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“Anyone can be Pussy Riot”: Exploring the Possibilities of Transnational Digital Feminism

Jessica Gokhberg

This essay examines the digital feminist strategies of the Russian political performance group Pussy Riot. At the same time that I argue that the risks the group takes in creating a digital transnational feminism on YouTube are interesting for how they open up translocal critiques of authoritarianism, I ask a broader question regarding the criteria by which international feminist scholarship evaluates its objects of analysis. I avoid relying on holistic judgements of success or failure, and instead focus on Pussy Riot's legitimate and tangible feminist engagement with police brutality and border regimes between the United States and Russia.

Keywords: Authoritarianism / Digital feminism / Feminist performance / Gender studies / Public feminisms / Pussy Riot / Putin, Vladimir / Social justice / Transnational feminism / Trump, Donald J.

I'm Not Afraid I'm Not Afraid I'm Not Afraid of Walls¹

On May 28, 2020, approximately 219 days after the first COVID-19 outbreaks and two months after the pandemic reached the South American continent, a group of feminists from Mexico, Chile, and Russia performed and published a co-authored manifesto against global police violence (Pussy Riot and LaTesis 2020). The Spanish and English-translated manifesto is a collaboration between Moira Santoro (née Wendy Moira), a Mexico-based *vocera* of the international Russian collective Pussy Riot, and Chile-based feminist artistic performance group LaTesis.² The two groups, represented by five masked women in the video, “call on the compañeras, the comrades because as a comandante in the

Sierra Maestra once said, a *compañero* is someone whose lips tremble with rage in the face of injustice committed anywhere on earth” (6:05–6:20). They argue that transnationally collaborative governments are taking advantage of the enforced confinement during the global pandemic to escalate police brutality, army invasions, and the stripping of civil rights. They call on their global audience to take the blatant exertion of militarized government power as a “historic moment to set it all on fire” (4:13).

“Manifesto in Police Violence” is a fascinating political project. Its use of YouTube illuminates the possibility of digital platforms to forward transnational social movements by addressing a global audience to resist collaborative authoritarian regimes—a matter of some urgency as I write in the midst of a global pandemic without a near end to social distancing in sight. Both Pussy Riot and LasTesis are important to consider for their feminist arts-based activism. Here, however, I focus specifically on the former because of the evolution of the group’s demands from being read locally and then transnationally. Pussy Riot allows me to consider the imbrication of a feminist transnational address in its local specificity, bringing up questions around the criteria by which feminist scholarship must evaluate transnational feminist activism.

Pussy Riot contributes to a rich and ever-growing world of feminist activism that centers gender, race, and biopolitics in its critique of authoritarianism. As scholar and journalist of feminist activists in China Leta Hong Fincher points out, the core demands of leftist feminism in this century are in direct conflict with authoritarian regimes that use punitive, pro-natalist, and ethnonationalist techniques to subjugate the most disenfranchised populations in order to scaffold the power of strongman rulers (2014). In Russia, moreover, Pussy Riot emerged at the downturn of the most recognizable type of feminist activism up to 2011—the women’s crisis center movement (Johnson 2001, 2009; Hemment 2004; Johnson and Saarinen 2013)—shifting the focus from domestic violence to police and state violence.³ Earlier scholarship on feminism under authoritarianism has often understood activists to draw on traditional gender norms in order to make space in political culture without being too polemical or threatening, particularly in postcommunist states struggling to transition to multiple-party democracies or soft- or semi-authoritarianisms (Henderson and Jeydel 2006; Robertson 2011; Katzenstein 2005). While they do engage and reiterate norms, Pussy Riot has set themselves apart as a long-surviving case of an antagonistic, artistic feminism that has fascinated scholars and journalists alike.

To be clear, I am not offering Pussy Riot as a utopic model of what transnational feminism can or should look like, nor am I interested in redeeming them from their political missteps.⁴ This article works instead through the paradoxical energies of Pussy Riot’s audio-visual productions—between a white feminism in which claims of solidarity are mobilized in ways that reinforce hegemonic whiteness, and a white feminism that draws attention to its own flaws; between a transnational movement that centers both borders and globality;

between a coalition that wants to be both virtual and embodied; and between a digital feminist resistance that struggles with its ephemerality and its desires for long-term sustainability.⁵ It is the aspirational risks Pussy Riot takes in confronting these paradoxical energies in the name of crafting a transnational, anti-authoritarian queer feminism that I explore here. I aim to bring the group's legitimate and tangible feminist engagement with transnational authoritarianism to feminist scholarship.

Feminist scholarship has been increasingly interested in understanding the changed environments of communication. As feminist media scholar Hester Baer points out, "the increased use of digital media has altered, influenced, and shaped feminism in the twenty-first century by giving rise to changed modes of communication, different kinds of conversations, and new configurations of activism across the globe, both online and offline" (2016, 18). My examination of Pussy Riot's evolution extends Baer's important work. Baer analyzes German case studies but makes a point that is significant to my study of Pussy Riot: for her, evaluating twenty-first century feminist movements on a success/failure model often provided by recent feminist scholarship elides the potential to categorize contemporary movements as "process-based political actions. Rather than participating in narratives of social progress or emancipation" that characterized twentieth century liberal second-wave feminism, process-based actions "emphasize the process of searching for new political paradigms, languages, and symbols that combat the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal" (30). Specifically, such actions "dra[w] attention to the relationship of personal experiences to structural inequalities," in effect maneuvering around the trappings of a universalizing liberal humanism (29). This is all to say that, in Baer's mind, digital platforms like YouTube and Twitter make the global scale of gendered violence and oppression visible.

I take my lead from Baer and approach Pussy Riot as a case of process-based political action that increasingly responds to transnational demands as the group evolves—particularly in the scope of what artists and performers are doing with political work as opposed to political activists who are not in the realm of the arts. This essay is then likewise a refusal to follow a success/failure model or a true (to history)/false one, and is instead an exploration of Pussy Riot's work in terms of its evolution from local to global, and, simultaneously, from live performance to online platform. I take seriously the significance of the connections they make between the United States and Russia and their styles of authoritarianism as the group struggles against old Cold War Red Scare paranoia, even as they deliberately engage with that cultural discourse. Ultimately, I argue that Pussy Riot produces what can be called a "digestible activism" on YouTube, meaning that they provocatively engage transnational state violence by mobilizing liberal tropes, smoothing out many of the more difficult anti-authoritarian critiques. From here on out, I define a transnational critique as one that traces the intersections between how nations are colluding/

interacting/translating power through capital material, racial dynamics, women's bodies, etc.⁶ Pussy Riot's videos and use of media do not simply criticize the United States and Russian states or their leaders; they make very precise points regarding police brutality, border regimes, and the usage of certain bodies in service of populism.

The first part of this article examines Pussy Riot's 2011 live performance "Death to prison, freedom to protest" to sketch out the group's earlier, localized politics. Then I look at their 2015 video "I Can't Breathe" to both confront the valid critiques of their efforts and to think about how the group crafts a feminist critique of authoritarianism that strategically, if at times reductively, links US and Russian regimes. Finally, I look at their 2016 video "Make America Great Again" to contemplate what the group offers feminist scholarship regarding social media as a movement platform. Ultimately, my essay inscribes the Russian group into an international feminist movement, particularly in relation to the role of the artist in such a movement.

Golden Idols Holding Rivals, Take My Body, Anybody

Pussy Riot formed in 2011 during Putin's second term as Prime Minister, when Nadezhda (Nadia) Tolokonnikova and her friend Yekaterina (Kat) Samutsevich were invited to give a lecture on "Punk Feminism in Russia." According to Tolokonnikova, "Russian punk feminism did not exist," so they created it for the lecture (2018a).⁷ Their most iconic characteristic is their aesthetic: ripped tights worn without underwear, confetti guns hidden inside; bright clothes with white Doc Martens; girls' dresses borrowed from friends; and, above all, their neon balaclavas (and now their black masks with *pizda* written across the mouth). Pussy Riot came to global attention first in February 2012 when they performed "A Punk Prayer" (also known as "Mother of God, Drive Putin Away!") in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Three members, Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich, and Maria (Masha) Alyokhina were all convicted of "hooliganism, which is a rude disruption of the social order showing a clear disregard for society, committed for reasons of religious hatred and enmity" after the performance and sentenced to two years' imprisonment (Gessen 2014, 166). The women were freed by the Russian Duma under amnesty on December 23, 2013 as a symbolic gesture before the February 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Since their release, Pussy Riot has produced three studio albums and over fifteen music videos, toured internationally, and performed at music festivals around the world. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina are the best-known members of the group in the United States due to their imprisonment, their unmasked faces in most music videos, and their individual publications. Members of the group currently include people of all genders who are still in Russia and Ukraine protesting the Russian government, as well as spokespeople around the world.⁸

The group's early work was largely based on live performances with specific locales in mind that structured their critiques of Putin and state authoritarianism in Russia, with their famous 2012 performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior being the one that garnered the group a serious international reputation. As their work began to respond to and solicit an international audience—a process augmented, if not put into play by the trip to the United States of two of their members in 2014—their performative mode became more engaged with online platforms and their potential for mass dissemination. Two compelling examples are their videos "I Can't Breathe" and "Make America Great Again," which seek to connect their depiction of authoritarianism of Putin's Russia to Trumpism and state violence.

But before delving into their coupling of Putin and Trump, I want to consider one of Pussy Riot's live performances before the international attention around "A Punk Prayer" in order to mark some of the group's early characteristics, some of which they later preserve, and some from which they diverge. "Death to prison, freedom to protest" was performed on December 14, 2011. On December 4–7 and December 10, an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 protesters (depending on who was counting) filled the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Chita, Khabarovsk, among other locations, to speak out against the 2011 Russian legislative election results, Putin's run for reelection, and the authority of the ruling party, United Russia ("Russian Election Protests" 2011). It was the largest protest since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Guterman and Ferris-Rotman 2011). Over 1,000 protesters were arrested, including opposition leaders Boris Nemstov and Alexey Navalny, and plans were made to take the streets again on December 24.

Pussy Riot responded to the arrests by performing "Death to prison, freedom to protest" on the rooftop of a building across the street from the pre-trial detention center (Matveeva 2011). One of the original Pussy Riot members, Garadzha Matveeva, posted a recording of the performance on YouTube the same day. The group has posted many of their live performances online since 2011, so the use of YouTube certainly is not new to them. But these videos are taken by a Pussy Riot member on a cell phone—they're grainy, difficult to understand, and shot from the angle of someone in the crowd watching from below/afar. There is no mistaking that these are not curated videos. Although they somewhat freeze and virtually distribute live performances, they preserve (in this video at least) the forbidden aura of watching members of Pussy Riot violate protected space through the metal and chicken-wire fences separating the camera person from the performers. Even more striking is that while the viewer of the YouTube recording has to watch the performance from behind the group and metal barriers, Pussy Riot's intended audience—the political prisoners and their guards—watch them head on. All present at the performance and those watching the video can hear the prisoners reacting throughout the song—many are cheering, hooting, sometimes booing, and, at the end, clapping out of their prison windows for Pussy Riot.

The performers are dressed in their standard uniforms of brightly colored stockings, dresses, and balaclavas, making them easy to spot through the fences and gates separating them from their public and imprisoned audiences; their amplifiers are turned up to the maximum volume, making them easy to hear but their words somewhat difficult to make out; their dancing keeps them in constant motion across the space of the rooftop; and they even light some roman candles to increase their visibility. Even though Pussy Riot performs in an open space outside, they fill it up with color, sound, smoke, and movement, as if to both magnify their presence and emphasize the fenced borders of their outside space, as well as to underscore the openness of their stage in contrast to the prison cell. The smoke billowing out of their roman candles is especially evocative of this contrast between openness and closure—the viewer can see the smoke is uncontained and free to rise into the open sky, but it also has a suffocating quality, as it obscures even the bright colors on the performers.

The title of the song, repeated between each stanza, is a parody of the Soviet WWII slogan “Death to fascism, freedom to the nation.” I understand Pussy Riot to be drawing a linear timeline from the various prisons of the twentieth century—the concentration camp, the gulag, the POW camp—and the contemporary prison. There is also the connection between the nation that defeated fascism on the eastern front and the one that uses police violence and detainment to uphold its implied neo-fascist regime. There is then the third equivalence set up between the nation’s freedom and the protestor’s freedom, as there is between fascism and the prison. This is all to say that “Death to prison, freedom to protest” is a locationally bound critique of the Russian government—from the citation of the Great Patriotic War and Russian pride in Hitler’s defeat, to the site of the prison chosen as a representative of the immanent/urgent electoral crisis under United Russia.

The quality of the lyrics and sound in their live performances are less relevant than audience and space, as the performances are spontaneous, and their voices are more often than not unintelligible against the wind. These “feminist events,” as Elizabeth Groeneveld calls them, are more about Pussy Riot’s physical presence and the meaning of their embodied disruption of space than the meaning of their lyrics. Groeneveld hypothesizes that this is why their aesthetics are so gaudy, their performances so chaotic, and their choice of space so intrusive. During their performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior just three months after their prison performance, for example, it “was enough for Pussy Riot to be ‘understood’ by church officials as a form of sacrilege because women are not permitted to step on to the chancel in the Russian Orthodox faith” (2015, 291). While Groeneveld emphasizes the size of audience as the key difference between live and curated performances, I find it more important to emphasize that the objectives of choosing a performative space and the energy of liveliness must necessarily be different than the objectives of an edited YouTube video with overlain lyrics and sound (291). Space and energy

are what localize Pussy Riot's early live performances more than anything else, even when recorded and streamed.

It's Getting Dark in New York City

The desire to localize their political critique came to an end when Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina brought their protest to the United States shortly after their release from prison. They were first invited to the United States as celebrity honorees of the Amnesty International benefit concert in Brooklyn in February 2014. They stayed for a year interviewing, meeting politicians, giving lectures, and filming their guest appearance in *House of Cards*. During their tour, they participated in the New York December 2014 protests to demand that police be held accountable for Eric Garner's murder. Inspired by the protests, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina decided it was time to make a statement on police violence and cohere their experiences between Russia's February 2014 invasion of Crimea and the July 2014 murder of Garner. In an interview with *Billboard* just after they released their video "I Can't Breathe" in February 2015, the two women (speaking as Pussy Riot despite their recent expulsion from the group) explained that for them, it was crucial during their first US tour to establish "an independent opinion" about the US police state, and, above all, to avoid "sink[ing] into the phantoms of the Cold War" when discussing US-Russian relations (Pussy Riot 2015; Brown 2015). "I Can't Breathe" was thus Pussy Riot's entry statement into the US political scene, using their Russian background as their access credential.

"I Can't Breathe" refers to the 2014 murder of Garner, who was approached by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo on suspicion of selling single cigarettes without tax stamps. Pantaleo put Garner into a chokehold, a prohibited detainment method, killing Garner even after he yelled out "I can't breathe" eleven times. A Richmond County grand jury decided not to indict Pantaleo in December 2014, inciting protests nationwide. Pussy Riot's music video was filmed in New York during the protests in collaboration with punk legend Richard Hell, Nick Zinner (of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs), Andrew Wyatt (of Miiike Snow), Shahzad Ismaily, and the Russian bands The Jack Wood and Scofferlane. In it, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina wear uniforms of OMON (Special Purpose Mobile Unit) officers. The two women are gradually buried alive by unseen hands, one shovel of black dirt at a time piling on top of their uncovered white faces, eyes and mouths open. The viewer must watch as Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina lie unreactive while they are buried for over four excruciating minutes. As the video slowly zooms out on the buried women, the viewer can see countless shovels thrown down onto the grave. This was not the work of a small, discrete faction of OMON; it was the effort of a faceless mass—whether Russian or American is left unknown. Cigarette pouches labeled "Russian Spring" (the colloquial name of the Russian annexation of Crimea) and "smoking kills" in

Russian scatter around them, signifying the unseen nationalist gravediggers at work who treat the murder site as a place to discard their deadly garbage. The Russian cigarette packs reference the reason Pantaleo singled out Garner, and they also symbolize the connection between the labor of burial and the labor of Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina's immobility. Both action and inaction are implicated in the violence depicted in the video. The two are intimately linked, and a critique of one is strengthened by the critique of the other.

The video ends with a reading of Garner's final words by iconic US punk rocker and artist Richard Hell. Pussy Riot's description of the video on the YouTube page reads: "This song is for Eric and for all those from Russia to America and around the globe who suffer from state terror—killed, choked, perished because of war and state sponsored violence of all kinds—for political prisoners and those on the streets fighting for change. We stand in solidarity" (Pussy Riot 2015).⁹ There is an uncomfortable (although I question if intentional) confusion of victimhood and power in the burial of white feminists wearing riot gear. Pussy Riot's OMON garb makes their whiteness appropriate in the video's context, since to bury the riot police alive is different from reading them as white women buried alive. By overlaying Garner's whitewashed words on top of the anonymized violence enacted on OMON officers, the video emphasizes the immobility of the riot police as they are murdered. I read "I Can't Breathe" as urging its viewers to connect police brutality on the local level—in New York or Crimea, enacted by one police officer or a mass of OMON guards, against a male or female body—to the international—*between* New York and Crimea, between the white body's immobility and the Black man's murder. As white women being buried against the sound of a white man's voice, Pussy Riot's gesture can be read as attempting to universalize police brutality across borders and bodies, reproducing liberal humanist politics employed by the language of ordinariness like that in Trump's and Putin's respective populisms; but as OMON officers, perhaps the video makes whiteness part of the story they are telling, opening up shared experiences of police brutality to radical critique of the ideological and financial complicity of the United States and Russia police states. The video makes state violence unexceptional, transferrable, and translatable across different geopolitical state-citizen encounters. They do this work while taking the risk of being critiqued for appropriating the circumstances of Garner's murder to make a statement with their white bodies about Russia. Such white-washing or universalization of violence and humanity is where this video leans into the trappings of liberalism; but it is this liberalism, I believe, that attempts to compensate for the viewer's discomfort. Whether successful in its attempt or not, the video presents a digestible critique (at least for the white viewer) of state violence by mobilizing the liberal white body and voice for the liberation of a marginalized group.

"I Can't Breathe" diverges from Pussy Riot's punk style (they call it "an industrial ballad"), but it still very much coheres their transatlantic rearticulation

with their discourse of punk (Brown 2015). True to Pussy Riot's character, Tolokonnikova defines against the word "punk" in her book *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*. In the section "Never Try to Give a Definition of Punk," she gives an anti-definition of punk: she tells the reader they must "[s]educ[e] and [. . .] be seduced into radical questioning." Punk is "the queer, liquid world"; it is an art that moves without concern for borders, even when borders are concerned with it. She uses the word "piracy" as an analogy for "punk," evoking the pirate's communal refusal to participate in legal citizenship as it sails and loots across borders (2018, 15–18). The group's punk practice appears most readily not in their participation in an underground scene, or even in the lyrics or sounds of their music; instead, Pussy Riot performs a belligerent and combative citational practice of their inspirations, of whitewashing, and of the governments they critique. They put together a collage of sound, image, lyric, and space to lend loud and colorful authority to their form of protest. The balaclavas are key to Pussy Riot's objectives, used not to protect members' identities from the police, since their faces are so often seen across social media; rather, they are used to de-individuate members of the collective from each other and those in their audience. Members of the group, regardless of gender expression or identity, don skirts, dresses, boots, and tights, and dance under the same name of "Pussy Riot." In a sense, then, gender (as much as whiteness or authoritarianism) becomes one of the masks parodied by the group's outfits. Articles of clothing as much as gender and members are interchangeable, belaboring their simultaneous anonymity and unity via the balaclava.

The anonymity offered by balaclavas and carnivalesque outfits provides Pussy Riot with a sort of negative freedom—freedom from detection, identification, gendering, racializing, or persecution; in other words, a freedom to preserve individual privacy in service of collective identification. This kind of anonymity conforms to and confirms the democratic notion of the anonymous voter, and has been useful for actions such as the Million Hoodie March by Black Lives Matter. Yet, on the other hand, one must not forget that the Ku Klux Klan has used the same notion of anonymity to enact anti-democratic white racial homogeneity and white supremacist violence since 1865 (Blee and McDowell 2013). And although members around the world continue to perform in balaclavas on stage and in videos, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were stripped of the privilege of anonymity after their 2012 trial. In fact, the original members of Pussy Riot disavowed the two after they appeared at an Amnesty International concert, explaining that the two women's celebrity status violated the group's use of balaclavas as a way of "act[ing] against any personality cult, against hierarchies implied by appearance, age and other visible attributes" (Pussy Riot 2014).¹⁰

Keeping the whiteness of Pussy Riot's feminism in mind, I underscore the risks they take in queering the boundaries between their Russian citizenship and the US citizenship of the intended viewer of their video, at the same time that they take the risk of blurring the line between their white female bodies

and the violence enacted on Garner's Black male body in the digital space of "I Can't Breathe." If for Pussy Riot punk is where borders are futile against the body that travels through them, then punk has particular significance for an anti-authoritarian movement because it troubles (although it does not defeat, and in its failure opens up more interesting sites for adaptation, survival, and action) the isolationist, nativist, and anti-Western or anti-Russian nationalism that depends on the drawing of concrete lines between the violence enacted by the Russian and US police states against gendered and racialized bodies.

Pussy is the New Dick, Ladies

Pussy Riot experiments more obviously with a critique of their Putin-Trump coupling by operationalizing an irrational reduction to Cold War tropes in their 2016 video "Make America Great Again." I examine "Make America Great Again" as the counterpoint to "I Can't Breathe" because, whereas the latter grapples with the racial implications of Pussy Riot's nascent transnationalism, the former goes much further in figuring the group's transnationalism into YouTube feminism.

The simplified, repetitive lyrics and catchy tune of "Make America Great Again" once again calls to a viewer who can or wants to listen in English. Pussy Riot explicitly explores the transatlantic relationship between the United States and Russia at the intersection of gender in this video. The title recalls Donald Trump's revanchist campaign slogan, and the narrative escalation through scenes of Tolokonnikova's grotesquely sexualized drag in a Trump wig, performed rape, and forced abortion harken to Trump's resurfaced 2005 interview with Billy Bush where he claimed that, "When you're a star they [beautiful women] let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (Puglise 2016). Pussy Riot's video description is brief: "#PussyGrabsBack #NastyWoman (!) Because YOU decide elections and if we get together, we could blow this shit up, take action and reverse the erosion of rights. Because fuck it." There is tension in this description between Pussy Riot's seemingly anarchist political call, asking the collective "we" to "blow shit up" for no reason but to "fuck it," and their simultaneous citation of liberal democratic electoral politics with their call to "decide elections." This tension extends into the fractured montages typical of Pussy Riot videos that switch rapidly between recordings of the real Trump's speeches and Tolokonnikova's voluptuous figure singing in her Trump wig, as well as Tolokonnikova-Trump singing to "Let other people in / Listen to your women / Stop killing black children / Make America Great Again" (Pussy Riot 2016).

Rather than fall apart at these moments of tension, contradictions in aesthetics and description should be read as meaningful and continuous throughout their videos. I interpret the video's cuts between Tolokonnikova-Trump's violent acts against her own body and transgressive lyrics as ambivalence

between nihilistic and hopeful politics that lies at the core of Pussy Riot's platform, and that should not be reduced to the anarchism typically found in the Anglo-punk tradition. This central ambivalence thinks about knowledge-power production across borders of totalizing languages of governance in which acts of resistant consciousness are always already implicated. What I see emerge in "Make America Great Again" is a political consciousness that deeply represents Pussy Riot's transatlantic method of critique that does not make claims to stand outside of the power exchanges it looks at, and thus holds a privileged position of critique from within parodic performance.

Significantly, Pussy Riot's stage of performance is not invented from nothing; their aesthetics, mediums, and slogans are all appropriated and recycled. They appeal to their Anglo viewer's knowledge of an old aesthetic: first, the video begins with Tolokonnikova as a newscaster on "Trump News Network," announcing Trump's election victory two weeks before it actually occurred.¹¹ Pussy Riot refers, as well, to the state ownership of *Rossia Segodnia*, a multimedia information agency owned by the Kremlin. The video uses twentieth century Cyrillic-style lettering characteristic of Soviet propaganda posters to communicate their uncanny projections of Putin-Trump connections. While "Trump TV" is written in an indiscernible typeface one might see on *CNN Network*, the credits with Tolokonnikova's name, Trump's presidential seal, and the final image of a black screen with "(THIS IS) THE END" typed across it are all written in the same red Cyrillic-style font. Pussy Riot closely focuses their political critique in this video on the parallels between Trump's populist campaign and the Kremlin's centralized information control for the purposes of encouraging their US viewership to participate in the November 2016 elections, as if the democratic act of voting is the only action standing in the way of the United States becoming Stalinist. What is most interesting about this video is that the group contacts their US audience using nostalgic Cold War signifiers, underscoring the group's Russianness. The Soviet propaganda typeface, Tolokonnikova's Russian name and Russian-accented omnipresent narration (in song and as newscaster), and the continuous red coloration of news banners, costumes, and flesh-branding harken to the ill-forgotten "red scare" of the Communist boogeyman that infiltrated twentieth century US democratic liberalism, and is in this video branded onto the Russian woman's skin.

Pussy Riot's approach has a doubled goal: to point out how Putin's and Trump's authoritarianisms are related, while at the same time confronting and reinforcing Cold War nostalgia as a way of making sense of the coupling, offering sexualized violence against the female body as a vessel.¹² The Putin-Trump connection is a tempting narrative: Trump has praised Putin's style of leadership often, including at a national security forum in September 2016 where he said that Putin "has very strong control over his country" and has "been a leader, far more than our president [Barack Obama] has been a leader" (Diaz 2016). More than their friendship, the issue of US-Russian financial and

political “collusion” in the 2016 elections has been the specter hanging over the legitimacy of Trump’s campaigns. I am not interested in whether Trump-Russia collusion/interference is real or significant enough to delegitimize an already illegitimate presidency; rather, I am pointing out the fetishization of Russia by the liberal left in its attempt to externalize culpability for Trump’s rise, consequently reiterating the conflation between mass sentiment and one man’s personality. Furthermore, Pussy Riot’s parodic-nostalgic invocation to resist the ease of calling current US-Russia relations a new Cold War derives from their insight into how the fetishization of Western or Russian interference in either location reveals a narrative that still harbors the relics of the old global conflict: global threats and international relations still excitedly cling to the familiarity of “the ancient Cold War paradigm” where the enemy (fascism, leftism, Westernism, Putin, or Trump) is external, knowable, and held within vaguely containable borders (Tolokonnikova 2018, 6).

Pussy Riot is reductive to call Putin’s government authoritarian, just as it is to equate Putin and Trump’s (or Putin and Stalin’s) leadership styles. As J. Paul Goode and Stephen Kotkin observe, pre-existing corruption and intervention by foreign institutions (e.g., the International Monetary Fund) stalled the transition of post-communist states into democratic governments (Goode 2010; Kotkin 2008). Goode calls the governments that resulted “hybrid regimes,” or governments that “combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism [. . .] featuring semi-competitive elections that serve to disguise dictatorship,” also called “electoral authoritarian” regimes (Goode 2010, 1056). Yet these definitions elide all but electoral politics as the defining characteristics of twenty-first century authoritarianisms. Feminist and queer critiques of authoritarianism in both the East and West have presented compelling evidence that the types of regimes resulting from communism’s collapse can be linked to gender and sexuality, such as reassigning the female workforce to the status of reproductive homemaker in an attempt to reinvigorate a Russian masculinity thrown into crisis (Baer 2009; Watson 1993; Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000). Whether intentional or not, I see Pussy Riot’s reduction of the Russian and US police states as authoritarianisms akin to Stalin’s, and of the Russian state to Putin as its figurehead and the United States to Trump, as a strategic move that foregrounds gender discrimination in their critiques of police brutality, border regimes, and the usage of certain bodies in service of populism in the United States and Russia.

“Make America Great Again” narrates two trans-historical and trans-geopolitical couplings: first between Trump’s and Putin’s populist authoritarianisms, and second, between twenty-first century post-Cold War US-Russian authoritarian collaboration and twentieth century Cold War US-Soviet authoritarian enmity, both of which are made manifest on the bare burning skin of Tolokonnikova in Trump drag. What is being made great again in the music video is the terroristic Cold War authoritarianism of the 1940s and 1950s. The

contradictory and continuous ambivalence sustained across the music video mobilizes the temporality pictured by Gessen in their analysis of Pussy Riot's early work, where understanding the post-Cold War period—especially the most recent years—requires reading the present as both a rupture from and a continuation of the past (2014, 35). Moreover, the couplings described above cannot be accounted for solely at the polls—it is the violated, burned, aroused, and fertile female body that bears the burden of accounting, not the ballot box. The coexistent-contradictory temporality in “Make America Great Again” is not only a useful hermeneutic; it is also a feminist language for productive tracings that, in the words of US studies scholar Donald Pease, “mobilizes plural, often competing discourses that generate contradictions, new truths, and ruptures” (Pease et al. 2011, 4–5). Cold War remnants in Pussy Riot's video parody, albeit limitedly, the specters of a bipolar world system, a territorialized enemy, and the cultivated powers of security that developed from both, shifted onto new figures of enmity, including the pussy, the immigrant, the Black American, and the queer Russian woman.

“Make America Great Again” is most interesting for its attempt to preserve and operationalize Pussy Riot's Russianness as their authority for intervening in US political culture. This is perhaps the most important feature any analysis of Pussy Riot's work must emphasize: the group, wherever they perform, are Russian, and the movements they make to cross borders depend on their grounding as such. Whereas their 2012 performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior cannot be called transnational because it was a very site-specific event—drawing on localized markers such as the belt of the Virgin Mary relic, Patriarch Gundyaev, and lyrical and stylistic citations from Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* from 1915—their movement into US politics is a very explicit statement by the group that they want to be read as transnational *and* Russian. Scholarship must make clear that Pussy Riot is less a music group and more an artistic political performance group—consequently avoiding simplifying their persecution as an issue of artistic expression and free speech, which risks depoliticizing the complexity of the localized geopolitics of their feminist intervention.

Take the first part of the title of my article, “Anyone can be Pussy Riot,” as an example. The phrase comes from multiple places: founding member of *Bikini Kill* Kathleen Hanna proclaimed in an interview with *Pitchfork* in 2012 that “Anybody can be Pussy Riot. We are all Pussy Riot” because of the “commonality” permitted by the balaclavas (Pelly 2012); #weareallpussyriot and #startapussyriot became global hashtags to protest Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Samutsevich's arrests; and Pussy Riot uses the phrase in their description under their 2017 video “Police State,” among many other variations elsewhere. “Anyone can be Pussy Riot” invokes the symbolism of the balaclava that struggles to both localize and transnationalize Pussy Riot's politics. As Groeneveld rightfully points out, there is a marked difference between seeing the colorful balaclava as a gesture of

solidarity with Pussy Riot and an object that enables one to *be* Pussy Riot (2015, 298). This is to say that while the balaclava, and YouTube as a sort of digital balaclava, helps Pussy Riot's messages travel across national borders, assuming they also invite anyone to be part of the group depoliticizes and decontextualizes the nature of Pussy Riot's relationship to the Russian state. The distinction I am drawing between pre-transnational (2012 and before) and transnational (after their 2014 release from prison) is important for disillusioning public and scholarly feminism from imagining that Pussy Riot marks a renaissance of the Riot Grrrl movement, a superficial unity between Western/Anglo and Russian feminisms, or global supremacy of Western/Anglo feminism.¹³

O nos organizamos o perecemos

I want to take a moment to briefly recap the distinction I have drawn between what Pussy Riot produces on YouTube from other platforms. Pussy Riot declares their work to be anti-authoritarian—but there are different types of anti-authoritarianism, including anarchist, anti-capitalist, and liberal (among other types). I see Pussy Riot donning all three of these critical standpoints in their different engagements with form. When doing interviews or giving lectures, the group is quite explicitly anti-capitalist/Marxist;¹⁴ on social media, where the group advertises its merchandise with slogans like “be queer do crime,” “no gods no masters,” “eat the rich,” and “fuck the police state,” the group is much more anarchist; but in their YouTube videos, as demonstrated above, their anti-authoritarianism has much more liberal undertones.

The formal evolution that I have been most interested in here is from their live to curated performances. I call the feminism of their later YouTube music videos a “digestible feminism” because they are grounded in the language of liberation and civil rights inherited from twentieth century Cold War liberalism. The action they're trying to invoke from their viewing audience in the music videos I examine here is to vote in the US elections and protest on the street against fraudulent elections in Russia. This is the same kind of digestibility Valerie Sperling identifies in the political rhetoric of pro- and anti-Kremlin activists who use “concepts of femininity, masculinity, and homophobia (heteronormativity) as tools [. . .] in their authority-building ‘toolboxes’ because of the accessibility and resonance of these aspects of cultural identity at elite and mass levels alike” (Sperling 2014, 2).¹⁵

I do not want to idealize the Pussy Riot videos examined in this article, nor do I want to excuse Pussy Riot for whitewashing Garner's words by assuming their intentions were pure or done in the name of coalitional politics. Instead, I want to hold both the faults of Pussy Riot's feminism and the possibilities invoked by their transnationalism. To be more specific, I believe it is inadequate to offer Pussy Riot's performances as answers to the problems international feminism must face (e.g., transnationalism, neoliberalism, surveillance, and

representation); rather, I believe that Pussy Riot's struggles with solidarity across lines of race, gender, and nationality have major implications for unpacking the problematics of evaluating feminist critiques of authoritarianism on YouTube.

Social media activism, hashtag feminism, and YouTube continue to be fraught objects for feminist analysis. With its self-produced nature and comments section, YouTube is (sometimes appropriately) treated as a platform of consciousness-raising à la 1970s feminism. For example, Michele White treats beauty and cosmetic videos as a means of interrogating gender norms and playing with feminist "beauty languages" (2017); Samantha Carroll sees potential in the YouTube swing dancing community for reclaiming a resistant history of African American "media power" (2008); Kristin McGee sees an emergence of a "counter public" of Black culture in the mass appeal of Beyoncé's YouTube archive (2019); and Sujata Moorti explores YouTube's capacity to "telescope the local into the global" in response to Chandra Mohanty's call for a feminism without borders (Moorti 2018). Feminist scholarship on social media also often criticizes platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, etc. for their inability to affect and sustain long-term social movements (Harrington 2018; Banet-Weiser 2014).

I do not believe in, nor do I see Pussy Riot proposing YouTube as a kind of borderless contemporary consciousness-raising platform (like Vanessa Valenti and Courtney Martin do in their project #FemFuture) that elides, whether intentionally or not, the embedded racism of access to and distribution of online social media platforms which prioritize the voices of white, cis, US, able-bodied, middle-class, neurotypical, heterosexual, single, documented, and more, women who believe they speak on behalf of all women under the pretense of "solidarity." The solution is not just to add multicultural/intersectional representation to online feminism, which would produce nothing more than a performatively liberal media like that which Chela Sandoval calls out in socialist or Marxist feminism emergent in the West beginning in the 1970s where intersectionality became the "added-on phase" of a feminist genealogy that was forced to recognize race and class—or, more often, just one or the other (2000, 67). The lesson learned from #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, for example, is "the ways in which white women shut out, silence and ignore women of color, intentionally and accidentally" (Clayton qtd. in Loza 2014). But at the same time, hashtags such as #MeToo (as Tarana Burke originally imagined the movement), #NotYourAsianSideKick, #FastTailedGirls, and #SecretLivesofFeministas have allowed women of color to decry how white feminist voices still dominate the public/digital sphere, criticizing the gate-keeping and base tolerance that result when white feminist "voices take over the conversation and articulate struggles that are selective and often patronizing" (Malik qtd. in Loza 2014; Kuo 2018).

Pussy Riot is no exception to the difficulties digital feminism must confront. As columnist Clem Bastow rightfully points out, Pussy Riot's viewership cannot deny "that Tolokonnikova and her bandmates are photogenic. The sight of a beautiful young white woman staring down a prison sentence is, for many, an

abject tragedy” (2012). These two members of Pussy Riot cannot claim anonymity any longer—they have been permanently demasked and their conventionally attractive faces associated with the group. One has only to watch the video “Make America Great Again” to see Tolokonnikova’s mostly nude, thin, toned, pale body as she becomes a sexualized vessel for Pussy Riot’s critique of Trump. Groeneveld quotes one particularly scathing tweet that said “#FreePussyRiot, but also #FreeManning, #FreeCece, #FreeMarissa, #FreeTinleyPark5 (and so many more). Because the United States has its own political prisoners” (Suzy X qtd. in Groeneveld 2015, 300). The tweet demands as much familiarity with Chelsea Manning; Cece McDonald; Marissa Alexander; Dylan, Cody, and Jason Sutherlin; and Alex Stuck and John S. Tucker, as they do with the white Russian women.¹⁶

Feminist scholarship and activists rightfully remain unsure of the role social media and YouTube have in sustaining short- or long-term social movements, let alone the relationship feminists of color can have to the hegemonic whiteness that pervades these popular platforms. I see an advancement towards some answers of what white feminism might be capable of, at least in Pussy Riot’s case, to be in what Pinar Tuzcu calls “digital feminist geographies.” Tuzcu optimistically describes “feminist excitement” over digital space to be “not the sudden, redemptive abolishment of all interfering differences, but rather, the opening up of new possibilities of politics of difference. Rather than being borderless by nature, the digital produces different kinds of borders, demanding a different kind of understanding locations” (2016, 150). This is the same concept of borders I see Tolokonnikova describe in her definition of “punk.” Location has long been an important concept for feminism because it both grounds localized practices of feminism and emphasizes the unhomeliness of belonging to a certain place in a globalized world. As a critical concept that breaks down the concreteness of origins, location can simultaneously embody and disembody subjecthood (Braidotti 2011; Rich 2001). Tuzcu borrows most of all from Susan Stanford Friedman’s definition of “a locational feminism” requiring:

A locational approach to feminism [. . .] requires a kind of geopolitical literacy built out of recognition of how different times and places produce different and changing gender systems as these intersect with other different and changing societal stratifications and movements for social justice. Locational feminism thus encourages the study of difference in all its manifestations without being limited to it, without establishing impermeable borders that inhibit the production and visibility of ongoing intercultural exchange and hybridity. Locational feminism also acknowledges the travels and travails of feminism as it migrates across multiple borders, adapting itself to new conditions. (Friedman 1998, 5)

Friedman’s definition resists essentializing the location of subject positions, emphasizing the traveling nature of differences and borders that the digital age of global capitalism forces upon “intercultural exchange and hybridity” (a

problematic that is more urgent now, more than ever before, as individuals are locked in their homes while a difficult to understand virus permeates and redefines all types of national and embodied borders). Focusing on location permits a feminist analysis that denaturalizes national origin and takes stock of geopolitically specific, albeit simultaneously transnationally mobile, positionalities. The digital life of feminism has to make space for locations that are slippery, ungrounded, and then regrounded, all of which then bear on how subjecthood is embodied in the analog world. Pussy Riot's videos can be viewed as a project not of moving beyond difference, but as a project that considers how location matters differently in digital feminism.

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Notes

1. The title of each section of this article is a quote from a Pussy Riot music video. The section headings come from the songs (in order) "1937" (2019); "Police State" (2017); "I Can't Breathe" (2015); "Straight Outta Vagina" (2016); "Manifesto Against Police Violence" (2020).

2. LasTesis was established in 2019 by Daffne Valdés, Paula Cometa, Lea Cáceres, and Sibila Sotomayor. The group is best known for their 2019 song "Un Violador en tu Camino" ("A Rapist in Your Path"), which became the anthem of Harvey Weinstein's trial and quickly spread beyond South America and the United States to Western and Central Europe. There is currently an open criminal case against the group by the national police force, the Carabineros de Chile. "Las Tesis Collective," <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/organization/lastesis-collective>.

3. Although this genre of feminist activism never went away. Even Pussy Riot remains engaged in the national feminist campaign against domestic violence.

4. For a more satisfying model one might look at the Russian groups Feministki (later Moskovskie Radikal'nye Feministki), Chainaia Gruppya, or Shkola Feminizma. All of these groups are counterexample to arguments that the postcommunist transition in Eastern Europe did not foster feminist or women's movements because there was no "thick democracy" (Baldez 2003; Waylen 2007; Basu 2010).

5. Jessie Daniels explains digital white feminism in terms of the fantasy "that people would go online to escape their embodied racial and gender identities" in a digital utopia without race and racism (2016, 42). Additionally, there is both the ubiquitous invisibility of whiteness and its hypervisibility doing the gatekeeping around whose voices get heard (44). In her example of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In campaign, Daniels points out that Sandberg's viral movement tried to answer the "central question of 'why there aren't more women leaders.'" Her question ignored "structural barriers or systemic inequality," and argued instead "that women need to change." "Women" here is limited to heterosexual, cisgender, middle-to-upper class women who, by the very nature of those unidentified inequalities, happen to mostly be white (46).

6. I adopt my definition of transnational from New American Studies, defined most famously by Donald Pease in his introduction to the field-defining collection *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives* (1994).

7. Tolokonnikova does not mention who invited her and Kat to give a lecture, or for what reason. This is a contentious statement, and has done much to isolate Pussy Riot from the punk scene in Russia. Feminist all-female punk bands have existed in Russia since the 1980s (since Jean Sagadeev's founding of the Zhenskaia Bolezn collective), and are themselves continually alienated from the chauvinistic punk scene. While Pussy Riot has gained respect for their imprisonment, they have never participated in the underground scene, and, in particular, the feminist one. More generous feminist punk musicians recognize the significance of Pussy Riot's political work, while clarifying that they are more of "the realm of contemporary art events and political struggle, rather than music" (Herbert 2019, 223). Alexander Herbert hypothesizes that Pussy Riot took on the label of "punk rock" to make their style of music more palatable, particularly to an international audience, or, perhaps, they are punk and their underground counterparts are reluctant to admit so in fear of isolating themselves from the predominantly male scene (224). For more on why Pussy Riot should be categorized as a performance, rather than punk, group, see Yngbar B. Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer" (2013); and I. Gololobov and Y. B. Steinholt, "The Elephant in the Room? 'Post-Socialist Punk' and the Pussy Riot Phenomenon" (2012).

8. I try to avoid equating the group Pussy Riot with Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina. Separating the two becomes difficult at times—especially after Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were shunned by the anonymous members of Pussy Riot in 2014 for focusing too much on prison politics. On February 6, 2014, the remaining six anonymous Pussy Riot members Garadja, Fara, Shaiba, Cat, Seraphima, and Schumacher published a letter on Livejournal expelling Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina from the name Pussy Riot and disbanding the group because of their overemphasis on prison rights and paid appearances. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina responded just days later in an interview with the *New York Times*, declaring that that the letter "doesn't follow the ideology of Pussy Riot" because "Pussy Riot can be anyone. [. . .] Pussy Riot can only grow." Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina took over as the lead figures of the group in the United States after their release in 2013 (Pussy Riot 2014). Although there are currently around eleven members of Pussy Riot, and group membership continues to be variable around

the world, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were individualized as synecdoche for the group after the 2013 documentary *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer*. Using Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Pussy Riot's names interchangeably is sometimes appropriate, however, as the two women became the primary voice, face, and theorists of Pussy Riot in the relationship between the United States and Russia, which is the relationship of primary concern for me here.

9. "I Can't Breathe," having been released in 2015, is of course a critique of the Obama administration, not the Trump campaign. As I mentioned previously, however, Trump is neither an aberration nor a surprise within American political culture. Neither the description nor the lyrics are translated into Russian, unlike their other songs.

10. For an insightful rethinking of the concept of anonymity in the digital sphere, see the discussions in Hans Asenbaum, "Anonymity and Democracy: Absence as Presence in the Public Sphere" (2018).

11. This dystopic projection conjures the long history of manipulated news that was popularized with "yellow journalism" during the Spanish-American war (1898), coalesced in Eduard Bernays's guidebook on "propaganda" (1928), and was canonized with George Orwell's "telescreen," where $2+2=5$ (1949).

12. Violent sexualization was part of Russian feminist protest culture even before Pussy Riot. The controversial Ukrainian group Femen uses the term "sextremism" to describe when "sexuality and gender [are] mobilized in dissent" (Channell 2014, 612).

13. Pussy Riot has made clear that they are not part of Riot Grrrl's legacy. The group said in a 2012 interview that, while they are inspired by the Western punk movement of the 1980s and 1990s, they divorce their Russia-specific style of post-Soviet anti-authoritarianism as grounded more in performance art, actionism, and Russian anarchism (Chernov qtd. in Groeneveld 2015, 294). Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina in particular are grounded in anarchism due to their participation in the group Voyna. For more on Voyna, see Oliver Johnson, "War on the Ru-net" (2013); and Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia* (2015).

14. See, for example, the provocative discussion "Pussy Riot Meets Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti" from the The First Supper Symposium (2014); Erika W. Smith, "From Russia With Love" (2017); and Slavoj Žižek and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, *Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj* (2014).

15. I want to thank my colleague, Lucas Power, at Duke University for suggesting that the digestive strategy I propose here would also seem to intervene in the cultural debate over selling out/authenticity, which is especially volatile in studies on punk.

16. I read the tweet slightly differently than Groeneveld does. She interprets the abbreviated names as a choice meant to presume the reader's familiarity with the imprisoned individuals; I interpret the rhetorical move as an imperative calling out the reader for their negligence in not already having such familiarity.

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