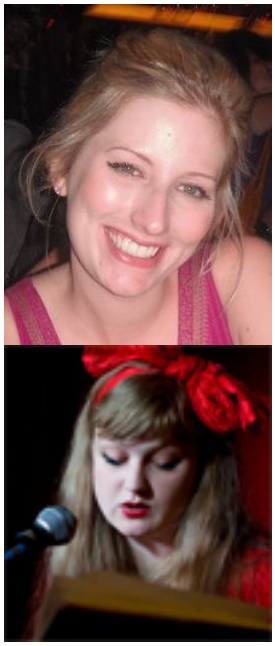
Feminists and SlutWalk: can reclaiming words empower women?

July 2011

Nina Powell and Anna Percy will introduce a discussion on whether women are *empowered* by *reclaiming* words like slut.



In January a Canadian police officer, Michael Sanguinetti, unwittingly triggered a series of marches a few months after a routine visit to Osgoode Hall Law School, Toronto - to advise a small group of students on their personal safety. And the cause of these marches across the globe? You might think it was the idea the state should lecture us on our personal lives, but no, it was the tone of his advice, saying 'I've been told I'm not supposed to say this - however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised'. The marches have been branded 'SlutWalks' and involve mostly women, some dressed in scantily clad outfits or burlesque style garments, carrying a variety of handmade placards, reclaiming the word 'slut'.

Although Michael Sanguinetti apologised for his comments, the various march organisers have targeted him on the basis that they say his comments express a popular view that 'blames the victim of rape for the rape committed against them'. Yet if the views expressed by his comments

are so widely held, why would he be singled out as a trigger to demonstrate against? As many march organisers have conceded, rape is usually committed against women who are not dressed provocatively, so the spectacle of some scantily dressed women on SlutWalk marches seems to confuse many observers and commentators, dividing opinion on whether the sexualisation of the issue should be supported, and indeed what people are really demonstrating about.

That women should be able to wear whatever they like without the fear of being sexually assaulted is widely accepted in society, and a practical reality in most town and city centres today. Yet there has been a wider cultural process of disarming any previous offence contained in some words by minority or discriminated groups, and the demonstrations to reclaim the word 'slut' follow this trend. While this message, on the surface, seems entirely reasonable, when you begin to look a bit closer at the motives behind SlutWalk, the movement seems oddly patronizing and banal, and perhaps problematises sexuality and the victimisation of women.

SlutWalk campaigners often confound the issues of sexual violence and rape with undesirable attention from men, articulating a continuum from something as severe as violent sexual assault to catcalling, which absolves any responsibility of women in attracting sexual attention from men. Traditionally, few areas of human activity accept the idea that people are not responsible for the impact they have through provocation, itself always been considered something that can at least potentially mitigate unlawful behaviour. Is the message of SlutWalk essentially antisocial in expressing the idea that what you do has no impact or consequence in a world full of other people?

Feminist movements have had many powerful demonstrations in order to progress women rights to vote, earn equal wages, and have autonomy. Even though many would argue that our progress today is not what it should be, it is undeniable that feminist movements of the past have led to women being treated as equal to men in the eyes of the state and legislation in the

West. Is SlutWalk really what we want for modern day feminism, and is it really what's left of the movements that got us to the point we are today? Do marches that conflate the serious sexual assault of rape with 'negative or undesired attention' victimise women, and insinuate sinister motives from men, making it harder to collectively change the world we live in?

Note: This was originally billed as having Louise Bolotin speaking alongside Nina. Unfortunately Louise had to withdraw and hope she has a speedy recovery. Many thanks to Anna for stepping it at very short notice so gracefully.

Listen again (not miked so variable quality)...

Speakers' introductions - click on the Play button: {mp3}feminism-speakers-intros{/mp3}

Initial audience interchange - click on the Play button:
{mp3}feminism-initial-audience-interchange{/mp3}

Initial audience interchange - click on the Play button:

{mp3}feminism-middle-discussion{/mp3}

Concluding comments - click on the Play button:
{mp3}feminism-concluding-comments{/mp3}

Some background readings

Why is the word 'slut' so powerful? , by Kathryn Westcott, BBC News Magazine 09 May 2011

Sluts like me , by Lindsay Beyerstein, Jezebel 11 May 2011

These 'slut walk' women are simply fighting for their right to be dirty , by Germaine Greer, The Telegraph 12 May 2011

SlutWalk: a step in the wrong direction , by Neil Davenport, spiked 18 May 2011

How feminists helped students to 'unlearn' liberty , by Wendy Kaminer, spiked 18 May 2011

Emin's skill has been usurped by celebrity , by Brian Sewell, This is London 19 May 2011

The rape debate is demeaning to women , by Nathalie Rothschild, spiked 19 May 2011

A feminist presumption of victimhood impairs justice , by Mary Dejevsky, The Independent 20 May 2011

Slutwalks and the future of feminism , by Katherine Sansom June 2011

SlutWalks and the future of feminism , by Jessica Valenti, The Washington Post 03 June 2011

Feminist critics of SlutWalk have forgotten that language is not a commodity , by Sophie Jones, The F Word 08 June 2011

Is Slutwalk skirting the issue? , by Dianne Cook, The Natter 10 June 2011

The double standards of prudish Slutwalkers , by Abigail Ross Jackson, spiked 14 June 2011

I Think I Just Figured Out SlutWalk , by Elle, Tits and Sass 16 June 2011

The politics of pubic hair in sexualised modern society , BBC Newsnight 21 June 2011

How to talk to little girls , by Lisa Bloom, The Huffington Post 22 June 2011

Vajazzling: feminists can't abide working-class taste , by Brendan O'Neill, The First Post 23 June 2011