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Aristea Fotopoulou

Feminist Activism and Digital Networks

Between Empowerment and Vulnerability

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PROLOGUE

This book is about digital networks, feminist networks and the spaces in between. It is about nodes and bonds, ties and knots, threads and loops, the things that connect us and those that break us. It is a book about politics and its attachments, about the materiality of affect and everyday practices and about the importance of social life and friendship. It is about gendered bodies that sweat, move and sigh, bodies that type, click and labour in front of a screen, bodies that get angry, get disappointed and have hopes. Above all, this book is about contradiction and tension, empowerment and vulnerability.

It is also a book about continuity and change. It started as a Ph.D. research project and transformed into a book, with a few years' pause. Many things changed in digital media during this pause; I bought a smartphone and used a fitness wearable device; social media sparked revolutions; airbnb became a verb. And suddenly, we were postdigital. I am aware that linear time is not friends with research about technological change. But like bodies, ideas too need to breathe and stretch. They stretch deeper in the past, to what it felt like to be the 8-year-old girl who coded with BASIC in 1983, to get connected to BBS in 1987; to partition your hard drive in 1993 and set up webpages just for fun in 1996. For this feminist geek, by 1999, the internet had lost its novelty, but the social transformations of the digital were just starting to unravel.

From subjective experience to performative moment, this book is an enactment of connections and relations. I am indebted to the activists and research participants who shared their stories and time with me, most of whom will remain anonymous: Beatrix Campbell, Carry Hamilton, Anna

van Heeswijk, Katrin Jacobs, Finn Mackay, Rebecca Morden, Susie Orbach and Lizzie Thynne. I am also thankful to the Brighton Ourstory project for access to their important archive of local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) history.

I am deeply grateful to many colleagues and friends for discussing some of the ideas that appear in this book. Special thanks to Caroline Bassett and Kate O’Riordan, my thesis supervisors, and my viva voce examiners Sally Munt and Sarah Kember. Many of the arguments in this book are around sustaining feminist knowledge in digital media, which I explored further in the research project Susnet (Sustaining Networked Knowledge: Expertise, Feminist Media Production), which was supported by the EPSRC Digital Economy Communities and Culture Network. Susnet culminated to the conference Queer Feminist and Social Media Praxis, which I organised with the support of the Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, and with the help of Cynthia Weber, Laura Sjoberg and Heidi Hudson, from the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. I am indebted to my co-editors Alex Juhasz and Kate O’Riordan of the special issue of *ADA: Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology*, entitled Queer, Feminist Media Praxis, to all the contributing authors and to the FemBot Collective for many inspiring exchanges. I would like to acknowledge the influence of my colleagues at the Sociology Department in Lancaster University, despite the shortness of my stay there, especially Debra Ferreday, Anne Marie Fortier, Maureen McNeill and Imogen Tyler. My thinking has also been shaped by the fascinating discussions I had with scholars in the Centre for Cultural Studies, History of Consciousness, and Science and Justice, during my visiting fellowship at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I am indebted to many colleagues in the field for their intellectual engagement, particularly in the conferences of Feminist and Women’s Studies Association (FWSA), and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). I would especially like to acknowledge Nick Couldry’s deep influence on my writing and thinking about the social. During my postdoc at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and after, he has acted as an important mentor. My new intellectual home, the University of Brighton, has provided me with an environment of collegiality, essential for completing the manuscript of the book. I am particularly grateful to Ryan Burns and Paula Hearsom for their flexibility and support. I would also like to thank Irene Fubara-Manuel and Leteris

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Some of the material in this book has appeared in other forms: a version of [Chapter 2](#) was originally published in *New Media & Society* in 2014; some material from [Chapter 3](#) has been published in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 17 (3–4), 253–266; and a very early and quite different version of [Chapter 5](#) has been published in the ECREA book *Communicative approaches to politics and ethics in Europe*, edited by Nico Carpentier et al. (2009).

Finally, my greatest thanks goes to my family. Georgia and Demos Fotopoulos have always encouraged me to walk my own path. My brother Charis, who told me bedtime stories about Silicon Valley and taught me how to fight back, will never read this book, but it would make him glad, I am sure. I honour him in every single page of this book. I am infinitely thankful to Hilde C. Stephansen, who has tirelessly read and edited. Her grammar purism and critical intellectual comments have greatly benefited this book. She has supported me generously in so many precious ways during the time it took me to complete this book and has always been there. I am grateful to have you in my life. And my son Erik Demos has been patient with me while I worked weekends for this book, and has made this world joyful. Thank you.

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