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Pussies Galore: Women, Power, and Protest in the Age of Trump

Jack Santino
Bowling Green State University
johnf.santino@gmail.com

Abstract: The Women's March of 2017 was an international response to the election of Donald J. Trump to the Presidency of the United States. In Washington, D.C., the gathering was estimated to be 500,000 participants. It was large, festive and carnivalesque with its costumes and bodily imagery, but it was not a carnival. The participants were very serious in their presentation of a counterpoint to the apparent validation of values they saw embodied in Trump, those of intolerance toward women, LGBTQ people, and racial and ethnic groups. This article investigates ways of analyzing such large-scale public performances, and suggests the term "ritualesque" as a useful complement to the idea of the "carnivalesque".

Keywords: Women's March, protest, demonstrations, carnivalesque, ritualesque, pussy hats

The Women's March of January 2017 was, by many accounts, one of the largest, if not the largest, mass demonstrations in U.S. history. Although clearly influenced directly by previous political actions, such as the 1963 March on Washington, the Million Man March, and the Million Mom March, the Women's March took place in its own specific historical moment – one represented by the election of Donald Trump to the U. S, Presidency. The Women's March has served as a new paradigm for female empowerment and has spawned follow-up marches, including a national gun control demonstration following a mass shooting at a Florida high school in 2018. In this article, I will analyze the Women's March in the context of previous research on public assembly and performative actions of grievance and censure; I will do this in the particular context of the Trump presidential campaign and inauguration.

To say that Trump is a polarizing figure is an understatement. During his presidential campaign against other Republican candidates, and then against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Trump was seen ridiculing a reporter with a

physical handicap; he directly insulted all Americans of Mexican descent; he was endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan; and he made innuendoes that a reporter was having her period during a presidential debate. During debates with Clinton, he moved into her area of the stage and hovered, glowering behind her. He is overwhelming in his social transgressions, and a great many of these indicate a hostility toward women in any role other than sexual object. It is, perhaps then, no surprise that his victory in the electoral college (he lost the popular vote by a substantial margin to Clinton) sparked a widespread movement loosely called "the Resistance" (see Carmon 2016, Simon 2018, Reuters Staff 2016, The Guardian 2015).

Historical Context

Perhaps the Occupy movement and especially Black Lives Matter can be viewed as immediate precursors to the wider Resistance, although the Arab Spring must be seen as the first mass resistance of the 21st century. Marches on Washington are traced to 1884 by historian Lucy Barber (2004), and the 1963 Poor Peoples' March is perhaps the most widely-recognized protest march in American history. Like all such rituals of protest preceding, people called attention to their grievances through their physical presence. For instance, influenced perhaps by the Arab Spring demonstrations, in the Occupy movement, people came and stayed: camping out, eating, and sleeping at significant sites. Occupy was largely a protest against neoliberalism and its political allies, by means of people occupying a site day and night as a means of calling attention to their grievances. Black Lives Matter is an ongoing struggle that took its shape after so many police shootings of unarmed Black men went unaccounted for. In this latter case, African Americans took to the streets and announced that they simply would not allow it to continue. To say "Black lives matter" is a way of saying "We are people too," demonstrating en masse is another way of asserting personhood and personal value through spectacular presence.

When Trump was elected, his extremism was responded to, fittingly, by a women's movement. The March of 2017 was by no means the first such action by women; it was not even the first Women's March. The Women's March to Versailles, in October 1789, resulted when the women of the Paris markets, tired of high prices, set out on foot to the Palace of Versailles. There, having been joined by the Marquis de Lafayette, they persuaded King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette to return with them to Paris as prisoners. Despite some failed escape attempts, the two never returned to Versailles and were eventually beheaded. While these events cannot be said to be a direct precursor to the recent Women's March on Washington, it is a precedent. In more recent years, there have been several female-led public protest marches, such as the Million Mom March, Slut Walks, lesbian demonstrations (see Currans 2017), and also the Madres de la Plaza demonstra-

tions in Chile and Argentine, and even the Pussy Riot actions in Russia. It is my belief that, along with these others, the Women's March was a cultural milestone. I believe such women-centric and performative public actions will continue to be of particular significance.

The Women's March 2017

In public protest gatherings, people find it necessary to speak not only with their voices but also with words and gestures, embodied and material. They speak also with their very presence. At the Women's March, the multitude of women's and men's bodies gathered spectacularly for all to witness was a performance of rejection, censure, opposition, but also a demonstration of an alternative, an enactment of ways of being together with other human beings. Some have said the Women's March was focused entirely on a negative, anti-Trump message. Still, I would argue that the massive gathering was a display of a worldview that values diversity, creativity, inclusivity, and equality – a very positive worldview that was realized in the manifestation of hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating together as individuals in consort with others. It is the mass coming together of bodies of all types, people of many backgrounds and identities that makes that statement; the bodies are the medium, the demonstration or manifestation is its own genre. Like a festival, the protest demonstration is a genre made up of other genres (song, music, procession, flags, etc.) and involves many dimensions, all of them symbolic and significant. For example, one can consider such aspects as size, place, participants, and symbols employed.

In a demonstration of this type, size matters. Such movements stake a claim to popular representation (I regret the acceptance of the term "populist" to refer exclusively to the extreme right-wing political movements we are seeing in the US and abroad). The more sizeable the turnout, the stronger the claim. The number of participants acts as an index to "the people". In mass demonstrations, the participants display themselves – they intend to be seen as a way of legitimizing the underlying claim that they are representative of a larger abstraction called "the people". It is important that there be many participants and that this large number of participants be seen.

In this regard, the Women's March was a stunning success. Estimates of crowds in Washington, D.C., range from 450,000 to 500,000. Millions of people demonstrated throughout the United States and internationally as well. The importance of this aspect of the event is illustrated by Trump's insistence that he had the largest crowds ever assembled for his Inauguration the day before (demonstrably false) and that his crowds were larger than the Women's March (also false). It seems that size matters a great deal to Donald Trump (bodily imagery will be addressed below.)

Composition

Despite the large numbers, attention needs to be paid to inclusivity. An issue arose with Black Lives Matter participants and organizers, who felt that being invited to the party after all their manifestations were ignored by white folks, was insulting. They have a point. Issues of inclusivity, and focusing on issues relevant to people of many different backgrounds, have long plagued women's movements. For instance, according to Elizabeth Currans, the March for Women's Lives in 2004 initially segregated Black and Latina women according to the messages on their signs, and the march was critiqued as being concerned with white, middle-class women's issues exclusively (Currans 2017: 120) If the demonstration is to signify inclusion of many different people's backgrounds, including race, as well as gender identity, bodily type, age, ethnicity, and so forth, people of those types need to feel represented and welcome to be present. Bridges have to be built, and efforts made to create real diversity, and real inclusivity. The Trump regime has shown hostility to many different categories of people. He has actively done away with legislation aimed at equality for the LGTBQ community, African Americans, Latinos (most recently Puerto Ricans), poor people who need health care, people with disabilities, and on and on. Each of these groups may have their own particular issues, and there may be disagreements and misunderstandings among constituent members. But if one meta-message of a mass gathering during a time of purposeful political division is the presentation of an alternative model of being, one in which mutual respect and acceptance are dominant values, then the inclusion of diverse and multiple groups is crucial. In this medium of public performance, presence is necessary. It is not enough to agree with the principles and goals presented – this is the flaw in the case of Black Lives Matter. White people supported the protests without ever thinking of joining them. There are in fact many groups who have felt left out not only of neoliberalist policy but also of so-called progressive thought. All who share in being the recipients of Trump's glare and hostility are all, to refer to Judith Butler, "precarious" (Butler 2004). A mass demonstration such as the Women's March seeks to assemble multiple groups whose shared quality is that of precarity.

The timing of the March is also an important dimension. Coming as it did, the day after the Inauguration, the Women's March presented itself as a kind of alternative inauguration, as well as a reminder to Trump, to the participants themselves, and to observers that the values that Trump represented had not succeeded in displacing and would not smother the values of inclusivity and diversity. As Butler says, "Political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse, and as they persist, under conditions in which that fact alone threatens the state with delegitimation" (2015: 83). Among other things, the Women's March said to Trump: "There are more of us than there are of you".

Physical Locality

Finally, in this regard, the place where the event occurs is symbolically important. It took place in precisely the same place the Inauguration did, the National Mall, on politically sacred ground amidst sacred national symbols of the American democratic ideal. This symbolism is always compelling, but in this particular context, the Women's March might be read as a reclaiming of these symbols and the ideals for which they stand, back from the narrow, xenophobic, militaristic, and white supremacist readings the Trump administration campaigned on, delineated in his inauguration speech, and was about to put in place.

A word on performativity: I use the term to mean more than simply performance, taking my cue from J.L. Austin. He described "performative utterances" as speech acts that make things happen socially; for example, "I now pronounce you a wedded couple" (1962, 5). Likewise, the Women's March was not merely a festive gathering, despite the carnivalesque bodily imagery it manifested. It was, in that sense, carnivalesque, but its purpose was to actively impact everyday life and culture. Like ritual, it was transformative and transformational in nature: the world does not simply return to the "right-side-up" after the carnivalesque inversions. Rather, the intent is to have a direct and lasting effect on social life, continuing after the event is concluded. This I call ritualesque (Santino 2017), The Women's March was a brilliant example of such.

I've been speaking about values, clashes of values, and ways of "speaking" with voice and body and with material objects such as signs. At the Women's March, most famously, apparel became the most visible and central symbol. Hats. Pussy hats.

Pussy Hats

The Pussy hats were not without controversy. Before the march, many women objected to them for many reasons – women shouldn't be associated only with their genitalia; the pink hats were too "girlish," or the term "pussy" was offensive, not suitable for children; it was even said that the hats resembled a women's reproductive system (personal communication January 2017). In reality, of course, the use of the term "pussy" is a classic example of a subaltern group seizing a taboo word used as a weapon of superiority and control by those in a dominant position and reversing its value, thus seizing control and power. Like "black" or "queer," the word was suddenly used against those who, like Trump, saw women only as pussies to be grabbed at (his) will. Moreover, the mass use of the reappropriated word served as a constant reminder that it was Trump, not the marchers, who had first introduced the word into this particular discourse. He had been caught bragging on

tape that he was so rich, so famous, and so powerful, that he could molest women with impunity (Wikipedia 2023).

Later, he dismissed this as "locker room talk". However, the crucial point was that he had been talking not of attraction but of his own personal power to impose himself on others without their consent. He was bragging about himself and how he could do whatever he wanted to anyone he wanted to. This was a strongly anti-woman statement, and it did not go unnoticed.

When we speak of carnivalesque bodily imagery, as suggested in the ground-breaking work of Mikhail Bakhtin, we are speaking almost exclusively of the male realm. Bakhtin notes that carnival foolery often involves reference to the "lower bodily stratum (1984: 303)" Here, he refers to costuming that includes oversized phalluses or men with swollen, pregnant wombs. Both the breaking of social taboos (including reference to defecation) and inversive categorical violations (male-female, e.g.) are at work here. In all of these, traditionally and historically, female genitalia has not been seen in carnival imagery.

Alina Mansfield (2017) has pointed out that at the Women's March, along with the reclaiming of the term "pussy," female genitalia was frequently depicted on signs and placards. Unlike the traditional use of male genitalia in traditional carnivals, however, the vaginas were drawn realistically. Both the use of female sexual bodily imagery and the naturalistic appearance are new developments in carnivalesque and ritualesque events. This reflects the female authorship of the imagery and further reinforces the event as a female counter-statement to the Trump victory.

Thus, the hats – homemade and hand-crafted, emerged as the primary symbol of the Women's March: embodied material culture representing women, representing true sexuality, of course, and also fecundity, fertility, reproduction, life - the real physical power of women that the Trump objectification denies and might very well be afraid of. And, of course, he ran against a woman, Hillary Clinton, who would have been the first female American President. Because the ultimate symbolic dimension of the Women's March was the women themselves, it is symbolically very powerful that the Resistance is led by women, who assert presence and power.

Currans points out that traditionally, public space is seen as a male domain, while women are relegated to the domestic. The rise of women-centered protest events represents a real inversion, with women asserting power in and claiming public space as theirs to recontextualize by speaking out on public issues of importance to them (Currans 2017: 132). In the face of Trump's insistence on reaffirming what many consider toxic masculinity, it was an almost cosmic rebalancing, an equal and opposite reaction, that the resistance be led by and in the image of women. Trump talks about women as trophies ("she was married, but I was on her like a bitch"), his own daughter as a sexual object defined by her body ("a piece of ass") (Nelson 2016). He referred to the size of his penis during a presidential debate (Krieg 2016).

The physical imagery has always been present in his speech. Additionally, he likes to present himself as a man of violence ("I'd like to punch him in the mouth, I really would") (Diamond 2016). He has complained that attempts to lower the rate of concussions in the NFL were ruining the game (Loria 2017). Against this, we saw an uprising of women, who, in their pluralistic public performance, posited inclusivity, multiplicity, diversity, and cooperation, all as a female counterstatement to the public performances of Donald J. Trump. Vive la Résistance!

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Biographical notes

Jack Santino is Professor of folklore and popular culture at Bowling Green State University. He was the Alexis de Tocqueville Distinguished Professor at the University of Paris IV – Sorbonne, 2010–2011. He has been a Fulbright Scholar in Northern Ireland and France and taught in Spain. His film "Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: The Untold Story of the Black Pullman Porter" received four Emmy Awards. His most recent book is Jack Santino, ed., *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnivalesque and Ritualesque*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. He has conducted research in Northern Ireland, Spain, France, and the United States on carnivals, public rituals, holidays and celebrations, and the public memorialization of death.