10 Materialising resistance against rape culture online: The phenomenon of SlutWalks

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Introduction

This chapter explores the phenomenon of SlutWalks as representations of a feminist movement that traverses the online and the offline to reach and engage wider audiences in complex inequalities faced primarily by women. Also, SlutWalks are discussed as an instrumental form of resistance against rape culture, an insidious set of cultural and societal practices which will be defined and contextualised in more detail throughout the chapter. SlutWalks are also discussed as a movement which has produced reverberations online and offline to produce a counter discourse to sexist, patronising and protectionist dominant beliefs which continue to victimise and affect women's lives.

Since their beginning in 2011, SlutWalks have pushed some of the stubborn binaries around women's bodies in contemporary society, such as covered-uncovered bodies and respectable-risky bodies. Additionally, they have also highlighted the victim blaming discourses that surround women and how this is indicative of what has been termed rape culture (Cocarla, 2017). Exploring performativities of resistance and solidarity both offline and online, I explore the development of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) surrounding the SlutWalk movement and how they have produced online materialisations against rape culture (Mendes, 2015). The chapter will narrate some of the emergent online activisms around the socio-cultural phenomenon of SlutWalks, and it will analyse how its implications produce a shift in feminist politics through the co-opting of online content and specific platform affordabilities, particularly those of Twitter. Some of these affordabilities are productive of what has been termed platform "vernaculars". Thus, with the phenomenon of SlutWalks, some forms of feminism have become interwoven with particular platforms and vernaculars, such as hashtags on Twitter, or likes on Facebook (Gibbs et al., 2015). These online feminist activisms are in turn recasting sets of power relations, which Foucault (1994) discusses as only visible and existing when seen as actions upon actions, in the case of the online, clicks upon clicks which increase the visibility, spreadability and durability of feminist activisms online.

I apply a theorisation of the interlinking between offline and online elements through a Deleuzian-Guattarian (2013, pp. 102–103) framework, more specifically through the notion of "machinistic assemblage", which has been defined as comprising different bodies technological, organic and inorganic which assemble and react to enable new fields of possibility and power. In recent

years, feminist, social and posthuman scholarship have provided initial steps for an understanding of social life through antihumanism, challenging traditional ethnocentric and rationalistic views through which relations in society are understood (Braidotti, 2013; Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Fox and Alldred, 2016; Latour, 2005). Following a Spinozist philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) have produced key terms, which the scholars mentioned above have embedded into what has become a new ontology of social life. Within this ontology, social production is explained as a result of relations which become affected by how entities (both human and non-human) interrelate and derive particular relationalities and temporalities from each other. Assemblages help explain and map out some of the relationalities traversing various social media and online activisms. Following a Deleuzian-Guattarian logic, the notion of assemblages makes sense of how different bodies assemble creating an impact, a new body or an unexpected event. On assemblages, Deleuze and Guattari argue (2013, pp. 102–103): "an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a mechanic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies". Deleuze and Guattari's (2013) focus on the assemblages of bodies can help explain how the immediacy of the online environment, such as Twitter has produced tiny but increasing accumulations of interest in and around an event: the safety talk at York University (that will be described later) and the resulting SlutWalks.

The Deleuzian-Guattarian notion of assemblage, although a philosophical notion, will be sensitised to enable an analysis of online activisms as generative of new sets of relations of power, but also bound to platform affordabilities and the ways in which online publics become harnessed by powerful affective events. These entanglements will also be permeated by inferences on how affective relations which bound online publics together across networks produce what Ahmed (2015) has called a cultural politics of emotion against rape culture.

The term rape culture entered the public domain in the 1970s and although not new has resurfaced in feminist scholarship (Niccolini, 2018; Ringrose & Renold, 2014) to challenge societal beliefs around rape as a rarity and only committed by transgressor individuals. The feminist interpretations around rape culture move away from criminal interpretations of rape as just an act, to rape as culture and everyday socialities that continue to perpetuate the acceptance of male aggression towards women. To this effect, Sills et al. (2016, p. 2) describe how the harnessing of two patterns of social and cultural practices create the conditions for rape culture to continue. First, victim blaming which results in discourses that excuse rape; second, "taken-for-granted features of everyday heterosexuality that normalise and naturalise male sexual aggression and female passivity" (p. 2). Rape culture as a notion involves a "socio-cultural context in which an aggressive male sexuality is eroticized and seen as a healthy, normal and desired part of sexual relations" (Keller et al., 2018, p. 23). So, while

the crime of rape is condemned in many parts of the world, there are still unshifting social and cultural politics which objectify women and trivialise rape through media representations, and even humour. Rape culture then excuses sexual assault on the basis of a construction of women as provoking or deserving of male aggression and sexual violence. A rape culture also endorses what has been termed toxic masculinities (Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018; Lewis et al., 2018); a set of repressive and narrow masculine practices that construct violence and assault as an inevitability and as a strong feature of dominant masculinity (Phipps et al., 2018). SlutWalks can be argued to be an important challenge to the sequels of living in rape culture, whereby women are constructed as objects of desire who have always been aggressively pursued, and so women should be aware of how their sexuality elicits responses in male counterparts who will always seek to dominate them. Within this context, sexual assault becomes the responsibility of women and how they manage their sexuality to avoid consequences; making sexual violence excusable (Keller, 2015; Keller et al., 2018).

In order to develop the discussion, first, I will be narrating the events leading to the emergence of SlutWalks as in Toronto; this section will then be extended by talking through the phenomenon of SlutWalks as a machinistic assemblage of resistance (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013). Second, the chapter delves into some of the online activisms on Twitter and how these manifestations have been enabled by the affordabilities of the site itself. Last, the work of online activisms is made sense of by analysing how the SlutWalks movement have been enrolling various affective publics into both, the resignification of the word "slut" (Ringrose & Renold, 2014), and the creation of transnational affective publics against rape culture. The chapter seeks to pursue how a retelling of the public understanding around the word "slut" has been enabled by the assemblages laid out in connections found in online activisms, platform affordabilities, affective publics, affective events and the co-opting of online media by feminism.

SlutWalks as challenge to rape culture and victim-blaming

The phenomenon of SlutWalks began to gain media visibility in 2011 and became an explosive offline/online movement attempting to generate a different kind of politics around women's bodies in society. SlutWalks began in Canada, in the city of Toronto, sparked by the comments of police officer, Michael Sanguinetti, who held "how to keep safe" talks for York University students. The police officer's comments at one of these talks suggested that women should avoid dressing like sluts to avoid attracting unwanted sexual attention to themselves. These comments provoked a series of criticisms and activisms both offline and online which sought to reclaim the word slut and resignify the negative connotations associated with the word, creating a unifying feminist affective response challenging rape culture. The two organisers Sonya Barnett and Heather Jarvis (2009), who cofounded SlutWalk Toronto, proposed that the word slut should be redeemed by women. They asserted that women "are tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming; of being judged by our sexuality

and feeling unsafe as a result… Being in charge of our sexual lives should not mean that we are opening ourselves to an expectation of violence, regardless if we participate in sex for pleasure or work. No one should equate enjoying sex with attracting sexual assault" (Dow & Wood, 2014, p. 23). Social media was used by Barnett and Jarvis to invite and mobilise women online and although they were expecting around 300 women to come along, the real number was around 3,000. The campaign around the first SlutWalk was directed at women who experienced and resented slut-shaming. The Toronto march happened on 3rd April 2011 with some women choosing to dress in everyday attire and others choosing to dress in lingerie and stilettos "to symbolize their right to dress like sluts without being targeted for social violence… others carried signs reading my dress is not a yes; slut pride; and don't tell us how to dress. Tell men not to rape" (Dow & Wood, 2014, p. 24). The marches spread to many other countries across all five continents, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Australia, Argentina, Mexico and South Africa where rape is an endemic social problem. These assemblages harnessed and accumulated affects which gained power from click to click; thriving in the augmented visibilities that characterise web cultures.

The comments made by the police officer in Toronto sparked such a significant response because they represented the prevalence of the main patterns associated with rape culture, routine victim blaming and the acceptance of male aggression. The suggestion made to students at York University encapsulated rape culture within a particular event, Deleuze referred to these instances when we are at the cusp of change in a plane of immanence as "events" or "singularities" (2005, p. 31). Rape culture was given form in this event, with the tangibility of the comments made by the police officer, encouraging women to keep safe by self-managing dress codes to reflect respectability, shifting the blame of sexual aggression onto women and excusing sexual violence. Within rape culture the category of women is still widely constructed as victim, through victim blaming and the passivity of women in the face of male violence. Feminist resistance has utilised SlutWalks offline and online to challenge and rewrite women beyond their role as victims.

SlutWalks: From the streets to the online

Streets have historically been tricky places for women to negotiate (Crinnion, 2013). The victimhood associated with women occupying streets, particularly at night is evident in how societally and culturally women are seen as partly responsible for rape "by failing to perform a chaste femininity, or for sending out signals to men that they are "up for it", regardless of how much they protest" (Keller et al., 2018, p. 24). The supposed signals that mark women as up for it might include wearing scanty clothing, going on a night out and staying out late at night, heavy drinking, demonstrating that they are sexually active, or even going out unaccompanied (Lewis et al., 2018). These practices are interpreted in the rape culture context as risky femininities, lacking in respectability, "drunken femininities" or "tragic girls" (Hutton et al., 2016, p.

73), who within socio-cultural practices of rape culture become signified as women who bring the risk of rape upon themselves.

Movements such as "Taking back the night" were created as a response to the sexual violence that largely victimises women. In 1976 the first "Taking back the night" gathering happened in Belgium, and later on in 1978 one of the first of these type of marches occurred in Vancouver, Canada. These marches enabled large numbers of women to form a collectivity that occupied the streets at night differently; publicly expressing women's anger at sexual violence and the victim blaming that accompanies it. Some of the women attending the marches had experienced sexual violence; but the protests were also attended by women whom although not victims of sexual violence, "had been taught to fear it" (Melville, 2016, p. 6). The collectivity of taking back the night created a public, geographical space in which women could "confront their fears about sexual violence by reclaiming city streets en masse" (p. 6). The streets were mobilised and reclaimed by the feminist outcry of women against sexual violence, underpinning the movement was a need to recognise that the way in which men and women experience the streets is marked by profound inequalities. Inadvertently, these marches were about rebuffing rape culture and were similar to SlutWalks although smaller and more focused on safety. SlutWalks were less about safety and more about challenging the ways in which women are made sense of in city streets as objects of desire and risk.

SlutWalks also have a wider reach and particular spreadabilities since they harnessed the reachabilities of social media, particularly, those of Twitter. SlutWalks demonstrate how the versatility of possibilities for circulating user-generated content and the openness of online material to various networks have moved social and cultural activities online, such as activism (Horeck, 2014; Keller et al., 2018; Mendes, 2015). Although the pervasiveness of digital social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – have contributed to the surging of cyberfeminisms and greater awareness of the effects of rape culture (Eudy, 2012), social media is also understood to be part of the problem. In recent years, terms such as "technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment" (TFSV) are used to "describe collectively the range of criminal, civil, and otherwise harmful sexually aggressive behaviours perpetrated against women with the aid of new technologies" (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 2). Other researchers (Herring et al., 2002; Jane, 2015) have proposed that women's incremental use of the Internet has provoked a mobilisation of online harassment and threat towards women, enabled by social media, reframing violence against women. This violence or "e-bile" (Jane, 2012, p. 1) against women is experienced very often by activists and female researchers and academics doing feminist activism and feminist research online (Vera-Gray, 2017). However, social media and online socialities continue to be an important space for young people in particular to learn about rape culture, and challenge inequalities. SlutWalks have provided a collective force that challenges sexual violence through movements that reclaim the physical space of city streets with multitudes of women walking them, to the online spaces where women seek to

contest traditional gender relations by clicking, retweeting, blogging, reblogging, following and joining supportive feminist networks (Bustillos, 2017; Clark, 2016; Keller et al., 2018).

SlutWalks have enabled performativities of resistance and solidarity online through the enrolling of feminist affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) surrounding the SlutWalk movement. The phenomenon of SlutWalks has particularly honed in the platform affordabilities of Twitter in order to reconstruct how women respond to everyday occurrences representative of rape culture and sexisms. There are currently over 30 accounts on Twitter used to organise and mobilise women online, @SlutWalkTO, @SlutWalk NYC, @SlutWalk Melbourne and @SlutWalk Berlin are just a few of the existing accounts. These online movements represent emergent online activisms which produce a shift in feminist politics through the co-opting of online content and specific platform affordabilities. Some of these affordabilities are productive of what has been termed platform vernaculars which are ways to engage with the online that become unique expressive possibilities (Gibbs et al., 2015). With the phenomenon of SlutWalks, online feminisms have become interwoven with particular platforms and vernaculars, such as hashtags on Twitter, or likes on Facebook (Gibbs et al., 2015).

Digital feminisms have become more mainstream in popular culture and have engaged different and younger audiences who have found an outlet on social media (Keller, 2012; Keller et al., 2018). There are many ways in which social media has enabled an online feminist politics of difference, first, by amassing groups linked by an affective response which binds that particular public (Ahmed, 2015). In the case of SlutWalks, the affective response was one of outrage and indignation. Second, the reclaiming of the word slut, from shameful to powerful, rewriting women from victims to agents of change (Ringrose & Renold, 2012; 2014). Third, by enabling a proliferation and accumulation of online activisms that have allowed women to generate a public debate, on the streets and off the streets, around the prevalence of rape culture in society.

SlutWalks as a machinic assemblage of online and offline feminism

SlutWalks can be understood as a pressing challenge to how women have been kept on the margins and a subverting practice to rape logic. Having defined rape culture and having discussed how it continues to form part of the social fabric, I want to theorise some of the ways in which the Deleuzian-Guattarian notion of assemblage can render visible the transformations enabled by online activisms. Deleuze and Guattari (2013) speak of assemblages as an intermingling of bodies, human and non-human and what their stabilisation allows, in other words, what becomes assembled. As I pointed out earlier there are three main aspects resulting from the machinic assemblages of SlutWalk feminism I want to discuss in more detail in the sections below.

First, there is the enrolling of publics based on a response to a particular event. The accumulations of people and different narratives which characterise

SlutWalks are important interactions which strengthen and create empowered feminist publics (Keller, 2012). On this first aspect, the online/ offline connections resulting from the SlutWalks showed how the movement was an amalgamation of online and offline occurrences. The response to the comments made by Michael Sanguinetti at York University produced a feminist response marked by intensities which multiplied and increased with every click and every follow on Twitter. All of these online engagements created an enrolling assemblage whereby feminist publics were formed and expanded due to the flaming character of Twitter (Papacharissi, 2015). The online mobilisations on Twitter contributed to the amassing of a feminist public which responded with affirmative anger against rape culture. An example of the creation of a feminist public can be seen through the use of the hashtag #slutwalk on Twitter by people all around the world. The use of #slutwalk has allowed the movement to find what Mendes (2015, p. 159) refers to as "networked counterpublics, or online spaces for feminists to regroup, connect with one another, form opinions, express emotions and draw attention to certain issues which may require action". The use of the hashtag has resulted in different media – short videos, pictures, comments and links to other online blogs and material – being posted regularly on Twitter under the hashtag and a multiplicity of views expressed on the movement (Guha, 2015). The emotional response produced a transformational affect which matched the incendiary nature of Twitter (Papacharissi, 2015); where reactions and a feminist politics of solidarity became visible in the form of comments, follows, tweets, retweets and likes. This is evident in the proliferation of SlutWalk Twitter accounts, which were quickly set up and which developed considerable followships online as a result of the first SlutWalk (Dow & Wood, 2014).

Another example of how feminist solidarity is strengthened by online work can be seen through the now over 30 SlutWalk accounts on Twitter, which are constantly expanding, both in their networks and in their content, all the while sustaining the values of sexual justice and gender equality which underpin SlutWalks globally. The ease with which the SlutWalks took to social media platforms transformed their reach and scope, both in content and expression. SlutWalks became a machinic assemblage of feminist possibility and contestation. As Deleuze and Guattari (2013, p. 95) suggest machinic assemblages "are in constant variation" and movement and "are themselves constantly subject to transformations [...] the circumstances must be taken into account [...] a performative statement is nothing outside of the circumstances that make it performative". In the case of SlutWalks, these transformations took shape in the creation and enlisting of various SlutWalks Twitter accounts which mirrored and utilised the online spaces for the propagation of online activism. The SlutWalks then are a specific form of assemblage, what Deleuze and Guattari have also referred to as a war machine, helping mobilise a feminist politics of resistance.

Second, the reinscribing of the word slut and challenging the public's understanding of women as victims. Historically, the narrative around women

and sexual violence has seen them constructed socially as victims. While this is a necessary construction in order to create protective laws against sexual violence, it has also resulted in stigmatising views which construct women as "weak", or "at risk", "needing protection" and "needing to protect themselves from sexual violence". Crucially, this focus still places too much responsibility on women, instead of challenging the traditionalistic, sexist and misogynist views which allow sexual violence to continue to be accepted as a normal experience in the lives of women (Niccolini, 2018). A retelling of the lives of women was needed, where the focus is shifted from women as sufferers and victims to women as agents of change and as an important voice in redefining the factors that underpin sexual violence. Some of these new voices which the SlutWalk movement allowed to emerge centred on questioning and redefining the usage and deployment of the word slut. Very importantly, the SlutWalk movement engaged the general public in a more open debate around tricky negotiations behind the meaning and use of the word slut (Borah and Nandi, 2012). From a pejorative term, the movement sought to normalise and underpin the use of the word with a different meaning which denoted the power of women to reject sexism in society. SlutWalk as an assemblage for feminist politics can be explained through how SlutWalks sought to destabilise traditional forms of power. Particularly, the power of men over women, and the sense of entitlement to women's bodies that is reproduced through rape culture. The SlutWalks globally were actively seeking to reclaim the word slut to address the imbalances of power that surround women's bodies (Rituparna & Subhalakshmi, 2012). By embedding the word slut in the movements, the marches and online activisms were challenging the idea that women lose control over their bodies and what happens to them if they choose to dress provocatively (Hill, 2016). The reclaiming of the word slut directly sought to endow women with a renewed sense of power, whereby they are not to bear the blame for the sexual violence they might experience. Instead, it highlights how women are continuously blamed and victimised for acts of assault and violence, and all the while excusing the predatory behaviours of men. SlutWalks as an assemblage disrupt the normalised flows of power that allow rape culture to go unquestioned.

Third, the online/offline activisms resulting from online feminist mobilisations, such as SlutWalk twitter accounts with thousands following, thousands retweeting, hashtagging and engaging in subversive practices against rape culture. Therefore, Twitter as a social media platform offered particular capabilities of expression, or platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257) which facilitated the generation and proliferation of feminist publics counteracting the effects of rape culture. The use of hashtags on Twitter – #SlutWalk, #marchforourlives, #Enough, #Metoo – has created an accumulation of feminist (dis)content that works as an online feminist knowledge hub helping others to understand the nature and everydayness of sexual violence; these have educational value, as they create new ways to understand the nature of sexual violence (Clark, 2016). The power of online feminist movements produces a set

of materialities in the form of content which intensifies the need for change amongst sexist and misogynist cultures which SlutWalks contest.

These accumulations of experience and knowledge help show the general public alternative ways to think about and respond to sexual violence in society, particularly, from a feminist point of view. Similarly, the use of hashtagging on Twitter is a useful way to create a wall of content which informs the public and which gives any online movement a sense of identity and purpose. When writing comments on Twitter, the use of particular hashtags, like the ones mentioned above, unite all the comments under one online page, ones might be supportive and others might not be, yet, hashtagging creates a core identity for a social movement, such as SlutWalks.

Additionally, Twitter's online design allows for the rapid aggregation of online content and the accelerated expansion of networks (Marwick & Boyd, 2010), both important practices in the development of the feminist counterpublic behind SlutWalks. The SlutWalks online activisms became mobilised in numerous marches on the streets of cities to challenge the stereotypical perceptions that continue to undermine women's agency over their own bodies (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). SlutWalks assembled online and offline activisms to reappropriate urban and public spaces, establishing a flowing relationality between online publics and on the streets activists and demonstrators. SlutWalks have therefore become a global assemblage of activism, enrolling a feminist counterpublic, both online and offline, demonstrating against rape culture logic.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the chapter, I have positioned SlutWalks as a phenomenon which can be best explained as an assemblage of online and offline events and engagements. The chapter began by briefly historicising the events leading to SlutWalks and the consequent online activisms which became very visible on Twitter. SlutWalks are discussed as an important and direct response to rape culture; the feminist movement both online and offline produced a feminist sentiment which contested the objectification of women and the victim blaming associated with rape culture. The chapter also highlighted the importance of the affective response behind SlutWalks, making sense of that affect of anger and indignation as a powerful driver of the online activism that followed.

Deleuze's and Guattari's assemblage theory was utilised to illuminate some of the ways in which SlutWalks have become a global assemblage of feminist resistance. The versatility of online platforms was contextualised in the chapter as accumulating connections, online content and feminist publics that reach wider audiences and engage larger audiences in activisms. There is a dynamic recruiting of factors behind the SlutWalks and they were explored in this chapter by positioning them as a complex feminist movement, harnessing the online and the offline to respond to coercive and sexist attitudes towards women.

Deleuze's and Guattari's assemblage theory was utilised to illuminate some of the ways in which SlutWalks have become a global assemblage of feminist resistance. The versatility of online platforms was contextualised in the chapter as accumulating connections, online content and feminist publics that reach wider audiences and engage larger audiences in activisms. There is a dynamic recruiting of factors behind the SlutWalks and they were explored in this chapter by positioning them as a complex feminist movement, harnessing the online and the offline to respond to coercive and sexist attitudes towards women.

The movement of SlutWalks is an example of how women have mobilised an alternative narrative, where they cease to resist the risky discourses around their bodies by highlighting the importance of challenging violent and aggressive masculinities and the effects of rape culture in society. These mobilisations have become global and transformational since the beginning, partly due to the shareability and scope of the online platforms which they inhabit, such as Twitter. SlutWalks continue to move through and recruit different affects and interests that bring a vitality to the demonstrations and movements, thus enabling a feminist politics materialising resistance and possibility.

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