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Free The Nipple: A White Feminist Movement

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## Introduction

Free the Nipple is a social movement stemming from Lina Esco's film *Free the Nipple*. The film follows a group of girls employing topless protest to combat censorship laws regarding the female nipple while advocating for the wider goal of gender equality.<sup>1</sup> The film is based on a group of women, who in 1992, protested for their right to be topless in New York City. Although the women succeeded in legalizing female toplessness, topless women continued to be arrested.<sup>2</sup> Esco frames the issue of gender equality by explaining how in the 1930s in New York City, men were not legally allowed to be topless. However, after protesting, men succeeded in overturning the law and are now allowed to show their nipples. Furthermore, it has become a norm and a male nipple does not offend society.<sup>3</sup> The film began to see real life involvement in 2014 when actor Scout Willis posted a photo on Instagram that included a female nipple. The photo was removed because of Instagram's guidelines. Willis fired back at Instagram by walking around topless in New York City, where it is legal, and documented the experience on twitter using #freethenipple.<sup>4</sup> In addition to Willis, many other celebrities, such as Miley Cyrus, chose to take part in advocating for the social acceptance of female nipples.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, many grassroots movements sprung up involving women going on topless walks to protest the societal censorship of the nipple and to promote gender equality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lina Esco and Hunter Richards, *Free the Nipple*, New York, 78 min, Sundance Selects and Disruptive Films, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Lina Esco, "Why I Made a Film Called Free the Nipple and Why its Being Censored in America," *Huffington Post*, September 12, 2013, accessed November 29, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/free-the-nipple\\_b\\_4415859.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/free-the-nipple_b_4415859.html)

<sup>3</sup> Lina Esco, "Facebook Wages War on the Nipple," *Huffington Post*, July 1, 2014, accessed November 29 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/facebook-war-on-nipples\\_b\\_4548832.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/facebook-war-on-nipples_b_4548832.html)

<sup>4</sup> Lina Esco, "From Susan B. Anthony to Gender In-Equality," *Huffington Post*, June 10, 2016, accessed November 29, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/from-susan-b-anthony-to-g\\_b\\_5471293.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lina-esco/from-susan-b-anthony-to-g_b_5471293.html)

<sup>5</sup> Esco, "Facebook Wages War on the Nipple."

<sup>6</sup> Laura Patterson, "Whiteness in Contemporary Feminist Campaigns: Free the Nipple," 2016, 26.

Free the Nipple, in its use of the female body as a form of protest, can be compared to other social movements that advocate for gender equality such as SlutWalk and Femen. These social movements and the women participating in them see the use of the body to protest as liberating or empowering. However, many women feel alienated because of the whiteness of the social movements. This essay will argue that Free the Nipple is a social movement serving a white feminist agenda due to the role of white women within the movement and its ignorance to the plight of minority groups. Consequently, it will be argued that Free the Nipple is an ineffective social movement. I will first analyze Free the Nipple's expression of white feminism. From there, Free the Nipple will be compared to SlutWalk and Femen's promotion of white feminism. Finally, I will analyze the effectiveness of Free the Nipple in the context of white feminism using Basok and Ilcan's definition of a social movement.

### **Free the Nipple**

White feminism is defined as a feminism, which focuses on the oppression of white middle-class women and disregards the distinct oppression of minority group women. White feminism tends to subjugate women of colour through the act of framing the oppression all of women through a Western lens. Consequently, white feminists will speak on the behalf of women of colour neglecting their unique problems. This works to neglect the vast array of issues faced by women of colour, by creating and using a discourse that views the oppression of women as being homogenous.<sup>7</sup> Free the Nipple represents white feminism through the use of predominately white women in their campaign. Additionally, because it is ignorant to the unique issues faced by black women, such as the black communities' relationship with the police. For

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<sup>7</sup> Sherri Liska, "Talking Back to White Feminism: An Intersectional Review," *Liberated Arts: a Journal for Undergraduate Research* 1, no.1 (2015): 1.

example, in the film *Free the Nipple* the actors protesting are primarily white, conventionally attractive, idealized women.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the participation of celebrities in the movement has consisted of primarily white women, such as Miley Cyrus and Cara Delevingne.<sup>9</sup> While *Free the Nipple* and its participants advertise that they are fighting for the equality of all women, outwardly it seems as though the campaign is only for white women. This relates to white feminists' tendency to consider the difficulties white women experience to be the issues all women face. Therefore, in the eyes of white feminists, since all women are fighting the same battle it is irrelevant if the discourse surrounding a women's right to go topless is primarily lead by white women. This is problematic because it results in the silencing of women of colour. This, in turn, contributes to the oppression they experience not only as a woman but also as a woman of colour. This is because white women continuing to speak on the behalf of women colour results in the perpetuation of a racial hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the result of primarily white women participating in *Free the Nipple* is the advancement of white feminism, which disregards the diverse voices and furthers the oppression of women of colour.

Specifically, *Free the Nipple* neglects the distinct issues faced by women of colour in regard to its ignorance regarding the black communities' relationship with the police. Topless protests have sprung up all over the U.S. by grassroots movements supporting *Free the Nipple*. It is common at these topless protests to have a police presence ensuring the safety of the bare-breasted women. However, as a consequence of the historical relationship between the police and the black community, having a police presence does not necessarily result in the safety of

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<sup>8</sup> Esco and Richards, *Free the Nipple*.

<sup>9</sup> Zing Tsjeng, "What the Hell is #freethenipple, anyway?," *Dazed*, March 27, 2015, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/24253/1/what-the-fuck-is-freethenipple-anyway>

<sup>10</sup> Patterson, "Whiteness in Contemporary Feminist Campaigns," 4.

black women. For example, a black woman while discussing a topless walk in support of Free the Nipple in Kentucky explained why having a police presence is not necessarily beneficial to her because of her race. She stated that because of the historical treatment of black people by the police if it were predominately black women participating in the topless walk, it would not be guaranteed the police would ensure safety. Instead, it is probable that they would be waiting for the women to make a mistake in order to arrest them.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, instead of providing protection the police would target the black women. The fact the white women involved in this topless protest were unaware of why a black woman may not view the police in a positive light is an example of white ignorance. White ignorance is a concept that derives from the fact that white people do not acknowledge the history of minority groups. This racial history is significant because it resulted in the privilege of white people, while minority groups continue to experience institutional oppression.<sup>12</sup> For example, white people have the privilege of being protected by the police, whereas black people are consistently targeted and framed as criminals. White people, on the basis of not being racist ignore this racial history, and focus on the notion of individuals. However, this ignorance results in the perpetuation of the oppression of minority groups.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the white women in Kentucky, while not intentionally being racist, did not have an understanding of the history of the black communities relationship to the police. This resulted in the alienation of black women from the Free the Nipple campaign. Through this example, it can be seen that white feminism manifests due to the ignorance of white middle-class women regarding the diverse oppression of women. Thus, within Free the Nipple white ignorance perpetuates the concept of white feminism.

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<sup>11</sup> Patterson, "Whiteness in Contemporary Feminist Campaigns," 27.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, (2007): 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## SlutWalk

The social movement SlutWalk can be compared to Free the Nipple by virtue of its use of the female body as a protest tool, and their call for gender equality through the reclamation of the female body. SlutWalk originated in Toronto in 2011 as a reaction to a comment made by a police officer regarding the outfits of women who are sexually assaulted. This officer stated that if a woman wanted to avoid rape, she should dress modestly.<sup>14</sup> SlutWalk's campaign consists of a group of provocatively dressed women, who are protesting victim blaming. This walk has the goal of reclaiming the word slut and rejecting the notion that females are responsible for the occurrence of sexual assault.<sup>15</sup> While outwardly it seems as though SlutWalk is representing all women, due to its disregard of intersectionality, only white feminism is represented. Moreover, SlutWalk works to advance white feminism through its ignorance to the history of the black community.

The ignorance represented in SlutWalk works twofold; firstly, as a result of the history of their sexualisation of their bodies, black women cannot reclaim the word slut. Secondly, similar to Free the Nipple, the history of black women in relation to the police is neglected, which works to alienate them from the movement. SlutWalk consists primarily of white women protesting to remove the negative connotation from the word slut. This ethnic homogeneity can be understood as a result of the ignorance regarding how different races interpret the word slut. The word slut has been used to oppress and degrade women, however, because of the racial history of different

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<sup>14</sup> Megan Gibson, "A Brief History of Women's Protests," *Time*, August 12, 2011, accessed November 29, 2016,

[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088114\\_2087975\\_2087963,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2088114_2087975_2087963,00.html)

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Evans, "Intersectionality, Symbolic Representation and Feminist Activism," 7.

ethnicities, slut does not have the same meaning for white women as it does for black women.<sup>16</sup> For example, black women have been sexualized because of their skin colour, not their clothes.<sup>17</sup> This means black women, regardless of what they are wearing are inherently sexualized. Furthermore, black women have a history of being sexualized by white people in the context of slavery. This means black women, regardless of what they are wearing are inherently sexualized. Therefore, white women and black women do not share the same history of sexualisation. This leads to black women and white women having a different relationship with the word slut. Black women, by attempting to reclaim the word slut, would be validating the sexualized image that has been painted of black women due to their race.<sup>18</sup> A group of black feminists expressed their discontent with SlutWalk in a letter sent to the leaders of SlutWalk in New York. This letter exclaimed that the organizers of SlutWalk were unaware of the racial undertone surrounding the word slut. Additionally, the letter stated that the leaders were ignorant to the fact that only white women have the privilege to attempt to reclaim slut.<sup>19</sup> The history of the word slut in relation to different ethnicities reflects the notion that SlutWalk, as a result of white ignorance is only advancing white feminism. White women, because of their privilege, are in a position where they can attempt to re-appropriate the word slut without further oppressing themselves due to their race. However, they do not acknowledge the unique meaning of slut to black women. SlutWalk further isolates black women from the movement through the use of police for protection during their protests. Similar to Free the Nipple, black women do not feel as though the police have the intention of protecting them.<sup>20</sup> Therefore. SlutWalk represents white

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<sup>16</sup> Evans, "Intersectionality," 8.

<sup>17</sup> Theresa O'Keefe, "My Body is My Manifesto! SlutWalk, FEMEN and Feminist Protest," *Feminist Review* 107. No.1 (2014): 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Evans, "Intersectionality, Symbolic Representation and Feminist Activism," 8.

<sup>20</sup> O'Keefe, "My Body is My Manifesto!," 12.



ignorance along with white feminism by being represented by white women who are unaware of the history of the sexualization of black women and the negative history regarding the police.

## **Femen**

Femen is a social movement created in the Ukraine in 2008. Similar to Free the Nipple, it uses of topless protest to fight for gender equality. Originally, it aimed to raise awareness about the dissonance between feminism and socialism.<sup>21</sup> However, throughout the years, Femen evolved into a social movement that shows discontent to any matter the members regard as patriarchal.<sup>22</sup> Femen outlines their social movement by describing the world as dominated by males, and describes women as slaves. To overcome the patriarchal world system, Femen advocates for protesting that includes female nudity. Femen identifies their activism as “sextremism” and states that their “weapons are bare breasts.”<sup>23</sup> The protests that are carried out by Femen consist of flash performances.<sup>24</sup> These performances are satirical and attempt to mock the patriarchy in order to expose the oppression of women.<sup>25</sup> Femen is similar to Free the Nipple and Slutwalk in its advancement of white feminism due to its exclusion and ignorance regarding minority groups. The aspects of Femen that work to alienate minority groups are its use of mainly white women in the campaign and its direct opposition to religion, specifically through Femen’s identification as Islamophobic.

Femen represents white feminism because it is characterized by topless protests being carried out by blonde, conventionally attractive, thin, white women.<sup>26</sup> For the same reasons that were

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<sup>21</sup> Karina Elieeraas, “Sex (t) ing Revoltion, Femen-izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmadgy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics,” *Signs* 40 no.1 (2014): 47.

<sup>22</sup> Jessica, Zychowicz, “Performing Protest: Femen, Nation, and The Marketing of Resistance,” *JUPS-Journal of Ukrainian Politics and Society* 1 (2015): 79

<sup>23</sup> “About Us,” Femen, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://femen.org/about-us/>

<sup>24</sup> Zychowicz, “Performing Protest,” 79.

<sup>25</sup> “About Us,” Femen, accessed December 5, 2016 <http://femen.org/about-us/>

<sup>26</sup> O’Keefe, “My Body is My Manifesto!,” 8.

outlined in regard to the participation of mainly white women in Free the Nipple, the participation of primarily white women in Femen is problematic. If white women solely occupy the space available for feminist activism, it follows that minority groups remain unheard and oppressed. This is reflective of the silencing of minority group women that results from white feminism. Femen is distinct from Free the Nipple and SlutWalk in its ignorance regarding minority groups because it directly poses itself against Muslim women. Whereas Free the Nipple and SlutWalk are merely inattentive to the distinct issues faced by minority groups. Femen openly disapproves of Islamic states and claims that women living in under these governments are experiencing extreme oppression.<sup>27</sup> Femen made this opposition explicit through topless protests that blatantly attack Islamism. For example, in 2012, Femen targeted the Sochi Olympics due to the inclusion of states practicing Sharia Law.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Femen held a protest named International Topless Jihad Day (ITJD). ITJD consisted of topless protests being held in front of mosques and Tunisian embassies throughout Europe.<sup>29</sup> This blatant attack against Islamism provoked responses from Muslim women who do not consider Femen to be liberating. For instance, a Facebook group “Muslim Women Against Femen” was created as a space for Muslim women to consolidate their disapproval of Femen. The group projects the voice of Muslim women in stating their view of Femen being Islamophobic and acting with imperialistic tendencies.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Muslim women expressed outrage over Femen through Facebook and Twitter exclaiming how nudity is not liberating for them and

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<sup>27</sup> “About Us,” Femen, accessed December 5 2016 <http://femen.org/about-us/>

<sup>28</sup> Zychowicz, “Performing Protest,” 94.

<sup>29</sup> Eline Gordts, “International Topless Jihad Day: Femen Activities Stage Protests Across Europe,” *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/04/international-topless-jihad-day\\_n\\_3014943.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/04/international-topless-jihad-day_n_3014943.html)

<sup>30</sup> Salam Al-Mahadin, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Making (Non) sense of FEMEN’s Ethico-Aesthetics in the Arab World,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 38, no. 4 (2015): 389.

Femen is ignorant in their attempt to “save” them.<sup>31</sup> Femen, while carrying out protests, such as ITJD, are attempting to liberate Muslim women, while having no understanding of Islam or the type of oppression Muslim women experience.<sup>32</sup> This resulted in Femen receiving the aforementioned backfire. This is because, while they may think they are liberating for all women, due to their misunderstanding of Islam, they are acting in a patronizing manner. This reflects the white ignorance that is apparent in Femen. Femen is not educated about the distinct oppression Muslim women face. Therefore, it conflates the liberation of white women with the liberation of Muslim women. This white ignorance results in Femen only promoting white feminism. Femen attempts to control the voices of Muslim women by holding protests that have the intention of saving them. Thus, white feminism is evident as Femen is a feminist organization that only represents aspects of Western values.

### **Effectiveness of Free the Nipple**

Free the Nipple, considering its perpetuation of white feminism, renders it an ineffective social movement. This can be argued by analyzing Free the Nipple using Basok and Ilcan’s definition of social movements. Basok and Ilcan define a social movement as having the following three objectives: a) access to protections, benefits, and privileges; 2) democratic political participation; and c) recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity.<sup>33</sup> The existence of white feminism impedes Free the Nipple from becoming an effective social movement. This is because, it results in Free the Nipple failing to meet the criterion of Basok and Ilcan’s definition of social movement. This can be understood by framing Free the Nipple within the three

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<sup>31</sup> Eileraas, “Sex (t) ing the Revolution,” 49.

<sup>32</sup> Salam Al-Mahadin, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?,” 389.

<sup>33</sup> Tanya Basok and Suzan Ilcan. *Issues in social justice: Citizenship and transnational struggles*. OUP Canada, 2013.

objectives. First, Free the Nipple can only meet the objective of access to protections, benefits and privileges if it is in respect to white women. For example, since white women are the face of Free the Nipple, and are ignorant to the issues of minority group women, it follows that only white women will be able to gain valuable protection, benefits and privileges. Furthermore, it can be understood that through not allowing women of colour to have a voice in their campaign Free the Nipple is only furthering the privilege of white women and the oppression of women of colour. Similarly, the aim of gaining democratic political participation is only met if it is in relation to white women. For instance, the use of topless protest is used by Free the Nipple to voice political concerns about gender equality. Furthermore, the topless protest gives the members of Free the Nipple the space to have political agency over the control of women's bodies by society. However, if the protests are the events that create this space, it follows that black women are alienated from expressing their political voice. This is a result of the ignorance that Free the Nipple demonstrates regarding the relationship of black women with the police. Finally, Free the Nipple fails to meet the objective of recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity. Due to the existence of white ignorance and white feminism within Free the Nipple, it is impossible for the campaign to be fighting for recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity. Thus, through examining Free the Nipple under Bascok and Ilcan's definition of a social movement, it becomes clear that Free the nipple is ineffective as it unable to meet the criteria.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Free the Nipple is a social movement that advances a white feminist agenda. Firstly, this is a consequence of white women occupying the space for discussion. White women participating in Free the Nipple claim the right to speak on behalf of all women. This rightful

claim is based on the assumption that all women experience the same oppression. Consequently, Free the Nipple perpetuates white feminism. Secondly, Free the Nipple displays ignorance regarding the distinct oppression of women of colour. This results in black women being alienated from Free the Nipple, specifically, from events such as topless protests that have a police presence. This disregard of women of colour renders Free the Nipple to be an ineffective social movement. This can be proved by analyzing Free the Nipple under Basock and Ilcan's definition of a social movement. Furthermore, Free the Nipple can be compared to the social movements Femen and SlutWalk. The similarities shared between Free the Nipple, SlutWalk and Femen are their calls for gender equality, their use of the female body as a tool for protest, and their displays of white ignorance along with white feminism. SlutWalk demonstrates white ignorance and white feminism through its neglect to understand the history of the sexualisation of black women. Additionally, SlutWalk, similar to Free the Nipple, alienates black women from their protests by being ignorant to the relationship between the black community and the police. These issues both reflect SlutWalks' advancement of white feminism that is charged by white ignorance. Finally, Femen represents white feminism as it, in comparison to Free the Nipple, consists of primarily white women. Furthermore, Femen is overtly discriminatory towards Muslim women. This discrimination stems from the ignorance regarding Islamism as well as Muslim women's conception of liberation. The comparison of Free the Nipple to SlutWalk and Femen can lead to the larger observation of the perpetuation of white ignorance and white feminism that is apparent in Western feminist movements that use the female body as a form of protest

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