

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

## *Women's Studies International Forum*

School of Social Sciences  
Murdoch University  
Western Australia  
20th January 1997

Dear Denise,

I have now received both reader's reports on the paper entitled "What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?" which you submitted to *Women's Studies International Forum*.

Both of your readers agree that the issue you address is very important and a highly appropriate one for the journal, and thus are keen to see your arguments developed. Neither, however, believes your paper is publishable in its present form.

Your readers made extensive comments on your paper, pointing out areas where your argument lacks clarity, and points where you needed to strengthen your argument against the obvious counter-argument. Reader A, in particular, has made some very useful suggestions and referred you to a long list of references which might help you in the task.

I have also taken the unusual step of including for you the marked-up reader's copies of your manuscript, since their detailed marginal notes may be of use to you.

At this point, I will not accept the paper for publication, but would encourage you to extensively revise it. On resubmission to the journal, the revised manuscript will be returned to the same two readers.

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Australasian and Asian editor

## **Reader A, WSIF**

Given that feminism is 'the unifying politics of opposition to male supremacy' (p15) and a 'political project [that] involves working towards a human status for all women at no one's expense, then embracing feminism *ought* to mean refusing racism' (p1), the author by definitional fiat excludes from 'feminism' anything which is racist, and as the paper proceeds, ethnocentric or imperialist. However, this definition of feminism, while entirely laudable, excludes much of what has passed for feminist theorising and political action in the last two decades, and by writers who would call themselves feminists, as the paper amply demonstrates. (I wonder, too, whether it is possible to achieve 'a human status for all women at no one's expense'. One could quibble here over what a 'human status' is and whether it does not preclude women benefiting from the labour of other women, whether as their secretaries, housekeepers or workers in free trade zones, thus not requiring that privileged women give up any of their resources to achieve better conditions for other women as part of feminism's project. However, that is beside the point of the paper to which I now turn).

What I like about this paper, and what I think can be salvaged and rewritten with more attention to possible counter-arguments, is the claim that by focusing on the axis of race, many so-called feminists have sacrificed the axis of gender. Thus most anti-racist struggles (from both black and white sides) are male-dominated (p2) (although I suspect black women in the United States and Aboriginal women in Australia might beg to differ, at least in terms of their own political engagements in improving the position of their people); Daly pays little attention to the 'worst excesses' of male brutality because they are experienced by African American women (p10); and the most powerful example to my mind—Stimpson's 'women and blacks' (p.14). (However, I would like to know whether the author—or other white feminists guilty of these omissions at least in the past—would have become aware of them if women of colour had not drawn them to our attention).

Thus, and I may be doing the author an injustice, she seems to be advocating a feminism which includes the experiences and writing of all women as long as they accept that male supremacism exists in their culture and every other culture and that this is a more extreme form of domination than oppression based on class, race, etc. This is not a particularly novel claim, being the hallmark of radical feminism for some years. But using this claim as a way of reading texts which claim to be feminist as 'not feminist enough' in that they are not 'anti-racist enough' would make an interesting contribution to this vexed issue of 'difference' and 'speaking positions'. However, I do think that a number of queries and counter-arguments that could be raised against the text as it now stands must be addressed. These are outlined below:

### **1. the problem that in the author's definition there are almost no feminists (except her)**

The paper can [not] sustain the argument that feminism is not 'racist' or at least 'Eurocentric' without

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excluding most of what has been written and practised under its name in the so-called west. Clearly there are women's movements in almost all nations but many of these women refuse the label feminist as they associate it with an ideology and history which arose with industrialisation and the enlightenment—hence the focus on 'rights', on access to paid work, on monogamy and mutual respect in marriage, and so on. Where attention has been paid to more 'universal' issues, like mothering or sexual assault, interpretations and solutions have derived largely from white women's experiences. Examples include the right to abortion as a reproductive right only expanded after debate with black women to the right to also have and raise healthy children. Thus Firestone's solutions to the 'universal' of childbirth are a product of her own culture. If she had read about women's experiences in some cultures where childbirth is more valued, she may not have offered technological solutions (p.5). In many rural societies women do not have to worry so much about the opposition between paid work and unpaid work in the domestic sphere (p6), as unpaid work in both 'spheres' (which are less distinct in some cultures), for example women who do the burden of farming, whether subsistence or for produce which is sold by the men. Sherry Ortner's article on the exchange of women is a clear case of anthropological imperialism accepted into the feminist canon, in that only we in the west can escape the exchange because women in the west are no longer exchanged by men (Ortner, Sherry 1974, 'If Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in Michelle Rosaldo (ed.) *Women, Culture and Society* Stanford: Stanford University Press).

### 2. the need to address some contemporary writings:

Given the enormous literature devoted to the substance of the author's paper under the rubric of 'post-colonial' writings, I do think some of this literature should be assessed and subjected to the similar searching textual analysis allied to earlier writings by so-called self-named feminists. Some useful starting points might be:

Emberley, Julia V. 1993. *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique. Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* Toronto: University of Toronto Press (for an overview and analysis from a revamped socialist perspective)

Lazreg, Marnia 1994. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* New York and London: Routledge (who writes as a feminist but still criticises how 'Muslim' women have been represented in writing by white western women)

Some attention to the more recent writings by black women which take on board the issue of their gendered status within their communities, and thus give support to some of this paper's claims, especially

Collins, Patricia Hill 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* Boston: Unwin Hyman (which seeks to define a feminism which is inflected by the

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experiences of black women)

and: hooks, bell 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation* Boston, MA: South End Press

More minor comments

There is an issue of whether white feminists are 'allowed' to write only from their own experiences, even if they are careful to state this (e.g. the Daly debate on p7ff). to women of colour is it akin to men writing only about masculine experiences or issues and refusing to discuss the pertinent feminist literature. A response to this could be elaborated with the point the author seems to be making that feminist must include a range of experiences or they define 'blacks' as only men and so on.

As a white feminist grappling with the gender-race axis, I found an analysis by Kappeler of the famous Rich-Lorde debate concerning white women as oppressors in slavery very useful, in that it explores where the attention goes depending on who is doing the writing:

Kappeler, Susanne 1995. *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour* North Melbourne: Spinifex

Re the abstract: this should be rewritten to focus on a re-reading of texts by so-called feminists to show how they ignore or repress women of other colours and so are not truly feminist. The points noted in the abstract—the male-dominated nature of the anti-racist struggle and the 'lack of clarity' concerning who is white and middle-class (which is not resolved)<sup>1</sup>—forms only a small part of the review. Some discussion of Mohanty's point that 'white and middle-class' homogenises many—not as many—differences as does 'Third World women' etc, but both point to privilege based on colonialism and imperialism, might be useful.

p.3: feminism is a 'scarce commodity': it is if we measure who has jobs as femocrats, women's studies academics, who gets published in journals, what has been the perspective of most of the writing, at least in English, under its banner and so on.<sup>2</sup>

p.7: What evidence is there that 'the centrality of the penis-as-phallus in the inculcation of the meanings, values beliefs and practices of male supremacy' will explain child-rearing in all cultures?<sup>3</sup>

p.7: On the Mayo debate, see

Jayawardena, Kumar 1995. *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule*. New York and London: Routledge

who, while sensitive to the feminist project, suggests that Mayo did not write so much as a feminist as an imperialist. There are claims too in the present moment that when women (and men) condemn female circumcision, the veil, intra-racial rape in Aboriginal communities, they are not doing it because they are feminist or pro-women, but because they are racist. Clearly one has to read texts carefully to evaluate these claims but I think the issue needs to be addressed.<sup>4</sup>

p.12: I do think we have to be careful in assuming that polygamy, seclusion, and so on are only indicia of oppression (for example women in medicine and banking in Islamic countries because of the practice of seclusion, or lesbian relations among co-wives). If we do wish to claim this, how can we be sure these amount to 'more' oppression than HRT, breast implants and so on in our own culture? (which is what Molyneux and the author supports).

## Reader B, WSIF

Reader's Report, *Women's Studies International Forum*

The issues outlined in this paper are in need of feminist airing and debate. As they are dealt with here, however, problems exist with the argument, development and analysis. I would suggest a major revision is needed before it would be suitable for WSIF.

This is a controversial and contentious issue. To make a paper worth publishing it will need to be tightly argued, very clear, and with the material well-ordered. For a start the intro leaves the argument uncertain and undeveloped. The paper sets out to outline a problem, but is then waylaid by its critiques of feminists such as Stimpson, and Carby, and its defenses of Daly and Molyneux. The writer also doesn't make it clear whether the concern is about claims and counter-claims by 'white, middle-class' feminists themselves, or whether it is responding to claims by women of colour. In fact, the case that is being made is not actually spelt out until p.15, para 2 and 3. In rewriting the piece it would probably be useful to start with the clear statements that are on p.15 and build the paper from there.

The paper includes some interesting material (eg on Stimpson and on Fraser and Nicholson for eg). the point about Fraser and Nicholson, however, has been made by Kathy Ferguson (*The Man Question*), and the writer might like to think about integrating some of the work by writers like Ferguson, or Jane Roland Martin, who have dealt with the tensions between different feminist positions. In any rewriting the paper will need more signposts to guide the reader through the argument, and much more attention to tightening the argument on the most controversial points. On several issues claims are made that are not then argued (for eg p.3, p.10). It is not self evident, for example, that non-racist practice is an unproblematically *feminist* principle,<sup>5</sup> since the ethnocentricities of 'white' feminisms have excluded, and in some ways go on excluding, women of colour. This is despite all good intentions and invitations to 'join in', simply because the 'inclusionary' invite presupposes an ethnocentric stance. But the writer cannot simply claim that such feminisms are therefore NON-FEMINIST.<sup>6</sup> Rather, that claim will have to be argued.

In several sections the writing is unclear, p.2, p.7; and some material seems not to be sufficiently

integrated into the argument (eg p.5 on Firestone)

I also feel that the writer would do well to address the critiques of 'white' feminism by Aboriginal women (see my comments on p.2)

### **Notes** (added in July 2003)

1. I have to intervene at this point. What I actually said was 'a lack of clarity about what "white and middle-class" might mean'. This is not about people, it's about meaning. It's not about types of persons, it's about what counts as feminism and what does not and why. (See my discussion of individualism in my 'Reply to WSIF' below, where I point out that I'm arguing against positions, whoever holds them). This reviewer re-phrases what I said so that it means something different, something I have gone to great pains to avoid, and then proceeds to smugly reprimand me on the basis of her own distortion. The ease and immediacy with which she re-couches a discourse analysis into a statement about individuals indicates how much power and influence the ideology of individualism has.
2. Why are these things the measure of feminism? The conditions of scarcity involved—only some women can have access to them—belong with the system of hierarchy and domination feminism is opposing. I said that in the paper. Once again, this reviewer simply failed to read what I said.
3. What would count as evidence? Isn't this a mite imperialistic, not to mention suffering from delusions of omnipotence, to presume that anyone can ever know 'all cultures'?
4. It is not addressed by way of unsubstantiated accusations like this one. By couching the question in the way she did, she has already answered it—'they're not feminist, they're racist'. The mention of 'intra-racial rape in Aboriginal communities' is a reference to Bell and Nelson, 1989. This paper was written by a white anthropologist and an Aboriginal woman in order to expose the existence of rape and other forms of violence against women in Aboriginal communities. (See also: Bell, 1991a, 1991b). The paper evoked outrage in certain academic feminist circles across Australia,

even though the Aboriginal community themselves, including many men, have subsequently vindicated everything Bell and Nelson said (although without mentioning their work).

5. It *is* self-evident. The argument goes like this: if feminism is opposed to domination in all its forms and racism is a form of domination, then feminism must be opposed to racism. That's the logic. What actually happens in practice is different. Actions, behaviours, attitudes. etc. may or may not be racist, but if they are, then they're not feminist.

6. I can, of course, and I do. Anyone can. And I did argue for it. I pointed out that there is an alternative to calling feminism 'racist', and that is to interpret racism as a failure of feminism, instead of as an exemplar of it.

## References

Bell, Diane (1991a) 'Intraracial Rape Revisited: On Forging a Feminist Future beyond Factions and Frightening Politics' *Women's Studies International Forum* 14(5): 385-412

Bell, Diane (1991b) 'Letter to the Editors' *Women's Studies International Forum* 14(5): 507-13

Bell, Diane and Nelson, Topsy Napurrula (1989) 'Speaking about Rape is Everyone's Business' *Women's Studies International Forum* 12(4): 403-16

## Email to a friend

February 1997

Hi [...], Lovely to hear from you. Yes, of course I had to defend you [in response to attacks on her in the New York Women's Review of Books] because you'd quoted me so much. But apart from that, you were the only non-famous person mentioned in the review. The journal didn't print my reply. I'm a non-famous person, too.

And likely to remain so. I've just had my 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' paper rejected by [the Australasian editor of WSIF] (and two readers).

That's the third time that paper has been rejected. I think there's some censorship going on. Oh, not the conscious deliberate sort, but the sort that can't see past its own dogma

and rejects anything that doesn't fit. The chief reason given for rejecting the paper was that 'it wasn't clear'. But I think the most that can be said is that there was incomprehension going on. Whether that incomprehension was a consequence of the writing, or whether it was a problem in the reading, is a nice question, don't you think? It obviously never occurred to the readers that their own reading might have been at fault. So of course they were grossly insulting, treating me as though I were an idiot who just hadn't read the right things, and offering me advice on what I should read to set me straight (in a manner of speaking). They also had numerous 'helpful' suggestions for re-writing, all of which would have utterly ruined the argument, since my purpose was to get beyond the paradigm they were trying to drag me back into.

Well, that was a bit of a diatribe, wasn't it? Re PhD: All finished and done with, apart from trying to get published, of course. I don't have high hopes of succeeding, given the above-mentioned non-famousness, radical feminism, and whatever it is about me that makes what I write 'unclear' despite my best attempts at clarity. Publishers want to know about markets. They're not charity organisations, they're in the business for the money. They want some idea that the book might sell, and I'm afraid I can't reassure them on that point. Spinifex doesn't want it, but I'm going to keep trying anyway.

The good news is that I got 3 excellent reports from [the markers], so good that they were tabled in the Arts Faculty Higher Degree Committee at UNSW who wrote me a lovely letter of congratulation (no money in it though).<sup>1</sup> And I've got a job at the moment. It's only to the end of the month, although there will probably be more work depending on the ... financial situation.

That's all for now,

Yours cynically,

Denise

## **Note**

1. And neither did the letter help me get a Postdoctoral Fellowship, because none of the three university departments I applied to was prepared to mentor me. The kind of work I do is not done anywhere, and the Australian Research Committee which gives out the Fellowships only funds them through university departments.



## **Reply to WSIF**

17.3.1997

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Dear [...],

I'm writing to decline your invitation to re-write my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?', along the lines suggested. Such a re-writing would ruin my argument, which is a critique of those very views your readers expressed.

The purpose of my paper is to get beyond that framework, in order to find another way into a debate which is helpful to no one. My paper contained a number of arguments attempting to do just that, but your readers seemed unable to grasp them, hence the frequent reiteration that the paper was 'unclear'. This assertion has built into it the assumption that it is the writing which is unclear. But the writing is not all that is involved here—there is also the reading. The most that can be said is that there was incomprehension going on. This is a clumsy way of putting things, but it has the advantage of leaving open the source of the misunderstanding.

In fact, from my standpoint it is the readers' inability to understand which is the problem. They seemed unable to detach themselves from the very paradigm I was challenging. For example, reader A simply reiterates the old argument against Firestone as though I had said nothing. My argument was that Firestone's account cannot be accused of 'falsely universalising' her own culture to other cultures because what she argues is not even right for her own culture. Her argument is not an example of Western cultural imperialism—it is just wrong. Given that Firestone's work is so frequently cited as a prime example of 'false universalism', my pointing this out suggests at the very least that some re-thinking is in order.

Indeed, this is the point of all the examples I use—to scrutinise the meaningfulness of the accusation that feminism is 'white and middle-class'. (Note the paper's title). If it is meaningless, then the question of its truth or falsity does not even arise. Hence the first marginal note of reader B completely misses the point when she says: 'needs a better intro outlining succinctly whether the argument is that white, middle-class feminism has been

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falsely accused of racism'. If no meaning can be given to the term 'white, middle-class feminism', then there is nothing to accuse of racism, falsely or otherwise. That is not to say that racism does not exist among feminists. It simply says that feminism and racism are incompatible. Not a very startling conclusion, I would have thought.

Both readers individualise my arguments, interpreting them as criticisms or defences of individuals rather than of positions. Reader A says that 'in the author's definition there are almost no feminists (except her)'. But the important question is not who is or is not a feminist, but what is feminism. To define feminism implicitly as anything said or done by anyone who says she's a feminist, is to reduce feminism to nothing but a matter of personal opinion. Since everyone is undoubtedly entitled to her own opinion, it renders the question of what feminism is beyond political contestation and debate. Reader B says that I am 'waylaid' by 'critiques of feminists such as Stimpson and Carby, and defenses of Daly and Molyneux'. But far from being 'waylaid', my arguments about these writings are central to my purpose which is to illustrate the problem, not to criticise or defend particular individuals. I am not concerned with who says something, but rather with what is said. This reader also complains that I don't make it clear whether I am arguing with 'white, middle-class feminists' or with 'women of colour'. But my purpose is to point to problems in arguments whoever makes them. Besides, those categories are horribly essentialist in the quite strict sense of intrinsic identities that no one can do anything about. They are not moral and political because no one can change them. Even class, that social category par excellence, is bizarrely transformed into an attribute of individuals.

It is true that the paper contained no discussion of individualism, but it was carefully worded to avoid falling into that particular ideological trap. I am becoming increasingly aware of the crucial role played by individualism in disguising the existence of relations of ruling. But I can't do everything in a single paper. Some of the issues raised by your readers are addressed in the thesis from which this paper was taken, e.g. defining feminism, the question of 'false universalism', and some discussion of the problem of individualism. But the paper contained enough to open up the debate for those with the will to allow it to happen. I'm sorry you don't think so, but that's your prerogative.

All the best,

Denise