

2020

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Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Katie (2020) "The Rhetoric Surrounding Mary Cain," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 8, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol8/iss1/5>

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The Rhetoric Surrounding Mary Cain

Katie O'Malley

Written for: ENG 418: Rhetoric and Theory (Dr. David Holmes)

The Rhetoric Surrounding Mary Cain

Ambitious, bread-winner, strong, and emotionally-controlled. These are adjectives that typically allude to the image of a male. Whereas: attractive, nurturing, personable, and home-maker are adjectives typically associated with females. This is because gender, different from sex, is an outward performance (Halberstam, 2019) while sex is the physiological assignment of a person (Fixmer-Oraiz and Wood, 2019). Although it is arbitrary to confine these performances and personal attributes to one gender, society tends to construct distinct images of masculinity and femininity. For example, strength is often associated with masculinity, causing female athletes to experience conflict between their biological sex and gender performance. This is why female athletes are often characterized by their female masculinity, a term coined for women who naturally embody strength and other masculine attributes without intentionally trying to imitate maleness (Sloop, 2004). In the case of professional runner Mary Cain, her own female masculinity, caused her to function as an aberration from society, thus falling into what Judith Butler calls “gender trouble”, or irregularity in gender performance (1999). Cain’s conflicting identity as both female and athlete caused her to suffer under a masculine power structure. Her story is important as it highlights a present struggle that many female athletes face.

For the purposes of a rhetorical study, it is important to discuss rhetoric in the context of this societal problem. Rhetoric can be defined on a smaller scale as “the study of effective speaking and writing, the art of persuasion” (The Forest of Rhetoric, 2016). On a larger scale rhetoric is “the entire range of resources that human beings possess to produce effects on others” (Lipson and Binkley, 2009), and is appearing everywhere, “ubiquitous” (Mailloux, 2008). There are many different facets through which rhetoric can be used for persuasion, and one prevalent example in this study is the practice of rituals. Through his analysis of rituals carried out in Ancient Near East civilizations, professor of Religion at Syracuse University, James Watts, defines ritual rhetoric as statements that invoke repeated behaviors that become common practice and yield powers to dominant institutions (Watts in Lipson and Binkley, 2009). This is important in the sports realm, as there exist common practices that cycle power back to males. Furthermore, rhetorician, Mari Lee Mifsud considers the art of rhetoric through storytelling and claims rhetoric to be epistemic, thus having the power to create realities that shape how people view the world (Mifsud in Lipson and Binkley, 2009). This is important to this specific case, as rhetoric was used to empower dominant systems and hide the realities of subordinate groups.

Finally, it is essential to consider the rhetorical refusal, or rhetoric that intentionally deviates from the norm (Schilb, 2007). As seen in this study, the rhetorical

Terminology and Background

refusal becomes an essential part of taking down dominant power groups.

Through ritual rhetoric, it is evident that rhetoric can bolster a power cycle. Similarly, doxa, from the Greek term doxastic, often functions to perpetuate dominant powers as well. In his rhetorical study, *Disciplining Gender*, communication scholar, John Sloop, defines doxa as the public opinion or common sense as created through the public discourse (2004). In his study on how gender is talked about, Sloop discovered through his analysis of media that doxa typically supports the gender binary system, hence supporting the existing, dominant structure. All forms of media (news, social media outlets, television, etc.) play an important role in society because they function to decide and transmit what is valuable (McChesney, 2015). An example of the importance of media is seen through the #MeToo movement, a social media movement in which women were able to share their sexual assault experiences with the #MeToo (Taylor, 2019). The #MeToo movement serves as a precursor and event for comparison to the movement surrounding Mary Cain. The way in which the community surrounds each movement is similar in response and style.

Finally, it is important to understand the concept of hegemony, which is the power of one group to dominate over all others (Messerschmidt, 2019). Mike Donaldson, professor from University of Wollongong in Australia, explains that if hegemony is a dominant group demonstrating superiority over a subordinate group, then hegemonic masculinity is the objectification, belittling, and sexualization of females by males, thus diminishing the power and presence of females and making the male ideology ubiquitous (2019). University of Sydney Australia professor, R.W. Connell calls it any practices that legitimize and maintain masculine dominance (2005). This is

important for the case of Mary Cain because the female athlete is in a system that is structured for and dominated by men. However, it is important to note that hegemonic masculinity is not synonymous with misogyny, which is active hatred of women (Wood, Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017). In the case of Mary Cain, the coaches do not hate her, but they still use rhetoric in a way that diminishes her.

The Story

On November seventh of 2019, Mary Cain shared her story. Cain was a long-distance running prodigy. At seventeen, she was the youngest athlete (out of both males and females) to ever make a world-championship track meet. Her skill awarded her attention from Alberto Salazar, coach of the world-famous Nike Oregon Project track team. In 2013, she joined Salazar's team not only with lofty personal aspirations, but with high expectations from those in the track and field community.

However, after failing to meet the expectations, Cain fell off the grid. On November 7th of 2019, she shared her struggle with the world via The New York Times. In the article titled, "I Was the Fastest Girl in America, Until I Joined Nike", Cain details the pressure she endured in the "win-at-all-costs" culture to be constantly losing weight. Coach Alberto Salazar always made her feel inadequate and ashamed of her body. He blamed all of her losses on her weight, and no one stood up to help her in this struggle. Cain details that she began to cut herself and have suicidal thoughts during her time training with Nike. She explains that she told colleagues about these harmful actions and thoughts, but no one did anything to help her. After years of this torment and self-injury, Cain walked away from the Nike Oregon Project. She is now sharing her story

with the rest of the world, and finding that many other female athletes can relate.

Nike did issue a response in which they apologized for the way that Cain felt she had been treated. However, in their apology Nike addressed that Cain asked to come back and train with the Oregon Project again, thus proving that the conditions she faced could not have been as bad as her story says. Other athletes, such as Tianna Bartoletta, were quick to harp on Nike's response, arguing that it was not an apology. Bartoletta is also a professional track and field athlete in the long jump. She keeps a blog and wrote a response to Cain's story titled, "Being Mary Cain". In this, Bartoletta thoroughly outlines the cycle of abuse, being a domestic abuse victim herself. She points out that Cain's desire to return to the Oregon Project is a natural part of the cycle of abuse in which victims often return to the perpetrator.

Overall, Cain's story received a plethora of responses and support, particularly from other athletes, but also from fans and social media users. Her story is a powerful rhetorical movement against an abusive culture.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study explores two hypotheses and two research questions. The first hypothesis is: (H1) through ritual rhetoric that enhances hegemonic masculinity, coaches are able to shame the bodies of female athletes without repercussions. The second hypothesis is: (H2) those in the inferior position of power must wait for the appropriate cultural moment to share a story that attacks those in power. The first research question asks, (R1) what constitutes the appropriate cultural moment to share a story that attacks hegemonic powers? Finally, the second research question seeks to understand the results of sharing such a story, asking (R2) what kind of responses does the story receive?

Hegemonic Masculinity and Ritual Practices

Sports are a specific setting in which masculine practices have always flourished. Being that the initial participants in sports were all males and that males have traditionally been at the forefront of athletics (through media, news, and other forms of doxa) this is a setting in which hegemonic masculinity can thrive (Connell, 2005). This is exemplified in Mary Cain's article when she discusses the athletic standards for women that are based on male development, "A big part of this problem is that women and girls are being forced to meet athletic standards that are based on how men and boys develop. If you try to make a girl fit a boy's development timeline, her body is at risk of breaking down" (2019). Cain's statement demonstrates that before even getting to the root of the problem of weight and body-shaming, the athletic system is already isolating females by pushing an agenda centered around males.

On top of an already flawed system, there are three ritual practices that Cain discusses in her article. The first is the ritual of weighing teammates in front of each other. As part of his regimen, head coach, Alberto Salazar, routinely made his athletes stand on a scale to be weighed in front of their teammates. Additionally, when an athlete did not perform well, Salazar blamed her performance on previous weigh-ins. This can be characterized as ritual rhetoric because it is a repeated practice used to legitimize those in positions of authority: coaches. As film theorist, Viola Shafik, points out in *Rituals of Hegemonic Masculinity*, the sexualization and subordination of the female body is a ritualized practice in all media outlets that perpetuates the problem in areas outside of the media (2012). Since media functions to transmit values into society (McChesney, 2015) this process becomes normalized and unquestionable. This normalization allows

coaches, like Salazar, to get away with these harmful ritual practices without consequence. The second ritual practice imposed by Alberto Salazar was his way of constantly reminding his athletes how lucky they are to be a part of his team. Cain explains that anytime she or other athletes complained or even asked a question about their training, Salazar took it as a personal attack and scolded them for their ungratefulness. Perhaps this should have been a hindrance to trusting Salazar. However, this is a message that high-level athletes have received since a young age. Thus the rhetoric of ungratefulness and disdain that Salazar used was particularly salient to the athletes, and they accepted the burden as their own instead of further questioning his coaching. This repeated ritual rhetoric not only works to enhance the power that Salazar possessed, but also functions to silence the marginalized group, a factor that Donaldson identifies as a key factor of hegemonic masculinity (2019).

The final ritual practice that Cain discusses is that of abuse, or what she calls: the “destruction of self”. Cain realizes, “I was the victim of an abusive system, an abusive man. I was constantly tormented by the conflict of wanting to be free from him and wanting to go back to the way things used to be, when I was his favorite.” (2019). Through Salazar’s process of shaming and silencing, in collaboration with reward in moments of success, his female athletes are put in a vulnerable mental state. Sexual violence expert, Pauline Fuller, points out that it is through the construction of masculinity as dominant that enables men to abuse women (verbally, emotionally, and sexually) (1996). It is not a natural desire, but rather comes from a greed for power and control. This idea is perpetuated by Nike’s “apology” to Cain’s article, in which Nike asserts that Cain wanted to come back to train with Salazar again. However, as pointed out by fellow

professional track and field athlete, Tianna Bartoletta returning to the perpetrator is a part of the cycle of abuse (2019). In her blog post that responded to Cain’s article, Bartoletta thoroughly outlines the cycle of abuse, as a victim herself. As highlighted in this cycle, after the abuse, there is usually a lull, or “honeymoon phase”, which provides the illusion that things are better, and the victim would feel comfortable returning (Johnson, 2006). Hence, why Cain considered going back to Nike.

These ritual practices of hegemonic masculinity proved extremely detrimental not only to Cain’s physical health but also to her overall well-being. In her early twenties, Cain was diagnosed with osteoporosis and had a high risk of infertility. Furthermore, Cain began to see herself as utterly unworthy as she continued to perform poorly and Salazar continued to berate her for the size of her body. Cain explains that she started to cut herself and even when she told other colleagues, no one did anything about it. She felt trapped in a system and because no one spoke up, she continued to believe that it was her fault. When there is a hegemonic power in place, even those with some authority will not question that power, and thus the power continues to be put in the hands of the dominant group (Donaldson, 2019). Which supports that it is necessary for there to be a particular cultural moment in which the hegemonic power is weakened in order for a change to be made.

The Cultural Moment

Critiquing, usurping, or taking away power from the dominant group is a difficult task. As seen in Cain’s case, even when she told other people (including assistant coaches) that she was hurting herself and having suicidal thoughts, no one intervened. Not only would it be challenging to actually create change, but also through the ritual

practices, power was continually cycled back to the dominant group. Thus, it seems essential that there be some other, most likely larger, factor that weakens the dominant power group. An example comes from Rachael Denhollander, a former U.S. National Team gymnast who sparked the story about sexual assault cases tied to her former coach and physician, Larry Nassar. Nassar sexually assaulted hundreds of girls in his more than twenty years working for the U.S.A. Gymnastics (USAG) Team. However, Denhollander had to wait sixteen years for the right cultural moment to share her assault story. When she initially tried to seek help at just seventeen years old, no one believed her nor wanted to do anything about it because of the established power systems. However, in 2016, an article was released that generally discussed sexual assault within the USAG organization. It was then that Denhollander determined she could credibly share her story (Denhollander, 2019).

Similarly to Denhollander, no one stepped up to support Mary Cain initially, but when the hegemonic powers were already threatened, her story gained credibility. She writes, “Last month, after the doping report dropped that led to his suspension, I felt this quick and sudden release. That helped me understand that this system is not O.K. That’s why I decided to speak up now.” (2019). Cain waited until Salazar was already weakened because of a doping report which cultivated the appropriate moment for her to share her story and receive support. When seeking out what is the ideal cultural moment, often the group in power must already be suffering from some sort of attack from another higher power group, such as the law.

An important concept in regards to the cultural moment is the rhetorical refusal, defined as “an act of writing or speaking in which the rhetor pointedly refuses to do what the audience considers rhetorically normal”

(Schilb, 2007). Many point to work done in the sixties by civil rights activist, Malcolm X, as an example of a rhetorical refusal. Scholar Scott Varda, claims that Malcolm X’s use of rhetoric that was often seen as “harsh” toward white people, was indeed a rhetorical refusal because it intentionally went against the cultural norm and challenged the dominant group (2011). In the same way, a story like Cain’s is an example of a rhetorical refusal because the audience does not perceive female athletes to be malnourished or worrying about their weight, rather they are perceived as brave and strong women. However, the truth diverts from the audience’s expectations of what is rhetorically normal, thus constituting a rhetorical refusal. In all, the appropriate cultural moment occurs in conjunction with the rhetorical refusal in order to effectively bring about change for marginalized groups.

The Reaction

Tianna Bartoletta’s blog post was one of the larger responses to Cain’s article, however there was a plethora more. Dozens of female athletes responded to Cain via Twitter by sharing her article, sharing support, and some even shared their own experiences with body shaming in the running industry. Some came from Salazar’s team and others from different levels. For example, runner for Under Armor, Rachel Schneider responded via Twitter saying, “We NEED to learn from this. We all need to do better” (2019). Runner Emma Kertesz tweeted about an arbitrary height and weight system her previous coach used to determine ideal race weight, claiming that she felt healthiest and fastest when she did workouts well, ate and slept (2019). Another one of Alberto Salazar’s former athletes, Yoder Begley, even came out with her own article in which she details Salazar’s ridiculing of her body.

Cain's story also elicited many responses from male athletes who shared the article and declared their support for Cain and others. It even evoked responses from former coaches who apologized for not knowing or not doing anything about the harmful situation. Specifically, her former coach, Cam Levins, remorsefully states via Twitter that he wishes he could have been the person looking out for Cain (2019). Other coaches claimed that the system is flawed and when they were in it, it was hard to see any way out of it; providing yet another example of how hegemonic masculinity was difficult to break down in this ritual rhetoric case.

This kind of a response is not unique to Cain's situation, rather when the cultural moment presents itself and one attacks the positions of power, it seems to act as a catalyst for many more voices to come forward and share their experiences. This was seen in Rachael Denhollander's case, as her accusal allowed for many other gymnasts to step up and share their own abuse stories related to Nassar. Similarly was the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement started in late October of 2017 when Harvey Weinstein was under fire for sexual assault cases. Actress, Alyssa Milano, tweeted about her assault experience and called others to share theirs with the #MeToo. Within a year, the #MeToo had over twelve million posts (Taylor, 2019). In her analysis of the movement and its responses, professor of gender and women's studies at the University of California Davis, Joanna Regulska, says that women jumped to "seize this moment of opportunity" -- that was created by the appropriate cultural moment -- in order to create an environment that was conducive to communication and understanding (2018). All it takes is one voice, such as that of Mary Cain, Rachel Denhollander, or Alyssa Milano, at the correct cultural moment to make an

important change and provide a space for others to share their stories.

Implications for Research

Upon considering implications for this research, there are a few ways it could be expanded. First, this research covers feminist movements that specifically attack hegemonic masculinity. However, there are many other marginalized groups in the world. Further research could "size up" and explore people of color or people with disabilities and their rhetorical movements against hegemonic powers, not limited to hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, this research could also "size down" to focus more on women, and specifically female athletes, by examining their voices and rhetorical power in their respective contexts. For example, research could conduct a cross-sport examination to see if weight is a problem in other sports, or discover what types of discrimination other female athletes face. Additionally, it would also be interesting to examine the social media aspect of Cain's movement. How long does a movement with momentum on social media last; does the initial momentum die off? It would be helpful to examine the real and effective changes made by other social media movements. Lastly, the final section of this research on the responses to Cain's article could be expanded to examine the importance of narrative in relation to social change. The research question could seek out whether narrative is a more effective method to evoke social change, rather than another method.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this paper assert that in the case of Mary Cain and the Nike Oregon Project, ritual rhetoric was used to perpetuate an abusive cycle of hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, this paper finds that in order to challenge those in power, the appropriate cultural moment must

take place. This moment is constituted by an existing threat to power and the use of a rhetorical refusal. Lastly, the release of Mary Cain's story at the appropriate time yields an abundance of responses and support, allowing others who have experienced similar trauma to share their stories too.

It is important to realize the practical ways in which conclusions from this research can be used. As David Beard, researcher on ethics, points out in his analysis of the #MeToo movement, it is essential that lessons that empower all genders are placed into the education systems. He asserts that K-12 education systems should not only have sexual harassment education, but that the teaching should attempt to move away from the power

structures that are already in place (2018). As Sloop points out, it is important that humans can come to recognize each other as humans, knowing their own biases, but putting them aside to understand and show respect for people unlike themselves (2004). This seems the most practical takeaway: to know one's self and biases, but to be willing to put them aside and hear others out. Rhetoric has the power to stereotype, marginalize and isolate. However, rhetoric also has the power to create a space for truth, relationship, and equality. It is essential that the rhetoric surrounding female athletes should promote truth by demonstrating the bravery and strength of these hardworking and resilient women.

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