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WHITENESS IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST CAMPAIGNS:  
FREE THE NIPPLE

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation *summa cum laude*

University of Louisville  
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## **Introduction**

In December 2014, Netflix released a drama documentary titled *Free the Nipple* that follows a group of young women in New York City who began a campaign to protest criminalization and censorship of female breasts. The title of the film quickly became the title, tagline, and brand of a nation-wide campaign to #FreeTheNipple, demand equal rights for women, and encourage a discussion over America's glorification of violence and repression of sexuality, especially in film and media (Esco 2014). This film has inspired women across the United States to take a stand against the patriarchal structures that tell them to cover their chests.

Toplessness serves the Free the Nipple campaign not only as a platform, but also as a protest and consciousness-raising tactic. The organizers problematize the every-day exposure American people have to violence through the consumption of media in the United States, and argue that the lack of female toplessness, save in sexual scenes, leads to the hyper-sexualization of our bodies. This repeated imagery of women in the media therefore defines our chests as inherently sexual, to be consumed by a male audience, rather than a feature of biological function. In their film, they argue that the media glorifies violence (i.e. war, killing, fighting) while censoring the bodies of women, and this prominent contradiction perpetuates rape culture, the fetishization of breasts, and limits certain freedoms for women (Esco 2014). The movement began as the filmmakers staged live topless protests in New York City to argue for their right to expose their nipples in public, and generate a conversation about gender inequality and violence against women.

Since the film debuted, over a hundred *Free the Nipple* chapters have emerged in different cities and states to protest the way in which female bodies are perceived and treated. My research began on September 5, 2015 when Louisville held its first event, a topless walk

down Bardstown Road. I walked topless among many bare-chested men and women, holding signs and raising rallying chants in the name of gender equality. I collected data through participant observation at this event and continued my research utilizing various ethnographic research methods to collect qualitative data (Murchison 2010) on *Free the Nipple* as it manifests locally.

This research explores the complicated origins, intentions, and impacts of Free the Nipple's overarching question, "How far will you go for equality?" Organizers direct their campaign at feminists across the country with the aforementioned question. This question is repeated again and again on campaign posters, the website, under the title of the feature film, and among feminists at the topless events and protests. While it implies a demand for equality for all people, the campaign's imagery portrays otherwise. The women who are featured in the film are almost exclusively white and thin with long hair and high-wasted pants. At the Topless Walk in Louisville, the demographic of women participating in the event was starkly homogenous as well. One of my informants stated, "to be honest, I don't know if I saw a single black woman there." So, while the campaign has created a platform to demand a political and cultural shift in the treatment of all women—it is seemingly exclusive to white women. My goal in this thesis is to interrogate the absence of women of color at these protests, and my research questions are as follows: Why are there only (or primarily) white women participating in this campaign? How does *Free the Nipple* exclude women of color?

Using a theoretical and historical framework my research will focus on the discourse of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* using critical ethnography.<sup>1</sup> This thesis proceeds as follows. First, I

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Chapters of *Free the Nipple* have emerged in different cities and states, and they each have variations in their campaign's focus. When I reference the national organization and

develop a theoretical framework to historicize *Free the Nipple* and explain the difference in liberal and revolutionary feminist ideologies. Second, I detail my methods of qualitative data collection that include participant-observation, interviews, and examination of contemporary cultural artifacts (Murchison 2010). Finally, I present my analysis of *Free the Nipple* and the local chapter *Free the Nipple Kentucky*. I will explain how *Free the Nipple* is a response to gendered oppression in a patriarchal society by and for white women. Through my analysis of data and literature I will show that while campaigning toplessly can be empowering for some people, the degree to which it serves as empowerment is directly related to a one's social location in society based on the intersections of race, gender, ability, and class identity (Bartkey 1998; Taylor 1995; Blum 1993). This leads into a discussion that problematizes feminist movements and campaigns that seek liberation only on the grounds of gender oppression.

I argue that without a racialized consciousness, *Free the Nipple* cannot be part of a revolutionary movement for an equal society. Instead, it will perpetuate a system of whiteness that maintains racial hierarchies that exist today by defining whiteness as the norm and erasing or silencing racial narratives of oppression (Davis 2004; Wilson 1996). It is evident through my discourse analysis that the goals and intentions of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* are for a cultural, revolutionary shift in the treatment of all women in our society. My purpose in this paper is to examine the ways in which the *Free the Nipple* campaign is or is not accomplishing this goal, and to suggest that adopting an explicitly intersectional, or revolutionary, approach to feminism will better serve their mission (Boykin 2000; hooks 2000; Davis 1996; hooks 1986).

### **Theoretical Framework**

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campaign, I will use only *Free the Nipple*. When I specifically address aspects of the movement here in Louisville I will distinguish the chapter as *Free the Nipple Kentucky*.

In this section I will explore ideologies that shape patriarchal, racist, and capitalist thinking and action, and work to unpack two specific narratives of feminist ideology that have emerged in resistance to male domination. The first I will name liberal feminism and the second revolutionary feminism. Both definitions rely on bell hook's definition of feminism in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), where she says, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."

Liberal feminism understands sexism on the basis of gendered oppression only. Revolutionary feminism understands that sexist oppression is inextricably tied to oppression based on race, class, ability, and sexual orientation—in other words, intersectional (hooks 2000; Blum 1999; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1984). I argue that liberal feminism serves as the dominant narrative that informs many mainstream feminist campaigns today. Revolutionary feminism tends to be pushed to the margins in mainstream and liberal spaces, despite it more accurately addressing and effectively resisting patriarchal domination (Collins 2002; hooks 1986; Blum 1999; Davis 2004). Finally, liberal feminism is shaped almost exclusively by white, economically privileged, cis-gendered women, while revolutionary feminism is largely conceptualized and practiced by women who face multiple oppressions of queerness, race, and various gender identities (Collins 2002; hooks 2000; Blum 1999). I will show how liberal feminism and revolutionary feminism co-exist today, and how liberal feminism undermines revolutionary work to transform our patriarchal society. *Free the Nipple* exists in the present in a complex, dialectical relationship with both feminist ideologies.

#### *The Ideological Construction of Liberal Feminism:*

The mainstream narrative of feminism in the United States is shaped largely by white women who are taking a stand against patriarchy by exposing institutionalized practices that

oppress women, whether financially through unequal pay, physically with violence, or socially with condescension (hooks 2000). The narrative tells the story of female oppression by showing statistics that in the year 2015 women still only make \$0.78 to every man's dollar and explaining rape culture in the context of college campuses and fraternity parties. In this narrative we argue that beauty standards, normalized on TV and in fashion magazines, are unrealistically thin and acne-free (Weitz 1998). We argue that this unattainable standard of what counts as a good body has created a generation of women who are shrinking in response to the male gaze—physically, always striving to be smaller, and professionally, stepping back in male dominated spaces (Weitz 1998). This figurative and literal desire to shrink manifests in low self-esteem, eating disorders, and internalized oppression (Weitz 1998). Patriarchy, then, defines goodness by what men desire.

This largely defined my feminism for twenty years because it reflected my race and gender identity. It is a prevailing feminist discourse presented through the mass media, on MTV, and in Seventeen Magazine. It is written in books such as *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), which encourages women to dig in to their careers, reject the social pressure that says women cannot do it all, and reclaim the word 'bitch' as a compliment for being powerful and assertive.

It is the narrative that celebrates Women's Suffrage in 1920 because women won the right to vote, without acknowledging that most Asian-born or Native American women were ineligible for citizenship, and most African-American women—like African American men—were prevented from voting because of Jim Crow (Weitz 1998). It is also the narrative that celebrates the tightening pay gap between men and women, while erasing the information that the number \$0.78 only reflects the pay gap between white men and women. A black woman only

makes \$0.64 and a Latina woman makes \$0.54 to the white mans dollar<sup>2</sup>. It erases the reality that this economic gain for some women comes at the cost and domination of less privileged groups (hooks 2000).

In addition, any discussion of standards of beauty that do not consider skin color, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair erases the entire body of the African American woman (Collins 2000), therefore eliminating the possibility she could, or suggesting that she should be included in normative “goodness” (Collins 2000; Davis 2004). And, talking about stereotypes of women, without addressing the Jezebel, Mammy, or Welfare Queen, erases the legacy of slavery and white supremacy that persists today in the United States (Collins 2000).

The dominant narrative that is published in the mainstream media erases racialized and class-based aspects of the female experience (hooks 2000). While still challenging accepted notions about women’s social position and role (Weitz 1998), liberal feminist ideology does not lay the groundwork for the liberation of all bodies. Instead, it seeks equality for white, middle-class women in a system where sexism is also maintained by racism and capitalism (hooks 2000; Davis 2004). Liberal feminists strive for equality with men within existing social structures (Collins 2000). Therefore, in practice, liberal feminism does not and cannot serve the interests of all women in their struggle to be free (Bevacqua 2008; Davis 2004; hooks 2000; Wilson 1996).

#### *Diversity: Power, Colorblindness, and Tokens*

Bonilla-Silva (2003) describes colorblindness as the tendency for white people to claim that they do not see color and yet behave in a way that supports racial hierarchies. When white women claim a colorblind consciousness they deny their social position of power in our society (Davis 2004; Wilson 1996). Colorblindness serves liberal feminist ideology because it allows

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<sup>2</sup> See statistics in Appendix A



curators of mass media and white women to support a feminist discourse without interrogating white racism or privilege (Bevacqua 2008; hooks 2000). In “Bad Breast-Feeders/Good Mothers: Constructing the Maternal Body in Public,” Joanna Davis explains the manifestation of colorblindness in feminist spaces:

When we do not hear [women] identify themselves by race, sexuality, class, nationality, or marital status...it is safe to assume that the debate is happening in a U.S. white, heterosexual, middle-class *language*—the language of dominant culture (Davis 2004:68).

The hegemony of white superiority in liberal feminism has re-written feminist history with systematic erasure of racial narratives in which they exercise power over other marginalized groups:

The white women’s location of themselves within a white feminist history in which they were oppressed, marginalized and disempowered *as* women and feminists makes it virtually impossible for them to recognize themselves also *as* dominant culture whites participating in the historical ongoing racial subordination of [people of color] (Wilson 1996: 6).

The absence of concern for specificity in identity based on race, class, sexuality, age and ability in the context of anti-sexism, defines the discourse as colorblind, white, and heteronormative (Davis 2004). Colorblindness maintains and drives a powerful and historical divide along racial lines in feminism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Anzaldúa 1990; hooks 1986).

When liberal feminist organizations claim a commitment to diversity, they are not inviting blackness into their space, but beckoning women of color into a room where at best they become tokens of their identity group and at worst they are patronized or actively discriminated against (Boykin 2000; Harper 2011). In her discussion of whiteness in vegan groups, Harper explains being invited into colorblind white spaces:

It is about feeling and being out of place when they should not have to. It is about always being put on display for, and being judged by white gaze that appears to be ignorant to the entire colonial history of what it means to play a nonwhite person, food, culture, and so forth, into the categories of exotic and foreign (Harper 2011: 4839).

She examines how “being a nonwhite in white-dominated spaces is connected to emotional distress and discomfort” (Harper 2011: 4748), and being consumed as exotic in vegan food spaces is dehumanizing.

It is into these hostile spaces that white liberal feminists tend to beckon women of color. Anzaldúa explains: “For me, a woman of color is not just a ‘woman’; she carries the markings of her race, she is a gendered racial being—not just a gendered being” (1990: 716). She warns the woman of color in her article of becoming tokens in liberal feminist spaces, for this will allow politics of domination to continue:

Both white and colored need to look at the history of betrayals, the lies, the secrets and misinformation both have internalized and continue to propagate. We need to ask; do women of color want only patronage from white women? Do white feminist only need and expect acceptance and acknowledgement from women of color? (Anzaldúa 1990: 716).

She complicates the call for diversity in movements that do not shift their framework to centralize the concerns of the marginalized. Further, Anzaldúa questions motivations for invitations presented to women of color from white feminists:

Do they want us to be like them? Do they want us to hide the parts of ourselves that make them uneasy, (i.e. our color, class, and racial identities)?...Are we there because those who would like to be our allies happen to have ancestors that were our oppressors and are operating out of a sense of guilt? (Anzaldúa 1990: 720).

bell hooks (1986) problematizes the gesture for diversity without antiracism as an invitation into white supremacist hegemony. When this happens, white liberal feminists further marginalize women of color as they claim to address the oppression of all women (Anzaldúa 1990; Wilson 1996; hooks 1986). They perceive the call for diversity and sisterhood as a non-racist gesture, “totally unaware of their perception that they somehow ‘own’ the movement, and that they are the ‘hosts’ inviting us as ‘guests’” (hooks 1986: 133).

### The Racialized Male Gaze:

Feminism rejects the male gaze. Both liberal and revolutionary feminism understand the male gaze as the on going sexualization and objectification of the feminine body (Bartky 1998; hooks 2000). Bartky refers to the male gaze as not something that only men project, but the internalization of the “*anonymous patriarchal Other*”:

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other (1998: 34).

In this way, the male gaze defines and judges a woman’s body based on its sexual appeal.

Liberal feminism has largely taken up the cause of interrogating the ways that the sexuality of a woman’s breasts collides with the maternal act of breast-feeding and responded with waves of pro-breast feeding activism (Davis 2004). The gaze, however, does not affect every woman in the same way—the controlling power of the “*anonymous patriarchal other*” is not just sexist, but also white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual (Davis 2004). Therefore, as we think about the male gaze, and the ways it defines femininity and womanly worth, it is vital to examine the different ways that working-class, queer, women of color experience the gaze (Davis 2004; Blum 1999; hooks 1986).

### Animalizing the Black Feminine Body

The bodies of African-American women have been dehumanized by colonial powers, explicitly and violently sexualized, and put on display in ways that the bodies of white women have not been (Collins 2000; Gilman 1985; Tuan 1948). European colonization elicited an animalistic display of Sarah Baartmann, the so-called Hottentot Venus, in the early-nineteenth-century. She was put on display, usually in cages with little clothing to provide entertainment for Europe’s elite (Gilman 1985). They exhibited her genitals and large buttocks, reducing her to her

sexual parts, and used her body to construct primitive, backwards, and hypersexual notions of African people (Collins 2000; Gilman 1985). Her exhibition formed one of the first and most powerful controlling images of deviant sexuality that Black women endure today (Collins 2000). The imagery of Sarah Baartmann became widespread and pervasive in European culture, and a platform on which black women were animalized—leading to the justification of physical and sexual violence against black bodies (Gilman 1985).

The history of public exhibition of black women extends into the antebellum American South onto the auction block during slavery (Tuan 1948). The public exhibition of black women created a narrative that portrayed black women as animals. “Animals acquire definitions of being like humans, only more openly carnal and sexual” (Collins 2000, 139). The animalization of black women is pervasive. Their dehumanization persists in controlling images today, such as the Jezebel, and her exploitation in the Mammy (Collins 2000). Black women are sexualized, valued, protected, or abused at the intersection of race and gender (Collins 2000).

In a description of the 1861 Georgia penal code Weitz shows how the animalization of African-Americans by a white male gaze has historic, legal, and political ramifications:

The code left it up to the court whether to fine or imprison men who raped African-American women, recommended two to twenty years’ imprisonment for white men convicted of raping white women, and mandated the death penalty for African American men convicted of raping white women. Moreover, African-American men convicted of raping white women typically were lynched before being brought to trial if suspected of raping a white woman, white men were rarely convicted for raping a white woman and probably never convicted for raping African-American women (Weitz 1998:5).

This is a stark historical and legal contrast in the ways that African-American bodies are treated by the law in instances of sexual violence that helps to explain the decades of divide in the feminist movement. While white women experience oppression and discrimination today because of their gender, black women are subject to violence and oppression multiplicatively

based on their gender and racial make-up. The absence of legal consequences for physical and sexual violence against African American women has been established historically (Weitz 1998). Its legacy exists today in a reality where black women are more likely to be assaulted without any legal or social consequences because of white supremacy, the animalizing male gaze, is fostered in our judicial system (Collins 2000; Gilman 1985). Feminist work to transform the law to protect women from male dominance and violence, void of this historical context, is utterly incomplete.

*Toplessness and the Politics of Goodness:*

The sexualization of the feminine breast and nipple creates a fierce legal and social dichotomy in the treatment of topless men and women. It is not only legal for men to be topless on beaches and in public, but also socially acceptable. Male nipple exposure is normalized during countless games of ‘shirts vs. skins’ basketball in the park, while the exposure of the female nipple elicits punishment in the form of legal sanctions or public shaming.

Attention to this drastic inequality is acute when mothers breastfeed in public. While breastfeeding, mothers resist the male gaze by exposing sexualized parts of their breasts in public. (Davis 2004; Blum 1999; Bartkey 1998). This has sparked a debate, not only among policy makers, but also among mothers and feminists about the legal and social implications of public female toplessness (Bartkey 1998; Blum 1999; Davis 2004). Davis (2004) shows how internalized sexist ideology leads to the criminalization of breastfeeding in public because of its inherent indecency and sexuality. Yet, the mainstream pro-breastfeeding counterargument does not advocate for public breastfeeding for all women in any circumstance, but places very narrow constraints on decent behavior for women (Davis 2004). Thus, feminists who advocate for breastfeeding in public do so without acknowledging barriers of class, race, and individual

circumstance that may prevent a mother from breastfeeding at all. As they advocate for all mothers to reject the male gaze and embrace breastfeeding in public, they reinforce a dominant construction of goodness in motherhood that is still white, heterosexual, married, and middle-class (Davis 2004). In addition, the voices of women of color are largely absent in this debate. Therefore, it “speaks in some ways to the increasing presence and power of women in public spaces, it simultaneously reinforces the power of the most privileged women” (Davis 2004: 50).

Liberal feminism in mainstream breastfeeding debates erases women of color, different gender identities, and sexualities (Davis 2004; Blum 1999). As white, heterosexual, middle-class mothers fight for their freedom to breastfeed in public, they operate from a place of privilege, while also using a victim narrative that continues to marginalize women of color and working class women (Davis 2004). Advocating for toplessness and the exposure of the female nipple in this narrow context undermines revolutionary efforts to dethrone the male, white, heterosexual, middle-class gaze by erasing the bodies of women who face intersectional oppressions from the debate.

Going topless and exposing the female nipple outside of sexual circumstances can be a revolutionary feminist tactic when the bodies exposed defy constructions of normative goodness and advocate for the liberation of black, brown, and queer bodies (Taylor 1995). In “Testimony of a Naked Woman,” Taylor describes going topless, resisting the intersectional male gaze, and a history disrupting the history of respectability politics as a black woman:

Our bodies—our tits, asses, pussies et al.—have been sewn into an image of the ‘wild thang’; the different, dark, and mysterious body that is fetishized and exploited. To expose myself in public in front of men (even if they were gay), unfamiliar women, and white folk was to revive a painful image that our female elders taught us to revoke, often to the point of self-abnegation (Taylor 1995:39).

As Taylor (1995), a black lesbian woman, goes topless she is vulnerable to not only being shamed like a white mother, but also to exposing herself to a male gaze that manifests in violence, legal ramifications, and rejection from her community.

When writing about the oppression of the male gaze, we often forget to detail the stories of resistance (Gore et al 2009). Black women have endured and resisted animalization and exploitation for centuries in the United States for survival (Gore et al 2009; Collins 2000). One form of resistance was to take up white constructions of goodness, and play by the rules of respectability (Taylor 1995). Respectability is a tactic that oppressed groups use to gain the respect and safety from dominant groups by assimilating to their customs and norms, while suppressing and/or erasing their own culture (Collins 2000). Playing by the rules of respectability placates to dominant culture, suggests that one should value assimilation and conformity over full expression and resistance (Nigatu and Clayton 2015). By rejecting not only the white, male gaze and a history of respectability politics, Taylor (1995) creates a tactic that revolutionizes the sexual construct of the female breast as something to be consumed by men and exposes her body for liberation and personal erotic expression.

Taylor (1995) uses toplessness to reclaim her sexual agency as a black, queer woman. She creates a radical way of expressing herself. She defies the norms of toplessness that are motherly, white, and middle-class and therefore protected by society. Her narrative of toplessness is erased by liberal feminism and rejected by black women who see her tactic as reinforcing negative stereotypes of black women and encouraging continued oppression (Taylor 1995; Blum 1999).

Exposing a female nipple as a white mother to breastfeed, while an act of resistance to a degree, reinforces patriarchal definitions of goodness (Davis 2004; Blum 1999); it therefore

reinforces a liberal feminist consciousness that does not interrogate the narrow limits of their activism or position of power with a historical context (Wilson 1996; Davis 2004). On the other hand, exposing nipples to reclaim sexual agency and defy normative constructs of goodness and gender roles, creates a platform for feminist action that rejects all aspects of patriarchal ideology. Women who embrace the latter place themselves in a dangerous position of being “unprotected from many forms of abuse and discrimination” (Taylor 1995:41). The potential dangers of embracing revolutionary toplessness in a body that lies outside the protected (white and middle-class) aspects of the gaze can be life threatening if not done so carefully (Davis 2004; Blum 1999; Taylor 1995). In her story, Taylor is embracing toplessness within the confines of a lesbian bar. Because of the intersections of neglect that lie at race and gender, it is likely that neither the law nor cultural constructs of goodness would protect her if she were a victim of violence for being topless public (Blum 1999; Davis 2004). Protection from public violence is more likely when the body experiencing it is a white, middle-class mother.

### *Revolutionary Feminism: Anti-sexism, Anti-racism and Sisterhood*

The absence of explicit considerations of race, class, and sexuality weaken any feminist argument in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable (hooks 2014; hooks 2000; Collins 2000; Lorde 1984). When feminists deny differences with the goal of uniting under a common oppression, they buy into a victim narrative where they relinquish their power to resist systemic white, male dominance (hooks 1986). In maintaining a colorblind ideology, liberal feminists also resign any ability to create connections across lines of race and class to form a stronger movement (Wilson 1996; hooks 1986; Lorde 1984). Liberal feminism is limited by the structures of racism and classism in which it is contained. Until these limits are interrogated, a revolution of patriarchal ideology is not possible, “For the master’s tools will



never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984:111). Genuine change will be possible when the dominant narrative of feminism becomes revolutionary by holding the needs and values of the most marginalized and oppressed groups at the center of its ideology (Collins 2000; Lorde 1984).

### **Methodology**

This project is an ethnographic case study of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, Louisville's local *Free the Nipple* chapter. My research combines qualitative data collection methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with a historical and theoretical examination of feminism, gender, race, and class divisions in relevant literature and in contemporary cultural artifacts (Murchison 2010). Examination of historical and theoretical sources in combination with my data analysis provides comparative and contextualizing information for the ethnographic data (Murchison 2010). Having a historical perspective when analyzing *Free the Nipple* allows me to place this movement in a larger context (Murchison 2010) of struggles for body liberation in the United States including black liberation, LGBTQ or gay liberation, feminist liberation, and their intersections (Boykin 2000). Finally, a critical examination of contemporary cultural artifacts such as the *Free the Nipple* Netflix film and *Free the Nipple Kentucky's* media presence here in Louisville gives me access to more details about the movement, its origins, and meaning (Murchison 2010).

In September of 2015 I began collecting data, beginning with participant observation at the Topless Walk on Bardstown Road. This event was the catalyst of my research. Over the past six months I have conducted nine interviews and engaged in participant observation at two other

local feminist gatherings—one of which was an organizational meeting for *Free the Nipple Kentucky* and the other was a panel and Q&A which featured *Free the Nipple Kentucky* and other local leaders in feminism. I utilized a purposive sampling strategy of snowball sampling (Biernacki 1981) to find informants from *Free the Nipple* for my interviews through my key informant Jane Ross, founder of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*.<sup>3</sup> To find informants from other spaces I utilized my network of friends and local feminists outside the *Free the Nipple* community here in Louisville.<sup>4</sup>

I was intentional in choosing informants that were active either in the movement or who identified as feminist or womanist because of my intention to analyze this movement from the understanding that politics of dominance exist even within spaces of liberal feminism. I therefore did not seek or choose informants who projected dissent on the movement because they believe either in the goodness or the non-existence of male supremacy—though expression of that particular ideology and criticism of the movement did emerge during participant observation.

I interviewed nine people in total, including four white women, three black women, and two white men. Five of the nine informants participated in the Topless Walk, including both men and three of the white women. One of the white women and all three of the black women that I interviewed had not participated in the Topless Walk. One of the black women was present at *Free the Nipple Kentucky's* organizational meeting in February, and one of the white women refused to participate in another *Free the Nipple* event after the Topless Walk in September.<sup>5</sup> I sought to address four major areas in my interviews: *racial identity, social location, perception of Free the Nipple, the future of feminism*, and additional questions specific to the informant.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B: Jane Ross is the pseudonym for Informant 1

<sup>4</sup> IRB Approval: 15.1167

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B for detailed chart on informant participation in *Free the Nipple Kentucky*.

I coded and analyzed the ethnographic record using critical discourse analysis (Steacy et al 2016). Researchers use this method of analysis to unpack and problematize dominant narratives and essentialist social categories, while remaining transparent and reflective of their positionality during the analytical process (Steacy et al 2016). Similar to the ways in which I argue *Free the Nipple* cannot be severed from its history and context, “the results of my analysis cannot be severed from their process and context” (Steacy et al 2016: 169). As a tool, discourse analysis has allowed me examine the ethnographic record and my position as a feminist, activist, and researcher with integrity (Murchison 2010; Steacy et al 2016).

Positionality:

During participant-observation, I made sure to establish my role as a researcher in the space (Murchison 2010). My positionality is complicated by my investment in the movement, contribution in these feminist spaces, and growing friendships with community members (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015). As a white woman, I hold a particular position as a researcher in a campaign dominated by white women (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015). I am easily perceived as part of the in-group, and this may have given me permission to operate as my full self, both researcher and activist, in these spaces, in ways that would have been impossible if I were not a cis-gendered white woman (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015).

My positionality also played a role during my interviews. I interviewed nine people from both inside *Free the Nipple Kentucky* and outside the organization to gain an understanding of how the campaign is perceived by people in Louisville from different identity groups. I created two separate interview guides: the first for members of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, the second for non-members.<sup>6</sup> In practice, I needed to rely on both guides during interviews as informants

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix B for interview guides.

shared information on how, when, and why they strive to end sexism in the United States. In interviews I asked questions about gender, race, and inequality. In doing so, I found that my position as a white woman and researcher influenced the ways in which white informants engaged in these conversations with me as compared to black informants; and it influenced the ways in which I approached the interviews.

In my interviews with white informants, I found it necessary to shape my questions in such a way that would not come across as accusations of racism in order to avoid the risk of shutting down the conversation (DiAngelo 2011). DiAngelo (2011) coins the term “White Fragility” to describe the defensive and reactionary behaviors of white people when their expectations for whiteness or colorblindness are disrupted by conversations on race and racism. Reactions include anger, fear, guilt, and silence. For progressive whites the most common reaction is disengagement or denial (DiAngelo 2011: 54). I addressed race with white people with attention to “White Fragility.” I explicitly explained my research as an investigation of intersectionality in feminist movements and in particular *Free the Nipple* (Murchison 2010), but avoided terms like “race,” “racism,” and “white supremacy” until I felt my informant was prepared to talk about them (DiAngelo 2011; Murchison 2010).

I began interviews by asking questions about informant experiences with *Free the Nipple* and feminism in other parts of their lives. I followed up with questions about the lack of people of color in *Free the Nipple* spaces, specifically at the Topless Walk. The question that I relied on the most to begin a conversation on race was, “Have you heard the criticism, ‘It’s just a white girl’s movement?’” This question was effective in easing us into a candid discussion of the informant’s perception of racial politics within feminism. I wanted to ensure that informants knew I was coming from a place of curiosity and exploration, rather than accusation, especially

because nothing shuts a liberal white activist down faster than feeling accused of racism (DiAngelo 2011; Nigatu 2015).

In my interviews with black informants I again explicitly explained my research of investigating intersectionality in feminist movements and *Free the Nipple*. However, our conversation on race in feminist campaigns and movements started immediately. I did not avoid using more direct language surrounding race and racism because I knew, from our shared experiences in feminist spaces, that all three black women were prepared to discuss the manifestations of white supremacy in their lives (Murchison 2010). I was also acutely aware of my position of racial power in these instances—and hesitated at times knowing that questions about race from a white feminist can put black women in the exhausting role of explaining their existence and oppression to me (hooks 2000; Wilson 1996). I did not want this to be the prevailing sentiment of the interview, so I worked hard to structure my questions in a way that showed that I was interested in unpacking the intersectional oppressions they faced individually as black women, particularly in the context of *Free the Nipple*. I know, despite my intention, this was not done perfectly, and I will detail the particular relevance of my position of power as a white, female researcher again during my analysis. I also want to note the implications of my own whiteness in changing my interview guide under these circumstances.

Data and analysis on *Free the Nipple Kentucky* and white feminism in Louisville is far from the saturation point in this project. Even through there are emergent themes and findings that contribute to the discourse of revolutionary feminism today, I do want to acknowledge that this study is limited by the small sample size and few opportunities I had for participant-observation. Specifically, I want to acknowledge that my research focuses heavily on the black-white binary of race within feminism, therefore it does not provide comprehensive data,

narratives, or discussion on colorism or the specific sexualization of feminine bodies from Latin American, South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern or Native American groups. A closer examination and thorough investigation of the perception of *Free the Nipple* and the impact of white feminism on these particular race and identity groups is an opportunity for continued scholarship. In addition, a closer examination of *Free the Nipple's* explicit focus on female breasts and nipples, as exclusionary to trans people because of cis-gender normativity (Johnson 2013), is another opportunity for continued research. It is not my intention for this project to erase or silence narratives from persons who exist outside the cultural binaries of race (black/white) and gender (male/female), but to acutely analyze and unpack these specific relationships as they fit into a movement for a more equal society.

### **Analysis**

In this section I argue (1) the national campaign *Free the Nipple* can be understood as a product of liberal feminist ideology; (2) *Free the Nipple Kentucky* currently serves as an anti-sexism consciousness-raising group for both men and women in Louisville, KY; (3) as members of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* interrogate the limits of liberal feminism, their meetings become a space to foster revolutionary feminist ideology.

#### ***Free the Nipple: A Call to Unite Under Common Oppression***

*Free the Nipple's* conception, performed in the Netflix film *Free the Nipple*, is situated in a narrative of liberal feminism that erases racialized narratives of oppression. No where in their film, website, or national campaign materials do they explicitly examine the intersections of race, class, and gender when talking about women's liberation through topless protests. The film features five main organizers of a citywide protest, one of which is a black woman. However,

there is no conversation concerning the amplified dangers of her safety during the protests and the different ways that her body has been stereotyped by mainstream media or the male gaze.

*Free the Nipple* argues that the woman's body is hyper sexualized today, because it is covered. This argument is made with little attention to the historical context of black body exhibition, animalization, and abuse (Gilman 1985; Collins 2000). It is a response to only the objectification of bodies that fit with in society's construction of goodness—white, thin, cis-gendered, and straight. While Taylor (1985), in “Testimony of a Naked Woman,” shows us a racialized context in which toplessness could be empowering for black women, *Free the Nipple's* argument is void of the multiplicative controlling aspects of the male gaze that a black woman must overcome to make a topless stand.

In the film, the leading black character, played by Monique Coleman, represents token diversity for a social movement by and for white women. There is no conversation in the film about the intersectional oppressions or specific aspects of her black identity that shape her feminism. By introducing a token black woman in the film Lina Esco, the film maker and director, gives herself permission to remain in denial about the exclusiveness of the campaign as a whole (Boykin 2000; Story 2016).

*Free the Nipple Kentucky* cannot be understood outside of the national campaign and this platform to liberate normative nipples. With the release of this documentary, Lina Esco creates a platform for *Free the Nipple*, where whiteness is the norm. This film has inspired topless marches across the nation to protest the censorship of the female nipple. In response to the film, over a hundred Facebook groups emerged focusing on the campaign in different cities, states, and countries.

*Coverage and Exposure of the Feminine Body*

Jane Ross, founder of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, organized the Topless March on Bardstown Road after seeing the Netflix film. She explained the influence of film on her feminist consciousness on a panel shortly after the walk:

The idea hit that me in a new way that I hadn't really thought about before [the film] was that we hyper-sexualize women's bodies because they are covered. There is nothing inherently sexual or secret about women's bodies, especially in a different way than a man's to make us cover them this way.

The argument implicit in this quote is, 'covering inherently leads to hyper-sexualization.' It addresses the history where a European, Victorian body was sexualized under the male gaze, and therefore covered to protect its purity and goodness (Blum 1999). At the same time this argument obtusely overlooks the history of the colonial male gaze that exhibited, exploited, and animalized black female bodies—justifying centuries of abuse and exploitation by white men (Collins 2000).

This narrative shows that *Free the Nipple* is seeking empowerment for white women from a history of oppression by white men. Its shocking tactic of toplessness is raising the consciousness of women who are seeking liberation because of their history of being covered, defined as pure, and denied feminine sexual agency. Taylor (1995) explains how assertions of sexual agency through toplessness of black women can be perceived as both admirable and particularly naïve in a culture of white supremacy that is partially maintained by projecting controlling images of black women that deem them sexual, carnal, and exploitable (Collins 2000). White women and black women both reject assertions of respectability because of different histories of stereotypes and narratives oppression. Assuming that coverage is what causes the hypersexualization of the feminine body, particularly breasts, erases the key aspects of the black narrative of sexist oppression. Therefore as *Free the Nipple* uses the rejection of coverage as the central aspect of their argument, they center whiteness without explicitly naming



it. When this happens, the campaign becomes an irrelevant means of protesting patriarchal domination for black women. Tracey, explained this in her interview:

Sure, I'll share it for white feminists on my [Facebook] timeline, but it's just not my liberation... We both want equality, we both want to be liberated, but the way we want to be liberated is totally different because our experiences are totally different and the way that society treats us is totally different.<sup>7</sup>

### Colorblindness

When *Free the Nipple* generalizes their work as a campaign for the liberation of all women and erases these essential differences of the racialized female experience, it becomes oppressive to women of color and divisive in a feminist movement (Lorde 1984; Collins 2000; hooks 1986). A black panelist at a local feminist meeting and all three black women that I interviewed expressed this sentiment. Jordan explained,

If you're like, 'because of my privilege, because of my own personal experiences this is how I'd like to contribute to the movement,' that's fine. But if you have the expectation that everyone should be on board, out on the streets doing this with you that is [a problem].<sup>8</sup>

At its outset *Free the Nipple Kentucky* was void of this consciousness. When the lack of black women was brought up as a criticism of the Topless Walk, Jane explained an action plan to rectify the divide:

Women of the Black Lives Matter movement and the black feminist groups, felt purposely excluded, and that is difficult, because there would never be any intention of that and there wasn't...it is difficult because we absolutely want to support those groups as well, but one of the things we've been talking about is [how] we need to support our own movement first, not just put ourselves out there to be a part of something else. I think that a part of all women's movements have a history of that, of trying to help others before they help themselves. So what we are trying to do now is reach out specifically to people in those groups and try to invite their head person to make sure that they are welcome. But we are focusing on *Free the Nipple* right now.

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix B: Tracey is the pseudonym for informant 7.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan is the Pseudonym for informant 5.

This quote shows how the founder of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* perceives herself as a “host” of the feminist movement in Louisville. We also see that she hopes to invite black women to *Free the Nipple*, without doing her homework, as guests and tokens for the sake of diversity (hooks 1986; Anzaldúa 1990). Three of the other white informants that participated in the Topless Walk repeated this invitation, believing diversity in the movement would be gained by simply reaching out. It is problematic when an all-white group seeks diversity only to ensure they will not be perceived as racist. If the intent to reach and bring in more women does not come with the deliberate inclusion of different perspectives and racial narratives, then the gesture for diversity is empty invitation into whiteness (Wilson 2006; Anzaldúa 1990).

In the quote above, there is also evidence that *Free the Nipple Kentucky* has re-written their feminist history (Wilson 1996) in a way that erases their social location as white in the history of women’s movements (hooks 1986; Wilson 1996; Davis 2004). Instead, they perceive themselves as not only victims of patriarchy, but also victims of other activist causes that undermine their mission, which is evidence of liberal feminist ideology.

### Victimhood

*Free the Nipple* operates off a victim narrative repeatedly. In analyzing the ethnographic record, a call to “bond because of shared victimization” (hooks 1986) emerged as a key part of *Free the Nipple’s* mainstream mission. This message partakes in a sexist message that compels women into a role of victimhood. Feeling connected to a campaign based on shared victimization does not necessarily serve anti-sexism (hooks 1986; Davis 2004). When *Free the Nipple* uses this discourse, they attract only women who identify as a victim. hooks (1986) explains:

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as victims because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically

demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization (hooks 1986:128).

When women unite in resistance rather than as victims, their language reflects strength and power rather than eliciting pity from the dominant group (Collins 2000). It is not pity revolutionary feminists demand from the dominant group, but respect, equal rights, and safety.

Collins (2000) describes African-American women's resistance by referencing the voices of Audre Lorde, Ella Surrey, Maria Stewart, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Marita Bonner and Sojourner Truth. "The voices of these African-American woman are not those of victims but of survivors" (98). When I asked if Tracey if she had been involved in *Free the Nipple*, she responded, "No, it's not liberating for my blackness."

#### Whiteness and Law Enforcement

Another emergent theme during from this research was a discussion of police activity at the Topless walk on Bardstown Road. *Free the Nipple* emerged around the same time as *Black Lives Matter*. *Black Lives Matter* has a mission to stop police from brutalizing black bodies at alarming rates. People are organizing with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to stop murder, incarceration, and violence against black people. This conversation was brought on a panel featuring Jane, founder of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, and two other local feminists. Kara, a representative of the *Fat Positive* movement, was also on the panel.<sup>9</sup> She is involved in fat activism, feminism, and black activism in Louisville. When she heard that police were present at the Topless Walk to protect the shirtless women in the march, she was put in the position to explain black racial history of violence and oppression to white women in the room. In an interview, Alicia also brought up the police:

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<sup>9</sup> Kara is the pseudonym for panelist

They were there to protect you? I feel like if it were all black women, the police would be there like waiting for these ‘angry black women’ to make a wrong move. I definitely don’t think they would be there in the spirit of protecting people. They would be waiting for an excuse to arrest people.<sup>10</sup>

This shows glaring contradiction in the ways that black and white people perceive and are perceived by law enforcement. When I addressed this with Sarah<sup>11</sup>, a white informant, she replied, “yeah, I didn’t think of that.” The ability to be blind to the racialized contradictions in law enforcement is indicative of the luxury white women gain from existing in a position of privilege (McIntosh 1992; Crenshaw 1989).

### White Privilege

White people tend not to bring up conversations about race and racism in their activist spaces because they have learned to ignore their privileges and assume an unwavering discourse filled with good intentions (Harper 2011; hooks 2000; Wilson 1996). White privilege and supremacy has given white people the ability to operate in U.S. society without thinking about race as a way that we experience the world (McIntosh 1992; Crenshaw 1989). The ability to be unconscious of the way the color of our skin affects our ability to get a loan, an education (McIntosh 1992), or go topless in the streets of Louisville is a manifestation of white privilege.

The theme of white privilege emerged continuously throughout the ethnographic record. Four of the five informants that participated in the Topless Walk on Bardstown Road, all of whom were white, did not bring up the glaring lack of people of color at the walk until I prompted them with a question directly about intersectional feminism or with the question, “What do you think of the criticism, ‘its just a white girls’ movement’?” While one white informant responded eagerly, curious about the implications of having an all-white feminist

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<sup>10</sup> Alicia is the pseudonym for informant 6.

<sup>11</sup> Pseudonym for informant 3

movement, many of them addressed this point in brevity. Jane and Caroline, two board members of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, understood the criticism as a misunderstanding of their core mission and a projection of internalized sexism (hooks 2000) instead of a legitimate concern. While they did face a tremendous number of criticisms from other women who insisted that nipple exposure only justified violence and male supremacy, they did not differentiate these criticisms at first. In a later section I will detail how this has changed over the past few months as the group, in particularly the founder Jane, seeks to understand intersectional feminism.

*Toplessness and Misogony:*

A narrative of humiliation and harassment from bystanders and onlookers leering at the participants at the Topless Walk emerged from my own reflection of the day and in several interviews. The streets were lined with men taking pictures, cat calling, and video recording with incredible earnestness and determination. It was the most powerful, tangible, and humiliating manifestation of the male gaze I have ever experienced. When I confronted bystanders calmly, they laughed. Once I shouted, “STOP!” in a man’s face whose camera was only two feet away pointed right at my chest. He replied, “You are the only one complaining.” In a note after the walk I wrote,

I am forced to question the effectiveness of this campaign tactic. Are women leaving these walks feeling tormented and belittled by the high levels of patriarchal harassment or empowered by their nude bodies?

Sarah, a cis-gendered white woman, shared a similar narrative of discomfort and humiliation at the walk. She went to the walk after feeling inspired by the Netflix documentary, but after the walk she felt it was naïve and ineffective tactic for a feminist movement. Alicia also repeated this sentiment, arguing that although *Free the Nipple* has created a very poignant way to

draw attention to inequality in the media, toplessness is not very effective in dismantling patriarchal power structures:

With current status-quo, people already view the campaign in a sexualized way and I don't think that further exposure [to the nipple] can change that. I think a lot of discussion needs to be had first, and some other sort of fundamental shift has to happen before [toplessness] can be effective.

From the discourse it is apparent that there are many of us questioning the campaign tactic because of the ease with which it can be hijacked by sexism, used to justify patriarchal oppression, and can create a space for misogynistic men to fulfill their wet dreams.

### *Toplessness and Intersectionality*

All the informants noted toplessness as an effective and efficient means of gaining attention for feminism on a broad scale. Jane describes how the provocative nature of *Free the Nipple* has given the campaign accelerated power and attention: "If you had called this walk for the same reasons but called it a women's movement or a gender equality march you would've gotten zero press attention and even less people to come." Toplessness as an effective and provocative tactic for raising awareness and engaging people in conversations about gender inequality was an apparent theme in every interview I conducted.

Jordan articulated an argument against normative toplessness both at the *Free the Nipple Kentucky* meeting and in her interview that called for the presence of bodies that face intersectional oppressions. She argued that, without bodies that fall outside of "the protected class," going topless in the *Free the Nipple* campaign reinforces racist, cis-gendered, straight liberal feminism. She spoke about the inclusion of not only brown and black bodies, but also gender queer and trans bodies in *Free the Nipple*: "For me, the optics of toplessness are much more effective and legitimized as a tool to fight patriarchy if the participants aren't solely thin, cis-white women." This argument largely reflects trends in the literature on feminism and

intersctionality. If *Free the Nipple* is designed with an intersectional framework rather than a liberal one, it can become revolutionary.

### Unpacking the Mission

This section will unpack the ways the goals *Free the Nipple* are perceived and communicated by different groups: (1) the national campaign, (2) *Free the Nipple Kentucky* members, and (3) feminists outside of the campaign. Unpacking these differences is vital to understanding *Free the Nipple's* position within both liberal and revolutionary ideologies. Analyzing discourse on the goals of the campaign complicates my original construction of *Free the Nipple* as existing only within colorblind, liberal ideological structures. It shows people describe *Free the Nipple's* goals with language that reflects both liberal and revolutionary feminism, including messages like seeking only equality between men and women, and/or dismantling patriarchy, reclamation of sexual agency, and demanding for equal rights and social treatment.

A repeated theme, both in the film and in *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, is the legal and social constructions of gendered toplessness as an aspect of patriarchal hegemony. As it is legal and acceptable for men to be topless, it is criminal and scandalous for women. This dichotomy understood as an acute manifestation of patriarchal domination and control over women's bodies. All of my informants, some unknowingly, described and largely supported the local campaign's mission statement:

*Free the Nipple Kentucky* aims to de-hypersexualize the feminine body by desensitizing society to the female breast. By recreating an image of the woman as separate from a sexual object, we hope to turn the tide against slut shaming, victim blaming, cat calling, and shunning breastfeeding mothers. Women can empower themselves by reclaiming their bodies, refusing to scale their self-worth and self-image on a fetishized ideal. Our conversation seeks to question what it means to be a woman and to demand that society respects us for it.

This mission statement, along with several informant narratives, articulates a goal of creating space for a critical dialogue about gender roles, the oppression of women and as a means of transforming sexism in dominant culture. When this mission is articulated without an intersectional consciousness it becomes a direct product of liberal feminism, thereby repelling women of color and serving only already privileged categories of women in the struggle for power (hooks 2014; Davis 2004). On the other hand, if we understand the use of ‘feminine body’ in the first line as an intentional choice over ‘woman’s body’ to include people who are trans or intersex in their mission, *Free the Nipple Kentucky* is then operating with an intersectional and revolutionary framework.

Dan introduced a perspective on deconstructing the gender binary in an interview just after the Topless Walk in September.<sup>12</sup> As an active LGBTQ activist he was excited about *Free the Nipple* because he understood the campaign as “a good movement for people who have breasts regardless of their gender identity.” By centralizing a queer or trans narrative of oppression, Dan transforms *Free the Nipple*’s campaign from reinforcing a normative and oppressive gender binary to instead shaping inclusive and intersectional campaign with a revolutionary vision.

Additionally, women and mothers from different race groups all experience patriarchal control through “slut shaming, victim blaming, cat calling, and shunning.” This mission is not necessarily exclusive to whiteness until it centralizes the white narrative, defining the white experience as the norm and neglecting racialized narratives of the male gaze and patriarchal domination (hooks 2014; Davis 2004). Because *Free the Nipple* was conceived in whiteness it does this automatically. To become revolutionary and intersectional *Free the Nipple* must divest

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<sup>12</sup> Dan is the pseudonym for informant 9



from white privilege, cis-privilege, and normative constructs of goodness and centralize the narratives of marginalized groups (DiAngelo 2011; Harper 2011; hooks 2000). Doing so will strengthen the movement as a whole by bringing in people from diverse backgrounds and creating a broader platform for feminist action and thought. *Free the Nipple Kentucky* recently started this process.

### *Developing a Racialized Consciousness*

I will use Harper's (2011) inclusive definition of a racialized consciousness as follows:

A racialized consciousness recognizes that decisions about ethics are influenced by an individual's consciousness, and that consciousness is affected by lived experiences of sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic class, and race (Harper 2011: 4982).

In this way, calling *Free the Nipple* into a racialized consciousness means establishing an intersectional framework that recognizes the many facets of power working on a body in United States culture. In doing so begin to build a broad base for their campaign. Developing an explicit antiracist discourse is essential in creating an intersectional framework for *Free the Nipple* because the campaign has already defined white as the norm (Wallace 2015; Harper 2011). If the campaign continues to operate without this understanding, white supremacy can continue to make the space exclusive. In addition, demonizing the campaign for whiteness and abandoning it entirely allows white supremacy to thrive (Wallace 2015).

I held a complicated position of power and an ability to introduce an intersectional framework and antiracist discourse to *Free the Nipple Kentucky* as a white cis-gendered woman, feminist, and researcher. Being part of the in-group, I was able to begin this work by gently interrogating the limits of 'a white girls movement' with group members. By doing so, I not only transformed my personal feminist perspective, but also began intentional conversations about race and identity with *Free the Nipple Kentucky* members. I was able to share my findings from

the literature when members asked about the research, and in this way helped spark the development of a racialized consciousness in *Free the Nipple Kentucky*. By no means can my agency alone explain the large steps the group and in particular Jane Ross has taken since the Topless Walk in September 2015, but I also cannot sever my involvement from this analysis.

In addition, my ability to contribute a researched and critical perspective on the movement might prevent the white members from relying on women of color to explain their experiences and hesitations for entering colorblind *Free the Nipple* spaces. When white women request explanations from women of color, we are asking them to close the gap of white ignorance (Wallace 2015; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1984). Lorde (1984) explains,

This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns...It is the task of women of color to educate white women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought (112).

Instead, doing more to be informed (i.e. reading black feminist literature, stepping back in spaces when women of color are the focus, and remaining curious and critical of normative language and the prevalence of all white spaces) can transform the politics of power in feminism.

#### *Racialized Consciousness as a Researcher:*

I maintain a position of power as a researcher of *Free the Nipple* because my race and gender identity fit the norms of liberal feminism and dominant culture. I interviewed with Tracey, a black woman and activist, before deeply engaging in a serious critical interrogation of my own position. In this way, I brought Tracey into an oppressive situation. In our interview the language of my questions largely reflected white liberal feminist ideology. For example, I asked, “Why are white women here and why is this exclusive? Not that it is intentionally exclusive, but why is it exclusive?” The idea that an all white movement does not intentionally segregate itself

is a misconception that functions to maintain racial privileges (DiAngelo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2003). It allows white people, particularly well-intentioned white people, to maintain an “identity of racial innocence” (DiAngelo 2011: 62) when it comes to the racial divide in a movement. Understanding segregation as something that ‘just happens’ instead of a real and purposeful manifestation of white supremacy is another way that colorblindness works to maintain white dominance (DiAngelo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Tracey seemed acutely aware of my liberal good intentions, lack of a racialized consciousness, and oppressive language when it came to discussing her blackness and *Free the Nipple*. The average time of my nine interviews is twenty-five minutes. My interview with Tracey was just over eight minutes long. The apparent brevity of the interview suggests she perhaps had no interest in wasting her time and energy explaining her forms of resistance to me before I engaged in a critical analysis of my own positionality going into this project.

Before interviewing another woman of color, I worked extensively on my literature review for this project and came to better understand how antiracism manifests as the essential fabric of any revolutionary activism (Fosl 2002; Davis 2004; Wilson 1996). I paid more attention to my language in all future interviews and addressed antiracism in the process of informed consent. I very loosely utilized my interview guide to hold space for both informants to share their stories, rather than interrogate them. This approach fostered a more in depth and authentic conversation about each of their approaches feminism.

The development of my own racialized consciousness serves as data for my thesis. By examining not only the discourse of my informants, but also the ways my language changed throughout interview process, I found a trend in which I begin to separate from liberal feminist

language and utilize instead the language of revolutionaries. As my language changes, the ease and productivity of my conversations accelerates.

*Free the Nipple Kentucky: Discourse and Ideology*

I collected data through participant observation at *Free the Nipple Kentucky*'s first group meeting of 2016. Since starting my research in September 2015, I have grown to know other *Free the Nipple Kentucky* members from either interviews or events. I also invited a friend of mine, Rachel, to join the meeting because she is a passionate organizer, activist, and feminist. At this meeting there were ten people: five white men, four white women, and one black woman.<sup>13</sup>

I went to the meeting prepared to address intersectionality in the movement, and said so declaratively when I introduced myself as a researcher at the start of the meeting. Other people introduced themselves and shared their reasons for attending: Rachel and Jordan attended the meeting out of (skeptical) curiosity. Jane and Caroline are active members of the group. Alex, Ben, and Jim declared their presence as a facet of what they understood to be anti sexist allyship. Adam hoped to learn about the legal issues of establishing a local nudist group, and Matt, hoped to “understand the possible conflicts in ideology” of *Free the Nipple* activism. While I was hoping to interrogate conflicts in ideology as well, it became apparent quite quickly that Matt and I were coming from completely opposite positions. He came prepared to the meeting with patriarchal ideological criticisms of *Free the Nipple*.

Matt, a white, male university professor, explicitly articulated sexist and racist criticisms of *Free the Nipple*, unapologetically centering his opinions, voice, and argument in the space by interrupting other people and using academic jargon to assert himself. Throughout the two-hour meeting he used ‘ideologically grounded criticisms’ as a tactic to reinforce male dominance in

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<sup>13</sup> All meeting attendants have pseudonyms. See Chart in Appendix B for interview informants who were also present at the meeting

the room and to justify his patriarchal power. He questioned not only the tactics of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*, but also the establishment of feminism in general with interpretations that included: asking, “How will we stop this from escalating into a bottomless movement?” He Reasoned that overt racism and public nudity are both offensive to particular groups of people, and therefore it is unfair to label racism as bad and not toplessness. Finally, he misunderstood intersectionality and argued that feminism needs to be inclusive for people who operate from a misogynistic ideology too. He either ignored or was dismissive of arguments that justified *Free the Nipple* and/or intersectional feminism.

Though Matt’s comments were troubling and harassing, they elicited a strong response from almost everyone in the room defending feminism, intersectionality, and topless action. There is a pattern in the discourse that shows each of his comments was met with articulate feminist arguments for the establishment of gender equality, the need for feminist resistance, and power of social organization with intersectional framework. This seemingly hostile space accelerated *Free the Nipple Kentucky*’s development of a racialized consciousness and intersectional framework. Language used in this meeting differed from the language used in the film and by *Free the Nipple Kentucky* members in previous interviews, including the following examples:

As Matt fear-mongered for a bottomless movement, Jane replied: “Going bottomless is not an equality issue,” and Jordan explained, “Men can and women can’t [go topless]. And that is a kind of symbol of inequality in our system.” When he equated the shock someone might feel when they see a topless woman to the to the shock someone a polish Jew may feel when they see man wearing a Nazi swastika, Jane responded:

I think the difference there is that, the person holding the theoretical swastika is not part of the oppressed Jewish community, whereas...when I go topless I am coming from and oppressed positions as a woman, claiming my right.

As people in the room discussed *Free the Nipple* as processes and protest, the theme of reclaiming our (feminine) bodies and exercising agency with freedom emerged. He countered this aspect of our feminist narrative repetitively, arguing that ‘not caring what other people think’ of this campaign and of our bodies is illogical. His capacity to repeatedly deny a thread of our feminist narrative was evidence of his position of power and an oppressive tactic learned from patriarchal ideology (Davis 2004; Lorde 1984). Jordan, responded to this dismissiveness at one point with a story of how liberating ‘not caring what other people think’ is for victims of sexual violence or assault. Doing so strengthened and expanded the base of the campaign.

He continued, and made an argument that men are in fact criminalized as flashers for doing the same thing as women when they protest topless, Rachel explained, “There is a very different intention from a flasher that is very sexual and predatory.” Finally, Matt’s reductive assertions that *Free the Nipple*’s mission is too broad and doesn’t have a clear message, elicited this response from Jordan that laid out a definition for intersectional feminism for the group:

When you talk about feminism, it is important it is intersectional. You can’t just take a part [of a person] and say, ‘I’m a woman, and that is all.’ There are women who are fat, there are women who are disabled, trans women, women all across the board, and...there are very few people who are just one. And it is very oppressive and insulting to ask people to separate them.

In this moment Jordan defined intersectionality and explained how to identify tactics of domination by oppressors for the group. Asking people to separate aspects of their identity to appeal to the dominant group, rather than being specific about and inclusive of those many identities is dehumanizing (hooks 2000). It emerges in patriarchal systems of oppression, including white liberal feminist groups. To expand on intersectionality, I added:

I don't think [talking about intersectionality] waters down the message at all. I think it makes it more powerful. A misconception that a lot of white feminists have specifically, is that trailblazing on our own in campaigns will allow other marginalized groups to follow, but that has been proven to actually oppress other groups more...patriarchy does oppress on the grounds of only gender.

Trailblazing forward without a broad and inclusive base for feminism, means that some women gain power at the expense of less privileged groups (hooks 2000). Jane and Caroline on separate occasions in the past, had used heroic, trailblazing language to describe their involvement and dedication to *Free the Nipple*. They both understood their role, as white cis confident women in a position of power, as sacrificial risk takers who could save others from the internalized male gaze. While raising the feminist consciousness is one of the most powerful aspects of the *Free the Nipple* movement at large, this discourse becomes problematic when it operates in the structures of patriarchal division that are already in place. At times, their pro-*Free the Nipple* stance came with an implicit argument that women who choose not to protest topless have not yet rejected the “anonymous patriarchal other” (Bartky 1998) that resides in their consciousness. Instead, understanding why a woman would not participate from an intersectional perspective shows that women who carry identities outside of white, normative womanhood seek different paths to empowerment. Trailblazing forward for gender equality without an intersectional base undermines revolutionary efforts to change patriarchal structures by erasing separate and historical experiences of women with intersecting identities.

While Matt's presence was disconcerting, it opened the space up for this conversation. The meeting continued with this pattern of misogynistic assertion rebutted by revolutionary feminism. The meeting space became a site of for an intense argument between on the politics gender, respectability, and inequality, and seemingly transformed the dominant discourse of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* from liberal feminism to revolutionary feminism.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown how *Free the Nipple*, particularly in the Netflix film and national campaign, perpetuates white supremacy by reinforcing normative standards of goodness (Davis 2004; Collins 2000). I explained how structures of liberal feminist ideology trap the campaign with coded language and colorblind racism and make it exclusive to whiteness (DiAngelo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2003). This exclusiveness is another manifestation of white privilege, and without a conscious understanding of why it happens white feminists will continue to deny their agency in transforming liberal feminist ideology (hooks 2000; Lorde 1984). By engaging in a critical interrogation of our social location (Harper 2011) with a historicized understanding intersecting oppressions and identities, liberal feminists can transform their consciousness and become part a revolutionary feminist movement (Davis 2004; hooks 1986). Revolutionary feminism works to dismantle all controlling aspects of patriarchy including gender, race, class, and sexuality (hooks 1986; Lorde 1984).

The future of *Free the Nipple Kentucky* as revolutionary or liberal will be determined by creating a group identity and mission informed by antiracism and intersectionality. This commitment must be actively maintained by group members and explicitly stated in their campaign discourse to effectively overcome the structures of liberal feminism. White cis gendered women need to take responsibility for addressing and dismantling white supremacy in liberal feminist spaces. In a movement that is focused on the liberation of all female bodies, not naming the ways in which race shapes our bodily experiences as women, invisibilizes and marginalizes women of color whether they are in the room or not (Wallace 2015). When responsibility to resist and explain domination is put on the shoulders women of color they are further oppressed and marginalized (Fosl 2002; Lorde 1984). Centralizing queer and racialized



narratives in feminist campaigns, gives strength to an intersectional and broad based movement to dismantle patriarchal power (hooks 1986). By raising awareness and building a racialized consciousness *Free the Nipple Kentucky* strengthens their mission and creates an environment to foster revolutionary feminism (Harper 2011; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984).

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## APPENDIX A: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Wage Gap, by Gender and Race

*Find median annual earnings of black men and women, Hispanic men and women, and white women as a percentage of white men's median annual earnings*

| Year | White men | Black men | Hispanic men | White women | Black women | Hispanic women |
|------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1970 | 100%      | 69.0%     | n.a.         | 58.7%       | 48.2%       | n.a.           |
| 1975 | 100       | 74.3      | 72.1%        | 57.5        | 55.4        | 49.3%          |
| 1980 | 100       | 70.7      | 70.8         | 58.9        | 55.7        | 50.5           |
| 1985 | 100       | 69.7      | 68.0         | 63.0        | 57.1        | 52.1           |
| 1990 | 100       | 73.1      | 66.3         | 69.4        | 62.5        | 54.3           |
| 1992 | 100       | 72.6      | 63.3         | 70.0        | 64.0        | 55.4           |
| 1994 | 100       | 75.1      | 64.3         | 71.6        | 63.0        | 55.6           |
| 1995 | 100       | 75.9      | 63.3         | 71.2        | 64.2        | 53.4           |
| 1996 | 100       | 80.0      | 63.9         | 73.3        | 65.1        | 56.6           |
| 1997 | 100       | 75.1      | 61.4         | 71.9        | 62.6        | 53.9           |
| 1998 | 100       | 74.9      | 61.6         | 72.6        | 62.6        | 53.1           |
| 1999 | 100       | 80.6      | 61.6         | 71.6        | 65.0        | 52.1           |
| 2000 | 100       | 78.2      | 63.4         | 72.2        | 64.6        | 52.8           |
| 2003 | 100       | 78.2      | 63.3         | 75.6        | 65.4        | 54.3           |
| 2004 | 100       | 74.5      | 63.2         | 76.7        | 68.4        | 56.9           |
| 2006 | 100       | 72.1      | 57.5         | 73.5        | 63.6        | 51.7           |
| 2010 | 100       | 74.5      | 65.9         | 80.5        | 69.6        | 59.8           |
| 2013 | 100       | 75.1      | 67.2         | 78          | 64          | 54             |

Source: U.S. Current Population Survey and the National Committee on Pay Equity; also Bureau of Labor Statistics: Weekly and Hourly Earnings Data from the Current Population Survey.

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

Chart on informant involvement:

| Informant:<br>Pseudonym | Race  | Gender | Sexual<br>Orientation | Participant<br>in Topless<br>Walk | Present at other<br><i>Free the Nipple</i><br>meeting or event | Active <i>Free the<br/>Nipple Kentucky</i><br>Member |
|-------------------------|-------|--------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| 1: Jane                 | White | F      | Straight              | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes  |
| 2: Caroline             | White | F      | Straight              | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes  |
| 3: Sarah                | White | F      | Bi                    | Yes                               | No   | No   |
| 4: Samantha             | White | F      | Queer                 | No                                | No   | No   |
| 5: Jordan               | Black | F      | Queer                 | No                                | Yes  | No   |
| 6: Alicia               | Black | F      | Queer                 | No                                | No   | No   |
| 7: Tracey               | Black | F      | Queer                 | No                                | No   | No   |
| 8: Matt                 | White | M      | Straight              | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes  |
| 9: Dan                  | White | M      | Bi                    | Yes                               | No   | No   |

Interview Guides:

Members: *Free the Nipple Kentucky*

1. What are you preferred gender pronouns?
2. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?
3. Have experiences from your past shaped your commitment to feminist action today? In what ways?
4. How does your race affect the way you engage in feminist action?
5. What does ‘everyday’ feminism mean to you?
6. How did you hear of *Free the Nipple*?
7. Have you participated in any or all of *Free the Nipple Kentucky*’s action events?
8. Do you hold a leadership role in *Free the Nipple KY*?
9. Why did you choose to get involved?
10. Why do you support the movement?
11. What are you critical of?
12. What do you think about the criticism, ‘its just a white girls’ movement’?
13. What do you understand the mission of *Free the Nipple* to be?
14. Who supports you as you engage in this campaign?
15. Who discourages you or is critical of *Free the Nipple*? What are they saying?
16. How does being topless shape your understanding of the campaign?
17. If you were topless at any of the events, how did that feel?

Non-members

1. What are you preferred gender pronouns?
2. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?
3. Have experiences from your past shaped your commitment to feminist action today? In what ways?
4. How does your race affect the way you engage in feminist action?
5. Have you heard of *Free the Nipple*?

6. What do you think of the campaign?
7. What aspects of it do you support? Which do you condemn?
8. What do you understand the mission of *Free the Nipple* to be?
9. Why have you chosen not to participate in *Free the Nipple* events?
10. What do you think about lack of women of color in *Free the Nipple*?
11. What do you think of toplessness as an aspect of their movement?
12. What does 'everyday' feminism mean to you?
13. What feminist groups are you a part of?
14. What do those spaces look like?

## APPENDIX C: ANALYSIS

List of goals of *Free the Nipple* from a critical discourse analysis of interviews.

- To seek gender equality: if men have the right to be topless in public, so do women.
- Advocacy for the rights of breastfeeding mothers to feed their babies in public
- Expand the definitions of beauty
- Liberate all women
- Reclaim sexual agency as women
- Dismantle conventional gender roles
- Spread awareness of feminist thinking
- Dismantle the patriarchy
- Reject sexualization at any age
- Reject the internalized male gaze
- Desensitize the public to breasts
- Prevent victim blaming
- Demanding respect and equality
- Exercise woman's rights
- Defetishize the female breast