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‘Smash the patriarchy’: the changing meanings and work of ‘patriarchy’ memes

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Abstract:

This article discusses the resurgence of the term ‘patriarchy’ in digital culture and reflects on the everyday online meanings of the term in distinction to academic theorisations. In the 1960s-1980s, feminists theorised patriarchy as the systematic oppression of women, with differing approaches to how it worked. Criticisms that the concept was unable to account for intersectional experiences of oppression, alongside the ‘turn to culture’, resulted in a fall from academic grace. However, ‘patriarchy’ has found new life through Internet memes (humorous, mutational images that circulate widely on social media). This paper aims to investigate the resurgence of the term ‘patriarchy’ in digital culture. Based on an analysis of memes with the phrase ‘patriarchy’ and ‘smash the patriarchy’, we identify how patriarchy memes are used by two different online communities (feminists and anti-feminists) and consider what this means for the ongoing usefulness of the concept of patriarchy. We argue that, whilst performing important community-forming work, using the term is a risky strategy for feminists for two reasons: first, because memes are by their nature brief, there is little opportunity to address intersections of oppression; secondly, the underlying logic of feminism is omitted in favour of brevity, leaving it exposed to being undermined by the more mainstream logic of masculinism.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Feminism; Digital Culture; Masculinism; Misogyny; Memes;

Introduction

The word 'patriarchy' is having something of a resurgence after some years in the backwaters of out-of-fashion structural feminism. This revival of the term is apparent in the mainstream media (e.g. Higgins 2018) and popular feminist publications (e.g. *Ms Magazine*, 2018). It appears emblazoned on placards at global Women's Marches, and on T-shirts. Our online lives are punctuated by references to patriarchy, particularly in the form of memes (images with superimposed text that are shared widely on social media, their provenance usually unknown).

The concept of patriarchy has not typically been viewed as a useful theoretical lens for understanding the multifaceted oppression of women since the 1980s, at least in academic circles (Hunnicutt, 2009). Theorised heterogeneously by feminists in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s to articulate the systematic, structural oppression of women, it provided frameworks through which to make links between seemingly distinct areas of women's experiences. However, criticisms (not always accurate) that the concept was ahistorical, homogenising and unable to account for gendered experiences that intersected with other structural oppressions - alongside the 'turn to culture' (Barrett 1990) in the 1990s – meant that the term fell from academic grace. Whilst it has recently resurfaced in academic texts (Enloe, 2017; Gilligan and Snider, 2018; Clisby and Holdsworth, 2016), suggesting a reclamation of the concept as a valuable analytical tool, questions remain over whether its theoretical problems have been sufficiently addressed.

Why, then, has a concept critiqued for its blindness to race, class and other intersections become once again so visible? How do we make sense of the renewed currency of 'patriarchy', particularly within online spaces? This paper aims to investigate the resurgence of the term 'patriarchy' in digital culture specifically, as a site where the term is especially visible. Based on an analysis of memes with the phrase 'patriarchy' and 'smash the patriarchy', we identify how patriarchy memes are used by two different online communities (feminists and anti-feminists) and consider what this means for the ongoing usefulness of the concept. We argue that, whilst performing important community-forming work, using the term is a risky strategy for feminists for two reasons: first, because memes are by their nature brief, there is little opportunity to address intersections of oppression; secondly, the underlying logic of feminism is omitted in favour of brevity, leaving it exposed to being undermined by the more mainstream logic of masculinism (Brittan, 1989; Nicholas and Agius, 2018) and anti-feminism.

First, we situate our intervention in relation to literature on online feminism and networked misogyny, and to theoretical debates on the concept of patriarchy. We then outline our methodology, before turning our analytical attention to patriarchy memes. We address how feminist memes mobilise the concept of patriarchy (and more precisely '*the* patriarchy') to provide a sense of feminist collectivity, and consider the risk this poses for intersectional feminism. We then examine anti-feminist memes and detail how the concept is re-appropriated to undermine feminism.

Digital feminisms and networked misogyny

It is instructive to consider the resurgence of patriarchy online through feminist scholarship identifying new visibilities of feminism in contemporary media and digital culture. Unlike the period of the late 1990s and 2000s, when the cultural landscape was characterised by a post-feminist repudiation or disavowal of feminist vocabularies and identities (McRobbie, 2009), in recent years feminism appears to have become acceptable and even popular (Banet-Wesier 2018): from celebrity feminism, to the #metoo movement, to an array of feminist merchandise, often sporting the phrase 'smash the patriarchy'. This 'new cultural life of feminism' (Gill, 2016) has been variously described and extensively debated, however it is widely accepted that digital culture has been a particularly significant site for this resurgent feminist activity. Indeed scholars have identified digital culture as important spaces for feminist community-formation and consciousness-raising, and for critiquing sexism and anti-feminism (Mendes et al., 2019; Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018). However, as Banet-Weiser warns, whilst feminist 'discourses have an accessibility that is no [longer] confined to academic enclaves' (2018: 1), feminism is most likely to achieve visibility when it is 'palatable' and 'media friendly': 'happy' (rather than angry), and conducive to the logics of consumer culture and neoliberalism. She argues that these expressions not only eclipse feminist structural critiques of systems of class inequality or racism, but privilege white, middle-class cis women.

Scholarship on 'post-' (Gill, 2016), 'popular-' (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and 'neoliberal-' (Rottenburg, 2018) feminism is valuable for thinking critically about how the feminist concept of patriarchy has gained visibility, and the ideological work that it might do. However, there is a risk of collapsing all expressions of feminism together, ignoring the multiple and diverse iterations of feminism that exist across media and digital culture. For this reason, we focus on one particular area of digital culture that has specific conventions and meanings for its audiences: memes. In everyday usage, a meme is often an image or gif, circulating online, shared by friends, with comic or ironic text across it, e.g. a picture of a cat appearing next to the humorously mis-spelled and grammatically flawed text 'I can has cheezburger'. Memes may seem like amusing diversions with little power to hold our attention or affect our thinking. However, the expansion of social media has meant that memes are now a prevalent part of our digital lives and a key way in which we communicate online (Miltner, 2014). This makes them an important site for critical investigation. Knobel and Lankshear (2006) argue that memes are worth studying because they tell us something about 'mindsets, new forms of power and social processes, new forms of social participation and activism, and new distributed networks of communication and relationship' (2006: 201). Furthermore, Gal, Shifman and Kampf (2016) state that memes are important for how norms are formed and/or subverted: they argue that memes do performative work and are 'performative acts' (Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016: 1700). Examining memes is therefore a valuable way to examine which ideas become prominent and in what forms. For example, Lawrence and Ringrose (2018) argue that feminist memes operationalise humour as a mechanism for expressing rage, forming communities, and calling out sexism and antifeminism – what Rentschler and Thrift (2015) call 'digital feminist warfare'. Lawrence and Ringrose also highlight the limitations to these practices, detailing how some feminist memes (such as misandry memes) endorse violence, reify essentialist notions of biological difference, and exclude intersectional perspectives.

Notwithstanding the different interpretations of this resurgent feminist visibility online, there is consensus that the luminosity given to feminism exists 'in tandem with intensified misogyny' (Gill 2016: 610). Just as digital platforms have created opportunities for feminist activity, they have also amplified forms of misogyny and anti-feminism; from men's rights activism, to rape threats, to more generalised hostility to women (and feminists) online (Ging and Siapera, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). Online spaces exist as sites of struggle and confrontation between different groups. As we show, the term 'patriarchy' finds life not only in feminist digital culture but also across networked popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where the concept performs very different kinds of ideological and community-forming work.

The concept of patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy was of central unifying importance in the Women's Liberation Movement (Beechey, 1979). In seeking a reason for women's subordination across a range of cultural and historical sites, discussions of 'patriarchy' therefore examined roles in the family (Delphy, 1977; Millett, 1971), the incest taboo and exchange of women (Mitchell, 1975) and the political differentiation of biology (Eisenstein, 1979), amongst other approaches. The concept was important: it provided a way to theorise 'feelings of oppression' (Beechey, 1979, p.66) and offered a unifying theory both inside and outside academia. Having said that, patriarchy was not theorised monolithically or ahistorically, as has been sometimes claimed (e.g. Acker 1989). Feminists laboured to theorise the workings of patriarchy in specific contexts, e.g. French farming families (Delphy, 1977), to define its varying manifestations, e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and East and South Asia (Kandiyoti, 1988), and account for it shifting interactions with racism and capitalism (Walby 1990). However, in her critical overview of how the term has been used, Fox (1988) argues that a theory of patriarchy must consider both superstructure and subjectivity. Moreover, she claims that the term is in urgent need of nuanced reconceptualization with specificity as to how we understand patriarchy working at both the structural and individual level. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s criticisms emerged with regards to the universal quality of the theory and its failure to address how women's experiences differ across race, class and sexuality (Combahee River Collective, 1997 [1977]; Lorde, 1994; hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989), although it did later form one axis of oppression in Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2011). Yet, in using 'patriarchy', Bhopal raises concerns that 'racial divisions are relegated to secondary importance as the notion of 'race' and ethnicity have been 'added on'' (sic 1997). Butler (1990) argues that in aiming to theorise a universal concept of patriarchy, Western feminists have sought examples from non-Western cultural contexts. In doing so they co-opt those cultures in a Neo-colonial way, causing damage through the subtle construction of these as barbaric, reading a Western version of oppression onto them. She calls this a 'colonizing epistemological strategy' (1990: 48) which inhibits the ability to understand 'different configurations of domination' (1990: 48).

Furthermore, in theorising patriarchy, no historical cause of women's oppression could be agreed on (Beechey, 1979, Jackson, 1998). Meanwhile, Pollert (1996) argues that, the concept of patriarchy, particularly as theorised by radical feminists, relies upon notions of women and men as different groups, with something essential linking women. But what might that essential quality be? Without an understanding of historical causes of male dominance, the concept of patriarchy is implicitly reliant on dimorphic biological reasoning relating to role(s) in reproduction, she claims. This biological essentialism raises the question of 'what is a woman?', since bearing children is not the single defining characteristic of those designated as women (Beechey, 1979). But this criticism is unfair, as Brickell (2006) outlines: ethnomethodologists (e.g. Kessler and McKenna, 1978) and materialist feminists (e.g. Wittig, 1992) all argued that bodies are socially constructed. Meanwhile, Marxist feminists left the underlying social theory of capitalism unexamined and therefore retained some of the problems of Marxism, problems that would have benefited from feminist analysis (Jackson 1998). A fundamental problem was a lack of agreement on how patriarchy worked or how it had arisen, and what its relationship with capitalism may be (Jackson, 1998).

The theory was not completely abandoned however. Walby's (1990) theorisation argues for a more flexible conceptualisation of patriarchy. Engaging with criticisms of the term, she argues that there are six main structures that together constitute the system of patriarchy, and which may have different emphases and levels of importance in different developed countries. Yet in Walby's theorisation there is minimal discussion of those who do not fit into the social category 'women' or of lesbians. This is primarily a theory about women who live cis, heterosexual lives. Nor are the intersections of race and class particularly well addressed.

The concept has found renewed life in feminist research on domestic and sexual violence, particularly in work on the global South (e.g. Mahadeen, 2015). Other attempts are being made to reformulate the theory. For example Hunnicutt (2009) revises the concept as 'varieties of patriarchy', arguing that discussion of violence against women needs a theory which can show the *gendered* nature of violence and how men are caught up in hierarchies in which they are disempowered. Thus Hunnicutt argues for a theory of patriarchy that acknowledges men's position in relation to other men; and pays attention to race and class hierarchies. Such a theory must enable analysis where structure and ideology may be divergent (e.g. patriarchal ideology may remain where gender equality is making gains), whilst also consider '"terrains of power" in which both men and women wield varying types and amounts of power' (2009: 555). Cynthia Enloe (2017) calls for feminist attention to the minutiae of patriarchy's workings, defining patriarchy as 'a system – a dynamic web – of particular ideas and relationships' which is 'stunningly adaptable' (2017: 16).

These re-theorisations move away from critiques of 'patriarchy' as monolithic in favour of considering it flexible, an argument that finds common ground with theorisations by Walby (1990) and Kandiyoti (1998). Enloe indicates that patriarchy operates hegemonically, responding to challenges from feminists and shifting the territory to maintain male dominance. Whilst rethinking 'patriarchy' as a more flexible system strikes us as necessary, questions about how patriarchy is enmeshed with racism and classism remain. In spite of the myriad criticisms that have been made of the concept and its resulting apparent toxicity (to the extent that Walby (2011) chose to use 'gender regimes' as more palatable to policy makers), the term still holds worth for some academics. As Clisby and Holdsworth say, it is valuable to use 'patriarchy' because it makes visible that which is 'unacceptable' (2016: 22). With this renewed interest in patriarchy theoretically, it is valuable to consider how feminists – and others – are utilising the concept. Within the brief space of the meme, can meme-makers (and their sharers) articulate these reformulated ideas? And what work does 'patriarchy' do in these spaces?

Methods

To investigate these questions, we employ textual analysis of memes. Memes are designed to convey a potent (if only for the purpose of amusement) message in seconds. Therefore unpicking the multiple discourses at work across a spectrum of patriarchy-related memes enables us to identify the meanings of 'patriarchy' in digital culture and the work the concept does. This method precludes us from commenting on the circulation and reception of memes by internet users, beyond our own experiences, and we identify this as a valuable area for further research. We collated patriarchy-related memes and examined them using discourse analysis. Our sample comes from a 7th November 2018 Google.co.uk image search (the computer's search history cleared to limit the personalisation algorithm) of the terms 'patriarchy' and, given the prevalence of the phrase in our social media timelines, 'smash the patriarchy'. Additionally we searched for '"smash the patriarchy" meme' and 'patriarchy meme', which enabled us to capture different ways in which the phrase and term are being used online. Our sample comprises images in the top four rows (c. thirty images) of search results from each of these search terms, with duplicates excluded (n=122). Using Google Image Search provides a quick snapshot into the highest page-ranked images across Google's indexed web and a quick view into what kinds of images are frequently seen by those using the world's most widely used search engine. However Google's algorithm can be 'gamed' to position some pages nearer the top of the list (Marres, 2017: 71) and algorithms are far from neutral. Indeed, as the most dominant search engine, Google represents a site of cultural struggle. As Safiya Umoja Noble's (2013; 2018) work on the search engine's representation of black women powerfully demonstrates, far from being neutral and depoliticised, 'search engine results perpetuate particular narratives that reflect historically uneven distributions of power in society' (2018: 71). Consequently, creating a snapshot of its search results is a valuable means of capturing a sample of these broader struggles (Noble, 2013).

Google image search provides details of the websites on which the memes are located, but typically gives little to no information about who made the images and for what purpose. Nor do we know how the images are engaged with (an area for further research). Image research online is notoriously tricky as it is difficult to put together a sample due to the web's 'enormous size and mutability' (Shifman and Lemish, 2010: 876). Tech companies do not provide access to all their data, and social media privacy settings mean that not all the images circulating at one time will be available. It is also difficult to track the provenance and circulation of images. Whilst tools are available to help overcome some of these issues, these require significant resources (boyd and Crawford, 2012).

We used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse the textual and visual discourses in the memes. We began from the position that language and visuals are inherently political and both make use of and are constructive of ideological messages (Griffin, 2007). Paying close attention to visual and textual recurrences, we coded the memes for imagery (e.g. images or text referring to hammers, conspiracy, flowers), political position (feminist/anti-feminist/neutral/ambiguous) and types of people in the images (famous/not famous), alongside noting metaphors and joke style (where relevant). We assessed the implied addressees and authorial positions.

The "'smash the patriarchy'" results show numerous images with the phrase 'smash the patriarchy' or that used the phrase for comic effect (e.g. 'the patriarchy isn't going to smash itself') (thirty three), sometimes accompanied by images of hammers (four) or flowers (five), sometimes as part of cartoons which feature fictional super heroines (e.g. Wonder Woman). They also show how intensely commodified the phrase is, appearing on t-shirts, mugs and other merchandise. This speaks to wider commodification of feminist language and imagery within mainstream media and consumer culture (Banet Weiser, 2018). We coded all these images as 'feminist'. We coded twenty of the "patriarchy" memes as 'feminist', one as 'anti-feminist', and eight as ambiguous or neutral. The results included feminist cartoons (ten); the phrase 'if I had a hammer I'd smash patriarchy' accompanied by a woman with a hammer smashing a wall (one); educational images offering graphic explanations of key terms in gender theory (two); images with the slogan 'smash the patriarchy' (four) or 'fuck the patriarchy' (one); two book covers of feminist books. Notably the datasets produced with the word 'meme' appended, gave starkly different results to those without. These images were nearly all memes in the image + white capitalised text format, *à la* LOLcats. Here are many images that we categorise as 'anti-feminist' where the humour of the memes is at women's and feminists' expense. Twenty-five of the thirty one "patriarchy meme" results we coded as 'anti-feminist' and only four as 'feminist'. This tells us something about how meme websites enable the creation and spread of anti-feminist memes. On the other hand, the majority of the "smash the patriarchy meme" results we coded as 'feminist' (nineteen of thirty one images), which indicates that the phrase itself does important work for a feminist identity, as we discuss below.

Community-formation: collectivity and humour for feminists

Memes operate as a shared communicative language. They express and assume a common identity and 'insider' status (Miltner, 2014; Massanari and Chess, 2018). Memes are inter-textual, building on other memes and cultural texts to transmit their message. The joke or meaning of the meme depends on this language being understood by the reader (Kanai 2015). Thus, memes play a role in the 'border work' of feminist collective identity construction as they hail us to 'get the joke' and share their perspective. In this way memes can have an important function for individual and collective identity formation (Miltner, 2014; Milner, 2016; Knobel and Lankshear, 2006). In this section we examine how feminist patriarchy memes do this community-forming work.

The phrase 'smash the patriarchy' appears widely across our dataset, often accompanied by visuals that complement the violence of 'smash'. The hammer in particular also references a feminist joke that starts with the Peter, Paul and Mary song 'If I Had a Hammer'. The joke appears in our dataset and goes: 'if I had a hammer… I'd smash patriarchy. I found it!' (see Figure 1). It is usually accompanied by an image of a woman with a hammer (the origins of this cartoon are possibly Rebekah Putnam and Carri Bennett in *Habitual Freak* zine, 1994, but many new memes have been created based on this).

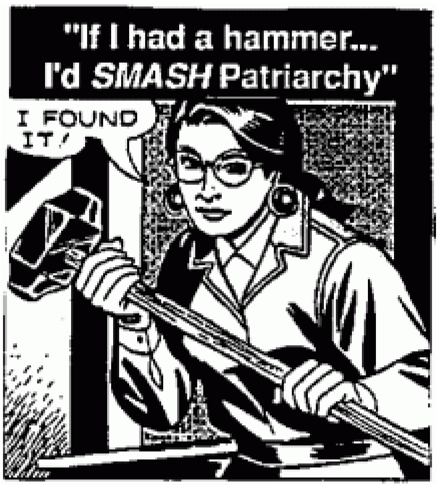

"If I had a hammer...
I'd *SMASH* Patriarchy"
I FOUND IT!

Figure 1

In the song the singer wishes for a hammer so that they can hammer all the time, everywhere in order to bring about peace (or perhaps remove love - the lyrics are ambiguous). Part of the meme's joke is that indiscriminate hammering is what little boys do when they get their first toy hammer; but the more important joke is that hammering indiscriminately is not good enough. Hammering requires an object if it is to effect change. The joke is further amusing because it breaks the rhythm of the song with an angry declaration. The hammer imagery of the memes therefore taps into this shared language and existing joke.

Flowers, hearts and other symbols of romance, childhood (e.g. Figure 2) and femininity which are *not* associated with violent destruction also appear in the feminist memes, often alongside the phrase 'smash the patriarchy'. Whilst the hammer imagery also hints at a second-wave empowering of women to be self-reliant and embrace traditionally male roles (such as DIY), this other imagery makes reference to a different set of feminist ideas relating to embracing the 'subversive' power of the feminine - an argument more akin to third-wave feminism (Nicholas, 2013).

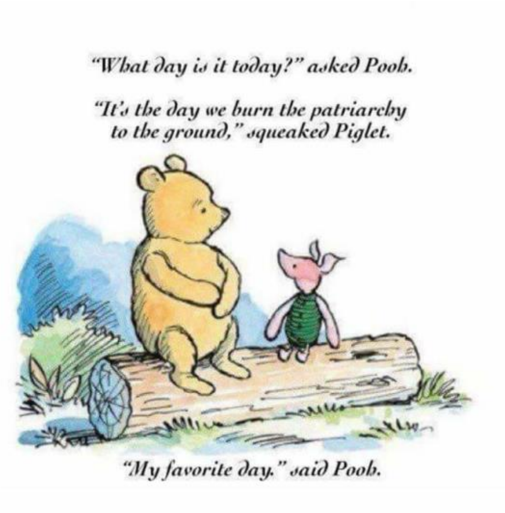

"What day is it today?" asked Pooh.
"It's the day we burn the patriarchy to the ground," squeaked Piglet.
"My favorite day." said Pooh.

Figure 2

The use of the term 'patriarchy' alongside a destructive verb ('smash' is sometimes replaced by 'burn', for example) is an important indicator of feminist alignment. It articulates a collective politics through the widespread use of the phrase 'smash the patriarchy', which, according to Google trends, has increased in worldwide usage over the last decade, with specific peaks in November 2016 (perhaps due to the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency) and January 2017 (possibly reflecting the increased feminist activism around the Women's March). The direct instruction 'Smash the Patriarchy' can be seen as a call to arms, instructing other feminists to join the fight. Some memes do this more explicitly, featuring several women together inviting others to join them, such as Figure 3 below which features the protagonists from the teen film *Mean Girls* (2004) in a car with the words 'Get in Loser. We're going to smash the patriarchy'.

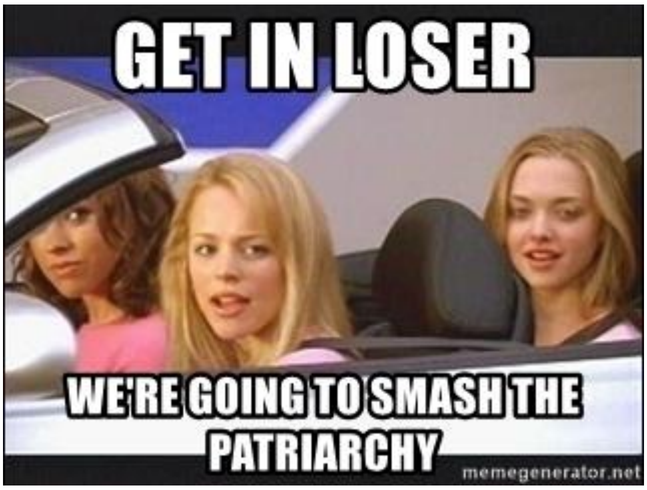

GET IN LOSER
WE'RE GOING TO SMASH THE PATRIARCHY
memegenerator.net

Figure 3

Whether one is aware of the symbolism in these memes and their associations with different strands of feminism, the words 'patriarchy' and 'smash' are enough of a shared language. We argue that these memes can be theorised as having performative and community-forming functions within feminist communities online, not just through assuming a shared digital literacy (Kanai 2015) but also by mobilising a shared feminist vocabulary. We suggest that typically people viewing the memes and recognising themselves in them are likely to be already (to varying degrees) familiar with, and supportive of, the ideas presented. This challenges the idea that memes are always necessarily consciousness-raising, because those looking at and sharing them are already 'bought in'. Nevertheless we argue that memes do important feminist work: they impress an urgency and activity on the viewer, and an assertion that feminism matters. The importance of this should not be understated in a wider context in which feminism as a political project is being vehemently undermined. This is not only occurring online (as we demonstrate below), but *structurally*, embedded within institutionalised processes and practices (Banet-Weiser, 2018); including the roll back of women's reproductive rights and intensifying attacks on Gender Studies.

'(The) Patriarchy' reformulated as a smashable 'thing'

'Smash the patriarchy' utilises the concept of 'patriarchy' in a distinctive way, subtly different from older theorisations of patriarchy, in which the concept was used grammatically without a definite article, e.g. article titles such as Beechey's 'On Patriarchy' (1979) and Walby's 'Theorising Patriarchy' (1989). In its online life, 'patriarchy' has gained a definite article: 'smash *the* patriarchy'. This produces a vision of something that can be done in one go - like knocking down a garden wall - and implies a recognisable 'thing', a target for feminist anger and action. 'The patriarchy' is universal, a singular entity. We suggest this visualisation of patriarchy as a 'thing' rather than a system of diffuse power working through individuals and institutions is a powerful feminist collectivising technology. When 'patriarchy' becomes '*the* patriarchy' it becomes a monolithic thing, and the meme works as a call to action. Yet it is not without its contradictions or limitations, not least the lack of a sense of what 'patriarchy' actually *is*. We return to these issues shortly.

Eight memes made reference to the days of the week (e.g. 'On Tuesdays we smash the patriarchy'). These references work alongside this 'thinginess' of 'patriarchy', suggesting that smashing the patriarchy might be part of the mundanity of our lives, such as a day's 'to do list' filled only with 'smash the patriarchy'. We argue that the humour of this meme lies in the knowing juxtaposition between the mundane and everyday connotations of the to-do list or diary, and the bombastic act of destroying a global system of inequality. The scheduling of such an unruly act plays on the gendered norms through which women are expected to be diligent, compliant and organised.

These memes present a sense of urgency. Patriarchy is not to be smashed in some distant future, but today (or at least scheduled). The connotation of the need for smashing the patriarchy to be timetabled in to the week signals that feminism is 'work'. Moreover it connotes that the transformative work of feminism is *ongoing* and requires us to think strategically in order to bring about change (Ahmed, 2017: 93): it is *every* Wednesday that the patriarchy needs smashing. Thus whilst we may still be unclear what patriarchy is, we know that we must keep at smashing it. If memes do important community-building work for those who are already feminists, we can theorise that they also do motivational work through recognising feminist struggle and legitimating rage that was previously 'illegible' (McRobbie 2009). In their analysis of feminist memes, Lawrence and Ringrose (2018: 229) contend that using 'humour and sarcasm to articulate female rage is a critical component for feminism'.

For feminist memes 'patriarchy' provides a point around which to organise, where patriarchy is unequivocally the enemy. What 'patriarchy' is doing online now, then, is the same as what Beechey argued it was doing for the women's movement in 1979: 'patriarchy' is useful as a way to theorise and explain 'feelings of oppression' (1979: 66). Its resurgence online may be because it provides a way for feminists to register the presence of injustices, to render these unacceptable, and to challenge them. To quote Ahmed in her discussion of the value of 'sexism' as a concept for feminism:

> When we put a name to a problem, we are doing something. . . Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost (2015: 8-9).

However, for all the positive work that feminist patriarchy memes do online, the return to a universalised concept is not necessarily a happy one. Pollert (1996) argues that, in academic theorising, patriarchy is used as a 'short-hand' (p.639) in ways that slip between '*description* and *explanation*' (emphasis in original). The effect of this slippage is to lose sight of the micro levels of social relations in the perpetuation of oppressive structures, obscuring 'the tension between agency and structure necessary to understand social processes' (1996: 640). This problem remains within feminist memes where the use of '(the) patriarchy' as a shortcut would seem to only relate to the structure - the smashable thing - thus obscuring the complexity of the microsocial relations of living in patriarchal societies.

The risk of losing intersectional perspectives

The question of who is being hailed and what kind of collective identity is being formed by feminist patriarchy memes raises difficulties for contemporary, intersectional feminism. Using '(the) patriarchy' in a meme context is a risky strategy. It is risky because using the concept without any kind of reformulation means that the theory cannot be free from the criticisms leveled at it by black feminists in particular. Specifically, in gaining a definitive article ('the'), it conjures a singular and monolithic patriarchy towards which our work as feminists must be oriented, isolating this from other injustices and mechanisms of power.

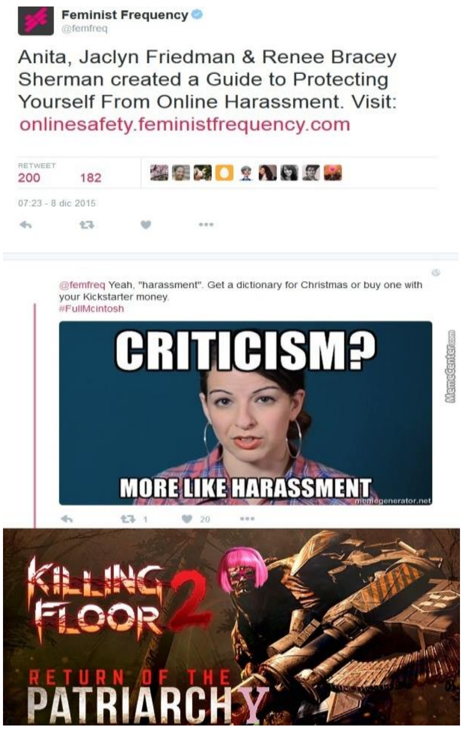
A meme has to be brief to be memorable and sharable – its success depends on it. 'Smash the patriarchy' is much catchier than the longer formulation 'if I had a hammer, I'd smash patriarchy', but this brevity does not provide space for discussion of the problems inherent in the theory. Nor is there room to articulate more complex reformulations of the concept which attempt to address the critiques and to take intersections of oppression into account (e.g. Walby, Hunnicut). Furthermore, the 'thingyness' of '*the* patriarchy', with its newly acquired definitive article and implications of monolithicism, expressly denies newer understandings of patriarchies as flexibly hegemonic (Enloe, 2017), context dependent, and working with and through other forms of discrimination and oppression. Thus the use of 'patriarchy' online maintains its bias towards middle-class, white women's concerns, i.e. prioritising gender, to the neglect of black, minority ethnic, working class, lesbian, bisexual and transwomen's particular experiences of oppression. Using 'patriarchy' in memes is therefore a risky strategy since it can exclude many women from the collective feminist sociality that it generates. Indeed, if memes build feminist communities through recourse to a shared vocabulary and assumed object of concern (in this case 'the patriarchy'), it is vital that we consider how wider relations (of class, race, sexuality and so on) organise feminist socialities online and shape their terms of participation (Khoja-Moolji 2015).

So far we have argued that patriarchy memes operate as a shared visual language through which feminist sociality and – to some degree – resistance can be generated online. However, the problem of foregrounding gender rather than addressing the intersections of multiple oppressions remains. We now move our focus to anti-feminist patriarchy memes which offer a new definition of patriarchy altogether and seize upon the potential reductionism of the term to undermine feminism.

Anti-feminist collectivity and identification of a target

In the previous section, we highlighted how humour operates in spaces of online feminist sociality, as memes function as a *lingua franca* among those who see the value in, and necessity for, feminism. The community-forming potential of patriarchy memes however extends beyond pro-feminist communities. Anti-feminist memes also create a collectivity through humour, but by inviting the reader to share in jokes at the expense of feminists and/or feminism. A key point of distinction from the feminist memes is the use of recognisable *targets*: individual women who are mocked directly. Two notable figures that emerged in our data set are Anita Sarkeesian (who created the website Feminist Frequency, and who came under fire from men in the gaming community, and Canadian LGBT rights campaigner Chanty Binx.

In one meme from the "patriarchy meme" results, Sarkeesian's image is used with the phrase 'Criticism? More like harassment' (Figure 5) in a screengrab of a tweet by Feminist Frequency. The Sarkeesian image is used to 'correct' Feminist Frequency's use of the term 'online harassment', which the tweeter @FullMcintosh argues should actually be 'criticism'. This is making use of the frequently-seen argument about feminists being 'snowflakes' who cannot take criticism. It works alongside the anti-feminist argument that what feminists call 'trolling' is actually 'free speech'.



Feminist Frequency
@femfreq

Anita, Jaclyn Friedman & Renee Bracey Sherman created a Guide to Protecting Yourself From Online Harassment. Visit: onlinesafety.feministfrequency.com

RETWEET 200 182

07:23 - 8 dic 2015

@femfreq Yeah, "harassment". Get a dictionary for Christmas or buy one with your Kickstarter money.
#FullMcintosh

Figure 5

Here the concept of 'masculinism' (Brittan, 1989) is useful, particularly as employed by Nicholas and Agius (2018) in their discussion of men's rights activism online. Brittan (1989) defines masculinism as the acceptance of dimorphic biological gender and associated 'naturalness' of heterosexuality, differing 'natural' gendered roles in labour, including the dominance of men in public and private life. He describes it as 'the ideology of patriarchy' (Brittan 1989: 4) and posits its basis in the ancient Greek philosophical approach to logic and reason, a position which has been well critiqued by Lloyd (1993) and others as justifying ideas of men as superior to women. Nicholas and Agius (2018) build on these ideas to understand how masculinist ideas manifest and are mobilised online, arguing that masculinism also involves a logic of individual choice and the rejection that individual agency is shaped or limited by society. In the case of the memes discussed above, the repositioning of trolling as 'free speech' is underpinned by that logic, and, indeed, according to this logic the idea of patriarchy is nonsense, a myth made up by feminists. This logic runs counter to radical or Marxist feminisms that understand women's oppression as structural and systematic. We return to these points shortly.

Memes featuring Chanty Binx (Figure 6), whose exchange with anti-LGBTQ campaigners was filmed and widely disseminated online (Don & Y F, 2018), also exhibit the logic of masculinism. Binx has become a figure of numerous anti-feminist memes, known as 'Big Red'. She appears three times in our data set, but many more times in the longer search results. In these she appears angry, with text that replicates the masculinist idea that feminists are illogical, ignorant and doctrine-driven (one Big Red meme includes the text 'Shut the fuck up | memes are patriarchy'). In depicting feminists as illogical, those reading the meme and agreeing can position themselves as bearers of reason, seeming to neutralise rationality, rather than it being *a priori* linked to the Western philosophical tradition that privileges masculinist views of the world over women's perspectives (Nicholas and Agius, 2018).

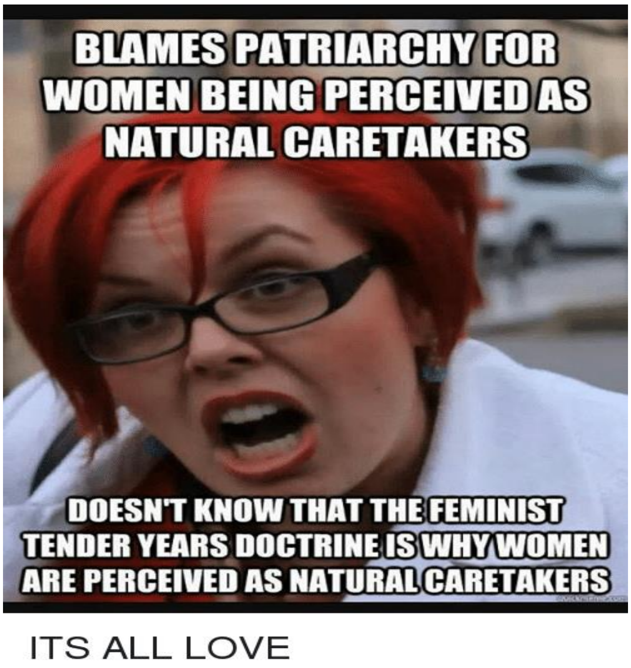

BLAMES PATRIARCHY FOR WOMEN BEING PERCEIVED AS NATURAL CARETAKERS
DOESN'T KNOW THAT THE FEMINIST TENDER YEARS DOCTRINE IS WHY WOMEN ARE PERCEIVED AS NATURAL CARETAKERS
ITS ALL LOVE

Figure 6

That feminists are 'unattractive' is another part of the joke that this set of memes in our sample mobilise, and this works to bolster claims of irrationality. Echoing historic caricatures of feminists as sexually undesirable, the memes depict Binx and other feminists as outside of conventional norms of feminine attractiveness: rejecting mainstream beauty choices by dying hair bright red, having dreadlocks, or celebrating 'fat' bodies. In their analysis of the Social Justice Warrior caricature, Massanari and Chess (2018) suggest that depictions of feminists as excessive (corporeally and emotionally) work to discredit feminism, shoring up ideas of feminists as 'intellectually damaged and (therefore) morally corrupt' (2018: 530). Emotion, in its alignment with 'the feminine', becomes antithetical to 'reason' and 'logic', and thus plays a role in discrediting feminism. We see this elsewhere: whilst men rarely featured in these memes, one meme depicts a crying man, with the text 'I tried to help her smash the patriarchy. She still won't touch my peepee' (Figure 7). This not only depicts feminist men as strategic and inauthetic (performing feminism as a means to get sex) but the tears and baby-like speech ('peepee') place them outside the realms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) – too feminine and too childlike.

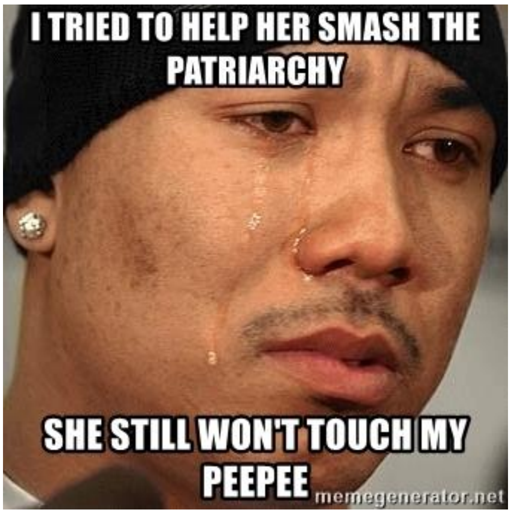

I TRIED TO HELP HER SMASH THE PATRIARCHY
SHE STILL WON'T TOUCH MY PEEPEE
memegenerator.net

Figure 7

This hostile and often violent[i] targeting of feminists (and feminist allies) is not mirrored in the feminist memes, whose power comes from a call to action, but whose foe is not clearly defined. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that whilst feminism is characterised by ambivalence and contradiction, popular misogyny is the opposite – it is a zero sum game. It is feminism's complexity in its critical questioning of gendered norms that antifeminists call out, misidentifying this as contradiction so as to discredit feminism.

The risk of 'patriarchy''s co-option for masculinism: patriarchy as conspiracy theory

As we have discussed, one way that anti-feminist memes discredit feminism is byconstructing feminists as delusional, irrational and hypocritical. Our analysis also reveals a very distinct deployment and re-appropriation of the feminist concept 'patriarchy' as a means to undermine feminist critiques of power. Using humour to 'belittle the problem that feminism names' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 58), the notion of patriarchy as a system of oppression is itself the subject of the joke: figuring as, at best, incorrect, and at worst a lie spread by women to oppress men (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). One of the key themes in anti-feminist memes is the notion of patriarchy as a conspiracy theory. This is done through image association, for example Giorgio Tsoukalos (Figure 8) from the television programme *Ancient Aliens*, which discusses theories of ancient links between humans and extraterrestrials, a popular topic for conspiracy theorists. The image of a suited green alien in front of a US flag (Figure 9) similarly draws on conspiracy theory imagery, as does the meme (Figure 10) which suggests that feminists are replacing theism with a belief in another non-existent omnipotent imaginary thing. Similarly the actor Keanu Reeves's image (Figure 11) links to the Reddit The Red Pill community, which uses the idea from the film *The Matrix* that taking the red pill will open up one's eyes to the reality of the world. The connotation here is that one should wake up from the feminist dream world.

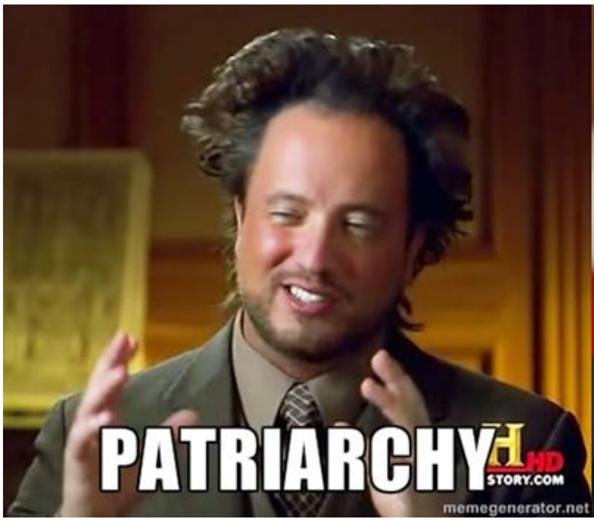

PATRIARCHY
HISTORY.COM
memegenerator.net

Figure 8

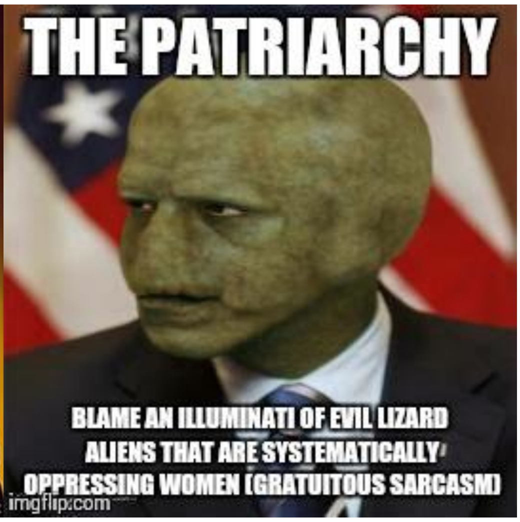

THE PATRIARCHY
BLAME AN ILLUMINATI OF EVIL LIZARD ALIENS THAT ARE SYSTEMATICALLY OPPRESSING WOMEN [GRATUITOUS SARCASM]
imgflip.com

Figure 9

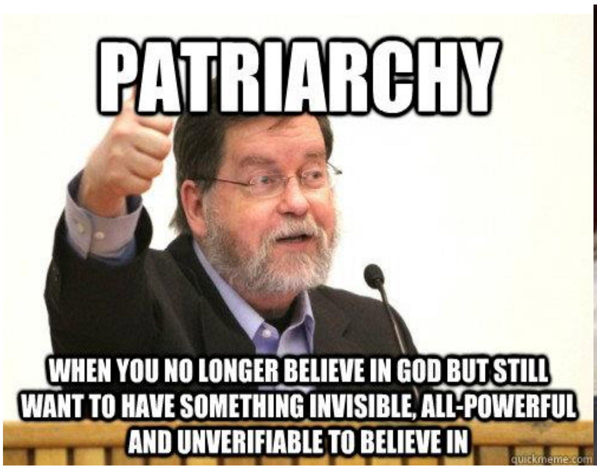

PATRIARCHY
WHEN YOU NO LONGER BELIEVE IN GOD BUT STILL WANT TO HAVE SOMETHING INVISIBLE, ALL-POWERFUL AND UNVERIFIABLE TO BELIEVE IN
quickmeme.com

Figure 10

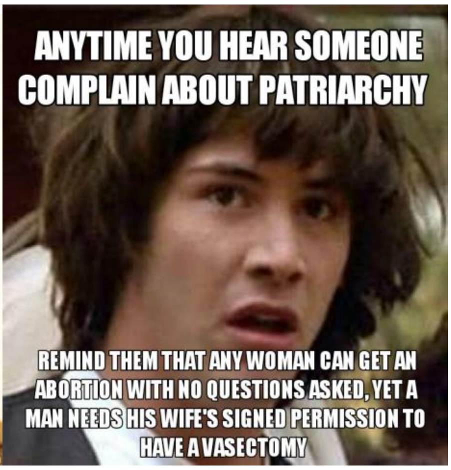

ANYTIME YOU HEAR SOMEONE COMPLAIN ABOUT PATRIARCHY
REMIND THEM THAT ANY WOMAN CAN GET AN ABORTION WITH NO QUESTIONS ASKED, YET A MAN NEEDS HIS WIFE'S SIGNED PERMISSION TO HAVE A VASECTOMY

Figure 11

Like the memes portraying feminists as irrational, Figure 12 shows the explicit linking of 'patriarchy' to the notion of feminists as illogical thinkers. This would seem to depict a woman making two contradictory statements at once: that using an app to expose how a woman 'really' looks (without makeup or filters) *and* manipulating a woman's image are both manifestations of 'misogynistic patriarchy'. As feminists we (the authors) see the logic of how these two statements make sense together – they both critique the idea that women are only valuable for their appearance – and the complexities of power they speak to. However, such discussions are too long to fit on a meme and so, superficially and without the support of a feminist framework, the juxtaposition of the two statements can appear to express a flawed logic.

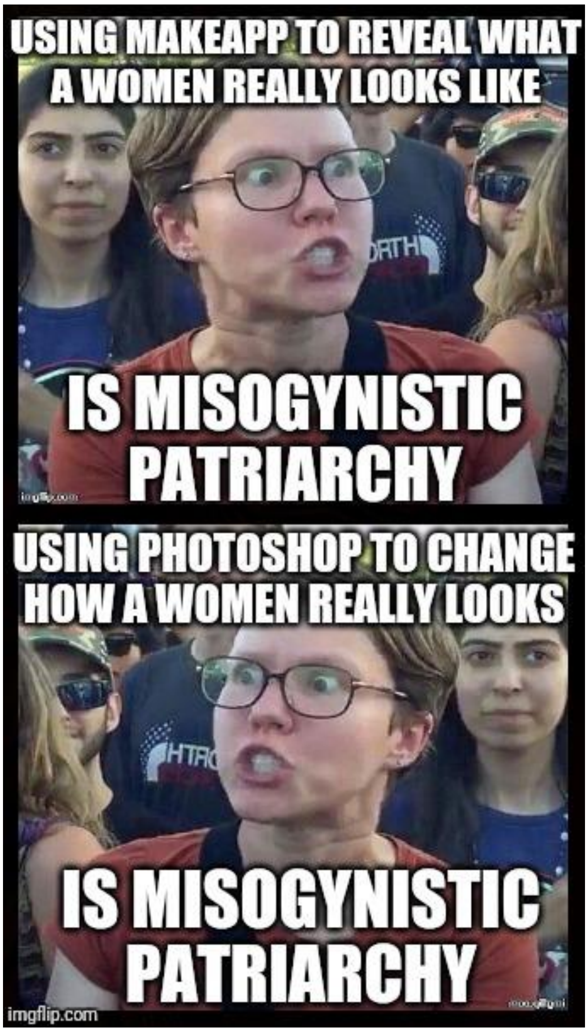

USING MAKEAPP TO REVEAL WHAT A WOMEN REALLY LOOKS LIKE
IS MISOGYNISTIC PATRIARCHY
USING PHOTOSHOP TO CHANGE HOW A WOMEN REALLY LOOKS
IS MISOGYNISTIC PATRIARCHY
imgflip.com

Figure 12

The ideological work of anti-feminist memes, therefore, is to redefine patriarchy as fantastical thinking. The denial of the tenets of feminism is writ large across networked popular misogyny, for example, in claims that feminists are 'imagining' or making up sexism (Marwick and Caplin, 2018). This discourse that patriarchy is 'nothing more than a conspiracy' – and created in order to victimise men – has important implications for feminist political claim-making. It not only encourages and justifies the harassment of feminists, but provides the ideological under-girding for wider attempts to discredit feminism (Garcia-Favaro and Gill 2016).

Conclusion

So what does our analysis of memes tell us about the concept of patriarchy? Alongside Ahmed (2017) and Beechey (1979), we assert the value of naming oppressive forces for identifying how we might effect change, even when those names are theorised in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. As Delphy has argued, 'we can't stop concepts from traveling' (Delphy in Calvini-Lefebvre 2018: 4) and taking on new meanings as they move through popular culture. What is needed, she posits, is for concepts to be attached to their definitions when we use them, something which is time consuming and wordy and not at all in harmony with meme culture – where memes must be brief.

Examining both feminist and anti-feminist memes tells us about the continued problematics of the concept in its popular usage. In feminist memes, patriarchy appears as a foe to fight and unite feminists, and something that requires action *and* collectivity. For anti-feminists, it stands for a conspiracy theory, and marks feminists out as illogical. We argue that the use of 'patriarchy' (and in particular '*the* patriarchy') in feminist memes as a way to identity inequalities is a risky strategy. In reclaiming the term as a shorthand – symbolic of the political identity 'feminist', rather than as a fleshed out theory – this brevity exposes it to ridicule by anti-feminists and an undermining of feminist claims. Without the underpinning feminist logic and, coming instead from a viewpoint that steadfastly maintains the 'common sense' and reasonableness of the dominant perspective (Nicholas and Agius, 2018), the concept of patriarchy is a shortcut which can be used to pull the rug out from underneath feminism. The anti-feminist masculinist individualised logic denies any structural effect on our lives (Nicholas and Agius, 2018), thereby enabling the refusal that patriarchal societies exist. Furthermore, the use of '(the) patriarchy' in feminist digital culture glosses over intersectional injustices that affect women's lives in different ways, and mediate connections to the very resurgent feminist communities feminist memes organise online.

With this in mind, it is worth examining our own positions as researchers and to query the questions we have asked, the sample we have created and the analysis we have undertaken. In our analysis we did not always understand the memes in our sample, or even know what we were overlooking.ii Whilst this is a common problem with online research with disparate communities that cross national, political and other kinds of boundaries, of which the researchers are not part, this also reflects our position as white middle-class Western feminists who are attuned to some arguments and logics, and out of step with others. We chose to search for 'patriarchy' - not 'intersectional patriarchy' or 'white supremacist patriarchy' or 'kyriarchy'. Our sample was thus already skewed by our choice of search terms, in a way that was very likely to preclude memes addressing more intersectional forms of oppression. Our sample was further skewed by our choice of search engine: Google's algorithms are written with the racist and sexist biases of their creators (Noble 2018). In effect any search results we returned have been returned by a racist search process, more so if you count our own blindness to other relevant search terms and memes.

Strikingly, the image below by Odile Bree (Figure 13), came up in one of our less scientific searches with the terms 'smash the patriarchy race'.

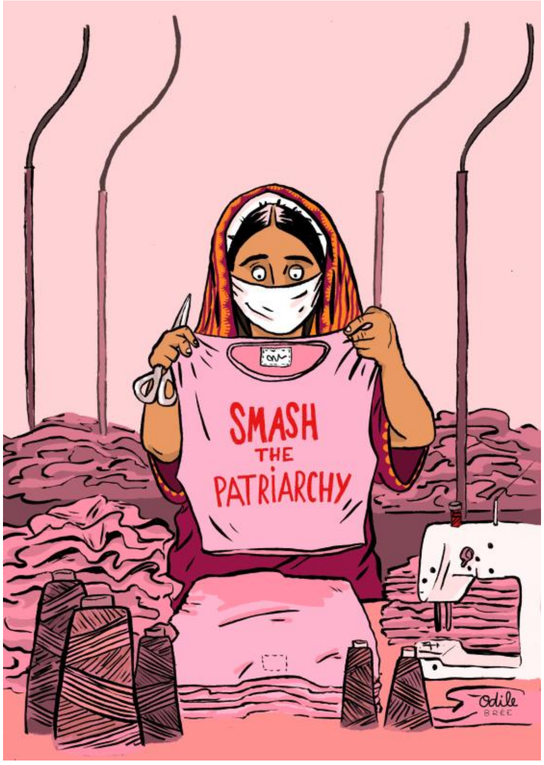


Figure 13 – by Odile Bree (https://odilebree.com/)

Bree's illustration poignantly satirises consumer culture's appropriation of feminism, particularly with respect to the ubiquity of 'smash the patriarchy' t-shirts available for sale on many online platforms. In articulating how the buying of feminist t-shirts relies on the exploitation of garment workers in the Global South, it serves as a stark reminder of (White) Western feminists' ignorance of what Haraway calls 'women in the integrated circuit' (1991: 149); how we are all linked together in networks of oppression and privilege. Anti-feminists' denial of the existence of systematic oppression on grounds of gender and race (Nicholas and Agius, 2018) suggests to us that as a counter some articulation of the structural nature of inequalities remains vital. In as far as the concept of patriarchy can do *some* of this work it may remain useful, but it is a risky strategy for feminists.

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[i] Both Binx and Sarkeesian have been the target of doxxing, rape threats and trolling, illustrating how the contempt towards feminists in memes has real effects on women's participation in public life.

ii We are indebted to the help of our colleagues and students in identifying some of the people in the memes, as well as knowyourmeme.com.