

1 Introduction: What's Laughter Got to Do with It?

Consider this hypothetical scene: Two feminist scholars are having a hotel breakfast in the very beginning of the #MeToo movement in October 2017. “Well, I’m gonna have some more coffee, possibly an orange juice,” one of them says. “Me too!,” the other replies, making the hashtag symbol up in the air with her fingers. In a split second, both are laughing, helplessly. The more they realize how inappropriate it is to laugh, the harder it becomes not to, and tears are soon running down their cheeks. Starting from this scene of absurd laughter out of place and its contagious energy, this book sets out to investigate feminist tactics of resistance in times of violent online sexism. Online sexism, hate, and harassment aim at silencing subjects coded as female or feminine by resorting to affective mechanisms such as shaming and fear. We are interested in how humor and laughter can help to reroute and reshape these forces and what their affective volatility may add to our understanding of mundane politics. Zooming in on the dynamics of shame, in particular, we further examine the complex ways in which sexuality operates within the affective politics of social media in connection with shame and shaming—and, by extension, the potentialities involved in shamelessness.

In what follows, we move from the markedly nonhumorous #MeToo movement and its ways of rewiring gendered sexual shame to instances where it collides with laughter; to the politics and ethics of commenting on and publishing hateful or otherwise offensive tweets, posts, and messages; to the appropriation of derogatory terminology for resistant ends; and to the tactic of making visible the exclusion of women from the realm of professional expertise and authority within the “Congrats, you have an all male panel!” Tumblr blog. We look into unsolicited vulva pics, consider

the possibilities and limitations of satire based on the reversal of gender roles, and argue for the value of absurdity in turning things around. We ask what has given the initiatives we examine their particular affective lift and also scrutinize the conditions and constraints that they both operate in and generate.

Humor and laughter are possibly not the first qualities or tactics to be associated with feminist activism, online or off. The “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2010, 2015)—the one who disrupts other people’s sense of happiness and refuses to laugh when expected to do so—more commonly embodies feminist tactics in the cultural imaginary. There certainly seems to be equally little to laugh about in the ubiquity of online hate, sexism, and misogyny (Jane 2016; Penny 2013) fueled by toxic masculinity (e.g., Consalvo 2012; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Massanari 2015; Phillips 2015; Salter and Blodgett 2012). As scholarly attention has begun to cluster on online feminist resistance and activism, it has focused on the affective dynamics of anger, rage, and frustration, as exemplified by the high visibility of the #MeToo movement (e.g., Boyle 2019; Chamberlain 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018; Guha, Gajjala, and Stabile 2019; Koivunen, Kyrölä, and Ryberg 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2019).

At the same time, humor plays a key role in how and where attention clusters on social media, which is increasingly providing platforms and modes for activist mobilization and critique. In this book, we explore feminist initiatives that have grown popular, even viral, and exemplify what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, 10), in her discussion of popular feminism, identifies as the imperative of visibility within online attention economy. Here, all kinds of campaigns, from advertising to activism, aim at virality where content—hashtags, posts, images, video clips, animated GIFs, or something else—gains a certain liveliness through its networked sharing, circulation, variation, multiplication, liking, and commenting. *Virality* is descriptive of how content spreads across platforms and geographical terrains in ways that cannot be planned, foreseen, controlled, or achieved by any single individual or group. In the optimized visibility, attention, reach, and volume of redistribution that virality entails, it remains something of a ubiquitous goal. Virality involves affectivity, which Tony D. Sampson (2012, 14) describes as “mesmeric fascinations, passionate interests, and joyful encounters.” As discussed in the chapters that follow, the registers of dismay, disgust, anger, and outrage nevertheless play an equally key role

in how people engage with social media content, possibly setting it in viral circulation of varying lengths and speeds. Outrage alone involves considerable capacity to set bodies in motion, as the #MeToo movement aptly illustrates.

In addition to the viral logic that guides our general methodological approach, we examine examples that remained emergent without fully trending in order to add diversity and nuance to our analysis. Although our interest is firmly in networked forms of feminism, we are primarily interested not in online feminist spheres, communities, and networks and their histories and activist contexts as such (see Marwick 2019) but in the viral and affective logics of resistant formations that may be more fleeting. Besides the social media examples that are at the heart of the book, we analyze mainstream media coverage in order to map out the broader public visibility and interpretations of contemporary discussions of sexism and harassment.

Throughout the book, laughter operates both as a key theme and as a methodological tool because we have been drawn to examples that attract or repel, entice or annoy us, rather than those leaving us unmoved. It follows that we address viral examples that have pulled us in or simply made us laugh. In the chapters that follow, we explore the role of humor and laughter in rewiring the affective circuits of anger, outrage, shame, and shamelessness that fuel resistant activities. How can laughter be an answer to something as serious as sexism? When is it inappropriate to laugh? Under which terms do feminist tactics of resistance become successfully viral? And how and when may they fall short? Who gets to laugh and about what or whom? And what happens when such relations are flipped or become utterly unclear? *Who's Laughing Now?* sets out to account for feminist tactics at a political moment when laughter is sorely needed.

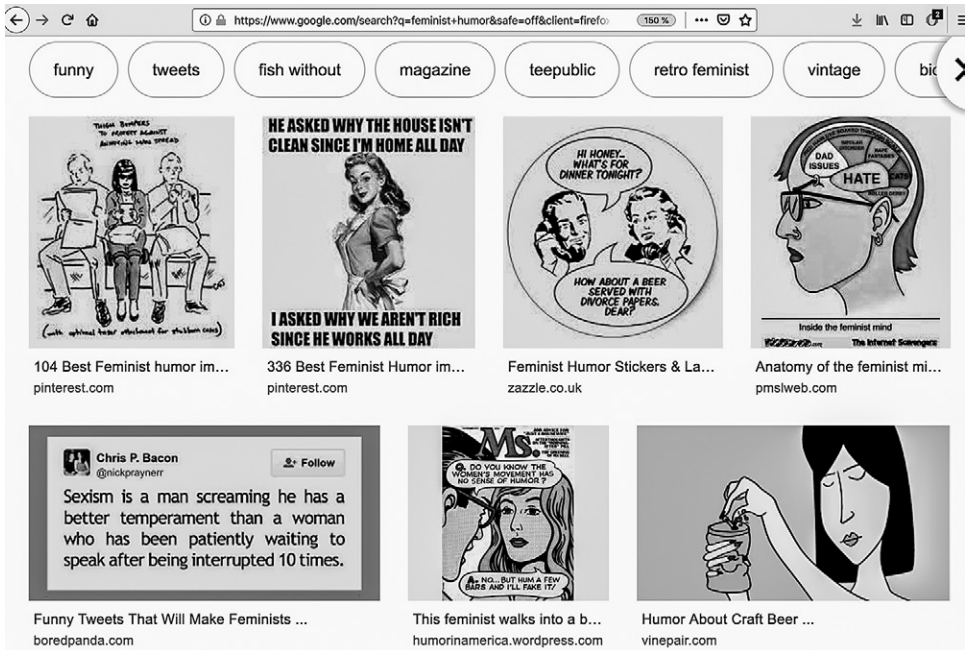
Feminist online humor certainly exists, but its general visibility is not high (see Rentschler 2015; Rentschler and Thrift 2015; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018). For example, a Google search for feminist memes will result in ample hits on antifeminist memes. Similarly, the results of a search for feminist humor display a range of commentary on humorless feminists (those killjoys). This is by no means a shocking revelation, given the degree to which online humor has been identified as “kicking down” and as being disproportionately leveled at women, queers, and racial others (Kanai 2016; Marwick 2014). Misogyny runs rife on Twitter exchanges and discussion

forums where laughter—laughing at and at the expense of someone—is instrumental in the maintenance and reproduction of social relations of power. As Jessica Ringrose and Emilie Lawrence (2018, 686) note, existing research has shown that most online humor is sexist and “working to reinforce and reaffirm notions of gender that are binary and hierarchically opposite.” There is an aggressive edge, both sharp and blunt, to much online humor, which trades in sexism, racism, and homophobia and makes downward punches toward socially marginalized and subordinated groups (Lockyer and Pickering 2005). This landscape may come across as gloomy, indeed. Powered by mockery, ridicule, and humiliation, it normalizes misogyny and reinforces male domination (Highfield 2016; Marwick 2013; Massanari 2015; Milner 2014, 2016; Phillips 2015; Phillips and Milner 2017). This, however, is not the whole story, or a book looking at feminist humor in social media, such as this one, would be a redundant project.

Online humor trades in and contributes to networked misogyny that includes persistent, casual sexism; slut-shaming carried out toward women by other women; and alt-right gender ideology and physical violence, celebrated within the so-called incel rebellion of involuntarily celibate men who organize on online platforms and target women with their misogynistic hate (Banet-Weiser 2018). Despite the differences between its articulations and the range of intensities that it entails, “popular misogyny” involves a fantasy of returning women to an imaginary place where they need not be heard, turning back the social clock, and getting back to how things once were (even if these never were). This should not be understood within a simple gender binary as something that men do to women: people of all genders can have strong investments in the status quo or in resistance toward it in ways that fuel and inspire tracking, critiquing, and devaluing the actions of those whose political stances, sexual preferences, or lifestyle choices do not conform to their own. Sexism involves a conservative impulse that points to shortcomings in how the term gets deployed in referring to sticking to, preserving, and conserving things. Conservatism of this kind does not just preserve but actively aims to transform, alter, and influence the social world. It is, in essence, actively regressive. The invitation to “get back to the kitchen,” generously offered to women who voice their opinions online (Jane 2014a), would not make sense unless women had not already left the kitchen or were, in fact, never confined to it.

At the same time, much feminist humor trades in popular imageries (advertisements and illustrations) of the 1950s and 1960s that display heterosexual romance, female intimacy, and blissful nuclear family life with clearly assigned gender roles. It adds novel texts to these and, in doing so, practices *détournement* of the situationist kind where objects of popular culture are appropriated for alternative political ends. Like situationists replacing the captions of popular comics with lines from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (a 1967 Marxist critique of consumer culture), feminist humor that is commodified as fridge magnets, postcards, coffee mugs, coasters, and a range of visuals shared online trades in vintage imageries combined with sarcastic, ironic, political, or absurd captions. A Google Image search done at the time of this writing for "feminist humor" resulted in a hit to a Pinterest post with a woman posing in an apron, combined with this caption: "He asked why the house isn't clean since I'm home all day. I asked why we aren't rich since he works all day." Another search hit was to a "retro feminist humor postcard." A man and a woman are holding phones: "Hi honey. What's for dinner tonight?" he asks. "How about a beer served with divorce papers, dear?" she answers.

This attachment of popular feminist humor to the gender imageries of decades past revolves around the institutions of heterosexuality of the white, Western, and middle-class kind: stay-at-home wives, more recently rebranded as "homemakers," are as specific to social class as they are to certain societies over others. This play with the past allows for reimagining it as one rife with snappy, sassy, bitchy, yet glamorous white women resisting patriarchal structures of oppression—and, in doing so, divesting these of their power. Such humor nevertheless remains regressive in the dictionary sense of returning to a former or less developed state, leaving the current moment (as well as the future moment) untouched. This indicates that, in order to be popular on the commodity market of coffee mugs and fridge magnets, feminist humor cannot have too sharp of a political edge. Feminist humor that targets a long-ago status quo is safe in the distance and disconnection that it operates with. The forms of humor addressed in this book, however, emerge in more immaterial, networked exchanges as social exchange, play, and critique. These resistant modes work within and further feed the clickbait media economy of scandal, attention, distraction, and titillation.



Google Image Search results for “feminist humor,” May 22, 2019.

Slutty Nordic Positionality

Without giving everything away at the outset, the most successful—in the sense of their visibility and spread—feminist online initiatives prioritize gender differences over other embodied differences and social relations of power. In fact, they tend to operate with a firmly binary gender logic reminiscent of feminist activist tactics of the 1970s. This logic unites feminist projects and provides them with much of their popular appeal and resonance while effacing from view other differences and relations that matter. As we argue in chapter 6, there is a certain allure to binary gender in feminist activism, and projects critiquing its operations may get stuck in its logic. For as decades of feminist critique have pointed out, a focus on binary gender—men and women, women and men, over and over again—renders invisible the intersections of diverse identity positions and social relations of power (e.g., Crenshaw 1991; Hird 2000; May 2014; Nash 2008). This, again, regularly involves positioning white women as default subjects of feminism (and beyond) and foregrounding their experiences.

It is therefore unsurprising, albeit dispiriting, that the female subjects to gain the most visibility in the feminist initiatives we explore tend to be white and, for the most part, middle class and heterosexual. On the one hand, sexism comes steeped in and intensely entangled with racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia in ways that require intersectional analyses. On the other hand, the feminist tactics of resistance that are most broadly discussed and acknowledged—and that may consequently have social impact—seldom foreground intersectionality. As in Banet-Weiser's (2018, 13) discussion of popular feminism, the most high-profile examples are "white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual." It follows that an examination of feminist success stories means analyzing the actions and stories of largely white women as well as those of *certain kinds* of white women. This necessitates asking not only who is laughing now but also whose laughter becomes heard and who gets to laugh in the first place.

Perhaps adding insult to injury, our analysis is authored by two white women—firmly middle class, admittedly middle aged, even if not necessarily straight. The first languages with which our white voices speak are Swedish and Finnish, respectively, and this book makes use of what we identify as "slutty Nordic positionality" in unpacking the dynamics of shame, shamelessness, and laughter connected to social media. With our Nordic bent, we contribute to a tradition of situated knowledge production (Haraway 1991) in a field where North American viewpoints tend to masquerade as universal. Since this is a book about social media—and hence the internet—our analysis moves across linguistic and national boundaries, and from one platform to another. Operating with both Nordic and North American examples and initiatives, we are much less interested in doing a comparative analysis than in making use of our own physical and cultural locations as productive analytical reserves. Our point is not that our positionality makes for objectively better knowledge but that there is productivity to integrating Nordic perspectives to debates and initiatives that, networked as they are, are irreverent of geography yet reverberate differently according to political and cultural context.

Our work is informed by Donna Haraway's way of theorizing positionality as a locus of knowledge production and as something by necessity partial, embodied, worldly (not innocent), and situated. According to Haraway (1991, 193), "positioning is . . . the key practice grounding knowledge"

because a position indicates how particular forms of power shape particular kinds of knowledge. Although Haraway emphasizes local forms of knowledge production, she does not dwell on the geopolitics of location and the difference an emphasis on the regional may make for knowledge projects. Positionality in feminist research is often a matter of accounting for intersecting identities of, for example, gender, race, sexuality, and class, but more rarely it is a question of considering the epistemological implications of regionality or nationality (Lykke 2004, 74). In a Hawawayian sense, Nordicness, as deployed here, is symbolic and material, fictitious and real. It is a regional formation shaped by strong traditions around social democracy, gender equality, and the welfare state (Mühleisen 2007, 176). In operating with Nordic positionality, we contribute to and diverge from common ways of imagining “Nordicness” as an imagined exclusionary and homogeneous regional identity that helps to sideline linguistic, colonial, and other historical differences (see Dahl, Liljeström, and Manns 2016; Martinsson, Griffin, and Giritli Nygren 2016). In both Sweden and Finland, powerful national imaginaries of being world leading in gender equality coexist with rising nationalism and violent racism—and as the avalanche of testimonies of sexual violence and harassment connected to #MeToo have made evident, painful discrepancies exist between theory and practice when it comes to gender equality.

Both Sweden and Finland are largely Lutheran in their cultural heritage, but they are notably secular in that religious overtones seldom play a vocal role in public and political debates. They are not Puritan when it comes to approaches and attitudes to sexuality and the dynamics of shame associated with it—a point elaborated in chapter 2. As our interests lie in thinking through the redistribution of sexual shame, we use sluttiness as a base note of sorts for a particular feminist attitude and sensibility. In doing so, we foreground the importance of sexual agency, playfulness, and the multiple pleasures that these allow for. Such is the slut who strides confidently through our writing as a vital reminder of how claiming a space for and indulging in pleasure—and laughter—for its own sake is a political act.

Oh, Shame!

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *offense* refers to “a breach of a law or rule; an illegal act,” “a thing that constitutes a violation

of what is judged to be right or natural,” “annoyance or resentment brought about by a perceived insult to or disregard for oneself,” and “the action of attacking someone or something.” These four aspects of offense are in active and rich use on online platforms where trolling and provocation abound and where affective ripples build, grow, and fade as people unwillingly and willingly misunderstand one another, attack each other’s persona and stance, and are offended by the comments and reactions of others (e.g., Tagg, Seargeant, and Brown 2017). Offense is readily given and taken in social media, and accusations of being easily offended—as in the title of snowflake associated with millennials—function as offenses in their own right. In social media content policies, offensiveness refers broadly to content that may be experienced as disturbing, such as sexuality, violence, or hate speech. This is in line with how offensiveness is more generally deployed as “the term of choice to flag whatever it is that bothers us so much about hearing an utterance of a slurring term” (Jeshion 2013, 354n4; also Marshall 1991). Many social media platforms ban content deemed offensive, and others tag it as “sensitive,” “adult,” or “NSFW” (see Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light 2019).

“You should be ashamed” and “Shame on you” are common enough rebukes in networked exchanges grown sharp or sour. As affective addresses, they position the targets of shame as inferior and failed—as people who should engage in self-reflection and critique, hang their heads in shame, and, preferably, apologize for the offense caused. The constant waves of offense rippling across Twitter and Facebook are inseparable from the affective dynamics of shaming involved in mocking, outing, critiquing, challenging, or disagreeing with others. A central focus of this book is on feminist tactics of resistance to shame and shaming (as in instances of slut-shaming), on the operationalizing of acts of shaming (as in publicizing offensive messages sent by others or in ridiculing the actions of others), and on the reworking and rerouting of shame (as in shifting shame from the victims to the perpetrators of sexual violence or as in feminist tactics of moving through shame toward shamelessness). Here, we build on Silvan S. Tomkins’s (2008, 200) conceptualization on shame as a strong, negative affect “induced by rejection by others and by self-doubt and self-contempt,” which, when increasing in intensity, can grow into a more incapacitating sense of humiliation. At the same time, shame involves the element of surprise and the potentiality to interrupt social hierarchies (Popa 2018).

Shame-humiliation is “the negative affect linked with love and identification” (Tomkins 2008, 636). As such, it is connected to and dependent on interest that becomes ruptured or refused when we are rejected, mocked, or disapproved by those whose recognition, approval, or desire we are seeking out. Shame entails a sense of failure, falling short, and feeling inferior, whether it is connected to failing to meet expectations or to violating a social norm (Tomkins 2008, 648). Shame operates within social relations, tapping into the ways in which one is perceived while also turning inward as one’s perception of oneself. There is nevertheless nothing automatic or causal about how shame builds up or fades away. In terms of the affective dynamics and politics that we examine, an attempt to shame does not necessarily stick but may bemuse, whereas a passing comment can unintentionally shame: “If someone expresses contempt for me, I may become angry and counter with contempt for him. The intention of the other to shame me does not necessarily mean I will experience shame” (Tomkins 2008, 370). Shame can linger, layer, and grow into a sense of humiliation; it can be perceived in the much lighter hues of embarrassment; or it can slide by so that others become embarrassed for the one who does not have a sense of shame.

The feminist tactics we address revolve around the dynamics of shame, often in complex ways. Slut-shaming, for example, is a tactic for policing the boundaries of acceptable, appropriately gendered, racialized, and sexualized femininity. This variation of putting women back into their imaginary place not as sexual agents inasmuch as the sexual property of chosen men, such as husbands and partners is countered in initiatives such as Slut-Walks (where women have, since 2011, taken to the streets to protest victim blaming and slut-shaming connected to sexual violence) as well as in more mundane refusals to be confined to its logic (as in the tweeting practices of Stormy Daniels discussed in chapter 4). As such a position of refusal, sluttiness, our chosen positionality, signifies inappropriate or shameless femininity.

The tactics examined in this book are markedly reactive in that they tend to emerge as the means of dealing with offense and injustice: #MeToo reacts to sexual harassment and violence; Instagram projects document, make visible, and comment on online harassment and are reactions to it; the appropriation of terms meant to hurt and shame is reactive in turning their meaning around; and the “Congrats, you have an all male panel!” Tumblr

blog reacts to sexism and the exclusion of women from the realm of expertise. Resistance, as such, entails a refusal to play along, conform to, accept, or be affected by the state of affairs on offer. Reactivity is a means of turning tables that allows for forms of parody, satire, and ridicule to emerge. At the same time, there is a certain passivity at its core, given that reactivity seldom involves queer or otherwise creative world making outside the parameters and power dynamics that it comments on and intervenes in. It can be claimed that such reactivity has been at the root of feminism as a social movement and social theory arguing for the equal rights for women since the nineteenth century, when such rights were not available. Although this is not the whole story, feminism has, throughout its history, responded to and worked against lack: the lack of rights, of equality, of space, of agency. And indeed, as Sara Ahmed (2015) argues, feminist critique of sexism is badly needed, given the persistence of sexism itself.

Our interest in feminist *tactics* is inspired by Michel de Certeau's (2002/1984) notion of tactics as everyday forms of opposition. We equally build on Megan Boler's (2008b) understanding of media tactics as interventions in hegemonic structures, whether they are dominant media systems or systemic forms of sexism. While recognizing the critical importance of feminist tactics that turn against or provide a wrench in the machinery of sexist power by lingering close to what is critiqued, we also seek out more open-ended and unpredictable ways of acting and relating. This is why we turn to laughter and, more specifically, to absurdity as a means of not merely turning things around or inside out but disrupting and eschewing the logic on offer. Such disruptions may be temporary or of the more lingering kind, and the permanence of the traces they leave—or fail to leave—is impossible to assess in the time of their unfolding. We therefore focus on their potentiality: the novel combinations, questions, and surprises that they allow and the possible social and political resonances that they may set in motion.

This Is Absurd!

According to its *Merriam-Webster* and *OED* definitions, the word *absurd* translates as “ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous,” as “extremely silly or ridiculous,” as “having no rational or orderly relationship to human life: meaningless,” and as “the state or condition in which

human beings exist in an irrational and meaningless universe.” The word *absurdity* is synonymous with “preposterousness, ridiculousness, ludicrousness, . . . idiocy, stupidity, foolishness, folly, silliness, inanity, insanity, as well as unreasonableness, irrationality, illogicality, nonsensicality, pointlessness, senselessness, incongruity.” In this sense, absurdity stands as the opposite of reason, rationality, and meaning. This is already encapsulated in its etymological root in the Latin word *absurdus*—“out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous.” Following this etymology, humor in absurdist registers plays with whatever is out of harmony with both reason and decency. In her taxonomy of humor, Marta Dynel (2014, 628) sees absurdity as building on untruthfulness and violating “the rules and norms of the real world.” For Dynel, absurdity, or nonsense, is distinct from both irony and surrealist humor, with which it is often conflated, in that it does not entail a negative evaluation or reaction toward what is being made fun of. In other words, absurd laughter can take flight toward wherever: there is freedom to its erratic jolts.

Theories of humor tend to be divided into three classic types: incongruity, relief, and superiority (e.g., Meyer 2000; Shifman and Blondheim 2010). Sexist and racist memes, for example, fall into the category of superiority, where the meme creators establish or maintain social hierarchies by laughing at something or someone. At the same time, these memes may also operate through incongruity—namely, the combination of incompatible elements. Relief theory, again, refers to humor as a social pressure valve of sorts that makes it possible for people to decrease tension when feeling baffled, troubled, overwhelmed, or uncomfortable. As Lauren Berlant (2017) points out, theories of humor and laughter also tend to be structured by or play off of binary oppositions such as flipping the switch on dominance and subordination through subversion (Bakhtin 1984/1968), reshaping the repressed through what escapes it and becomes expressed (Freud 1960/1905), or tapping into the pleasant surprise of incongruity and contrast between the expected and the unexpected (Bergson 1999/1911). Berlant (2017, 312–313) thus remarks that “virtually all comedy theorists are structuralists.” In relation to these variations that construe comedy as an either/or encounter in which something is turned into something else, escapes something else, or turns out to be something else, her own contribution aims to explore “the *copresence* of structuration and collapse, and its attention to the multiplier effect of comic disturbance” (Berlant 2017, 313,

emphasis in original). For us, such comic disturbance of binaries is key, in particular in thinking about the fickleness of affect and its role in humor.

In line with such binary, structuralist logics, many theorists of humor are careful in minutely separating its different shapes and forms from one another into taxonomies where irony and sarcasm, for example, do not touch one another. Elliott Oring (2003, 1) nevertheless characterizes humor in general as the perception of “appropriate incongruity”—as “the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous” where such incompatibility never fully becomes resolved. Following this line of reasoning, irony, parody, sarcasm, or ridicule—forms of humor and feminist tactics that are examined in the chapters to follow—can all be tinted with the absurd and thereby afford an affective release of laughter (Oring 2003, 18).

In the examples of feminist tactics addressed below, absurdities emerge in diverse combinations with irony, parody, and satire: the ridiculing of the apologies made by men accused of sexual harassment (chapter 3); the ironic appropriations of the pussy-bow blouse as a feminist symbol (chapter 3); the mockery of dick-pic senders and slut-shamers (chapter 4); the alternative parodic world-making practices within the “Shameless Extinction” Facebook event (chapter 5); and finally tips on gaining a fresher complexion by applying yogurt on one’s penis, as provided by “Man who has it all,” a social media satire “that exposes the absurdity of the patriarchy by turning the tables” along with the cringe-worthy irony of “Congrats, you have an all male panel!” (chapter 6). Although absurd humor can begin from a site of reactivity and negative evaluation, it need not remain confined to it. Rather, by turning things preposterous, ludicrous, and inappropriate, absurd laughter ends up somewhere different. Hence, it makes a good place to start.

Humor does not necessarily amuse, or it can amuse only some people, and not all laughs result from humor. Furthermore, a laugh is not necessarily happy. In his discussion of laughter as an uncensored channel of affective expression, Tomkins (2008, 320) points out that it “may become the prime vehicle of the expression of any and all affects which suffer inhibition. Thus there is the frightened nervous laugh, the dirty laugh of contempt or hostility, the ashamed laugh, the surprised laugh, the laugh of enjoyment, the laugh of excitement and the laugh of distress, the substitute cry.” Like shame, the laugh can be a vehicle for contempt

(Tomkins 2008, 367). Laughter is a means of affective expression and, as we argue, allows for active release. In highlighting the unpredictability and factual complexity of laughter, this book explores a range of tactics of intervention, resistance, and mobilization within and beyond Anglo-centric contexts.

Laughter may hold plenty of pleasure and joy but also considerable anxiety, sadness, and anger. Feminist laughter, as we approach it, may consist of everything from the forbidden, smothered giggle to the loud, uncontrollable belly laughter mixed with tears of joy (cf. Parvulescu 2010). Laughter is thus an unreliable force with uncertain outcomes, both affectively and politically. We examine the registers of humor deployed in feminist projects—from irony, parody, and satire to mockery and ridicule—and ask how they relate to seriousness and to the occasional absences of laughter. We also explore the ways these tactics play with the dynamics of public shaming and shamelessness and the ethical reverberations that all this entails. In doing so, we break away from views of humor as either subversive or as reproducing social hierarchies of power, with the aim of providing a more nuanced understanding of how laughter operates and ripples in social media exchanges.

From Sexual Shame to Shameless Hags and Beyond

We initially started planning this book in the fall of 2017, just as the #MeToo movement was gaining momentum and speed. Given the broad cultural visibility of #MeToo as a watershed moment of a kind—identified in markers such as “pre-MeToo” and “post-MeToo” used in discussing instances of sexual harassment and public reactions to them—it is both our chosen place to start and the focus of two chapters. Our analysis focuses not on the tweets or Facebook posts shared under the hashtag but rather on the broader discussions that the movement has given rise to in connection with sexual abuse, violence, pleasure, shame, and agency, as well as the affective politics and publics that all this involves.

In chapter 2, we ask how #MeToo works with and through shame, as well as how heterosexuality—female heterosexuality, in particular—becomes figured within its accounts of harassment, hurt, and abuse in the context of social media. Considering the expressions of distaste toward #MeToo voiced by a group of a hundred French women, we move to addressing

continuities and conflicts within histories of feminist activism and analyze the persistent, lingering presence of Puritanism in debates concerning the movement internationally. On the one hand, we argue that shame forms the backbone of #MeToo as a strong affect theory that tints the movement in particular and persistent ways. On the other hand, by working through both Swedish and North American examples, we identify differences in how the scandal of sexual harassment becomes addressed and debated in diverse contexts and how shame becomes differently distributed in the process. Returning back to the question of differences within the category of women, we conclude by asking which differences become highlighted, which ones are effaced, and consequently, what may be the possibilities and limitations of #MeToo.

Taking a different approach to #MeToo, chapter 3 asks what laughter may do to the sharpness of negative affect—of shame and anger—driving the movement. The tone of #MeToo is angry inasmuch as it is serious and engaged with the redistribution of sexual shame. We argue that this dynamic gives rise to what we call “affective homophily,” the love of feeling the same that brings people together through networked expressions of similar feeling. Through a discussion of three events—Hannah Gadsby’s viral 2018 standup comedy Netflix special, *Nanette*; the nonviral #MeToo musical comedy orchestrated by the feminist comedian, Lauren Maul; and the surprising resonances of humor in the sexual harassment and assault scandal that put the prestigious Swedish Academy in crisis in 2018—we explore the operations of affective homophily and its consequences for feminist humor and activism. We argue for the political importance of affective ambiguity, difference, and dissent in contemporary feminist social media tactics and highlight the risks involved when a movement like #MeToo comes to be organized through expressions and expectations of homogeneous feeling.

Examining public social media responses to hateful or otherwise undesired messaging as a tactic of resistance, chapter 4 first asks what happens when such content crosses the private/public binary. We start with the tactic of shameless retweeting and commenting, as practiced by the adult film star Stormy Daniels, and then consider @assholesonline, Linnéa Claesson’s Instagram gallery of hundreds of unsolicited advances and attacks. Second, and moving beyond the unsolicited dick pics that abound in Claesson’s gallery, we inquire after the possibilities and uses of the unsolicited

pussy pic as a feminist figure of intervention and a source of humor. This may suggest a compulsive repetition of a binary model of gender, but our purpose is to disrupt and in various ways queer the binary genital theater of online harassment and the gendered dynamics of shame and shaming that it entails.

Linguistic appropriation of terms that are meant to hurt and shame is a tested and tried tactic in feminist and queer activism. Digging into Swedish “hags” embodying shameless femininity and feminist solidarity and Finnish “tolerance whores” and “flower-hat aunties” standing for liberal, antiracist values, chapter 5 looks at the intersecting circuits of misogynistic and racist hate and ways of countering them. We attend specifically to the dynamics of shaming and shamelessness connected to linguistic appropriations and the vibrancy of language, as well as the forms of privilege that are tapped into by these appropriations. Because it is not evident that attempts at shaming work as planned or that derogatory labels stick in the ways intended, it is necessary to ask under which conditions labels can be turned around and what effects such rerouting may have.

Chapter 6 tackles the issue and, in fact, the allure of binary gender in feminist social media tactics. The “Congrats, you have an all male panel!” tumblr gained international media attention and something of a viral lift soon after its launch in 2015, making *manel* an academic household word. On the one hand, the tumblr’s firmly binary gender logic makes strikingly evident the virility of the “malestream” in how expertise and leadership continue to be articulated and embodied and in how nonmen continue to be excluded from their realm. On the other hand, this logic renders invisible other intersecting variables of difference and axes of power, such as race, language, age, and class. First, we examine the dynamics of embarrassment and the aspects of cringe humor that the tumblr involves, and we then look at the reiteration of binary gender in the Twitter and Facebook satire “Man who has it all,” which sets out to turn gender roles and stereotypes around for critical and comic effect.

Finally, we bring our strands of discussion together in the concluding chapter, where we consider the disruptive force of absurdity, the seeming, complex return to 1970s feminist vocabulary and tactics in contemporary projects, and the different ways in which social media platforms feed and support resistant tactics. In analyzing feminist social media tactics on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook in different chapters, we also consider

the rhythms, archival capacities, forms of organization, and social action that these platforms afford or block.

Our title, *Who's Laughing Now?*, foregrounds forms of feminist laughter and the diverse agencies that they involve. As such, it is a means of claiming space in the context of online culture where lulz (amusement derived at another's expense) is a popular sport, beyond the realm of trolling from which the term originates (see Milner 2014; Miltner 2014; Phillips 2015). Starting from a different place of laughter as world making or making the world a more livable place, we are much less interested in what laughter pins down, limits, or suppresses than in what grows with and in it. This book is one example of such potential growth. Returning to the hypothetical example raised in the beginning of our introduction, the process of writing this book results from ample giggles, wet cheeks inspired by random absurdity, and ripples of amusement caused by noticing and mocking our own idiosyncratic ways of phrasing things or from tracking academic conventions more generally. Neither of us suspected that working on topics such as sexual harassment or abuse occurring on online platforms would be particularly fun, yet we have come to realize the importance of embracing laughter—as inappropriate, out of place, or offensive as it may occasionally seem—in collaborative academic work and in feminist lives. Laughter helps to shift and move things, to reframe them, to take distance, and to move up close. It has the power to unsettle, and it can bring pleasure and joy to knowledge production on topics laced with the affective intensities of rage, sadness, shame, and disgust. Our argument is not to do away with these but to see how some of their dynamics may be unmoored in working with and through laughter. We believe firmly in the value and worth of a shameless, irreverent giggle.

