

# Asking Questions about Racism

(January 2004): This paper was presented at the 'International Feminisms—Towards 2000' conference, organised by the Australian Women's Research Centre, Deakin University, Geelong, and held in Melbourne, 1 August 1994. The paper was politely received on the whole, although one woman in the audience did get annoyed at what I said. I don't remember what her objections were, except that they reiterated the standpoint I was criticising. I think I answered them (to my own satisfaction, anyway, if not to hers). After the session I went up to this woman to continue the discussion. I don't remember any of it, except the annoyance and the fact that she didn't engage with what I was saying. She identified herself as 'a South Asian woman'.

Towards the end of the year, a review article appeared in Issue no. 20 of *Australian Feminist Studies*. Called 'Oh no, not race again!', it scathingly dismissed my paper, referring to it as the 'down point of the conference'. I have some sympathy with the sense of bored irritation conveyed by the title of the review. I, too, felt the 'race' debate was boring. But I also felt that the reason for the boredom was the blank refusal to consider alternative points of view and allow the debate to move on. Since this author was complicit with that refusal, and since she also misrepresented my argument, I wrote to AFS asking them to print my paper together with a prefatory note I had written. They said they were very pressed for space and could let me have two pages. I accepted their offer and my reply was duly published. (My reply is included below after the paper).

A response by the author of the review was printed in a subsequent issue of AFS. This response raised further issues I thought required debate, so I wrote a further reply and sent it to AFS. This time they refused to print it, saying the issue had already been discussed long enough (also included below after the paper)

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(I am, as usual, indebted to my lover, Marg Roberts, for her insightful comments.)

**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to come to terms with my dissatisfaction with much of what passes for 'anti-racism' within the context of feminism. I discuss a number of problems, using examples from the literature as illustrations. The main problem I address concerns the inadequacy of the evidence for claims that feminism, or aspects of it, is variously 'racist', 'white and middle-class', or deficient in the way it has dealt with the question of race. I also discuss briefly other problems: the denial of male domination which characterises so much of the debate; the relationship between experience on the one hand, and theory and politics on the other; the requirement that feminism address all forms of oppression; and the absence of a definition of 'racism'. I conclude by suggesting that racism is one of the twisted faces of male domination, originating in hierarchies of superiority / inferiority among men, and that racism, on the part of women or men, involves complicity with male supremacist meanings and values.

I am in a dilemma about the question of racism in feminism. On the one hand, it is obvious that feminism must not only not ignore racism, but that it must be actively engaged in struggling against it because racism hurts women, and because it is against everything feminism stands for. On the other hand, much of what I have read or heard on this question within a feminist context contains serious problems. These problems include: misrepresentations and mislocations of feminism; a fragmenting of feminism into different and antagonistic categories of 'women'; lack of evidence for assertions that feminism, or certain aspects of it, is, at best, deficient in the ways it has dealt with race, at worst, that it is 'racist'; and most importantly, and underpinning all the rest, the deletion of the problem of male domination.

In identifying problems in the 'racism' debate in feminism, I am not saying that racism does not exist among feminists. Racism is not always blatant and overt; it can be subtle, devious and sometimes ambiguous, and hence difficult to identify and describe. I am not arguing that a feminist commitment means that women cannot behave in racist ways; nor would I argue that anything and everything said in the name of feminism is automatically excluded from criticism on the grounds of racism. The on-going possibility of internal criticism, of self-criticism and criticism of each other, is vitally important if feminism is to continue as a viable politics. But criticisms must be substantiated and argued for, and must leave the way open for disagreement, if they are not to degenerate into sloganeering, name-calling and guilt-stricken silence. Moreover, feminism itself is not racist, 'white', Western, or only for the privileged if it is the political commitment of women who are none of these. It cannot be,

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if it is to continue to struggle for a human status for women which is achieved at the expense of no one else at all, and certainly not at the expense of other women, and if feminism is to build connections between women despite the barriers that divide us.

The problems revolve around the accusation—for it is an accusation, and a harsh one—that feminism, or at least certain supposedly dominant aspects of it, is racist because it is 'white and middle-class' and hence has excluded or misrepresented the lives and experiences of women variously identified as women of colour, black women, third world women, indigenous women, or women from ethnic minorities.

None of these terms is entirely satisfactory, for a number of reasons. 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. 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. That this is so 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. The terms also imply a homogeneity among those who fall outside the categories, those usually designated 'white'. I am reluctant to embrace the category 'white', unless it is necessary for a particular strategic purposes, because it is a category of domination and I am struggling to oppose domination, not embrace it. I am also reluctant to categorise any group of women as 'other' than me. Not only does my feminist commitment lead me to see the commonalities among women rather than the differences, no one can ever be in a position to know all the differences because none of us participates in all cultures. Nonetheless, addressing questions of racism requires the continued use of these terms or variants of them, given the absence of any adequate alternative. In what follows, I will use the term 'minority women' as a general term to refer to all the others, although that is not entirely satisfactory either, since no one is a minority to herself.

To return, now, to the accusation that feminism, or parts of it, is 'white and middle-class'. You have all probably come across the kind of thing I am referring to, but for the purposes of this present paper, I will provide a few examples:

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Working in the women's movement ... women of colour ... feel silenced from time to time. Our unique experiences as women of colour are frequently overlooked in discussions about women's oppression. (Ng, 1993: 197)

In discussing ... the question of ... why [US] black women have not joined the women's movement in large numbers and have been generally hostile to feminism ... there is a need to put aside the narrow and limited confines of feminism as defined and dominated by mainly middle- and upper-class white women to reach a broader analysis that could include the experiences of all women under white male domination ... white feminists ... have objectively excluded [women of color] from equal participation in the women's movement ... the racism of white women will not allow them to give us the right to speak on our own behalf. (Omolade, 1980: 247, 256)

The White women's movement has had its own explicit form of racism in the way it has given high priority to certain aspects of struggles and neglected others, and it has often been blind and ignorant about the conditions of Black women's lives. (Joseph and Lewis, 1981: 4)

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)

dominant Western feminist thought has taken the experiences of white middle-class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experiences of all women. (Spelman, 1988: ix)

This is a serious charge to level against feminism, and yet it is rarely substantiated with argument and evidence. Given the frequency with which it is reiterated over and over again in feminist writings, it appears to have been instantly accorded the status of a self-evident truth requiring no justification.

It is extraordinarily difficult to demonstrate an absence, in this case the absence of argument and evidence—if it is not in one place, then it might be in another, and it is impossible to know all of anything. In the longer paper of which this is a shortened version, I go on to

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discuss the ways in which the above examples avoid providing evidence for their assertions about feminism. Since my time is limited, I cannot go into those detailed arguments here. What I want to do in the time I have left, is to address three questions raised by the examples quoted above.

The first question concerns the location of feminism. Assertions like these imply that feminism is something other than the speaker's own political engagement and is located somewhere else apart from the speaker's own position. But if she herself is a feminist and a woman of colour, how can feminism be other than her own commitment? Part of the problem is defining feminism or 'the women's movement' as some kind of organised group or groups to which one can belong and from which one can be excluded. But feminism is not an organisation in this sense. If a woman is a feminist, then that is where feminism is, wherever else it may be as well.

The second question concerns the denial of male domination which is so much a feature of the 'racism' debate. What is too often forgotten is the radical feminist insight that racism (along with class oppression) is itself a form of male domination in the sense of hierarchies of domination among men. That some men have rights, benefits and privileges which other men are denied is a consequence of the male supremacist régime of power and 'knowledge' challenged by feminism. Many of the objections to feminism on the grounds of race, rest on the assumption that the feminist concept of male domination means that all men are equal, and that, since all men are not equal, the term should be dropped from the feminist repertoire because it makes false, and racist, assumptions about black men. However, since feminism has never argued that all men are in fact equal, and has, moreover, asserted the exact opposite, these objections do not constitute a critique of feminism.

The third question concerns the possibility of a common humanity. In a paper called 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', (Lazreg, 1990) Marnia Lazreg criticises US feminist writings on women in the Middle East for their reliance on the prevailing paradigm of 'difference', because it is too often used, she argues, to assert 'their' difference from 'us'. It has led to 'an essentialism of otherhood' (p.338), she says. Instead of 'difference', she argues, we need to be insisting on our common humanity. She

goes on to say that: 'The rejection of humanism and its universalistic character deprives the proponents of difference of any basis for understanding the relationship between the varieties of modes of being different in the world' (p.339). She points out that, with all its faults, 'old-style' humanism, with its appeal to 'a more reasonable rationalism or a more egalitarian universalism', provided colonised peoples with the tools required to argue for their freedom. Antihumanism, in contrast, locks powerless peoples into 'the prison house of race, color, ... religion ... and nationality' (p.340). The acknowledging of a common human bond provides, says Lazreg, 'a relative safeguard against the objectification of others', and 'a reminder that the other is just as entitled as I am to her/his own humanity expressed in his/her own cultural mode' (p.339). I will conclude on that note, leaving with you the ethical notion of a common humanity.

## References

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## **To (and from) Australian Feminist Studies**

The University of Adelaide

*Australian Feminist Studies*

6.1.1995

Dear Editors,

Enclosed is a copy of the paper I presented at the International Feminisms Conference in Melbourne at the beginning of August 1994. This is the paper which was criticised by Lenore Lyons-Lee in her notes on the conference. Since her criticism contained a number of misinterpretations and inaccuracies, I am sending it to you in the hope that it might be printed, together with my prefatory note, in a future issue of the journal.

Yours sincerely,

Denise Thompson

The University of Adelaide

*Australian Feminist Studies*

10 January 1995

Dear Denise,

Thank you for your letter in response to Lenore Lyons-Lee's comments on your paper 'Asking Questions about Racism'. While we feel that it is important for you to be able to respond to such criticisms, we are very pushed for space now—we would not be able to print the whole paper until some time in 1998, by which time it would probably have lost its relevance. However, if you were prepared to shorten your comments to no more than 2 pages and get it to me by the beginning of March, we could make room to publish it under 'Correspondence' in the next issue of AFS (May 1995). Could you please let me know as soon as possible which you would prefer?

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Assistant Editor

## Asking Questions about Racism - *Denise Thompson*

Assistant Editor, *Australian Feminist Studies*

Research Centre for Women's Studies

The University of Adelaide

26.1.1995

Dear [...],

Many thanks for your prompt reply to my letter about Lenore Lyons-Lee's report on my paper given at the International Feminism Conference. I would be grateful if you could publish the enclosed comments in the May 1995 issue of AFS.

The comments are about 900 words long. I hope that word-length is OK.

Once again, many thanks.

All the best,

Denise Thompson

### **A Reply to Lenore Lyons-Lee**

In issue no. 20 of *Australian Feminist Studies*, Lenore Lyons-Lee's report of the International Feminism conference criticised the paper I gave, 'Asking Questions About Racism'. (Lyons-Lee, 1994) Since Lyons-Lee's report, brief though it was, contained a number of inaccuracies and misrepresentations, I would like to make a number of points to set the record straight.

In the first place, the report proceeded by way of innuendo and pejorative language, rather than considered argument about what I actually said. At one point, for example, her account was even personally offensive. I am referring to her description of myself and another woman as 'middle-aged'. While that is true enough in my own case—I was two weeks short of my fifty-fourth birthday at the time I gave the paper—that fact has nothing to do with what I said. The implication is that there is something wrong with being middle-aged, that I am out of touch with the latest trends because of my age. This looks suspiciously like 'ageism', an over-valuing of youth (which is, let us not forget, a merely temporary condition) at the expense of those of us who are no longer young. It is also a classic example of an 'ad hominem argument', a personal attack substituting for a reasoned criticism of what was actually said (although I cannot see why being no longer young should be grounds for attack).

On another occasion, she referred to me as 'angry'. Since I neither felt angry, nor behaved in



any way which might have led anyone to believe that I was, I do not know why she assumed that. To the extent that my emotional state is relevant, my strongest feeling was anxiety. I knew that what I was saying was going against the grain of everything written about feminism and racism. I was afraid of being attacked, and afraid that I wouldn't be able to cope adequately.

Her interpretation of my paper as a 'summary of criticisms from women of colour' is not entirely accurate. What my paper was addressing were some of the problems involved in the assertion that feminism is 'white and middle-class' and/or 'racist', an assertion which is not made only by women of colour. My concern is with discourses, not individuals, with what is said not who says it. One of the problems with Lyons-Lee's account is her commitment to a version of methodological individualism, a tendency to reduce what is said to a matter of personal opinion instead of addressing the substance of the argument. Her statement that I 'believe that they [women of colour] have nothing to back up their claims that feminism is racist!' is a case in point. What I actually said was that the assertion that feminism is 'white and middle-class' is too often simply reiterated as though it were self-evident and beyond criticism, instead of being argued for and supported with evidence.

Lyons-Lee's twice-repeated statement to the effect that I 'believe that "feminism is where it's at"' is puzzling. Since it is placed in quotation marks in Lyons-Lee's text, it might be assumed that this was something I said. It is not. It is presumably Lyons-Lee's way of saying that my paper gives political priority to feminism. Since the paper was written for a feminist conference, I fail to see why that fact should be described in such pejorative terminology, as though there were something wrong with giving priority to feminism in a feminist context, or in any other context for that matter.

It also appears to be an attempt to grapple with a point I made about the location of feminism, since it is followed by the statement, 'if it's in India how can it be racist?'. I said that assertions to the effect that feminism is white and middle-class 'imply that feminism is something other than the speaker's own political engagement and is located somewhere else apart from the speaker's own position. But if she herself is a feminist and a woman of colour, how can feminism be other than her own commitment? ... If a woman is a feminist,

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then that is where feminism is, wherever else it may be as well'. My point was not that feminism cannot be racist if it is embraced by women of colour. Rather, I was arguing that, if a speaker/writer criticises feminism as 'white and middle-class', while still retaining a feminist commitment and absolving her own form of feminism from the charge, then it is important to distinguish between the 'white, middle-class' aspects of feminism and the feminism to which she herself is committed. I may not have made the point very clearly at the time, but I would have thought that it was clear enough that I was not arguing that the presence of women of colour automatically ensures that feminism is not racist.

In conclusion I would like to point out that ill-considered, knee-jerk reactions like Lyons-Lee's effectively silence debate. Women who have doubts about the ways in which the feminism and racism debate has proceeded are intimidated into saying nothing for fear of being held complicit with racism. 'Racist' is the very worst thing a politically committed woman can be called. Silence is preferable to risking the epithet 'racist'. But silence springs from political paralysis. The silence must be broken if we are to move once again.

Denise Thompson, January 1995

## **To (and from) AFS again**

Research Centre for Women's Studies,

University of Adelaide,

South Australia—5005

16.1.1996

Dear [...],

I would be grateful if AFS could print the enclosed letter in the next issue. I know how pressed for space the journal is, but I do think the issues are important and topical. I've tried to keep my comments to the minimum while remaining as clear as possible.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

All the best,

Denise Thompson

The University of Adelaide

*Australian Feminist Studies*

23 January 1996

Dear Denise,

Thank you for your letter dated 16.1.96. We appreciate your wish to pursue the broader implications of the differences over race and age between you and Lenore Lyons-Lee. However, we regret to say that we have decided that this particular set of differences have had a long enough run in Australian Feminist Studies, so we must decline your latest letter.

We'll return your letter with this, and wish you well with everything. (Are you coming to our congress?

I sent you a registration brochure in case you are interested).

All good wishes,

[...]

Editor

## **A Further Reply to Lenore Lyons-Lee** (unpublished)

I would like to make yet another reply to Lenore Lyons-Lee, further to my reply published in the Correspondence column in AFS no. 21, this time to her comments in the Correspondence column in issue no. 22. I ask this, not because I feel personally offended by anything Lyons-Lee says, but because her reactions to my arguments are indicative of broad trends in feminism generally, and hence have a wider relevance than simply an argument between two individuals. I would like to start with Lyons-Lee's apology for hurting my feelings by referring to me as 'middle-aged' (even if, as she says, the term was not intended to refer to me). To couch it in these terms is irrelevant—my feelings are neither here nor there when what is at stake is the important political issue of the ways in which women are demeaned by references to their age. The contempt which is directed towards aging women is a cultural norm in a male dominated world. Heedless use of the term 'middle-aged' brings with it all those connotations of devaluation and insult, unless it is relevant to the matter at hand. In this case it was not. Lyons-Lee's attempt to excuse her use of the term does not improve matters. She refers to the 'common practice in dealing with issues of representation to enunciate subject positions'. But to the extent that this 'practice' makes any sense, it is a matter of self-representation. The only one who has the right to 'enunciate her subject position' is the one who occupies it. No one else has the right to label her 'middle-aged' if she hasn't done so herself.

As for Lyons-Lee's question of why I did not take offence at being described as 'white and middle-class', the answer is that I was not taking personal offence at all, but trying to make a political point about the implications of referring† to women's aging. The terms 'white and middle-class' have different political implications. They have less social power to insult than references to aging women have. I also don't find the terms helpful for feminist politics. Being 'white' is not a moral and political issue because no one has any choice about it. That is not to say that there are not moral and political issues around racism and white supremacy. There are. But they cannot be addressed by simply noting whether or not someone is 'white'.

This brings me to the question of evidence. Lyons-Lee put this in terms of my 'calling for evidence of racism within feminism' in my paper at the International Feminism conference.

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That is not quite what I said. Rather I pointed to a problem of 'lack of evidence for assertions that feminism, or certain aspects of it, is, at best, deficient in the ways it has dealt with race, at worst, that it is "racist"'. I said that 'criticisms must be substantiated and argued for, and must leave the way open for disagreement, if they are not to degenerate into sloganeering, name-calling and guilt-stricken silence'. I also said that assertions to the effect that feminism is white and middle-class are 'rarely substantiated with argument and evidence', that they 'appear to have been instantly accorded the status of a self-evident truth requiring no justification'. That may or may not constitute 'calling for evidence', but at the time I was merely pointing to what I felt was a significant absence in the feminist 'race' debate. I did not suggest that the solution was to supply evidence, much less what kind of evidence it might be. It has only subsequently become clear to me (and Lyons-Lee cannot be blamed for not knowing this) that I was not asking for evidence that racism exists. I know it exists, I have seen too many instances of it to doubt it. What was puzzling me was that a feminist commitment ought to mean avoiding racism because feminists ought to know better. If racism was occurring within feminism or among feminists, I needed to know what form it was taking, both in the behaviour of individual feminists and in feminist theory and practice. I was not getting that information in most of the literature. Even when I came across examples of racist behaviour, I could not understand why that behaviour was not seen as a failure of feminist politics, why it was seen instead as an instance of feminism itself. And I was, and remain, thoroughly dissatisfied with attempts to theorise feminism as 'racist' in terms of its 'white and middle-class' nature, for example, or in terms of 'false universalism' or 'race, class and gender'.

Still on this question of evidence, Lyons-Lee says that calling for evidence 'alienates women of colour by insisting that they bear the burden of proof'. But I would argue, on the contrary, that the burden of proof does lie with those doing the accusing, whether they be women of colour or not. No one should be exempt from the common courtesy of substantiating an accusation they are making about someone else doing the wrong thing. Simple justice requires it. Non-specific accusations are paralysing. If we don't know what we are doing wrong, how can we do anything about it?

Denise Thompson, January 1996