Choosing to Refuse to be a Victim: ‘Power Feminism’ and the Intertextuality of Victimhood and Choice

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Introduction

The refusal to be a victim does not originate in any act of resistance as male-derived as killing. The refusal of which I speak is a revolutionary refusal to be a victim, any time, any place, for friend or foe... so that male aggression can find no dead flesh on which to feast.

(Dworkin 1976: 71–2)

Viewing violence as ‘male-derived’, Andrea Dworkin stresses that resistance to it must itself be non-violent. Male violence against women has always been a key concern of feminism, though the extreme essentialism of Dworkin’s position is disturbing. Physical violence, or the threat of it, is an obvious and crude way of wielding power. In patriarchal societies, it is used to dominate and control women. Second-wave feminism has exposed the massive scale of violence against women, generating in particular a growing awareness and concern about domestic violence (for example, Dobash and Dobash 1980). The constant identification of women as victims is, to put it mildly, depressing. Indeed, victim status can be damaging, as research on female sexuality has found: ‘If women increasingly view themselves entirely as victims through the lens of the oppressor and allow themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable’ (Vance 1992: 7). Among those feminists who have spoken out for the need to refuse victim status is Dworkin. The ‘refusal to be a victim’ she has in mind is non-violent, a matter of ‘repudiating our programmed submissive behaviors’ (Dworkin 1976: 72).
In this chapter I consider the curious intertextuality of victimhood and choice. Viewing individual texts as constituted from an indeterminable number of intertextual chains of relation with other texts, I examine the co-optation of feminist discourses in the USA by the National Rifle Association (NRA). I think it is important to keep track of the transformations and mutations that feminism undergoes. We need to be sensitive to the ways feminism is perceived outside the academic world, to be aware of how it is being appropriated and, especially, misappropriated. This particular study has developed out of a wider interest in feminism in advertising. Feminism in the marketplace is always of the liberal variety (except in parodies: see Talbot 2000). Liberal feminism in the marketplace has both provided a justification for self-indulgence (‘Because I’m worth it’) and transformed a politics into a lifestyle accessory. Here I continue to explore this notion of commodified feminism, of feminism as a lifestyle accessory. I attend to promotion for the ultimate ‘empowering’ commodities for women, namely firearms. My aim is to provide not sophisticated abstractions or analytical density but a form of clear, accessible critical analysis.

**Intertextuality**

The term intertextuality expresses a sense of blurred boundaries, a sense of a text as a bundle of points of intersection with other texts. Originally coined by Julia Kristeva in her introduction of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to the Western academic world in the mid-1960s, it asserts heterogeneity as a fundamental property of discourse (Bakhtin 1981; Kristeva 1986). The view that heterogeneity is not only possible but ubiquitous can be found in CDA. It is accompanied by an interest in relations between texts (for example, Kress 1985; Lemke 1985; Fairclough 1989; 1992; 1995; Threadgold 1989; Talbot 1990, 1995). Critical discourse analysis is unique in the importance attached to a focus on intertextuality (Wodak and Meyer 2001).

While Foucault does not use the term intertextuality, something very like it is central to his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). For example, a necessary condition for any statement is an associated field of other statements. It can only exist in connection with other statements that it repeats, opposes, comments on, and such like:

The associated field is made up of all the formulations to which the statement refers (implicitly or not), either by repeating them, modifying them, or adapting them, or by opposing them, or by commenting