



The Women's March on London: Virginia Woolf, John Berger, Judith Butler and intersectionality

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On January 21st 2017, the day after Donald Trump's Presidential Inauguration, over 100,000 people marched through London joining a global movement, initiated in the US to oppose Trump, in support of women's rights and the safeguarding of freedoms. The London March, organised by Beth Garner, Emma McNally and others, had fewer associate and institutional organisers than the Washington March (with its over 100 group supporters), but included Amnesty International, Pride in London, Unite, the Green Party, and was 'compèred' by the founder of the Women's Equality Party, the lesbian-feminist comedienne Sandi Toksvig. The London demonstration grew rapidly in numbers through social media, particularly Facebook, in a way new to the UK which traditionally organizes marches through trade unions and local and national political parties.

I found myself alongside Amy who answered my "Isn't this great!" with a whispered "It's my first demonstration." I choked back my "well, I've been marching since the anti-US Grosvenor Square demos in the 60s" and descriptions of being at Greenham Common, seeing her bright-eyed excitement at being caught up in this huge group of committed women.

Marching along Piccadilly for my hundredth time I was reminded of John Ashbery, the New York poet's 'A Last World': "Now all is different without having changed/As though one were to pass through the same street at different times" (Ashberry:63). Gender inequalities have not diminished greatly over time but for Amy and for me, we felt everything



will be different *and* be changed for the better (in spite of Trump's Presidency) by the coming together of new and intersecting identities on the March.

In understanding features of the London March, a few ideas from Virginia Woolf, John Berger and Judith Butler are pertinent. Berger was much on my mind having sadly recently died on the 2nd of January 2017; and as a Woolf scholar and feminist, I turn often to Woolf and Butler for inspiration (Humm 2002). Although very different kinds of thinkers both politically and conceptually, all three writers focus on cultural features (among many other concerns in their writings) as symbols of deeper patriarchal issues and controls.

One of the placards directly in front of me that day read "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world," one of Woolf's most quoted aphorisms from *Three Guineas*. The date of the March January 21st was close to Virginia Woolf's birthday of January 25th. Woolf rued the day when five grand town houses in Trafalgar Square were demolished in 1910 to build Admiralty Arch, yet another military monument, all of which she despised. She wrote in her diary "I preferred the songsters of Trafalgar Square...felt thrilled with an absurd visionary excitement" (Woolf 1977: 270). The songsters in Trafalgar Square this January included, as well as Toksvig, Natasha Walter, the writer and activist for refugee women, Kate Allen for Amnesty and many more who, through their speeches, clarified one visionary principle on which the march was based: the significance of attending to the Other however variously characterised.

Woolf was, above all, a chronicler of London. Cities are risky places but always invite new identities, new voices. In "Street Haunting" and *Mrs Dalloway* when Woolf's characters



step into the street “we are no longer quite ourselves,” the experience of many, I would guess, on the March (Woolf 1994: 481). Woolf took an affective response to London much like the demonstrators.

Feminism profoundly shapes Woolf's writings. “I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times,” she said in 1916, with its “preposterous masculine fiction” of World War I (Woolf 76). It is Woolf's link here between patriarchy and nationalism which makes Woolf's ideas pertinent to the London March with its focus on refugee women who had fled war-torn zones. Woolf worked for the People's Suffrage Organisation in 1910; her Hogarth Press published feminist texts including Ray Strachey's *Our Freedom and its Results* (1936); her novels are shaped by feminism, from the first novel *The Voyage Out* with its references to prostitution and women as victims of patriarchy, through to *Night and Day*'s character Mary Datchet who works in a suffrage office. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are the great feminist books of the twentieth century, documenting women's exclusion from education and the professions, as well as the significance of women's financial independence and autonomous “rooms”. London itself seemed to turn into a gigantic autonomous women's room when it came to a standstill due to the numbers marching, with the speeches in Trafalgar Square curtailed due to police fears about safety.

Like Woolf, John Berger focussed on the depictions of women in public arenas. His 1972 BBC television series had a profound impact on the way in which women of my generation thought about our portrayal in popular culture and high art. Before the series, in an insightful article “The Nature of Mass Demonstrations” written for *International*



Socialism in 1968, John Berger argued that demonstrations are “rehearsals for revolution.”ⁱ Berger died before he could witness the Women’s March, but his analysis accurately pinpoints two features of the March. Berger (as an art historian) argues in cultural terms focussing on symbolic appearances and sites. Although fewer in number than on the Washington D. C. Women’s March, the London demonstrators’ pink pussy hats exemplified Berger’s view that a demonstration is “artificial,” a “created event” full of symbols. In this way the march drew on the much earlier, but similarly symbolic, dress codes of British suffragettes at the turn of the twentieth century and in 1912 who adopted immaculate white dresses, hats and gloves combined with coloured banners of purple, green and white (Tickner) .

Amy’s pink hat bounced in the breeze. “I can’t knit,” I confessed, “had to buy one online.”

“That’s OK,” Amy said, “I can’t either. My mum knitted mine,” which reminded me of another, often quoted aphorism of Woolf that “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf 1929: 69).

Demonstrations, Berger claimed, must be essentially urban, “as near as possible to some symbolic centre” to have impact. The March began in Grosvenor Square, home of the American Embassy, and ended in Trafalgar Square, the destination of most of London’s anti-establishment marches, for example the march in March 2017 attacking government cuts to the National Health Service. In such sites, Berger suggests, demonstrations can be, “prophetic, rehearsing possibilities.”



Judith Butler, similarly, deconstructs cultural symbols although in a psychoanalytically informed way. In an interview, first given to Mediapart but since corrected on Verso books blog, Butler deconstructs the "fascist" ideology of Trump as representing a display of "brazen and wounded narcissism"ⁱⁱ. The interview discusses Trump's refusal to submit to evidence or logic, and concludes with Butler's crucial point that demonstrations can alter the "public understanding of who the people are" through their corporeal claim to the public space.

In a December 2016 interview on the *unphilosophe.com* web site, Butler suggests, like Woolf and Berger, that "forms of assembly and resistance [are] sites for imagining and enacting that alternative imaginary"ⁱⁱⁱ and the wearing of pink hats exemplified Butler's work on performing gender by being a gesture to subvert Trump's stereotypical ideas about women's bodies (Butler 1993). The huge numbers of marches across the world, combined with largely supportive media coverage, enacted an alternative bodily imaginary both in public and digital spaces. Butler goes on to argue in the interview, that although there are diverse forms of assembly, there cannot be "democracy without forms of assembly." Demonstrations (along with occupations and encampments) work politically, she suggests, when the police are aligned with demonstrators as happened at the London Women's March, when the Metropolitan police appointed six women police officers specifically to assist the organisers, and policed the March with the lightest touch I have witnessed in my years of demonstrating; and, as in Washington, there were no arrests.



The range of speakers at the London March exemplified the main determination of the organisers to redefine understandings of women and challenge inequalities by displaying intersectionality. It was not just *who* was speaking but what they were saying which revealed how intersectionality shaped the issues. Along with traditional trade union and mainstream political speakers such as Yvette Cooper Labour MP, multi-ethnic and refugee women addressed issues of reproductive rights, migrations and their material consequences including a young schoolgirl Sumayah's heartfelt reading of a poem by Dorothy Oger about women's strengths.

In the Verso interview Butler praised strong feminist speakers like Elizabeth Warren, the senator from Massachusetts, who turned Trump's insult to Hilary Clinton against him with "Get this, Donald. Nasty women are tough. Nasty women are smart. And nasty women vote," repeated on a placard at the London March. Here spectators were as diverse as the speakers, at least from their banners, seemingly coming together across boundaries of class, occupations, materialities, genders, race and sexualities. Demonstrators become stronger in their diversity when grouping themselves as outsiders to the establishment as Woolf suggests in *Three Guineas* with the creation of an Outsiders Society.

The intersectionality of the Women's March was, to me, its most significant feature. Intersectionality refers to these interactions of difference and multiple systems of oppression we experience in our lives. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in the context of Black identities and the legal professions, and developed further by her in 1991, intersectionality addresses the issue that oppressions co-exist with dominations and women experience this



differently in multiple contexts (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Intersectionality theory shows how identities are located in a matrix of domination, analogous to Woolf's view in *Three Guineas* that women are caught in a nexus of patriarchy which acts as a disciplinary force to construct gender identities.

Since Crenshaw's initial formulations, queer and postmodern theorists have added further conceptual challenges to traditional ways of thinking about gender as universal static categories, particularly adding a focus on lived experiences and on the instabilities of social categories (Rahman 2010). Queer destabilizes the coherence of dominant hetero narratives of identity and postmodernists deconstruct binary oppositions (ibid: 952). What all share, however, is the idea that performativity, to use Butler's terminology - that is gestures, clothing, and acts - do the work of attempting to stabilize traditional genders while performativity can also destabilize such restrictions by denaturalizing dominant social categories. The London March rendered visible such intersectional social groupings and, through home-made pink hats, speech acts and placards, gave demonstrators a sense of political and cultural power encouraging us to further challenges.

Intersectionality's focus on how race, class, gender and other differences are interwoven and mutually constitutive and yet are positives, offers an alternative vision to Trump's stances. In his campaign rhetoric and Presidential language (or lack of it) and current actions Trump shows that he is not only, or crudely misogynist, but racist, Islamophobic and classist in his constructed appeal to middle and working-class fears about globalization and immigration and attempts to frame class in terms of single demographics.



Butler claims in her *unphilosophe* interview, that assemblies are reasons to “hold out for ideals of democracy, even when, precisely when, they seem unrealizable.” Rather than unrealizable, the Women’s March on London Facebook group is proposing continuing events and acts to enact those ideals of democracy. The speed of assembly by means of the March’s initial Facebook page (now closed) showed the value of social media in bringing into activism huge numbers, many like Amy new to political action, but drawn in by the focus on women. As we marched, Amy was texting a friend, also on her first demonstration - the simultaneous Manchester Women’s March.

The March’s new Facebook group page can similarly bring out activists rapidly and meaningfully into carefully constructed events which have specific outcomes, promising not just as a catalyst for social change but an effective future resistance to neo-liberalism^{iv}. The first 100 days of Trump’s presidency are being matched by 10 actions to continue the March’s momentum. These include neighbourhood ‘Huddles’ of 10-15 people to plan new activities helped by the March’s Huddle Host Guides; solidarity with other marches for example, by planting tulips at the Dutch Embassy for the Amsterdam March; supporting the Million Women Rise 11/03/2017, Women of the World Festival, South Bank, and the Women’s Environmental Network (WEN) linking women to actions on climate change, a key global issue denied by Trump. In addition, national and local government actions were planned, for example campaigns to retain the UK Child Migrant Scheme by bombarding MPs with St. Valentine’s cards, and local councillor training via women in Momentum, a left-wing organisation. On 26th March 2017 women, wearing blue hijabs to signify peace, held hands along the length of Westminster Bridge in a very moving silent vigil to remember the victims



of the terrorist attack on Westminster in March. The problem is not simply the person (Trump) representing the problem but social conditions and how these are exacerbated by intersections of race, class and gender. If the organisers continue to adopt an intersectional approach, such actions will challenge activists to engage in more multi-systemic undertakings.

In Trafalgar Square, I felt like shouting out Clarissa Dalloway's wonderful paean to London in *Mrs Dalloway* (reworked with apologies to Woolf):

in the bellow and the uproar; the banners, flags, pink hats, badges, feminists...this was what she loved; life; London; this moment of January^v.

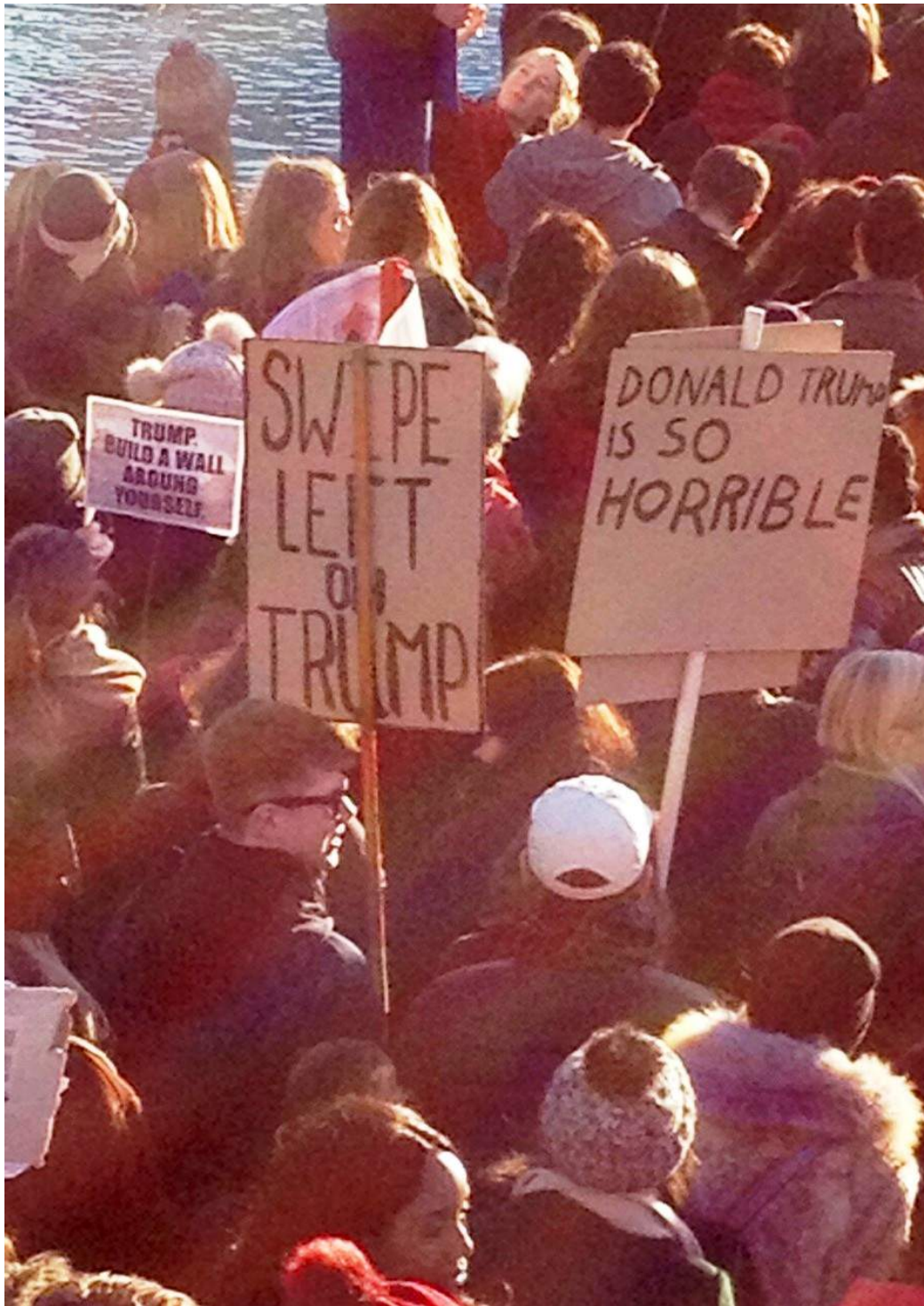
“When's the next demo?” Amy asked, a feminist being born.

“Hopefully soon,” I said. “See you there.”

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References

ⁱ <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1968/no034/berger.htm>. All Berger

quotations are taken from this unpaginated source.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3025-trump-fascism-and-the-construction-of-the-people-an-interview-with-judith-butler> Butler quotations are taken from this unpaginated web site.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://unphilosophe.com/2016/12/19/interview-with-judith-butler-the-freedom-of-assembly-assumes-that-bodies-can-assemble/> again quotations are from the unpaginated web site.

^{iv} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1332581573479599/>

^v Woolf's original quotation is: "in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages; motor cars; omnibuses; vans...was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (Woolf 1992: 4).

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