How to Take Back the Slut: Examining SlutWalk and its Impact on Women of Colour

> *"So ... how do you torture a woman?... You can pry her body away from her mind ... To pry her body away from her mind you need to physically humiliate her. Of course, rape is the most traditional method, but it's not the only one ... You can ridicule her body ... you can make her strap her breasts in. You can make her embarrassed about her periods. You can make her frightened of puberty, frightened of sex, frightened of aging, frightened of eating. You can terrorize her with her own body, and then she will torture herself."*
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> *- Carolyn Gage, The Second Coming of Joan of Arc*

Society has found many insidious ways to make women afraid of their own bodies. Periods, breasts, stretch marks, and a myriad of other natural occurrences have been ridiculed and made taboo by the world around us. Women cannot even choose to take part in sexual activity, or to deny it, without being degraded for either option. Not the latest, but one of the most currently prevalent methods of this is the term "slut." This word is used to mock a woman's sexual choices--whether real or perceived--by the way she presents herself. The word slut has become so common in society that in 2011 a Toronto police officer believed it was acceptable to tell a group of college girls to "avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized" (Carr 24). This blatant disrespect stirred up years of anger in these young women and led to the first SlutWalk. Started by a small group, which turned into three thousand at the first event, Toronto SlutWalk was a protest to dispel the myth that women were responsible for their assaults, an idea that supported rape culture. Rape culture refers to society's tendency to justify rape and violence against women by providing excuses for men's actions, such as drunkenness, as well as the way a woman dresses. This culture permeates society and is what SlutWalk was attempting to take a stand against through its protests. Protesters wore anything from bras and underwear to pyjama outfits, all with the common idea to take back the word "slut" and criticize its use to degrade women. White women's sexualities have long been tied to the way they dressed, with many women being labelled as "prudes" or "sluts" based on something as arbitrary as the length of

their skirts. Thus, many white women may find bodily autonomy in the reclamation and mockery of the word "slut." However, for women of colour, whose sexuality has long been "tied to institutionalized ideology about [their] bodies as sexualized objects of property, as spectacles of sexuality and deviant sexual desire" (Black Women's Brigade, par.4) no comfort, nor space for themselves within SlutWalks can be found. Through its focus on clothing, SlutWalk ignores the needs and history of women of colour and continues to perpetuate white feminist ideals. Although SlutWalk claims to be the next great feminist movement, it excludes those most in need of feminist reform, and thus, is ultimately ineffective in its attempts to unite women against harassment. To truly become a movement to help all women, SlutWalk needs to focus on building intersectionality and creating a space for women of colour.

Historical feminist movements in Canada and the Unites States, such as the suffragette movement, have almost always excluded women of colour. Regardless of these exclusions, white women still seem to take pride in their feminist actions and seemingly forget about the help that many of their sisters still need. One can see this ignorance by asking a simple question. When did women gain the right to vote? Most people's answer would be the same as Google's, either 1917 (Canada) or 1920 (America). However, what many people fail to realize is that these dates were only when white women received the right to vote, not all women. Indigenous women did not receive voting rights in Canada until 1960, and while black women were, technically, allowed to vote in the 1920's in America, many states put policies such as poll taxes, literacy tests, or grandfather clauses in place to restrict their ability to vote ("Elections… the American Way"). This lack of rights for women of colour was not an unintended side effect of racism but a part of the suffragette's actual agenda. Susan B. Anthony, credited as the mother of the suffragette movement, once said: "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or

demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (qtd. in "Black Women & the Suffrage Movement: 1848-1923"). Later, in 1913, black women participating in a suffragist parade were forced to march in an all-black group at the very back of the parade, segregated from the white women. Finally, when all women gained the right to vote, it was quickly stripped away from black women through intimidation and other tactics (Staples). White women were too concerned with their newfound freedom to help those who had had their rights taken away so quickly

Despite the inherent racism in Susan B. Anthony's ideals, which was also rampant throughout the entire suffragette movement, many feminists still lay their "I Voted" stickers at her grave after each election as a tribute to her and the other women who fought for the right to vote. This simple act represents modern feminism's still-withstanding neglect of women of colour. While Anthony may have been racist, she still did great things for white women, and many feminists (without even realizing it) only care about that part. White feminism has historically been, and continues to be, entrenched in policies that are ignorant of the specific needs of women of colour. A woman at SlutWalk NYC held a sign that read "Woman is the Nigger of the World" (qtd. in Carr 33). While SlutWalk NYC apologized for this act (Carr 33), the fact that it even occurred showcases the ignorance toward women of colour that was prevalent throughout the movement. This ignorance was perpetuated once again through SlutWalk's focus on clothing. The sexuality of women of colour is defined not merely by their clothing, but rather, by a legacy of slavery, genocide, and entitlement to the coloured body. Women of colour are affected disproportionately by gendered violence, and therefore, need to be represented in SlutWalk in order for it to be effective.

African, Hispanic, and Aboriginal women are affected by gendered violence at staggering rates. Indigenous women in Canada consistently report higher levels of physical and

sexual abuse, whether committed by a partner or other person. 52% of Aboriginal victims reported fearing for their lives during this abuse as compared to 31% of non-Aboriginal victims (Sinha). Aboriginal women are almost three times more likely to suffer gendered violence than white women (Brennan). As for African-American women, they experience partner violence at a 35% higher rate than white women ("Women of Colour"). According to Kathy Miriam, in her article "Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Slutwalk":

> [women of colour] compose the majority of sex trafficking victims in this country, who comprise the majority of those sold in the mail-order-bride system, who are the commodities offered in brothel houses ringing US military bases in and out of this country, who are the goods offered for sexual violation in prostitution. We who are and historically have been the "sluts" from whom traffickers, pimps, and other "authorities" of the global corporate sex trade realize $20 billion in earnings. (4)

The culmination of this evidence shows the terrifying level of misogyny prevalent in the lives of women of colour, solidifying the need for a movement that addresses their fears and real-world experience in the ways that movements created by and for white feminists have not. "An Open Letter from Black Women to SlutWalk Organizers" was shared by The Black Women's Brigade and signed by over one hundred other women of colour. In their letter, the Black Women's Brigade declares that "the problem of trivialized rape and the absence of justice are intertwined with race, gender, sexuality, poverty, immigration and community" ("An Open Letter from Black Women to SlutWalk Organizers"). The Brigade explains that their instances of harassment and assault have not simply been because they are women, but rather that a myriad of reasons have led men to believe that they have the right to take and use coloured bodies.

Some feminists have lumped the values of the original SlutWalk Toronto in with the values and ideals of the entire movement. However, the disregard shown toward women of colour in the planning and execution of other SlutWalks proves that this assumption is inaccurate. Annie Hill argues that "SlutWalk issued a radical challenge to rape logic: a pervasive ideology depicting women's appearance as causal or contributing to sexual violence" (24). She states that rape logic is incorrect in its assumption that a woman's appearance contributes to sexual violence. However, as the statistics above suggest, the colour of a woman's skin does contribute largely to their chance of being impacted by gendered violence. Hill's argument not only misrepresents rape logic, but also ignores the complex plight of women of colour who are trying to regain the right to have agency over their own skin. Hill tries to claim that SlutWalk stands for women of colour by stating, "it is important to grasp the significance of SlutWalk's ability to spark diverse engagement; its invitation to sex workers, queer and trans protesters; and its receptivity to criticism from women of color activists" (25). However, she provides no cohesive evidence to suggest that SlutWalk as a whole has created a space for women of colour and other marginalized groups besides one instance of SlutWalk in Toronto. While SlutWalk Toronto may have worked well for all women, it is not indicative of SlutWalk as a movement. In fact, Jacqueline Schiappa argues that SlutWalk has become a place where minority groups have become even more ignored in the interest of corporatizing the event. In her essay, Schiappa shares her experience observing the planning of a SlutWalk in Minneapolis. Throughout her paper, Schiappa describes the various instances of the two white organizers dismissing, belittling, and mocking ideas and reform suggested for SlutWalk by women of colour and transgender women. When a transgender woman suggested that the SlutWalk change its motto from "My dress isn't a yes" (qtd. in Schiappa 303) to something more inclusive to other groups,

lead organizer Kim brushed off the statement, saying “Let’s table it until after the walk” (qtd. in Schiappa 303). When another organizer brought up dealing with the racial issues SlutWalk had been criticized for, Kim replied “We want to avoid that altogether” (qtd. in Schiappa 304) and later mentioned that organizations focused on people of colour were “very critical” (qtd. in Schiappa, 304) and thus, too difficult to work with. Evidently, SlutWalk Toronto is not representative of what the movement has become; however, it can serve as a benchmark for what SlutWalks must achieve in order to become a movement that represents everyone.

Despite its many shortcomings, SlutWalk is not irredeemable. With a few changes leading to increased intersectionality, SlutWalk could become a movement that genuinely unites all women against sexual assault and gendered violence. While SlutWalk Minneapolis provides an example of the many ways to make SlutWalk ineffective in supporting women of colour, Hill is correct in her review of SlutWalk Toronto as working for the women most in need. Unlike Minneapolis, Toronto’s key organizers were a diverse group of women rather than a white man and woman (Schiappa 302-306). Out of the five SlutWalk founders, two were women of colour and at least two identified as some form of queer (Schiappa 306). Even Toronto’s motto shows their focus on inclusivity. While SlutWalk, as a whole, may focus heavily on clothing as a concept, the motto of Toronto was simply “We’ve had enough!” (qtd. in Schiappa 304). This statement shares the common belief between all groups that regardless of race, gender, or age, protestors have had enough with rape culture. The difference in intersectionality between the two SlutWalks proves that the involvement of a diverse group of women during the planning stage is key to creating a SlutWalk that all women can celebrate. SlutWalk Toronto prides itself on active intersectionality and has even included event speakers such as: Monica Forrester, “a 2-spirit, black, queer, Trans-femme, radical, sexworker, and activist” (qtd. in Schiappa 308), Blu Waters,

a grandmother and member of the Metis nation of Ontario of the Cree/Métis/Micmac-Wolf Clan, Jeff Perera of the White Ribbon Campaign, known for "men working towards re-imagining masculinity and inspiring men, young men, boys and male-identified people to help end gender-based violence" (qtd. in Schiappa 308). SlutWalk Toronto has created and maintained a platform for marginalized groups to unite and express themselves and, thus, has become a movement that truly stands for the rights of all women.

As it stands, SlutWalk is ignorant of the plights of women of colour and, thus, is ineffective in its goal to unite all women against rape culture. Many SlutWalks such as SlutWalk Minneapolis, ignore the history behind women of colour's experiences, and alienate women of colour from planning spaces. However, as shown by SlutWalk Toronto, if organizers and protesters work with marginalized groups and actively promote intersectionality, SlutWalk can still become a movement that supports women of every race, class, and orientation. Women of colour have uplifted and supported the white woman's feminist movements for decades, all while being beaten back into the shadows by the very women they are supporting. They have faced rape, beatings, slavery, segregation, residential schools, and countless other horrific acts, all based on the pigment of their skin. Isn't it time that white women stood up for them?

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