

Innocent Subjects

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Feminism and Whiteness

Terese Jonsson

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1. 'That Old Chestnut': Feminism and Racism	1
2. British Feminisms in the Aftermath of Empire	32
3. Leaving Feminist Whiteness Behind: Narratives of Transcendence in the Era of Difference	66
4. Inevitable Whiteness? Absolving White Feminist Dominance	97
5. Liberal Whiteness and the 'New' Feminism	126
6. Feminist Complicities	159
<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	217

1

‘That Old Chestnut’: Feminism and Racism

In a letter published in *Spare Rib* in December 1980, reproductive rights activist Jan McKenley writes of her frustration that most white feminists around her seem to have stopped caring about racism:

I’m beginning to feel invisible again within the WLM [women’s liberation movement], having to work myself up to making ‘heavy’ statements that will embarrass sisters in meetings – I can see the eyebrows going up already – ‘Not racism – that old chestnut again – it’s so boring.’ Well, if it’s boring for you, white sister I’ve got no monopoly on dealing with racism – it’s your problem too.¹

Noting that the topic had been ‘trendy’ a year or two prior, McKenley describes being ‘left feeling that racism was “last year’s thing”’, urging her white ‘sisters’ to take out ‘the 1978 file’ again in order to remind themselves of the anti-racist arguments they should already know but appear to have forgotten. ‘And if you don’t take that file off the shelf, I hope it falls on your bloody head, so don’t say you haven’t been warned!’ the letter ends.

Fast forward 37 years. In her 2017 book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, writer Reni Eddo-Lodge discusses recent feminist debates on social media and in the liberal press, highlighting how racism continues to ‘cause immovable fault lines in the movement’. ‘Too often’, she continues, ‘a white feminist’s ideological standpoint does not see racism as a problem, let alone a priority’. Drawing attention to the long history of Black feminist critiques of white feminism, Eddo-Lodge questions why, if white feminists ‘can understand the patriarchy’, they ‘struggle to understand whiteness as a political structure in the same way’.²

Even though over three and a half decades separate McKinley's and Eddo-Lodge's comments, the concerns they raise are similar: a lack of commitment on the part of white feminists to understanding racism, and an unwillingness to listen to feminists of colour and to see them as equal partners in shaping the movement. Between these two moments, as before and after, many other critiques have been raised about the ways in which white feminists have too often failed to take racism seriously, and the many ways in which they have marginalised, tokenised, erased and appropriated women of colour's work and experiences. This book is an attempt to act upon such critiques, drawing on their arguments and insights to develop an in-depth examination of how race and whiteness shape white-dominated feminist theorising and politics in the contemporary British context. I will elaborate on the concept of whiteness later in the chapter, but as a brief definition, this term describes how the structural dominance of white people within both Western society and globally is presumed to be natural. Whiteness positions white people as the norm within society. Within feminism, it positions white women as the normative and central subjects of theorising and political organising.

The need to resist feminist whiteness remains critical. As I will discuss, feminist theories and politics which do not adequately address race are not only flawed and irrelevant to many women, but harmful in their racist effects. The dominance of whiteness within many feminist spheres also destroys the possibility of powerful and sustainable multi-racial feminist movements – ones which are urgently needed.

Britain enters the third decade of the twenty-first century as a deeply unequal and unjust society. Following 30 years of neoliberal restructuring and a decade of austerity measures, right-wing politicians and press have fuelled the flames of anti-migrant, anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism. This rose to fever pitch in the lead-up to and continuing aftermath of the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership, in which the anti-migrant rhetoric of 'Leave' campaigners largely set the terms of the debate and ultimately led to its success at the polls. I finalise this book in January 2020 in the wake of the December 2019 general election, in which the Conservative Party, under Boris Johnson's leadership, gained a large parliamentary majority on the back of the election promise to 'Get Brexit done'. After three years of political deadlock over Brexit, the election results decisively reaffirmed the original results of the referendum, with Britain's ongoing shift to the right in line with global trends of

resurgent nationalisms. The Brexit saga, as Nadine El-Enany argues, is intimately tied up with the country's unresolved relationship to Empire; Brexit 'is not only nostalgia for empire – it is also the fruit of empire'.³ The 'Leave' slogan of 'taking back control' evokes a fantasy of a victimised nation under attack by migrant 'others' and European bureaucrats. It is based on a disavowal of Britain's brutal imperial past and its role in maintaining global inequalities through trade, military interventions and migration controls in the present.

The immensity of horrors unfolding at the borders of Europe provides the backdrop to the Brexit saga and the rise in racist populism, not just in Britain, but globally. As 'Fortress Europe' has shut down safe routes of travel, hundreds of thousands of people from African and Middle Eastern countries make desperate and dangerous journeys towards and across the Mediterranean Sea. Over 14,000 people have died during their attempts to cross the Mediterranean since 2014.⁴ The suffering of poor Black and Brown people is the background to European life, the underlying message clear: their deaths matter less than our (way of) life. In June 2017, the Grenfell Tower fire tragically exposed how this logic operates also within Britain's borders. Starting as a small fire in a flat on the fourth floor, the 24-storey tower block went up in flames in less than an hour, giving residents on higher floors little chance to escape. Alongside pictures of the dead and missing, details soon emerged of residents' previous unheeded warnings and complaints about the lack of fire safety, of the cheap materials used and their incompetent installation in a recent refurbishment. The majority of the 72 people who died in Grenfell Tower, which sits in London's richest borough of Kensington and Chelsea, were working-class people of colour, many with a migrant background.⁵

Gender analysis is crucial for understanding the ways in which racism, economic inequality and different forms of violence coalesce in these times. Anti-migrant and anti-Muslim discourse centres on arguments about how 'they' – migrant, Muslim others – treat 'their' women and sexual minorities, and the threat they pose to 'ours' and to 'us'. Muslim women's perceived oppressed status, their clothing practices, their supposed lack of agency, education and English language skills remain a constant source of fascination and regulation for policymakers and the media. Institutional surveillance and othering of Muslims creates an environment which further legitimates popular and everyday racism and

harassment. A year prior to becoming Prime Minister, Boris Johnson dedicated one of his regular *Telegraph* columns to mocking women who wear niqabs and burqas, describing them as ‘looking like letter boxes’ and ‘bank robber[s]’.⁶ As a number of us wrote in an ‘anti-racist feminist statement on Islamophobia’ at the time (signed by over 270 individuals and organisations), ‘[w]hile couched within an ostensibly liberal argument against a “total ban” of niqabs and burqas in public places, Johnson’s comments were clearly and very deliberately aimed at stoking already entrenched anti-Muslim racism and appealing to the right of the Conservative Party to build support for his likely leadership bid’.⁷ It worked. In the aftermath of Johnson’s column, assaults and street harassment against Muslim women increased, and Johnson’s dehumanising epithets were enthusiastically added to the Islamophobic lexicon.⁸ Just over a year later, Johnson led one of the most historically right-wing configurations of the Conservative Party to a resounding victory in the general election, with notorious far right personalities such as Tommy Robinson (former leader of the English Defence League) and Katie Hopkins declaring their support, and the far right group Britain First urging its members to join the party in order to ‘make Boris Johnson’s leadership more secure’.⁹

As we further wrote in the statement,

In affecting a concern for Muslim women’s rights while peddling Islamophobia, Johnson is treading the well-worn path of gendered racism. The demonisation of Muslims in western political discourse originated with the orientalism of European colonisers, and has always proceeded on highly gendered terms, with the figure of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ operating as a symbolic shorthand to justify all manner of imperial foreign and domestic policy interventions.

Naaz Rashid’s research on government policy initiatives aimed to ‘empower’ Muslim women as a counter-terrorism strategy reveals how this gendered racism functions, highlighting how such initiatives are based on and reproduce stereotypical ideas of Muslim women as ‘victims solely of “pathological Muslim patriarchy” rather than as victims of deprived socio-economic conditions, citizenship uncertainties, or patriarchy and racism in wider society’.¹⁰ The effect of such policies, then, as Rashid demonstrates, is not Muslim women’s liberation but rather

the further demonisation and surveillance of Muslim communities (and Muslim *men* in particular) within a context of institutional denial of structural racism and racialised impoverishment.

The impact of austerity is also gendered and racialised, with women of colour and disabled women hit the hardest by cuts to welfare services and jobs in the public sector, and the reduction of funding for refuges leaving many women experiencing sexual and domestic violence with nowhere to escape.¹¹ As the slogan of direct action group Sisters Uncut spells out, 'they cut, we bleed'.¹²

In times of ideologically constructed scarcity it becomes even clearer that to speak of women as a uniformly oppressed group makes little sense. Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel's research highlights how the effects of austerity are unevenly distributed, with women of colour 'disproportionately disadvantaged due to their already existing precarity'.¹³ At the other end of the spectrum, powerful women are instrumental in enforcing inequalities of gender, class, race and disability. For instance, since 2007, four women have held the office of Home Secretary as part of the British government: Jaqui Smith (Labour), Theresa May (Conservative), Amber Rudd (Conservative) and Priti Patel (Conservative). All apart from Patel have declared themselves as feminists. These women have overseen the running of immigration detention centres such as Yarl's Wood, where around 400 women are held at any given time. Run by the global private security firm Serco, Yarl's Wood has been the subject of a number of damaging reports and media exposés which have revealed detainees being subjected to sexual abuse and racism from guards, with high levels of self-harm and mental ill health among detainees.¹⁴ Yet, in 2014, May renewed Serco's contract for another eight years, and calls for the reduction or elimination of immigration detention have been ignored by successive Home Secretaries. Now, as always, differently positioned women have widely divergent needs, interests and experiences of life, and those with more power are more likely to ally with those similar to themselves in terms of class, race, politics and nation rather than with more marginalised women. It bears noting, for instance, that the majority of middle age and older white women voted for Brexit in the referendum. The fact that many of these women saw the solution to Britain's current problems in the need for less 'foreigners' is something which, as Ruth Cain argues, feminists need to take more seriously.¹⁵ In another sphere of social life, Nicola Rollock's

recent research into the experiences of Black female professors in UK universities (of which there are, shockingly, only 25) reports that white female academics have often contributed to Black female academics' experiences of alienation and exclusion, by, for instance, aligning themselves with the views of white men 'while ignoring the contributions of women of colour'.¹⁶

Anti-racist feminist analyses and politics are vital to address white supremacist and heteropatriarchal oppression and violence at both local and global levels. Yet, despite long histories of such theorising and organising by feminists of colour, there continues to be a lack of critical mass of white feminists working consistently against racism. As McKenley's comments convey, the sense of having the same conversation over and over again is habitual among those who challenge whiteness within feminism – and that was so even 40 years ago. But why has race been such a persistent problem within feminist politics, considering most white feminists balk at the suggestion that they are racist? Why haven't white feminists learned from the past, considering the critiques are so well rehearsed? These are some of the questions which led me to conduct the research which forms the basis of this book.

I started asking these questions around the time that I began learning about Black British feminism, and doing some research into the British feminist archives of the 1980s. Dominant white accounts of British feminism's recent past too readily cast the 1980s as a period of decline and fragmentation of the women's liberation movement, yet for the development of Black and anti-racist feminisms, the 1980s were a highly significant period. The ascendance of an autonomous grassroots Black women's movement in the 1970s and into the 1980s, alongside the emergence of Black British feminism as an academic project, enabled, as Julia Sudbury writes, a more 'coordinated attack on white hegemony [through which] white feminists were forced to take note of the serious challenge posed by Black feminism'.¹⁷ This was a time of intense debate and conflict along a number of fronts – race, class, disability, sexuality. Although often painful and acrimonious, these debates and the work of marginalised feminists in pushing them forward were highly influential in developing more complex understandings of gender through its intersections with other structures of power.

Learning from feminists of colour's anti-racist analyses, parts of the white-dominated movement began to transform, resulting in increasing

solidarity and coalition-building between feminists of colour and white feminists at this time. In her landmark essay 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', published in 1982, Hazel Carby argues:

... it is very important that white women in the women's movement examine the ways in which racism excludes many black women and prevents them from unconditionally aligning themselves with white women. Instead of taking black women as the objects of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanisms of racism amongst white women. This more than any other factor disrupts the recognition of common interests of sisterhood.¹⁸

A number of white feminist scholars, notably Vron Ware, Ruth Frankenberg, Antoinette Burton and Catherine Hall, took heed of Carby's and other Black feminists' calls, and published valuable research on white women's relationship to racism and Empire.¹⁹

There are many important legacies and lessons to learn from by revisiting activist archives and academic scholarship from this time, and I will explore some of these in the next chapter. But what this book is centrally concerned with is interrogating the ways in which feminist whiteness has (re)asserted itself in more contemporary times, particularly within academia and in the liberal public sphere: two significant sites where feminist thought and discourse has been institutionalised and gained increasing power. If we start with the premise that whiteness was – never wholly, but significantly – destabilised within feminist activist and academic communities in the 1980s, my analysis of contemporary feminist texts suggests that a re-centring towards whiteness has since taken place, despite claims that anti-racist critiques have been taken on board. Specifically, I suggest that a white-centred feminism is maintained through asserting its innocence of racism. Here I am drawing on a body of literature (discussed further below) which theorises claims to 'white innocence' as a manifestation of white racial power. White feminist innocence, I will argue, is sustained through the promotion of particular kinds of narratives and knowledge claims about the relationship between feminism, race and racism which repeatedly erase, marginalise or appropriate the work of feminists of colour. The book

focuses on feminism as a knowledge project: the ways in which ideas, concepts and narratives are theorised, discussed and struggled over within feminist discourse and communities. In particular, my research examines the ways in which dominant forms of feminist knowledge are entangled with ‘white ignorance’, which has been theorised by Charles Mills as a faulty knowledge system.²⁰

In the next section, I will clarify my usage of the terms ‘Black’ and ‘white’ feminisms. Following this, I will historically situate the construction of the categories of gender and race as well as the emergence of British feminism in the context of Empire. I will then elaborate on the concept of whiteness, and related theorisations of ‘white innocence’ and ‘white ignorance.’ The subsequent section addresses the questions of location, explaining the book’s focus on the British context and how I see this geopolitical and historical specificity as part of a commitment to transnational feminist solidarity. Here I will also address my own positionality in relation to this work. Following this, I will briefly address the ‘politics of citation’, urging readers to consider critically how they use and cite this book. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study’s methodological approach, as well as an outline of the remaining chapters.

BLACK AND WHITE FEMINISMS

The term ‘Black’ has often been used within Black British feminism as a political term inclusive of all people targeted by racism, although this has also been a recurrent point of contention and debate. Avtar Brah describes how the deployment of Blackness as a ‘political colour’ is ‘historically contingent’ and has no essential meaning, but should be understood as having been forged through political struggle for (primarily) African Caribbean and Asian solidarity against racism in 1970s and 1980s Britain.²¹ Similarly, Nydia Swaby describes ‘political Blackness’ as ‘a politics of solidarity; nothing more, nothing less.’²² Both Brah and Swaby stress that the term’s continued relevance cannot be assumed or predetermined, and it is important to recognise that it continues to be contested and critiqued. In recent years, mobilisations of ‘political Blackness’, for instance within the National Union of Students, have come under increased critique for obscuring (and thereby reproducing) anti-Blackness, i.e. the colonial racial hierarchy which places

people from the Black African diaspora at the bottom.²³ In an attempt to respect self-definitions, the way I use the term Black in this book varies depending on the context. However, unless otherwise specified, references to Black British feminism use Black as a 'political colour', as this is how it has most commonly been used. At the same time, I recognise that there are problems with this usage, so when it seems more accurate I use the term feminists of colour or other terms which are more specific to the context.

The term 'white feminism' originates from critiques by feminists of colour of white feminist politics which do not attend to race. Razia Aziz defines it as 'any feminism which comes from a white perspective, and universalizes it'. In Aziz's words, white feminism 'subsists through a failure to consider both the wider social and political context of power in which feminist utterances and actions take place, and the ability of feminism to influence that context'.²⁴ It is a theoretical and political perspective which anyone can promote or disrupt, thus there is no essential connection between white feminism and white feminists. Importantly, this distinction allows white feminism to be dismantled. The term's continued widespread use and resonance among feminists of colour speaks to the fact that this has yet to meaningfully take place.

While I use the term 'white feminism' to denote forms of feminist politics which continue to ignore race, as noted above, many white feminists today to varying extents do address, or at least acknowledge, race in their theorising and activism, and are more wary of universalising from a white perspective. To recognise this, while at the same time pointing to the persistence of whiteness as a normative framework within much contemporary theorising and politics, I often refer instead to 'white-centred' feminism. White-centred feminism retains white women as the central subjects of theorising and activism, even though women of colour and race analysis may also be visible to varying degrees within such work.

There is a danger inherent in analysing white and white-centred feminism of inevitably contributing to reinforcing its centrality. Suki Ali notes a common tendency within narratives of Western feminism to construct white, middle-class Western women as the key protagonists 'out to define the world, women and gender oppression in their own terms', while the work of women of colour is either 'erased entirely or reduced to the role of critiquing the central emergent field'.²⁵ In focusing

its analysis on white-centred feminism, this book risks reinscribing the kind of narrative Ali warns us about, especially as it draws mainly on Black feminists' and women of colour's theory which in some way critiques this field. Therefore, I want to spell out explicitly that Black (British) feminism(s) and women of colour's thought and activism in the last 50 years emerged from a number of different historical trajectories, and have been shaped by many different routes, contexts and motivations. As Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande write, 'Black women have always been leaders of women's liberation ... Black feminism is in no way an afterthought or a derivative of white feminism but rather a radical praxis for the liberation of everyone – starting with Black women.'²⁶ I do not do the histories of Black women's theorising and activism justice in this book, because that is not its purpose. For readers unfamiliar with these, Julia Sudbury's *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (1998), Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar's *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (1988), Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe's *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* edited by Heidi Mirza (1997), *Feminist Review's* two special issues on Black British feminism(s) (1984 and 2014), among other sources, provide useful starting points for learning about women of colour's thought and organising in the British context (some of which are referenced in this endnote).²⁷ Emejulu and Sobande's recently published collection *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (2019) represents a valuable addition to this literature, with contributions from Black feminists across the continent.²⁸

It is important, then, while critiquing whiteness within feminism, not to over-determine its influence. As Ali suggests, over-exaggerating the whiteness of feminism 'negates the huge struggles and highly contested nature of the field from its outset'.²⁹ This also includes (racialised) struggles over what gets defined as 'feminism', and who uses this term to describe their work. Struggles over analytical frameworks and priorities between differently positioned women have been continuous features of feminist politics in Britain as elsewhere. This has been clearly evident in the last decade within activist politics, as feminists of colour have been able to use social media to raise the visibility of their analyses and experiences, and to build transnational networks and communi-

ties which decentre whiteness. This is a point raised by Lola Okolosie, a member of the UK Black Feminists group (which was active in the early 2010s), who writes that 'social media has enabled our attempt to position Black feminism not as existing on the fringes and in opposition to "mainstream" feminism, but as centred in our own right'.³⁰ The group was influential in shaping feminist debate about race and intersectionality, both in grassroots feminist communities and in the liberal public sphere (as I will discuss in Chapter 5). Alongside the work of long-standing Black feminist organisations such as Southall Black Sisters (formed in 1979), the London Black Women's Project (formerly the Newham Asian Women's Project, formed in 1987), Apna Haq (formed in 1994) and Imkaan (formed in 1998), feminists of colour have also led many activist groups in recent years, including Sisters Uncut, Sisters of Frida, Freedom Without Fear Platform and London Latinxs, as well as online media outlets such as Media Diversified, No Fly on the Wall and Gal Dem.

In other words, while this book focuses and dissects the whiteness which dominates certain sites of British feminism – specifically within feminist academia, popular publishing and the liberal press – this whiteness should not be assumed to be overly determining of feminist politics and theory as a whole. At the same time, there is no denying that whiteness remains structurally dominant, particularly within well-resourced and powerful institutions, and thus constitutes a problem which still needs addressing.

GENDER, RACE AND THE MAKING OF MODERN BRITAIN

We cannot understand the politics of gender and race without locating the meaning of these categories as they emerged in the historical context of colonialism. Kathleen Wilson's research highlights how the colonial project led European colonisers to encounter unfamiliar gender systems 'not structured by the binaries and complementarities familiar to Europeans'. As Wilson argues, gender as a 'mode of power' was central to the maintenance of British colonial control, as differences in gender arrangements were used to justify colonial conquest. Wilson highlights how a central plank of the theory of the 'natural history of man' (from 'savage' to 'civilized'), for instance, differentiated each stage of human development by how women were viewed: 'from the treatment of