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PARALLEL SUBALTERN FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLICS IN CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT: *The historically exclusive nature of public spaces and discourses is beyond dispute. While feminist and "other" counterpublics have provided alternative ways of organizing public interaction and dialogue, these have remained largely invisible to nonparticipants. New information technologies afford new possibilities for feminist counterpublics to influence the norms of participation and boundaries between insiders and outsiders in mainstream public spaces. In this article I argue that feminist counterpublics in cyberspace are evidence of a new development in social discourse: the creation of subaltern parallel counterpublics distinguishable from oppositional/separatist counterpublics based, to differing degrees, on identity politics.*

Given the increasing significance of on-line communication, creating more inclusive public cyberspaces is an important component of social change movements that seek a more equitable distribution of wealth and power in society. As Mitchell (1995:116) reminds us, however, "Inclusion of more and varied groups of people into the public sphere has only been won through constant social struggle." Deliberate and strategic political action is required if public cyberspace is to come closer to achieving the normative impulse for inclusion underlying ideologies of the public. As Robbins (1993:xv) states, these conversations and the construction of public space are ongoing: "[N]o sites are inherently or eternally public. The lines between public and private are perpetually shifting, as are the tactical advantages and disadvantages of finding oneself on one side or the other.

MATERIAL ACCESS, PARTICIPATION, AND THE GENDER GAP

Most arguments for the democratic potential of cyberspace are based on a naive dismissal of the relations of power that construct and permit social interaction. They also fail to examine so-called democratic principles and practices in terms of

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their exclusionary tendencies. Both material and sociocultural access to and participation in the social spaces of “the net” in fact are characterized by wide gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” (Orlands 1998:7). Gender is one aspect of identity that intersects with “other” categories of exclusion that is significant where information technology is concerned. As Spender observes,

[T]he gender gap with regard to computers is substantial. The world of computers and their connections is increasingly the world of men: as more research is done in this new area and more findings are presented, the more damning is the evidence. Men have more computers, spend more time with them, and are the dominating presence in cyberspace. (1995:165–66)

The most obvious challenge to the democratizing potential of computer-based communications technologies is in terms of access—both to the hardware and to the software required for participation, the education required to make use of it, the information required to get on board, and, importantly, the sense of entitlement required to produce public written statements and to take up social space. For most, the introduction to “the computer age” requires a substantial investment of time and money. Although the presence of women of color on the Net is increasing (Hafkin and Taggart 2001; Wakeford 1997), the majority of women on the Net continue to be white academic professionals. That these relatively privileged women report experiences of exclusion indicates serious problems for the inclusive potential of public cyberspace (Gurak 2001).

If ever there is a case to be made that new technologies simply reinforce existing patterns of domination in society, in terms of both who uses what and how, male domination of cyberspace provides it. The majority of participants on computer bulletin boards, listserves, and Web-based discussion areas are men, and in mixed-gender cyberspaces, even on feminist topics, men clearly dominate both in terms of volume of participation and in terms of agenda setting (Gurak 2001). Women often experience these public spaces as hostile or unwelcoming or irrelevant because topics of interest to women are either nonexistent or fail to survive. As in face-to-face social interaction, men monopolize the space. Spender (1995) observes this parallel between the results of her research on face-to-face interaction, in which men were found to take up considerably more conversational space than women do, and her research on gendered interaction on the Internet.

While forms of cyberspace emerge in opposition to those that are hegemonic and monopolistic, we nevertheless have to contend with the cultural imperatives that are implicated in the very technological foundations of electronic communities and in the technologically mediated processes of participation in these spaces. Wajcman (1991:61) notes, “As with science, the very language of technology, its symbolism, is masculine.” Understanding computer technology as masculine culture is crucial for analyzing and generating alternative electronic communities.

In literature on gender and technology, psychological and sociocultural aspects of access for women emerge as crucial issues. As Cockburn (1985) and others have observed, the very notion of femininity has been constructed historically in opposition to technological proficiency and empowerment. Technology and technical

proficiency are identified with masculinity. This association is perpetuated rather than undermined by the ways in which new technologies are introduced. They tend to be introduced, both in the workplace and in the classroom, in ways that are consistent with existing patterns of gender stratification. Thus while for professional men, word processing and computer know-how generally translate into greater efficiency and empowerment on the job, the pattern of restricting women to service-oriented labor has not been broken by acquisition of word processing or computer skills (Menzies 1996).

Computers, like all technologies that reward proficiency with power, are identified as part of the “male” domain. Even in the computing counterculture, the so-called rebels are highly masculinist. Obsessed with the control of technology and dismissive of their physical beings, hackers are predominantly white middle-class men. The earliest contacts children have with computers leave a masculinist imprint—from the home computer usually purchased for the boys in the family to the harassment of girls in schools by boys monopolizing computers, from the war game-based video games and software culture to the association of computing with mathematics rather than language. Girls are either denied access to this sphere or not encouraged to become involved in it the way that (especially middle-class) boys are (Hickling-Hudson 1992). In the world of work, the kind of contact women have with computers tends to reinforce labor force marginalization (Menzies 1996). Computer technology reflects and reinforces existing relations of power in society.

EMBODIMENT AND ANONYMITY IN COMPUTING CULTURE

It is commonly argued that the anonymity of participation on the Internet makes it more democratic than other social spaces. Some authors, such as Heim (1992) and Turkle (1995), insist that this very anonymity makes for a particularly inclusive space because individuals are free from the identifying characteristics targeted for discrimination. Heim (1992:72) exults, “We are more equal on the net because we can either ignore or create the body that appears in cyberspace.” Bates makes a similarly naive point in heralding the advantages of computer-based communications technologies in educational settings:

Because gender, race, physical appearance, status, or experience are not readily apparent, and because access to conferences can be made available to students and teachers alike, everyone participating is judged solely on the value of their contributions (although this is heavily dependent on the approach adopted by the tutor or moderator). (1995:18)

In spite of the degree to which identity can be concealed or overtly constructed on the Internet, gender is usually the one marker that remains visible. Usernames or userids typically reveal the gender of the person. It is true that on bulletin boards where usernames or userids can be made up at will it is possible for computer cross-dressing to occur. It is this possibility that inspires Turkle (1995) to talk about computer technology’s emancipatory potential regarding gender norms and roles. Research to date suggests that while cross-dressing may occur, behavior

remains gender-specific nonetheless. Participants identifying themselves as women take up considerably less conversational space and are less assertive and aggressive, whereas participants who identify themselves as men adopt gender-appropriate behavior and dominate, in both quantity and content (O'Brien 1999). Gender norms remain stable on the Internet. In this way, computer cross-dressing cannot be interpreted as "gender-bending" and hence as undermining dualisms between men and women because gender-associated behavior remains. O'Brien claims that gender may be exaggerated on-line. As Smith and Kollock report,

O'Brien argues that gender is such a central feature for organizing interpersonal relations that persons go to great pains to reproduce gender in online interaction. . . . Gender is the one characteristic of our embodied lives that is a central feature in interaction throughout the Internet. (1999:12)

The opportunities to "experience" the other gender lauded by Turkle are understood less as opportunities than as the inevitable knowledge of the other's identity and social placement required in a culture dominated by dualism.

The issues associated with the argument that lack of embodiment increases democracy require attention. The dualisms mind/body, male/female, and public/private that characterize Western culture have placed the body and those more closely associated with it—women, peoples of color, animals, nature—in dispute. The celebration of anonymity through disembodiment brings to mind a Western quest to escape the physical, based on what Spellman (1988) refers to as somatophobia, or hatred of the flesh. Western social stratification reveals a link between physicality and low socioeconomic status. Freedom from physical labor is the reward for higher status. What assumptions are we perpetuating through this celebration of lack of embodiment in cyberspace? Denial of the body has been a foundation of forms of social and political engineering that have cruelly ignored the concerns of those for whom this denial is not possible: women, children, the elderly, the poor. Exalting the denial of the body reinforces the current gendered, race, and classed division of labor. In keeping with these concerns, Young (1987) criticizes conceptions of the public sphere that privilege only forms of communication that have been socially constructed as "rational," leaving no credible room for the emotional and the semiotic.

Significant tendencies in computing culture celebrate the negation of the body. Hackers signify their dedication to their craft by denying their physicality. This occurs in physical appearance, in the form of lack of attention to personal grooming, and in the denial of the physical needs of the body through marathon sessions at the terminal. Heim (1992:64) writes, "The cybnaut seated before us, strapped into sensory input devices, appears to be, and is indeed, lost to the world. Suspended in computer space, the cybnaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in a world of digital sensation." Hacker ethics are high productivity oriented and are reminiscent of the Calvinist denial of the flesh and normative dualism. Liberal humanism's dichotomy between mind and body seems to be institutionalized in the development of these new technologies. The long history of association of women and the body and their devaluation makes this central

characteristic of computing culture and the emerging culture of cyberspace problematic from a feminist perspective.

The negation of the body in hacking cultures has far-reaching implications and is not resolved by the nominal inclusion of women. The very dualism characteristic of Western ideology, which underpins and justifies exploitative relations, remains unchallenged. The fundamental assumptions underlying the development of cyberspace with regard to the place of the body need to be challenged. As Stone remarks,

[M]uch of the work of cyberspace researchers . . . assumes that the human body is “meat”—obsolete, as soon as consciousness itself can be uploaded into the network. . . . Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. . . . Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies. (1992:113)

Perhaps it is up to feminists, once again, to ensure that this privileged male desire to escape from the body is thwarted.

FEMINIST POSSIBILITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PUBLIC IN CYBERSPACE

An analysis of the gendered character of computer technologies could lead to a simplistic feminist dismissal of technology in general. However, this is neither practical nor warranted. After all, a glimpse through Western history since the industrial revolution reveals that many forms of resistance have taken existing technologies and subverted them to highly different ends (Penley and Ross 1991). As Haraway (1991, 1997) emphasizes, feminism and technology, therefore, need not be essentially antipathetic.

Feminist revulsion, while understandable, has the risky consequence of ensuring that the exclusiveness of public cyberspace becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without feminist and progressive contestation, these spaces are bound to become more inhospitable, and there is a greater likelihood that they will be left to those individuals and groups for whom genuine inclusiveness is not a goal. As Joan Baez once reminded an audience, “Don’t blame Ronald Reagan—it’s not *his* fault he’s president.”¹ All publics are socially constructed, and cyberpublics are no exception. If feminist and progressive voices leave the job of building cyberspaces to dominant interests, exclusivity is a predictable result.

There is some evidence to suggest that cyberpublics may be inclined toward a particularly narrow degree of inclusivity as a result of their (clearly temporary) restriction of social interaction to text (De Kerckhove 1997). Another significant factor in narrowing inclusivity is the increasing commercialization of the Internet (Calcutt 1999; Lax 2001). Grounding cyberpublics in affirmations of community and embodied social relations may be the most important contribution that feminists can make. With regard to the assertion of embodiment, Ullman’s (1996) characterization of women’s multichanneled communicative style as “codeswitching” is promising. By highlighting issues related to embodiment in cyberspace and/or

integrating interaction in public cyberspaces with social interaction in other mediums, whether face-to-face or technologically fostered in other ways (telephone, television, radio, for example), feminists have the potential to counter the tendency to glorify the disembodied capabilities of cyberspace with a more humanizing influence.

Hacker (1989) remarks that women and workers are considered “bad” if they take things into their own hands. Pressure to use technology appropriately reveals that meaningful opportunities for unintentional use need to be explored and that opportunities for resistance do exist. Penley and Ross’s (1991) and Haraway’s (1991, 1997) arguments for critical interaction with technologies suggest that feminists should be practical enough to exploit these opportunities. De Kerckhove puts this tension into a macro social context by pointing out the social conflict surrounding the development and use of new communications technologies:

Artists vie with military researchers to be at the cutting edge of technological investigation. . . . Both have a vested interest in understanding and exploiting the impact of the technology on the human sensorium. And each is involved in his or her own way with issues of aggression—the military for obvious reasons and artists due to their special sensitivity to the destructive potential of new technologies invading the established social order. The paradox, of course, is that society grants the military lavish funding for its R & D and the art world lives on crusts. Moreover, the military works in secrecy, while art tries at every opportunity to claw its way out of obscurity. (1997:xxvii)

It is reasonable to expect that although De Kerckhove pays little attention to gender, he would place feminists within the spectrum of artists attempting to shape new information technology in opposition to military (and increasingly corporate) interests and imperatives.

In relation to access, it is evident that cyberspace is de facto an elite space (Norris 2001). In relation to participation, the “absence” of physical cues, and, some would argue, body, in this social space presents as many problems as possibilities. And yet there is considerable activity and interest by women and feminists (the two are not necessarily the same) in Internet communication. In *Life on the Screen* (1995), Turkle is an avid proponent of the new possibilities for human communication and identity formation provided by the Internet. More skeptical but equally engaged accounts are to be found in volumes of feminist essays on computer-based communications technologies, such as *Wired Women* (Cherny and Weiss 1996) and *Processed Lives* (Terry and Calvert 1997). Feminists and progressives are acting with a sense of entitlement to the public potential of cyberspace and fashioning alternative social spaces at an impressive pace.

Feminist contestation of exclusive practices in supposedly public spaces and strategies designed for achieving social change have been firmly grounded, since the 1970s, in a parallel strategy of organizing feminist counterpublics, as Fraser (1993) has observed, and in problematizing the exclusiveness of supposedly public spaces. Combining the strategic tactics that proved so effective in the Civil Rights Movement, for example, with this parallel strategy in regard to claiming and rewriting public cyberspace has significant promise.

FEMINIST THEORIZING ON THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Feminists have been especially vocal about the limitations of the ideologies of the public sphere and in identifying ways in which supposedly public realms are actually quite exclusive.² Critics such as Pateman (1989), Fraser (1993), and Young (1987) have revealed that the liberal democratic public sphere is a realm of exclusion on the basis of hegemonically constructed “universals.” Notions of citizenship and hence participation in the public sphere have been constructed along lines of neutrality that actually reflect normalized white, middle-class, heterosexual male identities. The so-called universality of the public sphere actually amounts to the presentation of the subjectivity of a particular elite group as the objective category of normalcy.

The normative impetus behind varied conceptions of the public sphere in Western society is that it be inclusive. What feminist criticism has revealed so effectively is that the so-called universality that is intended to create this openness and inclusivity is actually based on hegemonic norms. People whose characteristics of identity lie outside the power structure participate effectively (if at all) only to the extent to which they are willing or able to bracket their particularity. As Pateman (1989) emphasizes, the very power of liberalism’s conception of the universal individual is predicated on disembodiment. Embodiment would reveal that this so-called neutral individual is actually male. Additional feminist scrutiny of this category has revealed a host of other physical characteristics (race, class, sexuality) associated with this hegemonic body (Fraser 1993). The hatred of the flesh, or somatophobia, has historically justified and continues to justify the delegation of physical tasks to those more closely associated with the body (Spellman 1988). Tied to this hatred of the flesh is the marginalization of women and other groups who are associated with the body: they remain outside of or invisible in the public sphere. As Smith (1987) argues, this invisibility is a modern “virtue”: the more successful women are, the less visible are both women and women’s work.

In liberal democratic discourse the ideal of the public sphere is defined by virtue of its impartiality and universality. Political discussion and debate about social issues occur here. Partiality and particularity are assigned to the private sphere. As participants in the public sphere are expected to be neutral, people identified as other through intersecting gender, sexual, racial, and class identities are excluded. Indeed, the exclusion of women’s “private” concerns prevents the exposure of male dominance in personal relationships with women (Pateman 1989). The so-called public sphere is not public after all. In considering ways to expand the public nature of on-line social spaces, therefore, we need to jettison the classical liberal notion and replace it with a feminist definition of “public” as genuinely inclusive (of differences and persons associated with them).

Feminist and progressive theorizing on the Western public sphere is increasingly dismissing the liberal notion of a singular, universal public and replacing it with an appreciation of public space as multiple and ever-expanding and contracting. Feminist organizing has deliberately created feminist public spaces that parallel and contest the “general public” (Freeman 1975). Radical democratic theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and feminist scholars such as Fraser

challenge the notion of the liberal democratic sphere, not only in terms of its universality and hence inclusive character, but in terms of its singularity. They argue that public spaces are multiple and, as Fraser (1993:14) notes, exist in particular contexts: "history records that members of subordinate social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics." Fraser (1993:14) describes these subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." These counterpublics play an important role in the stratified societies of the West in that they allow for the consolidation of identity and regroupment while supporting more effective efforts for inclusion in the larger society.

Feminists call on public spaces to provide the inclusivity that liberal democratic public theorists assign to an imaginary, universal public sphere. To be genuinely inclusive, narrow participation in accordance with the norms of what C. Wright Mills (1959) referred to as a "power elite" needs to be replaced with a broader notion of participation. More people need to be able to participate, and they need to be able to participate in all their diversity.

INDICATORS OF INCLUSIVE TENDENCIES

The traditional form of dialogue that characterizes the Western public sphere is adversarial in nature. It reflects an emphasis on *freedom to* as opposed to *freedom from*. According to Hoover and Howard (1995), traditional dialogue is characterized by the tactic of argumentation, which emphasizes "naming the other," and attack-oriented communication, aimed at preserving "truth." This definition of traditional dialogue closely resembles the polemical style of exchange referred to in the language of cyberspace as "flaming" (Dery 1994). In contrast, critical dialogue is defined by the acceptance of a multiplicity of perspectives and the deliberate attempt to construct community and establish inclusive public space (Hoover and Howard 1995).

Burbules and Rice (1991) define public space as a location characterized by commitment to dialogue across differences. In contrast to claims about how anonymity eliminates the barriers that differences pose to inclusion, Burbules and Rice emphasize that it is the construction of difference and how differences are assigned meaning and practices of communication around them that minimizes or maximizes inclusion. They identify a number of specific communicative practices or tendencies that contribute to the inclusiveness of a social space:

The success of dialogue across differences also depends on what we have called "communicative virtues" that help make dialogue possible and help sustain the dialogical relation over time. These virtues include tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one's own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may "have a turn" to speak, and the disposition to express one's self honestly and sincerely. The possession of these virtues

influences one's capacities both to express one's own beliefs, values, and feelings accurately, and to listen and to hear those of others. (1991: 411)

Burbules and Rice contrast such critical dialogue characterized by "communicative virtues" with traditional, adversarial dialogue. The extent to which critical as opposed to traditional forms of dialogue occurs in a social space is an indicator of the extent to which we can consider it genuinely, not merely normatively, public. While the majority of social spaces on the Internet are characterized by chilly climates for marginalized populations (Ebo 1998; Travers 2000), significant efforts are being made to create more inclusive spaces and to use cyberspace as a tool and a model for social change. Below I discuss the possibilities for parallel feminist subaltern counterpublics in cyberspace and explore several current examples of feminist activism involving the Internet.

FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLICS

Cyberspace provides feminists with unique opportunities for establishing visible feminist publics, for creating feminist spaces without "going away" from the "general" public space. Historically, feminists and other marginalized groups have caucused or formed subaltern counterpublics to consolidate political power, enabling them to participate more effectively in "mixed" publics. This has been necessary because in mixed settings, women who speak up are interrupted, talked over, or ignored and topics of concern to women are either ignored or addressed in a limited way. As a result, women have been denied the opportunity commonly available to men to interact *with each other* in public spaces and have had to go elsewhere.

A critical mass of feminist and progressive participants engaged in an organized attempt to contest the exclusive nature of and rewrite the public in cyberspace has the capacity to occupy public space in a way that is unprecedented off-line. The ability to ignore public spaces characterized by traditional dialogue by constructing, participating in, and modeling an alternative cyberpublic in the middle of a mainstream public is unique to cyberspace. Women's caucuses provide a basic model of climate control, but such control is achieved through (hotly contested) separation from the main group.³ Participation in the main group is enhanced through the acquisition of skills and confidence and the development of solidarity based on issues of particular concern to women in the caucus.

In cyberspace, an effective strategy for challenging the public takes one step further the notion of the women's caucus as empowering its members to change the larger context. The necessarily separatist off-line subaltern counterpublic serves as the basis for organizing the contestation of the mainstream cyberpublic but gives way to a parallel structure on-line.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that such a parallel public is an entirely new phenomenon. Many groups have communicated with each other without withdrawing from the larger group. But this was only made possible by ensuring that the larger group was either unaware that such communication was occurring or incapable of understanding it. For example, gay men developed ways of identifying themselves to each other without others being aware; the dialect of African

American slaves allowed them to communicate with each other without being understood by their masters. But the establishment of a parallel public visible to participants in the public at large is especially powerful because it models an alternative; that is, it demonstrates that the traditional and exclusive public sphere is not the only option.

FEMINIST ACTIVITY IN CYBERSPACE

Feminist activity and the creation of positive images of women on-line is occurring with impressive creativity, networking, and resistance to the sexism of the Web and much of computing culture. Numerous organizations with on- and off-line components aimed at providing women with resources for engaging with and about new information technologies have emerged in North America and throughout the world (Terry and Calvert 1997). Although it has occurred among an elite group of women, there has been a great deal of feminist activity on-line. This activity involves the use of the Internet both to facilitate networking and social activism and to claim public space more broadly for issues of concern to women. While inconsistent and incomplete in their aims for and achievement of communicative virtues, many sites represent women's efforts to use new information technology to overcome traditional boundaries of communication and to acknowledge and facilitate the constructive interaction of diverse groups of women.

In developing countries, on-line activity among women has primarily been concentrated among social activists. This is because electronic networking was promoted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were on the forefront of new information technology use in developing countries. According to Hafkin and Taggart (2001:16), "Information technology has already had a substantial progressive social impact in developing countries and has become identified with the quest for democracy, women's rights, and environmental protection." The use of the Internet for global feminist activism and regional feminist activism among women in developing countries was facilitated by the NGONet in preparation for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit and for the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. These efforts focused both on using new information technology to facilitate communication and participation on an unprecedented level in the planning of a conference of this nature and on increasing access and computer literacy for women. The use of the Internet by women's NGOs for greater inclusion in the planning process of the Beijing conference created new communicative practices and pathways that have enabled these organizations to have a meaningful voice on behalf of women in their regions (Hafkin and Taggart 2001).

Mudocca claims that on-line feminist activity such as the Third World-Women Web-Ring, which was established after the Beijing conference, has actually provided a counter to the dominance of first world, white heterosexist academic feminist theorizing:

Such feminist projects can be posited in relation to ethnic, racial, regional and national locations where the construction of feminist on-line space has its own semiotics. This semiotic underlines intersections of colonialism, racism and

heterosexism. These places, therefore, can be articulated as places/spaces of resource in as much as they are places of departure from the realm of more traditional academic feminist theorizing on post-coloniality. They are spaces of active theory and virtual theory. These are places of community, albeit a classed community of access. (2001:218)

New information technologies provide women from developing countries with unique opportunities to both access and create alternative publics, unique because access to public media for these women is so limited. In this sense, then, feminist on-line activity contains the potential for public spaces with more inclusive tendencies. And as Kellner (1997) points out, it represents the necessary “globalization from below” to counter the hegemony of global capitalism.

Gruber (2001) analyzes three feminist activist groups on the Web and argues that the virtual world they are creating is grounded in real-world efforts at increasing opportunities for, as Burbules and Rice would say, “dialogue across difference.” The three sites that Gruber studies are Bat Shalom of the Jerusalem link, whose purpose is to forge real peace between Israelis and Palestinians; the Network of East-West Women, which is interested in exploring women’s issues across the previous cold war borders in a context of nonessentialized discourse; and the United Nations Development Fund for Women UNFIM), which “promotes women’s empowerment and gender equality. It works to ensure the participation of women in all levels of development planning and practice, and acts as a catalyst within the UN system, supporting efforts that link the needs and concerns of women to all critical issues on the national, regional, and global agendas” (Gruber 2001:86).

Inclusive Tendencies in Feminist Cyberspace

A key tactic for creating more inclusive public spaces in general and cyberspaces in particular involves following in the footsteps of the civil rights activists in their lunch counter campaigns and contesting the space by literally *claiming the space*. The examples provided above indicate that feminists are already doing just that. Simply using the space *as if it were yours* subverts traditional and exclusive assumptions about public space. It contests its exclusive character and begins the transformative process.

Contesting exclusive tendencies of public space requires modeling an alternative. This involves articulating and actualizing a discourse of the public, with its attendant norms and sanctions, that reflects the principles of inclusive as opposed to traditional dialogue. The examples above reflect efforts by feminists worldwide to model and achieve more inclusive public spaces.

Unintended Consequences

In problematizing determinist perspectives, Giddens (1984) argues, it is the unintended consequences of action that produce social relations. All activists and researchers interested in promoting social justice and equity need to keep in mind the possibility that measures geared toward such achievements may actually pro-

duce the opposite of what is intended. It is for this reason that an ongoing critical reflexivity is required.

The characteristics of inclusive dialogue need to be understood as tentative and general. Burbules and Rice (1991) argue that “communicative virtues” are essential for inclusivity; they are not in themselves intended to advance a particular agenda over others. These characteristics will be useful to researchers and activists to emphasize the ongoing nature of creating greater inclusivity. But will alternative models of the public create new insiders and outsiders, and will these new boundaries have undesirable consequences? Activists and researchers need to recognize that the construction of the public is ongoing and will always and necessarily be imperfect. A characteristic of parallel subaltern feminist counterpublics must also be, therefore, an acceptance of such incompleteness and a commitment to ongoing critical reflexivity.

CONCLUSION

Public sites in cyberspace will be constructed with or without feminist input. In this article I argue for the value of feminist input as early on in the process as possible. While “climate” and “space” may seem “natural” or “external” conditions in cyberspace, climate studies have effectively shown the ways in which they are actually socially constructed. Feminists have made gains in drawing attention to particularity and the falseness of universal posturing. But such gains are never permanent; the spheres in which they are achieved change, and new spheres that may or may not reflect these gains are constantly emerging. Feminists and other activists may lament that we are constantly being called on to reinvent the wheel, but any assumption that gains in social struggle are permanent is naive and historically unsupported. As Robbins (1993) emphasizes, the social construction of public spaces is ongoing. As new social spheres emerge, new forms of feminist contestation must emerge with them. Spender’s (1995:168) words are worth repeating: “Women have to take part in making and shaping that cyber-society, or else they risk becoming outsiders.” Feminists have experienced outsider status in public spaces far too often to be complacent as this new space is constructed around old norms of exclusion.

The metaphor of the Web has a history in feminist movements for whom the act of weaving social networks has been a means toward contesting the status quo. The breadth and depth of feminist activity on the Internet is creating parallel subaltern feminist counterpublics that have the capacity to forge links between feminists and progressives throughout the world. Importantly, it also has the capacity to model an alternative to mainstream ideologies of the public.

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NOTES

1. As reported by Elaine Decker, who attended a Joan Baez concert during the Reagan years.

2. This is not to minimize the contributions of scholars and social activists who organize based not on gender but on other traditionally marginalized identities such as “race” or class. I am employing a definition of feminism predicated on an understanding of the intersecting axes of identity and marginalization.
3. This conflict is ongoing. For example, the women-only status of Simon Fraser University’s Women’s Centre and other women’s centers in North America is regularly contested.

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