

What Does It Mean to Call Feminism 'White and Middle-Class'?

UK Women's Studies Network conference, Stirling, Scotland, June 1995

(January 2004): I had intended to be in Europe in the northern hemisphere summer of 1995, because my lover, Marg Roberts, had a studio in the Cité des Arts in Paris for three months and I was going to stay there with her. Because I would be in Europe at the time anyway, I decided to send an offer of a paper to the organisers of the UK Women's Studies Network conference in Stirling, Scotland. The paper was rejected, but the reasons given for rejecting it were so obscure I was forced to draw my own conclusions. The conference organisers disagreed with my conclusions (of course), or they thought they did. In fact they ignored them or, more likely, didn't understand them, although they blamed me for their lack of comprehension—'the abstract itself was not very clear', as they said in one of their letters. Since the points they answered were not points I had made, they must have made up their own version of what I had said.

Two friends of mine, both well-known feminists with international reputations, intervened with the conference organisers on my behalf, one in a long letter, the other in person. To no avail. The friend who intervened personally also talked me into going to the conference anyway, and arranged cheap travel and billeting for me.

To and from the organisers (before the conference)

Department of Applied Social Science

University of Stirling

Stirling FK9 4LA

UK

22.1.1995

Dear [...],

I would like to offer a paper for presentation at the Women's Studies conference you are organising for June this year. With this letter, I have included a copy of the paper, along with the 300 word abstract asked for in the call for papers. As you will see from that paper, those arguments constitute a disagreement with most of what has been said about feminism being 'white and middle-class'.

I have been advised not to present these arguments in Britain. I have been told that the political climate in Britain is different from that in Australia, and that I would be very badly treated if I tried to say these things personally.

I know that my informant is right about the differences between Britain and Australia. I have myself observed that debates seem to be somewhat more heated and aggressive than here. But the issues are the same, and I have already received criticism here for what I am saying. I have also received support from women who are as worried about the issues as I am.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Denise Thompson

Feminism 'White and Middle-class?' Reply 1 - *Denise Thompson*

WSN Conference 95 Co-ordinator
Department of Applied Social Science
University of Stirling
Stirling FK9 4LA
UK

4.3.1995

Dear Colleague,

I am trying to arrange funding from the University of New South Wales to attend the Women's Studies Network Conference at the University of Stirling, 23-25 June 1995. Since funding is dependent on my presenting a paper, I need to know whether or not my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' has been accepted for presentation at the conference. Could you please fax confirmation or otherwise to the above fax number as soon as possible?

I would also like to know exactly when the conference begins and ends, since there is a possibility of funding for air fares from London, and I will need to get quotes on travel costs. Could you also tell me if there is a possibility of billeting? I am a post-graduate student on the dole and my finances are limited.

Many thanks,
Denise Thompson

4th April 1995

Dear Colleague,

Desperately seeking Sisterhood: Still Challenging and Building, Women's Studies Network Conference, 23-25 June 1995 in Stirling

We are sorry not to be able to accept your offer of a paper for the above conference in June this year. Our apologies for the delay in response, this was largely due to the late arrival of publicity materials which resulted in our extending the deadline for abstracts.

As you know each paper was reviewed by two independent readers and our criteria for inclusion centred on the nature of the material to be covered in terms of new material, challenging ideas and concentration on the conference themes. We also actively encouraged new speakers presenting papers for the first time. In addition we took into account the diversity of papers so that no theme was highlighted at the expense of others. We also have encouraged a good spread of papers from different regions on the theme of 'global' sisterhood.

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However, there will be several publishers of books and journals at the conference - including a publishing workshop at the pre-conference sessions on Friday afternoon. There will be ample opportunities to discuss with various people the arenas available for publishing various types of papers or articles.

We very much hope to see you in June and hope that you enjoy participating in the conference in a variety of ways.

Best wishes,

[...]

Conference Organisers

WSN 95 Conference

Department of Applied Social Science

University of Stirling

Stirling FK9 4LA

UK

21.4.1995

Dear organisers,

I am disappointed with your decision to reject my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' The reason for my disappointment is that, once again, a voice raised in protest against dogma masquerading as fact, has been silenced.¹ The dogma I am referring to is the frequently reiterated assertion that feminism is, in whole or in part, 'white and middle-class' and/or 'racist'. I call this a dogma because, more often than not, it is simply asserted without argument or evidence. On the rare occasions when there is some attempt to substantiate the assertion, those attempts do not hold up under close investigation. In my paper I gave one example of such an attempt. As I pointed out there, limited time precluded my giving more examples, since I tried to keep the paper to 15-20 minutes. I could certainly give many more examples, however, since I have been working in the area for nearly two years now.

The voice you have silenced by rejecting my paper is not mine alone. There are many women who are extremely worried at the form the 'race debate' has taken within feminist circles. Not all of those women are 'white'. One woman referred to 'feminist fundamentalism'. She was concerned about the ways in which the 'race debate' set up antagonisms between women and blocked communication across race lines. I am concerned that genuine debate is

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impossible as long as dissenting voices are suppressed. I know the dissenting voices are there because I have heard them. But they are not getting into the published literature and the public arena. Those who have the power to make that happen, like yourselves, will not permit it.

I find the reasons you give for rejecting my paper puzzling. You say that your 'criteria for inclusion' were 'new material, challenging ideas and concentration on the conference themes'. And yet, my paper fulfilled all those requirements. If my experience of the literature is any indication, what I said in my paper is certainly new. It is also challenging, and explicitly so. But it is obviously not the sort of challenge you feel able to take up. It is also in line with the conference themes of questions about 'Sisterhood', questions which are, to my mind, of the most desperate kind. It is also compatible with the strand called 'The Politics of Thinking/Doing Research', since the primary characteristic of dogma is an absence of thinking and a failure of research. My paper also raises questions about the sub-themes listed under the heading: 'methodologies, ethics, responsibilities and the ownership of knowledge', although not explicitly (again due to lack of time).

You also said in your letter of rejection that you were concerned to encourage 'new speakers presenting papers for the first time'. But how do you know that I do not fulfil that criterion? If you received the fax I sent you on the 14 March, you would know that I am a post-graduate student, a category which usually includes those just starting their academic careers. In fact, I have been writing and speaking for many years, but you were not to know that.

You also said that you did not want to highlight any theme at the expense of others. But I could make an educated guess that you did not receive a plethora of submissions on the theme addressed by my paper. I suspect that mine was the only one, and that without it, any dissent from the 'feminism is white and middle-class' accusation will simply not be heard. You also referred to 'a good spread of papers from different regions'. Does that mean that you received so many papers from Australia that you had to reject some? Or does 'different regions' not refer to geography at all? Is it, rather (as is usually the case), merely a euphemism for selecting papers solely on the grounds of the race of the presenter? While the intention is good, it sails perilously close to tokenism. By 'tokenism' I mean sorting women into racial categories in order to demonstrate one's anti-racist credentials, without addressing any of the really hard questions. It also has overtones of white liberal guilt,² of repressive tolerance of anything and everything said by or on behalf of women of colour,

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simply because women of colour have said it. It betokens a lack of respect for those women because it ignores *what* they say, and excludes it from the realm of contestation and debate. Your rejection of my paper has every appearance of censorship. I am all too aware of the unpopularity of arguments like mine among those who prefer dogma to reasoned argument and evidence. I have already been attacked a number of times for saying what I am saying. It has taken a great deal of personal courage on my part to get up and say them. I have been sorely tempted to let it all slide, not to bother with it because it's just too hard. I have persisted, however, because I know I am not alone in thinking the way I do, and because the issue is so important. If feminism is racist, then that racism must be identified and opposed. That requires argument and evidence, not mere bald assertion and a pusillanimous retreat from the fray.

I am sending a copy of this letter, along with a copy of my paper, to [names listed], among others. These are women I have met, some of whom will be attending the conference. I do not know whether or not they agree with me. Possibly they do not. But I feel the issue is far too important for me to accept your rejection of my paper meekly and in silence. The silence has gone on too long.

I will not be attending the conference. Since I am not presenting a paper, the University of New South Wales will not fund me, and I can't afford to go.³

Yours sincerely,
Denise Thompson

Notes (Added January 2004)

1. This is not, of course, the way to win friends and influence people (as my friend was to point out later, in relation to my response to the organisers of the Perth conference after they, too, had rejected this paper). But since I did think (and still do) that this is exactly what was going on, and since there was no nice way to say it clearly, there didn't seem to be much point in beating around the bush.
2. In fact, one of the conference organisers was Black, I found out later, so she probably wouldn't suffer from white liberal guilt. It's a silly notion anyway. I still agree with the point I was making—that there was a

distressing tendency in feminist circles to accept uncritically anything said by someone who could be identified as 'a woman of colour'. But I didn't have to use that terminology.

3. I did go to the conference. My friend talked me into it, and arranged a cheap train ticket and billeting for me.

The Conference Organisers Reply

Our ref: MSH/PY/1440

11 May 1995

Dear Denise

Re: Your WSN 1995 Conference Abstract

Further to your letter dated April 21st, whilst we appreciate your disappointment, we feel that you have made a number of rather crude assumptions about the process and the personalities involved in refereeing group.

To be brief, from the outset we received far too many abstracts than could be accommodated and our reasons for rejecting your abstract have already been noted. However, it should be reiterated here that we were at pains to be fair and consistent with all the abstracts received and took great care in ensuring that the whole process was **anonymously refereed**.¹ The ethnic background of the presenter was certainly not an issue,² the content and style of the abstract was the crucial factor as the enclosed guidelines stated. There were many difficult choices to be made and as a group we discussed the abstracts to be rejected in more detail before making a final decision. the issues raised in your abstract are certainly valid, but the abstract itself was not very clear, despite the guidelines on offer. We are sorry you feel that you cannot attend the conference as it promises to be a good event, both academically and socially. We sincerely hope that you will soon be able to raise the issue at another event or forum in the future. May we suggest that you send a short piece to the Women's Studies UK Newsletter, encourage debate on the many email discussion group lists or try the many women/gender studies journals? Please feel free to circulate this letter to the persons mentioned in your original letter.

Regards and best wishes,

[...]

The WSN'95 Conference Team

Notes (Added January 2004)

1. 'Anonymously refereed' simply means the reviewer doesn't know the name of the author (and the author doesn't know the name of the reviewer). Since the reviewers didn't know who I was anyway, this point is irrelevant. My point was that my submission was rejected because of its content, not because I wrote it, and there's nothing 'anonymous' about what the piece actually says.
2. What an interesting interpretation! Where did it come from? I said nothing at all that could be interpreted like this. I did not at any point say or imply that I thought they had rejected my paper because of my 'ethnic background'.

Support from a friend

Organising Committee

'Desperately Seeking Sisterhood'

Department of Applied Social Science

University of Stirling

Stirling FK9 4LA

UK

May 15, 1995

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you with regard to your rejection of Denise Thompson's proposed conference paper 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism "White and Middle-Class"?' As you will know Denise circulated her paper and her response to a few women. I have wanted to write to you this letter for quite some time but hesitated: as someone who has organised more conferences than I ever want to remember, I am aware of the absolute need of autonomy that an organising committee must have. In fact I'd be the first to fiercely defend any decision and go ahead as planned *if it feels right*. I am saying this so that you do not read my letter as an attempt to interfere with your autonomy. But I've decided to write to you because my letter may fill you in on some things that you could not otherwise have known. I don't want a response - do with the information what you see fit.

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Your rejection of Denise's paper was couched in terms that really do not apply. In terms of 'new material' I don't think there are too many women in the world who are brave enough to ask tough questions about a topic that most of us who are white shrink away from, even if we think it is historically incorrect. I think it is also patronising of indigenous/women of colour to not allow a paper to be heard that discusses the universalising nature of 'feminism-as-white-and-middle-class'. Increasingly Aboriginal women are saying in Australia that they want discussions - and not just a knee-jerk reaction in the sense of everything from the 70s was bad/racist/middle class. It is also very insulting to indigenous/black women like Destiny deacon and Pat O'Shane in Australia and Barbara Smith in the USA who certainly were amongst the early 2nd wave feminists.

As to the 'feminism-is-middle-class' assertion I am sure you know this is under a lot of scrutiny presently, in the UK, for instance by Pat Mahoney and Christine Zmroczek who are editing a book on how many working class women have always been feminists, in Australia by Zelda D'Aprano whose autobiography, written in 1975, was recently republished. Zelda is a working-class Jewish Polish Australian who together with an Italian woman, another Jewish working class woman and one white Anglo woman called a meeting in 1970 at which they decided to start the women's action committee which marked the start of the women's liberation movement! This is a history that many of the 'feminism-is-white-and-middle-class' adherents just don't know.

A further point in Denise's paper that I think is worth discussing is the question 'what is the feminism that's being talked about when these assertions are made?' I have just finished editing a collection on radical feminism and cannot remember how many times I've read with utter disbelief what is said about radical feminists - always by women who favour some other 'brand' of feminism. Given your topic 'desperately seeking sisterhood' aren't some of the urgent questions we need to ask 'which sisterhood?' 'defined by whom?' And don't feminists of all persuasions repudiate men (and women who are 'social males') when they try to define us by 'feminine' or 'non feminine' behaviour? And those of us who are lesbian, how often do we need to laugh off/get angry about simplistic stereotyping? Don't you think it might be a good idea to give women at your conference the chance to discuss the 'white-and-middle-class' assumption? Many might strongly disagree with Denise, but surely such a debate can only serve to make all of us more knowledgeable about our past including shortcomings and mistakes.

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The point is you denied Denise the opportunity to present her arguments. This despite the fact that on your conference registration you say 'for all women promoting feminist research' and that 'your conference will be an opportunity for all women to engage in good academic debates ...'. Frankly, whenever I've heard Denise present a paper, her academic standards have been very high.

This brings me to Denise Thompson herself. I certainly don't expect you to know this but Denise is well known in Australia as a fiercely independent thinker who on many occasions was the first to ask difficult questions and/or put a finger on to unpopular themes. In 1991 she self-published *Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality* which I use in my Women's Studies courses and which always leads to a lot of constructive discussions. In 1990 she also single-handedly established the much-welcomed *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*, thus filling a niche in the Australian feminist publications. She has done all of this 'from the margins' so to speak and I, for one, have a tremendous amount of respect for Denise - there aren't many other women like her that I know.

Two years ago, Denise decided to go back to the university and write her PhD. Given the tremendously hard-working woman that she is, in an extraordinary short time she is close to finishing it. She is, however, still without a job in academe and it is here that I want to bring it to your attention that your decision to exclude her from presenting a paper effectively means that her university won't give her a travel grant to attend your conference. Even more importantly, given the ageism that abounds in universities as much as anywhere else, presenting a paper at your Women's Studies conference would have contributed, if ever so slightly, to Denise's academic standing and lifted her chances of securing a job.

I am mentioning all this because I'm sure you don't have this information. Both the issues I discussed above - the courage to discuss issues that not many dare discuss, and this personal information - would make me want to reconsider, were I in your situation. But as I said at the beginning of my letter, I'm not - and what you do or don't do with this information - is up to you. I guess I had to write it down because I think your rejection was unwarranted - and unfair. Gatekeeping can never be in feminism's interest.

If you reconsider your decision, Denise might still be able to attend the conference.

With sisterly greetings,

[...]

To another friend

Sunday 21 May

[...] You're wonderful! Thank you so much for going to all that trouble. It looks as though it's possible for me to come even without university funding, thanks to you. The time is getting very short anyway. If I'm to get a cheap train fare your end, I can't afford to wait around for a decision from the faculty committee, and I don't know that my nerves would stand the waiting ...

I do hate this haggling over money, but the only way I can continue to exist below the poverty line is to be as tight with money as possible. While Marg and I are overseas we will have no income at all because we don't get paid the dole overseas. Marg gets a measly \$6,000 stipend from the Australia Council, but half of that goes on the airfare and Paris is so expensive. I'm using the money I got from *Reading Between the Lines*. The money doesn't cover what I paid to produce the book, but that's already gone and I have no intention of self-publishing a book again. The distribution problem is insurmountable. Still, if I hadn't published *Reading*, I wouldn't have met you, would I?

The problem of being silenced remains, though. The protest I raised will still not be heard. I am sick and tired of the gatekeeping of what counts as feminism by those whose commitment to feminism is shaky at best, pusillanimous at worst. It's been happening for years, of course. (It's what my thesis is about). The first barrier to any genuine attempt to address issues of race or racism is white liberal guilt. But even if you push through that, there's a further line of defence--dogmatic ignorance and the silencing of principled dissent. Sometimes I despair. All the best, and once again many thanks,

Denise

To the organisers (at the conference)

(January 2004): By the time I arrived at the conference, my complaint was common knowledge among the members of the Women's Studies Network, some of whom I had sent my protest to. One of them asked me on the Friday night if I was going to raise the issue of rejecting papers at the WSN Annual General Meeting to be held that weekend. At first I refused, but then I woke up at 4:00 am on the morning of the AGM, unable to go back to sleep and with my mind going over and over what I would say if I had the chance. The following short piece is the result.

(A short talk planned for the AGM of the UK Women's Studies Network, University of Stirling, Scotland, 24 June 1995, of which I delivered only the first part because I was interrupted by the chair saying that it was 'merely conjectural'. When I enquired whether or not that meant that I wasn't to continue, I received no answer. Instead, the floor was given to the chief conference organiser to 'explain' the procedures for selection and rejection of papers to be presented at the conference.)

For many years I have had a policy of never criticising conference organisers. The job's a nightmare. Not only can't you please all the people all the time, you can't please anyone some of the time.

But I do want to register a formal protest about the way in which proposals for presentation at this conference have been selected and, of course, rejected.

My name is Denise Thompson, and the reasons given for the rejection of my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism "White and Middle-Class"', were so obscure that I instantly suspected reprehensible motives behind the rejection. One further reflection, however, I realised that there was a more likely explanation, and that was that the selection process was random, that there were in fact no defensible criteria used in the selection process at all, that there was no clear and committed standpoint from which judgements were made. The problem with that is that, in the absence of an explicit feminist commitment, the status quo

switches in automatically, and judgements tend to be made on the basis of criteria which do grave damage to feminist principles.

Two examples of status quo criteria spring to mind: firstly, judgements on the basis of invidious hierarchical distinctions between women, between, on the one hand, famous or at least well-known women, and those whom nobody has ever heard of, on the other. A great deal has been made of the fact that the abstracts were anonymously reviewed. But I simply do not believe that the proposals by any well-known women were rejected as a result of this review process. [I was interrupted at this point, and did not finish.]

The second aspect of the status quo which I suspect influenced the selection procedure is the comfortable and familiar versus the new, challenging and/or unpopular. There is one thing that can never be anonymous in a review procedure, and that is the theme of the paper under review. What the paper says cannot be anonymous. If what is said goes against the general current of opinion in the area, and it is sent for review to those who are experts in directing the current's flow, then it is an unfortunate fact of academic life (and probably life in general) that that paper will be rejected more often than not. That ought not to be the way it is, but it does happen. Disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding, the new and the challenging are not welcome at this conference. It must be said that they're not welcome at any other conference either. The problem is a wider one of what I have come to call 'academic feminism' in general. Most of what is produced as 'feminism' these days is not only not feminist, some of it is actively anti-feminist.

Which brings me to the last point I want to make, which concerns the vitally important task of taking responsibility for what we mean by feminism. The need is urgent. The backlash is gaining strength and momentum, and it too often masquerades as feminism itself. Unless real feminists start taking responsibility for defining feminism, and saying it loudly and clearly and courageously, it will die with us. Male supremacy is already recuperating nicely from 'second wave' feminism. We must do all we can to continue to throw spokes into the wheel of patriarchal progress. We can't do that unless we know what we're doing and stand up for it against all the odds.

(January 2004): After the conference organiser had finished 'explaining' the selection process (an explanation that made as little sense as any of the preceding explanations), a woman stood up from the audience and asked the WSN collective when it was that the conference policy had changed from accepting all papers offered to accepting some and rejecting others. The reply she received was that there had never been any such policy. She said that her memory was that there had been such a policy, and she wanted to know when it had changed. She was told, once again, that there had never been any policy, that it had never been written down, and that the conference organisers therefore did not have to explain themselves. She persisted, saying that it may not have been written down, but she certainly remembered a time when feminist conferences accepted all papers offered, and why was it different this time? Again, the reply was that there never was such a policy, and on that she couldn't get the WSN collective to budge.