Return to Materiality: Reframing "Digital Feminism" in South Korea[1]

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Abstract This essay offers a critical examination of the development of South Korean feminism in cyberspace since 2015, reconceptualizing it as a political project that I refer to as "digital feminism." The popularization of feminism in South Korea over the past decade has witnessed the formation of online women's groups, such as Megalia and Womad, the founding of the South Korean Women's Party, and countless conflicts triggered by hashtag activism. Indeed, feminist organizing in South Korea in the past ten years has been a complex process involving the formation of new subjectivities and communities within the digital environment, resulting in conflicts, exclusionary political strategies, and contested gender categories. This paper theorizes the digital field not simply as a technological environment but as a political space with various material bases that includes bodies, labor, planetary minerals, and waste. It also analyzes various dimensions of materiality, such as the formation of connections between bodies in digital space, the shaping of subjects by algorithms, the gendering of platform labor, and ecological costs. In this way, the essay seeks to present "digital feminism" as a critical epistemology that is distinct from both cyberfeminism, which approached cyberspace in the 1990s in a dematerialized way and held a utopian perspective, and from online feminism, which focused on describing events that unfolded online after the 2010s in Korea. In conclusion, this paper argues that digital feminism should consider the new ethics and conditions for organizing feminist politics within the context of the posthuman age while focusing on differences and relations as rooted in material conditions.

Keywords digital feminism; Fourth Wave feminism; Feminism Reboot; South Korea; digital gore capitalism; gore masculinity; hashtag movement; materiality

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Introduction: The Feminist Reboot Ten Years On

It was August 2015, and I had just written that "feminism has been rebooted" in an article for the quarterly cultural studies journal *Munhwa/Gwahak* [Culture/Science] (Sohn, "Peminijeum ributeu"). The article examined the "#Na neun peminiseuteu imnida" [#I'm a feminist] hashtag movement, starting in February 2015, as a decisive moment in Korean feminist history. It also explored the recent popularization of feminist ideas, a process that began with Korean women's groups before spreading to the general Korean public.

This moment was not particular to Korea but rather was part of the unfolding of the Fourth Wave of feminism on a global scale (Munro). The Fourth Wave was a new stream of feminism that began in the early to mid-2010s by those who drew from popular culture and a diversified media environment, leveraging the combination of online platforms and digital devices to cross borders and form connections of solidarity and mutual influence across the globe. In this way, they expanded the popular feminist movement in both online and offline spaces. This movement pursued female empowerment via demands for the right to equal pay for equal work, freedom from sexual violence, gender parity in society, and the decriminalization of abortion. Fourth Wave feminism, under the influence of postmodern feminism, also emphasized the intersectional nature of gender. Identifying the factors that set off the Fourth Wave is a difficult task. That said, I look to the 2011 "SlutWalk" protest held in Canada as an important watershed moment.[1] South Koreans also participated in the SlutWalk movement, holding

1 Slut walks were a protest movement that began in response to a Canadian policeman telling university students attending a safety training in January 2011 that women should "avoid dressing like sluts" if they wish to avoid being sexually assaulted. Women marched to express that they had the freedom to dress like a "slut" if they wished and that it is not acceptable to victimize women simply because of the clothes they wear. The first protest was held in Toronto on April 3, 2011, and by early June of that year, slut walks had spread to over 30 different cities in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere.

their own *jamnyeon haengjin* [slut march]. In this way, these slut walks—as well as the "black protests" in Poland, South Korea, and elsewhere, which called for the decriminalization of abortion, and the #MeToo movement, which fought against sexual violence in workplaces, educational institutions, and elsewhere—constituted a glocal movement that criticized patriarchy in both its local and universal forms.

In the case of Korea, there has been a clear conflict between those who emphasize women's empowerment and those who prioritize intersectionality. In particular, regarding the political question of "Who counts as a real woman?" (e.g., should trans women be included or excluded), these two groups continue to argue, debate, negotiate, and (sometimes) join together in solidarity in a complex and dynamic relationship. That said, they are not diametrically opposed. Where their perspectives overlap, they engage in intense debates over the nature of gender-based discrimination, as well as its causes and solutions. Moreover, these debates are deeply impacted by the characteristics of digital media, such as its immediacy and anonymity, with debate occasionally devolving into extreme cyberbullying and high-stakes struggles over recognition. These debates also sometimes transition into conflict and political battles in offline spaces. These confrontations, which, for the past decade, have oscillated between online and offline spaces, have revealed that "women" are not a monolith, that feminists do not all speak with one voice, and that for those seeking radical social change, politics is as much a process of identifying one's enemies as it is one of finding comrades.

Examining the formation of feminist community and identity via early Twitter, Megalia, Womad, and private Facebook groups feels like witnessing the formation of a new "nation" These women first gathered to form an oppositional force intent on defying the dominant ideology in the name of safety, dignity, and equal rights for women. They pursued equality amongst themselves while fighting back against the existing social order and systems of authority. They developed a new language and culture that only members of the movement could understand and strengthened the bonds binding them together. Their internal unity was strengthened in response to the rise of anti-feminism, including attacks on feminism from politicians and the media, and biased police investigations that downplayed the crimes of men.[1] This was also accompanied by an increasing tendency to eliminate heterogeneity within the women's movement. Indeed, the list of those who were excluded continued to grow: political activists, married women, women who rejected the *tal koreuset*

1 For more on the anti-feminist attacks and corresponding critiques since the feminism reboot that have gained purchase with the public as part of the larger "gender conflict," see Kim Bo-myeong.

[escape the corset] movement, and women in romantic relationships. The thrashing of other women in the movement—particularly those who seemed to be using the feminist struggle for their own personal gain—may appear as a form of internal democracy; however, it also cannot be separated from the sentiment of "somebody is trying to steal credit for my work." Indeed, it is not easy to differentiate between cyberbullying and thrashing as ways of doing politics. Korean women who have styled themselves as "radical feminists" (radfem) have emphasized the associations between feminism and ethnic identity, relying on "biology" as a means of defining difference. Consequently, equality among members of the movement has evaporated, and a new hierarchy has emerged within the feminist movement, judging others based on how aggressively one "does feminism," such as whether one has "escaped the corset."

It is undeniable that over the past decade, feminism, compared to other discourses and social movements, has had a considerable influence on Korean society and politics. Likewise, tensions within the feminist movement have also gradually increased. Ultimately, 2020 was a watershed year with these tensions coming into acute focus. One such critical moment was when a trans woman admitted to Sookmyung Women's University gave up on attending due to attacks by trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs. Feminists increasingly spoke out against the treatment of this trans student, and support for trans people grew within the media and among the public. In the same year, there was explosive reporting on the existence of so-called "Nth rooms" on Telegram where men shared pornographic videos of mostly underaged girls obtained through blackmail and deception, resulting in an abrupt rise in public concern regarding digital sex crimes. Sometime later, the Women's Party was formed, and more organized political resistance emerged. Demand for harsher penalties for digital sex crimes grew. Prosecutors demanded that the creator of the "Nth room," Moon Hyung-wook (whose screenname was God God), as well as Cho Ju-bin, the creator of the so-called *baksa bang* [professor room], another Telegram chatroom for sharing illegal pornographic content, receive life sentences. Despite this climate of increased scrutiny of the justice system, Son Jeong-woo, who had been imprisoned for operating the dark web child pornography website Welcome to Video, was released from prison after serving just one year and six months. Additionally, the arrest warrants needed to investigate where Son had hidden the profits he made from his illegal activities were continually denied, illustrating the persistent limitations of the judiciary. In the ensuing years, debates around gender equality have only become more complex. In 2021, the government announced that it was "too soon" to allow

trans people to serve in the military, further inflaming debates on trans rights. Furthermore, an amendment was introduced to maintain penalties for abortion in the criminal code following a court ruling stating that the criminalization of abortion was unconstitutional. In this way, the last several years have seen intense battles over women's rights in Korea. In the 2022 Korean presidential election, feminism emerged as a focal point of political contestation, with anti-feminist sentiment ultimately being adopted as a key election strategy, further exacerbating tensions over gender politics in South Korea. In 2024, further controversy emerged in response to the mass production and distribution of deep-fake pornography.[1]

The arrival of Web 2.0 at the dawn of the new millennium was welcomed as offering new utopian possibilities. Subsequently, the Arab Spring of 2010 and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States presented a new time–space for experimenting with the potential of this new horizon for popular movements. In the current moment, however, we have witnessed a rightward shift across the globe alongside the recapture of the White House by an attention-seeking populist president and social upheaval created by Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who is suffering from a case of "brain rot" caused by binging on election denial videos circulating on YouTube. Judith Butler has described, quite beautifully, the bodies assembled at the Occupy Wall Street protest as "exercising a plural and performative right to appear" (11). Meanwhile, Amy Chua and others have characterized the Occupy Movement as a means for the diverse "tribe" of the white middle-class elite of the United States to set themselves apart from others (140).[2] If we continue to apply Chua's reasoning, it could be argued that Trump's arrival was an effect of the Occupy Movement. Whereas Butler's reading is romantic, Chua's is depoliticized. Therefore, in the current context of 2025, amidst the rightward shift led by machoism, where should feminism stand?

The lessons of the past decade have also taught us that any criticism that seeks to capture and explain the totality of our present moment will ultimately fail. This essay begins by recognizing the inevitability of this failure. However, this does not lead to frustration, as this essay turns its gaze toward relationality instead of totality.

1 In 2024, reporting revealed that a Korean-run Telegram room for the purpose of producing and distributing deepfake porn had approximately 220,000 members. In Korea, deepfake porn is commonly distributed under the label *jiin neungyok* (meaning "acquaintance humiliation" or "violating an acquaintance"), and those who make it often use the identities of people they know. According to a 2023 report by the security company Security Hero that analyzed 95,820 deepfake pornography videos, 99% of the subjects were women, and 53% were Korean.

2 Chua emphasizes that "Occupiers were disproportionately young, white, and highly educated, which helps explain the movement's oft-noted technological savvy."

Based on the understanding that believing in the generative expansion of feminism is just as naïve as having faith in the potentiality of the digital, this essay proposes the project of "digital feminism." Digital feminism is a political project that should be differentiated from terms such as "cyberfeminism," which was optimistic regarding the building of a feminist movement in online spaces, and "online feminism," which was used as a catch-all term to describe these changes. Rather, digital feminism represents a feminist epistemology that critically interrogates the digital while also recognizing that it is a mode of production and a set of conditions that regulates the formation and continuation of a new subjecthood. This essay begins by first describing the digital environment that present-day feminism inhabits in Korea and then advances an argument for why we must take seriously the question of materiality. Subsequently, after a cursory mention of the "type of materiality" under discussion, the essay suggests a direction for the future of feminist criticism.

The Digital World We Inhabit in 2025

Several neologisms sprang up in Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic. Terms such as *korona beullu* [corona blue] and *korona aenggeuri* [corona angry] were clear reflections of the emotional impact of the pandemic. The phrase *dolbap dolbap* [having to cook rice every time one turns around] described the increased demand placed on those performing care work during the pandemic, while *korona dibaideu* [corona divide] drew attention to class issues and worsening inequality due to COVID-19. Most conspicuous among these neologisms was *eontaekteu* [literally "un-tact," meaning "contactless"]—a term that perhaps most succinctly defines the post-corona age. This term, which refers to the arrival of an age dominated by remote, contactless interactions, has provoked two responses in Korea: anxiety over a future where the Fourth Industrial Revolution makes humans useless and excitement over the potential for establishing a new reality based on new digital communities through the passage of a Korean-style "New Deal." Vacillating between these two somewhat uncertain passions is another effort to develop new ideas for creating a commons. The key term here is *coexist*. How do we build a commons, and how can we ensure it continues to exist? Of course, the foundational orientation that supports this key term is posthumanism, or post-anthropomorphism. Therefore, can the digital—which is now the default value of life—become a condition for coexistence? The prospect of drafting a blueprint for the future remains rather dark at the moment. The digital world of 2025 constitutes

an addiction economy built on a network of illicit Telegram chat rooms, websites for maliciously distributing personal information, illegal gambling sites, and exploitative moneylending businesses. This essay now turns to take a closer look at this network.

Following the Great Recession that began with the US financial crisis in 2008, the internet became a battleground for recognition and attention among online snobs. These snob-netizens do not battle nature or dream of historical progress; rather, they simply accumulate "likes" while seeking recognition for recognition's sake. In this way, they are far different from the America that Alexandre Kojève observed in the 1950s. A snob is not a snob because they have become an animal that seeks only to fulfill its own desires amongst the abundance promised by capitalism. Rather, the snob is born from the total frustration that results from being unable to fulfill even the most basic of needs, to say nothing of one's desires (Azuma 67–68). Those who adopt an anti-authoritarian attitude that questions the global order and resists hierarchies cannot look to the social for resources, and therefore, they turn to the ontology of the snob, which craves the only resource available to it—attention—resulting in anti-intellectualism. Online (so-called manosphere) communities, such as DC Inside, a popular Korean online forum from the 2000s, have been described as anti-authoritarian spaces because they operate on the principle of equality among all members. However, the difference between anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism is deceptively minuscule (Sohn, "Eoyong simin"). Within this climate, where the line dividing anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism was dangerously thin, women began familiarizing themselves with the language used on various online communities and social networking sites, altering, reworking, and appropriating this language to wage their own fight against the manosphere, resulting in the appearance of Megalia in June of 2015. Megalia was an effort to overturn patriarchy, and therefore, it was closer to a political organization than simply a snobbish battle for recognition.

Near the end of 2015, misogyny among gay men emerged as a controversial topic on the site. Intense debates raged over such questions as, "How should feminists attempt a criticism of the misogyny expressed by gay men?" And "Can this be used to discriminate against and exclude gay men?" As a consequence of these debates, the group Womad was formed when members who declared themselves to be "women supremacists rather than feminists" split from Megalia. Although Korean society pointed its finger at Womad as a "group of deplorables" who had seemingly come from nowhere, the Womad community was amply fed by Korean cyberspace and even grew. The so-called "defiled sacramental bread

incident" of July 2018 is one representative example of the "deplorable" actions of Womad. At this time, the Hyehwa Station Protests against biased investigations into digital sex crimes [also referred to as the *bulpyeonhan yonggi* protests, or "uncomfortable courage" protests, in Korean] were ongoing, and, correspondingly, there was increased public attention on Womad. A Womad user posted a criticism of misogyny within the Korean Catholic Church alongside a photo of a piece of burnt sacramental bread. The post drew attention, and another post threatening to start a fire at a Catholic church appeared. Some Catholics reported the threat, and an investigation was launched. In 2019, a suspect was arrested. The assigned sex at birth of the accused was male. The media referred to him as a "male feminist," while some feminists criticized him as an "anti-feminist" who had "cooked up" the controversy to harm the feminist movement. "Look, see. It's men who do these kinds of things, not women," they urged. However, the user's assigned sex is not important. Rather, what is important is to question what kind of content can become "humor" or "bait" for the Womad "tribe" (to borrow the language of Amy Chua) and what actions by Womad does the Korean public choose to focus on?

Online macho culture and misogyny—which, in an ambiguous sense, is what nurtured the growth of Womad—began to construct a vast network and market for commodities in the mid-2010s, a time when platforms such as Africa TV and YouTube were becoming more popular and were emerging as money-making vehicles once they began interacting with online wars for recognition and attention. Attention-seeking is not simply about enjoying the attention of others; it can also be a means of making money. That is, we now live in a world where, despite having no resources, one can, simply by appearing in a male body and reenacting conventional and familiar forms of hate, earn money. In 2025, this has given us "digital gore capitalism."[1] In Korea, violence in online spaces is expanding into a "violence industry" that presents harm to the body and human dignity as commodities. Clickbait YouTubers stigmatize female YouTubers as "feminists" and call male volleyball athletes "queer," bullying their targets until they end their own lives. However, this describes only that which occurs "in the daylight." The exploitative live sex cam industry, which began alongside the first live internet broadcasts at the dawn of the

1 Sayak Valencia introduced the term "gore capitalism" to describe the narco economy of Mexico, where "death
has become the most profitable business in existence" and "the destruction of the body becomes in itself the product or commodity." For more on how I have adapted Valencia's concept of "gore capitalism" as "digital gore
capitalism" to describe Korean cyberspace, see Son Hui-jeong, "Dijiteol sidae."

twenty-first century, continues to this day. Following the arrest of Yang Jin-ho, the owner of several online file storage companies that distributed illegal pornography, so-called *beotbang* [naked live cams] became popular. These *beotbang* emerged as a popular illicit underground cam genre where men performed sadistic acts on women in response to viewers' requests. That is, the empty space left by illegal pornography was filled by the "sadistic shows" offered by *beotbang*. These *beotbang* are not made by independent streamers but rather are systematically produced and distributed by "entertainment companies," and female webcam models in the industry are subjected to extreme exploitation. Similar to the sex work industry, even if one enters the sex cam modeling industry willingly, due to its structure, it is difficult to leave (*Geugeosi algo sipda*, episode 1207). In addition to the expansion of live sex cams, there has also been a boom in "dark web" content, such as the Welcome to Video website and the "Nth room" Telegram channel, both of which distributed child pornography, as well as chat rooms for sharing deepfake pornography.

This period also saw the emergence of the *dijiteol gyodoso* website [literally, "digital prison"], an Instagram account and then a website that purported to share the personal information of individuals accused of digital sex crimes. This website grew rapidly, feeding off public anger resulting from the revelations of the "Nth room" case in March 2020 and the denial of a request to extradite Son Jeong-woo to the United States in the following July. The site began as an Instagram account that gained popularity for revealing the identity of those who had committed sex crimes on Telegram. Subsequently, an actual website was created to reveal the identities of not only those associated with the "Nth room" case but also perpetrators of sex crimes, child abuse, and more, placing the website at the center of ongoing controversy and discussion. For some time, this "illegal" activity was accepted as "extra-legal" justice. Within Korean society, there was little criticism of the site, even after innocent individuals who had been featured on the site committed suicide. Indeed, Koreans were apprehensive about casting suspicion on the claims of the creator of the "digital prison" account, as he had claimed that his own cousin was a victim of the "Nth room" abuse, stating, "I feel there are limitations regarding the lenient punishment given to vicious criminals in South Korea, and I intend to reveal their personal information so that they can be judged by the public" (Jang). However, the situation became only more confusing when it was revealed that the creator of the "digital prison" account had, in fact, been prosecuted for selling drugs online and operating his own "Nth room." He used the account to terrorize those who were uncooperative or crossed him by spreading their personal information. By exploiting the personal information of others, he forced numerous men into "slavery,"

a strategy identical to that of the "Nth room" operators. His actions were somewhat perplexing. On the internet, he presented himself as a god who exacted justice on his own terms, and perhaps as a way of further indulging in this god-like image, he even appeared on the TV show *Geugeosi algo sipda* [Unanswered Questions], where he reported on himself (episode 1234).

In this way, the "digital prison" account and website targeted male victims in the same way the "Nth rooms" had targeted women. This "digital prison" functioned by first luring men to the site with ads for such services as "creating humiliating deepfake images of your acquaintances" (i.e., advertising to make custom deepfake porn). Afterward, the owner would order these men to do his bidding while threatening to reveal their identities to the public. The digital prison website was also connected to illegal gambling sites. The connection between illegal gambling sites and sexual exploitation material has long been known. For example, the investigation into Soranet in 2016 also found that advertising revenue for illegal gambling websites sustains this underground world (Sohn, "Goemul eun"). That is, exploitative videos of women were the bait used to attract men to illegal gambling sites. In this dark world where one cannot even see their hand in front of their face, teenagers and those in their twenties who feel that "my life is a failure" flock to illegal gambling sites in hopes of striking it rich (Kim Wan and Kim Min-je; Kim Wan, Bak Jun-yong, and Kim Min-je). Likewise, it is unsurprising that some men produce, sell, and distribute illegal pornography to earn money for gambling and that male teenagers in South Korea have formed their own moneylending industry (Jeon). The market for illicit drugs is also relevant here. Among teenage boys, hierarchies are no longer determined by physical and sexual prowess. In the present world, where the ability to quickly strike it rich has become the foundation of power and authority, illegal gambling and moneylending have taken deep root. This is why the "digital community" as a clean zone that is being called for by supporters of a Korean-style New Deal rings hollow. Indeed, the "digital community" in which we currently live is a twisted network of male solidarity that rules by exploiting others.

The Trouble Facing Feminism

The above section describes the challenges that feminists currently face in the digital realm. How can we recover the conditions for coexistence in times of crisis, such as a global pandemic? Is it possible to form political subjectivities and foster solidarity within cyberspace? And how might we respond to the ongoing violence and femicide against women in an addiction-driven economy where hate and

violence have been commodified? Korean women primarily fought for feminist causes in online spaces, and this fight, therefore, was also a fight for survival. This does not mean, however, that it is acceptable to incinerate others as a fuel source for continuing the fight. This section addresses the trouble in which feminism, when faced with such challenges, falls into the trap of essentializing the body and, as a result, ends up attacking minorities-particularly in the form of transphobia. As a new ethics and politics, digital feminism must confront the task of moving beyond such essentialism of the body.

The "radfem" strain of Korean feminism, which first appeared in 2015, has pursued a strategy of exclusion and discrimination, strengthening bonds between "women" by actively excluding particular individuals, such as trans people. To examine these issues further, the essay now turns to address the formation of the South Korean Women's Party, which was both a product of "online feminism" and the political manifestation of radfem organizing.

For this purpose, it is necessary to first return to the morning of January 30, 2020, when it was reported that a trans woman had been admitted to Sookmyung Women's University, provoking feverish responses on social media. The university had already clarified its position that if an applicant had undergone sex reassignment surgery and had legally changed their legal gender marker to female, then there were no obstacles to them applying for admission. Nevertheless, so-called TERFs reacted with vehement opposition. This led to the release of a petition by "radfems" opposing the student's admittance. The president of Yeolda Books, which had published a book inciting trans hate under the label of "radical feminism,"[1] made a sarcastic comment on their personal social media account, stating, "Transgenderism violates the constitution." Later, it was revealed that they planned to file a constitutional appeal if the student were to be admitted. Korean society expressed surprise that a feminist organization would claim that anyone's existence is "unconstitutional." And as if some had been waiting for the opportunity, criticisms of feminism began to intensify. One particular YouTube ideologue who had been dormant for some time came back to the platform, creating a live stream video titled "I came back because of the Sookmyung issue. It's been a while." (Lee Seon-ok TV). Each time she blamed trans hate on feminists, her subscribers sent Super Chat donations. As donations worth 10,000, 30,000, and 100,000 won flashed on the screen, she smiled while saying "thank you" to her subscribers—a clear illustration of how attacks against feminism can be monetized within the market for anti-

1 In 2019, a Korean-language translation of Sheila Jeffreys' book *Gender Hurts* was published. Jeffreys was also invited to Korea to give lectures and participate in roundtable discussions.

feminist content.

Many who are active in this digital space, including anti-feminists, place the blame for transphobia on feminists while demanding that they deal with the issue internally. Although this is an issue that feminists need to confront and resolve, transphobia is not solely a problem of feminism. That is, although the logic of trans hatred expressed by TERFs in Korea has been borrowed from TERF commentators in the West, it is also rooted in a more widespread hatred of minorities within Korean society. Indeed, the same logic was on display in the incendiary protests against Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island in 2018. Conservative Christians wrote fake news articles (Kim Wan, Bak Jun-yong, and Byeon Ji-min), and radfems actively spread them. Consequently, a national petition posted to the Blue House website titled "Petition Against Accepting Yemeni Refugees" was signed by 710,000 people. Although it is unclear how much overlap there was between conservative Christians and radfems, it is clear that, regardless of either group's intentions, it resulted in a productive collaboration.[1]

Those in Korean society who sought to exclude minorities in the name of feminism ultimately succeeded in denying this trans student their right to an education while violating her autonomy. Unable to overlook this injustice, some commentators reflected on some existing feminist views and expressed regret over the outcome, while some feminists who supported the student published their own statements of support.[2] The confrontation was fierce, and ostentatious efforts to exclude and discriminate against trans people continued. Following the Sookmyung Women's University incident, another national petition was filed under the title "Don't Allow Gender Marker Changes Without Genital Reconstructive Surgery," which received over 220,000 signatures. It had become difficult to voice one's opinion in opposition to the exclusion of trans people. Within the logic used by TERFs to exclude trans people, the rhetoric of "protecting women" wields a particular power, likely because achieving a society where women are safe remains a far-off reality. Of particular significance here was the "Nth room" case. The sexual exploitation and violence of the "Nth room" case were so abhorrent that even anti-

1 Writings posted on the Facebook page Feminism Without Borders speaking out against hatred directed toward refugees on Jeju Island were collected and published in 2019 by publisher Waon under the title *Gyeonggye eomneun peminijeum: Jeju yemaen nanmin gwa peminijeum ui eungdap* [Feminism without borders: Yemeni refugees in Jeju and feminist responses].

2 These statements were published in book form in 2020 by publisher Waon under the title *Uri neun jagyeok eomneun yeoseong deulgwa sesang eul bakkunda* [We are changing the world alongside women who have been denied recognition].

feminists had to express their disapproval. The number of accounts that could be successfully traced back to these "Nth" Telegram rooms reached 260,000, and as the disgusting nature and scope of the violence, as well as the ages of the victims and perpetrators, was revealed, many women experienced both fear and anger. It is at this moment that women began to declare, "Up until now, I was a feminist who spoke of solidarity, but from now on, I'm a radfem." In this context, the term "radfem" was used to denote "an exclusive focus on women's issues." Likewise, the category "woman" was clearly defined to exclude trans women.

This unfortunate quagmire is strikingly similar to the patriarchal governmentality that seeks to block any progress within feminist discussion. Korean women had become increasingly despondent as they witnessed repeated incidents of violence and discrimination against women, such as the Soranet scandal, the Gangnam Station murder (and many other murders and assaults of women), Yang Jin-ho's cloud storage cartel, ideological "screenings" intended to identify feminists among job applicants at game companies, cases of discrimination in hiring, and the "Nth room" case. Unsurprisingly, women erected tall fences around the identity of "woman," further strengthening their internal sense of "tribalism." However, a movement that relies on biological essentialism and an exclusionary definition of woman is unable to realize a fair and just society that can liberate women from discrimination and violence. Discussions that deny the existence of trans people and again reduce "women" to their external sex organs ultimately imitate the patriarchal culture that reduces women to their genitals. Discrimination and violence that objectifies and dehumanizes women is a product of gender stereotypes based on a gender binary that divides humans into the male and female sexes. This constructed myth of the masculine and feminine is the central core of misogynistic culture. In its attempt to oppose misogynistic culture, feminism made the error of reinforcing the very gender binary that sustains this misogyny. Donna Haraway previously commented on this vicious cycle in the 1980s, stating, "Sex is 'resourced' for its representation as gender which 'we' can control" (Haraway 592). It is a vicious loop: Misogynistic culture feeds transphobic culture, and transphobic culture, in turn, props up misogynistic culture.

Of course, it is possible to steelman trans people and, for a short while, generate sufficient "firepower" to sustain a movement by conjuring up images of "monstrous trans people" and claiming that "the very existence of trans people is the rape of women." No strategy is more effective for strengthening the internal unity of a community than identifying a common enemy and expelling them from the in-group. Consider the fact that the South Korean Women's Party, which declared

the "Nth room" case to be its top priority, began recruiting members and preparing for its official entrance into electoral politics in the aftermath of the controversy at Sookmyung Women's University—a time when TERFs in South Korean were consolidating their power. Although it may have been difficult for the Women's Party to make transphobia part of its official party platform, it is clear that the politics of exclusion contributed to the party being able to attract many members in such a short period of time.

Here, we are presented with another challenge. Even progressive activists, intellectuals, and others who express interest in human rights and solidarity politics are willing to exploit the dynamic power generated by the politics of exclusion to realize the feminist objectives that they see as taking precedence over all else. Not only feminism but all political movements can fall victim to the trap of exclusionary politics. No one is free from this temptation. Exclusionary politics are characterized by a stoic determination, and this sublimity is alluring. The language of hatred that drives exclusionary politics can be pleasurable, like the crisp freshness of a carbonated drink. In this way, when politics becomes an amusement, it can have powerful effects. When this is combined with impatience over the feeling that "Nothing can be accomplished if we keep doing things this way," emotional chaos intensifies, and it is this chaos that generates an increasing sense of "something getting done." However, compared to the feminists who construct imaginary enemies to alleviate the discomfort and fear they experience in their everyday lives, feminists who, out of impatience, ignore such ongoing incitement of hatred set the movement back even further.

It is notable that feminists (of a certain sort) have sought to justify their conversions by expressing the need to "take care of women first." That is, they separate the "women's movement" from other "minority movements" to assert their legitimacy. Of course, this is done with clear knowledge that the two cannot be separated. Moreover, this reckless dividing act will not just ghettoize feminism but ultimately destroy the accumulated significance of the women's movement in South Korea. This is demonstrated by such claims as "Women's groups have not properly represented the anguish of young women" and "Elite feminists have been silent regarding the death of Jang Ja-yeon."[1] (Both false claims that were made by those

1 Jang Ja-yeon committed suicide in March 2009. There was considerable public controversy when a letter she had written before her death was made public, revealing that she had been physically and verbally abused by the president of her agency and had been forced to serve alcohol and provide sexual services at a hostess bar. This incident exposed the sexual exploitation of female celebrities within the Korean entertainment industry.

associated with the formation of the Women's Party.) Such claims are both a denial of the history of the feminist movement in Korea and a rejection of the feminist colleagues with whom they must forge a path forward.

In the 2020 South Korean general elections, the Women's Party received approximately 210,000 votes, constituting 0.74% of the total vote. When considering that the party was formed in March and elections were held in April, this is a rather astonishing accomplishment.[1] However, the popularization of feminism via digital media following the so-called "feminist reboot" did not simply conclude with the establishment of the Women's Party, nor is its meaning exhausted by the Women's Party alone. Feminism continues to spread and expand among the public via various intersecting positions and perspectives, including socialist feminism, ecofeminism, queer feminism, and trans feminism—a process of differentiation that actively continues in the current moment.

Digital Feminism Centers the Material

Above, I examined the digital environment in which feminism is situated and the difficulties feminism faces within Now, I turn to digital feminism as a form of radical feminism necessary for our time and will discuss the question of materiality that digital feminism must deal with.

Within the pop culture imaginary, the image most immediately evoked by the term "digital" is the world of falling vertical green text from the film *The Matrix* (1999). It is an immaterial world that appears in the binary of mind and body. However, even though the digital is imagined as that which facilitates the shift from the material to the immaterial, the digital is still material. Of course, there are those who indulge in the digital in a non-material way. This minority abstracts the workings of the digital into something immaterial, polluting the world and exploiting the majority. The process of enjoying the immateriality of the digital is analogous to the process by which life becomes "meat" served on a table. The slaughtering of animals, the removal of bones, and the packaging and distribution of flesh all disappear from view, leaving only a piece of appetizing meat before our eyes. A life of enjoying the digital as one enjoys meat is an extension of the modern

1 Perhaps more revealing would have been an analysis of how this party, which emphasized that it "stood not for the left or right but for women," would have sought to expand its political power. However, after its founding, it power continually waned, and currently, it is struggling to survive.

humanism that places "historical masculinity" as the center of life.[1] Therefore, there is a need to think more intentionally about the materiality of the digital. In this context, the "material" is an analytical concept that—according to different bodies and the different conditions of life—can capture the flux and variation of subjects who possess different desires and urges and different hopes and anxieties while seeking to mediate between these differences. However, most of all, the material serves as a clear marker of the specific coordinates from which the effort to face reality head-on must begin.

Therefore, in this context, what kind of "material" are we talking about? Firstly, it seems necessary to begin by stating that the digital is that which connects bodies together. As demonstrated by the networked relationships between illicit Telegram rooms, the "digital prison" account, and illegal gambling sites, digital space can serve as a site for the exploitation of bodies. However, such connections between bodies do not take exclusively violent forms. The "connective action" of hashtags on social media is another example of making connections between bodies. Such hashtags as #Naneun peminiseuteu imnida" [#I'm A Feminist], #00 Gyenae seongpongnyeok [#Sexual violence in the art world], #MeToo, and #Nanneun naktae haetda [#I had an abortion] function to connect bodies via their experiences, forming loose networks and creating webs of meaning. On platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, hashtag activism has had an inflammatory effect on the formation and development of discourses on issues surrounding minorities.

Meanwhile, "Hashtag activism [also] intensifies as differences of opinion widen, resulting in the formation of frames for competing with others" (Kim Su-a 316). Such "framing battles" have been rather intense. For example, when the Korean web media company Dot Face (dotface.kr) held a virtual queer parade in 2020, TERFs invaded the parade and left hateful and inciteful comments. Both queer people and TERFs began posting under the hashtag #Urineun eopdeon gildo mandeulji [#Making roads where there were none]. TERFs also used hashtags such as #Jendeo baksal [#Gender annihilation] and #Jamaedeuriyeo yeohyeom kwieo

1 The fact that attributes such as "short hair, muscles, athleticism, and pants" are both stereotypes of maleness and models for masculinity is an issue of culture. And because such attributes have been understood this way within a particular history of humans, I refer to these gender stereotypes as "historical masculinity." Likewise, I refer to "dressing up, long hair, detail-oriented, and dresses" as associated with "historical femininity." Historical masculinity and historical femininity are the product of a gender system that divides humans into two genders, male and female. That is, historical femininity and masculinity do not represent intrinsic categories; rather, they should be understood as things that can be embodied according to non-verbal compulsions regardless of the medical designation of sex that is applied to the gender spectrum.

eseo talchul hara [#Sisters, escape from the women-hating queers] (Bak). TERFs continue to use these hashtags to attack the rights of trans people. This battle continues to play out in the context of a variety of issues. The injuries suffered by bodies that become linked through hashtags and engage in battle are not easily healed. Additionally, these bodies sometimes suffer attacks strong enough to demand medical intervention, including psychiatric treatment. The uplifting energy of movements and the sudden collapse of hope are necessary elements that constitute the acts of connection made possible within digital spaces. The question of how to regulate the destructive imaginary and its imperative to "fight until only one is left standing" is a critical task for digital feminism. There is a need to more effectively convey the reality that there is another breathing, living body on the other side of the screen.

Second, although the experience of being online is often imagined as a free and unencumbered "voyage" sailing from one hyperlink to the next, there is an unseen reality of IT companies using data mining to collect our information and employ algorithms that motivate us to spend increasing amounts of time online. The freedom to browse and search that users feel in cyberspace comes at the price of submitting to a variety of control mechanisms operating clandestinely behind the computer screen (Chun). Just as the accumulation of memories is what makes the individual, IT companies create algorithms to draw us in, creating constantly updating, personalized social media feeds that lead to the formation of an identity for the online "me." This point is connected to the feminist identity generated within battles over attention. Posting violent tweets, contributing to the exclusion of certain minorities, and seeking attention from others are all strategies for winning battles for attention. More precisely, however, this is also the space wherein social media formalizes neoliberal ideology as media. As the problems of confirmation bias and digital echo chambers increase, users become increasingly tied to their feeds and are driven to continually produce data. Simultaneously, social media mechanisms intended to induce unintended consumption operate outside of the political spectrum. They do not discriminate between left and right or between liberals and fundamentalists; they also blur the distinction between feminists and anti-feminists. Consequently, the strategies employed by online selves and collectives of selves are shared and adopted regardless of one's values and objectives.

Third, it is necessary to think more concretely about the labor that makes the digital world possible, as well as the labor that is created and transacted within this digital world. In the current age of "un-tact" services, it is often said that humanity is facing the "end of work." However, as a virtual space produced by human

technology, cyberspace inevitably relies on material machines, such as computers, and electricity. Moreover, the labor involved with producing, distributing, maintaining, and using such machines remains the work of humans. Brash statements about the "end of work" are problematic as they make certain forms of work invisible, forcing workers to labor under more vulnerable and precarious conditions.

Another issue that must be addressed here is the "platform work" facilitated by the digital. As Danggeun Maket (branded as "Karrot" outside Korea) and Airbnb demonstrate,[1] platform capitalism "exhibits a centripetal force that indiscriminately pulls [everything] into the platform market" including "the gift economy that has existed outside the capitalist market and the tradition of free gift giving" in an effort to realize the marketization of everything. Simultaneously, it also seeks to create a distribution network for labor to further the flexibilization of labor markets and strengthen capital's domination of workers (Lee, "Peullaetpom" 19–27).[2] However, current discussions about platform work have concentrated on male workers, such as delivery bike drivers, resulting in a lack of attention to women's work. The gender discrimination and sexual violence affecting women in the current labor market also force women out of platform work, and this misogynistic culture has also been transplanted into the world of platform labor. Considering the poor labor protections within platform work environments, its expansion will have "a high probability of exacerbating outsourcing and precarious work arrangements within fields with high rates of female works that have historically been undervalued in the labor market," and it is already contributing to the worsening "marginalization of vulnerable female workers" (Kim Won-jeong). Relatedly, when the "workplace" becomes dematerialized and the "home" becomes a place of work, it becomes crucial to consider the issue of housework and care work.

Fourth, the digital gadgets that make cyberspace possible are based in the material world. Media scholar Jussi Parikka has referred to the current age as the "capitalocene" as a means of criticizing how capital ceaselessly produces surplus value by maximizing human desire. Parikka emphasizes that media rests on a foundation that requires various minerals, metals, and chemicals that have formed

1 Danggeun Maket is the most used application for the buying and selling of used goods in Korea. In addition to used goods, the application also allows users to sell or trade services and give away goods for free.

2 For suggestions on how to improve labor conditions within the world of platform work, see Lee Gwang-seok's chapter titled "Peullaetpom nodong eul eotteoke bol geot inga" [How should we view platform labor?] in the book mentioned in the above in-text citation.

over vast expanses of time, such as lithium, platinum, and coltan. In this way, the material base of the newest digital gadgets is connected to a lengthy history that extends back to ancient times. In order to make its digital gadgets, humanity must dig up resources from, as Siegfried Zielinski states, "deep time," creating e-waste that does not decompose chemically or materially, thereby threatening "deep time" long into the future. Media exploits the ecosystem, and once it has exhausted its uses, the media itself becomes a component of the ecosystem. Media has already become synonymous with nature. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the energy and physical space that goes into maintaining cyberspace. Ultimately, we must reach a place of "uncomfortable coexistence" in relation to the waste and innumerable other forms of filth created by the digital. Humans must find the good in the appropriate technology movement, which is a necessity for humanity, and happily tolerate this discomfort amidst the good.

However, it is important to remain vigilant to ensure that this emphasis on materiality and the body does not devolve into essentialism. As the sentiment of "My body is mine," as expressed at such demonstrations as the SlutWalk and Black Protests, continues to grow, the body has begun to be understood in increasingly essentialized terms. As the body become sacralized as a site where experiences unfold and meaning is embodied, and is increasingly perceived as a possession, the body assumes a new status. Consequently, the concept of the body as "something that should not be harmed" is further emphasized. A problem arises, however, when this emphasis on the body is combined with biological essentialism and racism. Indeed, it is within this context that the TERF logic that answers the question "What is a woman?" according to the appearances of sexual organs, chromosomes, and hormones gains legitimacy. It is occasionally argued that accepting the "existence" of the female sex is a matter of thinking rationally about the material world. However, thinking seriously about the materiality of the body can also begin from an acceptance of the fact that it is impossible to capture and understand the countless sexes that exist in nature with the epistemology of "the two sexes," as asserted by patriarchal epistemology. Thinking about materiality is not simply about grouping generally similar things together and describing them as a category of objects. Rather, it is about confronting differences that cannot be bound to one another.

Rather surprisingly, within the radfem logic that asserts that the medical differentiation of the two sexes is a fundamental fact, men and women are defined by physical differences that transcend language and culture, while at the same time, all diverse sexual practices are understood as being determined solely by the gender system. In this framework, lust as something that cannot be captured by culture

disappears, and everything sexual becomes understood according to power relations. Moreover, "historical masculinity" is imaged as the only thing able to escape from the domination of the gender system, and "historical masculinity" is enthroned as the default value for the human body. Consequently, "historical femininity" naturally becomes regarded as that which must be repressed and expelled. For example, the "escape the corset" movement, which began as a criticism of the beauty expectations placed on women, went beyond a call for women's autonomy, with style choices such as "short hair" and "pantsuits" being presented as the new standard for true liberation, reducing femininity to the various ways women dress and the negative connotations attached to such choices. This, in turn, further exacerbated the hatred directed toward "historical femininity." Ultimately, the very women who stated they "hated misogyny" ended up expressing more hatred of women than any other group.

Digital Feminism and Network Leadership

The Hyehwa Station Protests and other actions that demonstrated both the political potential and limitations of online feminism "involved neither leadership nor membership, lacked a clear organizational power, and operated based on the involvement of diverse participants" (Kim Eun-ju 15). This type of movement is reminiscent of discussions of the multitude and has continually elicited questions over its potentiality or impossibility. Butler states, "We have to read such scenes not only in terms of the version of the people they explicitly set forth, but the relations of power by which they are enacted. Such enactments are invariably transitory when they remain extraparliamentary." She continues, "As the popular will persists in the forms it institutes, it must also fail to lose itself in those forms if it is to retain the right to withdraw its support from any political form that fails to maintain legitimacy" (7). The fact that the bodies that are incited to action are temporary in nature is, in fact, a "strength." What is most important is ensuring to leave behind the necessary building blocks for organizing this strength-leadership.

One possible future for digital feminism may lie in building the leadership for a future feminist network (Negri and Hardt). It is the abortion decriminalization movement in Korea that enables me to speak of the romantic project of "network leadership" at the end of this rather depressing discussion. It was by discovering one another online, forming connections, and ultimately coming together as bodies in offline spaces that women were able to make their voices heard while avoiding capture by the language of patriarchy. This passion has found concrete form in

various women's groups and has resulted in new social agendas. Moreover, in the realm of politics, female politicians have planned and put forth specific systems and legal mechanisms. Although political disagreements persist regarding whether the decriminalization of abortion is "for everyone" or "for women only," there is clear movement toward a system of collaboration. Although the Korean government continues to take steps backward by seeking ways to maintain the illegality of abortion within the criminal code, feminists are once again creating spectacles that inspire hope for future change. The concept of network leadership can serve as a practical strategy for digital feminism.

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