

Flaunting our way to Freedom? SlutWalks, Gendered Protest and Feminist Futures.

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Abstract:

This article questions the emancipatory potential of the SlutWalk movement and asks whether there is transformative potential in using the gendered body as an explicit form of protest. When the SlutWalk movement spontaneously erupted in February 2011 it struck a chord with many women in Canada and beyond. Many seasoned feminists have also championed the SlutWalk cause. The movement is not without controversy, however, and has sparked fierce debates about the power of language and the usefulness of reclamation as a feminist strategy. Despite the accolades, the SlutWalk movement, I argue, is riddled with problems related to inclusivity, a tendency to universalise women's experiences, and lacks a structural account of violence against women. A comparative contextualisation of SlutWalk to other forms of body protest reveals that, while it is possible to rely on gender tropes when using the body a site of resistance, the subversive capabilities of the SlutWalk movement are limited. SlutWalk also illustrates how Third-Wave slippages into postfeminist politics are dangerous as they hide the structural and intersectional nature of women's oppression. Taken in combination, I argue, such problems make the transformative potential of SlutWalk highly questionable.

Key words: activism, female body, feminism, social movements, body politic

Introduction

On the 24th of January 2011, a campus safety information session was held at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto. Members of York's private security force and two male Toronto police officers were invited to direct students on how best to stay safe on campus; the campus is, in effect, a privileged oasis situated in the middle of one of Canada's poorest, most ethnically diverse and conflicted communities (Boudreiu, Keil and Young 2009). One officer's advice to the women present, prefaced by the claim that he was told not to say it, was if they want to stay safe they should avoid 'dressing like sluts' (Kwan 2011). The subtext of his instruction is that there is a causal relationship between clothing and consent and that, ultimately, women are themselves responsible when raped and sexual assaulted. This cop's comment is indicative of the institutionalisation of an acceptable culture of rape, and of victim-blaming in particular. The unpredicted level of outrage over this misogynist comment sparked a new global movement that continues to develop at a quick fire pace. Four women in Toronto, enraged by the comments, sent out a call to other women to flaunt their inner slut and publicly denounce this cop's behaviour. The subsequent response overwhelmed the four female organisers as the SlutWalk movement was brought to life on an April afternoon. Many women across the globe have marched in SlutWalks while many more are organising them as an affront to the pattern of blaming victims for their experiences with sexual violence.

For those interested in feminist resistance, whether as academics and/or activists within and supporting movements, SlutWalks are an interesting yet not uncontroversial development within what has been branded as a postfeminist era. SlutWalks have captured the imagination of many feminists, including well known

Second-Wave activists like Selma James, who celebrate the movement as a re-ignition of the feminist imagination amongst women. The SlutWalk movement has sparked fierce debates among feminists about the power of language and the strategic usefulness of the reappropriation of misogynist language. The dividing line between those who support or oppose SlutWalk and its call to embrace ‘sluthood’ is continuously sketched out as a battle between ‘new versus passé’, ‘young versus old’, ‘fun versus prudish.’ Ultimately, the discontent has its roots in the struggle between second and Third-Wave feminism, or quite simply feminism versus postfeminism. To be sure, this movement has reignited significant questions regarding the relevance of feminism to the lives of women today – a valiant achievement. SlutWalks have also indirectly brought conversations about women’s bodies to the fore again – both as policed bodies and resisting bodies, though the actual *use* of bodies as a site of resistance is implied, not made explicit. Despite the accolades however, the SlutWalk movement is riddled with problems related to inclusivity, the tendency to universalise women’s experiences, and lacks a structural account of violence against women. SlutWalk also illustrates how Third-Wave slippages into postfeminist politics are dangerous in that they hide the structural and intersectional nature of women’s oppression. Taken in combination, I argue, such problems make the transformative potential of SlutWalk highly questionable.

On a micro-level this paper offers a contextual examination of SlutWalk via the problems I have with Third-Wave feminism and its relationship to postfeminism. The hope is to contribute to the forward motion of feminist praxis through an analysis of new forms of mobilisation. More broadly, it reflects on gendered body protest and the usefulness of making more explicit the connection between bodies and protests within

social movements in general. I argue there is a lot to be gained by placing bodies at the centre of discussions on mobilisation. To illustrate this I place the SlutWalk movement alongside other forms of protest where the gendered body is used a site of resistance. Finally, the paper is designed more to provoke questions than provide answers. The questions, I hope, will foster a much needed discussion on the future directions of feminist organising – a discussion that reorients us away from the disparateness produced by Third Wave feminist politics and back to conversation which places the idea of emancipation back on the agenda.

Bodies in Movement

Bodies are central to power struggles and the body itself is the locus of resistance (Foucault 1979; Harvey 2000). To engage in protest is to engage the body. Individual or collective acts of resistance rely on bodies. “What besides bodies,” asks Margaret McLaren, “can resist? It is my body that marches in demonstrations, my body that goes to the polls, my body that attends rallies, my body that boycotts, my body that strikes, my body that participates in work slowdowns, my body that engages in civil disobedience.” (McLaren 2002: 116) Despite this seemingly obvious fact, bodies are the taken-for-granted vehicles used to transmit political action. With the exception of feminist research, the ‘protesting body’ is rarely made explicit, although it is central to collective action (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003: 379, 382).

Social movement scholarship and practice has attempted to thoroughly assess protest tactics with a view to movement-building, including the cultural meanings attached to strategies (Sutton 2010: 205). Useful knowledge on the sustainability of movements and the physical and emotional sustenance of activists has been produced (Cox 2011);

yet, what do we know of the activist body itself? Broader social movement literature has tended to overlook this in aid of understanding the motivational and cognitive factors of social activism (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport 2003: 382). Social movement literature is inclined to treat the activist body as given and not address, in any meaningful way, the significance of the activist body itself (Sutton 2010: 205). While emotion, love and care are indeed related and have been addressed (Baker et al 2004; Flam and King 2005) meaningful conversations about the physical manifestation of the protesting body are rare.

To study the body in movement is useful for a number of reasons: the most obvious perhaps being they are powerful sites of resistance (O'Keefe 2005; Butler 1990), and that both bodies in protest and 'body protests' are potentially important sources of knowledge for movement development. Bodies in protest are not necessarily overt exercises in issues relating to the body. Although bodies in protest embody a political text the body, in this instance, is not the focal point of the protest, as is the case of the current Occupy movement; the body merely facilitates the protest. This is distinguishable from body protest which is specifically about the body; it names the location and significance of the body to the protest. Body protest is, as Michelle Alexandre points out when writing on women's body protest in Trinidad, defined by the use of the body 'as a mode of expression and as a tool for liberation and transformation.' Body protests, like the dirty protest against strip-searching in Armagh women's prison or the 2004 naked protest staged by Meitei women in Imphal, India against rape, torture and murder, make explicit the location of the body as that which is a site of oppression and, in turn, uses the body to explicitly challenge this oppression – bodies are the medium and message (Alexandre 2006: 178). Body

protests seek to challenge patriarchal norms, assumptions, and behaviours with regard to bodies like, for example, SlutWalks do. Body protests can challenge the human/animal dichotomy in relation to bodies as well, as PETA protests that compare the killing of animals with that of humans well illustrate (PETA 2011). Body protests are about the socially-inscribed body. To gather knowledge on bodies in protest and body protests is, in effect, to understand protest itself.

The relationship between bodies and protest is very much gendered as body and protest is typically only visible as women's bodies and protest. The way in which we approach body and protest - how we value it, attend to it, gaze at it - is gendered. It is much less common to see explicit connections being made between men's bodies and protest, with the exception of HIV/AIDs activism and gay rights activism (Berlant and Freeman 1992). To make explicit male bodies in movement, to move beyond just connecting bodies and protest to women and women's issues then, also disrupts the body/mind, female/male dichotomy that the current association reproduces.

Another ostensibly obvious utility to the study of bodies and protest relates to the issue of sustainable organising. Protracted, physical struggles like the one against Shell Oil in Mayo, Ireland, are reliant on continued bodily resistance in the face of sustained violent repression. Campaigns of resistance which are regularly subjected to police brutality such as those against Shell are forced to engage in discussions about the strengths and limitations of the activist body. Such conversations, however, rarely become part of the broader discourse on social movements. A focus on bodies should further our understanding of the limitations of tactics and strategies, and, quite significantly, the implications of differing bodies to differing tactics and strategies.

The protesting body is not static and its capabilities change at various points in time and in different contexts. How is this reflected in movement organising? As a participant in campaigns where direct action tactics are widely used, my ability to commit to such campaigns has changed dependent on various states of emotional and physical well-being. As I age and my mobility changes I find restrictions are placed on my involvement by my body. This is an important acknowledgment, on a micro level, but is all the more significant on the macro-level.

A related, yet distinct, point with regard to the usefulness of focus on the body is the issue of inclusivity. Bodies are gendered, racialised, classed, dichotomised and marked as normal/abnormal or able/'disable'-bodied. The body is very much a contextualised product of the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism and other systems of oppression. How do we build movements that are inclusive of differing bodies?¹ How can groups organise so as not to exclude because of body difference? Are movements reproducing those hierarchies based on body difference, i.e. fat bodies, skinny bodies, bodies that use wheelchairs, 'attractive' bodies versus 'ugly' bodies, bodies that are racialised, visibly different or marked as Other? Are their hierarchical corporealities in movements and how might they hinder movement development? To study bodies in movement helps us not only understand these relationships and their intersectional nature but challenge them more definitively and with precision.

On initial reflection this might appear to be a perilous call to give primacy to the biological body – it is, in fact, the opposite. The location and meaning assigned to

¹ See Elizabeth Betita Martinez (2003) for a discussion of the risks activists of colour take when

bodies has little to do with biology; bodies are given meaning through power-laden, discursive practices (Butler 1990). These discursive practices, in turn, control how we engage with bodies, including our own; it dictates what we do to and with our bodies (Foucault 1979; Bartky 1995). Structural systems of oppression work to ensure that the link between these discursive practices and the material reality is very much naturalised. This, no doubt, affects the ways in which bodies not only identify but contribute, resist, act, protest, occupy, in varying conditions and contexts. An understanding of these differences would surely constitute useful knowledge. This, in turn, is why the subversive body is significant for destroying systems of oppression.

The subversive body is, therefore, a necessity for movements. Bodies that resist simultaneously serve as a medium for change and also realise it. Those of us interested in producing and utilising useful social movement knowledge should consider the potential power of the protesting body as an agent of social change, which allow movements to challenge existing social and political orders (Sutton 2010: 400).

‘Femmenist’ and Postfeminist bodies

The gendered body has long been a subject of feminist scholarship and praxis. Women’s bodies continue to be sexualised, particularly in western societies, from an age that is ostensibly all the more young. Women in the UK and US are experiencing a retrenchment of their reproductive rights while Irish women still do not have reproductive choice. Women who work in the sex trade in New Orleans, particularly African-American women, were until as recently as June 2011, criminalised as sex

engaging in protest in comparison to activists with class and racial privilege.

offenders because of their work. Women in France have had their rights to bodily integrity curtailed as their right to veil was taken away – a move that particularly affects Muslim women and also serves as a reminder that state power is constantly used to control women's bodies. Rape culture still thrives and is very much institutionalised as both the 'Garda Rape Tape' and Osgoode Law School incidents document.² These examples are by no means exceptional and represent a tiny fraction of the ways in which women from varying backgrounds, cultures, societies and locations are oppressed. Despite such direct, oppressive control being exercised on women's bodies, many insist that we are living in a postfeminist era.³

Postfeminism is based on the assumption that feminism is no longer needed, that it is somehow passé and has little relevance in the lives of women today, particularly young women (McRobbie 2004: 256). Postfeminism designates the equality project as worthwhile but erroneously assumes equality has actually been achieved.⁴ Feminism is seen as 'old', representative of 'older women', prudish, anti-sex or asexual, outmoded, and anything but fun, assumptions which are, one could argue, inherently ageist (See Shayne Lee 2010: 125 for a particularly good example of this).

² In April 2011, members of the Irish police force, An Garda Síochána, policing the struggle against Shell Oil in Mayo, Ireland, were recorded making comments regarding two female protestors they had arrested moments before. Most notable in the conversation were the 'jokes' made about threatening to rape the women if they did not comply when being arrested. See Flood (2011a) for a detailed account of the 'Garda rape tape' incident.

³ It has also been claimed, albeit in limited quarters, that we are witnessing a feminist revival. I agree with this and address it later in the paper.

⁴ It is important to point out postfeminism is a western term and mostly applicable in a western context- though this does not temper the universalising tendencies of those who champion it.

To counter the killjoys, emphasis is instead placed on the freedom of individual choice for women and within that, the freedom to dress, look and act how she pleases, free from the watchful eye of her scornful feminist mother. This has created a space to celebrate women as consumers; the postfeminist woman has money to spend on designer shoes, clothes and makeup – this, in fact, is the indicator of women’s success and the subsequent irrelevance of feminism.⁵ Postfeminism does not critique capitalism - on the contrary; it carves out a distinct space to justify and encourage consumption. In addition to designer shoes and fashion, postfeminist consumption also includes ‘stripper heels’, pole dancing lessons and poles for private use even, designer breasts and vaginas. The postfeminist woman has total body freedom and, unlike her prudish Second-Wave mother, embraces sex and sexuality, she flaunts it and, in turn, feels empowered by it (Henry 2004).⁶ This ‘femmenist’ quipped Stephanie Genz (2006: 345) is the archetype as her empowered and feminine selves fuse to form a category of femininity that is rooted in sexualised and patriarchal notions of autonomy and agency. It could be argued that this has made way then for the raunch culture, the pornographied societies others have detailed elsewhere (McNair 2009; Levy 2005).

This emphasis on freedom of choice and ability to consume is shared with Third Wave feminism, though the inspiration of the latter is generally referenced as

⁵ This is very much found in films and television shows like *Sex and the City* which have become a reference point for many women in western societies (Henry, 2004).

⁶ Despite the attempts of postfeminism to mark itself as ‘outside’ the feminist family, the arguments with regard to bodily autonomy and sexual expression represent a continuity with Second-Wave

postmodernism. Third Wave feminism, much like postfeminism, positions itself against Second Wave feminism by placing emphasis on individuality. Astrid Henry looks at sexual agency via *Sex and the City* as an expression of Third Wave Feminism and claims that, in a rejection of the ‘perceived dogmatism’ of the Second Wave, Third Wave feminists have “steered clear of prescribing a particular feminist agenda and instead have chosen to stress individuality and individual definitions of feminism....With this focus on individualism, feminism becomes reduced to one issue: choice.” (Henry 2004: 71). This emphasis is also present in the representations of femininity articulated by Riot Grrrl and bands like Bikini Kill. Although such representations are more staunchly politicised than the femmenism, the focus remains very much on “the individual and the emotional than on marches, legislation, and public policy” (Rosenberg and Garafalo 1998: 810). Choice, as Henry’s *Sex and the City* analysis shows, is very much linked to consumption and the auto-sexualisation of the body. This has irrevocably blurred the lines between Third Wave and postfeminism and, arguably, made the two virtually indistinguishable. Consequently, a shift from ‘sexual objectification to sexual subjectification’ has happened epitomised by the t-shirts emblazoned in slogans such as ‘fcuk me’ or ‘fit chick unbelievable knockers’ (Gill, 2003). More extreme examples are padded bras for primary schoolchildren as well as the crotchless thongs for seven year olds available on shelves in a Colorado shop (Huffington Post 2011). The hegemonic postfeminist/Third-Wave body is the ‘sexy body’ – the difference being that women are ‘choosing’ to self-sexualise on patriarchal terms.

There are, to be sure, a number of issues with this approach, not least of which is the

debates, particularly S&M and vanilla feminist debates around the eroticisation of hierarchy.

lack of material analysis, blindness to structural oppression, and the inherently westernised, racialised and ageist assumptions. Furthermore, the categories of sexy and sexual are, in the main, uncontested. The ways in which women self-sexualised are difficult to differentiate from ways in which patriarchal norms constitute the sexual female body. The sexual body, in primarily western contexts, is the free body yet this construction of femininity, as Gill highlights, comes “straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy.” Furthermore, such constructions “must also be understood as authentically owned by the women who produce them” (2009:102). These constructions of femininity are also commodified to an unprecedented extent (Attwood 2009: xiv), whereby the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in relation to women’s sexuality and modes of sexual expression are being repackaged by capitalism and sold back to women as a consumable form of empowerment. Burlesque, the middle-class take on strip-work, is a perfect example of this, as is the normalisation of threesomes and swinging in western popular culture.⁷ At no point is the male gaze disrupted, contested, eschewed even. On the contrary, to win the male gaze is the reward for the body torture which masquerades as ‘pampering’ (Bartky 1995). Women are disciplined into focusing on hair, makeup and overall appearance in pursuit of both self-respect and the respect of others – a pursuit which is highly gendered and makes little sense outside the confines of patriarchy. The issue, to be sure, is not sex, sexuality, women’s sexual enjoyment, or expression but the uncontested, uncritical acceptance of categories that are rooted in

⁷ Over the last couple of years television programs which centre around the concept of swinging, threesomes and alternative sexual lifestyles are increasingly commonplace. Two of the more recent prime time programmes include *Swing Town* (cr. Mike Kelley 2008) and *Threesome* (dir. Ian Fitzgibbon 2011).

patriarchal definitions. The western sexualised hegemonic female body is white, fit, able-bodied and young – women who do not fit this ideal are either invisible, deemed asexual or sent on a journey to attain the ideal. This era of feminist politics has done little to question that.

Spectacles of Defiance or Compliance?

Given the emphasis on auto-sexualisation of the body, it is perhaps no surprise that a dominant form of women's resistance as of late is a fusion of body protest with sexual expression: the 'sexy protest.' Examples include Pamela Anderson's nude 'don't wear fur campaign' for PETA, or the Ukrainian feminist group Femen who make headlines for their sexualised, topless protesting, most recently for posing as sexy chambermaids and undressing outside the home of Dominique Strauss Kahn (Storyful 2011).⁸ In its current manifestation SlutWalk, an exemplar of sexy protest, is the poster child for Third Wave/femmenist politics with its mix of feminist language with rejection of the feminist label. While many claim they march in defiance of social norms which regulate women's bodies, the subsequent discussion attempts to illustrate that the movement meme reproduces such norms.

Upwards of 3500 protesters marched onto police headquarters in Toronto on April 3, 2011 in reaction to the call sent out by organisers Heather Janzen and Sonya Barnett (SlutWalkToronto 2011). Both women claim they were overwhelmed with the response given they had expected a few hundred participants at most. Their initial call

⁸ It is important to draw attention to the distinction between the uses of nudity and nakedness in protest. As Sutton (2007) explains using John Berger (1979), nudity relates to sexualisation whereas nakedness through its bareness is desexualised; conversely, nudity is on (erotic) display.

to action questioned 'slut-shaming' and the policing of women's sexuality, specifically implicating the Toronto Police Services:

We are tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming; of being judged by our sexuality and feeling unsafe as a result. Being in charge of our sexual lives should not mean that we are opening ourselves to an expectation of violence, regardless if we participate in sex for pleasure or work. No one should equate enjoying sex with attracting sexual assault. We are a movement demanding that our voices be heard. (www.slutwalktoronto.com/organise)

Since that first march numerous satellite marches have been held across the globe in a variety of cities and in countries as widespread as Canada, the US, UK, Indonesia, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, Peru, China, India and Ireland. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the viral status of SlutWalking has also captured the curiosity of the media. *The Guardian* has devoted numerous pages to documenting the development of the movement with contributions from well-established feminists like Selma James, who proudly declared that her placard read "Pensioner Slut." Those interested in women's activism and social movement development more broadly cannot help but also pay attention. The movement has produced a dichotomised debate between 'old' feminists and young 'femmenists,' centred almost exclusively on the word 'slut.' SlutWalk's *modus operandi* is "to challenge the word 'slut' and other degrading words around sexuality and sexual assault in their current mainstream use" and its aim is to "reappropriate the word 'slut' to use it in a subversive, self-defining, positive, empowering and respectful way" (www.slutwalktoronto.com). Elsewhere on their webpage, one can find the following call to action "Whether a fellow slut or simply an ally, *you don't have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve*, we just ask that you come. Any gender-identification, any age. Singles, couples, parents, sisters,

brothers, children, friends. Come walk or roll or strut or holler or stomp with us”

(www.slutwalktoronto.com).

Photos of SlutWalks found on various internet sites, including the official SlutWalk Toronto Facebook page depict marches that are a fusion of carnivalesque and burlesque. They are a spectacle typically reminiscent of gay pride – celebratory, “fun, fresh, young feminism,” in the words *The Guardian’s* Ray Filar (2011). Women who slutwalk often dress in scantily clad clothes, fishnets, stockings and suspenders, bras, basques and corsets, short skirts and dresses, heels, and other items associated with sexualisation of the female body in western societies. Some adorn the words slut across their naked flesh in lipstick or paint. Others, including men, remain fully clothed wear badges which proclaim ‘I love sluts’ or carry posters and placards with a variety of messages including “My little black dress does not mean yes”, “Consent is sexy”, “sluts say yes” or “it’s my hot body. I’ll do what I want with it”. Reminiscent of a line from *Sex and the City*, Suzanne Moore (2011) writes in her article “Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun...To see a movement such as SlutWalk that brings together women who say "hands off our bodies, and our clothes ‘is fabulous.””

SlutWalking is as much a spectacle to be gazed upon as it is a march of defiance.

When I became first aware of SlutWalk in April 2011, Ireland was in the midst of coming to terms with its own patriarchal policing scandal with regard to rape culture. I was intimately connected to this in my professional capacity and was anxious to make a connection with the Toronto incident as I saw both as a clear statement on the problems of policing as an institution more generally. After research and conversation (via pages on and by SlutWalk - blogs, documentation of satellite events,

press releases, media stories, Facebook updates and a number of email and Facebook exchanges⁹) I decided, for a number of significant reasons, that SlutWalk in its current formation is not the type of movement worth devoting my feminist energy to. While there are numerous critiques to level at SlutWalk, I have three overarching concerns: 1) the uncontested representations of female sexuality; 2) universalisation of women's experiences and 3) lack of structural analysis of oppression. In short, SlutWalk protests are problematic for how they frame bodies in protest and how they shape bodies as subjects of protest.

The SlutWalk goal of reclaiming the word 'slut' has been controversial, to say the least. Although the act of reappropriation has been done in other contexts (i.e. queer, dyke), it has also been pointed out that this strategy of reclaiming terms that 'were never ours to begin with' has done little to further equality agendas (Murphy 2011). Gail Dines, perhaps the most vocal of the critical commentators on slutwalking has argued that the word slut is beyond redemption and is unequivocal in her disdain for the campaign. In an article written for the Guardian she and Wendy Murphy state, "[w]hile the organisers of the SlutWalk might think that proudly calling themselves "sluts" is a way to empower women, they are in fact making life harder for girls who are trying to navigate their way through the tricky terrain of adolescence....They have been told over and over that in order to be valued in such a culture, they must look and act like sluts, while not being labelled slut because the label has dire

⁹ I contacted the organisers via Facebook and direct email to obtain further information about their campaign and to make them aware of what was happening in Ireland. I was stressing that this was an opportunity to highlight the institutionalised nature of patriarchy, and asked at the very least if they could share the information I had provided them on the Garda incident but my request was declined.

consequences including being blamed for rape, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and self-mutilation”(2011). This makes clear why the word slut cannot be reappropriated in an uncontested manner; to not re-imagine it outside the confines within which it currently exists strikes me as being of little political value. As Dines and Murphy explain, “Women need to find ways to create their own authentic sexuality, outside of male-defined terms like slut” as opposed to ‘copying dominant societal norms of sexual objectification’ (2011). The SlutWalk approach embodies the ethos characteristic of Third Wave/femmenist politics and its emphasis on unproblematised sexual autonomy. SlutWalk is a form of body protest which simultaneously celebrates and exploits the sexy female body. The sexy female body is selling the message. Nowhere is the word slut disentangled from patriarchal definitions, contested and re-imagined. To not contest the concept is, arguably, to not contest the unequal relationships in which such concepts are created. Though hardly scientific, some online commentary from those reacting to SlutWalks, illustrates this very point. In the Guardian comments section in response to a Selma James article on her slutwalking experience, one (presumably male) poster quips, “I’m confused. If I drool at the bare arses on show during this walk, am I now supporting feminism?” Similarly, on the most used Irish internet forum, boards.ie, we find comments like “I’m wholeheartedly in favour of anything which brings more sluts to the streets” and “if this is what feminism is about I’m all for it” and “Perhaps also they should reclaim the concept of stripping from the patriarchal warmongers and put on a strip show. I suggest Destabilizing The Sexist Signifier Of Striptease: Shedding Our Clothes as a working title. Wet T-Shirt Competitions, Mud-Wresting and Naked Female Rodeo are all other contested arenas of sexism that must be reclaimed,” the mocking tone of the latter suggests a ridiculous incongruity of SlutWalks with feminism

(www.boards.ie).¹⁰ These comments show that the templates of female sexuality for this body protest are a replication of prevailing heterosexual male fantasy, typical of the Third-Wave and femmenist politics documented above. In the current era (and only in certain quarters), to be a proud slut is not out of step with being ‘chic’ and fashionable, sexy even; and, it was popularised long before SlutWalk, through the postfeminist identity adopted, in the main, by women of privilege. These forms of uncontested sexual expression are hip, trendy and are designed to attract the male gaze; to adopt a masculinised approach to women’s sexuality is to be fashionable as evidenced by stars like Rhianna frequenting strip clubs, or the mainstreaming of all things burlesque from fashion to Friday night entertainment. Sluts are not necessarily promiscuous but are sexually adventurous; they embrace mainstream pornography, and seek to embody the dominant, heterosexual male fantasies it imagines. Protest that embodies these norms only serves to reproduce them. They also exclude those who do not identify with auto-sexualisation, particularly when it is remarkably similar to heterosexual male characterisations of female sexuality that have long served as a means of policing women’s bodies. Where, for example, in the SlutWalk movement do asexual (whether or not by choice) women fit? Without a doubt, there are women on those marches who have experienced sexual violence but one must also ask where is the space for women who, because of experiences with sexual violence, continue to have a complicated relationship with sex and sexual pleasure? Where do women who do not have body autonomy fit?

¹⁰ Incidentally, at the November 16th 2011 student protest against fees in Dublin, a number of reports indicate that many protestors were chanting ‘no fees, more sluts’ as they marched. A number of posters/signs also overtly sexualised women; most shocking perhaps were those which called for ‘less fees more gee,’ gee being a derisory word for vagina in Ireland.

A second but by no means less significant concern I have of SlutWalk is the propensity to universalise women's experiences and sexual senses of self and the overall lack of diversity within the movement. Repeated use of language like "us" and "we" throughout any of their published material, indicates that, at a minimum, the organisers are not taking into account the diversity of women's experiences. This is particularly apparent in their initial call to action:

We are here to call foul on our Police Force and demand change. We want Toronto Police Services to take serious steps to regain our trust. We want to feel that we will be respected and protected should we ever need them, but more importantly be certain that those charged with our safety have a true understanding of what it is to be a survivor of sexual assault — slut or otherwise. (www.slutwalktoronto.com)

This original statement can also be read too as racialised and classed with the way in which women's relationship to the police is represented. The call on the Toronto Police services to "regain our trust" fails to acknowledge the varying relationships women have with police, depending on their class and racial positions. The relationship between the police and many women located within poor and ethnic-minority communities in Toronto, like that which is home to Osgoode Law School, could not be characterised as one of trust.

Furthermore, the term 'slut' is only meaningful in particular contexts. Slut is not a universal category used to police women's sexuality in a uniform manner. In fact, the term is very much racialised in that it is rooted in white women's sexuality; slut is used, more precisely, to discipline the sexuality of white women. The bodies of

African-American women, for example, are typically policed on the basis of skin colour and rather than dress; Black female bodies were sexualised through slavery and sexualised by white society in ways that are much different to that of white women (bell hooks 1992; Blogando 2011). Similarly, amongst white western women, the term is classed. To be a slut is, for the most part, to regulate and control middle-class women. To be a 'slut' is to question her class position and is often done in conjunction with classist descriptors like 'uncouth', 'trailer trash', 'trashy' – the opposite of 'proper', good, clean, from a good upbringing. The working-class woman is dirty, loose – particularly in reference to single mothers. Her promiscuity is a given, and the only means of controlling it is through medical procedures like sterilization - forced or through bribes.

Similarly, the desire to reclaim the word slut also fails to acknowledge women who, because of their body appearance, are seen as asexual or invisible as a consequence of patriarchal norms around women's sexual bodies. How does the fat woman who is deemed 'too ugly to be raped' let alone worthy of a consensual sexual encounter reclaim a word that, by its very inapplicability to her, is oppressive? Women have differently abled-bodies as well, some of which are deemed to be asexual as a result. How might such women identify with this movement? What happens when we account for age? Sexual orientation? The multiple configurations of women's bodies in relation to sex and sexualisation are denied visibility here too.

On a more descriptive level, the SlutWalk movement is criticised for its lack of diversity despite its spread to non-western countries and locations that are not predominantly white. Some women of colour have documented their discomfort with

participating in the marches given the overwhelming ‘whiteness’ of the participants and organisers (Crunk Feminist Collective 2011). These accounts run counter to the personal reflections offered by Selma James on her SlutWalking experience. While she acknowledges the lack of diversity, she heralds “the end of identifying black women as sex objects personified; sluts of colour strike back” and proceeds to report that “the largely white crowd welcomed women of colour not because it was right and moral and good to be against racism, but because it was too late in the day for racism – anti-racism was what we assumed” (James 2011). The difficulties I have with this account are too numerous to detail in any meaningful way here and, as a white woman, I am not sure it is my place to do so. Nevertheless, it does stand as recognition of the lack of diversity within the movement.

The SlutWalk movement has also been accused of explicit racism after a march in New York City on October 1, 2011. At the march in question a white woman carried a placard bearing the text “Women is the n***** of the world,” lyrics John Lennon and Yoko Ono were rightly admonished for decades earlier. Many African-American women’s groups were outraged (blackwomensblueprint.org) which has, in turn, spawned a very public debate about racism and the movement. SlutWalk organisers reacted by posting an open letter of response on their website, with a somewhat simplistic banner graphic “Racism is Wrong” to accompany it. As this is a fairly recent development (and movement) it is fair to assume that there will be subsequent, significant challenges in this regard.

The final criticism I will put forward relates to the previous in that the movement ostensibly lacks any decipherable structural analysis. SlutWalk, as a product of the

Third-Wave/femmenist era, offers little by way of an analysis of the material realities of women's bodies. There is no acknowledgement of patriarchy as a system of oppression, no mention of the exploitative nature of capitalism, or any reference to systemic racism, homophobia or heteronormativity. In fact, typical of the dominant forms of Third- Wave/femmenist politics, the politics of women's bodies are significantly depoliticised. The organisers have refused to label this as a feminist movement stressing the importance of 'inclusivity' instead. Much like the Occupy movement, politics and political ideology is not a shared value amongst participants. This 'lowest common denominator politics' (O'Keefe 2005) is arguably a contributing factor to the quick-fire spread of both movements. The absence of a structural analysis of oppression in exchange for a superficial expression of commonality means less political ground to disagree over (Flood 2011b). Consequently, as I have argued elsewhere, there are few if any meaningful conversations that seek to name oppression, to understand its causes, consequences and strategies of resistance (O'Keefe 2005).

Blood, Breasts and Bodies in Black

To my mind, SlutWalk's superficiality is even more pronounced when compared with other protests of a similar nature. In fact, though the previous section questions the utility of a certain type of women's body-based protest – the sexy protest- this does not mean all gendered body protests should be dismissed. If we look to women's protest in Armagh prison against state violence, the Niger Delta in opposition to multinational oil companies, and in Israel against the Occupation of Palestine, we see how the gendered body can be engage in meaningful and subversive bodily acts. In fact, the status of women's bodies in most societies as 'subordinate' and characterised

as something to be hidden from view or grossly sexualised when in view, positions it as an ideal site of resistance.

The first example of body protest that offsets the speciality of SlutWalks is that of the ‘dirty protest’ by women in Armagh jail. On 7 February 1980, 30 female republican prisoners engaged in a subversive body protest in direct response to brutal physical and often sexualised violence they experienced at the hands of Armagh prison guards (O’Keefe 2006). Their protest involved smearing their own excrement – including menstrual blood – on the walls of their cells. As I have argued elsewhere, this was the “ultimate act of disruption and empowerment,” as women reclaimed control of their bodies as a direct challenge to the manner in which their bodies were gendered and abused by the prison system (O’Keefe 2006: 547). To make visible menstrual blood was to disrupt long-held societal disciplinary taboos which dictate that menstruation should always be hidden. This protest was quite shocking and seen as decidedly more disdainful and scorn-worthy than the concurrent dirty protest by male political prisoners in Long Kesh.

The immediate accomplishment of the protest was that these women’s bodies were now untouchable to the prison staff. Wardens went to great lengths to distance themselves from the women, adopting ritualistic behaviours and clothing to, ironically, protect them from the female prisoners. Whereas before the protest, women’s cells were constantly torn apart, their bits and pieces destroyed, wardens now refused to enter the cells unless fully protected with masks, gloves, rubber boots and special ‘insulating suits’; crucially, as one former dirty protester explains “they didn’t like to touch you” (Aretxaga 1997: 136). The use of menstrual blood was, in

itself a transgression of powerful social norms but also spoke to those which relegated women to the home and silenced 'women's issues' more generally. Women used their bodies to resist being silenced – by the republican movement, the state, and society more broadly. Their actions represented a challenge to the hegemonic British state, and the gender-based violence it used as a weapon of war. These women also resisted the patriarchal elements within republicanism who thought 'dirty and hungry women' were bad for publicity. Finally, they forced a very open, public debate within the women's movement in Ireland, north and south, about what constituted a women's issue; this, in turn, exposed the cracks in non-intersectional feminist approaches. Many of these women went on to struggle as explicitly republican feminists and continue to work in women's centres and on broader campaigns for equality and social justice.

Women's protest in the Niger Delta against big oil companies offers a more contemporary example of subversive gendered body protest. Although not the first time women engaged in a battle against big oil (Ekine 2001), July 2002 marked the beginning of a year-long intensified, woman-led and sustained insurgency against Chevron. This war involved a gendered but effective use of the body as a weapon to resist one of the most notoriously militarised (and consequently violent) industries on the planet. Women protested by exposing their breasts and, in particular, their vaginas to bring about the curse of 'social death' on men who ran the oil companies. In the Niger Delta, and indeed in many countries across the African continent, it is historically believed that to be exposed to a woman's vagina was to be cursed with impotency, madness or death.¹¹ It is based on the belief that, as women are the givers

¹¹ It must also be noted that this form of protest is seen as a last resort as women who use it are at risk

of life they too can end life. Today the curse is most often associated with social death as it is used as a means of shaming and socially excluding men – particularly if they are exposed to the nakedness of married and elderly women. This powerful superstition has meant that women's nakedness, with no sexual connotation, made women's bodies a powerful weapon of resistance. The 'curse of nakedness' allowed over 600 women from a wide age span to occupy the Chevron/Texaco export terminal and tank yard and halt the production of almost half a million barrels of oil a day (Turner and Brownhill 2004). This inspired further actions and takeovers with over 1000 women involved within a week. Solidarity from the unions followed and a sustained struggle against the oil industry was the result. This struggle was also linked to the US-led war in Iraq; in the context of anti-war activism Nigeria's Environmental Rights Action, Project Underground, called for a boycott against Chevron Texaco. A number of naked anti-war protests were held worldwide, inspired by the naked protests of the women of the Niger Delta (Turner and Brownhill 2004: 71). Ultimately, these protests marked a powerful and transgressive opposition to the interests of capitalism and war.

Finally, we turn to Women and Black in Israel who offer an interesting example of gendered body protest that sits in stark contrast to the body protests of the Niger Delta. This global, feminist-identified group came into being in Israel a month after the first Palestinian Intifada in 1988. These Israeli and Palestinian women, taking their inspiration from women's protests throughout history that used similar tactics, organise silent vigils while dressed entirely in black to symbolise the tragedies of both communities. These vigils are silent and use a mixture of civil disobedience and

of being raped or murdered (Turner and Brownhill 2004: 71).

symbolism to draw attention to oppose Israeli Occupation of Palestine (WIB UK). The group, though reliant on the gendered association of women with peace, and far from revolutionary, uses a type of protest that is particularly subversive in the given location. The masculinist nature of politics – whether in protests or parliaments – is typically vocal, aggressive and loud, and tends to deter or marginalise women from political involvement. The women’s silent vigil was an affront to this tendency. The silence, as Sasson-Levy and Rapaport explain, compelled passersby to ‘listen’ and that the message was powerful precisely because of its silent mode of delivery (Sasson-Levy and Rapaport 2003: 385). The vitriolic response to the protests – which are in stark opposition to those of SlutWalk – are indicative of the controversial nature of these actions. Scorn and anger mixed with misogynist slurs typify the abuse hurled at the protesting women: ““Arafat's slut," "Go get fucked in the Jaffa Gate" (one of the gates to the Old City of Jerusalem), or "You should be fucked and then killed”” (Sasson-Levy and Rapaport 2003: 395). This created, in Tamar Mayer’s words, “an atmosphere of violence” (Mayer 1994: 90). The achievements of Women in Black might not be comparable to those of the women of the Niger Delta but, much like their republican feminist counterparts, they have made a significant contribution to the development of women’s and feminist politics. WIB oppose gender-based violence across the continuum of ‘bedroom to battlefield’ and have organised on this basis in over 150 locations worldwide (WIB UK). In the context of nationalism, the significance of the female body is even more pronounced, as it is often the battleground upon which national struggles fought and nations built. The Women in Black in Israel, much like the political prisoners in Armagh, disrupted the exclusive use of the female body as a passive tool of the nation.

Concluding thoughts

Feminism rooted in a meaningful, structural analysis of patriarchy and its relationship to other systems of oppression has taken a bit of a battering over the last two decades. If we look at the politics fostered through Third Wave feminism the picture might look pretty grim to those hopeful of an explicitly feminist revival. Third Wave feminism attempts to shift us away from naming and problematising the hierarchical structures of power which reproduce structures of inequality. The question of women's emancipation has also been dislodged from the agenda in dominant feminist rhetoric, and has been for some time.

This article seeks to spark a conversation about how we move beyond the Third Wave/postfeminist politics that seems blind to structural oppression, and instead engage in meaningful discussion about subversive resistance that actually seeks to put emancipation from structural oppression back on the agenda. Positive conversations about feminism are increasing in the popular domain, a shift that is in part due to the SlutWalk movement. To start we might focus on body protest and ask questions regarding tactics, goals and sustainability as a means of gaining 'useful knowledge'. Useful knowledge might include, but is not limited to, the 'situatedness' of different activist bodies and how that might influence tactics as well as the public reactions to these tactics, as the above examples demonstrate. (Sutton 2010). For example, while we may take issue with the goals and parameters of each of the three examples of body protest outlined above – as either not being far-reaching or sufficiently critical – they each made had a significant impact locally and globally- particularly in the case of the Niger Delta and Women in Black protests. Leaving that aside, these struggles do demonstrate the utility of comparing the ways in which women seek to

subversively use their bodies. Exploitation of cultural taboos in relation to gender are powerful and the presence of rage and/or disgust in response to gendered body protests also serve as a good indicator that gender norms are, in fact, being challenged.

A focus on the relationship between the body and protest also has merit for movements beyond those that mobilise primarily on the basis of feminism. The centrality of the body to issues of production and reproduction (Harvey 2000) means that any attempts to seek revolutionary change should take account of this and understand where best to locate the body in any strategies of resistance.

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