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Chapter 16
Communicating Human-Object Orientation:
Rhetorical Strategies for Countering Multiple Taboos

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ABSTRACT

The Objectùm-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website is the largest source of information representing a community who experiences emotional and romantic desire towards objects. This chapter presents a queer rhetorical analysis of OSI to understand how queer communities that must negotiate multiple taboos (en)counter the public. The author argues that OSI reveals two things about taboo communication: 1) the discursive and material boundaries that constitute the taboo and 2) the rhetorical work required to disrupt these boundaries. The author's analysis reveals how OSI engages in complex rhetorical practices to lay the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts the heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions that constitute certain lived experiences as taboo. Such a move exposes the possibilities and ethical implications at stake in communicating the taboo while outlining an analytic framework for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering the taboo in public communication.

INTRODUCTION

The objectùm-sexuality (OS) community includes over 300 individuals who experience "a pronounced emotional and often romantic desire towards developing significant relationships with particular inanimate objects."[1] People who identify as OS express romantic interests toward varied objects, such as bridges, buildings, cars, musical instruments, sporting equipment, and amusement rides, with some even expressing desire for less material objects such as words, syntax, languages, and accents (separate from people who speak with accents). The largest source of information about OS, authored by those who identify as OS, is the Objectùm-Sexuality Internationale (OSI) website (http://www.objectum-sexuality.

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org/). The OSI website was founded by self-identified objectùm-sexual Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer, from North Sweden, and further developed with the help of OSI members Erika Eiffel, from the U.S., and Oliver Arndt, from Germany. The site features information about how OSI members define and describe OS, how the OSI website was started, testimonials about living as OS, and links to external information about OS that have been deemed as acceptable by the community (some self-authored and some authored by mainstream or alternative media sources).

For those who identify as OS, their experiences of love and intimacy are little understood and often delegitimized by anthropocentric heteronormativity. Anthropocentrism positions human beings at the center of everything, which manifests in assumptions that human ways of being are the norm and fosters beliefs that humans are exceptional in comparison to all other entities (Tyler, 2021). Heteronormativity is a worldview that upholds dominant understandings of gender as binary and prescribes heterosexual coupling as a normal and preferred sexual orientation. Anthropocentric heteronormativity, then, reaffirms human-to-human sexuality as a normal and preferred dimension of hetero/sexuality. Consequently, many outside media outlets and medical practitioners categorize objectùm-sexuality as taboo—a violation of boundaries of propriety and normalcy—thus representing OS folks in unfavorable ways. For example, OS is described as a psychological disorder (Thadeusz, 2007), a capitalist fetish (Clemens & Pettman, 2004), a manifestation of Asperger's syndrome (Lynn, 2009; Marsh, 2010), a fantasy refuge for victims of sexual and emotional abuse (LeMouse, 2018), or a perverse form of masturbation (Dennison, 2011). OS has even been featured on National Geographic's now defunct television docuseries, *Taboo*. In documentary television and film, editorial news articles, Internet blogs, and even academic research, OS is framed as pathological, unnatural, and a practice symptomatic of late capitalism's alienation.

Much of this criticism stems from that fact that the term *objectùm-sexual* denotes identification with emotional-sexual ties and longings toward objects that are deemed by outsiders as inanimate; however, to objectùm-sexuals they are soul-bearing companions. This perspective is founded in animism, the belief that "natural phenomena" possess a "spiritual essence"[2] and are capable of communicating and reciprocating love. Although authors of the OSI website explain its primary function is to help those who identify as OS find, connect with, and support one another,[3] much of the site functions simultaneously to challenge external perceptions of their lived experiences as taboo, thus correcting negative misconceptions about OS and cultivating respect from outsiders. OSI's communication about OS to curious audiences—whether it be because of personal identification, genuine information seeking, or sensationalistic consumption—elicits the following questions: 1) How does OSI, a marginalized community deemed taboo, construct (public) identity and disrupt a taboo (public) landscape? and 2) What do these rhetorical processes reveal about how people "come together around nonnormative sexualities in a framework for collective world making and political action" (Warner, 2002, p. 18)? In other words, what do we learn from OSI about taboo communication, specifically, public rhetorical practices that navigate the weight of being characterized as taboo?

Through queer rhetorical criticism (Otis, 2020; Slagle, 2003, West, 2013), I analyze the OSI website to understand how communities that must negotiate multiple layers of taboo, such as the OS community, (en)counter the public; meaning, how they disrupt "binaries and traditional categories" that fuel taboo constructions and, in doing so, how they build "alternative queer worlds" (Otis, 2020, p. 158). I explore how OSI exists, resists, and persists within dominant public contexts (Warner, 2002) by (re)imagining who and what is included in the public sphere. I argue that OSI teaches us two things about taboo communication: 1) the discursive boundaries (i.e., sociocultural frameworks that we speak to and through) and material boundaries (i.e., objects, spaces, and structures) that constitute the taboo, and 2) the rhe-

torical work required to disrupt these boundaries. I reveal how OSI engages in this complex rhetorical work to construct and navigate (public) identity. By entering the public sphere, they are burdened with communicating themselves and their relationships into existence while simultaneously (de)constructing taken-for-granted norms surrounding sexuality and deeply embedded philosophical assumptions about reality. In doing so, OSI necessarily lays the groundwork for a queer-posthuman counterpublic—a rhetorical space that disrupts heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions, which constitute certain lived experiences such as OS as taboo, in order to remake the world as less anthropocentrically heteronormative. Such a move exposes the possibilities and the ethical implications at stake in communicating the taboo.

BACKGROUND: WHAT MAKES OS TABOO?

What is taboo is constituted through discursive and material configurations. Taboo identities and topics do not merely exist in the world, rather, through communication we "articulate boundaries and their violations" (Brenner, 2010, p. 231). These articulations are not only verbal declarations but can also emerge in silence and taken for granted assumptions about reality—the patterns of thought and material configurations that organize what exists and how we exist. Taboo thrives on the status quo. We avoid talking and thinking about the taboo and what we avoid talking and thinking about becomes taboo. Thus, anyone who breaks the silence or questions the status quo risks being ostracized; however, remaining silent and being complicit fuel fear and shame, particularly regarding sexuality. The discursive and material boundaries that constitute what is normal and what is taboo are not merely proscriptions of propriety but can produce dangerous consequences for livability (Brenner, 2010).

Malta & Wallach (2020) explain that a context in which there is a lack of communication about a topic (e.g., sexuality and death), coupled with discriminatory attitudes about a group of people related to that topic (e.g., ageism and assumptions about the asexuality of older adults), yields multiple taboos when juxtaposed to one another (e.g., intimacy among older adults receiving palliative care = a triple taboo). OS is a double taboo in that it violates the boundaries of both anthropocentrism and heteronormativity, thus evoking discriminatory attitudes about preferred and moralistic human coupling, which results in a lack of communication about the topic. Queer theory and posthuman studies reveal the binaries, norms, and assumptions that enable silence and a discriminatory status quo, which positions communities such as OSI as multiply taboo. In particular, these bodies of scholarship survey the ways language, discourse, and material configurations regulate (human) sexuality and how they render particular forms of love and desire as normal or taboo, pathological or healthy, livable or unlivable.

What Queer Theory Teaches Us about Taboo Communication

What queer theory teaches us about taboo is that anything that falls outside of (hetero)normative arrangements, binaries, norms, or assumptions evokes regulation and revulsion. One of the key projects of queer theory has been to reveal and challenge "naturalized assumptions about genders, bodies, sexualities, and desires" (West, 2018, p. 2), including assumptions about the "continuities between anatomical sex, social gender, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice" (Martin, 1994, p. 105). These configurations are what Butler (1993) refers to as the *heterosexual matrix*, which assumes that a person's sex will determine their gender which will lead to opposite sex attraction (desire).

Assumptions about (hetero)normative arrangements emerge through "the communicative force of norms," constituted through discourses about sexuality, genders, bodies, etc. (West, 2018, p. 2). For example, Foucault (1978) challenges the idea that sex is natural/biological by stating that discourses of sexuality are what produce our notions of sex. This discourse does not determine sexuality but rather constitutes and regulates it. Foucault attributes the construction of the term *homosexual* to the subsequent invention of homosexual identity. He argues that although there were same-sex acts prior to the construction and use of the term, there was no discursive category with which to identify, thus it was the creation of this label that turned same-sex acts into a taboo identity. Foucault's theory of the discursive formation of sexuality points to how heterosexuality is constantly reaffirmed and rearticulated by discursive moments throughout history.

Looking at these historical configurations of sexuality, Rubin (1999) offers an overview of laws, morals, and values from across time that have differentiated "'good,' 'normal,' and 'natural'" sexuality from taboo, perverse, and pathological sexuality (p. 159). She visually maps a sexual hierarchy, referred to as the *charmed circle*, which shows how contemporary sexual norms construct "good" sexuality as "heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial," as well as "coupled, relational, within the same generation," occurring at home, and "should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female" (p. 159). Anything that violates these norms is not only considered "'bad,' 'abnormal,' or 'unnatural'" but is vilified and policed. These practices of marginalization reinforce the exclusion of queerness (as sexuality, identity, discourse, etc.)

Deconstructing binaries that uphold the heterosexual matrix, such as outdated binaries like heterosexual/homosexual and male/female, "makes it possible to identify them as sites that are *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 10). The policing of these binaries denies a host of sexual possibilities (Yep, 2003). By revealing the unstable incommensurability of these binaries, there is possibility to manipulate and make possible other identifications of sexuality, intimacy, and desire outside of dominant conceptions, perhaps even beyond human-to-human desire.

What Posthuman Studies Teach Us about Taboo Communication

What posthuman studies teach us about taboo is that heteronormativity is simultaneously regulated and policed through anthroponormativity—the taken-for-granted assumption that being human is the norm by which all other entities are judged (e.g., the binary division of human/nonhuman). The human is performed through heterosexual desire, and heteronormative discourses—such as those about preserving the two-parent family and saving the children (Reid, 1995)—imply that the success of humanity is dependent on the future of heterosexuality (Edelman, 2004; Runions, 2008). Thus, the policing of heterosexuality is dependent upon demarcating the boundaries of the human and vice versa, which is what positions human-object intimacy as doubly taboo, a violation of heteronormativity and anthroponormativity. Scholarship interested in queer non/in/trans/post-human (collectively referred to here as *posthuman*) studies seeks to interrogate the "fragile division between animate and inanimate" that is "relentlessly produced and policed" (Chen, 2012) and to "'decenter the human'" (Luciano & Chen, 2019, p. 115) by disrupting the stability of the category *human*, including binaries and assumptions that position humans as hierarchically superior to all other entities.

In communication studies, the human is consistently positioned as exceptional to and dominant over non-humans. Burke (1963) suggests that the ability to be reflexive about symbol use is what makes humans distinct and capable in many ways that animals and objects are not. Posthuman studies challenge

this perspective. Some suggest that the category of human and the connotations of superiority that this category carries are discursively regulated constructs with material implications, similar to gender and sexuality. For example, Giffney (2008) states, "The Human is both a discursive and ideological construct which materially impacts on all those who are interpellated through that sign" (p. 55). Being human is performative, a product and production of the repetition of particular discourses and material practices that are defined as human by being "defined against those who are deemed unrecognizable and thus excluded from its remit" (Giffney, 2008, p. 56). Labeling and categorizing what is human engenders discursive patterns and material configurations that constitute certain entities as hierarchically superior over others, thus continuously reinforcing who or what is excluded from the category of human.

Like queer theory, posthuman theory offers possibilities for countering the taboos demarcated by anthroponormativity. These possibilities include acknowledging that everything, not just humans, might be speaking (Seegert, 2016), understanding communication in relation to "mind-independent [e.g., non-human] realities and the limits of our abilities to know that reality" (Barnett, 2017, p. 13), and to challenge human exceptionalism by embracing the agency of the material world (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). This means listening to and considering communication that is "not expressed in word" (Seegert, 2016, p. 78) and accepting that "nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world" (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). There is an inseparable relationality between the discursive and the material, meaning there are both symbolic and tangible implications that emerge from interaction between the human and nonhuman. To account for these relational practices and implications "we need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world" particularly "between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological" (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). Such accounts hold the potential to expand our "range of ethical concern" (Barnett, 2017, p. 15) to include others so often silenced and ostracized by the normative boundaries that constitute and regulate the taboo. As a case study in navigating multiple layers of taboo, OSI not only reveals how discursive and material boundaries produce taboo but also the rhetorical work required to make the taboo comprehensible and utterable to a dominant public.

WHEN TABOOS GO PUBLIC

Taboos proliferate in silence and through the status quo but they emerge from the differentiation between what is deemed private versus public, which is unquestionably tied to who has access to contributing to and, thus, defining the public sphere (e.g., public space, public policy, public discourse, etc.). With regards to sexuality in particular, Berlant and Warner (1998) explain how heterosexual culture is defined by the privatization of sex—the removal of sex acts, their literal and discursive manifestations, from the public sphere—which "bestows on [heterosexual culture's] sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy" (p. 554). The legal and moral righteousness of heterosexuality is the ideological undercurrent of heteronormativity—political and social arrangements that privilege heterosexual formulations of intimacy, family, romance, community, coupling, kinship, etc. Such boundaries of normalcy are a consequence of historical conceptions of a single public sphere (articulated by Habermas, 1989), which is implicitly dominated by the voices and lived experiences of people in power who have the agency to shape political, legal, and social proscriptions that prevent "the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 547). These proscriptions discursively and materially

reaffirm that in order to contribute to and exist in the dominant public sphere, one must be complicit in heteronormativity and participate in practices that police sex.

In contrast, scholars such as Fraser (1990) explain the emergence of coexisting public spheres that develop in reaction to dominant, exclusionary political and discursive practices. She (1990) explains, "members of subordinate social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternatives publics" (p. 67). Fraser proposes calling these collectives "*subaltern counterpublics*," which are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Whereas the dominant public sphere shapes what is acceptable and permissible—thus constituting what is taboo—counterpublics emerge in response and resistance to these discourses.

Within formulations of counterpublic theory, scholars question: "what makes a public 'counter?'" (Squires, 2002, p. 446). As Fraser's (1990) work suggests, collective voices that convene around shared marginalized identity is one possibility of the origin of a *counter*public. Palczewski (2001) elaborates this perspective, claiming counterpublics do not "strive toward a universal understanding of the human condition," rather, they serve to affirm specificity, which allows people excluded from dominant public spheres to "develop and explore" their identity, as well as "counter repressive characterizations of it" (p. 165). The purposes of these counterpublics, then, are to "create the space for safe discussion of ideas," to develop "alternative validity claims," and to develop "vocabulary with which the subordinate can articulate their needs" (Palczewski, 2001, p. 178). From these perspectives the *counter* in counterpublics refers to collective resistance to identity-based exclusion and the development of discursive practices that are inclusive of marginalized identity.

However, some scholars argue that the development of a counterpublic is not just a matter of shared identity and struggle for inclusion but *how* dominant discourses are (en)countered. Asen (2000) suggests that counterpublics are in and of themselves "discursive entities," which cannot be "reduced to the identities of their participants" (p. 431). What distinguishes a community or collective from a counterpublic is the latter's recognition of exclusionary practices and attempts to resist or transcend these practices. The term *counterpublic* "signifies the collectives that emerge in the recognition of various exclusions from wider publics of potential participants, discourse topics, and speaking styles and the resolve that builds to overcome these exclusions" (Asen, 2000, p. 438). Identifying counterpublics requires understanding how they emerge from discourses that "acknowledge dilemmas of difference," whether implicitly or explicitly (p. 427). In later work, Asen (2002), highlights how the crux of counterpublics is their refutation of "discursive norms and practices" (p. 359). In other words, the *counter* in counterpublics refers to alternative discourses that uncover, resist, and transcend the ideological and practical differences that lead to dominance and exclusion.

Expanding on this notion, Squires (2002) proposes considering how marginalized public spheres emerge differently depending upon "political, economic, social, and cultural conditions" (p. 448). This includes how they "respond to dominant social pressures, legal restrictions, and other challenges from dominant publics" depending on potential repercussions and access to means of circulation (p. 457). Squires differentiates counterpublics from enclaves, in which the latter produce "hidden transcripts"—which are guarded group communications that contradict dominant ideologies and risk unfavorable response if shared widely (p. 458). Enclaves become counterpublics when hidden transcripts are used to intentionally reject "public transcripts" that reinforce inequities—such as those facilitated by taboos—in order to "change the minds of dominant publics, or seeking solidarity with other marginal groups" (p.

460). The potential for circulating hidden transcripts is made possible by greater access to "independent media resources and distributions channels" that increase the possibility of wider participation and discussion (p. 461). In other words, the *counter* in counterpublics refers here to the ways groups, who are heterogenous in their marginality, strategically deploy (previously hidden) discourses in arguments against dominant conceptions and interests.

Squires (2002) and Asen (2002) both acknowledge the potential for counterpublics to be coopted and undermined by dominant publics. Squires (2002) points out explicit processes, such as censorship and direct attacks on counter discourses, which monopolize time and resources and harm counterpublic movement. Asen (2002) describes the ways counterpublic agents are imagined and represented by dominant public forums in negative ways, which creates a "symbolic hurdle" that other public sphere participants do not have to manage (p. 360). As such counterpublic agents must skillfully occupy multiple roles, including articulating their own perspectives while simultaneously countering negative images and dominant ideologies.

With regards to queer inclusion, Dean (2003) reminds us that "one does not resist the forces of normalization by inventing new kinds of social or sexual identity" (p. 239). What is taboo is constructed in tandem with what is considered normal, and, for that reason, queer counter discourses must not just deconstruct to reconstruct but also stand "in opposition to the forces of normalization that regulate social conformity" (p. 239). One of the ways this can be accomplished is by disrupting heteronormative imaginings, or what Dean calls *fantasies*. He suggests that violent reactions to queer sexuality emerge from a "preoccupation with how the Other organizes [their] enjoyment," which manifests as a fantasy of queer sexuality as a form of "sexual excess" that is incompatible with "decency and normalcy" (p. 246). For this reason, articulating and raising awareness about sexual identities that disrupt normative binaries and assumptions is not a political endeavor in and of itself, it is also important to develop discourses about sex that counter and construct queer imaginings (or fantasies) beyond focusing on the reproduction of social norms that constitute and reaffirm taboos.

Based on these various definitions and theories of counterpublics, it is easy to see many hallmarks of a counterpublic when looking at the backstory of OSI. The OSI Web site provides a detailed description of how Eija-Ritta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer "took a chance and braved hoards of criticism from faceless critics on the Internet in an effort to find others like her." The site goes on to describe how she developed hundreds of pen-pal relationships all over the world, which allowed her to "open up about her sexuality with little to no reprisal." She educated her pen-pals about her sexuality by creating typed flyers to include in her letters. In 1996, Eija turned these flyers into the first OS Web site, written in four different languages. She states that "it was from these early hand-coded pages that objectùm-sexuality became known in the trenches of the Internet." In 2002, co-founding member Oliver Arndt developed the largest network for Objektophilie, the German word and online network for objectùm-sexuality. Co-founding OSI member Erika Eiffel travelled to meet Eija-Riitta and Oliver Arndt in the early 2000s to gather data and learn more about OS. From these meetings, in 2004 Erika and Oliver were able to work together to adapt the German OS group for English speaking objectùm-sexuals in order "to help to share the hope started so long ago...to know we are not alone." From this initial description we can see that OSI emerges through a sense of marginalized identity and a search for shared struggle, a desire to correct misconceptions about OS through education, and access to an evolving public platform that facilitated wider discussion and the possibility of countering negative images of OS.

However, this backstory only scratches the surface of OSI's counterpublic project. Arguing that OSI functions as a queer-posthuman counterpublic is not just to say that OSI is a queer identified collective

that coalesces around a shared desire for post-human relationships with objects—though they are and they do. It is also not just that they counter dominant discourses and negative images through strategic employment of hidden transcripts through an independent media channel—though they also do this. Most significant to OSI's counterpublic project is that they advocate against ideologies and practices of normativity while discursively producing a post-human public—one that represents and engages the material world.

Specifically, OSI engages in what Asen (2002) calls *collective imagining*. He developed the concept of *imagining* to elucidate the nuances of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere, wherein dominant groups cultivate collective assumptions and arguments about marginalized groups—even in their absence from the public sphere—by constructing discursive images and employing them through representations—expressions of collective imagining. Asen states "our attitude toward and treatment of others depends crucially on how we imagine others" (p. 354) and representations reflect "choices regarding how people should be portrayed" (p. 353). In Asen's configuration, people who have access to and legitimacy within the dominant public sphere have the power to imagine and represent those excluded, thus determining how they are portrayed (e.g., as taboo) and treated (e.g., silenced and ostracized). However, the analysis of OSI presented in this chapter reveals how representation can also be employed in service of (re)imagining marginalized worlds, thus changing assumptions and arguments about who/what is taboo. Explicating this process of counter representations and imaginings is facilitated by a method of queer rhetorical criticism.

Analyzing Taboo Communication through Queer Rhetorical Criticism

One of the concerns central to queer theory is livability—determining possibilities; ways in which all lives are livable. The overarching task being "about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breath, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" (Butler, 2004, p. 8). One approach that can reveal and complicate normative conventions is exploring the rhetorical function of language and discourse in constructing and disciplining the taboo, for which queer rhetorical criticism is well suited.

First and foremost, queer rhetorical criticism endeavors to bring "issues of sexuality–issues generally considered private and personal–to the fore through critical inquiry" (Slagle, 2003. p. 130). There are two "critical impulses" of queer rhetorical criticism, identified by Otis (2020), which are "(1) the disruption of binaries and traditional categories and (2) the building of alternative queer worlds" (p. 158). Though Slagle's (2013) original framework of queer rhetorical criticism emphasized dominant and resistant readings of texts by rhetorical critics, West (2013) suggests that we expand this method to "understand how rhetors are themselves theorizing genders, corporealities, sexualities, desires, and other embodiments in ways that exceed our extant explanatory frames" (p. 540). This present analysis employ's West's proposed approach in conjunction with Slagle's method for identifying assumptions and practices regarding essentialism, heteronormativity, privacy, and assimilation. Meaning, it attends to the ways that OSI, as a rhetor, (1) "challenges the notion of a static, essential, or natural identity" (essentialism) (p. 133), (2) "illuminates heterosexual privilege in discourse" (heteronormativity) (p. 135), (3) "challenges the notion that sexuality is a private matter" and argues against reducing sexuality to sexual activity (privacy) (p. 134), and (4) attempts to "construct a world in which sexual difference is not only acknowledged, but celebrated" (resisting assimilation) (p. 137). Though queer rhetorical criticism was originally developed to account for "language and discursive rhetoric" or "any symbolic activity

that focuses attention on sexual difference," the following analysis engages simultaneously with counterpublic theory in order to expand and account for the symbolic and material possibilities for imagining queer post-human (counter)publics.

Queer rhetorical criticism supports an endeavor of counterpublic investigation through its critical attention to processes of normalization, its excavation of rhetorical strategies that seek to disrupt norms, and its embracement of communicative practices that work to create queer worlds (i.e., counterpublics). Public sphere scholars "ought to seek the counter of counterpublics in participants' recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and its articulation through alternative discourse practices and norms" (Asen, 2000, p. 427). Even when an individual or collective does not explicitly articulate exclusion, rhetorical critics are tasked with identifying and inferring this recognition through alternative rhetorics that counter dominant discourse, images, and representations. In doing so, identifying how publics are countered can yield a discussion of potential change. Ott (2011) reminds us that "rhetoric is defined in part by its *consequentiality*, by its capacity to effect change in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of individuals and the rules, rituals, and norms of collectives" (p. 344). Although the influence or effects of counterpublics cannot be determined through rhetorical criticism, Ott suggests that one way the critic can engage in this step is to explicate the modalities, or modes, through which change is carried out. Doing so allows the critic to portend its significance and elaborate on why it matters to the advancement of knowledge and scholarship.

The analysis presented here reflects a multi-level investigation, which began with broadly identifying OSI's key assumptions and practices that contest essentialism, illuminate heteronormativity, challenge privacy, and resist assimilation. This first level of analysis provides context and insight into the second layer of analysis, which are the modalities through which OSI's project of change is developed. As a project that (en)counters the taboo at two levels—sexuality and nonhuman agency—OSI employs a paradigmatic modality, through which to imagine a queer posthuman public requires altering patterns of thought underlying representations not only at a symbolic (terminological) level but also at ontological (i.e., relating to the nature of being) and axiological levels (i.e., relating to the nature of value). By representing objects as agents in the public sphere, OSI cultivates an image of a queer sociomaterial world—constituted by entanglements of queer social practices and posthuman configurations of matter—that disrupts the moral divisions of public vs. private and the philosophical distinctions between the human vs. non-human, thus countering normative discourses and assumptions that render certain lived experiences taboo.

Key Rhetorical Practices for Communicating Taboo

The first layer of analysis revealed 7 themes, which organize the key assumptions and practices employed by OSI to contest essentialism, illuminate heteronormativity, challenge privacy, and resist assimilation. These themes include: Orientation, Sensuality/Intimacy, Gender, Love, Animism, Nonverbal Communication, and Marriage. Each of these themes are explored in-depth to reveal how they 1) contest identity as natural and monolithic, 2) call attention to anthropocentric heteronormativity, 3) publicly counter these dominant discourses (i.e., reveal hidden transcripts), and 4) work to build a queer posthuman world that (en)counters the taboo.

Orientation

OSI defines OS orientation as separate and different from sexual orientation. They state that OS is "an *orientation* to love objects [emphasis added]," which is different from a *sexual* orientation. By countering traditional understandings of orientation, this discourse aims to disrupt and expand perceptions and possibilities of sexuality beyond human identity and anatomy—beyond sexual activities. In a section of the website titled "What is OS?" a definition of sexual orientation is opposed to a definition of orientation (sans sexual) to demonstrate to visitors of the site the ways the term *sexual orientation* does not account for object desire and separating *sexual* from *orientation* provides a more accurate account of OS. Sexual orientation is described as: "*the direction of someone's sexual desire toward people of the opposite gender, people of the same gender, or people of both*. This does not include objects [emphasis original]." Immediately following is a definition of orientation, described as "*a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways* [emphasis original]. This does include objects as we see it." Later, in the same web link, OSI suggests that if you replace *objectum* with *hetero* or *homo* before *sexuality*, it merely implies an inclination toward such, suggesting that sexuality is more fluid than determinable by different types of sex acts.

As demonstrated in the queer and posthuman literature, anthropocentric heteronormativity depends upon a linear and static formula of sexual orientation that assumes human sex will determine gender identity which will lead to opposite (human) attraction that results in private sex acts involving only genitals between humans of the opposite sex. OSI calls attention to the rigidity of this definition, and its exclusion of a wide range of possible relationships, including those with objects. They counter and broaden this discourse with a hidden transcript that reveals an alternate view of orientation as cerebral, diverse, and involving more than just genitals.

This definition dovetails with the queer posthuman work of Ahmed (2006), who suggests that objects have always been present in orientations but mostly in service of orienting us toward the normative and away from the taboo. Ahmed says "orientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them" (pp. 27-28). Repeated practices of facing and directing attention toward certain objects over others solidifies an orientation overtime. In an anthropocentric heteronormative sphere, our bodies are directed toward symbols and objects that reaffirm heterosexual human coupling so that we are appropriately oriented in that direction but the possibility for orienting another direction is always there. OSI's definition of orientation disrupts the taboo of object-directional orienting by creating rhetorical space for turning our minds and bodies toward ways of being that are not just about the desire of a singular human entity. Instead, it is possible for various orientations, including sexual orientation, to manifest as inclinations toward ways of living and loving that exist outside of the heteronormative/anthropocentric boundaries that perpetuate and police taboos. OSI goes on to suggest that the OS community prefers the terms *sensuality* and *intimacy* over *sex* because physical acts of desire are not generalizable across many relationships, including human-object relationships.

Sensuality/Intimacy

Many curiosities related to OS arise from interests about how someone has sex with an object and how sex with an object differs from masturbation or fetishism. When discussed in the context of what it means to be OS, OSI offers sensuality and intimacy as opposed to dominant presumptions about sex as

penetration. Sensuality and intimacy are characterized, instead, as psychic or spiritual presence. One OS member, identified as A. L., recalls a counseling session with a psychiatrist who claimed that "it is not possible to have sex with a building" and that A. L. "must love a building because it's a large phallus!" The psychiatrist assumed that object sex is not possible because, from their perspective, sex requires a penis, or, at the very least, some form of penetration. In response, A. L. says "OK, that may be the case if you are going off the prolific definition between humans." Instead, A. L. suggests that OS cannot be understood within (hetero/anthropo)normative frames of reference that presume the role of sexual activity is penetration.

The OSI website goes on to state, "we use sensuality or intimacy to describe physically related expressions of love as this offers a broader definition considering our partners are not human and cannot be generalized." They explain further, "intimacy is very broad and what may be sensual for some may not be so for others." This representation of sensuality and intimacy counters dominant assumptions about sex as penetration with more broad, flexible, and non-monolithic terms. In doing so, it also calls attention to the ways anthropocentric heteronormativity facilitates taboos around intimacy that are not only limiting and exclusionary but also minimize our understanding of a wide range of possible relational configurations, among humans and nonhumans. By publicly sharing their expanded definitions of sensuality and intimacy, OSI charts rhetorical terrain that invites open-ended notions of sexual activity, which may include physicality but could also include a variety of expressions beyond physical touch, penetration, and gratification. These concepts of intimacy/sensuality point to the more complex role that gender holds in defining and developing human-object relationships.

Gender

One of the most common questions that Erika Eiffel says she receives is how OS people determine the gender of an object and how this impacts the way OS people label their sexual preference (i.e., does a female loving a female object mean they identify as a lesbian?). Erika responds by saying "I can't lift a leg and check, but there is a general persona that I sense about my objects…some OS people see their objects as only male if they are female and vise [sic] versa and some do not sense gender." In other words, object-gender complicates dominant perceptions of human-gender as biologically, socially, or even performativity perceived and constructed. Gender, instead, is sensed. Objects may give off gendered auras that come from senses about personality, other people's perceptions of the object (e.g., the labeling of the Eiffel tower as the Grand Madame of Paris), or gender might not be involved in the loving and desiring of objects at all.

In fact, many OS people also identify as cisgender, transgender, intersex, asexual, gay, bisexual, polyamorous, and androgynous because object desire obscures dominant links between gender and sexual preference. OSI characterizes gender in ways that contradict normative perceptions of gender identity, especially in relation to sexual identity. Whereas (hetero/anthropo)normative conceptions of gender enforce a naturalistic connection between sex assigned at (human) birth and perceived gender identity, which then presumably translates into love and attraction, OSI builds upon previously provided hidden transcripts that emphasize the fluidity of attraction and intimacy to counter the monolithic assumptions about gender that percolate curiosities of the taboo. OSI carefully constructs and represents a world where gender is not merely reappropriated but transcends the confines of medical, social, and visual perception. Instead, it exists in an ethereal state that may or may not be apprehended but also may or

may not matter, given all the possible connections that humans and objects might formulate. For OSI, gender does not make or break any part of existence, including love.

Love

Love is one of the most frequent and complex concepts discussed in OSI rhetoric because love of objects disrupts dominant conventions. OSI defines love in opposition to normative and monolithic notions that consider its drive as positive and understand its expression as similar across relationships. Instead, OSI conceives of love as obsessive, abstract, and metaphorical. One of the questions that OSI responds to in the "What is OS?" Q&A section of the website is "what makes OS different from an obsession?" The response is that "truly there is not much difference." To OSI, "Love is a feeling that preoccupies one's thoughts," which is the same thing as obsession. Love is putting all focus on the one desired, which is a level of obsession. The site goes onto suggest that because desire of objects is "unorthodox," mainstream rhetoric often labels it an *obsession* instead of *love* in order to make it seem like a negative relation. Therefore, instead of characterizing love in ways consistent with perceptions of positivity, OSI embraces negative connotations of obsession, thereby disrupting normative conceptions that do not account for object love.

Object love is also described as residing on a spectrum, where humans have certain things to offer relationships and objects have others. All humans and objects, therefore, can and should be loved, but this love happens differently. The OSI website describes love as a bell curve, where various loving relationships exist together but emerge differently. At the middle and top of the bell curve is "the majority of those whose relationships that can be characterized by the similarities to whom and how they love." In contrast, "Objectúm-sexuality finds its place at one end as a minority." In this metaphor, all relationships where partners are like one another, such as human-to-human love, are considered mainstream, or (hetero/anthropo)normative, love. OS love, then, is love where partners are not recognizably similar to one another, and therefore falls outside of traditional notions of love. Rather than (re)imagining OS with the charmed circle (Rubin, 1984), OSI develops an entirely new way to represent configurations of sexuality—as love on a bell curve. In other words, to call attention to the ways OS is excluded from and marginalized by dominant conceptions of love, OSI not only breaks down what constitutes hetero/anthroponormative love but also develops a theoretical model to publicly represent what a sociomaterial vision of love looks like. Such a complex and heterogenous vision is influenced by and connected to a foundational engagement with animism.

Animism

Animism, the belief that objects bear souls, is described by OSI as forming the basis of an orientation toward loving and desiring objects. For example, Erika Eiffel states in her FAQ that "if the object possesses no spirit, than [sic] love is not reciprocated." Animism is a spiritual belief based in reciprocation, respect, and the interconnection of all beings, which is opposed to dominant, Western imperialist understandings of religion. On the "What is OS" section of the OSI website, animism is described as "the innate belief that objects are not inanimate but possess a spirit, soul, or energy to which one can connect with." A link within the website to Eija-Riitta's homepage provides a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between animism and OS. She states, "We believe that all objects (things) are LIVING and having a SOUL, (Animism). I think that is very important to see objects as living, if one should be able

to fall in love with an object [emphasis original]." In other words, for OS, a belief in animism facilitates an understanding of objects as intelligent, feeling, and communicative.

Animism is also about the belief that "artifacts (objects) have the same level of awareness as human beings." In other words, animism views beings as hierarchically indifferent. As Eija-Riitta claims, "I see artifacts as equal to human beings, animals and plants." Animism resists dominant categorizations of beings as biologically determined (i.e. the belief that biological life equates possession of a soul) and hierarchically classified (e.g., humans at the top of the proverbial food chain). Instead, this belief facilitates a relationship between humans and objects based in interconnectedness and accountability to one another, which leads to a more ethical view of the world.

In her discussion of OS and animism, Eija-Riitta states that people need to challenge the superiority of humans and, instead, adopt a view where all beings exist equally. She states, "The human race is neither more or less worthy than anything else on this planet. We all are equal, no matter what we are - objects, humans, animals or whatever." Being OS and believing in animism, which to Eija are one in the same, are ways of seeing beyond this horizon of superiority in order to empathize with other beings. She claims that objects do not ask to be built just as "humans do not ask to be born," therefore, anything that is born (including objects) has the same right to "exist and have a decent life." As a spiritual belief, animism is about respect for all beings and acknowledgement of their (equal) rights.

Many OS members discuss in their "expressions" that, in many ways, resistance to OS is more about a different spiritual orientation than it is about "perverse sex." For example, one OS member states "it's the sanctions on us in the form of making us look ridiculous" such as seeing objects as having "a feeling soul and a conscious mind" that lead to "harassment with the normal society." OSI counters this resistance by suggesting that because beings must bear a soul in order for love to be reciprocated; love cannot exist without a fundamental belief in animism, whether we call it that or not. In other words, OSI suggests that the basis for love should be a belief in the life, soul, and rights of other beings, and the extension of this perspective into human-object relations only makes us more accountable and ethical to the interconnectedness of all lifeworlds. In doing so, OSI attempts to disrupt dominant beliefs about inanimacy with visions of a unified animistic world. This rhetorical move counters the anthroponormative boundaries drawn by human exceptionalism, which position OS as taboo, while simultaneously providing a hidden transcript for envisioning all relationships, not just OS relationships, as facilitated by animism. Not only does this rhetorical move establish animism as the foundation of a queer posthuman counterpublic, it also positions this imagined world as one that is merely a rhetorical shift away from dismantling the taboos the dominant public sphere holds so dear; thus, showcasing the fragility of hetero/anthroponormative assumptions and representations. Where animism tends to confuse many people is at the point of communication.

Nonverbal Communication

Many sections on OSI address the question of how a relationship can develop with an object if an object cannot talk. Emerging from a belief in the equality of all beings and respect for the rights of objects is a view of human-object communication as non-verbally reciprocal. Object-relational communication is contrasted to dominant presumptions of communication as both verbal and nonverbal, usually with a heavy emphasis on the verbal. OSI claims that the dominant public relies so heavily on verbal communication that they often cannot conceive of relationships where nonverbal communication is a primary mode of interaction. Instead, they suggest "communication comes in many forms besides verbal." In

fact, many OS individuals "commune" with objects "via sensations." These sensations are more complex than verbal patterns of communication. They include psychic connection and telecommunication, which emerge from deep senses about an object's consciousness, personality, and public knowledge about an object. This counters logocentrism—the valuing of speech and writing over other forms of communication—by advocating for human-object communication as a legitimate and ethical approach to interpersonal interaction.

Eija-Riitta states, "You might wonder how I communicate with artifacts. That is done by thought transference….Artifacts are also telepathic, so although I prefer to speak aloud to the objects, that is not necessary." The OSI website explains further, "It is via our intense feelings that our interests are driven in everything related to the object. The more knowledge we learn and internalize, the more we develop a clearer ability to sense the object." Many individual "Expressions" discuss the ways that communicating with an object includes getting to know an object, flirting with an object, and initiating and terminating a relationship with an object, which are all mutual processes of nonverbal communication. Objects telepathically communicate their level of interest in a particular relationship just as much, if not more, than their human counterparts and, in many instances, may even initiate a break up with their partner.

Animistic beliefs in the soul of objects and respect for their equal rights is what facilitates OS communication with objects and also what encourages an awareness of relational reciprocity as an ethical consideration. Communication with objects means deeply sensing and negotiating our impact on and accountability to one another. Therefore, interpersonal relationships are not necessarily dependent upon the verbal exchange of messages. Verbal communication may be one way of developing mutuality; however, nonverbal communication requires deeper and less definitive ways of developing relational connection. Thus, OSI challenges dominant understandings and presumptions of anthropocentric communication by encouraging people to take telecommunication seriously and to view it as a more complex and ethical mode of interacting. This calls attention to the ways dominant modes of interacting implicitly create boundaries around what is normal and what is taboo when it comes to how we live and love. In representing transference and telecommunication as diffuse and moral pathways for communicating, OSI contests taken-for-granted assumptions about communication while constructing a wider range of possible ethical entanglements among humans and nonhumans. One practice by which these entanglements are imagined is through the rhetorical framing of marriage.

Marriage

OSI often works within dominant terms and logics in order to analogize, appropriate, disrupt, and in some ways strategically assimilate into these frameworks, behaviors, and categories. Doing so constructs OS as both understandable within and resistive to normativity. Marriage to objects, as discussed on the OSI website, is a topic that non-OS people have a hard time comprehending. Marriage is employed by OSI in dominant ways as a legitimizing institution but also as an institution that signifies a life-long commitment to loving objects, which complicates and expands the function of marriage. Two of the founders of OSI, Erika Eiffel and Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer, have married objects and changed their last names to signify these relationship. However, their stories about why they decided to symbolically marry objects and change their names reveal that marriage for OS is less about being recognized by a legal, religious, or even normative institution and more about utilizing marriage as a representative institution, which taps into its legitimizing capabilities. In other words, marriage is simply a category that symbolizes love and desire as real and true.

In particular, marriage is about symbolic identification with a specific kind of love, in this case object love, in a publicly recognized and acknowledged way. The OSI website states, "Erika came out about her long-time affection for the Berlin Wall and also iron bridge structures, including the matriarch of Bridges, the Eiffel Tower, which she unofficially married April 8, 2007." In her personal expression she elaborates on her decision to marry, saying it is "merely a manifestation of my love for and commitment to Bridges, not marriage by any conventions." Changing her last name, she says, was a "measure to illustrate my love for Bridges and a commitment to what I am, an objectum sexual." In other words, marriage is not about legally sanctioned access to rights and privileges, a moral and/or religious affiliation, or even a subscription to the socially prescribed norm of monogamy. As Erika and Eija acknowledge, objects cannot participate in many of the rights afforded by marriage and many OS individuals are polyamorous. Therefore, labeling OS relationships as marriages is a rhetorical strategy for employing an already established and legitimized institution to publicly declare and recognize a particular orientation to love objects.

Employing marriage in this way is a disruption of what Goltz & Zingsheim (2010) discuss as the binary of "queer antisociality and normativity" (p. 294), through which resistance to marriage excludes relationships from social recognizability yet acquiescence to marriage proscribes (hetero/anthropo)normativity. OSI refuses to abandon the discursive frame of marriage but instead leverages it as a portal to the (counter)public sphere. In doing so, OSI imagines marriage as a frame that ties humans and objects together in the world, thus disrupting the boundaries that paint humans and nonhumans as incompatible in relational arrangements. This reconfiguration, along with all the other rhetorical practices previously mentioned, demonstrates complex rhetorical work that challenges long held beliefs about relationships and reality.

Modalities for Communicating Taboo

The rhetorical work of OSI reveals how imagining a queer posthuman counterpublic requires employing a paradigmatic modality, which works to alter deeply embedded patterns of thought that produce taboo assumptions and representations. To counter these patterns, OSI develops terminological, ontological, and axiological shifts in norms, discourses, and representations about sexuality and human existence. Terminological shifts occur through OSI's development of new language that is representative of OS and their adaptation of existing language to reflect OS experiences. Ontological shifts occur through OSI's communication of a higher-level philosophy about the existence of beings and the (in)stability of meanings and modes of living and loving, in the context of OS and beyond the limits of sexuality. Axiological shifts occur through OSI's development of criteria for ethical values and judgments in relation to OS and other processes of marginalization. Together, these shifts enable disruptions of hetero/anthroponormative formations of love, desire, and sexuality as well as the imagining of a sociomaterial (counter)public. By countering potential unfavorable reactions to OS as taboo, OSI engages in a higher-level project of articulating the foundations and consequences of a human-object orientation and, in doing so, carves out symbolic and material space for queer posthuman counterpublics.

Terminological Shifts

OSI is largely about terminology—the formation of identity and the development of a counterpublic through shared systems of language and reference. Without developing new language and adapting

existing language, objectùm-sexuality—as a term and identity—would not exist. Communicating OS and, subsequently, human-object orientation, in understandable and relatable ways is dependent upon rhetorical practices that disrupt, construct, and appropriate terminology through alternative discourses and practices. Although OSI does not discuss OS as queer or posthuman, the theoretical assumptions underpinning these concepts offer significant insight into how these terminological modifications occur and how they yield paradigmatic shifts.

Communicating about objects in a way that resists reinforcing the category of human and disrupts normative conceptions of sexuality necessitates the creation of new language and the adaptation of existing terms. OSI consistently and systematically works to engage in this terminological project. From the outset, they create the term *objectùm-sexuality* and its subsequent acronym, OS. From there, every term that is utilized to discuss OS and to communicate experiences of OS is invested in representing new meanings for concepts traditionally operated by the dominant public. For example, orientation is not *sexual* orientation, it is an inclination that extends beyond sexual desire. Sexuality is not defined by sex acts, it is sensual and/or intimate connection. Gender is not a defining biological, social, or performed characteristic, it is a sensed aura with varying significance. Love is not a feeling, state, emotion, or action, it is a drive toward obsession or the amount of distance between sameness and difference. Marriage is not a legal institution of privilege but, instead, a signifier of love and desire as real and true. In many ways, this rhetoric disrupts binaries such as human/non-human and sex/gender in favor of in-betweeness, ambiguity, and resistance to essentialization.

These terminological creations and conceptual adaptations are not necessarily free from the boundaries and constraints of the discourses they employ. As Sloop suggests (2004), although they may operate as transgressive representations, they are limited by being comparatives to a norm. However, even though they might not be subversive in the sense of complete transgression, "it is in these public representations and the ways individuals interpret and struggle over them that ideological transition and change can take place" (Sloop, 2004, p. 1). In other words, it is through the implicit and explicit acknowledgement of the limits of dominant terms and concepts, as well as their normative investments, that OSI counters taboo images and (re)presents them as queer posthuman possibilities. Although OSI seems to be striving, in some cases, for inclusion into a dominant public, they also interrogate the contradictions and limitations of heteronormative anthropocentrism to construct expanded and nuanced understandings of sexuality and identity. Such a project yields a terminological shift from anthropocentric heteronormativity to queer posthumanism, which gives way to even larger sociomaterial ontological moves.

Ontological Shifts

The queer-posthumanism implicit in OSI's rhetoric challenges categorical and hierarchical separations of beings and, as an alternative, posits and embodies an interconnected mode of living and loving. This approach mirrors many of the tenets theorized in the work of object-oriented ontology (Bogost, 2012) and object-oriented sociality (Cetina, 1997). For example, Bogost's (2012) work argues for understanding the life of objects as existing on an equal playing field with all other entities. Object-oriented ontology resists any form of exceptionalism among humans, animals, objects, etc. and, instead, sees everything as interconnected. Approaching the life of objects through a more relational-ontological point of view, Cetina (1997) argues that, too often, we consider the significance of objects based on either "intrinsic valuation [commodities]" or "external usefulness [instruments]" (p. 12). Instead, object-oriented sociality sees objects as holding the "capacity to unfold indefinitely" (p. 12). By acknowledging object agency,

she encourages humans to engage in 1) "mutual communicative partaking," where subjects and objects "cross-over" one another to mutually produce knowledge (p. 18); and 2) "object solidarity," which occurs through "human beings' altruistic behavior toward an object world" (p. 23). Although OSI does not categorize OS as an object-oriented ontology or sociality, their equalizing appeals to and practices with objects and object-agency facilitate a similar sociomaterial ontological project.

OSI's development of a human-object orientation that contradicts anthropocentric heteronormative binaries suggests that OSI is not only about identity and community formation but also about countering proscriptions of living and loving that are based in human-oriented ontologies. They offer an alternative ontological framework that complicates normative perspectives of agency, desire, and relationality. Doing so implicitly advocates for a flattening of the dominant entity-hierarchy and a multiplication of interactions among all entities while explicitly imagining and representing objects in the public sphere. For example, OSI's emphasis on non-verbal communication as a mode of constructing and perceiving reality is often incompatible with the anthropocentric ontological paradigms that characterize the dominant public sphere. Sensuality and intimacy as spectral, gender as fluid and perceptual, love as metaphorical, animism as psychic interconnection, and communication as sensation all comprise an object-oriented ontology that (re)conceptualizes desire as human-object sociality while manifesting it through representation in a public sphere. This process deconstructs the impenetrable boundaries that constitute taboo to reconstruct a more fluid and heterogeneous lifeworld. These ontological shifts inform appeals to broader sociomaterial axiological practices.

Axiological Shifts

Whereas anthropocentric desire is predicated on an investment in specific objects-of-desire or the construction of the desiring self in relation to objects, OS is about radical accountability to all beings, including objects, as a foundation of desire. Therefore, OSI's development of an object-oriented ontology is also, implicitly, a proposal for criteria of ethical values and judgments regarding sexuality and public interaction more broadly. These criteria parallel Bell's (2012) advancement of "ecologies of concern," which are networks of relationality that lead to conscientious living.

Bell (2012) suggest that life, energy, and desire are not just the property and domains of humans, or even animals, which anthropocentrism would have us believe. As an alternative, she advocates an ecological perspective, which "reminds us that any entity exists multiply in ways that may not be initially apparent" (p. 113). This ecological awareness, which illuminates the ways that all entities are entangled, creates a "shared concern" that forces us to see "each element is sustained because it is required by, and only *therefore* concerned with, the other" (p. 113). Ecologies of concern facilitate an ethical appeal for humans to "attend *better*—that is, more broadly—to the distributed agencies that are potentially of relevance in the emergence of an entity or situation" (p. 114). One of the ways Bell suggests that humans can attend to distributed agencies is through "non- or anti-anthropocentrism," because this is a perspective that "invites the sorts of reflections that better explain processes at stake through the provocative opening up of boundaries between entities" (p. 119). What is at stake, for Bell, is that "the boundaries we articulate and the exclusions that we thereby perform are simultaneously ones about relevance and about ethics" (p. 117). In other words, demarcating boundaries around what counts as an agentic entity is always a process of exclusion, which not only determines what types of relational connections are taboo but also the significance of one entity over another. Ecologies of concern acknowledge multiple

possibilities for interaction, which is a more ethical endeavor, and one that OSI implicitly and explicitly uptakes, symbolically and materially.

Stemming from queer-posthumanism and object-oriented ontology, OSI presents many suggestions for interacting with others and the world more ethically. Most prominent are their discussions of animism and nonverbal communication, in which all entities bear souls and psychic connection can facilitate mutuality. Whether or not an audience agrees with these beliefs and claims, OSI presents compelling critiques of anthropocentrism and logocentrism as ethically unsound in theory and practice. In doing so they shift these dominant discourses and embody an axiology of relational interconnectivity, where ethical desiring, loving, and living hinges on attunement to and representation of distributed agency among all entities, in all spheres.

CONCLUSION: WHAT WE LEARN FROM OSI ABOUT TABOO COMMUNICATION

Answering questions about how OSI (en)counters the public warrants asking the question: how does OSI also reaffirm the public? Naming a desire and describing an experience that agitates or opposes normativity requires, first, making assumptions about what is dominant, which is inevitably a culturally specific endeavor. Largely, OSI assumes an audience steeped in Western colonialist religious practices and discourses that exclude animism. As Luciano & Chen (2019) remind us, posthuman ontological turns are not new, they are in fact an appropriation of indigenous beliefs and materialisms. That OSI perpetuates this in their queer posthuman worldmaking not only reveals the origins of their own philosophical assumptions but also their foothold in the dominant public sphere. Additionally, analogizing OS with heterosexuality, even if to disrupt it, suggests that OSI assumes an external audience who subscribes to assumptions about gender and sexuality established through this dominant discourse. Therefore, to infer that OSI acknowledges and works to overcome exclusion brought on by the shadows of taboo also affirms a particular vision and representation of a dominant public sphere. This is not to say that an analysis of OSI does not have consequentiality. Its emergence and persistence as a queer posthuman counterpublic demonstrates the nuances involved in countering the taboo from two distinct yet overlapping marginalized positionalities while simultaneously revealing the communicative resources (symbolic and material) involved in such a public project.

What this chapter reveals is that OSI is not simply an alternative or subaltern collective that emerges through shared identity and common struggle. As a queer posthuman counterpublic, the discursive work of OSI functions to (re)imagine and (re)present the socio-material world in a way that counters anthropocentric heteronormativity and its dominant configurations of the public. This counterpublic subsumes identity and cultural conditions in service of a project of world(re)imagining. What this suggests is that *taboo* is not just about communicating for or against particular identities or practices, nor is it simply about the production of dominant discourses, it is also about inclusion of marginalized subjects into the public through representation—a specifically queer-sociomaterial imagining. In countering taboo within a queer posthuman public, we can see that taboo is constitutive of broader discourses and paradigms; it is both a symbolic and material condition of world making.

We also learn from OSI that disrupting the taboo—especially when communicating about a subject that is so absent in the public sphere and that intersects with multiple layers of discrimination—requires an incredible amount of rhetorical work. This work is important because it carves out (counter)public spaces for more complex, queer, and ethical engagements with the sociomaterial world. However, this

work also reveals how deeply engrained taboos are and how difficult they are to overcome. OSI has been countering the dominant public sphere since the 1990s and its likely that the majority of readers of this chapter will be learning about OS for the first time here. Nevertheless, OSI provides an extended and comprehensive look at the rhetorical strategies that communities deemed multiply taboo are burdened with employing in order to (en)counter the taboo in the public sphere. Thus, the framework outlined in this analysis of OSI provides a starting point for understanding the rhetorical processes that facilitate (en)countering multiple taboos in public communication.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Anthropocentric Heteronormativity: Reaffirms human-to-human sexuality as a normal and preferred dimension of hetero/sexuality.

Anthropocentrism: A perspective that positions human beings at the center of everything, which manifests in assumptions that human ways of being are the norm and fosters beliefs that humans are exceptional in comparison to all other entities.

Anthroponormativity: The taken-for-granted assumption that being human is the norm by which all other entities are judged (e.g., the binary division of human/nonhuman).

Counterpublic: Refers to collective resistance to identity-based exclusion and the development of discursive practices that are inclusive of marginalized identity and/or alternative discourses that uncover, resist, and transcend the ideological and practical differences that lead to dominance and exclusion and/or the ways groups, who are heterogenous in their marginality, strategically deploy (previously hidden) discourses in arguments against dominant conceptions and interests.

Heteronormativity: A worldview that upholds dominant understandings of gender as binary and prescribes heterosexual coupling as a normal and preferred sexual orientation.

Objectùm-Sexuality: An emotional and/or romantic inclination towards objects.

Posthumanism: A philosophical perspective that interrogates and disrupts that stability of the category human, including binaries and assumptions that position humans as hierarchically superior to all other entities.

Public Sphere: An imagined space where information is exchanged and opinions are expressed, which has historically been dominated by the voices and lived experiences of people in power who have the agency to shape political, legal, and social proscriptions.

Queer Theory: A theoretical perspective that complicates heteronormative configurations of sex/gender and attraction/desire.

Queer-Posthuman Counterpublic: A rhetorical space that disrupts heteronormative moral divisions and anthropocentric paradigmatic distinctions in order to remake the world as less anthropocentrically heteronormative.

ENDNOTES

1 This definition comes from the Wikipedia entry on OS, which was authored by the OS community and is promoted on their website as a valid source of general information about the OS community (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_sexuality).

2 This definition comes from the Wikipedia entry on animism, which readers are directed to via the OS website (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Object_sexuality).

3 The purpose of the OSI website is clearly outlined in its very first paragraph, which states: "This international website about objectùm-sexuality, (widely known as Objektophil in Germany), is designed to offer a support network for objectùm-sexuals (Objektophile) and education for friends and family about objectùm-sexuality (Objektophil), and insight into our way of accepting, living, and adapting as individuals who are in love with objects."