

Inappropriate Laughter: Affective Homophily and the Unlikely Comedy of #MeToo

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Abstract

This article investigates the affective and ambiguous dynamics of feminist humor as an unexpected strategy of resistance in connection with #MeToo, asking what laughter may do to the sharpness of negative affect of shame and anger driving the movement. Our inquiry comes in three vignettes. First, we deploy *Nanette*—Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 Netflix success heralded as the comedy of the #MeToo era—arguing that the uniform viral warmth surrounding the show drives the emergence of networked feminisms through “affective homophily,” or a love of feeling the same. With *Nanette*, the contagious qualities of laughter are tamed by a networked logic of homophily, allowing for intensity while resisting dissent. Our second vignette zooms in on a less known feminist comedian, Lauren Maul, and her online #MeToo musical comedy riffing off on apologies made by male celebrities accused of sexual harassment, rendering the apologies and the men performing them objects of ridicule. Our third example opens up the door to the ambivalence of irony. 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 carnivalesque comedy and feminist uses of irony in the appropriation of the pussy-bow blouse as an ambiguous feminist symbol. Our examples allow us to argue for the political importance of affective ambiguity, difference, and dissent in contemporary social media feminisms, and to highlight the risk when a movement like #MeToo closes ranks around homogeneous feelings of not only shame and rage, but also love.

Keywords

feminist humor, laughter, affective homophily, #MeToo, seriousness

Consider this hypothetical scene: Two feminist scholars having a hotel breakfast in the very beginning of the #MeToo movement, October 2017. “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 article investigates feminist humor as a strategy of resistance in connection with #MeToo, asking what laughter may do to the affective body politics driving the movement.

Although the hashtag was coined already a decade ago in the shape of a slogan by the Black feminist activist Tarana Burke for supporting young women of color who have survived sexual abuse, #MeToo grew into an overwhelmingly white, viral Twitter and Facebook campaign with the Harvey Weinstein scandal, soon bleeding into

national and international 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, leading to “law suits, boycotts, resignations and reviews of workplace regulations and procedures” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 2). Meanwhile, as in many other feminist media initiatives, “white, middle-class, cisgendered, and heterosexual” subjects were the ones to gain most attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 13).

#MeToo has connected individual personal accounts into a networked entity making visible structures of

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privilege and sexual violence across national and linguistic boundaries. 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 of power abuse. 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 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 & Burgess, 2015) operating through, and galvanized by articulations of affect. It can equally be conceptualized as an affective public 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 body 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 and violence. As we argue in more detail below, this dynamic gives rise to what we call “affective homophily” bringing 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 even feel impossible to connect with the sharpness of negative affect that experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse entail. At the same time, feminist and other political movements have long used humor, laughter, and parody as forms of resistance, and even as ones of subversion, in coping with, or providing relief from oppression and violence (see also Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019, pp. 77, 91). Uses of charged humor has helped marginalized groups to turn tears and anger into laughter—from African American humor playing with racism to rude queer high camp, or even Holocaust jokes told within Jewish families (e.g., Gilbert, 2004; Krefting, 2014; Moskowitz, 2018). Considering this legacy of laughing at power, humor may provide a breathing space of sorts where the pressing heaviness of anger and sadness 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 this article, we investigate the affective and ambiguous dynamics of humor when it unexpectedly makes its way into the heart of the #MeToo debate. Our inquiry comes in three distinct vignettes. In the first of these, 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 trauma. 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 also managed to grab the attention of a much broader audience. 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 the affective unpredictability and value of laughter as it intersects with, and operates through feminist politics and registers of vulnerability.

Our second vignette zooms in on a less known feminist comedian, Lauren Maul, and her online #MeToo musical comedy riffing off on apologies made by male celebrities accused of sexual harassment. Her playful songs and animated videos rendered the apologies, as well as the men performing them, subjects of ridicule by pointing out their acute shortcomings. While these two vignettes make it possible for us to consider how affective dynamics of shame and outrage connected to #MeToo become reworked and re-routed through laughter, our third one opens up the door to irony and its inherent ambivalence. In considering the unexpected pockets of humor within the #MeToo scandal that ripped apart the prestigious institution of the Swedish Academy and put the Nobel Prize in literature on hold, we explore the emergence of carnivalesque comedy and feminist uses of irony in the appropriation of the pussy-bow blouse as an ambiguous feminist symbol.

Our opening and closing examples were chosen due to their viral nature. In this sense, they exemplify what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 10), in her discussion of popular feminism online, identifies as the imperative of visibility connected to the attention economy of social media where “its sheer accessibility—through shared images, ‘likes’, clicks, followers, retweets, and so on—is a key component of its popularity.” In addition, these examples afford a juxtaposition of an Anglophone (Australian) and a Swedish example with intense international reverberations. Meanwhile, our intermission is more low-profile, and as such interesting as an example of a project designed for virality that failed in its quest for visibility. Admittedly, when working with uses of feminist humor and affect, we are drawn to examples that attract or repel, entice or annoy, rather than those leaving us unmoved. Then again, due to the fickle nature of humor and laughter, what initially proved funny may, over time and recurrent revisiting, become much less so. Our strands of investigation connected to these three examples move from the affective homophily of seriousness, anger, and shame to the more volatile feminist terrain of ridicule and irony. They map out ripples of feminist laughter (or the lack thereof) connected to #MeToo and the affective body politics that 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 projects in

social media, and to highlight the risks involved when a movement like #MeToo closes ranks around homogeneous feelings of not only shame and rage, but also those of love.

Nanette, or, the Viral Warmth of Affective Homophily

Nanette, a queer and feminist stand-up comedy set by the Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby was released as a Netflix special in June 2018, and it grew viral almost overnight. Through an explosion of shares in social media feeds testifying to the life-changing qualities of the show, and further propelled by raving reviews in established media outlets, *Nanette* was praised to the skies. Gadsby's performance was considered "remarkable" (*The Washington Post*), "groundbreaking" (*Slate*), "soul-affirming" if yet also "comedy-destroying" (*The New York Times*), as well as daring "to dream of a different future—for ourselves and for comedy" (*The Guardian*). Moreover, there was no shortage of praise from fellow comedians. Jenny Yang, known for her viral videos and political satire, tweeted that "This one's gonna linger for a while and will influence a whole generation of comedians. If I don't change how I do comedy after seeing her special, why even?" In her tweet, Aparna Nancherla found the show to be, "one of the most incredible, powerful, wrenching pieces of comedy and art I have ever seen."

The first-half of *Nanette* is a clever if yet conventional queer stand-up comedy set leaving plenty of space for laughter for audiences of diverse sexual orientations and gender identifications. Gadsby tells stories about growing up "a little bit lesbian" in rural, conservative Tasmania. In a knowing play at the straight and male-dominated world of comedy, she asks, "What sort of comedian can't even make the lesbians laugh?" "Every comedian ever," she answers, "the only people who don't think it's funny are us lezzies, but we've gotta laugh, because if we don't—proves the point!" The joke wittily uses a marginal position for laughter while also positioning the (hypothetical) lesbian in the audience as someone uncomfortable with laughing along, at her own expense. But it is the second part that gave the show its viral edge. It basically consists of a rebuttal of stand-up comedy, or a deconstruction of how a joke is structured, with a buildup requiring a certain amount of affective tension and a punch line that releases this tension through laughter. Gadsby tells the story of how, as a child, her very existence created tension, and how she learned to use humor to turn things around. She argues that jokes need tension to function, yet also cut off stories, or more precisely, they do away with the traumatic weight of personal stories in order to generate laughter. For her, comedy cannot embrace, or work productively alongside trauma, as it short-circuits the very space in which it could be processed. Laughter affords no such space, the audience learns, and at this stage *Nanette* leaves comedy behind in order to relay painful, violent stories of moving through a homophobic, sexist world as a butch lesbian;

stories that had previously been cut short in the interest of laughter. Having built a career on self-deprecating humor, Gadsby states that she is quitting comedy, as she no longer wants to relieve her audience of the kind of tension people like her create ("it's not humility, it's humiliation").

In the second-half of *Nanette*, Gadsby is angry. No longer wanting to use herself as the butt of her own jokes, or to make the audience feel good while being complicit in the structures of homophobia and sexism, she replaces tension-release afforded by laughter with anger. Rather than ending here, she nevertheless soon denounces anger as toxic in the tensions it generates and fuels. That which in one moment appears to open up a space for queer rage in the midst of a stand-up comedy set is quickly transformed into a speech on the need of civility and mutual respect. In one of the very few critical analyses of *Nanette*, Peter Moskowitz (2018) argues that "in order to convey her trauma, Gadsby dismisses all of comedy, the uses of queer anger, and the entire premise of self-deprecation as inadequate."

The rapid and wide circulation of *Nanette* in the summer of 2018 testifies to how affective intensities travel, amplify, and resonate through social media, and give rise to networked events. As forces and intensities that operate beyond capture, comprehension, and control, affect does not settle as an object of knowledge to be grasped and dissected. To the extent that affect is anything, it is unpredictable, volatile, and in perpetual motion as it connects and separates bodies, shapes their capacities to act and relate, and transforms them in the process. There nevertheless seems to be something in the affective events of social media that works against this very instability by pushing networked bodies to sense things strongly in similar ways, and generates waves of affective uniformity resistant to ambivalence in how things become sensed and made sense of.

The registers of feeling connected to *Nanette* are rich and manifold, from anger to anxiety, shame, sadness, joy, and even love. Audiences loved the show, and they loved Gadsby. And those who did not pretty much remained silent, unwilling to risk the underbelly of this love as that which protects its objects of affection from critique through sharp flames of resentment, othering, and anger. In investigating how social media is shaping the production and consumption of comedy, Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc (2015) argue that social media networks make for a sort of homophilic tribalism among like-minded comedy fans, which impacts both the makeup of audiences and the content of comedy made. They warn against any hasty celebratory analyses of social media as having the power to confront social hierarchies. The uniformly warm virality of *Nanette*, in turn, emphasizes the *affective* dimensions of homophily and similarity that allow for intensity while resisting dissent.

"Homophily"—love of the same—is a classic sociological concept and an attempt to understand the formation of friendships based on similarity of values (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). It was coined in tandem with "heterophily," or love of

the different, which added complexity and an analytical openness to how sameness and difference operate in the formation, maintenance, and rupturing of social ties. More recently, homophily has been broadly used in accounting for how people bond in social media networks and how these networks algorithmically reinforce similarity. “Similarity breeds connection,” Miller McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) argue, turning homophily into that which both drives and shapes social media connectivity. As Wendy Chun points out in an interview with Martina Leeker (2017, p. 79, emphasis in the original), homophily has become an intrinsic yet problematic part of network algorithms as the easiest way to grasp how connections take shape and linger: “Homophily is segregation. It assumes that love is love of the same, that you would naturally love to be around people like yourself, so therefore, segregation is natural.”

With *Nanette*, such homophilic logics of love and sameness have contributed to that which we identify as “affective homophily,” namely the love of *feeling* the same. Considerations of affect add an important dimension to the discussion of homophily based on shared values, opinions, or identities in that it draws attention to the bonding (and segregating) power of networked affect. With *Nanette*, the contagious qualities of laughter are tamed by a networked logic of homophily, according to which similarity underpins connection but also affection. Here, love becomes a love of feeling in the same way as others, or even a love of feeling love in the same way. And if you feel differently, you do not belong, for you do not love. If you feel differently, you may even be a bad feminist, or a bad queer, given that such politics of sentiment (and sentimentality) are formed around feeling good together, in the midst of everything that is bad. It is a manner of being similarly touched, and to feel hope through touching similarity. Affective homophily brings bodies together through feeling, pulls them apart in instances of conflicting feeling and, in doing so, drives the emergence of affective publics.

Stand-up Tragedy, or, Take Me Seriously, I’m Not Laughing

While humor involves “a capacity to hold together a greater variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects” (Berlant & Ngai, 2017, p. 239), the affective resonances of *Nanette* seemed more distinct. In transgressing some boundaries, and leaving other ones intact, comedy can be helpful for clarifying the bounds of an “us” through the contagious force of affective homophily. Gadsby herself states that “anger, much like laughter, can connect a room like nothing else,” yet also claims that she no longer has an interest in uniting her audience in this way (“I just need my story heard”). Writing for *Slate*, Andrew Kahn (2018) claims that it is precisely this move from stand-up comedy to “stand-up tragedy” and the reluctance to unite an audience that makes *Nanette* radical. Yet the affective homophily of viral online warmth and affection spun tightly

around the show indicates that its audience was indeed united—perhaps not primarily by laughter, but by love, tears, and joy. We argue that such an affective shift from unpredictable laughter and justified queer anger to heartfelt, teary love and respect may not make queer feminist comedy more radical, but less so. *Nanette* turns seriousness into a queer feminist protest, a plea to be taken seriously in a way that is incompatible with laughter. This not only makes impossible to use humor and laughter as a way of dealing with hurt and trauma: it also makes comedy much smaller than it needs to be.

It is this seriousness, connected with rage in the face of discrimination and violence, that afforded *Nanette* with the title of the comedy show of the #MeToo era. In other words, the show’s affective registers found harmonious resonance in those of the #MeToo movement. It equally resonates through the figure of what Sara Ahmed (2010) identifies as a “feminist killjoy,” namely she who disrupts other people’s sense of happiness by refusing to laugh along or make others happy. Furthermore, considering how *Nanette* is situated in the intersection of *lesbian* feminist comedy and politics also does things to Gadsby’s claim to seriousness. Historically, women’s need to be taken seriously in public spaces has made them seem unlikely as comedians, or indeed to have any sense of humor at all (see Barreca, 1988; Boyle, 2015; Finney, 1994; Gray, 1994). Caught in binary understandings of both gender and humor, according to which women rarely get to be funny while also being taken seriously, the space for funny women comes across as differently limited.

For a butch lesbian stand-up comedian, there may be additional things at stake that make laughter risky or difficult. As Don Kulick (2014) shows, stereotypification positions marginal groups diversely in relation to laughter and seriousness. For example, gay men are associated with sharp wit and edgy humor, whereas lesbians—much like feminists, and women in general—are perceived of as humorless and void of joy. Kulick traces the root causes of “the humorless lesbian,” and argues that it is not merely a matter of lesbians being women, and as such dominated by men, but also of how the (stereotypical) lesbian embodies yet fails to perform masculinity. In a reference to Jack Halberstam’s (1998, p. 234) take on dominant understandings of masculinity as essentially non-performative and natural—as opposed to femininity which “reeks of the artificial”—Kulick holds that the non-theatricality of masculinity makes it difficult to laugh at, except when it fails. According to this logic, the masculine lesbian is bound to fail, and as such become something to laugh at, rather than someone who laughs (other than at themselves). As Gadsby no longer wants to contribute to this logic in *Nanette*, seriousness may be her only resort.

To turn to seriousness as the last resort for feminist and queer humor in connection with #MeToo is also to subscribe to a particular understanding of how feminist politics and vulnerability relate, or fail to relate, to humor and laughter. As already argued earlier, *Nanette* has been heralded as the comedy of the #MeToo era precisely for the reason that it

does not aim to be funny, to make people laugh, or to offer the release of humor, but rather sets out to abandon and even destroy the format of stand-up comedy. The forging of some connections, such as those between politics and seriousness, at the expense of others, may also speak of how laughter is understood and how it operates affectively.

Much theorization of humor and laughter sidelines their affective unpredictability. To Gadsby, laughter functions as a release of affective tension that simultaneously helps to efface social tensions, hierarchies, and violence from view. As such, laughter connects the bodies of a live audience with those consuming the show online and, in doing so may provide momentary solace from how social norms make these bodies tense, heavy, and vulnerable. This, however, is not the only way for laughter to work. In the affective force and intense relationality that it may entail, laughter is unpredictable in both how it feels and in what it does, and hence resistant to or even disruptive of affective homophily. Laughter may release tension, but equally build it up. Are you laughing at me, with me, or both? Laughter can be comforting yet uncomfortable, both freeing and opening things up while painfully closing them down.

“The Louis C.K. Apology,” or, Sorry Not Sorry

In a discussion of the profound ambivalence of comedy, Laurin Berlant and Sianne Ngai (2017, p. 233) point out that the pleasure of comedy partly arises from its ability to do away with anxiety, but that it equally produces anxiety, “risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes pleasure.” What a collective “we” finds funny is contextual in highly volatile ways since that which appears funny mixes with the not so funny, perhaps conflating the two. *Nanette* may balance precisely on this tipping point between laughter (in the first-half) and the absence thereof (in the second). The absence of laughter is nevertheless tightly scripted in ways that empties out comedy-turned-tragedy of ambivalence and the potentiality of risky transgressiveness.

Berlant and Ngai also point out how laughter may slide into shame. This connection is crucial, given the degree to which the feminist tactic of #MeToo involves a decisive redistribution of shame from the victims to the perpetrators, as well as to the bystanders who knew but remained silent. #MeToo breaks the silence and presumed privacy surrounding sexual harassment and reworks the circuits of shame and shaming by calling out aggressors and by inviting others to witness personal accounts. The movement’s affective dynamics are driven by outrage: outrage over the ubiquity and mundaneness of sexual harassment of women, over the inability of institutions and corporations to respond to reports of abuse, and over the tendency of not believing the harassed and undermining their credibility. The enabling affective power of outrage and anger lent #MeToo much of its initial

political lift and this affective homophily has helped to extend the movement’s momentum beyond October 2017. The oscillation and amplification of affect generated in both the streams of tweets and the coverage of scandals connected to male celebrities accused of harassment has given the movement longevity and cultural power. While energizing, the negative affective charge of #MeToo also repulses different kinds of intensities and modes of engagement.

We however suggest that shame, in its multiple circulation and reworking—even more than outrage—comprises the affective backbone of #MeToo. As such a backbone, shame operates as a strong affect theory. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, p. 134) points out that, for Silvan S. Tompkins, what characterizes strong theory is not “how well it avoids negative affect or finds positive affect, but the size and topology of the domain that it organizes.” It then follows that an affect theory can grow stronger through the amplification of shame into humiliation, rather than by offering releases from it. A strong theory eats away at affective complexity in an engulfing manner: “The stronger the shame theory, the more expensive it is for the person who holds it” and the more often she/he “misrecognizes, imagines, sees, or seizes upon—shame” (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 21). A strong affect theory is then a negative one, and amplifies the qualities of sensation involved. If one sees #MeToo as operating with the strong affect theory of shame, it becomes evident that the redistribution and reorientation of shame occurring within it cannot disrupt or even disturb its overall logic. For, rather than helping to lift the shame brought forth by sexual assault, or that associated with sexuality more expansively, a strong affect theory further solidifies such connections. We argue that humor can, particularly in its irreverent and inappropriate forms, create spaces for an affective lift where the weight of trauma temporarily lightens and where the strong affect theory of shame becomes much less firm or stable as it meets the unruly ripples of laughter. Laughter, then, can set things into motion. In doing so, it complicates and possibly disturbs the affective homophily that organizes affective publics.

The redistribution of shame within #MeToo becomes evident in how the terrain of rape jokes has been shifting as some male comedians accused of harassment now find themselves at the receiving end of the joke. Known for his dark and shock humor, the award-winning comedian Louis C.K. made a public apology admitting to sexual misconduct in November 2017. The apology nevertheless lacked the word “sorry” while repeatedly emphasizing how admired he was, also by the women who did not consent to his masturbatory performativity. This non-apologetic apology was soon turned into musical entertainment by the filmmaker Lauren Maul in a catchy Vimeo video clip. “The Louis C.K. Apology . . . Set to Music” consists of off-key lyrics by Maul herself singing the comedian’s apology in a somewhat infantilizing vein, combined with a similarly playful, animated DIY mise-en-scène where Louis C.K. is present as various cutouts, sheds

glittery tears, and articulates his apology with post-it notes and speech balloons. The song's chorus plays up the statement's least believable line for comic effect: "I never showed a woman my dick without asking first." The Louis C.K. video can be seen as intervening with the misogynistic overtones of comedy discourse in making the comedian a laughing stock (see Elrick, 2016, p. 266). Ridiculing the apology made, the video operates within the scene of shaming yet simultaneously disrupts it through its absurdist and playful aesthetic choices. This is not a scene heavy with sticky shame but rather a light and distanced one where a man admitting to sexual harassment becomes a cartoon figure who, as a cut-out, literally lacks depth.

In her analysis of American sex scandals, Susan Wise Bauer (2008, p. 2) notes that an apology does not equal a confession, and being sorry is not an admission of fault or wrongdoing. An apology therefore carries much less weight and is more ephemeral in its focus whereas a confession involves taking moral responsibility (Bauer, 2008a, p. 3). The aesthetic choice of cutouts in "The Louis C.K. Apology" reverberates with the weightlessness of his apology that did not even extend to the word, "sorry." The video is one in a series made by Maul, titled "Apologies from Men," and available on Vimeo and as an audio album from iTunes, Google Play, and Amazon. Similar in their execution, the videos star men equally caught in the dynamics of #MeToo, from "Kevin Spacey's Apology: THE REMIX" to "Sorrow & Regret: The Matt Lauer Apology," "Humbly Apologize by Russell Simmons," "A Short Apology by Dustin Hoffman," "The Culture Then by Harvey Weinstein," "I Do Not Believe by Charlie Rose," "Pizza Dough Cinnamon Rolls Recipe by Mario Batali," as well as an instrumentals song, "The Men Who Have Not Apologized," a video similar to that of "We Are the World." Here, the cutout figures of Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, Donald Trump, and other men accused of sexual misconduct, wearing headphones, approach a microphone one-by-one, yet always meander back again, unable to break into song. The musical score is cinematic, dramatic, and somber.

In contrast with the broad popularity of *Nanette*, "Apologies from Men" largely flew under the radar, the Louis C.K. video attracting only some 7,000 views in the first 10 months following its release. Despite being crafted as spreadable media connected to the viral energy of #MeToo to be expansively shared, Maul's particular form of ridicule found little resonance among social media users. The reasons for this relative lack of attention and engagement remain to be speculated: possibly it just did not come across as funny. Or perhaps their chosen style is the key here. Making fun of the apologies, which fail to apologize and remain concerned with saving male face, the videos are distanced and stylized, veering away from the personal. There is no play with trauma connected to sexual harassment and any anger expressed remains indirect at best. Considered in relation to shame as strong affect theory that organizes feeling while contributing

to affective homophily, the particular frivolousness of Maul's videos disconnects them from the affective public of #MeToo. Maul's videos focus on the men in question, framed by an absurdist aesthetic as objects of ridicule. Our other, significantly more viral examples of #MeToo humor all focus on women, their experiences, and their laughter. In the redistribution of shame from the victims to the perpetrators that is so significant for #MeToo, humor seems to travel in the opposite direction. In so far as humor and laughter get to enter #MeToo, they seem to better take off when women are put center stage.

Gittan, or, Unruly Laughter

The ignition of the #MeToo movement in Sweden involved 18 women who came forth in a national newspaper accusing Jean-Claude Arnault—a high-profile power player in Stockholm's literary circles with close ties to the Swedish Academy—of more than two decades of sexual assault and harassment (Gustavsson, 2017). Founded in 1786 to further the Swedish language and literature, the Academy is best known for awarding the annual Nobel Prize in literature. The scandal came to reveal a tangle of not only decades of systematic sexual abuse but also abuse of academy finances, cronyism, nepotism, and leaked secrets, held together by a deep-seated code of silence within an old boys' network.

Sara Danius, a Swedish literary scholar and author, who until April 2018 the first female head of the Academy, launched a legal investigation into the matter and was eventually forced to leave her post because of this. The crisis spiraled rapidly as other members had been quitting, and as public trust in, and respect for the work of the Academy plummeted, leading to the Nobel Prize in literature in 2018 was put on hold. The scandal and its repercussions quickly made its way into international media reporting. *The New York Times* titled their article, "In Nobel Scandal, a Man Is Accused of Sexual Misconduct. A Woman Takes the Fall," pointing out the "stunning causality" between Danius' forced exit and the reveal of sexual abuse (Anderson, 2018).

Meet Gittan P. Jönsson, Danius' imaginary alter ego. As opposed to Danius who has brought an unprecedented elegance to the Academy with her signature pussy-bow blouses, pencil skirts, and high heels, the virtual Gittan is a blonde Valkyrie with big, lacquered, helmet-like hair, and sensible shoes who sports the same handbag as Margaret Thatcher and speaks with a broad southern Swedish accent. In interviews with the Swedish media, Danius describes Gittan as a loud, slightly obnoxious steamroller who came to dominate dinners with members of the Academy, also breaking into formal functions. While Danius was in the Academy, Gittan supposedly made appearances several times a week, becoming something of a regular. This kind of absurdist humor—as embodied by a relentless, fictitious 19th lifetime member of the Swedish Academy—did not work for everybody within this formal, male-dominated context. One anonymous source

on the inside admits that while surprise appearances by someone more outspoken than Danius herself were fun at first, they grew confusing when taking notes. For what do you write down exactly, when Danius becomes Gittan? Who is actually speaking? (Börjesson & Skoglund, 2018).

Without missing a beat, Danius summarized the current political moment on Swedish television, hinting at the connections between Gittan and the social media uprising of #MeToo: “It could use some more Gittan, this me too-discussion!” To state that #MeToo needs more Gittan could of course mean a number of things: that we can all use an alter ego now and again; that someone loud and fearless could speak for us when we ourselves run out of steam; that debates on sexual assault and harassment could use absurdist, situational humor that allows for seeing things differently; or that #MeToo could, for all its gravity and experiential sharpness, perhaps paradoxically, make use of a good laugh.

Viewed in the framework of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1968/1984) notion of the carnivalesque where laughter is a disruptive force related to the underworld of society, and as such linked to transformation and potential subversion, Gittan’s carnivalesque performances shook up an exclusive cultural institution by transgressing its bounds of normalcy, tensely regulated by a particular form of seriousness steeped in culturally elitist masculinity. In theorizing the feminist potential of laughter through Bakhtin, Kathleen Rowe (1995), pictures the figure of “the unruly woman” as someone who interferes in male-dominated spaces by taking up too much space, by being too loud, and by laughing too hard, and who as such unsettles the lines of heteronormative femininity. Reminiscent of how we, elsewhere, theorize “the shameless hag” as someone who moves through the world “like a man,” in defiance of those norms guarding respectable white, bourgeois femininity, Rowe’s (1995, p. 10) unruly woman is “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of the carnival.” (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). While Danius may already pose quite a challenge to the Swedish Academy as herself, Gittan’s outrageous, rule-breaking performativity could well have undermined male norms and authority.

Following Rowe, unruly women turn themselves into spectacles for their own (and others’) enjoyment, and bring release, joy, and pleasure in doing so—yet they may equally produce anxiety, fear, and anger. In their affective power and relationality, the outcomes of laughter are always unpredictable (see Kyrölä, 2010). Rowe is careful to point out that the figure is not inherently radical, but rather deeply ambivalent and as such open to competing appropriations and interpretations. Such ambivalence may well have played a part in Danius’ downfall. The unruly woman may evoke delight, but also unease, fear, and loathing in the men she dominates. In other words, Gittan was possibly loudly calling for male retribution.

In theorizing theatricality and performativity through a feminist lens, Mary Russo (1994) understands the female transgressor as spectacle in public, male-dominated spaces

as someone at once marginalized and threateningly unruly. “Making a spectacle out of oneself,” she argues, is a specifically female danger linked to the risk of exposure (Russo, 1994, p. 53). Such inadvertent stepping into the limelight involves liberatory potential, yet is bound to emerge as “out of turn—too young or too old, to early or too late” (Russo, 1994, p. 53). For Danius to step into the limelight and take the lead within the Swedish Academy was bound to be “out of turn” and “too early.” Moreover, Danius was not afraid of making a rather stunning spectacle out of herself with her snappy fashion sense, glamorous designer gowns, or Gittan, her relentless, colorful sidekick. Deliberately turning oneself into a spectacle comes across as a rather explosive possibility tugging at the edges of dangerous exposure and attention.

Pussy-Bows, or, Selfie Solidarity

The reactions after Danius’ exit on social media were immediate. On 13 April 2018, the day after Danius stepped down, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram exploded with feminist support and solidarity, primarily gathered around hashtags like #knytblus (pussy-bow blouse), #knytblusforsara, and #backagittan (support Gittan). Her signature pussy-bow blouse went viral, and armies of ciswomen, some transwomen and cismen—including high-level politicians and one of the defected Swedish Academy members—sporting blouses with neck-bows in her honor and as a symbol of fighting male power structures and sexual violence. They also took to the streets in a #knytblusmanifestation in several Swedish cities, demanding the resignation of the entire academy. Danius admits to having started with the pussy-bow blouse as a joke with her students at Södertörn University, yet over time has come to acquire quite a few (Strömquist, 2015). According to *Vogue*, “Whether or not Danius wore her bows with irony, her supporters wear them earnestly” (Borrelli-Persson, 2018). Of this we are less certain. Why grant Danius ambivalence in her pussy-bow wearing, but not extend the same to her supporters? Would it not take a fair amount of irony and humor to transform the conservative pussy-bow blouse into a symbol of feminist solidarity and transformation?

The pussy-bow blouse is a loaded garment, its ribbons tightly tying together questions of gender, class, and race. It has made its way into fashion and politics in waves, perhaps most iconically worn by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s as she found it softened her appearance. More recently, Melania Trump wore a hot pink Gucci pussy-bow blouse to the second 2016 presidential debate, which much to journalistic delight has been interpreted in juxtaposition with her husband’s infamous statement to “grab ’em by the pussy.” It seems like the most appropriate of dress choices for the occasion, a strikingly conservative blouse named after the practice of tying ribbons around the necks of pussy-cats. As far as feminist symbols go, this is admittedly a rather odd choice. Apart from being a central component of Thatcher’s power

suit, it signals femininity as at once innocent and modest, yet working with girly, silky flirtatiousness.

The pussy-bow blouse comes across as a rather unreasonable symbol of feminist solidarity. The trending of the #knytblus hashtag performed a humorous, ironic spin and opened up a political space afforded by the fundamental ambiguity of the garment itself. Many of those gathering around the hashtag did not own an actual pussy-bow blouse, and never would have considered wearing one, which instead made them tie a scarf around the neck of a regular blouse. The affective ambiguity of the garment makes it ripe for this kind of ironic appropriation and playfulness. Irony literally translates as expressing the opposite of what is meant for critical, comical effect. Linda Hutcheon (1994) nevertheless argues that there is also something to irony that makes it differ from other modes of expression, namely its “edge.” This edge is social and political but also something that can put people on edge. For Hutcheon (1994, p. 35), irony is slanted toward the unsaid and the very ambiguity of irony, in leaving out more than it states, makes for its affective edginess. The pussy-bow blouse read within a context of irony sets the scene for an affective relationality entailing a disruptive force between expression and understanding that is rife with possibilities to misunderstand and to misinterpret. As a hashtag, it was played out in the midst of nervous edginess involving both delight and anger: delight on the part of those involved in the playfulness of the moment and its juxtaposition of rather incongruous images and fantasies; anger on the part those who went for more sincere readings of the incompatibility of upper class attributes and radical symbolism. #knytblus shuttled in intricate ways between bodies and digital networks, as well as between aesthetics and politics, affectively entangling the somatic with the political in rather fleeting affective assemblages where homophily was not constant.

Then main bulk of #knytblus consisted of selfies taken by mainly cisgender women in ribboned blouses, wearing bright red lipstick without even a hint of a mile, grounding a form of activism reminiscent of what Theresa M. Senft (2008, p. 98) calls “networked reflective solidarity,” a kind of political identification which stems from recognition of being “one of us.” Due to its temporal logic of rapidly flaring spikes of affectivity and visibility, the hashtag heightened the similarities of these selfies at the expense of their differences, due to which oppositional hashtags such as #vågavägraknytblus (dare to resist the pussy-bow) never quite took off. Despite its appeal, #knytblus’ edge of irony remained rife with affective dissonance and uncomfortable feeling, as not everyone was convinced of the capacity of the pussy-bow blouse to move from conservative political registers to feminist ones.

By primarily assembling white upper/middle class femininity, the pussy-bow holds obvious classed and racialized connotations, and positions the ones wearing it in relation to them. These tensions were not lost in discussion of the #knytblus hashtag connecting the class connotations of the garment to social and racial inequalities (e.g., Persson, 2018).

Pussy-bow feminism holds together a range of differences and contradictions, combining humor with dead seriousness in unpredictable ways, and rubbing against the call of affective homophily in doing so. At the same time, given its attachment to social class and particular feminine performance styles, the pussy-bow renders visible a much broader tension apparent within the #MeToo: for no matter how powerfully the movement makes visible the relations of power and gender, its binary logic focusing on male perpetrators and female victims obscures the complex differences in how sexual abuse and harassment press differently upon different bodies. This makes for a logic in which gender binaries are configured through both white and middle class privilege, which makes for a dynamic that “hides” its racial and classed underpinnings in plain sight.

Conclusions, or, What Laughter Does

Anger mobilizes affective publics and fuels social change, but it also wears bodies down: constant anger is simply exhausting. For its part, the kind of redistribution of shame carried out in the context of #MeToo comes with a heavy stickiness that never quite releases the bodies involved in it from its grasp. As we have suggested earlier, laughter facilitates affective release that energizes bodies by increasing their capacities to act. Laughter and humor are, therefore, as crucial to affective publics as are expressions of outrage and anger: all these intensities of feeling set bodies into motion, transform their capacities to act, and help in connecting the somatic with the social. The fact that *Nanette*, heralded as the comedy of the #MeToo era, wishes to destroy comedy and refuses to laugh, speaks volumes of how the role of humor is perceived in this particular feminist context. As feminist politics become the politics of killjoys, feminist laughter comes to inhabit a contradictory, if not impossible space for those supposedly less seriously committed.

Refusing this particular commitment to seriousness, this article has aimed to expand considerations of humor and its affective potentiality in the context of #MeToo by focusing on instances of ironic affiliation, mocking and irreverent laughter that displace some of the affective weight of anger and shame. As we have argued, the affective body politics of laughter are nevertheless ambivalent by definition, as ripples of amusement often fail to catch on, and as one’s joke may easily result in others not registering it, or taking offense. Laughter disrupts the strong affect theory of shame and outrage that drives #MeToo but, rather than dismantling any of its force, enables different kinds of momentary releases in instances of proximity steeped in pleasure that increase bodily sense of liveliness and, ultimately, makes lives more livable.

As we also suggest, there is a seductive quality to networked affective homophily—a love of feeling the same—as it permeates digital connectivity and gives shape to affective publics. This may have serious ramifications for how feminist politics emerge in the wake of #MeToo. As sexual violence is

no laughing matter, there is an investment not only in seriousness, anger, and outrage, but also equally in shared sentiments of love, tears, joy, and compassion. The viral warmth of *Nanette*, as comfort in stressful and discomfiting times, provides such affective unity and community. But it also makes virtually impossible to accommodate affective differences in how sexism is being resisted and combatted.

For Claire Hemmings (2012, p. 150) “affective dissonance” is that which moves feminist activism as rage stemming from feeling amiss, undervalued, and not fitting in ways that then become to a degree shared. We suggest for leaving room for dissent, dissonance, and disruptive laughter between bodies. For if feminist activism is to embrace difference, it should not be guided by affective homophily. We then find it essential to argue for the importance of “affective heterophily”—the love of feeling the different or of feeling differently—which opens up a much needed space, not only for a multitude of voices and bodies, but also for affective ambiguity and a multitude of ways of connecting politically through how things feel. Strong affect theory driving affective homophily is likely to give rise to airless spaces within which inappropriate laughter is seen as too disruptive and risky. Within #MeToo, laughter may be interpreted as disrespectful, and by extension as a failure to express appropriate sentiments of love or outrage. In this sense, affective homophily powerfully segregates networked bodies by shrinking the very space where not only opinions but also feelings may diverge, yet come together. When networked feminist politics operate through affective filter bubbles premised on sameness, generate intensity through sameness, or assume similarly dissonant feelings, the necessary spaces of friction, difference, and dissent will shrink from view. Yet we need spaces to breathe.

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