Part II

Emancipation: Analyses of Identity

Part II

Emancipation and Social Difference

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

Mary Talbot

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).
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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 blurring boundaries, of 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; Fair 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 suchlike:

The associated field is made up of all the formulationstowhichthestatementrefers (implicitly or not), either by repeating them, modifying them, or adapting them, or by opposing them, or by commenting on them; there can be no statement that in some way or another does not react upon others (ritual elements in a narrative; previously accepted propositions in a demonstration; conventional sentences in a conversation).

(Foucault 1972:98)

The most obvious kind of intertextuality is expressed in the form of a conversation, an exchange of statements, a task that demands a structured and predictable format. In one sense a conversation can be seen as a conversation; conversational engagement in turn means that in one way or another doors on other texts are open. The intertextuality of a conversation is a characteristic of the way language is used in communities, and the meanings we make through texts and the ways we make them, always depend on the currency in our communities of other texts we recognize as having certain defined kinds of relationships with them: generic, discursive, thematic, structural, and functional.

The form of a conversation expresses a sense of being bound to a network of other discourse, a sense that we are always engaged in interaction with the world of discourse in which we participate.
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not exclusive ones. For example, advice-giving texts as a genre set up a particular kind of social relation between source and audience; many printed advisory texts consist of numbered or bulleted points, a common organizational structure of the genre. These interpersonal and textual elements of the advisory genre may both establish an intertextual relation. In addition, a particular theme, say safety advice, may link texts. Alternatively, two texts may be very different in theme, interpersonal relations and textual organization, but be linked by a discourse; for example, feminism. In the discussion that follows in a later section, I consider intertextual links forged in a public relations campaign by the NRA to align itself with a discourse of feminism. Before going on to this discussion, however, I need to provide background details.

The National Rifle Association and gun control

The NRA is a powerful political force in the USA. It was set up in 1871 to ‘protect the 2nd Amendment’ of the Constitution (‘A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed’). Until 1992 the NRA was highly successful in blocking attempts to set up gun-control laws. Its politics are Republican; its biggest, richest supporters are arms manufacturers; its traditional support base is men in rural areas. The rural base is diminishing, however. Hunting, a traditional leisure pursuit, is in decline; this decline is exacerbated by a continued drop in the rural population. Since at least the early 1990s, the gun lobby has been looking around for ways to replenish its membership. In seeking support in other areas, such as among assault weapons enthusiasts, the old base may be further undermined (Dahl 2003). In 1995, shortly after the Oklahoma City bombings, the NRA suffered a big loss of membership (including the then President Bush) after one of their newsletters referred to federal agents exercising gun-control law as ‘jackbooted thugs’ (Brady Center 2002). After the attacks on Manhattan and Washington on September 11 2001, ever quick to play on fear in order to promote their pro-gun agenda, they accused Canada of responsibility for the attacks, claiming that Canada’s more restrictive gun laws ‘contributed’ to them (First Monday 2001).

In 1992 the first Clinton administration passed the Brady Bill. This limited federal legislation imposed a degree of control over the purchase of handguns. It was signed into law in November 1993, requiring a background check on prospective buyers during a five-day waiting period. Though the background check requirement was repealed four years later, this law was nevertheless a milestone for gun control at a national level and the first of several key successes on the part of campaigners for gun control legislation, prominent among them being the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, a major opponent of the NRA. Since then, other legislation has followed (for example, a federal Assault Weapons Ban came into effect in September 1994) and the Brady Campaign’s following has increased (Brady Center 2002).

In 2000, opposition to the gun lobby was very prominent in the media, partly as a result of demonstrations collectively labelled the ‘Million Mom March’, which took place in Washington and other American cities. In the same year another gun-control movement was launched; currently the two biggest agenda items for ‘First Monday: Unite to End Gun Violence’ are the promotion of a code of conduct to govern the business practices of weapons manufacturers and dealers and a demand for an end to deceptive firearms advertising. The NRA now presents itself as beleaguered by ‘the anti-gun mainstream media’ (Women of the NRA 2002: 11). However, after the 2002 elections, the gun lobby is a formidable political presence that dominates the federal government, despite widespread grassroots opposition. A new NRA magazine, Woman’s Outlook, launched in January 2003, claims 170,000 female NRA members (Mehall and Smith 2003: 32). While this figure is probably inflated, it does suggest some success in developing a new support base.

Firearms for women

According to Naomi Wolf, 12 million women bought a handgun in the 1980s (1993: 216). Though this figure has been dismissed as unsubstantiated propaganda on the part of the gun manufacturers, Smith & Wesson (Brady 2002), Wolf presents it as a big increase in firearms-ownership among women and sees it as a manifestation of ‘the unlabeled power feminism of women in the American mainstream’ (1993: 217). Of course, the gun-toting woman is not entirely new, either in fact or in fiction, and firearms are big business in the USA. Whether or not women actually do constitute a larger proportion of the firearm-buying population than previously, the gun-carrying woman is on the increase in advertising and in the industry’s market projections. There is now a range of small-frame handguns designed for women (for example, Smith & Wesson’s LadySmith, first marketed in 1989, or the Beretta Tomcat reviewed in Women & Guns, March 1997). A whole range of products is available for women carrying guns: handbags with concealed gun pockets and steel-reinforced straps; cuter clothing designed to conceal a weapon; even ‘concealed-carry’ underwear. Handguns are sometimes advertised as up-market fashion
Accessories; Davis Industries, for example, run an advertisement that Sarah Brady describes as follows: 'The headline... reads “Precious Possessions” and shows four handguns, along with a pearl necklace, a diamond bracelet, and two hundred dollar bills peeking out of a leather purse. The light that reflects starlight off the diamonds does the same for the handguns' (Brady 2002:2). Women are now favoured for modelling firearms in catalogues. A catalogue called The Blue Press is advertised with the help of a smiling, feminine machine-gunner. The American Rifleman, in which these advertisements appear, is the official association of police officers and members of the police force. The magazine is the official magazine of the NRA.

There is a monthly firearms magazine specifically for women, Women & Guns. Its covers have seen fictional gun-toting women such as Sarah Connor from the Terminator films, and both Thelma and Louise from the film of the same name, as well as non-fictional female users of firearms. It presents women as capable, self-sufficient and serious. Though the publication is now owned by the Second Amendment Foundation, it started life as a humble newsletter independent of the gun lobby, which is some indication of a grass-roots interest in non-ownership among women in the USA. Women & Guns articulates a kind of liberal feminism preoccupied with women's achievement of independence and self-empowerment through weapons ownership. Its contributors express concern for autonomy and determination to take responsibility for their own safety. Rejection of victim-status is explicit in early issues of the magazine: 'I made my choice: I will not be a victim' (cited in Wolf 1993:217). Wolf calls this 'power feminism'.

Victimhood and choice

The gun lobby in the USA often makes an association between gun ownership and good citizenship. Like their male counterparts, American women are now addressed as responsible gun-carrying citizens. An association of police officers and members of the police force, known as the Law Enforcement Alliance of America (LEAA), ran an advertisement in The American Rifleman that reads as follows:

Helpless Victim or Responsible Citizen?
LEAA Defends your Freedom to Choose
NOT TO BE a Victim!

This text accompanies two cartoon-like drawings, rather like 'spot the difference' pictures, and appears to be addressing women, both dramatic.

The NRA itself addresses women too. As a political force it is Republican and hardly known for its feminist activism, yet it reiterates a feminist slogan in its Refuse to Be a Victim campaign. This campaign began as part of a massive public-relations exercise after the Brady Bill. When the bill went through, in 1992, the NRA's public image had never been worse. It set about a transformation into 'the New NRA' (Sugarman 1994:43) with the considerable help of a small number of ambitious female members (probably most of all by Marion Hammer, who became the first woman NRA president, 1995—8). In rewording Dworkin’s much quoted noun phrase, the NRA appropriated feminist discourse. It has recently laid legal claim to the slogan by registering it (at about the same time as the launch of a range of Refuse to Be a Victim merchandise). Needles to say, the slogan itself is the only connection between this campaign and Dworkin’s pleas for ‘refuse to be a victim’ back in the 1970s. What Dworkin was advocating was predominantly a change in attitude, certainly not the use of weapons; the NRA is by no means a feminist organization. At the time, Betty Frieden denounced the campaign as a ‘false use of feminism’ (Stone 1994:3) and Nita Lowey, a Democrat Congressmember, identified it as ‘a thinly veiled attempt... to promote gun ownership by preying on women’s legitimate fears’ (Beck, Glick and Cohn 1993:22).

The NRA’s Refuse to Be a Victim campaign began in 1993 (a year after the launch of its Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program, aimed at children, for which Hammer is credited (Mehall and Smith 2003:33)). Pilot television advertisements in Houston, Miami and Washington played on women’s fear of assault: ‘they showed a woman—actress Susan Howard of Dallas—looking terrified as she and her young daughter walked through a dark underground garage’ (Stone 1994:3). Subsequent television, magazine and internet advertisements presented the following testimonial from the same actress: ‘Like you, I’ve felt the fear of being female in a society where violence against women is common. That’s why I decided that I refuse to be a victim, and why I’m active in the NRA’. The advertisements also featured testimonials from women who shared similar stories. The campaign’s tagline was ‘Refuse to Be a Victim’, and the advertisements were accompanied by a copyright notice: ‘© 1993 NRA. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized use is a violation of copyright law’. The campaign was advertised in women’s magazines such as Redbook, Cosmopolitan, and Good Housekeeping. The message was: ‘Women are more addressed in responsible gun-carrying citizens, more responsible and good citizens. Like that woman in that ad, you and I can be more citizens, and inculcate our children to be more citizens, too’. This message is a clear example of an advertisement that appears to be addressing women, both dramatically and in a more literal sense.
personal safety plan', free advisory sessions were and continue to be, offered. They also offer an advisory brochure on home and personal safety. The promotion of gun ownership is not central to either of these advisory texts, though the NRA's current anti-legislation campaigns are presented in the seminars. The advice sheet – providing '42 Strategies for Personal Safety' – was available online throughout the 1990s and could be obtained in printed form until late 2001. For the most part, this brochure provides standard advice as offered by police authorities and social services in the USA and elsewhere: 'strategies' include sensible suggestions about fitting secure locks and other security devices, planting spiky bushes under ground-floor windows and not leaving the house key under the mat. Some emphasis in the initial television and magazine advertising was placed on lack of pressure to buy firearms, though gun ownership was presented as a constitutional right:

What You'll Get
And What You Won't
When You Call.

...You will not be encouraged to own a gun, or asked to join the NRA, to get the help you need.
Refuse to Be A Victim.
Call 1-800-861-1166 Now.

...The NRA does not advocate firearm ownership. We only advocate your constitutional right to choose whether to lawfully own a gun. And if you choose to exercise that right, to help you do so safely and responsibly. In the past decade, an estimated 12 to 20 million American women have purchased firearms for personal protection. If you're among them, it's essential you take advantage of training the Women of the NRA offer you.

Number 42 of the strategies in the advice brochure involves, finally, thinking about buying a gun. In it, gun ownership by individuals is again presented as a constitutional right:

Firearms, A Personal Choice

42. Make an informed choice about firearm ownership. Firearm ownership is a deeply personal and profound decision. NRA does not promote firearm ownership. We only advocate your constitutional right to choose whether to lawfully own a gun. For women who do choose to exercise that right, NRA offers information on the pros and cons of ownership, types of firearms, legal issues, and education and training for responsible use and safe storage of firearms with children in the home.

Compare the passages above with the following, part of a full-page advertisement placed in the New York Times in 1989 by the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL):

ON JULY 3, AMERICANS LOST A FUNDAMENTAL LIBERTY.
Now it's up to you to win back your right to choose.
The Supreme Court's ruling...has given politicians the power to intrude on the most personal decision an American can make – whether or not to have an abortion.

(quoted in Cameron 1992: 119)

Both iterate the phrase: 'right to choose'. Like the NRA, NARAL is an articulate supporter of women's 'constitutional right to choose'; but, in NARAL's case, it has been so since its inception in 1969. Their early promotional material is now hard to locate, though it has not changed greatly; in a 1998 press release, for example, NARAL asserted that 'Doctors – not politicians – should decide what is the safest procedure for a woman exercising her constitutional right to choose' (23 March 1998). The NRA texts contain phrases familiar from the discourse of pro-choice, a rhetoric devoted to protecting 'a woman's right to choose'; in launching its Refuse to Be A Victim campaign, the NRA co-opted a discourse of reproductive rights circulating in the same period. But, of course, rights and choices are at the heart of American political rhetoric; as one of NARAL's oldest slogans says: 'The freedom to choose: A fundamental American value'. The two organizations, politically different as they are, co-exist in the same political order of discourse, so that they draw on similar themes and share a fund of rhetorical resources. However, it goes beyond a shared emphasis on the right to choose, as shown in Table 7.1.

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<th>NARAL</th>
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<td>- your right to choose</td>
<td>- your constitutional right to choose</td>
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<tr>
<td>- the most personal decision an American can make</td>
<td>- a deeply personal and profound decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>- a woman exercising her constitutional right to choose</td>
<td>- for women who do choose to exercise that right</td>
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Table 7.1 NARAL and NRA
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Deciding whether to have an abortion is, according to NARAL, 'the most personal decision an American can make'; similarly deciding whether to go out and buy a weapon is, according to the NRA, 'a deeply personal and profound decision'. The issue of gun ownership is no longer a civic, social one: it is now a personal matter. And not only is it personal, it is also profound. The NRA's re-presentation in feminist terms of their central tenet (that unrestricted weapons ownership is a constitutional right) might almost be a parody of pro-choice campaigns.

It is not only pro-choice discourse which has been appropriated; the NRA's point-by-point 'personal safety plan' recommendations also mimic safety plans that were circulating in the same period for preventing battering and harassment, produced by the crime prevention divisions of police departments, by women's shelters and by crisis counselors (see, for example, Crites 1992). Like the recommendations of these organizations serving the interests of victimized women, the NRA offers sensible, commonsense advice in a familiar generic format:

Home Security

9. Plant 'defensive' shrubbery around your home, especially beneath windows. Bushes that feature thorns or stiff, spiky leaves are not good hiding places for criminals.

10. When moving into a house or an apartment, always change or re-key the locks or have the tumblers reset. Otherwise, the previous resident—and anyone they supplied keys to—has unrestricted access to your home.

Like other advisory texts, the 42 Strategies for Personal Safety are presented as a sequence of unmitigated directives, each one followed by an explanatory statement. The advisory brochures speak from a position of benign authority, as a bestower of valuable information for women beneficiaries. The key differences are these: the NRA's Number 42 (under the heading: 'Firearms, A Personal Choice'), their anti-gun control campaigning, their overall purpose (a prolonged, costly public relations exercise) and, not least, their financial backing: the arms industry.

So, by means of near-verbatim repetition, the NRA promotional material articulates a feminist discourse based on 'personal choice', 'decision', 'freedom', 'rights' and, not least (picking upon weariness with victim status), 'refusing to be a victim'. It articulates a kind of liberal feminism that is clearly useful for arms manufacturers, as well as for the NRA's own membership drive. The NRA's campaign is helping to open a whole new market, by setting it up as a defender of women.

The Refuse to Be A Victim® campaign is now in the NRA's 'Women's Programs' department alongside its sister campaign, Women on Target™, which promotes game hunting for women. Industry sponsors include Beretta USA, Browning and Remington, among many others (Women of the NRA 2002: 3). Given the NRA's commitment to opposing all legislation and restriction on firearms—even when explicitly intended to protect women from abuse—there is no reason to doubt that the NRA's campaign is part of a broader attempt to weaken the pro-choice position and to make it more problematic. Power resides in the unrestricted circulation of a simple commodity: firearms.

Conclusion

The NRA's campaign urging women to 'choose to refuse to be a victim' is tapping into the notion of women fighting back, resisting victim status. A woman wielding a weapon has certainly (if I may paraphrase Dworkin) repudiated any submissive behaviors she may have been programmed into, but the personal empowerment given by firearms can hardly be what Dworkin had in mind. It presents a personalized and commodified notion of power: a 'power feminism' that offers empowerment through gun ownership. If there is feminism here at all, it is of women's entirely justifiable concern for autonomy and from their determination to take responsibility for their own safety and that of their children.

The NRA's campaign among women, to choose to refuse to be a victim...
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partial repetition of phrases from other political arenas, produces improbable alignments with both liberal and radical feminist discourses. Pro-choice supporters assert choice as a citizen's right. Since the rights of the individual are at the centre of NRA rhetoric, this is easy for it to plug into, despite their considerable political differences (the gun lobby's right-wing constituency is certainly opposed to women's reproductive rights (or 'pro-life')). Links like these are easy enough to make, but superficial. The links that such fragments of texts forge give the NRA a mantle of feminism that is ultimately an illusion. It is simply one more appropriation of left-wing rhetoric by the political right (as parodied in the film Bob Roberts, featuring Tim Robbins as the eponymous protest-singing Republican senator). Platitudinous remarks about rights and choices mean nothing outside the specific social and historical context in which they are produced and interpreted.

The distinction between rhetoric and reality is at best elusive. If we lose sight of it altogether, however, we risk also losing sight of any political engagement, which is why CDA practitioners insist on it (for example, Fairclough 2001). The thematic and generic links themselves are real enough: the repetitions of slogan-like phrases, the positioning as benefactor in the use of the advisory genre and the articulations of safety issues taken up elsewhere. They pull in feminism as part of their associated field, establishing the NRA as a champion of women's rights, but any discursive links that are implied with feminism are tenuous in the extreme.

Notes

1 This is not to say, of course, that earlier periods had not addressed violence against women. In Britain, for example, violence against women in the home was identified as a problem as early as the 1870s, during the first wave of feminism. An influential pamphlet, Wife Torture, produced by Frances Power Cobb, led to the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1878 (Tuttle 1986: 31).

2 This campaign takes its name from Jim Brady, press secretary to Ronald Reagan, who was shot at the time of the attempted assassination of the President in 1981 (Mother Jones, 1994).

3 This organization was launched with the NRA's financial assistance in 1991 (Mother Jones, 1994).

4 It has been replaced by a Refuse to Be A Victim® Student Handbook, available for NRA instructors to buy through their online store, along with keyrings, pens and other merchandising.

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