



Selected Papers of #AoIR2019:
The 20th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Brisbane, Australia / 2-5 October 2019

LAUGHTER OUT OF PLACE: AFFECTIVE HOMOPHILY AND THE ABSURD COMEDY OF #METOO

Jenny Sundén
Södertörn University

Susanna Paasonen
University of Turku

Consider this hypothetical scene: Two feminist scholars having a hotel breakfast in the very beginning of the #MeToo movement, October 2017, during AoIR. “Well I’m gonna have some more coffee, possibly an orange juice,” one of them says. “Me too!,” the other replies, making the hashtag symbol up in the air with her fingers. In a split second, both are laughing, helplessly. The more they realize how inappropriate it is to laugh, the harder it becomes not to, and tears are soon running down their cheeks. Starting from this scene of absurd laughter out of place, and the contagious energy that it involves, this paper investigates feminist humor as a strategy of resistance in connection with #MeToo, asking what laughter may do to, and in the affective politics driving the movement.

Although the hashtag was coined already a decade ago by the Black feminist activist Tarana Burke for supporting survivors of sexual abuse, #MeToo grew into a global, viral Twitter campaign within the Harvey Weinstein scandal, soon bleeding into other social media platforms, news outlets, parliamentary investigations, and forms of retrospective inquiry revisiting accusations of sexual misconduct by powerful men. In the course of this, sexual harassment became a topic of debate and intervention on an unprecedented, international scale. #MeToo has connected personal accounts into a networked entity making visible structures of privilege and sexual violence across national borders. Bringing together experiences of harassment, from the casual to the profoundly traumatic under a hashtag, it has made them visible as nodes and patterns in a broader social fabric. Within this fabric, the anecdotal meets the structural while gaining solidity, gravity, unity, and expansiveness in the process. Following John Protevi (2009), this is a means of connecting the somatic—as the immediately and corporally

Suggested Citation (APA): Sundén, J. & Paasonen, S. (2019, October 2-5). Laughter Out Of Place: Affective Homophily And The Absurd Comedy Of #Metoo Paper presented at AoIR 2019: The 20th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Brisbane, Australia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

felt—with the social, and the level of personal action with political activism on a civic level. In this sense, #MeToo exemplifies the transformative potential of contingent “hashtag publics” (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) operating through, and galvanized by articulations of affect. It can equally be conceptualized as an affective public emerging as a networked, contingent sense of belonging as people tweet, retweet, share, follow, and post in social media (Papacharissi, 2014).

As an affective public, #MeToo is energized by articulations of anger and outrage. Shaped by the sharpness of negative affect, its affective politics are as serious as the claims to bodily integrity and gender equality that the movement makes. The tone of #MeToo is, in sum, angry inasmuch as it is serious and engaged with the redistribution of shame connected to sexual harassment. As we argue in more detail in the full length paper, this dynamic gives rise to what we would like to call “affective homophily,” that brings people together through expressions of similar feeling. Humor and laughter are therefore probably not the first responses to come to mind when considering the movement and its possible affective dynamics. Playfulness, humor, and laughter may feel impossible to connect with experiences and incidents of sexual harassment and violence. At the same time, feminist and other political movements have long used humor as a form of resistance, and even as one of subversion, in coping with, or providing relief from oppression and violence. Considering this legacy of laughing at power, humor may provide a breathing space of sorts where the pressing heaviness of power abuse and trauma become momentarily lighter to bear. For this reason, we find it important to explore the unexpected spaces of laughter in contexts where playfulness and humor seem unlikely, out of place, or even inappropriate.

In our paper, we investigate the affective and ambiguous dynamics of humor when it unexpectedly makes its way into the heart of the #MeToo debate. Our analysis plays out through two examples. Firstly, we deploy *Nanette*—Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 Netflix success heralded as *the* comedy of the #MeToo era—as our entry to explore the interconnections of humor, seriousness, and feminist politics. Electrified by glowing reviews, journalistic coverage, and countless shares and likes in social media, *Nanette* did not only resonate powerfully in queer and feminist settings but managed to grab the attention of a much broader audience. We argue that the uniform viral warmth surrounding the show drives the emergence of networked feminisms through affective homophily, or a love of feeling the same which allows for affective intensity while resisting dissent in what is being felt. Moreover, in contrast to Gadsby’s understanding of humor, and the format of stand-up, as something which short-circuits her (and, by extension, her audience’s) possibilities of reworking and understanding hurt and trauma, we argue for other ways of thinking about the affective unpredictability of laughter as it intersects with, and operates through networked feminist politics and registers of vulnerability.

Secondly, and as a counter force of sorts to such intense sameness, we open up the door to feminist humor in the absurd, something which traffics in the unreasonable, illogical, and inappropriate. In considering the unexpected pockets of humor within the #MeToo scandal that ripped apart the prestigious institution of the Swedish Academy, we explore the emergence of absurdist feminist comedy by zooming in on the figure of the unseemly woman and a type of humor which is out of tune with both reason and

decency (cf. Sundén & Paasonen 2018). The ignition of the Swedish #MeToo movement involved eighteen women accusing Jean-Claude Arnault—a high-profile player in Stockholm’s literary circles close to the Swedish Academy—of more than two decades of sexual assault. Sara Danius (the first female head of the Academy) launched a legal investigation into the matter and was eventually forced to leave her post. Her alter ego, the unruly and absurd “Gittan” who crashed Academy meetings and functions, along with spectacularly loud designer gowns at the Nobel banquets did not help her case. By turning things nonsensical, absurd feminist humour refuses to operate within a preset logic, be it one of binary gender, heteronormativity, or something else while allowing for both affective release and affective rerouting. Absurdity is a tactic for rupturing things, for opening them up—and, possibly, for proposing entirely different places to start. In its unpredictability, absurdity remains resistant to affective homophily as that which aligns people and joins them in affective publics.

Our strands of investigation then move from the affective homophily of seriousness, anger, and shame, to the shared refusal to laugh and the much more volatile feminist terrain of the absurd where things just refuse to make sense. They map out ripples of feminist laughter (or the lack thereof) connected to #MeToo and the affective politics they perform and intervene in. Taken together, our examples allow us to argue for the political importance of affective ambiguity, difference, and dissent in contemporary feminist movements in social media, and to highlight the risk involved when such movements close ranks around homogenous feelings of not only shame and rage, but also those of love. Our discussion further opens up a space for laughter and affective release that the unpredictable and surprising routes of absurd humour, combining the illogical with the indecent, afford.

References

Bruns, Axel and Jean Burgess. 2015. Twitter Hashtags from Ad Hoc to Calculated Publics. In *#Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, edited by Nathan Rambukkana, 13–28. New York: Peter Lang.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2014. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Protevi, John. 2009. *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Sundén, Jenny & Susanna Paasonen (2018) “Shameless hags and tolerance whores: Feminist resistance and the affective circuits of online hate”. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 643-656.