The Counterpublics of Political Discourse: Queer Poetic Witchcraft on Facebook

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In January of 2017, a friend of mine on Facebook posted a link to a Google document that could be viewed and/or downloaded, for free, as a pdf. This document was overtly claimed by a group calling itself the Yerbamala Collective (meaning “bad weed” in Spanish). It is entitled *OUR VENDETTA: WITCHES VS. FASCISTS*, it runs forty-three pages, and it appears to be a collection of feminist anti-fascist poems calling for action against the perceived fascist movements taking place in North America—specifically, as a parenthetical statement running below the subtitle states, “FUCK DT, FASCISTS, RICHARD SPENCER, MILO, ALL THEM FUCKED UP JAWNS. DIFFERENT FACE, SAME ENEMY.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Reading through the text, the Arial, 60pt all-caps font pages often seem more direct political polemic than poetry, but the author(s) intentionally name the pages as poetry, and provide an appending injunction for readers to join in taking action by writing their own poems:

JOIN THE RESISTANCE / CRAFT ANTIFA POEMS / LIKE RN // FORGET EVERYTHING YOU’VE LEARNED ABT POETRY // YOU’VE GOT REAMS OF BEAUTIFUL WORDS IN YOU THAT LIVE TO DESTROY YOUR OWN CHAINS // WRITE WITH ONE GOAL: DESTROY FASCISM WITH POETIC WITCHCRAFT.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The text demands the fortification of an ongoing resistance through the fabrication of timely, politically-minded poetry. Through a conflictual poetic language, it aligns itself not only with political polemic, but with a tradition of politicized poetry. It also mentions witchcraft. The tradition of aligning witchcraft with feminism overlaps in a significant way with current discourse surrounding the intersection of feminism and queer culture, as well as the engagement of this tradition with contemporary poetry. In this paper, I hope to bring these topics together through a discussion of Michael Warner’s theory of “Publics and Counterpublics,” based on the public-poetic framework provided by the Yerbamala Collective (YMC) text. I will focus on the fact of this text being published and existing online, being made available to me through the social media platform that is Facebook, and how this access may constitute an instance of “public poetics.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In developing Warner’s theory, I will examine what “public poetics” means in the context of the contemporary digital age. Through discussing *counter*public existence, virtual publics, and the problems of circulation and temporality in the digital age, I hope to demonstrate how the specific provisions made by the YMC are actually necessary for contemporary political commentary.

To begin, the question must be asked: What is a public? A counterpublic? I borrow the theory of publics from literary and queer theorist Michael Warner, who laid out these terms comprehensively in a paper and book, both called “Publics and Counterpublics,” in 2002. The ideas drawn out by Warner create what is for me a necessary framework for considering sites of generation and address. He defines a public as an elastic group that comes into existence simply by being addressed. In his shorter essay on the subject, Warner explains what he means by “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” by pointing out to his reader that in the act of reading—of being addressed—they have become part of the public generated by his essay.[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition, by the fact of the shared commonality in being addressed by the same text, a public comes into existence as “a relation among strangers.”[[5]](#footnote-5) A single text does not a public make, however, and this is a crucial point. As Warner explains, a single text is

insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Texts themselves do not create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When examining a single instance of public poetics, as I do in this paper with the Yerbamala text, there are thus several important points to examine: what, if any, previously existing discourse provides its contextual understanding; the temporality and constraints of its circulation; and the possibility of its intelligibility by an imagined public.

In the case of the Yerbamala text, imagining its intelligibility by an imagined public might already suggest certain things about its reception and circulation. The YMC citations at the beginning of this paper demonstrate that we all make suppositions upon being addressed by any given text. In the case of the YMC text, certain suppositions about its genre can be made quite readily: contemporary North American political discourse, poetic discourse, feminist discourse, non-normative discourse such as witchcraft, perhaps even a touch of the manifesto. It is intelligible as addressing a public because these assumptions of genre may be made in a relatively stable way. What is less certain is how this text circulates within and addresses its public. Warner seems to acknowledge that publics, although rather abstract and slightly formless, are nonetheless constructed both *by* and *of* the action of people, and it is people, through their attention, who provide a public’s means of existence.[[7]](#footnote-7) He writes that to “address a public we don’t go around saying the same thing to all these people. We say it in a venue of indefinite address, and hope that people will find themselves in it.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This “venue of indefinite address” is significant for my discussion here, in that the venue that texts are poured into now largely exists online, and it is both indefinite and complicated by constraints or boundaries in a number of ways. I will return to virtual public space, but a developed understanding of counterpublics, and their importance, is essential before moving on.

**Explaining Counterpublics through Queer Culture and Heteronormativity**

In a 1998 paper titled “Sex in Public” that provides a glimpse into Warner’s development of his theory of publics and counterpublics, Warner and co-author Lauren Berlant spend time defining queer counterpublics against the dominant hegemonic public of heteronormative America. Warner and Berlant provide a helpful entrance point into how counterpublics may be considered as different from the publics against which they are necessarily defined.

In “Sex in Public,” Berlant and Warner develop a discussion around heteronormativity in America, and the construction of a national heterosexuality as a dominant hegemonic public against which to define queer culture as a counterpublic, or series of counterpublics. This “defining against” may be understood from Warner’s later, succinct definition of counterpublics as being comprised of

members [who] are understood to be not merely a subset of the public, but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Heteronormativity is identified by Berlant and Warner as the dominant public in America because of the role that *assumption* plays in the organization of a dominant hegemony. Heteronormativity as a dominant ideology would assume that a romantic relationship is one that exists only between a man and a woman, whereas this assumption simply cannot be made within a queer community. Berlant and Warner consider the role that assumption plays in defining publics, and the counterpublics that come to conflict with them, to be a crucial point. Defining “heteronormativity” in “Sex in Public,” the authors write:

Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. *It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions.* Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative.[[10]](#footnote-10)

They clarify the distinction between heteronormativity and *heterosexuality,* writing that the latter“organizes homosexuality as its opposite. Because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has, it would not be possible to speak of ‘homonormativity’ in the same sense.”[[11]](#footnote-11) It is tempting, nearly twenty years later, to replace the authors’ assertion that homosexuality “can never” have a sense of tacitly understood rightness to it with an assertion that it “does not yet” have these associations, as in North America there continues a slow-moving but generalized societal acknowledgement of queer culture, people, and spaces. [[12]](#footnote-12)

I quote Berlant and Warner’s definition almost in its entirety because this distinction between an assumptive, hegemonic public heteronormativity, and (for the authors) the resultant unimaginable dominance of “homonormativity,” is an apt example of the relationship between a public and the counterpublics that are defined against it. It would seem as though it would now make sense to conceive of a plurality of counterpublics in relation to a singular dominant public, which is indeed the essence of the relationship, but the authors are careful to warn against conceiving of a dominant public as a monoculture: “Hegemonies are nothing if not elastic alliances, involving dispersed and contradictory strategies for self-maintenance and reproduction.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This is an important distinction to note, and I will return to it later.

In presenting queer American culture as a collection of queer *counterpublics,* defining themselves against a self-sustaining project of national heteronormativity, Berlant and Warner’s aim is to demonstrate just how many practices—most of which are not related to sex—are part of heterosexuality’s public dominance in America.[[14]](#footnote-14) I will extend their argument to include North America, as the same heteronormative assumptions pertain in Canada, where I write from. By pointing out that such assumptions exist, Berlant and Warner identify their project as belonging to the counterpublic discourse of promoting “queer world-making,” generating a culture where the dominance of heteronormativity is not considered absolute and unassailable.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, they acknowledge that making a queer(er) world necessitates “the development of kinds of [queer] intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.” Such intimacies thus relate to a counterpublic, which the authors characterize as “an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation.” The alternate intimacies they suggest are “typical of both of the inventiveness of queer world-making and of the queer world’s fragility.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

This last point is especially salient in the context of the Yerbamala text; not in that it specifically works towards the project of normalizing alternative intimacies, but because it is very much a part of the stated queer world, and aligned with Berlant and Warner’s project of queer world-making. The YMC is inventive in its mode of communication and dissemination in that it addresses its readers through a commanding poetic register. It also works through a decentralized locus of anonymity—necessary to sustain a fragile counterpublic whose members may include those whose marginalization or vulnerability requires such anonymity to ensure their virtual and bodily safety. In having no stable centre of existence, such a counterpublic is itself marginalized by dominant public space, but the marginal space thus occupied might also be construed as a *liminal* space. Counterpublics not only adjoin the contested borders of dominant publics, but often work and play on or within those very borders, occupying the space at the threshold. To understand how the Yerbamala Collective does so, it is necessary to turn to an examination of its engagement with witchcraft, and its choice of poetry as the medium for political commentary.

Thus far, use of the term “queer” has been used to identify a non-heteronormative mode of being and discourse. Yet queer, queerness or queering can also refer more broadly to difference, alterity, otherness, or non-normative modes. The Yerbamala text is a work of poetry that not only identifies itself with, but draws upon a tradition of feminist witchcraft, which has strong ties to “queer” modes of thinking and practice.

A recorded interview with Adèle Barclay, a poet, scholar and activist who identifies herself with practicing witchcraft, yielded crucial insights into the connection between queer culture, witchcraft, and poetry. In the interview, from an episode of the podcast “#secretfeministagenda” titled “Rising Signs and Anticapitalist Poetry with Adèle Barclay,” Barclay speaks about the role of witchcraft and magic as an alternative to mainstream (largely heteronormative) culture. Prompted by the show’s host, Hannah MacGregor, Barclay asks herself “Why do queers like magic so much?”

It’s because when all of the systems and script teleologies that you’ve been told are supposed to work for you—when they don’t, it makes you feel like you’re broken, not that those systems are broken. And really coming to terms with, ‘actually it is those systems that are fucked up,’ and finding the space to thrive within these other systems that aren’t attached to linearity or progress or even neo-liberal conceptions of wellness. It’s about redrafting the narrative. So much of queerness is that we were given these scripts that were useless to us.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In short, queer readings of magic and witchcraft acknowledge the ways in which social systems are constructed, rather than taken as inherent and unchangeable. Barclay describes the relation between the “script teleologies” of “fucked up systems”—i.e. the assumptions made in dominant public discourse—and the redrafting of such discourse that must be undertaken by people in queer communities. This action amounts to counterpublic, queer world-making. As Barclay notes, one mode of literary redrafting happens through poetry, which provides the kind of space necessary for distance from, or resistance to, dominant modes of discourse. Part of this necessary space stems from the fact that, as she claims, poetry is a largely non-monetary practice. Poetry “exists outside of the market,” she says, “which is actually a blessing in many ways, because I believe [the realms of poetics] is this magical space where you can process and critique and reimagine the world and actually pull at capitalism and colonialism—you’re given this really irrational, playful, magical sphere.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Specifically, when engaging with witchcraft, poetry provides access to another world,

and a lot of witchcraft is about accessing this spiritual world, which is distinct from or overlaps with our very material capitalist neo-liberal society. It allows you to endure it a little better, and as you’re moving through it you can think ‘I have my people, my coven, my poems. I have these rituals that I’ve done to give me the armour which allows me to connect with people, as well as protect myself from the forces that may be disturbing or perturbing.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

Barclay adds laughingly that witchcraft and poetry “can be about community, but I think it’s really about this radical resistance or otherness to this crushing neo-liberal society that we’re living in.”[[20]](#footnote-20) I will add that the confluence of witchcraft and poetry concerns *both* community and resistance, in that a counterpublic may be considered a community that it is defined precisely in its otherness; its very fact of existence may often be considered an act of radical resistance.

Above, I connected the necessarily-subordinate relation of counterpublic communities to their relegation to marginal or even liminal spaces. I draw the suggestion of liminality from MacGregor, who answered Barclay’s comments on the overlap of a spiritual world with our dominant capitalist society by adding that poetry is a “liminal space which abuts all of these [capitalist] systems in a way that lets you play around the margins of them.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This liminality is important in considering poetry as a medium through which to provide critical commentary and alternative discourses, and through which to organize ideologies of resistance. This is because the circulation of poetic texts may dictate the bounds of certain counterpublics, but it thus also generates the possibility of a bridging between the marginalized spaces those counterpublics occupy, and the margins of the dominant publics they may wish to contest. This tenebrous abuttal is a part of what creates the borders of counterpublic circulation, but it also presents the place at which that border may be explored, or breached. The next section will discuss how poetic-political resistance requires a certain “bypassing” of counterpublic circulation, as suggested by the specific methodology of the polemic-poetic language employed in the Yerbamala Collective’s text.

To consider how a text might bypass the constraints of its *own* counterpublic circulation, I must now return to where the seed for this paper began. I mention again that I first came across the Yerbamala text, *Witches vs. Fascists,* on Facebook. This fact is significant. As stated before, Warner’s “venue of indefinite address” now exists largely online, and is perhaps more indefinite than ever before. It is thus necessary to consider quite carefully how Facebook functions as a virtual public space, and what it means for texts to circulate there.

Facebook is a social platform made up of constituent users who are constantly provided content that is generated by them as individuals, by other users, and by various news, corporate, commercial, and advertising agents. If this generative action can be considered “text,” then the consolidated entity that is Facebook itself addresses a public comprising all of its users all of the time; it generates “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.”[[22]](#footnote-22) In being the online host for this circulation, Facebook can also be considered to be the medium of conveyance, the marketplace, the milieu where a “crowd [witnesses] itself in a public space,” allowing that the internet and its virtual spaces may be considered public.[[23]](#footnote-23) “Facebook,” the proper noun having come to mean both the platform and its many constituents, invites consideration of a paradoxical tension by being both “public” and “text.”

As such, Facebook is both a medium and a “mediating cultural form.” Warner notes that “[publics] have to be understood as mediated by cultural forms, even though some of those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms. Publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.”[[24]](#footnote-24) By being an ever-present “text,” Facebook creates a virtual space for a generalized public that is *always* being addressed, and thus, once in existence, may never retreat back into nonexistence (for as long as social media exists). It is now imaginable that Facebook as a place of ever-present public textual address is here to stay. Through the creation and mediation of both a vast public *and* the virtual public space from which that public is addressed, Facebook does not deny its status as a mediating cultural form. Indeed, in being such a mediator, and by the fact that it is also the medium, Facebook provides a virtual public space *and* the dominant public discourse of that space—creating and maintaining certain normative foundations against which innumerable counterpublics may define themselves.

The Yerbamala Collective and its online text, as I have determined through Warner’s definition, is part of a counterpublic circulation. It is most definitely “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public,” and certainly makes “different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.” The poems of the YMC all run against the grain of a dominant North American public discourse, but they do so through a complication of multiple levels of discursive transgression, and with a multi-layered relationship with their public (and counterpublic).

This is because Facebook, as the medium through which this anti-fascist text may address its counterpublic, is only one of the dominant publics with which the Yerbamala Collective exists in a conflictual relationship. Though the group may recognize itself as, and indeed define itself through being conflictual, it may not in fact realize its nature as a counterpublic to the dominant discourse of Facebook’s virtual public space. This is because it aims higher, standing firmly in opposition to the greater dominant public addressed by the perceived fascist political organizations of power in North America, and specifically in the United States (“FUCK DT, FASCISTS, RICHARD SPENCER…” etc.). In this way, Facebook as a dominant public is merely a “scale-model” virtual facsimile of the larger hegemonic public of the United States—the public whose assumptions the YMC confronts with its counterpublic polemic. Though there may not, at this stage in our largely virtual lives, seem to be an important difference between public discourse that takes place online and that which occurs outside of the internet, I will maintain that there is nonetheless a crucial distinction to be made between these as online and offline *sites of address.*[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Constraints of Circulation and Temporality**

As a virtually disseminated text, there are several questions to consider in the context of the YMC’s counterpublic. For one, the “different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” of a counterpublic text are primarily what mark the boundaries of its circulation.[[26]](#footnote-26) In “Publics and Counterpublics,” Warner draws upon the example of circulation within a queer counterpublic to illustrate this point: “this circulatory space, freed from heteronormative speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet with intense resistance.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The YMC text, in a similar fashion, assumes that its counterpublic would accept the assertion that “FASCIST / AMERICA IS / RACIST / AMERICA IS / COLONIAL / AMERICA WAS / ALWAYS A / WAR.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Resistance gives rise to what Warner refers to as “social closure,” which is the part of circulatory bounding that involves certain assumptions about pre-existing public (or counterpublic) intelligibility: “the selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so on.”[[29]](#footnote-29) It is not hard to imagine how the Yerbamala text, with its all-caps, page-filling abrasion, might “meet with intense resistance” outside of its already-understanding, or at least sympathetic, counterpublic circulation. Yet resistance is also exactly what this text is meant to incite. As a result, the bounding entailed by social closure makes it one of Warner’s “constraints of circulation,” which helps to contextualize the question of how such circulatory constraint inflects the Yerbamala text’s multi-layered relationship with its (counter)public(s).[[30]](#footnote-30)

Warner defines social closure as occurring because of different assumptions made about genre, style, address and so on, but in the context of Facebook, something he couldn’t have imagined at the time of writing “Publics and Counterpublics” (2002), social closure happens for reasons of a limited pool of “friends.” It also happens because of the complicated algorithms that decide, based on data collected from online activity, what we see in our own personal versions of Facebook’s public text. This fact is generative, and in a way that is detrimental to unimpeded public circulation. These algorithms create dangerous “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” where constituents only see things that they are already interested in, or which are already aligned with their apparent interests, politics, gender and sexual orientation, etc.[[31]](#footnote-31) Engin Bozdag, a Dutch researcher, warns against the monocultural consequences of this personalization, writing that “results in a search engine will differ per user and two people with the same friends in a social network might see different updates and information, based on their past interaction with the system.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Compare this monocultural trending with that mentioned earlier by Berlant and Warner, themselves warning that dominant hegemonies are anything *but* monocultures. It is becoming apparent that the privatization of personal content-generation in fact creates an endless series of monocultures; perhaps this is one of the “dispersed and contradictory strategies for self-maintenance and reproduction” that Berlant and Warner claim are deployed by hegemonic powers.[[33]](#footnote-33) In this instance, the contradiction lies in the fact that the creation of a series of monocultures is actually an effective way to delimit online communities, and so limit the diversity of opinions and voices in and between such communities. These personalization algorithms, which cause information intermediaries such as Facebook and Google to act as the “emergent gatekeepers of our society,” as Bozdag puts it, were created to manage the glut of information that is produced on the internet every day. The unintended (or perhaps perfectly intentional) result is that the bounding of differing publics and counterpublics online is more marked than it would be “in real life,” which is to say, outside of the internet.

This has significant repercussions for the circulation of texts, news, and ideas online. Through these “echo chambers,” the social closure of counterpublics may be more stringently bounded on a platform like Facebook than it would be in the instance of a counterpublic addressed by, say, a printed queer zine. In print media, the circulation would be bounded when actively met by the resistance of the dominant heteronormative public, whereas online such a chance altercation might now likely be avoided by filtering algorithms. In its publication as a Google doc and circulation on Facebook, the hoped-for distribution of the YMC text falls victim to the reflexive action of online echo chambers. However, The Yerbamala Collective seems to be aware of these insular bubbles of social closure, knowing that it will for the most part only *virtually* be able to address a counterpublic already sympathetic to its message. The polemic, commanding poetry of the Collective’s text itself holds the key to overcoming the contemporary difficulties posed by online circulation.

Because the YMC text incites its counterpublic members to acts of resistance (subversion), and because the likelihood of resistance (recoil) from the dominant public is much slimmer solely online, the poems of the text order the reader to “POST [THESE PAGES] EVERYWHERE // LEAVE THEM ON BUSES // LEAVE THEM IN OFFICES WHEN NO ONE IS LOOKING … IF YOU LOSE THESE PAGES YOU CAN MAKE NEW ONES // MAKE NEW ONES EVERYWHERE // MAKE THEM IN YOUR MIND // WRITE THEM DOWN AND SLIP THEM TO THE UNSUSPECTING.”[[34]](#footnote-34) By making the text ubiquitous online to a sympathetic counterpublic, and then commanding both the fabrication and distribution of the existing pages and *altogether new poetry,* the Yerbamala Collective bypasses *both* the boundaries of social closure *and* Warner’s first “constraint of circulation,” which would also affect that theoretical printed queer zine: material limits. Those would be the “means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects, [and the] social conditions of access.”[[35]](#footnote-35) If printed from a home, an office, or a library, by anyone in possession of the virtual document, the poems may reach a far wider public circulation than their determined or assumed counterpublic. By bypassing the constraints of its own counterpublic circulation and meeting with the resistance and recoil of the dominant public, the Yerbamala Collective not only stands in a conflictual relation with hegemonic public discourse, but actually works towards successfully resisting and subverting its influence and power. The YMC text demonstrates that the bridging of marginal and dominant spaces that I suggested earlier is necessary for contemporary public-poetic political commentary to take place. If such action is undertaken *only* online, there now exists evidence that any attempt to engage beyond the social closure of a counterpublic circulation, without a consideration of algorithmic echo chambers, can and will be severely limited.

Another necessity exists when it comes to the possibility of political engagement by the YMC, and that is an effort on their part to remain relevant. In “Publics and Counterpublics,” Warner succinctly lists the attributes of publics, remarking that “publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This makes sense; different publics and counterpublics will exist at different periods throughout history, each with their work characterized by the world at the time—their particular venue of address. Warner goes on to characterize this temporality as a necessary attribute of political engagement, writing that “the more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics.”[[37]](#footnote-37) To explain, he uses the example of the daily newspaper headline; it is from such a temporal announcement that politics takes its character, not the dusty records of the archive.[[38]](#footnote-38) Turn now to the YMC’s poems: they are not shared on a daily basis, they have no quotidian venue from which to address an audience, yet the document is a political text. This fact comes both from its content and its self-generated ability to bypass its own counterpublic circulation, as I argue for above. derek beaulieu, the Canadian poet, recommends that his students distribute their work for free, online, so that it may be taken up and changed by other artists, creating new iterations in surprising and exciting ways. He calls this act a “metastisization,” and it is this that the Yerbamala Collective actively calls for in the intended reshaping and (re)distribution of its poetry.[[39]](#footnote-39) By carrying out the exercise with politically-based poetics, they create a perpetually-possible circulation, and so maintain a counterpublic that may never stop being addressed by its ever-mutating text. If such a text can be redistributed and recirculated by its counterpublic members, then it may index “the punctuality of its own circulation” through a continual rolling circulation, without the need for publication dates or serial numbers.

Back in 2002, when the internet was not yet ubiquitous as our medium for communication and social interaction, Warner recognized that digital technology would change how texts are considered in the temporality of their discourse. In a phrase now almost laughable, he acknowledged that there had been “some successful use of the web by some social movements,” but that “it remains unclear to what extent the changing technology will be assimilable to the temporal framework of public discourse.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In somewhat of a reversal of this formulation, it would seem as though authors distributing their texts online, and seeking a venue for public discourse, must now consider how to assimilate—or overcome—the limits of a constantly-changing technological world, especially if they wish to remain relevant enough to make political commentary and impactful change. Warner worried that it “may even be necessary to abandon ‘circulation’ as an analytic category.”[[41]](#footnote-41) On the contrary, an examination of circulation, and how it now works online, has formed the backbone of this paper. It may now be a far less quantitative analytic category, as with many texts we are no longer being able to count the number of copies in print, for example, but this complication entails that it remains just as important to closely examine circulation, and its problems, in contemporary discourse.

The Yerbamala Collective’s acknowledgement of its subordinate relation as a counterpublic, and subsequent measures to counter the limits of its own circulation, is an exemplary demonstration of the kind of work that is seemingly required for transgressive political commentary and action to take place in the digital age. They also seem to acknowledge that the subordination of a counterpublic existence is accompanied by the fragility associated with exclusionary marginalization, and as Berlant and Warner note, with queer world-making. In an anonymous online interview, a representative speaks about the goals of their Collective, and of *Witches vs. Fascists*:

Our hope is that if something should happen to us as individuals, this project will have a life of its own and people will continue creating and resisting, though we believe this is inevitable. We wanted this to be something that spread so that it exists in multiple spaces and mediums. Resistance is most effective when it is coordinated and not centralized. If it is too centralized it is easy to behead. The more people are part of this rhizome the more extensive and life-sustaining the mangrove.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The aforementioned “fragility” of a decentralized project of queer world-making thus emerges as one of its greatest strengths. In engaging with the Yerbamala Collective and their text, this very work becomes part of the growing rhizome. Here, I have not written my own anti-fascist poems, as their poetry commands—but this text is active in helping to disseminate them. Warner tells us that it is in circulation and further representation that we are convinced that disparate publics have activity and duration: “A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citations and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric.”[[43]](#footnote-43) With this work, which maintains a citational relationship with the YMC without sharing its genre or style of address, we in turn work to maintain the public generated by *Witches vs. Fascists*. Yes, we. Like Warner’s earlier example implies, if you are still with me, you are a part of the public of this paper. Welcome to the resistance.

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   In citing the Yerbamala text, all instances of single slashes denote line-breaks, while double-slashes exist in the text as a punctuation choice by the author(s). Pagination in citations is taken from the page numbers of the .pdf document. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the wonderfully rich anthology, *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics* for the development of the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Warner. “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech.* Vol. 88, No. 4, November 2002, pp. 413-425, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 423. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547– 566. *JSTOR*, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/1344178. Footnote 2, pp. 548. Emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. However, this movement comes with its own complications. Since the publication of “Sex in Public” in 1998, “homonormativity” has been taken up to describe “how certain aspects of the queer community can perpetuate assumptions, values, and behaviors that hurt and marginalize many folks within this community, as well as those with whom the community should be working in solidarity. It addresses assimilation, as well as intersection of corporate interests and consumerism within LGBQ spaces. It also describes the assumption that queer people want to be a part of the dominant, mainstream, heterosexual culture, and the way in which our society rewards those who do so, identifying them as most worthy and deserving of visibility and rights.” (Kacere, Laura. “Homonormativity 101: What It Is and How It's Hurting Our Movement.” *Everyday Feminism*, 10 Sept. 2016, everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/homonormativity-101/) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Sex in Public,” 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 557. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 558. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hannah McGregor. “Ep. 1.8 Rising Signs and Anticapitalist Poetry with Adele Barclay.” Audio blog post. *Secret Feminist Agenda.* September 1st, 2017. Web. Accessed September 17th, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Publics and Counterpublics,” 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I think of my friend Paisley, who corresponds with other poets over Twitter, marking the distinction between her “url” friends and her “irl” (in real life) friends. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Witches vs. Fascists,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Publics and Counterpublics,” 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Engin Bozdag. “Bias in algorithmic filtering and personalization.” *Ethics and Information Technology* (2013) 15: 209-227. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-013-9321-6. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “Sex in Public,” 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Witches vs. Fascists,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “Publics and Counterpublics,” 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid, 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. derek beaulieu. https://derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com/pdfs/. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. “Publics and Counterpublics,” 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Janus Kopfstein. “Resistance Is Witchcraft: An Interview With The Yerbamala Collective.” *Medium*, Medium, 8 Mar. 2017, medium.com/@lawfulintercept/resistance-is-witchcraft-an-interview-with-the-yerbamala- collective-6d040996ec2f. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. “Publics and Counterpublics,” 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)