

Feminists on Facebook: an Ontology of Assemblages for Digital Platforms of Resistance

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In this paper, titled “Feminists on Facebook,” I will argue that the current social media environment is counterproductive for lesbian-feminist activists, especially as privately-owned platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google increasingly function solely to enrich the capitalist-hetero-patriarchically wealthy, antithetical to feminist ideals. From my perspective as a librarian and information-scientist with a background in theology, LGBTQ and gender studies, I will elaborate on the ontology of data science, how anti-feminist aspects of privately-owned social media affect users’ emotionality and social structures. Lastly, I will draw upon Jasbir Puar’s framework of queer “assemblages” while offering social, technological, and perhaps theological solutions. Ultimately I will aim to push this discourse towards an ontological theology of assemblages directed at resistance activism in the digital space.

At the 2017 American Academy of Religion Conference, within this Lesbian-Feminisms and Religion group, the question was posed that if the lesbian bar is dead, should *activism* be our new space for community?² Discussions of “lesbian space” increasingly center activism, while feminist activism moves increasingly towards using social media platforms to foster what Paulo

¹ This is the version for print. The version of this paper to be read aloud will be shortened and edited for auditory clarity.

² Anjeanette LeBoeuf, “Space, Location, Resistance, and Lesbians” presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (Boston, MA: November 2017).

Gerbaudo calls a “choreography of assembly.”³ That is, concrete collective action, choreographed over privately-owned social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

As the author of this paper and a queer-identified gender-nonconforming lesbian feminist, I will now make it an explicit point to identify my personal viewpoint and biases in my approach. This paper is written from my point-of-view as a librarian situated at the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary and within the Columbia University Libraries. Union is a progressive non-denominational seminary whose students ground their studies in liberation theology with community organizing, grassroots activism, and faith-based justice work in an interreligious though predominantly Christian context. I teach information literacy and research methods in the seminary setting and in the wider university. One of my responsibilities as a librarian is to promote critical evaluation of authority, credibility, and editorial purpose.

Stemming from the idea of “the lesbian as a space for revolution,”⁴ it can be argued that lesbian-feminist identity and collective feminist spirituality have become catalysts for activism in the current political climate, in defining an engaged feminism as that which stands up to resist the ways in which male power dominates and renders women subservient and lesbians invisible, and against continued devaluation and sexual violence waged against women of color, transgender and transfeminine persons especially. Clearly, engaged feminism is flourishing in the digital space;⁵ the #MeToo movement has drawn attention to enduring gender inequality as well as deep feminist networks, especially among young people online, who had once been

³ Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets : Social Media and Contemporary Activism* / (London : New York : Pluto Press ; Distributed in the United States of America exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5.

⁴ To note: this author raised objections at the 2017 American Academy of Religion conference in the Lesbian Feminisms and Religion group (the theme of which was “The Lesbian as a Space for Revolution in Communities, Organizations, and Politics”), during the discussion of using digital social media platforms for the resistance, citing the potentially harmful uses of data by privately-owned companies and the potential detriments to the feminist movement in general; this, in fact, was months before the now-infamous Cambridge Analytica scandal became public, the aftermath of which made composing this paper a chronological challenge over the course of the year leading up to its presentation at the 2018 conference.

⁵ Kumarini Silva and Kaitlynn Mendes, eds., *Feminist Erasures: Challenging Backlash Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

thought to have abandoned feminism.⁶ Alison Dahl Crossley has called online versions of feminist organizing “Facebook Feminism,” and studies digital feminism among college students who use Facebook “to advertise events, create community, and further their feminist campaigns,” and “to set up boundaries between feminists and non-feminists, to facilitate social justice conversations, and to disseminate feminist news articles and blog posts.”⁷ Facebook, she writes, is often used as a site to establish boundaries, often through confrontation and conflict. Sarah Ahmed’s framework of the “feminist killjoy” resonates here, defined as “the one who speaks as a feminist, usually heard as the cause of the argument. She stops the smooth flow of communication. It becomes tense. She makes things tense,” in summary, she kills joy.⁸ One could argue that the figure of the feminist killjoy is seen in everyday life on social media, and is an identity that many come to inhabit at some point or other on platforms that encourage conflict.

As a platform used for feminist discourse, Facebook was where the majority of the conversation in the #MeToo movement occurred,⁹ in addition to other powerful anti-violence hashtags started by women of color that came before #MeToo, such as #YesAllWomen and #WhatWereYouWearing.¹⁰ It is tempting to lift up these powerful stories of viral discursive threads as sites of resistance online; we may cite our ability to create dialogue and choreograph

⁶ Alison Dahl Crossley, *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 37.

⁹ To summarize the events of this movement, in early October of 2017, the *New York Times* broke the story of several women accusing Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. Ten days later, actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter (colloquially, she “tweeted”) that “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” In the first 24 hours after Milano’s tweet, #MeToo had been posted over 12 million times on Facebook. For more on this see Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017.

¹⁰ Some have criticized popular narratives of the origins of the #MeToo movement for “whitewashing” and crediting Alyssa Milano unduly with the creation of the phrase; the name “Me Too” was incidentally the name of an organization started by Tarana Burke (who is black) in 2007 to help victims of sexual harassment and assault. Giving credit where credit is due on the subject of hashtags originating from black women, the #YesAllWomen hashtag started around 2014 when the #WhatWereYouWearing movement was started by Christine Fox, and black activist Feminista Jones created the #YouOkSis hashtag in 2014 as a movement to center awareness of, and promote interventions against, street harassment experienced by black women specifically. For more see Margaret Renkl, “The Raw Power of #MeToo,” *The New York Times, International Edition; New York*, October 22, 2017, Opinion section.

marches, and indeed, social media can be useful for generating connection and coordinating resistance efforts. I would add, though, that it is also important to weigh these benefits against due concern for the conflicting interests of private companies in a market-driven, male-dominated, competitive technology sector.

I believe there are many anti-feminist aspects to these tech companies that should be concerning to feminists, theologians, and activists. Again, the aspects of social media platforms at issue in this paper are information-sharing and the coordination of faith-based and grassroots resistance-mobilization efforts. The over-arching lens framing this analysis will be a feminist and anti-capitalist one. By way of an example, Nancy Fraser has called for feminism as a social movement to focus on the issue of “the evisceration of democracy and the assault on social reproduction now being waged by finance capital,” calling for feminism to join with anti-capitalist forces to address “questions of how emancipatory struggles expand political agency when ‘territorial states’ are no longer the borders of power.”¹¹ Rather than territorial states and governments, indeed, it is quickly becoming these tech giants who control worldwide economic and public forces.

Among these social media platforms, the sheer size and magnitude of Facebook as a tool of finance capital is one reason to focus on this platform, over and above other major platforms such as Twitter. Facebook is the largest existing social media company, with over 2.2 billion active users -- more than a quarter of the world’s 7.4 billion people.¹² By contrast, Twitter, while still gigantic, has far fewer users, only 350 million. One reason for Facebook’s disproportionate size has been attributed to its Free Basics service offered in some countries, where use of the Facebook app does not count against users’ cellular data plans-- effectively, Facebook wields

¹¹ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013), 5.

¹² “Facebook Users Worldwide 2018,” *Statista*, accessed September 26, 2018.

monopolistic control over the internet in many countries where the internet is accessed solely by mobile phone. Among the seven most-used social media platforms, the Facebook company owns four -- Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram.¹³ It is a far more influential communication platform than some may realize. Next I will describe the social media environment of Facebook and argue that such companies' capitalization on the rampant spread of misinformation, occurring as it does in a dynamically polarized social landscape, is antithetical to the goals of feminist organizing and should be opposed by those doing justice work in the digital space.

Facebook, in the narrative of its misogynistic origins in academia familiar to those who have watched the film *The Social Network*, was created by a Harvard student named Mark Zuckerberg. Originally it was created as a tool to view and rate photographs of female Harvard classmates. The platform grew and became available first to any college student, then for any individual over the age of 13, then entire organizations, to create profiles for themselves and link to one another through "Friending" or "Following." Users can create Groups and coordinate Events, and content is shared through what is called a News Feed which consists of the posts by one's Friends and connections. Friends can react to each other's posts by clicking them and selecting a reaction--Like or Love, or emotional face icons showing anger, crying, etc. Posts can be original compositions of words, images and videos, or they can be linked to content that already exists online, as when a user shares a news article, video, or website in a post.

The troubling thing is that the more a post is clicked, the more visible it becomes, and on private web platforms, every click is tracked and sold for advertising revenue, in the interest of generating more and more clicks. Web companies like Facebook and Google use digital files

¹³ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects US and Undermines Democracy* (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2018), 102.

called “cookies” to monitor user “engagement” such as clicks, hitting the “Like” button, and comments. Websites tailor what users see online based on their demonstrated interests, and what they most frequently engage with. For example, if you are thinking of travelling to Denver, perhaps you look up prices on a Denver hotel. Now you have a cookie on your computer that indicates you are probably going to Denver. Next time you log on, your web browser sends that cookie’s information to an automated digital advertising auction, and a few seconds later, an ad company has purchased the right to place ads for Denver sightseeing and car rental companies on your screen.¹⁴ This same technology used for targeting ads is used in ordering the content shown in users’ News Feeds. Facebook orders content based on the likelihood of each post to generate clicks, likes, and even dislikes. This is a concern for information-scientists, because Facebook is the largest conduit of journalism in the U.S., and users have increasingly less agency in what information they are able to view. According to one recent Pew study, the majority of American adults (67%) get some of their news from social media,¹⁵ and another study showed that Facebook is the primary news source for at least 44% of Americans.¹⁶

The visibility of content is determined by its clickability rather than its quality. Users are only shown content tailored to their interests and beliefs. As countless confirmation-bias studies have shown, users will increasingly gravitate towards content that satisfies those interests and confirms those beliefs, until their informational sphere is completely separate from that of those with opposing views. Political “Unfriending” and “Defriending” (decoupling the link between two users on Facebook) has become a norm among those who, like Sarah Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy,” argue and debate publically with those whose views on race, sexuality, and

¹⁴ Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 161.

¹⁵ Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017,” *Pew Research Center*, Journalism and Media Section (September 7, 2017), cited in Vaidhyanathan, 97.

¹⁶ Jonathan T. Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy*, First edition (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), 4.

gender differ from theirs, even to the point of separation or break.¹⁷ Eli Pariser, the board president of MoveOn.org, coined the term “filter bubbles” to describe the narrowing of one’s informational tunnel vision on social media platforms.¹⁸ This splitting of informational spheres has led to a bifurcation in U.S. society by belief in what constitutes factuality -- essentially an epistemological rendering-asunder.

On both sides of this bifurcation have been colloquial accusations of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” However, engagement-driven information feeds have been shown to increase the spread of false rumors; an investigative study by BuzzFeed editors in Canada showed that, in late 2016, articles with investigative reporting received fewer clicks on Facebook than articles containing misinformation -- that is, information that has been debunked by nonpartisan fact-checking groups.¹⁹ Media scholars such as Caroline Jack use the term “disinformation” for news which is deliberately false or misleading.²⁰ This has arguably led to a rise in authoritarian and populist governments in countries where Facebook is a primary source of information.²¹ Emotionally powerful stories drive up clicks and engagements, which in turn create more profit for Facebook. Sensationalist rhetoric abounds on social media, and it has been shown that disinformation²² and xenophobic hate speech has led to a rise in authoritarian governments,

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 194.

¹⁸ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Craig Silberman, “This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook,” BuzzFeed News, accessed September 22, 2018.

²⁰ Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information,” *Data & Society* (blog), accessed September 22, 2018.

²¹ Facebook has been linked to the rise of authoritarian leadership in parts of the world where its “Free Basics” service operates. Free Basics provides use of the Facebook app for free, without counting against one’s cellular data plan-- this has become immensely popular in countries where low-cost mobile phones are the primary source of information-sharing, and data plans charge for every text and post users transmit to one another. For example, Free Basics was operating in Myanmar, the spread of rampant disinformation undoubtedly contributed to sentiments against Rohingya Muslims that led to genocide; Facebook withdrew Free Basics from Myanmar this past May, but Free Basics still exists today in Kenya, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and several other countries. This is not to claim that the U.S. is exceptional, or to juxtapose our communications laws against those of the countries just mentioned; on the contrary, with the expiration of net neutrality rules in our current political climate, it remains to be seen in what direction our information infrastructure will begin to tilt in the years to come. For more on this see Vaidhyathan 190, and Kevin Roose, “Forget Washington. Facebook’s Problems Abroad Are Far More Disturbing.,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018.

²² Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information,” *Data & Society* (blog), accessed September 22, 2018.

racialized violence, and populist violent uprisings, in countries such as Myanmar and India where Facebook is a primary source of information via its Free Basics service, the United States being no exception-- it is crucial that we not exceptionalize users in the U.S. as free and inculpable from social media violence. Emotionally powerful stories around the world drive up clicks and engagements, which in turn yield Facebook profits, in a cycle of violence in which U.S. users may be more complicit than we might imagine.

Navigating the emotion-driven landscape of social media is a deeply feminist issue. Social communication companies organize and separate different groups of audiences by demographics and geographics, but also through something called *psychographics*, which are algorithm-driven principles to predict a user's personality and feelings.²³ Users who post about the same subjects -- such as #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo -- are psychographically studied, profiled, and targeted with stories, videos, and posts that are likely to provoke engagement. Simultaneously, those who continuously engage negatively with such users can then be targeted with anti-BlackLivesMatter and anti-MeToo content designed to provoke them in turn.²⁴

Psychographics work by targeting users based on their emotions, which increasingly has an effect on the political process both within and outside the United States. For example, during the 2016 Presidential race, the Republican campaign firm Cambridge Analytica was hired to conduct psychographic research and succeeded in the illegal recording of the data of up to 87 million people, in the interest of targeting right-wing voters with pro-right-wing ads, and

²³ Vaidhyanathan, 151.

²⁴ Lanier, 118.

left-wing voters with negative ads designed to suppress their voter turnout.²⁵ At the same time, an organization in St Petersburg, Russia called the Internet Research Agency was manufacturing social media profiles independent of actual users, and creating fake accounts to promote content. One of these was the fake user “Blacktivist,” who created and promoted actual events, had more followers than Black Lives Matter,²⁶ and whose friends (and enemies) were monitored and targeted with engagement-driven content.²⁷ Other fake user accounts spread false information encouraging voters to stay home on election day and text or tweet their votes rather than going to the polls.²⁸ Whether or not the Internet Research Agency operated in conjunction with Russian or American heads of state, a fact that remains elusive to this day, political scientists have weighed in that these social media accounts undoubtedly contributed to the results of the 2016 election.

The clandestine quality and elusive nature of these issues remains a troubling concern in terms of privacy; there is no accountability for private platforms to disclose the nature of their

²⁵ Carole Cadwalladr, writing for *The Guardian*, provided the most extensive journalistic coverage of Cambridge Analytica and its effects on the 2016 Presidential Election: what follows is an abridged timeline of events, to the best of the author’s understanding. Long before the election, Christopher Wylie, a gay* Canadian computer programmer, read a paper by Kosinski and Stillwell at Cambridge, in which they coined a psychographic principle called the OCEAN model, to chart online behavior by five characteristics: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Wylie read that liberalism is correlated with high openness and conscientiousness. Later he got involved with doing tech for the SCL Group, a defense contractor for hire by election campaigns, which advertises expertise in “psychological operations” or “psy-ops.” The SCL Group is the parent company of Cambridge Analytica, the company hired by leaders of now-president Donald Trump’s election campaign, which under Wylie’s tech leadership used the OCEAN model to target users with political messages. Among other targeting efforts, Cambridge Analytica used an app called thisismydigitallife that collected the data of both its users and all of their friends and networks, up to 87 million people, and shared that data with experts working for the Trump Campaign to target political messages. Cambridge Analytica used the data not just to target likely pro-Trump voters, but also to target likely liberal voters and discourage them from voting (e.g. showing liberals a story (ad) about Clinton that would dissuade lefties from going to the polls. For more on this see Carole Cadwalladr, “‘I Made Steve Bannon’s Psychological Warfare Tool’: Meet the Data War Whistleblower,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2018. See also Cecilia Kang and Sheera Frenkel, “Facebook Says Cambridge Analytica Harvested Data of Up to 87 Million Users,” *The New York Times, International Edition; New York*, April 5, 2018. See also Vaidhyanathan, 171).

*See Michelangelo Signorile (Huffington Post, 3/20/2018). When gayness is harnessed by tech corporations to target group identities and monetize those groupings, the perceived fashionability of the gay lifestyle is linked to neoliberal finance capital in anti-feminist ways. See also Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013).

²⁶ Jane Mayer, “How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump,” *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2018.

²⁷ Vaidhyanathan, 88

²⁸ Kurt Wagner, “These Are Some Tweets and Facebook Ads Russia Used to Try and Influence the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Recode*, October 31, 2017.

algorithms and architecture. Facebook can invisibly run programs such as a “sentiment analysis” categorizing positive and negative emotions of individual posts and photos, and can manipulate the visibility of positive and negative content tailored to individual users, without notifying users it is doing so.²⁹ Facebook is also capable of eavesdropping on ambient noise whenever the app is open on your mobile device, feeding this noise into artificially-intelligent transcription software, and recording what you say and even where you are and who else is with you.^{30,31} Proprietary algorithms are stored in the hands of private corporations, in the case of Facebook solely owned and operated by a single man, Mark Zuckerberg, and there is little to no accountability to users in terms of how data is stored and sold.³²

Free online information-sharing does indeed have some positive aspects, from an intersectional feminist point of view; for instance, marginalized voices have a free platform for publishing and promoting content that otherwise might go unseen. On the other hand, while Facebook is indeed free to use, some have argued that its users are better thought of not as users but as a worldwide *unpaid labor force*. Information scientists have indeed coined the term “Data as Labor” to describe the system in which users’ time spent posting and clicking on things (which creates data that is then sold for advertising revenue) *exponentially* increases the value of privately-owned tech corporations -- making profits for the owners that the users never reap.³³ Women in professional fields, often charged with interpersonal labor such as social media presence, may indeed constitute an unpaid workforce, unknowingly manufacturing data products for Facebook.

²⁹ Galloway, *The Four*, 102.

³⁰ Mike Murphy, “Here’s How to Stop Facebook from Listening to You on Your Phone,” Quartz, accessed September 11, 2018.

³¹ Anecdotally, while I know that I saw an ad in my News Feed for an LGBTQ psychological practice *the day after* I was discussing, in person with a friend, my interest in finding a new therapist with an LGBTQ focus, I have no way of tracing whether and how Facebook was able to target that ad to me based on our spoken conversation, aside from the fact that I had not been doing any research on the web, having only my browser history to anchor my sanity against this technological gaslighting.

³² Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 201; Lanier, *Ten Arguments*, 86-91.

³³ Lanier, 106-117.

Moreover, this extends beyond users alone; even if one does not use Facebook, a friend or colleague who *does* might have uploaded one's name, address, and anything else in their contact file to Facebook when using the app.³⁴ In this way, even offline users are being tracked as data points; one is performing unpaid labor for Facebook, even if one has never used it oneself.

As I had previously said, the use of Facebook to promote the work of women writers and academics, and to choreograph movements and assemblies, can be of great value to organizers online; however, more clicks and engagements through feminists' labor currently means more money for Mark Zuckerberg and others in Silicon Valley, and I would argue that it would be in the collective interest of women to claim the profits of our own data-labor -- not only for those of us who use social media platforms regularly, but also for those who don't, whose liberation struggles are bound up with ours. In thinking about how the digital platforms most commonly used for resistance organizing function to connect and disconnect us, we can imagine this as our current epistemological social framework, and begin to question how a different sort of ontology might serve us better in the long run, alongside practical technological solutions for communication and organizing ourselves along such ontological lines, and choreographing our resistance in productive ways. Moving towards a decentralized model of digital links, I will next examine these issues through the lens of Jasbir Puar's ideation of the Deleuzean assemblage, which may be a helpful framework -- especially as we begin to interrogate its implications for feminist activism and organizing online.

But first, in case the audience is curious as to this author's recommended technology solutions, here are a few practical solutions to the problem of the patriarchal capitalist surveillance data tracking. Among the most difficult long-term actions to take is for users to quit everything. Delete accounts on Facebook (and Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram), quit using

³⁴ Vaidhyanathan, 61.

Google, Gmail, and YouTube, quit Twitter, and quit using these platforms' login info to log on to other sites, apps, and platforms. Dropping them even for a while sends a message. If dropping them is not an option, we must collaborate and organize to collectively demand major changes in the way our data is used and sold. For starters, we must demand payment for the use of our data. User data is so valuable that tech experts have suggested one possible way of redistributing the power and value of private platforms would be for users to form a kind of data union, collectively claiming their right to unambiguously own and profit off the use of their data.³⁵ I want to own my data and even get paid for it, not be used as uncompensated labor. We must demand that companies like Facebook be broken-up and formed into user-run collectives and cooperatives.³⁶ We can demand that social media be made decentralized, without invisible monetized nodes and without engagement-driven visibility. At the very least we can insist on tech oligarchs' increasing their philanthropy and directing funds towards libraries, information-literacy campaigns, and the use of truly free internet browsing for the sake of a freer democracy and a free press, and definitely the elimination of the "Free Basics" service.

On the everyday practical level, users can refer to the Do-It-Yourself Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity by the hacker-activist Hackblossom,³⁷ which includes tips on installing cookie-blocking browser plugins, using fake email accounts and virtual private networks or VPN's, and encrypting one's hard drive. Feminists can also subscribe to and pay for news journalism, and go to news sites directly, not through social media platforms via posts and tweets. Ideally, we may consider organizing feminist-hackers to make inroads into creating our

³⁵ Kevin Roose, "Can Social Media Be Saved?," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2018.

³⁶ Roose, "Can Social Media Be Saved?" 2018.

³⁷ Hackblossom, "DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity," accessed November 2018, <https://hackblossom.org/cybersecurity>

own social networks. Organizers, activists, women, girls, and trans* and gender-nonconforming folk can learn to create our own servers to host decentralized nodes of connection.

We must move away from privately-owned monolithic tech platforms in the ways we connect with one another and disseminate information, challenge demographic and psychographic tracking, and combat the capitalization of our innermost thoughts and feelings. If, indeed, we begin to move towards small individual or collectively-owned independent platforms, what ontological implications might there be for the ways in which we connect and grow our social bonds, both digitally and materially? Here one might turn to the Deleuzian frameworks of Jasbir Puar, in this ontological analysis.

Jasbir Puar uses the framework of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages³⁸ in her work, particularly in her book *Terrorist Assemblages*, to theorize race and sexuality as nonlinear ontological paradigms (as opposed to binary political frameworks that privilege hierarchical thinking and enmity).³⁹ This groundbreaking work has long been recognized in its applicability to theologizing and the study of religion; at the American Academy of Religion conference in 2011, a session dedicated to Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* featured a discussion on the importance of assemblage work. Melissa Wilcox wrote that, "Within the study of religion, the assemblage might be useful not simply as a way of elaborating ritual practice, but also as a way of seriously approaching the multiple effects of power that religion carries, expresses, and is subject to."⁴⁰ Perry writes extensively on assemblage theory's implications for political theology,

³⁸ See "Introduction: Rhizome" in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 1-25.

³⁹ In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar opposes racism and what she calls "homonationalism," a nationalism constructed through neoliberal capitalist frameworks that privilege certain [white, middle-class] forms of homosexuality, and through a false construct of "U.S. sexual exceptionalism" in international relations. She constructs the queerness of the perceived terrorist body to resist "queerness-as-sexual-identity" in favor of "spatial, temporal, and corporeal convergences, implosions, and rearrangements." *Terrorist Assemblages*, 204.

⁴⁰ Melissa M. Wilcox, "Introduction: Terrorist Assemblages Meets the Study of Religion," *Culture and Religion* 15, no. 2 (April 3, 2014), 156.

highlighting Puar's insistence on a move toward affective politics in political organizing, and suggest adopting an affective approach for queer theologies, too, "based not in static identitarian terms, but in the movement and sensation of bodies and their relations to other bodies."⁴¹ Perry hopes that "queer theologians might begin to think differently about what constitutes community and collectivity for queer people, whoever they may be, in the face of biopolitical control that divides bodies into those worthy of life and those destined for death..."⁴²

Puar's poetic language frames the Deleuzian assemblage as "a series of dispersed but mutually implicated networks" that "draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect."⁴³ This is particularly applicable to the tech solution of feminist hacking cited above, of creating multiple small, independently hosted, linked digital platforms in co-operative structures, rather than using large all-pervasive privately-owned ones; assemblages are connections of multiplicities with no beginnings and no ends. Puar further cites Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, an interconnected root structure with no beginnings and no ends,⁴⁴ explores the idea of letting go of identity-based thinking,⁴⁵ paying closer attention to the overall *affect* and emotionality of social media. We can apply this to the tech solution of feminist hacking cited

⁴¹ Brock Perry, "Towards an Ontogenesis of Queerness and Divinity: Queer Political Theology and Terrorist Assemblages," *Culture and Religion* 15, no. 2 (April 3, 2014), 215.

⁴² Ibid., 186.

⁴³ Puar 2005, 128.

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

⁴⁵ Where there has been fruitful ground for debate is where Puar's work on assemblages contrasts with identity-based thinking in terms of intersectionality. Identity, writes Puar, is about fixity. "Intersectionality colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state -- census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance -- in that "difference" is encased within a structural container."# Some have criticized Puar for trying to sidestep intersectionality and underplay the importance of its foundational black feminist theorists, but as Tavia Nyong'o has explicated in the new Introduction to the 2017 edition of *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar has said that she never intended to sidestep or undermine the importance of intersectionality, and that it was never an "either/or" position, where intersectionality is theorized to be replaced by assemblages (though she admits paying short shrift to black feminist thinkers). My take on the debate about Puar's work and intersectionality, especially in the digital realm which is the focus of this paper, would be to pay particular attention to the emphasis on visibility. If intelligibility of identity is the focus, it becomes a marketable data point. If visibility is what you are after, perhaps some critical engagement with your own perception of the benefits of visibility can lead to questioning what keeps you contained in this framework, rather than focusing on how you can become more visible. Belaboring the critique of identity politics would be beside the point here; I would merely suggest that it is important to recognize our past and our differences, but it is crucial that we move away from fixities, binaries, and static identity categories, to the extent that they can be used to target us, market to us, and divide us.

above, of creating multiple small, independently hosted, linked digital platforms in co-operative structures, rather than using large all-pervasive privately-owned ones; assemblages are connections of multiplicities with no beginnings and no ends. Puar explores the idea of paying closer attention to *affect* and emotionality in resistance efforts; foregrounding assemblage, says Puar, “enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies.”⁴⁶ It allows us, I would argue, to engage critically with the psychographic aspects of social media and emotional targeting. We are more than our usernames and identitarian affinities that allow us to be tracked and targeted for advertising revenue. An emphasis on assemblages allows us to engage critically with the psychographic aspects of social media, their targeting users by predicting their personality and feelings, and to engage critically in efforts to reduce and remove such platforms.

Finally, resistance can be the focus of our attentiveness to assemblages. Puar herself has an activist movement-organizing background, having written her dissertation on gay and lesbian organizing in Trinidad. She suggests that, “if we transfer our energy, our turbulence, our momentum from the defense of the integrity of identity and submit instead to this affective ideation of identity, what kinds of political strategies... might we unabashedly stumble upon? [C]an we think instead of affective politics?”⁴⁷ This is significant for organizing work: “a queer praxis of assemblage,” she writes, “allows for a scrambling of sides that is illegible to state practices of surveillance, control, banishment, and extermination.”⁴⁸ If lesbian-feminists can move away from privately-owned neoliberal capitalist platforms of data surveillance, and move toward independently-hosted linked social networks, such a queer praxis might be attainable.

⁴⁶ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 205.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

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