

“WE MIGHT GIVE PEOPLE A SENSE OF THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM”: ON THE TRUTH DISCOURSE ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE FIRST PHASE OF THE POLISH #METOO (#JATEŻ) ACTION (OCTOBER 2017) ON FACEBOOK

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/// Introduction¹

The #MeToo movement started in 2006 with a campaign led by Tarana Burke, an African-American activist who works with survivors of sexual violence in minority communities (Adetiba & Burke 2018). The hashtag employing the phrase ignited a digital activist movement in social media networks on 16 October 2017, when a group of American film stars reported allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment by the prominent Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Actress Alyssa Milano published a Twitter post with the hashtag encouraging women to share their stories of sexual harassment and/or abuse publicly to “give people a sense of the

¹ This paper is based on a part of my MA thesis, which I defended in 2018, under the supervision of Roman Chymkowski at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. I would like to thank my advisor, Adam Ostolski, for inspiration and the suggestion to include the notion of parrhesia in this analysis. I also thank the editors of this issue and especially one peer reviewer for their helpfulness and insightful remarks.

magnitude of the problem.” The hashtag instantly went viral. During the first twenty-four hours, it reached 12 million posts, comments, or reactions among 4.7 million users, on Facebook alone.

For the Polish #MeToo movement, the Black Protests that started in 2016 against a fundamentalist Catholic legislative initiative to wholly ban abortion provided a crucial context. The black colour in the visual identification of the protest (clothing, etc.) symbolised both the resistance and the mourning of women who are structurally deprived of control over their own bodies. Poland already has a strict abortion law that proscribes the termination of pregnancy due to difficult socio-economic conditions. This law was adopted after the collapse of state socialism, when there was an overall re-traditionalisation of the gender order (Szelewa 2016). The protests in 2016, 2017, and 2018, which were held online and throughout the country by the grassroots organisation Polish Women’s Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet), were among the largest social mobilisations in recent years. Ewa Majewska described these demonstrations as a strategy of “weak resistance” by feminist counterpublics against hegemonic, heroic, and masculine political practices in the public sphere (Majewska 2018). Numerous women’s rights initiatives have derived from these protests (Korolczuk et al. 2019), adding a layer of mass social movement to the constant efforts on the part of experts, feminists, and activists fighting for reproductive rights. In the wake of the Black Protests, which moved the problem of systemic violence against women into public discourse, #MeToo arrived in Poland, on ground that was already stirring.

Polish #MeToo (#JaTeż) started as a mass action based on sharing personal experiences of patriarchal violence and occurred mainly on Facebook, the leading social media platform at the time.² In contrast to the US action, #JaTeż did not disclose any high-profile figures. The turning point of the action, however, was the article “Papierowi feminiści. O hipokryzji na lewicy i nowych twarzach polskiego #Metoo” [Feminists on paper: On the left’s hypocrisy and the new faces of Polish #MeToo], published in the online magazine *Codziennik Feministyczny* on 27 November 2017. For the first time in the Polish #MeToo action, public figures were revealed as perpetrators, a development marking the beginning of the second phase of #JaTeż in Poland (Grabowska & Rawluszko 2018: 77). In the article,

² In the third and fourth quarters of 2017, the user penetration rate of Facebook in Poland was about 62% (Instagram 24%, Twitter 18%). At the end of 2017 there were about 14 million active users, which makes about 37% of the country’s population (Statista Research Department 2020; “Internet in Europe Stats”).

a group of women shared their accounts of sexual harassment, assault, and rape, and identified two liberal-left journalists as the perpetrators. The mostly critical reaction of the symbolic elites (i.e., journalists, feminists, academics, etc.) towards “Feminists on Paper” turned the attention from systemic violence against women to the presumption of innocence and the credibility of the rape allegations against one of the journalists. This shift of focus in turn changed the dynamic of the action, possibly halting other disclosures about abusive individuals in positions of power (ibid.). It could be argued that #JaTeż was enthusiastically backed as long as it exposed patriarchal norms, not particular individuals.

In this study, I examine public posts published between 16 and 20 October 2017, and thus during the first phase of the Polish #MeToo action, on Facebook, when thousands of women shared their personal stories of subjection to systemic violence, without disclosing the individual male perpetrators. I decided to focus on the first phase of the action rather than to discuss the effects of the backlash to “Feminists on Paper” in order to identify the processes that made sexual harassment more visible in the public discourse and in everyday life in the long run. I attempt to address the first phase of the #MeToo action as the affective production of a truth discourse countering the normalisation of violence against women. To this end, I start with a discussion of the research material, followed by a brief introduction to the post-Foucauldian framework applied in this study: dispositive analysis and modes of truth-making in avowal and parrhesia. Next, I proceed with an analysis of the role of the circulation of affects in countering patriarchal norms, the right to define sexual harassment, and a critique of the normalisation of gender-based violence. I focus on the role of courage and solidarity in #JaTeż posts. Finally, I conclude by examining the normative function of #JaTeż and sketching its impact on both individual and social levels.

/// Research Material and the Hashtag Network

This study covers all public posts with “#jatez” and “#jatez” hashtags published on Facebook during the first five days of the action (16–20 October 2017). The database was restricted to the Polish version of the hashtag, because the “#metoo” phrase could not have been exclusively associated with Polish-language public posts using media monitoring tools. Nonetheless, the database of 2,863 public posts and commentaries with #JaTeż (1,733 of them posted by women) was sufficient for the purpose of qualitative analy-

sis and a basic quantitative description. In comparison, during the next five days, “#jateż” appeared ten times less frequently (286). Additionally, the research sample was extended by several dozen Polish “#metoo” posts from the same period, using non-probability sampling on phrases such as “victim,” “harassment,” “shame,” and so forth.³

While #JaTeż testimonies were predominantly given in written form, their linguistic character fits those of oral expression. An analysis of the relations between speech and written word in online communication is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to note, nevertheless, that according to David Olson, context for written words is reduced to the content of the words used, in contrast to context in a speech act (Olson 1994, quoted in Sikora, forthcoming: 186–187). Furthermore, context is immediately denoted in the hashtag network, as there is no need to ask about the intent of any single post under the #MeToo-related hashtag. #MeToo (#JaTeż) posts are performed *as if* in oral communication, but still without non-linguistic features, such as gestures and intonation.

Technically speaking, hashtags were introduced to categorise the massive spread of information by using organically created metadata tags to wire up all the relevant posts in a network (“I got here looking through the posts under the hashtag, curious about these stories, wondering how much I’ve contributed to the problem unintentionally” (M)).⁴ In this sense, the #MeToo action was a viral event with memetic elements. The viral object is transformed into a meme when it is appropriated, imitated, and altered for other uses by a considerable number of people, for example, in hashtag derivatives (#MenToo, #NotMe, etc.; Edwards & Lang 2018: 124).

/// What Is Dispositive Analysis?

I approach the #MeToo (#JaTeż) action and its impact upon the normative views on violence against women using the tools of dispositive analy-

³ I took into consideration only those posts which had the “public” setting turned on. The overall database was estimated to consist of around 3,000 posts, half of which were published on 17 October 2017, the day after #MeToo (#JaTeż) started. Research material was extracted with the brand24.pl media monitoring tool to prevent bias in the data. I would like to thank the brand24.pl crew for free access to the service and for helpdesk support.

⁴ After the Cambridge Analytica data breach in 2018, Facebook changed its data policy and restricted access to some types of archival data from 2017. For this reason, I was not able to extract the exact date and time of the analysed posts while editing the paper in 2020. These posts are cited here with gender symbols (“M” for male, and “F” for female Facebook users), as they appeared originally in my MA research. Quotes that do not contain hashtags are comments on posts that do. All translations of quotations from Polish are my own work.

sis, which is a post-Foucauldian research perspective on relations between the forms of subjectivity and power-knowledge. In this framework, the dispositive is a heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discursive and non-discursive elements connected in a network of power relations, which produces a truth discourse about the world and plays a strategic function in responding to urgent needs (Foucault 1980: 194–197). Dispositive analysis aims to study how various mechanisms shape social reality, understood as the resultant of the orders of knowledge intertwined with the techniques of power (Nowicka 2016: 179; Raffnsøe et al. 2014).

In discussing Michel Foucault and gender studies, Patricia Amigot Leache and Margot Pujal i Llombart introduced the dispositive of gender which produces and regulates sexual identities and the subordination of women (Amigot Leache & Pujal i Llombart 2011: 6). The authors did not, however, refer to the element of urgency. I support the claim that a disclosure of systemic violence in #MeToo (#JaTež) was that urgency towards which the dispositive of gender responded. In the following analysis, I attempt to show how the power-knowledge and affects accumulated in the hashtag network by means of the circulation of #MeToo (#JaTež) countered the patriarchal dispositive of gender and the normalisation of gender-based violence in public discourse.

/// Avowal and Parrhesia in #MeToo (#JaTež)

Two modes of truth-telling – avowal and parrhesia⁵ – are of interest to this study as they serve to explain how a subject speaks her truth from the subordinated position in power relations. In his 1981 Louvain lectures Foucault defined avowal as

a verbal act through which the subject affirms who he/she is, binds himself/herself to this truth, places himself/herself in a relation-

⁵ In *The Courage of the Truth* lectures Foucault signalled that parrhesia is not a technique of truth-telling such as rhetoric or confession, but a mode anchored in the criticism of ethos of individuals and situations (Foucault 2011: 14). On that basis, Foucault claims parrhesia is not performative. He differed performative speech acts, with effects “known and ordered in advance,” from parrhesia, whose defining characteristic is the extent to which truth-telling “opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known” (ibid.: 62). At this moment, however, he seems to limit the “performative” to the illocutionary effects of the heavily contextualised performative speech act. It is worth noting the difference that J.L. Austin indicated (1962: 101–104) between illocutionary acts, with their conventional effects (e.g., the remission of sins by a priest), and perlocutionary acts with actual, unconventional effects, such as the abandonment of faith by a priest after hearing a confession. Thus parrhesia may have some performative effects, which are identified here with the work of affects.

ship of dependence with regard to another, and modifies at the same time his [/her] relationship to himself [/herself] (Foucault 2014: 17).

Avowal was first identified with the liberation of the speaking subject when confession was made an obligatory practice in the Catholic Church, and gradually ceased to be exercised as a form of external coercion but as a common technique of truth production in Western societies (Foucault 1978: 60). The ritual allowed for the process of subjectivation, by simultaneously creating the sinful “self” to be responsible for its deeds and the obligation to acknowledge them. A priest who held pastoral power over community members was a necessary figure in order for a subject to come into relation with her own truth.

Dave Tell examines the Foucauldian critique of confession and concludes that “confession is a *sine qua non* of modern power – it is an essential component without which modern power could not be exercised” (Tell 2010: 98). Tell refers to disciplinary power and recalls Foucault by claiming that confession as a technique of power is interchangeable with Bentham’s panopticon (Foucault 2004). Through Catholic confession, a truth-speaking exercise was inscribed into modern governmentality, by which Foucault meant to describe the set of practices in control of both the individual soul and the whole political body (Folkers 2016: 9–10).

But #MeToo participants did not report any “sins” other than being a woman in patriarchal society, and this points to the structural reason for including avowal in a #MeToo analysis. In her article on the feminist-Foucauldian approach to countering sexual violence, the American scholar Dianna Taylor claims that asserting the subjectivity of women who have experienced gender-based violence is “ultimately insufficient as a strategy of resistance” (Taylor 2013: 89). Taylor is interested in contemporary strategies for countering sexual violence that would have similar effects to those of parrhesia in the context of antiquity: disobedience and anti-normalisation (ibid.: 99). Parrhesia was frank public speech, a mode of truth-telling in which a speaker expressed his personal relationship to truth (Foucault 2001: 12). Socrates is probably the most renowned parrhesiastes – his defence during his trial served as evidence of his truthfulness, which ultimately led to a death sentence. A parrhesiastes speaks his/her mind as clearly and directly as possible, regardless of the dangers this may evoke, since a parrhesiastes’ moral duty is to criticise the injustice of superior or major opinion from a subordinated position, for the sake of improving

the community (ibid.: 17). Taylor argues that “a parrhesiastic self-relation represents what in modern/contemporary terms can be characterised as an anti-normalising alternative to the confessional self-relation that subjectivity inherits and reproduces” (ibid.: 96). While Taylor underlines anti-normalisation at the level of parrhesiastic self-relation, the social function of parrhesiastes was progressively to impact the injustice of existing norms.

Referring to the truth-production modes of avowal and parrhesia, #MeToo posts are understood here as performative acts whose replication and accumulation produced a truth discourse on systemic violence against women. The apparently paradoxical union between the “self,” which is subjectivated in avowal and empowered in parrhesia, highlights both the personal and public characteristic of the #MeToo action.

/// Norm-Countering: Affect Circulation in the Hashtag Network

The Polish #MeToo movement started on 16 October 2017 when Stowarzyszenie Kobiet 8 Marca, the organisers of Warsaw Manifa, an annual feminist demonstration on Women’s Day (8 March), shared a Facebook post written by the American actress Carmen Ruby Floyd, with a Polish translation:

#metoo #Jateż

If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “Me too.” as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.

Jeśli wszystkie kobiety, które były kiedyś molestowane seksualnie napisały „Ja też” w statusie, być może pokazalibyśmy ludziom jaką skalę ma to zjawisko.

Over the period under consideration, 570 posts with identical or slightly modified content were published, making it a standard formula and a most frequently shared post. The “#MeToo” tag itself could be extended to the confessional expression “I was sexually abused, too,” which serves to establish the identity of women who have experienced sexual harassment while throwing light on the normalised violence against them in a patriarchal society. The following sentence in the post aims to counter the patriarchal norm from the subordinated position in power relations. The use of the conditional seems to express symptomatic uncertainty in terms of the importance of women’s voice in public. The reference to scale

(“if all women”) indicates how the normalisation of sexual violence makes many forms of abusive behaviours unnoticeable to perpetrators and victims alike.

[I]n many cases we do not even realise that we are victims of abuse. violence. it is not a matter of repression... it is a matter of the norm in which we were brought up. we: victims and aggressors. all from the same world (F).

The action aimed at exposing and countering patriarchal norms through the replication of #MeToo posts accumulated in the circulation of affects which globally took over social media in October 2017. In Brian Massumi’s classic definition, an “affect” is a social potentiality that becomes accessible to awareness when it is actualised as an intelligible emotion (Massumi 1995: 96). Otherwise, an affect may be understood as a tension between bodies and things. At the peak of #MeToo, with which this analysis is concerned, Facebook was highly saturated with the various emotions shared by thousands of people. In this respect, the #MeToo action fits Kathleen Stewart’s definition of an affect as “public feelings that begin and end in social circulation” (Stewart 2007: 5, quoted in Edwards & Lang 2018: 125). Building on Dustin W. Edwards and Heather Lang’s understanding of hashtags (Edwards & Lang 2018: 120), I suggest that hashtags are material-discursive practices for the accumulation of affects. The contagious feature of both hashtag and affect makes them a vehicle for power-knowledge distribution. With every #MeToo hashtag repetition, the affective flow in the network increased, broadening its visibility and possible impact.

/// The Right to Define Sexual Harassment: Against the Patriarchal Normalisation of Gender-Based Violence

Like most penal codes, the Polish Penal Code has no definition of sexual harassment. This not only creates significant problems when seeking justice in court, but also explains the weakness of the law in regulating behaviours that do not fall under the sexual-violence paragraphs.⁶ Admittedly, Article 199 § 1 of the Polish Penal Code provides that

⁶ Further reading: *Breaking the Taboo: Report on Sexual Violence* by the Foundation for Equality and Emancipation STER (Grabowska & Grzybek 2016).

whoever, abusing a relationship of dependence or by taking advantage of a critical situation, subjects such a person to sexual intercourse or makes him/her submit to another sexual act or to perform such an act shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to 3 years.

However, this paragraph does not cover most of the acts identified as sexual harassment by victims. A definition of sexual harassment exists in the Polish Labour Code, but it does not account for situations outside of the professional field. Additionally, the uncertain meaning of a “workplace” in late capitalism leaves the qualification of abusive actions to the patriarchal norm.

Moreover, victim-blaming, the low effectiveness in solving cases of sexual violence, and other practices of the state apparatuses have produced a lack of confidence in the police and justice system. In *Feminism and the Power of Law*, British sociologist Carol Smart argues for a feminist strategy to question the power of law as an inherently patriarchal truth discourse with a tendency to dismiss alternative discourses of knowledge (Smart 1989: 162–165). The ability to redefine the truth of events, outside the legal discourse, allows for direct political action in which “feminism can (re) define harmless flirtation into sexual harassment” (ibid.: 165). Truth works here as a social operator that integrates #MeToo participants and allies in the critique of violent, patriarchal morality (Kleeberg 2019). In some of the #MeToo (#JaTeż) posts, participants insisted on their right to define what sexual harassment is, on the basis of an inferior position in the gender order. The “right to define” is equal here with the “ability to identify”:

[P]recisely because of the lack of a “sexual harassment” definition in law, women decide what it is. Today I had a discussion in which some girls said that wolf-whistling was sexual harassment. They did not want to go to court right away, just wanted the guys to stop doing it (F).

The feminist redefinition of sexual harassment and call for change to the norms of conduct between men and women corresponds with the concept of rape culture, where “rape is our everyday reality and any behaviour that denigrates women because of gender opens up the field to rape” (Staško 2017: 7). Rebecca Solnit elaborates on rape culture in her 2014 es-

say on #YesAllWomen, an action analogous to #MeToo, but with far less global impact:

We tend to treat violence and the abuse of power as though they fit into airtight categories: harassment, intimidation, threat, battery, rape, murder. But I realise now that what I was saying is: it's a slippery slope. That's why we need to address that slope, rather than compartmentalising the varieties of misogyny and dealing with each separately (Solnit 2014).

The rhetoric of a slippery slope is based on the belief that the first and relatively small step starts a chain of related events that inevitably lead to a serious, unintended effect. Rape culture draws attention to the systemic character of sexual violence by describing how the normalisation of any kind of gender-based violence paves the way for sexual assault and rape to occur. This approach is frequently met with comments that undermine the power-knowledge on the systemic characteristics of violence against women by referring to a legal qualification, implausibility, or an emotional burden that is not striking enough:

There are people who survived tragedy and live with trauma – how in their eyes does it look when someone gets upset because they got felt up? These posts don't stand in solidarity with people who are really abused, they only rub salt into their wounds and remind them of situations they want to erase from memory. I have yet to meet someone who was abused, but really abused, to actually join the hashtagging and talk about what they survived (F).

This statement takes sexual violence for a traumatic experience that prevents victims from sharing stories in public. The argument was put forward by women and men who ignored or depreciated the wide spectrum of sexual violence, claiming that only criminal acts like assault and rape should be considered as such. An alleged attempt to symmetrise in #MeToo (#JaTeż) was attacked with a concurrent demand for justice for the victims of sex crimes. This critical reaction employs the Habermasian division between the private and the public sphere, which excludes women who experienced sexual harassment from participating in public discourse (Fraser 1992). When #MeToo (#JaTeż) took place in Poland, a secondary victimisation also occurred broadly – probably because many forms of

verbal and physical sexual harassment experienced and problematised by women had not previously been taken seriously in public discourse.

Some participants drew attention to the cognitive dissonance evoked by contact with #MeToo (#JaTeż). They understood that the perpetrator is guilty and should be ashamed of his act, but at the same time they felt the emotional burden: “[E]ven though I know who is guilty, I am very ashamed and I am afraid to talk about it” (F), or “[T]hey should feel shame and fear, not me” (F). The lack of a non-patriarchal normative framework for sexual harassment favours the individualisation and rationalisation of this experience by victims who are forced to take responsibility for the causes of their emotional state. Meanwhile, the perpetrators can remain ignorant or indifferent to the violent nature of their acts. Truth-tellers risked the danger of social stigma, shame, and secondary victimisation. One of the liberating effects experienced by some #MeToo participants was shedding emotional sanctions and responsibility: “I have experienced situations I want to forget, but becoming aware that I’m not the only one made me feel that it was not my fault” (F). Community support and awareness of the institutional nature of violence against women enabled the victims’ sense of personal responsibility to be lifted.

The second most frequently shared post in the Polish #MeToo movement was a detailed definition of sexual harassment from the Feminoteka Foundation website, a feminist organisation which coordinates a Polish edition of the global action on violence against women One Billion Rising – Nazywam się miliard (105 shares in the database).

Sexual harassment is any form of unacceptable behaviour that aims to humiliate or violate another person’s dignity in relation to her gender, or which is of a sexual nature. Harassment is often associated with a sense of power over another person [...] (“Nazywam się miliard”).

Feminoteka Foundation’s expert knowledge thus became an important point of reference for the #JaTeż discourse. Adding more forms of sexual violence to physical abuse, this definition qualitatively and quantitatively broadened how sexual harassment was identified. In the #JaTeż discourse, its meaning oscillated from the definition above, through disregard for the violent characteristics of harassment and in favour of “rudeness,” to complete denial by some men, who ignored the performative effects of speech and/or identified harassment with sexual assault (“A large percent-

age of these hashtags are there because the ladies have been victims of brutal verbal assault like ‘such a nice ass’ or ‘I would bang her’” (M)). I do not elaborate on men’s various reactions to #MeToo (#JaTeż) in this paper and merely point to the male backlash against women who described their experiences of gender-based violence (“Girls open up about painful things while the boys put it under the microscope to show that it’s not actually harassment” (F)). Due to the danger of an aggressive reaction, speaking up against the patriarchal norm requires courage (Foucault 2001: 16). Hashtag circulation contributed to a construction of sexual harassment that covered a wide range of behaviour described by aggrieved women: “Cat-calling, loud and vulgar comments on my appearance, trying to feel me up, stupid gestures, bawdy propositions and staring at my boobs or ass, I experience that daily” (F).

The prevalence of sexual harassment is a normative phenomenon at the intersection of gender, law, and culture. While the #MeToo action does not produce law, it confronts unaccepted practices, calling for normative change on the basis of popular sovereignty in the assembly (Butler 2016). In her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, the American philosopher Judith Butler develops the Arendtian conception of “the space of appearance” as a political domain in respect to the affective characteristic of public assemblies. Butler puts forward the conception of “the right to appearance” as a performative claim on what is not legally codified yet, or cannot be codified at all (ibid.: 68). Butler emphasises that “the right to appearance” is ensured by popular sovereignty, which allows the creation of a community in the act of self-constitution (ibid.: 149).

/// “The Personal is Political” Revisited: Courage and Solidarity in #MeToo (#JaTeż)

The identification of individual experience with systemic violence has enabled women to articulate a collective demand for their safety and well-being to be increased.

#metoo # jateż at first I thought that this topic does not concern me, but while reading more posts I felt huge depression and pain, as well as rage that so often we, women, are the ones who feel ashamed and embarrassed, and because of that we remain silent (F).

The statement above demonstrates in a nutshell how the awareness of being a victim of systemic violence gradually emerges, as the author moves from the first-person singular (“At first I thought”) to plural identification with other women through their shared emotional burden (“we, women, are the ones who feel ashamed”). Nevertheless, almost all the posts under #JaTeż that contain personal experiences are written in the first-person singular, where the speaking subject is at the same time the object of the statement.

#metoo #jateż In the seventh grade in elementary school a group of peers pulled me into the basement, after which the head of their gang put his tongue in my throat. It was my “first kiss.” Then they repeatedly stalked me on the street and kept ringing my doorbell. I was afraid and I felt ashamed (F).

The confessional nature of this story lies in the courage needed to share in public a detailed description of sexual assault, continuous harassment, and inflicted harm. Foucault mentions five features of parrhesia that occur in #MeToo (#JaTeż) posts: sincerity, truthfulness, danger, criticism, and moral duty (Foucault 2001: 19–20). Bearing this in mind, Magdalena Nowicka and Karol Franczak point out that parrhesiastes speak on behalf of the silent majority – of those who cannot speak (Nowicka & Franczak 2016: 10).

#metoo #jateż Great respect for those who have the courage to speak up, and of course to those who do not have this courage. I have not experienced the worst scenarios; I do not know how I would function then, but even such situations as described above [a verbal form of harassment] can paralyse, take away courage and a sense of security (F).

The courage of truth unfettered by fear, shame, and guilt in many cases proves to be stronger than the disciplinary function of confession: “[M]aybe someone needs my confession, or maybe I need it myself, and that is also okay” (F). If there is any justification for speaking in someone else’s name, it might be the sense of mutual experience and thus of understanding why the other person cannot or simply does not want to speak: “[...] but there is something more than solidarity between us[,] these stories change into something[,] courage appears[,] the victim disappears, the sto-

ries told change us[,] I am waiting for what will grow[,] how we will grow because there is in us, girls, strength” (F). Solidarity is distinguished from a victimhood associated with powerlessness and sacrifice (“[W]e victimise ourselves hiding behind our shame. We’re not victims when we fight for change” (F)). The ethos of solidarity manifested in #MeToo (#JaTeż) was consolidated in an affect that emerged from shared experiences with systemic violence. On that basis, the claim for gender justice and an elementary sense of security is expressed in collective rather than individual categories. The explosion of rage in the first days of the action did not drain #JaTeż of its fighting spirit. Instead, it became organised in the economy of rage, owing to which the action acquired a long-term nature (Sloterdijk 2011: 65–70). According to Peter Sloterdijk, along with the rise in the organisation of rage, the rationalisation of vindictive energy occurs (ibid.: 73). Accordingly, the initial impulse of aggrieved women is turned into a project of collective awareness-raising, and finally, into a revolutionary movement which undermines the patriarchal order.

Hashtag circulation affected social media users, but decisions on whether to take part in the #MeToo action remained autonomous. Some of the participants suggestively problematised their resistance to the coercive function of confession:

It seems to me that #metoo #jatez is righteous, but I feel conflicted about this action [...] Those who bear responsibility should be the ones to feel shame and explain themselves (F).

Stressed here is the resistance to the subjectivation in confession, which serves to victimise:

[B]ecause that’s how the gagging mechanism of “avowal” works – you don’t just say something, you turn on “whining” victim mode, and a wimpy crybaby gets treated they way he most likely deserves to be treated due to his own fault. [...] I don’t want to write about it because I don’t want to victimise myself. That’s all the more why I have to do it, to make it harder for those who would like to see me weaker only because I’m a woman (F).

Here, parrhesia and avowal as modes of truth-telling in #MeToo connect: the courage to speak up against the patriarchal norm while being subjected to it, effected in the social production of power-knowledge on

violence against women. The subject of #MeToo oscillates between the states of being a subject and an object of disciplinary power – one is at the same time subjectivated (forced to confess) and engaged in a struggle for the improvement of social norms (“SPEAK OUT #jateż, so that future generations don’t have to” (F)). Foucault’s thesis on avowal as a means to the transformation of speakers rather than listeners is confirmed with the supposed increase of social awareness about sexual violence among women in the first place.

Enthusiasm for #MeToo at least partially came from faith in the beneficial influence that truth may have on social relations. Indeed, to acknowledge a structural problem by making it visible or perceptible at the level of repeated individual events can be a first step towards its resolution. On that basis, the “personal is political” slogan from second-wave feminism takes on new life in social media. In the safety section of Facebook’s Community Standards, there is a paragraph on the “Sexual Exploitation of Adults” (II/8), which was updated after the #MeToo action:

We recognize the importance of Facebook as a place to discuss and draw attention to sexual violence and exploitation. We believe this is an important part of building common understanding and community. In an effort to create space for this conversation while promoting a safe environment, we remove content that depicts, threatens or promotes sexual violence, sexual assault, or sexual exploitation, while also *allowing space for victims to share their experiences* (Facebook 2018; emphasis added).

In other words, “the right to appearance” is officially encouraged by Facebook, which stands for liberal values and declares its intent to moderate offensive content. The company endorses sharing personal stories as a proper means of moving towards gender justice, at least in the space controlled by the platform.

/// Conclusion: #MeToo (#JaTeż) as a Normative Phenomenon

Growing concerns over Facebook’s political irresponsibility turned attention to the insufficient regulations within the virtual space managed by US technology corporations. Against the background of recent disturbing events, such as personal-data breaches and election interferences, #MeToo provided an uplifting moment for Facebook. In his testimony to the

US Senate over Cambridge Analytica, Mark Zuckerberg mentioned the #MeToo action as one of the benefits of social networks, as circulation of the hashtag in social media caused an explosion of interest in the problem of sexual violence. In this regard, it is vital to look at how slacktivism – which is a pejorative term for digital activism – is deemed to be an illusory belief in the causative power of online action requiring little involvement from the participants. Contrary to this opinion, an analysis of the #MeToo (#JaTeż) discourse confirms the emotional involvement and courage needed to engage.

In this paper, I have described how the #MeToo (#JaTeż) action affectively produced a truth discourse on structural violence against women. In #MeToo (#JaTeż) posts some features of avowal and parrhesia intertwine: women testified about their subjection to systemic violence, but at the same time they spoke up against patriarchal norms and codes of conduct between genders. Circulation of the hashtag on social media increased the visibility of sexual harassment and created a “space of appearance” in the absence of adequate social regulations. Consequently, a patriarchal dispositif of gender, which normalises violence against women, was disclosed and countered by the #MeToo movement, showing that no violence is a private matter.

The #MeToo action is a recent example of how the second-wave slogan “the personal is political” merged with social-media technology (see Rogan & Budgeon 2018). Michael Salter claims that social media enables the creation of counterpublics in which statements regarding sexual violence are processed in an opposite manner to the established social and legal norms (Salter 2013). After the Black Protests in Poland, the feminist pursuit of raising social awareness on women’s rights shifted from critical discourse towards the mainstream, which came with a growth in “femvertising” and the commodification of feminism in general.

The difference between the first and second phase of Polish #JaTeż, as well the US #MeToo, shows that accusations were not focused on a few “rotten apples,” but rather on the whole structure of power (Duggan 2018). Systemic oppression, however, stems from singular, repeated events of subjugation and violence. As the article “Feminists on Paper” made clear in addressing both the individual and social levels, parrhesiastes’ truth-telling risks provoking the hostility and hatred of the social environment (Foucault 2011: 25). While the dynamics of normative change are usually disappointing for individuals and inflict more harm on them by way of social drama, in the wider scope

it works to make better community standards, which ultimately benefit everyone.⁷

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⁷ For more on the normative function of callout culture and pain in a specific group, I recommend the anthropologically tinted podcast “The Callout” by Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel for NPR (Rosin & Spiegel 2018).

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/// Abstract

This paper considers how a truth discourse about violence against women was produced with the #JaTeż posts published on Facebook between 16 and 20 October 2017, during the first phase of Polish #MeToo. It applies a post-Foucauldian perspective of dispositive analysis to outline how the circulation of #MeToo (#JaTeż) in social media affected the patriarchal dispositive of gender, which had to give way to women speaking truth. The replication of posts and accumulation of affects in the #MeToo (#JaTeż) network allowed the normalisation of violence against women in public discourse to be countered. Michel Foucault’s work on parrhesiastic and confessional modes of truth-telling is employed to analyse courage and solidarity in #MeToo (#JaTeż), as well as to connect individual engagement in the action with the collective claim for a normative shift in favour of women’s rights.

Keywords:

dispositive analysis, Facebook, #MeToo (#JaTeż), truth-production, violence against women

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