

FIGHTING FIRE WITH YET MORE FIRE

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As one of the six most basic emotions understood by contemporary psychology, anger serves an adaptive function (Prinz 69-70). It is essential to sentient human existence, an affective state that is innately programmed and collectively recognized and understood. Evolutionarily, our cave-age progenitors needed anger: it mobilized them to protect their kin, allowed them to assert dominance and establish social power dynamics, and served as a vital social cue for the detection of imminent danger. But the day-to-day threats to our far-off ancestry are no longer relevant in modern public life; today, there is an enduring social trend towards propriety and civility, away from confrontation and overt dispute. Such a drift is especially evident in post-feminist discourses of political protest. The broiling exothermic fire of first- and second-wave feminism has ceded to a slow-burning glow as women and men alike assert their ostensible gender equality and claim no further need for feminist griping. In this supposedly progressive social context, is anger still useful?

The heated debates ignited by the SlutWalk movement foreground questions of effective protesting techniques. The grassroots movement emerged in January 2011 when a police officer advised female students at Toronto's York University that in order to avoid rape, they shouldn't dress like "sluts" (Valenti). The comment sizably oxidized the flame of feminist anger, prompting widespread upset among students and staff and leading to the organization of the first SlutWalk the following April. They had hoped that the walk would draw at least 100 marchers; it rallied over 3,000 (Valenti). SlutWalks now take place in over 200 countries worldwide and the movement continues to grow (SlutWalk Toronto).

During a SlutWalk, marchers appropriate the term "slut" in various ways: they scrawl it over their bodies, carry signs asserting it, and dress in scandalous ways associated with it. The goal is to challenge the dangerous myth "that women's clothing has some bearing on whether they will be

raped” (Valenti). SlutWalk marchers are impenitently arguing that women deserve to live without the fear or risk of rape—regardless of what they wear, what they drink, and how they act.

But does fire effectively fight fire? Two divergent responses have emerged in response to the radical SlutWalk ethos. One is adulatory, praising the marches for courageously appropriating and subverting long-held labels for and myths about female sexuality. The other is critical, denouncing the movement as politically misguided and ineffectively reactive. Much of the debate is centered upon terminology: some read the movement’s appropriation of the historically derogative term “slut” as empowering while others read it as enslaving.

Those who praise SlutWalk’s mobilization of the term “slut” argue that it is subverting the suppressive connotations enforced by patriarchal hegemony. In “SlutWalks and the Future of Feminism,” Jessica Valenti applauds the unapologetically in-your-face approach of the marches. She asserts, “it’s . . . the proactive, fed-upness of SlutWalks . . . that makes me so hopeful for the future.” Valenti champions appropriating sluttiness for use by feminists, for feminists, as a way of bringing the power back into the hands of those from whom it was taken.

The massive success of the walks proves that many agree with Valenti. Still, some feminist critics think that the attempt to reclaim the word “slut” is futile—that it is an irrevocably irredeemable term. In “SlutWalk is Not Sexual Liberation,” Gail Dines and Wendy J. Murphy argue that the focus on repurposing the term “slut” obfuscates the real issue of the protests: “the word is so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment; trying to change its meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources.” They believe that it would be more effective to “expos[e] the myriad ways in which the law and the culture enable myths about all types of women—sexually active or ‘chaste’ alike.” Dines and Murphy see “slut” as a divisive label, one that stultifies women within the archetypal binary of “Madonna/whore.” The movement’s excessive focus on “sluttiness” is perhaps fetishizing rather than radicalizing, enforcing a Manichean reduction of feminine sexuality without offering much real-life, user-friendly advice for avoiding rape and engaging in consensual sex.

Other critics read the term “slut” as non-inclusive of racial minorities. A collective of African American women wrote the SlutWalk organizers a letter explaining how they feel alienated by the term. The letter asserts, “in the United States, where slavery constructed Black female sexualities, Jim Crow kidnappings, rape and lynchings, [and] gender misrepresentations . . . ‘slut’ has different associations for Black women. We do not recognize ourselves nor do we see our lived experiences reflected within SlutWalk and especially not in its brand and its label” (Brison). The letter explicates how they do not have the privilege to call themselves “sluts” without validating limiting and destructive ideologies already historically-embedded in the black female identity. The letter complicates the issue of reclaiming derogative labels by paying heed to the racial discrepancies within marginalized groups.

It is true that some women face the threat of violence more frequently than others. But, shouldn’t those women be the most vocal in contesting such a truth? In a *Ms. Magazine* blog post, Janell Hobson urges black women to march front and center in SlutWalks, taking back the power of “slut” in solidarity with white women. She comments, “I am concerned by the politics of respectability that seem to be a common theme among the criticisms of SlutWalk. Yes, nineteenth-century club women fought tirelessly to delink black women’s bodies from the stereotypes of ‘Jezebels,’ ‘sluts’ and ‘hos,’ but do we really want to move forward in this same line of pushing for black women’s ‘respectability’—especially since respectability does not keep a woman from being raped?”

Hobson’s critical frame begs further debate into the relative value of minority assimilation. In appropriating “slut,” she argues, black women could refuse to defensively hide from its offensive historical use against them. African Americans’ uptake and reconstruction of the “n-word” reflects a successfully seditious assertion of visibility, one that parallels the potential for black females’ appropriation of “slut.” The media theorist Andrew Jacobs argues, “the African-American usage of ‘nigga’ is a strategy for asserting the humanity of black people in the face of continuing racism, a strategy that celebrates an anti-assimilationist vision of African-American identity.” When a white woman calls herself a slut, a whole set of political and oppositional imperatives manifest; for a black woman to do so, a necessarily different

narrative of oppression is encoded—one that deserves to be heard and explicated, not quietly bowed away from.

But how effectively can minorities linguistically recast the slurs that have been used against them? Cultural appropriation is a nuanced exercise, one that can be easily and almost imperceptibly mismanaged. In their article “Naturalizing Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*,” Ji H. Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon, and Ariel R. Chernin critically investigate the ideological implications of the racial jokes subtly embedded within the 2001 blockbuster comedy. The film, starring Jackie Chan as “Lee,” a police officer from Hong Kong, and Chris Tucker as “Carter,” a police officer from Los Angeles, is a twist on the classic “buddy movie” genre: the two leading men are Asian and African American respectively, rather than a white hero and his inferior minority foil. The fact that *Rush Hour 2* exhibits an African American and Asian working together as friends and successfully reaching a goal can appear refreshingly progressive at face value; even the clichéd racist teasing they toss at each other seems, in a way, ironically empowering. Yet Park *et al.* take issue with how the comedic film genre fosters a landscape wherein racist jokes and stereotypical constructions are more easily swallowed. Through textual and audience-based analysis, they reveal how Lee and Carter “consistently conform to negative minority stereotypes that can be deemed racist” (158).

Park *et al.* unpack a dilemma relevant to the SlutWalk controversy: is it an effective, progressive exercise for minority groups to overtly call upon the derogatory slurs and myths that have subjugated them throughout history? Or, does such explicit employment and manipulation of racist or sexist tropes simply anchor them further into the collective consciousness? Park *et al.* conclude that comically “subversive” uses of racist clichés do not evidence an accepting, color-neutral social arena. Rather, the authors assert that such cinematic representations serve only to further naturalize racist ideologies by situating them in lighthearted viewing contexts, adding: “it is often difficult to distinguish social commentary and satire from the ideological reproduction of racial stereotypes in comedy” (159).

The film comedy genre’s insidious ability to circulate and support racist characterizations is reflected in the precarious communicative power of political feminist protesting. The SlutWalk movement can be read as a media

event that proffers a particular cultural reading and positions its viewers to positively adopt the derogative slur “slut.” The walks and their philosophy are largely successful because the people mobilizing “sluttiness” are women, just as the racist jokes in *Rush Hour 2* are, for the most part, accepted by Asian, black, and white audiences as not racist because the actors saying them are Asian and black. But what makes *Rush Hour 2*'s jokes so funny to viewers? After interviewing audiences, Park *et al.* gathered evidence that viewers derived pleasure from the fact that the jokes spoke to some small sense of an ostensible truth: “participants . . . felt that the racial stereotypes in the film were humorous and acceptable because they were based on a ‘kernel of truth’ that had been exaggerated” (171). Thus the power of the jokes was not that they satirically made visible the fictional aspects of racist clichés, but the seemingly truthful ones. This conclusion could extend to the SlutWalks to suggest that the use of “slut” and “sluttiness” as forms of appropriation and protest may counter-productively embolden the terms as they exist in conventional discourses of hetero-male dominance.

Yet examples of female sexuality represented on female terms do exist; interestingly, they abundantly proliferate when looking back at earlier waves of feminism and the cultural artifacts produced from them. Throughout the late twentieth century, feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann represented objects traditionally characterized according to heterosexual male desire and reconstructed them along registers of female imperatives and physicality. One iconic piece of hers from 1981, *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology*, forefronts menstruation taboos and offers a feminist appropriation of Freudian dream theory. The process of menstruation and its related physical consequences have a history of being hidden, of being labeled debased and dirty; Schneemann's artistic rendering of the process re-characterizes female sexual cycles as essential tools of female autonomy.

Fresh Blood begins with a taped monologue of Schneemann as her silhouetted body moves with an umbrella in front of a visual constellation of vulvar imagery. It then moves into a live text in which she retells a dream of hers with reference to a black woman she imagines as her double within the dream. The dream opens with Schneemann sitting in a taxi with three men. One of the men points to a blood spot on his thigh; Schneemann instinctively fears that she has stabbed him with her umbrella. What follows is a stream-

of-consciousness retelling of the man's "flowering" blood wound and of Schneemann making love to her partner while she is on her period. The use of an umbrella is a salient motif: Schneemann analogizes it to the female genitals in a trance-like chant: "umbrella cunt *umbrella both cunt and cock* unfurling / it expands and contracts covers the body the head / is a hollow shaft a tissue thin fabric rigid supports / umbrella is ridged ribbed tactile ridges of cunt cock / is wet covered with rain rain pours down" (73). Thus, the umbrella and its signified vulva are both weapon and wound, an instrument of penetration just as it is cavernous and able to be entered into. The female genitalia's complexity is brought to light concomitantly with the exposition of the power of menstrual blood—Schneemann refers to the "particular pleasure of fucking during the period" and the transformative communion that occurs with the fusion of semen and blood (73).

Schneemann's symbolic rendering of blood recasts it as generative rather than as a result of injury. The particular feminine viewpoint is revealed: for women, blood represents a cyclical process of nourishment and reproductive potential; for men, the release of blood signifies injury. Thus Schneemann's fusion of male and female genitals by way of the umbrella distorts and elides heterosexual male desires and conceptions and reproduces them with images of uniquely female sexual affordances and pleasures. In addition to comprehensively suturing male and female relations of desire, Schneemann moves toward a cross-racial narrative of female subjugation and empowerment. By transposing her dream point of view against that of her imagined black double, she elucidates the underlying tether among women regardless of the color of their skin.

The overt adoption of taboo aspects of female physicality in Schneemann's work serves as a useful model for the SlutWalk movement. Though *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology* took place many years ago in a very different (and arguably less progressive) political climate, it is in many ways a more nuanced and comprehensive protest for gender equality than the contemporary SlutWalk movement. SlutWalks and *Fresh Blood* share a refusal to support the invisibility of the female perspective with a call to redefine female sexual autonomy as an innate right of all women. The two projects diverge in the breadth of their demands. In telling a detailed multimedia narrative through visual, oral, taped, and live performance, and by including the

perspective of women of another race, Schneemann offers an all-encompassing account of what it means to live in a female body. Furthermore, her intimate account of lovemaking extends to include the male anatomy as it is implicated with female genitalia.

The SlutWalk is in many ways easier to swallow than Schneemann's exposition. Though it contains nudity and slurs that are offensive to many audiences, it doesn't blatantly reference the rawer aspects of female physicality or call for their acceptance into the mainstream narrative of female sexuality. But this is not the problem: SlutWalk's weakness lies in its narrow inclusion of details and viewpoints. Its root aim—widespread gender equality and guaranteed safety for women regardless of what they wear—is admirable, yet this aim becomes obfuscated by a glamorized spectacle of parading women scantily dressed and calling for acceptance of "sluts." The walks can appear reductively parade-like, proffering a hyper-sexed vision of female liberation that begs the question, what is really being celebrated? To answer this question, "slut" and its many historical, political, and social iterations must first be defined. Once its root meaning—that of a patriarchal tool to inflict female shame—has been established, women across races and socioeconomic ecologies must enter into a discussion of how they want to re-establish the connotative identity of "slut." Or, if they want to at all.

SlutWalks employ in-your-face tactics to shock and to draw attention; this is pragmatically justifiable, as what is a movement if not for its following? But the organizers and proponents of SlutWalks must now move behind, beneath, and beyond "slut." When the multifarious social, racial, political, and historical modes of defining female sexuality are illuminated, the spark of reconstructive progress will be able to light with synergic vigor.

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