The Feminist XResistance Project: Reflections and Commentary

by Galit Ariel, Aparajita Bhandari, Sarah York-Bertram, and Kacie G. Hopkins

Abstract: On May 31, 2023, we showcased the Feminist XResistance project at the Women and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) conference under the apt thematic "Take Back the Future." The project started on July 9, 2022, when a group of international, interdisciplinary, early career feminist scholars convened on Zoom for the Feminist Digital Methods (FDM) Drop-in Virtual Lab hosted by York University's Centre for Feminist Research (CFR). The drop-in took place two weeks after the United States Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion and became a digital space to express our fears and anger over rising gender essentialist fascism, worries about the future, and to imagine feminist digital methods for resistance. In this reflection and commentary, we share our observations and processes for the Feminist XResistance project, starting with our first exploratory workshop, our co-creative analysis and outputs, the development of our AR installation, and, finally, our conclusions and insights.

Keywords: activism; augmented reality; digital methods; embodied resistance; embodiment; extended reality; feminism; feminist community; feminist resistance; interdisciplinary; research-creation

Résumé: Le 31 mai 2023, nous avons présenté le projet féministe XResistance lors de la conférence Women and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) qui avait pour thématique « Take Back the Future » (Se réapproprier l'avenir). Le projet a débuté le 9 juillet 2022, lorsqu'un groupe de spécialistes féministes internationaux issus de différentes disciplines et en début de carrière, s'est réuni sur Zoom dans le cadre du Feminist Digital Methods (FDM) Drop-in Virtual Lab organisé par le Centre de recherches féministes (CFR) de l'Université York. La rencontre a eu lieu deux semaines après que la Cour suprême des États-Unis a renversé le droit constitutionnel à l'avortement et est devenue un espace numérique dans lequel nous avons pu exprimer nos craintes et notre colère face à la montée du fascisme essentialiste fondé sur le genre, nos inquiétudes quant à l'avenir, et imaginer des méthodes numériques féministes de résistance. Dans cette réflexion et ce commentaire, nous communiquons nos observations et processus dans le cadre du projet féministe XResistance, en commençant par notre premier atelier exploratoire, notre analyse cocréative et nos réalisations, la création de notre installation de réalité augmentée et, enfin, nos conclusions et réflexions.

Mots clés: militantisme; réalité augmentée; méthodes numériques; résistance personnifiée; personnification; réalité étendue; féminisme; communauté féministe; résistance féministe; interdisciplinaire; recherche-création.

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Kacie G. Hopkins (she/her) is a PhD Candidate with expertise in community economies, feminist social enterprises, and geographies of rural women's handmade crafts and creativity. She studies in the Communication and Cultural Studies program at York University and Toronto Metropolitan Universities. She is also a storyteller, creative writer, artist/ textile designer, and social entrepreneur. She is a member of global research networks such as: The Community Economies Research Network, Rural Women's Studies Association, Women, Gender and Social Justice, and Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation. Outside of her PhD studies she is active in the social enterprise, Wildflower Enterprises at WildflowerConnection.com, that she and her twin sister founded to connect rural women through crafting, design, and empowerment services. She is an advocate for ethical trading of fashion and continues to write on ethical fair trade practices, specifically decolonizing the fair trade field through ethical and decolonial storytelling and marketing and advocating against toxic charity structures. Further she is a survivor advocate and worked with the YWCA, National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, and Pennsylvania Coalitions Against Rape and Domestic Violence. She is passionate about lifting survivor voices and working on survivor centered and trauma informed pedagogies and approaches to social change.

Sarah York-Bertram (she/they) is a historian, a qualitative researcher, a recent graduate of York University's Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies doctoral program, and is currently an H. Sanford Riley Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Winnipeg. Their postdoctoral research is a history of emotions examining the affective basis of judgments and narratives surrounding sexual commerce during Canada's westward expansion in the nineteenth century and western Canadian colonial worldmaking in the twentieth century. Sarah has sixteen years experience in intersectional, transnational, and community-based feminist research and twelve years experience in queer and feminist digital methods. She is a member of York University's Centre for Feminist Research's Feminist Digital Methods Research Cluster. Sarah is a settler born in Treaty 6 territory and the Homeland of the Métis in what is currently called Saskatchewan. Currently, Sarah lives in St. Catharines, Ontario which is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. St. Catharines is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement.

Aparajita Bhandari is an assistant professor of Critical Digital Studies at the University Waterloo's Department of English Language and Literature. She previously completed her SSHRC-funded doctoral research in the Department of Communication at Cornell University where she was a member of the Social Media Lab. Aparajita's current work sits at the nexus of critical internet studies and feminist media studies engaging in critical examinations of social media platforms with a focus on understanding instantiations of everyday or mundane online experiences as potential sites of resistance against hegemonic power. Her interdisciplinary research has been published in top-tier journals such as *New Media & Society, Social Media + Society, Communication, Culture and Critique,* and *Big Data and Society*.

Galit Ariel is an award-winning researcher, author, and new media artist exploring the wild and imaginative side of bleeding-edge technologies. Galit is a creative technologist and PhD candidate at York University, where her "Biodigital Being(s)" research-creation project explores how embodied technologies, culture, and politics forge new body fictions. She is part of the Feminist Digital Methods Research Cluster, a graduate research fellow in York's Sensorium Centre for Digital Arts and Technology, and the recipient of the OGS Scholarship and the Susan Mann Dissertation Excellence Scholarship. Galit authored the book *Augmenting Alice: The Future of Identity, Experience and Reality* (BIS Publishing); her critical writing appeared as articles and book chapters in *Humanity-in-between and Beyond* (Springer Nature Volume on Posthumanism), *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, *Global Perspectives* (University

of California Press), DAMN *Magazine*, *Wired*, and more. Galit's creative work spans across location-based Augmented Reality art, subversive animation, speculative interactions, and art curation. Her work was presented as public art installations in international film & animation festivals and academic conferences, including the Dutch Design Week (EU), Opera Beyond (FI), Digital Arts Resource Center (CA), TED (US), The European Union (FI), the Humanities Congress (CA), HASTAC (US), and the International Symposium of Electronic Arts (Australia).

O n July 9th, 2022, the feeling in the Feminist Digital Methods (FDM) Drop-in Virtual Lab was grim. It was two weeks after the United States Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion. What had been intended as a time focused on FDM shifted to sharing fear, pain, anger, and worry about the future and the present. It was during that drop-in when the foundations were established for the Feminist XResistance Project as we looked for ways to face rising gender essentialist fascism and to imagine feminist digital methods for resistance. The outcome became a location-based XR project —providing an immersive space that centres critical representations and typically marginalized voices to cultivate revolutionary and experimental digital space to counter white, cis-male, patriarchal hegemony.

The project, which is a thread in York University's Centre for Feminist Research's FDM Research Cluster (FDMRC), is stewarded by four early-career and interdisciplinary feminist digital methods practitioners, Galit Ariel, Sarah York-Bertram, Kacie G. Hopkins, and Aparajita Bhandari. Project lead, Galit Ariel, is a TechnoFuturist, author, and creative with award-winning work in location-based Augmented Reality (AR) art, subversive animation, alternative interactions, and art curation. Ariel is a PhD candidate at York University. Sarah York-Bertram is a historian and PhD candidate at York University with sixteen years experience in feminist research and twelve years experience in queer, feminist, and transnational digital methods. Kacie G. Hopkins is a textile artist and PhD candidate at York University who uses an intersectional feminist lens to study rural community economies organized by women. Hopkins' training in anti-violence, sexual violence prevention education, community organizing, and trauma-informed facilitation aided our participatory workshop and content analysis. Aparajita Bhandari, whose work sits at the nexus of critical internet studies, critical data studies, and digital culture, examines everyday online experiences as potential sites of resistance against hegemonic power. Bhandari recently completed her PhD at Cornell University and is an assistant professor of Critical Digital Studies at the University Waterloo's Department of English. The Feminist XResistance Project integrated the input of over twenty contributors. In the spring of 2023, it was presented at the Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) conference, under the apt thematic "Take Back the Future," and the Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) conference in New York City.

As Legacy Russell writes in *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020), the crafting of self online can be "an exploration of future self" (00 Introduction) It can also be a way to find "family and faith in the future" by "shaping personal visions of a self that could be truly empowered in being self-defined." As we write this commentary, provincial governments in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Ontario are leveraging "parental rights" discourses to end gender-affirming policies in public schools and third-party sex education (Ibrahim 2023; Latimer and Sciarpelleti 2023). Though we are cognizant of the legacies of abuse in colonial education systems, we also see how these arguments concerning "parental rights" and sex education support fascistic logics that are in the same vein as the *Dobbs* decision, which struck down *Roe*. Speaking from the context of East Africa in conversation with Tigist Hussen, Sheena Magenya argues that queer and gender-non-conforming people "find a space online where you can be out, as anonymously or safely as possible" (2022, 71) This, according to Magenya, is "some kind of freedom" that "must be protected." As

young people in Canada lose access to gender-affirming education, it is highly likely they will turn to digital spaces for safer self-expression and to find community.

Yet, as Russell (2020) suggests, the online is not a wholly separate space from the offline. For those with access, the route between online and offline is a loop. The evidence for such a loop rapidly mounted during the time this project was undertaken. The *Dobbs* decision enabled charges against a mother and her teenage daughter for an illegal abortion after Facebook acquiesced to a warrant from police in Norfolk, Nebraska, requesting the mother and daughter's private messages (Kaste 2022). As technology journalist Sam Biddle reports, Big Tech has mobilized against abortion care and targeted activists (2022a; 2022b). Biddle found that the US Marshals Service received regular alerts from Twitter/X's "official partner," Dataminr, about the precise time and location of abortion rights demonstrations (2023). In the Canadian context, access to abortion care depends on region (Kaposy 2010; Schummers and Norman 2019) and comprehensive reproductive justice remains inaccessible, particularly for Indigenous, Black, and disabled communities (Paynter 2022).

To engage with these themes and to respond to gender essentialist and technologically mediated fascism, we turned to speculative, relational, qualitative, embodied, and critical trans-fem(me)inist methods for research creation. The FDMRC's open access values informs our post-academic approach which challenges what is considered an academic output, breaks down boundaries between research and technology, and engages in critical dialogic relationship with media and its tools (Bucchi 2009). Critical trans-fem(me)initities grapples with desire as a generative force for imagining futures and examines femininity unhinged from "woman" (Duggan and McHugh 1996; Cowan 2012; Cheng 2021; Dahl 2012). As an interdisciplinary group, we leveraged our different viewpoints and attended to such frictions as:

- the gap between our desired experiences and actual embodied experiences in digital worlds;

- open access values and concerns over safety within digital spaces;

- strategic essentialism in movements to resist gendered and racialized oppression, anti-universalism (Spivak 2003; Hemmings 2011; Arora 2019), and pluriversal thinking (Escobar 2018).

Taking direction from Arora (2019) to strive for "provocative generalizability" over universalization (371), we engaged Scheer's (2012) theorization of emotions as historically and contextually specific and Howe's (2022) explanation of sensory studies, which "treats the senses and sensations as both object of study and means of inquiry" (3). In this reflection and commentary, we share our observations and processes for the Feminist XResistance project, starting with our first exploratory workshop, our co-creative analysis and outputs, the development of our AR installation, and, finally, our conclusions and insights.

Process: Co-Creation in a Speculative and Exploratory Workshop

Our first workshop, titled *Embodied XResistance*, occurred Friday February 24, 2023, at York University's Sensorium Centre for Digital Arts and Technology with both in person and online participants. We were all affiliated with an academic institution and had a shared language to articulate and address themes of digital agency and concerns over safety. The goal of the workshop was articulated as follows: "During this workshop participants will articulate frictions related to their embodied representation and a speculative/aspirational/alternative embodied representation they would like to have in immersive and digital spaces." In *Glitch Feminism* (2020), Russell argues that "*Glitch Is Cosmic*: We practice the future in the now, testing out alternatives of being. We openly, honestly consider together how to be strategically visible,

when visibility is radically necessary" (p. 146, emphasis original). This futuristic vision and experimentation informed our goals for the workshop.

A consent form and link to the FDMRC community guidelines were sent ahead of time to participants via email to ensure transparency and allow participants to hold us accountable for any discrepancies. A community Spotify playlist was sent to people ahead of time to allow them to add song requests which helped create a shared sense of contribution prior to entering the workshop.

The in-person space was set up with several creation stations which held numerous crafting tools including paints, papers, magazines, fabrics etc. Participants were invited to engage with these creative tools throughout the session. Online participants used word processors and Canva to digitally craft along with their fellow participants.

The workshop started with a discussion of the "code of conduct" as a tone-setting practice to establish a shared sense of safety and accountability from the get-go. The discussion of the code of conduct then gave way to an opening activity designed to help build community and trust and break the ice: a recitation of Maya Angelou's poem "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" accompanied by paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat. These two activities coupled with the playing of music from the shared Spotify playlist as participants entered and got set up cultivated a casual and open atmosphere to start the session before moving into discussion of potentially difficult topics around online conflict and danger.

The focus of the workshop was to centre participant's lived experiences whilst using social media platforms and their emotions arising from such experiences. Thus, emphasis was placed on the qualitative, subjective, plural, complex, and potentially contradictory feelings of those in the room rather than on creating a universal or generalizable understanding of the issues. Workshop design choices centred participants' feelings and experiences. A large sheet of paper ran through the centre of the table and participants were invited to write and doodle any direct discussion responses or other thoughts that came to mind during the session using markers we provided.

Figure 1: Code of Conduct—Workshop Slide Deck

Online participants' contributions in the chat were also included. Additionally, a "self-care" station was set up within the room with headphones, plants, and printouts of breathing exercises. This served as a space where people could go to check in with themselves and take space away from the rest of the group. Online participants were encouraged to take breaks as needed, with their camera and mic on or off.

To get participants thinking about their digital selves and experiences, we created a break-up letter template allowing participants to "break up" with the platform/digital identity/avatar that no longer served us. This writing exercise enabled us to create a vulnerable space to assert agency. The writing exercise was followed by a debrief which offered the opportunity to trace similarities and divergences in online experiences.

A key component of the workshop was the co-creation of artistic responses to the following prompts: 1) What does it feel like to be a female, non-binary, nongender, cisgender, etc. body in a digital space? OR 2) Show us what it feels like to be a female, non-binary, nongender, cisgender, etc. body in a digital space? In person participants used the "analog" crafting supplies (magazines, paints, glitter, fabrics, etc.) that were made available to collage or otherwise create responses to their experiences and our discussion, whereas online participants used digital collaging tools such as Canva.

Figure 2: Sharing Sesh—Workshop Slide Deck

Creative Analysis

In the process of our work together, we met weekly on Zoom for both work and informal chats leading up to the workshop and following it. Our conversations consisted of the project as well as supporting each other through our graduate studies. We also used Mural during our chats to make notes and conceptualize our ideas. After collecting and documenting workshop outputs, including recordings, transcripts, and creative contributions, we identified and analyzed explicit and implicit themes and frictions expressed by the

participants. What surfaced and quickly became evident is that digital space holds unresolved white-cis-hetero-patriarchal and exclusionary politics. Be it casual or professional digital platforms and spaces, fem(me)inine identities and representations are often met with hostility, intimidation, and discriminatory interactions. Despite the premise that digital spaceforges an inclusive and empowering space, abusive interactions and incidents were shared by all participants. Such experiences are not a "marginal" or "repository" part but a core quality of our digital experiences.

For participants, digital platforms are intimidating and lonely spaces that represent past and future trauma. For those with fem(me)inine experience or identity, entering digital spaces requires emotional and practical "gearing up," anticipating conflict arising from expressing an opinion or just "existing" in a digital space. Participants described this as influencing their decision to alter and/or conceal their fem(me)inine digital representation, their tone, or how they use their voice. Participants shared that they conduct extensive editing and fact-checking practices before engaging with digital correspondence and commentary. Sadly, they often choose to minimize or avoid digital interactions altogether. Even when interacting, their digital experience is exhausting, challenging, and lonely.

Confronted by these insights, we decided to make code bias and fem(me)inine code visible. Ruha Benjamin (2019) writes that "codes operate within powerful systems of meaning that render some things visible, others invisible, and create a vast array of distortions and dangers" (117). The critical fem(me)ininities subfield challenges the silencing and invisibilization of fem(me)inine experience and identity (Cheng 2021). One way it does so is through what Duggan and McHugh (1996) theorize as "Fem(me) science," which is interested in "science for desire" (156). Through these critical frameworks for analysis, we identified four frictions to explore and express in an AR Feminist XResistance installation:

- The digital gaze and politics of visibility

- Agency and voice in digital spaces

- Online body objectification

- Connection and community

Creative Development

Research shows that white cis-male experience of immersive computing is favoured, systemically supported, and technologically imbricated (Stanney, Fidopiastis and Foster 2020; Lopez et al. 2019). The Feminist XResistance project subverts these norms. The creative output we developed following our workshop includes three location-based AR installations with visual and sonic elements. Our approach to developing these elements includes representations of multiplicity and singularity, drawing from Escobar's (2018) frameworks of pluriversal thinking and pluriversal design. The pluriverse creates a space for many worlds inside our world. Pluriversal thinking challenges the notion of a single universal subject or experience and rejects the colonial project of world-flattening through generalization. Instead, we embraced radical differences and multiplicity to revise the world ahead. We used the workshop outputs as jumping-off point and:

- Co-authored, co-edited, and co-recorded written and voice-performed statements for each installation. The writing and editing process drew on phrases and expressions from the workshop. The outcome was delivered as a poetic yet evocative statement that expresses fem(me)inine digital experiences and resistance;

- Executed multi-sensory creative outputs (interactive, visual, sonic) that allow for multilayered experience for viewers of the AR installation;

- Utilized AR as a technique and delivery platform to reintroduce and reconnect physical and digital spaces and experiences. The AR installation can be viewed via a mobile app and various devices (smartphones or tablets), allowing for broad participation and viewing without using Immersive Tech specialized devices (such as headsets or dedicated immersive spaces and facilities);

- Utilized embodiment, bodies, and body parts, as core visual AR elements. These elements were created to reflect themes of embodiment from the workshop (like eyes, mouth, shoulders, and breasts) and as a thematic statement aiming to recompose, reclaim, and recognize fem(me)inine/ fem(me)inist embodiment, spaces, and agencies.

Bringing together the installation, voice-over statements, and AR body parts, we highlight the tension between embodiment and disconnection. Often, the experience of online danger is visceral and physically evocative. Participants spoke of needing to disconnect and section off parts of themselves to protect themselves in digital spaces. Thus, different body parts are separated in the AR installation. This visual, together with the sentiments expressed in voice-over statements, reflects desire to holistically come together to be our whole selves across digital and offline spaces.

Installations

On November 18th, 2023, we invited participants to experience the Augmented Reality (AR) installation as a walk-and-talk activation in downtown Toronto. Participants had the opportunity to share and reflect on similar lived-experiences, events, and frictions they endured on digital spaces. The route of the installations was (poetically) selected to be in front of the Meta, LinkedIn, and Twitter/X headquarters to assert fem(me)inist digital agency and resistance.

Figure 3: Under Their Eyes AR Installation—Downtown Toronto

Under their Eyes explores the concept of gaze and the politics of visibility (Mirzoeff 2011) in relation to fem(me)inine experience and the technologically enabled patriarchal gaze in the "hyper" society of spectacle (Debord 1983). The AR installation animates an eyeball tornado that spawns from the ground, gradually surrounding the viewer and placing them in "the eye of the storm" (pun intended). The installation's sonic element reads:

I'm so tired of the constant cringe of watching others, of the lingering anxiety of being seen. What used to be a pleasurable act, of showing up and curating my online presence, feeling really connected to people, friends, colleagues, became an inescapable subscription to the relentless digital gaze. Now I am surrounded by invisible eyeballs that follow my every move, that reject or approve my actions, urging me to engage, consume, subscribe, be relevant, participate. Hungry eyeballs that keep demanding I'll perform for them. I am tired of dancing to the tune of invisible audiences. I am so tired of the digital gaze, the gaze I can't escape. The gaze that devours me and is always hungry for more. I have nothing left to give the gaze. All I can do is gaze back.
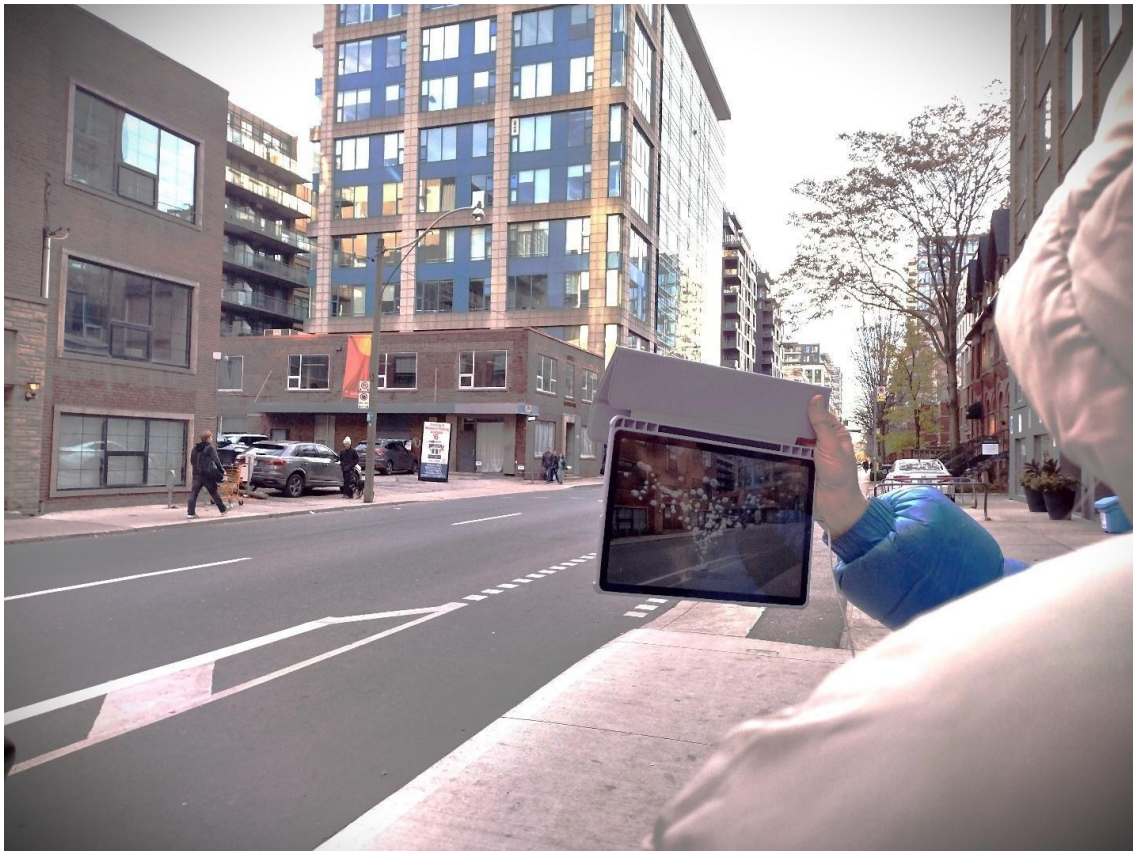

Figure 4: November 18, 2023, Under Their Eyes AR Installation Activation—Downtown Toronto

Possessed addresses online body objectification and harassment stemming from digital patriarchy and the non-consensual pornification of digital spaces. The installation aims to explode the false madonna/whore binary, centre consent and safe(r) digital space practices, and support each other/resist together when we are targets. The visual component animates an array of breasts, "raining down" on the viewer's environment, deflating and flattening as they hit the ground. The sonic element voices out:

My body doesn't feel my own online. It is everyone else's to comment on, mock, and objectify. Being harassed in real life is bad, but online, I have no control—it's just so easy, so mundane, so frequent, so immediate, one click—and you're harassed. Your digital body is just 'there' as an open invite to be advanced on, commented on, digitally grabbed, edited and pinched. Where are these body freedoms that digital space promised us? Or was it the freedom to abuse others' bodies they were talking about?

Figure 5: Possessed AR Installation—Downtown Toronto

Figure 6: Hush AR Installation—Downtown Toronto

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Hush represents and responds to the silencing of fem(me)inine voices, experiences, and perspectives. It explores the unfortunate outcome of self-editing, code-switching, or choosing to remain silent, or to opt-out of digital spaces altogether. The AR animation is of a mouth-shaped cloud that is slowly decimated by the wind, until wholly wiped out. The sonic statement voices:

> I end up hiding my gender online, I avoid audible interactions and edit my tone of voice when posting—wiping out any "femme" emotions and backing everything up with fact-checking before I post anything. I'm told "the internet gives a voice to the voiceless," but in the rare cases my voice is *actually* heard—it instantly drowns in hissy fits of male egos, keyboard rulers and professional trolls. Dismissing, correcting me, suggesting I should join their echo chamber or shut up. The static noise of consensus is deafening. Listen to my silence—it's the only defiance I have left.

Conclusions and Insight

This project has helped build a community of practice around feminist digital methods with contributors across Canada and the United States. We facilitated enough safety to come together to share our experience and to imagine and build an immersive space. Through our exploratory workshop we confirmed that digital spaces have unresolved white-cis-hetero-patriarchal politics of exclusion that shape our experiences and alienate us from our bodies and from each other. The emergent themes from the workshop showed us that we experience similar patterns of white-cis-hetero-patriarchal control in digital spaces. Naming these politics, tracing similar patterns of experience, and co-creating artistic and immersive resistance helped us express, reimagine, and repossess our digital and physical presence in the face of techno-patriarchal hegemonies. Our observations and processes for the Feminist XResistance project consisted of connecting our exploratory workshop, our co-creative analysis, and our outputs into the development of our AR installation experience. This allowed us to understand our shared experiences of our current digital selves to begin to create meaning to the future feminist digital spaces that we will all embody. For instance, our outcomes from our workshop included noting the emotions of participants. Our final AR installations, *Under Their Eyes, Possessed, and Hush,* are representations of the sentiment and experiences that we, the authors, and our workshop participants share. As we reach broader audiences and grow our community of practice with the aim of collaborative and defiant co-creation, we hope to foster new dialogues, agentic assertions, and imaginings.

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