## CHAPTER THREE

## "MY UTERUS DOESN'T EXPEL RAPE SPERM:" SLUTWALK AND THE ACTIVIST LEGACY OF THE SUFFRAGETTES

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In terms of public demonstrations in the cause of the emancipation of women, many parallels suggest themselves between the suffragettes and the SlutWalkers. The most immediate is in the taking to—"taking back"—the streets: a rude display of comradely presentness in metropolitan centres—disruption, spectacle, celebration. And, in this, the evidencing that those who were once considered as silent, or allotted marginal spaces often away from the public thoroughfares, were loudly, unavoidably, in the centre.

But, across a century, and through three waves of feminist thought and activism, it is easy to misread the actions of the suffragettes in relation to the aims of the SlutWalkers. The suffragettes are perhaps best considered as an insurgency: the revolt of the democratically oppressed (in the sense of those suffering from a democratic deficit), which extended to civil disobedience and damage to public and private property, and was met with state retaliation and violence. SlutWalk, on the other hand, was "merely" a provocation to those members and institutions of state that would seek to challenge or curtail what were perceived as the excesses of extant freedom.

The challenge at the point of origin of the SlutWalk movement came from the informal concern expressed by a Toronto police officer that women were inviting sexual assault at York University by "dressing like sluts." The officer apologised, but the underlying assumption had been articulated in a way that prompted a creative response: an explicit connection between sexual violence visited upon a woman, and her own complicity in inviting that violence through some sort of lapse or degeneration in relation to given standards of demur presentation. In short:

that she was "asking for it." The apparent but unspoken corollary of this narrative was equally problematic: that the woman who then successfully prosecutes an accusation of rape against the attacking male, and so finds her case benefitting from a more enlightened contemporary juridical process in terms of fully recognising such a crime, and with the accused incarcerated, has effectively risen to a higher moral ground in the public eye, but has essentially chosen to revel in her victimhood rather than acknowledge that her own behaviour is also to blame. Perhaps, then, if a modicum of decorum was applied to the dress sense of the female students at the York Campus, there would not be so many promising male students behind bars, labelled as "sex offenders," and so denied access to the middle class privileges reasonably expected by those in university education. The officer's concern, after all, had been "campus rape." But for those on the receiving end of this advice, the sentiment was redolent of the idea of-as Second Wave feminists identified it-"rape culture:" the normalisation of sexual assault as part of general societal workings. A verification of this position came in a second incident that has been cited as foundational to SlutWalk: a lenient sentence in a rape case, on the grounds that the guilty party had been "led on" by the victim-for which the judge later apologised. This was in Summer 2011, during the heyday of SlutWalk events around the globe.

That creative response was a defiance of such a line of thought: to flood the popular imagination, and thoroughfares, with "sluts." This was an "I am Spartacus!" logic: one and all implicate themselves in such sartorial lapses, exercising a right to dress in whichever way is desired. This response typically took the form of a march through metropolitan centres, often bookended with events: making placards, speeches, planning routes, getting dressed up... and then post-march parties and socials. The singularity of such marches was often righteous anger and indissoluble bitterness. Many seem to have used the moment—out on the street, in full sight of an often astonished public-to announce their own status as a victim of rape. But the ambience of such marches was typically playful and non-threatening. The technique of anti-capitalist and Occupy demonstrations of deploying inflatable toy animals is entirely comparable to this ambience. In public relations and media terms, the police have already lost the image battle: uniformed in black, armed, hidden behind masks, and intimidating. The mainstreams of protestors, on the other hand,

On Outrage, see Ian Lucas, *Impertinent Decorum: Gay Theatrical Manoeuvres* (London: Cassell, 1994); On ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), see Douglas Crimp; Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

are amassed as colourful, non-violent and endlessly varied in appearance. At the point of any clash, a kind of weapon of semiotics comes to hand. Throwing inflatable toys into an affray can result in a dissipating of heavy-handed policing via a reminder that the demonstrators are there for "play," as well as introducing the danger that images of riot police bludgeoning a hapless Barney the Dinosaur, as disseminated across broadcast and social media, will rapidly cast the forces of law and order as violent and authoritarian, and killjoys. And so it is with the dress of SlutWalk: the very assumed vulnerability of the "weaker sex" pre-empts and potentially derails any strategy of physical restraint. It is as if that state of willing the threat of rape, as supposedly brought about through slutty appearance, now defies the forces of the state to exert control.

Critics of SlutWalk invariably honed in on what was perceived to be the way in which the activists were effectively simply reproducing the same power structure of oppression in order to critique it, as if unthinkingly embracing the contradiction. They seemed to actually now be dressing in the way that the Toronto police officer had imagined. This criticism occurred on the grounds of the erotic spectacle of the march of the activists (many of whom were semi-clad, or topless, or sporting outfits that presented their bodies squarely in terms of patriarchal codes of sexual attractiveness), and the reclaiming of such a rebarbative and derogatory term—as one placard had it: "We're taking slut back." The latter seemed at the limits of what could be done, but also an affront to dignity and a trivialising of the gains made between the post-1968 "march through the institutions" and the institutionalisation of identity politics and positive discrimination. (After all, the precursors of SlutWalk—as with Take Back the Night and even ACT UP-did not tend towards open displays of sexuality, but such distaste was reserved for the "kiss-ins," and so on, arranged by OutRage!). "SlutWalk is not sexual liberation," a Guardian opinion piece stated: "[this] focus on reclaiming the word slut fails to address the real issue... it is beyond redemption... [the organisers] are in fact making life harder for girls who are trying to navigate their way through the tricky terrain of adolescence." Or, as Goff put it: "Dear Feminists, Will You Also Be Marching in N\*\*\*erwalk? Because I

liberation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Gail Dines and Wendy J. Murphy, "SlutWalk is not sexual liberation.," *Guardian*, 8 May 2011, accessed 1 December 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/08/SlutWalk-not-sexual-

Won't." The use of the word "nigger" on placards and banners ("Woman is the nigger of the world"), as denoting a second-class or enslaved citizen, and alluding to the John Lennon/Yoko Ono song of the same name, prompted criticisms from other feminist activists, as did the general whiteness of the SlutWalkers. Bogado noted in a blog post that the term "slut" in some parts of North America effectively "carries a criminal sex offender record," and that those who can use the term in such a provocative and playful way only do so unquestioningly, by dint of their ethnic privileges, and safe in the knowledge of their social securities.

Why, the question must have been, test the limits of taste and provocation in these matters? Why "pornify" feminist activism? And those gains of the 1970s and 1980s were not made through such a frontal assault and on such trivial grounds: notions of beauty and sexuality during the phase of Second Wave feminism did not seek to align themselves with patriarchal givens. This was a secondary concern, beneath basic rights such as equal pay, equal representation, the rights to education, birth control and abortion, and so on. That faction of hyper-sexualised walkers seemed more emboldened by the ways in which Third Wave feminism sought to reclaim the feminine, the girly, and the right for women to behave as if subordinated. Positions in this area coalesced across popular culture (The Spice Girls, Sex in the City, Girls, Vagina Monologues performances and associated activism—see Ensler 2001 and 2005), 6 journalism (Levy 2006; Walter 2012), theoretical books and interventions (such as Harris 2004; Power 2009: the lightening conductor for these positions was to become Hakim 2011), self-help books (Armstrong and Rudúlph 2013), and combinations of theoretical and self-help books (Muscio 2002; Wolf 2012). Subsequent cultural phenomena, as with Pussy

<sup>3</sup> Keli Goff, "Dear Feminists, Will You Also Be Marching In N\*\*\*erwalk? Because I Won't," *Huffington Post* 3 October 2011, accessed 1 December 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keli-goff/SlutWalk-new-york\_b\_993261.html.

Riot and Femen protests, seem to owe much to SlutWalk, as did memelike "sexy" activism/charity, such as the "no make-up selfie" and the "ice bucket challenge."

It is easy to lose sight of SlutWalk in the context of such skirmishes between Second and Third Wave feminism, as played out in the mainstream media, the blogosphere and academe. And it is easy to mistake the medium for the message: the tension between the relative importance of what is said over what is worn, and where it is worn. At the same time, as with protests associated with anti-capitalism and Occupy, and protests during the early 2000s in relation to Western military action against Afghanistan and Iraq, there is often no one clear message or manifesto. Gwynne, writing about SlutWalks in Singapore, extracts manifesto-like writing from a website post of one of the co-founders of SlutWalk8 in order to find a clear meaning, but then reverts to a more useful catch-all term: "sensibilities." A sensibility is shared, spread, nuanced and allows for a spectrum of tactical, and even substantial, differences. The coming together is an inclusive and inviting amassing of singularities: this is both a frustration for those wishing to understand or account for such action and a defence against those who would wish to reduce such action to a sound bite or two, and extract protest leaders who could potentially be tamed and inculcated back into the mainstream. The slogan and position of Anonymous—"We Are Everywhere"—indicates just such a centreless and leaderless initiative, and the very 24/7 imminence of activism.

What, then, was said? One of the problems with hijacking the media—especially when effectively demanding exposure of the exposure from the salacious gutter press—is that the image can dazzle and so overwhelm the written message. This hijacking is, of course, a political stratagem in itself; the Retort collective identify this as a secondary front between the imperial centre and insurgent swarm—"the war of websites, the ballistic exchange of images." For the SlutWalkers the images that the marches

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> As discussed by Judith Butler and Kyle Bella in Kyle Bella, "Bodies in Alliance: Gender Theorist Judith Butler on the Occupy and SlutWalk Movements," *Truth Out*, 15 December 2011, accessed 1 December 2014, http://www.truthout.org/news/item/5588:bodies-in-alliance-gender-theorist-judith-butler-on-theoccupy-and-SlutWalk-movements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Aura Bogado, "SlutWalk: A Stroll Through White Supremacy," *To The Curb*, blog post (2011), accessed 1 December 2014,

http://tothecurb.wordpress.com/2011/05/13/SlutWalk-a-stroll-through-white-supremacy/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For further discussion, with respect to Ensler, see Benjamin Halligan, "'({})': Raunch Culture, Third Wave Feminism and *The Vagina Monologues*," *Theory and Event* 17:1 (2013), accessed 1 December 2014, doi: 10.1353/tae.2014.0007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> On Pussy Riot, see Yngvar Steinholt, "Roars of Discontent: Noise and Disaffection in Two Cases of Russian Punk," in Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, Nicola Spelman (eds.) *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 121–133.

Sonya J.F. Barnett, "Because We've Had Enough," SlutWalk Toronto 28 February 2011, accessed 1 December 2014

http://www.SlutWalktoronto.com/welcome.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Joel Gwynne, "SlutWalk, Feminist Activism and the Foreign Body in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43:1 (2013): 175–176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Retort, Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War (London: Verso, 2005), 186.

generate contain both "come-on" and critique. Scantily-clad women wield placards: "Women Power," "Slut pride," "End," "#SlutWalk," "Vulva Trot," "I love consent," "Sluts say yes," "Proud slut," "No means no." And, more arrestingly, some melded the two (the "come-on" and critique) via writing features on their bodies, often across the chest, and so inscribing the message of unwelcome sexualisation on the very bodies that seem to dare to both invite it, and potentially suffer from it: "This is not permission," "Consent is sexy," "Mine," "Blame rapists not boobs," "Still not asking for it," "Fuck your morals," "Don't fucking touch me," "My uterus doesn't expel rape sperm," "Don't touch," "No = no," "Ask me what I'm asking for," "Survivor," "Make love not rape," "Free hugs for sluts," "My body my rules," "No Entry." And, from banners from SlutWalk events in the English-speaking world:

All rape is forcible.

I don't attack you when you run shirtless.

I'm not asking for it.

My body is not your object.

The way little girls dress doesn't create [sic] pedophiles. The way big girls dress doesn't create rapists.

Rapists cause rape, clothes do not.

Freedom to all women.

This is not my "I Want You" face.

My pussy, my choice.

Abolish rape culture.

My outfit is not an invitation.

I model pin-up. Doesn't mean I'm asking for it.

My little black dress does not mean "yes."

Still not asking for it.

Like your Mama taught you: you can look but don't touch.

By definition you can't ask for rape.

Clothing is not consent.

I'm a human not a sandwich.

Yes means fuck me, no means fuck you.

I am "asking for it": respect!

Are any of us asking 4 it?

Don't blame the victim.

It's my hot body -I do what I want.

Because we've had enough.

Walk of no shame.

Stop. Don't cum in unless you're invited.

My vagina my rules.

Jesus loves sluts.

My lycra, my bush, my choice.

My skirt is not responsible for your sexual misconduct.

We fight the silence, we fight the stigma. My ass is not an excuse for assault. How to prevent rape:

a) don't rape anyone

b) see above.

70% [of] sex workers are mothers.

A kiss is not a contract.

It would be easy to extract a variety of seemingly contradictory messages from such a melange: on the one hand, the emphatic and repeated "no," while on the other the difficulty of avoiding proclamations that sluttish behaviour is about the enabling of a freer saying of "yes," with that as a horizon of aspiration. Or, in short, that SlutWalk is about moving towards the "yes," once freed from the fear of rape and the oppressions of rape culture. It is a dynamic encapsulated in Friedman and Valenti's 2008 edited collection Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power in a World Without Rape. They seek to lead didactically: by example. And the boldness of the sexualised bodies present suggests that this has been, for those activists and to some degree, achieved. And this example of "ves"ness is also the aspiration of freedom from the tyrannies of body image: collectively, or often, these are not bodies supposedly understood as "worthy" of display, but bodies that happen to be on display. Notes from Nowhere find, of such carnival-inflected protests: "... carnival brings the body back to public space; not the perfect smooth bodies that promote consumption on billboards and magazines, not the manipulated plastic bodies of MTV and party political broadcasts, but the body of warm flesh. of blood and guts, organs and orifices."11 Empowerment here is found along the lines of Stonewall and gay/queer protests: "out and proud," transcending prejudicial imperatives that would otherwise police what is and is not deemed acceptable in terms of difference.

The confusion of the bystanders seemed to be that this is a march of "yes" for the right to say "no." And for whose right? The marchers seem not to speak of themselves so much as their oppressed brothers and sisters. But, at the same time, this affective and existential example—of "being a slut," shame-free, and in pubic—seeks to shift the paradigm of all forms of sexual identity: an extant exemplar of behaviour that others then find their own behaviour defined in relation to. The commonality across all positions is that sense of absolute ownership of one's body, which extends both to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Notes from Nowhere, "Carnival: Resistance is the Secret of Joy," in Notes from Nowhere, We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism (London: Verso, 2003), 175.

presentation ("my hot body") and to sexual autonomy: "My cunt is mine to give, not yours to take," "It's my hot body —I do what I want" (emphasis added).

SlutWalk Manchester occurred on 20 June 2011, and ploughed noisily through the city centre in the afternoon, entangling those leaving offices at the end of the day. Unlike in London-where rain had blighted that bastion of the public sexualisation of women, the Wimbledon Tennis Championships—the weather was fine. The march wended its way from the square outside the Town Hall (where journalists gathered to interview participants) to the well-heeled commercial and social stretch of Deansgate, on past up-market stores Selfridges and Harvey Nichols (where, for a moment, it seemed as if the police might kettle the marchers; seemingly no "permission" had been sought for the event), and then on into the scruffy and "bohemian" Northern Quarter of the city. Press and freelance photographers were present, and some then sought to sell the images back to participants via their websites. The images I took I left on social media. 12 Some three years later, by which point SlutWalk seems to have vanished altogether, I contacted some of those who participated in the Manchester event. These images, and their thoughts and recollections, follow.



Fig. 3.1: The word slut should be reclaimed, but not sure it is there yet. All insults are worth reclaiming, especially ones used so dangerously against women. Reclaiming does work, but it's a difficult journey and not all words make it. I'm not certain slut will.

I wore regular clothes, not confident at my age to wear sexualised clothes. I brought my Queer Resistance Against The Cuts banner.



Fig. 3.2: I wore normal everyday clothes, to reinforce the idea that what you choose to wear has no bearing on your risk of being raped. I went as part of Manchester Feminist Network.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Such a strategy makes the discussion in this chapter difficult: the danger is ever present of effectively offering a universalising interpretation or extracting an ideological position that at best has questionable legitimacy and at worse entirely misrepresents. However, the spectacle of SlutWalk itself is one that elicits responses, valid or otherwise. A further limitation of this chapter is that it considers hetero- or homo-normative "sluttishness," arising from the experience of the majority of activists encountered, rather than affording an equal consideration to the minority, in stratas associated with alt-sex, and trans communities, as well as men also marching ("Men of quality respect women's equality"), and the disabled.



Fig. 3.3: I was involved in helping to organise Slut Walk. I wore my clothes—just whatever clothes I had to hand. I spent the day making banners, liaising with press and in the event was a steward and police liaison.



Fig 3.4: I joined SlutWalk because I believed in protesting against the idea that what a woman wears affects her likelihood of getting raped. This idea is not only factually incorrect but very damaging since it encourages victim blaming.

The term 'SlutWalk' is an empowering term because it was coined as a reclamation of a term that was used to insult—by a male police officer. The term is reclaimed to provide it with different meanings—whatever meanings those it has been used [against] as an insult [now] want it to represent about them. Any word that is used to subjugate a group should be reclaimed if that group wants to.



Fig. 3.5: It was empowering to not have told the police our route. As an organiser, it was wondrous to see so many people there and such a good atmosphere. My main thoughts were around ensuring people didn't walk too quickly (so the pace was set by the slowest person), and that the police didn't intimidate or harass us.

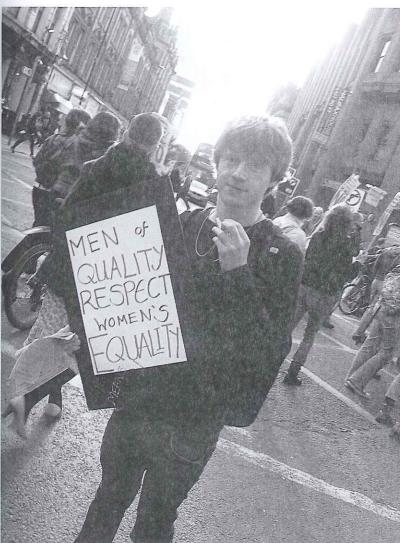


Fig. 3.6: I found it empowering and great fun. It felt like being on a huge hen party! It's the only march I have been on that GREW, as women we passed cheered us on and then joined in. The best fun march.



Fig. 3.7: I found the chanting empowering, along with the general sense that we were united in our outrage about the original comments made by Constable Michael Sanguinetti. However, I found that the occasional presence of men standing outside bars with pints [of beer] in their hands and cheering on scantily-clad women undermined the cause somewhat.

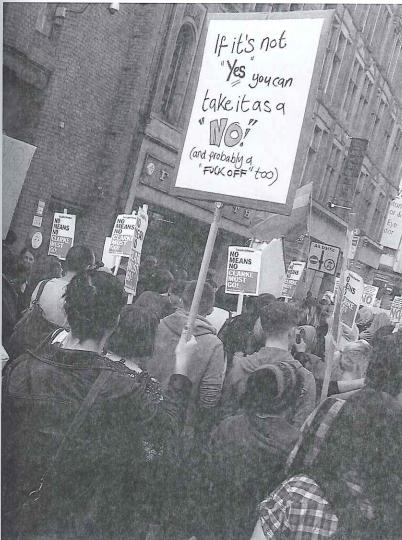


Fig. 3.8: I feel uncomfortable about reclaiming a word with such negative connotations. However, I felt that it was important that as many people as possible protested against the attitude that what women wear can cause them to be raped so I put my doubts aside and took part.



Fig. 3.9: I remember telling friends how great it was, and wished they'd been there. Not many of my friends and family expressed strong opinions on the event, which may or may not be due to a lack of understanding of the SlutWalk message.



Fig. 3.10: My sister came on the march, and I knew lots of people there. I took the time to explain the reasoning to my parents, who were really on board with it.

Judging women's promiscuity and using it as rationale for gender-based violence is unacceptable and I don't associate with people who disagree with that!

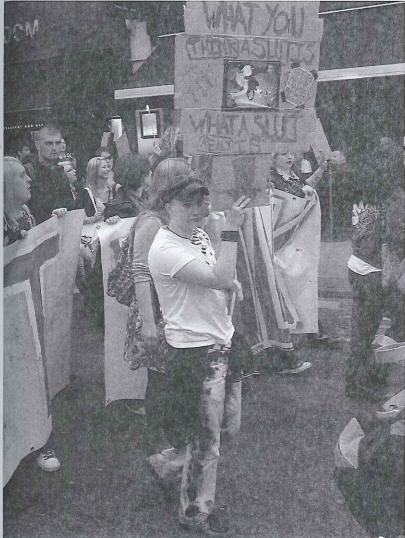


Fig. 3.11: Since women are disproportionately affected by rape and sexual abuse, these are feminist issues, but I do not necessarily see SlutWalk as a feminist protest. This is because the term SlutWalk can be easily confused with the "sexpositive" idea that women should be able to have many sexual partners and not be branded as "sluts." This is undoubtedly true but is more about sexual empowerment than feminism.



Fig. 3.12: At the time I was part of Manchester Feminist Network. We went on a lot of demonstrations, including ones we had organised ourselves, i.e. against the opening of a new Playboy night at Manchester 235 Casino and ones others had organised. I have also been on climate change marches.

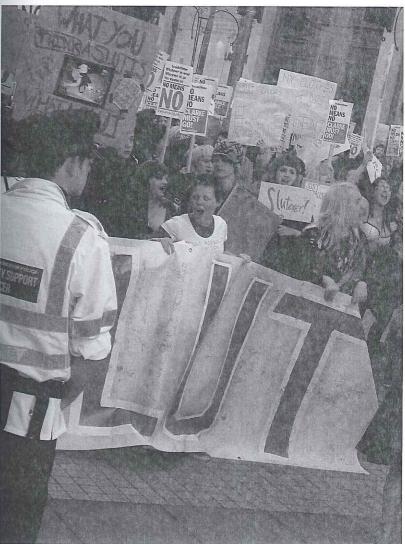


Fig. 3.13: I'm a feminist, and believe strongly that women have the right to wear what they want and feel safe.

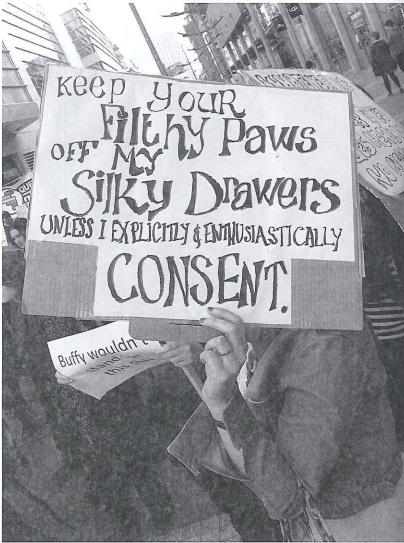


Fig. 3.14: I'm an active feminist who believes in women's rights to wear whatever we want and not be harassed because of it.



Fig. 3.15: [I am a] Feminist. I am from between the second and third waves, from the pro-sex, anti-separatist, Rebel Feminist Dykes of the 1980s.



Fig. 3.16: I'm not the kind of feminist that endorses sex work or pornography.



Fig. 3.17: I don't like to think of feminism in waves. I like that there are feminists who are still tackling the oppressive ideologies of trans exclusionary radical feminists and building views of feminism that are less set in binary gender ideas and show more solidarity and intersectionality between different groups and that don't place blame on women.



Fig. 3.18: We were stripping, and wore sexy clothes as Rebel Dyke Feminists in the 1980s, before third wave [feminism] had started!



Fig 3.19: [I think] stockings, short skirt, big boots, short hair and shaved heads is conventionally attractive! Certainly the men in the streets who shouted at us didn't seem to think so.

Terms such as "pussy" and even "cunt," on placards, are difficult to take as anything other than endearing: the former as warm slang, the latter as fierce and proud. "Uterus" however resonates in a quite different way: "My uterus doesn't expel rape sperm" was one slogan that seemed to shun sloganeering, gesturalism or just be content with shock value. The slogan, written on a body, was a statement of biological fact, and aligned the presence of bodies with the material threats that were being identified: this is the body that could be subject to rape, for these patterns or tropes of ("slutty") behaviour, as now demonstrated. A second front of placards announced that their bearers had indeed been victims of rape or sexual assault: "I was 7. Giving me cookies does not justify rape." The "fuck you"-style slogans, in addition to their sisterly solidarity, implied only a position against a system, in their zesty rejection of given mores and codes of behaviour. The parading of, or on behalf of, the individual's uterus,

suggested a more straightforward ontology: witnessing the condition of the body under rape culture, as prey to alien and enforced fertilisation. In this sense, the separations of bodies and sensibilities and desires, in discussions surrounding SlutWalk, seems muddle-headed. The insides and the outsides ought to be considered as one: as flesh. It is the flesh that desires or repels, that is subject to violence and pleasure. Sexual arousal is sensory and uterine.

Second Wave feminist-flavoured criticisms of SlutWalk as a manifestation of Third Wave feminism's reintroduction of, pace Armstrong and Rudúlph, "sexiness" or, pace Hakim, "erotic capital" (a subscribing to empowerment through the utilisation of aesthetic or sexual charisma), seems, in this context, to exist in a state of having overcome such dangers. That is: that the streets no longer need to be "reclaimed," the night no longer needs to be "taken back." That may be truer in such metropolitan centres, and especially for the stratas in which the commentariat can be found, but remains a privileged position nonetheless. The provocation of the statement "my uterus doesn't expel rape sperm" is that it effectively sheds light on the limited gains of the feminist struggle. That is: that the streets still need to be reclaimed, where the night becomes the time of imminent sexual danger. This reminder is particularly problematic for that generation whose position as interlocutors and custodians of feminism presupposes that the battle has long since shifted from the everyday and now occurs in, say, the rarefied environs of the board room, or on the grounds of identity politics. In that process-of quotas for female politicians and Managing Directors, and so ongesturalism begets gesturalism. The ontological exactitude of imminent danger and the uterus effectively speaks truth to this power. And the reintroduction of the actual body back into the fray suggests an activist continuum to the strategies of the militant suffragettes, whose bodies (via incarceration, hunger strikes and force-feeding) were also the sites of political struggle. The fight against rape culture in this way is aligned to the fight for democratic representation: the fundamental and necessary condition in which the female can fully enter society, and the inclusivity of this demand resonates in the sartorial "affronts" of SlutWalk. Which female bodies are to enter into society? Flesh that is queer, that is alt, that is non-"conventional," that is "hot?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For Inga Muscio in *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2002), but Germaine Greer's maxim "Lady, love your cunt" had first been voiced decades before.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Catherine Hakim, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2011).

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