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Speak Out!: Feminist Activism from Behind the Scenesⁱ

Gabrielle Jamela Hosein

Abstract

The nine-minute video, *Speak Out!*, uses photos, textⁱⁱ, interviews and musicⁱⁱⁱ to document feminist activism undertaken by students in Trinidad and Tobago in 2006. It highlights the centrality given to consciousness-raising, telling women's stories, women's issues and feminist politics in a first year Introduction to Women's Studies course at the University of the West Indies. The "popular actions" documented in the video were undertaken as an assignment in the course. Overall, the course aimed to teach students about the personal as political, the connection between Women's Studies and women's movements, and the contribution feminist activism can make to knowledge and to gender justice (Vassell 2004).

Introduction

Since being completed in 2007, the video has been shown to later cohorts of students in the course, and in political education workshops among (mostly male) unionists, (mostly female) feminist activists and academics, and female and male youth activists in Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica. It has been used to facilitate discussions about the future of feminism, the status of women, men and masculinities, and movement-building in the Caribbean. In the following pages, I outline some reactions to the video, issues and questions that emerge, and the ways it can be used for facilitating workshops or classes on gender and activism, particularly among young women and men.

Through a looking glass

For some, the video has been inspiring because it shows that ordinary young women and men can use simple and creative activities to engage discourses about violence and sexuality, to explore issues of gender, to bring to the forefront women's perspectives and to publicise issues that people do not normally consider political. Students doing an action on reproductive rights, for example, dressed as traditional Trinidad Carnival "baby-doll"^{iv} characters in wigs and housedresses to show some of the problems faced by women unable to afford a baby and seeking an abortion. Others drew images of women in chalk and asked students to write their interpretation of their circumstances and feelings next to the drawings.

In the classroom, I have used the video mainly as a visual document to convey the powerful and ubiquitous ways that feminist activism can capture the university landscape as well as to highlight the tensions and challenges of different issues and strategies, such as those related to the naming of women's bodies and reproductive rights. The images move quickly, in multilayers and from every direction, and are all drawn from materials in students' actions. They present ideas for popular theatre, posters and themes that female and male gender conscious activists^v can take up, replicate or refine wherever they are.

As a facilitation tool, the video can be used to start discussions about the issues emphasised by the students — their prevalence, manifestations, causes and solutions — both in Trinidad and Tobago, and globally. Are these issues common, yet experienced differently, across varied contexts? Why? What forms should activism and advocacy take? What can be achieved using different strategies and what skills are needed? The video can also be used to stimulate discussion about other issues, other ideas for poster campaigns, workshops or popular theatre, and other spaces where both short, symbolic actions and longer engagements can and need to take place.

More fundamentally, the video highlights the connections the course makes between Women's Studies, feminisms and women's movements, and the definitions of feminism that students then articulate for themselves. It also invites reflection on the role of men. Should Women's Studies seek to expand feminist consciousness and action? What is its relationship to the wider women's movement? Why emphasise a space for focusing on

women's lives and hearing especially from women? In positing a message of solidarity amongst women, because far more still needs to be gained globally, the video also opens up reflection on the differences among women, and the stereotypes and structural relations that create distance, divisions and distrust. How can women examine and challenge the power of negative stereotypes of women, and fearlessly claim and empower more meaningful definitions? On what bases can women actually unite against patriarchy?

These key foci raise additional questions. What does it mean to be feminist? Can men be feminist? Caribbean feminism always benefited from the solidarity and contributions of men, and both young women and men need to continue to cooperate to change unequal gender relations. In workshops, I have used the video to interrogate the idea that because some individual women have done well in the public sphere, this therefore means that all women have "won". If women and girls are succeeding in educational and occupational spheres, what then explains continuing sexual violence against women — and the continuing threat of sexual violence that all women and girls learn to fear? What do students' choices of issues suggest about the relationship between public and private spheres, the intersections of capitalism and patriarchy, and the notions of womanhood and manhood that we continue to negotiate in popular culture, intimate relations, public health care, community policing and workplaces? Therefore, at another level, the video often aroused dialogue about the challenges of creating greater awareness about women's lives among men, and the contributions their solidarity can make to politicising women's experiences and interests.

Can women speak for 'Man'?

In popular consciousness, gender refers to both women and men. However, the fact that men are equally gendered doesn't negate the reality of unequal power relations between women and men (Barriteau 2003). One expression of such power is the way that the "Man Question" frequently drove reaction to the video, just as it underscores many reactions to feminism.

Some critics thought that men were not equitably represented and, for this reason, saw the video as excluding men, and women who reject a Second Wave version of woman-centred feminism, from the target audience. On this basis, both women and men sometimes challenged the video's legitimacy and relevance. Without always intending to, their reactions reinforced the authority of male-centred perspectives and masculinist power relations at individual, systemic and ideological levels.

First, and most commonly commented upon, is that there are no male voices in the video. There are photos of the two men (of ninety-two students) who were in the class, and photos of many others who attended the popular actions, signed petitions and participated in activities. In the video, a handful of the ninety women therefore speak for all the students, including the men. Aside from students in the course, there was only one other student whose perspective is heard. She is a female and I included her because she expressed how surprisingly eloquent and convincing the "cuntspeak" (Caputi 1996) action was with ordinary students.

One of the two male students in the class was involved in a popular action against rape and the other against armed aggression, and both did well overall in the course. I had interviewed both of them, but it was difficult to edit one of the interviews and the other, with one of the men who was quite soft spoken, had terrible sound quality. Both young men gave similar responses to those of the women who ultimately appear. However, for aesthetic reasons, neither interview could really be used. Nonetheless, in addition, there were political considerations as well.

Throughout the semester, when I told people about the large size of the class, often the first question both women and men would immediately ask was how many students in the class were men. This happened repeatedly as if the precedent-setting ninety female students simply didn't exist. Discussion would then focus on why I thought that more men were not enrolled in the class, and how I should make extra efforts to get more men and to make the syllabus more relevant to and about them. By the end of the semester, I was very frustrated by continual attempts to insist that greater androcentrism would make the course appear more legitimate, more relevant to everyone in the society, less "discriminatory" and of higher status.

By 2006, two-thirds of the university student population, especially in humanities and social sciences, were females. This alone made it more likely that the class would be predominantly female. Men were also less likely to enrol in large numbers in a class titled, "Introduction to Women's Studies", either in response to stereotypes about feminism, disinterest in studying women or the assumption that information about women is really for women and not relevant to all society and to men. Many men also fear being the only male in a class of women and getting talk about it by their peers. If young women enrolled in the class often had to deal with comments about becoming a "man-hater", "lesbian" or taking a class in "man-bashing", few men would have been prepared to deal with that as well. Heterosexual men would be especially concerned about appearing feminised because of their choice of course.

So often, we accept it when men speak on behalf of everyone including women, accept that men's perspectives and experiences can represent that of the society as a whole, and are comfortable with the hidden elision between men representing both the species Man and the group men at the same time (Spender 1990). When women speak, can't it be for us all as well? Could not a woman also stand for Man the species when speaking from her own perspective and experience? Can only men's views be considered universal? Rather than reducing them to their sex, I felt that the women in the video could speak for the community of students, both women and men, just as men often and with total legitimacy often speak for the communities of which they are a part despite their specific gendered experience and bias.

Nonetheless, the video highlights twenty-first century dilemmas for documenting feminist activism in academia. It is true that it could appeal to a wider audience and especially to men if other males could speak to the ways that "feminism is for everybody". Yet, this idea exposes the premise that unless men, their perspective or the

male gaze of women is represented, men both would and should have no reason to be interested. It is also true that it would have been worthwhile to hear from at least one of these two special men who chose to take the course. They could shed light on different ways of doing masculinity and, from their standpoint, the way that they defined the relationship between masculinity and Women's Studies. They could even discuss if they were more likely to take a course on "gender" rather than "women" and how their expectations would have differed. Yet, their absence from the video doesn't necessarily mean it represents an outdated feminism, nor one where only women's voices count.

In many ways, these criticisms assumed that men and especially young men would react in clichéd ways to the video. One older woman even called up a young man she knew so that he would come over and immediately verify the video's limitation and bias. Against her expectations, the young man liked the video, liked the idea of getting students involved in campus life, and didn't feel excluded by its message. Some young men's gender politics may in fact have moved beyond where many women and men stereotypically place them. Ironically, the young man was more concerned that a single early shot of a seemingly "gay" man would turn men off the video more than anything else^{vi}. In another setting, one man reacted strongly to one young student's statement that she learned that "not all men are bad". I left this in precisely to confront a misconception of feminism as teaching that "all men are bad" as well as to show the reality of young women's fears about men as they grow into adulthood.

Beyond the director's cut

The video can continue to provoke debate about Women's Studies, feminist activism, representation, gender and the terms of women's and men's participation. It signals both the ways that masculinity is positioned in relation to violence while also leaving space for discussion of its other meanings. The video can also encourage students, activists, feminist scholars and others to clarify the kind of space that exists for masculinity within a Women's Studies class, what is asked of men enrolled in such a class, the way that patriarchy should be defined and theorised, and the extent to which the students are able to adequately combine a message of solidarity and sisterhood with one about the importance of recognising difference.

More thematically, it hints at debate about aspects of sexual politics such as pornography and reclaiming a positive meaning for the word "cunt", and the extent to which women are responsible for their bodies. Is pornography bad? When? When not? Were the students' posters empowering or derogatory? In another scene, while students are claiming an ethnic and feminine identity based on having "natural" hair, India Arie's background lyrics seem to repudiate this. The word "dreadlocks" appears in both the visual and musical texts at the same moment, showing different ideological layers for viewers to unpack.

The video also highlights the centrality given to theorising violence in the course (Clarke 1997). This emphasis can be assessed and other starting points defined. Some have critiqued the seamlessness with which themes of domestic violence, rape, pornography and sexual harassment are presented, arguing that there was not enough nuance. Also, the

video doesn't convey the kinds of debates that students encountered in their popular actions, over whether or not women can rape men and whether or not men experience domestic violence at the rates that women do. Some have argued that the video failed to highlight the importance of celebration, recovering women's history and critiquing androcentrism in knowledge as a central part of what Introduction to Women's Studies courses do. Still others wished for additional focus on students at the beginning of the course so that more about their views at the end could be understood.

These reactions to the issues and actions as well as the video techniques and content have provided a rich basis for my own reflections on teaching feminist theory and action. I have shown how the video raises questions for debate and discussion in both Women's Studies classes and in feminist and activist workshops. From T-shirts to chalk graffiti, it also exemplifies a myriad of ways that young people can participate in feminist activism. Together, the video and essay can be an accessible resource for both encouraging and interrogating contemporary feminist movement-building in academic feminism and in the Caribbean.

ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱ Text in the video was drawn from Roberta Clarke (1997), Audre Lorde (1984), Sheila Ruth (1990), the NGO ASPIRE (Advocates for Safe Parenthood: Improving Reproductive Equity) at www.ttaspire.org and from my own poetry (Hosein 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ In order of appearance, the background soundtrack comprised excerpts from Destra Garcia’s “Independent Ladies” (Razorshop White Stripes refix), 3Canal’s “Blue opera”, Mungal Patassar’s “Tendonitis” (Razorshop remix), India Arie’s “I Am Not My Hair”, Gabrielle Hosein’s and Lyndon Livingstone’s “Never Let Nobody (Remix)” and Kes Vs Liquid People’s One day with Dragons (Razorshop Refix).

^{iv} Jeff Henry (2008, 70) writes that “the character of the Baby Doll that has survived the vicissitudes of time was played by a black skinned female who carried a blonde blue-eyed doll in her arms, challenging male spectators, ‘mind yuh baby’.”

^v Patricia Mohammed defines gender consciousness as, “the self-awareness and confidence of one’s rights and privileges as ‘female’ or ‘male’ in society as well as the limits or oppressiveness being male or female still imposes on the individual to realize their potential” (2003, 6).

^{vi} He was surprised to learn that the Indo-Trinidadian guy was attending one of the students’ consciousness-raising sessions with his female fiancée, and in fact only looked like what he (an Indo-Jamaican) assumed was “gay”.

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