my body is my manifesto!¹
SlutWalk, FEMEN and femmenist protest

Theresa O’Keefe

abstract
This paper uses an intersectional analysis to look at contemporary forms of women’s popular protest in the hopes of raising questions about the explicit use of the gendered body in struggles for women’s emancipation. Specifically, it explores the protests of SlutWalk and FEMEN to suggest that such body protests exemplify a problematic interface between third-wave and postfeminism. This interface or junction is most noticeable and problematic in relation to uncontested auto-sexualisation or ‘femmenism’. I argue that any subversive potential these recent mobilisations might offer is limited through their reproduction of patriarchal, hegemonic norms. This piece is theoretical in the main, though it does include some preliminary qualitative research by way of drawing on websites, news reports, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and other online content produced by or about SlutWalk and FEMEN. The hope is to raise questions about the value of this increasingly pervasive use of sexualised, gender protest for feminist organising, not merely as an academic exercise but for its utility in practice.

keywords
SlutWalk; FEMEN; protest; body; intersectionality

¹ Title derived from a FEMEN slogan.
introduction

On 24 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. In this case, 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 was if they wanted 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, victims are themselves responsible when raped and sexually assaulted. Four Toronto women, enraged by the comments, sent out a call to women to flaunt their ‘inner slut’ and publicly denounce the police officer’s remark.2 The subsequent response overwhelmed organisers as upwards of 3,500 protesters marched onto police headquarters in Toronto on 3 April 2011, effectively giving birth to the SlutWalk movement3 (Pilkington, 2011). The outrage over this misogynist comment sparked a global reaction that developed at a rapid-fire pace. Since that first march numerous satellite marches have been held across the globe in a variety of countries as widespread as Canada, the UK, Indonesia, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, Peru, China and India. Hundreds of subsequent marches have been organised in different cities across the globe with some locations holding repeat events on an annual basis.

As this story of rape culture in the Toronto police unfolded, another patriarchal policing scandal relating to rape culture erupted in Ireland. On 31 March 2011, Irish police inadvertently recorded themselves ‘joking’ about raping and deporting two female campaigners protesting the Shell pipeline under construction in County Mayo, Ireland. The incident became headline news and the women, not the male police officers involved, became the centre of national media attention. One of the women was a postgraduate student under my academic supervision at the time, and as a result I was drawn into the investigation and subsequent smear campaign launched by the police watchdog An Garda Siochana Ombudsman Commission.4 Given my connection to what I saw as a related incident I was anxious to make a connection with the SlutWalk Toronto organisers. I saw both as a clear statement on the problems of policing as an institution more generally, and thought it might be useful to make connections and even organise a similar march in Dublin. After some discussion with fellow activists, email exchanges with SlutWalk organisers in Toronto and further research (via pages on and by SlutWalk — blogs, documentation of satellite events, press releases, media stories, Facebook exchanges) I decided, for a number of significant reasons, that SlutWalk in its current formation is not a feminist political project I wished to devote my energies to.5 As I began to tease out the reasons for this I could not help but make comparisons to FEMEN, the


3 It must be noted that ‘movement’ is used by SlutWalk founders, though such classification could be considered dubious at best (see ‘WHY’ at www.slutwalktoronto.com/, last accessed 15 December 2011). FEMEN also use the term as a self-descriptor, albeit erroneously.

Ukrainian female topless protesters who also address issues related to women's bodily autonomy. Both groups are equally controversial albeit for different reasons, and yet both are similarly flawed in their politics.

In this paper I use an intersectional analysis to sketch out some of the difficulties I have with SlutWalk and FEMEN as feminist political projects. I am primarily concerned with the ways in which gender norms are (re)appropriated by these groups, their reliance on universalisms that in turn foster the marginalisation of women from diverse backgrounds, and their anaemic analysis of structural oppression. The questions raised spring from my work as a feminist academic and practitioner and from conversations between myself and comrades about how best to organise as feminists in inclusive yet revolutionary ways. I situate my analysis in the broader context of gendered body protests—protests that make explicit the use of the female body to call attention to issues that pertain to women’s bodies, or simply protests where the gendered body is both subject and agent. I argue that this is a useful lens to examine such protests as it can clarify and build our knowledge on how gendered bodies might best be used as sites of resistance. The goal of the paper is to provoke a critical discussion that can inform feminist practice regarding the value of this increasingly pervasive use of sexualised, gender protest.6

spectacles of defiance or compliance?

Bodies are powerful sites of resistance (Butler, 1990; O'Keefe, 2006), and bodies in protest are important sources of knowledge for movement development. 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 strategies of resistance. Bodies are gendered, racialised, classed, dichotomised and marked as normal/abnormal or abled/disabled. The body is very much a contextualised product of the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism and other systems of oppression. Consequently, it is important to decipher how bodies are located in movements that resist such structures. Are there hierarchical corporealities in movements and how might these hinder movement development? Are movements reproducing these hierarchies based on body difference; that is, fat bodies, skinny bodies, bodies that use wheelchairs, 'attractive' bodies versus 'ugly' bodies, bodies that are racialised, visibly different or marked as Other? How do we build movements that are inclusive of differing bodies?7 How can groups organise so as not to exclude because of body difference? To name the location and significance of the body to protest is to also understand the ways in which power contestations are played out via the body. To specifically explicate the gendered body in protest is to look at more than just the intricacies of how gender is discursive, but also the

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

6 The ideas in this paper were presented at Dublin’s Festival for Choice on 15 November 2013 as part of a broader workshop that examines women’s bodies as performance in protest. The hope is that the workshop will help generate ideas for future protest actions, particularly in the active struggle for access to abortion rights.

7 See Martinez (2003) for a discussion of the risks activists of colour take when engaging in protest in comparison to activists with class and racial privilege.
physical, corporealities that the use of the body in protest brings to light. This is significant in so far as the body, as Alexandre (2006: 178) points out in her work on women’s body protest in Trinidad, is useful ‘as a mode of expression and as a tool for liberation and transformation’. The gendered body in protest can be used to manipulate, challenge and seize the power that seeks to confine and define it.

Not all body protests, however, are useful feminist strategies, as evidenced by SlutWalk and FEMEN. Both make explicit the female body in protest and employ the strategy of reclamation as a political weapon. SlutWalk and FEMEN should be praised for highlighting how the female body is a site of struggle and sparking conversations about what constitutes feminist protest. However, despite these achievements, both forms of protest are particularly weak for how they fall short in their attempts to (re)appropriate patriarchal signifiers. It can be argued that not only do they fail to do this adequately, they actually reinforce the original use of these signifiers and their associated norms.

To be sure, (re)appropriation is not a new feminist strategy, and discussions abound as to the ways in which gendered performance can simultaneously make gender explicit while also performing it ironically (Butler, 1990; Bail, 1996; Rupp, Taylor and Shapiro, 2010). Work that attempts to locate women’s bodies as protest performance in the anti-globalisation and anti-war movements offers some interesting reflections on strategies for subversive reclamation. Juris (2008: 77) details how the combined militant and playful protests of the anti-globalisation movement’s ‘Pink and Silver Bloc’ involved ‘the strategic appropriation of carnivalesque performance and aesthetics, including playful mockery, ritualized inversion, gender bending’. One section of the bloc, the Pink Fairies, playfully adopted the gender trope of women as cleaners, and used this as a performance in which to ‘play’ with police, dusting their shoes. This served to destabilise the power relationships, even if momentarily, between protesters and the militarised police, shifting the dynamics of the confrontation as the police failed to react (ibid.: 76).

Similarly, Kutz-Flamenbaum (2007) details how Missile Dick Chicks ironically perform the ‘middle-class housewife in support of war’ while wearing missile-dildos projecting from their groins. Their subversiveness rests in their ability to exaggerate the parody so that it is unmistakeably read as irony. As Linda Hutcheon argues, the subversive potential is plausible when we ‘speak the language of the dominant (which allows you to be heard), but then to subvert it through ironic strategies of exaggeration, understatement, or literalization’ (O’Grady, 1998). The failure to communicate parody can erase the subversive element of such performances. This double-bind of (re)appropriation and deconstruction comes from spectators not recognising the parody, if parody is not articulated well. Jameson’s concept of pastiche is useful to illustrate this dilemma. He argues that

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8 I use (re)appropriate as opposed to re-appropriate to acknowledge that the word ‘slut’ was never a term used by women, and therefore its contemporary use by women does not constitute a re-appropriation, but an appropriation.
parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (ibid.: 16).

Pastiche is not subversive as, unlike parody, it celebrates rather than mocks.

Turning to SlutWalk and FEMEN, we see that pastiche rather than parody is a fitting classification of their attempts at (re)appropriation. Their protests embrace heteronormative, hegemonically masculine ideals of women and sexuality through performance in an attempt to challenge societal norms. The endeavours of SlutWalk to reclaim ‘slut’ and FEMEN to ‘take back’ women’s breasts succumb to the double-bind, however, as their failure to inject mockery and irony into their approach means it is commonly read as repetitive of such norms rather than subversive. At first glance such protest might seem inherently anti-feminist, but in an era shaped by third-wave and postfeminism such protests are themselves the embodiment of the interface between these two traditions. While there are clear differences between postfeminism and third-wave forms, they share many characteristics, particularly in relation to the body politic. This ‘femmenism’, the shared space occupied by third-wave and postfeminism, indicates the uncritical embodiment of hegemonic, heteronormative corporealties that are unquestionably rooted within patriarchal and capitalist values. It is an emphasis on bodies as free, fun and playful, celebratory. Postfeminism, which even its proponents suggest is a product of neo-liberalism (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 8), does not critique capitalism. On the contrary, it carves out a distinct space to encourage consumption. In addition to designer shoes and fashion, postfeminist consumption also includes ‘stripper heels’, pole dancing lessons and poles for private use, and 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 them and, in turn, feels empowered by them (Henry, 2004). Her femininity 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 pornification of dominant culture whereby gender and its everyday performance has come to reflect the aesthetics found in pornography (Levy, 2005; McNair, 2009).

Postfeminism’s 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 postmodernism and its concerns as more diverse (Gillis et al., 2007). Third-wave feminism, much like postfeminism, tends to position itself against second-wave feminism by placing emphasis on individuality and freedom of choice, with ‘choice’ also being the language of neo-liberalism (Heywood and Drake, 1997; Henry, 2004: 71). Although representations are more politicised than postfeminism, third wave’s focus remains more on ‘the individual and the emotional than on marches, legislation, and public policy’ (Rosenberg...
and Garofalo, 1998: 810). Choice is very much linked to consumption and auto-sexualisation of the body (Henry, 2004). This has irrevocably blurred the lines between third-wave and postfeminism, to such an extent that it is often difficult to distinguish the two, particularly in relation to sexual politics. The hegemonic postfeminist/third-wave body is the 'sexy body', the difference being that women are 'choosing' to self-sexualise on terms usually recognised as patriarchal.¹³ SlutWalk and FEMEN, with their emphasis on individual choice and autonomy, are clear constituents of 'femmenism'.

'slut' strutting

SlutWalk have captured the imagination of many feminists who celebrate the movement as a re-ignition of the feminist imagination among women. 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 to '(re) appropriate the word slut to use it in a subversive, self-defining, positive, empowering and respectful way'.¹⁴ The organisers' initial call to action questioned 'slut-shaming' and the policing of women's sexuality:

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.¹⁵

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.'¹⁶

Photos of SlutWalks on various internet sites, including the official SlutWalk Facebook page, depict marches that are a fusion of carnivalesque and burlesque through a mixture of costumes, performance, gaiety, sexual expression and, in some cases, eroticism. They are a spectacle typically reminiscent of gay pride¹⁷ — celebratory, 'fun, fresh, young feminism', in the words of The Guardian's Ray Filar (2011). Women who SlutWalk are often dressed scantily, and wear 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 scrawl the word 'slut' across their naked flesh in lipstick or paint. Others, including men, remain fully clothed but wear badges that 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'. SlutWalking is as much a spectacle to be

criques posed by women of colour regarding the whiteness of second-wave feminism and the tendency of feminist theory and practice to purportedly speak for all women's experiences, while not acknowledging that these perspectives are based on those of white, privileged women, in the main. This was appropriated by the type of feminisms I detail.

¹³ For the purposes of this paper, self-sexualisation and auto-sexualisation are used to refer to the presentation of one's body in a sexualised manner for the purpose of making it an object of sexual desire.


¹⁶ See www.slutwalktoronto.com, last accessed 15 November 2011.

¹⁷ I am not arguing that all carnivalesque protest is problematic. Indeed, it might be useful to examine such forms of protest more intimately with a view to developing productive gendered body protests that are inclusive. I would suggest that Pride marches are more subversive than SlutWalks, at least historically, given the risk taken to make visible...
gazed upon as it is a march of defiance, a characteristic they arguably share with FEMEN.

In its current manifestation, SlutWalk is the poster child for femmenism in its mix of feminist language and rejection of the feminist label. While many claim they march in defiance of social norms that regulate women's bodies, the movement's meme of performing 'sluthood' reproduces such norms rather than disrupting them. In the current era (and only in certain quarters) to be a proud 'slut' is not out of step with being 'chic', fashionable and sexy, 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 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. 'Proud sluts' are not necessarily promiscuous but are sexually adventurous; they embrace mainstream pornography, and seek to embody the dominant, heterosexual male fantasies it imagines. To be a proud 'slut' is not to challenge the policing of women's sexuality but to reinforce the limited ways in which it is acceptable for women to be sexual. SlutWalk, through its unproblematised sexual expression, is a form of body protest that simultaneously celebrates and exploits the 'sexy female body'; the sexy female body is selling the message. Thus, SlutWalk celebrates rather than mocks 'sluthood', and as a result is what Jameson (1988) calls 'a blank parody'.

The SlutWalk goal of reclaiming the word 'slut' has been controversial, to say the least. The Guardian and The Huffington Post devoted numerous pages to documenting the development of the movement and subsequent debates, with contributions from well-established feminists such as Selma James, who proudly declared that her placard read 'Pensioner Slut'. Although the act of (re)appropriation has been carried out in other contexts (e.g. 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). This divergence of opinion is often positioned as a dichotomised debate between new and passé, 'young and old', fun and prudish, 'old' feminists and young 'femmenists'. Gail Dines, among the most vocal critical commentators on SlutWalking, argues 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, 'While 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 consequences including being blamed for rape, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and self-mutilation' (Dines and Murphy, 2011).
Reclamation as a SlutWalk strategy fails as nowhere is the word ‘slut’ disentangled from patriarchal definitions, contested and re-imagined. 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’; the mocking tone suggests a ridiculous incongruity of SlutWalk with feminism.18 These comments show that the templates of female sexuality for this body protest are a replication of prevailing heterosexual male fantasy. They also illustrate that any irony behind the use of ‘slut’ has gone unnoticed. 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’ (*ibid.*, 2011). To not contest ‘slut’ is to not contest the unequal relationships in which such concepts are created, and thus strike me as being of little political value.

Such protests also potentially exclude those who do not identify with auto-sexualisation, particularly when it is remarkably similar to the hegemonic, 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 bodily autonomy fit? SlutWalk thus fails to problematise the varying relationships women have with sex, sexuality, sexual violence and indeed their bodies as a consequence of the webs of power that entangle them.

**sextremism**

FEMEN grab headlines for their protest tactics more than the issues they seek to address. Their method is to ‘defend with their breasts sexual and social equality in the world’, or more simply they organise publicity stunts where they bare their breasts to capture the attention of the mainstream media.19 The public face of FEMEN consists of roughly forty topless activists who resemble high-fashion models in appearance—mostly white, with long blonde hair, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, with striking facial features and toned, slender, hairless bodies that make them statuesque figures or ‘Amazons’ as they call themselves. FEMEN as a brand is readily identifiable by the ‘pop star look’ (Zychowicz, 2011), and wearing little beyond make-up and a *vinok*, the traditional Ukrainian garland of flowers worn on the head.


FEMEN were founded in Kyiv in 2008 by Oksana Shachko, Inna Shevchenko, Sasha Shevchenko and 23-year-old economist Anna Hutsol, the supposed creative mastermind behind the group (ibid., 2011). They came together in an attempt to counter the lack of women activists in Ukrainian society, and what they saw as the passive role often assumed by women. Feminism, once a thriving movement, was nearly obliterated during Soviet times. Feminist history was also eroded over time with the exception of feminist nationalism. Post-Soviet Ukrainian feminism has struggled in the face of this legacy and remains muted. FEMEN are one of the first feminist protest groups to emerge from this complex history (Phillips, 2008; Hankivsky and Salnykova, 2012). Unsurprisingly, FEMEN have divided Ukrainian feminists and non-feminists alike with their protests (Zychowicz, 2011), nevertheless stimulating lively debate about the role of feminism in Ukrainian society, a society where ‘men talk and women listen’ according to FEMEN (Shevchenko, 2013).

FEMEN held their first topless protest in 2009 in Kyiv, and their base is roughly estimated to consist of 300 young, well-educated women (Khaleeli, 2011). These theatrical topless protests, which they brand ‘sextremism’, often include women who are heavily made up, wearing bright red lipstick, and if their bottoms and genitals are clothed it is often in fishnets, hot pants or shorts that go below the pubic bone. High heels and other clothing associated with sexual appeal is also a common adornment. This is evident in protests that are sexually overt, such as the notable media stunt outside the home of former International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss Kahn, where they posed as ‘sexy chambermaids’, and engaged in intentionally provocative sexual manoeuvring and undressing. Earlier demonstrations against sexism at universities saw the group re-enact ‘x-rated scenes of inequality’ in the classroom (Zychowicz, 2011: 215). They also engage in topless mud-wrestling competitions (Rohozinksa, 2012). The publicity material found on their website, Twitter account, Myspace page and Facebook profile only serves to reinforce the image of the sexualised, protesting woman who fits into the narrow yet hegemonic category of ideal women. On their website they describe themselves as ‘morally and physically fit soldiers’, ‘the new Amazons’, with ‘hot boobs, a cool head and clean hands’. This is not unlike Gill’s (2009) description of postfeminisms wherein 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’ (ibid.: 102) as is the case with FEMEN’s desire to package their nudity in a particular way.

The initial focus of the group was sex tourism and the sex industry in Ukraine, though they have expanded their reach into areas such as the wearing of the hijab, fascism and homophobia. They conducted topless protests in Davos against male domination of economic decision-making, and in France in celebration of the resignation of Pope Benedict. Hutsol manages the funds of the organisation, organises its protests and,

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in many ways, is the leader of the group, though there is little evidence to suggest that she participates in the topless protests herself. It has also been reported that Hutsol received leadership training from a US State Department-funded initiative (Zychowicz, 2011: 216). FEMEN branched out with camps in France, Sweden and Brazil, yet not much is known of the group’s structure, and they are particularly closeted about their sources of funding aside from the sale of ‘FEMEN art’, which consists of T-shirts and paint imprints of their breasts.24

Like SlutWalk, FEMEN easily fits into the paradigm of femmenism. Its activists strive to set FEMEN apart from earlier forms of feminism, arguing as Inna Shevchenko does, ‘Classic feminism no longer works. It is, if you excuse me, impotent’ (Glass, 2012). Another activist says of her attraction to the group, ‘There was a spirit, an ardour of youth about it’ (Larssen, 2013). It should come as no surprise then that FEMEN activists are all in their 20s and 30s. FEMEN also exemplifies femmenism through its use of the ‘sexy’ female body as a protest strategy, with ‘sexy’ defined according to the templates of hegemonically masculine ideals, which reify the ideal female body. FEMEN need the male gaze; they explicitly seek to capture it. They take the commodification and objectification of women’s bodies and use it to sell a message. Hutsol explains that this is somewhere between performance and the market: ‘I think if you can sell cookies in this way [through mass appeal] why not also push for social issues using the same method? I don’t see anything wrong with that’ (Zychowicz, 2011: 221). With their ‘our body is our manifesto’ message, activists argue that they are reclaiming their naked breasts, that women’s nakedness was always ‘an instrument of patriarchy. It was always used by man’s hands in fashion industry, in sex industry and in advertisements’, and they are ‘playing really with the stereotypes…We are making a sign that it’s back now to its rightful owner, to women’ (Larssen, 2013).

Yet whose breasts are they purporting to reclaim? Membership to FEMEN is quite explicitly restricted to women who organisers deem ‘physically fit’ (read conventionally attractive). In a personal interview with researcher Jessica Zychowicz (2011), Hutsol openly admits that this is an intentional PR strategy for the group because ‘by limiting the “cast” of performers in the show to a slim, trim troupe of 20 or so, Hutsol preserves their celebrity status and bolsters their marketability. This in turn personalizes their protests in a way that reinforces their iconicity at the expense of reifying and branding feminism as a product, to be sold rather than accessed in open dialogue’ (ibid.: 219). FEMEN’s nudity as performance functions through the inclusion of particular types of bodies, dressed and moving in certain ways. Bodies deemed visually appealing by hegemonic standards are feminised and sexualised to express the political in an erotic fashion through well-placed clothing, make-up, hair, posture and general presentation. Sasha Shevchenko, one of the original members explains, ‘We might seem like girls from Playboy but we stand for something very different’ (Glass, 2012). FEMEN’s former ‘consultant’ Victor Svyatski was revealed in September 2013 by documentary film maker Kitty Green to have had

sole decision-making power in selecting which women would participate in the group's topless protests. According to Green, 'It's his movement and...he hand-picked the prettiest girls because the prettiest girls sell more papers. The prettiest girls get on the front page...that became their image, that became the way they sold the brand' (MacNab, 2013). In an interview after the revelations, the 36-year-old Ukrainian man defended his actions and branded it as 'new feminism', set against the 'grey jumpers' and 'armpit hair' of what he calls 'old feminism'. 'The new feminism says: It is good that women are different from men. The woman is beautiful; her breasts are a symbol of femininity. That is why the women from Femen go topless on the streets. Only through differentiation can we truly reach equality.'

Topless protesting has been done quite successfully in other contexts. Nigerian women have a long history of using topless and naked protesting as a powerful challenge to colonialism, capitalist interests and gender relations (Ekine, 2001; Turner and Brownhill, 2004). The subversive use of nakedness rests in the reclamation of women's bodies to disrupt long-held societal disciplinary taboos. This differs from the nakedness of FEMEN because the sexualisation of women's breasts is not taboo; it is the norm in many societies. FEMEN's performance of nudity and wish to attract the male gaze rests on the premise that breasts deemed worthy of sexualisation, deemed desirable according to dominant norms, are the only breasts that can be rendered visible. These are typically white, young, firm, pert and on the body of a slim woman. The implication is that breasts that cannot be sexualised, or indeed undesirable bodies, should remain hidden; hence, only certain types of breasts are sought to be reclaimed. One follower on their regularly updated Facebook page asks, 'Is there any fat femen? LOOL [sic] White, skinny and young what kind of women are you fighting for?' (13 March 2013). Where do older women, women of size, disabled women, women of colour fit in FEMEN's politics? Where do women whose bodies are not seen as sexual fit? How might FEMEN's work be of benefit to them? Consequently, FEMEN and indeed SlutWalk reproduce patriarchal norms as they do not seek to disrupt what constitutes the 'desirable' female body. They exemplify how the ironic use of language or performance is not always pragmatic, particularly if it is the only strategy utilised (Ahmed, 1998: 34). The failure to communicate the irony in their antics renders the parody as neutral or blank, to once again use Jameson's term. This 'blank parody' that embodies and (re)appropriates patriarchal norms thus reproduces these norms through the inability to effectively re-imagine them as ironic.

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25 These revelations called into question the feminist credibility of FEMEN and a significant public relations battle ensued. The group distanced themselves from Svytskii, blaming the lack of feminism in Ukrainian society for its willingness to hand over power to him (see Shevchenko, 2013).


27 I note one exception that I came across in my online research—a woman of size protesting topless against the sex tourism during the Euro 2012 soccer finals in Ukraine. She, the sole protester, stood in a pig pen with a pig (see 'Topless protest spice up psychic pig's feeding time' at http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/06/21/soccer-euro-ukraine-femen-idINDEE85K0DD20120621, last accessed 3 December 2013). Thus, not only are FEMEN reifying ideal sexual Theresa O’Keefe feminist review 107 2014 11
universalisms

SlutWalk and FEMEN are strikingly remiss around issues of race and racism, with racist overtones and undertones present in both. On a descriptive level these two forms of protest lack diversity in terms of organisational structure and participants, despite their spread to countries and locations outside Europe and North America. SlutWalk have come under fire for the overwhelming 'whiteness' of the participants and organisers, leading some women of colour to document their discomfort with participating in the marches (Crunk Feminist Collective, 2011). Meanwhile, FEMEN are arguably worse in terms of lack of diversity. There is one woman of colour in their coterie of protesters, even though FEMEN's more active factions are now located in multicultural societies such as Paris and Brazil.\(^\text{28}\) The lack of diversity is not surprising given that the group's organisers admit to hand-picking women with a 'certain look' in line with dominant ideals of physical attraction, so as to maintain the FEMEN brand.

The whiteness of both groups is also indicative of the ways in which the substantive politics of these forms of feminist mobilising have alienated women who are located within marginalised communities. SlutWalk, for example, can be effortlessly criticised for its insensitivity to the lived experiences of women of colour. Repeated use of language like 'us' and 'we' throughout much 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 found on the general website page:

> 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.

This original statement can be read as racialised and classed with the way in which women's relationship with 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. People of colour face racial profiling, disproportionate arrest, detention and imprisonment, as well as violence, all at the hands of the police. Police are not allies to men and women in these communities.

Furthermore, SlutWalk was also accused of explicit racism after a march in New York City on 1 October 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 (Black Women's Blueprint, 2011), which has, in turn,
spurred 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. The movement has struggled to restate this and continues to receive criticism on its lack of recognition of women’s varying experiences.29

This incident also led to wider discussions on the racial implications of the movement’s goals and the limitations of reclaiming the word ‘slut’, given that ‘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 as 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 rather than dress; Black female bodies were sexualised through slavery and by white society in ways that are very different to the experience of white women (hooks, 1992).30 Many women of colour vociferously objected to SlutWalk on this basis, most notably in an open letter to SlutWalk penned by Black Women’s Blueprint and signed by numerous women and groups working in anti-racist feminist struggles. It contained a powerful critique of the racial implications of using ‘slut’ even ironically:

As Black women and girls we find no space in SlutWalk, no space for participation and to unequivocally denounce rape and sexual assault as we have experienced it. We are perplexed by the use of the term ‘slut’ and by any implication that this word, much like the word ‘Ho’ or the ‘N’ word should be re-appropriated… 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 (Black Women’s Blueprint, 2011).

Similarly, among white western women, the term is classed. ‘Slut’ is, for the most part, used to regulate and control middle-class women. To call a woman a ‘slut’ is to question her class position, and this is often done in conjunction with classist descriptors such as ‘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 sterilisation—forced or through bribes. One must also wonder where Muslim women who choose to veil fit into this framework? Muslim women in predominantly non-Muslim societies are targeted for covering up and wearing what is perceived to be too much clothing, and as Walia (2011) points out, ‘sexual violence against Muslim women is often minimised in such societies because Muslim women are perceived as repressed, and therefore in need of sexual emancipation’. Similarly, the desire to reclaim the word ‘slut’ 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

29 In a further controversy, SlutWalk Toronto was forced to publish an online apology on 22 August 2013 for its association with Hugo Schwyzer, the self-identified male feminist blogger and former women’s studies professor (www.slutwalktoronto.com/hugo-schwyzer-and-slutwalk, last accessed 3 December 2013). Schwyzer was a member of the steering committee for SlutWalk Los Angeles, despite being criticised by a number of commentators who called into question his politics and, in particular, his targeting of women of colour through social media (Grace, 2012. See also http://www.redlightpolitics.info/post/33891884144/i-have-kept-my-mouth-shut-all-these-months-out-of-i-have-kept-my-mouth-shut-all-these-months-out-of, last accessed 3 December 2013). Schwyzer has since (August 2013) publicly admitted his involvement in misogynistic behaviour, including the ‘trashing’ of a number of women of colour in 2008. See Schwyzer’s public declarations at https://twitter.com/hugoschwyzer/statuses/365917436521856896. For an excellent overview of how white feminism was complicit in Schwyzer’s attacks by providing him a platform, see Vasquez (2013).

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? To assume a universal relationship between slut-shaming, victim blaming and sexual assault renders invisible the multitude of ways in which women experience sexual violence.

FEMEN are similarly blind to the myriad of ways in which women’s bodies are policed and sexualised. Their linking of nudity to liberation is problematic, in so far as it universalises women’s experiences with nudity and sexualisation. By insisting that all women would be liberated by going topless, FEMEN fails to see how women’s bodies are constituted beyond the obvious, and ignores the meaning of nudity and nakedness in relation to racialised bodies in particular. The naked body as a signifier has different meanings in different contexts and can be used to shame, not sexualise, women. The discursive practices that occur around the representation, perception and objectification of naked bodies of African-American women, for example, have a different meaning in so far as nakedness was used as an instrument of shame to disempower and discipline both women and men being sold as slaves. Thus, FEMEN’s calls to ‘get naked’ offer little to challenge the power struggles mapped out across women’s bodies.

FEMEN’s racialised positions are even more pronounced than those of SlutWalk, especially their protests that target the wearing of the hijab by women. Their opposition to veiling routinely slips into uncomplicated derision of Islam, Islamophobia and the universalisation of Muslim women as ‘Other’ to be saved by western, ‘enlightened’ women. French FEMEN protested the participation of athletes from Muslim countries in the 2012 Olympics in London, accusing the Olympics of supporting ‘bloody Islamist regimes’. The group have made racist public pronouncements such as ‘as a society, we haven’t been able to eradicate our Arab mentality towards women’ (Tayler, 2012), and dressed in turbans made from bath towels and prayer rugs, with beards drawn on their faces (Jones, 2013) to mock Muslim men. They have come under increasing scrutiny because of this position, particularly in the wake of the ‘Amina Tyler’ incident and the subsequent declaration of ‘International Topless Jihad Day’ on 4 April 2013 (Miller, 2013). Nagarajan (2013) in her stinging critique of FEMEN writes, ‘International feminist solidarity is crucial but this is not the way to do it. A true ally does not use racism to attempt to defeat patriarchy’. FEMEN remains unmoved by such criticisms, however. On 9 July 2013 Inna Shevchenko created a Twitter storm when she tweeted, ‘What can be more stupid than Ramadan? What can be more uglier than [sic] this religion?’ And thus, racist colonial feminism is fed, as Nagarajan (2013) argues, through constructing women of the east as veiled, oppressed and in need of saving by the civilised west.

31 Jennifer Scott (2011) writes in Ms magazine of her experience on a Slut-Walk. Scott, a wheelchair user, critiques the name of the movement and the desire to reclaim the word ‘slut’ because it fails to represent disabled women’s experiences with sexual violence. She argues for a movement that is wider in scope and less focussed on slut-shaming.

32 As of November 2013, SlutWalk Philadelphia has changed its name to ‘A March to End Rape Culture’, while SlutWalk Winnipeg is debating a similar move.

33 See http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/05/muslim-women-against-femen-facebook-topless-jihad-pictures-amina-tyler_n_3021495.html, last accessed 6 April 2013.

34 Tunisian feminist Amina ‘Tyler’ Sboui achieved international attention when she posted a topless picture of herself on Facebook with ‘my body belongs to me, and is not the source of anyone’s honour’ written across her chest. Affiliated with FEMEN at the time, Amina received widespread condemnation in Tunisia and was threatened with being stoned to death; she
A final criticism of both SlutWalk and FEMEN relates to the preceding in that these ‘movements’ ostensibly lack any decipherable structural analysis. Both SlutWalk and FEMEN show little by way of depth beyond a superficial, aesthetic presence. Their antics offer little in terms of feminist sustenance as their politics are underdeveloped; analysis is secondary to action. Both groups as products of ‘femmenism’ offer little by way of an analysis of the material realities of women’s bodies.

FEMEN’s belief that women’s liberation is tied to what they wear is vacuous. While the group does make a feeble attempt at linking sexual exploitation of women to patriarchy, it fails to acknowledge what that actually means. Patriarchy as a term is not really problematised or defined. No account is given of the material conditions that create and perpetuate women’s inequality. Thus, for instance, while they oppose sex tourism in Ukraine, no analytic material can be found that attempts to explain either the material conditions of and for sex work or how we as feminists might address it; they simply name it as problematic. When the flashy tactics are removed from the equation, FEMEN offers little by way of a substantive critique of patriarchal, capitalist society beyond superficial reflections on struggles faced by some women. Inna Shevchenko says, ‘We know what the media need—sex, scandals and fighting—and that’s what we give them’ (Chollet, 2013).

SlutWalk are plausibly weaker on this front than FEMEN. Unlike the topless protesting troupe, SlutWalk Toronto refused to adopt the label ‘feminist’ and, as a consequence, there is no acknowledgement of patriarchy as a system of oppression, no mention of the exploitative nature of capitalism, and no reference to systemic racism, homophobia or heteronormativity. In fact, typical of the dominant forms of femmenist politics, the politics of women’s bodies are significantly depoliticised. This reductionist politics could be a contributing factor to the rapid-fire spread of the protests. Any structural analysis of oppression, currently absent from SlutWalk’s rhetoric, is exchanged for a superficial expression of commonality, as it offers less political ground over which to disagree. Consequently, evidence of any meaningful conversations among SlutWalk organisers that seek to name oppression, and to understand its causes, consequences and strategies of resistance, is hard to come by.

To be sure, these contemporary forms of popular protest have made way for debates regarding the relevance of feminism to the lives of women today, a welcome development. However, they are riddled with problems related to inclusivity and the universalisation of women’s experiences, and the reproduction of harmful gender norms. This, together with no structural account of violence against women, the sexualisation of women, or how women’s bodies continue to be a battleground for racial, patriarchal capitalism, means that these types of body...
politics are dangerous. They hide the structural and intersectional nature of women’s oppression and, in their claims to be universal, are widening gender hierarchies based on body difference.

In an era where western feminism has been shaped by a politics to emerge at the overlap of third-wave and postfeminism, a politics also tainted by neo-liberal doctrine, the gendered body is constituted in ways that reflect the language of choice, consumption and individualisation. These representations can mask the ways in which hierarchical structures of power are mapped out on the gendered body, and how the body continues to be a site of struggle for women. An analysis of contemporary popular protests such as SlutWalk and FEMEN that emerge from these politics and exploit the gendered body in uncomplicated ways without regard for its intersectional positionings reveals the difficulty with such politics as an emancipatory project for women. This establishes why feminisms that seek to disrupt the gender norms that restrict women’s bodily autonomy must locate the body in the webs of power that give meaning to such norms. By locating the gendered body in protest, we can also ask questions regarding tactics, goals and sustainability as a means of gaining ‘useful knowledge’ for building movements.

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author biography

Theresa O’Keefe is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth where she co-directs the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism. She researches gender, social activism and radical social change using intersectional analysis. Her book Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. O’Keefe has published work in the International Feminist Journal of Politics, National Identities, Nationalism, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, and Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements, for which she is a member of the editorial collective.

references


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