Remonstrative Agitation as Feminist Counterpublic Rhetoric

Kyle Larson

Abstract: This article draws upon research with an Arab Muslim blogger on Tumblr to introduce “remonstrative agitation” as feminist counterpublic rhetoric. Farrah (the blogger’s chosen pseudonym) uses remonstrative agitation to challenge discursive and rhetorical imperialism, provoking accelerated circulation of counterdiscourse in response to impositions and harassment from white nationalists and white feminists. It functions as a performative, parrhesiastic rhetoric to claim rhetorical agency in the face of epistemic injustice while offering her counterpublic audiences discourse to learn from, relate to, and circulate. This article ultimately offers insights, methods, and visualizations for digital counterpublic rhetoric and future research.

Keywords: Counterpublics, blogging, remonstrative agitation, parrhesia, feminist rhetoric

“For the record, I’m still angry. And I think a lot of us in this room are still angry. We have a lot of reasons to be angry. And I get that it’s a turn off for some people. But I’ve learned to embrace that anger. It means that we don’t accept the status quo. It means that we know that our culture and our institutions can do better. My anger makes me strong, and it makes me bold. And that’s what I see in a lot of today’s young activists. It may not be palatable to some. But I don’t think we care.”

– Kamilah Willingham, 2015 National Sexual Assault Conference

Introduction

In this article, I introduce “remonstrative agitation” as feminist counterpublic rhetoric. With recognition of listening rhetoric’s critical limitations, remonstrative agitation challenges discursive and rhetorical imperialism, provoking accelerated circulation of counterdiscourse in response to dominant publics’ impositions and harassment (Asen; Dich; Fraser; Lyon; Warner). This concept evolves from research with an intersectional feminist blogger who chose the pseudonym “Farrah.” She’s a North African Arab Muslim and first-generation
United States citizen whose family moved from their home country of Libya due to fear of imprisonment by Muammar Gaddafi (Farrah, “Gaddafi”). This article also offers broader research findings on a feminist counterpublic circulating on Tumblr, a social microblogging site known for feminist intellectual discourse. It builds on and seeks to extend technofeminist research on women’s blogs and blogging practices—research that uplifts and documents the lives and rhetorics of contemporary women who use the digital medium as a platform for asserting their public voices (Jack; Keller; Lane; Ouellette; Queen; Rhodes).

Research on digital feminist rhetoric circulating on Tumblr offers the field of Rhetoric & Composition (among other fields like Communication) further insights into feminist counterpublics and their counterpublicity. Here, I use “counterpublic” based on research findings and experiences in reference to a networked discursive space formed over time through the affective invention, circulation, and encounter of performative and parrhesiastic counterdiscourse on Tumblr, counterdiscourse that challenges dominant publics for the expansion of discursive possibilities (Asen; Foucault; Fraser; Papacharissi; Warner). This provisional definition importantly acknowledges Robert Asen’s (among others) rightful advocacy against a “decontextualized and dehistori-cized perspective” that positions “counterpublic” as a neutral term and “that fails to account for the ways in which relations of power and symbolic and material resources influence the production, circulation, and reception of discourse in the public sphere” (265). This feminist counterpublic therefore functions through the circulation and concatenation of performative texts as a networked discursive space of empowerment and support, fostering oppositional

Fig. 1. Visual Representation of a Feminist Counterpublic on Tumblr.
discursive- and identity-(trans)formation while cultivating parrhesiastic rhetorics in resistance to dominant publics. Fig. 1 offers a visual representation of this feminist counterpublic and its discursive, rhetorical character.

Tumblr’s particular affordances establish the platform as a prominent social media site for counterpublics, offering a porous space of circulation for (counter)public engagement beyond the boundaries of a blogger’s immediate community of followers (Cho; Fink and Miller; Renninger). Therefore, it fosters coalition-building opportunities between different counterpublics and even between counterpublics and wider publics for the expansion of discursive space (Dich 94). But as counterpublic texts continue to circulate widely and capture further attention, dominant publics can and do directly impose on and harass these counterpublics. Due to epistemic injustices conditioning these exchanges, Farrah uses remonstrative agitation as a performative, parrhesiastic rhetoric to continue and even further incite the affective circulation of counterdiscourse in the pursuit of feminist, anti-imperialist recognition of her humanity in the broader public sphere (Bourdieu; Lyon; Medina; Papacharissi). I ultimately aim to demonstrate that remonstrative agitation functions as an affective consciousness-raising praxis for this feminist counterpublic on Tumblr.

I will now outline my methods for the participatory design of this research before continuing on to offer an overview of remonstrative agitation’s rhetorical and analytical framework. It consists of three theoretical concepts: remonstration, community-public writing imaginary, and rhetorical anger.

---

1 Originally designed for my students, the illustration depicts the counterpublic's “circulation of empowering intra-public oppositional discourse” as the inner circle (or gear). This discourse works to help secure a counterpublic against a dominant public through discursive- and identity-(trans)formation, as illustrated in its border contact with dominant discourse. The outer circle as the “circulation of agitational inter-public oppositional discourse” depicts texts further carving out discursive space against the dominant public, while also not necessarily a concatenation. I don't wish to suggest that this illustration represents all counterpublics, for a counterpublic’s specific character can differ based on its sociopolitical, material context of circulation (e.g., Squires). This representation could be re-imagined in different ways. For instance, the counterpublic could be inside of the dominant public’s circulatory parameters since counterpublics arguably cannot escape the imperialism of dominant discourse. But I chose to represent it in this way to emphasize its oppositional character, for counterpublics fundamentally challenge discursive, rhetorical imperialism in their attempts to open and expand discursive possibilities (Asen 271).
interdisciplinary framework merges parallel scholarly discussions that collectively offer significant insights into digital counterpublic rhetoric and its potential to provoke social change. I will then apply this framework to Farrah’s blogging practices to analyze and discuss her rhetoric of remonstrative agitation. The conclusion suggests future implications for digital feminist rhetoric and research. Importantly, I wish to stress to my readers that it is imperative to support, learn from, and (when appropriate) research the ways in which Arab Muslim women (among other oppressed social groups) use rhetoric in the public sphere for resistance to and subversion of domination—especially in light of the increasingly emboldened public expression of anti-Muslim bigotry and white supremacy resulting from the rhetoric of the 2016 United States Presidential Election.

“Prove to Me You’re not a Troll”

I initially began following Farrah’s blog *Feminist Women of Color (FWOC)* roughly a month into a broader research project about feminist counterpublics on Tumblr. Her blog interested me due to how it addressed an impressive range of issues, how it framed these issues with an astute critical awareness of multiple communities, and how it interacted with various and at times hostile audiences. I simply followed, read, and at times circulated *FWOC*’s posts (among others’ posts) in order to immerse myself in and learn from the counterdiscourse.

When I first contacted Farrah through *FWOC* to participate in this research, she responded with understandable caution. She answered my outreach message with (and gave me permission to quote) the following:

> [I]n order for me to agree to this (after I get a better understanding of just what it is I’m signing up for), I’m going to have to ask for some kind of way you can show me that I’m safe to say what I want and that you’re not, I don’t know, some troll on the Internet who just wants to mess with me. I know that might sound like a pain, but I just want to make sure my words are not misrepresented are [sic] used in hurtful ways. We can talk later about how to do this. (“Personal Communication”)  

2  Throughout this article, I will use “anti-Muslim bigotry” and “anti-Muslim oppression” instead of the more common term “Islamophobia” because (1) various disabilities communities have advocated against ‘-phobia’ suffixes being used to describe systems of oppression and (2) it simply doesn’t accurately capture the institutionalized, systemic, and social character of anti-Muslim oppression (see Reisigl and Wodak 6).
Of course, her suspicion is reasonable. Critical feminist bloggers on Tumblr are often the targets of hateful discourse involving everything from death and rape threats to racist and sexist affronts. People have created and continue to create online accounts and initiatives solely for the sake of harassing Tumblr feminists. One specific example is ‘Operation Happy Birthday’—a celebration of the 12th anniversary of 4chan (a social media network particularly known for misogynistic, racist discourse). A coalition of 4chan users decided to harass feminists by tagging Tumblr posts showing horribly disturbing content with #feminism. For the sake of clarity and awareness, I reluctantly share the following as examples of what I mean by “horribly disturbing content” and as examples of the extent to which hostile publics will go to attack feminists on Tumblr—although I would like to explicitly warn my readers that this graphic content is extremely violent towards women: “A photo of a dead woman lying in a puddle of blood, an image of a severely mutilated female body, a security video of a woman being stabbed to death. These images come with comments like ‘Good riddens fuckin to the bitch,’ ‘this is what should happen to those woman [sic] that have abortions and adoptions’ and ‘Haha bitch got what she deserved’” (Clark-Flory and Cuen). Anyone going through the feminism hashtag on Tumblr to learn from and engage with the circulating counterdiscourse would then encounter this violent content. This harassment initiative, in effect, functions as an attempt to silence a counterpublic and therefore coerce it out of circulation. The level of targeted harassment against feminists on Tumblr arguably reflects the threat that their fierce feminist counterpublic intellectualism poses to oppressive systems and those who maintain them.

As the example of Operation Happy Birthday begins to illustrate, dominant publics unconsciously and consciously, passively and actively resist changes to the oppressive status quo. Linh Dich mentions that wider publics “may impose on these counterpublics and community spaces in ways that we have yet to theorize” (94). Farrah’s remonstrative agitation offers insights into counterpublic rhetorical practices that challenge discursive, rhetorical
imperialism in response to (in)direct imposition and harassment from wider publics. Farrah particularly encounters direct harassment on FWOC from white nationalists and white feminists when her posts on anti-Muslim oppression broadly circulate outside of her immediate counterpublic community of followers. When bloggers from these publics comment on her posts and send hateful messages to FWOC (which can and does happen suddenly and in large numbers since a dominant-public blogger with many followers might unintentionally or intentionally rally them for antagonism), she used to directly interact with them more than she currently does. She acknowledges in reference to this direct antagonism from white nationalists, “I used to engage them more. Now, not so much, to be honest. I realize they never change their minds. They don’t care... I already know they really, really despise me so I just decided I’m gonna block them and just close my inbox” (Personal Interview). But as the post continues to circulate within and across hostile publics, Farrah can still experience broader-public imposition on Tumblr through new messages to FWOC from different bloggers/blogging accounts and through observing activity updates on the various interactions with the post. Further, the discourse of dominant publics colonizes the social imaginary, making it seemingly impossible to avoid both discursively and affectively in counterpublic spaces even if dominant-public bloggers are not actively antagonizing a certain counterpublic or blogger (e.g., Gould, “On Affect and Protest” 30).

These experiences illustrate why Farrah would be suspicious of a white man asking her to participate in research and thereby reveal her identity. At the beginning of the research process, I recognized the potential for this

3 Discursive imperialism involves dominant discourse as “a structured and structuring medium tending to impose an apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through the disguised (and thus misrecognized) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures that are objectively adjusted to social structures” (Bourdieu 169). Relatedly, Scott Richard Lyons defines “rhetorical imperialism” as “the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of the debate” (452). He indicates that dominant powers often enact this control through definitions: “they identify the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways” (452; emphasis in original). Hegemonic control over these definitions and descriptions can perform what Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” in operating through the power of suggestion “which, instead of telling the child [or any individual] what he [sic] must do, tells him what he is, and thus leads him to become durably what he has to be” (Bourdieu 52). Counterpublics fundamentally challenge discursive, rhetorical imperialism in their attempts to open and expand discursive possibilities (Asen 271).
recruitment constraint to occur. To address this, I took specific measures during the research process as an attempt to establish transparency and credibility as a researcher within this counterpublic.

Researching a counterpublic’s alternative dispositions, protocols, and rhetorics requires at least some form of membership or experience within that counterpublic. In addition to a two-hour Skype meeting about the research with a Tumblr feminist blogger from the Netherlands, I also consulted the counterpublic’s wisdom by requesting assistance with the research design from Taylor Meredith. She is (along with being my partner) a biracial Black woman who participates in this feminist counterpublic by managing the signal-boosting Tumblr blog titled *Tay Talkin Bout Stuff* (previously titled *Pass It On, Stay Informed*). Furthermore, I adopted Heidi McKee and Jim Porter’s methodological framework for ethical feminist researchers in digital environments. This guaranteed that I could foreground feminist ethics at all stages of the research process. Taylor and I applied this framework of digital feminist ethos to the research design.

Taylor and I first designed my research blog titled *Public Rhetoric* that would participate in the circulation of counterpublic texts while also publishing my own texts. When helping me design *Public Rhetoric*, Taylor emphasized the importance of foregrounding positionality statements in the blog description so that they are announced when bloggers hover their cursors over my blog’s thumbnail on the dashboard, which makes a text box with the blog’s descriptive profile appear (see Fig. 2). I used a close-up picture of my face for the profile to save space in this drop-down text box by already transparently showcasing my racial presentation as a white person and gender presentation as a man. Listing one’s preferred pronouns in the profile especially lends a blogger more immediate ethos in this intersectional feminist counterpublic. Furthermore, the homepage of *Public Rhetoric* features a link that announces, “Call me out if I make a mistake,” which is a common blog feature within this counterpublic that demonstrates an ethos of openness to critique. This link directs people to the page on which they can write me a private message that would then become public when I respond to it. Taylor also composed a list of fundamental rhetorical practices performed on Tumblr as well as some of the more specific practices performed within this
feminist counterpublic (see Appendix A). Taylor’s list offers a good foundation-al overview of the general rhetorical blogging practices in this feminist counterpublic— one that rhetoricians could use for future research with Tumblr, in general, and/or with feminist counterpublics on Tumblr, in particular. I incorporated this knowledge into my participation in and engagement with the counterpublic during the roughly 11 months before I contacted Farrah about participating in the research.

A particular rhetorical practice that proved to be effective for circulation on many occasions is taking screenshots of tweets that address a kairotic issue and arranging them in a sequence within one Tumblr post. One example is the post that I published directly following the November 13, 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris, France. Seeing “Muslims” begin to trend as a topic of discussion on Twitter, I imagined that the tweets would be either anti-Muslim rhetoric condemning an entire religion for the actions of a few people or rhetoric proactively opposing and intervening in the (unfortunately predictable) upcoming surge of circulating anti-Muslim rhetoric. The latter was the case. I quickly took screenshots of four of the tweets, posted them on Tumblr in an order that somewhat constructed an argument in its sequence, and tagged the post with #paris, #parisattack, #islamophobia, #racism, and #terrorism. I also included the following commentary underneath the screenshots of the tweets: “Quick reminders while the horrible events of the #ParisAttack are still unfolding. Be safe, my friends” (Larson, “Paris Attacks”). With the attacks occurring only a few hours beforehand, the post went viral. As of February 1, 2018, it has 85,681 notes of interaction (i.e. ‘likes’ and reblogs). (See Appendix B and its explanatory footnote for network visualizations of this post’s circulation). Interestingly, FWOC is one of the blogs that shared this post. Although FWOC doesn’t follow Public Rhetoric, the post apparently circulated enough and in the right networks for FWOC to encounter and interact with it.

With this background, I hoped to establish some credibility and transparency within the counterpublic as an ethical researcher that supports the intellectual, emotional labor of feminist Tumblr bloggers. But in order to specifically gain Farrah’s trust as a researcher, I recognized, based on her response to my outreach message, that I still needed to explicitly acknowledge how she can have power over me in this situation—something a troll might arguably never do. This power came in the form of the contact information for the university IRB committee board and my IRB faculty advisor, Dr. Kate Ronald. I instructed Farrah that she could and should contact them at any time—especially if I do anything to violate her trust. I instructed her that she could and should use the contact information to have them hold me accountable. Farrah took further precaution by contacting Dr. Ronald to inquire into my credibility. After receiving Dr. Ronald’s verification of my identity and endorsement of
my intentions, Farrah confirmed with me that I gained her trust and that she
would participate in the research by giving me permission to survey her based
on her blogging practices and experiences, interview her based on her survey
answers, and use her blog posts in the research itself.

Afterwards, Farrah still seemed curious about my disposition towards
feminist counterpublic rhetoric on Tumblr. She answered one of the survey
questions by asking about me and how I view the digital feminist discourse
on this social media platform. The question asked her how I could practice
reciprocity, what interests her about feminism and consciousness-raising on
Tumblr, and what she would like others to know. She answered, “I guess I’m
just curious how you yourself got into feminism, and what you think about the
feminism that’s on Tumblr? What do you think, as a white man, when you see
blogs run by POC that make fun of white people and give white people a rea-

I responded that it doesn’t at all make me uncomfortable. I indicated
how I would have been uncomfortable with this discourse years ago, but this
disposition gradually transformed after encountering and interacting with the
discourse again and again over time. In this way, I attempted to illustrate to
Farrah that I owe critical feminists on Tumblr (among others) for the ways in
which their fierce intellectualism helped challenge me to always be in the pro-
cess of becoming a more ethical and critical person and thinker, to always be
in the process of learning and relearning in the pursuit to trouble past learn-
ing. My gratitude, in fact, inspired me to undertake the research presented in
this article—which Farrah read and approved.

I will now offer an overview of the key concepts that undergird Farrah’s
rhetoric of remonstrative agitation. But I would first like to stress that Farrah’s
level of caution illustrated in this section should highlight the seriousness of
imposition and harassment critical feminists on Tumblr (and marginalized so-
cial groups in general) experience—particularly for an Arab Muslim woman
like Farrah in the current sociopolitical climate of the United States.

**Framing Remonstrative Agitation**

Research on deliberation across disparate digital publics must account for
the ways in which analyses can rest upon certain assumptions about delibera-
tion that further disadvantage marginalized rhetors and that don’t account for
the uptake residue of digital circulation within affective rhetorical ecologies. Remonstrative agitation as a rhetorical and analytical framework for digital counterpublic rhetoric can help intervene in these assumptions. It consists of three theoretical concepts—remonstration, community-public writing imaginary, and rhetorical anger.

Recognizing the ways in which power operates in deliberative encounters is crucial to any analysis of counterpublic rhetoric. In _Deliberative Acts_, Arabella Lyon offers three critical perspectives on the hegemonic limitations of Aristotelian persuasion as the only analytical approach to deliberation: 1) persuasion presumes a rhetorical situation involving a powerful speaker and docile audience; 2) persuasion describes action with an end; and 3) persuasion, based in rhetorical address to the polis, presumes common interests, knowledges, and spaces (33). She responds to these limitations with the following fundamental (and hopefully commonplace) observation: “Contemporary deliberations, however, often engage members of disparate communities who refuse, counter, or do not attend to the opposing arguments. Furthermore, the power differentials are embedded complexly in cultural differences that minimize any particular speaker’s appeal across issues” (33). Farrah’s interlocutors benefit from privileged positions of more institutionalized social power than her based on their proximity to whiteness, among other intersecting social positions. Farrah’s experiences with intersecting oppressions as an Arab Muslim woman result in multiple discursive impositions from imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (to use bell hooks’ famed phrase). Discursive, rhetorical imperialism ultimately compromises Farrah’s capacity to engage persuasively in deliberation with interlocutors across difference due to the

---

4 Zizi Papacharissi describes the significance of affective uptake residue for digital publics in _Affective Publics_. Drawing upon Jodi Dean, she describes how affect can “describe the circulatory drive that characterizes networked publics, in that they become what they are and simultaneously ‘a record or trace’ of what they are. Sustained by ongoing reflexivity that is regenerated by singular moments of expression and connection deposited by individual users, the affective flow and affective links remain and resonate with network publics even after the specific links to context have been shut down. Affective attachments to media cannot produce communities, but they may produce ‘feelings of community’ (p. 22). Depending on context, these affective attachments may reflexively drive a movement that aims at community and/or capture users in a state of engaged passivity” (9).
ways in which it establishes the conditions for her to experience testimonial and hermeneutical epistemic injustices.\(^5\)

Based in Confucian communication, remonstration accounts for the socially constructed existence of cultural hierarchies and their effects on and between differently positioned interlocutors (Lyon 43). Remonstration, in contrast to persuasion, “emphasizes the act of showing or demonstrating. Persuasion may be an effect of demonstration, but it need not be, and consequently the audience's interpretive skills and powers of resistance are more prominent. They see the act of demonstration, and based on their assessment, they respond” (Lyon 39). Remonstration allows for Farrah's production of counterdiscourse itself to serve as a consequential rhetorical performance of empowerment within the context of discursive imperialism. Rather than emphasizing persuasion as what constitutes a successful end to a deliberative exchange, remonstration suggests that one can understand the performance itself as a successful deliberative act—especially for digital circulation within affective rhetorical ecologies (Edbauer 9-10; Lyon 40; Papacharissi 119). Within unjust societies like the United States, members of oppressed groups are vulnerable to internalizing the negative dispositions that dominant groups hold towards them and circulate through dominant discourse, thereby potentially leading to, for instance, an underestimation of their own intellectual, rhetorical, and affective capacities (Collins 304; Medina 28). But remonstration's assertion of epistemic rights in using these capacities against discursive imperialism contributes to the circulation of a counterdiscourse that can potentially accrete enough affective uptake residue over time to destabilize this habitus of social reproduction and establish the conditions to provoke social change (Godbee 595; Gould, “On Affect and Protest” 32; Lyon 42; Papacharissi 19). The deliberative performance of remonstration itself should therefore function, for members of oppressed social groups, as a successful rhetorical act in the pursuit of opening discursive space.

In a disadvantaged deliberative position, Farrah uses a community-public writing imaginary both to situate and invent her ethos simultaneously.\(^6\) Resisting the binary spatial construction of audience as either “community”

\(^5\) Testimonial injustice concerns unjust perceptions of a rhetor’s situated ethos, and hermeneutical injustice concerns unjust interpretative obstacles in a rhetor’s capacity to understand themselves outside of dominant discourse and be understood while expressing oneself in resistance to dominant discourse (Medina 91, 129).

\(^6\) Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream* offers valuable insights on situated and invented ethos for marginalized rhetors (64).
or “public,” Dich writes about Asian-American counterpublic bloggers’ use of a community-public imaginary in “Community Enclaves and Public Imaginaries”:

They perceive themselves in these overlapping spaces and they write to these overlapping audiences, which underscores how identities are never contained in one space and for one audience. To be able to express a racialized identity and experience, writers may need to be a part of and imagine multiple spaces and audiences. (94)

Building on Michael Warner’s theoretical framework of (counter)publics, Dich states that the bloggers in her study “are not only writing to a strong community, but they are aware of writing to [sic] simultaneously to a public of strangers” (94). This case study on FWOC supports and builds upon Dich’s findings. Alluding to Tumblr’s affordances as a porous space of circulation, for instance, Farrah indicates an awareness of wider-public audiences when writing for her community audience of supporters who follow FWOC: “Sometimes posts or comments I’ve made get around to troll accounts or the Nazi side of Tumblr—it’s inevitable really, given the kind of site that this is. I don’t just expect supporters to be exposed to my content” (Personal Survey). This correlation between the studies suggests that a community-public imaginary might exist as a broader rhetorical practice of counterpublic writing for social media, perhaps especially for blogs. This writing imaginary undergirds Farrah’s remonstrative agitation, allowing her to shift the degree to which she addresses each audience depending on context and purpose. It offers her a means to respond to anti-Muslim white supremacist impositions and harassment by addressing grievances to her community of followers while also taking aim at the imposing dominant publics.

Rhetorical anger is another component in remonstrative agitation. Feminist counterpublic discourse often sets itself apart from the logocentrism of dominant publics with an increased emphasis on the use of pathos as a valid form of expression, on the use of anger as a performative construction of ethos in demonstrating “a speaker cares about the subject and is invested in the audience’s hearing it” (Weisser 613). Although dominant discourses often characterize anger (from marginalized groups, that is) “as pushing people away, and teach us, as listeners, to see only half the interaction” (Ryder 522), Audre Lorde rightfully acknowledges that the one refusing the relationship in this interaction is not the angered speaker, but the one who refuses to listen to the angered speaker: “If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you” (130). Due to rhetorical anger’s affective capacity to provoke accelerated circulation, remonstrative agitation also functions as an act of resistance against dominant-public attempts to harass feminist counterpublic bloggers out of circulation. Robin Boylorn, for instance, reflects on her experiences with
provoking accelerated circulation in writing for the *Crunk Feminist Collective*: “Blogs . . . are emotionally intelligent texts whose success is largely determined by their capacity to instigate a reaction in readers, either resonance or response” (77). In *Zines in Third Space*, Adela C. Licona speaks about the use of anger in her discussion of “reverso,” which she describes as “a practiced critical inquiry from messy identities, experiences, locations, and relations of third space” that “also works to subvert hierarchies and authorized and expert knowledges” (72). Spelling emotion as “e-motion” to indicate its driving force, Licona writes, “Anger as e-motion and writing together are deployed as practices of reverso to question the taken-for-granted in the context of the everyday, to heal, to share and circulate information, and to build community” (78). Rhetorical anger in remonstrative agitation allows feminist counterpublic bloggers to heal from and talk back to oppressive conditions, offering their audiences counterdiscourse to learn from, relate to, respond to, be agitated by, and circulate. As Lorde states, “When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar” (131). In this way, it builds a sense of community between counterpublic bloggers through affective attunement as well as agitates dominant publics to respond—which, on Tumblr, can often involve actually reblogging a post in order to comment on it, thereby enlarging its audience through circulation.

These three theoretical concepts—remonstration, community-public writing imaginary, and rhetorical anger—work together to perform a rhetoric of remonstrative agitation. Importantly, an analysis of digital counterpublic deliberations across difference must account for how circulation is arguably central in public rhetorical theory (Sheridan et al. 62). These deliberations can be less about the immediate rhetorical situation of persuading an individual interlocutor and more about the broader rhetorical ecology of challenging the imperialism of dominant discourse through the affective uptake residue of circulation. Indeed, both can be true—but subversion through the circulation of counterdiscursive affect must also be accounted for in evaluative claims about digital counterpublic rhetoric: “Power certainly operates through ideology and discourse, but it also operates through affect, perhaps more fundamentally so, since ideologies and discourses emerge and take hold in part through the circulation of affect” (Gould, “On Affect and Protest” 33). Increased circulation of counterdiscourse offers further opportunities for those socialized by

---

7 As can be expected with social media, Tumblr’s affordances changed during the research and writing process for this article. Before, bloggers had to reblog a post to comment on it. Now, Tumblr posts have a feature allowing bloggers to comment on them without circulating. Both practices are widely used.
dominant discourse to reencounter that counterdiscourse again and again over time and therefore to potentially learn from and become a participant in it—like me: “Over time, affect may lead to subtle disruptions of power hierarchies, which cumulatively may produce considerable energies of resistance and renegotiation of boundaries” (Papacharissi 120). I will now use this theoretical framework to analyze Farrah’s rhetoric of remonstrative agitation and then conclude with future implications for digital feminist rhetoric and research.

A Feminist Counterpublic Rhetoric of Remonstrative Agitation

Farrah describes her mission for Feminist Women of Color (FWOC) to followers: “I’m here to bring – as well as share from others – perspectives that need to be heard but are being ignored. No longer will I tolerate the silence” (“About Us”). Farrah precedes this description with an acknowledgement of growing up in a city with few people of color and attending a high school in which white people made up 98% of the student body. FWOC features a section for ‘Personal Posts’ on its menu, and two of Farrah’s posts populate this section. In the personal post titled “My Struggle,” Farrah reflects on her experiences living in this racially homogenous environment and internalizing self-hate as a result: “Ever since I became aware of how different I am from those who surrounded me in school and in stores and how I saw that no one around me looked like me except my own family I began to feel alone. I began to wish that I wasn’t different. I began to wish I was white” (“My Struggle”). She attributes leaving this city and attending college elsewhere as a catalyst for developing the critical disposition(s) necessary for identifying “all of the struggle, pain, feelings of loneliness and isolation I felt as well as the reasons for my feelings” (“My Struggle”). She indicates that coming to self-love through critical consciousness is a difficult journey, but “the very process of addressing and challenging the forces in place that work to keep me down is a victory all on its own” (“My Struggle”).

Farrah’s reflection on her struggle echoes Deborah B. Gould’s insights on the ways in which activists channel affective states into productive energy for resistance. Gould’s analysis involves ACT UP, a direct action advocacy group that formed to fight the AIDS crisis. These activists participated in naming practices to channel their grief into action-oriented anger for the sake of harnessing its energy for social action (Gould, Moving Politics 233-35). As Lorde herself observes, “Anger is loaded with information and energy” (127). In her reflection on the development of critical consciousness, Farrah invokes her affective state originating from dominant consciousness and channels it into
productive energy for resistance—a transformative process that Sara Ahmed associates with feminist consciousness-raising groups (174-5). Farrah challenges “the forces in place that work to keep [her] down” while also valuing the oppositional and agitational process of identity- and discursive-(trans)formation in resistance to dominant publics. Consequently, she decides to take social action and create an intersectional feminist blog on Tumblr: “I started this blog because I’m very passionate about the oppression of POC and wanted to express my own opinions on the topic. Not only that, but I felt that perspectives from Arab Muslim women were severely lacking on this site, so I decided to give it a shot” (Personal Survey). Farrah’s creation of FWOC serves as a critical intervention. She reasserts herself into an environment (in this case, a digital environment) where she had encountered few perspectives like hers in order to contribute these perspectives to counterpublic discourse and further open feminist discursive space for women of color, particularly Arab Muslim women. Creating FWOC therefore functions as a rhetorical act of resistance: Farrah breaks the silence to open a counterdiscursive space for her perspective and the perspectives of others like her.

Managed by Farrah and her moderators, FWOC offers its approximate 10,200 followers an encounter with an array of blog posts on varying issues, often responding to kairiotic exigencies from sociopolitical contexts. These posts can range from original posts to reblogs on topics such as issues of racism to requests for donations. For this reason, I collected a data set of posts within the timeframe of a randomly selected month. The publication dates of these posts range from April 10, 2016, to May 10, 2016. Within this timeframe, FWOC published a total of 138 posts. Reblogs account for 111 (~80.43%) of the posts, and 10 of these reblogs (~9%) include additional commentary. Furthermore, 13 of the reblogs (~11.71%) are signal boosts for donation posts (that is, posts from bloggers requesting emergency financial assistance). The 27 original posts (~19.57%) consist of 24 ‘text posts’ involving alphabetic writing (~88.89%), 2 posts answering questions from followers (~7.41%), and 1 post featuring an article (~3.7%).

Grounding the research in Farrah’s experiences and insights learned from blog posts, a survey, and an interview, I focus on an event around her particular advocacy as a central thematic foundation for this rhetorical analysis. Farrah states, in particular, that the misconception of Muslim women as inherently oppressed is a significant recurring theme in her blogging practices: “I do feel that the concept of Muslim women being helpless and demure is a common theme that I do my best to deconstruct and demolish” (Personal Survey). The word “demolish” here is noteworthy. It reflects Farrah’s response to dominant publics’ discursive imperialism for which she at times identifies with anger as an invention resource of resistance for channeling her affective
state into a rhetoric of remonstrative agitation. Fig. 3 is one of the posts from the data set described above. This post circulated broadly and received a significant amount of response\(^8\) from white nationalists and white feminists (with 40,925 notes of interaction at the time of this writing), and Farrah discussed this event at length during her interview with me. (See Appendix C for network visualizations of this post’s circulation.)

Fig. 3. Text Post by FWOC on the racism of Islamophobia.

In Fig. 3, one can observe that Farrah demands discursive space for recognition (e.g. “Fucking deal”) (Welch 36). She expresses contempt for the ways in which people attempt to derail discussions about the intersections of racial and religious discrimination in anti-Muslim oppression. That is, people erase the racialized social context from the discrimination and state that Islam isn’t a race as an attempt to derail and silence counterdiscourse on the racism of anti-Muslim oppression (Riche 94). This erasure illustrates Scott Richard Lyons’ recognition of rhetorical imperialism as often attempting to control definitions.

\(^8\) My attempts to collect the responses to the Farrah’s post represented in Fig. 3 as data were largely unsuccessful (and Tumblr’s ‘Reblog Graphs’ tool didn’t exist at this time)—even after contacting Tumblr for research assistance. Unfortunately, Tumblr only offers access to a very limited amount of the total number of notes on a post, even on its long-form activity page and through Tumblr API. Specifically, I can only access 197 notes of this post’s currently 40,925 total. My access is even limited in the exact same way for my own posts on Public Rhetoric. For this reason, I use as evidence of the imposition and harassment Farrah’s subsequent posts addressing it as well as her discussion of it in her interview with me.
in such a way that can render certain phenomena as natural and beyond question (452). Farrah indicates that she’s well aware of Islam being a religion, not a race. At the same time, she recognizes and explains that the rhetorical imperialism of dominant discourses operates through the slide of metonymy in conflating “Muslim” and “Arab” as synonymous within the social imaginary, thereby establishing anti-Muslim bigotry as a form of racialized religious oppression (Ahmed 76; Ernst 29). The fact that “Arabs comprise roughly 18 percent of the world Muslim population” attests to this anti-Arab racist stereotype (Ernst 60). Being an Arab Muslim provides Farrah with the positioned potential within this feminist counterpublic on Tumblr to talk back to this misrepresentation and prejudice using her situated experiences at these intersections (Lyon 44). But unfortunately, interlocutors socialized within anti-Muslim dominant discourses often don’t recognize Farrah’s ethos as an Arab Muslim, a subject position that can even compromise her ethos formation for this audience (Royster 64). They instead perform a testimonial injustice against her. As illustrated in Fig. 3, Farrah channels her frustration with experiences of epistemic injustice that result from dominant-public habitus, agitating these dispositions through mockery and call-out—as illustrated in the use of “har har har” and the use of second-person address. She doesn’t resist mocking them and calling them out because their anti-Muslim discourse enacts rhetorical violence against her and those in her positionality as an Arab Muslim.

Speaking to her critical intervention on Tumblr through the creation of FWOC, Farrah often talks back against the ways in which the discourse of Western (white) feminism especially perpetuates this rhetorical violence. She states, “I definitely think that certain groups of women, especially Muslim women—are just assumed to be these helpless victims of the patriarchy, and somehow need saving by white women behind computers” (Personal Survey). This statement reflects her experiences with impositions on Tumblr resulting from the colonialist, paternalistic, patronizing assumption held by white women (although not exclusively, of course) who visually consume images of Muslim women through their own “ideologically, geopolitically, and culturally mediated gaze” (Queen 264). This imposed gaze constitutes an epistemic failure based on their reluctance or inability to recognize difference in the specificity of others. It involves what Elizabeth Spelman calls “boomerang perception,” as described by José Medina: “neo-racist and neo-colonialist ways of looking at racial others construe the subjects being perceived as reflections of the perceiver, hence the boomerang structure of the perception” (Medina 151). Suggesting a tactic for coping, Farrah first expresses personal transcendence through irony before moving to frustration and anger: “I find it laughable, and also patronizing and insulting” (Personal Survey).
In fact, the second personal post from Farrah on FWOC is commentary on how Muslim women are not necessarily oppressed as a result of their choice to wear the hijab, burqa, or headscarf. In this post, she performs an understanding of her situated limitations by stating that she doesn’t speak for all Muslim women and by acknowledging that any compulsory requirement about the burqa or hijab “would be an incorrect approach to Islam and completely missing the point” (“Wearing a Hijab”). Moving forward from this position, she attacks the assumption that Muslim women are necessarily oppressed because they choose to veil. She writes, “It is incredibly insulting for you to make the assumption that we lack such a degree of control over our lives that we cannot even decide how it is that we are to be dressed” (“Wearing a Hijab”). With the plural first-person pronoun “we,” Farrah situates her ethos as a Muslim woman—someone with the authority within a feminist counterpublic to talk back against this misrepresentation using her lived experiences. The second-person address in this passage functions rhetorically to call out the public audience and provoke readers to reflect on these assumptions as people who hold them due to how epistemic injustice functions in oppressive societies like the United States. Even though she isn't necessarily writing directly to an explicit anti-Muslim audience with this personal post, the rhetorical address nonetheless operates in a way that holds readers, even potential readers, socialized by dominant discourse accountable for these uncritical assumptions. As Dich finds with the counterpublic bloggers in her study as well, Farrah consistently uses her writing to address grievances to a community audience, but she also aims it “to the broader public, providing . . . a way to address past racial injuries through imagining this public as part of [her] readership” (Dich 98). It proves to be a common appeal in her rhetoric of remonstrative agitation.

Farrah flips the perspective on the (imagined and potential) wider-public readership using her situated experiences as a Muslim woman who lives in the United States. Although she doesn't currently practice veiling, her decision not to veil is the result of experiencing hostility and alienation from people when she did publicly wear a hijab (“Wearing a Hijab”). Articulating these situated experiences, she exposes and challenges this readership's underlying Western assumptions about the presumed moral superiority of the United States. She states, “I would also like to point out that as a Muslim woman in the United States I face severe societal pressures to NOT wear a burqa or hijab... I feel as though I had never even been given the option to wear one in the first place” (“Wearing a Hijab”; emphasis in original). This powerful statement reflects Pierre Bourdieu’s insight on the power of suggestion in symbolic violence “which, instead of telling the child [or any individual] what he [sic] must do, tells him what he is, and thus leads him to become durably what he has to be” (52). She writes for this reason, “Muslim women who wear hijabs/burqas in

Peitho Journal: Vol. 20.2, 2018
the United States are brave souls for doing so, and I commend them for having such a strong connection with Islam that they are still willing to do so despite societal judgement [sic] (“Wearing a Hijab”).

Indeed, wearing a hijab can be alienating and honestly dangerous for Muslim women in the United States—especially in the current sociopolitical climate. According to a report from California State University-San Bernardino’s Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2015 demonstrated “a sharp increase of 78% in hate crimes directed against Muslims for the 20 states surveyed. Anti-Muslim hate crimes for only those 20 states soared to 196, a level 29% higher than 2014’s anti-Muslim total of 154 for the entire nation as tabulated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for a new post-2001 record” (Levin; emphasis in original). In December of 2015, for instance, an anti-Muslim white man named Gil Parker Payne approached a seated Muslim woman during a Southwest Airlines flight from Chicago, Illinois, to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Addressing her hijab, he unironically yelled, “Take it off! This is America!”9 After she refused, he violently assaulted her by completely pulling it off her head (Gibbs). Data from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) indicates that anti-Muslim hate crimes were 44% higher and bias incidents were 57% higher in 2016 than in 2015 (Empowerment of Hate 2). Pew Research Center reveals that anti-Muslim assaults in 2016 “easily surpass[ed] the modern peak reached in 2001, the year of the September 11 terrorist attacks” (Kishi). And alarmingly, CAIR also reports initial data that anti-Muslim hate crimes were even 91% higher and bias incidents were 24% higher in the first half of 2017 than the same period in 2016 (“CAIR Report”).

Even with these publicized attacks on Muslims and Muslim women, people informed by Western, Eurocentric discourses tend to presume moral superiority in terms of their own values and practices. The discourse of Western feminism perpetuates this rhetorical violence. Carl Ernst explains in Following Muhammad, “[T]he scientific language of racial categories and the alleged evolutionary superiority of Europeans were key elements in the ideology of colonial ascendancy. A new and surprising weapon in the colonialists’ arsenal was the language of European feminism” (143). In “Consuming the Stranger: Technologies of Rhetorical Action in Transnational Feminist Encounters,” Mary Queen discusses the ways in which the Eurocentric feminist portrayals of Arab and Muslim women as inherently oppressed serve as an ideological tool for

9 Sara Ahmed offers a valuable perspective on how Western discourse distorts the hijab as a symbol in its construction of “how bodies inhabit the nation in relation to an ideal” of the nation “which depends on being inhabitable by some bodies rather than others,” resulting in these performative “love for the nation” behaviors, actions, and rhetorics (132-33).
geopolitical interests: “Women in Afghanistan and Iraq became symbols of the victimization of women by ‘barbaric religious fundamentalism’ and thus a central focus of and justification for U.S. invasion” (265). Farrah articulates frustration with the imposing pervasiveness of this colonialist discourse in the social imaginary—especially the ways in which white feminists perpetuate it on Tumblr.

And to be clear, ‘white feminism’ doesn’t necessarily mean “feminism practiced by white women.” As I have written elsewhere (“Subversive Remix Rhetoric”), one can be white and feminist, but not a ‘white feminist.’ Rather, white feminism is a common term for a particular set of feminist dispositions and discourses that consciously or unconsciously uphold Eurocentrism and white supremacy for the expedient advancement of Western, white women. Even though white feminists would argue that they fight for the liberation of “all women,” the ways in which their practices fail to account for intersectionality suggest otherwise. They instead act through a “colonizing gaze that conquers the perspectives of others, rather than being transformed by them” (Medina 222). Farrah’s frustration with this habitus is clear in the following post that she published in response to white feminists’ comments on, replies to, and messages about the broadly circulated post featured in Fig. 3: “White feminists need to get the fuck over their goddamn Western, Eurocentric superiority complex” (“White Feminists Need...”). In fact, white feminists fail to recognize that wearing the hijab can be an anti-imperial, anti-capitalist form of protest within certain Muslim feminist communities (Ernst 148; Katebi). Instead, they perform an epistemic injustice with their boomerang perception by universalizing and imposing their own habitus onto others who might not adhere to the cultural dispositions of those same practices, perceptions, and attitudes.

Farrah’s performative, parrhesiastic rhetoric reflects a dismissal of listening rhetoric as an ineffective tactic for oppositional and agitational appeals in the face of dominant publics’ discursive, rhetorical imperialism and antagonism (e.g., Booth; Ratcliffe). In this context, a reliance on listening rhetoric can often result in further dominant-public impositions and harassment for Farrah to endure within her counterdiscursive space. Based on my past and continuing research experiences on Tumblr, for instance, I often observe dominant-public bloggers troll counterpublic blogs by asking them broad, generic questions that in effect serve as a rhetorical attack. These broad, generic questions can also intend to bait a feminist blogger into the time-consuming act of educating the dominant-public blogger (popularly known as “sealioning”)—even though (1) it’s not the feminist blogger’s responsibility to educate and (2) the dominant-public blogger likely cares less about learning from the
feminist blogger and cares more about gaslighting the feminist blogger’s experiential knowledge of oppression. Many feminist counterpublic bloggers for this reason don’t respond, respond with a witty and/or ironic dismissal of the sender’s suspect intentions (e.g. “I’m not Google”), or return the affront. For example, a blogger anonymously submitted the following question to FWOC: “How can you be a Muslim AND feminist?” Farrah responded, “How can you be Islamophobic AND feminist??” (“Response to Troll”). In other words, too much emphasis on listening rhetoric maintains and even reinforces the same oppressive relational dynamics between Farrah and dominant-public interlocutors within a space intended for oppositional discursive- and identity-(trans) formation. It can adhere to a naïve cultural logic of individualism in appealing to the emotional habitus of dominant social groups, as if emotions “reside in the individual” rather than being habituated affective investments in (oppressive) social norms, discourses, and institutions (Ahmed 56; Ryder 518). After all, well-cited and important theoretical discussions on listening rhetoric, upon critical inspection, have been largely framed with an insufficient recognition of power dynamics—or perhaps with apparently only white audiences in mind, even when admirably attempting to decenter whiteness. A few important questions for the ethics of advocating for listening rhetoric are: Who is supposed to be doing this listening? In what context? And what rhetorical violence would take place in that process?

A community-public imaginary is important for counterpublic engagement due to how power differentials condition these deliberative encounters. As previously mentioned, Farrah’s mission for FWOC is to open discursive space by disrupting wider publics’ silence in amplifying perspectives that these publics ignore. Instead of directly engaging with individual bloggers from white nationalist and white feminist publics who attempted to impose anti-Muslim discourse on her through aggressive comments on, replies to, and messages about the broadly circulated post in Fig. 3, Farrah therefore closed FWOC’s inbox and proceeded to publish a series of posts to her followers (one of which I previously quoted). She channels her frustration with this antagonism, resisting appeals that center the emotional habitus of dominant publics: “If you’re 10 Rachel McKinnon identifies the abusiveness of gaslighting as taking two forms, psychological and epistemic. The psychological form involves manipulating someone into doubting their own memories and sense perceptions. McKinnon extends this more classical understanding to also include an epistemic injustice-based definition that accounts for more subtle forms: “Directly, or indirectly, then, gaslighting involves expressing doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claimed” (168).
a feminist who’s against Muslim women and them wearing the hijab, kindly go fuck yourself. I’m not gonna be nice about it anymore. Just go fuck yourself. Full stop” (“If You’re a Feminist...”). Farrah admits, in fact, that she doesn’t recognize white feminists as part of her feminist counterpublic community or even as feminists due to their failure to account for intersectionality (Personal Interview). She does, however, recognize them as a public audience of her agitational address: “With white feminists, I critique them a lot. I get messages from them. I don’t have any problem interacting with them, really. I just let them know what I think. I’m pretty aggressive about that” (Personal Interview).

One of the follow-up posts especially illustrates Farrah’s rhetoric of remonstrative agitation against white feminists’ imperialism and antagonism in response to the post in Fig. 3. She writes:

> I am so tired of white people, especially white women, sharing opinions about Muslim women and the hijab that are false and that they pretty much pull out of their ass. It’s annoying as fuck. You all talk about how ~oppressed~ and ~hopeless~ and ~powerless~ Muslim women are, without even realizing that your stereotypes and generalizations and Eurocentric narratives are what make Muslim women look so helpless and weak. (“I Am So Tired...”)

Here, Farrah first uses the third-person plural pronoun “they” in reference to “white people, especially white women.” This reference indicates that she is directly addressing her community audience of FWOC followers—who she perceives as “primarily supporters, open minded people, or maybe allies” (Personal Survey). She expresses to this audience her grievances with white feminists who patronizingly address a Muslim woman as if they are authorities on Muslim women. With this “e-motion” (to use Licona’s term), remonstrative agitation can—as Boylorn claims—successfully “instigate a reaction in readers, either resonance or response” (77). Zizi Papacharissi, for instance, acknowledges this instigation of resonance in Affective Publics when...
writing about publics “presencing” marginalized perspectives: “These affectively charged micro-narratives typically produce disruptions or interruptions of dominant political narratives, inviting others to tune and feel their way into their own place in politics” (131). In other words, similar to how Farrah articulated her own struggle, her rhetoric of remonstrative agitation here might resonate or eventually resonate over time with her community audience’s—or, with circulation in mind, her potential and future audiences’—“inarticulate and inarticulable sensation that something in the established order is not quite right” and that others feel this way too (Gould, “On Affect and Protest”). It might offer language to affective sensations so that the consciousness-raising transformation of grief to anger to critique to action can possibly, eventually occur (for instance, see Fig. 4). Depending on previous circulatory encounters (among other things), its illustration of epistemic friction between two discourses might transform something ordinary and natural to something extraordinary and constructed (Medina 224). In provoking this audience to circulate the post in oppositional solidarity, remonstrative agitation offers an opportunity to share the experience of Farrah’s outrage and further attune one’s sense of community and identity with this counterpublic (Nish 245; Papacharissi 9).

Farrah then shifts to the second-person plural address “You all” to call out white women as the broader public audience through remonstration and state how they participate in the oppression of Muslim women. In reference to this audience, she uses tildes to surround the terms that function in the service of rhetorical imperialism (“~oppressed~ and ~hopeless~ and ~powerless~”). In this context, white feminists’ rhetorical use of these terms functions as a shallow discursive framework that attempts to persuade audiences at face value about the presumed righteousness of their colonialist argument about Muslim women and the hijab. Farrah’s performative act of surrounding the terms with tildes—otherwise popularly known as the “snark mark” based on her usage—indicates verbal irony (Katz). Using snark marks against their terms serves to undercut the shaky rhetorical foundations of their argument’s framework through mockery, thereby performatively illustrating Farrah’s consideration of their arguments as without foundation in the realities of Muslim women who choose to veil. Furthermore, Farrah’s remonstrative agitation provokes direct epistemic friction between these two discursive frameworks—demonstrating what James Paul Gee refers to as a “liberating literacy” (154)—by coordinating both their three terms as well as her three critiques of white feminists with two conjunctions (“and”). This polysyndeton invokes a parallel

11 At the time of this writing, Facebook Messenger translates a word surrounded by tildes into a word with a strikeout when sent to another user, further illustrating the snark mark as ironic performance.
relationship between their terms (oppressed, hopeless, powerless) and her points of critique (stereotypes, generalizations, Eurocentric narratives). This parallel relationship reinforces Farrah’s statement of frustration and exhaustion with the rhetorical imperialism of white feminists’ stereotypes of Muslim women as ~oppressed~ (due to the hijab), generalizations of Muslim women as ~hopeless~, and Eurocentric narratives of Muslim women as ~powerless~. The redundancy of the polysyndeton also suggests white feminists’ excessive disregard of Farrah’s situated ethos.

Interestingly, Farrah runs another blog on Tumblr called *Just White Feminism Things* to critique and mock white feminists to her counterpublic community of followers through the multimodal remonstrative agitation of its memes. Fig. 5 offers a representative example of these memes and the rhetorical practices within them—rhetorical practices that Dustin Edwards might refer to as “tactical rhetoric.” It also speaks to Farrah’s frustration with white feminists’ excessive disregard and compromising of her situated ethos that limits her positioned potential in deliberations across difference. Fig. 5 showcases a stock photo of a white woman with blonde hair expressing anger while holding her smiling face in her hand as if it were a mask. The accompanying text reads, “claiming to be an ally, but then showing your true colors and getting angry when you are challenged on your racism.” The memes on this blog all use the present participle form of a verb at the beginning of the text. This tense indicates continuous action, thereby illustrating white feminists and their continuous disingenuous allyship and ideological alignment with white supremacy. Farrah states, “I always choose pictures that would probably . . . piss white women off. And then they just get so mad at me... I don’t know what it is about white feminists. But like, I like it when they get mad at me” (Personal Interview).

Farrah articulates a rhetoric of remonstrative agitation through these photos. The image in Fig. 5 conveys the hypocritical nature of white feminist support for women of color through an invocation of “two faced.” Through mockery, these memes attempt to agitate and disrupt white feminist discourse due to the epistemic injustices and rhetorical violence white feminists
perpetuate against (Muslim) women of color in the name of “feminism” (read: white feminism). I also find Farrah’s use of stock photos to be intriguing due to their association with mass use for commercial businesses. I would argue that it could function as an interdiscursive performance that positions white feminists in alignment with the media production of dominant publics (Bhatia 28). If so, it would offer an implicit counterdiscursive critique of how white feminist identities, perceptions, attitudes, and practices are subservient to the habitus of dominant publics through their consumption of and situatedness in capitalist mass media production.

Based on Farrah’s blogging practices illustrated above, one can understand remonstrative agitation as a consciousness-raising praxis for feminist counterpublic rhetoric, especially when considering the uptake residue of digital circulation within affective rhetorical ecologies. Reflecting a dismissal of listening rhetoric, Farrah uses remonstrative agitation as a parrhesiastic rhetorical tactic to challenge the epistemic injustice of discursive, rhetorical imperialism. She adopts a community-public writing imaginary to demand discursive space for recognition of her epistemic rights, provoking accelerated circulation through rhetorical anger in addressing her grievances to a community audience while also aiming the writing to dominant publics. In this way, remonstrative agitation allows feminist counterpublic bloggers to heal from and talk back to oppressive conditions, offering their audiences counterdiscourse to learn from, relate to, respond to, be agitated by, and circulate.

**Implications for Digital Feminist Rhetoric & Research**

Remonstrative agitation offers rhetoricians and activists a rhetorical, analytical framework well-situated within and responsive to digital circulation within affective rhetorical ecologies. It answers Jenny Edbauer’s call for new concepts to “theorize how publics are also created through affective channels” (21). With its foundational recognition of the ways in which epistemic injustice operates in deliberative encounters, this feminist counterpublic rhetoric moves beyond the linear causality of persuasion in its attention to the affective flows of discourse in social reproduction and transformation. Indeed, the discursive imperialism of dominant publics conditions (but never fully determines) the felt intensity associated with affect in one’s interactions with peoples, discourses, ideas, objects, etc. (Ahmed 7; Edbauer 10; Gould, “On Affect and Protest” 31; Papacharissi 16). These ‘affective states’ or ‘structures of feeling’ “are what temper and intensify our attentions, affiliations, investments, identifications, and attachments” (Gould, “On Affect and Protest” 33). But increased circulatory encounters and interactions with feminist counterpublic discourse
can build affective uptake residue over time, potentially and eventually destabilizing a habitus invested in social reproduction (Ahmed 11). Farrah’s rhetoric of remonstrative agitation serves as an example of this consciousness-raising praxis within Tumblr’s digital infrastructure of circulation.

And here, I see and feel much potential for future digital feminist rhetoric and research in a way that, at times, I find difficult to articulate. Based on my past and continuing research experiences, counterpublics on Tumblr feel different than the networked counterdiscursive spaces that I regularly experience on other social media platforms—which, for me, makes Tumblr one of the more interesting social media sites for future research on digital counterpublics. Moving forward, I hope scholars in Composition & Rhetoric (and beyond) can help me make more sense of this feeling and put language to this experience, as I continue to do the same.

Reading this counterpublic’s threaded posts on Tumblr, for instance, can at times be affectively jarring and disorienting in intellectually exciting ways—like a digital consciousness-raising group taking place all on one post. Research does exist on the ways in which Tumblr’s affordances situate the platform as particularly well-suited for the production and circulation of counterpublic discourse (Cho; Fink and Miller; Renninger). And I find myself returning again and again to the feeling of feminist counterpublics on Tumblr almost as consciousness-raising groups (or networks) in digital circulation, which suggests that returning to insights from historical feminist praxis might help orient future inquiries into digital feminist rhetoric. Consider Nancy Fraser’s now famous definition of “subaltern counterpublics”: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). This “formulation of oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” calls for more attention in digital rhetorical theory and research—perhaps especially in this current historical moment. As Bourdieu states, “[P]olitical subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world” (127-8).

Therefore, research on digital feminist rhetoric can use and/or develop methodologies and methods for capturing, tracing, mapping, and understanding the affective emergences and residues of counterpublic rhetorics, like remonstrative agitation, on knowledge production and identity transformation over time. Importantly, tracing this epistemological and ontological development cannot reduce its focus to the linear causality of persuasion as the only analytical approach to counterpublic rhetoric, for residue helps ideas stick. For instance, Tumblr blogs are archives of encounter and interaction—or what Dylan Dryer might call “uptake capture” (65). Threshold concept scholarship provides a theoretical, pedagogical, and educational framework for better
understanding how learners encounter, interact with, and take up troublesome, transformative ideas—a particularly interesting and arguably necessary lens for counterpublic rhetoric, especially when in conversation with scholarship on epistemic injustice and epistemologies of ignorance (see Leonardo and Manning; Medina; Pohlhaus, Jr.; Sullivan and Tuana; Winkler). Kairotic moments might offer access to research on habitual uptakes, counteruptakes, and disruptive uptakes in light of these archives of encounter and interaction (see Bawarshi; Papacharissi 15-6). Interestingly, texts on Tumblr also appear to have a longer circulatory life than texts on other platforms, thereby arguably generating more uptake residue over time. Tumblr's new(er) ‘Reblog Graphs’ tool (see Appendix B and C) offers a mechanism to trace the circulation of \textit{all bloggers’ old and new posts} (that is, a blogger’s own posts and even random posts that circulate across one’s dashboard) up to roughly the first 600 reblogs and the first 600 influential reblogs. This tool appears to reveal the circulatory connections forming (counter)publics, at least to some extent, by visualizing constellations of networked blogs. Since Tumblr doesn’t display a blog’s number of followers as public information like Twitter, this tool’s visualization of an individual blog’s influence on circulation provides a means for counterpublic bloggers on Tumblr to access information that could potentially be instrumental to building digital coalitions for increased circulation. It would also be productive to investigate circulatory cross-pollination between platforms. The cross-pollination of counterpublics on Tumblr and Twitter would be especially fruitful as a starting point, particularly for feminist counterpublics circulating on Black Tumblr and Black Twitter. #BlackoutDay can be one specific example of a social media celebration/protest that lends itself to such an analysis.

But of course, researchers must take great care in ensuring that the counterpublic spaces they enter—if they do not already belong to the communities and/or publics circulating in the networked space—are not operating as what Catherine R. Squires would refer to as an ‘enclave public’ (or what I tend to observe more as an ‘enclaved counterpublic’ on Tumblr) or what Vorris L. Nunley would refer to as a ‘hush harbor.’ Their hidden transcripts are not for wider-public consumption. If it \textit{does} operate as an enclaved counterpublic, one would need to approach Taylor’s list of rhetorical blogging practices on Tumblr (see Appendix A) in consideration of whether or not it’s appropriate to circulate the posts, even if it’s in oppositional solidarity—which is good praxis anyways. Tumblr is a porous space of circulation, but one’s technological ability to access these spaces doesn’t necessarily mean one should have discursive access to them. The hashtag space on Tumblr posts can often include everything from hashtags as categorization to hashtags as jokes or even full conversations, and Tumblr now offers a ‘Tag Crawler’ feature that displays all the hashtags used for a reblogged post. Bloggers from enclaved counterpublics
might add #DoNotReblog to posts or might have descriptions written in their drop-down profiles (Fig. 2) that declare, for instance, their blogs as a space for Black women only—which ethical researchers who are not Black women should respect. Some enclaved counterpublic blogs state—either in their drop-down profile description, ‘About’ page, FAQ, or when asked by someone who does wish to follow—whether or not allies/accomplices are welcome to follow. At least from my experience encountering responses to these inquiries, the not-entirely-enclaved blogs can tend to welcome these followers, but sometimes only if they follow “silently” and learn to listen. For these reasons and more, I wholly recommend following participatory feminist research principles for future digital feminist research with counterpublics.

These counterdiscursive spaces invent and circulate rhetorics from a situated praxis that can introduce, challenge, and build upon rhetorical theories. Paying attention to and supporting these spaces would be beneficial for future digital feminist rhetoric and research. And with these implications in mind, I am excited to learn from future interdisciplinary scholarship on counterpublic rhetorical theories, an area that seems to have a lot of room for research and theory-building in this current sociopolitical climate.

**Acknowledgements:** Many people supported the production of this article. I would like to thank Farrah for trusting me and allowing me the true honor of learning from her. Taylor Meredith has been an amazingly insightful and supportive partner and collaborator throughout this process—academic partners don’t get enough credit. I’m incredibly grateful to have Kate Ronald, Tim Lockridge, Linh Dich, LuMing Mao, Shatha Alali, and Kaydra Bui as mentors, colleagues, and friends who have informed the ideas presented here. I especially wish to thank Jason Palmeri, who provided incredible feedback and support on multiple drafts of this article. And a special shout out to the Peitho reviewers—truly brilliant and generous feedback. Please introduce yourselves to me some day so that I can buy you a drink.

**Works Cited**


—. “Personal Communication.” Received by Kyle Larson, 15 Feb. 2016.


Peitho Journal: Vol. 20.2, 2018


Larson, Kyle. “Fig. 1.” Visual Representation of a Feminist Counterpublic on Tumblr. 2017.
—. “Fig. 2.” Blog's Mouse-Over Profile. 2016. Screenshot.


**Appendix A**

**Follow.** Like most (if not all) social media, one of the best ways to get followers/interact on Tumblr is to first follow other users. Some users will follow you back once you’ve followed them, but that’s not necessarily why following is so important. It’s mainly because that way you’ll have new content on your dashboard to reblog and respond to. And some users only allow you to comment on their material if you’re following them (or, as a specific Tumblr setting allows, if you’ve been following them for two weeks).

**Respond.** If the user allows it, you’ll sometimes see little speech bubbles in the bottom right-hand corner of Tumblr posts. There’s a limit to how much you can say in these response fields, but you’re not expected to say a lot here anyway. Utilize this space for short, concise comments or questions. If you have more to say, you should send the user an “ask” or “fan mail.”

**Private message.** Most users have their “ask” boxes enabled, while more private users will have them disabled. Others will have the ask box disabled only to anonymous questions. Almost all users have their fan mail enabled though. Fan mail is especially helpful if you have a lengthy message, as there’s a limit on how much you can say in an “ask.” You can utilize these messaging systems for almost any reason. Ask a question or simply tell the user you like their blog. Who doesn’t love to hear that?

**Reblog.** This is a perfect way to not only add great content to your blog, but users are alerted when you reblog from them (both the original user and whoever you reblogged from are alerted).

**Reblog and comment.** Users are also alerted on their dashboard when someone adds something to their post. Sometimes simple reblogs go unnoticed, but if you add commentary there’s a better chance the original user may check your blog out. Also this is the perfect way to start a dialogue, because it’s not uncommon for people to then reblog you and reply to what you’ve said. This is how those long conversations get started.
Tag people. Tumblr now allows you to tag users, the same way you would on Twitter. Simply type @username and the user will be alerted on their dashboard that they've been tagged. You can do this when you reblog and add commentary, to make sure your post is being seen by someone. If you're reblogging someone's original content, even a simple additional comment like, “I love this post, @username. Thanks for sharing” can go a long way.

Tag your posts. You know the importance of tagging, since lots of social media sites use this feature. Tagging on Tumblr not only lets people find your posts more easily on the dashboard, but it also lets people find specific posts of yours once they're already on your blog (you can create a list of tags in your sidebar with links so people can easily search for specific topics). Keep in mind: only the first five tags on your posts show up in the search engine, but you can add as many tags as you want in order to help categorize your material for your blog.

**Trigger Warn as you see fit.** And if you trigger warn, it would look like this: “sexual assault tw” (Add in your blog’s sidebar that you’re open to trigger warning material if someone calls you on it.)

Make original content. I’m a big believer in reblogging posts if they’re well done so that the original poster gets credit, but it’s also important that you only have content on your blog that you’re 100% happy with. This means that if someone has shared an article and added commentary that you don’t like, you shouldn’t reblog the post and erase the comments. Rather, you should go right away and share the link yourself and add your own original commentary. Original posts show up in searches. Reblogged posts do not. So the fastest way to get more followers is to post awesome, original material.

Share a variety of post types. Share photos, article links (adding a short excerpt is always a good idea), quotes, etc. Having a wide variety of mediums is great for learners of all types.

Search tags. Search tumblr.com/tagged/(whatever). Also use the search field for more options such as “most popular” and post categories (video, photo, etc).

Find less popular blogs. They’ll be more likely to follow back and respond.

Make your blog look good and easy to navigate.

Faux pas. Don’t derail. Don’t erase other people’s comments. Don’t lecture anyone who’s not in your community (men and white people and heterosexual and cis people).

Hyperlink to sources when necessary. (Meredith)
12 Tumblr ‘Labs’ launched an interactive ‘Reblog Graphs’ tool that allows users to visualize the networked circulation of a blogger’s first ~600 reblogs as well as ~600 first influential reblogs on a given post. Significantly, activating this feature allows users to not only see the circulation of their own posts, but also see others’ posts too. It provides data on who the blogger is (represented as a node), the blogger’s influence (represented based on node size), how deep the blogger is in terms of reblogs (e.g., “six reblogs deep”), and what the blogger posted along with the reblog. When one selects a node, the visualization continues to expand. The text’s original blogger displays as orange.
Appendix C

About the Author

Kyle Larson is a PhD student in Composition & Rhetoric at Miami University (OH). His research interests include (counter)public rhetorics, anti-oppression discourses, and activist literacies.