
April 2016 marks the five-year anniversary of the formation of “SlutWalk” in Toronto, Ontario, a grassroots, third-wave feminist movement aimed at challenging cultural attitudes around sexual propriety and gendered/sexualized violence, which has since expanded to become a global movement. Kaitlynn Mendes' SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media provides a necessary intervention into discussions of feminism, global movements and activism, and cultural understandings of sexual violence and sexuality. SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media feels especially pertinent and useful in light of some of the more recent celebrity sexual assault cases seen in Canada and the United States and the subsequent discussions of what a “good”/”bad” victim looks and acts like. This book not only historicizes SlutWalk, including many of its global chapters, but it also situates this feminist movement within discussions of activism, highlighting the ways in which gender and feminism are often erased from media and academic attention to political mobilization.

SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media is comprised of findings from Mendes' research on the SlutWalk movement and of individual chapters and marches held worldwide (including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, the U.K., and the U.S.) In addition to examining some of the specificities of the global chapters through interviews and observation of their online presence, Mendes also analyzes how SlutWalk has been represented by both mainstream news and feminist media. One of the overarching questions that organizes this book is how mainstream media discussions of SlutWalk frame understandings of sexual assault, gendered violence, and rape culture. Do they utilize feminist discourses on these topics? And how do these conversations on sexualized violence differ from feminist media renderings? To answer these questions, Mendes employs a substantial methodology, including frame analysis, interviews, critical discourse and content analysis, and netnography.

The introduction and Chapter 2 provide context for the book, focusing on SlutWalk's inception, initial responses to the movement, and SlutWalk's relationship to feminism and feminist activism. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are primarily comprised of findings from Mendes' analysis of media responses to SlutWalk. As one of the stronger chapters, Chapter 3 examines the differences and similarities in how the movement (through its global chapters) promotes and represents itself and its goals, and how this is taken up by various media. One of the more interesting aspects of this chapter is Mendes' discussion of intersectionality (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991). In Mendes' highlighting of how the goals of the movement were utilized and changed by the various chapters, it is evident that despite the global presence of sexual violence (perhaps the biggest reason this movement was globally successful), there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to countering rape culture. Mendes' skilfully displays some of the more prominent critiques surrounding the “SlutWalk” name and the centring of white,
Western women’s experiences from women of colour (within and outside of the organization of SlutWalk), and highlights some of the difficulties within white, Western feminism and the mobilization of political movements. Chapters 4 and 5 serve as a composite illustrating two main debates surrounding SlutWalk—a supportive frame, where SlutWalk is represented as challenging rape culture, and a more critical perspective, where SlutWalk is seen as misguided in its application. Throughout all three chapters, Mendes pays considerable attention to not only more traditional media examples (e.g., news coverage and recognizable feminist media websites), but also incorporates the “feminist blogosphere” in her analysis, noting how such feminist online responses may not be hindered in the same way as traditional journalism.

Mendes’ analysis changes course in Chapter 6, where she explores the organizational structures of the various SlutWalk chapters. As a whole, this chapter seems quite separate from the first half of the book, especially in its absence of media analysis. However, one point of connection may be Mendes’ exploration of how media is used (in particular, social media) within the various SlutWalk chapters. Similar to Chapter 6, Chapter 7 draws on Mendes’ interview data of the SlutWalk chapters, and specifically examines how social media functioned for these chapters as a “network counterpublic,” allowing for feminist connection and advice/emotions/opinion-sharing. The conclusion discusses SlutWalk’s legacy as a feminist movement that brought feminist conversations and concerns into the mainstream and, as well, acknowledges how these conversations have encouraged (at least in part) various changes to how certain institutions address and acknowledge sexual violence.

Throughout the book, Mendes analyzes many of the media representations of SlutWalk through an understanding of postfeminism, which is based on a belief that feminism is over, that women now have free choice and sexual liberation, and which views structural and societal problems as individual ones. While this is a useful frame for analyzing media responses to a feminist movement like SlutWalk, as feminism is often portrayed as irrelevant (especially in Western countries), it would have been useful for Mendes to further clarify her specific understanding of postfeminism as being separate from other postfeminisms, in particular, postfeminism as connected to post-modernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, which understands identities as discursively produced in particular historical moments and power structures. As such, postfeminism can be understood as a “feminism of the now” (Railton and Watson, 2011, p. 26), which recognizes its connection to previous feminisms (second-wave in particular) but also critiques the more rigid identity politics surrounding “feminism,” “femininity,” and “womanhood” of those particular feminist moments. This version of postfeminism would have been equally interesting for Mendes to acknowledge, especially in conversation with her discussions of the third-wave, intersectionality, and global feminisms, which have also critiqued discursive identity productions.

Finally, while the aim of the book is not to compare similarities and differences between other global social movements, it would have been interesting to elaborate a bit more on SlutWalk in relation to other movements that have also gained notable media attention. In particular, why is SlutWalk simultaneously seen as more culturally relevant than some global movements (i.e., Take Back the Night) and less than others.
(i.e., Occupy and Arab Spring)? This would be especially useful since Mendes highlights the relevance of SlutWalk as a both a feminist and global movement in addition to recognizing the similar timelines (2011) of these more prominent global activisms and their shared mobilization tactics (social media).

Overall, Mendes presents a well-written, interesting, and culturally relevant examination of SlutWalk in particular and social and cultural understandings of rape culture, feminism, and sexual violence more broadly. Each chapter is accompanied by a plethora of data and detailed examples from the analyzed media and interviews, which further grounds and strengthens Mendes’ analysis and discussion. This book would be of interest to anyone interested in activism, media representations, and feminism. Despite the more introductory-like overviews of feminism (the waves) and rape culture in the Introduction and Chapter 2 in particular, this would still be a useful text for feminist and gender studies scholars, especially in utilizing it as a textual example of third-wave feminism and current feminist activisms. Its stronger possibilities exist in the fields of communication studies, for its focus on media representations, online activism, and social movements, and international/global studies, for its discussion of global activist movements. Mendes’ choice of SlutWalk as the main focus of analysis is exciting, as SlutWalk offers a current example of feminist activism that has received notable amounts of media attention and relative success in moving conversations of rape culture into mainstream domains. As such, Mendes contributes to larger understandings of activism, in particular situating feminist content and analysis into discussions of online media organizing/activism and global social movements.

References

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