

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

(January 2004): And then there was *Signs*. Their reader's report was the most insulting of all the rejections I received, accusing me, as it did, of 'profound racism'. I replied to it at the time, answering what I felt were the main points needing rebuttal.

## ***Signs***

August 25, 1997

Dear Denise Thompson,

Thank you for submitting your essay, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' to *Signs*. We regret that we are unable to publish it. We receive many more excellent essays than we are able to publish, and our editors must make difficult choices among very fine articles. Many of the essays we return go on to be published elsewhere.

We've enclosed reviewer comments, which we hope you will find helpful.

We are pleased you have considered publishing in *Signs* and wish you well in your work.

Sincerely,

## **Reader, *Signs***

MANUSCRIPT #SIGNA970172:

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CALL FEMINISM WHITE AND MIDDLE CLASS?"

COMMENTS TO THE AUTHOR (AND EDITORS)

I was quite disturbed by what I believe to be the profound racism in both the conception and execution of this manuscript. Its primary purpose appears to be to defend white feminist authors from critiques by women of color. But, aside from attempting to refute what in some cases are minor points made by women of color, the author does virtually nothing to engage, or even acknowledge, the depth of the challenge to feminist theory and practice posed by women of color. (E.g., where is her engagement with the pieces in Guy-Sheftall's anthology *Words of Fire?* With selections in Ruiz and Dubois' *Unequal Sisters?* Or even with the words of white feminist Ruth Frankenberg in *White Women, Race Matters?* More specifically, I believe the piece is marred by a serious misunderstanding of the nature of racism. Racism (like patriarchy) is not just a set of nasty attitudes which are occasionally expressed by inconsiderate white women (or men). Racism or white supremacy affects the basic structure of our

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political and economic institutions, and our conceptions of knowledge, as profoundly as does patriarchy. The refusal of white women to acknowledge the profundity of the anti-racist struggle to both feminist thought and practice is self-serving at best. (E.g., racism cannot simply be "refused" on an individual level, any more than the legal, economic, and cultural structures which support patriarchy can simply be "refused". How can one "refuse" job discrimination or a lack of childcare or rape?)

I also believe that the piece is marred by a serious misinterpretation of what feminism is. Feminism does not consist of a series of texts to be critiqued. Feminism is a political and cultural movement for the equality and liberation of all women. To defend feminism (and not merely the writings of a few, mostly academic, white feminists) from the charge of being white and middle class would require confronting the realities of where most self-defined white "feminists" have put their political energies. ("Keep your eyes on the hands, Let the voice go buzzing". Piercy). Have most white "feminists" worked as hard to prevent sterilization abuse (which primarily affects women of color) as they have for abortion rights? Have most white "feminists" confronted and worked on AIDS (which disproportionately affects women of color) as a women's health issue alongside our battles against breast cancer and unnecessary hysterectomy? More basically, have most white feminists taken the time and listened with open hearts to the experiences of women of color and how racism (including the racism of white feminists) has impacted upon their lives? Have these white feminists made a real commitment to work to change those practices and institutions which women of color say are causing them pain? (Not the ones white women arrogantly decide that women of color should be fighting—but the ones battles women of color choose for themselves?) Until the majority of white feminists can answer "yes" to these and similar questions, talk of "refusing racism" is simply empty words.

The author seems extremely unwilling to acknowledge that feminist politics might not be simple; indeed, that developing an anti-racist feminism could be a very complex task indeed. As Cherrie Moraga and so many others have noted, no one form of oppression is "primary", and reiterating over and over that "patriarchy is primary" merely reflects the particular experiences of white women not personally oppressed by racism or other inequities. A truly anti-racist feminism would acknowledge that more than one serious form of oppression exists—and that these structures of oppression (patriarchy, white supremacy, class, ableism, and others) can interact in myriad and very destructive ways. It would also recognize that taking seriously the struggle against racism does not "dilute" the feminist struggle. Indeed, it makes it possible for white women and women of color to work together to fight both. And it might force a creative and constructive re-working of the feminist categories and language we take for granted—changes which would make our concepts more universal and more powerful.

If the author wishes to pursue this topic, I would recommend that she take a different approach—that she read and grapple with the emerging bodies [of] thought written by feminists of color, not as a

critique of white feminism, but as valid feminist perspectives in and of themselves. (And I would urge her not to view the words of women of color as "insults" intended to provoke "guilt", but as challenges meant to inspire thought and reflection and action). Once grounded in those experiences and writings, she might be able to more accurately and fairly assess the ways in which white feminist words *and actions* have or have not been complicit in racism.

## **My reply**

3 October, 1997

Your reference: SIGNA970172

The Editors,

Thank you for your prompt response to the submission of my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' Although I had hoped you would publish the paper in *Signs*, I was not surprised by your rejection. The paper, either in the form I sent to you or in shortened versions, has been rejected more often than it has been accepted.

You might wonder, then, why I persist in submitting it. There are a number of answers to that question.

—The first is that I am intrigued at how difficult, indeed impossible, it is to get any dissenting voice on the question of feminism and racism onto the public agenda. I came across none in my survey of the area. And yet there are serious problems with the debate as it stands. Why are these problems not being discussed in the literature? My own experience has led me to believe that they are being censored out of existence. I do not mean this in any conspiratorial sense. The censorship is often self-imposed, and I have done it myself. But why is it that accusations of 'racism', or that feminism is 'white and middle-class', are placed beyond criticism and debate? What is so sacrosanct about them that any disagreement must be silenced?

—A second answer to the question of why I persist is to collect a small portfolio of rejections and the 'reasons' there for. As I mentioned above, I submitted the paper with the expectation that it would be rejected, and in order to elicit something very like the response I received.

—A third answer concerns the responses themselves. I have yet to come across a reviewer's report which does any more than reiterate the paradigm I am challenging. So far the reviewers have seemed incapable of reading the words on the page. Instead, they read through the prism of dogma and change what I say to fit their own preconceptions. Take your own reviewer's response:

1. She accuses me of 'profound racism', but it is unclear what constitutes this 'racism'. Does it consist (as she puts it) of 'attempting to refute what in some cases are minor points made by women of color'? I do not know what she classifies as 'minor points' (she gives no examples). But how does disagreement become 'racism'? Is it because those I am disagreeing with are 'women of color'? But nowhere in my paper do I disagree with 'women of color'. I disagree with *arguments*, whoever makes them. I do not disagree with or defend *individuals* at all, whether they be 'women of color' or 'white feminists'. My task is to clarify and evaluate what is being said in the context of the 'race' debate within feminism. I am not concerned with *who* says something, but with what is being said. The arguments are not the private property of individuals but a matter of public record. As such, they ought to be available for contestation. Labelling disagreement 'racist' is a crucial aspect of that censorship I mentioned above. It is an intimidatory tactic which closes off debate. What is it that the unsubstantiated accusations of 'racism' are designed to hide?

Or does the 'racism' consist in my not having cited the texts she mentions? What about the texts I do discuss in detail? Your reviewer does not mention them, nor does she discuss my actual arguments.

Or is it 'racism' that I fail 'to acknowledge the depth of the challenge to feminist theory and practice posed by women of color'? But I do not fail to acknowledge this 'challenge', I disagree that there is one, giving a plethora of reasons for my disagreement. How does this constitute 'racism'? It seems to me that it is far more racist to *refrain* from expressing disagreement with points of view simply because they are put forward by 'women of color'. In that case, 'women of color' are having

different standards applied to 'them' than the rest of 'us'. Either 'they' are too oppressed to cope with disagreement; or 'they' are so intelligent that 'they' are never wrong. Anyway, the arguments I disagree with are not propounded only by 'women of color', or at least not as far as I know.

2. Your reviewer also says that I have 'a serious misunderstanding of racism'. She goes on to say that 'racism is not just a set of nasty attitudes' as though she were disagreeing with something I said. But I did not refer to racism as 'a set of attitudes'. Even so, I would think that racism is centrally a set of meanings and values which define some people as less worthy or less human on the basis of their ethnicity, culture, language, religion or skin colour. In that sense, it is a matter of attitudes or consciousness. That does not mean that it is not also institutionalised, although not always as *white* supremacy (e.g. anti-Semitism, Japanese society's treatment of the Ainu, the genocidal mayhem between the Hutu and Tutsi in Central Africa, the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Muslim population in Serbo-Croatia). Institutions, wherever else they reside, are also part of people's consciousness, of their attitudes, beliefs and opinions, of the way they see the world and act within it. In that sense, it can be refused, a possibility which your reviewer appeared to find derisory. Indeed, it *must* be possible to refuse racism. It is undoubtedly embedded in 'our political and economic institutions', but it is also a moral issue within the sphere of individual responsibility. That is surely the whole point of the feminist 'race' debate, that racism is wrong, and that feminists ought not to be complicit with it. If that is a 'misunderstanding of racism', then I am afraid your reviewer and I will just have to agree to disagree.

3. Your reviewer also accused me of 'a serious misinterpretation of what feminism is', asserting that it 'does not consist of a series of texts to be critiqued'. Well, no, but texts provide an enduring record of feminist debates, and are a form of feminist activism in themselves. Does your reviewer mean to imply that critiquing texts is illegitimate as a feminist activity? If so, we once again part company.

She goes on to define feminism as 'a political and cultural movement for the equality

and liberation of all women'. Here again we have a difference of opinion, and I think that at this point we have arrived at the crux of the matter. I have found it insufficient to define feminism only in terms of 'women'. First, focusing on 'women' is not always feminist. Gynaecology, the right-wing anti-abortion crusade, religious fundamentalism's version of 'woman's place', for example, all focus on women but they are not feminist. And second, defining feminism only in terms of women tends to reduce feminism to anything said by anyone who identifies as a 'feminist', including right-wing women co-opting pseudo-feminist rhetoric. What gives feminism its distinctive driving force is its moral and political opposition to male supremacy, that is, to a social order structured around the principle that only men are 'human'. Women are central to the feminist struggle because females are the first to be dehumanised under social conditions where males monopolise the 'human' norm. As a consequence, feminism is at the same time the struggle for a human status for women, wherever we are situated and whatever the particularity of our experiences of male domination. This is quite different from talk of 'oppression' since it first names the relations of ruling which oppress. I am inclined to the view that male domination is the primary form of social domination, although that emphasis is heuristic rather than argued for. It is a strategy for investigating the social world by starting from the question: If the social is seen as male supremacist, whatever else it might be as well, what unacknowledged aspects of social life does that expose? I would argue, though, that no form of social domination, whether capitalist or racist, has been adequately accounted for unless its male supremacist aspects have been exposed.

Your reviewer seems inclined to define feminism only in terms of concrete activism. I have assumed this because of her dismissive attitude to 'critiquing texts', and her listing of such issues as sterilization abuse, abortion rights, AIDS, breast cancer and unnecessary hysterectomy. But many of us are not in a position to engage in organised political activities. What we *can* all do, however, is take responsibility for the meanings and values we espouse. We can all develop our own awareness of social domination, and we can all acquire a constant readiness to take a stand wherever and however it is called for. However else it is characterised, this is a world ruled by

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men (and not all of them are 'white'), aided and abetted by women who eagerly embrace the meanings and values of male rule. Male rule is dehumanising because it is based on the exclusion of women from the status of human beings, and it also dehumanises the dominator because a genuine human status is impossible as long as the dominator's 'humanity' is bought at the expense of others. Male rule operates not only through coercion and imposition, but also, and more efficiently, through 'consent' to those meanings and values which maintain domination as business-as-usual. Because those meanings and values structure and govern everyday life, they can be resisted there as well, whether that resistance involves concrete activism or not.

Your reviewer refers to the 'arrogance' of white feminists ... decid[ing what issues] women of color should be fighting'. But her own arrogance is second to none. She seems to think that she has a right to lay down the law about what women should and should not work on, and that it is reprehensible to focus one's energies on some areas rather than others. But since confining oneself to some things and not others is unavoidable, I fail to see how it can be reprehensible. She also has a peculiar view of feminist projects, that they can be confined to particular categories of women, e.g. that abortion rights are relevant only to 'white feminists', or that sterilisation abuse is relevant only to 'women of colour'. But whatever feminists are working on is in the interests of women to the extent that it is part of the struggle for women's human status, and hence a challenge to the male supremacist principle that only men are 'human'.

—A final answer to the question of why I have persisted in submitting this paper is that the arguments in it have had quite different reactions to your own. The paper is an extract from chapter five of my doctoral thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning*. You might be interested in reading a selection of the examiners' comments:

From Dr Renate Klein, Australian Women's Research Centre, Deakin University— 'Chapter Five on "Feminism and Racism" is the strongest piece in this Thesis. This topic is fraught

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with difficulties and apart from needing to be congratulated for her courage, I found this chapter particularly forcefully argued and insightful.'

From Dr Diane Bell, Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts— 'In Chapter Five, in my view her best, Thompson is able to work through the issue of feminism and racism ... It is perhaps one of the most troubled of issues facing feminism in the late 1990s and Thompson, while not claiming to have resolved that matter has provided the most clear and honest analysis I am yet to read. She displays real sophistication and courage in her writing and I hope that this chapter will become one that is set for all undergraduates to read.'

And Dr Celia Kitzinger, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, recommended that I submit this section of the thesis (among others) for publication. I do not expect a reply to this letter, and neither am I asking for a reversal of your decision. Your response is already a useful resource for my larger project. I would appreciate it, though, if this letter could be placed in your archives as a future witness to the fact that some of us at least were trying to inject some sense into the 'debate'.

Yours faithfully,  
Denise Thompson

(July 2003): Not surprisingly, there was no reply to my letter.