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

Abstract: This paper argues that there are a number of problems with the often reiterated arguments to the effect that feminism is 'white and middle-class'. They tend to elide the problematic of male domination, focusing instead on hierarchies among women. They ignore the male dominated nature of the anti-racist struggle itself. And they suffer from a lack of clarity about what 'white and middle-class' might mean. The body of the paper is devoted to a detailed investigation of some of these arguments, with the aim of elucidating the problems. It concludes with a recommendation that any assertion that feminism is 'white and middle-class' be carefully and critically evaluated, and not simply reiterated as self-evident.

While it is clear that there are many women, variously identified as women of colour, black women, third world women, indigenous women, or women from ethnic minorities,[1] who feel excluded from a great deal of what is called 'feminism', what is less clear is the nature of and reasons for that sense of exclusion, and what is to be done about it. This problem of exclusion tends to be blamed on what is perceived to be the 'white, middle-class', or 'Western', nature of feminism, and to be explained in terms of feminism as a 'white women's movement' which focuses on the concerns of women who are already relatively privileged, at the expense of women who are subjected to social exclusions and indignities because of their race.

But there are a number of problems with this account. There is little discussion of what counts as 'white and middle-class' and what does not. Such assertions are too often presented as self-evident truth requiring no argument or evidence. In raising this question of evidence, I am not intending to cast doubt on the occurrence of racism among feminists, much less its existence more generally. I have no doubt about its existence, having seen too many instances of it. But if that is the case, why raise the question of evidence? The answer is: if feminism's political project involves working towards a human status for all women at no one's expense, then embracing feminism *ought* to mean refusing racism. If it does not, then it is vitally important that the racism which does occur be identified so that it can be eradicated. There is no further insight to be gained from simply reiterating that racism exists. There can be no doubt about that. What we need to know is the form or forms it is taking among women whose political awareness should preclude it. We also need to know because hurling insults is easy, and guilt reactions automatic. The issues need to be argued through if they are to lead to

something more positive than simply occasions for self-aggrandisement or breast-beating.

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

If the debate has been, at the very least, unhelpful for feminist politics, it has also been inadequate as an anti-racist politics. One reason for this derives from that very avoidance of questions about male domination which makes it so problematic for feminist politics. In other words, it is inadequate as an anti-racist politics to the same extent as, and for the same reason that, it is inadequate as a feminist politics, i.e. its deletion of the question of male domination.[2] There is too little discussion of the male dominated nature of the human categories on whose behalf the anti-racist struggle is waged, categories which contain only men unless women are explicitly mentioned. The exclusion of black women or women of colour is blamed on a 'white women's movement' or a 'white middle-class feminism', when the original exclusion is a male supremacist one, i.e. the exclusion of women from every 'human' category because they are not men. In contrast, starting from the standpoint of opposition to the male domination allows the problem of women's exclusion from all 'human' categories to be addressed directly, in a way that focusing exclusively on 'race' does not. Certainly texts authored in the name of 'feminism' can be complicit with this exclusion of women from categories defined in terms of 'race', but it does not originate there. Rather, it originates with the male supremacist ideology that only men count as 'human'.

At first sight, it seems that the meaning of the statement that feminism is 'white and

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

It is also presumably a generalisation referring to instances like those described by Alice Walker in her paper, 'One Child of One's Own', in the anthology, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. (Hull, Scott and Smith, eds., 1982)[4] In this paper, Walker gave three examples of what might be referred to as white, middle-class bias on the part of feminists. The first example involved Patricia Meyer Spacks' book, *The Female Imagination*. Spacks herself acknowledged that her research was confined to writings by 'white, middle-class' women, because, she said, she was reluctant to theorise about experiences she hadn't had. But, as Walker pointed out, this was an inadequate excuse for excluding writings by US black women, since Spacks included the BrontÎs although she had no experience of nineteenth-century Yorkshire either. But the problem with Spacks' book went further than this. Not only did she fail to include writings by black women, she did so in the face of a golden opportunity to expand her own 'female imagination'. At the time she was writing the book, she was sharing an office with Alice Walker who was teaching a course on 'Black women writers', and who was prepared to share the fruits of her own research with Spacks. Walker's second example involved Judy Chicago's exhibition, *The Dinner Party*, which included only one plate referring to black

women, the one devoted to Sojourner Truth. Walker's objection was not just to the tokenism of including only a single example. It was also directed to the kind of example it was. Although all the other plates depicted stylised vaginas, the Sojourner Truth plate did not. Instead, it depicted three faces, one weeping, one screaming and one smiling. Walker commented that, although there is something to be said for depicting women in terms of faces rather than vaginas, that was not what the exhibition was about, and the faces were nothing but tired old clichÈs about black women. Walker's third example involved a brief interchange at an exhibition of women painters at the Brooklyn museum. In response to one woman's question about whether there were any black women painters represented, another woman replied: 'It's a *women's* exhibit!'

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

On too many occasions where attempts are made to demonstrate the 'white, middle-class' or 'racist' nature of feminism, the demonstration fails because of lack of evidence, inadequate argument, or terminological confusion. For example, in the Introduction to the anthology, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson says: 'From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, feminist theory exhibited a recurrent pattern: Its analyses tended to reflect the viewpoints of white, middle-class women of North America and Western Europe.' (Nicholson, ed., 1990: 1) By this she means that, as she says later, 'aspects of modern Western culture were postulated as present in all or most of human history' and in cultures other than the West (p. 6). The reason Nicholson gives for what she sees as the 'white, middle-class' emphasis of feminist theory is not the obvious one. She does not argue that feminist theory reflected the viewpoints of 'white, middle-class' women because it was written by 'white, middle-class' women in defence of their 'white, middle-class' interests. Rather, she goes on to discuss a

version of the 'false universalism' charge. But with this move to 'false universalism', the ground of the accusation has shifted. The question of the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminism has dropped out of the account, and feminism is now being accused of inappropriately generalising from one culture (which Nicholson later calls 'modern Western') to other, different cultures. With this shift of focus, even feminists who do not qualify as 'white' and/or 'middle-class' within 'modern Western' culture could imperialise the situations of women of other cultures. (See: Washington, 1985, for an acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of referring to US black women as 'Third World women'). The problem being identified here is that of Western cultural imperialism, and the question being addressed would be more accurately couched in terms of the extent to which feminism is peculiar to 'the West'. Nicholson does not address this question. The problem with social generalisations which emanate from the West, and in particular from the USA, is domination. It is not the case that just any 'specific cultural and historical context' is randomly and inappropriately applied to any other, but that hegemonic frameworks serving the vested interests of the powerful are imposed on those who have no right to be heard. It may be that this was what Nicholson was attempting to suggest with her categories of 'white' and 'middle-class'. But she failed to spell out what these categories involve, and hence she failed, too, to substantiate her assertion about the elitist and racist nature of (some aspects of) feminism.

Nicholson does provide some examples of those feminist writings which she regards as implicated in 'false universalising'. But her arguments against them do not survive close examination, not surprisingly, given the basic incoherence of the concept of 'false universalism'. (See Thompson, 1996: 78ff) One text she discusses is Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone was among those who had, she said, a 'too casual' approach to history. (Nicholson, 1990: 5) Arguments like Firestone's, Nicholson said, are 'essentialist', because 'they project onto all women and men qualities which develop under historically specific conditions'. (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 28) Firestone's 'appeal to biological differences between women and men' did not allow for the way these differences vary across cultures and throughout history (Nicholson, 1990:5), and hence 'falsely universalised' Western cultural values. But this is a decidedly peculiar argument, for two reasons. In the first place, the 'biological difference' which Firestone was addressing was

childbirth. The fact that females give birth and males do not is not a 'false universal', but a true one. Childbirth is not a Western cultural value, but something common to the whole human species. In the second place, although Nicholson is quite right to point out the falsity of Firestone's argument, she does so for the wrong reasons. It is true that, as Nicholson says, childbirth is not the cause of women's oppression, as Firestone argued it was. But what is wrong with Firestone's argument is not that she 'falsely universalises' childbirth as a biological difference between the sexes—it is, after all, universal. What is wrong about Firestone's argument is wrong for *any* cultural context, including her own. She perceived pregnancy and childbirth as inherently oppressive of women, and hence could only recommend that they be abolished by technological means. She did not see that their oppressiveness to women was a consequence of their happening under conditions of male domination, and that they could be a source of joy and excitement if women had control over the conditions under which they got pregnant and gave birth. Hence, the problem with Firestone's argument was not that she made inappropriate generalisations from her own culture to other cultures; the problem was that it was false for her own culture as well. Childbirth is not inherently oppressive, even in the West. And neither is women's lack of control over the conditions under which they get pregnant and give birth peculiar to the West. Nor does the issue of women's taking control over their own bodies and reproductive capacities have relevance only for 'white, middle-class' women.

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

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

It is true that 'cross-cultural' generalisations are suspect, not, however, because they are

'essentialist' or 'ahistorical', but because they are imperialistic. Anthropology is a framework originating in Western colonialism. The speaking position of the anthropologist reflects that origin, as do 'cross-cultural' comparisons, which are uni-directional, imposed *from* the West upon other (more or less) 'primitive' cultures without reciprocity.[5] It is difficult to imagine, for example, the Trobriand Islanders studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, studying in their turn British social mores and customs. Or a group from the highlands of Papua New Guinea studying, say, the denizens of the highlands of Scotland. Or the Kmer people of Cambodia studying the tribal arrangements of the citizens of the US.

But Nicholson's account is too scanty to count as evidence for the grand generalisation about the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminist theory with which she began. She does not tell us which aspects of 'women's labour' and 'women's sexuality' are 'white' and 'middle-class', and which are not. Neither does she tell us what is peculiarly 'white' and 'middle-class' about the 'domestic/public separation'. Even women who are not 'white' or 'middle-class' have to struggle with the conflicting demands of paid work in the public sphere and unpaid work in the domestic sphere, of dependence on a male wage, or lack of access to one. And given the world-wide domination of Western economic and cultural imperialism, a critique of Western values, institutions and practices is not entirely irrelevant to the 'Third World'. (For critiques of the massive destruction, amounting to nothing less than cultural and physical extermination, visited on the 'Third World' by the economic policies of the West, aided and abetted by the economic elites of the 'Third World', see: Waring, 1988; George, 1990[1984]; George, 1990).

Another of Nicholson's examples concerns the work of 'writers such as Chodorow'. On this occasion she says that 'the categories that they employ, such as mothering, are not situated within a specific cultural and historical context'. But this assertion is absurd. Categories, as linguistic entities, cannot avoid being culturally and historically specific, whether that specificity is spelled out or not. Problems arise if generalisations made to fit one cultural and historical context are inappropriately and imperialistically applied to another. Whether or not Chodorow did this, is not entirely clear. Sometimes she limited the scope of her generalisations to 'our society', 'the Western family', 'capitalist industrialization', 'the contemporary reproduction of mothering', and sometimes she referred to 'all societies',

'transhistorical facts', etc. But even if she did overgeneralise from her own historical situation, merely pointing that out does not falsify her entire thesis. (See: Yeatman, 1990: 291, for a similar argument). If inappropriate generalisation is a problem in Chodorow's work, that can be countered by citing occasions and situations where the generalisations do not apply. This Nicholson did not do. And by focusing attention on the postmodernist fantasy of 'essentialism', she avoided addressing the very real problems with Chodorow's work—her insistence that women's mothering is responsible for male domination, and her failure to recognise the centrality of the penis-as-phallus in the inculcation of the meanings, values, beliefs and practices of male supremacy. Instead we are presented with an array of 'postmodernist' mantras—'essentialism', 'totalisation', 'universalisation', 'ahistorical', 'transcendent reason', 'rhetoric', 'desire', 'identity', 'difference', 'modernity' and, most obfuscating of all, 'gender'.

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

Lorde's second objection was that Mary Daly depicted non-European women only 'as victims and preyers-upon each other' (p.67). But to the extent that this is a problem, it is one which

is common to feminism in general. How is it possible to speak about the atrocities committed against women, while at the same time asserting women's strength? Besides, Daly did not confine her depiction of women's victimisation to other cultures—most of the second part of her book is devoted to Western Europe, to the witchcrazes and modern Western medical practices.

The basis of Lorde's complaint that Daly's text was complicit with racism is not clear. If the reason for that complaint was that the text was not even-handed, it rests on a misinterpretation of the text. Daly did not, it is true, portray any 'black foremothers', 'black women's heritage' or images of 'noneuropean female strength and power'. But neither did she portray any images of *European* female strength and power. It has never been Mary Daly's purpose to provide historical examples of female strength and power, because for her, history is invariably patriarchal. For Daly, women's strength starts now, with radical feminism, and with women's complete separation from patriarchal institutions, meanings and values. Whatever criticisms might be leveled against the possibility of that project, it is in principle available to all women without exception. Lorde's second objection to Daly's text—that it depicted women of 'other cultures' only as victims—is also a misinterpretation of Daly's project, although even in the misinterpretation it is even-handed. All women are victims of patriarchal practices (if that is the way it must be interpreted). But Daly's critique was not primarily a depiction of women at all, but an exposure of the workings of male supremacy. Women are its chief (although not the only) victims because male supremacy thrives at women's expense. But to demand that women, any women, not be portrayed as victims is to demand that the critique of male supremacy cease.

Gyn/Ecology has, however, been subjected to other criticisms on the grounds of its racism. In an article published in the lesbian journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, Elly Bulkin criticised Daly's selective quotation from two of the texts she used in her research. (Bulkin, 1980) Bulkin argued that Daly discussed the first of these books, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published in 1927, only in favourable terms, while ignoring its racism. Bulkin illustrated this racism with excerpts from Mayo's book. Mayo depicted 'the Indian' in terms of '"inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself"', and characterised 'the

Hindu's woes, material and spiritual'' in terms of 'poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness, not forgetting that subconscious conviction of inferiority which he forever bares and advertises by his gnawing and imaginative alertness to social affronts'. She also described Indian men as '"broken-nerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients"', in comparison with '"the Anglo-Saxon"' of the same age, who '"is just coming into the full glory of manhood"'. She also said that Indians would never be free of British rule because '"their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or hold the reins of government"'. (Bulkin, 1980: 125-6)

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

were responsible for the suffering. Challenging the racism would mean defending the men who systematically raped and murdered women and children. It is not uncommon in the feminist 'race' debate, to find that challenging racism means defending the men of the subordinated race (e.g. Spelman, 1988), rather than black or third world or indigenous women whose interests are once again elided in favour of men. That Mary Daly refused or neglected to do this is not altogether to her discredit.

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

Another example of a position which failed to substantiate arguments to the effect that

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

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

In the case of 'the family', Carby argued that it was not always oppressive for black women because the black family has often been the site of struggle against racial oppression. But although this might be true enough in relation to black resistance, it is beside the point. Black families could be both a site of resistance to racism, and be oppressive for women at one and the same time. When Carby herself acknowledges that 'we would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us', she has already conceded the whole of the feminist point about 'the family', and hence its relevance to the experiences of black women. She does not, however, acknowledge the reason for 'the family's' oppressiveness to women, i.e. male domination. (Neither does the quotation she uses as an example of feminist theorising about 'the family', a passage from Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today*). Indeed, in her argument against the relevance of the concept of 'dependency' for black feminists, she denies the existence of male domination within black families where women are heads of households, and where women are not dependent on a male wage because of the high levels of black male unemployment. But male domination is not limited to the

behaviour of individual men as husbands and fathers, and it is unlikely that black women are untouched by the effects of male domination such as male violence and poverty. Hence this is not an argument against the relevance of feminism to the experiences of black women, since the feminist exposure of male domination is not confined to families, black or white, and includes the recognition of the existence of hierarchies of domination among men.

She does make one point which appears to support her claim to identify racism within feminism. She says that some feminist writings portray the West as 'more "enlightened" or "progressive"' than the 'Third World', and the latter as 'backward'. She provides two quotations from a paper by Maxine Molyneux, the second one of which does indeed appear to support Carby's contention. That quotation reads:

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

Carby interprets this to mean that 'since "Third World" women are outside of capitalist relations of production, entering capitalist relations is, necessarily, an emancipating move'. (Carby, 1982: 217) But this quotation omits Molyneux's provisos and qualifications on this point. In the paper cited, Molyneux went on to acknowledge that 'of course imperialism has also had negative consequences for women'. She said that capitalist employment conditions for women in the Third World 'are often extremely oppressive—whether in urban sweat-shops, free-zone economies or rural plantations'. She said that 'development programmes' have often worsened women's situations by eroding the respected statuses women had before colonisation, and by making use of existing forms of women's subordination. And she deplored the growth of large-scale prostitution and sex tourism as consequences of Western imperialism (pp. 4-5). Molyneux's point was that the abolition of such traditional practices as 'polygyny, the brideprice, child marriages, seclusion, and forms of mutilation such as footbinding or female "circumcision"' (Molyneux, 1981: 3), could only advance the cause of women's emancipation, whether that abolition was a consequence of imperialism or of the

need for economic 'development' within Third World countries. She was also concerned to point out that, too often, such traditions were lauded in the name of 'national authenticity', while women's own demands to be free from traditional constraints were dismissed as 'foreign influences' or an 'imperialist plot' (p. 5).

Carby's discussion misinterpreted Molyneux's task. Molyneux did not subscribe to 'the assumption that it is only through the development of a Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labour that the potential for the liberation of women can increase'. (Carby, 1982: 222) On the contrary, Molyneux explicitly argued against that view. She referred to its 'economism and reductionism', and pointed out that it involved a failure 'either to problematize relations between the sexes or to acknowledge the differential effect of class relations on men and women'. Molyneux also pointed out that this failure was not a mere oversight on the part of 'socialist states', but the result of 'a quite conscious promotion of "motherhood" and of the idea of women as naturally suited to this role [of domestic labour and childcare] because of their supposed "spiritual, moral and physical needs"'. (Molyneux, 1981: 9-11)

Her task was to compare the record of socialist countries with their official stated policies on women's emancipation. In the case of the Third World, far from arguing for the 'progressiveness' of capitalist relations, Molyneux argued the exact opposite. 'Whatever the failures of socialist society', she said, 'it is evident that in the Third World its record is nonetheless impressive when matched against capitalist societies of comparable levels of development and religio-cultural background' (p. 5). Molyneux did not argue that Third World countries were 'backward' in comparison with the 'progressive' West, as Carby said she did: 'Maxine Molyneux falls straight into this trap of "Third Worldism" as "backwardness" ... foot-binding, clitoridectomy, female "circumcision" and other forms of mutilation of the female body have been described as "feudal residues" ... linked in reductionist ways to a lack of technological development'. (Carby, 1982: 216, 222) Although Molyneux used the term 'feudal residues' in the first of the passages quoted by Carby, Molyneux was herself quoting from what she referred to as 'official literature'. She was pointing out that this was the way traditional practices were characterised by 'Third World post-revolutionary states', when those practices were seen by the ruling parties in

those states as 'an obstacle to economic and social development'. (Molyneux, 1981: 4) She was not presenting this view as her own opinion, and hence Carby's arguments against it (pp. 222, 227) are irrelevant as a critique of her position. Molyneux did not use the West or capitalism as the exemplar of progress. Her point of comparison was the historical past of those countries themselves. Her criterion of progress throughout the paper was the degree to which women had been emancipated within nation states which claimed to be working towards that goal. On the feminist criterion of women's liberation, the abolition of cruelty and injustice towards women is progress, and it is unlikely to be only 'Western feminists' who are saying so.

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

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

Women, like black slaves, have a personal relationship to the men who are their masters. 3. Women, like blacks, get their identity and status from white men ... 6. Women, like blacks, sustain the white man (etc.)'. Stimpson admits to liking this pamphlet, although she eventually disagrees with it. Her disagreement, however, is not because of its erasure of black women, but because it is parasitic on black politics. That women have been excluded from the category 'black', she does not appear to notice.

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

The charge that feminism is 'white and middle-class' or 'Western' needs to be carefully and critically examined. It needs to be subjected to the same scrutiny, open to the same public debate as anything else said in the name of feminism. I want to suggest that it not be merely routinely reiterated because it is so obvious it needs no discussion, or because it is so threatening it silences debate, or because the questions it raises are just too hard. For my own part, I have found the charge meaningless because it appears to rely on a view of feminism which I do not recognise. I say it 'appears' to rely on such a view, because I have not yet found any instance of the charge where what feminism means is made explicit. But as far as I have been able to establish, the charge relies on a view of feminism which makes no

reference to male domination. Without the unifying politics of opposition to male supremacy, 'feminism' becomes nothing more than a multiplicity of sometimes antagonistic categories of 'women', who have nothing in common because some are more privileged than others. This is a 'feminism' of political stagnation.

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

Notes

1. There are problems with all of these terms. They imply a homogeneity among those so categorised, which is not only not the case, but can lead to its own form of domination and exclusion. This is evidenced by the way in which the debate has been dominated by the concerns of US black women, concerns which are certainly pressing and important, but which are different in crucial ways from the interests of, say, Australian Aboriginal women. Once women's interests are characterised in terms of different cultural realities, the inclusion of some will inevitably occur at the expense of others. It is impossible to include all cultures because no one can ever be in a position to know. The terms also imply a non-existent homogeneity among those who fall outside the categories, those designated 'white'. Nonetheless, addressing questions of racism requires the continued use of these terms or variants of them, given the absence of any adequate alternative.

2. For some exceptions to this, see: Wallace, 1990; Lorde, 1978; Lorde, 1979a.

3. It also implies that feminism is confined to women to the exclusion of men. But the feminist strategy of separatism is not intended to exclude men from understanding feminism and learning from it, but rather to prevent men from dominating it. Moreover, given the extent to

which male supremacist meanings and values have permeated much of the feminism authored by women, excluding men and confining feminism to women is obviously not sufficient to keep feminism focused on a critique of male supremacy. The much debated question of whether or not men can be feminists is the wrong question, as is the question of who among women is or is not a feminist. Both questions only make sense within an ideology of individualism which reduces feminism to a matter of personal identity.

4. This anthology, with the delightfully accurate title, is not one of the texts I am criticising here. Although it focuses exclusively on 'women', its manifest purpose of rectifying the exclusion of US Afro-American women from US history and society situates it firmly in the honourable feminist tradition of insisting that women are human too.

5. To say as much is not to suggest that individual anthropologists are inevitably complicit with Western imperialism. There are many anthropologists who devote the whole of their working lives to providing for the people they live with and work among access to Western resources the people would not otherwise have had.

6. Mary Daly made the same point in her autobiography, *Outercourse*, where she said that she had pointed out in a conversation with Audre Lorde that *Gyn/Ecology* was not 'a compendium of goddesses', but was intended as a discussion of 'those goddesses which were direct sources of christian myth'. (Daly, 1993: 232)

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