

Ladies, We Have a Problem

By REBECCA TRAISTER JULY 20, 2011

I wanted to love SlutWalks, the viral protest movement that began this spring after a Toronto police officer told a group of college women that if they hoped to escape sexual assault, they should avoid dressing like “sluts.” In angry response, young women (and men) have marched in more than 70 cities around the world, often dressed in bras, halter tops and garter belts.

But at a moment when questions of sex and power, blame and credibility, and gender and justice are so ubiquitous and so urgent, I have mostly felt irritation that stripping down to skivvies and calling ourselves sluts is passing for keen retort.

This fall will mark the 20th anniversary of Anita Hill’s testimony before Congress about the sexual harassment she experienced while working for Clarence Thomas. Though Hill offered only her own narrative about the behavior she witnessed, her story helped other women build a vocabulary and learn to talk about unjust sexual-power dynamics. Thanks in part to her, we were, by now, supposed to be braver and more skilled at calling out injustice, at exposing or reversing sexual-power imbalances. But 20 summers later, we’re marching in hot pants.

I understand that SlutWalkers want to drain the s-word of its misogynistic venom and correct the idea it conveys: that a woman who takes a variety of sexual partners or who presents herself in an alluring way is somehow morally bankrupt and asking to be hit on, assaulted or raped. Not coincidentally, it is a word that was used to discredit Hill by one of her (since repentant) denigrators, David Brock, who called her “a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty.”

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. Scantily clad marching seems weirdly blind to the race, class and body-image issues that usually (rightly) obsess young feminists and seems inhospitable to scads of women who, for various reasons, might not feel it logical or comfortable to express their revulsion at victim-blaming by donning bustiers. So while the mission of SlutWalks is crucial, the package is confusing and leaves young feminists open to the very kinds of attacks they are battling.

That lack of precision and self-protection leapt out in another recent example of a woman grappling with issues of sexual power. In June, Good magazine published an online personal essay by Mac McClelland, a respected human rights journalist. In it, McClelland recounted how a series of assignments, especially a two-week stint in Haiti in which she spent time with a traumatized rape victim and fought off threatening, unwanted male advances herself, left her with post-traumatic stress disorder and the conviction that the only way to unravel the coil of debilitating anxiety in her chest was by having a consensual but violent encounter with a friend. The essay began with the arresting sentence, “It was my research editor who told me it was completely nuts to willingly” have sex “at gunpoint.”

McClelland’s strategy, like that of SlutWalks, was to regain sexual power through a controlled embrace of the dynamic that had initially rendered her, and women around her, vulnerable. But the story read as if McClelland was so jumpy about writing it that she did so with eyes closed and face scrunched up, rushing to get the words out before she lost her nerve. The result was a flashiness that drew in readers with a “violent sex” headline and taboo premise, but also an imprecision that left her open to reasonable critiques (from those who felt she portrayed Haiti in a colonialist fashion and used the tale of an unnamed rape victim without permission) as well as hateful ones.

On Twitter, not just prudes but peers impugned McClelland’s journalistic abilities; they referred to her as an attention seeker (as if any writer puts forth work without wanting it to garner notice) and a liar, and wondered whether she might not be branded a “geisha” because of her description of sex with a French U.N. peacekeeper.

The writer Amy Wilentz unfavorably compared McClelland's essay to the account of Lara Logan, a journalist assaulted earlier this year in Tahrir Square. Wilentz noted that Logan had "reported it right. The facts, with an element of emotion" — the suggestion being that there is some proper way for a woman to convey a tale of sexual trauma.

It was odd, given that McClelland had not been raped herself, that the tenor of some of the attacks on her read like a compendium of invective commonly used to discredit actual rape accusers. Scanning through them, I found myself again wishing that the young women doing the difficult work of reappropriation were more nuanced in how they made their grabs at authority, that they were better at anticipating and deflecting the resulting pile-on. But I also wondered if, perhaps, this worry makes me the Toronto cop who thought women should protect themselves by not dressing like sluts.

The trouble with Wilentz's assessment and my own anxieties about self-preservation is that two decades after sitting through Hill's excruciatingly careful narrative, there is still no way for women to tell stories of sexual injustice that allows them to bypass character assassination.

Logan was herself trashed as an attention monger and for dressing in a manner that invited assault. A young woman who pressed rape charges against two New York City police officers could not be believed, in part, because she was drunk. When an 11-year-old Texas girl was allegedly gang-raped by 19 men, The New York Times ran a story quoting neighbors saying that she habitually wore makeup and dressed in clothes more appropriate for a 20-year-old. The maid who accused Dominique Strauss-Kahn of rape has been discredited for being a liar, and The New York Post claimed she was a prostitute. The young French woman who is pressing charges of attempted rape against Strauss-Kahn — an event she has recounted in a novel — has been painted as an unreliable narrator, young, overdramatic and unstable.

None of us can know the veracity of any of these women's claims. But the standard response to any public attempt by a woman to upend expectations of consent, passivity and silence — whether she does it calmly or hurriedly, in court or in fiction, or while wearing a corset on Michigan Avenue — is still that she is a little

bit nutty and a little bit slutty.

The most sophisticated attempts elicit just as much derision and, frankly, receive a fraction of the attention. All of which suggests that while clumsy stabs at righting sexual-power imbalances may be frustrating, they remain necessary.

Social progress is imperfect, full of half-truths and sloppy misrepresentations. After all, we celebrate the victories of a civil rights movement that was shot through with misogyny, and of a women's movement riddled with racial, class and sexual resentments. Fighting for power is a complicated, messy process, especially for complicated, messy human beings. Often, the best we can hope for is that our efforts draw a spotlight.

Which, I guess, is enough to make SlutWalkers of us all.

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