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Feminist futures: #MeToo's possibilities as poiesis, techné, and pharmakon

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue that the #MeToo movement contributes to combatting sexual harassment by acting as *techné* (tools), which offer a range of *poietic* (world making) possibilities given the contexts under which #MeToo circulates. We situate #MeToo as *pharmakon* (creation and constraint) to highlight how the movement enables new feminist possibilities for action and simultaneously restricts the movement's limits. Drawing on existing coverage of #MeToo featured in popular media stories, we consider the layers of meaning and circulation of some key #MeToo tweets and their framings within media accounts of the movement. We focus on tweets that emphasize remembering experiences of misogyny, assault, and harassment, in addition to implicating social structures in perpetuating rape culture. In employing poiesis and pharmakon as orienting frames, we acknowledge both the discursive power a movement like #MeToo holds and the forms of occlusion, privilege, and marginalization that emerge.

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Introduction

Over the last few years public discourse surrounding sexual harassment and assault has shifted as an outcome of the resurgence of Tarana Burke's MeToo movement across social media. Recall, for instance, Christine Blasey Ford's public accusation of sexual harassment against Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and subsequent allegations by Deborah Ramirez (Sanya Mansoor 2019). Consider also the stories of over 150 women, prompted by gymnast McKayla Maroney, who experienced sexual assault from gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar who is now serving 40–175 years in prison (Elena Nicolaou and Courtney E. Smith 2019). Or, the removal of musician R. Kelly from Spotify alongside a host of cancelled concerts following the exposure of his "sex cult," where women were held against their will, and the beginning of the #MuteRKelly movement, founded by Kenyette Barnes and Oronike Odeleye (Jim DeRogatis 2017; Nicolaou and Smith 2019). These prominent cases importantly suggest changes in how accusations of sexual assault are levied. However, such cases largely create ripples because of how well known the accuser or accused may be, and how widely circulated the stories are within popular media; everyday people

experience sexual assault, and they equally deserve justice. As Anne Kingston (2019) observes, despite the “first crop of #MeToo books” that reflect “the movement’s complexity,” sexual assaults still happen, “abetted by silence” (para. 14). As activists and academics, we need to continue to speak to and challenge the conditions that lay the groundwork for the perpetuation of violence, especially against marginalized voices.

Within this context we argue that #MeToo plays a crucial role in fighting sexual harassment by acting as *techné*, offering a range of contemporary poietic possibilities across the hashtag’s viral circulation. That is, #MeToo is a tool (*technai*) that opens up possible feminist futures (*poiesis*) through the wide-spread circulation of feminist critiques of sexual harassment that were not previously admissible within public discourse due to existing sociopolitical conditions. From this framework we emphasize that #MeToo, like any feminist hashtag movement, exists as a *pharmakon*, that which encapsulates both cure and toxin, positive and negative, possibility and constraint (Ross Abbinnett 2015; Jacques Derrida 1981; Bernard Stiegler 2012). We situate #MeToo as *pharmakon* insofar as the movement enables new feminist possibilities for action, while constraining the movement’s intersectional limits. This is, in part, tied to exclusionary white-feminist, neoliberal frameworks highlighted by media coverage.

To extend important existing scholarship on hashtag movements and social media activism (e.g., Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; Hester Baer 2016; Tara L. Conley 2014; Eleanor Tiplady Higgs 2015; Carrie A. Rentschler 2017; Sherri Williams 2015; Samantha C. Thrift 2014), we analyze #MeToo’s circulation within dominant media through the lens of *poiesis* and *pharmakon*, outlining how it offers different possible feminist futures. Our analysis highlights how actor Alyssa Milano’s and activist Tarana Burke’s voices were differently taken up. This, we argue, demonstrates that various media iterations employ different versions of MeToo as *techné* for different poietic possibilities. These versions gesture towards divergent feminist futures: futures located in neoliberal frames and/or intersectional futures that center marginalized voices and are oriented toward long-term institutional changes. To do so, we examine how popular news sources have framed the #MeToo movement over its relatively brief history, following its Twitter resurgence in 2017. What emerges are two overarching discursive strands that echo an on-going friction between the competing interests of popular feminism focusing on individual empowerment and intersectional feminism centered on structural change, particularly for marginalized voices (Banet-Weiser 2018; Rosalind Gill 2017). This is evident in the oft cited case of how media continue to re-center white feminist voices like Alyssa Milano’s over and above the work of Tarana Burke, including the ways in which black women’s and women of color’s bodies have significantly lacked media representation (Morgan Jenkins 2019; Marie Solis 2018).

Because there are obviously more than two discourses of #MeToo, we comment briefly here on the ways in which media have fixated on binary discourses, obscuring other forms of resistance from mainstream view. By concentrating on binary tales, it seems as if these are equal and opposite stories, when, really, they are neither opposite nor equal. Here, stories of white women are privileged over stories from marginalized communities, and these stories are afforded value in relation to the stories of white women. For example, reflecting on the viral resurgence of #MeToo, Tarana Burke wrote on Twitter, which was then highlighted by *Vice Media*, “I was definitely in danger of being erased if YOU ALL Black women and our allies and friends, didn’t speak up. But something else happened

too. I watched for hours that first day as more and more stories poured out across social media from survivors” (cited in Solis 2018, para. 11). By focusing on binary tales, patriarchal systems are reinforced and the voices of “YOU ALL Black women and our allies and friends” struggle to be heard.

The following section offers countermoves made by feminists online to mediated misogyny and a snapshot of some of the important research on this resistance. We then theoretically situate techné and poiesis in relationship to #MeToo, explain pharmakon, and connect discursive activism to hashtag activism. Before focusing attention on media discourses that parallel the work of Tarana Burke and Alyssa Milano, we set out the contemporary landscape that the #MeToo movement responds to and emerges from. We then analyse #MeToo as both enabling and constraining (pharmakon) intersectional feminist futures (poiesis), as circulated to the broader public through popular mainstream media sites. We conclude by envisioning ways forward for #MeToo as collective witnessing.

Context

Issues of gender equity within digital culture have been marked in recent years by paralleled discourses of feminist digital activism and mediated misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018; Susan Berridge and Laura Portwood-Stacer 2015; Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell 2016; Laura Portwood-Stacer and Susan Berridge 2014). As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner (2016) observe, “[w]e are in a new era of the gender wars ... marked by alarming amounts of vitriol and violence directed at women in online spaces” (171). The increased digitization of feminist and antifeminist movements has led to cyberbullying, censorship, and the silencing of marginalized groups including LGBTQ and indigenous, black, people of color (bipoc) communities, and women online. At the same time, a feminist resurgence is building across spheres of media production. From viral GIFs of Wonder Woman smashing a glass screen with “patriarchy” written across it, to a growing number of blockbuster films featuring women protagonists, to the social media activism of #MeToo and #TimesUp, a renegotiation of gender politics is unfolding in public and popular culture. This resurgence is, in part, a response to the continuous erosion of LGBTQ, bipoc, and women’s rights under neoliberalism, as well as the further entrenchment of postfeminism as a gendered outgrowth of neoliberalism (Gill 2017; Catherine Rottenberg 2014). Current digital feminist practices are significant for how they “can mediate new social relationships and forms of resistance to ... gender inequalities ... through critical engagement” (Marta Zarzycka and Domitilla Olivieri 2017, 528). For instance, Thrift (2014) frames #YesAllWomen as “a mimetic disruption of dominant discourses denying the prevalence of misogynist violence,” like the Isla Vista shooting (1091). She argues the hashtag “asserts a counter-narrative to exceptionalist discourses” that are complicit in “normalizing gender violence and sexual entitlement” (1019). Among the wealth of media used to advance justice, few muster enough force to profoundly alter the ways in which we navigate our gendered institutional and social worlds in the same way that that #MeToo and other gender justice oriented movements have (this, we might add, is not coincidental given the popularity of white neoliberal feminisms).

Given the wealth of newspaper and journal articles (type “#metoo” into your favorite newspaper’s online archive and you’re bound to receive hundreds of hits—*The Guardian*,

as one example, offers over 800 articles on #MeToo), it is clear that the MeToo movement has been significant. Important research on digital responses to gendered and racialized violence has highlighted the complexities of the relationship between hashtags and feminist activisms (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015). On one hand, social media hashtags have become effective ways of talking about black women's issues when mainstream media outlets will not. As Williams (2015) writes, "Black feminists' use of hashtag activism is a unique fusion of social justice, technology, and citizen journalism . . . Twitter is often a site of resistance where black feminists challenge violence committed against women of color and they leverage the power of Black Twitter to bring attention and justice to women who rarely receive either" (343). Hashtags enable affective and technological solidarity to express a range of reactions to rape culture and the occlusions from mainstream media, including feminist rage, irony, and humor. Feminists are thus able not only to expose rape culture and systems of oppression but share their own experiences with an invitation for response (Carrie A. Rentschler 2014). Moreover, scholarship has recognized emerging opportunities for social justice, commenting on the transnational reach of feminist hashtagging for women's rights activism. "For those who have access to them," observes Higgs (2015), "social and digital media provide unparalleled opportunities for crossing borders of all kinds, allowing advocates for women's rights to organise around, through, and despite national and cultural divides" (344).

And yet, on the other hand, it is these very acts of "border crossing," both physical and digital, that continue to reveal the kinds of power and privilege inherent to online spaces, even when fighting from intersectional perspectives for justice against sexual violence (Baer 2016; Higgs 2015). Campaigns like #JusticeforLiz and #BringBackOurGirls, though important for bringing awareness and possible change, underscore the prevalence of a white savior complex that plays into dominant stereotypes of black and brown bodies perpetuated by white feminist, neoliberal, and colonial frameworks and threatens possibilities for genuine solidarity (Higgs 2015; Shenila Khoja-Moolji 2015). As such, it is important to continue to critically reflect on the ways that social media differently affect social justice. Joan Wallach Scott 2008 reminds us that "[t]he point of critique is not to tear down or destroy but . . . to open up new possibilities, new ways of thinking about what might be done to make things better. Critique does not offer a map that leads to a guaranteed future; rather, it disturbs our settled expectations and incites us to explore, indeed to invent, alternate routes" (7). Growing literature on feminist hashtags surrounding rape culture and #MeToo speaks to this ongoing need to critically document, reflect on, and analyze the movement. Sustained attention on these incremental shifts is crucial for the very reason that change does not happen instantly. For centuries, marginalized people have been finding ways to resist domination, and yet gender and racial inequity persists. Continued research on the effects of misogyny is thus important, especially given the popularity of the digital where marginalized people continue to have to find their footing in a system made for someone else (Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White 2012; Safiya Umoja Noble 2018; Lucy Suchman 2009; Judy Wajcman 2004, 2010). This paper seeks to contribute to the valuable and quickly growing body of research by offering another theoretical lens through which to consider #MeToo. Although we recognize hashtags as tools and crafts that open ways of knowing, making, and building, we also see the ways that hashtagged stories are constrained by problematic structures, including neoliberalism and global technical frameworks. Different ways of theorizing

#MeToo and hashtag activism more broadly are necessary for combating the proliferation of such complex structures, especially as we work within them.

Theoretical framing

To form our ideas of *techné* and *poiesis*, we draw on ancient Greek descriptions via Aristotle, the continental philosophy of Heidegger, and feminist iterations from Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift. While *techné* translates from Greek to English as practice, craft, and art, in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009) Aristotle links *techné* with knowledge (*epistémé*), since the foundations of practice are based in understanding and how we come to know. Martin Heidegger (1977) builds on these ideas to turn towards the manufacturing of goods and techniques of the arts more broadly. *Techné*, for Heidegger, is in itself a way of knowing since participating in craft will uncover something that was not there before. *Techné* is an integral part of *poiesis*, which Heidegger describes as a “bringing forth” or manifestation of something not yet revealed (Heidegger aligns *poiesis* with *aletheia* to link the powerful capacities of poetics with truth, but that is outside the scope of this paper). We suggest that hashtag movements as *poiesis* are a form of world-making that bring new things into being that respond to the time and cultural context that they work within, with *techné* working as ways of “doing feminism” collectively, affectively, technologically, and globally in the aftermath of a “media event” (Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift 2014). Here, *techné* represents “more than technical skill,” including also “embodied habits for acting and doing” (Rentschler and Thrift 2014, 242). We read the production and circulation of #MeToo as a way of “doing feminism” that reflects both producers’ and consumers’ embodied relationships to technology. In such a frame, binary recognitions of #MeToo’s workings, as mentioned above, reflect the idea that people are consumers or producers due to the conditions of the platform, despite the ways that they are always already both affective producers and consumers through the circulation of #MeToo: hashtags and the affective and physical labour involved to read, experience, connect, and possibly add to the conversation suggest a multiplicity of roles that should not be confined to a “one or the other” route, but rather a multitude of experiential roles and outcome possibilities. Social justice involves acknowledging these intersections between (im)material entanglements; attention to affect offers an important set of tools that facilitate more dynamic, life-affirming engagements with our on/offline worlds, which can highlight new poietic possibilities. A focus on affect, especially in the digital as we think through #MeToo, helps to embrace phenomena that meet at the intersection of sensation, intensity, and materiality, and exploring how different (kinds of) bodies produce or experience these (see, e.g., Sara Ahmed 2010; Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth 2010; Brian Massumi 2015; Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley 2007). Bodies that are affected and affect one another can “equally be human, animal, individual, collective, linguistic, social, as well as bodies of thought” (Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis and Michael Petit 2015, 10). Affects become evoked as active, dynamic, and relational, orienting interpretations in embodied ways.

If we expand possibilities for production and consumption outside of neoliberal ideologies, we also expand possibilities for doing (hashtag) feminisms that move beyond white feminism. In this line of thought, we understand the viral force of #MeToo as reflecting these possibilities, especially if we consider #MeToo as a public and affective

assembling of voices. Judith Butler (2015) argues that bodies assembled in public space function as a performative gesture, *en masse*. In the context of protest, such assembly asserts “the right to appear,” eliciting “a bodily demand for a more livable set of lives” (25). In their effort to counter dominant forms of institutional power, public assemblies create provisional forms of solidarity between people who otherwise may not have many commonalities, producing a “coalitional framework” (27). Assembly is thus performative because it names “a power language has to bring about a new situation or to set into motion a set of effects” (28). Performative assemblies of bodies encourage us to reflect on forms of collective expression, with feminist hashtag activism as a virtual form of public assembly: #MeToo asserts the right for voices to be heard and validated within the chorus of collective voices. But, although #MeToo offers forms of consciousness-raising aimed at building communities of support for marginalized and targeted groups, as *poiesis* it also functions as a site of exclusion, reiterating dominant white feminist and colonial frameworks. Thus, we argue that we need to think about these kinds of *poietic* or world-making actions with the recognition of #MeToo as *pharmakon*, where futures are also dangerously constrained for socially marginalized bodies. As Stiegler (2011, 2012), *pharmakon* emphasizes the limiting and productive frictions between humankind and technology. Stiegler laments the “toxic reduction of life to capitalized desire” and admires “the expressive forms of cathexis (love, spirit) that have been made possible by the techno-hybridization of human beings” (Abbinnett 2015, 66). We argue that an analysis of #MeToo requires a holistic examination that pays attention to its potentials and limitations, including the forms of erasure and silencing of marginalized people that it enacts.

This shift to digital activism marks a discursive shift within contemporary feminist activism (Rosemary Clark 2016) and the political rise of media commentaries. Clark argues that it is “a hashtag’s narrative logic—its ability to produce and connect individual stories” that “fuels its political growth” (2). This “discursive activism” understands discourse as always already political, insofar as it enables new ways of speaking and new social responses and paradigms to emerge (Francis Shaw 2012), which we argue suggests *poietic* possibilities. New emerging paradigms and modes of speech can lead to collective action and movement through the ways in which discursive activism highlights how the sentiment itself is political by virtue of being uttered (Shaw 2012). Extending Clark’s and Shaw’s ideas that online discourses and stories are “capable of triggering sociopolitical change” (Shaw 2012 cited in Clark 2016, 792), we reiterate that a vital value of feminist hashtag activism lies in their role as *techné* to open up *poietic* possibilities that gesture towards feminist futures. These tools (*techné*) include hashtags, tweeting, blogging, commenting, photo-posting, captioning, and other forms of online posting that circulate stories, memories, and expressions of identity through affective resonances that reach from the individual to the collective. Gestures of remembering lived experiences and articulating those memories become an affective and *poietic* act of world-making as new forms of discourse are made available through their remediation and circulation.

Methods

As Conley (2014)¹ argues, hashtags are important pieces of data to analyze because they “compel us to act. They ... represent evidence of women and people of color resisting authority, opting out of conforming to the status quo, and seeking liberation ...” (1111).

The tweets we select for analysis signal meaningful embodied actions that social media users have engaged and the discursive archives that form as they circulate. Although #MeToo and the tweets we analyze indeed index these repertoires, they are complicated by the fact that they quickly become discursively archived and canonized without consideration of what then is lost, erased, and silenced. This recognizes the necessity of analyzing the pharmacological nature of #MeToo in order to better grapple with what is lost by focusing on the prioritized archives within digital culture. Our analysis of the tweets and their provocations trace affective data “glows” (Maggie MacLure 2013). Following the concept of the “wondrous quality of data” (MacLure 2013), we recognize “that when data glow they instill in us a curiosity, a fascination that impels us as researchers to follow where the data may take us” (Shana MacDonald and Brianna I. Wiens 2019, 368). Our interest lies in the ways that multiple sites engage with #MeToo’s evocation of memory as an archive of embodied experience and how they both promote and constrain it, particularly as these sites converge on a select few tweets as emblematic of #MeToo.

We focused on tweets that were repeated across collected articles because these repetitions indicate a degree of importance in popular culture and dominant ideology. We revisited popular media discourse on the hashtag movement on both the first and second anniversaries of its emergence into a viral media form. This revisiting of selected tweets allowed for a longer mapping of what themes were persistent and discursively maintained. Importantly, this re-visitation and reflection shifted our focus to the affective relationships between things in order to acknowledge how social, political, and economic relationships necessarily shape each other in their changing formations (MacDonald and Wiens 2019). We conducted a discursive analysis of the overarching themes arising from media framings of #MeToo and their general treatment of Burke and Milano, as well as a textual analysis of popular #MeToo tweets highlighted in the extensive coverage of the movement within popular media sites. We collected a data set of fifteen popular #MeToo tweets circulated and engaged within the earliest articles describing and explaining the #MeToo campaign across ten popular news sites including, but not limited to, *The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, and *The New York Times*. Each tweet analyzed offers a list of media sources where it can be found. Our choice to focus on mainstream media’s circulation of select tweets offered a picture of what sentiments and perspectives were indeed being picked up, widely circulated, and debated in dominant discourse. This was an attempt at pushing beyond the algorithmic echo chambers of our own explicitly feminist media feeds and to explore what popular news deemed “newsworthy” in the earliest moments of the movement.

With these examples we did not attempt to reach saturation or be exhaustive. Rather, we concentrated on articles that came up under the search “#MeToo,” and focused on repeated tweets within these articles that centered on themes of misogyny, assault, and harassment, and the role social structures play in perpetuating rape culture. Importantly, these tweets helped us to think through the feasibility of our analytical tools (techné, poiesis, and pharmakon) and they prompted us to reflect on how popular media framed these particular discursive areas in their initial and continued reporting on the movement. From there we would follow up on those tweets shared across multiple media sources and explore the dialogue that unfolded within the tweets themselves. Here we followed

data glows in order to trace conversations occurring within the selected tweets that expanded on the discourse of #MeToo in ways that the mainstream outlets did not.

We recognize that these articles are necessarily limited in which tweets they select, further emphasizing the need for a pharmacological frame to analyze #MeToo. Indeed, recognizing the ideological underpinnings of the mainstream media texts we chose to examine directly informed our understanding of how #MeToo within popular discourse operations within parallel sites of constraint and connective potentials. To attenuate the kinds of exclusions mainstream media enabled in those early days, we supplemented our data sets with tweets circulating within our personal accounts, allowing the inclusion of both popular discourse analysis and the small data of researchers as participant-observers embedded within social media flows (danah boyd and Kate Crawford 2012; Robert V. Kozinets, Pierre-Yann Dolbec and Amanda Earley 2014; Aimée Morrison 2019). The tweets we take up come from celebrities and public activists as well as personal accounts in North American contexts. Overall, tweets considered in this article take individual experiences and bring them to the collective in two ways: first, they become part of the public sphere via the fact that they are posted to begin with, and second, they become collaborative through the ways they are put into conversation with each other both locally and globally and then re-emphasized by mainstream media. This suggests that these tweets hold a certain amount of affective and trending power in North America as they prompt attention from media sources and other Twitter users and influence socio-political and cultural matters outside of Twitter.

#MeToo's poietic possibilities

The tweets highlighted here demonstrate a similar techné with comparable collective outcomes, as they were picked up by news media outlets and retweeted many times. One discernable difference is that the Twitter users Alyssa Milano and author/poet/speaker/educator Najwa Zebian are differently positioned across race and class lines, suggesting that the knowledge and world-making possibilities of this craft do not have to be relegated to white rich people. The poietic reorientations enabled by #MeToo offer a form of public criticism that offers a way to break with imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal systems (bell hooks 1981). In this act of breaking, the movement opens a space that allows feminists to merge personal experience with both broader collective resistance and structural critiques. One such intervention is evident in Milano's now infamous tweet from October 2017. The discursive significance of this tweet lies in the imperative put forth by Milano, which is contingent upon both memory and technological practice. Attached to an image reading, "Me too. Suggested by a friend: 'If all the women and men who have been sexually harassed, assaulted or abused wrote 'me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,'" Milano writes,

@Alyssa_Milano: If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet. (October 15 2017, 4:21 pm, United States).

Amplified by *The Atlantic*, *Buzzfeed*, *CBS News*, *Deadline*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *India Today*, *The LA Times*, *NBC News*, *The New York Times*, *Odessey*, *Oprah Magazine*, *The Telegraph*, *Time Magazine*, *US News*, and many, many others, mass responses to Milano's request resulted in 25,000 to 40,000 responses circulating by the following morning on

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Heidi Stevens 2017). In a follow up post on October 24th, Milano cites that the MeToo movement, only ten days later, included “1.7 million voices from 85 countries,” indicating the viral and global reach of the hashtag (Desaree Nicole Prokos 2017). Two important elements are worth mentioning here. First, the tweet begins with the simple pronouncement of “me too,” which locates the assertion in the personal, located, and specific lived experience of an individual. Second, the acknowledgement that the instructions to share and support the hashtag are a response to a suggestion from a friend indicates a network, a community, and a shared act of communication that situates the utterance of “me, too” through these utterances as located in both the personal and the collective.

Milano’s tweet and its recirculation underscore how she and others are not on their own in making these statements—they are spurred on by a collaborative effort within an emergent network. The gesture requires that the public visualize the “magnitude” of the problem while also explicitly naming it as a problem. #MeToo’s circulation opens discursive space to take seriously the mass testimonies of survivors, in a world structurally positioned to minimize, deflect, excuse, and outright deny experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Without requiring those posting “me too” to go into any detail, it highlights the widespread, normalized nature of sexual harassment and assault, illustrating that almost all industries, public and private, are propped up by rape culture. This suggests that one possibility of hashtag campaigns is to bring into greater awareness conversations that were previously excluded, silenced, or erased from dominant discursive sites including politics, news media, and structural organizations.

Consider this early, widely circulated tweet from the hashtag campaign posted by Canadian activist, author, poet, speaker, and educator Najwa Zebian:

@najwazebian: #MeToo And I was blamed for it. I was told not to talk about it. I was told that it wasn’t that bad. I was told to get over it. (October 15 2017, 7:09 pm, London, Ontario).

Flagged in initial reports of the movement by *CTV News*, *Huffington Post*, *Global Citizen*, *Man Repeller*, *The New York Times*, and others, the tweet was framed as “bearing witness” to lived experiences of sexual assault and their consequences (Anna Codrea-Rado 2017, para. 2). Zebian’s tweet exemplifies the tension between her lived experience and the imperatives from official discourses to silence, erase, and make invisible her experience; her public documentation describes the forms of victim-blaming, minimizing of her assault, and discrediting of her memory that are leveled against survivors who speak out. In the context of the hashtag movement, Zebian’s (and other Twitter users’) articulations of her dismissal both confirmed the widespread nature of such experiences and pointed to the failure of social structures to provide the necessary support needed. Notably, it is through this recollection of individual experiences that the collective movement was able to emerge. The thread following Zebian’s tweet reveals an ongoing dialogue between her and others who have experienced harassment and assault. Same-day responses include “Them: ‘You are fine,’ ‘You don’t have to ruin his life over this,’ ‘Get over it.’ For the record, I was not fine. It changed me. #MeToo”; “We are victimized twice: once by the predator and second by those we trust and believe will have our backs. I’m sorry. #MeToo”; and “Same. I was blamed by family and told I had ruined his life, that I shouldn’t be sleeping around. However, I had every intent on staying a virgin”.² In these responses, users echo similar experiences, to which Zebian responds with supportive

affirmations and thanks for sharing their experiences with her. The thread's dialogue centers lived experiences as a form of politics and demonstrates the modes of collectivity that can be fostered by the hashtag. As a site of connection, it is a *technai* for the creation of new memories and associations that for some participants validates experiences that were formerly dismissed and opens possibilities for different avenues of resistance and solidarity.

#MeToo's practice of naming or evoking the lived, the personal, and the embodied extends material life into discursive and affective circulation online. Recall that *poiesis* is a form of world-making: it brings new things into being that specifically respond to the particular time and cultural context they work within. The *poiesis* of #MeToo's repertoire of tweets, gestures, performances, and movements undoes the "received notions of knowledge production" through enacting the "transformative and performative aspects of language" (Alessandra Capperdoni 2013, 194). These ways of participating in the (re) production of knowledge are crucial for the creation and presence of a feminist archive of #MeToo media events and *techné*. But, in addition to language, we contend that acts of *poiesis* also bring forth transformative and performative aspects of the environmental, technological, social, and political conditions of our time. In the case of #MeToo, the hashtag's ability to simultaneously circulate and archive individual experiences as part of a larger collective repertoire is an important component of its ability to incite discursive, worldmaking change. As *poietic* acts, demonstrated by Milano and Zebian's tweets and responses to Zebian, the repertoire created by MeToo practices mobilizes the present social, political, and technological conditions in order to reimagine feminism's presence and potential growth (and regression) in the digital era. Reading feminist digital activism as a networked social movement illustrates how its complex constellations can help feminists to further understand the forms of power that constrain us and the collective practices that make feminist work possible.

#MeToo as *pharmakon*

#MeToo has helped to change the conditions under which we can discuss gender, assault, harassment, and women's agency. However, this dominant messaging overlooks the ways in which the movement enacts different forms of constraint, particularly for women of color and trans and queer women. In doing so, it loses the opportunity to be a significant site of support beyond white feminist spaces. Within the broader histories of the feminist movement, Sherri Williams (2016) notes that "[w]hen white feminists miss opportunities to stand with their black sisters and mainstream media overlooks the plight of nonwhite women, women of color use social media as a tool to unite and inform" (342). Williams argues that hashtag activism is capable of bringing "attention to black women's issues" despite the fact that "traditional mainstream media newspaper articles and television stories ignore black women's concerns as they have for decades" (342). While many women are stepping up to the spotlight through #MeToo in order to break the normalized silence surrounding sexual harassment and assault, for many others this spotlight predominantly shines on white heteronormative experiences to the exclusion already marginalized people.

In order to minimize these occlusions, we need to more directly name the anglo-heteronormative structures of power operating within digital feminist activism within the

context of #MeToo and beyond. The voices of bipocs, poor women, queer women, trans women, and disabled women have been few and far between in this highly broadcasted campaign. Alongside the hashtag's early (and ongoing) assembling of people via affective feelings of hope, recognition, refusal, and solidarity, powerful statements of missing voices within the dominant discourse of #MeToo began (and continue) to emerge within the larger conversation. In response, intersectional feminists have pushed for necessary correctives to counter the ways in which #MeToo has become tied to white feminism and celebrity visibility. In one instance, a Twitter user notes, "#MeToo but let's remember not to center this around white ciswomen. Remember to uplift marginalized folks" (October 16 2017, 4:24 pm, United States).³ While thistweet was not reflected in mainstream discourse, we argue that it is still crucial to highlight moments like these that are readily available on our own personal Twitter feeds because tweets like this demonstrate the contrast between what was and was not shown in popular news media around the necessity of an intersectional lens in the early days of #MeToo's viral circulation. This reflects a discursive intervention supported by many intersectional feminists on the over-reliance of white feminist perspectives in framing and understanding the stakes and conditions of the movement. For example, Meredith Talusan (2017) writing for *them.*, a popular queer online magazine for topics ranging from pop culture to politics, called for feminists to reckon with the limitations of #MeToo. And from the academy, editors of *Feminist Media Histories* argue the pressing need for genealogies of feminist media to ensure that the public privileging of particular celebrity figures like Milano in the #MeToo movement do not overshadow Burke's trailblazing efforts (Miranda Banks, Ralina L. Joseph, Shelley Stamp, and Michele White 2018, 8).

One major example of such efforts is found in how the broader public was quickly informed that Tarana Burke was the originator of the movement. This re-centring of the conversation around Burke's work and the intentions of black women activists and allies ensured Burke was credited with the movement's initial commencement, something she has publicly acknowledged from her own Twitter account. Burke has outlined that "she doesn't believe white celebrities in Hollywood meant to steal her work and erase her from #MeToo—but she sees how that could've easily been the case if other women of color didn't add their voices to the movement" (Solis 2018, paras. 6–7). Along these lines, it is critical to mention that allies, activist, and survivors must continue to examine whose shoulders this virtual work continues to land on in order to share the arduous (emotional, physical, financial) labor of sexual assault and harassment activism. The initial sidelining of Burke's foundational work has consequences—a central repercussion being the impact that it had on Burke herself in those initial moments of the viral hashtag's rise to prominence. On the one-year anniversary of #MeToo's viral launch Burke tweeted the following, which was amplified by *21Ninety*, *Huffington Post*, *Vice Media*, *Yahoo News*, and discussed in her interview with Aisha Harris (2018) for *The New York Times*:

@TaranaBurke: A year ago today I thought my world was falling apart. I woke up to find out that the hashtag #metoo had gone viral and I didn't see any of the work I laid out over the previous decade attached to it. I thought for sure I would be erased from a thing I worked so hard to build (October 15 2018, 7:22 am, United States).

Ensuring that Burke's role as the originator of the hashtag is known in the mainstream has required media discourses and activists to be more mindful of the locations, actions, and

milieu that privilege one version of the movement's history over another (Sandra E. Garcia 2017). This is the risk of activist movements shifting from located spaces of lived experience to archived histories. While the whitewashing of #MeToo began with the silencing of voices of color like Burke's, the oversight gave way to larger discussions of the history of whitewashing in media; the normalization of ignoring women of color, queer women, and trans women; and the appropriation of the work of women of color by white women. Given the impact of the movement and its histories of contemporary feminism, there is hope that the critical engagements with white and celebrity feminist misappropriation of black feminist activism will signal greater attention for the necessity of intersectional feminist principles now and in the future.

Ways forward: considering poiesis and pharmakon

The gathering of collective stories of injustice via feminist techné illustrates how practices of critique are never separate from lived experiences. As Christina Howells and Gerald Moore (2013) suggest, the past is remembered through the culture in which we presently live and its corresponding technologies. As feminist poiesis, #MeToo collectively reorganizes cultural discourse through a naming of experiences and actions that have been silenced and discredited. Both the poiesis of the movement and the lived experiences that the hashtag recalls directly refuse master narratives and tools: feminist digital poiesis reveals new ways of being, modes of organizing, and social relationships that did not exist before, even when they echo former feminist movements and practices. Regardless, sexual harassment continues to take place in highly public (and private) spaces. One difference now is, perhaps, the weight that feminist critiques have within cultural conversations around harassment.

The complexities of these conversations came to yet another breaking point during Ariana Grande's televised tribute to Aretha Franklin in August 2017. After performing Franklin's "(You Make Me Feel Like A) Natural Woman," Grande met Bishop Charles H. Ellis III at the pulpit where he enthusiastically drew her into a close hug, one hand resting on the side of her breast as he likened her to a new menu item at Taco Bell (Grande is Italian-American). Burke responded publicly to Grande's post-performance encounter in a tweet that was also picked up by, to name a few, *Bustle*, *Glitter Magazine*, *Hello Giggles Magazine*, *The LA Times*, and *Yahoo News*:

@TaranaBurke: What we witnessed yesterday in this moment was immediately recognized by women everywhere. It's in your face but subtle, it's demeaning but 'a joke', it's love from an elder but it's an abuse of power. So many of us are so conditioned that we saw it, cringed and moved on. #metoo (September 1 2018, 2:53pm, United States).

Again, Burke mobilizes #MeToo as a vital technai for collective witnessing. Her tweet lays out the continued relevance of #MeToo's ability to translate lived histories into critiques of socially supported sexism. Burke outlines that these "subtle" (to the majority, but not-so-subtle for those who face harassment) experiences are, in fact, clear abuses of power that call for an analysis of structural inequality. Burke opens these accepted experiences of assault, situated within cultural, religious, and historical structures, for dialogue. She registers the importance of our affective responses of cringing at the sight of the abuse and our social conditioning to minimize and deflect as forms of survival. At the same time,

we should notice that it is still a woman of color doing this work of pointing out injustice, and that it is seemingly Grande's celebrity status that makes it more acceptable for collective witnessing and condemnation. On a technical level, we should consider how the platforms that make this commentary possible are capitalist ventures for white upper-class people. And on a structural level, we should note that just because these systemic problems are seen and pointed out does not automatically mean that they will be changed.

Conclusion

As we have suggested, feminist hashtag campaigns offer insight into the embodied aspects of our digitally mediated communication practices and the experiences, affects, performativity, and relationality they can include. #MeToo not only questions what kinds of gendered truths have been accepted, reified, and circulated in a culture that has long forgotten what truth looks like (e.g., "fake news"), but also creates a springboard to disseminate different sets of cultural truths. It provides a critical means of reflection for reframing the ways in which the public sphere often collapses women's and non-binary people's experiences of sexual assault and harassment. #MeToo represents a shared understanding of the culture we live in, and projections of what this society could be. The feminist poesis of the #MeToo campaign names the injustices of the world based on the lived experiences of those involved, upending the dismissal of embodied and affectively charged knowledge so central to patriarchal discourse and its institutional power.

MeToo as a worldmaking and world-constraining social movement holds the potential for feminist resistance, while also holding the potential to undermine its own poietic promises and the very principles that it strives to create by virtue of its often classed, raced, cis-focused nature. In exploring the poesis of MeToo, we suggest that it is more than just a hashtag: it is a social movement that is actively creating openings for future possibilities. While discourses that circulate online are not necessarily textual catalysts for change, they are still evocations of experience that begin in and with the body. #MeToo is a digital memoir of over 1.7 million voices and bodies; it engages in vital acts of circulating affective and embodied knowledges in order to counter the largely immovable structures that uphold rape culture.

The externalization of our experiences through digital platforms illustrates how we are sutured into a historically continuous set of structures and value systems constituted by the relationship between culture and technology. Situating #MeToo as participating within transformative forms of empathy that operate from "self-reflexivity and [the] potential transformation of one's own assumptions" helps recognize how the movement fosters communities of support for women's lived experiences of assault and abuse while also underscoring forms of systematic oppression on a broader scale (Michelle Rodino-Coloncino 2018, 97–8). We need to call on this self-reflexivity and empathy to center disabled, poor, bipoc, trans, queer women's and non-binary people's experiences without pathologizing them or over-simplifying their everyday discrimination. What we foreground as #MeToo's promise is an ability to highlight the ubiquity and varieties of gendered abuse and how, unaddressed, they ensure the continuation of violent structures. The movement offers us a set of tools for unhinging patriarchal screws that hold the racist capitalist heteropatriarchy in

place, while simultaneously holding physical and digital space for that very hegemony to exist. As techné, #MeToo and other feminist hashtag activisms create poietic openings that have catalyzed and continue to motivate people in digital and physical solidarity. These poietic formations are crucial for a speculative feminism that gestures towards and holds on to preferred intersectional feminist futures.

Notes

1. Tara Conley (@taralconley) also created Hashtag Feminism (#F) found at hashtagfeminism.com, which tracks and amplifies online feminist discourse and social movements with a specific focus on black and women of colour feminism from 2013-2015.
2. Given the sensitive nature of #MeToo tweets, we do not include the names of Twitter users who respond to Najwa Zebian and have made subtle changes to the spelling and grammar of these tweets so that they cannot be traced back to the users.
3. Again, given the sensitive nature of #MeToo tweets, we do not include the name of this Twitter user and have made subtle changes to the spelling and grammar of this tweet so that it cannot be traced back to the user.

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