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Response to Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant

Event co-sponsored by The Barnard Center for Research on Women and The Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies at NYU; held on April 12, 2011 at Barnard College

Video available at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

Response published December 10, 2012 at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

Slutwalk NYC and Cruel Optimism: A Reaction to Public Feelings Salon

On September 24, 2011, I joined Sylvia Rivera Law Project's Dean Spade and Applied Research Center's Rinku Sen in a dynamic conversation about the intersection of knowledge and activism at the Barnard Center for Research on Women's fortieth anniversary conference. Our moderator, GRIT TV's Laura Flanders, instigated a vibrant discussion about the ways we experience our work.

We explored the tensions that exist between academia and the activist world and the spaces where the academy and activism are aligned. Our moderator's mention of Gramsci's adage, "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," remained at the forefront of my mind after we concluded. When Lauren Berlant, University of Chicago professor and author of "[Cruel Optimism](#)," was referenced in our panel, I contemplated whether the "promise" of equality that anchors the feminist movement is my object of desire that is, as Berlant would say, "inherently optimistic though it may not [always] *feel* optimistic."ⁱ

Later that evening, I watched BCRW's online footage of their April 2011 [Public Feelings Salon](#) featuring Berlant and NYC-based scholars José Muñoz, Ann Pellegrini, Tavia Nyong'o, and Janet Jakobsen, interrogating how our insights related to identity, solidarity, and citizenship are frequently attached to emotional expressions of optimism, belonging, disillusionment, and alienation. Their conversation aligned with questions I problematized in my head throughout the day, reinforcing my personal exploration of how and why my personal feelings impacted my political participation and sense of belonging in the context of the feminist movement.

When Berlant asked, "what is the difference between being attached to the political and being attached to politics; politics being the place where you are always disappointed," I

instantly connected with her words. On the same day, I decided to withdraw from speaking at [SlutWalkNYC](#).

SlutWalkNYC is one of numerous global, grassroots mobilizations challenging rape culture and fighting to eradicate sexualized violence. While I acknowledged and agreed with many of the legitimate critiques of Slutwalk and its inclusion issues,ⁱⁱ I planned to participate to share my personal perspectives as a woman of color living in a victim-blaming and shaming world.

I initially elected to speak to support the central goal that binds all SlutWalks together, from Bangalore to Boston—an endeavor to end sexualized and domestic violence. I chose to remove myself as one of the speakers because I was troubled by some of the SlutWalkNYC organizers' dismissive responses to critiques from women of color, and by their failure to promptly and publicly address these complaints in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Due to what Berlant would call my affective attachment to “political” movement ideals, I expressed solidarity and stated that I did not want to disrupt the momentum of the movement. At the same time, I mentioned that I experienced a familiar feeling of disappointed disillusionment about the lack of impactful and rapid attention given to addressing oppressive “politics” within the organizational body.

As I unpacked why I chose not to speak on the SlutWalkNYC stage, I recalled Jose Muñoz' scholarship about activism and survival. I considered the transformative possibility of negotiating with(in) and with(out) of the movement, “disidentifying” with the mission and frame of SlutWalkNYC.

Additionally, while I supported many of the criticisms elucidated by [Black Women's Blueprint](#) and [Af3irm](#), their critiques did not completely encompass my vision of global liberation for all women of color and transfolks. I “disidentified” with the limits of their analysis as well, honoring our shared history and sisterhood while also longing for a future similar to the possibility of a time and space that Muñoz defined in the panel as “otherwiseness.”

Like Muñoz, I am seeking my own “exit sign for futurity,” imagining a feminist movement that has not yet been established in the painful reality of the “here and now.” I am still searching for what Hortense Spillers describes as “insurgent ground:” a new space where women of color can liberate ourselves from the dispossession we often face within the current framework.

Berlant explained that “public spheres are affect worlds.” When she asked, “what is the difference between being attached to the political and being attached to politics—politics being the place where you are always disappointed,” I experienced a moment of recognition that my decision to remove myself from speaking at SlutWalk was influenced by my affective drive. While I remained in theoretical solidarity with the core principal of the movement to end sexualized violence against women and the “enduring object desire” of the “promise” of SlutWalk activism, the emotions that attached themselves to my intuitive notions of belonging moved me to decline to speak. An excerpt from my letter to the SlutWalkNYC addresses this:

As a woman of color who has experienced being dismissed because of fear and discomfort in reaction to expressing my authentic voice, I am not able to raise my voice knowing that my sisters have been ignored. The open letter (critique from Black Women’s Blueprint) created a space for bridge-building and solidarity. I am disappointed that the call for connection and respectful engagement has not been addressed.

I was introduced to Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism” at a moment for me of heightened awareness about the nature of my feelings, and their inherent influence on my participation in the movement and my self-actualization as an activist. I learned that feelings contribute to governing the tensions and contradictions that exist within our policy agendas and discourses. Even though my own emotional and ethical compass moved me to choose not to speak on stage under the banner of SlutWalkNYC, I ultimately decided to attend the march on my own terms, waving my own feminist flag.

My enduring attachment to the feeling, the emotion, and the intimate gut-wrenching clench of intuition about justice, love, and solidarity in struggle gets me every time. I’ll be marching and imagining a future for feminists where all of our voices are heard. Until then, I’ll

continue to ride the wave of “cruel optimism,” understanding that its pain and its pleasure are crucial to my survival. I’ll remain faithful to what Ann Pellegrini describes as the “compromised pleasure” I get from feminist activism, and I will honor the spirit of Berlant’s call to produce “new forms of optimism we can trust.”

ⁱ Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” 17.5 *differences* (2006): 20.

ⁱⁱ See Salamishah Tillet, “What to Wear to a SlutWalk,” *Nation* 28 Sep. 2011.

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/163679/what-wear-slutwalk#>