emotions. What forms does it take? Provide examples. How do you benefit (financially, emotionally, socially, culturally, etc.) from this sharing economy of emotions? If you don’t have any social media account, or you don’t feel comfortable analyzing your own social media account for this class, choose another person’s social media account.
CHAPTER FOUR

Questions for Discussion

- How is speaking up valued on Twitter? What kind of voice has more currency than others?
- How can #SilenceAsTestimony move us beyond silence and speaking up?
- Did you ever feel pressured to speak up on social media? What creates such pressures? Can you identify not only the people but also ideologies, structures, and discourses that create those pressures?
- What assumptions do we have about people who are silent on social media when there’s a big issue that everyone seems to be participating in (e.g., #MeToo)? Why are these assumptions problematic? How can we also focus on the structure/ecology rather than only on the people (i.e., why they did or didn’t do something on social media)?
- How does the revaluing of silence on social media provides us with new ways to embody feminist agency? What does it mean to consider silence as an expression of and a form of embodying feminist agency?
- How does neoliberal ideology shape how we think and make sense of what happens to us?

Suggested Activities

- Do a research on the history of social media. Which social media platform was first created, when, and what was its purposes? Which social media platforms survive and which didn’t? Why do you think that is? How do expressions of gender, sex/sexuality, and emotions contribute to the rise and fall of specific social media platforms?
- In a group of 4-6 students (or a class can be divided into two groups), identify the most pressing gender, and sexuality issue that the students at your college or the local people in your community experience. Identify what specific changes you’d like to see happening in regards to this issue. Create an online petition. Share the link on social media. After a week, analyze whether it was a success. Why or why not? What’s your definition of “success”?
- Create other hashtags that value silence other than #SilenceAsTestimony, yet highlights the structure of violence that creates that silence to begin with.
- Analyze a recent hashtag that exemplifies a feminist issue. (If you can’t find one, you can use the example of #MeToo.) Do a Twitter search on this hashtag, what are the common patterns that you find? What are the common words that kept coming up? Do they rely on the neoliberal self(ie) gaze? How? What are their strategies to make a change?
CHAPTER FIVE

Questions for Discussion

• In the wake of calling out and the cancel culture, Professor Loretta J. Ross at Smith College suggests that we turn to practicing “calling in” instead. This means that we call out the person “privately and with respect.” It involves “conversation, compassion, and context” (“What if Instead of Calling People Out, We call Them In?” by Jessica Bennett, November 19, 2020, New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html). What do you think of this solution? Is it problematic? Helpful? How is it different from a suggestion mentioned in chapter 5, that the person being called out respond by saying “Did I say anything else?” What is fundamentally different here? Where does the responsibility lie?

• How does vigilant eco-love practice provide us with an answer that goes beyond calling out, calling in, and the cancel culture?

• Can you think of other practices of social media activism that challenges the neoliberal self(ie) gaze?

• List social media and activism practices that you plan to and can actually do to bring us closer to social justice.

• How have feminist movements evolved from their first, second, and third wave ancestors? How does social media play a role in that evolution? How does social media reconfigure feminist movements? How does social media make the work of today’s feminist movements harder, easier, or different from the early movements? What stays the same, even with the new technology of the Internet?

• How does vigilant eco-love practice provide us with a language and space to critique and engage with other feminists in our communities in a more productive and loving way?

Suggested Activities

• Imagine that you are going to build a startup company of a social media platform that is compatible with feminism and does not rely on neoliberalism or neoliberal selfie gaze. Come up with an infographic, or a proposal, of what this new social media platform will look like and is about. What are all the features that it will have? Which features of it will support feminist activism on social media? How will it establish connections differently than existing social media platforms? Which feature will make it easier for people to participate in activism, not only online, but also in-person?

• Find a recent news about a famous person who was being called out for their racism/sexism/heterosexism/ageism etc. on Twitter, and analyze how that person responded to the callout? How could that person respond differently? Think about this through the conversations discussed in chapter 5.
CHAPTER SIX

Questions for Discussion

- What does love as an epistemic device mean? How does this apply to your own process of knowledge production, in your writing a paper for a class, or in your learning process in life in general?

- What activities do your friends, families, or followers on social media do that trouble you? How can you think more critically about this feeling and problematic issue? What do their practices and your feelings tell you about how ideologies (identify the specific ideology you’re referring to here) operate, and how power is maintained through these everyday practices?

- This book allows us to have a better understanding of social media feminist activism as a form of labor. In chapters 2-5, the author deconstructs how these feminists have to do various works to curate and create these postings. What does it mean to think of social media as a site of work? How does social media shift one’s relationship to activism and mode of production? What assumptions do we have about the labor associated with feminist activism? How does the technology of social media perpetuate or challenge those assumptions?

- How does the author’s argument that the underlying structure of social media limits feminist activism challenge dominant perceptions about social media and its powerful effects?

- How does this book allow you think about social media differently?

- What are the strategies that the author adopts in this book to engage with the case studies critically yet compassionately, embodying the tone that Krista Lynes (see back cover of the book) calls “passionately non-judgmental”?

Suggested Activities

- Come up with a fun activity that you can play on social media that does not indulge the neoliberal self(ie), and instead, highlight changes that need to happen with our ecology/community. For instance, on social media such as Facebook, people often play the game of tagging someone and asking them to “Name 10 of your favorite books” or “Show an image of you in black and white to honor the victims of . . .”. Instead of doing these kinds of activities that embody the neoliberal self(ie) gaze, can you think of a different activity that is fun, but does not rely on perpetuating the neoliberal self(ie) gaze? After you post the game, analyze people’s reactions to it. Do people tend to participate in the game? Why do you think they do/don’t?

- Create a meme that is fun, funny, and feminist to highlight an important social
justice issue. Make sure it does not perpetuate and instead challenge racist, hereto/sexist, ageist, ableist stereotypes. How hard/easy is it? Why?

Note: Before sharing any of the activities or assignments with the public on social media, please ask the students to share their drafts with the instructors first. The call-out culture on social media can indeed be traumatizing and unforgiving. It is best that students do not experience them during their first participation in online feminist activism, as to not discourage them from doing these forms of activism in the future. Certainly, there may be students who are already savvy with doing online activism. It is my experience that the students who come to my class have various backgrounds and different levels of engagement prior to entering my classroom. I’d prefer to err on the side of caution and encouragement, rather than chaos and unnecessarily trauma. It is also always a good idea to cultivate a practice of consulting with others prior to publishing anything, on social media or beyond.