

Cultural Daily

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Slutwalks: Girls Gone Wild?

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Wednesday, May 11th, 2011



Just for the record: I am not a slut and I would be offended if anyone called me a slut. But not everyone feels this way. Some women are trying to reclaim the term, like gays have reclaimed the term “queer.” I’m not sure I agree with this mission but, like it or not, sluts are coming out of the dark bars and nightclubs and taking to the streets. Nearly 2,000 “sluts” marched through Boston Common this weekend. Some wore jeans and t-shirts; some were dressed in nothing more than a bra and a micro-mini. All of them protested the idea that women who dress a certain way are “asking for it.”

Slutwalks started in Toronto after a [police officer](#) said that the best way for women to avoid rape is to “stop dressing like sluts.” The Slutwalk protests have now spread to cities all over the world and more are being planned every day. I am reminded of the [Take Back the Night](#) campaigns that began in 1975 and have happened every year since. I attended an all-women’s college and Take Back the Night was (and is) a major event each year. I imagine that some of the current students marched through Boston this weekend with banners reading “My Outfit is Not an Invitation!”

Sluts, like women activists/performers of the past, are pushing the boundaries of respectability. Madonna did this in the 1980s with her lingerie-as-outwear look and sexual openness. Marina Abramovic took performance art to new heights in the 1970s – even inviting her audience to chose weapons with which to assault her. Women in the 1920s took up smoking, chopped off their hair, shortened their hemlines and threw off their mothers’ old-school Victorian ideals. At the turn of the 20th century, suffragists chained themselves to the White House gates in order to get the right to vote.

I admire these women. And I admire the current activists/performers who are trying to change how women think about themselves – and how they are treated by men in our society. As an educator, I am acutely aware of the violence being done to young women. I have had several students who have been raped, often on their college campus. Currently, [Yale](#) is being investigated for (allegedly) being a “sexually hostile environment” but, unfortunately, this is not just Yale’s problem. Many college campuses are hostile towards women. Young women are assaulted in dorms and at parties; female faculty are sexually harassed; women’s studies departments are marginalized; qualified female professors are denied tenure, less qualified males are promoted. And the ugly truth is that many college campus administrations are not nearly as responsive or proactive as they should be.

In the world of pop culture, Lady Gaga has taken over where Madonna left off. Her outrageous outfits, hair and make-up are a theatrical attraction but her message can be on-point. Her song “Born This Way” inspired 10-year-old [Maria Aragon](#) to cover the song and become a YouTube sensation. Aragon has now performed the song with Lady Gaga, been on the Ellen DeGeneres Show and performed for the Canadian Prime Minister. She has also been nominated for an MTV award. Watching Aragon sing about having self-confidence and believing in one’s own, unique beauty is quite moving.



But as heart-warming as it is to watch a 10-year-old Filipina with an amazing voice on YouTube, I’m not sure that her presence – or that of Lady Gaga – does anything to stop violence against women. Like women on college campuses, Gaga herself has been the subject of marginalizing and ridicule. Is she a real [artist](#)? Is she a passing fad, raking in money from impressionable young girls and their mothers? Is she even a [woman](#)? The Slutwalk participants are likewise being attacked. Their [detractors](#) call them “dumptrucks” and “fat pigs” and suggest that these women are just mad because they aren’t sexy enough to get raped.

Slutwalk participants, Lady Gaga and the women who have brought the lawsuit against Yale all seem to be asking for the same things: Respect and freedom from violence and ridicule. But are we listening? In the past 100 years women have fought for and received the right to vote, the right to contraception (including abortion), the ability to work outside the home, to marry or not (without stigma), to engage in same-sex relationships with other women, to adopt children without having a husband, to have careers previously held solely by men (in the military, as heads of corporations, as university presidents, as world leaders). Yet the attacks on [funding](#) for women’s health services continue. Women are still being [stoned](#) to death in Iran. The [sex trafficking](#) of under-age females is a global problem.

I applaud the Slutwalkers’ decision to bring the issue of violence against women out into the open (again). I am less sure about reclaiming “slut.” This is always tricky – while “queer” may have been recuperated, the “n-word” still holds its power to harm. But I think there are more pressing issues: Will Slutwalkers finally end the assaults and rapes of women? Will the case against Yale – whatever the outcome – end sexism and discrimination on college campuses? Will Lady Gaga create a generation of self-assured women who live free from abuse? Perhaps not, or at least not yet. But perhaps a fight on several fronts – in the media, in the courts and in the streets – will at least give hope to women who want to reclaim their own dignity and help others do the same. And I also know that those suffragists – chained to the White House gates, ridiculed, beaten and arrested – did eventually win their cause.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 11th, 2011 at 2:45 pm and is filed under [Theatre, Discourse](#)

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