Intersectionality, Symbolic Representation and Feminist Activism

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Abstract

Intersectionality has become a critical part of western feminist theory. And yet it has been argued feminist activism is not always very inclusive of ethnic minority women. One way of evaluating the inclusivity of feminist activism is through the prism of symbolic representation; analysing symbols that ‘stand in’ for the wider movement in order to unpack feminist norms and values. One such symbol is the gendered body: it constitutes both a critical subject of contestation and a site of protest. This paper uses the theory of symbolic representation to question whether feminist protest that focuses upon the gendered body is inclusive of ethnic minority women. It does this by setting out the value of symbolic representation for studies of feminist activism before analysing three recent high profile and controversial feminist campaigns: the Slutwalks; Femen; and the Muff Marches. The paper argues that a failure to adequately recognize the racialized nature of the gendered body means that some recent forms of feminist protest have not advanced an inclusive or intersectional agenda.

Introduction

Intersectionality, the recognition of the multiple and overlapping layers of oppression that affect an individual’s life, is a central concept in feminist discourse (McCall, 2005; Hancock, 2007). Yet, western feminism continues to be dominated by white women. Recent work has illustrated the use of symbolic representation, the extent to which the representative or symbol ‘stands for’ the represented (Pitkin, 1967), to examine the discursive construction of
gender (Lombardo and Meier, 2014). This paper argues that it can also be used to examine the visual symbols associated with feminist activism, specifically to explore marginalization and inclusivity within feminist protest. The paper begins by establishing the importance of symbolic representation for studies of feminist activism and of intersectionality in particular. It then provides analysis of three recent contested protests that have made explicit use of the gendered body: Slutwalks; Femen; and the Muff Marches. The paper builds upon work exploring symbolic representation by linking it to intersectionality and applying it to activism beyond the legislative sphere. The paper has two central arguments: 1) that symbolic representation provides a useful framework for exploring aspects of inclusivity; and, 2) that feminist protest centred on the gendered body is not inclusive of ethnic minority women.

Intersectionality emerged from the writings of black feminists (Crenshaw, 1989) and has become a critical part of feminist discourse (Davis, 2008). For black feminists, eliminating intersecting oppressions is the only way in which women of color can be fully empowered (Collins, 2000: 36). Although it is a difficult concept to work with, in the sense that it is not only difficult to apply but also represents a potentially atomizing approach to collective politics (Evans, 2015), it resonates with activists keen to challenge power dynamics and patterns of exclusion within the feminist movement. Ethnic minority women have traditionally been excluded from the wider women’s movement (Davis, 1982; Lorde, 1984), a pattern that continues today (Henry, 2004; Penny, 2014). Some forms of feminist activism fail to either descriptively represent the diverse nature of the movement and/or substantively reflect the specific concerns of ethnic minority women. Both of these aspects of representation also speak to the symbolic dimension of representation, particularly when specific acts, visual signs or rhetorical phrases come to stand in for the wider movement. This is particularly obvious when we consider the role of the gendered body in feminist protest as a symbol for the wider movement.

Unlike political parties or politicians, feminist activists do not automatically seek to assert a representative claim on behalf of the wider women’s movement (Weldon, 2012). This does not mean that we cannot interpret feminist groups as representatives; indeed, the absence of ‘claim-making’ on the part of the representative does not preclude them from fulfilling that function (Rehfeld, 2006). Protests and campaign groups have an important role to play in the representative process, providing the public with a set of heuristics for interpreting
feminist activism. As such, who and what constitute the symbolic face of the feminist movement matters. The publicity attracted by some of the more contested and highly visual acts, allows for more obvious scrutiny of the extent to which ethnic minority women are marginalized within the movement. This paper explores this marginalization through analysis of protests that make explicit use of the gendered body in feminist protest, including the transnational Slutwalks, the topless protests undertaken by Femen and the UK-based Muff Marches. This paper argues that a failure to adequately acknowledge that the gendered body is also racialized is problematic for feminist protest because those bodies often become symbolic of the wider movement.

This paper illustrates the importance of symbolic representation for analysis of feminist activism, specifically in order to consider the ways in which ethnic minority women are marginalized within a feminist protest that is centred upon the gendered body. The paper begins by setting out the importance of symbolic representation for studies of feminist activism and of intersectionality in particular. It does this by firstly reviewing the literature on symbolic representation before linking it to feminist activism and then to intersectionality. The paper agrees with previous research that activism beyond the legislative sphere offers an important site for analysis of feminist claim making (Weldon, 2002; 2012) and that symbolic representation in particular offers a useful analytical tool for exploring visual symbols in feminist protest.

Symbolic Representation

Although political representation is a multi-faceted concept, at its most basic it refers to a person, object or group (the representative) standing in for another person, idea or group (the represented) (Pitkin, 1967). Political representation can most obviously be identified in the electoral and policy making process, whereby the interests and opinions of the citizenry are ‘made present’ by democratically elected politicians. Accordingly, much work on political representation focuses on its applicability to democratic institutions and normative political processes. If however we agree with Rehfeld that political representation ‘describes facts about the political world without necessarily appealing to normative standards of legitimacy or justice’ (2006:2), then representation can be undertaken by any individual,
group or object; it is not reliant upon an electoral process. Indeed, we know that claims to represent an idea or a group are made all the time by non-elected actors across multiple sites (Saward, 2009). To be sure, non-elected actors play an important role in the representative process, ‘making present’ those voices and interests that are often marginalized in electoral politics (Weldon, 2002). Whilst non-elected actors do not always seek to claim the mantle of representative, that does not negate them from fulfilling that function, especially at the symbolic level (Rehfeld, 2006).

Pitkin defines symbolic representation as the extent to which the representative, or symbol, ‘stands for’ the represented; linking it explicitly to the meaning that the representative has for the represented (1967). The use of the word ‘symbol’ is not as straightforward as it might appear. We tend to associate the symbolic with the superficial but to assume a lack of substance is to overlook the social, political and historical context. The semiotics of symbols are such that a linear reading of what they represent becomes difficult if not impossible. Consider the universal symbol for women: historically, it was used as the astrological symbol for Venus; it has been used to denote copper; it is frequently used to signify the Women’s Liberation Movement; and it has also been used by various advertisers to sell products to women. Thus, the historical and cultural context plays an important role in the interpretation of any given symbol; it is not driven solely, as Pitkin argued, by ‘irrational beliefs’ (1967: 100).

Few feminist studies have sought to explore symbolic representation in terms of the extent to which the represented believe that they are being represented (although see Bird, 2012). Symbolic representation has traditionally been linked to descriptive representation, or the extent to which elected representatives resemble the represented (Lombardo and Meier, 2014:6). Gender and politics scholars have sought to explore symbolic representation through analysing the links between voters or constituents and women politicians (Lawless, 2004); the impact of women politicians as role models (Childs, 2004); and as a means by which to assess how women politicians are portrayed in the media (Sreberby-Mohammidi and Roos, 1996). More recent studies have shifted the focus away from elected representatives using it as an interpretive framework for analysing the performative aspects of representative claim-making (Stoffel, 2008). Indeed, the emphasis on discourse and performativity are to be welcomed and this paper seeks to build upon those studies by
exploring how symbolic representation is a particularly useful framework to explore the links between symbols and claim making beyond the electoral sphere.

Lombardo and Meier’s recent theoretical and empirical exploration of symbolic representation highlights how the concept can aid analysis of the discursive construction of gender. Specifically, they argue that symbolic representation contributes towards the construction of meaning and identity, both of which are critical to the creation and recreation of discursive norms that shape our understanding of gender (2014: 11, 27).

Whilst Pitkin identifies groups, nations or states as the principal or idea that can be symbolically represented by objects (1967), Lombardo and Meier focus on how the concept of gender is symbolically represented in political discourse. Such an approach facilitates greater critical refection on gender power dynamics operating at the discursive and policy level. In short who is included and who is excluded. Building upon Lombardo and Meier’s work this paper explores how the visual symbols at work in the representative process also have implications for inclusion, as they come to signify power, acceptance and authority.

**Symbolic Representation and Feminist Activism**

Symbols associated with interest groups and social movements can play a significant role in conveying meaning to a wider audience. Visual cues or heuristics can become an important means by which to communicate the message of a campaign or issue: the symbols that become associated with an interest group can shape the extent to which it is taken seriously, regardless of whether or not it is perceived to be an authentic or legitimate representation of the wider movement. Of course we do not expect feminist groups to be accountable to the movement in the same way that political parties are accountable to their electorate. And yet, such is the nature of social movement politics that specific feminist groups are often interpreted by the media as representing both specific causes and the wider movement. In sum, images of feminist protest can easily be read as shorthand for the wider feminist politic.

Feminists are frequently portrayed as ‘unfeminine, lesbian and man-hating’ (Scharff, 2012: 13); for some who seek to ‘reclaim’ the mantle of feminist from the anti-feminist press this
has meant trying to present a more feminine version of feminism (McRobbie, 2009). A focus on reclaiming girliness, alongside the promotion of explicit and traditional forms of femininity, has formed a part of this latest wave of feminist activism (Siegal, 2007). These attempts to present a more feminine form of feminism have also been accompanied by a turn towards the explicit use of the gendered body as a form of feminist protest. Bodies are highly symbolic sites of contestation and resistance (Butler, 1990) and which bodies are included and excluded in feminist protest, can tell us something about who or what is the symbolic representative of feminism and who or what the represented. Unsurprisingly, acts of protest that rely on often highly sexualized representations of the female body tend to receive a significant amount of public attention and so have wider implications for the ways in which the feminist movement comes to be seen.

Symbolic representation can be a useful way of approaching feminist activism; its emphasis on visual cues can tell us something more meaningful about the priorities of the movement. Although intersectionality is a popular concept within feminist theory, it is not so obvious how well its principles are applied to feminist activism. In short symbols of feminist activism can help us explore how well intersectionality has made the journey from theory to practice. Symbolic representation can address both the visual and discursive ways in which feminist activism is constructed and the extent to which ethnic minority women are excluded. Like symbolic representation, intersectionality has links both to the descriptive and substantive dimensions of representation; it can tell us something both about who is doing the representing and the content of that representative act. More than that however, analysis of the symbolic allows us to explore the gap between rhetoric and substance. The multiple meanings that become attached to a symbol mean that it often occupies the space between a carefully constructed image and the reality of the object or idea it hopes to represent. Not quite a façade but also not the whole truth. The paper now turns to three case studies in order to consider the ways in which the symbol of the gendered body in feminist protest acts in such a way as to exclude ethnic minority women.

**Three Case Studies: Slutwalk, Femen and Muff Marches**
Thus far we have considered how symbolic representation might be of use to analysis of feminist activism, we can now consider what the symbolism associated with contemporary feminism means for the inclusion of ethnic minority women. As such, this section of the paper explores three highly visual and symbolic feminist protests that all concerned with the gendered body: Slutwalk; Femen and the Muff Marches. Whilst varying in degrees of visibility to an international audience, these case studies were selected because the marches and organizers stressed the universal nature of the protests and the wider implications of their cause to the transnational feminist movement. The three cases demonstrate some of the various ways in which they are symbolic of a feminist movement in which ethnic minority women are marginalized, primarily through the use of and focus on the gendered body.

*Slutwalk*

The Slutwalks have been one of the most high profile and controversial demonstrations of recent feminist activism. The marches were organised in response to a Canadian police officer who advised women to ‘avoid dressing like sluts to avoid victimisation.’ The Slutwalks provided a symbolic representation of wider feminist opposition to victim-blaming and were also intended to encourage women to challenge established conventions regarding the monitoring of female sexuality. Ostensibly, there were two aims of SlutWalk: the first was to argue that women should be free to wear what they want without fear of being attacked; and the second more controversial aim was to re-appropriate the term ‘slut’. The Slutwalks have divided opinion amongst feminists and have also been used by anti-feminists to deride the aims of the movement. The controversy and division amongst feminists came not from the first aim but from the second. The symbolism of the Slutwalks is highly problematic not only in the explicitly gendered use of the body as a site of feminist protest but also in terms of its ability to represent ethnic minority women.

On a symbolic level there are two key issues with the Slutwalks: firstly, the images that emerged from the marches and secondly, the discursive problems associated with reclaiming the word ‘slut’. The most widely circulated images that emerged from the Slutwalks were of scantily clad young women bearing placards demanding their right to be
called a ‘slut’ (Mackay, 2015). For some the symbolism of this was highly problematic, not least in the extent to which the ‘sexy feminist body’ was exploited as the vehicle for selling the message (O’Keefe: 2014:7). Although the Slutwalks were intended to protest the policing of female sexuality, in reality the highly sexualised use of the female body simply conformed to traditional portrayals of heteronormative feminine sexuality. Moreover, it is clear that the interpretation of the marches by the mainstream media was such that both the subject and mode of activism became symbolic of the wider movement. Reclaiming the word ‘slut’, which has traditionally been used to denigrate and oppress, suggests a lack of historical awareness and a de-politicisation of language. Because of the controversial nature of the marches, as well as the accompanying images of scantily clad women, media coverage was widespread and quickly became used as symbolic of the wider feminist movement. Above and beyond the criticisms regarding the reclamation of the word ‘slut’ and the use of the highly gendered and sexualised body as the site of protest, the use of the Slutwalks as symbolic of the wider movement was problematical in terms of its lack of attention to racial diversity.

The images of the women participating in the Slutwalks were noticeable for their lack of ethnic diversity (O’Keefe, 2014: 12). Moreover, an open letter was sent to the organisers of the New York SlutWalk by a black feminist group, accusing the organisers of failing to think about the racial implications of re-appropriating a term such as ‘slut’; the critique rested upon the fact that the organisers had failed to appreciate the term’s specific racial connotations and that no thought had been given to the fact that not everyone was privileged enough to claim such a label (Evans, 2015). The lack of attention paid to the specific challenges facing black women, both in terms of participating in such an overly sexualised form of protest in addition to reclaiming a word that also has racial connotations, signifies a failure on the part of the Slutwalk movement to put intersectional theory into practice. The Slutwalks were heralded by those who organised them as an innovate way in which to engage young women who had not previously been involved in feminist activism (Evans, 2015); in other words those who participated in the Slutwalks were not necessarily representative of the wider movement. In terms of the inclusion of ethnic minority women this was particularly problematic both in terms of the images that emerged, the mode of protest and one of the central goals of the protest.
An image of a young white woman wearing very little with ‘slut’ written across her body is clearly not representative of the wider feminist movement. Moreover, the Slutwalks did little to advance a more intersectional feminist politics. And yet, the Slutwalks quickly became symbolic of contemporary feminism. Such an outcome indicates some of the problems with symbols and the use of images to stand in for social movements. In particular the extent to which ethnic minority women are part of high profile feminist protests.

Femen

The Ukrainian feminist group Femen, founded in 2008, specialize in what they call ‘sextremism’, a ‘non-violent but highly aggressive form of activism’ (Femen, 2014: x). Primarily based in Ukraine they now have branches in France, Brazil and Tunisia; largely thanks to the amount of attention they have attracted from the international media who have heralded them as a new kind of feminism (Zychowicz, 2011: 215). The core activity at the heart of sextremist activism is the topless protest which is underpinned by their motto ‘my body is my weapon’ and their logo, the Cyrillic letter F Φ which ‘mimics the shape of a woman’s breasts’ (xi). In order to become a Femen activist, women are required to physically present in a specific way; indeed, they have been described as looking like ‘runway models’ (Zychowicz, 2011: 217). Furthermore, activists have to demonstrate willing to undertake topless protests on a range of issues, (they initially started as a protest against sex trafficking but have expanded the range of issues on which they campaign), in often potentially dangerous situations which carry a high risk of arrest. Femen have sought to set themselves apart from both academic theories of feminism and the mainstream women’s rights organizations in Ukraine (Zychowicz, 2011); part of this distancing is illustrated by the tactics adopted by the group, best summed up by the Femen manifesto which describes the group as ‘the crack troops of feminism, its fighting vanguard, a modern incarnation of the Amazons, fearless and free (2014: viii).

The visual symbols associated with Femen, young blond topless women, are a deliberate strategy to attract media attention; something they consider to be key in the war against
patriarchy (2014). As with the Slutwalks the visual images that are widely circulated do little to challenge conventional expectations concerning the female body and sexuality. The image of Femen protests which rely upon a highly sexualized and heteronormative presentation of femininity do not represent the wider feminist movement. And yet, as with the Slutwalks, Femen have become an iconic symbol of contemporary feminism. The topless woman as symbol of feminist protest relies upon an inherent set of contradictions. On the one hand protesters are keen to challenge the sexualisation of women whilst simultaneously using their own sexuality to draw attention to their cause. Topless protest undertaken by women who look like runway models complicates their aim to liberate all women, particularly ethnic minority women.

Where Slutwalk perhaps unwittingly waded into controversies concerning race, Femen have been at times explicit in their racism. For instance On 9 July 2013 Inna Shevchenko created a Twitter storm when she tweeted, ‘What can be more stupid than Ramadan? What can be more uglier then [sic] this religion?’ (quoted in O’Keefe, 2014). Furthermore, Femen staged an International Topless Jihad Day, designed to protests against Islam and sharia law in particular. Their slogan, ‘I’d rather go naked than wear a veil’ unsurprisingly attracted considerable anger amongst Muslim women who counter-protested with an online Muslimah Pride Day. Muslim women around the world posted selfies whilst wearing the hijab and holding signs rejecting Femen, their tactics and their claim to represent women (Eileraas, 2014). Topless protests undertaken by white women in order to ‘liberate’ Muslim women, symbolises both western imperialism and neo-colonial tendencies towards the bodies of non-white women. Femen themselves have done little to counter claims of Islamaphobia or racism, although some have claimed that they are ‘ignorant’ of their essentialisation of Arab women (Channell, 2014: 613). Whilst Femen deny the charges of racism levelled at them, it is difficult to ignore the highly charged racial implications of their topless protests or indeed the subject of their protests.

_Muff March_

The Muff March was intended to protest the rise of ‘designer vagina’ cosmetic surgery and has, to date, only been carried out in the UK. The protesters, organised by leading British
feminist group UK Feminista, marched through Harley Street in London, home to most of the UK’s leading cosmetic surgeons. The protesters sought to highlight the increasing trend for labiaplasty operations and linked this to a culture of body fascism that has led to a pornification of women’s bodies. This was also discussed in the context of increasing media discussions of ‘vajazzling’, a trend in which pubic hair is removed and replaced by stick-on jewels; indeed, the subject was discussed on the BBC’s Newsnight programme. Whilst the theme of the march was ostensibly about the way in which the cosmetic industry and wider porn culture body-shames women, the playful title was symbolic of attempts by feminist activists to engage in more light hearted and headline grabbing forms of protest.

The images that emerged from the Muff March revealed women carrying witty placards, fully dressed with an occasional wig positioned over their crotches. Unlike either Femen or the Slutwalks the Muff March did not rely on the use of the gendered body as the mode of protest, although it did constitute the site of protest. Both the subject of the march and the ‘playful’ tone of the march was indicative of an attempt by feminist protesters to put women’s bodies at the centre of their activism. The bodies that constituted the focus of the march are bodies which are subjected to an unrelenting gender regime; a regime which exists within a culture that has increasingly pressurized women to look like porn stars. The issue of labiaplasty, whilst perhaps narrow speaks to the broader debates concerning the objectification of women in our society. Moreover, the nexus of capitalist interests and patriarchal pressures combine to shame women into hating their genitals. The march was symbolic of a turn within British feminism to resist the ‘pornification’ of women’s bodies.

Whilst not directly or indirectly racist, the Muff March raises interesting questions regarding their ability to represent the concerns of ethnic minority women. As with Slutwalks the images of the protest were largely of white women. The site of the protest being Harley Street is also indicative of the type of women who have labiaplasty, those women who can afford it. Given that we know that ethnic minority women are on average more likely to come from poorer economic backgrounds it is not unreasonable to assume that the majority of those women who opt for surgery are white middle class women. This is particularly true when we think of the focus of the Muff Marches on designer vagina surgery, rather than the much more widely spread and dangerous practise of FGM; a practise that overwhelmingly affects ethnic minority women’s bodies. At that time of the
march (2011), FGM wasn’t as high profile an issue in mainstream feminism as it is today and yet the lack of critical attention paid to the wider issue of abuse carried out against all women’s bodies is telling. The symbolism of the Muff march does to some extent reflect the hegemony of white interests within feminist activism.

The three examples of feminist protest are of course different in the impact that they have upon the inclusion of ethnic minority women. Whilst one seems to invite the criticism that they exclude non-white women (Femen), another seemingly failed to think through the implications of their activism for ethnic minority women (Slutwalk) whilst the third can perhaps be critiqued at best for failing to consider the issue within a wider political context that directly affects ethnic minority women (Muff March). This is not to suggest that the use of the gendered body in feminist protest is neither important nor politically useful. But considering other contemporary examples, for instance the French protest group La Barbe who undertake bearded protest, demonstrates that feminist protest need not always rely upon a highly gendered and racialized body.

Of course, the focus on the gendered white female body as a key symbol within feminist activism, raises other important questions of inclusivity. What role for disabled women, older women or transwomen? An emphasis on the gendered body, especially in the case of Femen and Slutwalks, means that many (if not most) women are excluded. Where do those other bodies fit into a feminist protest that ironically appear to reify the very body type that feminists have long sought to resist and deconstruct? Again this is not to say that women’s bodies should be absent from feminist protest but rather we need to critically interrogate the types of bodies that often become symbolic of the wider movement. Part of this lies in the type of protest that is being undertaken: the aims, rhetoric and the mode of activism. Women’s bodies should not be absent from protest, and although there exists a lively online feminism, the dreams of the early cyberfeminists to reimagine gender identities have not been realised.

The presence of women’s bodies matters, both in political institutions but also in political protest; historically women; have been consigned to the private sphere and their presence in public spaces is symbolically important. Moreover, the need to campaign on issues that affect women’s bodies and in which they constitute the chief site of contention is a vital
part of the feminist movement. And yet the dominance of white young women’s bodies suggests a form of symbolic representation that is at odds with the trend towards inclusivity and intersectionality within feminism.

Conclusion

Contemporary feminist activism makes much of the fact that it is diverse and more focussed on aspects of inclusion than the second wave of feminism. And yet when we consider the extent to which ethnic minority women are part of high profile forms of feminist activism it is clear that white women (and their interests) continue to dominate. Femen, the Slutwalks and the Muff March do not descriptively or substantively represent the concerns of the wider movement and it is the symbol of the white woman’s body that underpins all three forms of protest. Moreover, the intersection between class and race is also apparent when we consider Slutwalk and the Muff March. Whilst it would not be possible or indeed desirable to erase the use of the gendered body from feminist protest, it is clear that it symbolizes a feminist activism that is at once highly gendered but also highly racialized. Thinking substantively about the representation of ethnic minority women’s interests, should in theory, lead to the inclusion of ethnic minority women’s bodies. Note, this need not necessarily result in a highly gendered or sexualised use of the gendered body a la Femen or Slutwalk. The visual images associated with feminist activism are important, not least in terms of encouraging women to feel included in a movement that, at least theoretically, seeks to empower all women.

Bibliography


