

“We have tiny purses in our vaginas!!! #thanksforthat”: absurdity as a feminist method of intervention

Absurdity as a
feminist
method of
intervention

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Abstract

Purpose – According to thesaurus definitions, the absurd translates as “ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous”; “extremely silly; not logical and sensible”. As further indicated in the Latin root *absurdus*, “out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous,” humor in absurd registers plays with that which is out of harmony with both reason and decency. In this article, the authors make an argument for the absurd as a feminist method for tackling heterosexism.

Design/methodology/approach – By focusing on the Twitter account “Men Write Women” (est. 2019), the rationale of which is to share literary excerpts from male authors describing women’s experiences, thoughts and appearances, and which regularly broadens into social theater in the user reactions, the study explores the critical value of absurdity in feminist social media tactics.

Findings – The study proposes the absurd as a means of not merely turning things around, or inside out, but disrupting and eschewing the hegemonic logic on offer. While both absurd humor and feminist activism may 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. The feminist value of absurd humor has to do with both its critical edge and with the affective lifts and spaces of ambiguity that it allows for.

Originality/value – Research on digital feminist activism has largely focused on the affective dynamics of anger. As there are multiple affective responses to sexism, our article foregrounds laughter and ambivalence as a means of claiming space differently in online cultures rife with hate, sexism and misogyny.

Keywords Feminist, Twitter, Affect, Laughter, Humor, Absurdity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Humor is probably not the first method of intervention commonly associated with feminism, either online or off, given the persistence of the figure of the “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010, 2015) as one who disrupts the sociability of happiness by refusing to laugh along. Recent studies of online feminist resistance and activism have largely focused on the affective dynamics of anger and rage as exemplified by the viral visibility of the #MeToo movement (e.g. Boyle, 2019; Chamberlain 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2018; Guha *et al.*, 2019; Mendes *et al.*, 2019). It is very easy indeed to hold back one’s laughter in the face of pervasive online hate,

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sexism and misogyny (Jane 2016; Penny 2013) spiked with toxic masculinity (Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Massanari, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). We, however, believe that feminist killjoys benefit from broad alliances with those who giggle, sometimes out of turn, and who react to the perceived absurdities of the world with bursts of laughter—the manosphere being, after all, “by turns absurd and depressing, hilarious and terrifying” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 116).

Online humor has habitually been identified as “kicking down” and as entailing an aggressive edge in downward punches disproportionately aimed at women, queers and racial others (Kanai, 2016; Marwick, 2014). Misogyny runs rampant in social media posts and comments where laughing at, and at the expense of others, is instrumental in the reproduction of social relations of power. This regularly involves turning women and other others into objects of laughter. Networked cultures easily come across as both dark and depressing, and as steeped in mockery, ridicule and humiliation that normalize hate and harassment (Highfield, 2016; Massanari, 2015; Milner, 2014, 2016; Phillips, 2015; Phillips and Milner, 2017).

At the same time, humor is crucial to how attention clusters on social media, which provides accessible and broadly used platforms for feminist mobilization and critique. Humor equally plays a vital role in social movements and feminist online sociability (see Massanari, 2019; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018; Sundén and Paasonen, 2018, 2019, 2020). Under a surface of ubiquitous online sexism, a growing number of social media initiatives produce spaces for what Rentschler and Thrift (2015) identify as “networked laughter” refueling feminist critique and political agency. Networked feminisms emerge as reactions to sexism and make use of irony, parody, mockery and ridicule to counter everything from rape culture to unsolicited dick pics and slut-shaming. While anger is a powerful feminist feeling, it is not the sole affective response to sexism: frustration and outrage, for example, can be layered with or disrupted by startle and laughter in unpredictable and ambiguous ways.

There is, in fact, something utterly absurd about everyday heterosexism—a quality, or an energy that is reworked in feminist social media tactics. In this article, we make an argument for the absurd as a critical feminist method of intervention and resistance that makes it possible to point out the ludicrousness of extant arrangements and routines connected to gender and sexuality. In doing so, we propose the absurd as a means of not merely turning things around, or inside out, but for disrupting and eschewing the hegemonic logic on offer. By focusing on the Twitter account “Men Write Women” (est. 2019, with 66K followers), the rationale of which is to share literary excerpts from male authors describing the minds, bodies, thoughts and actions of women—as well as men’s perceptions, feelings and thoughts about women—and which regularly broadens into social theater in the user replies, we explore the critical value of absurdity in feminist social media tactics. While absurd humor—much like feminist activism—may begin from a site of anger, 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. This makes for a good place to start.

In this article, humor operates both as a key theme and a methodological tool in that we discuss examples that amuse, entertain, or otherwise draw us in, rather than those leaving us unmoved. We have simultaneously made our pick based on whether the examples have similarly grabbed the attention of the followers of “Men Write Women.” Our method is thus not one that seeks a representative sample, but rather one setting out to trace laughter, comedic rhythm, and timing in instances where individual tweets find resonance with the followers, highlighting moments of networked laughter. To select examples on the basis of such affective dynamics is likely not unusual in qualitative inquiry, even as it is rarely made explicit as a methodological alternative to more formal ways of sampling, given how affectation has been cast as being at odds with criticality (see Armstrong, 2000, p. 86–87). What “we” (as researchers and followers) find funny is a matter of taste that intersects with

gender, class, ethnicity and geographic location (cf. [Friedman, 2014](#)) and is not necessarily shared by the readers of this article. While “Men Write Women” has a feminist, intersectional foundation, it is also marked by whiteness and middle-classness.

Our analysis engages with both tweets and comment threads. Most comments are direct reactions to the original tweet, although some are also comments on comments, expanding the social exchanges horizontally. When reproduced one after another similarly to dialog in a screenplay, the excerpts retain some of the feel of digging deeper into Twitter comment threads. Additionally, we follow the logic of “Men Write Women” in not contextualizing or analyzing the literary works that the excerpts are extracted from. Instead, we focus on what these disclose about male authors’ ways of imagining women. In terms of ethics, we do not reproduce the individual Twitter handles as these have little relevance in terms of aiding reader understanding and focus unnecessary attention on singular contributors over the general dynamics that we set out to explore. The quotes themselves are, however, left verbatim and are as such searchable: since these are not of personal or sensitive kind, and as they are contributed to a public, popular Twitter account, it is our understanding that they are intended for open social exchange.

The vagina purse

Dino put his feet up and chatted for a couple of minutes, then he put down the phone and returned to the table. “Okay,” he said, the ME confirms his first estimate of time of death. The girl had a tiny purse tucked into her vagina, just big enough to hold her driver’s license, a credit card, and a few bucks. Her name is Elizabeth Sweeney.

Where does she live?

(Stuart Woods, 2018, *Desperate Measures*)

We do not get real pockets in pants because we have tiny purses in our vaginas!!! #thanksoforthat #menwritingwomen

(Men Write Women, July 29, 2019, 1.4K comments, 7.2K retweets, 17.1K likes)

According to its *Merriam-Webster* and *Oxford English Dictionary* thesaurus 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 further synonymous with “preposterousness, ridiculousness, ludicrousness, . . . idiocy, stupidity, foolishness, folly, silliness, inanity, insanity, as well as unreasonableness, irrationality, illogicality, nonsensicality, pointlessness, senselessness, incongruity.” Absurdity, then, stands as the very opposite of not only reason and rationality but also of sanity and meaning itself.

This can also be traced back to its etymological root in the Latin word *absurdus*: “out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous.” In line with this linguistic root system, humor in absurdist registers plays with that which is in discord with reason, politeness, and decency. From this follows that absurd humor partly moves in a landscape of social norm breaking. In her taxonomy of humor, [Marta Dynel \(2014, p. 628\)](#) understands absurdity as violating “the rules and norms of the real world.” For her, absurdity in terms of nonsense is something distinct from both irony and surrealist humor (with which it is often confused), as it does not involve a negative evaluation of or reaction to whatever causes laughter. Put differently, absurd laughter can take off toward wherever: there is a measure of freedom and unpredictability to its fitful impulses.

Building on incongruity, absurdity falls into one of the three classic theories of humor alongside relief and superiority (e.g. Meyer, 2000; Shifman and Blondheim, 2010). It can be argued that the absurd, in bringing together incompatible elements, cuts through humor more generally as “the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous” (Oring, 2003, p. 1) where such incompatibility never becomes fully resolved. Through this tension, absurd humor affords affective releases of laughter without doing away with the tensions that create and fuel it.

As a feminist tactic of resistance, the absurd may work in a number of ways: most obviously as a form of humor which points out the absurdity of sexism as *ridiculously unreasonable*. The Twitter account “Men Write Women”—from which the tweet cited above is borrowed—is a particularly vibrant example of feminist social media tactics making use of the absurd. “Men Write Women” is a loosely knit, ephemeral network of participants that comes together around literary excerpts and thrives in the tweets’ comment sections. The literary excerpts shared range from depicting heterosex as something that ever so casually borders on rape to unrealistic beauty standards and to lending subjecthood to a pair of breasts seemingly unattached to an actual person. Snatched out of context as photos of print books or as screen grabs of e-books, the excerpts speak much less to the literary works in question than to male authors’ repeated, shared and disappointing shortcomings in imagining women as people. Here, absurdity operates in a straightforward manner as a critical tool for pointing out ridiculousness passing or disguised as literary skill, often in works highly regarded as literature in a gesture of *really, now?*

The tone of “Men Write Women” is frequently angry in that those contributing the excerpts and commenting on them express irritation, frustration and even ire at what they are witnessing. Or, as one of the followers describes the Twitter account in a comment: “It’s hours of rage and laughter” (“Men Write Women,” May 30, 2020). The examples given often include award-winning, canonized and bestselling novels from male authors that many readers love. User reactions are by no means always positive: the rage can well be targeted against the account, its aims and goals. As the account operates with the relatively straightforward method of pointing out the absurd, the discussion can end just there. However, shares and comments regularly expand the tweets’ overall visibility, some tweets unfolding in hundreds of comments and reaction GIFs (animated Graphic Interchange Format files) dwelling in the absurd. The tweet cited above was of the more generative, viral kind (partly since it was long pinned to highlight and add to its visibility), inspiring comments such as

I mean, I’ve kept a lipstick inside my penis before, what’s the big deal?

She also had an umbrella stashed in her urethra. Hopefully not one of those automatic jobs.

She says with her lips pursed!

I do not know about you all, but I keep pepper spray in my vagina purse.

Hahah. Ah yes, the Christian Labiaton purse.

Mine just clenched in sympathetic pain reading that. WTF

Careful. Don’t want to crack your Amex. . .

I think he thinks it’s shaped like a slot, like a card reader.

I’m still using a swipe vagina

Not only is this bad writing about women, it’s bad writing about men too. After this revelation, there should’ve been like two pages of the men saying variations of WHAT THE FUCK?! A VAGINA PURSE?!

I'm sure it seems plausible to the author, given that he apparently pulled an entire novel out of his ass

It's the utterly unfazed way the second person continues that really makes this a thing of beauty.

Absurdity operates in a number of ways within and across the tweet and comments, the entrance point being the ludicrousness of the reference that the literary excerpt makes—in passing—to a small purse in the victim's vagina, the hilarious casualness of the remark then being enjoyed by the participants. But there is also an unmistakable playfulness to the comments as collective wit is used to explore an alternate and utterly absurd universe unfolding. By taking the excerpt and developing it *ab absurdum*, contributors envision a world where vagina purses are mundane accessories and where people store all kinds of paraphernalia in the different folds of their bodies. While starting out as a negative impulse to point out a ridiculous and nonsensical way of imagining female physiology, the comments take flight toward somewhere else through humor combining the illogical with the unseemly. The comic timing of participants' collective imagination feeds off on the delight of accelerating the absurdity of this literary snippet and, in doing so, using it as platform to envision something else.

“She mourned their lovely breasts”

Feminist absurd humor—of which “Men Write Women” is a prime example—traffics in the illogical and the inappropriate. Its material can be quite dark and tap into heterosexist views of bodies, genders and sexualities. But despite this darkness, or perhaps rather because of it, the tone is often considerably light. Noonan (2014) argues that absurdist humor is often understood to be split in two: rational or logical absurdism on the one hand and existential absurdism on the other. Rational absurdism is preoccupied with logical breakdowns, as exemplified in the method *reductio ad absurdum* (in which the logical result of a philosophical position is exposed as being ridiculous or impossible), whereas existential absurdism trades in the absurd meaninglessness of human existence (often linked to French existentialism and the postwar theater of the absurd). In line with these definitions, Noonan (2014, p. 1) argues that rational absurdism leans toward light playfulness whereas existential absurdism entails darker tendencies.

While this distinction can be useful to distinguish between, for example, Lewis Carroll and Albert Camus, it is much less productive in relation to our take on feminist absurd humor. Classifications of humor comprise a notoriously risky terrain rife with unhelpful pigeonholes, yet we find in “Men Writing Women” a layering of the lighthearted and the darkly existential. In other words, the absurd or surreal qualities of everyday life for women resonate with a seemingly lighter strand of humor that combines the nonsensical and the ridiculous with the inappropriate. In this sense, “absurdist humor can in fact help bring out the brighter side of the lack of meaning it highlights” (Noonan 2014, p. 4). Feminist absurdist humor involves tangible lightness yet remains grounded in something decidedly heavier—a paradox that shapes methods of grappling with a ludicrous reality (cf. Massanari, 2019).

Our first example was taken from Stuart Woods, a prolific American thriller writer whose novel *Desperate Measures* belongs to his *New York Times* bestselling Stone Barrington series. We may now be ready to move to the critically acclaimed (and long-time favorite in the speculations around the Nobel Prize in Literature) Japanese postmodern and surrealist author Haruki Murakami.

Aomame mourned the deaths of these two friends deeply. It saddened her to think that these women were forever gone from the world. And she mourned their lovely breasts—breasts that had vanished without a trace.

(Haruki Murakami, 2009, 1Q84)

(Men Write Women, May 24, 2020, 300 comments, 2.5K retweets, 6.3K likes)

There could be an entire “Murakami Writes Women” Twitter account, as examples of his absurdist ways of writing about women are abundant. For this reason, his work has perennial presence in “Men Write Women,” often generating a vivid stream of comments.

It’s what we do. When another woman dies, we mourn her lovely breasts.

A tragetitty.

Sure the women are dead, but I’m just too sad about the loss of their boobies to cope right now

When I die, I want the eulogy to be entirely about my tits

Do they write men in the same way? He mourned the loss of his step-brother, and wept that a fine set of bollocks had departed this world.

So pendulous, so hairy. It pained him to think another pair like them would never swing in this world.

Wrinkled, yet smooth. . . Clammy yet dry. . .

And to think their musty odor, like a mildewed shower curtain, would never again linger in the air.

I absolutely loathe the way he wrote the women in this book. LOATHE.

Even as a man, I have no answers. . .

These comments moved from joy and delight in the unfolding of an absurdist world of ghostly nipples, tit eulogies, and the mourning of balls that will never again be swinging and their odor lingering, to anger in the face of the infamous preoccupation with female breasts, both teenage and more ripe, in Murakami’s work. Not everyone joined the choir of amusement and contempt, attempting to contextualize this particular literary universe and its characters instead: “They tend to inhabit slightly absurd worlds, so if they act slightly absurdly, there is a consistency there.” (“Men Write Women”, May 28, 2020). Here, the absurd is used as a frame of explanation in which absurdity makes perfect sense, and hence that which may appear as nonsensical is, in fact, the opposite. Comments such as this did not however change the overall dynamics of anger, confusion, surprise and laughter rippling through the comments thread. The emphasis on discontent also entailed forms of identity politics (“as a woman attracted to women,” and “Even as a man, I have no answers. . .”). Such positioning functions as a way of clarifying that even if you desire and sexualize breasts, this does not make a literary scene where a set of breasts are mourned above the full person any less absurd.

Like [Berlant and Warner \(1998, p. 558\)](#) imagine queer worldmaking, “Men Write Women” offers a form of feminist worldmaking where “world” is something which “differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned.” Twitter accommodates many identifiable feminist communities whereas an account such as “Men Write Women” entails more of an ephemeral resistant formation of playfulness and critique. Twitter accounts are by definition uncertain points of reference in terms of identifying users’ gender, sexuality, race or age, yet it is clear that the followers of “Men Write Women” are not all women: trans and non-binary users and a fair share of male-identified Twitter account holders are equally disappointed in the literature under discussion (the Murakami excerpt in question for example was posted by a male user). This bottom-up literary engagement with the absurdities of moving through the world as a woman is open to all willing to play along.

This feminist underworld fueled by the ludicrous qualities of sexism finds obvious resonance in [Bakhtin’s \(1968\)](#) carnival, in which laughter becomes a disruptive force linked to

transformation. The carnivalesque in Bakhtin reveals subversive moments within a dominant system, something which disintegrates rigid structures by transgressing normative boundaries. Then again, Bakhtin's carnival was never merely subversive, but also conservative in that carnivalesque laughter may help maintain and reinforce the status quo. Laughter stemming from the absurdity of sexism may thus help create spaces of transgression while also reifying normalcy—a momentary release from an oppressive reality that ultimately remains the same. But what this Bakhtinian binary dynamic of dominance and subversion appears to omit are those in-between spaces of affective ambiguity that consistently render unclear what laughing at something might mean, and also how it feels.

The affective ambiguities emerging in the comments, moving from anger to giggles and back, provide openings for ambivalent kinds of laughter. A burst of laughter may indeed involve mixed pleasures, or pleasure mixed with displeasure, and a laugh is not necessarily happy. In his discussion of laughter as affective expression, Tomkins (2008, p. 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.” Different kinds of laughter run through and bind together the comment threads of “Men Write Women.” There is the nervous laugh in moments of uncertainty as to whether it is appropriate to laugh (or better and more properly feminist to just stay angry). There is the laughter of disdain in laughing at, or at the expense of someone else. There is the laugh stemming from a sense of shame or embarrassment felt for another, such as the seemingly shameless or clueless author. There is the laugh of enjoyment, delight and excitement in contributing to a contagious networked comedy. There is certainly also the troubled, anxious laugh and the familiar feminist feeling of not quite knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Laughter is an erratic affective force with unknowable outcomes, not least in terms of feminist politics. Feminist laughter, as we approach it, may hold everything from the forbidden, quiet giggle to the roaring, uncontrollable belly laughter infused with tears of joy (cf. Parvulescu, 2010). “Men Write Women” is a space where otherwise forbidden giggles may echo with one another and grow in strength, volume and impact. Laughter is a means of both bringing bodies together in networked formations and of pulling them apart, depending on what or who is the butt of the joke, who finds things funny and who gets to tell the joke in the first place. Such lines are drawn repeatedly in “Men Write Women” as this space of fleeting identification and engagement also fosters *certain kinds* of feminist feelings. Anger, outrage and frustration are valued starting points, as are surprise, startle and a sense of bewilderment, all of which can be mixed with humor and laughter in absurdist registers.

The contributors of “Men Write Women,” far from being sex negative, are vocal advocates for believable depictions of sex and female bodies. They certainly do not mind literary representations of sex as long as these make sense from the point of view of someone with embodied experiences of moving through the world a woman or of someone who can at least imagine themselves having such experiences. In calling out male authors on their disappointing and absurdist ways of writing women, and fostering feminist absurd humor in the process, the contributors somewhat paradoxically push for the opposite of the absurd: logic and meaning missing in the literary excerpts shared and discussed. This may come across as a limited view of what literature is or what it could be, or as one that simply discriminates against fantastical, imaginative or indeed absurdist writing. Yet these participants are well versed in literary genres and forms of composition, displaying notable cultural capital. Rather than merely pleading for particular kinds of realism or authenticity, the combined sentiment of the account communicates collective fatigue—of having run out of patience with clichéd or otherwise unimaginative ways of writing when faced with *yet another* example of the very same.

“Is a handful the same as the imperial grope?”

I pulled at the window shade, and it rolled up with a *swish!* and flapped at the top of its roll.

I was staring into two of the more beautifully-tipped breasts the world has ever known. They were full and round and using the standard measure, three and a half milliboobs per handful. She was powdering them with a big pink puff, and as the shade snapped free she paused in mid-puff.

I grinned stupidly; what else could I do?

(Harlan Ellison, 2012 (originally published under a pseudonym in 1959), *Getting in the Wind*)

A totally normal measurement

(Men Write Women, July 27, 2020, 66 comments, 133 retweets, 645 likes)

In our concluding example, the jumping-off point consists of a literary extract courtesy of Harlan Ellison, known for his work in New Wave science fiction and speculative fiction. While these literary genres are known for experimentation in form and content, as well as for non-realist, futuristic flights of imagination, the “Men Write Women” crowd was bemused by these particular imaginative leaps.

This has to be satire. I literally require this to be satire.

I bet his junk is shorter than 2 millipeens

Three and a half thousandths of a boob per handful? That’s tiny. It’s true what they say. Sci-fi writers have no sense of scale.

Meanwhile some rando American. . . What’s the conversion from milliboob to tit-inch? Is a handful the same as the imperial grope?”

It’s about time we replaced the old imperial ‘cup size’ system.

Ok this is bad but I also think milliboob as a method of measurement is legitimately hilarious

Milliboob? I’m not even mad at it.

I’m more puzzled by the powdering tbh: is she 3 months old?

I have never in my life powdered my Boobs. Am I using them wrong?

You need to powder them before you roll them out, otherwise they will stick to the rolling pin.

Moving far and quickly away from considerations of literary value—emotional realism, rhythm, nuance of expression or mastery of form—this strand of social theater grew focused on the scientific precision and accuracy of the “milliboob” as a category of measurement, also lingering on the detail of powdered boobs. This exchange points to the quality of playfulness that cuts through “Men Write Women” as incongruities become amplified and elaborated on. The ludicrousness of vaginal purses, dead breasts missed and milliboobs registered become objects to play with and improvise upon. Built on the Latin root *ludō*, to play, ludicrousness connotes amusement in lighter tones than ridiculousness tied to mockery and judgment, these blending together in the feminist absurdism discussed in this article. In his theory of the ludicrous, [Schopenhauer \(1958, p. 98\)](#) argues that “As a rule, laughing is a pleasant state; accordingly, the apprehension of the incongruity between what is conceived and what is perceived, i.e., reality, gives us pleasure, and we gladly give ourselves up to the spasmodic convulsion excited by this apprehension.” As we argue above, laughter can be more multifarious business than Schopenhauer allows for, yet a quest for pleasurable “spasmodic convulsions” clearly drives participation in the networked absurdities of “Men Write Women” where outrage and giggles are never too far apart.

On the one hand, the excerpts discussed in this article point out the overall dynamic of “Men Write Women” where contributed snippets are torn apart for critical effect. On the other hand, the playful social theater within the comment threads shifts focus from negative reactivity to creative imagining which, by recognizing and acknowledging the absurdity of the excerpts at hand, creates spaces for affective release through laughter that perhaps makes the heaviness of structural sexism easier to bear. Through the mosaic of literary excerpts that it assembles, the account makes visible the structural in what may, innocently, seem plain anecdotal. It gives a name to persistent bias of voice, fantasy, perspective and imagination and through this, pleads for change.

The account contributes to a decades-long feminist project of making visible the male bias of literature—in who gets published, read, appreciated, studied and potentially canonized. Mapping onto the marginalization of female authors in how the gravity of perspective and story are conceived of, this one-sidedness, this unbalance of voice, then results in a truncated understanding of the human experience as conveyed in and through literature. By pointing out absurdity in how men write about women, the account moves from the current moment to the past, and back again, tracking collective shortcomings in examples cutting across genres and cultural hierarchies, from the markedly highbrow to the plain pulp and all the things in-between.

We argue that the feminist value of absurdity, and indeed that of humor, has to do with both its critical edge connected to questioning and critique and with the affective lifts and spaces of ambiguity that it allows for. Anger and frustration are powerful affective engines for resistance, activism and social organization. In [Protevi's \(2009\)](#) terms, they help to bridge the somatic (as the personally felt and experienced) with the more general, allowing for political mobilization and transformation moving from the individual to the group level and, ultimately, to the level of social change—the body politic being the slowest to transform. There is compelling power to being affectively aligned, as in being furious together in feminist organizing. At the same time, anger eats at, wears down and exhausts bodies in ways that set temporal limits to alignments based on outrage. Feminist initiatives also need to allow for spaces of feeling differently so that it remains possible to breathe. With [Kember \(2015\)](#), we thus call for an antagonistic feminist political theory of humor—one based on the ambivalence of rebellious laughter in the face of ridicule within sexist social media theaters of the absurd. As [Kember \(2015, p. 117\)](#) puts it, “laughter is, more specifically, antagonism in action, a tension un-held, ex-pressed in the space-time of the laugh.”

When absurdity—regularly intermeshing with irony and parody—enters the picture, a space is opened for affective ambiguity. Addressing ambiguity and absurdity, [de Beauvoir \(1976, p. 129\)](#) argues for the importance of plying the two apart: “The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given meaning; to say it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed.” For de Beauvoir, ambiguity is about the multiplicity of meanings—and hence the very stuff of life—while the absurd denies meaning in a more abrupt existentialist vein. Our argument, again, is for understanding absurdity as a feminist tactic fueled by ambiguity. In order to critically examine culture and society, it is necessary to acknowledge irreconcilable differences and to work through and with tensions that may just refuse to be resolved.

Things are *both and*, cultural texts afford mutually exclusive readings that coexist, and one and the same things can hurt us and bring us joy, set political transformation into motion and incapacitate individual bodies in paralyzing ways. As a feminist method, absurdity highlights incongruity, silliness, and lack of reason in critical ways. It refuses relativism that, in reducing the critical edge of ambiguity, simply acknowledges that the meaning of things is subjective, and just *all depends* on the perspective. Absurd humor plays off on ambiguity yet also performs a cut by pointing out incongruity: it shows how different perspectives give rise to incongruent views and stances that can, frankly, be plain unreasonable, “extremely silly or ridiculous,” and have “no rational or orderly relationship to human life” in their premises,

claims, or in the social relations of power that they tap into. In refusing the given or proposed state of affairs—and by declaring it absurd—this feminist method foregrounds affective ambiguity and embraces the possibilities of sensing and making sense of the world differently, both together and not. It makes evident that things do not simply depend but that some things are plainly ludicrous.

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