What does it mean to call feminism 'white and middle-class?'

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**Publication Date:**
1994

**DOI:**
https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/673

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What does it mean to call feminism 'white and middle-class'?

[Added 2009:] This is one of the papers referred to in ‘Introduction to the refereed papers’.

I spent four years trying to place on the public agenda the arguments in this paper (in various versions). It was accepted twice, once for the 1994 'International Feminisms’ conference (after a decision to reject it was overturned), and once for the 1994 Australian Women's Studies Association (AWSA) conference at Deakin University. It was also rejected six times by gatekeepers of academic feminism:

1. the organisers of the 'International Feminisms—Towards 2000' conference, organised by the Australian Women's Research Centre, Deakin University, Geelong, and held in Melbourne, 1 August 1994—that decision was later withdrawn, and the paper was accepted, when I complained personally to one of the organisers;
2. the organisers of the UK Women's Studies Network conference, Stirling, Scotland, June 1995;
3. the organisers of the AWSA conference, Perth, Western Australia, 1996;
4. the journal Women’s Studies International Forum in 1997;
5. the journal Signs in 1997; and
The paper is included immediately below, followed by my reactions at the time to the peer-review process. The reviewers’ reports are not included because I could not get copyright permission.

Two other versions of the paper are included on UNSWorks: ‘Asking questions about racism’, given at the ‘International Feminisms’ conference in August 1994; and ‘Feminism and racism: what is at stake?’ given at the AWSA conference at Deakin University in December 1994.
Abstract: This paper argues that there are a number of problems with the often reiterated arguments to the effect that feminism is 'white and middle-class'. They tend to elide the problematic of male domination, focusing instead on hierarchies among women. They ignore the male dominated nature of the anti-racist struggle itself. And they suffer from a lack of clarity about what 'white and middle-class' might mean. The body of the paper is devoted to a detailed investigation of some of these arguments, with the aim of elucidating the problems. It concludes with a recommendation that any assertion that feminism is 'white and middle-class' be carefully and critically evaluated, and not simply reiterated as self-evident.

While it is clear that there are many women, variously identified as women of colour, black women, third world women, indigenous women, or women from ethnic minorities, who feel excluded from a great deal of what is called 'feminism', what is less clear is the nature of and reasons for that sense of exclusion, and what is to be done about it. This problem of exclusion tends to be blamed on what is perceived to be the 'white, middle-class', or 'Western', nature of feminism, and to be explained in terms of feminism as a 'white women's movement' which focuses on the concerns of women who are already relatively privileged, at the expense of women who are subjected to social exclusions and indignities because of their race.

But there are a number of problems with this account. There is little discussion of what counts as 'white and middle-class' and what does not. Such assertions are too often presented as self-evident truth requiring no argument or evidence. In raising this question of evidence, I am not intending to cast doubt on the occurrence of racism among feminists, much less its existence more generally. I have no doubt about its existence, having seen too many instances of it. But if that is the case, why raise the question of evidence? The answer is: if feminism's political project involves working towards a human status for all women at no one's expense, then embracing feminism ought to mean refusing racism. If it does not, then it is vitally important

There are problems with all of these terms. They imply a homogeneity among those so categorised, which is not only not the case, but can lead to its own form of domination and exclusion. This is evidenced by the way in which the debate has been dominated by the concerns of US black women, concerns which are certainly pressing and important, but which are different in crucial ways from the interests of, say, Australian Aboriginal women. Once women's interests are characterised in terms of different cultural realities, the inclusion of some will inevitably occur at the expense of others. It is impossible to include all cultures because no one can ever be in a position to know. The terms also imply a non-existent homogeneity among those who fall outside the categories, those designated 'white'. Nonetheless, addressing questions of racism requires the continued use of these terms or variants of them, given the absence of any adequate alternative.
that the racism which does occur be identified so that it can be eradicated. There is no further insight to be gained from simply reiterating that racism exists. There can be no doubt about that. What we need to know is the form or forms it is taking among women whose political awareness should preclude it. We also need to know because hurling insults is easy, and guilt reactions automatic. The issues need to be argued through if they are to lead to something more positive than simply occasions for self-aggrandisement or breast-beating.

However, on those occasions when the 'white and middle-class' nature of feminism is argued, it fails to stand up under close investigation. Not only is there a lack of clarity about what 'white and middle-class' means, more importantly, the problematic of male domination tends to be shoved into the background or elided altogether. Instead feminism is seen as a concern only with categories of oppression or hierarchies of domination among women. But it is only the focusing of feminist attention on the social construct of male monopolisation of the 'human', I would argue, which promises to address that sense so many women have of feeling excluded from much of what is labelled 'feminism'. It is only that political focus which can make sense of feminism for women everywhere subjected in a multitude of different ways to the dehumanisation inherent in the social order of male supremacy.

If the debate has been, at the very least, unhelpful for feminist politics, it has also been inadequate as an anti-racist politics. One reason for this derives from that very avoidance of questions about male domination which makes it so problematic for feminist politics. In other words, it is inadequate as an anti-racist politics to the same extent as, and for the same reason that, it is inadequate as a feminist politics, i.e. its deletion of the question of male domination.2 There is too little discussion of the male dominated nature of the human categories on whose behalf the anti-racist struggle is waged, categories which contain only men unless women are explicitly mentioned. The exclusion of black women or women of colour is blamed on a 'white women's movement' or a 'white middle-class feminism', when the original exclusion is a male supremacist one, i.e. the exclusion of women from every 'human' category because they are not men. In contrast, starting from the standpoint of opposition to

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2. For some exceptions to this, see: Wallace, 1990; Lorde, 1978; Lorde, 1979a.
the male domination allows the problem of women's exclusion from all 'human' categories to be addressed directly, in a way that focusing exclusively on 'race' does not. Certainly texts authored in the name of 'feminism' can be complicit with this exclusion of women from categories defined in terms of 'race', but it does not originate there. Rather, it originates with the male supremacist ideology that only men count as 'human'.

At first sight, it seems that the meaning of the statement that feminism is 'white and middle-class' is obvious. It means that feminism (or aspects of it) is preoccupied with the interests of women who are white, middle-class and Western, that is, of women who are relatively privileged in relation to other women. It means that feminism excludes, or is irrelevant to, women who are not white, middle-class or Western, women who identify themselves as black women, women of colour, indigenous women, third world women, or (in the Australian context) Aboriginal women or women of non-English-speaking backgrounds. It also means, in some versions (e.g. Mohanty, 1988), that feminism is complicit with Western imperialism, and that white feminists in the West impose on other women the same kinds of frameworks as the male dominated Western imperialism imposes on the rest of the world. It says that feminism belongs to one particular category of women, to the exclusion of women who do not belong within that category. This implies that feminism consists of organised groups with criteria of membership, ways of distinguishing members from non-members, etc., and which includes some but not others. It also implies that feminism is some kind of scarce resource or commodity which can be monopolised by particular groups of women at the expense of other women.\(^3\)

It is also presumably a generalisation referring to instances like those described by Alice Walker in her paper, 'One Child of One’s Own', in the anthology, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*

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3. It also implies that feminism is confined to women to the exclusion of men. But the feminist strategy of separatism is not intended to exclude men from understanding feminism and learning from it, but rather to prevent men from dominating it. Moreover, given the extent to which male supremacist meanings and values have permeated much of the feminism authored by women, excluding men and confining feminism to women is obviously not sufficient to keep feminism focused on a critique of male supremacy. The much-debated question of whether or not men can be feminists is the wrong question, as is the question of who among women is or is not a feminist. Both questions only make sense within an ideology of individualism which reduces feminism to a matter of personal identity.
In this paper, Walker gave three examples of what might be referred to as white, middle-class bias on the part of feminists. The first example involved Patricia Meyer Spacks’ book, *The Female Imagination*. Spacks herself acknowledged that her research was confined to writings by ‘white, middle-class’ women, because, she said, she was reluctant to theorise about experiences she hadn’t had. But, as Walker pointed out, this was an inadequate excuse for excluding writings by US black women, since Spacks included the Brontes although she had no experience of nineteenth-century Yorkshire either. But the problem with Spacks’ book went further than this. Not only did she fail to include writings by black women, she did so in the face of a golden opportunity to expand her own ‘female imagination’. At the time she was writing the book, she was sharing an office with Alice Walker who was teaching a course on ‘Black women writers’, and who was prepared to share the fruits of her own research with Spacks. Walker’s second example involved Judy Chicago’s exhibition, *The Dinner Party*, which included only one plate referring to black women, the one devoted to Sojourner Truth. Walker’s objection was not just to the tokenism of including only a single example. It was also directed to the kind of example it was. Although all the other plates depicted stylised vaginas, the Sojourner Truth plate did not. Instead, it depicted three faces, one weeping, one screaming and one smiling. Walker commented that, although there is something to be said for depicting women in terms of faces rather than vaginas, that was not what the exhibition was about, and the faces were nothing but tired old clichés about black women. Walker’s third example involved a brief interchange at an exhibition of women painters at the Brooklyn museum. In response to one woman’s question about whether there were any black women painters represented, another woman replied: ‘It’s a women’s exhibit!’

These are undoubtedly instances of racism, of the way in which white US society ignores the existence of such a large and important part of its population. They are the kinds of things that a feminist politics needs to be alert for, and to resist. But it is not helpful to refer to such examples as instances of feminism. Rather, they are failures of feminist insight, not exemplars of it. That is not, however, the way in which...
which the ‘white, middle-class’ debate is couched. Instead, instances like those above are seen as a part of feminism itself, rather than as examples of the meanings and values feminism is struggling against. While Alice Walker herself does not interpret them in this way, there are many feminist writers who do.

On too many occasions where attempts are made to demonstrate the ‘white, middle-class’ or ‘racist’ nature of feminism, the demonstration fails because of lack of evidence, inadequate argument, or terminological confusion. For example, in the Introduction to the anthology, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson says: ‘From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, feminist theory exhibited a recurrent pattern: Its analyses tended to reflect the viewpoints of white, middle-class women of North America and Western Europe.’ (Nicholson, ed., 1990: 1) By this she means that, as she says later, ‘aspects of modern Western culture were postulated as present in all or most of human history’ and in cultures other than the West (p. 6). The reason Nicholson gives for what she sees as the ‘white, middle-class’ emphasis of feminist theory is not the obvious one. She does not argue that feminist theory reflected the viewpoints of ‘white, middle-class’ women because it was written by ‘white, middle-class’ women in defence of their ‘white, middle-class’ interests. Rather, she goes on to discuss a version of the ‘false universalism’ charge. But with this move to ‘false universalism’, the ground of the accusation has shifted. The question of the ‘white, middle-class’ nature of feminism has dropped out of the account, and feminism is now being accused of inappropriately generalising from one culture (which Nicholson later calls ‘modern Western’) to other, different cultures. With this shift of focus, even feminists who do not qualify as ‘white’ and/or ‘middle-class’ within ‘modern Western’ culture could imperialise the situations of women of other cultures. (See: Washington, 1985, for an acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of referring to US black women as ‘Third World women’). The problem being identified here is that of Western cultural imperialism, and the question being addressed would be more accurately couched in terms of the extent to which feminism is peculiar to ‘the West’. Nicholson does not address this question. The problem with social generalisations which emanate from the West, and in particular from the USA, is domination. It is not the case that just any ‘specific cultural and historical context’ is randomly and inappropriately applied to any other, but that hegemonic frameworks serving the vested interests of the powerful are imposed on
those who have no right to be heard. It may be that this was what Nicholson was attempting to suggest with her categories of ‘white’ and ‘middle-class’. But she failed to spell out what these categories involve, and hence she failed, too, to substantiate her assertion about the elitist and racist nature of (some aspects of) feminism.

Nicholson does provide some examples of those feminist writings which she regards as implicated in ‘false universalising’. But her arguments against them do not survive close examination, not surprisingly, given the basic incoherence of the concept of ‘false universalism’. (See Thompson, 1996: 78ff) One text she discusses is Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone was among those who had, she said, a ‘too casual’ approach to history. (Nicholson, 1990: 5) Arguments like Firestone’s, Nicholson said, are ‘essentialist’, because ‘they project onto all women and men qualities which develop under historically specific conditions’. (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 28) Firestone’s ‘appeal to biological differences between women and men’ did not allow for the way these differences vary across cultures and throughout history (Nicholson, 1990:5), and hence ‘falsely universalised’ Western cultural values. But this is a decidedly peculiar argument, for two reasons. In the first place, the ‘biological difference’ which Firestone was addressing was childbirth. The fact that females give birth and males do not is not a ‘false universal’, but a true one. Childbirth is not a Western cultural value, but something common to the whole human species. In the second place, although Nicholson is quite right to point out the falsity of Firestone’s argument, she does so for the wrong reasons. It is true that, as Nicholson says, childbirth is not the cause of women’s oppression, as Firestone argued it was. But what is wrong with Firestone’s argument is not that she ‘falsely universalises’ childbirth as a biological difference between the sexes—it is, after all, universal. What is wrong about Firestone’s argument is wrong for any cultural context, including her own. She perceived pregnancy and childbirth as inherently oppressive of women, and hence could only recommend that they be abolished by technological means. She did not see that their oppressiveness to women was a consequence of their happening under conditions of male domination, and that they could be a source of joy and excitement if women had control over the conditions under which they got pregnant and gave birth. Hence, the problem with Firestone’s argument was not that she made inappropriate generalisations from her own culture to other cultures; the problem was that it was false for her own culture as well.
Childbirth is not inherently oppressive, even in the West. And neither is women’s lack of control over the conditions under which they get pregnant and give birth peculiar to the West. Nor does the issue of women’s taking control over their own bodies and reproductive capacities have relevance only for ‘white, middle-class’ women.

Other examples Nicholson gives of ‘essentialist’ and ‘historically casual’ feminist attempts to locate the cause of women’s oppression are:

the postulation by many influential feminist anthropologists in the 1970s of a cross-cultural domestic/public separation, … later appeals in the late 1970s and early 1980s to women’s labor, to women’s sexuality, and to women’s primary responsibility for childbearing [sic—Does she mean childbearing? How can women not have responsibility for childbearing?]. In all of these cases, aspects of modern Western culture were postulated as present in all or most of human history. (Nicholson, 1990: 5-6)

It is true that ‘cross-cultural’ generalisations are suspect, not, however, because they are ‘essentialist’ or ‘ahistorical’, but because they are imperialistic. Anthropology is a framework originating in Western colonialism. The speaking position of the anthropologist reflects that origin, as do ‘cross-cultural’ comparisons, which are unidirectional, imposed from the West upon other (more or less) ‘primitive’ cultures without reciprocity. It is difficult to imagine, for example, the Trobriand Islanders studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, studying in their turn British social mores and customs. Or a group from the highlands of Papua New Guinea studying, say, the denizens of the highlands of Scotland. Or the Kmer people of Cambodia studying the tribal arrangements of the citizens of the US.

But Nicholson’s account is too scanty to count as evidence for the grand generalisation about the ‘white, middle-class’ nature of feminist theory with which she began. She does not tell us which aspects of ‘women’s labour’ and ‘women’s sexuality’ are ‘white’ and ‘middle-class’, and which are not. Neither does she tell us

5. To say as much is not to suggest that individual anthropologists are inevitably complicit with Western imperialism. There are many anthropologists who devote the whole of their working lives to providing for the people they live with and work among access to Western resources the people would not otherwise have had.
what is peculiarly 'white' and 'middle-class' about the 'domestic/public separation'. Even women who are not 'white' or 'middle-class' have to struggle with the conflicting demands of paid work in the public sphere and unpaid work in the domestic sphere, of dependence on a male wage, or lack of access to one. And given the world-wide domination of Western economic and cultural imperialism, a critique of Western values, institutions and practices is not entirely irrelevant to the 'Third World'. (For critiques of the massive destruction, amounting to nothing less than cultural and physical extermination, visited on the 'Third World' by the economic policies of the West, aided and abetted by the economic elites of the 'Third World', see: Waring, 1988; George, 1990[1984]; George, 1990).

Another of Nicholson's examples concerns the work of 'writers such as Chodorow'. On this occasion she says that 'the categories that they employ, such as mothering, are not situated within a specific cultural and historical context'. But this assertion is absurd. Categories, as linguistic entities, cannot avoid being culturally and historically specific, whether that specificity is spelled out or not. Problems arise if generalisations made to fit one cultural and historical context are inappropriately and imperialistically applied to another. Whether or not Chodorow did this, is not entirely clear. Sometimes she limited the scope of her generalisations to 'our society', 'the Western family', 'capitalist industrialization', 'the contemporary reproduction of mothering', and sometimes she referred to 'all societies', 'transhistorical facts', etc. But even if she did overgeneralise from her own historical situation, merely pointing that out does not falsify her entire thesis. (See: Yeatman, 1990: 291, for a similar argument). If inappropriate generalisation is a problem in Chodorow's work, that can be countered by citing occasions and situations where the generalisations do not apply. This Nicholson did not do. And by focusing attention on the postmodernist fantasy of 'essentialism', she avoided addressing the very real problems with Chodorow's work—her insistence that women's mothering is responsible for male domination, and her failure to recognise the centrality of the penis-as-phallus in the inculcation of the meanings, values, beliefs and practices of male supremacy. Instead we are presented with an array of 'postmodernist' mantras—'essentialism', 'totalisation', 'universalisation', 'ahistorical', 'transcendent reason', 'rhetoric', 'desire', 'identity', 'difference', 'modernity' and, most obfuscating of all, 'gender'.

Feminism 'white and middle-class'?—Denise Thompson
Another example of a less than successful attempt to demonstrate the ‘racism’ of a particular feminist text concerns Audre Lorde’s criticisms of Mary Daly’s book, *Gyn/Ecology*. In ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’ (Lorde, 1979b), Lorde has two main objections to Daly’s book. Firstly, she criticises Daly for portraying only ‘white, western-european, judeo-christian … goddess-images’ and for ignoring images of powerful and divine women from Africa. Daly, said Lorde, ‘dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women’ (pp.67-8). But my own reading of Daly’s references to goddesses in *Gyn/Ecology* is that her purpose was not to present a feminist mythology within which women could find images of female strength and divinity, but rather to criticise and expose the ways in which Western European patriarchal religion and mythology had co-opted and distorted the goddess-worship which preceded it. On that interpretation, Daly’s confining of the discussion to Europe was intrinsic to her purpose.6 As well, Daly’s discussion of goddesses did not portray them as figures of female strength and divinity, since she saw them as already containing elements of male supremacist distortion. For Daly they hardly provided unambiguous role models for women to emulate or look up to, since they were already characterisations of male supremacist purposes and values.

Lorde’s second objection was that Mary Daly depicted non-European women only ‘as victims and preyers-upon each other’ (p.67). But to the extent that this is a problem, it is one which is common to feminism in general. How is it possible to speak about the atrocities committed against women, while at the same time asserting women’s strength? Besides, Daly did not confine her depiction of women’s victimisation to other cultures—most of the second part of her book is devoted to Western Europe, to the witchcrazes and modern Western medical practices.

The basis of Lorde’s complaint that Daly’s text was complicit with racism is not clear. If the reason for that complaint was that the text was not even-handed, it rests on a misinterpretation of the text. Daly did not, it is true, portray any ‘black foremothers’, ‘black women’s heritage’ or images of ‘noneuropean female strength and power’. But neither did she portray any images of *European* female strength and power. It has

6. Mary Daly made the same point in her autobiography, *Outercourse*, where she said that she had pointed out in a conversation with Audre Lorde that *Gyn/Ecology* was not ‘a compendium of goddesses’, but was intended as a discussion of ‘those goddesses which were direct sources of christian myth’ (Daly, 1993: 232).
never been Mary Daly's purpose to provide historical examples of female strength and power, because for her, history is invariably patriarchal. For Daly, women's strength starts now, with radical feminism, and with women's complete separation from patriarchal institutions, meanings and values. Whatever criticisms might be leveled against the possibility of that project, it is in principle available to all women without exception. Lorde's second objection to Daly's text—that it depicted women of 'other cultures' only as victims—is also a misinterpretation of Daly's project, although even in the misinterpretation it is even-handed. All women are victims of patriarchal practices (if that is the way it must be interpreted). But Daly's critique was not primarily a depiction of women at all, but an exposure of the workings of male supremacy. Women are its chief (although not the only) victims because male supremacy thrives at women's expense. But to demand that women, any women, not be portrayed as victims is to demand that the critique of male supremacy cease.

*Gyn/Ecology* has, however, been subjected to other criticisms on the grounds of its racism. In an article published in the lesbian journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, Elly Bulkin criticised Daly's selective quotation from two of the texts she used in her research. (Bulkin, 1980) Bulkin argued that Daly discussed the first of these books, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published in 1927, only in favourable terms, while ignoring its racism. Bulkin illustrated this racism with excerpts from Mayo's book. Mayo depicted 'the Indian' in terms of "inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself", and characterised 'the Hindu's woes, material and spiritual' in terms of 'poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness, not forgetting that subconscious conviction of inferiority which he forever bares and advertises by his gnawing and imaginative alertness to social affronts'. She also described Indian men as "'broken-nerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients'", in comparison with "'the Anglo-Saxon'" of the same age, who "'is just coming into the full glory of manhood'". She also said that Indians would never be free of British rule because "'their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or hold the reins of government'". (Bulkin, 1980: 125-6)

These descriptions are undoubtedly racist, and it is true that Daly did not mention them in her discussion of Mayo's text. But Daly’s omission can be defended, at least
in part, in light of the reason why Mayo was so scathingly contemptuous of Indian men. That reason was the entrenched practice within the Indian higher castes of marrying young girls to much older men. Mayo's argument was that men who had been mothered by children would never be fit to rule. Her intemperate racist language was a consequence of her horror at the cruelties which marital rape visited on the often very small girl children: "Aged 9. Day after marriage. Left femur dislocated, pelvis crushed out of shape, flesh hanging in shreds ...", etc. (Daly, 1978: 121) She was also outraged that widows were forced to throw themselves, or were forcibly thrown, onto their husbands' funeral pyres. The racism of her text was directed towards men who treated women and girl children abominably. While that does not excuse it—her outrage could have been expressed in other ways, and racism is also abominable—it does make it more understandable. Her argument can also be criticised on other grounds, for example, her implicit belief that men mothered by adult women are fit to rule; her lack of awareness that high caste male children were unlikely to have been cared for by their child mothers, but by adult female servants (for a similar argument to Mayo's, in relation to the British ruling class and its custom of 'the Nanny', see: Gathorne-Hardy, 1972); and her lack of awareness that the rape of female children is not confined to the Indian subcontinent. Nonetheless, what must not be forgotten in any criticism of Mayo's work is her exposure of what are atrocities under any definition, not only a feminist one. It must also not be forgotten that she was fighting in the interests of women, for a world where such things as the mutilation and casual murder of girl children and the enforced immolation of women would not exist. The racism in Mayo's text was directed towards the very men who were responsible for the suffering. Challenging the racism would mean defending the men who systematically raped and murdered women and children. It is not uncommon in the feminist 'race' debate, to find that challenging racism means defending the men of the subordinated race (e.g. Spelman, 1988), rather than black or third world or indigenous women whose interests are once again elided in favour of men. That Mary Daly refused or neglected to do this is not altogether to her discredit.

Bulkin does, however, make a more cogent point in relation to her discussion of another text cited by Mary Daly, G. J. Barker-Benfield's The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women in Nineteenth Century America, published in 1976.
Daly used this text as a source of information about the career of J. Marion Simms, known in the US at the time of his death in 1883 as ‘the father of gynecology’. Daly quite rightly points out that Simms was a brutal butcher who perpetrated the most appalling tortures on women in the guise of ‘science’, and who was honoured by the male medical establishment for doing so. But as Bulkin points out, although Daly does acknowledge that Simms originally learned his vile trade on the bodies of black female slaves, that acknowledgment is cursory. And yet Barker-Benfield’s text describes Simms’ experiments on black women in some detail, along with Simms’ own admission that he used black women, some of whom he bought for the purpose, because as slaves they had no power to refuse and no right of redress. If Daly’s purpose was to expose the worst excesses of male brutality towards women, her failure to present her readers with an account of what Simms did to black women looks suspiciously like complicity with the racist belief that what happens to black women is unimportant. The same suspicion arises in relation to Daly’s discussion of the experimental use on women of contraceptive technology. She allows that ‘low-income and nonwhite’ women are ‘victimized in a special way’, but she says no more about this, and immediately proceeds to discuss ‘well-educated (miseducated) upper-middle-class women’. While her discussion is apt and to the point, in failing to discuss what was done to black and third world women, she once again passed up an opportunity to expose some of the most chilling aspects of gynocide. (Bulkin, 1980: 126-7; Daly, 1978: 225-7, 259) Perhaps it is this kind of thing that Audre Lorde was alluding to in her criticisms of Gyn/Ecology. But unfortunately she did not say so.

Another example of a position which failed to substantiate arguments to the effect that feminism is, was or has been ‘racist’, concerns a paper by Hazel Carby, ‘White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood’. (Carby, 1982) In this paper, Carby asserted that ‘most contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of black women’. She said that this inadequacy cannot be redressed by simply adding black women into already existing feminist theory. What was required, she said, was to ‘challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent mainstream feminist thought’ (p. 213). She then proceeded to analyse three concepts which she identified as central to feminism—‘the family’, ‘patriarchy’ and ‘reproduction’—and argued
that it was doubtful whether these concepts could be applied to the history of black women’s oppression and struggle (p.214).

It is not entirely clear why Carby chose these three categories in particular as central to feminism. Presumably they were designated as such in the type of feminism she was reading—all the texts she criticises are socialist feminist texts. The term ‘patriarchy’, in the sense of male domination, is arguably the central concept of feminism; but ‘the family’ and ‘reproduction’ (terms which could be taken to refer to the same social phenomenon) are not central at all unless they are identified as male dominant.

In the case of ‘the family’, Carby argued that it was not always oppressive for black women because the black family has often been the site of struggle against racial oppression. But although this might be true enough in relation to black resistance, it is beside the point. Black families could be both a site of resistance to racism, and be oppressive for women at one and the same time. When Carby herself acknowledges that ‘we would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us’, she has already conceded the whole of the feminist point about ‘the family’, and hence its relevance to the experiences of black women. She does not, however, acknowledge the reason for ‘the family’s’ oppressiveness to women, i.e. male domination. (Neither does the quotation she uses as an example of feminist theorising about ‘the family’, a passage from Michèle Barrett’s Women’s Oppression Today). Indeed, in her argument against the relevance of the concept of ‘dependency’ for black feminists, she denies the existence of male domination within black families where women are heads of households, and where women are not dependent on a male wage because of the high levels of black male unemployment. But male domination is not limited to the behaviour of individual men as husbands and fathers, and it is unlikely that black women are untouched by the effects of male domination such as male violence and poverty. Hence this is not an argument against the relevance of feminism to the experiences of black women, since the feminist exposure of male domination is not confined to families, black or white, and includes the recognition of the existence of hierarchies of domination among men.
She does make one point which appears to support her claim to identify racism within feminism. She says that some feminist writings portray the West as 'more "enlightened" or "progressive"' than the 'Third World', and the latter as 'backward'. She provides two quotations from a paper by Maxine Molyneux, the second one of which does indeed appear to support Carby's contention. That quotation reads:

There can be little doubt that on balance the position of women within imperialist, i.e. advanced capitalist societies is, for all its limitations, more advanced than in less developed capitalist and non-capitalist societies. In this sense the changes brought by imperialism to Third World societies may, in some circumstances, have been historically progressive. (Carby, 1982: 217; Molyneux, 1981: 4)

Carby interprets this to mean that 'since "Third World" women are outside of capitalist relations of production, entering capitalist relations is, necessarily, an emancipating move'. (Carby, 1982: 217) But this quotation omits Molyneux's provisos and qualifications on this point. In the paper cited, Molyneux went on to acknowledge that 'of course imperialism has also had negative consequences for women'. She said that capitalist employment conditions for women in the Third World 'are often extremely oppressive—whether in urban sweat-shops, free-zone economies or rural plantations'. She said that 'development programmes' have often worsened women's situations by eroding the respected statuses women had before colonisation, and by making use of existing forms of women's subordination. And she deplored the growth of large-scale prostitution and sex tourism as consequences of Western imperialism (pp. 4-5). Molyneux's point was that the abolition of such traditional practices as 'polygyny, the brideprice, child marriages, seclusion, and forms of mutilation such as footbinding or female "circumcision" (Molyneux, 1981: 3), could only advance the cause of women's emancipation, whether that abolition was a consequence of imperialism or of the need for economic 'development' within Third World countries. She was also concerned to point out that, too often, such traditions were lauded in the name of 'national authenticity', while women's own demands to be free from traditional constraints were dismissed as 'foreign influences' or an 'imperialist plot' (p. 5).
Carby's discussion misinterpreted Molyneux's task. Molyneux did not subscribe to 'the assumption that it is only through the development of a Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labour that the potential for the liberation of women can increase' (Carby, 1982: 222). On the contrary, Molyneux explicitly argued against that view. She referred to its 'economism and reductionism', and pointed out that it involved a failure 'either to problematize relations between the sexes or to acknowledge the differential effect of class relations on men and women'. Molyneux also pointed out that this failure was not a mere oversight on the part of 'socialist states', but the result of 'a quite conscious promotion of "motherhood" and of the idea of women as naturally suited to this role [of domestic labour and childcare] because of their supposed "spiritual, moral and physical needs"'. (Molyneux, 1981: 9-11)

Her task was to compare the record of socialist countries with their official stated policies on women's emancipation. In the case of the Third World, far from arguing for the 'progressiveness' of capitalist relations, Molyneux argued the exact opposite. 'Whatever the failures of socialist society', she said, 'it is evident that in the Third World its record is nonetheless impressive when matched against capitalist societies of comparable levels of development and religio-cultural background' (p. 5). Molyneux did not argue that Third World countries were 'backward' in comparison with the 'progressive' West, as Carby said she did: 'Maxine Molyneux falls straight into this trap of "Third Worldism" as "backwardness" ... foot-binding, clitoridectomy, female "circumcision" and other forms of mutilation of the female body have been described as "feudal residues" ... linked in reductionist ways to a lack of technological development'. (Carby, 1982: 216, 222) Although Molyneux used the term 'feudal residues' in the first of the passages quoted by Carby, Molyneux was herself quoting from what she referred to as 'official literature'. She was pointing out that this was the way traditional practices were characterised by 'Third World post-revolutionary states', when those practices were seen by the ruling parties in those states as 'an obstacle to economic and social development'. (Molyneux, 1981: 4) She was not presenting this view as her own opinion, and hence Carby's arguments against it (pp. 222, 227) are irrelevant as a critique of her position. Molyneux did not use the West or capitalism as the exemplar of progress. Her point of comparison was the historical past of those countries themselves. Her criterion of progress
throughout the paper was the degree to which women had been emancipated within
nation states which claimed to be working towards that goal. On the feminist
criterion of women’s liberation, the abolition of cruelty and injustice towards women
is progress, and it is unlikely to be only ‘Western feminists’ who are saying so.

There are feminist texts which obliterate the existence of women of racial, ethnic and
cultural minorities. This obliteration, at least as it relates to US black women, is
succinctly expressed in the title of the above-mentioned anthology of writings on
Black Women’s Studies: ‘All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men’. (Hull,
Scott and Smith, eds, 1982) But the problem is a consequence of ignoring the feminist
insight that all ‘human’ categories are automatically male unless care is taken to
focus attention on women.

The problem is exemplified in two papers by Catharine Stimpson, dating from 1970
and 1971, and reprinted in 1988. The first paper, ‘Black Culture/White Teacher’, is an
account of the political contradictions faced by a white teacher teaching black
literature. With the benefit of hindsight gained since the paper was first published,
Stimpson herself recognises that this text excludes black women writers. The paper,
she says in the Introduction, ‘makes grievous, ironic errors. Using the generic he, I
write as if all black writers are male. This pronomial reductiveness erases black
women writers and their daunting, renewing texts’. (Stimpson, 1988: xv) She allowed
the paper to be reprinted without amendment, however, and she did not comment
on the second paper, although it compounds the errors of the first. This paper, ‘“Thy
Neighbour’s Wife, Thy Neighbour’s Servants”: Women’s Liberation and Black Civil
Rights’, does sometimes mention black women. But unless they are mentioned
explicitly, they drop out of the account altogether. For example, towards the end of
the paper, Stimpson says: ‘women [sic] use blacks to describe themselves’. She goes
on to quote at some length from a women’s liberation pamphlet which draws the
analogy between ‘women’ and ‘blacks’ no less than eleven times: ‘1. Women, like
black slaves, belong to a master ... 2. Women, like black slaves, have a personal
relationship to the men who are their masters. 3. Women, like blacks, get their
identity and status from white men ... 6. Women, like blacks, sustain the white man
(etc.)’. Stimpson admits to liking this pamphlet, although she eventually disagrees
with it. Her disagreement, however, is not because of its erasure of black women, but
because it is parasitic on black politics. That women have been excluded from the
category 'black', she does not appear to notice.

The problem is inextricably entwined with her main argument, which concerns the
failure of black and women's groups to find common cause despite their common
enemy, 'white men and their culture'. The argument sets up two separate and
symmetrical categories, 'women and blacks', which leave no place for those who live
in both categories. The crucial error, for feminist purposes, of such arguments is their
failure to apply the feminist insight into the male supremacist constitution of the
male as the 'human' norm. All 'human' categories under male supremacist
conditions are male, unless specifically stated otherwise, or 'marked', to use a
linguistic term. (Spender, 1987[1980]: 19-24) The category 'blacks', too, is male; here
too, 'male' is the default option, the 'neutral' referent which switches in
automatically, and which can be displaced only by adding extra qualifiers. It may be
that it is this kind of exclusion of black women and women from other cultural
minorities, that black feminists are referring to when they accuse 'white, middle-
class women' of racism. But the error in Stimpson's paper, as with all such
arguments, is due to a failure of feminist commitment, a failure to recognise the male
supremacist implications of using any term referring to a category of human
individuals without explicitly rectifying the exclusion of the female.

The charge that feminism is 'white and middle-class' or 'Western' needs to be
carefully and critically examined. It needs to be subjected to the same scrutiny, open
to the same public debate as anything else said in the name of feminism. I want to
suggest that it not be merely routinely reiterated because it is so obvious it needs no
discussion, or because it is so threatening it silences debate, or because the questions
it raises are just too hard. For my own part, I have found the charge meaningless
because it appears to rely on a view of feminism which I do not recognise. I say it
'appears' to rely on such a view, because I have not yet found any instance of the
charge where what feminism means is made explicit. But as far as I have been able to
establish, the charge relies on a view of feminism which makes no reference to male
domination. Without the unifying politics of opposition to male supremacy,
'feminism' becomes nothing more than a multiplicity of sometimes antagonistic
categories of ‘women’, who have nothing in common because some are more privileged than others. This is a ‘feminism’ of political stagnation.

Although raising these issues goes against the grain of most of what has been said in the name of an anti-racist feminism, there is no benefit to be gained, either for feminism or for the anti-racist struggle, in refusing to address the problems because they are too hard, too confusing, or too threatening. Ignoring the problems will not make them go away. It leads to political paralysis because, as it stands at the moment, the debate provides no ground from which to start righting the wrongs which are supposedly at issue. But a feminist anti-racist politics must involve more than the simple acceptance and meek reiteration of anything and everything said by or on behalf of women of colour without challenge, argument or debate. Otherwise it does a grave injustice both to feminism’s own insights and political priorities, and to those of the anti-racist struggle.

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The peer-review process

UK Women's Studies Network conference, Stirling, Scotland, 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 the organisers (before the conference)

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. 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 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.

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7. [Added January 2004: This is not, of course, the way to win friends and influence people (as a friend of mine 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.]
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 postgraduate 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,⁸ of repressive tolerance of anything and everything said by or on behalf of women of colour, 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.⁹

Yours sincerely,
Denise Thompson

The conference organisers’ reply

[July 2009: The conference organisers replied to this letter, saying that I 'made a number of rather crude assumptions about the process and the personalities involved in refereeing group’, thus turning the issue into

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⁸ [Added January 2004: 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.]

⁹ [Added January 2004: I did go to the conference. My friend talked me into it, and arranged a cheap train ticket and billeting for me.]
a matter of personal insult, rather than dealing with the substantive political issues I raised. They also said that they had been ‘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*’ (their emphasis). My response to this is to note that ‘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. They said, too, that ‘the ethnic background of the presenter was certainly not an issue’, that the only criteria were ‘the content and style of the abstract’, and that ‘the abstract itself was not very clear, despite the guidelines on offer’.

*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.

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.

[Added January 2004: I delivered only the first part of this paper 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. 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.]
Australian Women's Studies Association conference, Perth, Western Australia, 1996

[Added January 2004: I sent another version of the 'White and Middle-Class' paper to the organisers of the AWSA conference to be held in Perth, Western Australia. They rejected it, too. To give the conference organisers their due, the reason they gave—that the paper had already been given elsewhere—was a sensible one, and they did give me the opportunity to submit another paper. But for a number of reasons, the decision was not as sensible as it appeared at first sight. The time was short and I didn't have another paper immediately available. There had been no indication in the pre-publicity for the conference that previously presented papers would not be accepted for this conference. And then there was that question raised at the AGM of the UK Women's Studies Network at the conference in Stirling—when did the policy of accepting all submissions to feminist conferences change, and why? I found these circumstances highly suspicious, and said so.

This was hardly likely to influence the organisers to feel kindly towards me (as a friend of mine was later to point out). But there isn't any nice way to say I think you've made a mistake. And my suspicions were confirmed next year, when one of the organisers, in her role as Australasian and Asian editor of the journal, Women's Studies International Forum, rejected a longer version of the paper on the advice of two readers who couldn't read what I said (see below). All three wanted me to re-write the paper in line with the framework I was criticising. I declined.]
To the conference organisers

6.7.1996

Dear Conference Organisers,

Why are you accepting some papers and rejecting others? Why have you decided to rescind the usual policy for feminist conferences that all proposals be accepted? You say you are 'overwhelmed' with papers, but is that a good enough reason for imposing criteria of exclusion? Surely a large number of proposals is a cause for rejoicing not dismay, especially given how far Perth is from the populous centres of the east coast, and how poor women are. You say that my paper has been rejected because it has already been presented at the Congress on Women. But papers presented at the Congress were sparsely attended (unless they were presented at plenaries by someone more important than the rest of us), and hence were heard by very few women. Any paper presented there is going to be 'new' to most women.

The paper I proposed for the AWSA conference is the culmination of months of work, including 2 or 3 previous versions. It is simply not possible to write anything 'new' in the time available. I am what is euphemistically known as an 'independent scholar'. In practice, that means being excluded from academic employment (money, in crude terms), status and recognition. Feminist conferences are the only access I have to public forums of debate, and I have had that access only because feminist conferences have had a policy of non-exclusion. As soon as criteria of selection are applied, my experience has been that my proposals are invariably rejected, despite my years of work. Whether that is because what I say is unpopular in certain circles, or whether it is simply that my work is unknown (and saying unpopular things is the best way of staying unknown), the result is the same. What little access I have to public debate is blocked.

As a consequence of your decision, I and others who proposed papers which were presented at the Congress have been excluded from the AWSA conference in terms of a rule we knew nothing about. If that is the 'future of feminism', I want nothing to do with it.

Yours faithfully,

Denise Thompson
A letter to a friend
6.7.1996

Dear [...],

... Thanks for sending me the extract from the BSA [British Sociological Association] Newsletter, but I don't know what you thought I could do with the information. I'm unlikely to be in the UK next year, and even if I were, there is no way that anything I said would be accepted for the 'Transformations' conference, since I disagree so fundamentally with that paradigm. Despite what they say, they don't want to 're-think' anything. There is a dogma afoot here, viz. 'the questioning of "woman" and "women" as foundational categories, and the Black and post-colonial critiques of ethnocentrism in white feminist discourse'. Any attempt to make inroads into the dogma just creates confusion at best, and antagonism at worst. If the conference were happening here I'd give it a go, but only to add yet one more rejection to my growing pile.

'Paranoid', you say? But I can't ignore the evidence. I've had to learn painfully that challenging entrenched doctrine carries penalties. Naively, I didn't expect it. I thought that I was simply clarifying the nature of feminism in order to get beyond certain paralysing political contradictions. I should have realised that the contradictions only existed because there were vested interests in keeping them on the boil. Nonetheless, I have learned a few things. One of the most recent is a peculiarity of the arguments opposing what I say. Both in the case of defining feminism, and in the case of what I say about the 'race' debate, no one has challenged what I actually say. What has been challenged is my right to say it. No one has disagreed with the content of what I say. Instead, I am told that I ought not to be saying it. For example, I have been told that I ought not define feminism—because I have no right to say who is a feminist and who is not, because defining feminism is some kind of dogmatic imposition, etc.—but not that the definition I propose is wrong. I have been told that I ought not to say what I am saying about 'race'—because I will be attacked, because 'we' ought not to criticise 'them', because race politics is entitled to its polemical stances and has nothing to do with truth, etc.—but not that what I am saying is wrong, how it is wrong, or how it might be improved.
You yourself have said something to the effect that the problem with what I say is that I set up my own paradigm and then make everything else to fit. (Have I understood you correctly?) But why is that a problem? Not only do I explicitly acknowledge that that is what I do—it is the crux of my argument about feminism being a moral and political commitment—who doesn’t do it? No one speaks from outside systems of meaning and value. The only difference between what I do and what happens anyway, is that, whereas I can see the importance of struggling to acknowledge the moral and political stance I am taking, relations of ruling proceed as business as usual to the extent that they remain covert and disguised. We cannot afford a 'tolerance' which allows complicity with male supremacist meanings and values to pass unchallenged, especially when they masquerade as ‘feminism’.

The problem is that you and I have had too few chances to talk and argue things through. Unfortunately, I don’t see that changing in the near future. Oh, well.

Lots of love,
Denise

[July 2009: This friend tried to get me to see that I wasn’t helping my cause by what she saw as my ‘antagonistic’ attitude. ‘How does anything you say in the letter challenge your marginalisation as an independent scholar and increase your access to feminist debate?’ she asked. She said that she was ‘really not happy about the slippage from the rejection of a repeat paper/rejection of content/exclusion of yourself as a scholar’, and asked, ‘does rejection of a paper in these terms invariably lead to or include the last two?’ But her concern, genuine and caring though it was, missed the point I was making. I was not complaining that I, personally, had been excluded, but warning that exclusions have political consequences (which I outlined in more detail to the conference organisers later – see below). The friend’s advice individualised the political point I was trying to make. This may have been a reasonable interpretation of my original letter to the conference organisers, but subsequent discussion was unable to shift this view back to the level of the political. (I was to encounter the same difficulty later with the peer
reviewers of the papers I sent off to academic journals attempting to theorise individualism as a political ideology. See especially: ‘Feminism and the problem of individualism’ (1997); and ‘The trouble with individualism ...: a discussion with some examples’ (1999))

A reply to a friend

15.7.1996

Dear [...],

We really are talking past each other. Let me take your objections to what you see as my arguments first:

1. I did not say that 'the procedures used for selection' by the AWSA organisers were 'complicit with male supremacist meanings and values'. You have drawn an inference which isn't there. My reference to 'male supremacist etc.' was in the context of my discussion of 'systems of meanings and values' and the importance of making those explicit because they happen anyway. That discussion followed on from my comments on the 'Transformations' conference in the UK. Except for the first paragraph, I didn't discuss the organisers' decision at all in my letter to you.

2. You say that you are not happy with what you refer to as 'the slippage from the rejection of a repeat paper/rejection of content/exclusion of yourself as a scholar'. You then ask whether the first 'invariably leads to or includes the last two'. Why do you interpret my letter to the AWSA organisers that way? Let me suggest a different interpretation:

a. I started by asking the organisers why they had decided to rescind the usual policy at feminist conferences of accepting all proposals. (By the way, the question is not original to me. It was asked by a woman at the annual general meeting of the UK WSNA about the organisation of the WSN conference at Stirling in Scotland last year. She did not get an answer). I said that I was not convinced by their reasons, firstly, because a large number of papers is a good thing not a bad one, and because the papers at the Congress were heard by very few women, the sessions being sparsely attended, and hence would be new to most women.

b. My references to my own experiences in the second paragraph were intended to illustrate the consequences of exclusion for whatever reason, with the only case
study I have access to, my own. Nowhere did I say that the organisers had rejected my paper because of its content, nor that they had rejected me personally. I do not have access to sufficient information to know whether that is the case or not. I was pointing out that the consequence for me (I don't know about anyone else) was that the organisers’ decision meant that I was prevented from participating in the only public forum I have access to. Since there are personal historical reasons why feminist conferences are my only access to public debate, I gave a brief account of what I thought were the most relevant ones.

c. I concluded by pointing out that they were excluding papers in terms of a rule which no one knew about.

This interpretation is less 'antagonistic' than the letter (isn't it?). Nonetheless, it is possible to interpret the letter itself in the terms outlined above. By interpreting it in the way you did, you are implying that I was making snide insinuations about the organisers' motives. You ought to know me better than that. If I know that something is the case, I say so, I don't rely on sly hints.

When you refer to my 'unproductive' and 'too antagonistic' framework, are you saying that this is what is responsible for my 'marginalisation as an independent scholar', and my 'exclusion from the dialogue', as you put it? But I was perfectly polite when I made my initial proposal to the AWSA organisers. I only got antagonistic after my paper was rejected. In fact, I've been polite for years. It's only recently, since I have felt I had a large enough body of work to justify it, that I've started complaining about being excluded.

And there is still the general political point I made that exclusions have consequences. The consequence which most concerns me is the exclusion of radical feminism from one of the few public forums left. I am not talking about anyone's intentions or motives here. I am talking the structural realities of academic feminism. Whether you know it or not, 'women's studies', and even more so, 'gender studies', is dominated by frameworks antagonistic, or at the very least indifferent, to radical feminism. As a consequence, exclusionary policies are going to hit radical feminism hardest.

I've reached the end of the page, so I'll finish here.
Love, Denise
To the conference organisers

5.8.1996

Dear [...],

Thank you for your letter and detailed explanation. I appreciate your attempt to clarify the situation. I also appreciate the conference organisers making the time in what I am sure is a very busy schedule to discuss the issues raised in my letter. However, there are still misunderstandings which I would like to try and clear up.

Perhaps the best way to start is by trying to remain on the level of the political, rather than the personal (although the two will keep getting entwined, since I can only know the political through personal experience). I started my letter to you with a political question about why you had decided to rescind the usual policy at feminist conferences of accepting all proposals. That question has a history. It is not original to me. I heard it asked by a woman at the WSN conference at Stirling in Scotland in June last year. At Stirling, the answer the questioner received was that accepting all proposals was not a Women’s Studies’ policy because it wasn’t written down, and that therefore the conference organisers had no obligation to inform WSN members before changing it. The questioner persisted with her inquiry by saying that it may not have been a written policy, but that it was a policy nonetheless in the sense that it was standard practice, and she wanted to know when it had changed. The response was simply to reiterate that conference organisers had no obligation … etc.

The question’s history also includes a conversation I had with Sheila Jeffreys about the change in policy. She said that it was becoming more common in the UK to apply selection procedures to proposals for Women’s Studies conferences, and that this was having political consequences. I said did that mean that radical feminism was being excluded because it is unpopular in academe, and its proponents were less likely to be well-known, and hence more easily excluded, and she said ‘yes’. This is in fact the crux of my political worry about policies of selection and rejection, that is, that it is one more strategy in the ‘academic feminist’ war against radical feminism.

Let me hasten to say that I do not think that this is so in the case of the Perth conference. I do not believe, and I nowhere meant to imply in my first letter, that the

[July 2009: Not included here]
conference organisers were motivated to reject papers on political grounds. I accept your assurance that your decision was not motivated by disapproval of my political position or my ideas. I have sufficient knowledge of your own work, […], to know that that would not have been the case. But what I have called a 'strategy' is not always deliberate (although given the sheer volume of attacks on radical feminism, it is sometimes shockingly overt). There is no need for a conspiracy theory when the academic system operates as business as usual, and radical feminism is already excluded. All I am saying to you (collectively) is that you are participating in a precedent which has worrying implications for radical feminism's future on the public agenda. In my first letter, I was simply drawing your attention to something you seem not to have considered, i.e. the political implications of applying selection criteria.

You say that you are 'completely unaware of' the policy I am talking about. In fact, you disagree that there ever was such a policy. You refer to 'the routine exclusion of men' as evidence that feminism has never had a policy of accepting all proposals for papers at conferences. But why do you equate the exclusion of men with the exclusion of other feminists? Where is the equality here? There are very good feminist reasons why men have been excluded from feminist spaces and occasions—men tend to dominate wherever they are included, and women tend to be reduced to silence because they find it difficult to intervene in the flow of masculine certainty. That the exclusion of men from feminist occasions is justified, is amply demonstrated by the rise and rise of 'gender studies' and 'queer theory'. What are the feminist reasons for excluding work by self-identified feminists? There may indeed be reasons—self-identification as a 'feminist' is not sufficient guarantee of feminist politics. But surely the reasons need to be feminist ones.

Still on the question of feminism's supposed past exclusions, the reference in your letter to 'the various versions of the postmodern/rad fem debates' doesn't say who is doing the excluding of whom. In my experience, it is postmodernism which is hegemonic, and radical feminism which is excluded. Is that what you mean? In that case, are you defining postmodernism as (a) feminism? I don't. I see it as anti-feminist, as part of the backlash against feminism masquerading as 'feminism' itself. (I have argued the case in more detail in my paper in the anthology edited by Diane Bell and Renate Klein, Radically Speaking, and in my PhD thesis, Against the
Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning, of which [my friend] has a copy). In fact, it is this hegemony of postmodernism which is currently the chief cause of my worry about selection criteria being applied for inclusion at feminist conferences. Although the Perth conference’s selection criteria are not postmodernist, are you really sure they’re feminist?

The reasons why I believe that such a policy did exist stem from my own personal history. (This is what I was attempting to convey in my first letter). It is true that I have never seen the policy written down, nor even heard it stated aloud. The only indication I have that it was policy is the fact that my proposals were accepted. In contrast, whenever selection criteria are applied, even at feminist conferences, my proposals are invariably rejected. Only sometimes are those rejections based on identifiably political grounds, e.g. the HRC ‘Sexualities’ conferences in Canberra (although even there, the ‘reasons’ given were not acknowledged as political—instead, I was given some waffle about dropping off the agenda or some such). Usually, though, the selection criteria are not political in intent (like your own, for example). One of the reasons I referred to my own personal experience was to point out that I am peculiarly placed to be able to raise doubts about the political wisdom of applying selection criteria for whatever reason.

I am sorry you saw my letter as ‘so angry’. ([My friend] saw it as ‘antagonistic’). Yes, I am angry, although not with you. I agree that conference organisers have a right to make their own decisions. It’s a thankless task, the rewards small or non-existent, the criticisms many. (This was another reason for including my personal history in my letter to you—to indicate that my exasperation had a wider focus than the decision of the Perth conference). However, conference organisers also have a responsibility towards the feminism which they represent from a relatively powerful position. They are gate-keeping feminism’s access to the public arena. It is therefore crucial that organisers of feminist conferences be aware of what feminism is and what it is not.

You appear to have assumed that I was asking you to reverse your decision and accept my paper. I was not, for the reasons adduced in the paragraph above. If I had been I would have said so. Anyway, reversing your decision only in my case would have failed to address the political point I was making: that selection criteria have consequences. I illustrated those consequences with the only case study I have
access to, my own. But these personal details appear to have masked the political point I wanted to make. They also appear to have led to misconceptions. For example, my point about being an independent scholar did not relate to how busy I am. In comparison with full-time academics I'm not busy at all. It related to my limited access to arenas of public debate. And my point about the amount of work I have put into my proposed paper was not connected to being an independent scholar, but to the impossibility in the short time available of proposing anything new.

And what do you mean with your reference to 'struggles over who is occupying the higher moral feminist ground'? This is not a struggle I’m engaged in. Why have you interpreted my letter as moralistic? It was certainly critical of your decision, and that implies a judgement that that decision was wrong. But putting it in terms of a 'high moral ground' trivialises what is surely a right to criticise decisions which have consequences both personal and political.

The point of this lengthy epistle is to open up debate. I am not asking you to do or not do anything in particular. I am merely drawing your attention to something you seem to have overlooked. What you do in response to that (including nothing at all) is your decision.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to respond.

Yours

Denise
Women's Studies International Forum

My reply to WSIF

School of Social Sciences
Murdoch University
South Street
Murdoch, WA—6150
17.3.1997
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 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
Feminism ‘white and middle-class’?—Denise Thompson

Signs

[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.]

My reply to Signs

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 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 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.]
Australian Feminist Studies

[January 2004: AFS was the last journal I sent this paper to. After this rejection, no different from any of the others in its lack of insight and stubborn refusal to know, there didn't seem to be any point in continuing. I replied briefly and left it at that. However, I subsequently decided these reports needed a longer response than I gave them at the time, so I've written a belated reply and included it here.]

My replies to AFS

9.11.1998
Research Centre for Women's Studies
The University of Adelaide

Dear [...],

I am writing to express my disquiet at the reasons given for the rejection by Australian Feminist Studies of my paper, 'What does it mean to call feminism White and Middle Class?' I don't want to go into any detail about the misreadings contained in the longer (2-page) report. (The other report is so scanty as not to constitute a reading at all). I just want to make two points which exemplify the problems with the reports. The first point concerns the shorter reader's report which asserted that my paper had not mentioned the work of Mohanty and Spelman (among others). Both of these authors are referenced in the bibliography. Although they are not mentioned by name in the text, it should have been obvious that I had taken their work into consideration (whatever the reader might think of the arguments).

The second point concerns the readers' contention that the texts I discuss are 'out of date'. This suggests to me a worrying erasure of history. The issues I discuss in some detail have not been resolved, 'postcolonial studies' and 'deconstructive approaches' notwithstanding, and they never will be if they are simply left on the record to remain unchallenged.
I'm not asking for a reconsideration of the decision to reject the paper. I didn't expect that it would be accepted, since it has already been rejected a number of times by other feminist journals. Might I suggest, though, that there is something seriously wrong with the 'race' debate within feminism if principled objections cannot be allowed to appear on the public agenda.

[July 2003:] I didn't reply to Reader A in detail at the time because I didn't know what she was talking about with her reference to 'periodisation'. I still don't. However, the misunderstandings need to be challenged, and better late than never.

The first point I want to make involves her mistaken view of what went (and still goes) on with the 'race' discourse in feminism. This is her reference to 'those positioning themselves on either side of the debate', and the implication that there were two sides. There weren't. There was only one position allowed. It was impossible to put the contrary view and say in public that feminism wasn't racist or white and middle-class, and not get howled down or censored. My own experience taught me that, but I also came across no published challenges to the dominant position. They may have been somewhere where I didn't look, and I didn't do an exhaustive search, but I found none, none at all. Of course, in itself this says nothing about the truth or otherwise of assertions that feminism is racist. But it does mean that any view that there were two sides to the debate, or that there was even a debate, is quite simply wrong.

My second point concerns a difference of emphasis, but it is a crucial difference since it is central to the reader's misunderstanding of what I was trying to do. She refers to 'critiques of Daly and Molyneux' and says that I 'offer some persuasive points in defence of both'. But although the text could be read in that way, my purpose was not to 'defend' Daly
and Molyneux. Rather, it was to demonstrate in detail the inadequacy of some influential accusations of racism leveled against feminism, and in doing so, to bring the whole paradigm into question. If these particular accusations don't hold up under close investigation, maybe there's something wrong with the accusation in general. I wasn't defending individuals, I was criticising standpoints. Every single 'peer reviewer' of the paper missed this point, and in missing this point, they disqualified themselves as competent judges.

What Reader A says about 'universalism' is a misreading. I neither asserted that universalism appears in feminist texts nor defined it as 'not feminist at all'. I argued it is meaningless. I referred to the term's 'basic incoherence', and pointed out (a) that it doesn't make any sense to call childbirth a 'false universal', and (b) that the problem with Firestone's argument is not that it's a 'false universalism', but that it's wrong (i.e. childbirth is not the source of women's oppression). By the same token, I didn't say that 'universalising is the exception', I said I can't make any sense of the accusations leveled against texts alleged to be among the worst offenders, e.g. Firestone, Daly, Molyneux. And if no sense can be made of the charge in these cases, perhaps no sense can be made of it at all. By exposing its meaninglessness (at least in these instances), I was calling for a rethinking, and asking that the charge of 'false universalism' not be thrown around mindlessly and indiscriminately.

Reader A's charge that I have a 'difficulty with language' is gobbledegook. To start with, 'the fact that childbearing is universal to women' is not something I 'consider'. It's not a matter of opinion. And yes, it is 'biological reproduction'. How is this a 'mistake'? When she tries to demonstrate my 'mistake', what this reader says is nonsense—
knowledge that women give birth is not 'based upon Western science'. And it may be the case that 'understandings (of whatever) differ in culture and language', but it may also not be the case. People communicate across cultures, etc. all the time, so whether they do or not cannot be decided a priori. Anyway, one of the things that will remain constant throughout all the differences is the fact that women give birth and men do not. As for this reader's assertion that 'there is no inert body we can come back to as the basis upon which feminism rests', that may be true, but it's not a disagreement with what I was saying because I wasn't arguing it. My point was a much, much simpler one—you can't assert that women's role in childbirth is a 'false universalism' because it is universal.

And finally, there is the reader's statement that she doesn't find it 'useful' to 'claim that bringing critical attention to the hierarchical differences between women means ignoring the oppression of women by men'. I agree with this statement (although I find the claim untrue, not useless). Exposing invidious distinctions between women doesn't mean denying male domination, or it ought not to mean that. But in fact it does. And because it does, it's vitally important that any charges of racism or any other form of elitism be thoroughly substantiated and argued for. I found that they were not, and I was often not allowed to say that in public.