

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

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

Australian Feminist Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Research Centre for Women's Studies

31 July 1998

Dear Denise,

Thank you for your letter regarding the article you submitted to *Australian Feminist Studies* entitled 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?'

I apologise for the delay in contacting you, but at this stage we have only received one reader's report about your article. This reader finds your work promising, but does not think that your article is suitable for publication in AFS in its present form. However we need to receive the report of the second reader before a final decision is made. A reminder has been sent to the second reader, and I hope to receive a response soon. In the meantime I have included a copy of the first reader's report with this letter for your consideration.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries.

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Assistant Editor

Reader A, Australian Feminist Studies

Overall this paper engages with an important question clearly and with continuity of argument. The author aims to problematise the criticism that second-wave feminism is fundamentally white and middle-class in its origins and aims. She/he sets about questioning what this might mean, rightly pointing out that neither term has received sufficient attention by those positioning themselves on either side of the debate.

The author selects several texts as case studies through which she/he investigates assumptions underlying the criticism of whiteness and middle classness. Here the author reads critiques of authors such as Daly and Molyneux to good effect, taking us back to the texts in question and offering some persuasive points in defence of both. At the same time she/he is careful to acknowledge their weaknesses where apparent.

Nonetheless periodisation of these texts is largely missing and I find the author reiterates some of the very problems she seeks to make apparent. For example we get a really quite powerful account of Bulkin and Daly's use of a 1927 text. While the author courageously points out that cultural difference neither exonerates nor explains nationalist/masculinist violence against women and girls, she/he fails to allude to the historical context of this early text. Information and argument from all three end up sitting side by side, which merely reduces her/his argument. Many of her/his chosen texts are from the 1970s and 1980s and periodisation needs to be brought into her account here as well.

Overall the author's argument appears to be that universalising tendencies evident within some feminist writings about 'women' represent the problem of Western epistemology, not of feminism itself. More than this, she/he asserts, Western universalism, when it appears within supposedly feminist texts, is not feminist at all. 'White and middle-class' may apply to feminism's failures but not the body of real feminism which aims to undo such universalism towards the betterment of all women's lives.

It is on this deeper level of argument that I am least persuaded. It requires a more extensive overview to defend the argument that universalising is the exception rather than the rule within feminist scholarship of the past nearly three decades. In this regard, I am perplexed that the author does not move beyond the early 1990s. More recent years have seen important moves in relation to the conceptualisation of difference, in particular in taking up whiteness. More needs to be done with 'white' rather than the more general issue of the historical effects of hierarchies of racial difference upon feminist politics. Her/his statement that imperialism underlies the act of erasing or writing 'over' an other's life would suggest postcolonial studies might offer highly constructive insights material to the paper. See for example Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani's essay 'Crosscurrents/Crosstalk'.

The author needs to move forwards to more recent debates, particularly in the final section of the paper.

Feminism 'White and Middle-Class?' Reply 5 - *Denise Thompson*

Language is clearly important to this paper, yet little is done to analyse representation and the politics of identity within which black women's and women of color's (and these labels were mobilised for particular purposes at particular times) interventions into feminist scholarship took place during the 1980s.

The author's difficulty with the politics of language shows itself most clearly in the points she/he makes about childbirth. I think she mistakes what she considers is the fact that childbearing is universal to women with biological reproduction. Yes, female bodies can reproduce and do so through a certain physiology but as soon as that is said we have to acknowledge that our 'knowledge' of those 'facts' is based upon Western science. Understandings of conception, of pregnancy etc differ in culture and language, and as such, are sets of practices and knowledges. I would argue that there is no inert 'body' we can come back to as the basis upon which feminism tests. Rather there are lived bodies which are imbued with political meaning.

Similarly while 'middle-class' is noted as being undefined when mobilised in many of these interventions, the author does not make any clear suggestions about what to do with the question of class when the focus is more directly upon race. To say that feminism is about the oppression of women by men is one thing. To claim that bringing critical attention to the hierarchical differences between women means ignoring that oppression is quite another and not an argument I find useful. Surely this reenacts the old argument that not only have 'women' more in common with each other than differences, but that to recognise that power operates between women is to be anti-feminist. Again I would suggest the author considers some of the important historical work of recent years which considers the way in which notions of race, sexuality and class cannot be separated from each other but play complex roles in colonial, imperial and settler-colonial inter-subjectivity.

THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Research Centre for Women's Studies

28 October 1998

Dear Denise,

Thank you for the article you submitted to *Australian Feminist Studies* entitled 'What does it mean to call feminism "White and Middle Class"?' I have now received the second reader's report about your work.

Unfortunately, while both readers are interested in your work, this article is not considered suitable for publication in AFS. I have enclosed their comments for your consideration, along with copies of your manuscript.

Thank you for your interest in Australian Feminist Studies.

Reader B, *Australian Feminist Studies*

What does it mean to call feminism 'White and Middle Class'?

It's a pity that this very clearly argued paper is so out of date: if it had arrived on AFS desk in 1990, perhaps, it would have had crucial clarifications to offer the state of debate on these issues. But key developments in feminist theorizing of difference have happened since 1990, with the emergence of post-colonial feminism, building on deconstructive approaches.

This paper contains no contributions to the international debate since 1990, even if they were only included to be refuted. Spival, Chow, Mohanty, Spelman, Hooks, Huggins et. al. are not mentioned.

My replies

9.11.1998

Research Centre for Women's Studies

The University of Adelaide

Dear [...],

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

The second point concerns the readers' contention that the texts I discuss are 'out of date'. This suggests to me a worrying erasure of history. The issues I discuss in some detail have not been resolved, 'postcolonial studies' and 'deconstructive approaches' notwithstanding, and they never will be if they are simply left on the record to remain unchallenged.

I'm not asking for a reconsideration of the decision to reject the paper. I didn't expect that it would be accepted, since it has already been rejected a number of times by other feminist journals. Might I suggest, though, that there is something seriously wrong with the 'race' debate within feminism if principled objections cannot be allowed to appear on the public agenda.

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

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

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

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

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

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