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Affective dimensions of naked body protests

Mathebula, Mpho

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Abstract

The naked body has been a means of protest among African women dating back over a century. Once a working-class women's form of protest, naked protests have seen an upsurge in the past two decades, and have become increasingly common in middle-class university spaces and national events such as the Presidential Summit against gender-based violence and femicide held in South Africa in November 2018. This study sought to understand naked body protests through the lens of affect and feminist theory with a view to contributing to the psychology of naked body protests. The study is organised around four foci: an exploration of how women might use naked body protests as a form of decolonial praxis; the psychosocial role played by naked body protests; the possible meanings of gendered protests in order to understand the preponderance of women's participation in naked body protests; and the afterlife of naked body protests. The exploration is conducted through a critical discourse analysis of four data sources: sixteen interviews conducted with women naked body protesters; two radio podcast interviews of women student protestors who staged naked body protests during #FeesMustFall and #RUReferenceList in 2016; a video recording of a protest staged by working class women against the destruction of their homes in Dobsonville, Soweto on July 12, 1990; and YouTube commentary on videos of the women's protests. Four significant findings emerged. The affects generated by naked body protests can inform decolonial praxis and can play a psychosocial role in advancing strivings for freedom. Through naked body protests, women are able to resist oppression and fight for new realities and social rights. Psychosocially, the expression of transgressive affects such as rage, anger and self-love during naked body protests enables women protesters to work towards collective decolonisation. However, the findings suggest that not all protest is necessarily targeted at particular outcomes. This means that naked protest might also be about simple refusal and not burdened with political intent. Naked protest is contextual and occurs in response to socially and historically specific conditions. The study found that affect can be a generative lens through which the body speaks. The exposure of different parts of the body (e.g., breasts, buttocks etc.) convey specific messages during naked body protests. Finally, naked body protests can have long-lasting effects, years after the incidents. Among other after-effects, the participants suffered mental health issues, body shaming, and adverse material consequences, cathartic affects, confronting oppression, conscientisation and raising political awareness. The central theoretical contribution is the contention that African women theorise their refusal through embodied disruptions of orders of violence.

Keywords: *affect, naked body, protest, African feminism, decoloniality, psychosocial*