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## "We're Taking Slut Back": Analyzing Racialized Gender Politics in Chicago's 2012 Slutwalk March

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“We’re Taking Slut Back”:

Analyzing Racialized Gender Politics in Chicago’s 2012 Slutwalk March

by

Aphrodite Kocięda

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis will examine “bodied” activism in Chicago’s Slutwalk 2012 march, a contemporary movement initiated in Toronto, Canada that publicly challenges the mainstream sentiment that women are responsible for their own rape and victimization. Adopting an intersectional approach, I will use textual analysis to discuss photographs posted on the official Chicago Slutwalk website to explore the ways this form of public bodied protest discursively engages women’s empowerment from movement feminism as well as third wave and post feminisms. I will additionally analyze the overall website and its promotional materials for the Slutwalk marches, as well as how Chicago’s photographic representations privilege the white female body as victim, demonstrating how the reclamation “slut” privileges whiteness. The website depictions normalize how one should react to a system of violence which provides negative implications for women and men who are situated in a postfeminist rape culture. Positioning my analysis within Communication/Cultural Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies, I will contribute to literature about rape culture and postfeminist activism with my analysis of Slutwalk. By employing intersectionality from feminist theory and textual analysis, I will demonstrate how Slutwalk’s promotion of bodied activism naturalizes postfeminism and excludes Black women from participating.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.”

~Toronto Police Officer

When a group of Toronto women came together to respond to an officer advising them about what to wear to prevent rape on the York University Campus, they launched a third-wave global movement called Slutwalk. Slutwalk is a form of bodied activism that challenges sexist ideas that women are responsible for sexual assault. In a rape culture, women are responsible for rape, and are expected to socially bear the burden of the assault. Rape culture has been an increasingly popular topic of analysis in mainstream media culture, ranging from discussions about Slutwalk marches, to victim-blaming in cases like Steubenville, Ohio where football players raped a 16 year old girl in 2012 (CNN Staff, 2013).

Slutwalk protests have helped propel women’s activism to the mainstream, and have facilitated the public interrogation of rape culture and patriarchy (Valenti, 2011). This thesis explores Slutwalk which is a form of public bodied protest. I analyze photographs from the 2012 Chicago Slutwalk march to describe how empowerment is articulated through language and dress by drawing from both movement feminism and postfeminism. I am interested in understanding how both the term “slut” and the style politics of the Slutwalk marchers privilege whiteness.

Three questions guide my analysis:

1. How is “slut” reclaimed?

2. How is feminist empowerment represented?
3. How is racialized gender communicated?

Research about Slutwalk is important because it is a contemporary dialogue that centers on the communicative strategies needed to combat oppression, and demonstrates how activist spaces can be sites that reinforce oppression. What started out as a local protest has rapidly transformed into a transnational movement with Slutwalk marches taking place all over the world (Armstrong, 2011). Though Slutwalk organizers never explicitly define their movement as feminist, blogger Jessica Valenti (2011) writes, “In just a few months, Slutwalks have become the most successful feminist action of the past 20 years.” The discussion of Slutwalk is not confined to the popular press. Scholars from Ratna Kapur (2012) to Joel Gwynne (2012) have written about the protests, although they have not framed their research with a postfeminist lens. My research extends their work by describing this recent form of bodied activism. My research contributes to the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies and Gender and Women’s Studies by addressing the ways the protest reproduces porn chic (i.e. popular pornography) and postfeminism through articulations of empowerment. By examining the way porn chic and postfeminism coalesce in Slutwalk, I can demonstrate how patriarchal domination is reproduced in this activist space, and works to exclude Black women from participating.

### **Communication and Cultural Studies**

Because Slutwalk is such a new phenomenon, scholarship about Slutwalk in the field of Communication and Cultural Studies is sparse. There is a significant body of literature about gender representation that takes up rape culture and feminism (Barnett, 2008; Droogsma, 2009; Enck, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Lule, 1995). Sarah Projansky for example, connects a postfeminist media culture with rape narratives in media and popular culture. She contends that postfeminist



narratives blame women for rape and excludes Black women from victimhood (2001, p.232). I point to Projansky for two reasons: (1) she demonstrates how postfeminism can contribute to rape culture, (2) and, by integrating intersectionality, she identifies how rape narratives privilege a particular racialized body. In my thesis, I also analyze the racialized, gendered dynamics of the Slutwalk marches.

Rachel Griffin (2013) and Jack Lule (1995) also adopt an intersectional approach to reading race and gender in the rape case of Mike Tyson in which Black women have been seen as unrapeable because of their status as hypersexualized Jezebels, and Black men as deviant, hyper-sexed criminals (Collins, 2004) . In “Gender Violence and the Black Female Body: The Enduring Significance of ‘Crazy’ Mike Tyson,” Griffin argues the public attack of Desiree Washington, the rape victim of then heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson, was due to racism and sexism. This “reveal[s] how the discursive treatment of both Washington and Tyson continues to sustain the frightening precedent in U.S. American society to dismiss men’s violence against Black women” (p.75).

For Lule, Mike Tyson was demonized after his 1992 rape conviction of Desiree Washington. Lule argues that the press used his trial as a way to project prevailing racist stereotypes about Black men’s sexualities onto Tyson. Though Lule’s article focuses on Black men, the author’s arguments might speak to the complicated terrain surrounding Black women and their solidarity with Black men who commit acts of sexual violence (No! Rape Documentary, 2006) . Racialized solidarity can perpetuate Black women’s silence.

### **Gender and Women’s Studies**

There is specific scholarship about Slutwalk and an extensive body of literature about rape culture and postfeminism in Gender and Women’s Studies. It is important to note that the

categories outlining communication and cultural studies, and gender and women's studies overlap because of the interdisciplinary nature of the fields where researchers in both spaces analyze race and gender representations in media and popular culture. In chapter two, I discuss postfeminism and its relationship to third wave and Black feminism. Most of the scholarly discussions about Slutwalk take place abroad (Borah & Subhalakshim, 2013; Gwynne, 2012; Kapur, 2012). For example, Rituparna Borah and Subhalakshmi Nandi discuss Slutwalk in India and whether India even needs a Slutwalk because feminists have been protesting against sexual harassment for years. Additionally, the authors discuss the subversive politics in Slutwalk because of its ability to build alliances. Joel Gwynne's article, "Slutwalk, Feminist Activism and the Foreign Body in Singapore" discusses Slutwalk's relevance to the local communities in Singapore, and how they re-frame the march to ensure they respect the conservative beliefs of the community. Though discussions have already centered on Slutwalk, none of them talk about postfeminism. While some authors address style politics, the authors do not frame it through the lens of porn chic. Moreover, Black women's organizing activist practices are overlooked. My research not only integrates Black feminist perspectives, but offers a close reading of a popular Chicago-based Slutwalk that included Black women.

*Feminist Studies* published a special issue on Slutwalk marches where the authors shared personal conflicting views and experiences (O'Reilly, Altman, Mitra, & Miriam, 2012). In "Slut Pride: A Tribute to Slutwalk Toronto," Andrea O'Reilly said, "the misconception, now unfortunately accepted by many, that the organizers excluded certain groups from the movement, including transgender people, sex workers, and women of color" (2012, p.247). While O'Reilly celebrates the Slutwalk marches and the appropriation of the term slut, she fails to account for the racial politics of rape. Concerns about inclusiveness are dismissed as complaints. Kathy

Miriam (2012) challenges O'Reilly by talking about the postfeminist, neoliberal tones in Slutwalk where women "own" their own individual bodies and can do "whatever" they choose with them. She argues that in capitalism, women do not own their sexualities because they are always under the pressure of a marketplace to tailor their bodies to serve men. She adds, "The structural causes of how women dress and adorn ourselves as a class are obfuscated by the emphasis on individual self-determination" (p.263). Miriam is one of the few scholars to take up Black women's concerns with Slutwalk specifically. She refers to two transnational feminist organizations that place women of color at the center of their analyses of rape culture: Black Women's Blueprint and Af3im, a transnational, anti-imperialist organization.

Miriam suggests that these two organizations offer a new way of looking at group-based violence. By centering the analysis on the women most burdened by the violence, we can construct critiques and resistance movements that are inclusive to different groups. The special issue on the march helps to better understand the contemporary race and gender politics in body activism. Miriam's critique and intersectional approach facilitates my argument that Slutwalk provides a discursive space of privilege where certain groups are seen as "rape-able" and are recognized as victims.

Scholars like Miriam question the tactics Slutwalk uses to raise awareness about rape culture. One of the most divisive debates stems from the term slut. Reclaiming the term is one of the projects of Slutwalk (see O'Keefe, 2011). Amanda Marcotte (2011) said, "If we can't have a laugh while fighting this fight, we're going to drown in despair. Slutwalkers get this. People have strove to have laugh-out-loud signs and half the crowd was wearing outfits sending up the ridiculousness of the very idea that one can objectively define 'dressing slutty.'" Reclaiming slut and bitch deal with gender politics but might be engaged in different projects, considering the

pornographic conventions in the march. The appropriation of the term “bitch” underwent similar scrutiny in the 1980s and the 1990s during the dawn of third wave feminism. Sheryl Kleinman, Matthew B. Ezzell, and A. Corey Frost (2009) detail the evolution of the term “bitch” and its use in popular culture as both a harmful term to exert dominance over women, as well as a slur that women use in a friendly way. It too has ignited another debate within feminism after self-identified feminists such as Beyoncé use it to convey power. Like some scholars, I suggest the appropriation of the term slut has its limits because it is steeped in patriarchal, misogynistic attitudes towards women’s sexualities and impacts populations of women differently (Black Women's Blueprint, 2011; Dines & Murphy, 2011).

### **Popular Feminism, Popular Culture**

In my thesis, I use (and critique) popular feminism, or a particular type of feminism primarily favored by young women who value economic and social equality between the sexes. This strand of feminism is interested in empowerment and liberation, as well as popular representations that showcase women as empowered subjects. In my definition, popular feminism uses popular cultural texts and events as sites of analysis and does not necessarily rely on the academy for activism. Blogging is especially central to popular feminism. Well-known popular feminist Jessica Valenti is the epitome of what pop feminism is. Not only did she create the blog, Feministing, she has written books for young women like *Full Frontal Feminism* (2007) and *He’s a Stud, She’s a Slut* (2009). She is very vocal about rape culture and women’s subordination. For example, Valenti (2008) published an anthology called, *Yes Means Yes: Visions of a Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*. The anthology is devoted to understanding rape culture by discussing “victim-blaming” and consent; however, there is no critical discussion of race. Unlike Valenti, feminist academics writing for a hip hop feminist blog

called the Crunk Feminist Collective tackle Slutwalk as it intersects race. One post in particular compares the “hoodie marches” for the slain Florida Black teen Trayvon Martin to the Slutwalk marches. Both marches use certain clothing such as the hoodies and the stiletto heel, which signify racial and sexual deviance. Both marchers wear these items to call attention to culturally coded bodies. The Crunk Feminist Collective writer” states, “I felt like there was simply much more at stake to ask a woman of color to come and actively identify as a slut, than was at stake for the white women who readily jumped on the bandwagon” (2012, “Why I Supported the Hoodie March). Scholars who problematize Slutwalk also state that “slut” is irrelevant to the goals of feminism and ending rape culture (Dines & Murphy, 2011). Slut is ingrained in the Madonna/Whore complex and is associated with the pornographic female subject who is punished for being sexual. Slut might be beyond recuperation. Together, the concern about reclaiming slut highlights differences between feminist academics and activists, and the different feminist perspectives that inform feminist activism.

Slutwalk repackages rape and modes of activism for mass consumption in popular culture. This is a form of commodity feminism. Commodity feminism is a type of women’s empowerment hijacked by consumer culture that seeks to reduce the central political core of the feminist project to marketable products (McRobbie, 2008, p.532). While I do not examine commodity feminism in detail, it informs how I interpret postfeminism as it relates to the celebration of sexuality. Feminists argue that the instrumentalization of feminism for market-based consumption leads to a depoliticized, watered-down popular feminism where structural critiques are silenced in favor of a fun, sexy type of individual liberation (Dines, 2010a; Gill, 2012; Hains, 2009; McRobbie, 2008).

This particular type of “popular feminism” relies upon commodity feminism which presents a time and space for women to demonstrate their equality through economic means, typified through shopping, or through their ability to stylize their bodies.

Miriam states:

The personal, which was hitherto by definition political, has now been reprivatized as the domain of individual choices comprising one’s consumer-modeled identity. In this context, political consciousness need not interfere with women’s personal choices of dress, sexualization, or self-presentation...in this kind of feminism, political consciousness can be added and stirred without fear of chemical reaction-with little challenge to the very structure of our everyday life. (2012, pp.265-6)

The problematic relationship young women possess in relation to consumer culture can be seen in some representations of the third wave (McRobbie, 2008, p.547) and postfeminist porn culture. The Chicago Slutwalk highlights marchers who wear clothing associated with sex work. If the body becomes the dominant site to showcase liberation, then this form of style politics becomes a way to fashion (sexual) freedom in Slutwalk. Using the logic of sexiness in regards to the clothing is both ironic and tragic, considering many women come dressed in clothes from their rape. Marcotte states, “The way the media portrays Slutwalk, you’d think women were using sex to sell an anti-rape message. It is true that many of us were scantily clad or rocking the fishnets (though with our tongues firmly in our cheeks), but I would actually say that Slutwalk uses an anti-rape message to sell sex positivity as much as anything else (2011). Marcotte suggests the sexy clothing is intended to contest rape and celebrate sexuality, which I find problematic within the context of commodity feminism. Commodity feminism and empowerment are steeped in ideas about what constitutes sexiness and sexuality. Consumer

culture suggests that women should buy to attain a particular look and political identity, wrapped up in ideas of liberation.

Consumer culture is also largely guided by porn culture, which is a term that describes the mainstreaming of pornographic elements and values into everyday society (Collins, 2004; Dines, 2010a; Evans & Shankar, 2010, Kinnick, 2007; Levy, 2006a; McRobbie, 2004). The lines between pornography and mainstream popular representations of sexuality are blurred. Pornographic conventions are employed to signify “authentic” representations of sex and sexuality in popular culture. Feminists have historically battled pornography’s function in feminism during the “porn wars” in the 1970’s and 80s, producing “sex-positive” feminists and “anti-porn” feminists; however, there is still a contemporary fracture between feminists in regards to pornography. Some feminists argue that pornography is merely a representation of a sexual fantasy that grants individual women autonomy and agency to explore their sexuality (Thorne, 2011, Dec. 16; The Pervocracy, 2011, Oct. 21), and other feminists argue that pornography is an institutionalized product, made for mass consumption, that sexualizes subordination, and eroticizes racialized stereotypes (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, A, 1998, p.23). In Chapter 3, I show how sexy clothes signify women’s sexual “freedom.”

Mainstream porn culture fuels postfeminist notions of “individual empowerment” by privileging the individual when confronted with claims of structural inequality. As long as the individual woman feels empowered in porn, regardless of how demeaning the sexual acts are, critique of the larger structures of inequality are seemingly no longer relevant. I am arguing that pornography is a business, constructing products for mass consumption, rather than a site of sexual expression or liberation, especially within the context of commodity feminism and

postfeminism. Though women can and do experience pleasure in pornography and sex performances, I am looking at porn as an institution rather than an individualized feeling.

Mainstream pornographic culture also can participate in the trivialization of rape that women experience by employing rape narratives in their sexual plots (Dines, 2010, p.96-7). Postfeminist media culture not only incorporates porn chic aesthetics to conjure up sexual empowerment, but also integrates notions of the individual that neglects collective or group-based activism associated with feminist politics. In order for women to showcase that they are sexual, they must look to the pornographic conventions to guide their sexual outfit choice. The emphasis on the individual to address empowerment serves as the blueprint for imagined solutions within the Chicago Slutwalk march. The myopic focus on the individual in all instances participates in the silencing of structural blame and critique.

Although efforts to challenge rape culture are seen in the Slutwalk marchers' posters, the Chicago Slutwalk website appears to reify rape culture ideology and postfeminism through their consistent focus on the individual. Postfeminist media culture advertises how attaining sexual liberation and freedom is an individual depoliticized enterprise. Success is your responsibility. Therefore, in using the logic of postfeminism and rape culture, if a woman is raped or sexually harassed, one *could* argue that claiming victimhood becomes problematic when she went "too far" with her sexual representation. I argue that in postfeminism and rape culture, going "too far" ironically refers to a woman's sexual representation, not a man's action where the woman is expected to take responsibility for her looks. Within a postfeminist rape culture, women are already policed, which makes discussions about empowerment difficult.

Slutwalk is part of a larger conversation about the mode, the medium and method of women's activism (Valenti, 2011, June 3). Cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner reminds



us that, "... difficult discriminations must be made as to whether the resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive" (2011, p. 14). The compulsory association of activism with automatic progress can prevent progress from occurring and can actually perpetuate violence.

Slutwalk is becoming a space reserved for white, sexy women who fight for the right to be sexy, rather than fight to end gender discrimination. Rather than movement feminism, I see Chicago Slutwalk as an extension of postfeminism because it overlooks collective or group-based activism by women from different backgrounds, ignores history of racialized gender violence, and it neglects an intersectional critique of interlocking systems of oppression today. My analysis of Slutwalk is significant for Communication/Cultural Studies and Women's and Gender Studies because it disrupts the contemporary celebratory literature about sex-positive, bodied activism by calling attention to the exclusion of race in gendered analyses, and extends contemporary literature on white-centered postfeminist activism in Communication Studies and Women's Studies by demonstrating how activism can be the platform for the replication, communication, and naturalization of oppression.

## CHAPTER TWO

### (POST)FEMINISM(S), INTERSECTIONALITY, AND POST-RAPE LOGIC IN SLUTWALK

“In this new formulation of raunch feminism, stripping is as valuable to elevating womankind as gaining an education or supporting rape victims. Throwing a party where women grind against each other in their underwear while fully clothed men watch them is suddenly part of the same project as marching on Washington for reproductive rights” (Levy, 2006, p.75).

Popular feminist author and blogger, Jessica Valenti (2011) states, “Slutwalks stand out as a reminder of feminism’s more grassroots past and point to what the future could look like.” Though Slutwalk never explicitly defines their movement as “feminist” they draw upon visual imagery and discourse of the second-wave feminist movement to bolster ideas of empowerment. Therefore, in this chapter, I will demonstrate how third wave and white-centered, postfeminist articulations of empowerment and individual sexual liberation guide the logic in Slutwalk’s protest of rape culture. Within this logic, a porn-based consumer culture is celebrated where an emancipated femininity is constructed. In emancipated femininity women have the “right” to be sexy (Lazar, 2011, p.41). Since porn culture trivializes rape by featuring rape as a staple narrative in its plots (Dines, 2010, p.96-7), I argue that the coupling of porn culture with postfeminist activism constructs a post-rape logic, which becomes ironic when used to fight rape culture.

Organizers of the Chicago Slutwalk march (2012) argue that, “Slutwalk Chicago aims to combat the myth of ‘the slut’ and the culture of victim blaming that prevails the world over.” Therefore, in the Slutwalk marches, “slut” is used as a signifier for a sexual free woman who can act and dress as she pleases. I will draw from Intersectionality theory and Black Feminism to

demonstrate how the rape of Black women is publicly consumed differently than the rape of white women, and consequently demonstrates how Black women cannot participate in the porn-chic postfeminist appropriation of “slut.” Black women are invited to participate in Slutwalk as gendered bodies, erasing their racialized experiences of rape (Black Women’s Blueprint, 2011).

### **Third Wave, Intersectionality and Postfeminisms**

Third wave feminism, which is often confused with postfeminism is comprised of multiple agendas (Heywood, 2006) born from the critiques of second-wave feminism. Third-wave feminists seek to harbor inclusive qualities that highlight racial and ethnic differences, as well as religious differences. Third wave feminism became popularized through Rebecca Walker’s 1992 article in Ms. magazine where she stated, “I am not a post-feminist feminist, I am the third wave” (Heywood, 2006, p.3). Walker’s article was written in response to the Clarence Thomas controversy where Anita Hill accused him of sexually harassing her. That same year, the Third Wave’s first organized project, “Freedom Summer Riders” reached out and helped 20,000 people register to vote (Third Wave, “About”). The “Third Wave Foundation” founded by Walker and activist, Shannon Liss, fosters grassroots feminist organizing for “youth most impacted by inequity” (“About”).

Gillis and Mumford (2006) point out that some of the strongest voices of the third wave came from those in the grrl culture which centered on music and zines, and paved the way for a relationship between “feminism and popular culture that has been positioned by many second wave feminists as unavoidably antagonistic” (p.169). Magazines like *Bitch* and *Bust* are central to this particular wave of feminism (Gillis & Mumford, 2006; Snyder, 2008). Third wave has several components. R. Claire Snyder’s essay (2008), “What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay” outlines the different goals of the third wave movement, like rejecting grand

narratives that erase particular women's experiences, and prizing multivocality. Within this thread of feminism, Intersectionality is highlighted as a way to understand how oppression operates. Intersectionality theory states that "theory and research on inequality, dominance, and oppression must pay attention to the intersections of, at least race/ethnicity, gender, and class" (Acker, 2006, p.442). Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) employment of "standpoint theory" in *Black Feminist Thought* demonstrates how Black women's lives are complicated by race, gender, and class; therefore, only focusing on white women's experiences as the central experience of oppression is limiting. Third wave offered to amplify voices from women of color whose oppression was largely unexamined in second-wave feminism. Though there are different nuanced versions of third wave and postfeminism, Slutwalk draws upon a more mainstream, white-centered articulation of both. "White" here is defined as a "relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible...it affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists...any characterization that would allow for a mapping of its contours" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p.88). In 1979, Adrienne Rich coined the phrase, "white solipsism" which states that all of culture and analysis is based on the white body and experience (Williams, 2013, p.6). Third wave's representation in the media began to slowly shift into a white-centered, post-feminist brand that drowned out voices of women of color. It has been noted that grrl power's transformation to a sanitized, de-politicized "girl power" helped propel postfeminist articulations of empowerment. According to Sue Jackson and Tiina Varres (2011):

As a media (re)production, Girl Power offers girls 'power', independence and choice, all of which may be seen as having continuity with feminist goals. The 'twist' or departure point is marked by the modes of accomplishment; consumption, (hetero) sexuality and reclamation of a 'girlie' femininity that draws on a discourse of emphasized femininity

(Connell, 1987). Some refer to this ‘brand’ of feminism as commodity feminism, others Third Wave feminism and others postfeminism; there tends to be considerable conflation as well as debate about the relationships (p.136).

Postfeminism is a fragmented movement couched in rhetoric that centers on the de-politicized individual (Braithwaite, 2002; Gill, 2007; Hains, 2009; McRobbie, 2004). Some refer to postfeminism as a backlash (McRobbie, 2004), while others a sensibility (Gill, 2007).

Postfeminism, as a backlash, is a phenomenon, characterized by generational rebellion from young women who overtly discard the idea that they are oppressed or held back (Levy, 2006; Springer, 2002). In postfeminist media culture, white women are usually depicted as the central focus of the backlash. Astrid Henry (2004) critiques the idea of “sisterhood” in her book, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, critiquing the sisterhood metaphor for third wave women and second-wave feminists. Henry also outlines how the “sisterhood” metaphor does not necessarily apply to the relationships women of color have. Some Black feminists regard postfeminism as an era that carries on the same mission of the generation before but with new tactics. In discussing Black feminist, Joan Morgan, Kimberly Springer (2002) states:

The popular press’s use of the term postfeminist signifies a uniquely liberated, sexy, young woman who believes that feminism is dead or all the battles have been won.

Morgan uses the prefix post to signal the end of a particular era of tactics and action. She in no way indicates that the goals or hopes of those movements were fulfilled or are no longer relevant to current generations (p.1067).

Therefore, in discussing white-centered postfeminism, I am drawing upon popular representations in media culture to guide my analysis of Slutwalk. Mainstream media culture has

its own articulations of postfeminism that popularly inform how the public should consume images and ideas associated with feminist activism. The media focuses on "...women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (Gill, 2012, p.12). Consequently, in mainstream postfeminist praxis, the collective spirit of resistance characterized in second-wave feminism and parts of third wave feminism transforms into a completely individualized revolution, void of a political base. Ann Braithwaite (2002) notes how the "post" in postfeminism has popularly transformed into "anti" feminism (p.337). The individual is seemingly autonomous and dictates what liberation is, and looks like; consequently, women discard the label "feminist" because of its anachronistic connotations (Acosta-Alzuru 2003; McRobbie, 2004; Williams and Wittig, 1997; Zucker, 2004). Through postfeminism, historically sexist spaces become spheres of liberation and empowerment for the individual. "A grammar of individualism underpins all these notions -- such that even experiences of racism or homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal as political on its head" (Gills, p.11).

Postfeminism operates in conjunction with power-feminism, a term coined by feminist Naomi Wolf who states that women have "enormous power" in both financial and political arenas (Hains, 2009, p.89). She argues that feminism fails to inspire women when it only represents women as victims of patriarchy. Therefore, one could argue that power feminism and post-feminism use a "post-victimhood" logic, meaning women do not have access to being victims. Postfeminism's post-victimhood status conflicts with Slutwalk's focus on rape culture, where women are positioned as victims of rape.

Mainstream media culture's grammar of individualism in postfeminism erases Black women's particularly nuanced experiences in American society as "groups" rather than

“individuals.” Collins (2004) argues that the status of “individual” is inherently a white privileged enterprise that Black populations do not have access to, considering people of color are not granted individual citizenship status. Though gender itself is a category that forces individuals into groups, whiteness grants a particular type of individual citizenship status that can transcend gender. Collins (2004) states:

Across these different racial formations, one commonality is that the closer one approaches Whiteness, the more likely one is to be seen as an individual and to be granted the rights of first-class citizenship. ..White privilege enables White Americans to avoid confronting how being members of a racial group generates the privileges they enjoy-in this case, individuality itself (p.179).

Therefore, Slutwalk’s celebration and re-appropriation of “slut” packaged in an individualized fashion uses a logic of whiteness that privileges white women’s experiences.

### **“Emancipated Femininity” and “Feminist-Speak” in Postfeminist Activism**

Slutwalk draws upon a particular type of second-wave politicized rhetoric to accomplish their performance of feminist activism. Not only do the marchers coalesce in a collective manner that gives the illusion of group-based collective protest, they also draw upon slogans and verbiage that align with the second-wave. Though they conjure up images of second-wave, they couple second-waves’ politicization, with the watered-down, individualized logic in postfeminism and some factions of third wave. Michelle Lazar uses the phrase “emancipated femininity” in her essay (2011), “The Right to Be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty” as a way to describe the phenomenon of consumer culture advertising liberation to women through their products. Lazar states, “the beauty project is an extension of women’s right

to freedom and liberation...the consumerist discourse of emancipation-centering on rights, freedoms and choices-purportedly speaks to the concerns of feminists” (p.38).

In Lazar’s piece, she deconstructs several advertisements for products that use the discourse of “emancipation” to conjure up nostalgia for feminist action and activism. Freedom, in the consumerist discourse, refers to the ability to be beautiful, wear anything, and flaunt everything (p. 40) She adds “Conformity to the narrow beauty ideals, paradoxically, is represented as freedom of expression for women” (p. 40). Postfeminist beauty ideals; however, function to conjure up the male gaze. Therefore, in women celebrating the de-politicized “right” to be beautiful, they are celebrating the mediated images packaged by patriarchy that relies on visual tropes of sexiness for women. Postfeminist media culture suggests that women should use these tropes to construct their own sexual identities; women go from being sex object, to a “desiring sexual subject.” (Gill, 2007, p. 154). I argue that white-centered postfeminist media culture embraces sexism and patriarchy, but couches sexist ideas in second-wave feminist jargon to look “authentically” feminist.

In Lazar’s piece, she notes that advertisers and companies accomplish nostalgia for feminist activism by using “feminist-speak” that “combines resonances of second-wave feminist sentiments with popular postfeminist ones” (p. 41). She provides examples of phrases used in ads for products like, ““women’s empowerment”; ‘women...unite’; ‘the struggle’” (p. 41). Within these linguistic constructions, ideas of being beautiful and consuming to maintain beauty are conflated with political activism. Within consumerist discourse, feminist consciousness is coupled with a femininity concerned with beauty and consumption (p. 37). Through consumer culture, feminism becomes a commodified entity concerned with attaining products as the “activism” instead of political critiques.



Angela McRobbie states:

Within the last decade a substantial sector of the commercial domain has embraced notions of gender equality...and has used this ideal as a means of generating and disseminating more energetic, confident and assertive accounts of girlhood and young womanhood (Jean-Luc Nancy 2000). This process can be seen in the fields of popular music, girls' and women's magazines, cinema, television and advertising. (2008, p.533)

The commodification of feminist activism in the third wave and postfeminist climate constructs another de-politicized strain of feminism called Commodity feminism. Though my interrogation of Slutwalk does not specifically rely upon notions of commodity feminism, it is still an integral part of postfeminist media culture. Commodity feminism presents a time and space for women to demonstrate their equality (read as economic equality) where "celebration" is the primary goal. Essentially, this new market rationality becomes embodied for women. Commodity feminism is most typified in mainstream media culture, which centralizes on middle-class women who demonstrate their liberation through shopping and attaining items. The popular film, "Sex and the City" is most demonstrative of commodity feminism where women seemingly have personal choices and independence (McRobbie, 2008, p.533). Choice rhetoric in postfeminist media culture helps in conjuring up images of successful liberation and empowerment.

Choice rhetoric used to refer to the second-wave struggle of attaining access to safe abortions (Lazar, 2011, p. 43). Postfeminist activists use "feminist-speak" to give the illusion of political activism or protest, and employ "choice" as a way to anchor their critiques. Instead of "choice" referring to political choices that relate to the systemic inequality, "choice" transforms

into a buzz-word to facilitate the mainstreaming of postfeminist logic, like the choice to wear heels, the choice to wear make-up, or the choice to be sexually empowered:

The language of choice gradually permeated woman's decision-making in other domains and paved the way for a culture of 'choice feminism'. Coined by Hirschman, 'choice feminism' indexes the shift to personal (rather than social and political) choices made by women in the domains such as paid work, domesticity and parenting, sexuality, as well as grooming (2011, p.43).

Therefore, the shift from the political to the de-politicized personal is facilitated by feminist-speak which gives automatic legitimacy to postfeminist claims, which are couched in second-wave language. "Sexist media has also caught on to this trend. This kind of language is used to justify the objectification of women's bodies." (Meghan Murphy, 2011). Thus, a performance of second-wave political feminism is employed by Slutwalk march protesters who use feminist-speak to talk about rape as well as sexual empowerment. Slutwalk becomes reduced to women stating that they have the "right" to wear what they want, and come dressed in those outfits. Therefore, critiquing postfeminist clothing choices becomes conflated with "judging" an individual woman and slut-shaming. Slut-shaming is a phrase referring to the intentional act of degrading or shaming a woman's character because of her sexuality and sexual choices (Kramer, 2013). Because postfeminism is centered on individual choice, discussing a "system" or "culture" of domination becomes ironic. Women are seemingly no longer constrained by a system which is why using postfeminist empowerment to fight rape culture and patriarchy sends mixed messages. The inclusion of pornographic conventions in postfeminist articulations of empowerment further adds to the paradox of using postfeminism to combat rape culture.

## **“Gang-banging” Liberation: Porn-Chic Post-Feminist Empowerment**

Porn culture is a phrase that describes the mainstreaming of values, attitudes, and imagery regularly found in porn into everyday cultural texts and events (Dines, 2010a; Kinnick, Jackson & Vares, 2011). The hyper-visibility of characters found in porn or the sex industry on mainstream television demonstrates the rising popularity and influence of pornography in everyday society. “Porn is so synonymous with sex to such an extent that to critique porn is to critique sex” (Dines, 2010, p.5). For example, Howard Stern, who is a radio host of the “Howard Stern Show” which features porn stars, strippers and sex workers, is now a judge for the family show, *America’s Got Talent* (Hibbard, 2011), and former Playboy Playmate of the Year, Jenny McCarthy is a new host on the View (Lewis, 2013). The blending of porn and mainstream pop culture is almost unrecognizable. In 2013, the music video for Robin Thicke’s song, “Blurred Lines” featured topless women (Murphy, 2013; Puente, 2013), and Justin Timberlake also cast naked women in his music video for the song “Tunnel Vision” (Murphy, 2013). Actress and singer, Miley Cyrus removed all of her clothes for her music video, “Wrecking Ball” (Toomey, 2013), and in October 2013, Cyrus was offered one million dollars to direct a pornographic video by Adult Entertainment Company (Burke, 2013).

The mainstreaming of porn into every day society gives birth to a term called porn chic (Jackson & Vares, 2011, p.136) which alludes to pornographic representations, most evidenced in clothing that reflects postfeminist sexual empowerment, like thongs or shirts that say “porn star” (Kinnick, 2007). “A sexually empowered, confident, fun-loving subject (Machin and Thonborrow, 2003; McRobbie, 2009) inhabits the postfeminist wardrobe where, for example, T-shirts variously proclaim a bold sexual desire or allude to the (sexy) body underneath (Gill, 2007) and the thong conveys a ‘naughty’ but liberated sexuality borrowed from mainstreamed

pornographic chic” (p.135). Porn has seamlessly pervaded all of pop culture, from films to commercials. Carl's Jr. sandwich ads are known to feature hyper-sexualized models who remove their clothes while the camera pans all over their bodies (Buzzfeed Staff, 2013).

Porn-chic femininity has also been seeping into feminist activism. The feminist activist group, FEMEN, uses blonde, thin women to go topless to bring mainstream attention to systemic issues, like homophobia and religious violence (Macnab, 2013). The founder of FEMEN, Victor Svyatski “hand-picked the prettiest girls because the prettiest girls sell more papers...the prettiest girls get on the front of the page...that became their image” (Macnab, 2013) FEMEN also stages sexual protests where they use pornographic imagery to get media attention.

Even anti-animal abuse organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), recruits porn stars to “go naked” to end animal abuse. They have used porn stars like Jenna Jameson, Ron Jeremy, Sasha Grey and Pamela Anderson to feature in their ads (PETA, 2011). In regards to Slutwalk and rape culture, Rebecca Traister (2011) of the New York Times states, “To object to these ugly characterizations is right and righteous. But to do so while dressed in what look like sexy stewardess Halloween costumes seems less like victory than capitulation (linguistic and sartorial) to what society already expects of its young women.” In the New York City Slutwalk march, a woman was dancing on a mobile stripper pole, while other women wore corsets, or were topless (Doyle, 2011). Although the Slutwalk Chicago website (2012) advertises all forms of dress for participants for their marches, the photo gallery shows women dressed in clothing aligned with sex work, or the cultural imagination of what a slut looks like. Lily Rose (2012) from DepauliaOnline.com states, “Hundreds of men and women in colorful body paint, skimpy dresses, underwear, fishnet tights, high-heeled shoes, heavy makeup, and some with barely any clothing on at all, carried protest signs” (“Consent in Sexy,” 2011).

Together, these are examples that demonstrate how particular forms of porn are so popular that they even infiltrate movements combatting rape.

Slutwalk's employment of porn conventions in their postfeminist protest can construct paradoxical messages considering mainstream porn culture overtly trivializes rape. In fact, rape is a staple narrative in a plethora of mainstream porn films. Some popular, free porn sites, like [redtube.com](http://redtube.com), [freeporntubexx.com](http://freeporntubexx.com), [freeporntubehub.com](http://freeporntubehub.com), as well as many others have a category called "gang bang" where one woman is "raped" by multiple men for entertainment. It serves as a type of "consensual, nonconsensual" sex act. Oftentimes, at the end of these videos, the director will interview the porn actress to demonstrate how she consented to the video and enjoyed it, or they will overtly show how the kidnapped woman enjoys herself in the process of being raped. Some popular forms of pornography employ the term "slut" to signify a particular type of woman who is sexual, yet deserving of punishment. In popular porn, women are called, "whores, sluts, cumdumpsters, beavers, and so on" (Dines, 2010a, p.64). Slutwalk's appropriation of the term slut, in conjunction with the use of particular pornographic conventions, like stripping poles, and sexy uniforms creates a paradoxical relationship where women are fighting rape culture, while simultaneously embracing a particular porn culture that relies on the degradation and rape of women.

Though the literature correlating pornography to sexual violence has been contentious and conflicting (Vega, Malamuth, 2007; Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, Leaf, 2011), newer studies (Hald, Malamuth, & Yeun, 2010) have shown "consistent significant association between pornography and various dependent measures including both attitudes supporting violence against women and actual aggressive behavior..." (Hald, 2010, p. 14). Another study in 2011 that focused on adolescents' consumption of explicit, violent pornography

demonstrated that there is a correlation between violent behavior and violent, sexually explicit material (Ybarra, 2011, p. 14).

Slutwalk marchers celebrate pornographic imagery associated with commodified sexuality by drawing upon porn conventions to guide their ideas of what a liberated, (post)feminist woman looks like. Porn has a particular stylistic theme to the ways in which it represents women. Normally, women featured are white, with long (preferably blonde) hair, surgically enhanced breasts, surgically altered genitals, and these women wear thongs and stilettos (Cochrane, 2006). There are certain recognizable characteristics within the mainstream porn world that are evidenced in Slutwalk.

Porn culture, much like popular feminism, or white-centered “postfeminism” advertises attitudes about sexual empowerment and independence. In fact, “sex work” in porn culture is promoted as an avenue of economic empowerment for women, where women have control over their sexuality. Sex work, in the mainstream media, is presented as glamorous position where freedom, sexuality, and power all seemingly converge (Dines, 2010).

Mainstream pornography also has a grammar of whiteness evidenced through the normalization of white women’s bodies that conjure up the white male gaze, as well as the simultaneous hyper-visibility of non-white bodies and stereotypes directed at them. Women of color, in particular, are categorized into tropes in many mainstream pornographic videos and narratives. For example, on the porn site, Redtube.com “Home of the free porn videos” the racial categories are, “Asian, ebony, interracial and Latina.” There is no “white” category; however, there are categories like, “blonde” and “redhead” that feature white women. This signifies the normalization of white women’s bodies as the standard “sexual” woman, and demonstrates how women of color are exoticized and marked as different.

Porn contributes to and naturalizes the controlling images of women of color that circulate in dominant culture. Stereotypes about non-white women's sexualities are employed in the pornographic space where whiteness is normalized as the unquestioned dominant element. There is a sexual hierarchy in porn where certain bodies are valued over others. For example, "Women of color in the pornography industry are paid half to three quarters of what white actresses tend to make" (Rivas, 2012). Even the popular pornographic franchise, "Girls Gone Wild" favors a particular type of woman for their videos:

The team is coached to always be on the lookout for a '10,' which translates into a young, white, blonde, blue-eyed female with big breasts and a toned body. The cameramen even get bonuses for finding and filming such women...for example, in one scene...the cameraman hones in on three girls, two white and one black...but the two white women get all the attention. As they begin to kiss...the black woman stands perfectly still not knowing what to do...the camera blocks out the black woman completely (Dines, 2010, p.31).

These narratives inform mainstream culture about sexuality and empowerment considering porn is so popular. Porn culture has roots in white-centered postfeminist activism and resistance, evidenced by Slutwalk. Using pornographic conventions in postfeminist activism is problematic considering porn trivializes rape, and thus acts post-rape, and simultaneously values a particular aesthetic that privileges white women's bodies, while exoticizing and fetishizing women of color. Sexual liberation and empowerment for women is grounded in the pornographic idea that men have access to women's bodies at all times. In fact, conjuring up the male gaze through pornographic conventions is to enact liberation in postfeminism. I will demonstrate this point

further by using Katherine Webb as case study to showcase her successful mobility through porn-chic, postfeminist. rape culture.

### **Katherine Webb: Convergence of Postfeminism and Post-Rape Logic**

On January 7, 2013, Katherine Webb, former Miss Alabama 2012 and girlfriend of Alabama football quarterback A.J. McCarron, was present in the stands during a televised Alabama football game with Notre Dame when the ESPN commentator, Brent Musburger, kept remarking on her looks. The camera kept focusing on her face in the stands, while the commentators continued to make statements about how beautiful she was. Musburger stated, “You quarterbacks, you get all the good looking women...what a beautiful woman...whoa!...If you’re a youngster in Alabama, start getting the football out and throw it around the backyard with pop” (Boren, 2013). After Musburger’s comments went viral, ESPN issued an official apology stating that Brent “went too far” (Boren, 2013). However, Katherine Webb was interviewed on the “Today” show after the event and publicly defended Musburger stating that she was flattered by the attention. She stated, “I think that if he would have said that we were hot or sexy or made any derogatory statements like that, I think that would have been a little bit different...but the fact that he said we were beautiful and gorgeous, I don’t see why any woman wouldn’t be flattered by that” (Phillips, 2013). Even Ali Rogers, Miss Carolina, defended Musburger’s comments towards Webb (Staff, 2013). She states, “I think Musbuger has every right to point out Webb’s beauty...She is, in fact, gorgeous, and I think this is something that we can display not only on the Miss America stage, but, hey, at a football game, too” (Staff, 2013).

Because of Musburger’s comments towards Webb during the football game, Webb became an overnight celebrity. After the game, she received thousands of new Twitter followers (Staff, 2013). Webb even landed a deal with Sports Illustrated. Musburger publicly signed a



photo of Webb in Sports Illustrated where she's featured in a bikini. He wrote, "She's a 10" (Manfred, 2013). Webb was given a spot on the celebrity competition show, *Splash*, where celebrities trained each week and executed difficult dives to avoid elimination. Before Webb's first dive on the show, she dedicated the dive to Musburger. She said, "Thanks, Brent Musburger. This dive is for you" (Sorich, 2013). This is an apt example of postfeminist media culture, where women take responsibility for unwanted assaults towards their bodies. Wolf's idea of "power feminism" where victimhood is a thing of the past contributes to hostile conditions for women's bodies where they cannot claim victimhood. In October 2013, Webb landed her own Carl's Jr. commercial where she recreated the football game where Musburger targeted her (Douglas, 2013). The commercial starts with the recreation of the scene where she is in the stands with the camera on her face, and then features Webb responding to the gaze by ripping her clothes off and eating a sandwich, while the camera focuses on her breasts and mouth. Throughout the commercial, the commentators are remarking on her hotness, similar to the actual event with Musburger.

Though the commercial advertises a sandwich, there is an overt trivialization of Webb's experience as a public target of objectification, and a simultaneous discursive rewarding of Katherine Webb for not taking offense to Musburger's comments. ESPN did note Musburger went "too far" with his comments. Webb, as a seemingly free independent sexual woman in postfeminism, is expected to take responsibility for Musburger's unwanted gaze. Since postfeminist sexual empowerment relies on conjuring up the male gaze, women, as free agents, are expected to take responsibility for objectification. Rape culture and porn-chic postfeminism work hand-in-hand to victimize women. Sexual independence and individual freedom become problematic when situated in a rape culture. Although women are advertised as having complete

freedom over their bodies, images, and lives, these messages of “complete” sexual independence conflict with the rape culture where women’s bodies are routinely sexually harassed and raped.

Just as postfeminist discourse congratulates individual women for achieving their sexual liberation (by emulating porn culture); I argue that postfeminist discourse conversely works to blame individuals who fail to protect themselves against sexual harassment and rape. Being sexually harassed or raped in a postfeminist culture indicates that as a liberated autonomous woman, you do not know how to properly conjure up the male gaze with porn-chic femininity without going “too far.” Because white-centered postfeminism draws upon porn culture as the vehicle through which sexual liberation is achieved and actualized, irony is present.

Within a postfeminist framework all women walk a tightrope. Each woman must be able to feel empowered by (re)claiming sexual liberation in a male-defined, white marketplace and be prepared to shoulder individual blame for her participation in patriarchal, mass consumed pornographic culture that suggests all women are sexually available to men. This double-bind works hand-in-hand with rape culture ideology which states that women are individually responsible for their rape if they invite sexual advances through their states of dress or inebriated state. Katherine Webb’s successful mobility through culture as a celebrity demonstrates how postfeminism relies on post-rape logic in order to actualize sexual liberation for women. Porn-chic postfeminism, however, operates off of whiteness where women of color are excluded. The public objectification of Katherine Webb, as well as her overnight celebrity-dom after the event, demonstrates the different ways white women and women of color are treated in rape culture and postfeminism. The fact that ESPN issued an apology because they recognized Musburger went “too far” speaks to the idea that Webb was capable of being violated. Women of color, particularly Black women, have historically and contemporarily been viewed as

“unrapeable” and thus have a difficult time being recognized as victims. I discuss this further in the next section with the Duke Lacrosse team’s rape scandal.

### **(Post) Racializing Rape**

On April 19, 1989, Trish Meili, now known as the Central Park Jogger went for a jog at night in Central Park and was attacked and raped by five men who were Black and Latino (Associated press, 2013). They became known as the “Central Park Five.” This particular event was reported on major news stations and made headlines because of its viciousness. That same week 28 other rape cases took place most of whom were women of color (Crenshaw, p. 1268). One woman of color raped that week was thrown off of the top of a four story building in Brooklyn (p.1268). “She suffered fractures of both ankles and legs, her pelvis was shattered and she suffered extensive injuries” (p.1268). Though her injuries were life-threatening, her rape did not make national headlines like Meili’s. In fact, most of the rapes that were committed on brown bodies that week did not make headlines. In 1990, a study was done in Dallas on rape cases and demonstrated that the average prison term for men who raped white women was ten years, compared to two years for raping Black women (p.1269).

Rape in the United States is a contested domain saturated with racialized and sexualized politics. During slavery, rape was used as an institution to control African women’s bodies. In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis states that rape was used as part of an “uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder’s economic mastery and the over-seer’s control over Black women as workers” (1999, p.7). African women were breeders who were forced to have sex with strong Black laborers and were raped by their masters as a tool of racialized, sexualized violence and control. Rape was largely viewed as a crime that could only be committed against white women, especially since there were no laws protecting Black women. Black men were lynched for any

type of sexual advances on white women, even if they were unfounded. Imagery of Black lynched men became the “prophylactic measure to keep Blacks under control” (p.1272); rape was largely viewed as a “white woman/Black man” crime. Black women, as victims, were never fully recognized. In fact, some scholars argue that Black women were, and still are, perceived as being “unrapeable” (Donovan & Williams, 2002, p.97; Crenshaw, 1991, p.1271).

This sentiment serves as the underlying discourse in the 2006 Duke Lacrosse case where two Black women were hired as strippers for an off-campus party run by the Lacrosse team. The three white men specifically asked for white or Hispanic women, but Black strippers were sent instead. This led to the white men saying derogatory racial remarks that dealt with slavery. The men even wanted to use broom sticks on the women’s bodies. One of the women, Crystal Magnum, accused one of the men of raping her. This accusation ignited tension in the public, considering from the beginning, many didn’t believe her claims, and resulted in the three white men’s innocence (Eromosele, 2011, April 18). Since Black women had no legal protection historically, they were forced to be silent about the abuse inflicted upon their bodies out of fear of punishment from their abusers, and this contributes to the contemporary erasure of Black women as victims. Since enslaved Africans were viewed as chattel, they had no protections. Silence became a tactic of survival.

In contemporary culture, the oppressive controlling images of Black women’s sexualities (Sewell, 2012) contribute to the ways in which Black women are perceived. Studies show that Black women tend to be blamed for their rape and are viewed as less truthful when speaking out about their victimization (Donovan & Williams, 2002). “The discrediting of Black women’s claims is the consequence of a complex intersection of a gendered sexual system...these narratives may explain why rapes of Black women are less likely to result in

convictions and long prison terms than rapes of white women” (Crenshaw, p.1271). As a result, Black women today tend to remain silent about sexual injustices committed upon their bodies, just as they had during slavery (Broussard, 375). Stereotypical images, like the hypersexual Jezebel, contribute to the discursive disempowerment of Black women, and conjure up Black women’s “chattel-like” status during slavery (Sewell, 2012). Black women’s rape and victimization in contemporary culture is linked to the historical experiences of African slave women who were viewed as public property. Similarly, the trope of the strong Black woman, or matriarch, and contributes to the invisibility of Black women as rape victims (Sewell, 2012). The culture of silence surrounding Black women’s victimization can lead to mental and physical health problems (Donovan & Williams, 2002), especially since there is no mainstream recognition of Black women as victims.

The experience of rape, as an institutionalized, racialized tool of control is experienced differently between populations. Research demonstrates that women of color at the lower end of the socio-economic scale have a higher risk of encountering rape than white women or middle to upper class women. Therefore, sitting at a particular intersection of social factors could increase a woman’s risk of getting raped. Rapists therefore are not necessarily color-blind. The racialized experience of rape is largely left absent from Slutwalk Chicago. The actual word “slut” in Slutwalk is only employed as a gendered term, erasing any racialized connotations.

“Slut” therefore has a different meaning depending upon which population it is directed towards. Although many women of all races consider the word damaging, women of color have different experiences of racialized gender oppression and sexual assault in America. In regards to the word “slut,” the blog, the Crunk Feminist Collective has a piece called “Slutwalk’s v. Ho Strolls” (2011, May 5) which states:

As a word used to shame white women who do not conform to morally conservative norms about chaste sexuality, the term very much reflects white women's specific struggles around sexuality and abuse. Although plenty of Black women have been called "slut," I believe Black women's histories are different, in that Black female sexuality has always been understood from without to be deviant, hyper, and excessive. Therefore, the word slut has not been used to discipline (shame) us into chaste moral categories, as we have largely been understood to be unable to practice "normal" and "chaste" sexuality anyway.

Slutwalk's employment of "slut" erases the racialized gendered experience of sexual assault that women of color have and still do face in America. For many women of color, slut is a derogatory racialized, gendered word that refers to their deviancy or animalistic sexual nature, as is characterized in popular culture. Therefore, the organizing practices of Slutwalk should reflect the different realities of sexual assault for women, such as historical enslavement as well as the contemporary controlling images that broadcast stereotypes of Black women's sexualities.

"...our skin color, not our style of dress, often signifies slut-hood to the white gaze"

(Anonymous, 2011). Though Slutwalk has invited Black women to speak at their marches, some of the Black women are ambivalent with appropriating the word "slut." Aishah Shahidha Simmons, an award-winning filmmaker and activist, was a guest speaker at the Slutwalk Philadelphia march. Though she supports Slutwalk, she does not, "...embrace the word Slut at all" (Simmons, 2011). Though statistics show that women of color are raped more than white women (Olive, 2012), women of color are absent in the framework of Slutwalk's logic. Slutwalk New York City 2011 garnered attention because a white woman held a sign that said, "Woman is the Nigger of the World" (Solomon, 2011). This sign, coupled with Black women's invisibility

in the movement, demonstrates how Slutwalk's framework privileges a particular type of experience and a particular type of woman. I include a larger discussion of this sign in Chapter 3. Because of Black women's stifled voices in rape culture, a coalition of Black women wrote an open letter to Slutwalk detailing why they do not have the privilege of participating (Black Women's Blueprint, 2011):

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"...The way in which we are perceived and what happens to us before, during and after sexual assault crosses the boundaries of our mode of dress. Much of this is tied to our particular history. 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.

Slutwalk fails in racializing the experience of rape. Slutwalk lends credence to the gendered experiences of rape culture, yet erases the lived experiences of rape from women of color. "Black women are simply presumed to be represented in and benefitted by prevailing feminist critiques" (Crenshaw, p.1271). Though the appropriation of culturally offensive words is not a new phenomenon, Slutwalk's simultaneous employment of porn chic conventions that contribute to the negative controlling images of Black women, coupled with white-centered postfeminism, makes their appropriation of slut exclusionary, and facilitates in the silencing of women of color.

While Slutwalk attempts to politicize rape, it simultaneously de-politicize Blackness. This is problematic considering patriarchy is coupled with white supremacy (hooks, p.4). In

order to dismantle rape culture, a complex understanding of patriarchy is necessary, and part of patriarchy is white supremacy.



## CHAPTER THREE

### POSTFEMINISM, POSTRACISM AND POST-RAPE NARRATIVES IN SLUTWALK

Slutwalk marches have become a transnational movement, emerging in countries from the United States of America to Australia (Armstrong, 2011, May 10). In particular, Slutwalk Chicago has occurred from 2011 to 2013 and the organizers have tracked their activism online in a cohesive interface depicting images from the march on the site. For my research, I examine how the term slut, (post)feminism, and racialized gender are reclaimed and represented through language and dress. These three themes emerged from my textual analysis of the photographs published online from the 2012 Chicago Slutwalk march: (1) Pin-Up Protesters: (Post)Feminist Activism through Porn-Chic (2) Feminist Speak , and (3) Postfeminism, the Individual, and Rape Culture.

#### Textual Analysis as Method

Textual analysis is an interpretive form of qualitative analysis that seeks to understand culture by looking at the signifying system of language. I am interested in looking at both the language or discourse feminism offered from Slutwalk, and the visual codes the protesters employ to represent feminist activism. In the introduction of *Paper Voices*, Stuart Hall uses newspapers as an example to demonstrate how texts can be studied qualitatively. He says:

Our study...treated newspapers as *texts*: literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its wildest sense...Every newspaper is a structure of meanings in linguistic and visual form. It is *discourse*...The patterns of meanings imposed on events, the logics

of arrangement and presentation, are not given in the raw material: even when they have a meaning of their own, those meanings are modified...and transformed, when they enter an already formed discourse of linguistic 'space' (p.17-8).

I will be regarding Slutwalk in a similar way, as a visual construct bound by symbolic meanings and shaped by rules. In "Feminist Sexualities, Race, and the Internet: an Investigation of Suicidegirls.com" Shoshana Magnet analyzes the online profiles and the photographs of the third-wave group called Suicide Girls to address what constituted feminist representation. Magnet also wanted to see how the online community in the Suicide Girls space understood the representations. She uses the method of discourse analysis to "determine how feminist constructions of sexuality are produced and constrained" (2007, p.4). In addition to discourse analysis, Magnet employs Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's method for looking at and studying visual culture. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) state that "the text is also open to meanings and interpretations that exist alongside and even against their more obvious meanings...knowing a producer's intentions often does not tell us much about the image, because intentions may not match up with what viewers actually take away from an image or text (p.53-5). This method of studying visual culture is especially useful to my own interrogation of Slutwalk Chicago's images online considering the images conflict with the information about the march on the site. I used Magnet's approach to reading gender representations as a model to examine the production of empowerment captured on the website.

The amount of online data about Slutwalk provides many possibilities to address representation. There are thousands of photographs from marches around the world. For this project, I analyzed 146 photographs from the 2012 Slutwalk Chicago march. I provide a close reading of one from each of the three categories. The 2012 Chicago Slutwalk website is a

cohesive, well organized page with self-contained photographs in one gallery. I can clearly see the phrases and slogans written on the posters in the photos to determine how the marchers advertised activism for women. The Chicago photographs contained a “flickr” account to prevent editing or copying. The marches take place annually; at the start of the project photographs from the 2013 march were unavailable, so I did not include that march into my research.

For my analysis, I am primarily interested in how Slutwalk organizers and marchers represent empowerment through language and dress. Though the Chicago website says they “do not frame sexual assault as something solely done by men to women” they post pictures of marchers that seem to address rape culture differently. Most of the signs suggest rape is a violent act done by bad men to good women. The website also states that particular communities are impacted more by rape culture than others based upon factors like class, race, and ability; however, in my analysis, I showcase how this sentiment was largely ignored in regards to how the movement manifested. Another rupture between the website and the march focus on how clothing is advertised. Many of the marchers did not wear risqué clothing, but those who are dressed as stereotypes of sex workers or sex performers are spotlighted on the website. The declaration of feminism and the recuperation of porn chic is a tension that I point to throughout my analysis.

## **Analysis**

### ***Theme One: Pin-Ups: (Post)Feminist Activism through Porn Chic***

Slut signifies liberated sexuality. Clothing is one way slut is represented. Marchers wear lingerie, stilettos, tassels, and thongs in the photographs. Individual empowerment becomes a theme, reflected through the emphasis on sexuality and liberation. In addition to these conventions, many of the marchers stylize their hair and dress in a fashion that mimics Rosie the

Riveter, a cultural symbol of women's powerful economic potential, stemming from World War II when women replaced male workers in factories and other positions. Rosie is recognized by the red polka dot handkerchief covering her hair, as well as her right arm raised in a position that shows her muscles, signifying her strength. In the poster, Rosie says, "We Can Do It!" that was supposed to boost the morale of the women workers to increase production. In addition to Rosie's image at Slutwalk, Marilyn Monroe and Bettie Paige are also featured on a poster to represent (sexual) liberation. This cold war imagery coalesces in the march under the label of postfeminism, reflecting the different iterations of sexuality and empowerment steeped in whiteness. Empowerment not only is sexualized through popular pornography, it is one that is also white-centered and individualized. The photographs of the 2012 Slutwalk Chicago march on the website contain themes that relate to a porn-chic, white-centered, postfeminist understanding of empowerment (See Figure 1).

In several photos, some white women are wearing their shirts open, exposing their bras, and other young white women are topless with nipple pasties (See Figure 1). One photograph depicts a young white woman wearing thick chains around her neck with a bright pink wig on. She is wearing a transparent crop top over her chest, with nine visible wrapped condoms situated inside her top. In the photograph she is smiling while pulling on the straps of her top. This woman is also featured in another photograph with three other women and one man. The young white man is situated in the middle of the photograph fully clothed wearing a hat. He has his arm around two women on his right side, and two women on his left side. Each of the women is wearing a type of lingerie, such as fishnet stockings, corsets, and lace underwear. One photograph showcases three white women who are all wearing fishnet stockings. One woman dons a corset while the other has a ripped top that only covers her breasts, exposing her midriff

bearing the words, “Love Your Belly.” There is a photograph of a guest speaker standing in front of a crowd disrobing. She pulls her pants off to reveal her body underneath.

Without the captions, slogans or the discursive framing of a protest, the images resemble a modern Halloween costume party where women have permission to be “a slut” for a day. This is a visual trope that we see in other spaces where having fun is privileged above anything else. “Slut” is a performance that can be captured with clothing items rather than a term that reflects the marked status of sexual women in American culture. Slut appears to be something a woman can put on and off like a Halloween costume. Women are using this as an opportunity to have fun with their sexuality in a commercialized way, borrowing items from porn culture to establish a sex-positive sexuality that is temporary. Additionally, the “slutty” clothing items employed in the march showcase the imaginary sex worker, one who is constructed out of postfeminist media culture myths. Our cultural imagination of a sex worker is guided by a pornographic culture that glamorizes sex work.

The fun, almost Halloween-like party atmosphere of Slutwalk also speaks to the exclusion of Black women at the march. Halloween is a time when racial visual tropes are employed to emulate cultures marked as “other” or different. Therefore, it’s common to hear of white individuals dressing up in blackface or appropriating cultures for one night, demonstrating how surface-level their understanding of difference is. Evidently, being Black is as simple as wearing blackface. This trivialization and caricatured understanding of differences demonstrates how Halloween becomes a time and space for the most privileged to have fun. Similarly, Slutwalks provides a space for the most privileged women to come celebrate a sexuality that privileges whiteness, while erasing Black women’s unique history of sexualized violence.

## Pin-Up Protestors



- "Whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no."
- "Just because I dress this way does not make it okay."
- "My clothes are not my consent."
- "My outfit is not an invitation."
- "we're bringing slutty back."
- "so i've got a great ass, you've still got to ask."
- "slutpride is hot, slut shaming is not."
- "even a ho can say no."
- "i know i look good, you don' thave to yell it at me."
- "6 inch pumps don't mean I want to hump."
- "modesty did not protect me from rape."
- "a slut shares their sexuality the way a philanthropist shares their money-because they have a lot to share, because it makes them happy to share it, becuae sharing makes the world a better place."

Figure 1: Pin-Up Protestors

There are nine posters that feature hand-made drawings of stilettos, as well as images of bras, thongs, panties, and corsets. There were several hand-drawn images of naked white women. One white woman marcher held a hand-drawn sign of a naked white woman with her legs spread open. Many posters contained sexualized imagery of women. One white woman held a hand-made sign that stated, "Don't you dare try to COP a feel." The text was accompanied with hand-drawn images of two white women in their underwear and bra with a gun. They each had cop hats on. This theme also reflected an emphasis on clothing and consumer culture. There were a

few posters that had hand-drawn stilettos on them, and others that had images of short skirts and bras.

The inclusion of women of color peppered through the march photographs complicates but does not negate the popular assertion that Slutwalks are exclusionary. At Slutwalk Chicago, one young Black woman held a sign that stated, “even a ho can say no.” Her image was featured three times in the gallery. The slogan “even a ho can say no” suggests that there is a hierarchy of victimhood within the logic of the march and it suggests that the term slut does not fully represent Black women. The pejorative term, “ho” is popularly associated with Black women. Slutwalk’s continuous use of this image shows Black women’s devaluation within the discussion of rape. Not only can a slut can say “no”, but even a “ho” can. In addition, the fact that this one Black woman’s image was replicated three times within the context that Black women are lacking at the march, makes it seem as though the organizers strategically showed her to conceal the overwhelming whiteness at the march.

Prominent antirape activists have participated in Slutwalk. For example, Aisha Shahidah Simmons was a featured speaker at the 2011 Philadelphia march. In regards to her invitation and acceptance as a speaker, Simmons states, “...I believe it is important that the faces, voices, and perspectives of women of color (inclusive of all sexualities) and trans people of color are seen and heard.” Salamishah Tillet, an Associate Professor of English and Africana studies, also celebrates and participates in Slutwalks, while simultaneously recognizing that women of color are excluded. She states, “I made the choice to participate as a way of protesting the alarming rates of sexual violence that Black girls and women experience...the idea of a march that brought attention to sexual violence and celebrated its survivors was too compelling to ignore-I had to be there.”

Though Black women participate in the Slutwalk marches, Black women and Slutwalks have a troubling relationship with another. This was most typified during the 2011 New York Slutwalk where a white female marcher held the sign, “Woman is the Nigger of the World,” referring to a 1972 song written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. The song discusses issues relating to women’s subordination in patriarchy. Having this sign featured in a walk that has been criticized for being largely white complicates its usage. Slutwalks emphasize the gendered dynamics of rape while de-politicizing the racialized elements of rape culture. Relying on a white-centered postfeminist notion of sexuality through “sexy” attire problematizes Black women’s participation further considering clothing is never mentioned as an element that contributes to Black women’s rape. The organization, Black Women’s Blueprint, posted an open letter to Slutwalk from a coalition of Black women who refused to participate in Slutwalk. The letter was signed by celebrities like Issa Rae, creator of the web-series “Awkward Black Girl” as well as Dr. Andreana Clay, creator of the “Queer Black Feminist” blog. Even Crunk Feminist Collective (2011) states, “I recognize that there are many women of color who are participating in the SW movement, and I support those sisters who do...But rather than forcing white women to get on the diversity train...I’d prefer that white women acknowledge that they are in fact organizing around a problematic use of terminology endemic to white communities and cultures.”

The consistent focus on dress and the performative elements of sexiness used by some of the marchers recalls the Toronto police officer’s comments about women dressing “slutty” as a possible cause of contributing to rape. This is a very narrow way of addressing prevention. From the posters, the majority of marchers appeared to focus only on the officers comments, instead of focusing on the *actual* reasons as to why women are raped. For example, “rape most often takes



place between people who know each other, either acquaintances, ‘friends, dates, partners, or spouses’” (Projansky, 2001, p.8), demonstrating that clothing has nothing to do with rape.

Instead of only using Slutwalk as a public platform to shame mainstream sentiments that blame women for rape, the marchers could have provided the public with accurate information pertaining to rape culture. Projansky argues that, “the paradox of discursively increasing (and potentially eliciting pleasure in) the very thing a text is working against is not unique to the representation of rape. The same argument can be made about representations of graphic war scenes in antiwar films” (p.96).

Similarly, publicly focusing on “slutty” attire in front of an audience to combat the myth that women are raped because of their clothing choices is simply confusing. If clothing choices have nothing to do with the reality of rape, which is why Slutwalk marchers were upset with the officer’s comments, the marchers should reconsider their large focus on clothing, represented through “slut” attire, as well as the slogan on the posters that attempt to justify why women should be allowed to dress as sexy as they want. The marchers are discursively reifying the notion that rape and clothing have a relationship because it is the most frequent topic mentioned on the posters.

Slutwalk inadvertently strengthens the relationship between clothing and rape narratives which is counter-productive to the goals the Slutwalk organizers listed on their website. It is necessary to have a conversation about the myths surrounding why women get raped; however, when the clothing myth is already the dominant cultural narrative surrounding rape, Slutwalk marchers have to be careful to not naturalize the mythological relationships even further by making clothing their predominant focus in the march.

Since the women in the marches are taking pleasure in the “slutty” attire without consistently dismantling the myth that clothing leads to rape, several confusing narratives are constructed for the public. In this setup, celebrating pornographic consumer culture is conflated with resisting rape culture. While trying to fight rape culture, these women simultaneously subscribe to post-feminist, porn chic notions of sexuality. There was such a strong emphasis on women being able to wear whatever they want, and this focus distorted the goals of Slutwalk, which was supposed to create a dialogue about rape culture and to “engage others in dialogue” (Slutwalk, 2012).

Additionally, the celebration of sexuality and sexual attire appeared to be guided by white-centered pornographic conventions. The fact that Marilyn Monroe and Bettie Paige were featured on a poster as the emblems of sexuality demonstrates how racially distorted mainstream sexuality is for women in the U.S., and how this logic has seeped into the framework of Slutwalk Chicago. “The pin-up girl image replicates some of the most damaging, clichéd, commercialized stereotypes of women’s sexualities — that we exist to invite the male, heterosexual gaze, that we need to ‘perform’ sexiness publicly in order to be viewed as authentic sexual women — that we cannot conjure up any authentic sexual feelings without catering to a man’s desire first” (Kocięda, 2013). Though the march is supposed to centralize on resisting a culture of domination, women can only meaningfully participate by focusing on their individual bodies and the degree to which they can be sexy. As I noted in the Introduction, focusing on freedom through clothing choices, without simultaneously having a discussion about the compulsory need for women to look sexy in all spaces of their lives, feels like a one-dimensional way of approaching liberation.

## **Theme Two: Political Performance through “Feminist Speak”**

In conjunction with the white-centered, porn-chic postfeminism as empowerment theme, another theme I found in my analysis of 2012 Slutwalk Chicago was the marcher’s employment of “feminist speak.” As Michelle Lazar (2011) points out in beauty advertising, postfeminist media culture transforms the “rights” and “choices” narrative from one that historically centered on attaining systemic rights, to a contemporary focus on attaining the “right” to be sexy (p.41). As I discussed in Chapter 2, “feminist speak” refers to Lazar’s (2011) article where she notes how advertisers and companies accomplish a nostalgia for feminist activism by using “feminist-speak” which “combines resonances of second-wave feminist sentiments with popular postfeminist ones” (p.41). Within these linguistic constructions, ideas of being beautiful and consuming to maintain beauty are conflated with political activism. Similarly, Slutwalk marchers use phrases that conjure up political protest from the era of women’s liberation.

Alluding to politicized slogans of the past help to normalize Slutwalk’s employment of a white-centered postfeminism, while simultaneously dismissing the serious tone of marches of the past. The “fun” tone of the march acts as a third-wave corrective to second-wave. The second-wave of feminism is consistently regarded as “too serious”; therefore, contemporary activism is framed as “old vs. new” or “fun vs. prudish” (O’Keefe, p.4). As I mentioned in Chapter One, feminist Amanda Marcotte stated, “if we can’t have a laugh while fighting this fight, we’re going to drown in despair” (2011). Therefore, the marchers are “updating” feminist activism to be more palatable, or fun. As I noted in the first theme, Slutwalk relies upon visual tropes of partying to accomplish its fun atmosphere. This is starkly different from the tone of “Take Back the Night”, which is a march against rape and sexual violence targeting women (Take Back the Night, n.d. ). Originally formed in 1975, “Take Back the Night” holds more solemn protests, and includes a

history of combatting pornography because of its links to rape culture (Hanson, n.d.). Slutwalk's use of porn conventions in the "fun" framework of the march relies upon politicized slogans of the second-wave to extend the legacy of feminist activism. Here are the popular slogans repeatedly displayed on posters at the 2012 Slutwalk Chicago march that explicitly reference contemporary politics or historical phrases popularly aligned with political activism (See Fig. 2).

**Feminist Speak**



- "It's good to know that my foremothers fought this same war over 40 years ago."
- "make love not rape."
- "vagina power"
- "girls just wanna have fundamental rights"
- "I am walking for my daughter and all victims."
- "just another radical Marxist for women's liberation."
- "Free Pussy Riot, tee shirts \$16.00"
- "Sluts vote"
- "sluts, register to vote here."
- "i support gender equality"
- "if it's a legitimate Republican, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down."
- "Rept. Todd Akin: Not wanting, waiting OR needing for you to legitimize my rape."
- "Sluts have rights too."

Figure 2: Feminist Speak

Within this theme, there is an explicit attempt to politicize Slutwalk by referencing political issues and popular phrases. There is also a visual component to this theme. Many women at the march had hairstyles that conjured up historical feminism's Rosie the Riveter, characterized by the popular head handkerchief. Abortion was also a theme in regards to the clothing that the

marchers wore. One white woman had a sticker on her shorts that stated, “Abortion on Demand and without apology!” Another white woman, with a Rosie the Riveter hairstyle wore a shirt advertising abortion for women with a feminist symbol in the middle of the shirt characterized by a fist in a circle. The visual references to abortion demonstrates the multiple layers of complexity in Slutwalk. At one point, abortion was the center of political protests and struggles for women, and now the struggle for reproductive justice is repackaged as a visual trope to conjure up movement feminism. It merely becomes an emblem of feminist authenticity, a way to politicize Slutwalk, regardless if sexist ideas are advertised.

In regards to white-centered postfeminism, “feminist speak” is instrumental in normalizing objectification in spaces that women occupy-even activism. In appropriating “choice” rhetoric, as well as visual imagery associated with movement feminism, Slutwalk marchers can employ sexist tropes of womanhood and sexuality seamlessly without critique. In doing this, the project to become sexy, or the project to wear whatever you want as a woman, becomes conflated with feminist activism. Women have attained the “right” to be sexy, which has become the new empowerment. Having slogans that refer to politicized events, like the Pussy Riot imprisonment, helps the movement look “political” even though the women are not politicizing the clothing choices they wear as well, which is steeped in consumer culture. Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist band that publicly critiques sexism and other systems of domination. In 2012, two of the members were arrested for hooliganism which sparked international support for the two feminist musicians. Having this mentioned in a Slutwalk in the U.S. demonstrates the transnational ties Slutwalk has to other women’s struggles outside of the U.S., yet also showcases how confusing the logic is in the march considering these slogans are featured alongside posters that focus on porn conventions.

The slogan, “Make Love, Not Rape” was featured five times in the gallery, and alludes to the 1965 protest slogan “Make Love, Not War” used by marchers in anti-war protests. The Slutwalk marchers are drawing upon linguistic constructions formulated in the ‘60s protest era to demonstrate how they are carrying on the legacy of resistance, but packaged in a fun, non-serious way. These references to historical feminism, through slogans and dress, serve as reminders of what the march is *supposed* to resemble. Ironically, Slutwalk draws upon visual imagery from the second-wave feminist movement, while subscribing to an individualized logic that propels post-feminism and the exclusion of Black women.


### **Theme Three: Got Consent: Postfeminism, the Individual, and Rape Culture**

The individualized foundation of postfeminist media culture contributes to the individualized imagined solutions for rape culture. The slogans on many of the marchers’ posters deal with individual consent as the solution to rape culture (See Fig. 3). The most popular slogan at the 2012 Chicago Slutwalk is, “Consent is Sexy” and was featured over four times. The poster was usually accompanied with hand-drawn imagery of a woman’s lips covered with red lipstick. Posters that mentioned consent or ideas relating to consent were featured over 20 times, making consent a very popular theme at the march.

Some of the slogans were featured on hand-made posters that were shaped as short dresses, and were also written on women’s bodies. Consent serves as the ultimate postfeminist vehicle for women where individual empowerment is actualized. The solution to a system of violence towards women relies on consent. In Meghan Murphy’s (2013) article, “The Tyranny of Consent” she states, “Consent is messier than we often pretend it is. ‘Consensual’ or ‘nonconsensual’ are the two choices we’re offered when it comes to ethics around sex and sexuality. And those two choices...are being used against us.” As Murphy notes, consent rhetoric

conjures up a binary that does not get to the root of the problem, and superficially provides women with a sense of autonomy when they are routinely dehumanized throughout rape culture. Consent is merely a symptom of the problem and should not be celebrated or touted as the solution to a system of inequality. Additionally, sexual assaults can still take place with “consent.”

**Got Consent?**



The image shows a woman with long brown hair, smiling, holding a white sign. The sign has the word 'CONSENT' in large black letters, 'IS' in smaller black letters, and 'Sexy!' in pink cursive. In the background, there are other signs, including one that says 'FRIBER' and another that says '8'.

- "Consent really isn't that hard."
- "Now am I 'asking' for it?"
- "yes means yes."
- "Please don't touch me, I haven't said yes."
- "no means hell no. get it? got it? good?"
- "There's not yes in no."
- "Consent is: active and not coerced, give by sober, wake adults, an enthusiastic 'yes!', sexy! Consent is NOT: 'no', 'I'm not sure!', silence, anything other than an enthusiasitc yes."
- "Tell me I'm asking for it-I dare you!"
- "no doesn't mean convince me."
- "I love my vagina, and so can you with my consent."
- "teach consent in all sex ed courses-it's part of safe sex."
- "No: statement, adj. meaning: to object and refuse. Ex: no, I will not have sex with you."

Figure 3: Got Consent?

In postfeminism, women are responsible for themselves individually; therefore, consent places the entire burden on women. Within a postfeminist framework, all women walk a tightrope. Each woman must be able to feel empowered by (re)claiming sexual liberation in a male-defined marketplace and be prepared to shoulder individual blame for her participation in

patriarchal, mass consumed pornographic culture that suggests all women are sexually available to men. This double-bind works hand-in-hand with rape culture ideology which states that women are individually responsible for their rape if they invite sexual advances through their states of dress or inebriated state,

The consent slogans in Slutwalk animate postfeminist sensibilities because the logic states that women are individually responsible for themselves. The focus on the individual in Slutwalk directly conflicts with popular efforts made by Black women , and other women of color, to combat rape culture, where the focus is on the community. An apt example is the organization, Incite! which focuses on violence in communities where women of color live. Incite! was founded in 2000 by women of color activists “who were fed up with existing organizations that couldn’t (or wouldn’t) address violence faced by women of color.” Ironically, this was stated before Slutwalks even started, and evidently still applies. Incite! focuses on colonialism, immigrants’ rights, mass incarceration, reproductive rights of women of color, and other systemic violence’s responsible for committing violence upon brown bodies. Focusing only on “consent” is irrelevant to women of color, especially Black women, who are subjugated by multiple institutions, not a singular man. The central focus on dismantling rape requires a meaningful engagement with the structures that (re)produce violence against women. Incite! places the most marginalized women at the center of their analyses in order to ensure that all women are included in their activist endeavors. This differs very much from the ways in which Slutwalk manifests.

The consent slogans and posters at Slutwalk tend to be coupled with sexualized imagery, either on the posters or with the actual clothing the women wear in the marches. Yet again, the marchers are publicly creating a relationship between consent, rape, and clothing choices. In



addition to postfeminism, consent rhetoric excludes the racialized gender components in rape culture that can increase a woman's likelihood of getting raped, as is discussed on the Slutwalk Chicago website. As I noted previously, the Chicago website states, "Some communities/people are at a higher risk of sexual assault than others based on their class status, work, ability, access and resources, race, identity, trans status and a variety of other factors. We aim to recognize this and come together, in all our diversity, as people who are all affected" (Slutwalk, 2012).

Consent conjures up a universalized logic, appearing as though it applies to all women equally, even though women of color do not have the same social privileges as white women. There is no mention of race, class, ability, or any other social factors that could increase a person's chance of rape on any of the posters at all. When there are patterns of victimization towards certain groups of women who sit at particular intersections, consent-as-solution becomes unhelpful. The consent paradigm presupposes that all women have equal access to individualism, which is complicated further when we factor in low-income, women of color who are perpetually viewed as being part of a group-status. The Chicago Slutwalk marchers collectively ignore systems of oppression that violate certain bodies.

The central focus of rape culture should not be consent, but re-articulating rape as a cultural act where we all bear responsibility for producing certain social actors who violate the rights of others. Instead, Slutwalk uses consent rhetoric, which consequently suggests that individual men are the only problem; by transforming "bad" men into "good" men, rape culture is solved. The consistent erasure of collective-based solutions to a rape culture indicates how individualized the imagined solutions are for a culture that violates women's bodies. The idea of consent is still a highly individualized solution to a larger systemic problem. How can "consent"

ever be meaningful in a culture where women, especially women of color, are still viewed as unequal second-class citizens, and at times are viewed as public property?

The danger in focusing on the individual in Slutwalk, is that we lose sight of the structural inequalities that keep women in subjugated spaces. Rape culture is created through the discourses that we produce about women and men; therefore, the solutions must take these discourses into account. Focusing on individualized consent and blame mirrors the logic in rape culture. The “individual” is separated from dialogues about race, class, and gender. Without a consistent focus on systems in the discussion, we produce a de-contextualized individual who cannot yield solutions to a culture of domination.


### **Individual Men as the Problem: “Blame Rapists Not Victims”**

In Slutwalk Chicago, blaming individual men for rape serves as the corollary to consent. The focus on men as the sole perpetrators of rape, as demonstrated in the posters at Slutwalk, complements the individual consent paradigm constructed by postfeminism (See Fig. 4).

The general premise of this theme is that rape is solely individual men’s faults. Therefore, the marchers advocate for men to be better, signifying that individual men who violate women’s bodies are “bad.” There is no examination beyond that in Slutwalk. Men are discursively rewarded in Slutwalk by carrying posters displaying how they are “real” men because they don’t rape. Like consent, blaming men does not necessarily get to the root of the issue, which is rape culture. In reality, not “all” men are viewed as rapists—this narrative is predominantly saved for African American men whose sexualities are publicly constructed as deviant and lacking discipline (Crenshaw, 1991; Projansky, 2001). Like consent, blaming “individual” men becomes a post-racialized endeavor where systems of oppression are not factored into the solution. In fact, most of the men who were holding signs about being “real” men and not raping women

were white. Slutwalk's logic of whiteness is most evidenced in the police participation at the marches.

Blame Rapists, Not Victims



- "real men get consent."
- "I know better."
- "real men don't rape."
- "rape is never the survivor's fault."
- "male chauvinist pig."
- "Men. Be Better, no street harassment, no victim blaming, no rape culture, yes to respect, yes to anti-sexism, yes to a new masculinity, we can be better."
- "society teaches don't get raped, instead of don't rape."
- "real men take no for an answer."
- "you can't touch just because you see, i'm not your property."
- "Bring back codpieces."

Figure 4: Blame Rapists, Not Victims

The incorporation of police in the Slutwalk march directly excludes people of color, particularly Black men, from participating because of the immense amount of police brutality and discrimination in communities of color. Some would argue that the police force, as an extension of the justice system, perpetuates violence towards women and men of color. The fact that Slutwalk Chicago is working in tandem with police, instead of highlighting how they have contributed to rape culture demonstrates how their blame of individual men for rape is post-racial. Police participation in Slutwalk also complicates Black women's participation considering Black women raped by Black men feel conflicted about seeking help from police because of racism in the justice system. Aishah Simmons' documentary, "No! The Rape Documentary: Ending Sexual Assault and Violence Against Women" explores this racialized phenomenon

further. Simmons states, “I think because of racism in the criminal justice system, [there’s] this feeling of I don’t want to put another male in jail ...this is a very community issue...this is not just like oh, it’s that woman over there. 1 in 3 is a lot...it’s a lot of women, and it’s in our community.”

Slutwalk fails in highlighting how complex rape culture is for Black women, and only focuses on individual men as the perpetrators. The “real” men who don’t rape seemingly have a moral authenticity that the “bad” rapists lack individually; however, “if we see patriarchy as nothing more than men’s and women’s individual personalities, motivations, and behaviors...then it probably won’t even occur to us to ask about larger contexts...and how people’s lives are shaped in relation to them” (Johnson, 2009, p.99) Though individual men may act on rape, rape is still a cultural product. One must look at rape as a text in order to fully understand how it manifests. Projansky (2001) states that the ways in which we produce discourse about rape, becomes the way in which we understand rape. Rape is discursively (re)produced through the media texts we consume that showcase women as vulnerable, second-class citizens; however, Slutwalk changes the discourse and individualizes it so that rape only becomes an act between two parties (a woman and man), rather than a cultural construction that is (re)produced and maintained by several systems. Sociologist, Allan G. Johnson (2009) states:

From this kind of individualistic perspective, we might ask why a particular man raped, harassed, or beat a woman. We wouldn’t ask, however, what kind of society would promote persistent patterns of such behavior in everyday life, from wife-beating jokes to the routine inclusion of sexual coercion and violence in mainstream movies. We are quick to explain rape and battery as the acts of sick or angry men...we need to see and

deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems...in the behavior of individuals (p.99).

One could argue that women are discursively raped daily if we rearticulate rape as something more than a physical act committed by an individual “bad” or “crazy” man. Focusing on cultural products as paratexts, or peripheral products or texts that have relation to the central text of rape culture, does not lessen the accountability we should hold on individual perpetrators of rape, but instead changes the narrative from one of “women as victims, men as perpetrators” to one that holds the collective accountable for solidifying the myth that women are second-class citizens (Gray, 2010, p.5). There are almost no posters in Slutwalk that focus on a media culture saturated with violence towards women’s bodies, or slogans that focus on governmental legislation that attempt to control and discipline women. All of these events contribute to the conditions that support rape. Slutwalk’s focus on individual men perpetuates the logic in rape culture, which already uses the individual as a unit of analysis. The marchers fail to examine systems of oppression that contribute to women’s dehumanization, like mainstream media culture, as well as mainstream pornography and how these entities work with rape culture.

Slutwalk additionally overlooks other movements that have also attempted to combat rape culture in a more inclusive way. In February 2012, the same year as the Slutwalk Chicago march, Afro Puerto Rican and 2008 Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate Rosa Clemente created the “We are the 44% Coalition” which challenged sexual assault against Black and Latina Teens. The coalition was interested in highlighting how Black and Latina girls were disproportionately affected by sexual violence. After rapper Too Short gave advice to young teen boys in XXL magazine on how to “turn out” their female classmates by pushing Black girls up against walls and sticking their fingers in their underwear, Black and Latina activists and women

came together to combat Too Short's "rapey" advice. "The coalition recognizes this video-and the fact that XXL gave it a platform-as part of the larger issue of sexual assault against our women and children, particularly Black and Latina girls." Instead of only blaming Too Short for his rape advice, the coalition listed 6 demands to ensure that Too Short and the Editor-in-Chief of XXL magazine, Venessa Satten, were committed to ending sexual violence. The demands ranged from Too Short having to donate to anti-sexual violence organizations that cater to Black and Latina girls, to the firing of Satten from XXL.com and XXL magazine. The coalition also created the twitter hashtag, #ItsBiggerThanTooShort to demonstrate that Too Short is only a symptom of the larger problem of rape culture. Dream Hampton, a member of the "We are the 44% coalition", and a contributing writer for the African American magazine *Ebony*, engaged Too Short in an exclusive interview about Black men's participation in Black women's oppression. She asks him pointed questions about his participation in rape culture and urges him to understand Black women's violent experience with sexual targeting. However, she also states, "And it's not like Hip Hop, or you (as an individual) have created this culture, but you have been a part of perpetuating it." Though men are perpetrators of these crimes, men are simultaneously ultra-conformists to a culture that breeds the dehumanization of women that Hampton addresses. Therefore, if individualized men are going to be at fault for rape, then films, music videos, and systemic discrimination of women should also be framed as rape culture artifacts, or "paratexts" of rape culture that need to be excavated and interrogated.

## **Discussion**

It must be noted that Slutwalks are very complex, dynamic set of texts to analyze, because they open up conversations about women's possibilities for activism and resistance. Overall, Slutwalks have contributed to a necessary, ongoing dialogue about rape culture,

patriarchy, and women's activism. While I showcased different themes in my analysis, there were six posters that did not clearly fit into a category. In fact, some of these posters articulated issues with rape culture. These posters have a different focus from the others and showcase that there are some individuals who are targeting the cultural aspects that contribute to women's dehumanization, like pornography.

While there are many different readings of Slutwalks, and there are some posters that do not fit into the main themes that I noticed, my analysis of Slutwalk Chicago 2012 highlights a contradictory understanding of rape culture, victimhood, and women's possibilities for resistance. At the 2012 Chicago Slutwalk, rape is treated as an individualized action that a man does to a woman; therefore, Slutwalk marchers respond with individualized solutions. There is no cultural, collective solution offered at Slutwalk Chicago to dismantling rape culture; therefore, I argue that Slutwalk's consistent focus on the individual disguises the cultural tenets of rape, hence, ignoring rape culture. The individual, as a unit of measurement, is hyper-visible through Slutwalk's employment of postfeminist notions of empowerment that are grounded in individual women's right to be sexy as proof that women have achieved equality. Postfeminism is employed as the lens through which empowerment is understood. Being able to wear whatever one chooses becomes the ultimate measurement of success in a postfeminism, which ignores systems of domination that keep women down, namely women of color. Focusing only on dress additionally minimizes the influence consumer culture, porn culture, and capitalism have in the way women fashion their sexualities and identities.

The consent paradigm employed by the marchers further illustrates how the imagined solutions for a culture of dehumanization and violence rests in individual women saying yes or no, rather than a community-centric focus in dismantling rape culture. Focusing on the

individual erases the systemic realities that certain populations are at a higher risk for rape than others. Rape is not a random, individualized act committed by an unbalanced, or “hyper-sexed” man, but is instead a strategic, learned normalized action that is designed to further discipline minoritized populations. The lack of women of color in the framework of Slutwalk’s logic further contributes to the violence committed upon the bodies of women of color. Though the marchers wanted to combat rape culture myths surrounding women’s sexualities, they ended up promoting porn-chic articulations of sexuality, and further naturalized the assumption that women’s clothing choices and rape narratives are connected. The way in which we construct discourse about rape constitutes the way we understand rape culturally. Slutwalk’s hyper-emphasis on sexy clothing choices reifies the cultural misperception that clothing is part of the rape culture discussion.

The white-centered appropriation of the term slut, coupled with pornographic conventions that favor a white aesthetic demonstrate how slut is reclaimed as a term for white-centered feminist empowerment. We need a thorough understanding of rape culture in order to combat it. I argue that we need to link porn-chic postfeminism to rape culture. I am not suggesting that women are responsible for their own rape and victimization; I am, however, arguing that the logic promoting women’s sexual empowerment additionally functions in the strengthening of rape culture, which complicates the popular controlling images of sexual liberation for women. It is necessary to dismantle the “empowerment” paradigm of postfeminism in order to understand how activism is being hijacked by patriarchy through postfeminism.

Postfeminism is not meant to function as a collective-based, political movement or critique of patriarchy. Women are supposed to look within themselves to discover their individual liberation; therefore, postfeminism is a preoccupation with the self. As I stated earlier,



postfeminism works to *blame* individual women for going “too” far with their femininity, which is why women must take responsibility for unwanted gazes. Coupling postfeminism with porn culture, which trivializes rape, solidifies postfeminism’s position in rape culture.

The ways in which we construct discourse about a particular subject aids in the understanding of that particular subject, and even discursively constitutes that subject. As long as we regard rape as an individualized event committed by a man on a woman, we will not be able to move beyond the “individual” paradigm, where the solution rests in changing individual behaviors. Rape culture blames individual women for being raped based upon clothing choices or lifestyle choices; Slutwalk marchers in Chicago blame individual men for rape. Both solutions advocate for better men.

Rape is discursively erased in postfeminist media culture where women are all autonomous, individual, post-victimhood women. Rape, in postfeminist media culture, ironically serves as a cautionary, disciplinary lesson to women that our “empowerment” and “equality” is blemished with the residue of patriarchy, white supremacy, and rape culture. There is an inherent responsibility narrative built into postfeminist media culture. Women’s successes are constantly advertised in this individual empowerment paradigm; however, there is rarely any discussion about women’s inability to succeed in postfeminism. There are no winners in a post-feminist, porn-chic media culture. Rape serves as a reminder of this.

We need a more complex, dynamic understanding of rape culture and how it subsists in order to fully engage with solutions to this problematic. “If we have a superficial surface-level understanding of oppression, then we will have superficial surface-level solutions. It’s that simple” (Kocięda, 2013). Slutwalk’s dismissal and erasure of movements created by Black women to combat rape culture demonstrates how racialized gender oppression is largely ignored

in Slutwalk. The exclusion of Black women from the logic of the march is illogical considering Black women have been organizing around sexual violence for decades and can offer a blueprint for contemporary activism surrounding rape. Black women have already demonstrated effective ways of engaging communities in dialogues about violence. As Kellner (2011) notes, activist struggles or campaigns should not automatically be regarded as progressive entities, but should instead be interrogated to assess what covert meanings are actually present (p.14). In a postfeminist era, women should be suspicious of the mainstream encouragement to reclaim a sexuality packaged by patriarchy and white supremacy. Slutwalk Chicago serves as a reminder that our activism can be the platform for the replication, communication, and naturalization of oppression.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis explored Slutwalk, which is a form of public bodied protest. I analyzed photographs from the 2012 Chicago Slutwalk march to describe how empowerment is articulated through language and dress by drawing from both movement feminism and postfeminism. I was interested in understanding how the term “slut” and the style politics of the Slutwalk marchers privilege whiteness. After using textual analysis as my method to analyze the photographs, I looked for themes in the slogans and visual representations to make sense of the march. The three themes that emerged from my analysis were: (1) Pin-Ups: (Post)Feminist Activism through Porn Chic, (2) Feminist Speak, and (3) Postfeminism, the Individual, and Rape Culture.

For the first theme, I looked at the ways clothing was used to represent the idea of slut. I also analyzed slogans that centralized on the sexy body, or women being allowed to wear “whatever” they wanted. I looked at the ways empowerment was understood and how pornographic conventions were used to accomplish sexual liberation. Within this theme, I focused on the ways Slutwalk acted as a corrective to second-wave feminism by making the environment fun and sexy. In this theme, I demonstrated how Black women were excluded from the imaginary of slut, evidenced by the slogan, “even a ho can say no.”

The second theme that emerged focused on the ways the Slutwalk marchers employed phrases, clothing, and attitudes from second-wave feminism to bolster postfeminist ideas about women’s bodies and empowerment. I argued that instead of fighting for systemic rights, women were fighting for the right to wear whatever they wanted, while using visual tropes to politicize their (post)feminist notions. Images like the feminist symbol, or Rosie the Riveter costumes

conjured up a particular nostalgia for historical movement feminism of the past while using these visual cues to advance sexist ideas about women's bodies.

The last theme centralized on the heavy emphasis on the individual within the logic of the Slutwalk march. Slogans focusing on consent was one of the most popular themes in the march. I argued that this emphasis excludes Black women who do not have access to individualism [a prerequisite for consent] in the ways that white women do. Additionally, I argued that focusing on the individual minimizes the structural responsibility for rape. We must re-articulate rape as something larger than an individual act between individual men and women. The second part of my analysis of this theme centralized on Slutwalk's emphasis on men as the problem for rape, which consequently guides the solutions for rape culture. Marchers argued that women are not responsible for rape, but rapists are; therefore, we should teach men to not rape. I problematized this notion, which merely functions as an uncritical corollary to the consent paradigm.

Within the confines of my research and analysis, I did experience some limitations. Methodologically, I could not clearly see every single poster in the march. Even in some photographs, there were marchers in the back with slogans that could not be deciphered. Additionally, I did have six poster slogans that did not clearly fit into a theme and they offered new directions and possibilities which initially complicated the organization of the themes I created. For example, one of those six posters focused on pornography as an extension of rape culture. Another poster discussed the reality that most women know their rapists. If I had more time to look at the Slutwalk march, I would have incorporated the other Slutwalks in Chicago to have a larger amount of data to look at. It would be interesting to see how the march is evolving since there was a Slutwalk in Chicago in 2013.

The research and analysis I have is very significant for the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies, and Gender and Women's Studies. I think activist marches are apt spaces to interrogate considering oppression can easily be replicated with a guise of progressiveness. Communication scholarship is lacking in literature dealing with the privileging of whiteness in social movements. Both Communication and Women's Studies have yet to do a critical, textual analysis of a particular Slutwalk march and my research will help to fill that void. My analysis could help future projects that seeks to create alternatives to Slutwalk. Dominant ideologies can permeate activist spaces and hijack the potential for social change. Though Slutwalk is interested in dismantling rape culture, the marchers simultaneously reify much of rape culture's logic by supporting a porn-chic postfeminism that privileges the most elite women.

The term slut was appropriated as a positive signifier for a sexual woman, without meaningfully excavating and interrogating the racialized components of the pejorative term. Without a careful analysis of the reclamation of the word, Black women are invited to participate in Slutwalk as gendered bodies, but are stripped of their racialized experiences. In doing this, Slutwalk politicizes rape, while depoliticizing race and how the two intersect and contribute to a culture of domination. The heavy emphasis on the "fun" aspects of the activism minimized the attention on the violence the marchers were committing on brown women's bodies. To uncritically reclaim a word without understanding its history reifies mainstream narratives of white women hijacking feminism, while leaving women of color on the margins. This is a topic that has been gaining mainstream attention, especially in 2013 after Nikki Kendall's infamous tweet, #Solidarityisforwhitewomen, arguing that white women are hijacking feminism while simultaneously silencing women of color (Kendall, 2013). Slutwalk sits at the crux of these racialized debates about feminism and activism.

Porn culture's seamless entrance into popular culture and postfeminist articulations of empowerment anesthetizes the critical core in many strains of popular feminist activism. Using women's sexualized bodies to combat patriarchy appears to be a cultural trend that minimizes the actual cause women are protesting against. Meghan Murphy states, "Contrary to popular belief, I am not opposed to boobs. Rather, I am opposed to women's bodies constantly being objectified and sexualized. I am also opposed to the fact that nobody gives a shit about women or feminism unless women and feminism look like a beer commercial or a burlesque show" (2012). This particular activist ethic is seen in campaigns, like FEMEN, the Ukrainian feminist activist group that is raging a "topless" revolution, to groups like PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Movements like Slutwalk confirm the myth that in order for women to engage in meaningful collective change, we can only use our sexualized bodies. This particular activist paradigm privileges white women's bodies, and minimizes the extent that Black women can participate.

In fact, one of the first studies of its kind has come out that proves dehumanizing women for an ethical cause actually decreases the support for the ethical topic that is being advertised:

When it comes to selling ethical causes-which we define as those causes promoting concern for the welfare of others-the dark side of sexualized advertising may limit its effectiveness...men who dehumanize women by associating them with animals or objects are more likely to sexually harass women and have a higher rape propensity...sexualized advertising could therefore backfire for ethical causes by eliciting responses that are antithetical to such causes." (Bongiorno, Bain, & Haslam, 2013, p.1).

The authors use PETA advertisements with scantily-clad women to discuss this phenomenon.

Using hyper-sexualized women to bring awareness to ethical causes can have the opposite effect. There are many possibilities for Slutwalk, especially because they have already successfully garnered international attention; however, their exclusion of Black women from their framework, and their surface-level analysis of rape culture is discursively causing more damage. Though Slutwalk has many possibilities, we must still remain critical of a movement that uses tenants of rape culture to combat it.

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