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## Mapping the Routes: An exploration of charges of racism made against the 1970s UK Reclaim the Night marches



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### SYNOPSIS

This article addresses early charges of racism, made against the original UK Reclaim the Night (RTN) marches in the 1970s. These charges appear to have stuck, and been accepted almost as a truism ever since, being maintained in several academic texts. Using archive materials, and recent, empirical qualitative research with founding RTN activists and participants, I shall investigate the emergence of RTN in the UK in 1977 and the practicalities and influences behind this type of protest. I will also consider possible reasons behind the charges of racism, addressing justifiable critiques and concerns. I will conclude that the specific charges made against the first RTN marches were inaccurate. However, I will also explore possible reasons why concerns about racism surrounded these marches at their formation.

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### Introduction

In this article I shall trace the emergence of the Reclaim the Night (RTN) march in the UK in 1977 and explore charges of racism made against the protest soon after its founding; which have been frequently repeated since. RTN is traditionally a women-only, night time, urban protest march against all forms of male violence against women. Specifically, the charges made against the original marches are that they: purposely and unthinkingly chose routes through urban areas with a high proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities; demanded increased policing; and made links between Black men and the crime of rape. To investigate these charges, I will explore evidence from original periodicals of the 1970s UK Women's Liberation Movement, in which some practical and political decisions behind the first RTN marches are outlined. I will conclude that none of the first RTN marches called for increased policing, nor did any focus on BME communities. However, some commentators have clearly perceived RTN as racist; and there are numerous valid reasons why they may have done so, which I will explore in this article.

This historical investigation and contemporary reflection on the birth of RTN are important, not least because RTN is not just a piece of history, consigned to the shelves of the feminist

archives, but is in fact enjoying a global resurgence as a key element of the current feminist uprising observed in the West and beyond (Budgeon, 2011; Dean, 2010; Long, 2012). After regular marches from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the RTN protest then appears to have gone into decline, being revived again in 2004 most prominently by the London Feminist Network. Since 2004 the marches have grown from two marches to around twenty such protests every year, across the UK from North to South. This study of the original RTN is therefore arguably timely, and relevant to contemporary feminist activists, scholars of feminist history and of new social movements. In addition, nearly forty years later, questions of exclusion still surround the modern RTN movement. Today this criticism in activist circles more often focusses on issues around the exclusion of men, of trans identified people, and of Queer or non-gender identified people; although the underrepresentation of Women of Colour is still an ongoing concern (Antubam, 2013; G, 2012; Jeffreys, 2012; Kaveney, 2012; Kendall, 2013).

Important debates are unfolding in the current UK movement around the definition and utility of women-only space on RTN marches, the decline of women-only political organising, the role of men, the role of the police in stewarding marches, and the efforts of RTN activist organisers to welcome a diversity of participants. Perhaps as a result of such concerns, the

majority of UK RTN marches today are mixed and open to all, including men, in stark contrast to the protest of the past. While debates around these issues are taking place publicly both inside and outside the feminist movement, online and offline, the roots of RTN are harder to map, mainly slumbering in the embrace of the various newsletters, periodicals and magazines through which news and controversy was broadcast throughout the movement pre-internet. Unearthing these roots will shed some light on the beginnings of one of the most well-known and widespread global tactics of feminist protest, allowing this history to perhaps inform the debates today as well as provide a context to scholarly observations of the current UK feminist movement.

### The study

The empirical data in this article is taken from my doctoral field work, carried out in the UK Women's Liberation Movement between October 2011 and January 2012. The critical analysis of my thesis concerned changes in the form and function of this movement over three decades, using the past and present RTN march as a lens and route into this broad consideration. I conducted twenty five semi-structured, in-depth interviews, alongside an activist survey and archival research. Research participants were aged from their late teens to their sixties; they resided all over the UK and reported being active feminists from between one to over thirty years. They had a variety of ethnic, political and sexual identifications.

All research participants have been given pseudonyms, apart from two, from whom I received consent to use their real names. These two participants, both identifying as Radical Feminists, Al Garthwaite and Sandra McNeill, are founders of original 1977 RTN marches in Leeds in the North of England and London in the South of England respectively. Garthwaite is a media consultant and community activist and McNeill is a policy expert on gender based violence with a long history in local government; both are still committed feminist activists. As there is scarce published history on this protest in the UK, I felt it was important to credit these activists for the work they did, for their contribution to the UK Women's Liberation Movement and their foundational role in establishing RTN in the UK.

I too have a history of involvement with RTN, albeit a more recent past. I founded the London Feminist Network and the revived London Reclaim the Night in 2004 and have been active in the feminist movement in the UK for twenty years. I too identify myself as a Radical Feminist, and, in order to situate my positionality in relationship to the topic under study in this article, I should also state that I am White and identify my nationality as Scottish. I conducted my research in the UK feminist movement as an insider researcher, though I prefer to refer to my positionality as that of a 'besider researcher'. I use this term because I conducted my research alongside, or beside individuals who I consider to be fellow feminists and activists (Gangoli, 2007; Roseneil, 1995). However, for the duration of my research I stepped back from many practical, activist tasks in order to focus on the field work and thus moved temporarily to the sidelines of a movement I was very much a part of. I felt that this besider position enabled me to broaden, and thus hopefully enlighten and clarify a fuller view of the field under study.

### The roots of Reclaim the Night

In order to set this article in context, I will firstly provide a brief background to the emergence of RTN globally and then focus on its founding in the UK. The roots of the protest appear to be European, early references can be traced back to Brussels in March 1976, to an international conference on male violence against women. Attendees at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women held a march on the evening of the last day of the conference to protest against all forms of violence against women (Russel & van de Ven, 1976). This appears to be the first documented incidence of an organised, urban, women's night-time march against male violence against women (TBTN – Take Back The Night, 2001). While it is likely not the first such event, as women's resistance to male violence against women is presumably as old as this violence itself (Hanmer, 1981; Hester, 1992; Lerner, 1986), in the chronology of the emergence of organised RTN marches, this occurrence in Brussels appears significant.

Women delegates at the conference in Brussels in 1976 took news of the women's night-time protest march back to their own countries and a similar march was held by women in Rome, only a few months later, following a rise in reported rapes in the city (Chan, 2004; TBTN, 2010). The following year, in March 1977, women in Berlin organised a march in response to the rape and murder by a man of a young woman resident in the city. Germany then became host to the world's first synchronised night-time RTN marches, being held across several towns and cities on the same night. That night was the 30th of April 1977, and on that date at midnight women marched with flaming torches through towns and cities across West Germany, protesting against sexual harassment and male sexual violence against women (SR 61, 1977).

The synchronised marches in West Germany were covered in the periodicals of the German New Women's Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement of Germany; a magazine called 'Courage' recorded the marches (Erickson, 2010). This coverage was then picked up by journalists working at the UK feminist magazine 'Spare Rib'. Founded in July 1972, this is arguably one of the most well known of the many and varied newsletters and magazines of the British Women's Liberation Movement of the 70s and 80s; continuing to run until 1993 (Bouchier, 1983). Perhaps reflecting the resurgence of feminism mentioned in the introduction to this article, the magazine made a comeback in 2013, with a different name, 'Feminist Times', under the steerage of a member of the original magazine collective (Cochrane, 2013). Returning to the historical context however, in the August 1977 issue of 'Spare Rib', a small article, edited from 'Courage', relays news of the coordinated German marches. Included is a photo of women carrying flaming torches, with their faces painted with women's symbols, alongside the headline "Germany: Reclaiming the Night" (SR, 61, 1977:21). This was the first seed which led to the growth of RTN in the UK, and the phenomenon marched onto these shores later that same year in November 1977.

The news of this new type of protest proved inspiring for feminist activists in the UK. RTN marches were discussed in Scotland at an Edinburgh conference on Revolutionary Feminism, held in July 1977, where activist Sandra McNeill, then based in London, suggested that similar protests be held in the UK (McNeill Interview, 21/01/12<sup>1</sup>). Feminists from

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