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Reni Eddo-Lodge

WHY I'M NO LONGER TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACE

BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS

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For T&T

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

On 22 February 2014, I published a post on my blog. I titled it ‘Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race’.

It read:

> I’m no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the legitimacy of structural racism and its symptoms. I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience. You can see their eyes shut down and harden. It’s like treacle is poured into their ears, blocking up their ear canals. It’s like they can no longer hear us.
>
> This emotional disconnect is the conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their skin colour is the norm and all others deviate from it. At best, white people have been taught not to mention that people of colour are ‘different’ in case it offends us. They truly believe that the experiences of their life as a result of their skin colour can and should be universal. I just can’t engage with the bewilderment and the defensiveness as they try to grapple with the fact that not everyone experiences the world in the way that they do. They’ve never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white, so any time they’re vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront. Their eyes glaze over in boredom or widen in indignation. Their mouths start twitching as they get defensive. Their throats open up as they try to interrupt, itching to talk over you but not really listen, because they need to let you know that you’ve got it wrong.
>
> The journey towards understanding structural racism still requires people of colour to prioritise white feelings. Even if they can hear you, they’re not really listening. It’s like something happens to the words as they leave our mouths and reach their ears. The words hit a barrier of denial and they don’t get any further.
>
> That’s the emotional disconnect. It’s not really surprising, because

they've never known what it means to embrace a person of colour as a true equal, with thoughts and feelings that are as valid as their own. Watching *The Color of Fear*[1] by Lee Mun Wah, I saw people of colour break down in tears as they struggled to convince a defiant white man that his words were enforcing and perpetuating a white racist standard on them. All the while he stared obliviously, completely confused by this pain, at best trivialising it, at worst ridiculing it.

I've written before about this white denial being the ubiquitous politics of race that operates on its inherent invisibility. So I can't talk to white people about race any more because of the consequent denials, awkward cartwheels and mental acrobatics that they display when this is brought to their attention. Who really wants to be alerted to a structural system that benefits them at the expense of others?

I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often coming at it from completely different places. I can't have a conversation with them about the details of a problem if they don't even recognise that the problem exists. Worse still is the white person who might be willing to entertain the possibility of said racism, but who thinks we enter this conversation as equals. We don't.

Not to mention that entering into conversation with defiant white people is a frankly dangerous task for me. As the heckles rise and the defiance grows, I have to tread incredibly carefully, because if I express frustration, anger or exasperation at their refusal to understand, they will tap into their pre-subscribed racist tropes about angry black people who are a threat to them and their safety. It's very likely that they'll then paint me as a bully or an abuser. It's also likely that their white friends will rally round them, rewrite history and make the lies the truth. Trying to engage with them and navigate their racism is not worth that.

Amid every conversation about Nice White People feeling silenced by conversations about race, there is a sort of ironic and glaring lack of understanding or empathy for those of us who have been visibly marked out as different for our entire lives, and live the consequences. It's truly a lifetime of self-censorship that people of colour have to live. The options are: speak your truth and face the reprisal, or bite your tongue and get ahead in life. It must be a strange life, always having permission

to speak and feeling indignant when you're finally asked to listen. It stems from white people's never-questioned entitlement, I suppose.

I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself trying to get this message across, while also toeing a very precarious line that tries not to implicate any one white person in their role of perpetuating structural racism, lest they character assassinate me.

So I'm no longer talking to white people about race. I don't have a huge amount of power to change the way the world works, but I can set boundaries. I can halt the entitlement they feel towards me and I'll start that by stopping the conversation. The balance is too far swung in their favour. Their intent is often not to listen or learn, but to exert their power, to prove me wrong, to emotionally drain me, and to rebalance the status quo. I'm not talking to white people about race unless I absolutely have to. If there's something like a media or conference appearance that means that someone might hear what I'm saying and feel less alone, then I'll participate. But I'm no longer dealing with people who don't want to hear it, wish to ridicule it and, frankly, don't deserve it.

After I pressed publish, the blog post took on a life of its own. Years later, I still meet new people, in different countries and different situations, who tell me that they've read it. In 2014, as the post was being linked to all over the Internet, I braced myself for the usual slew of racist comments. But the response was markedly different, so much so that it surprised me.

There was a clear racial split in how the post was received. I got lots of messages from black and brown people. There were many 'thank you's and lots of 'you've articulated my experience'. There were reports of tears, and a little bit of debate about how to approach the problem, with education being rated highly as a solution to bridge the communication gap. Reading these messages was a relief. I knew how difficult it was to put that feeling of frustration into words, so when people got in contact and thanked me for explaining something they'd always struggled to, I was glad that it had served them. I knew that if I was feeling less alone, then they were feeling less alone too.

What I wasn't expecting was an outpouring of emotion from white

people who felt that by deciding to stop talking to white people about race, I was taking something away from the world, and that this was an absolute tragedy. ‘Heartbreaking’ seemed to be the word that best described this sentiment.

‘I’m so damn sorry you have been made to feel like this,’ one commenter wrote. ‘As a white person I’m painfully embarrassed by the systemic privilege we deny and enjoy on a daily basis. And painfully embarrassed that I didn’t even realise it myself until about ten years ago.’

Another commenter pleaded: ‘Don’t stop talking to white people, your voice is clear and important, and there are ways of getting through.’ Another one, this time from a black commenter, read: ‘It would be such a painstaking task to persuade people, but we should not stop.’ And a final, definitive comment read simply: ‘Please don’t give up on white people.’

Although these responses were sympathetic, they were evidence of the same communication gap I’d written about in the blog post. There seemed to be a misunderstanding of who this piece of writing was for. It was never written with the intention of prompting guilt in white people, or to provoke any kind of epiphany. I didn’t know at the time that I had inadvertently written a break-up letter to whiteness. And I didn’t expect white readers to do the Internet equivalent of standing outside my bedroom window with a boom box and a bunch of flowers, confessing their flaws and mistakes, begging me not to leave. This all seemed strange and slightly uncomfortable to me. Because, in writing that blog post, all I had felt I was saying was that I had had enough. It wasn’t a cry for help, or a grovelling plea for white people’s understanding and compassion. It wasn’t an invitation for white people to indulge in self-flagellation. I stopped talking to white people about race because I don’t think giving up is a sign of weakness. Sometimes it’s about self-preservation.

I’ve turned ‘Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race’ into a book – paradoxically – to continue the conversation. Since I set my boundary, I’ve done almost nothing but speak about race – at music festivals and in TV studios, to secondary-school pupils and

political party conferences – and the demand for this conversation shows no signs of subsiding. People want to talk about it. This book is the product of five years of agitation, frustration, exhausting explanations, and paragraph-long Facebook comments. It's about not just the explicit side, but the slippery side of racism – the bits that are hard to define, and the bits that make you doubt yourself. Britain is still profoundly uncomfortable with race and difference.

Since I wrote that blog post in 2014, things have changed a lot for me. I now spend most of my time talking to white people about race. The publishing industry is *very* white, so there's no way I could have got this book published without talking to at least *some* white people about race. And in my research, I've had to talk to white people I never thought I'd ever exchange words with, including former British National Party leader Nick Griffin. I know a lot of people think he shouldn't be given a platform for his views to be aired unchallenged, and I agonised over the interview here. I'm not the first person with a platform to give Nick Griffin airtime, but I hope I've handled his words responsibly.

A quick word on definitions. In this book, the phrase 'people of colour' is used to define anyone of any race that isn't white. I've used it because it's an infinitely better definition than simply 'non-white' – a moniker that brings with it a suggestion of something lacking, and of a deficiency. I use the word black in this book to describe people of African and Caribbean heritage, including mixed-race people. I quote a lot of research, so you will occasionally read the phrase black and minority ethnic (or BME). It's not a term I like very much, because it conjures thoughts of clinical diversity monitoring forms, but in the interests of interpreting the research as accurately as possible, I have chosen to stick to it.

I write – and read – to assure myself that other people have felt what I'm feeling too, that it isn't just me, that this is real, and valid, and true. I am only acutely aware of race because I've been rigorously marked out as different by the world I know for as long as I can remember. Although I analyse invisible whiteness and ponder its exclusionary nature often, I

watch as an outsider. I understand that this isn't the case for most white people, who move through the world blissfully unaware of their own race until its dominance is called into question. When white people pick up a magazine, scroll through the Internet, read a newspaper or switch on the TV, it is never rare or odd to see people who look like them in positions of power or exerting authority. In culture particularly, the positive affirmations of whiteness are so widespread that the average white person doesn't even notice them. Instead, these affirmations are placidly consumed. To be white is to be human; to be white is universal. I only know this because I am not.

I've written this book to articulate that feeling of having your voice and confidence snatched away from you in the cocky face of the status quo. It has been written to counter the lack of the historical knowledge and the political backdrop you need to anchor your opposition to racism. I hope you use it as a tool.

I won't ever stop myself from speaking about race. Every voice raised against racism chips away at its power. We can't afford to stay silent. This book is an attempt to speak.

5

THE FEMINISM QUESTION

Back in October 2012, I sat in a cold university library, furiously typing out a blog post on race and feminism. I was supposed to be revising, but was so irritated I could barely sit still. Lena Dunham's television programme *Girls* had premiered that year to critical acclaim. It was widely regarded as an accurate reflection of young women's lives. The characters were all working low-paid jobs and waiting for their lives to begin. They bickered among themselves, and wrestled with jealousy, pettiness, and body-image troubles. These were all characteristics I recognised among my peers and myself. Most of us were just drudging ahead, balancing unpaid internships alongside bar or retail jobs in the hope that we would reap the same rewards for hard work as the generation before us did. We had been hoping for a nine-to-five job and secure housing. We thought that if we worked hard enough, we would rid ourselves of that panicky feeling that sets in when you don't quite know where next month's rent is coming from. The scenarios in *Girls* were hugely familiar. But the programme, set in New York City, was starkly white. Because of this, it was hard to take commentators seriously when they insisted that it was the most feminist television show in decades.

As a result of the show, one of the most prominent debates in recent years about feminism's race problem began to brew. Some asserted that it would be nothing but tokenistic for Dunham to write black characters into her TV show just for the sake of it. Others said that it was absurd to set a television show with an all-white cast in one of the most racially diverse cities in America. To me, it was obvious. It also wasn't really about a TV programme, although the programme was symptomatic of a widespread problem. Finishing up the blog post, I wrote: 'When feminists can see the problem with all-male panels, but can't see the problem with all-white television programmes, it's worth questioning who they're really fighting for.'

On reflection, the representation and inclusion of black faces wasn't actually what I was passionate about. This wasn't about being seen, or about

being included. I was used to not seeing positive reflections of black people in popular culture. An all-white television programme was nothing new to me. What I was really upset about was the ease with which white people defended their all-white spaces and spheres. Theirs was an impenetrable bubble, and their feminism sat neatly within it. Not only this, but the feminists who insisted they were agitating for a better world for all women didn't actually give a shit about black people and, by extension, they didn't give a shit about women of colour. Gender equality must be addressed, but race could languish in the corner.

The same sort of scenario happened repeatedly over the next couple of years. Just one year later, pop star Lily Allen released her first music video, 'Hard Out Here', after a long hiatus from the music industry. The formula of the resulting race row was similar to the furore around *Girls*. A young and successful white woman had revealed public work that was immediately lauded as raw, relatable and utterly, thoroughly feminist – the definitive anthem for young women everywhere. In this instance though, it wasn't a lack of black people that sparked upset. The black bodies were present, but Lily Allen's black back-up dancers were scantily clad, dancing in a parody of misogynistic hip-hop videos as she sang about glass ceilings, objectification, and strongly implied that smart girls didn't need to strip to be successful.

After a while, it became wise to stop paying attention to anything tagged vaguely feminist in popular media, as it would only end up being disappointing. What I carried on doing was writing.

On New Year's Eve of 2013, I was invited by a BBC producer to appear on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*. It was a fairly innocent request – to discuss the year in feminism alongside Laura Bates of the Everyday Sexism Project, and Caroline Criado-Perez, who that year had campaigned to have historical women figures featured on British banknotes. When I took my seat in the studio, I realised I was the only black face in the room. That was the first red flag. I was joined by Laura and the radio presenter. Caroline was phoning in. The segment began. I was nervous. I explained that I didn't really consider myself a campaigner, but that during the year I had been writing about racism in the feminist movement – my frustrations with a doggedly white-centric perspective from the movement's 'leaders' – and found that lots of women who were not white were feeling exactly the same way. 'A tide has turned in

terms of these issues in feminism,' I said. 'They cannot be ignored any more.'[1]

The burden then fell on me to explain why feminism was so divided, and why feminism needed a race analysis in the first place. I was asked: 'What lies at the bottom of the divisions, and why has the phrase "check your privilege" become so popular?' That was the second red flag. This framing suggested that racism wasn't a concern for my white peers. Having worked with Laura Bates in the past, I knew that this wasn't the case. Despite my discomfort, I put forward my case for the need for a race analysis in feminism. But my point was quickly picked up on by Caroline Criado-Perez, who said that people had used an anti-racist perspective as a reason to harass and bully her online.

The context of her comment was very disturbing. Earlier in that year, Caroline's women-on-banknotes campaign had drawn national headlines. The press coverage attracted a misogynist sentiment, and what started out as a win quickly descended into one of the most high-profile British cases of online harassment. When the Bank of England announced plans to put an image of the author Jane Austen on the ten-pound note, the women-on-banknotes campaign claimed this as a success. But because of the harassment that followed as a result of the campaign's work, Caroline had been sent death threats. She received messages that told her that bombs had been installed outside of her home. She was repeatedly messaged by anonymous ill-wishers who were encouraging her to commit suicide. Eventually, two people pled guilty to sending her some of the more vicious tweets. They were sentenced to twelve and eight weeks in prison respectively, under the Malicious Communications Act.

On that New Year's Eve *Woman's Hour*, Caroline's comment, aimed at discrediting her online abusers, came across as equating my work and politics with these vicious and abusive messages. I felt implicated in the harassment against her. In the BBC studio, it fell to me to account for Caroline's horrific experiences, putting me in the position of defending the arguments (that I didn't share) of people I didn't even know. I was completely lost for words.

This was the cost of representation. The overwhelming whiteness of feminism – on a radio-show segment that would have been all white if it wasn't for my presence – was not considered a problem. I had wanted to

discuss how feminism wasn't exempt from white privilege, but instead I found myself on the receiving end of it.

There was an Internet storm about the interview immediately after we came off air. Some people were as shocked at this assertion as I was. Others were convinced that I was a liar and a bully who had been waging a war against Caroline online – not true – and that by balking at her intervention, I was playing the victim. I hadn't wanted to at first, but after some encouragement from friends, a few hours later I wrote a short blog post clarifying what went on.

Think about the last time you heard a comprehensive description of the nature of structural racism in the mainstream media, I wrote. *These issues just don't get the kind of airtime that feminism does in the UK press. Think hard about the last time you heard a person of colour challenge the virulently racist rhetoric around immigration in this country, or just state the plain fact that structural racism prevails because white people are treated more favourably in the society we live in. I was afforded the opportunity to do this live, on national radio. I didn't take it lightly.*

After a concerted effort from many a white woman to portray black feminist thought as destructive and divisive, I'm aware that accepting these media requests is a double-edged sword. It was Audre Lorde who said: 'If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.' Though it sometimes feels like I am entering into a trap, I'm hyper-aware that if I don't accept these opportunities, black feminism will be mischaracterised and misrepresented by the priorities of the white feminists taking part in the conversation . . . I'm tired of this tribal deadlock. I meant what I said on the programme: the only way to foster any shared solidarity is to learn from each other's struggles, and recognise the various privileges and disadvantages that we all enter the movement with.

Caroline apologised in the early evening, writing on Twitter: 'I just wanted to apologise if this am it came across at all like I was suggesting the abuse is something you have been party to. I didn't mean to imply that at all, but I can see that given I responded to your comment, it might have seemed like that. I didn't want to suggest I have ever felt abused by you – I haven't, because of course you haven't abused me. I just wanted to take the opportunity to talk

about abuse I have experienced and how damaging I think it is, because I think it needs to stop. But perhaps could have picked a better moment/way of saying it. So am sorry for that.'

Despite her apology, the day got worse.

The former Conservative MP and self-fashioned right-wing feminist Louise Mensch saw fit to swoop in and support Caroline. She began to tweet at me. 'Reni was wrong and Caroline was wrong to give in to her bullying. I wouldn't have.' I told her she was stirring. She responded: 'I would hope that I am stirring against your frankly disgraceful attitude and I am not lying. You are bullying, trying to silence.'[2]

For the crime of daring to suggest that racism is still a problem in Britain, I had been smeared by a former Member of Parliament. Simply using my voice was tantamount to being a bullying disgrace. Old racist stereotypes were being resurrected, and I found myself on the receiving end of them. I was a social problem, a disruptive force, a tragic example of a problem community.

Years later, while writing this book, I contacted Caroline Criado-Perez in the hope of getting her perspective on the *Woman's Hour* debacle. She didn't want to speak to me about it.

Even though I write about my experiences with so much contempt, feminism was my first love. It was what gave me a framework to begin understanding the world. My feminist thinking gave rise to my anti-racist thinking, serving as a tool that helped me forge a sense of self-worth. Finding it aged nineteen was perfect timing, equipping me with the skills to navigate adulthood, stand up for myself and work out my own values.

I found feminism a few years before the Twitter and Tumblr generation really took off. It happened in a rather old-fashioned way. As an English literature student, I'd been assigned a stack of books to read for a module on critical theory, which led me to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. As unlikely a situation as it was, the book spoke to me, and I found myself furiously agreeing with the long-dead French existentialist. When she wrote, 'To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile . . . any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness,' it sounded like she was describing my entire existence.

I couldn't find any people in my immediate vicinity who agreed, though.

Criticising the misogyny in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* in a university seminar drew disapproval from my peers, with the majority of my female classmates concluding that 'that's just how it was at the time'. So I sought out feminism elsewhere, spending my student loan money on travel to feminist conferences and events happening around the country. During those years, I met tons of inspiring and passionate women, some who are still my good friends today. Being at feminist events was a relief; to be in a space where people just *got it* – the shared anger, frustration, the burning will to do something, anything, to change the messed-up world we live in. This passion took me to tiny, draughty church halls in little villages in the north-west of England, huddled in a circle surrounded by women my mum's age, and on trains to London, to huge gatherings packed to the brim with hundreds of women – young and old, some new to the movement and some who'd been engaged in activism longer than I'd been alive.

But something wasn't quite right. Feminism was helping me to become a more critical, confident woman, and in turn, it was helping me come to terms with my blackness – a part of myself that I'd always known was shrouded in stigma. I'd grown up with white friends who had assured me that they 'didn't see me as black', and that I 'wasn't like other black people'. Up until then, I'd understood myself as someone who was 'pretty for a black girl', as someone who 'spoke well for where she came from'. I couldn't quite understand why these distinctions were made, but I had a feeling it was to do with class, education – and latent racism. The feminist circles I'd thrown myself into were almost all white. This whiteness wasn't a problem if you didn't talk about race, but if you did, it would reveal itself as an exclusionary force.

A lot of white women in feminist spaces couldn't understand why women of colour needed or wanted a different place to meet, so they would find ways of subtly undermining the self-determination of those who chose to organise separately. At one feminist gathering, there were paper sign-up sheets for every break-out session, designed to keep tabs on the numbers of people attending each one. On the sheet for black feminists, someone had taken the time to vandalise it with their ignorance, simply writing: 'Why?' At another event, a friend held a break-out session called 'the colour of beauty'. With a big stack of fashion and beauty magazines piled in front of her, it was a pretty

simple premise, aimed at deconstructing Eurocentric beauty standards. It was primary-school level, really – 'what are the similarities and differences in these pictures?' As others in my group pointed out the models' slimness, I, the only black person in my group, said, 'They're all white.' 'And they've all got long hair,' added a white women eagerly. Laboriously, I explained, 'Yes, but you can grow out your short hair if you want to. I can't change the colour of my skin to fit this beauty standard.' I'm still not sure if she understood what I was saying.

On and on it went like this, tiptoeing around whiteness in feminist spaces. This wasn't a place to be discussing racism, they insisted. There are other places you can go to for that. But that wasn't a choice I could make. My blackness was as much a part of me as my womanhood, and I couldn't separate them.

In my activist days, I joined a small group, named black feminists, so I could speak my truth in a collective full of like-minded women without fear of social punishment. This was a space solely for women of colour. We met once a month to vent and support each other. It was a space I desperately needed.

Meeting with black feminists every month was not unlike the old-school feminist activist method of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising was first used by New York Radical Women in the mid-1960s, who in turn took the tactic from America's civil rights movement. In black feminists, we would talk about whatever was happening in our lives. When we met, we began to learn from each other, and I began to realise that other women were experiencing the same things I was. Together we asked why. We took what we thought were isolated incidents, and linked them into a broader context of race and gender.

I met my friend, writer and teacher Lola Okolosie, in that space. 'I'm not sure if those first meetings people were saying "this is structural racism",' she said when we met to reflect on the purpose of the group. 'I think that out of meeting every month, and all of the things that we did in between, analysis started coming, and we were quick to start using that term.

'I just remember people describing what it was, and then everybody else in the room saying "yes, that's happened to me, isn't it infuriating." People were coming at it from lots of different levels. Some were very academic, and

some hadn’t read any key feminist texts. People’s knowledge was very varied. But we were all kind of describing the same hurts, the same frustrations, and the same anger-inducing moments. That, to me, was just absolutely powerful. That it wasn’t seen as moaning, that it wasn’t seen as reading too deep into things, it was just like yeah, people get it.’

We discussed why it was so important for us to meet without feminists who were white. ‘That gaze does so much to silence you,’ Lola said. ‘Even if you’re really confident and really vocal, there is still a holding back that you have to do. Because as a normal human being, you kind of don’t really like confrontation. And there’s an element of just speaking the truth of what it means to be a black woman in the UK that it would be ridiculous, as a white person, to not read that as implicating you.’

In black feminists, we used the word intersectionality to talk about the crossover of two distinct discriminations – racism and sexism – that happens to people who are both black and women. For black feminist academic Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw, it was her studies in law that led her to coin the now mainstream term. When we met in London’s US Embassy, she told me, ‘That work started when I realised that African American women were . . . not recognised as having experienced discrimination that reflected both their race and their gender. The courts would say if you don’t experience racism in the same way as a [black] man does, or sexism in the same way as a white woman does, then you haven’t been discriminated against. I saw that as a problem of sameness and difference. There were claims of being seen as too different to be accommodated by law. That led to intersectionality, looking at the ways race and gender intersect to create barriers and obstacles to equality.’

This was a word to describe the previously undefined phenomenon, although black feminist activists, scholars and theorists had written and spoken about the very same thing years before Dr Crenshaw gave it a name. In 1851, black abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth addressed the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention.

She said, ‘I think that ’twixt de niggers of de South and the women of de North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about? That man over there say that women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place

everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? Then they talks 'bout this ting in de head; what this they call it?' ('Intellect,' whispered someone near.) 'That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or niggers' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?'[3] The speech was published twelve years later in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard.*

A century on in 1984, black feminist, activist and poet Audre Lorde wrote in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches:* 'Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of colour to educate white women – in the face of tremendous resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.'

In 1979, in her essay 'Anger in isolation: a Black feminist's search for sisterhood' from the essay collection *But Some of Us are Brave,* Michele Wallace wrote: 'We exist as women who are Black who are feminist, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one has done: we would have to fight the world.'

Then bell hooks stepped forward in 1981, writing in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*: 'The process begins with the individual woman's acceptance that . . . women, without exception, are socialized to be racist, classist and sexist, in varying degrees, and that labelling ourselves feminists does not change the fact that we must consciously work to rid ourselves of the legacy of negative socialization. It is obvious that many women have appropriated feminism to serve their own ends, especially those white women who have been at the forefront of the movement; but rather than resigning myself to this appropriation I choose to reappropriate the term "feminism," to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense

of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.'

And in a law lecture delivered to London's Birkbeck University in late 2013, Angela Davis expanded on the history of how black women have articulated their experiences over the years. In 1969, she explained, American civil rights activist Frances Beale wrote a pamphlet called *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. Later, the Third World Women's Alliance created a newspaper called *Triple Jeopardy*. For them, the struggle was not just against racism and sexism, but imperialism too. Elizabeth Spelman's 1988 book *Inessential Woman* challenged the methods of adding on oppressions a year before Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality'.

America, with its grid-like road system, neatly packed full of perfect rectangles and squares, was the right place for the birth of this metaphor. Every person knows of a place where all the roads meet. A place where there's no longer one distinct road, but instead a very particular spot, a space that merges all of the roads leading up to it. Black women, in these theories, were proof that the roads didn't run parallel, but instead crossed over each other frequently. And the aforementioned women writers' work thoroughly illustrates how much richness and depth there is to be found when examining those intersections, instead of denying they exist, or forgetting them altogether. For too long, black women have been the forgotten, and have had to come up with strategies of being remembered. In the analysis of who fell through the cracks in competing struggles for rights for women and rights for black people, it always seemed to be *black women* who took the hit.

When black feminists started to push for an intersectional analysis in British feminism, the widespread response from feminists who were white was not one of support. Instead, they began to make the case that the word 'intersectional' was utter jargon – too difficult for anyone without a degree to understand – and therefore useless.

'If you haven't got the same background in or affinity with academia, though, intersectionality is a word that says *this is not for you*,' wrote Sarah Ditum on her personal blog in 2012.[4]

In the *New Statesman*, Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett wrote: 'This means that issues of race, class, religion, sexuality, politics and

privilege often end up fracturing feminist dialogue, most regularly causing disagreements between those armed with an MA in Gender Studies and a large vocabulary to match, and those without [. . .] Going into certain state comps and discussing the nuances of intersectionality isn't going to have much dice if some of the teenage girls in the audience are pregnant, or hungry, or at risk of abuse (what are they going to do? Protect or feed themselves with theory? Women cannot dine on Greer alone). [. . .] It almost seems as though some educated women want to keep feminism for themselves, cloak it in esoteric theory and hide it under their mattresses, safe and warm beneath the duck-down duvet.'[5]

As the debate intensified on social media, feminists who didn't comply with this line were routinely monstered in the press. The jabs were kept just about evasive enough so that no particular woman was named, and so there was very little response published from those being criticised. Sadie Smith wrote in the *New Statesman*: 'The Online Wimmin Mob takes offence everywhere, but particularly at other women who are not in their little Mean Girls club, which has their own over-stylised and impenetrable language, rules and disciplinary proceedings.'[6]

The white feminist distaste for intersectionality quickly evolved into a hatred of the idea of white privilege – perhaps because to recognise structural racism would have to mean recognising their own whiteness. They were backed up by their men. Tom Midlane wrote in the *New Statesman*: 'While the idea is obviously born out of honourable intentions, I believe the whole discourse around privilege is inherently destructive – at best, a colossal distraction, and at worst a means of turning us all into self-appointed moral guardians out to aggressively police even fellow travellers' speech and behaviour. Why does this matter, you ask? The answer is simple: it matters because privilege-checking has thoroughly infected progressive thought.'[7]

You'll notice a trend here. Between 2012 and 2014, the most spirited takedowns of black women talking about race, racism and intersectionality were always published via the *New Statesman*, Britain's foremost centre-left political magazine. Because of the sheer frequency of these takedowns, I began to wonder if there was an editorial line. There were weak efforts by the *New Statesman* to publish rebuttals by defenders of intersectionality, but it was the harsh criticisms that seemed to set the magazine's agenda on the

topic.

A few years later, the arguments first put forward by white feminists and left-wing bloggers in 2012 and 2013 were being echoed by publishing platforms that were decidedly *not* left wing. The extreme, hard-right, website *Breitbart London* defined intersectionality as 'A debate strategy: when you're losing an argument about feminism, call your opponent racist or, even more damningly, capitalist', and defined privilege as 'What white middle-class feminists have and their victims don't'.[8] In another dictionary-style takedown of progressives, the *Spectator* wrote: 'I is for identity politics. Always define yourself by your natural characteristics rather than your character, achievements or beliefs. You are first and foremost male, female, other, straight, gay, black or white and should refer to yourself as such. Martin Luther King should have checked his privilege when he had that nonsense dream of a world where people "will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character". That's easy for a middle-class straight man to say, Marty. I is also for intersectionality, the tearaway offspring of identity politics, where you must constantly wonder how your various personal identities intersect with each other (or something).'[9] On the same topic, another writer in the same magazine wrote, 'As theories go, this one isn't wholly mad. The trouble is, it has become faddish among people who don't read books or essays but merely tweets and Internet comments, and thus don't know what they are talking about. So what you end up with is a kind of minority Top Trumps, and a sort of spreading, infectious belief that the more box-tickingly disadvantaged a person is, the wiser, kinder and more all-seeing they must be. And it's stupid.'[10]

Based on these responses, it seemed like black women's interventions in white British feminism were absolutely not welcome. The reaction was identical to the way the most sexist of men treat feminism. In the middle of this heated debate about intersectionality in British feminism, four months after my disastrous conversation with BBC *Woman's Hour*, Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw was invited onto the same show to explain why feminism can no longer ignore race. She was asked 'how helpful is it when . . . black women are asking white and well-off women to check their privilege?' Quoting some of black feminism's harshest critics, the interviewer continued, 'It's closing down the debate, and it's diminishing empathy.'

‘That’s always going to be an issue in any kind of movement that makes a claim that everybody in the category is experiencing discrimination in the same way, when in fact, that’s not often the case,’ Dr Crenshaw responded. But the damage was done. The utterance of a meme-ified phrase saw black feminism reduced to nothing more than a disruptive force, upsetting sweet, polite, palatable white feminism. British feminism was characterised as a movement where everything was peaceful until the angry black people turned up. The white feminist’s characterisations of black feminists as disruptive aggressors was not so different from broader stereotyping of black communities by the press. Women of colour were positioned as the immigrants of feminism, unwelcome but tolerated – a reluctantly dealt-with social problem. It’s surprising that no prominent white feminists made it far enough in their hyperbole to give an Enoch Powell-style, impassioned speech – something along the lines of ‘in this country in fifteen or twenty years’ time the black woman will have the whip hand over the white woman’. Considering the verbal violence with which they greeted a race analysis in feminism, this seemed to be the logical conclusion of their arguments.

It’s important to see the white feminist pushback against intersectionality not in isolation, but rather in the historical context of establishment clampdowns on the black struggle. All the signs were there: a closing of ranks, paired with a campaign of misinformation, lies and discrediting. When Louise Mensch wrote her aggressive tweets about me, the women she felt she was supporting were doyennes of the left – regular writers for left-leaning publications like the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman*. They were supported by white, well-known writers and figures of a host of different political persuasions. But at that point, their minor political differences didn’t matter. The white consensus in feminism required defending, and they needed to club together to do it. My speaking up about racism in feminism, to them, was akin to a violent attack on their very idea of themselves.

This is how racism perpetuates itself in all spaces, feminist or otherwise. My situation was very public. But back then I had a feeling that similar scenarios were playing out across the country – in workplaces, in social circles, in families; and the result everywhere was a person of colour with no support network, doubting themselves.

In British feminism, questioning whether a woman could have feminist

politics and do traditionally feminine things was a sentiment that intrigued women's magazines in the 1990s and early 2000s. Can you be a feminist and wear high heels, the magazines asked. Can you be a feminist and wear make-up? Can you be a feminist and get your nails done? These were the most facile of questions, giving rise to the most facile of magazine features. The 'can you be a feminist and' questions were all predicated on tired stereotypes of feminist activism from the 1970s patriarchal press, depicting feminists as dungaree-wearing angry women who sought to crush men under their Dr Marten-clad feet. In this stereotype of the scary imaginary feminist that no woman would ever want to be, her appearance was the antithesis of all beauty standards.

It was complete rubbish, of course. If the last five years have taught us anything, it's that feminism is a broad church that has less to do with the upkeep of your appearance, and more to do with the upkeep of your politics. Instead of asking about high heels and lipstick, the pressing questions we have always needed to ask are: Can you be a feminist and be anti-choice? Can you be a feminist and be wilfully ignorant on racism?

Feminist themes seem to be ever-present in television and film at the moment. This is a marked improvement from the media that went before it. Feminism is thriving in journalism and music, and it is all over social media with no signs of subsiding. The people who are calling themselves feminists are getting younger and younger, due in part to their favourite pop stars and actresses demystifying the word. Each time a celebrity stakes her claim on feminism, a little bit of the stigma surrounding the word is shattered.

With countrywide political landmarks like the legalisation of same-sex marriage, everyone is keen to look like they approve of progress. But among feminists, there are a few ideological standpoints – race, reproductive rights, conservatism – that continue to cause immovable fault lines in the movement. Too often, a white feminist's ideological standpoint does not see racism as a problem, let alone a priority. The backlash against intersectionality was white feminism in action.

When the phrase 'white feminism', used as a derogatory term, picked up circulation in the feminist lexicon, its popularity made some feminists who are white somewhat agitated. But this knee-jerk backlash against the phrase – to what is more often than not a rigorous critique of the consequences of

structural racism – was undoubtedly born from an entitled need to defend whiteness rather than any yearning to reflect on the meaning of the phrase ‘white feminism’. What does it mean for your feminist politics to be strangled, stoppered, and hindered by whiteness?

If feminism can understand the patriarchy, it’s important to question why so many feminists struggle to understand whiteness as a political structure in the very same way. Similar to the fact that they are man-heavy, our most recognised political structures are white-dominated. In that space of overwhelming whiteness, there is always a wide range of opinions to be found. So much of politics is just middle-aged white men passing the ball to one another. Every so often, a white middle-aged woman is brought on board in an effort to diversify. The one thing that unites these differing political perspectives is their flat-out refusal to challenge a white consensus.

White feminism is a politics that engages itself with myths such as ‘I don’t see race’. It is a politics which insists that talking about race fuels racism – thereby denying people of colour the words to articulate our existence. It’s a politics that expects people of colour to quietly assimilate into institutionally racist structures without kicking up a fuss. It’s a politics where people of colour are never setting the agenda. Instead, they are relegated to constantly reacting to things and frantically playing catch-up. A white-dominated feminist political consensus allows people of colour a place at the table if we’re willing to settle for tokenism, but it clamps down if they attempt to create accountability for said consensus – let alone any structural change.

Whiteness positions itself as the norm. It refuses to recognise itself for what it is. Its so-called ‘objectivity’ and ‘reason’ is its most potent and insidious tool for maintaining power. White feminism can be conceptualised as the feminist wing of said political consensus. It’s a set of white-centred feminist values and beliefs that some women like to buy into. Other factors, like class indicators, play a huge part in it.

White feminism in itself isn’t particularly threatening. It becomes a problem when its ideas dominate – presented as the universal, to be applied to all women. It is a problem, because we consider humanity through the prism of whiteness. It is inevitable that feminism wouldn’t be immune from this. Consequently, white feminism enforces its position when those who challenge it are considered troublemakers. When I write about white

feminism, I'm not reducing white women to the colour of their skin. Whiteness is a political position, and challenging it in feminist spaces is not a tit-for-tat disagreement because prejudice needs power to be effective.

The politics of whiteness transcends the colour of anyone's skin. It is an occupying force in the mind. It is a political ideology that is concerned with maintaining power through domination and exclusion. Anyone can buy into it, just like anyone can choose to challenge it. White women seem to take the phrase 'white feminism' very personally, but it is at once everything and nothing to do with them. It's not about women, who are feminists, who are white. It's about women espousing feminist politics as they buy into the politics of whiteness, which at its core are exclusionary, discriminatory and structurally racist.

For those who identify as feminist, but have never questioned what it means to be white, it is likely the phrase white feminism applies. Those who perceive every critique of white-dominated politics to be an attack on them as a white person are probably part of the problem. When white feminists are ignorant on race, they don't initially come from a place of malice – although their opposition can very quickly evolve into a frothing vitriol when challenged on their politics. Instead, I've learnt that they come from a place very similar to mine. We all grew up in a white-dominated world. This is the context that white feminists are working within, benefiting from and reproducing a system that they barely notice. However, their critical-analysis skills are pretty good at spotting exclusive systems, such as gender, that they *don't* benefit from. They spout impassioned rhetoric against patriarchy with ease, feeling its sharp edge of injustice jutting them in the ribs at work in the form of unequal pay, and socially, hurled at them in the street in the form of catcalling. And they rightly say, 'I'm sick of living in this world built for the needs of men! I feel like at best, I can fight it, at worst I have to learn to cope in it.' Yet they're incredibly defensive when the same analysis of race is levelled at their whiteness. You'd have to laugh, if the whole thing wasn't so reprehensible.

When they talk about equal rights and representation, white feminists deeply mean it. They can be witty, intelligent, eloquent and insightful on issues like reproductive rights, street harassment, sexual violence, beauty standards, body image, and women's representation in the media. These are

issues that so many women can strongly resonate with and relate to. It tends to be white women who find themselves representing feminism in the press, talking about it on television or the radio, enthusing about it in magazines.

It helps that the white women espousing feminist politics in the public sphere are conventionally attractive with enough of a quirk that renders them relatable to the everyday woman. They have chubby thighs or gappy teeth. They have bodies that are far from the supermodel standard that we've come to hold all women in the public eye to. This is refreshing, we shout. These women look like us. These women are real. These women are women's women. These women are not afraid to say what they think. In an age of Twitter followings and YouTube subscriber counts, it's also about personal branding and burgeoning careers. So we click, and like, and follow.

Being a feminist with a race analysis means seeing clearly how race and gender are intertwined when it comes to inequalities. Looking at the politics of race in this country, I can see how an entitlement towards white British women's bodies plays out in what is being said. 2066 is the year white people will supposedly become a minority in Britain. Oxford Professor David Coleman is the man who estimated that date. In 2016, he wrote in a *Daily Mail* article – framed around the issue of Brexit: 'women born overseas contributed 27 per cent of all live births in 2014, and 33 per cent of births had at least one immigrant parent – a figure which has more than doubled since the 1990s.'[11] The article was titled, 'RIP This Britain: With academic objectivity, Oxford Professor and population expert David Coleman says white Britons could be in the minority by the 2060s – or sooner'.

I think it's easy to see how those who espouse white nationalist politics could take these figures and run with them, and insist that the year 2066 will mark Britain's doomsday. It looks like there is a subtle ethno-nationalism in this discussion, almost worthy of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It seems to be a racialised misogyny that is preoccupied with wombs, and urges white British women to fuck for their country while accusing women who aren't white British of breeding uncontrollably and destabilising the essence of Britain.

Despite this pernicious narrative, there are quarters of British society who maintain that misogyny is somehow the reserve of foreigners. Never in a million years did I think I'd hear former Prime Minister David Cameron call

out the ills of a patriarchal society. When, in 2012 and 2013, British women's groups such as the Fawcett Society and the Women's Budget Group did the laborious maths to argue that the government's austerity agenda was hitting women the hardest, David Cameron and his party barely responded. It was interesting, then, that when Mr Cameron finally uttered the words 'patriarchal society' almost three years later, it was to lay out government plans of an ultimatum policy that demanded Muslim women who were living in the UK on a spousal visa either learn English, or face deportation.

'Look, I'm not blaming the people who can't speak English,' he told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme. 'Some of these people have come to our country [from] quite sort of patriarchal societies, where perhaps the menfolk haven't wanted them to learn English, haven't wanted them to integrate.' He continued, 'What we've found in some of the work we've done is . . . [a] school governors' meeting where the men sit in the meeting and the women have to sit outside, [and] women who aren't allowed to leave their home without a male relative. This is happening in our country and it's not acceptable. We should be very proud of our values, our liberalism, our tolerance, our idea that we want to build a genuine opportunity democracy . . . where there is segregation it's holding people back, it's not in tune with British values and it needs to go.'[12]

Speaking on national radio, Cameron let it be known that alongside dedicated funding for Muslim women in what he called 'isolated communities' to learn English, the plans would also come with compulsory language tests for these women within two and a half years of them arriving in Britain. As surreal as it was to hear David Cameron challenging a patriarchal society, it wasn't surprising that his idea of patriarchy was described in direct opposition to our own advanced, so-called egalitarian and meritocratic British sense of self.

When we tell ourselves that misogyny is simply an import from overseas, we are saying that it's just not a problem here. David Cameron probably shouldn't be too quick to insinuate that extreme misogyny is a foreign import to the British Isles. When the Office of National Statistics shows that, on average, seven women a month in England and Wales are murdered by a current or former partner,[13] and 85,000 women are raped in England and Wales alone every year,[14] we know that this is simply not the case. Misogyny

is not a problem that can be solved with closed borders, nor a crash course in Received Pronunciation. It exists in the psyche of what it means to be a man in every country.

Despite this truth, it was the idea that multiculturalism brings with it a corrosive sexism and misogyny that was touted after mass sexual assaults took place on New Year's Eve of 2015 in Cologne, Germany. The same angle emerged when a child sexual exploitation ring run by Asian men was uncovered in Rotherham, south Yorkshire, in 2013. In 2012 and 2013, the phrase 'Asian sex gang' occupied what seemed like a million headlines. The far right loves this Asian sex-gang angle. To them, the women are their property, the women are 'ours'. But the reality is that if every Asian man left the country, child sexual exploitation on British Isles would not go away.

There is a race aspect to these incidents that can't be ignored, and acknowledging this doesn't invalidate any condemnation of grooming, abuse and misogyny. A lot of the time, being a black feminist situates you between a rock and a hard place, challenging the racism you see targeted at black and brown people and also challenging the patriarchy around you. And while the endless tug of war of political debate demands clear rights and wrongs, this topic desperately requires nuance.

What is undeniable is that Western beauty ideals and Western objectification of female flesh focuses heavily on whiteness and on youth. White female flesh is commoditised in the public eye all the time. If black and brown flesh is ever included in these forums, it's often considered a novelty – perhaps described as 'ebony', 'chocolate' or 'caramel', sometimes approached as taboo. Amid the No More Page 3 campaign was the little-referenced point that black Page 3 girls rarely exist, presumably because some media didn't believe that black and brown women are beautiful enough to bother objectifying. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, often in entertainment and media in which creative control is designed to pander to the needs of black and brown men.

Let's look at how racialised bodies sit inside an understanding of sex and sexual abuse in a world drunk on overwhelming whiteness. Racist beauty ideals encourage a culture of certain types of female flesh being considered publicly available. After two Pakistani men were jailed in 2011 for raping and sexually abusing young white girls, it seemed like Jack Straw, former

MP for Blackburn, took on the language of the abuser when he said that white girls were seen as ‘easy meat’ for Asian rapists. Speaking on BBC *Newsnight*, he said, ‘These young men are in a Western society, in any event, they act like any other young men, they’re fizzing and popping with testosterone, they want some outlet for that, but Pakistani heritage girls are off-limits and they are expected to marry a Pakistani girl from Pakistan, typically.’[15] There was pushback on his comments from other politicians, but the objections started and ended with indignation that Straw was stereotyping an entire community.

What was missed was how Jack Straw not only echoed abusers, but also failed to challenge their language. First he indulged in the ‘boys will be boys’ excuse, as though fizzing and popping with testosterone is a precursor to violating another human being’s body. It never is, yet this pervasive belief excuses abuse and coercion as simply youthful curiosity. His second error was fairly simple: women are not flesh to be consumed. Women aren’t objects, passive and docile and open and waiting. There is something so insidious about this language of food and flesh, one that suggests that men must eat as much meat and fuck as many women as possible in order to be the manliest. In our gender relations, ‘meat’ strips women of basic bodily autonomy, asserting that we are only ever on the menu, and never at the table.

This, plus a feeling of public piety around the hijab, the niqab, and covered black and brown female flesh in particular, makes for a toxic combination. The modesty expectation is just as limiting and judgemental as the compulsory bikini-body one. Both obsessively focus on a woman’s looks and how covered or uncovered her body is in determining her value, as though her body belongs to a male gaze before it belongs to her. There are always external factors influencing the way a women dresses, but the ultimate decision should be her own. All the while, in the case of the aforementioned abuses, the voices of poor white women and girls; and the voices of black and brown women and girls are denied any agency. This is not simply a question of patriarchy; it’s a manifestation of the virgin/whore dichotomy that spans across postcodes, countries and cultures.

We cannot effectively destroy this kind of exploitation without attacking pervasive cultural messages, at home and away, that tell men that women’s bodies are always up for the taking. As long as women are groped on public

transport, masturbated at in the street, and as long as female flesh stares dead-eyed and pouty-lipped from millions of images advertising goods as banal as exercise supplements and hooded jackets, we will have a misogyny problem.

As we challenge racist, Islamophobic stories regarding sexual abuse, we've also got to challenge patriarchy where we find it. One cannot be done effectively without the other. At present, the conversation about misogyny that has reached the highest levels of government has maintained that it is a foreign import. This is disingenuous and it is done to pull the wool over our eyes. Feminist activists would be foolish to ally with political forces that only ever speak in defence of women when there are Muslims to bash.

So, we know that as much as the subject needs nuance, groups of white men who rape and abuse children and babies are reported on by the press, but their crimes are not seized upon as indicative of the inherent problem with *men* in the same way that men of colour's crimes are held up as evidence of the savagery of their race. When an organised gang of seven white men were found guilty of raping and abusing children (or conspiring to) in April 2015, the far right did not co-opt the story as evidence that we should deport all men from the country. The seven men, who were scattered across the UK, communicated online and streamed abuse to each other using conference-call technology. All the while, they were embedding themselves in their separate communities and grooming the parents of the children they were preying on. One even befriended a pregnant woman with a view to abusing her unborn baby. According to the BBC's reporting on the cases, officers from the National Crime Agency called the crimes the most 'vile and depraved' they'd ever seen. These white men's crimes didn't get an affix of their race in the consequent headlines.

We as a nation hate paedophiles. We malign them because they are paedophiles. But crucially, we see them as anomalies. We don't think that their actions are because of the deviancy of white men. When white men target babies, children and teenagers for sexual gratification, we don't ask for a deep reflection on these actions from the white male community.

This isn't about good men or bad men – binary notions that we feel comfortable enough with to slot into neat boxes – but about rape culture. We should be asking why, when children and women speak up about being raped or sexually assaulted, there are always people around them who bend over

backwards to try and find ways to suggest that she incited or invited it. We should question the class prejudice that allowed white, poor victims to be ignored by the authorities in a way that would be less likely to happen to a middle-class white girl raised in Islington. Class assigns your life with a correspondent value in the eyes of gatekeepers. The taboo in discussing these crimes isn't about race, it is about men. Predatory men. Every woman who has ever been a teenage girl could tell you a tale about an encounter with a predatory man, men who smell youth and vulnerability, and seek only to dominate.

Far from shutting down debate, incorporating the challenges of racism is absolutely essential for a feminist movement that doesn't leave anyone behind. I'm not sure our most popular versions of feminism are currently up to that task.

I fear that, although white feminism is palatable to those in power, when it has won, things will look very much the same. Injustice will thrive, but there will be more women in charge of it. Feminism is not about equality, and certainly not about silently slipping into a world of work created by and for men. Feminism, at its best, is a movement that works to liberate all people who have been economically, socially and culturally marginalised by an ideological system that has been designed for them to fail. That means disabled people, black people, trans people, women and non-binary people, LGB people and working-class people. The idea of campaigning for equality must be complicated if we are to untangle the situation we're in. Feminism will have won when we have ended poverty. It will have won when women are no longer expected to work two jobs (the care and emotional labour for their families as well as their day jobs) by default.

The mess we are living is a deliberate one. If it was created by people, it can be dismantled by people, and it can be rebuilt in a way that serves all, rather than a selfish, hoarding few. Beyond the obvious demands – an end to sexual violence, an end to the wage gap – feminism must be class-conscious, and aware of the limiting culture of the gender binary. It needs to recognise that disabled people aren't inherently defective, but rather that non-disabled people have failed at creating a physical world that serves all. Feminism must demand affordable, decent, secure housing, and a universal basic income. It should demand pay for full-time mothers and free childcare for working

mothers. It should recognise that we live in a world in which women are constantly harangued into being lusted after, but punishes sex workers for using that situation to make a living. Feminism needs to thoroughly recognise that sexuality is fluid, and we need to dream of a world where people are not violently policed for transgressing rigid gender roles. Feminism needs to demand a world in which racist history is acknowledged and accounted for, in which reparations are distributed, in which race is completely deconstructed.

I understand that these demands are utopian and unrealistic. But I think feminism *has* to be absolutely utopian and unrealistic, far removed from any semblance of the world we're living in now. We have to hope for and envision something before agitating for it, rather than blithely giving up, citing reality, and accepting the way things are. After all, utopian ideals are as ideological as the political foundations of the world we're currently living in. Above everything, feminism is a constant work in progress. We are all still learning.

I have always loved feminism's readiness to viciously rip into the flesh of misogyny, to stick its chin out defiantly and scare the living daylights out of mediocre men. But it needs to be the whole package, to take into account every aspect of what writer bell hooks called 'the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. Feminism doesn't work well as a polite, gender-only analysis that is neat and unchallenging enough to be accepted in corporate environments. It has failed when it works as an unwittingly exclusive movement that isn't self-aware enough to recognise where its participants benefit from the current system. At the point in which feminism has become a placidly white movement that claims to work on behalf of all women, but doesn't question its own overwhelming whiteness, we really need to think about starting again.

Demands for equality need to be as complicated as the inequalities they attempt to address. The question is: who do we want to be equal to? Men, like women, are not homogeneous. The Chancellor of the Exchequer leads a very different life to the postman who pushes letters through my front door every day. He has had access to vastly different opportunities in his life than his governmental counterpart. He probably wasn't born into wealth, and his parents probably couldn't stump up the cash to get him into an elite private

school that would buy him upper-class entitlement for the rest of his life. Men inhabit different spaces. Some face racism. Some face homophobia. Even if we as feminists decide to put the differences between men aside, does equality demand parity with people who have always had a disproportionately large share of resources?

It's clear that equality doesn't quite cut it. Asking for a sliver of disproportional power is too polite a request. I don't want to be included. Instead, I want to question who created the standard in the first place. After a lifetime of embodying difference, I have no desire to be equal. I want to deconstruct the structural power of a system that marked me out as different. I don't wish to be assimilated into the status quo. I want to be liberated from all negative assumptions that my characteristics bring. The onus is not on *me* to change. Instead, it's the world around me.

Equality is fine as a transitional demand, but it's dishonest not to recognise it for what it is – the easy route. There is a difference between saying 'we want to be included' and saying 'we want to reconstruct your exclusive system'. The former is more readily accepted into the mainstream.

There is such stigma attached to speaking up and being a woman, let alone speaking up, being a woman, and being black. When, in 2013, model Naomi Campbell lent her voice to a campaign dedicated to getting more models of colour on the runways of Fashion Week (the statistic at the time was that 82 per cent of Fashion Week models were white), she was confronted by a Channel 4 News reporter who told her 'you have a reputation, rightly or wrongly, for being quite an angry person.'[16]

The angry black woman cannot be reasoned with. She argues back. She is not docile, sweet or agreeable, like expectations of white femininity. Her anger makes her ugly and undesirable. It's for that reason she'll never find a husband, and if she does, she will emasculate him. Emasculation as a concept is one that requires the rigid upholding of sexist gender roles. The angry black woman stereotype wields misogyny as a stick to beat black women over the head with. That angry black women appear to emasculate men is sexist because it makes assumptions about the characteristics of men that inevitably limits the scope of their humanity. To believe in emasculation, you have to believe that masculinity is about power, and strength, and dominance.

These traits are supposed to be great in men, but they're very unattractive in women. Especially angry black ones. Women in general aren't supposed to be angry. Women are expected to smile, swallow our feelings and be self-sacrificial. Bossy is ugly, and of course, the worst thing a woman could ever be is ugly. As black women, our blackness already situates us further along the ugliness scale. God forbid we be fat.

The 'angry black woman' phrase says more about maleness and whiteness than it does about black women. It speaks to a status quo that recognises its own simultaneous suffocating dominance and delicate fragility – of the reality of its increasing irrelevance over time, and a compulsive need to stop that looming change.

I used to be scared of being perceived as an angry black woman. But I soon realised that any number of authentic emotions I displayed could and would be interpreted as anger. My assertiveness, passion and excitement could all be wielded against me. Not displaying anger wasn't going to stop me being labelled as angry, so I thought: fuck it. I decided to speak my mind. The more politically assertive I became, the more men shouted at me. Performance artist Selina Thompson told me that when she thinks of what it means to be an angry black woman, she thinks of honesty. There is no point in keeping quiet because you want to be liked. Often, there will be no one fighting your corner but yourself. It was black feminist poet Audre Lorde who said: 'your silence will not protect you.' Who wins when we don't speak? Not us.