

Journal of Feminist Scholarship

Volume 4
Issue 4 Spring 2013


Article 3

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Carr, Joetta L.. 2018. "The SlutWalk Movement: A Study in Transnational Feminist Activism." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 4 (Spring): 24-38. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol4/iss4/3>

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The SlutWalk Movement: A Study in Transnational Feminist Activism

Joetta L. Carr, Western Michigan University

Abstract: In the past two years the term “slut” ricocheted through the North American media and showed up on signs and banners on every continent as young feminists and their allies launched a series of demonstrations under the name of SlutWalks. In January 2011, a Toronto police officer told students at York University that if women wanted to avoid rape they should not dress like sluts. This incident sparked international outrage, with protests spreading quickly throughout the world, and revealed the misogyny and victim-blaming vitriol that characterize contemporary patriarchal culture. In the wake of the global SlutWalk movement, important questions have emerged about “reclaiming” the word “slut,” whether this form of protest effectively challenges rape cultures, whether it promotes sexual agency while deploring slut-shaming, and whether it reflects the aspirations of women of color who face different historical and cultural realities without the cushion of white privilege. Using the theoretical framework of transnational feminism and drawing on social-movement research, the goals of this paper are to examine the global SlutWalk movement and to interrogate its significance as a resistance strategy that challenges patriarchal attempts to control women’s sexualities through sexual violence and slut-shaming.

Keywords: SlutWalk movement, slut-shaming, sexual agency, transnational feminism, feminist activism, patriarchy

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In the past two years the term “slut” ricocheted through the North American media and showed up on signs and banners on every continent. A new form of protest emerged called SlutWalks, initiated by young feminists who were furious with victim-blaming, slut-shaming patriarchal cultures. These protests were unlike any in the past, their mood upbeat and playful but at the same time deadly serious. People in outrageous attire with drums beating, bodies painted and dressed in vamp couture, comingled with mothers in jeans strolling babies, men, transgender people, nuns, and others. They marched, they carried homemade signs, they had speak-outs, they danced, they cried, and they shared stories of sexual assault and humiliation. The Toronto incident on January 24, 2011 that “went viral” was the comment of Constable Michael Sanguinetti, a Toronto police officer who spoke to a small group of students about personal safety at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, noting, “I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this, however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” (Rush 2011). Sanguinetti’s remark struck a raw nerve, and several young women responded by organizing the first SlutWalk in Toronto on April 3, 2011. They expected a hundred or so participants, but the event attracted several thousand people. Protests organized around the theme “Because We’ve Had Enough” opposed slut-shaming, sex-shaming and victim-blaming in society. Several thousand people in Toronto protested against rape cultures that perpetuate the myth that what women wear is a key component in getting raped. The invitation to join the SlutWalk in Toronto read, “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” (SlutWalk

Toronto 2013; original emphases). Sanguinetti apologized for his remarks, saying, “I am embarrassed by the comment I made and it shall not be repeated” (Rush 2011). Organizers Heather Jarvis and Sonya JF Barnett were chosen as *Utne Reader* visionaries in 2011 (Aldrich 2011).

Although the SlutWalk protests emerged spontaneously from a groundswell of rage among young university women who were insulted by one police officer’s concept of a rape-avoidance strategy, they spread quickly throughout the world (Roy 2011). SlutWalks represent the spontaneous outrage of women, the LGBT communities, and pro-feminist men around the world against patriarchal rhetoric. Feminists of all ages and genders have participated in the SlutWalks. Selma James, a veteran feminist who attended the SlutWalk in London, wrote, “This was the new women’s movement, born of student protests and Arab revolutions, tearing up the past before our very eyes. It has a lot of work to do and it is not afraid.” James reported she had received much kudos for her placard that read “Pensioner Slut” (James 2011).

SlutWalks are new shoots of creative and edgy protests against the misogynist culture that promotes dress codes or sexuality codes to differentiate “good girls” from “bad girls.” This new form of activism emerged at the same time as Occupy Wall Street and the upheavals and protests subsumed under the label of Arab Spring. Judith Butler discussed these new movements and her experience of participating in a SlutWalk in Ankara in the following terms:

When I was in Ankara, Turkey, and I was on a march with a group of transgender women, queer activists, human rights workers and feminists, people who were both Muslim and secular, everyone objected to the fact that transgender women were being killed regularly on the streets of Ankara. So, what’s the alliance that emerged? Feminists who had also been dealing with sexual violence on the street. Gay, lesbian, queer people, who are not transgender, but are allied because they experience a similar sense of vulnerability or injurability on the streets. (Bella 2011)

The SlutWalk movement pierced the hold that rape cultures have on societies, turning the objectification of women on its head with its bold, audacious parody of the slut, and has become a unique and innovative form of protest against gender-based violence. While originating in North America, SlutWalks spread like wildfire to other continents and countries, including those in the global South. In 2011 protests took place in over 200 cities (including 70 in the United States) and at least 40 countries (Westendorf 2013; Global Voices 2012). Locations have included Spain, Hungary, Finland, Norway, South Korea, South Africa, Australia, Ukraine, Mexico, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Germany, Morocco, England, and Canada, among others. Common protest signs at these marches read, “My Dress Is Not a Yes,” “Stop Sexual Profiling,” “Walk of No Shame,” “It’s a Man’s World—Let’s Fuck It Up,” and “Slut Pride.” In Morocco, SlutWalk founder Majdoline Lyazidi, who is twenty years old, challenged women who are sexually harassed on the streets to “stand up for yourselves and demand respect. Shame has to switch sides!” (SlutWalk Morocco 2013). Instead of being defensive about expressing their sexuality, SlutWalkers are going on the offense, using street theater to make their points and garnering more media attention than mainstream marches for women’s rights. Rose Munro, a Scottish feminist activist who spoke at the 2011 Edinburgh SlutWalk, blogged about the significance of this event:

Since SlutWalk my friends have been talking collectively about rape and sexual violence as if victims have a right to be heard. Sentences have been uttered like: I was raped, my mother was raped. Friends who’d never heard this before started saying, I cannot any longer be a bystander to rape jokes, now I’ve heard this about you/your friend/your sister/your mother. It’s been a golden opportunity. We’ve gone some way to making victims less ashamed, which means the problem is becoming more visible to ordinary people. This is important progress. (Munro 2011)

From India to Australia, Denmark to Mexico, each protest has been locally organized with independent initiative and without any overarching organization, blueprint, bylaws, etc. Instead, these protests have taken many forms, some less focused on the “slut” image, especially in more conservative countries like India. Women in bikini tops have marched next to women in burkas, students marched alongside grandmothers and nuns, and significant numbers of men have participated in the events. Gay, lesbian, and transgender people have been well represented in the marches. One young Muslim woman in a burka held a sign stating that her burka had not protected her from rape. The message across the globe was loud and clear: Don’t focus on how we dress—focus on the rape culture.

Brazilians held SlutWalks in more than 40 cities in the summer of 2011 and in a dozen or so cities in 2012 (Garcia 2012). Brazilian blogger Lia Padilha wrote:

We Brazilians are faced everyday [sic] with the control of female sexuality. The religious-conservative conception is repressive and tells women that they should hide their bodies from society and save themselves for their husbands. On other hand, the voracity of capitalism has interest in the naked female body, and in this case, exposes, trivializes and violates female sexuality and attacks. (Freitas 2011)

Trishla Singh, media coordinator for the SlutWalk Delhi explained that for centuries words like “slut” have been used in India to hinder the development of women, and today the pejorative term is used against women who go out in the evening or take jobs at call centers. Before SlutWalk Delhi occurred on July 31, 2011, there was sharp debate in the media. Umang Sabarwal, a nineteen-year-old student who set up a Facebook page to support the event, said, “The way the men stare, you feel like meat” (Roy 2011). According to a global poll by the Thomas Reuters Foundation, India is the fourth most dangerous place in the world to be a woman, and rape is the fastest growing crime in India (Banerji 2011). In 2009, a group of young women were sexually attacked in a pub in Mangalore by men who called them sluts and justified their assault because the women were dressed “indecently,” consumed alcohol, and mixed with non-Hindu youth, according to Rita Banerji, a gender activist in India (Banerji 2011). The attack was videotaped and excerpts were shown on TV repeatedly.

More recently, in December 2012, the brutal gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman student in New Delhi by a group of men on a bus sent shock waves throughout the world and triggered tremendous upheaval in India. Protests shook many cities as women and men of all ages came into the streets day after day to express outrage over this vicious attack (Timons, Mandhana and Gottipati 2012). In India, many girls and women are regarded as a family’s property—either the family they are born into or the one they marry into (Banerji 2011). Parents, husbands, and in-laws decide everything, including whether the female relative goes to school, her clothing, whom she can marry, when she has sex, how many children she has, and whether she is allowed to live. To those critics of India’s SlutWalks who point to more serious women’s issues like female infanticide, female feticide, dowry violence, and honor killings, Banerji responds that

the issue at the crux of the SlutWalk is one and the same as for all the other above-mentioned afflictions. It is about the recognition of women as individuals with certain fundamental rights, including that of safety and personal choices, which no one, not even the family, can violate.... The basic message of the SlutWalks to society is this: “A woman’s body is her personal domain! And nobody else’s!” (Banerji 2011; original emphases)

SlutWalks are decentralized, manifesting many formats and cross-national variations. Digital social media and mass media have created cross-national flows of information regarding SlutWalk activities. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter appear to be the main organizing tools for the hundreds of local protests that were organized on every continent. Most events have a Facebook page with mobilization

plans, photos, and video clips, as well as statements of purpose, slogans, and mission statements. Jackie Smith writes in her study of the anti-WTO protests of 1999 that “both national and transnational social movement groups make extensive use of Internet sites and electronic list serves to expand communication with dispersed constituencies and audiences ... [that] allow organizers to almost instantaneously transmit alternative media accounts and images of protests” (Smith 2002, 220). Since the “Battle of Seattle” Smith documents, the role and importance of social media has greatly expanded, and the SlutWalk movement illustrates this expansion very clearly.

SlutWalks as a Case Study in Transnational Feminist Solidarity

For the purposes of this study, research methods used to obtain information and commentary about SlutWalks included online searches of public media and social media. I conducted targeted Internet searches of international press sources such as the Associated Press, BBC, Reuters, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, social media sources such as Facebook, and feminist blogs including *Ms.*, the Crunk Feminist Collective, Feministing, and Jezebel. Rich information and commentaries were found on Facebook pages for each city’s event. In addition, I studied dozens of YouTube videos of SlutWalk protests from around the world. Finally, I attended SlutWalk Chicago in 2012 and videotaped the event.



SlutWalk Chicago, September 29, 2012. Photo by Joetta L. Carr.

My case-study approach is similar to that employed by Valerie Jenness in studying the prostitutes’ rights movement (Jenness 1993). Jenness argues that the case-study methodology is the “preferred strategy when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being posed ... case studies allow for exploration, description, and theory building” (Jenness 1993, 11; original emphasis). In documenting and describing the prostitutes’ rights movement named COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), Jenness found that social movements representing stigmatized groups face added contradictions regarding legitimacy and morality, and she explored “how social movements associated with deviance and deviants operate differently” (Jenness 1993, 7). SlutWalkers are likewise building a movement that welcomes sex workers, transgender people, and other “deviants.” Drawing from Jenness’s case study of the prostitutes’ rights movement and its blurring of the distinction between “good girls” and “whores,” I argue that the SlutWalk movement has challenged the historical definition of “slut” and reframed its associated imagery. Additionally, SlutWalkers redefine

the problem of sexual violence as caused by men who rape, not by women who “ask” to be raped. Also at issue is legitimacy, as SlutWalks contest law-enforcement attitudes toward rape victims and the ideology underlying these attitudes while legitimizing the expression of female and LGBTQ sexualities. In close parallel with Jenness’s theory of reconstructed social problems derived from her study of COYOTE, the SlutWalk rhetoric reconstructs the problem of rape, similarly blurring the distinction between “good girls” and “bad girls” while upholding sexual agency.

The SlutWalk movement presents an opportunity for scholars to apply feminist theories to a new form of transnational feminist activism located at the margins of mainstream society. Drawing upon transnational feminist and social-movement theories, I argue that SlutWalks have the potential to open up “new spaces for political and intellectual engagements across North/South and East/West divides,” as Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar call for in their edited collection *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010, 14). According to Swarr and Nagar,

transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time. (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 5)

Swarr and Nagar further suggest that “grounding feminisms in activist communities *everywhere* is a means to interrogate all forms of implicit and explicit relations of power (e.g., racist/classist/casteist), and to contest those power relations through ongoing processes of self-critique and collective reflection” (2010, 5; original emphasis). Feminist analysis of the SlutWalk movement can fulfill the potential to create the new spaces and directions in transnational feminist discourse and practice called for by Swarr and Nagar.

Chandra Mohanty’s groundbreaking theoretical work on transnational feminism, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1986), argues for the “need to highlight Third World women’s activism and agency, as well as to recast the category of Third World women to imagine new forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations” (quoted in Swarr and Nagar 2010, 5). This paper both highlights Third World women’s activism and agency and contributes to creating a springboard for transnational collaborations among scholars and activists. Critical transnational feminist models also challenge the dichotomy between feminist academics and activists (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 2), and feminist praxis provides a framework to synthesize the feminist political activism embodied in SlutWalks with feminist scholarship.

Historical Context for the SlutWalk Movement

The new form of transnational feminist protest represented by SlutWalks emerged within the historical context of the women’s liberation movement. The “second wave” of the feminist movement began as an activist movement in the sixties and was subsequently taken up by the academy. In 1970, at the height of the women’s liberation movement, Susan Brownmiller wrote that “the women’s revolution is the final revolution of them all” (Brownmiller 1970). Women in industrialized countries in particular made great gains in the sixties and seventies in terms of legal rights, such as making marital rape illegal, the creation of rape-crisis centers, workplace rights (e.g., naming sexual harassment), and reproductive rights. The SlutWalk

movement can be situated historically within the anti-rape movements of the sixties and seventies, which spawned rape-crisis centers and Take Back the Night marches and rallies. In Europe, the first international Take Back the Night event occurred in 1976 at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels (Take Back the Night 2013). Over 2000 women from 40 countries participated. Under the name Reclaim the Night, marches also occurred in Italy, Germany, England, India, and Australia. At the same time, Take Back the Night marches emerged in the US and Canada. They have continued to be organized on campuses and in cities throughout the world, focusing on eliminating all forms of sexual violence.

The women's liberation movement in the sixties emerged during a historical period of great political upheaval on every continent. From African liberation struggles to the worldwide student strikes, sit-ins and uprisings against unjust wars, colonialism, and racism, from the Native American occupation of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee to the Stonewall Tavern protest in New York City that launched the gay liberation movement in the US, this cauldron of political activism created favorable conditions for feminists. However, soon after the liberation struggles of the sixties and seventies, the New Right movement in the US was launched during the Reagan era to clamp down on gains made by women and to roll back reproductive rights, affirmative action programs, no-fault divorce, and LGBT rights, to name a few. Jessica Valenti, in a *Washington Post* piece on SlutWalks and the future of feminism, commented, "In a feminist movement that is often fighting simply to hold ground, SlutWalks stand out as a reminder of feminism's more grass-roots past and point to what the future could look like" (Valenti 2011). SlutWalks can also be situated within the recent wave of worldwide grassroots protest movements led by young people that appear to be organized through and fueled by social media (for example, the uprisings in Egypt, Turkey, or Brazil). While SlutWalks draw on and in some ways resemble earlier forms of feminist activism, at the same time they represent radical new shoots of feminist activism unfettered by mainstream organizations and partisan politics.

SlutWalks Contest the Patriarchy

The continuing subjugation of women to men in many parts of the world reflects social relations that are based on traditional property relations under capitalist imperialism. Patriarchy, the prevailing ideology of male domination that provides the framework for understanding sexual violence, is also an essential part of capitalism, as Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty argue. Although they criticize "a notion of universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way to subordinate all women" (1997, xix), they also make the critical point that "global realignments and fluidity of capital have simply led to further consolidation and exacerbation of capitalist relations of domination and exploitation ... as processes of recolonization" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii). Marx and Engels argued that two radical ruptures were necessary for revolution—of traditional property relations and of all traditional ideas flowing from these relations (Marx and Engels 1848). Of course, social practices rooted in patriarchal relations take different forms in different parts of the world, from bride burning in India to slut shaming in North America. While the basis of the traditional patriarchal family has eroded as millions of women entered the workforce in the last few decades, the capitalist system is still based on traditional social relations concentrated in the patriarchal family (Avakian 1999, 15). Although patriarchy cannot be eliminated under the existing capitalist imperialist superstructure, the seeds of its unraveling exist in revolutionary socialist movements.

The new form of sisterhood represented by the SlutWalk movement has defied patriarchal social control over female sexuality and its insistence on defining appropriate sexual behavior. Protesters demand the right to define their sexuality on their own terms while protesting rape cultures so predominant in most of the world, which are characterized by misogyny, victim-blaming, sexual objectification of girls and women

in pornography and the media, popularizing rape myths, and attitudes of rape acceptance in society.¹ In addition, the SlutWalk protests foreground the most outrageous social practices rooted in the patriarchal system, including incest, marital rape, bride burning, and the commodification of women and girls.

Slut-Shaming as a Rhetorical Weapon

The word “slut” conjures up a woman who has sex with random, indiscriminate partners and therein gets a bad reputation. Women and girls who are called sluts are shamed, shunned, and judged to be less worthy than other women (Tolman 2005, 7). They are fair game for sexual attacks, harassment, insults, and humiliation fueled by our cultural stereotypes about women. “Slut-shaming” is a powerful tool to attack and discredit girls and women whose behavior or speech is nonconforming and rebellious, or who dare to hold men accountable for their actions. This epithet, like the words “whore” and “bitch,” plays a vital role in invalidating, dismissing, silencing, and degrading women who fight for their humanity and for control over their sexuality and body.² Long used as a weapon to humiliate and ostracize girls and women who break the sexual mores of societies or rebel against stifling convention, the term is now being appropriated by angry women who refuse to be dehumanized by the patriarchy.

Alice Walker was asked during an interview on June 15, 2011 what she thought of the SlutWalk phenomenon:

I've always understood the word “slut” to mean a woman who freely enjoys her own sexuality in any way she wants to; undisturbed by other people’s wishes for her behavior. Sexual desire originates in her and is directed by her. In that sense it is a word well worth retaining. As a poet, I find it has a rich, raunchy, elemental, down to earth sound that connects us to something primal, moist, and free. The spontaneous movement that has grown around reclaiming this word speaks to women’s resistance to having names turned into weapons used against them. I would guess the police officer who used the word “slut” had no inkling of its real meaning or its importance to women as an area of their freedom about to be, through the threat of rape, closed to them. (Archer 2011)

As with Walker’s response reproduced above, many other commentaries on the SlutWalk movement have focused on its appropriation of the culturally pejorative term “slut.” For example, the FAQ section of the New York City SlutWalk website addressed the question of the event’s name in the following terms:

Some SlutWalk supporters have co-opted the term as a means of reclaiming the insult and defusing it of its sting by wearing it as a badge of pride to indicate sexual self-awareness and humanity. Others have rallied around the word in order to highlight its inherent absurdity and illegitimacy; while still others seek to remove the word from our popular lexicon, believing it to be an inherently violent term. All these views are welcome at our march and in our organizing; a multiplicity of voices is the greatest strength against prejudiced monolithic ideologies. (SlutWalk NYC 2013)

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the origin of the word “slut” has been traced back to the Middle Ages in England, where it was used to depict a slovenly person. Chaucer used the word “sluttish” to describe a slovenly man in 1386. Another early usage was “kitchen maid or drudge,” and this reference to a dirty female continued through at least the eighteenth century. Similar words referring to a “dirty woman” are found in Dutch, German, and Swedish dialects. The sexual connotation developed later. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary’s first definition of slut is “*chiefly British*: a slovenly woman”; the second definition is “a promiscuous woman; *especially* prostitute”; and the third is “a saucy girl: minx.” The Oxford English Dictionary’s entry classifies the term as “derogatory” and switches the order of definitions

so that a “woman who has many casual sexual partners” appears first and “a woman with low standards of cleanliness” is second. The unabridged Oxford English Dictionary defines slut as “a woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade.” Interestingly, the popular *Bridget Jones* series written by contemporary British novelist Helen Fielding at the same time emphasized the original meaning of the word and combined its distinct uses to connote dirty and slovenly habits in Bridget, a bold and saucy young woman (Fielding 1996). To further complicate the sociolinguistic nuances of “slut,” it is used as a non-judgmental slang term in gay, bisexual, and polyamorous communities, referring to individuals who openly choose to have multiple sexual partners. According to the book *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*, “a slut is a person of any gender who has the courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you” (Easton and Liszt 2009, 4). Here the term is reclaimed to declare sexual agency and personal choice to lead a non-monogamous lifestyle.

During the SlutWalk in Boston on May 7, 2011, speaker Jaclyn Friedman said that although the original definition of “slut” was an untidy woman, now the term is used to label women who “stepped outside the line that good girls are supposed to stay inside ... it is used to keep us in line, separate us, police each other,” while “all we want is to enjoy the incredible pleasure that our bodies are capable of” (Friedman 2011). Germaine Greer, one of the leaders of the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s, brilliantly tied together the two definitions:

Twenty-first century women are even more relentlessly hounded and harassed by the threat of dirt. No house is ever clean enough, no matter how many hours its resident woman spends spraying and wiping, Hoovering, dusting, disinfecting and deodorising. Women’s bodies can never be washed often enough to be entirely free of dirt; they must be depilated and deodorised as well. When it comes to sex, women are as dirty as the next man, but they don’t have the same right to act out their fantasies. If they’re to be liberated, women have to demand the right to be dirty. By declaring themselves sluts, they lay down the Cillit Bang and take up the instruments of pleasure. (Greer 2011)

SlutWalkers are speaking in a voice that deplores sexual violence while embracing sex positivity. They have taken the sting out of a word that has been used to control their sexuality. They are refuting the virgin/whore dualism with righteous anger, humor, and creativity. The young women who sparked this movement have performed a semantic sleight of hand in appropriating the word “slut,” making it impossible to tell the “good girls” from the “bad girls.” They have adopted the slogan commonly seen on SlutWalk signs and banners: *We Are All Sluts!*

SlutWalks and Sexual Agency

One strong message of the SlutWalk movement is that women have the right to be sexual beings without being judged, raped, discounted, or harassed, as well as the right to express their embodied sexuality by appearing on the streets in “slutty” attire and revealing clothing. In doing this, they are exposing mass media’s objectification of women’s bodies to sell movies, liquor, magazines, music, cosmetics, underwear, and thousands of other products and services. By reclaiming their sexuality, women are not only rejecting the rape myth that what you wear can lead to sexual assault; they are also challenging the dominant discourse that sex is dangerous for unmarried women and only “bad girls” are overtly sexual (Tolman 2005, 80). There is a very thin line between being viewed as a slut and being viewed as a respectable young woman, and this line can shift and become a moving target as young women attempt to “walk the line” and

maintain their reputations. SlutWalks represent the rebellion of thousands of young women and others against having to walk that tightrope.

Cultural scripts for girls and women regarding sex carry a double standard that is confusing and paradoxical. While boys are encouraged to express their heterosexuality as a sign of masculinity, girls are supposed to remain virgins or at least wait for a serious monogamous relationship and become the object of their lover's affections (Tolman 2005, 5). Sexual subjectivity means being the *subject* in the development of one's sexuality instead of being a sex *object*. In order to become the subject instead of the object, one must develop sexual agency. As Deborah Tolman (2005) discovered in her interviews with teenage girls, the girls who are able to develop agency with regard to their sexual lives are better equipped to make informed and conscious decisions about when, with whom, and what they choose to do or not do sexually. She defines sexual subjectivity as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman 2005, 6). In critically deconstructing and then embracing the traditionally derogatory label "slut," women are expressing their sexual agency and subjectivity.

Never before in history have girls grown up in a culture that encourages five-year-olds to strut onstage in sexy clothes and heavy makeup to compete as beauty queens on TV, where pole dancing is taught at the local gym, and where middle-school girls are pressured to give oral sex to their male schoolmates. Girls often hurl the term "slut" at other girls whose sexual behavior is out of line with the cultural double standard, or as payback for perceived wrongdoing. Today's girls and young women have grown up in the age of cybersex, cyberbullying, sexting, sexual violence in video games, increasingly violent pornography, and media saturated with sex. The "pornification" of mainstream culture, the attacks on women's reproductive freedom, the epidemic of sexual violence, and the widespread use of the label "slut" create a toxic brew.³ It is in the context of this hypersexual culture that SlutWalks have emerged as a new form of protest.

Feminist Debates about SlutWalks

Of course, the SlutWalks have their thoughtful critics and have stirred up controversy in feminist communities. Feminist scholar Gail Dines, author of the book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (2010), and Wendy Murphy insist that young women cannot reclaim the word "slut" in a pornified society:

The term slut is so deeply rooted in the patriarchal "madonna/whore" view of women's sexuality that it is beyond redemption. The word is so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment that trying to change its meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources. (Dines and Murphy 2011)

Along the same lines, Samantha Berg, the feminist blogger and activist who founded the Stop Porn Culture movement, expressed the following view in an essay entitled "On the Feminists-in-Underwear Walks":

In 2008 frat pledges at Yale held signs declaring "We Love Yale Sluts" in front of the campus Women's Center and in 2010 another frat's pledges chanted, "No means yes. Yes means anal!" Young pornfed men have been giving women proof long before SlutWalks that positively sexy feminist tactics aren't working. "Yes Means Yes" is a useless strategy for stopping men who are turned on by the thought of violating a woman's "no." Such men view women enthusiastically wanting sex as a challenge to find something more degrading than they believe merely poking a woman vaginally already is (in this case anal sex is the next level) and will never be happy with hordes of lovely ladies begging for it. Like the global appeal of sex with virgins, the whole point is to break something irreplaceable. (Berg 2011)

Another major criticism of SlutWalks appeared in an “Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2011). This letter was signed by dozens of activists, scholars, anti-violence advocates, and organizations serving Black women, and it begins with a commendation to the SlutWalk movement:

First, we commend the organizers on their bold and vast mobilization to end the shaming and blaming of sexual assault victims for violence committed against them by other members of society. We are proud to be living in this moment in time where girls and boys have the opportunity to witness the acts of extraordinary women resisting oppression and challenging the myths that feed rape culture everywhere.

However, the letter then goes on to argue that the legacy of slavery and the dehumanization of Black women through rape make it impossible for the signers to reclaim the word “slut,” or the related term “ho,” more commonly used against Black women:

As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves “slut” without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations. Although we understand the valid impetus behind the use of the word “slut” as language to frame and brand an anti-rape movement, we are gravely concerned. For us the trivialization of rape and the absence of justice are viciously intertwined with narratives of sexual surveillance, legal access and availability to our personhood.

While applauding the organizers of SlutWalks for their spirit and acknowledging their well-meaning intent, the authors of the letter also challenge the movement to change its name and bring Black women’s voices to the forefront. They cite the historical patterns in the feminist movement of excluding or marginalizing women of color and declare that justice for women is “intertwined with race, gender, sexuality, poverty, immigration and community” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2011).

Leaders of SlutWalk Toronto, the movement’s original group, have embraced these criticisms and shared the letter with other SlutWalk collectives, challenging them to engage in serious introspection and dialogue and to address privilege, intersectionality, and inclusivity (SlutWalk Toronto 2011).

The leaders of SlutWalk NYC have also engaged in serious reflection and self-criticism after a young white woman held a sign at their event that read, “Woman is the Nigger of the World,” quoting the title of a song written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1972 (Simmons 2011). Although Ono, a woman of color, coined this slogan, the song was banned on airwaves in many countries in the early 1970s as too inflammatory (Hilburn 1972). The image of this placard, which referred to women’s oppression by citing the most derogatory racial epithet used against African American people, went viral and caused a strong backlash in the Black feminist community and beyond. Black feminist blogs and forums criticized the white women’s position as privileged and misguided. SlutWalk NYC issued a formal apology to the Black community, and the organization held forums and discussions on strategies for greater inclusion of more Black women’s voices. They also described the rich diversity of SlutWalkers, including women of color, transgender and queer people, sex workers, and men across much of the globe. After months of discussions and analysis, the NYC SlutWalk leaders announced on Facebook that they were rebuilding their coalition and that they were currently focusing on reproductive freedom struggles. On March 4, 2012, their last post to date on Facebook was signed by “former SWNYC organizers”:

As we have been indicating over our various social media sites for several months, SWNYC has splintered. Many of us realized too late that working under the “SlutWalk” moniker was too oppressive to many communities that

we should be allying with. How could we claim to be creating an intersectional and safe feminist community with such a privileged name? Many former organizers have moved on and have been working on forming new feminist organizations since the fallout.... We cannot forget our past mistakes. If we do, we'll never be better feminists; that's what we want more than anything.

Salamishah Tillet, a Black professor of English and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania who spoke at DC SlutWalk, expressed a more nuanced view of the movement. Although she voiced some of the same criticisms as the Black Women's Blueprint group, she also stated the following in an article in *The Nation*:

I would raise the question, "Are black women confident enough in their respectability and femininity that they can wear shorts and a halter and say I am still someone worthy of your respect? Someone who is worthy of being respected?" (...) As a longtime activist against sexual violence who has seen the way survivors are consistently silenced, the idea of a march that brought attention to sexual violence and celebrated its survivors was too compelling to ignore. I had to be there.... For me, walking alongside women who confidently wore the clothing in which they had been sexually assaulted was exciting and empowering. As a black woman and a rape survivor, it was one of only times in my life that I felt like I could wear whatever I wanted, wherever I wanted, without the threat of rape. (Tillet 2011)

Janell Hobson, a Black women's studies professor and scholar at SUNY Albany, also wrote a response to the Open Letter from Black Women on the *Ms. Magazine* blog, expressing concern about the "politics of respectability" that became a theme among SlutWalk critics:

But instead of seeking respectability, what would it mean to confront the danger of a word that was historically constructed to support economies of slavery and legal segregation? (...) The truth is, white women have historically benefited from the racialized virgin/whore dichotomy embodied in words like "Jezebel" and "slut." That can encourage black women to distrust white women, especially those whose privilege has blinded them to considering what a SlutWalk would look like in solidarity with black women, with low-income women, with immigrant women, with queer women, with sex workers.... I'd suggest that black women, rather than oppose SlutWalk, should think of the ways it can be appropriated to serve our needs. I would like to see a SlutWalk with black women front and center. (Hobson 2011)

In the wake of the global SlutWalk movement, important questions have emerged for feminists and gender scholars. Does "dressing like a hooker" minimize the forced prostitution of millions of women and children who are trafficked in the sex industry? Can we uphold sexual agency while deploring sexual objectification of women and girls? Some criticize SlutWalks as titillating spectacles that reinforce the objectification of women. At the same time, however, this movement has captured the imagination of many women, men, and transgender people around the globe.

The SlutWalk protests portend sharpening battle lines between women and the patriarchy throughout the world. The palpable global outrage of women and gender-nonconforming people at rape-culture rhetoric strengthens the struggle against gender oppression. Who controls women's bodies and women's sexualities is not a settled matter, but without such control we have nothing. Women in the US have lost ground in the area of reproductive freedom, and we are dangerously close to turning the clock back to the time when there were few options available to women who wanted to control their fertility and their sexuality, a situation that still exists for millions of women throughout the world. Reproductive freedom was a key demand of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, as women carved out space to express their sexuality, to be free agents of their sexual expression, and to control their reproduction. Whereas feminists in the

1960s revealed in the invention of the Pill and legalized abortions, heterosexual women today are faced with the possibility of losing the ability to have sex without the threat of unwanted pregnancy. The pressures on girls and young women to control their sexuality are different from those experienced by women of the sixties, and it is unproductive to examine today's gender and women's liberation struggles through the lens of conditions that existed forty years ago. After all, many people were aghast at the image of feminists throwing their bras into the trash during the 1968 Miss America Pageant and at the Gay Pride parades with their provocative messages and costumes. We can learn from and build on these tactics, since the "street theater" they relied on created lasting and politically potent imagery and symbolism.



SlutWalk Chicago, September 29, 2012. Photo by Joetta L. Carr.

A year after the first SlutWalk, on April 18, 2012, an event took place in Toronto where two organizers of the first Toronto SlutWalk delivered a speech entitled "SlutWalk 1 Year Later: Sluts of SlutWalk Talking about Slut Talk" (Motherhood Initiative 2012). On May 25, 2012, Toronto held its second SlutWalk, in which several hundred people marched, including many men. One man held a sign that read "Patriarchy sucks for everyone." Many US cities held SlutWalks in 2012, including St. Louis, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, Washington, Seattle, Tallahassee, Salt Lake City, Detroit, Richmond, and Minneapolis. SlutWalks also occurred in 2012 in London, Berlin, Korea, Jerusalem, Vancouver, Hamilton (Canada), Seoul, Kolkata, Melbourne, Perth, New Zealand, and especially Brazil, where there were SlutWalks in a dozen cities in late May. In Brasília, the capital, more than 3,000 people marched, and over 1,000 gathered in São Paulo and in Recife. Hundreds marched in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Vitória, Curitiba, and other locations (Garcia 2012). According to my survey of SlutWalk Facebook pages this spring, more than twenty SlutWalks were scheduled for 2013 throughout North America as well as internationally, from Singapore to Melbourne to London and beyond. The full extent and meaning of the contributions of the SlutWalk movement to the overall struggle against gender oppression and the patriarchy may only be understood in the decades to come.

Notes

I am an activist scholar who teaches in the Gender and Women's Studies department at Western Michigan University. I have been an activist all of my adult life, participating in a variety of social justice and environmental movements, including feminist activism. I am interested in the connections between academic and activist feminisms. My teaching and research are in the areas of sexuality, rape, and gender violence, and I have been a therapist of rape and incest survivors for many years. My activism in women's liberation movements began in feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s. I am active in Take Back The Night, abortion rights movements, and International Women's Day. When the SlutWalks emerged two years ago, my scholarly curiosity and my activist stirrings led me to develop this paper. I participated in the Chicago SlutWalk in the fall of 2012.

1. The concept of "rape culture" was first used in the mid-1970s by such feminist activists as the New York Radical Feminists in Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson's book *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (1974) and in Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975). In addition, a documentary film entitled *Rape Culture* by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich was produced in 1975 through a collaboration between the DC Rape Crisis Center and Prisoners Against Rape, Inc.

2. Following the first wave of SlutWalks in 2011, another high-profile slut-shaming incident was provoked by Rush Limbaugh in late February of 2012. Limbaugh, who hosts a popular conservative national talk-radio show, called Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student and reproductive rights advocate, a slut and a prostitute after she was not allowed to testify at a House of Representatives Oversight Committee hearing on birth control coverage policy proposed in President Obama's Affordable Care Act (Keyes 2011). In the course of this hearing, an all-male panel of religious leaders testified against religious institutions being forced to offer birth control coverage with no co-pay. In response, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi convened an unofficial hearing of the House Democratic Steering Policy Committee, which heard Fluke's testimony on February 23, 2012. In a three-day on-air barrage against Fluke, Limbaugh stated that she "must be paid to have sex" and asked, "What does that make her? It makes her a slut. Right. It makes her a prostitute" (and, he added, "We're the pimps"). He further said Fluke was "having so much sex, it's amazing she can still walk ... so frequently that she can't afford all the birth-control pills that she needs." In the end, he recommended that in return for paying for Fluke's birth control pills, "videos of all this sex [should] be posted online so we can see what we are getting for our money" (Keyes 2011).

3. The popular term "pornification" appears to come from Pamela Paul's book *Pornified* (2005) and refers to pornography being so "seamlessly integrated into popular culture" that it is ubiquitous in mainstream media, pop music, advertising, magazines, and cyberspace (Paul 2005, 4).

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