Activist organisations worldwide have long struggled with attaining recognition. Feminist activists, in particular, struggle with attaining recognition without essentialisation. Female activists, especially those arguing for women’s rights and equality amidst other civil and human rights arguments, are often grouped together and essentialised, allowing women’s voices to build strategic coalition narratives but simultaneously defining and limiting their identities as “feminine” (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016; Moghadam, 2014a, 2014b; Newsom, 2004). Significantly, this type of activist strategic essentialism is often coopted within larger nationalist and international strategic narratives as a type of commodification of soft power. A recent example of this is the promotion of women’s “new” rights to drive in Saudi Arabia by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a means of gaining international, particularly US support for his “modernisation” efforts, while simultaneously still remaining one of the most oppressive regimes for women (Newsom, 2018) and while still arresting many of the leaders of the women’s right to drive movement within that nation (El Sirgany & Clarke, 2018; Yaakoubi, 2018). Feminist activists are therefore challenged to create narratives of femininity and resistance.
to oppressions that can reach out to multiple audiences without diminishing key identity and ideological concerns.

There exists an “aesthetic grammar of activism” (Rea, 2018a), rooted in narrative constructions and fleshed out through performance artistry of FEMEN, a feminist activist organisation known for using artistic expression of the female body to defy patriarchal constructs. FEMEN is one of the more visible feminist activist organisations using strategically constructed feminist and feminine embodied narratives to promote their messaging to various and mixed audience groups. FEMEN (2014) self-identifies as an “international movement of bold, topless activists whose bodies are covered with slogans and whose heads are crowned with flowers” (p. viii). Founded in the Ukraine in 2008, the first key issue of the FEMEN (Ukrainian: Фемен) was combatting sex trafficking and sex tourism. The central visual element of FEMEN’s “sextremist” activism is the topless protest accompanied by the group’s motto “my body is my weapon”, and the FEMEN logo, the cyrillic letters “Ф Φ” which “mimics the shape of a woman’s breasts” (FEMEN, 2014, p. xi). Since their first offline protest in Kiev in the summer of 2008, FEMEN have made an impact on the streets in various locations including, but not limited to, Eastern and Western Europe, North Africa, and the US.1 However, it is FEMEN’s online activist presence that has exponentially broadened their global reach.

This study examines the strategic narratives of FEMEN through its recognised and analysed self-identified feminist, anti-patriarchal protest movements of the past decade. We investigate the ability of FEMEN to claim feminine identities intentionally crafted within the activists’ strategic narratives and how those narratives are promoted to challenge consumption by the larger and heavily promoted strategic narratives of

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1 Please see FEMEN US’s (2018) explanation of its structure and activities: “International women’s movement FEMEN legally operates in the democratic societies and illegally operates in the countries controlled by the dictatorial regimes. FEMEN is registered as an international organization and is now working to legalize the national FEMEN-groups throughout the world. Today, the movement FEMEN is represented by national branches all over Europe and is interested in permanent development of new locations through involvement of new activists. Female sextremists are trained in the training centers created by the movement in Ukraine and France. The movement is managed by the Coordination Council which includes the founders and the most prominent activists of the organization” (para. 2).
Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. In particular, the use of feminine-embodied visual rhetorics by FEMEN plays a large role in constructing strategic narratives that simultaneously resist and reinforce consumptive status within larger progressive and conservative political arguments. This is particularly challenging in relation to those narratives that set FEMEN in direct opposition to conservativisms, including the contrasting conservativisms of politically right extremisms. In this way, the activist strategic narratives of FEMEN are most easily recognised by both potential supporters and antagonists when they fit larger narrative norms.

FEMEN’s hyper/visible embodied visualisations function as a form of contained empowerment, (Newsom, 2004), problematising their capacity for political engagement and agency, and their capacity for challenging hegemonic and patriarchal norms and political oppression. Many scholars (see, for instance, Abu-Lughod, 2013; Al-Mahadin, 2015; Alexander, 2017; Eileraas, 2016; Faber McAlister, 2015; Hungerford, 2015; McAlister, 2015; Nagarajan, 2013; Rivers, 2017; Zychowicz, 2011) have questioned whether FEMEN’s visual tactics have provided voice to the oppressed, or if they have merely re-created digital, gender, and political divides and reinforced the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975; 2009). Have the organisation’s efforts simultaneously transcended and restrained hegemony, or have they provided an impetus if not the means for altering hegemony?

Guided by three foundational elements grounding the study of visual culture, the sign, the institution, and the viewing subject (Evans & Hall, 1999/2004), we interrogate the embodied visibility, resistance, and essentialising of FEMEN. We take a multi-tiered approach to analyse the visual rhetorics of FEMEN and artists’ representation of the organisation. First, we draw from cultural studies theorising on affect to consider FEMEN’s visual rhetoric of the body as a visually affective activist group. We consider the role of affect in rhetorical persuasion broadly and digital and interactive visual communication specifically. Second, we draw from Newsom’s theorising on contained empowerment (2004) to analyse how FEMEN’s visualisation becomes trapped in its own rhetoric, its labels thus limiting its potential, relegating it to a form of contained empowerment (Newsom, 2004; Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Newsom, Cassara & Lengel, 2012). Third, we specifically critique the
visual rhetorics of FEMEN’s “Sextremism” which the group describes as a “non-violent but highly aggressive form of activism”, “a super-powerful, demoralizing weapon” (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014, p. x) to combat patriarchal discourses, policies, and cultural enactments, and how this form of activism has been interpreted in various regions, most notably the Middle East and North Africa.

The study centres around how FEMEN has employed social and digital media to create a visual and textual narrative architecture that has encouraged the development of strategic character identities (Baines & O’Shaughnessy, 2014; Kalpokas, 2017) and other narrative elements (Jenkins, 2004). It also focuses on Spivak’s (1987) notion of strategic essentialism which, in its ideal form, allows a demographic category to be formed for policy decisions, therefore allowing systemic recognition of that demographic, with categorical definitions that attempt not to limit the possibility of dissention within the category itself. However, in activism and policy making, this plays out as intentionally vague definitions and instructions, and often results in simplified, tokenistic, and limited identity constructions (Danius & Jonsson, 1993).

**Strategic narratives and visualisation**

Strategic narratives are calculated stories utilised by public figures, particularly in the international political arena, to generate support for politically motivated interests, ideologies, and power structures (Archetti, 2013; Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O’Loughlin, 2014; Schmid, 2014). They are carefully planned stories that are meant to generate specific audience reactions. Such narratives serve as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” and aid “political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, p. 2).

While strategic narratives are generally considered the realm of nations and national and international political entities, they are also used by activists and interest groups attempting to gain recognition on local, national, and especially global stages (Jenkins, 2015; Johnston,
Biro, & MacKendrick, 2009; Lukens, 1998). The relationship between political leaders and activists can also be understood through a strategic narrative lens (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013).

Strategic narratives are “mutually constituted by text and visuals” (Van Noort, 2017, para. 2). While some scholarship has addressed the centrality of the visual in the construction of strategic narratives (Crilley 2015; Hansen 2011), far more work is needed to analyse visualization as central to strategic narratives, particularly the affective nature of gender and the body. The relationship between the strategic narrative’s visual appeal and the emotive response of audiences is also key, as strategic narratives are often intentionally constructed to appeal to audience emotional contexts (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O’Loughlin, 2014).

Strategic narratives, particularly those with visual rhetorical coding, become a means of branding the identities of those involved in the narrative. This process of identity construction allows the audience to recognise the character of the argument through the “soft power” of brand recognition (Clark, 2016; Kalpokas, 2017; Nye, 1990, 2004; Senn, 2017). Logos, symbols, and visual rhetorics influence this branding, along with key terms, slogans, and narrative action (Senn, 2017; Walker, 2015). Visual branding associated with embodied femininity, as highlighted by FEMEN, further encourages soft power commodification (Yano, 2013). This also can lead to problematic essentialisations by larger narrative constructs as a means of reducing and controlling the feminine and female bodies (Attwood, 2005; Crewe & Martin, 2016).

**Digital and offline visualisations**

In our previous work (Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Newsom & Lengel, 2012b), we argue that while often closely aligned with conventional, traditional, or geospatially specific activism, online and offline activist efforts often differ substantially. Online activism affords opportunities for issue-focussed efforts allowing activists to identify with and support specific efforts, for promotion of goals and activities that can reach further and more quickly than is the case with traditional activism, potentially reaching beyond its contained status. Online activism also offers the potential to amplify marginalised voices, creates the opportunity for
cross-boundary dialogue, and provides an impetus for social change. Online feminist activist spaces attempt to provide the possibility for enacting the ideas of gendered dialogue. Therefore, online feminist activist spaces are an excellent starting point to build a dialogue, both online and off, and extend and expand efforts for change.

Further, online activism occurs in a liminal “third space”, a place where conventional societal rules and norms can be bracketed (New Media Consortium, 2007). Rooted in theories of space as constructed by the material needs of its inhabitants, the concept of the “third space” assumes that space is not an empty construct, socially defined by the contrast between what is experienced within a given space and what can be imagined for that space (Bhabha, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Newsom & Lengel, 2012a; Soja, 1996).

Whilst, arguably, there is more control of a strategic narrative that combines both text and visualisation distributed through online fora, the conceptualisation of the activist online “third space”, especially for issues regarding gender inequality and oppression, are a negotiation between the concepts and experiences of power, revealing a space of contained empowerment. We have argued (Newsom & Lengel, 2012b) that gendered messages are constructed, essentialised, reconstructed, and made invisible by western corporate media. However, with the case of FEMEN, rather than being made invisible, the organisation’s online activist visualisations are made hyper/visible. This hyper/visibility, however, in many ways serves a similar function to invisibility as the cooptation by larger political strategic narratives, both progressive and especially conservative ones, still threatens the stability of FEMEN’s activist core.

Visualisations and the hyper/visible

The hyper/visible of FEMEN can be seen as an enactment of strategic essentialism, a concept by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990), widely cited in post-colonial scholarship, that centres on presentational efforts of nation-states, groups, and individuals, “a specific cultural identity being upheld for political reasons” (Manghani, Piper & Simons, 2006, p. 245; see, also, Bal, 2003). Similar to Spivak’s strategic essentialism is the deliberate, tactical production of mimesis. Luce Irigaray (1985)
argues, “To play with mimesis is thus for a woman to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself to be reduced to it” (p. 76).

Our previous work (see, for instance, Newsom, 2018) argues that, in women’s organising, for instance during and since the citizen uprisings particularly in North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011, strategic essentialism was highlighted by shared goals and coalition building, but left many gender-based ideals vaguely articulated (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016; Moghadam, 2014a, 2014b). Women activists organised around narratives that promote equity without outwardly promoting gender rights to the exclusion of women’s safety in the regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016; El Haitami, 2014; El-Hibri, 2014; Khalid, 2015; Michielsen, 2017; Moghadam, 2014a, 2014b).

FEMEN’s activism in and about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and efforts concerning Islamic women, has been particularly problematic in its essentialism. Activists and scholars in the region have critiqued FEMEN and other western and northern women’s activisms related to clothing choices, including the hijab, burka, abaya, and niqab, which have been highlighted in the press both in the MENA and in the West. These efforts, however, were often brought about by men’s actions, men’s commentaries, and Western-driven women’s rights narratives (Daniele, 2014; Sreberny, 2015). MENA women activists, instead, focused on democratic reform, calls to gain the right for free and open elections, and attacks upon long-held dictatorships (Moghadam, 2014b), far more complex and nuanced, because they are situated within the growing “war of narratives” between center-right to far-right factions in both the MENA and the West (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Schmid, 2014).

Has it been advantageous for FEMEN to essentialise its identity in a

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3 Much has been written about the politics of the hijab, and the inscription of covering dresses on the Muslim woman’s body (see, for instance, Ahmed; Badran; Chater; MacLeod). This term hijab is widely used to refer to the Islamic head covering. However, a more exact definition constitutes hijab as an act of obedience to Allah involving iflah [modesty], tabara [purity], sitr [shielding; covering], taqwab [righteousness], eemaan [belief or faith], and haya’ [bashfulness] (See Lengel, 2004).
essentialising visualisations of Femen in a simplified manner in order to achieve certain political objectives? Many critics would say no (see, for instance, Al-Mahadin, 2015; Hebron, n.d.; Hungerford, 2015; Landesman, 2015). Or, is FEMEN adhering to human rights activist and feminist Joan Smith (2014), who announced, “Posing naked is one of the ultimate feminist acts”?

Visual Re-essentialisation

Essentialising categories such as gender is a process that occurs through labeling. Naming and citing a problem and a category is only one step in addressing problems associated with that category, and the process of labeling is itself, dangerous (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Taylor and Hardman, 2004). On the one hand, labels are useful and necessary in order to draw attention to a marginalised group. On the other hand, no label is adequate because no category can ever truly be adequate. Further, labels are themselves a process of “Othering” and therefore reinforce the status quo, because the process of labeling implies deviance from a norm (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Therefore, essentialising and or labeling as “different” or the “Other” disenfranchises all persons in those categories, removing them from the potential for power (Butler, 1990; 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949). Labels are a primary source of containing empowerment as they rhetorically construct the limits and boundaries of empowering potential. But one cannot address the problem without giving it the label. Labeling, therefore, and the essentialisation necessary in the process, is itself a form of contained empowerment; literally a type of rhetorical entrapment.

Theoretically, ways of addressing the problematics of gender labeling include re-essentialisation, or shifting the narratives of power and power dynamics away from dominant culture and patriarchy (Butler, 1990; 1993; Haraway, 1991; Spivak, 2001). Traditional categories must be destabilised, and alternative interpretations of these categories must become accepted in order for labeled, essentialised categories of “others” to gain systemic power and thus transcend their containment. One means of disassociating narratives of power with dominant culture is to illustrate alternative histories. As an example, Taylor and Hardman (2004) suggest, “we must “uncover” (dis-cover) alternative narratives” referring to stories of war told by dominated cultures, rather than the
dominant (p. 4). The authors continue, attaching patriarchal connections to war and aggression:

We need to resurface these stories...to correct the widely believed “man the hunter” and “man the warrior” survival stories. We need narratives that bring the much, largely ignored ‘factual’ evidence of humans working together for survival into our cultural and political histories. (p. 4)

Altering narratives in this manner described by Taylor and Hardman will both reveal the falsehoods of known histories and the complicity of the marginalised in their own marginalisation. Thus, alternative narratives reveal how we often are responsible for our own containment. When dealing with gender marginalisation, it is important to recognise how often women and women’s interpretations of gendered (feminine) traditions reinforce patriarchal norms. Yet, disassociating a category of woman from femininity and feminine tradition, removing woman’s difference, ultimately destroys what women are hoping to empower. In an intercultural setting, or an international or transnational arena, this task seems particularly challenging. Because consumers interpret the category of woman through the narrative constructs that appeal to their emotional and ideological preferences, activists must construct narratives that highlight the feminine form and use this as a means of attracting the support from carefully selected audiences. In this way, the story of “woman” acts as a strategic narrative of soft power, or consumptive power (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O’Loughlin, 2014), situated to attract the attention of polarised audience groups.

Interestingly, FEMEN also employs the notion of re-essentialisation. Feminist theory has, like patriarchy itself, historically essentialised women. In this way, feminist theory and feminism(s) often reinforce patriarchal norms. To reduce this tendency, feminism critiques its own positioning while inhabiting the oppressed status position (Newsom, 2004). Mirzoeff (1999) notes it is “important to do the hard work of moving beyond such essentialism towards an understanding of the plural realities that coexist and are in conflict with each other both in the present and in the past” (p. 24). FEMEN’s approach to visual narratives of embodied femininity seeks to reposition the feminine within patriarchal systems, through essentialisation. This type of reessentialisation does
two key things: it serves to get the message heard through narrative structures with which audiences are already familiar (Singer & Shope, 2000; Wallace 1997), and to place the feminine narrative in contrast to conservative norms. In a sense, FEMEN essentialises within broader narratives of social and economic progress to attack patriarchal norms by making the feminine visible in discomforting, rather than tokenistic ways.

De-essentialising through art

Art is one way to do the “hard work” for which Mirzoeff in order to transcend essentialism.⁴ In her article, How Art Fought for Women’s Rights, Angie Kordic (2018) argues that, in the twentieth century, “Feminism’s most powerful tool for transmitting the message was surely – art, in all its forms” (para. 3). It is still very powerful in the twenty-first, particularly as a feminist strategic narrative. Several visual artists, including members of FEMEN,⁵ have created work about/in honor of the organisation. This study analyses two of these artists, José Parra-Moreno and Bettina Rheims, on their work on FEMEN.

José Parra-Moreno. Parra-Moreno, a grandson of painter, Antonio Moreno (1900-1991), was born in Madrid in 1960 where, as he reflects, “I took my first steps in the art world, at my grandfather’s studio.” His early artistic development was highlighted by several youth awards in Madrid, and study in the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, and at the Academy of Raphael Hidalgo Caviedes.⁶ Through his study at the Superior Technical School Architecture of Madrid, where he was awarded the title of Master Architect in 1989, Parra-Moreno created intersections of his identities and professional efforts as an architect and an artist, receiving numerous prizes in drawing and painting. His work has been exhibited and in important private collections in Germany, Peru, Spain, Switzerland, and the US.

⁴There is a substantial body of work on feminist art. For a selection of the most recent publications, see, for instance, Mondloch, 2018; Moravic, 2017; Smith, S. (2017).
⁵The work of the several FEMEM member and post-member artists, including, but not limited to Oksana Shachko, Bettina Semmer, and Jenny Wenhammar, will be the focus of our future studies, along with an analysis of Oksana Shachko’s death in July 2018.
⁶For more on painter Raphael Hidalgo Caviedes (1930-1995), see https://www.saatchiart.com/parramoreno
Parra-Moreno’s most recent exhibit, *Cherchez la Femme*, at the Galerie Peyer in Zurich, Switzerland in November 2017, was “inspired by the FEMEN Movement’s sextremists and dedicated to all free women.” The *Cherchez la Femme* exhibition included numerous works that feature FEMEN’s iconic flower headdress of flowers, which are also exhibited in digital form on the FEMEN site.

![Figure 1. Untitled portrait, José Parra-Moreno](image)

In his artist’s statement, Parra-Moreno explains his exhibition: “Cherchez la femme”: Look for the woman. The phrase is a cliché of pulp-fiction-detective’s stories: no matter what the problem or the evil were; a woman was always the cause of it. Patriarchs, oppressors and repressed - sexist all of them - have reduced women to a place of submission for centuries. My art is looking for other woman: The empowered woman, the modern feminist women who rises [sic] up in 21st century. I look for these WOMAN!”

Particularly striking about the first digitised image (See Figure 1) is the de-emphasis on the body. Instead of the expected bare torso of a FEMEN activist, is a portrait of a woman, a black and white line

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7 Retrieved from FEMEN site, specific page on P-M art.
8 FEMEN’s symbols are explained on the FEMEN US website: “Flower crown is a symbol of femininity and proud insubmission, a crown of heroism. Body-poster is the truth delivered by the body by means of nudity and meanings inscribed on it. FEMEN’s logotype is Ф, a Cyrillic letter, the shape of which is similar to women’s breasts that are the key symbol of the women’s movement FEMEN. FEMEN’s slogal: My Body Is My Weapon!”
drawing, with the exception of the red flower headdress. In addition, the choice of the portrait is an interesting one by FEMEN, who chose to situate it first on the page highlighting Parra-Moreno’s art on the FEMEN site, and given all that all the other works by Parra-Moreno picture waist up or full body imagery of FEMEN members.

Figure 2. Naked Truth, José Parra-Moreno

The second digitised image on the FEMEN site, also from the “Cherchez la Femme” exhibition, is an extension of the portrait (in Figure 1). Whilst the woman in the work is same as in the above portrait, there continues to be a de-emphasis on the body, as the woman’s breasts are pixilated in the digital image on the FEMEN site (See Figure 2). The original work, however, does not include the pixilations.

The text around the image, in all capital letters, reads “naked truth”, “spring women is coming”, “my body belongs to me” and, at the lower
section behind the woman’s lower torso, “freedom”, “woman”, and, what may be “beautiful”, although the word is obscured by the woman. Behind her and within the text, from top to bottom, are rows of nuns in full habit, military men, and women in full black veil including niqab.

The work exemplifies Para-Moreno’s self-identification with comic and graphic novel artists of the mid- to late 20th century, as well as his influences of the classical drawing of Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660) known for his “radical candor and originality as a painter” (Cumming, 2016).10 It is interesting to note that Velázquez was also admired by Edouard Manet and Picasso, and that his work, most notably the 1656 Las Meninas [The Ladies-in-Waiting] was analysed by Michel Foucault in his book, Les Mots et les Choses [The Order of Things] (1966). In Scanning the Hypnoglyph: Sleep in Modernist and Postmodern Representation, Nathaniel Wallace (2016) notes,

In his seminal discussion of The Ladies-in-Waiting by Velázquez, Foucault helped found a new visual rhetoric, a destabilizing of conventional perspective and pictorial space as received in the 1960s. Focusing on the paradox that the viewer of the canvas and the royal individuals whose portraits are being rendered occupy the same locale at the same instant, Foucault via Velázquez calls attention to a certain ‘deregulation’ or expansion, during the mid-seventeenth century, of the painterly maneuvers that a visual artist would recognize. That is, operations until then seen as acceptable-without-discussion (often without recognition). (p. 246)

Wallace identifies the “process of representational updating by manipulating the pictorial area in a new way” (p. 246).

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10 See Bojana (2015) for an interview with the artist. Velázquez, along with being one of the most renowned painters of the Baroque period, was also known to be a rebel for his time. For example, during the Spanish Inquisition, when it was forbidden to paint live nude models, Velázquez did so (Cumming, 2016).
My Body My Rules by Jose Parra-Moreno is another drawing in the style of the graphic novel. Parra-Moreno (cited in SaatchiArt, n.d.) analyses contrasts in the 39.4 H x 27.6 W x 0.1 work by noting, “A Kimono looks like a prison sometimes…a naked woman has her own rules.” In My Body My Rules, and other work, Para-Moreno (cited in SaatchiArt, n.d.) “reimagines messages of female icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse and the Geisha of Japan, exposing the truths underlying their public personas — drug use, exploitation, and objectification.”
Parra-Moreno’s graphic novel influences are also evident in *FEMEN Strikes Back!* (See Figure 4). In this work, Parra-Moreno positions FEMEN protestors in formation ahead of Imperial Stormtroopers, the main ground force of the Galactic Empire of the Star Wars franchise. By ranking FEMEN with the fighting force of the fictionalised Empire, Parra-Moreno’s further legitimises FEMEM’s impact on contemporary collective culture. Along with the Star Wars film franchise having a substantial impact on contemporary popular culture (Brooker, 2002), broadly, specifically to the representation of stormtroopers in the Parra-Moreno work is the connection with the noteworthy woman Stormtrooper, Captain Phasma, Commander of the legion of Stormtroopers of the First Order, subverts gender stereotypes and transcends gender inequality.

Rather than imagining FEMEN members in protest against gender oppression, Parra-Moreno presents them as a forward phalanx, leading the charge in their own immediately recognisable uniforms: Naked torsos, rings of flowers on their heads. In addition, Parra-Moreno’s juxtaposition of Femen protestors with science fiction characters raises the question: Has FEMEN’s “uniform” become little more than a comic gesture? Was it FEMEM to whom Oxana Shachko, co-founder of the organisation, directed her final Instagram post which read, simply: “YOU ARE FAKE”?\(^\text{11}\)

\(^\text{11}\) For more on Oxana Shachko, FEMEN co-founder who died by suicide on 23 July 2018, please
De-essentialising by redirecting the gaze

Arguably the most striking work in the *Cherchez la Femme* collection is Parra-Moreno’s homage to, Picasso’s monumental 1907 painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. In the 111 years since the work shocked the world, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, according to Shulamit Almog (2018), has been “crowned as a central piece in the history of art in the twentieth century, and possibly of all time” (p. 64).

The painting of five women, either nude or partially covered by a curtain, is a bombastic work, not only in size (over eight feet tall), but in impact. In his book, *Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World*, Miles Unger (2018) announces that *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* “splits art

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*Figure 5. Homage to Picasso’s “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” by José Parra-Moreno*

historical time into an old and new epoch, BC and AD.” *Les Demoiselles* is now known as the “first great proto-Cubist” work, the start of an era that “overturned the reigning paradigm of painting in the West – instead of depicting subject matter from one consistent viewpoint (as painters had been doing since the early Renaissance), Picasso pioneered an approach of painting from multiple viewpoints” (McDaniel & Robertson, 2017, p. 423).

Gertrude Stein, who was painted by Picasso the previous year and had opportunities to discuss art with him, reflected on the matter of viewpoint. McDaniel and Robertson (2017) interpret Stein’s (1956) work as follows: “when we look from one vantage point, we must change our focus in order to see what we can see. A change of focus is a change in viewpoint. You don’t need to move or even tilt your head. You change the way your eyes are seeing” (p. 425). FEMEN, too, aims to change “the way your eyes are seeing” about women. FEMEN aims to reclaim their bodies. **FEMEN co-founder**, Inna Shevchenko, announced “A woman’s naked body has always been the instrument of the patriarchy. They use it in the sex industry, the fashion industry, advertising, always in men’s hands. We realised the key was to give the naked body back to its rightful owner, to women, and give a new interpretation of nudity” (cited in Cochrane, 2013, para. 10).

Just as Picasso’s cubism gave rise to new interpretations of the body, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* is also relevant to an analysis of womanist strategic narratives and re/de-essentialisation. It is interesting to note that Picasso originally titled the 1907 piece, *Le Bordel d’Avignon* [The Bordello d’Avignon]. André Salmon, an art critic who managed its first exhibition, renamed it *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* to reduce the potential controversy. Whilst Picasso succumbed to the title change, he never accepted it and, as a compromise, “would have preferred las Chicas de Avignon instead.”

In “The Philosophical Brothel”, his often cited analysis of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, art historian Leo Steinberg (1972) notes the five women in the work “appear to be frightfully detached, to be sure entirely unconscious of one another. Rather, they concentrate singularly on the viewer, their dissimilar styles just advancing the power of their

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glare.” Further, Steinberg argues *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* exemplifies “the reversed gaze, that is, the fact that the figures look directly at the viewer, as well as the idea of the self-possessed woman, no longer there solely for the pleasure of the male gaze, may be traced back to *Olympia*, 1863 of Manet.” The power of the reversed gaze of the five women in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* is such that what Picasso “painted in 1907 is a work of art that looks back at you with furious contempt” (Jones, 2007, para. 10). Not unlike FEMEN, “There’s something anarchist and ruthless about it that contains dada and Marcel Duchamp and punk” (para. 13).

**Bettina Rheims.** The reversed gaze is also evident in the work of Bettina Rheims (1952–) also highlights FEMEN’s reversed gaze. This celebrated French photographic artist has a history of provocative work featuring women’s and non-binary bodies. Her early work includes a series of portraits of strip-tease artists and acrobats exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1981, which was followed by *Modern Lovers* (1989–91), a photographic series of androgynous adolescents, and, collaborating with writer and art critic, Serge Bramly, *Chambre Close: A Photographic Novel*, a project involving a group of ordinary women posing nude in unconventional poses and settings (Rheims & Bramley, 2007).

Catherine Millet (2017) asks, “Ou Bettina Rheims post-t-elle depuis toujours son objectif? Sue le fil du rasoir” [“Where has Bettina Rheims been positioning her lens over all these years? On the razor’s edge”] (p. 34). Much of her work has centred around visualisations of gender, sexuality, and “erotic ambiguity” (Christopher, 2013, p. 12). For example, her 2014 series, *Déteneues [Detained]*, is a collection of 68 frontal portraits photographed against the stark white walls of a room in a women’s prison “which puts the spotlight on women whose life is confined, both literally and metaphorically, to the shadows” (Millet, 2017, p. 34). *Déteneues* was exhibited in the chapel of Château de Vincennes, a former royal castle outside Paris, that housed “women of ill repute” in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Her most recent project, *Naked War*, emerged from a collaboration with novelist Serge Bramly, and meetings with FEMEN activists. *Naked*
War was first exhibited from 21 October to 25 November, 2017 at the Xippas Gallery in Paris. Renos Xippas (2016) notes “The portraits of the FEMEN extend the research on the construction and representation of femininity which the artist has been leading for over 35 years” (para. 2). The work is similarly politicised, as was Détenues and is aligned with “the feminist movement, where she finds affinities intrinsic to her work” (para. 2).

Selections from Naked War are exhibited in digitised form on the FEMEN site. Figure 6 pictures Tara Lacroix, in two color photographs, each 45 x 108 cm. (57.1 x 42.5 in.). In the first, Lacroix holds a chain in both hands above her head; in the second, the chain, still in her hands, is behind her back. On her chest is painted in black, “personne ne me soumet” [which could be translated as either “no one will make me submit” or “no one subjugates me”]. The art reflects a protest by two FEMEN members at le Salon Musulman de Pontoise [The Muslim Salon at Pontoise], an event that occurred on the 12th and 13th of September 2015 which was focused on the role of women in Islam (Liberation
avec AFP, 2015). The two women, who entered the event in full black abayas, ran onstage le Salon and shouted, in Arabic and French, “Personne ne me soumet, personne ne me possède, je suis mon propre prophète!” [“No one subjugates me, no one possesses me, I am my own prophet!”].

Figure 7. “Naked War” by Bettina Rheims, Exhibit at Gallerie Xippas, Paris, October-November 2017

In Rheims’ Naked War, FEMEN members “demonstrate that the body remains the last and only means of resisting oppression, and the reactions to the Femen’s demands have proven that it is a highly powerful means. These reactions, ranging from accusations of public indecency to physical aggression, reveal the violence inherent in the current socio-political system” (Xippas, 2017, para. 4).

The strategic essentialism could be considered as reduced due to the diversity of women in Naked War. FEMEN has been critiqued for its essentialisation of women’s bodies; it is the heteronormative bodies of FEMEN members are those that most visible in news reports of their public protests. In Naked War, [p]hotographed against a neutral background, these fighting bodies are taken out of their public environment and, facing the spectator, address themselves directly to them. By means of photography, Bettina Rheims highlights the performative side of Femen activism and creates a work of which the

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15 Pontoise is located in the northwestern suburbs of Paris, in the département du Val-d’Oise.
artist and the activists are the co-authors. Giving a strong presence to the non-ideal and sometimes unconventional female body, turned into the medium of a political message, corporeality, always present in Bettina Rheims’ work, unveils another dimension – that of engagement and power” (Xippas, 2017, para. 6).

Figure 8. “Naked War” by Bettina Rheims, Exhibit at Gallerie Xippas, Paris, October-November 2017

In her own assessment of her work with FEMEN, Rheims said, “Elles annulent et oblitèrent la nudité.” [“They cancel and obliterate nudity.”] She continues, “Elles ont trouvé l’endroit où mettre leurs slogans, pour être sûres qu’ils seraient vus et filmés. Elles jouent beaucoup avec l’image, avec les médias. On sent qu’elles sont imprégnées du travail des femmes activistes, dans les années 60, et même de Marina Abramovic. Elles ont compris que leur corps était vraiment un outil politique. [“They found the place to put their slogans, to be sure they would be seen and filmed. They play a lot with the image, with the media. We feel that they are imbued with the work of women activists in the 1960s, and even with Marina Abramovic. They understood that their bodies were really a political tool.”]

16 Marina Abramović (1946– ) is a performance artist known for her provocative and often dangerous performances that highlight use of the human body, including her own. Most recently she was attacked with a framed portrait of herself by performance artist, Vaclav Pisvejc, whose performances have included staged disruptive incidents that have involved public nudity and vandalism (Rea, 2018b;
In “Feminist rhetoric in the digital sphere: Digital interventions & the subversion of gendered cultural scripts”, Liz Lane (2015) argues “A disruptive rhetoric must unify power and action from preexisting avenues and harness the rhetorical power of digital visibility” (para. 23). With the neutral backgrounds behind each FEMEM member, Rheims’ art may remove the activists from the preexisting avenues of the contexts of public protest. In the neutral space of the white canvas, and given the range of activists’ bodies, an engagement with Rheims’ FEMEN photographic portraits, as well as Parra-Moreno’s drawings, is a de-essentialised engagement with art. Nevertheless, we return to Newsom’s contained empowerment theory in our analysis of Rheims and Parra-Moreno’s visualisations of FEMEN. The liminal nature of art, especially in artistic interpretation, implies audiences predisposed to react to FEMEN’s art through their own predispositions. The power of each artists’ work, and the representative power of the activists, remains confined to the page, the framed work, and the galleries that exhibited them.

17 For more analysis on the digitisation of art space, see Enhuber (2015). For more analysis on essentialisation from a feminist art perspective, see Meagher (2011).
Aesthetic Liminality: Essentialisation within Strategic Narratives of Empowerment

Lane (2015) asks, “how might contemporary feminist scholars, historians, and digital citizens use the complicated history behind us to propel a sustainable feminist rhetoric into the future?” (para. 11). FEMEN is one of the more visible efforts to generate “sustainable feminist rhetoric” through visual strategic narratives. FEMEN’s official blog (2018b) explains:

Who would have guessed 10 years ago, that a little group of women from Ukraine would become one of the most noticeable, controversial, beloved (and also hated of course) feminist movement today? … That not only many French women, but also Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, Tunisian, German, Canadian and American women would cover their bodies with slogans, cover their hair with flower crowns to denounce the sexist, political, and religious oppressions of which they are victims? … Who would have guessed that in 2018, Iranian women would have the idea of launching a branch of FEMEN, at a historic moment when women are taking to the streets to fight against compulsory veiling? … Who would have imagined that FEMEN would manage to defy all security services by facing Putin and Berlusconi face to face? That we’d bypass New York City Police and Secret Service security to infiltrate the polling station of Donald Trump on America’s Election Day in 2016? That we’d manage to silence Marine Le Pen in France? … With ardor, passion, humor and determination (and obviously many arguments) FEMEN has brought her methods and utopian dreams into this new feminist era that continues to grow to unite.

FEMEN’s increasing visibility has developed along with the growing presence of a number of other rising feminine and feminist movements over the past decade, including, but not limited to the #MeToo movement, Emma Watson’s HeForShe effort, which aims to encourage men to support feminist issues, and the #EndRapeCulture campaign in
South Africa,\textsuperscript{18} Many of these movements have generated worldwide interest in response to the rise in conservative narratives and far-right ideologies.

Our analysis illustrates that FEMEN’s efforts have been most easily identified and recognised when they fit within global and Western narrative norms, including when they are placed in direct opposition to center-right to far-right female purity narratives. By directly attacking those narratives, FEMEN creates an alternative to femininity that flourishes among feminist ideals strategic narratives. However, this aggressive stance also serves as a type of contained empowerment; power restricted by social norms yet flourishing in a space customised for and welcoming that power (Newsom, 2004). FEMEN cannot resist patriarchy through artistic expression if it is completely removed from patriarchy, hence it operates in a space between and between patriarchy and post-structural resistance to patriarchy. This functions within the current dynamic as the means by which global powers are attracted to and become involved in the situation.

Global organisations, including FEMEN, then use those narratives to reach strategically chosen consumers who are expected to respond to the narrative constructs. Walter Fisher (1984) illustrated that stories generally elicit emotional response, and are therefore more persuasive than public arguments when aimed at audiences expected to respond to that emotional stimuli. Drawing on this concept, we can see that the formation of strategic narratives as “not necessarily analytical and, when not grounded in evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies” (Freedman 2006, p. 23). FEMEN has used visual strategic narratives in order to increase visibility for themselves and the causes they support, and media and other institutions have reproduced FEMEN’s visual street narratives by connecting them to larger strategic narratives (Roselle, et al., 2014). The constant cooptation of FEMEN’s ideals and statements into larger political narratives, including the narratives of radical feminism, anti-Catholicism, and Islamophobia, by political agents and global media masks the local narratives of FEMEN members within larger political goals (Feldman, 2018; Tayler, 2013; Withnall, 2013). FEMEN

\textsuperscript{18} For an analysis of the #EndRapeCulture campaign in South Africa, see Gouwus, 2018.
analyst and journalist Feldman (2018) explains, “Today I’m not sure I’d have chosen Femen for a subject. From the start, I had a horror of the notion that I’d wind up apologizing for the Islamophobia, or for the abolitionism vis-à-vis sex work, for which the group was, fairly or not, known” (para. 7). However, FEMEN’s topless protesting and embodied aesthetic remain visible even within the narrative cooptation. The naked female body serves as both a site of vulnerability and sexual objectification, and a form of battle armor.

**Authors’ note:** The theory section of this submission is a revised and updated version of a refereed paper co-authored by Newsom and Lengel and presented at the International Communication Association annual conference, 23 May 2014.

**References**


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