

3 #GirlsLikeUs: Trans Feminist Advocacy and Community Building

Trans women's advocacy online and in popular culture epitomizes the complications and possibilities of digital counterpublics. While many trans women are members of the larger LGBTQ and feminist counterpublics, and though trans women of color occupy important roles in race- and ethnicity-based counterpublics, they still occupy marginalized positions in all three. As Catherine Squires has detailed, counterpublics "emerge not only in reaction to oppression from the state or dominant public spheres, but also in relation to the internal politics of that particular [counter]public sphere and its material and cultural resources."¹ Given historical and contemporary exclusions, both in the mainstream and within identity-based counterpublics, the communication constructed by and for trans women of color online illustrates some of the most subaltern in this book. We include a discussion of trans women's networked labor both in the spirit of recognizing the layered ways that counterpublics function and as a response to activists and scholars who have called on academics to do a better job of considering the "T" in LGBT. As Leland G. Spencer writes in the introduction to *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, "The 'T' too often tacked onto the end of 'LGBT' demands a

spot at the center of communicative and rhetorical analysis,” especially in light of the way cisgender gay white men have been centered in research on LGBT communication and in public representations of LGBT issues and activism.²

The trans community in the United States was reminded of this marginalization in 2015 when trans activist Jennicet Gutiérrez was booed by a largely cisgender crowd and physically removed from an LGBTQ White House event after speaking out about the disproportionate violence faced by trans women in U.S. immigration detention centers. Gutiérrez’s words, and her interruption of President Barack Obama, were met with harsh criticism from many organizations that bill themselves as central to LGBTQ equality efforts. Gutiérrez was chastised for a “lack of civility” and “rudeness” by the LGBTQ magazine *The Advocate*, which compared her asking Obama to address the torture and rape of transgender immigrants in detention centers to Kanye West’s infamous interruption of Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards.³ For trans women, the moment was part of a painful pattern of derision directed toward members of the LGBTQ counterpublic to which they belong.⁴

Beyond explicitly political and activist spaces, the representation of trans women as disruptive—even dangerous—to civil society is evident in how trans women are portrayed on our nation’s big and small screens. The representation of trans women, and trans women of color in particular, in news stories and popular culture has long been one of stereotyped hypersexual tricksters whose victimization at the hands of cisgender men is framed as a natural or deserved consequence of their disruptive identities.⁵ In the early 1990s, trans women became regular objects of fascination on daytime talk shows; Jerry Springer, for example, was frequent fodder for scholars interested in trans

representation—representations that tied trans identities to fear, deception, and freakishness.⁶ This media trope is also iconized in *The Crying Game* (1992), a film that shows the white protagonist vomit when he realizes that Dil, the Black woman he loves, is trans. These media representations have both influenced and been influenced by larger cultural and political narratives about trans identity. In fundamental U.S. systems of governance, trans women have been deemed deviant and held responsible for the violence and discrimination they face. In the late 1990s, for example, the gay and trans panic defense became popular among some attorneys seeking to justify their clients' violent crimes against members of the queer and trans community.⁷

In the last thirty years, the visibility of transgender Americans has shifted significantly. In 2007, trans advocates were successful for the first time in including language addressing gender identity as a possible area of employment discrimination when the Employee Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) was being debated in Congress. Yet this language was subsequently removed because lesbian and gay special interest groups did not think the bill could pass if it was included.⁸ The bill still failed. It was not until 2013 that a new ENDA, one that included trans identity, was signed by President Obama. Also in 2013 the Netflix original TV series *Orange Is the New Black* became a runaway hit in part because of Laverne Cox's compassionate portrayal of an incarcerated Black trans woman. That same year, military whistleblower Chelsea Manning came out as a trans woman. In 2014, California became the first (and only) state to pass a law banning the gay and trans panic defense.⁹ In 2015 the very public transition of Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner helped further transgender visibility.¹⁰ As noted in chapter 2, #SayHerName was inclusive of trans victims of extrajudicial violence alongside

their cis counterparts, furthering a necessary but unfortunate sisterhood.

Despite this visibility and progress on specific trans issues, and despite *Time* magazine's proclamation in 2014, along with a cover featuring Laverne Cox, that the United States had reached a "transgender tipping point," a "quantitative increase in media attention," as Jamie Capuzza notes, "did not equate with challenges to cisnormativity."¹¹ In fact, trans women continue to negotiate unique threats to life and health, which are further multiplied at the intersections of race, class, and sexuality.¹² Along with the advances and greater visibility of recent years, trans women continue to be murdered at a startling rate. In 2014, Deshawnda Sanchez, a Los Angeles-area Black woman, became one of 225 trans women murdered that year around the globe. Sanchez was shot dead by her assailant as she pounded on the door of an L.A. residence for help. According to a 2015 report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, trans women are the group most victimized by violent hate crimes in the United States.¹³ The year 2017 proved to be the most deadly year on record in the United States, with twenty-eight trans women murdered by year's end.¹⁴ Reports count the same number of trans women murdered in 2018.¹⁵ This deadly violence is often perpetrated by intimate partners, many of whom, in a narrative that is all too familiar, claim they were "duped" or "tricked," and became enraged to the point of murder. Further, these stories and statistics do not include the widespread harassment, abuse, and harm that trans women survive as they move about the world.

In today's popular media, Hollywood is notorious for casting cisgender, heterosexual actors as trans women, including Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica* (2005), Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club*

(2013), Jeffrey Tambor in *Transparent* (2014), and Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015), drawing critique from trans and allied communities for how such casting continues to marginalize trans actors.¹⁶ The increasing visibility of trans women did not prevent the makers of the 2015 historical drama *Stonewall*, about the uprising that birthed the LGBTQ rights movement, from erasing the role of trans women of color in activism in 1960s Greenwich Village.¹⁷ Notably, much-publicized critiques of the film's whitewashing of the Stonewall Rebellion (using the hashtag #NotMyStonewall) led to a boycott of the film and its subsequent failure at the box office. Many boycotters chose instead to fund *Happy Birthday Marsha!*, an independent film about Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans woman who was a central figure in the Stonewall riot and in queer and trans activist circles in New York City.¹⁸ Writer and producer of *Happy Birthday Marsha!*, Tourmaline has gone on to co-author work revealing the surprising statistics that show that the increased visibility of trans women has led to more violence against them in their communities.¹⁹

Increased visibility and debate over trans issues and the simultaneous frequency of antitrans acts of violence and erasure have prompted a rise in advocacy by trans women, particularly through online media. As we illustrate in this chapter, online community building and advocacy among trans citizens and activists has been important in extending and nurturing a trans counterpublic that is actively shaping American culture and national politics.

While few and far between, previous studies investigating online trans advocacy have highlighted its important role in challenging and reshaping the way media-makers, and the nation, communicate about trans identities.²⁰ K. J. Rawson has

compellingly argued that transgender worldmaking online is an especially important form of historical activism because “cyber-space provides a revolutionary tool for creating, sharing, and preserving trans histories that would otherwise remain untold.”²¹ Joshua Trey Barnett has detailed how blogs authored by trans people have created a “transsexual counterpublic” in which the human body is constructed as a natural and continual site of transformation, in opposition to dominant constructions of the body and gender as normatively immutable.²² Likewise, we view the work of trans advocates online as particularly fruitful for the study of counterpublic identity politics because on social media, unlike in news and entertainment media spaces, trans women can communicate about and construct their identities and experiences without the fraught, incomplete, and transphobic mediation of mainstream narratives.²³

Of particular interest in this chapter is the trans advocacy and communicative self-definition that have evolved on Twitter. Through an examination of the #GirlsLikeUs network and related hashtags, we illustrate how for trans women, especially trans women of color, Twitter is an important site of countercultural practice and intervention.

The Birth of #GirlsLikeUs

In 2012, trans advocate, author, director, and TV host Janet Mock (an interview with whom starts on page 72) was moved to become a more outspoken activist because of the murders and suicides of queer and trans youth. She used her cultural capital as a former web editor for *Marie Claire* and digital tools such as YouTube videos and Twitter, to reach out to other trans women with messages of support and opportunities for community

building. In explaining the origin of her hashtag #GirlsLikeUs, Mock describes her support of Jenna Talackova, a contestant disqualified from the Miss Universe Pageant for, in the words of the pageant officials, “not being a natural born female.” Mock’s desire to help Talackova achieve her dream led to the creation of the hashtag as a form of trans feminist community building and advocacy.²⁴ On May 28, 2012, Mock explained on her personal blog:

So I shared Jenna’s petition on Twitter, and said: Please sign & share this women’s rights petition in support of transgender beauty queen Jenna Talackova & #girlslikeus: ow.ly/9TYc6b 27 Mar 12 And that was the online birth of #girlslikeus. I didn’t think it over, it wasn’t a major push, but #girlslikeus felt right. Remarkably a few more women—some well-known, others not—shared the petition and began sharing their stories of being deemed un-real, being called out, working it, fighting for what’s right, wanting to transition, dreaming to do this, accomplishing that. ... #girlslikeus soon grew beyond me ... my dream came true: #girlslikeus was used on its own without my @janetmock handle in it. It had a life of its own.

Mock has also credited activist CeCe McDonald, whom we discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, as an inspiration for the hashtag, stating on Twitter, “#BecauseOfCeCe I was inspired to begin using the phrasing #GirlsLikeUs which led to a social media visibility movement. #CeCeIsFree.”²⁵

In Mock’s description of creating the hashtag we see what Michael Warner has called the “world-making” power of publics, that is, the discursive self-organization of a public among strangers that reflexively speaks to the historical and contemporary contexts of its makers and observers.²⁶ As Mock notes, other trans women quickly embraced the hashtag, using it to discuss everything from the desire to transition, to the violence of being outed in unsafe situations, to dreams of success. Through the

discursive contributions of other trans women, the hashtag became a space for counterpublic engagement. By sharing information through the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs on Twitter, YouTube, and various blogs, Mock and other users have created a new media network through which conversations generally reserved for members of the transgender community can, and do, reach beyond it.

Transcript of Keynote Conversation between Janet Mock and Moya Bailey from “Ways With Words: Exploring Language and Gender Conference,” Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

March 4, 2016

Moya Bailey: Do you want to talk about the origins of #girlslikeus and how you’ve seen it shift?

Janet Mock: Twitter was a different thing in 2012. I joined Twitter in 2009, and I remember wanting to have a space where I could talk about certain things, and for folks to not necessarily know what I was talking about, but then for folk that do know what that space is, they’ll get it and know, right, and then they can engage. And so when I hashtagged #girlslikeus, it was a space where trans girls and women could come together and talk about our issues, our resources, share resources and experiences, have a sounding board, and link up. And what I’ve seen is that it’s led to real life friendships for people. Even in my own space, because I created that hashtag, I connected with people. I connected with other trans women who are now friends of mine—deep, deep friends who I had never known before I created that hashtag. And I’ve seen that happen for other folk, so the hashtag was like a connector. ... I don’t even use it as often as I used to, because now it has its own world. It’s a part of other people’s lives. They put it in their Twitter bios, instead of saying blatantly, “I’m a trans woman,” they just say #girlslikeus. It’s a wink and a nod. The girls know.

MB: I was really excited to see it in *Her Story*. There's a moment where the two characters talk about #girlslikeus.

JM: *Her Story* is a project that was created by Jen Richards, who is a trans woman, and starring Jen Richards and my other friend Angelica Ross. We met through #girlslikeus. I was going to a speaking engagement in 2012 in Chicago, and I DM'd them through Twitter, and was just like, "Let's get together." And so they became friends because I linked them together. So it was a great connector. That's what #girlslikeus is.

MB: Is there anything that's exciting you about the way that language and words are moving in this moment?

JM: Yeah! So, what excites me is the fact that we all, now, have access. Our phones are like extensions of ourselves, and they carry so much stuff on them. And so the fact that I'm constantly communicating with people—on Snapchat, on Twitter, on Tumblr—I can follow a Tumblr tag and may not understand what it's talking about, but will be taught that day about someone else's experience. I feel like, because we have tools to create, we can now broadcast our lives. We don't need to wait for a network or a producer to come and tell us, "I want to do a story on your life." No—I do a story on my life every day. And so in that way, I no longer have to look at mainstream media to represent and reflect me. I can go to a hashtag and find more people that reflect me. I can find my people. And then I can find myself. And then I can be empowered because I found my people and myself to then share myself with the world.

Characteristics of the #GirlsLikeUs Network

We collected data for #GirlsLikeUs for two years, from July 2013 through the end of June 2015. During that time, #GirlsLikeUs was tweeted or retweeted more than 100,000 times by more than 60,000 unique users. Though relatively modest in size compared with other hashtags we examine in this book, as a network of tweeters connected by retweets and mentions, the #GirlsLikeUs network has several unique features. First, the conversation is dominated almost entirely by Janet Mock and actress Laverne Cox, whose tweets were retweeted thousands of times more often than the next most retweeted people in the network. The network grew steadily, if slowly, throughout the two years we observed, with an average of dozens to hundreds of tweets appearing per day, with the exception of two spikes in activity: in December 2014, when Mock, Cox and twelve other trans women appeared on the cover of *CANDY* magazine, and in June 2015, when Caitlyn Jenner appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine. These upticks in activity were fairly modest, however, and driven by increased activity among core members of the network rather than by a sudden influx of new members (as happened with hashtags discussed elsewhere in this book).

#GirlsLikeUs is a broadcast network, or a network in which most people retweet messages authored by a small number of prominent users.²⁷ Almost one-third of the tweets we examined originated from either Mock or Cox, and half originated from the top ten most retweeted members of the network, which include other trans women advocates and celebrities, such as Carmen Carrara and Geena Rocero, trans activist groups such as Trans March, and mainstream media outlets that published articles about trans women during the time our data were

collected (including *Vanity Fair*). When we look more broadly across the network, we see a remarkable level of cohesion among those using the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag, with most people tweeting at or about one another, in addition to engaging with the most retweeted members of the network. The average distance between members of the network is just slightly over three, meaning that any given person in the network is in communication with any other through just two intermediaries. Combined with the disproportionate number of tweets originating with Mock and Cox, this suggests that most people in the network are either engaging directly with Mock and Cox or engaging with people who are.

The network structure also provides evidence of a cohesive conversation stemming from Mock and Cox and centered on inclusion and affirmation of trans women. Consider the following network visualization: Mock and Cox and their followers constitute the majority (just over 75 percent) of the network, shown wrapping around the upper-right portion of the image. In the lower left is a subcommunity that is almost entirely detached from the rest of the network. This subcommunity is centered on two self-identified conservative women, @xoCAMILAXo and @Meeeech_L, who tweet primarily about conservative political issues. They tweet frequently and are often retweeted by other users who are in conversation neither with the main portion of the #GirlsLikeUs network nor with one another. Of note, @xoCAMILAXo and @Meeeech_L turn up in our search results not because they use #GirlsLikeUs or related content in their tweets but because both had set their profile *locations* to #Girls-LikeUs, which attaches the hashtag to the metadata about their tweets. This has the effect of adding the hashtag to every tweet they write and returning their tweets in search results, regardless

of whether or not the hashtag appears in the text of their tweets (and there is no evidence it ever does). Although we can only speculate about their motivations for including #GirlsLikeUs in their profile information but not in the content of their tweets, because both women tweet frequently, and because their tweets turn up in search results for the hashtag, we can be reasonably sure that the broader community of tweeters using #GirlsLikeUs is aware of their existence. So @xoCAMILAXo and @Meeech_L's nearly complete separation from the rest of the #GirlsLikeUs network is no accident—the community has assessed the content of their tweets and chosen not to engage with it. This divide underscores how #GirlsLikeUs is predominantly a bounded community, centered on trans women with progressive politics and sustained by a consistent, if not especially large, stream of daily trans-positive tweets.

The exclusion of @xoAMILLAxo and @Meeech_L from the rest of the #GirlsLikeUs network serves as a reminder that neither a particular identity (@xoAMILLAxo is trans) nor the incidental use of a hashtag (in the case of @Meeech_L, who has since removed the hashtag from her location and no longer appears in the network) is enough to gain membership in a counterpublic that centers a particular set of identity politics. Rather, counterpublic membership is earned primarily through political positions and community connections, with identity mattering only to the degree that it is intertwined with the other two. For the vast majority of Twitter users engaging in conversations using the hashtag, #GirlsLikeUs is a space to talk through the ways that trans identity, along with other forms of social oppression, including racism and poverty, has an impact on daily life. Thus conservative users who reject the importance of these issues are summarily ignored.²⁸

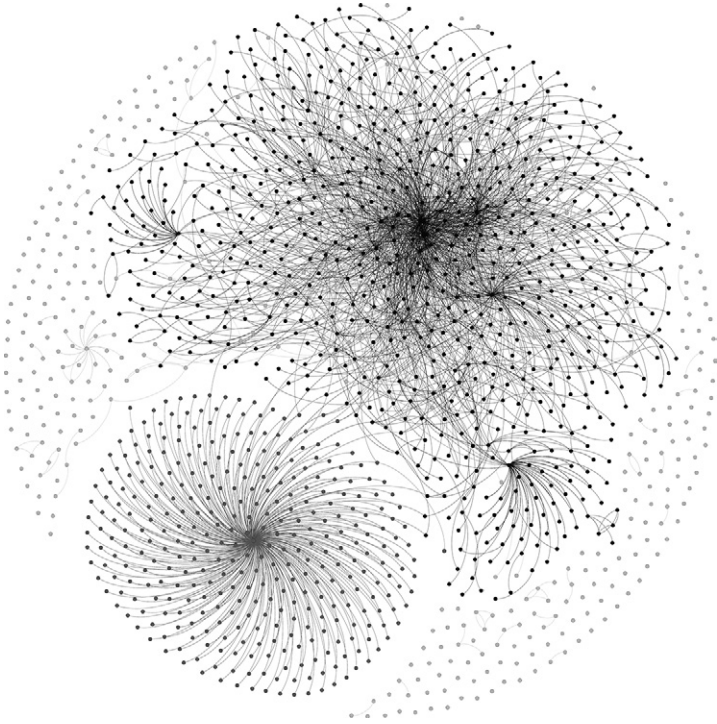


Figure 3.1

Visualization of #GirlsLikeUs retweet and mention network. This graph was generated in Gephi using the Fruchterman-Reingold force-directed layout algorithm.

Narrating the Lives of #GirlsLikeUs

Trans women use #girlslikeus in three primary ways: (1) to connect with one another on every day, often mundane, experiences, (2) as a way to advocate for trans issues and rights (particularly through critiques of mainstream representations of

trans people and anti-trans violence), and (3) to celebrate the accomplishments of trans women. This third use of the hashtag often overlaps with the previous two.

Building Community

Members of the #GirlsLikeUs network regularly tweet about their day-to-day lives and challenges. Discourse about quotidian experiences, which includes, for example, accounts of sick relatives and breakups, works to both center and normalize trans voices and experiences by illustrating how trans women's lives are not as unrelatable as popular culture would suggest. These tweets are met within the network by words of encouragement and expressions of friendship. For example, trans businesswoman @angelicross shared, "I'm regaining at least 20 hours of my life back a week moving to Chicago! More time for my spirit, tennis, yoga & friends #GirlsLikeUs."²⁹ These kinds of positive-toned shares are frequent in the network, as are words of support and encouragement. In response to a tearful video posted by trans teen homecoming queen Cassidy Lynn Campbell about the online bullying she was experiencing, Janet Mock tweeted, "Dry those tears, babydoll. You are a bright, shining star, @xocassidylynn! #girlslikeus."³⁰ This rapport building between members of the network does important discursive community-building work, shaping cultural solidarity and providing important emotional and psychological support.

Creating Change

#GirlsLikeUs tweets that focus on advocating for trans issues and rights do so by elevating the voices and history of trans women and sharing facts and information about trans experiences with injustice. These tweets are educational, a call to



Figure 3.2

Trans March #GirlsLikeUs tweet about activist Marsha P. Johnson.

action, or both. For example, Trans March (@TransMarch) a San Francisco organization that works to “inspire all trans and gender non-conforming people to realize a world where we are safe, loved, and empowered,”³¹ regularly tweets educational and biographical information about trans activists and figures like Martha P. Johnson, Jazzie Collins, Billie Cooper, and Chelsea Manning.

Tweets in this category also work to connect issues of trans liberation to intersectional concerns of poverty, racism, and sexism. For example, Janet Mock connected the case of CeCe McDonald to that of Trayvon Martin, the Black Florida teenager killed by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman, whose case we consider in the next chapter. By using the hashtag #JusticeforTrayvon alongside #GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCeCe, Mock



Figure 3.3

Janet Mock tweets #FreeCeCe, #JusticeforTrayvon, and #GirlsLikeUs.

illustrates the connection between anti-Black violence and trans identities, often left out of conversations on racial profiling. At the same time, Mock makes the issue of anti-Black violence, too often excluded from the mainstream LGBT movement, central to her brand of trans advocacy.

In a similarly intersectional spirit, Laverne Cox uses the mantle of sharing content about, as well as many of her public interviews on, the hit Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* to discuss issues facing trans prisoners and to advocate for prison reform. For example, after her first appearance on the (since canceled) *Melissa Harris Perry Show*, Cox tweeted, “Check out the video of my #nerdland debut today. We talk about @OITNB and prison policy <http://t.co/SuE1pJvuej> @MHPshow #girlslikeus.”³² Here, Cox connects the hashtag to a policy conversation on incarceration while maintaining the casual tone of the #GirlsLikeUs network and calling in *OITNB* (@OITNB) and the *Melissa Harris Perry Show* (#Nerdland) fans. This illustrates how the hashtag is used as a kind of prompt to a community of fans and allies who, because of shared ideologies and tastes, are invested in the lives, successes, and inequalities faced by trans women.

What is notable in these examples, and throughout #Girls-LikeUs advocacy, is the centering of intersectional experience. In particular, women of color activists and stories about intersectional activism are widely visible in the #GirlsLikeUs network. Thus, not only does the discourse created in the network contribute to an educational project on trans rights and issues, it also works toward framing the solutions to antitrans violence and transphobia as inextricably tied to fights against racism and sexism. Such hashtagged advocacy contributes to what Sarah Florini has called a “recontextualization” of mainstream social movement memory³³—in this case, a recentering of trans experiences in civil rights, LGBT, and feminist projects.

Celebrating Trans Lives

#GirlsLikeUs users frequently engage in celebrating trans women’s accomplishments and visibility. Often this overlaps with advocacy narratives that celebrate trans activists and with community-building narratives that highlight the rise and accomplishments of trans women. For example, trans model Geena Rocero publicized a photoshoot in *Glamour Magazine* using #GirlsLikeUs beside the hashtag for her own trans advocacy organization, Gender Proud, and the hashtag #TransRevolution. Here we see Rocero connecting her accomplishments as a trans woman and public personality—profiled in a mainstream women’s magazine—to trans advocacy work offline and to the digital community constructed through #GirlsLikeUs. As is common in the #GirlsLikeUs network, Rocero’s tweet was responded to with words of encouragement, including from Janet Mock, who replied, “gorgeous + glowing! Can’t wait to pick up my copy! #genderproud #girlslikeus.”



Figure 3.4

Geena Rocero tweets about her *Glamour* magazine profile with #Girls-LikeUs, #GenderProud and #TransRevolution.

Many members of the #GirlsLikeUs network, even those who are not celebrities, use the hashtag to celebrate their accomplishments, including starting new jobs, taking a new step in gender confirmation, or making a cross-country move. Here again, we see how the hashtag works to build community from within while centering and normalizing trans lives to outside observers. For example, Angelica Ross tweeted that she was “just interviewed by @Forbes on #TransTechSocial & my journey as a Black trans entrepreneur! Thanks @ClairJoyFarley! #GirlsLikeUs.” This tweet, while a celebration of her own accomplishment (being interviewed by *Forbes*), also works to build community by mentioning Trans Tech Social, the development and employment community Ross founded for trans and gender-nonconforming people, and by thanking Clair Farley, an advocate for trans people in business and media.

Broadening the Counterpublic

As the above examples illustrate, the #GirlsLikeUs network made frequent use of co-occurring hashtags to broaden conversations about trans women’s experiences. While considering the connections between #GirlsLikeUs and broader conversations about trans women, we find a number of other co-occurring hashtags that both reinforce and extend the conversation that emerged on #GirlsLikeUs. The most common co-occurring hashtags include references to trans people, women, and women of color in general (such as #trans, #Tgirl, #twoc), references to specific trans women in the news (such as #CallMeCaitlyn, referring to Caitlyn Jenner, and #IslanNettles, a Black trans woman murdered in a 2013 hate crime), and references to general issues that are important to members of the trans counterpublic (#education, #tolerance).

Of particular interest here are co-occurring hashtags popularized by Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, the central shapers and broadcasters of the #GirlsLikeUs network. These include #FreeCeCe, a hashtag used to advocate on behalf of CeCe McDonald, #RedefiningRealness, which is drawn from the title of Mock's 2014 memoir, and #TransIsBeautiful, which Cox began to encourage diverse media representations of trans people.

#FreeCeCe and the related hashtag, #BecauseOfCeCe, appeared alongside #GirlsLikeUs hundreds of times, especially at the start and end of McDonald's incarceration. As part of the broader conversation on trans rights, the #CeCe hashtags often co-occurred with both #GirlsLikeUs and other references to the trans community at large (such as #trans and #twoc). #RedefiningRealness is among the most common hashtags co-occurring with #GirlsLikeUs, ranking in the top twenty overall, with the hashtags appearing together in thousands of tweets. #TransIsBeautiful also commonly appeared alongside #GirlsLikeUs. Though used less frequently overall than #RedefiningRealness, and less frequently with #GirlsLikeUs, there are still hundreds of examples of the hashtags being used together. Inverting the analysis and looking at hashtags co-occurring with #RedefiningRealness and #TransIsBeautiful, we find #GirlsLikeUs the most common in both cases, by a considerable margin. Together, the co-occurrence of #RedefiningRealness, #TransIsBeautiful, and #FreeCeCe with #GirlsLikeUs illustrates how digital counterpublics expand community-building and advocacy efforts through the discourse of hashtags.

#FreeCeCe

In June 2012 a then twenty-three-year-old CeCe McDonald was accosted by bar patrons in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota.

McDonald and her friends were called racist, transphobic, and homophobic slurs. One of their attackers threw a bottle at McDonald's head, which shattered and created a large gash on her face. McDonald pulled out a pair of scissors to defend herself in the scuffle, and one of her attackers—a member of a white supremacist gang—was killed. McDonald was sentenced to three and a half years in a men's prison. Her trial and subsequent imprisonment raised many questions about the differential treatment Black trans women experience in our legal system—particularly as related to self-defense and concepts of victimhood.³⁴ Members of the trans feminist counterpublic we examine here used social media to share McDonald's story and protest her imprisonment, noting that she too was a #GirlLikeUs. Thanks to this activism, the Minnesota Department of Corrections was successfully petitioned to administer the full regimen of hormones McDonald needed, but she remained quartered with men despite a transfer to a second facility.³⁵ On her release, Janet Mock tweeted, “#BecauseOfCeCe I'm reminded daily that our lives are worth fighting for and that we matter. #CeCeIsFree”³⁶

In considering the discursive power of #FreeCeCe and its variations (such as #Free_CeCe, #CeCeIsFree, and #BecauseOfCeCe), we see the connection of the community building and advocacy work characteristic of the #GirlsLikeUs network extended to a specific criminal justice case. In this case, the two hashtags worked to center women like CeCe McDonald—Black, femme, young, and incarcerated—in the trans counterpublic and to make a specific demand of a legal system that is anything but fair in its treatment of Black trans women. For example, after the *Advocate* tweeted a link to an op-ed by the executive director of the Center for Transgender Equality titled “Black, Poor, Young, Trans Is Sadly Often a Recipe for Violence: CeCe McDonald Was

Punished for Surviving,” multiple members of the #GirlsLikeUs network manually modified the tweet by adding #FreeCeCe and #GirlsLikeUs before sharing it. In this way, members of this intersectional trans feminist counterpublic ensured that the narratives about violence against Black trans women that did arise from more mainstream LGBTQ spaces were pulled into the discussions of their specific network. At the same time, those tweeting #GirlsLikeUs along with #FreeCeCe engaged in open criticism of narratives about McDonald’s case arising from non-LGBTQ spaces, including critiques of the media’s misgendering of McDonald through the use of incorrect pronouns and the sharing of petitions and other direct forms of advocacy related to the case. As Mia Fischer has detailed in her ethnography of the CeCe Support Committee, a grassroots group of Minneapolis activists that engaged in advocacy for McDonald during her imprisonment and trial, online activism successfully motivated, shaped, and changed the local and national framing of the story.³⁷

Further, the co-occurrence of #GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCeCe hashtags was employed by members of the network to legitimize trans activism. For example, user @Arizona_Abby, a member of the #GirlsLikeUs network who describes herself on Twitter as “Attorney, trans woman and general rabble-rouser on feminism, trans and LGB issues #girlslikeus #Trans100,” tweeted about the political immediacy of violence against transgender women (see figure 3.5).

In her tweet, @Arizona_Abby recalls the power of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), one of the most revered, successful (and, to some, radical) LGBTQ activist groups of the twentieth century, to legitimize a refusal to be silent in the cases of CeCe McDonald and Paige Clay, a Black transgender woman murdered in Chicago. Alongside the hashtagging of these two



Abby Louise Jensen
@Arizona_Abby



Following

Silence isn't just a disservice; as #ACTUP made clear 25 years ago, SILENCE=DEATH. cc @janetmock #freecece #paigeclay #girlslikeus

7:15 AM - 1 May 2012

Figure 3.5

Co-occurrence of #GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCece as activism.

women's names and ACT UP, #GirlsLikeUs appears in the tweet to signify both McDonald's and Clay's belonging in, and the collective identity of, the counterpublic.

#FreeCeCe remains an important hashtag long after McDonald's incarceration. In 2016 Laverne Cox produced the documentary *Free Cece!*, which explores both McDonald's time in prison and her subsequent release. The hashtag has been used to promote the documentary and further the cause of trans women still embroiled in the prison-industrial complex.

#RedefiningRealness and #TransIsBeautiful

In November 2013, in concert with the launch of her book, *Redefining Realness: My Journey into Womanhood*, Janet Mock began a social media campaign with the hashtag #RedefiningRealness. The Tumblr instantiation of the hashtag invited people to post selfies that were overlaid with text that read, "I am [the person's name followed by a list of descriptors] I am #RedefiningRealness."

Mock began the social media initiative with a selfie that read, "I AM JANET writer, woman, lover, friend I am #REDEFINING-REALNESS."³⁸ Trans and queer, Black and white, submitted to the Tumblr site for nearly ten months, with more than 120 unique



Figure 3.6

Janet Mock Tumblr post.

contributions. The hashtag encouraged users to say more about themselves than just their gender or sexuality, bringing in their humanity and various social and relational roles. Recapitulating much of the community-building and community-celebrating functions of #GirlsLikeUs, contributors discussed their jobs, their favorite qualities about themselves, and their hopes for the future. The use of the hashtag #RedefiningRealness quickly moved to Twitter, where it is used by trans and queer users to describe ways in which they are redefining gender, by fans of Mock's posting selfies with the book, and in Mock's own tweets logging her nationwide travels to promote the book and related projects.

Actress Laverne Cox started the #TransIsBeautiful hashtag in 2015 after discussing her past shame at being recognized physically as a trans woman. She observed:

It took me years to fully internalize that someone can look at me and tell that I am transgendered and that is not only okay, but beautiful, because trans *is* beautiful. All the things that make me uniquely and beautifully trans—my big hands, my big feet, my wide shoulders, my deep voice—all of these things are beautiful. I'm not beautiful despite these things, I'm beautiful because of them.³⁹

Here, both Cox and Mock use hashtags to advocate for the humanity and value of trans women by insisting that mainstream and cis-normative definitions of “real” and “beautiful” be opened up to them. In doing so they encourage their followers, who happily join in on both hashtags, to share stories and selfies about learning to love themselves and finding appreciation for and community with other trans women. In extending the #GirlsLikeUs network by sharing their own experiences and validating the complexity of trans individuals, Mock and Cox encourage and extend the larger modes of social support offered by the feminist trans counterpublic. While this support often includes celebrating the style choices, successes, and physical beauty of trans women, it also frequently includes members of the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag, using co-occurrence to lift up, support, and call for help for members of the network who might be struggling with mainstream messages and conditions related to trans identity.

For example, many members of the #GirlsLikeUs network tweeted links sharing their own donations and encouraging their followers to donate to #TransBookDrive, an effort begun by Mock to ensure that low-income and incarcerated members of the trans community could read *Redefining Realness* and other

books they requested. This effort and the tweets it inspired with the co-occurring hashtags #GirlsLikeUs and #RedefiningRealness are an acknowledgment within the trans feminist counterpublic that many of its members lack support and access to even the simplest of self-affirming resources, such as books that take up their stories.

The Power of #GirlsLikeUs

As matthew heinz has noted, feelings of isolation are one of the most frequently recurring issues among trans people. In providing a venue for a community that transcends distances through #GirlsLikeUs, Twitter has become a space in which this issue can be addressed as users locate other trans people, find social support, and share the “microstresses” of trans living.⁴⁰ At the same time, the digital discourse of #GirlsLikeUs extends the postmodern characteristics of transactivist literature noted by Heather Hundley and J. Scott Rodriguez as various members of the #GirlsLikeUs network share their stories, offer each other support, and advocate for trans histories, worlds, and rights.⁴¹ This discourse organizes a community through identity construction, encourages polyvocality through recognizing the importance of and celebrating the multiplicity of trans voices, and promotes polysemy as a means by which members of the network can create multivalent appeals to one another and to the larger public. #GirlsLikeUs sparked similar hashtag networks from other related communities, such as #BoysLikeUs for trans men and #FolksLikeUs for gender-nonconforming and nonbinary folks on the queer and transgender spectrum.

The trans feminist network that sustains and is sustained by #GirlsLikeUs is one that centers discourses from the most

multiply marginalized trans voices; influencers in this network are not only trans but women, Black, and, in some cases, quite open about their experiences with poverty, sex work, and the legal system. Influencers like Janet Mock and Laverne Cox facilitate and encourage everyday trans women with a variety of intersectional identities to speak up and speak out about their experiences in a networked counterpublic that has become much bigger than they could have predicted. In turn, the collective contributions of all the members of the #GirlsLikeUs network have aided in constructing and extending an online trans feminist counterpublic that works toward self-sustaining political identity creation and, in so doing, supports the health and social inclusion of network members while strategically infiltrating mainstream talk about trans identities.

The mainstream media have responded to #GirlsLikeUs. Popular online news sites such as the *Huffington Post* now allow users to quickly find stories about trans women through the linked tag “girlslikeus,” CeCe McDonald’s story has been featured in *Rolling Stone* and other popular publications, Janet Mock’s #RedefiningRealness has been featured on almost every major network and cable channel, and #TransIsBeautiful has been featured in mainstream fashion magazines like *Elle* and pop culture magazines like *People*. Alongside mainstream attention, this universe of hashtags has garnered debate and discussion within larger LGBTQ, feminist, and racial justice counterpublics, including feature articles in the LGBTQ magazine *The Advocate*, on the racial justice blog *Colorlines*, and on the popular feminist pop culture site *Jezebel*. The depiction of Laverne Cox, a Black trans woman known primarily for playing a prisoner as Lady Liberty, one of the most important U.S. political and cultural symbols, on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*’s first ever “LGBT Issue”

speaks to the cultural power of #GirlsLikeUs. Here, Black trans women and their political frameworks have become *the* face not only of trans issues but of LGBT issues as a whole—a representation few could have imagined even a decade ago.

Ultimately, the discursive work done by members of the #GirlsLikeUs counterpublic works to both center trans politics and normalize trans lives by using the hashtag to mark the mundane, the popular, and the activist. It is clear from this discourse and from our network analysis that #GirlsLikeUs prioritized



Figure 3.7
Laverne Cox as Lady Liberty.

in-group solidarity from day one, even as its members have engaged the broader public. In-group messages spread beyond their initial community and became intentionally shared with a broader public in moments of advocacy, like that on behalf of CeCe McDonald, and more generally because of the public nature of Twitter and the especially public visibility of #Girls-LikeUs adherents such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox. This, of course, is no accident: Twitter users who connect to online conversations through hashtags and use mentioning and replying to engage high-profile figures understand their ideas and experiences may reach unknown audiences, indicating an awareness among members of the counterpublic that their often personal conversation will be visible to anyone willing to look.⁴² It is also clear that the mainstream visibility of some members of the counterpublic, Mock and Cox in particular, allows a widely visible interrogation of mainstream narratives about gender identity and feminist and queer politics while supporting in-group needs.

Since Mock first used the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs in 2012, issues of trans visibility and inclusion have reached an increasingly wide audience and have shaped some of the most visible popular cultural and political debates. The increasing number of representations of trans lives that are written and controlled by trans people has worked to humanize trans experiences. In niche media, #GirlsLikeUs continues to be a phrase for intragroup connection. In January 2016, the web series *Her Story* launched on YouTube. In a scene from the final episode of the first season the character Paige, played by Angelica Ross, says to another trans woman character, "It never gets easier for girls like us." This use of the phrase between two trans women actors portraying two

trans women characters underscores its cultural significance within the community.

In politics, the lingering call for “state’s rights” has been swept up in egregious policies designed to exclude trans people from public spaces. In March 2016, North Carolina banned trans people from using bathrooms that did not correspond to their sex assigned at birth. Such laws force trans citizens to make impossible choices between their safety in restrooms and breaking the law, and has created health problems as people have avoided public restrooms altogether.⁴³ In response, the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice issued a letter supporting transgender students’ right to use the bathroom of their choice and issued an injunction to stop the North Carolina bill from being implemented. Unfortunately, the legal red tape has yet to be resolved, and trans North Carolinians remain caught in the middle for the foreseeable future. A number of other states, including Massachusetts, have passed or confirmed public accommodation access bills that uphold the rights of trans people. The successful #YesOn3 initiative in Massachusetts successfully kept language that protected trans and intersex rights.⁴⁴ Additionally, in a Trump administration memo leaked to the *New York Times*, advisers proposed redefining “gender” on “a biological basis that is clear, grounded in science, objective and administrable.”⁴⁵ While it’s unclear how this redefinition could be actionable, its ability to wipe away legal gains for trans and other gender-nonconforming individuals is high.

In racial justice activism the issue of transgender rights has been taken up passionately by a generation of millennial radicals unwilling to accept the respectability politics and assimilationist tactics of the past. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, has often spoken about

the importance of trans and gender-queer Black lives to her and the other founders' vision of the contemporary Black liberation movement.⁴⁶ As illustrated in the previous chapter, the use of hashtags to discuss and center Black trans women victims of violence has become intertwined with Black feminist initiatives such as #SayHerName.⁴⁷

A hashtag alone did not result in these developments, but as part of a larger cultural shift that centers sex, gender, and civil rights and that has been led primarily by trans women of color, the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs has played an indispensable role in constructing an intersectional digital trans community and radically shifting representations of and messages about trans people that arise from outside that community.

