

#MeToo as a Counterpublic

Lauren O’Conner, a female assistant to Harvey Weinstein, wrote in a memo sent out to Weinstein’s company, “I am a 28 year old woman trying to make a living and a career. Harvey Weinstein is a 64 year old, world famous man and this is his company. The balance of power is me: 0, Harvey Weinstein: 10.” O’Conner subsequently signed an NDA about Weinstein’s misconduct in the company. Harvey Weinstein wielded his power by enforcing a culture of silence; employees were not allowed to criticize the company or its leaders in a way that could harm the business’ reputation or any of its employee’s personal reputations (Kantor and Twohey, 2017). Another way that Harvey Weinstein enforced a culture of silence was through NDAs, through which women accepted payouts and agreed to confidentiality about events (Prasad, 2018). Since sexual violence is already fraught with cultural taboos, it is pushed out of the public sphere. This silence perpetuates a culture of shame around sexual violence. Moreover, preventing survivors from speaking out about their experiences is a form of violence in itself, because it allows sexual violence to perpetuate. When a survivor has the power to speak about trauma, the survivor can prevent further violence by warning others and raising awareness. #MeToo attempts to empower survivors so that they no longer must remain silent about sexual violence.

The #MeToo movement began in 2006 by Tarana Burke to help survivors of sexual violence, especially women of color and women from low wealth communities, speak out about sexual violence and find healing. In 2017, the phrase was popularized by actress Alyssa Milano on Twitter, in order to call attention to sexual violence in Hollywood (Khomami, 2017). #MeToo forged a counterpublic where survivors reframe their identities by creating a space free of shame. However, the movement has struggled to create positive change in the public sphere due to its inability to conform to discourses of rationality that characterize the dominant public. That is, #MeToo has forced out the “bad apples” like Harvey Weinstein, which appears to be productive and rationally just, but in fact does little to create true structural change.

Everyday interactions entail negotiations of power and status. Constant negotiations of power and status structure these interactions, as Bonnie Urciuoli highlights in *The Political Topography of Spanish and English: The View from a New York Puerto Rican Neighborhood*. Code-switching, also known as mixing, is when a bilingual speaker switches the language they are speaking in during a conversation. Whether a speaker can mix or speak a language other than English depends on the addressee's persona, which Urciuoli defines as "an active construction that the speaker attributes to the addressee" (1991, p. 299). The persona is constantly renegotiated based on the addressee's appearance and relationship to the speaker. In this way, the persona is cumulative and shifts with more information about the addressee. The question of what one can "get away with" in a social situation depends on whether or not two speakers or coming together as equals or in a hierarchy. For instance, two Spanish speakers can come together and speak Spanish. Due to their shared language outside of the dominant English language, they have formed an alternative space where they can exist as equals relative to each other. However, if one speaker is a fluent native English speaker and the other is a native Spanish speaker whose English skills are less strong, then the English language becomes a mark of power in the relationship. The native Spanish speaker may worry that broken Spanish will undermine her persona's credibility (Urciuoli, 1991).

Although language can function as a means of marking hierarchy, it can also create a safe space among equals by keeping out those who would be dominant. For instance, if two Spanish speakers come together and speak Spanish, they are excluding English speakers who would otherwise be more powerful and authoritative in the conversation. Similarly, the #MeToo movement adopts a discourse that is exclusionary to those who are not survivors. By creating a space in which only survivors can participate, survivors can reclaim narratives and gain a voice in a space shielded from an oppressive external discourse. Using the #MeToo hashtag is analogous to using Spanish in a hegemonic-English setting; both linguistic tools draw lines between a dominant mainstream and a subaltern place of exchange so that individuals oppressed by hierarchy can reframe their status among other equals.

The typical behaviors that occur on social media, such as reposting, retweeting, and liking, give messages social power. This social power causes messages to gather fame, quite like how goods in The Kula Exchange give social power to their exchangers. The Kula, documented by Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, is an intertribal circular

exchange in the Trobriand Islands which is comprised of transactions between lifelong partners where partners exchange necklaces and bracelets (Malinowski & Frazer, 2006). Gifts travel in a circular network in the Trobriand Island and generate fame for those who have owned them. In this way, circular exchanges can give participants social power. #MeToo, like the Kula, involves exchanges in the form of retweets, reposts, likes, and comments on social media. Through these interactions, the individuals who post #MeToo messages can regain power.

A movement similar to #MeToo was #Ferguson, a Twitter movement in response to police violence in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa analyze the movement in *#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States* (2015). In both these movements, the circulation of text gave its participants social power where they may otherwise would have had little power due to societal hierarchies. Furthermore, both movements aim to highlight inequalities that dominant discourses refuse to recognize. The messages that comprise #MeToo and #Ferguson disprove mainstream notions that society is post-racial and post-patriarchal.

Both #Ferguson and #MeToo through their circular exchanges form publics. Michael Warner, in *Publics and Counterpublics*, defines a public as being self-organized, in that it exists because it is addressed. A public must also be a relation among strangers that are united solely by their participation in a public and the speech exchanged in the public must be both personal and impersonal (2002). In the context of #MeToo, the public exists because individuals post about it and participants share intimate details about their experiences online with strangers. These stories are directed at other survivors in a personal way, but the number of observers makes it impersonal. Warner also describes how a public is created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. This relates directly to #MeToo, as #MeToo is not just one text or one voice, but rather the circulation of many voices. Although #MeToo is a public, #MeToo is not a dominant public because it is subaltern; it involves sharing stories that would be unacceptable to speak of in a dominant sphere.

#MeToo directly counters the enforced silence of survivors by forming a counterpublic. Warner defines that counterpublics “mark themselves off unmistakably from any general or dominant public. Their members are understood to be not merely a subset of the public, but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” (2002, p. 85) Then, Warner

points to Nancy Fraser in a 1992 article, where she defined that, “members of subordinated social groups - women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians - have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” or “subaltern counterpublics” which are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (2002, p. 85). #MeToo is a clear example of this kind of counterpublic; members of the #MeToo movement are survivors of sexual violence (member of subordinated social group) silenced by their perpetrators (usually men of power). Survivors participate by circulating messages on Twitter to re-interpret the culture of shame around sexual violence and reinforce a survivor, rather than a victim, narrative. Furthermore, #MeToo hopes to show how rampant sexual violence is to the larger public, and how it typically is perpetrated in obvious spaces, like the workplace. By speaking about sexual violence, the counterpublic of #MeToo aims to reframe the shame and stigma around sexual violence by creating a space where it is socially acceptable to come forward as a survivor. #Ferguson similarly engages in this kind of reframing; as Bonilla and Rosa explain, participants were able to contest their racial devaluation on Twitter in a way that they could not in face to face interactions (2015). By posting images and messages on Twitter, racialized individuals could reinterpret their identities and confront racism in a society that claims colorblindness and the eradication of racism.

Like all counterpublics, #MeToo makes direct reference to its subordinate nature. Warner emphasizes how a counterpublic must be aware that it is subordinate to the dominant public that views the discourses of the counterpublic with hostility (2002). This accurately describes #MeToo; the #MeToo counterpublic is subordinate to the dominant public because its message would be repressed and silenced in the dominant public. On an individual level, #MeToo participants are directly subordinate to the powerful individuals who have tried to silence them. As a whole, the #MeToo counterpublic is seen as improper because it consists of speaking openly about sexual violence, a shameful and privatized topic.

The use of the #MeToo hashtag permanently marks survivors. This echoes Warner’s claim that, “Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers... [However,] addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse” (2002, p. 86). In the case of #MeToo, the hashtag itself marks participants on their social media platforms. Warner remarks that code-switching of a bilingual speaker, similarly

referenced by Urcioli, might also mark where a conversation becomes part of a counterpublic. He goes on to explain how “ordinary people” would not want to be a part of a counter-public discussion. Although #MeToo was widespread, it did not reach all individuals, especially those in communities outside political and cultural elite; perhaps “ordinary people” would not want to be a conversation that could put their jobs, careers, and reputation at risk. It is much easier for those who have status to take the risk and say #MeToo than a single mother of color with an abusive boss who needs to support her family, or a survivor who faces racial discrimination and has less social power to take a stand.

#MeToo fails to shift destructive societal paradigms that lead to sexual violence. As #MeToo grows beyond fringes into more “mainstream” culture, it has shifted the inherent power structures that cause sexual violence, and it has done little to effect change in the everyday interactions that lead to sexual violence for “ordinary people”. Although #MeToo has brought the pervasiveness of sexual violence to light, it has done little to change the structures that allow sexual violence to occur. Furthermore, exposing a single person’s bad behavior is not the same as completely expunging the problem. The paradigm of the rich, powerful Harvey Weinstein perpetrator and beautiful actresses as victims makes it easy to think that #MeToo is only for the wealthy (Zarkov and Davis, 2018). Rather, #MeToo impacts every individual who must grapple with hierarchies in society. Even men, although structurally empowered by their gender, can face situations in which they have less power and are subjected to sexual violence by an abusive perpetrator.

The “call out culture” #MeToo perpetuates similarly prevents any structural change to prevent sexual violence. Discarding Harvey Weinstein does little to change the culture that created him. Rather, by throwing out men whose actions are so egregious that they become a liability, the culture maintains itself. The “bad apples” may be thrown out, but the small actions that constitute systems of hierarchy and violence remain (Zarkov and Davis, 2018). In this way, #MeToo has done little to effect any structural change.

The counterpublic of #MeToo might have failed to institute change because of the very way counterpublics are defined. Warner defines how publics can “acquire agency...Publics act historically” and can be forces for change (2002, p. 88). Publics can engage in “acts of private reading...scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge” (2002, p. 89). Counterpublics on the other hand are not able to engage in these kinds of activities. Warner gives a few reasons why this may

be the case, and it might be because counterpublics veer to far into the territory of the private to participate in public discourse (2002). In order for counterpublics to acquire agency and become a social movement, as #MeToo did once it started to gain momentum and be thrust further into the mainstream, Warner argues that “they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public itself” (2002, p. 89). Perhaps the #MeToo movement, once it attempted to produce change, started calling out obvious perpetrators of sexual violence. This seems rational, ascribing to typical modes of justice in the dominant political sphere. However, these actions did little to actually instantiate change, and might have undermined the movement. Calling out perpetrators bolstered claims of false accusations because alleged perpetrators were unable to defend themselves. Rather than leading to structural change, #MeToo’s discourse was dominated by affect. #MeToo may have failed because affect alone does not lead to change; it is not specific or rational enough to be coded in policy.

#MeToo exists in terms of affect and genealogy, rather than autonomy and rationality, making it difficult for it to persist in the public sphere. In *Totalitarian Tears: Does the Crowd Really Mean It*, William Mazzarella analyzes the American fascination with North Koreans crying during the death of their leader, Kim Jong-il. He calls this fascination an “itch” that reflects how the Western world aims to develop a strict differentiation between the public sphere, marked by personal autonomy and rationality, and the private sphere, marked by genealogy and affect (2015). #MeToo is genealogy, as its participants all have a clear shared identity, coming together each as individuals through a shared experience. Furthermore, #MeToo is affect, as individuals aim to evoke a sense of empathy by exposing vulnerability. Therefore, it is difficult for #MeToo to translate into the public sphere; it involves a private matter that does not belong in the public domain. Furthermore, it exposes societal inequities and hierarchies that undermine the notion of social equality, making individuals feel uncomfortable and in denial that there even is a problem.

Although #MeToo has created a space for survivors to counter narratives of shame around sexual violence, it has done little to produce change outside of the counterpublic. How affect can translate into policy is unclear, but perhaps through consistent messaging and specific goals, the movement can generate true structural change. By co-opting discourses of rationality

without sacrificing the movement's overall goal, the #MeToo movement may be able to alter how social hierarchies function.

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