

Reflections on Celebrity Feminism

Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs

University of Salford

In recent years, the circulation of feminism via celebrity culture is a curious beast. It has in some ways, democratized feminism, allowing a metaphorical opening up of the concept and its associated practices to those who may not have encountered it if was it not for a particular celebrity claiming the term and issuing calls to redress gender inequalities.

There have been several impactful moments that have brought feminism to mass audiences via the precarious vehicle of celebrity in recent years. Two stand out and have received mass publicity. Singer Beyoncé's hugely publicized 2014 MTV Video Music Awards performance where she appeared on stage with the word 'feminist' illuminated in oversized lettering behind her, after excerpted words from Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2014) now much reproduced *We Should All Be Feminists* speech accompanied her performance. In the same year, actress Emma Watson, in her capacity as United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador, garnered comparable levels of publicity following her delivery of a speech on gender equality to launch the UN's #HeForShe Twitter solidarity campaign. The #HeForShe campaign aimed to make men consider gender equality as also their issue, and Watson extended a very public "formal invitation" to men to do so.

Both moments and many more since, indicated that discursive struggles over the meanings of feminism are now, perhaps more than ever, largely staged in and through popular culture. Given that celebrity interventions into ongoing debates over feminism have recently intensified, celebrity scholars are seeking to come to terms with the ideological and cultural implications of these publicly staged discursive contests. As much as this democratization through celebrity culture has provided new opportunities for debate and allowed a new

generation to engage with feminist issues, it is also important to sound a note of caution regarding how valid the potential entry points into feminist thinking offered up by these celebrities actually are. We must on the one hand, be cautious of the popular media's engagement with feminism, and of individual 'celebrity feminists' in particular. However, when thinking through the complicated nexus of feminism and celebrity, it is important not to simply re-inscribe familiar critiques that presume this relationship to be inherently negative for feminist politics, and to recognise that there is no authentic fame driven feminism that exists beyond its celebrity manifestations.

Mainstream celebrity feminism is certainly characterized by a pronounced whiteness, something that has, interestingly, been recently disrupted by figures like Beyoncé with the release of the music video for the song *Formation*. This video presents powerful political and radical imagery that was clearly conceived to create a conversation and to challenge ideas about black women, black feminism and self-representation. Here Beyoncé presented a challenge to the ways in which black women are often portrayed in the mainstream. Her take on Southern black female pride and defiance has rarely been seen in popular culture.

Debate that ensued from these particular cultural moments reveal little or no consensus on feminism among celebrities and their critics (what it is, what it should be, what is at stake for celebrities in self-identifying as feminists or not), and are reminiscent of the backlash discourses of millennial post-feminism. What comes to be made available as 'feminism' in popular culture including via the realm of celebrity culture, requires further, much more nuanced critical thought. Indeed, celebrity feminism certainly needs to attend to how feminism and celebrity culture (and media culture more broadly) necessarily intersect in ways that may be at once productive and unproductive, with both constraints and possibilities.

Works Cited

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Author biography

Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs is Senior Lecturer of Media and Performance in the Schools of Arts and Media at University of Salford, Manchester (UK). Her research covers an inter-disciplinary field

across cultural studies, media studies and film studies, with a particular focus on representations of female celebrity and stardom, stand-up comedy and gender, music video and representations of female sexuality, and gender and the contemporary Hollywood film industry. Some of her most recent work include *Beyoncé: Celebrity, Feminism and Pop Culture* (I.B Tauris, 2016) and the co-edition of *Music/Video: Forms, Aesthetics, Media* (Bloomsbury, 2016), *The Arena Concert: Music, Media and Mass Entertainment* (Bloomsbury, 2015) and *Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop* (Routledge, 2013).