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Colorblind Feminisms: Ansari-Grace and the Limits of #MeToo Counterpublics

With the article, "I Went on a Date with Aziz Ansari: It Turned into the Worst Night of My Life" (Way 2018), *babe*, a feminist website by and for young women, triggered a watershed moment in the #MeToo movement. Following news in October 2017 about Harvey Weinstein's egregious pattern of sexual assault, #MeToo went viral, to put it mildly, on Twitter but also on other sites such as Facebook, which reportedly had 4.7 million people around the world participating in the conversation and 12 million posts and responses in less than twenty-four hours (Santiago and Criss 2017). Within days, Alyssa Milano repurposed Tarana Burke's catchphrase "Me Too," rendering it a Twitter hashtag, #MeToo.[1] Burke initiated "Me Too" in 2006 as a means to counter the shame of sexual assault and build empathic solidarities among African American girls and women. Milano's hashtag, too, was intended to demonstrate the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment (Birnbaum 2017). Signaling the emergence of a feminist counterpublic—a public both marginalized and oppositional—#MeToo quickly expanded to news and other entertainment industries. The movement focuses primarily on calling out and taking down powerful men accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault mainly, but not only, by mobilizing digital forms of activism through Facebook, Twitter, and online publications for the *New York Times* and such.[2]

Published in the thick of this, *babe*'s exposé of a date between the well-known comedian and actor Aziz Ansari and Grace, a pseudonym for a woman in her early twenties, represented a breaking point. First, although this case retained the focus on male celebrities, it shifted attention from cases of sexual harassment to power imbalances in heterosexual dating and hookups,

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[1] See Tarana Burke's *Biography* profile at https://www.biography.com/people/tarana-burke.

[2] Additionally, TimesUp, a nongovernmental organization that emerged from #MeToo, seeks to address workplace sexual harassment and abuse by offering "legal and public relations assistance" across a range of industries (see https://www.timesupnow.com/history).

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thereby expanding #MeToo's scope to routine sexual encounters and potentially resonating with many more heterosexually identified women. Perhaps therefore, and this is the second point, it generated a range of contentious positions and ambivalences among #MeToo's counterpublics—from criticisms of Ansari to his defense, concerns that this case was detracting from more pressing issues of sexual violence, to views that it was symptomatic of the sexual violence characterizing virtually all aspects of relations between women and men.

The third point of note is that it was the most prominent case up to that point in the #MeToo movement to surface issues of racialized difference. That is, with the spotlight on Ansari's sexual mis/conduct toward Grace, race became pertinent—presumably because the vast majority of perpetrators and survivors, exceptions such as Lupita Nyong'o and Salma Hayek notwithstanding, making the headlines thus far had been white, which comes with the privilege of being racially unmarked. But race became relevant only up to a point. Ansari's Brownness and his non-Christian name were contrasted with Grace, whose Christian pseudonym and unmarked racial status (and Ansari's pattern of dating white women) inferred her as white. At the same time, ironically and despite the range of positions and ambivalences in the feminist counterpublics that the *babe* article generated, there was little open discussion about how race, along with gender and heterosexuality, not to say anything about class, were shaping this case or, for that matter, #MeToo's itineraries. Indeed, most commentaries on Ansari-Grace across mainstream news sources, digital as well as print media, strove to keep the accent on gender and (hetero)sexuality even as racialization and racisms colored their accounts.

This is not the first time that issues of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct have been under the public spotlight; nor is this the first time that the relevance of race has been mishandled. Consider the media spectacle around Clarence Thomas's 1991 confirmation as a US Supreme Court justice and Anita Hill's account of his sexual harassment. Not only was sexual harassment catapulted into the public limelight, but the ensuing discussion that shaped the formal proceedings and media spectacle proceeded through a troubling mix of racism and heterosexism, as a result of what Moya Bailey (2013, 311) has called "misogynoir." In contrast, because President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky are both white, race was absent in the media coverage once the sexual relationship, or really sexual harassment, came to light in 1998.

Even as the #MeToo movement trails these entwined histories of sexual harassment, race, and media representations, it also emerges in a different cultural and political moment—one dominated by a changing media

landscape, networked feminist counterpublics, and the persistence of colorblind racial ideologies. Since the 1990s, there has been an explosion of digital media and social networking sites that have significantly altered the production and dissemination of news and information, leading to what Andrew Chadwick calls a "hybrid media system . . . built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizational forms—in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics" (2013, 4). This altered landscape has opened up new possibilities for digital forms of feminist activism, or what have been called networked feminist counterpublics (Travers 2003; Jackson and Welles 2015).[3] While the #MeToo phenomenon continues to illustrate the potentials of these feminist counterpublics—by contesting and revising dominant frames of knowledge about gender and sexuality, and supporting feminist communities and agendas—it also raises questions about how networked feminist counterpublics can reproduce colorblind ideologies or forms of discourse in the post–Civil Rights era that deny the ongoing significance of race and end up perpetuating racial inequalities (see Bonilla-Silva 2017). To the extent that #MeToo focuses on gender and sexuality, it becomes implicated in colorblind ideologies by either neglecting race entirely or by deploying it in uneven, troubling ways.

In this article, we analyze the Ansari-Grace encounter to underscore the fault lines of colorblind perspectives among #MeToo's feminist counterpublics. Tracking articles and posts that circulated widely on Facebook, we address networked feminist counterpublics that foreground gender and heterosexuality while failing to adequately contend with the relevance of race. (Here, we must note that the author who initially broke the *babe* story is a woman of color.) Using an intersectional and postcolonial feminist lens, we explore the ways that race and racialization frame public discussions on sexual misconduct and sexual harassment even as race is superficially absent. In so doing, we come to grips with long-standing feminist debates about publics and counterpublics that have been reenergized in an era of networked feminist activism.

Scholarship on feminist publics widely engages Nancy Fraser's (1990) revisions of Habermasian notions of the public sphere, especially to identify the subversive, dissident, and democratic potentials of subaltern constituencies, abbreviated as counterpublics. Building on these contributions, we

[3] These spaces of networked feminist activism do not align with the physical and the digital, or with the dichotomies of representation versus reality (that there is a physical world that is represented in the digital sphere) but rather meld into what Nathan Jurgenson (2011) has called "augmented reality."

highlight what remains implicit and underexplored in them, namely, the limitations of feminist counterpublics that trail colorblind ideologies. In other words, this article parses feminist counterpublics to show how, while they may break ground by focusing on gender and heterosexuality, the sidelining of race exposes their potential limits. Thus, it reveals the ways that counterpublics can be simultaneously oppositional and normative, contributing to more layered and critical understandings of public feminisms. To take liberties with Ann Travers's (2003, 228) phrasing, the so-called counterpublic may not be counter after all. Looking at the Ansari-Grace encounter, we show the limits of reducing issues of dating and hookup violence to narrowly conceived notions of gender while either completely overlooking race or taking it into account inadequately. By overlooking the historic role of race in gender (and sexuality) politics, for instance, such an approach can end up reproducing racisms in the process. We also trace the ways that hybrid media technologies are themselves contributing to promoting colorblind feminisms. We argue that given the multiple inequalities structuring networked feminisms, what is centered by default are the viewpoints of privileged white women.

In order to access the #MeToo counterpublic and, more specifically, the Ansari-Grace encounter, we turn to Facebook as a means of tracking the range of positions, contentions, and ambivalences that emerged across sources, including news articles, editorials, and analyses spanning traditional news media such as CNN and the *New York Times* as well as independent and online zines, blogs, detailed personal accounts, visuals, and commentaries. As the most widely used social networking site, Facebook is as much an index of mainstream public conversations as an index of counterpublic positions, making it particularly suitable for our purposes.[4] Its format allows for what has been called the echo chamber effect as well as the expression of plural and even oppositional positions, thereby allowing for the possibilities of unified albeit internally fraught counterpublics (Garrett 2009).

Focusing on items that gained traction, those shared over 50 times on Facebook, we track the making of a feminist counterpublic as well as the fault lines of race that were made clear by the internal divisions, dissensions, and ambivalences about the Ansari-Grace encounter. We are interested in the architectures of these networked forms of activism that generate particular publics and their practices—through built-in technologies for reader and writer interactions and the sharing of texts and visual images. We argue that these collective practices help to constitute a colorblind yet racially inflected

[4] For comparative statistics, see Smith and Anderson (2018).

counterpublic, which potentially exceeds the intentions and perspectives of individual participants.

In what follows, we locate our focus on #MeToo and the Ansari-Grace encounter within the context of feminist debates on publics and counterpublics. Proceeding to consider the most shared items on Facebook regarding the case, we delineate the constellation of a colorblind yet racialized feminist counterpublic. We consider this formation against the broader history of race and racisms in politics around sexual violence in the United States. Against this historical backdrop, we point to the shifting modalities of race and racisms within the politics of sexual assault in the current networked, neoliberal, and "postracial" moment. In doing so, we further contribute to conversations around the complexities, tensions, and limits of feminist counterpublics.

Networked feminist counterpublics and the making of #MeToo

Coming to grips with public spheres as discursive, unequal, and contested arenas has been a deeply political feminist project, one that aims to contest dominant discourses, foreground subjugated knowledges and antihegemonic practices of marginalized publics—as women, Black women, feminists, LGBT people, among others—and highlight their democratic potentials. Following Fraser's reflections on subaltern counterpublics, a phrase drawn from Rita Felski (1989) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), the concept has been especially fruitful for theorizing the formation of alternative discursive sites that are at least partially at odds with mainstream publics: for example, the umbrella movement in Hong Kong, networked Tunisian feminism, anti–police violence movements in the United States, and the Arab Spring. Although modified over the years, Fraser's definition of counterpublics—"parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990, 67)—continues to be a reference point for feminist scholars (Squires 2002; Travers 2003; Batra 2016).

A central question, one raised by Robert Asen (2000), that persists among the feminist and other critical scholarship has to do with the "counter" in counterpublic.[5] That is, what defines a counterpublic and how to understand the relationship between publics and counterpublics remain ongoing points

[5] See Dawson (1994), Black Public Sphere Collective (1995), Asen (2000), Asen and Brouwer (2001), Warner (2002), and Lee (2015).

of inquiry. In this vein, theorizing the "counter" in the early 1990s led Michael Dawson (1994) to remain pessimistic about the possibilities of a Black counterpublic sphere due to what he saw as the absence of critical social movements and political organizational bases, even as he identified the challenge of building Black counterpublics as central to the future of Black politics. Challenging Dawson's account from a Black feminist stance, Catherine Squires (2002) theorizes the counterpublic as offering not only a nuanced typology of alternative Black publics but also as rethinking identity as their root. As such, she makes intelligible plural Black publics—counter but also conservative—in ways that are prescient about the emergence of oppositional publics such as Black Lives Matter.

These archaeologies and possibilities of alternative publics assume particular urgency in a context invigorated by the emergence of hybrid media systems wherein the lines between "old" and "new" media platforms are blurred, and a series of tweets can precipitate networked counterpublics. Feminists have been adept at generating networked counterpublics especially but not only around matters of sexual violence (Zlitni and Touati 2012; Eslen-Ziya 2013). A number of initiatives in North America and elsewhere—#BeenRapedNeverReported, #BoardtheBus, #Jada, and SlutWalk—preceded the #MeToo movement in efforts to reshape knowledge and cultural meanings about enduring forms of sexual violence to which women are vulnerable (Newsom and Lengel 2012). More broadly, networked feminisms played a defining role during the Arab Spring, whereby women used online spaces to shape public opinion, share resources, and express dissent (Zlitni and Touati 2012; Eltantawy 2013). The do-it-yourself politics permitted by this hybrid media system has enabled constituencies of women to participate in public feminisms in new ways (Bennett 2012). In the United States, Black women use Twitter more than any other demographic group as a means of countering the invisibility of race and gender in conventional media (Williams 2015).

But the issue is not simply about the multiplication of publics through these hybrid media systems. Rather, it is also about the ways these new technologies and platforms are deployed and, perhaps even more important, the kinds of activism and counterpublics that they foster. For the most part, these technological innovations have generated optimism about the possibilities of networked feminist counterpublics to forge cross-national alliances and to impact mainstream public conversations at the national and local levels.[6] Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015, 2016) have

[6] See Travers (2003), Guta and Karolak (2015), Lee (2015), Jackson and Welles (2016), and Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2018).

underscored networked counterpublics to emphasize how Twitter has been effective in discursive, affective, and ideological struggles over meaning making, especially in relation to state-based racialized violence. Alison Dahl Crossley's study of a racially diverse group of college students shows the potential of Facebook and blogs to forge online feminist communities, nurture offline networks, and recruit and engage with adversaries (2015, 263).

What remains to be further explored, though, are the limits of these networked counterpublics that operate through what is sometimes ironically called "'post-it' activism" (Zlitni and Touati 2012, 52). As Yochai Benkler (2006) notes, the networked public sphere is not merely a collection of tools but is also about the social production of practices. More precisely, these forms of activism raise questions about the making of counterpublics fostered by technological changes. They animate concerns about the broader neoliberal context and the predilection toward "commodified private acts of rebellion" in place of more systemic anticapitalist and antiracist critiques (Mohanty 2013, 968). Thus, Jackson and Welles (2015) caution that Twitter is not a counternormative space, and even trending topics do not necessarily lead to substantive engagement by either those who have privilege or even other members of counterpublics. Furthermore, and this is equally important, networked activisms are not free from the trails of colonial and racial histories. For example, referencing the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015) troubles how networked feminist counterpublics can reinforce imperializing representations of girls and women from the global South, making it yet another instance of epistemic violence (pace Spivak 1988)—one that reproduces Western feminists as saviors while reducing the complexity of the issues to Black male Muslim violence and terrorism.

Therefore, as we consider #MeToo through the lens of the Ansari-Grace encounter, we cannot but inquire into the discourses as well as what Ashwini Tambe (2018) calls the "silences of MeToo." Examining these aspects sheds light on the making of a networked feminist counterpublic—through the social practices of networking, discourses of gender and heterosexuality, and ideologies of color blindness. If counterpublics are discursive constellations, how do we trace their ideological and technological contours? How does the counterpublic that congeals around #MeToo and more specifically around the Ansari-Grace encounter signal transformative but also reductive capacities, the possibilities of shifting the social landscape on heterosexual violence from feminist viewpoints but also reproducing histories of racial exclusion? Given that networked feminism is dominated by privileged white women (Travers 2003), we explore the extent to which their experiences come to be centered in these feminist counterpublics.

The noise of sharing and publics of silence

babe broke the story about Ansari on January 13, 2018, and the piece was subsequently shared over 14,000 times on Facebook. As an exposé of the sexual violence that is immanent in casual heterosexual encounters, it was published following Ansari's award at the Golden Globes, in line with #MeToo's focus on shaming and criminalizing individual perpetrators, a strategy that had already resulted in the taking down of numerous celebrities as well as other high-profile figures. According to Grace, what specifically sparked her to tell her story and *babe* to report it was the need to call out Ansari's conduct and to hold him accountable, especially because of the gap between his sexual misconduct during the evening and his public persona as a feminist ally and a keen observer of modern romance. Following his repeated attempts to have sex with her despite her "verbal and non-verbal cues to indicate how uncomfortable and distressed she was" (Way 2018), Grace accused Ansari of sexual assault. Furthermore, the intimate account of the date and hookup, from start to finish, is told from the perspective of Grace as a means of elevating the stories of women, which historically have been sidelined, suppressed, or disbelieved (this is particularly the case for women of color, working-class women, and LBT women). Indeed, there has been an outpouring of deeply disturbing accounts of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence from cisgender white heterosexual women since the beginning of the #MeToo movement and then in the aftermath of *babe*'s pivot to heterosexual dating and hookups. The scale and scope of these accounts is staggering, to say the least.

But, what is different about the *babe* report, and this is what caused the firestorm, is whether what happened to Grace could be considered sexual assault. Complicating the allegations, per the *babe* report, is that Grace did not explicitly say "no," and at some point, Ansari did read Grace's "cues," stopped attempting to have sex with her, and called her a car. The article split the #MeToo counterpublic between those who sympathized with Grace (e.g., Koehler 2018) because of the sexually coercive aspects of the evening she describes—whereby she had little agency over the events, in part given Ansari's aggressive pace and tone-deaf behavior—to those who blamed Grace (and *babe*; e.g., Flanagan 2018), for damaging Ansari's reputation and career by refusing to take responsibility for not directly expressing her desires (or disgust) to Ansari. Other mitigating positions also emerged, including the ire that was directed at the website for first soliciting Grace to tell her story, then doing shoddy and inflammatory reporting, and for sidetracking the public conversations from pressing issues of abuse and workplace harassment to the sexual ambiguities and complexities of heterosexual dating (see, e.g., Stevens 2018).

The outpouring occurred largely via the sharing of links to online news media, blogs, zines, tweets, individual posts, video clips, and even the broadcasting of a radio conversation concerning the original story, across Facebook as well as other digital sites. The links spanned established, commercial media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and CNN to lesser-known and independent zines and blogs. Such practices of sharing content on social media have become central to the dissemination of news, information, and perspectives and are clearly important to the making of feminist counterpublics. They are enabled by contemporary digital technologies that allow participants to be active by following links that have been shared on social media, according to Damian Trilling, Petro Tolochko, and Björn Burscher (2017). These practices elevate the significance of sharing in shaping news flows today, where audiences or readers themselves play a role in redistributing content by means of sharing (Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher 2017). Bente Kalsnes and Anders Olof Larsson (2018) argue that such processes may impact audience engagement and give news stories the potential to go viral. The increasing significance of such practices can also impact the making of news itself: "understanding not only what content users will want to consume but also what content they are likely to pass along may be key to how stories are put together and even what stories get covered in the first place. Thus, news sharing is a central aspect of . . . the hybrid media system" (2018, 1669).

Keeping in mind the significance of "shareworthiness" within the hybrid media system, as well as its various implications for politics and meaning making, we examine the links that users shared the most concerning this story on Facebook. What we seek to underscore, and the data bears this out, is that counterpublics are not stable, clearly identifiable entities but constellations that cohere around sharing practices.

Researching Facebook

Facebook allows users to search for all shared items on a particular topic (links, posts, videos, pages, etc.). One may search for all posts, shared by anyone, for a particular date range. We focused on all shared links, since these can come from various parts of the hybrid media system—more traditional news media as well as less traditional sources such as blogs. To be sure, the contexts for sharing items can vary significantly: individuals may share items they agree with or disagree with. But our emphasis on the sharing itself, rather than its varying contexts, follows psychological literature on the "illusion of truth" effect (Hasher, Goldstein, and Toppino 1977). With this effect, psychologists argue that repeated exposure to an argument, even when the goal is to discredit it, increases its believability as true (Hasher, Goldstein,

and Toppino 1977; Skurnik et al. 2005). Based on this, we argue that the most shared items on Facebook have an impact on how users engage with the Ansari case, regardless of why or how individual pieces were shared.

We searched for links that mentioned the *babe* article (search terms = "Aziz Ansari babe" and "Aziz Ansari assault") on Facebook up to four months after the story first broke. Subtracting items after the cutoff date and duplicates, there were 212 individual results, variously shared between zero and upwards of 24,000 times. The results included shared links, their titles and dates, and the number of times a particular link was shared. We focused on those shared more than 50 times (and the sources of these high-circulation items), identifying 84 separate links that met this criterion. Table 1 shows a breakdown of items shared by number of shares.

The sharing of particular links on social media may be affected by a number of factors, including the emotional tone and the status of the sender (Kalsnes and Larsson 2018, 1672–73). Here, we are interested in the most shared items and their sources as a window onto the emergence and constitution of a certain kind of feminist counterpublic around this case. Focusing on links shared more than 50 times, we take the number of shares as an indicator of the perspectives that were more widely circulated and therefore more likely to be impactful. We define sharing over 1,000 times as "high level of engagement," while the 43 items shared between 101 and 1,000 times are taken as "medium level of engagement." The 34 items shared between 51 and 100 times are understood as "some level of engagement," and items shared less than 51 times are defined as "low level of engagement" and generally not included in our analysis.[7]

We are also interested in the sources of the most shared items (as well as the converse of this), and table 2 shows the sources of items of "high" and well as "medium" engagement. Perhaps not surprisingly, the "high engagement" pieces include items from mainstream corporate media news outlets as well as contributions from feminist zines. The top two items, from the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic*, were shared significantly more than others and indicate an especially high level of engagement. These point to the reach and impact of mainstream, corporate media. On the other hand, the feminist outlets of *Jezebel* and *Bust*, as well as the racially progressive website *Very Smart Brothas*, also enjoyed considerable (high or medium) engagement. Items with "low levels of engagement" (which did not make it into our sample), while also including mainstream, corporate sources such as CNN and *USA Today*, were much more likely to include small US-based websites and blogs as well as non-US-based outlets.

[7] These categories are for heuristic purposes and are necessarily imperfect.

Table 1. Items Shared on Facebook over 50 Times by Number of Shares

Number of Shares	Items Shared
51–100	34
101–500	34
501–1,000	9
Over 1,000	7
	$N = 84$

Eighty-four items were shared 50 or more times, which constitutes our sample, and we examined each piece for the following: first, stance toward the *babe* article and central arguments for this stance; second, discourses on contemporary US heterosexual dating and hookup culture; and third, the role of race/racisms within this case.

As we explain below, none of the items in our sample discussed race in any in-depth way. For this reason, we did a second search specifically on the Ansari story and race (search term: "Aziz Ansari assault racism") up to eight months after it initially broke. We found two pieces, a beta version of a blog by an African American woman (*ShaRhonda Tribune*, shared 26 times) and a

Table 2. Sources of High and Medium Engagement

Sources of Engagement	Number of Shares
High:	
New York Times	23,508
The Atlantic	18,056
Vox	5,008
Jezebel	3,208
Bust	2.092
The Guardian	1,359
Washington Post	1,261
Medium:	
Vox	896
Daily Wire	835
Huffington Post	814
Vox	735
YouTube	668
Buzzfeed	665
Very Smart Brothas	659
Business Insider	580
TMZ	537

Note.The multiple appearances of *Vox* in this table refer to multiple pieces published by *Vox* that met our criteria for analysis.

piece from a queer woman of color on the radical queer blog *Bully Bloggers* (shared a handful of times). We contrast the ways in which these pieces discussed the Ansari case to its framing in the circulated items we examined in order to show the borders and limits of networked feminisms.

What is said (and what is left unsaid)

Thirty-eight items were merely descriptive (describing developments in the story without taking a clear position). Of those that took a position, the central contentions involved defining what actually happened in the event between Ansari and Grace, the meaning of consent, and what the event says about the current state of gender, heterosexuality, and power relations within the broader US culture. Twenty-seven pieces either supported the *babe* piece or took a generally supportive stance concerning the issues of power and consent it brought up. Eleven pieces critiqued the specific article as problematic while expressing general support for the concerns of the #MeToo movement. Three pieces critiqued the coverage from an explicitly anti-#MeToo and anti-feminist perspective. Finally, five pieces, while not remaining merely descriptive, took no clear position vis-à-vis the *babe* piece.

The most prominent example of a supportive stance toward the piece is an article published on *Vox* titled "The Aziz Ansari Story Is Ordinary: That's Why We Have to Talk about It" (North 2018). Shared over 5,000 times, the piece uses the *babe* article as a jumping off point to take seriously the relations of power that shape heterosexual dating culture. While writings that critique the *babe* piece are fewer in number, the most prominent pieces were shared significantly more times. For example, an editorial in the *New York Times* titled "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty: Of Not Being a Mind Reader" (Weiss 2018) was shared over 23,000 times. It argues that the Ansari story is not a #MeToo story but rather merely "bad sex." The author insists that the *babe* story does not acknowledge women's agency. The discrepancy in the number of shares between these two items may be shaped by the relative prominence and prestige of each publication since the *New York Times* is one of the oldest and most elite newspaper publications in the United States and *Vox* is significantly newer and less revered. Alternatively, the difference may be taken as a reflection of one stance or another toward this case, and it may even be that more participants were inclined to side with Ansari over Grace.

At the same time, regardless of the ideological differences and fractures within this feminist counterpublic, they are nonetheless overridden by omissions of race. Here is the startling point: of the 84 items we examined, none discusses race in any depth. Quite curiously, 81 of the articles sidestep the relevance of race in an encounter between a Brown Muslim man and a

presumably white woman that is occupying national attention in the United States. None of these repeatedly shared articles sees fit to remark on or locate the story within the cultural (or historical) context of race. Rather, the articles steadfastly focus on the details of the case and what it does or does not say about contemporary heterosexual dating culture. Authors write passionately about the significance of #MeToo, its proper scope, and whether the Ansari case is a legitimate #MeToo case.

As few as three pieces briefly mention race. Two, written by authors reputed to take antifeminist or politically conservative approaches, do so as a way to criticize #MeToo and its associated take on this particular event. A piece in the *Atlantic* titled "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari" (Flanagan 2018), shared over 18,000 times, characterizes the *babe* piece as merely "revenge porn." On race, the author writes: "I thought it would take a little longer for the hit squad of privileged young white women to open fire on Brown-skinned men. I had assumed that on the basis of intersectionality and all that, they'd stay laser focused on college-educated white men for another few months. But we're at warp speed now, and the revolution—in many ways so good and so important—is starting to sweep up all sorts of people into its conflagration." Likewise, the piece "The Ridiculous Sex Assault Allegations against Aziz Ansari Prove That #MeToo Is a Witch Hunt" (Walsh 2018), shared over 800 times, also mentions race: "We are at a point where a privileged white woman can launch accusations at a Brown-skinned Muslim man, and the white woman will be automatically believed. Women, even white women, have ascended to the top of the Left's sacred Victim Hierarchy."

Both of these pieces, though expressing different sentiments regarding #MeToo and its feminist goals, bring up race in order to critique the *babe* piece. And yet neither article develops this perspective. Race is mentioned, and it is quickly discarded. The third piece mentions race in response to the *Atlantic* article. Published in *Jezebel* and shared over 3,000 times, the article rebuts the former's argument about the role of race in the Ansari case, arguing that the author "uses race as a rhetorical device for her disdain of #MeToo" (Shepherd 2018). Hence, while a handful of articles of varying perspectives consider race to some extent, none do so in an in-depth way. That is, none consider the relevance of racial difference to this story or its shaping through the racializations of sexual assault and their ongoing impacts.

This becomes especially evident when contrasted to the results of our subsequent search for racially conscious discussions of the *babe* piece. These highlight the relevance of race but in ways that do not affect the contouring of this networked feminist counterpublic. In the two main results, race is significant and central. African American author ShaRonda Knott-Dawson

shifts the focus from the specific Ansari case to a broader consideration of white women's *perceptions* of sexual danger from the perspective of histories of US racisms. Referencing the tragic murder of Emmett Till, she writes: "Because of the historical and present way that white women's fear, real or perceived, is used as a tool of racial oppression, I cannot support 'Grace' or the #MeToo movement, that includes white women accusing men of color, of sexual misconduct, based solely on how a white woman *perception* of danger" (Knott-Dawson 2018).

The second piece was from the queer radical *Bully Bloggers* and shared but a handful of times. By queer woman of color Angela Jones, it engages discourses of heterosexual sex as well as racialized sexual politics in the United States. Critically, this piece also references the racialized history of sexual assault in the United States and how it pertains to white women's perceptions of sexual encounters:

> He [Ansari] has said he is not religious but was raised Muslim, and he is an Indian American. By all accounts, Grace is white. There is ample research in the social sciences that empirically show that institutionalized white supremacy creates cognitive biases in individuals, and so it is crucial that we ask how these cognitive biases shape sexual encounters. For example, when white women accuse men of color of sexual assault, we must consider if and how these racist cognitive biases might be shaping perceptions of these encounters. We should use this an invitation to think through how race is affecting our conversation about sexual assault at the present moment. (Jones 2018)

If anything, these two pieces underscore the deracialized character of the dominant conversations on Facebook, which came up in our original search regarding the *babe* story. In these conversations, race is largely absent. When it is mentioned, its invocations are fleeting and superficial. In contrast, these latter two pieces recognize that sexual assault and violence have histories of racialization in the United States, which continues to have implications for women's perceptions of sexual danger. Shared significantly less than pieces from corporate media or even better-known feminist and other progressive zines and falling into our "low level of engagement category," however, these radical queer and antiracist blogs remain at the edges of dominant conversations.

What needs to be noted: Race, sex, history

These critical interventions matter because, as antiracist feminist scholars have long pointed out, issues of sexual assault and violence, or heterosexual dating and hookups, are not just about gender. For South Asian men such

as Ansari, the discussions are framed, as Vrushali Patil and Bandana Purkayastha (2018) show, through the racialized production of an "Indian rape culture" that has its roots in British colonial processes. The so-called 1857 Indian Mutiny, for example, was a rebellion of Indian soldiers who worked for the East India Company in the 1850s. The British proliferated a discourse of sexual and physical violence on the part of Indian men toward British women in order to justify their violent crushing of the rebellion and the subsequent solidification of colonial rule on the Subcontinent. Reproduced by global North missionaries as well as development and human rights organizations, such discourses form a cultural memory of the sexual dangers posed by Brown men.

While the United States does not share Britain's history of colonialism in India, it certainly consumed images of Brown and Black men produced by British and other European colonial powers. For instance, E. M. Foster's iconic novel *A Passage to India* chronicles a tale of another namesake, Dr. Aziz, being (falsely) accused of sexually assaulting a young white woman, Adela, in ways that weave together racial difference, desire, and anxiety with sexual and gendered fantasies. More recently, the "war on terror" has also focused on the dangers posed by Muslim men, including as rapists (Serisier 2017). The point here is not that sexual aggression and violence do not occur at the hands of Brown/Muslim men, but it is to pause at the overdetermined histories that continue to shape the meanings of these encounters today. For example, comparing mainstream US news coverage of two prominent sexual assault cases that occurred at about the same time in the United States and India—a 2012 rape case in Delhi, India, and a 2012 rape case in Steubenville, Ohio—Patil and Purkayastha (2015) reveal that while the Indian case was constructed as representative of Indian patriarchal culture, the US case was constructed as specific to its particular situation.

We recall these pasts to say that when we deal with instances of heterosexual sexual misconduct and assault today, we are not simply dealing with sexual interactions between two individuals, or even with broader systemic cisgender and heterosexual understandings of appropriate sexual behavior. In societies with white supremacist histories such as the United States, men of color have all too frequently been at the center of public discussions or, more accurately, public inflammations on discussions on sexual violence and sexual encounters gone wrong, leaving deep traces in terms of who is considered a perpetrator and who is considered a legitimate victim.[8] Powered by notions of immanent criminality, these histories reproduce the myth of

[8] See Crenshaw (1991), Cuklanz (1995), Moorti (2001), Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald (2002), Jackson (2013), and Patil and Purkayastha (2015).

the Black or Brown or Muslim rapist. For Black men in the United States and elsewhere, this was especially perpetrated in the context of the slave trade and its aftermath. In the Jim Crow South, the supposed threat of rape was routinely an excuse for the lynchings that took place (Davis 1983). In fact, Angela Davis (1983) compellingly notes that rape laws were typically introduced to allow upper-class white men to protect their wives, daughters, and sisters—this even as Black women were subject to systemic, institutionalized forms of rape. While Black men are constructed as perpetrators, Black and other racialized women have had to and continue to struggle to be recognized as victims of sexual and other forms of violence (Crenshaw 1991). What also needs to be considered is how newer digital technologies and the social practices surrounding them give new life to these older ideologies.

Modalities of race within this neoliberal, "postracial" moment

Today, assumptions that we are in a postracial or colorblind moment seek to locate these histories safely in the past. In contrast, critics have explained the various ways in which race continues to matter (Bonilla-Silva 2017). The racial dimension of sexual assault in particular has what Sara Ahmed (2004, 118) might call a "sticky" quality. That is, because of racial and imperial histories, such charges stick to the bodies of racialized men with greater speed and intensity than white men. Histories of racialization shape our cultural memory and orient us in different ways toward differently racialized perpetrators and victims. Such pasts shape what we "feel" and "know" about different cultural or racial groups prior to dealing with the particulars of a given case (Patil and Purkayastha 2018). They contribute to ongoing racial disparities in sentencing for sexual assault and other crimes (Gross, Possley, and Stephens 2017). In contrast, cases such as that of the white Stanford student Brock Turner, who assaulted a woman (who was eventually revealed to be mixed race) and received barely a sentence, point to how elite white men may be able to brush such charges off. Based on racial and other privileges, the charges do not stick (Koren 2016).

Furthermore, in the contemporary colorblind moment, the neoliberal, digitized context in which feminist counterpublics emerge is especially relevant. An article published a few days after the *babe* piece, "The Aziz Ansari Story Is a Mess, but So Are the Arguments against It" (Tiffany 2018), gives the backstory. Noting that the website actually approached Grace for her story, the article begins with *babe*'s relationship to the media startup *The Tab*:

> Founded in 2009, *The Tab* launched as a series of campus-specific blogs written primarily by unpaid writers and editors who could earn "prize money" by hitting specific page-view goals. This incentive-based

> structure led to a two-pronged approach to content: anodyne "relatable" blog posts that take little time to write and circulate widely on Facebook, and controversial opinion or topical news reactions that can go viral by inciting conversational rage. . . . *Babe*'s Brooklyn office opened in 2017, and it currently has a small staff of early-20-something reporters and editors, many of whom initially entered *The Tab* ecosystem for college extracurricular activities. Few of them have had previous paid jobs in journalism. (Tiffany 2018)

The case was indeed "controversial . . . go[ing] viral by inciting conversational rage." An important component of its virality was that it concerned something many heterosexual women can identify with—going out on a date or hooking up with a man. The particular significance of this case lies in its marking a transition from a focus on the abusiveness of elite (mostly white) men in power in the workplace to everyday heterosexual dating and hookup encounters. In this vein, pieces that took the Ansari case seriously saw it as a "very common," "ordinary" scenario symptomatic of our dominant heterosexual culture. While the white men accused of sexual misconduct or sexual assault prior to Ansari were constructed as less common, more extreme cases, Ansari was made to stand for the general sexual danger most women encounter. Thus, even though Ansari is a celebrity, the case shifted attention from elite figures in the entertainment industry to ordinary contexts, and from less common to more common scenarios of perhaps greater political import, through the figure of a Brown man. It is perhaps from this perspective that we can begin to understand impassioned statements that sought to equate Ansari's behavior with the likes of Weinstein. And, even though this equivalence was debated passionately within the feminist counterpublics, the way rape and sexual assault stick to the bodies of racialized men ensured that this was fodder for consideration. To be underscored is how such charges adhere to the bodies of racialized men with greater speed and intensity than those of white men—even in a supposedly colorblind conversation.

The digital environment also ensured that despite the debate and controversy around the Ansari-Grace encounter, new modalities of racialization prevailed. The dialogue itself developed through extensive sharing in the hybrid media system, in a way that did not happen for previous cases. Almost every piece shared more than 50 times also included a prominent visual image of Ansari.

Following the illusion of truth effect, more significant than the specific positions of individual articles or senders are the effects of such sharing at the aggregate level. Collectively, and exceeding the intentions of particular

sharers, individuals shared stories about Ansari about 70,000 times, each time furthering the association of this Brown man with sexual danger and controversy while seemingly saying nothing about race. The images produce a racialization that is at once extradiscursive, visual, and affective. If explicit racisms and racist intentions on the part of individuals are associated with more traditional forms of racism, the current case is an example of how racialization may operate in a networked, digitized, neoliberal, so-called colorblind environment—quite outside of and apart from individual intentions.

In contrast to the hypervisibility of Ansari, Grace understandably stayed anonymous and hence has been unmarked and whitened by default. This is because, as critical work on colorblind ideology argues, when race is not specified, whiteness is typically assumed (Crenshaw et al. 2019). Scholars point out that allegations of sexual assault are simply more likely to stick and have repercussions when the victims are elite white women (Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-Macdonald 2002; Jackson 2013). For example, the social, class, and racial statuses of the women who initially accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault have everything to do with the hybrid media coverage that they received and the subsequent criminal charges against him. But far less attention has been given to the Black women who have been R. Kelly's targets.[9] This does not mean that all white women (or men) are positioned in the same way, of course. Class, education, religion, sexuality, age, ability, and gender identity also matter when it comes to which women are deemed respectable and worth protecting.[10] Even privileged white women considered worthy of protection are subject to the interests and wishes of elite, typically white men.

Nonetheless, research indicates that the racial politics of sexual assault are brought to bear especially when the perpetrators are racialized men and the victims are (especially elite) white women (Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-Macdonald 2002). An outcome of the presumption of Grace's whiteness has been the foregrounding of gender—and hence the focus on the pain of (especially elite) white women. Insofar as questions of racial difference have not featured in these networked feminisms, this implicit foregrounding of privileged white women's pain has gone unchallenged. It is further consolidated by the technology-specific social practices—the sharing, the recirculating of images, regardless of stance and intentions—that

[9] A recent documentary attempts to correct this invisibilizing of Black women; see *Surviving R. Kelly* (2019).

[10] See Roberts (1997), Skeggs (1997), Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald (2002), and MacKenzie and Marcel (2009).

forge the networked counterpublics. Thus, despite the controversy, debates, and ambivalences in response to the *babe* story—and here we must note that Katy Way, who broke the story, is a woman of color and that other women of color have participated in the counterpublic—the histories of racialization and the modalities of colorblind networked feminist counterpublics converge to reinforce emphases on gender, heterosexuality, and privileged white women's pain and suffering.

To be clear, we are not arguing that Ansari's behavior is not problematic, nor that we do not need to have difficult conversations about it. Rather, what we are arguing is that the singular attention to gender and the elision of other hierarchies is deeply inadequate for understanding the significance of this case. The color-blind discussion on Ansari not only fails to disrupt histories of racialization, it also produces a new racialization that is at once nondiscursive, visual, and affective. Set against this historical and technological backdrop, then, race is multiply present even as it is absent in the conversations around the Ansari-Grace encounter. We thus point here to the difficulty and even impossibility of a colorblind, feminist discussion of heterosexual culture in white supremacist societies such as the United States. We suggest that the lines between feminist publics and counterpublics are blurred—#MeToo's counterpublic also functions as a feminist public structured by racial, class, and other politics.

Concluding thoughts

#MeToo is perhaps the most prominent networked feminist counterpublic in existence today. Its possibilities and dangers are forged within a hybrid media system shaped by the neoliberal political economic and technological impetus for likes, clicks, and shareworthiness. *babe's* story on the Ansari-Grace encounter emerged and exists within this system. As the first high-profile case in the #MeToo era involving a person of color, it is a lens onto #MeToo's possibilities and dangers as they pertain to the politics of race. Our analysis of the most shared items on Facebook shows a steadfastly colorblind discussion on sex, power, and violence, which focuses on gender while eliding race (and other dimensions of power and difference).

And yet, we argue, race cannot be so easily dispensed with. The racialized history of sexual assault in the United States leaves traces in terms of how we orient to differently racialized perpetrators and victims. Hierarchies of race (as well as class, sexuality, and so on) shape how and when allegations of sexual misconduct and violence come into view, resonate, and actually stick. Newer technologies of the hybrid media system, access to this system, and the social practices of networking collude to reproduce older racial

histories in newer forms. Ansari's hypervisibility, and the contentious move to equate him with the likes of Weinstein, is a case study in how this stickiness can operate. The repeated sharing of images of Ansari's face and body, regardless of individual perspectives, furthers the association of Brown men with sexual controversy and violence and reproduces the ways these allegations adhere to the bodies of racialized men. Relatedly, what also endures is a whitened and privileged feminist subject position in the emerging counterpublic. As the actress Gabrielle Union said on #MeToo, in an interview prior to the *babe* article: "I think the floodgates have opened for white women. . . . I don't think it's a coincidence whose pain has been taken seriously. Whose pain we have showed historically and continued to show. Whose pain is tolerable and whose pain is intolerable. And whose pain needs to be addressed *now*" (Krischer 2017).

Here we are less interested in taking sides on this particular case than in locating it within the broader context of public conversations on sexual harassment and sexual violence that digital feminisms have helped mobilize. Public sentiment appears in favor of distinguishing issues of sexual violence from sexual misconduct as in Ansari's case (four out of six items shared more than 1,000 times on Ansari/Grace took this position), and we are sympathetic to the difficult task of expanding the conversation around sexual assault beyond more clear-cut cases, such as those of Weinstein, to the larger culture.

Our interest is in engaging networked feminist counterpublics that proceed through color-blind ideologies. We argue that despite their potential for advancing feminist causes and forging feminist counterpublics, scholarly assessments of networked feminist activism must proceed through intersectional lenses. We insist that the racialized histories of sexual assault and violence that have shaped the United States cannot be backgrounded or dispensed with, especially as these networked forms of activism take hold. These histories complicate any simple, binary approach to victims and perpetrators, and between publics and counterpublics. Rather, an intersectional lens underscores the mix of racial, gender, and sexual politics that shape which assaults are visible and which are invisible in our cultural memory, which assaults make the news and become the focus for "others" as well as for "us," which "perpetrators" are constructed as dangerous, which are disappeared into privilege, and which victims are visible and which are not. Networked feminist counterpublics that are unable to contend with these complexities are fundamentally blunted in their impact as oppositional or subaltern publics. As antiracist feminist scholars, we argue that not only are single-axis analyses of sexual misconduct and violence inadequate for addressing complex, intersecting relations of power in contemporary US

culture, they may actually reproduce and further heighten racialized hierarchies as a result of digital technologies. We insist that we can and must do better in this age of feminist networked activism.

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