

**Pussy Grabs Back: Bestialized Sexual Politics and Intersectional Failure in Protest Posters for the 2017 Women's March**

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# **Pussy Grabs Back: Bestialized Sexual Politics and Intersectional Failure in Protest Posters for the 2017 Women's March**

The women's march on Washington on January 21st, 2017 and its more than 600 sister marches across the world was characterized by its distinctly feline theme. Most notable were the pink pussy hats and a multitude of signs that played on the historical association between women and cats to resist the crude remarks made by US presidential nominee Donald Trump who bragged of grabbing women "by the pussy." This article explores this feline counterframing from a vegan feminist perspective. A content analysis was performed on photographs that were published in *Why I March* (2017) and uploaded to the Women's March on Washington Archives Project, the Georgia State University Women's Marches 2017 Collection, and Instagram in Spring 2017. Results illustrate the persistent role that animality plays in feminist politics, but they also point to a critical intersectional failure exhibited by an ultimately anthropocentric collective.

Keywords: animal studies; human-animal relationships; protest; social movements; symbolism

## **Introduction**

The largest protest in American history, the January 2017 Women's March rallied approximately two and a half million people across the world and was characterized by a distinctly feline theme. Knitted pink "pussy hats" (a play on "pussycats") became the embodiment of solidarity, but many protest signs featured images and slogans that referenced cats as well. The march was strategically planned to coincide with the inauguration of Donald Trump. Trump had become notorious for his anti-woman posturing on the campaign trail, most notably evidenced in a leaked Access Hollywood audio recording in which he bragged about "grabbing them [women] by the pussy." Contrary to pundit predictions, the Access Hollywood scandal proved to be only a minor roadblock in Trump's campaign. Indeed, his shocking win rattled feminists who had waged their bets on Senator Clinton. It became a mobilizing moment for women and allies worldwide. The 2017 women's march demonstrated a national and global concern with American misogyny, while the symbolism of "pussies," typically employed to derogate and suppress women, would become central to feminist resistance.

After centuries of pejorative feline comparisons, the 2017 march etched a powerful episode in feminist history when cat-called women in cat-eared hats hit the pavement in record numbers. Given that cats and other animals are frequently objects of meaning construction in human political spaces, particularly in the negotiation of gender relations, the choice to apply cat imagery to the women's march was not altogether surprising. As powerful goddesses heralding female power, bedeviled associates of suspiciously independent women, and sexualized objects of the domestic sphere, cats have served as a highly resonate representation of womanhood and its social expectations.

To be sure, Nonhuman Animal imagery is frequently utilized in movement representations. The Black Panthers is one memorable example, yet, the Panthers' feline symbolism brandished on banners and newsletters became almost incidental in their effort to portray themselves as powerful, resistant, and militaristic. By comparison, the anti-lynching movement of decades prior actively described African American victims in animalistic terms, hoping to capitalize on the highly resonant frames employed by the concurrent animal welfare movement (L. Johnson 2018). For feminists, too, nonhumans may not simply act as mascots, but an embodiment. In the 2017 march, felinity permeated mobilization and media discourse, but its manifestation was most powerfully observed in the march through poster art and clothing. Feminist media scholar Van Zoonen (1994) asserts that media is a site of negotiation, impacting not only shared cultural understanding but also the material condition of women. Rather than necessarily reflecting reality, media instead represents the "collective dreams, fantasies and fears" (152) of its creators and consumers. Thus, for protesters, media serves as a powerful leverage in their agenda for social change (Atkinson 2010). Protest visuals also influence group solidarity in their ability to bring various actors together as well as masking or excluding difference in the process.

This article will explore these intersections of feline symbolism and sexual politics in protest by identifying the ways in which participants employ symbols of animality to frame their identity and grievances. As a theoretical matter, it will explore difficulties in achieving solidarity in movement representation. Butler (1990) describes gender as *performative*, such that it resists an essential, biologically-derived nature and

is invariably qualified by other identities. The 2017 march offers insight to this performance as it manifests in protest, but it also demonstrates the difficulties of achieving solidarity by restricting gender politics to women's experiences to the exclusion of nonhumans. Despite this disconnect, cat symbolism has historically been applied to the feminist fight for personhood and citizenship. Women primarily seek to reclaim their animality in the abstract only, overlooking the structural oppression of Nonhuman Animals. While cat imagery may offer powerful protest symbolism, it has, in practice, run contrary to goals of feminist solidarity.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Vegan Feminism and the Construction of Gender***

The pussycat protestors are a recent incarnation of a much older relationship between femininity and felinity. In earlier societies, the felinization of women reflected women's power and their relatively higher social standing. In some cases, this association presented women's power as threatening and necessary to suppress. In Europe and America, for instance, cats were believed to serve as witches' familiars, complicit in executing women's evil deeds (J. Serpell 2002). Medieval texts similarly employed cat metaphors to describe suspiciously lustful and disobedient women. This symbolic association was frequently a dangerous one for cats as well as women. Cats, in particular, have been the subjects of non-consensual, painful, and lethal medical and consumer testing for some centuries, while millions of cats each year are "euthanized" in "shelters," betrayed by bureaucratic inefficiencies and lethal policies. At various points across historical and contemporary society, cats have been the target of extermination efforts (such is the case today with "feral" cats in the Australian outback). This violence is enacted from the outside and also from within. Similar to the effect of patriarchy on girls and women, the institution of domestication renders cats perpetually dependent, constrained, and vulnerable. Their bodies and actions are heavily controlled by human institutions that entrap them.

As de Beauvoir (2011 [1949]) emphasizes that women have been defined in relation to men (for whom society has been structured to prioritize), so does vegan feminism argue that nonhumans have been defined in relation to humans, relegating

them to second class status. Vegan feminism is a branch of ecofeminist thought that explicitly recognizes the role of animalization and human supremacy in manifesting inequality. Furthermore, vegan feminism identifies that this process is frequently gendered. The category of “animal” has been used for centuries to categorize all manner of human and nonhuman “others,” thus justifying discriminatory treatment (A. Ko and S. Ko 2017). The relationship between humanity and power renders predictable the aforementioned intersection of femininity and felinity in which women are often described as cats and cats are often described as effeminate. Vegan feminist theory acknowledges that the congruent subordination of various groups, particularly human and nonhuman, works to maintain a hierarchical social structure. As Gruen (1993) identifies, “The categories of ‘woman’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society” (61). Categorical difference is created across groups to dissolve solidarity and increase vulnerability to control and exploitation. Most fundamental to this division is the separation of humanity from nature and animality, with humanity traditionally defined in androcentric and Eurocentric terms.

While Marx observed that oppressed groups are frequently made ignorant to this shared oppression and harbor a false consciousness to the exploitative nature of their material world, intersectional feminism has suggested that oppressed groups have potential to overcome the structural disincentives to ignorance, hence the tactical utility in consciousness raising. Indeed, the second-wave feminist movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by its emphasis on acknowledging intersections of experience and identity (B. Ryan 1992). It is in this historical stage that the Nonhuman Animal rights movement and vegan feminism also emerged to encourage an awareness to nonhuman intersections (C. Adams and L. Gruen 2014). Vegan feminists, in particular, recognize that the oppression of women mirrors that of other animals, as both groups are framed as subhuman or nonhuman, impulse-driven, irrational, bodied, reproductively controllable, and existent to serve male interests (in providing food, shelter, sensual pleasure, and offspring).

## *Felinity in the Women's Movement*

The dichotomous symbolism of femininity and animality (especially felinity) had firmly established by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and cat imagery was employed by both the women's movement and its countermovement. Anti-suffragette propaganda frequently depicted women as infantile cats mewing for the vote, sometimes donning shawls or large Edwardian hats with their suffragette insignia. Illustrating feminists as cats<sup>1</sup> cued the audience to interpret women's efforts as infantile and their demands frivolous. As symbols of the domestic sphere, cats are used as indirect references to women's disruption of idealized motherhood and family life as well. Anti-suffragette imagery often pictured a frantic scene on the home front with fathers bumbling the housework, children screaming and unattended, and, somewhere in the mayhem, a terrified or otherwise miserable cat would be present. As radicalized suffragettes found themselves jailed for their activism, women resisted the label of criminal and identified instead as political prisoners. In protest of their criminalization, many chose to hunger strike and were subject to violent forced feedings as a result. Activists quickly became conscious to the similarities between their treatment and that of the invasive, institutional torture inflicted on nonhuman animals (many of whom were cats) in contentious, male-orchestrated "scientific experiments" (I. Miller 2009). One suffragette poster depicted a bruised and battered downtrodden cat with the play on words: "I'm a suffer yet."

The hunger strikes failed to solicit institutional sympathy, but the tactic was highly successful in garnering public support. Starving women faced serious health problems, and some even died. Because these victims were apt to become martyrs, the state passed legislation requiring the temporary release of hunger strikers whose health had deteriorated. The state intended to detain the women again following their recuperation such that this legislation became colloquially known as the "Cat and Mouse Act." The popular understanding of the act positioned the *state* as feline in this case, albeit in a masculinized, predatory sense.<sup>2</sup> One propaganda poster produced in response features an angry tomcat gripping a faint suffragette between his fangs.

The relationship identified between women and other animals was not always believed to be entirely deleterious. Cats continued to represent women's rebellion against the state in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Lakota women of the American

Indian movement likened themselves to cats. As her political agency and awareness grew, activist Mary Crow Dog explains: “I [ . . . ] was growing from a kitten into an undersized cat. My claws were getting bigger and were itching for action” (1990, 35). The first resistance literature she created was a zine titled the *Red Panther*. Likewise, Chicano feminist Gloria Anzaldúa drew on her own experiences as a queer and intersex person of color in her ground-breaking intersectionality philosophy, emphasizing the role of animalization in constructing (and deconstructing) gender (1987). Consider also the aforementioned Black Panther Party, which would come to be female-led. Their chosen panther symbolism is anything but timid and domestic. The essence of jungle panthers, embraced by women activists as well as men, tactfully avoids the domesticated, powerless persona of the housecat.

### ***Finding Solidarity***

Whether or not this feminist bestialization extends beyond symbolic appropriation to constitute a form of trans-species solidarity identified as necessary by vegan feminists is unclear. Feminism has displayed a tactical sophistication in the social movement space with its strategic negotiation of politics of difference. In formulating a flexible solidarity, the movement has been able to accommodate a variety of races, classes, genders, sexualities, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, feminist scholars celebrate the movement’s ability to overcome difference, transforming it into a source of strength and creativity (J. Steans, 2007). However, vegan feminists, who position the oppression of Nonhuman Animals and the construction of animality as central to gender politics, have been critical of mainstream feminism for either ignoring or explicitly rejecting vegan protest and the relevance of speciesism (Adams, 1994; Ko and Ko, 2017).

Achieving solidarity, in fact, is not especially easy and must be constantly negotiated. Other feminist scholars have bemoaned the elusiveness of solidarity often compromised by identity politics (Ryan, 1992). Racial difference tested 19<sup>th</sup> century campaigners and ripped open the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave, while the role of lesbianism (“the lavender menace”) would challenge 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. More recently, the rise of transgender politics currently disrupts the meaning of gender as it is linked to the body, necessitating that traditional feminist claimsmaking be radically transformed (C. Heyes, 2003). Along

similar lines, ecofeminism has also made inroads in the feminist imagination, but solidarity with Nonhuman Animals is strained. Most feminists, for instance, are neither vegan nor vegetarian, and feminist conferences routinely serve animal products (Adams, 1994). Yet, the progress of feminist solidarity across time suggests that the recognition of difference is not always straightforward and may take time to materialize. The explosion of animal symbolism in the 2017 protest suggests that a trans-species solidarity could be on the horizon.

### ***Framing Protest with Bodies, Art, and Other Objects***

Feminist solidarity owes much of its success to movement media, which shapes a sense of shared experience and provides easily retrievable language and imagery for expressing grievances (V. Roscigno and W. Danaher, 2001). Movements create and curate visual codes not only to effect change, but also to manage various actors (Doerr and Teune 2012). Art, song, poetry, and cinema are all tactically explored by activists hoping to tap into the public imagination, frequently confronting and critiquing power in the process. Indeed, feminist media practices contend with dominant ideologies for the right to define signification. For example, the Black Panthers employs theatrical performance in staged protests and displays of symbolic dress, hairstyles, postures, and props, while the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist collective of radical artists, effectively employs posters and billboards to draw attention to inequality in the arts. FEMEN, a group of young, conventionally attractive women who protest topless with jarring chants and messages scrawled across their bodies, manipulate stereotypical depictions of women as passive sex objects in the hope of advancing women's status (M. Betlemidze, 2015).

As these examples attest, feminist protest frequently melds the symbolic with the corporeal. Feminists across many cultures have long protested the cultural and political meanings associated with the female body via embodiment whereby the activist's own body and agency become the subjects of dissent and instruments of social change (W. Parkins, 2000; T. Oma Sasson-Levy, 2003). As the 2017 protesters took to the streets in pink pussy hats in defence of their bodily integrity, reproductive rights, and other body politics, they joined a tradition of started with the suffragettes over a century prior and refuelled by 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists inspired and incensed by de



Beauvoir's (2011 [1949]) observations that women's bodies had been defined, objectified, and controlled by their service to others. Indeed, feminist activists and artists of the 1970s made it a priority to regain control and representation of the female body in the cultural imagination (J. Frueh, 1994). This intention is unmistakable in the 2017 march, as evidenced in the rationale provided by The Pussyhat Project:

We chose this loaded word [pussy] for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment. [...] the answer is not to deny our femaleness and femininity, the answer is to demand fair treatment. A woman's body is her own. We are honoring this truth and standing up for our rights. (K. Suh and J. Zweiman 2017)

This march was a body politic, one that resisted patriarchal and governmental claims to women's bodies but also tested the conflation of animality with inferiority. Similar to projects that queer or crip politics by drawing on their respective disciplines to create critical intersections in movement discourse and practice (C. Sandahl 2003), the pussy marchers bestialized sexual politics to reclaim their animality.

The march was more than an embodiment tactic. It also constituted what J. Delicath and K. Deluca (2003) term an "image event" with its swarms of women donning adroit posters and pink pussy hats filling the public sphere and impacting visual culture. This new form of communication, they emphasize, is well positioned to effect "[...] social issue construction and public opinion formation" (321). The spectacle itself, in other words, acts as "argumentative practice." Movement art can motivate participants and transcend social structures deemed problematic. Similarly, Reed (2005) draws attention to the potency of "cultural texts" produced by social movements, suggesting that cultural forces "[...] may at times have a deeper and more widespread impact on most of our lives than political or economic forces" (xviii). Social movements, Reed observes, capitalize on pop culture in pursuit of resonance, manipulate wider culture to align with movement goals, and manifest culture as a means of activist solidarity. Of course, just whose culture and meaning will rise to prominence is often a matter of contention. Social movement scholars have applied Goffman's theory of framing to describe the ways in which protestors actively seek to shape meanings such that they spark the public's support and encourage political openings

(Snow and Benford 1992). Movements grapple with multiple, often competing frames, although a “master frame” is likely to surface in order to manifest some sort of solidarity and rallying point.

Goodnow (2006) emphasizes the ability for campaign symbols to “[ . . . ] serve as visual tropes” in the persuasive process, ultimately becoming “[ . . . ] part of American public consciousness” (166) in their ability to offer explanation, awareness, identification, and sanction to activists and their audience. In feminist protest, art has been identified as essential for framing, resource mobilization, activist motivation, and symbolic communication with stakeholders and audiences (J. Adams, 2002). While less examined, protest posters employed in marches and rallies often achieve the same. Certainly, the posters of the Million Woman March became iconic in their multitude, creativity, and poignancy. Limited in space for image and message, posters by necessity must succinctly frame a complex social issue, relying on widespread cultural meanings to aid in their interpretation while also seeking to challenge the discernment of nonparticipants and bystanders. This strength, of course, is also a limitation, and the need for quick, choppy, and widely understood cultural symbols can easily undermine the feminist brand of solidarity that aims to be inclusive of a wide variety of identities and meanings. For cats, in particular, whose identity permeated the movement, it is worth exploring how feminist meaning-making aligns (or misaligns) with solidarity-making.

## **Methodology**

Reed (2005) argues that protest art is vital in the struggle for cultural resonance in its ability to “critique and transcend ideology” (303), suggesting that poster displays utilized in the march can provide a traceable narrative of the feminist agenda. Four samples were examined in this vein. The Women's March on Washington Archives Project hosted by Open Science Framework (OSF)<sup>5</sup> constituted the largest sample. At the time of this writing, this database was still growing; the sample utilized herein reflects files that were available on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (n=1,473). The available photographs were taken at marches in 18 cities across the United States. Images from

these samples that featured cat symbolism in the form of image or text were coded. The second dataset, Georgia State University's digital Women's Marches 2017 Collection documenting the Atlanta march, was included in its entirety.<sup>5</sup> At the time of this writing, this collection contained 247 images, six of which were unique and tagged with the keyword cat to indicate a sign pictured with a feline theme. Third, data was pulled from the picture book *Why I March* (S. Weiner and E. Jacobs 2017). Published just weeks after the march, it contained a total of 306 images taken at protests held across the world.

Lastly, a sample of 2,169 top rated public Instagram images that were tagged with the women's march (#womensmarch) was collected on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Only 394 (18%) of these images were taken at the protest. Time between data collection and the march corrupted the quality of data. As of January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, there were over 1.6 million images were tagged with the women's march, but this reduced to 1.3 million when the sample was taken. The number tagged not only declined, but fewer of those tagged in March were actually related to the march. Some users were deleting images, while others were coopting the tag to increase their audience based on the popularity of the protest. Some may simply have been tagging "womensmarch" for another shared cultural meaning altogether. Instagram data collection was fortunately completed before the succeeding International Women's Day mobilization efforts of March 8<sup>th</sup> which would have likely muddled the tag further.

Posters were considered relevant if they depicted an image of a cat, if the sign itself was formed in the shape of a cat, or if feline language was used (most frequently the word "pussy"). The ubiquitous pink hats, of course, are the most obvious allusion to cats, but ascertaining a frequency count on hats would have been a monumental task and would not offer any novel information. For simplicity's sake, this content analysis focused on posters or other insignia worn to the protest. However, the Instagram sample did deliver a smattering of cat imagery in portraits, quilts, t-shirts, stickers, comics, badges, toys, and buttons related to the protest, but not in use at the protest. When images contained multiple posters, each poster was coded individually. A number of images were crowd shots and no posters were legible. Posters that were illegible due to the crowd or angle were not scrutinized, but fully visible posters in another language were translated wherever possible to determine if they were relevant. A final

consideration is necessary in regards to bias of availability. None of the samples depicted a random selection of posters since the images were purposefully selected by the photographer and/or editor. The consistent presence of cat imagery in the sample could mean that Nonhuman Animal posters are simply more attention-grabbing, but, if so, this would also support the argument presented herein that cats are considered a master symbol of the women's protest. In any case, it cannot be said that the sample analyzed was random.

## **Results**

Snow and Benford (1992) point to the importance in constructing an innovative master frame to mobilize activists and affect political opportunities. Although the prevalence of pussycat hats suggests that felinity or animality was a master frame for the women's march, these themes were less prevalent in poster art than was predicted. Cat signs were present in 3.4% of the Open Science Framework sample, 2.9% of the Georgia State sample, and 6.5% of the *Why I March* selection, but only .04% of the Instagram sample. Due to the compromised nature of the "womensmarch" hashtag, the prevalence of cat themed images on Instagram was much less than expected. Recall that only 18% of the sample of 2,169 Instagram images were actually taken at the march. Of these, only 9 signs drew on feline imagery, constituting 2% of protest images and only .04% of the entire sample.<sup>6</sup> A combined total of 91 instances of cat symbolism were identified from the four samples and analyzed.

### ***Women as Cats***

By far the most common use of cat symbolism was to metaphorize women or their genitalia (Table 1) which could evidence an attempt bestialize frames of sexual objectification to dislodge them from their patriarchal capacity. Over two thirds of the posters using the word "pussy" used an image of a cat to substitute the word "pussy" or used an image of a cat to supplement the textual use of the word "pussy" (Figure 1). One prominent example of this was a poster produced by NARAL Pro-Choice America which read, "Keep your hands off my" and included a picture of a cat (Figure 2). Mass produced, this NARAL poster surfaced regularly across the sample. This theme was an

important one. In embracing the feline association, marchers asserted control and disrupted its negative ramifications.

In addition to this frame of ownership and control, there was also theme of resistance. The most popular slogan was a variation of “This pussy grabs back” (Table 2). The next most common was a play on “Hear me roar.” Only two signs used cat language other than “pussy” and “roar.” One of these referenced catcalling, while the other read, “The revolution is feline.” Warnings to keep one’s (tiny) hands, paws, or laws off were also frequent. A few employed pussy rhetoric to highlight Trump’s admission of sexual assault, specifically in referencing the importance of consent. Rather than embracing felinity and animality, these messages essentially flipped the feminization and animalization onto the opponent.

There was considerable creativity in poster design, meaning that a few slogans resisted categorization. Most were consistent with the overarching theme of defiance (Table 3). A smaller proportion of units were simply images of cats used without textual accompaniment presumably because the reference was thought to be obvious. Goodnow (2006) emphasizes that successful protest symbols will be those that can be easily replicated, and this appears to be the case in the women’s march given the innovativeness in applying felinity. Cats surfaced in the form of wearable insignia as well. Aside from the pink pussy hats, several protesters turned up to the march wearing hats that were either fashioned to look like cat faces or had cat toys, labels, or buttons affixed to them (Figure 3). A few also wore cat shirts. Some women even dressed as cats, wearing tails, masks, and face paint (Figure 4, Figure 5).

Movements draw liberally from wider culture for symbols of protest, while they, reciprocally, contribute to cultural production themselves (Reed 2005). For many, the goal is to manipulate the meaning of cultural artifacts to support the interests of their constituency and challenge dominant, frequently problematic narratives. A potent frame can make all the difference for movement success (Snow and Benford 1992). For the Million Woman marchers, the January 2017 event codified the feline-feminist connection in pop culture, mobilizing an army of pussies in defiance of state gender oppression. The bestialization of feminist politics was strategically introduced to disrupt problematic cultural narratives, although whether or not the cultural diffusion of pussy

power has been successful may as yet be unclear given the contradictions and power imbalance previously discussed.

### ***Intersectional Failure***

A primary weakness of solidarity manufacture, image events, and master frames is the facilitation of a one-dimensional representation that dampers diversity. Although gender and species are both evidenced in the epistemology of the 2017 protest, this does not automatically grant an explicit intersectional awareness among participants. That is, protesters may not necessarily connect the dots between cats and other animals, women, class, race, and so on. The strategic employment of identity politics could bear some blame in this regard. Collective identity is essential for creating a sense of solidarity and motivation, but it can also aggravate binaries in explicitly denoting an “us” and “them.” Binaries inevitably allow for the interests of those with the most privilege to be centered, while less powerful groups are apt to be excluded (W. Gamson 1995). As to be expected with a protest so large and diverse, intersectional failure<sup>4</sup> surfaced in many key areas of the women’s march. For instance, a contributor for *The Huffington Post* took issue with the whiteness of the pink pussy mascot:

I hope this new movement will not make blind assumptions that all pussies are alike and therefore united. Because our pussies, Black pussies, have been on the front line for a very long time. And we have not been flaunting her or wearing hats on her, or hashtagging her, or hanging slogans out of her. (L. Toussaint 2017)

Collective identity, here materialized in pink pussy iconography, may be useful in bringing a sense of comradeship, togetherness, and solidarity, but social movement scholars have emphasized that this solidarity is a “necessary fiction” (Gamson 1995, J. Jasper 2010). Encompassing the wide variations in experience under one grand narrative is difficult, if not impossible, and the resulting frame will easily defer to the experiences of the relatively privileged.

It is also a solidarity that is internally contradictory. Feminist media leader Bitch, for instance, criticizes the pink pussy approach with concerns that the

emphasized pinkness underscores problematic stereotypes of femininity as flowery, sweet, and genteel (H. Derr 2017). Marchers also paradoxically capitalized on the stigmatization of feminization by emasculating Trump with numerous chants and poster slogans that mocked his tiny hands and highlighted his presidential impotency. Given that the march has already drawn criticism from Black feminists concerned with the whiteness of liberal feminism, the stereotypical pinkness could also aggravate the cultural coding of ideal femininity as white. Thus, women of color are not only alienated from feminist spaces, but from womanhood in general. Vegan feminists Adams (1994) and Ko and Ko (2017) have emphasized that humanity has historically been framed as white and European, such that marginalized groups often seek to distance themselves from animality (which is defined in racial terms regarding physical appearance, cognitive inferiority, and uncivilized behaviour) to advance their status. It is possible that the pink pussy accomplishes the same in choosing pussy iconography associated with white bodies to elevate it from the base, animalistic pussy symbolism associated with women of color. Trans women, too, were subject to exclusion. Although the Pussyhat Project explicitly recognizes the experiences of trans women (Suh and Zweiman 2017), by equating womanhood and sisterhood with ownership of a “pussy,” many trans or nonbinary women are apt to feel as alienated by the emphasis on genitalia as Black women, both trans and cis, have been by the emphasis on color. Indeed, one protest sign in the sample read, “Womanhood is more than having a pussy: Protect Trans Lives.”

### ***Other Animals***

That said, the pussy symbolism advanced by The Pussyhat Project was not the only to represent protestors. The organizers of the Women’s March on Washington composed its *Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles* (J. Alotta et al. 2017) to include a litany of intersections including race, gender, police violence, economic inequality, and sex trafficking to “affirm our shared humanity and pronounce our bold message of resistance and self-determination.” Although Nonhuman Animals permeated protest media, they remained conspicuously absent in this solidarity rhetoric as well. By

drawing the boundary at “shared humanity,” marchers expressly ignored other animals whose identities were exploited for the campaign.

While not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that cats were not the only nonhuman species to surface in protestor rhetoric. Marchers in Antarctica, for instance, relied heavily on penguin iconography. Another sign featured images of several types of free-living bird species juxtaposed with a quote from Senator Elizabeth Warren: “OUR DIVERSITY MAKES US STRONGER, MORE INNOVATIVE, AND MORE CREATIVE.” Birds also surfaced as the peace dove, birds flying from cages, and the Twitter logo (a reference to Trump’s infamous tweeting). Dogs featured regularly, too, but not as poster content. More often, they were carrying signs that played on their canine identity, “I <3 NAPS BUT STAY WOKE” and “Bitches for Equality,” for example. Dogs were consistently represented in crowds across the various samples. While cats were an absent referent in poster design, dogs actually took part in the march as agential nonhuman marchers. One dog even sported a pink pussy hat.

Species that are regularly exploited and killed for food, however, did not surface at all as a symbol of protest. They did surface from time to time to denigrate Trump by referring to him as a “pig,” describing his hands as “paws,” or referring to his behavior as “pawing.” In fact, *The New York Times* identified Trump’s campaign-winning animalistic behavior as the pivotal mobilizing moment for the women’s march: “In an evening, the would-be first female president was shoved to the side by what a sizable chunk of the nation saw as that classic historical figure: the male chauvinist pig. [ . . . ] It was a repudiation of feminism itself” (A. Hess 2017). Contenders on both sides of the divide were thus bestialized.

Although not included in the coding frame and absent from protest consciousness, sheeps<sup>3</sup> were as visible as cats in the widespread use of “wool” material in pussy hat construction. Yarn stores and “wool” purveyors across the country were depleted of product as feminist knitters heeded the Pussyhat Project’s call (E. Smith 2017). Perhaps unbeknownst to protestors, genetic manipulation, mass incarceration, sexual mutilation, regular maiming, and the eventual killing of sheeps is inherent to the “wool” industry (J. Sneddon and B. Rollin 2010, *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, n.d.). In any case, domestication (or *domeseccration* as vegan sociologists have



conceptualized it) is itself an institution of oppression (D. Nibert 2013). The very pussy hats that were meant to represent reclaimed empowerment were, in many cases, made of very stuff of disempowerment.

In fact, a number of Nonhuman Animals became collateral damage in feminist resistance. Local restaurants in the Washington area offered a variety of freebies and discounts on food and beverage products made from the flesh, eggs, or breastmilk of exploited animals. Undoubtedly, most of the shoes on marchers' feet were also made from the preserved skins of cows, pigs, kangaroos, and sheeps. Following the Park City, Utah march, so many protesters wore Uggs boots (made with the skin and hair of sheeps), the phenomenon was incorporated into comedian Jessica Williams's post-march speech (C. Dwyer 2017). Women were literally donned in sheeps' body parts from head to toe. The Pussyhat Project emphasizes that "A woman's body is her own," but this value was not to extend to the bodies of other animals.

### ***Anthropocentrism***

This analysis supports that animality is employed in complex, sometimes contradictory ways. Just as animality was used to disempower, animality was sometimes explicitly denied. As has been identified, most protesters attempted to embrace their bestialization, but others viewed it primarily as a mechanism of oppression. In these cases, cat references were not reclaimed, but rather rejected. For instance, one sign read, "Are you calling my cunt a pussy?" while another declared: "WOMEN ARE NOT BITCHES, HO'S, INCUBATORS, PUNCHING BAGS, SEX OBJECTS, OR BREEDERS! WOMEN ARE FULL HUMAN." One reasserted the human/nonhuman binary by clarifying language use: "Want a pussy get a cat." Protest symbolism of this kind highlights the precariousness of bestializing identity in a society that still uses animality as justification for inequality. Consider also that a common slogan that surfaced was, "Women's rights are human rights" or a variation thereof. This was a reference to Hillary Clinton's famous speech to the United Nations which appealed to women's humanity in the struggle for their political inclusion. However, human rights language maintains an anthropocentric hierarchy of moral worth and

explicitly ignores the rights of other animals. One sign summarizes this exclusion explicitly: “I AM A WO-MAN not a [image of a kitten]” (Figure 6). Thus, cats surfaced in the women’s march in a variety of ways, but primarily as absent referents, metaphorizing womanhood or female genitalia.

This anthropocentric response is clearly potent among women eager to distance themselves from what they perceive to be a degrading label of animality. Goodnow (2006) finds that successful protest symbols facilitate participant identification. Felinity may have created group cohesion for feminists, but this in-group work clearly did not include Nonhuman Animals in the material world. Trans-species solidarity could potentially disrupt the process of otherization and eliminate “animal” as a category utilized in the oppression of not only women, but people of color, poorer persons, disabled persons, and nonhumans. This type of radical solidarity, however, was not evidenced in the march.

## **Conclusion**

The power of protest art to propel a movement is intuitively understood and regularly engaged by social movements, but resonance is often fickle. The ACT UP movement, for instance, in working to draw attention to the AIDS crisis found that, while artwork was initially provocative and vital to mobilization, it quickly lost its radical edge (Reed 2005). A victim of its own success, ACT UP artwork became part of the cultural landscape and lost its distinction. It was also vulnerable to capitalist co-optation. This has been the case with feminist artwork, which has been susceptible to co-optation by privileged groups, marginalizing contributions by queer women and women of color (Y. López and M. Roth 1994). For the women’s march, the choice to reduce women to pink pussies also entailed some degree of compromise given its potential for political inconsistency. Women of color, trans women, and Nonhuman Animals were alienated by or otherwise excluded from the march narrative.

The slutwalk campaign of 2011, which relied on costume as well as poster art to reclaim sexuality in its resistance to rape culture, ran into similar difficulties. In addition to concerns that the imagery of the protest whitewashed the diversity of experiences with sexual violence, critics remained unconvinced that the potent misogyny of slut

rhetoric could be reclaimed (Mendes 2015). Intersectional instability may also be observed of the Guerrilla Girls, who, in a play on words, don gorilla masks in their protest operatives. Despite the heavy reliance on animal imagery, their framework fails to incorporate a nonhuman perspective. Indeed, the ape symbolism is employed primarily as a measure of comedy. The masks also serve a practical purpose in concealing identity and facilitating equality among players as a political resistance to hierarchy (Demo 2008). When pressed, they insist that the gorilla choice was a play on words that emerged out of happenstance (Guerrilla Girls 1995). In other words, feminist agitation both within and without the 2017 march has been more appropriative than inclusive in its consideration of other animals.

Butler (1990) posited that parody might be employed to disrupt the confines of gender, and the application of cat symbolism in 2017 march appears to be utilitarian in this regard and not an act of solidarity. The contest over representation and meaning is difficult to conquer given the power imbalance between protesters and the system they challenge. Lost in the symbolism is the identity of cats themselves. Although their interests are not recognized by most women's marchers, the quality of life available to cats is majorly shaped by human gender politics. Indeed, the feminization of cats undergirds their status as property. In campaigning singularly for their own citizenship and ignoring feline oppression, women ensure the continued exclusion of cats from citizenship in the moral community. Vegan feminist theory advocates a challenge to the human/nonhuman binary given that humanity has been traditionally wielded to aggrandize men, specifically European elites. This level of intersectional consciousness is lacking from mainstream feminist spaces.

The contradictions in the frames presented in the Million Woman March poster art underscores this disconnect. Identity politics are critical for mobilizing collectives and achieving recognition, but they can never fully represent the diversity of participant experiences and interests. Butler (1990) rejects the possibility of an essential, universal femininity and finds difficulty in identity politics. Indeed, this problem has plagued the feminist movement through the decades. It has been suggested herein that the destinies of women and other animals are intertwined and, for this reason, feminist politics blunder in their exclusion of nonhumans. If Butler is correct and gender is a performance, not an essence, and gender is always qualified by other identity categories,

it behooves 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists to view other animals in terms of comradeship rather than parody.

## Notes

1. Anti-suffragette propaganda also pictured feminists with dogs to masculinize them; “Beware of the dog” one such example warns. Others presented women as chickens or geese to trivialize them as cat imagery likewise intended.
2. Incidentally, state deportation of undocumented immigrants entering the United States has also been termed a game of “cat and mouse.” While all undocumented immigrants subject to state violence are feminized, it is men in this case who are most impacted as women are less likely to be apprehended (K. Donato et al. 2008).
3. Where appropriate, euphemistic language (such as “wool”) and mass terms (such as “sheep”) are corrected or put into quotation marks to denote their contested nature and their ability to reinforce oppressive ideologies.
4. Available from: <https://osf.io/5fh58/>
5. Available from: <http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/marches>
6. However, feline images occasionally occurred outside of posters (and pink pussy hats) as Instagram invites all manner of images. These included a cat stuffed animal (1), a quilt (1), a selfie of the user wearing a pink pussy hat posing with her cat (1), a sticker (1), buttons (3), cartoons (5), and t-shirts (5). If I were to include these images not taken at the protest, the frequency of feline images rises to 1%.

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