

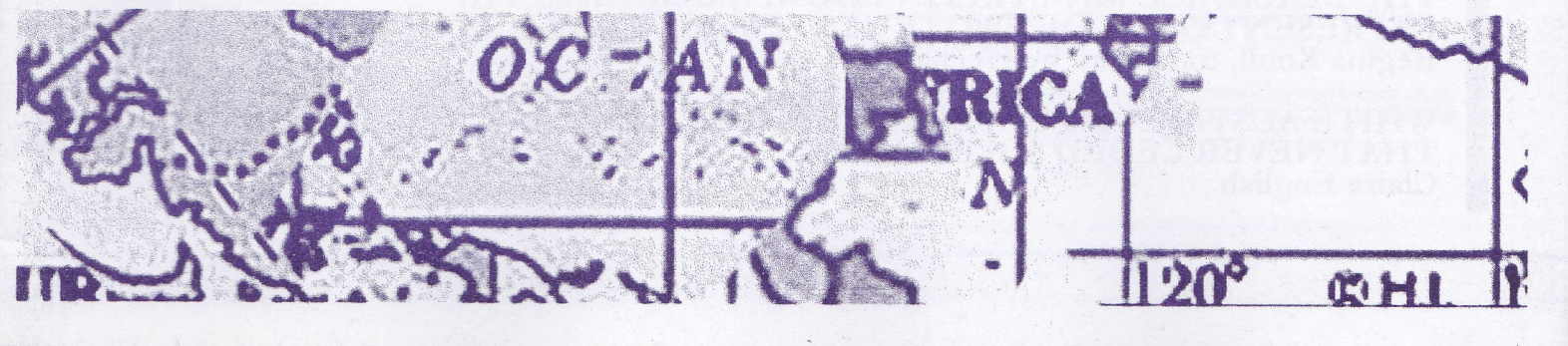


RACE

REVOLT

ISSUE FOUR

'WHITENESS'



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INTRODUCTION

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This, the second special issue of Race Revolt, is themed 'Whiteness', the idea for which came from wanting to highlight that 'white' is as racialised as 'of colour' (Issue 3 was made up of contributions from people of colour only). The result is a collection of pieces that, as well as doing this, show that things are never as simple as they may seem. As the contributions in these pages insist, whiteness is not only racialised; it is mobile, it exists in history - shaping presents and futures, and it means different things in different places...

The contributions within talk about how whiteness manifests itself as bodies and as skin, but also as concepts. They discuss how all this is carried and enacted by different positions and privileges, complicating our engagements with race and forcing us to see how none of these ideas exist within a vacuum - that many intersections and specificities exist in dialogue within ideas of 'whiteness', ideas of 'race'. Perhaps most importantly this collection does not propose to solve such complexities, instead showing the potential for discussing the many ways in which race, power and identity need to be considered.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this issue.

April 2009

CONTRIBUTE TO RACE REVOLT!

Upcoming Issues:

Autumn 2009 - General Issue

submission deadline - September 10th 2009

Spring 2010 - Race and Class, Intersections Issue

submission deadline - March 10th, 2010

Autumn 2010 - Race and Dis/Ability, Intersections Issue

submission deadline - September 10th, 2010

scribbles, rants, essays, pictures, poetry, art, conversations...

whatever else you feel like sending in!

Race Revolt is also looking for people to write in with their responses to the 'zine, to try and gauge what impact it is having and emphasise how all the discussions in these pages are part of ongoing conversations.... so please, send in your thoughts!

Thanks to the following for fundraising so this issue could be printed:

London Queer Activist Group; Manifesta Leeds & Debi Withers; Misster Scratch

Race Revolt is a zine addressing issues of race. focussing on (but not limited to) activist, feminist, queer, and d.i.y. punk cultures and communities.

racerevolt@riseup.net (www.racerevolt.org.uk is slowly being built so keep an eye out!)

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Six simple tactics for white people on the run

Michelle Green
email@email

I speak with authority over no one but myself. These words are not objective, not neutral, not academically and correctly footnoted (although there are footnotes for the curious).

These words are not written in isolation, not groundbreaking, not flashes of individual insight that exist in a vacuum. They are built on scaffolding so vast that I sometimes can't see what's hidden underneath: my life, my experiences, my privileges, all part of a thousand social and cultural pipes.

Like these:

I am white. Born in England. Urban, suburban and small town upbringing in Western Canada and England. Raised by two English-speaking white parents – one Scottish, one English. Irish and Italian grandparents. Working class, welfare class, aspiring middle class depending on dates, definitions, contexts and who's reading what into my mongrel accent and the jobs/clothes/newspapers/interests me and my parents do or don't have. University educated to undergraduate level, first (and only) member of family to finish high school. Working on a low wage for most (though certainly not all) of my working life so far, living in social housing after period of homelessness. Dark haired, blue eyed, pale skinned. Often assumed Irish. Occasionally assumed straight. Female bodied, plump to fat, female presenting, most of the time. History of mental ill-health. Currently disabled, still moving.

I name these pieces of the scaffolding not because they are particularly unique or fascinating in and of themselves, but because they are what I stand on, slip on, trip on and cling to. They are relevant. They shape how I move in my daily life. They mediate each moment, each interaction, each one of these words, and some of them can even be rendered invisible to the naked eye, depending on the light and where you stand.

“I don't experience white privilege because I'm Irish / my culture is different than the dominant white culture in this country”

My granddad: Scottish-Italian with a Glaswegian accent and a last name that he didn't tell. Everyone knew him as Charlie, and so when anti-Italian rioting, arrests, internments and deportations took place across the UK in 1940ⁱ, every window in the street was smashed, except his. When hundreds of gelati men and shopkeepers were marched at the tips of bayonets onto an unmarked boat bound for Canada, he was left: not a member of the Italian club, and so not on the list. When that same boat was torpedoed en route, hundreds drowned in the cold Atlantic, choking on the scum of oil from the boat, crushed by debris. Charlie's was not one of the bodies to wash up

on the shore of Ireland three weeks later. He remained unharmed, safe under the cloak of assimilation.

Light skin privilege. White-ish. Not the right kind of white, off-whiteⁱⁱ, but with the right accent and an Irish mother to explain away his dark looks, he passed. White enough to stay, to sign up, and then be sent to fight for the Eighth Army near his father's family home, in Italyⁱⁱⁱ. For years, he was mercilessly bullied by his British comrades, until finally his reality cracked and he was discharged to a mental institution in Scotland where he lived out the rest of his days as a disintegrating man with split personalities.

White peeled back on Pvt. Castelli. White but not white. Right, and then not right. A shift of position, a bitter turn. Another layer of scaffolding added, another removed.

“I don't benefit from racism because I'm working class. How am I privileged by my whiteness when I've been dismissed as white trash?”

My parents have immigrated to Canada from the UK twice.

The first time, they were sponsored by my mum's brother. He had moved to Alberta after he applied for a job with an Italian oil company doing exploration in the Northwest Territories. He had red hair and a Glaswegian accent – and an Italian surname. He was the only non-Italian speaker in the whole company. He got the job before they met him in person. My parents got sponsored.

The second time^{iv}, they were told by Canadian Immigration officials that the only reason they were being allowed back was because their son had been born on Canadian soil six months before they moved back to the UK, so he was in the eyes of the law, Canadian. Without that, they utterly failed on the immigration point system (class control in action: no qualifications, no money, no 'skilled profession' = no entry), and would not have been welcome. Canada had its fill of unskilled labour and didn't need more. But, as the legal guardians of a Canadian citizen, they were granted permission to land. They were told: 'If you leave this country again for more than three months, don't bother even applying to come back.'

So – two more people with no qualifications and no cash were let in with their two children in tow. Four more open mouths granted entry to Canada's multi-cultural mosaic land of milk and honey, due to a technicality of birth.

My parents and me were classed as Landed Immigrants, and due to the cost of buying citizenship after they'd been there long enough to apply, my parents never did become 'Canadian'. I bought mine with a loan from a friend at the age of 23, after having lived there for 15 years in all.

Fifteen years in a country dominated by white people of western and eastern European descent. Fifteen years as a legal immigrant, granted leave to remain and work, but with no voting rights, no passport, no permission to leave and return. The entire time I lived in Canada I was not a citizen.

Once I learned the accent^V, however, not once was I asked where I came from. Not one single time. My right to be living in Canada was never questioned on the basis of my ethnicity or skin colour.

Meanwhile, every brown skinned Canadian^{VI} I ever spoke to about this told me that on a regular basis they would be asked by wide-eyed 'interested' white Canadians where they were from, and wouldn't ya know, "Vancouver" never was the right answer, even when it was true.

More pieces of scaffolding – more complexities, more details like class or lack of cash – do not ERASE white privilege. They might complicate it, add a new layer or different angle, but they do not completely nullify the perks that come with whiteness.

I've been called white trash. I've been The Poor Friend for more than one slumming suburbanite. I've been sneered at and blushed for because of the place I lived, the food I ate, the clothes I wore and the jobs my parents did (or didn't do). But not once was this white immigrant girl asked by another white person in Canada, 'Where are you from (and what are you doing here)?'

"I don't experience white privilege because I have dreadlocks/piercings/tattoos. I look different and I am punished for it."

There are all kinds of reasons why people choose to modify their body – art, spirituality, self-expression, fashion, initiation, commemorative and cultural reasons, to name a few. Choice is the key word.

Styles of adornment and practices of marking and body modification are culturally significant. They are culturally loaded. They do carry weight. So when they are plucked up and consumed by people who have no cultural affiliation with those practices or markings, it does mean something.

Chinese dragons and 'tribal' tattoos, 'urban primitive' ear plugs, trustafarian^{VII} dreadlocks – all things I regularly see adorning white people's bodies, and, speaking as someone who used to have those white girl dreadlocks^{VIII}, yes it IS cultural appropriation, those ARE someone else's clothes, and as special and interesting as they might make me (you?) feel, they don't belong to me.

"I don't have white privilege because I'm gay/queer/trans."

There are so many in my mind when I think of this one, but above the rest, one stands out.

He grew up as a girl, came out as a dyke, and then bit by bit embraced the trans gender that complicated the body he was born into - some pieces of his scaffolding. Important pieces.

He's affluent, he's middle class, able-bodied. He's white. More important pieces.

He dresses himself in designer jeans and expensive trainers. Slicks his hair and cultivates a cocky swagger. Takes up space. Puffs his chest and asserts the masculinity that's sometimes threatened.

Gets read as a boy who's half the age of his female body. Crosses boundaries with his gender. Sometimes. Reinforces them, sometimes. All part of the structure. All connecting.

He talks to me about his crossings, his marginality, his life on the periphery. And I listen for a long long time...

He drives a flash car too fast and though he's never been pulled over on suspicion of not being the rightful owner – a too young face for such an opulent ride – he's never connected this to the shade of his skin or the Aryan features that glow gold around his head. Never wondered why. Cause a well-dressed sixteen year old white guy in a flash car hasn't jacked it from the side of the road or bought it with drug money – no – more likely he's driving a gift from Daddy's deep pockets, right?

(I know men in their forties who regularly get stopped by police wanting to know whose shiny car they're driving; men with brown skin driving fast in a flash car must be dodgy, must be on the make.)

He accelerates as he flips the station, his talk of marginality never turning to matters of race, and still I listen for a long long time. Why is it so hard to challenge a queer white trans guy on his unspoken racial privilege and the ways it intertwines and interacts with his gender? On the fact that one more piece of scaffolding doesn't change the whole structure?

...

...and what about my queer identity?

I walk into a space – a queer space, or perhaps a gay space – and all kinds of thing may arise. I may shift under the itch of my discomfort in the room of professional home-owning lesbians cracking chav jokes over chilled white wine.

Another time, leaning against the bar of an isolated gay outpost, a young butch boi tells me she's OK dealing with the staggering sexism and homophobia of her army barracks, because whatever doesn't kill her makes her stronger and besides, she dropped out of high school and signing up was her best chance of a good job, a career, and an education. My university experience and varied work lives lean in at the bar beside me - knowing something of what she says, and simultaneously knowing nothing.

Other times it's the dress I've worn or the stick I walk with that taps out my sense of difference and not quite fitting.

At a queer collective meeting I realise I am the only one present who is not currently or previously involved with a post-grad course on radical politics or gender and sexuality studies. Intimidated and insecure, Judith Butler name-drops from my mouth, remembered from a long ago and confused reading, and everyone chuckles knowingly. My sad little attempt to pass is accepted, and I feel even more spineless.

When my lover is male (and born with a cock – important point), I get embarrassed/

disgusted/disappointed looks and comments from fellow queers...thankfully not all of the time, but WAY too much of the time. When my lover is female (or female born, or trans identified), I get welcomed back into the fold, actually told 'Thank goodness you've not gone straight on us – it was just an experiment ha ha ha!' Ha.

There are so many times when my fit feels awkward and forced, but in these queer spaces never do I feel unwelcome or invisible on account of my whiteness. On the contrary – most of the time it is the one thing about me that fits without fail^{ix}.

“White privilege is irrelevant when we are all so privileged, living as we do in one of the richest countries in the world.”

And 'we' suddenly contracts to the tiny two-letter word it is, pulled tight by assumptions. **We are not immigrants and we are not under immigration control. We have access to work, or if not work then benefits, or if not benefits, then a whole network of organisations, family and friends who offer up support when it's needed. We have food in our bellies and roofs over our heads. We live in Britain, where racism means the BNP and there is no poverty – not real poverty like in India.**

Whenever a white person claims that there is no 'real' racism in their community, their workplace, their activist group, my doubt kicks in hard. Living as we do in a white supremacist culture, 'we' sure make a lot of assumptions about who 'we' are talking about, or who 'we' might be talking to, don't 'we'?

“I don't benefit from racism or white privilege because I've studied race theory/am involved in anti-racist activism and I've dealt with all my issues.”

One of the most painful things for us white folk^x to confront can be the fact that, although we may have studied histories, learned about oppression and the racist legacies that run through our own family trees in whole forests of social and structural injustice - although we may have been active in anti-racist work, may have supported others doing the same, may have challenged racism when we saw it, may see and acknowledge ways in which people around us are ignored, ground down, abused, ridiculed, and silenced by both overt and covert racism – although some or all of this may be true some of the time, and though we may wish it otherwise, us white people do still benefit from racism, racial bias and the privilege that comes of being (and being seen as) white.

Too often I see white activists and academics and community organisers – people who make it their job to question injustices - unwilling to question themselves and their actions/inactions with that same passion that fuels their work. I've seen myself do it (and only realise far too long after the fact). Too often I see sharp minds resort to blunt defensiveness, denial and diversion, too often unwilling to examine the uncomfortable bits, our own parts in this racist structure, the ways in which privilege and bias are threaded through our lives...and isn't this refusal to be accountable just another privilege, another cosy comfort, of whiteness?^{xi}

Is our arrogance and fear built so high that we can't climb down from it? That we can't try? One

pole at a time? One fitting, one plank, one joist. We are part of this structure whether we want to be or not - whether we want to acknowledge it or not. We stand on it. We live with it. Scaffolding is built, deconstructed, and rebuilt one piece at a time. And it doesn't disappear when we close our eyes.

Imperfect...still moving.

- ⁱ See 'The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain' by David Cesarani and Tony Kushner, especially the chapter by Lucio Sponza, titled 'The British Government and the Internment of Italians', pp125 - 44
- ⁱⁱ See Richard Dyer's book 'White' for more on his phrase 'off-white' - fractures in the veneer of the ethnicity/ies commonly known as White.
- ⁱⁱⁱ He was posthumously awarded the Italy Star for his participation in the Allied Italian Campaign of WWII, sent to his widow thirty years after the end of the war.
- ^{iv} They moved back to the UK because the only work my dad could get involved driving to the next town to run alongside vats of chemicals in a metal fabrication place wearing jeans and a hardhat, so he was losing his sense of smell and his skin, they couldn't afford to just live on my mum's secretarial wage, and their marriage was heading down the pan. The popular 'let's move away from our problems' move.
- ^v This is a family inheritance – this ability to avoid bullying by learning a new accent and blending in. Secret agent in white skin. We do it without even trying. It took me about 6 months.
- ^{vi} Except for people who were or were assumed to be First Nations. This usually included anyone with Filipino or Pacific Island heritage of any kind. White people are lazy like that, especially when they like to ask people who look different to them 'Where are you from?', while standing on stolen ground.
- ^{vii} (noun) Contraction of 'trustfund rastafarian'. Rich white person with dreadlocks; can often be found scratching a living as a roots reggae/dub DJ, travelling for 4-6 months of the year in a converted horse box (and parking up outside a lucrative ex-council block for the rest of the year), writing/planning to write long tracts relating their varied drug experiences to at least one major conspiracy theory, the Bilderberg group, etc. Not actually a practicing Rastafarian.
- ^{viii} ...though never made claims to a mock Jamaican accent or to being a societally oppressed spiritual pot-smoker.....yes I'm thinking of YOU, eco-warrior festival crusty boys.
- ^{ix} ...even in spaces that AREN'T dominated by white people, because as well as being queer I'm white and so used to erasing my race. See how that works?
- ^x I realise that saying 'us' is problematic – that it doesn't account for all the differences and complications of 'white' (or off-white, as I mentioned earlier) - but the alternative right now is that I never make reference to 'us' and so 'we' never ever have to take collective responsibility for 'our' part in this racist structure. White privilege becomes a personal, individual issue, not one that is supported and fed by whole communities, whole groups, whole structures of white people. So for right now, here, I will say 'we'.
- ^{xi} See Red Chidgey's article on Feminist Racism in issue 2 of Race Revolt for a really clear look at subtleties and 'unconscious' racism in operation in 'anti-oppression' spaces.

Don't Shoot - I'm White

Josie, eisoj@care2.com

Hello, my name is Josie. In July 2006 and again November 2007 I went to Palestine. Over the two visits I spent in total around 5 months as a solidarity activist in the West Bank..... Usually when I describe this I refer to my role as 'human rights volunteer' or 'human rights observer', but I choose the term 'solidarity activist' here because I want to describe and explore the contradictions and complications of being a white western activist in Palestine and attempting to act in solidarity. There my British passport and visible whiteness (non-Arabness) were privileges I used daily and which were often necessary to the actions I took.

I'll assume some understanding on your part of the situation in Palestine/Israel (apologies to those without this... I encourage you to do a bit of research or ask people about it). But briefly, the situation in the West Bank is one of Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territory, alongside annexation of Palestinian land for settlements for Israeli civilians. This means the Israeli army can intervene into any sphere of Palestinian life a any time, and frequently do so via road checkpoints, invasions of towns and homes, road closures, arbitrary arrests etc etc.

The role of foreigners is very varied – Palestine is overflowing with NGOs – but both times I was there I worked with solidarity organisations doing accompaniment (eg with farmers needing to access land where they were in danger of attack from settlers or denial of access by the army, or with school children at risk of attack by settlers on the way to school); monitoring and intervention into abuses of Palestinians by soldiers or settlers (eg. at checkpoints). I also attended demonstrations and sometimes direct actions against the wall, confiscation of land or building of Israeli-only roads.

At checkpoints, my presence with a camera, phone and notebook can deter some acts of violence by the soldiers. The fact that I am English-speaking allows me to converse with them, since a large number of Israelis speak English well. As a foreigner, especially I am

sure as a white woman, I am more likely to elicit some level of politeness from them. Also, I am not able to hide from awareness of my privilege there, not from its subtle workings or from its larger more unpleasant consequences. Faced with a line of hundreds of people waiting at Huwarra checkpoint outside Nablus, I find myself in the position of choosing which of the people in line is most 'deserving' of my efforts to get the soldiers to let them through. One choice is to simply operate on a 'first-come first served' basis, but it might be more effective to try with someone who looks really ill, or old, or pregnant, because if you keep hassling the soldiers to let people through they get pissed off and sometimes stop talking to you at all, or even try to get you to leave. It is a pragmatic reality.... the inhumanity of the situation inevitably invades all the relationships therein, but its also an uncomfortable one.

Similarly, at demonstrations, the presence of foreigners and even more so of Israelis massively decreases the level of violence and repression that greet the demonstrators.

In all these activities my power lay in being a visible foreigner. An Egyptian volunteer, black, and with a passport from an Arab nation, faced far greater problems passing checkpoints and in every dealing with soldiers. My power is either because my presence signifies the possibility (so often untrue) that 'the world is watching', or because the value of my life is seen as greater – the spilling of my blood will have greater consequences for Israel (bad PR if nothing else) than injury or death caused to Palestinians. Most people with any familiarity with the situation remember the name of Rachel Corrie, the activist with ISM (the international solidarity movement) killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza in 2003, but probably not those of Ahmed Mousa, a ten-year old shot by Israeli Border police at a demonstration in his village, Nilin, in July 2008, or Mahmoud Awad, an 18yr old shot and killed by the army in Beit Ummar in January 2008 while I was there, trying desperately to get my white face seen. With another activist, from Argentina, I ran up

and down the streets of Beit Ummar with our local guide/contact Mohammad, who was trying to find us a vantage point where we could either photograph what the army were doing or be seen by them. But between us and them was the line of fire..... we ran forwards towards the street corner and back again as tear-gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition continued to fly. Then a crowd of young men ran past us calling for an ambulance, carrying Mahmoud Awad who had been shot in the stomach, who would be dead inside 2 hours, buried within 5. Until then I had glibly described my role thus: "If foreigners are there, the army can still be cruel, but at least they don't shoot anyone". No more.

This experience in Beit Ummar really brought home to me the limits of this use of my privilege, of this somewhat unrecognised 'Don't Shoot - I'm White!' strategy. It also gave me the taste, just the tiniest taste, of the fearful experience of being one of the worthless lives....*if they don't know I am white, what is to stop them shooting me just like an Arab?* These are the moments when my reliance on racism becomes visible. Its a rather stark situation, not one which occurs often in a British life, but it also kind of tips me off to the perhaps more subtle but nonetheless real ways I rely on this same privilege in my everyday life at home.

The organisations I worked with involve Palestinians, foreigners and Israelis, and they attempt to be 'Palestinian-led' in what they do and how, while allowing groups of foreign activists to act as 'affinity groups' making their own decisions about what activities they do. In reality this is a complex process - when foreign activists are present only for a few weeks (or even just a few days in a particular location) they inevitably look to Palestinians to guide their actions. And when you have been there for several months or more, you begin to become familiar with the particular conflicts and interests (personal and political) present in the community you are guest in, although as an outsider it can be extremely hard to understand and navigate these.

Speaking to people in Palestine about their impression of the solidarity work done by foreigners, the response was quite varied. Some people were happy to see foreigners and urged us to tell widely about what we saw there. Some felt that our presence there was fairly pointless, that only international governments are able to affect change through pressure on Israel to end the occupation. Most people seem familiar with the presence of foreigners and aware of the different cultural expectations that we bring, although these can also be problematic at times. There have been numerous instances of romantic and/or sexual relationships between foreign activists and Palestinians, mostly

between foreign women and Palestinian men, because men are afforded more freedom in many families and are therefore more likely to be the ones working with foreign activists. In some cases this has led to problems within Palestinian communities and mistrust between them and activist organisations.

Palestinians active with solidarity organisations have access to getting to know foreigners, sometimes to travel and to other experiences not available to everyone.

Familiarity with the culture/s of foreign activists as well as speaking English (more common among men) affords status and can lead to someone becoming an unelected spokesperson for their community, or for 'Palestinian women' etc. Even having an awareness of this, the sense of urgency (every day, every hour sometimes, another emergency), and the language barrier, and the constant turnover of foreigners usually staying only for a few weeks or months, make it hard to work on breaking this down.

In Palestine I was actively using and relying on my privilege as a white person carrying a British Passport and was increasingly conscious of doing this. My hope is that I continually apply the learning given to me by being in this particularly extreme situation to my 'normal life', becoming more vigilant to the ways in which I benefit from my whiteness and more active in acknowledging and challenging them.

My power is either because my presence signifies the possibility (so often untrue) that 'the world is watching', or because the value of my life is seen as greater - the spilling of my blood will have greater consequences for Israel (bad PR if nothing else) than injury or death caused to Palestinians.

The Little Things

Having people see you the way you want to be seen- the way you see yourself- is a privilege. And when you don't have that privilege, every day is a battle to have your identity validated, a battle against erasure and for self-determination. In a lot of ways this is a battle of details, where every choice you make about how you present yourself to others becomes loaded, and all the little things take on more meaning than they know what to do with.

Example, this little thing, the way I wear my hair, will seem trite to those who aren't walking through a cultural minefield of misinterpretations everyday, but I feel like when I cut it boy-short or let it grow wild and curly I have to choose between presenting as queer (a white dyke or white pretty boy, specifically) and maintaining my "ethnic ambiguity," thus having a slightly greater chance of getting read as a woman of color. In short, I have to choose between being queer and being of-color in the eyes of the world. I'm not one who puts a lot of effort into my appearance, so why do I feel like my hairstyle has so much meaning?

Boy-short my hair looks straight. I lose the curls and gain the guilt and fear of being interpreted as "trying to pass" as white. My hair is one of very few markers of my ethnicity that I inherited from my Black dad. In itself it's not usually enough to get me read as Black, but it does make people think twice when mentally trying to squish me into a race-box, and inspires remarks like, "I never seen a white girl with hair like that before," (because I'm not fucking white, moron,) "are you ethnic or something?" The conversation only goes from there.

I like my hair boy-short, I like it a lot. I like passing as a boy at times, it makes me feel safer out in the world, alone after dark especially. But with boy-short hair I fear melting into white dyke oblivion. And sans curls I am reminded of a time when I was ashamed of my "ethnic" hair, the hair I wasted endless time, energy and styling product trying to straighten (like many women of color on the curly-to-nappy spectrum) after the kids at school dubbed me Mufasa (see the Lion King). When I cut off my curls, I wonder how much or how little I've outgrown that shame since middle school.

I am a queer woman of color, so why would I have to choose between getting read as one or the other? Part of it has nothing to do with me, but with racism in "the queer community" at large. White queers have more visibility in the media, in the US, than queers of color, and thus historically they've gotten to set the standards for what queer is "supposed to" look like. When queers of color enter white spaces, many of us have to fight for visibility as queers (while additionally fighting against being desexualized, fetishized and tokenized as POCs.) Unless POCs match white models of what queer looks like we're often simply invisible in such spaces. In my somewhat unique position of POC-nobody-knows-is-a-POC, I can fit the queer model easily, but have to fight in white queer spaces (as in the world at large) to be read as a person of color. Because of the lack of queer POC visibility, the tendency to assume someone is white until proven otherwise is even stronger if said person is queer. Thus because of my light skin and blue eyes, and because of the queer default is already set to white, I can rarely be recognized as both queer and as a person of color.

Earlier I said that my hair is one of the only markers of my ethnicity. The other big one is my name. Nia is Swahili for "purpose". It's also the fifth day of Kwanzaa, which falls on December 30th. When I compiled "MXD: True Stories by Mixed-Race Writers," I edited it and submitted to it under the name Oxette. I took this nickname while traveling places where no one knew me. I decided to use it full time when I was looking to settle down and start over. I hoped ditching the old name would help me put the past behind and get a fresh start. But I had this nagging guilt. How could I start over and leave the proud Black name my father had given me- one of so few markers of my ethnicity- behind? It was unconscionable. And so I took the name back.

Acting out of fear and guilt feels pretty absurd sometimes, especially because I happened to be starting over in a unique community where folks would validate my identity as a person of color even if I decided to call myself Whitey McWaspsalot. But that's the kicker. When the general

White queers have more visibility in the media, in the US, than queers of color, and thus historically they've gotten to set the standards for what queer is "supposed to" look like. When queers of color enter white spaces, many of us have to fight for visibility as queers. Unless POCs match white models of what queer looks like we're often simply invisible in such spaces.

public doesn't see you the way you see yourself- as a queer, as a person of color, (as a boy, a girl or a genderqueer)- you have to protect the few things that grant you entry into the communities where you see yourself, where you want to be accepted and validated.

I know that I will never be anything but a queer person of color, regardless of whether I get read as white, "ethnic", straight, or queer. Knowing who I am is crucial, but unfortunately I can't write off everybody who doesn't see me the way I see myself. The uphill battle to be seen for what I am has no end in sight. And so I continue to strive to reconcile what you see, how I identify and what I have to do to be accepted in the communities in which I know I belong.

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Nia King is a Black Lebanese Hungarian writer, illustrator, drummer and activist from Boston, Mass. living in Oakland, CA. She has made the liberation of people of color, women, queers and transgender folks her lifelong work. She loves zines, indie comics, falafel, sweet potatoes, 4square and Scrabble. And dancing. You can find her other zines; Angry Black-White Girl and the Borderlands series at StrangerDanger Distro.com and QZAP.org.

We Miss the Culture but Does the Culture Miss Us?

Kathryn Fischer
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It is Sunday and we arrive at the front of Mauer Park at 8:15, so we're early, but that gives us time to buy a brötchen and coffee, and to sit on our table-number 44-and watch the circus begin. At this hour, everyone is setting up, and those that have cars use them, pulling through the rows of wooden stands, their vehicles barely fitting, inevitably pissing off some seller who is slightly obstructing the way with a stray clothing rack or pile of books. The hot and cold tempers of our neighbors are comical-one moment they're greeting us with beaming smiles and the next moment their screaming, "Asshole!" at another seller who is trying to maneuver himself between two stands. Dogs side with their masters and fights break out. A truck is waiting behind our neighbor's car, which is at a standstill while she unloads all her boxes. The truck driver beeps at her and tells her to keep moving and she screams back "I'll go when I'm good and ready." In the next breath she comes over and asks if she could borrow one of our extra sawhorses.

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I love being awake at this hour, even if I have not slept, even if I have slept one hour (sometimes worse than none at all). I love being awake and alive as the sun comes brighter in our eyes; I love the camaraderie and the anger. We are competitors but we are in it together and we know this. It feels good to be accepted; reluctant, hard-earned acceptance is even more satisfying than being instantly loved or being identical birds of a feather.

The market grows larger. The

nursery awakens; geraniums and tomato plants are cheap here. The book stand directly across the "street" (the narrow path that runs through our row of tables) is open for business. I peruse his English books; this week he appears to have come across the former collection of a feminist. Gloria Steinem, Virginia Woolf, a book about why women's writing gets ignored, an anthology by and about women and fiction; the list goes on. I smile at the uncanniness (?) of these books being in such an "unlikely" place as the hands of this "normal" German guy who sells everything from cook books to romance novels to physics textbooks. But I don't know him, really, do I.

Tape cassettes sheep skin rugs metal train cars old radios clocks hammers bicycles military jackets mangled lamps shoe polishing kits used boots answering machines pirate socks dream catchers beanies stuffed crows comic art seventies porn magazines antique furniture baby bibs soaps silkscreened skirts hemp bags jewelry studded belts pig purses.

The Mauer Park flea market is in essence a microcosm of a larger dynamic which is occurring currently in Berlin, and that's one of the reasons why I find it so fascinating to hang around and observe the movement. For one thing, Mauer Park is long and narrow and runs from Danziger Strasse all the way to the S-Bhan train tracks. Part of the Berlin Wall used to stand here, and this is the site of some of the first protests and the first hackers-those that began to

break down the wall piece by piece. Think Nazis invading last this Sin City Berlin, think cabaret, think Salon Kitty, think the wall falling and instead of cheering for the coming of the West, much of the East lost their way of life overnight. 250,000 people laid off from one day to the next. Former skilled persons unemployed. Right here at Mauer Park ... we're grappling with some of those same questions: Shall they let the West in, the English speakers, the high prices? We can't sell our handmade products to people who come to this market willing to pay no more than 5 Euros for an item; we long to raise the "status" of this flea market to an "arts and crafts faire" on par with London's Bricklane Market or Sugarloaf Mountain Arts and Crafts faire in Maryland. And why shouldn't we? We are artists, we want to make a living selling what we make with our hands. Yet we're fully aware that what brought us here in the first place was the fact that Berlin isn't yet London or the DC Metro Area.

And let's not be romantic here. The "real" Berliner drinks beer like water, coughs out their lungs as they chain smoke, and complain about being unemployed in a thick Berliner-only accent. They venerate the real Berliner Folk. Depending on their political persuasion, they might be relatively pleased or displeased with their economic situation and the changes in East Berlin since the fall of the Wall, which was, in essence, an invitation for us eager-beaver American and other foreign capitalists to join in and raise



the so-called bar. But in general, the Berliner is sort of happy (well let's not use the word "happy") with just making it. They kind of like the idea of selling a few old toilets to fellow do-it-yourselfers in order to put food on the table and pay the rent and then coming back again the next week to do it again.

They kind of-dare I say-enjoyed the early days when they were kings of the flea market and the flea market really was still a flea market-when you really didn't want to buy anything, you bought it because you needed a used hot water boiler. You went there to buy a used black and white TV because it was a treat. You actually bought cigarettes by the cigarette.

They're kind of angry at people like us who are trying to raise the standard. They're not interested in a goddamn Sugerloaf Mountain Arts and Crafts Festival! They want to keep selling toilets! And to be honest, I understand them.

And there are several brands of "us", all of whom are changing the face of the Mauer Park - the German latte truck guy (a Wessie, to be sure), the Americans selling "couture," the Russian selling her hand-sewn pants, the Turk that appears to have defected from the Turkish market to sell his sequins, elastic and zippers to all the Prenzlauerberg make-their-own-clothes-artists, the French lady selling her handmade jewelry, the Macedonians next to us selling used shoes. For now, we're all there together, which is what makes it such a lively place to be.

And it's not just these new sellers that have changed the market and brought in new products, it's also the demands of a changing clientele. Accordingly, some of the long-time sellers had to alter their

tactic and stop selling used car parts. Now they sell used DDR antiques and relics-some sell large pieces of furniture and others just sell mounds of trinkets, but both are catering to a changing audience: a whole wave of new tourists and the up-and-coming Berliners who furnish their homes with a mix of IKEA and antiques.

Then there are those Berliners, like the ones across the way, who have gone straight for the commercial jugular, selling the typical bad gothic wear, cheap dream-catchers, the random glass pipe, marijuana leaf shirts, ugly synthetic hats, pins that say, "I'm here about the blowjob," and "I have a drug problem, I can't afford them."

We all need a certain type of client to come to Mauer Park. And we're all in the mix - those of us who want rich Italian tourists after artesian crafts, and those who attract the Berliner trend kid after the nostalgia of a real "flea market" ... Those of us who want tourists and those who want the working class. Some bargain hunters walk up to our stand and gape at the idea of paying 30 for a shirt when the guy next to us lets used t-shirts go for one euro. "Make us a deal," they say, but our stand alone cost us 28 and Juan's labor much more. We can't.

You can see how this builds resentment-the artists want the guy with 50 cardboard boxes full of DDR dishware to raise the real-estate value on this neighborhood ... and the hardcore guy with the cardboard boxes is grumbling, "We're out here without fail in rain and snow, you pansy English speaking fair weather sellers."

And that's when we got accepted-when we pulled a Berlin winter at the flea market. Every single Sunday, 8 am to sunset, rain, sleet, or snow.

Well it's mid November now and only one more weekend until advent season starts and those who made it past August 30 are stiffing it out and likely to suck it up through the whole winter to safe guard their spot through the spring. Since we've chose to bundle ourselves and weather the rain and snow we have come into the ranks of the hardcore and we are more respected for it. Which means small signs of respect like nodding along to at least one of the songs we blast from our stand, e.g. "Boys Don't Cry," (Germans love the Cure) or, even more appreciated, safe-guarding our stand by fighting off would-be squatters on those seldom Sundays that we arrive huffing at 9:01 in the morning (you lose your reservation if you show up after 9:00).

For this, we are eternally grateful. We've been accepted as regulars. And this is more than just a symbolic softening of "hard Berlin hearts" to American artists. 15

But the fact remains, artists are attracted to culturally interesting, ethnically diverse places and then yell about "gentrification", after they show up, angry that all the real spots have been supplanted with obnoxious postmodern restaurants named "Eleven" and "Lime." Yet it's the coming of the artist that spells the death of an ethnically based cultural community, not because artists want it that way, but because they need people around them with enough money to buy their art.

"We miss the culture" they say-I remember White San Franciscans wishing more mariachi music was still floating down "their" streets. And as the Mauer Park Market continues to change, as all of us continue our invasion, we'll probably say the same thing: We miss the culture. But does the culture miss us?



The machinery of the invisible

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White people are born into the world with invisible skin, a translucent beam that distorts and shapes reality.

That world is not natural, but the product of structures of racialisation that make skin white.

One of the major problems even now in radical communities – as well as the wider world – is that white people don't feel that the problem of race, or even race, 'belongs' to them. White people are often not aware that they are also subject to processes of racialisation which allow them to pass through the world without questioning the colour of their skin. This blocks awareness to the type of privileges it affords them, which they do 'own', equally without question. White skin carries within it the responsibility for histories of gruesome expansionism, violence, colonialism and extermination as much as it carries privilege and mobility. Is it invisible anymore? Of course, not all people experience white skin 'equally', the 'value' of whiteness shifts according to different historical and social contexts.

***** What are the processes of racialisation, and what are they attributable to? *****

Racialisation occurs within a hierarchical structure called white supremacy, or white supremacist hetero-patriarchy. White supremacy is the underlying, racialised logic that motivates the actions of colonial enterprises that form the fabric of our political and social lives. Very basically it is the idea that white people (and their culture, eugenics and 'civilised' ways) are superior to non-white cultures. The precious attachment to civilisation as the purview of white culture perpetuates continued racial and sexual violence in the current war on terror. While in history, it has served as the justification for the invasion of countries deemed less civilised or barbaric, economically enslaving populations, stealing resources, setting up white supremacist forms of government (that divide and rule, and turn people against each other) and genocide.

White supremacy is not the only structure of racialisation which occurs on planet earth, but it is probably the most dominant one and is responsible for so much of the ruin around us. The relationships it produces (and here i mean the types of positions we can occupy within the social order as a structural possibility and the opportunity for creating loving bonds) need to be examined in conscientious and methodical manner. We can ask pragmatic questions and through this, seek genuine alternatives: how does this structure work, and what opportunities for imaginative, embodied alternatives can we enact, shape; or better still, provide examples of what exists already?

How do we live with each other in a world not shaped by white supremacist racialisation?
How do we build relationships that do not circulate inside reactive hierarchies?

It is necessary to unpick the mechanics of how white supremacist relationality operates, because most of the world still behave like robots – and by this i don't mean that we are all cyborgs (although from the moment we used spoons to eat food with we were) but that we respond in predictably programmed ways to the relationships that surround us. Fear, suspicion, hatred, superiority: these are the products of relational alienation which render cultures incapable of nurturing compassionate, social

bonds that are enlightened by positive desire and curiosity. Do we have to always be *against* something? I believe we *do* have the tools to unpick pervasive, structured programming and build alternative relational cultures, as well as celebrating suppressed connections between people that already exist, which not are dominated by imposed divisions.

Much of this comes down to ontology. Ontology is the theory of being – how we are in the world, how it is. Since the transition to capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries, the dominant ontological framework which underlines political culture is of the liberal humanist subject.ⁱⁱ Within this model there is a distinct self and a distinct other, more often than not, the self is scared of the other and wishes to keep it distinct and clean – uncontaminated – from it. This relational separateness, which is also a hierarchy, when filtered through racial, gender and sexual logic, produces the kind of white supremacist, male dominated and homophobic culture we continue to live in today. It is a relational culture based on separateness and tiered distinction. It has a lot to answer for.

Within recent times there has been an emergence of suppressed ontological knowledges that do not accept the ontological separation between self and other, and rather show processes where our subjectivity is formed in interaction or 'intra-action'ⁱⁱⁱ with others. This is significant because it provides models of relationality where we are made *with* each other – it is, in my view, the ontological intelligence that may allow us to rethink racialisation outside of dominant white supremacist structures. Finding alternative relationship structures may seem like an obvious thing to people in radical communities, but it is clear that most of the world still can't seem to get along with each other. As important as it is to name the invisible privileges of whiteness, it is equally important to name underlying ontological

patterns which shape the rhythms of our social and political world. Imagine what the government's migration politics would look like if the relationship between Britain and Congo was understand fundamentally interconnected at a relational level – if separation is never a possibility and there could literally be no existence without the other shaping it? There would be no us or them but a stream of connections between diverse and shifting entities.

These may seem like simple things, and, I expect, somewhat naive and insignificant to many: people may always find reasons to kill each other you may be thinking. How can we kill, hate and subjugate if our possibilities for understanding who we are radically shaped by our interaction with others, if we are relationally orientated?

My hope of living outside of structures of white supremacist racialisation is the growing awareness that being can be otherwise and that many people are articulating this with me. We need to be aware of all the machinery we have at our disposal to fight racism, sexism, specieism, homophobia, ableism and capitalism, as well as the deep, emotional and structural changes that have occur in order for our world to be radically different. It can, but more importantly, it already is.

ⁱSee Jin Haritaworn 'Loyal Repetitions to the Nation: Gay Assimilation and the War on Terror' in *Dark Matter*

<http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/05/02/loyal-repetitions-of-the-nation-gay-assimilation-and-the-war-on-terror/>.

ⁱⁱ Silvia Federici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the State and Primitive Accumulation*, New York: Autonomedia.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen Barad (2007) *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.

This relational separateness, when filtered through racial, gender and sexual logic, produces the kind of white supremacist, male dominated and homophobic culture we continue to live in today. It has a lot to answer for.

from Melanie and Vinz

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introduction to this text à la vinz:

- these thoughts are mostly speaking out of a privileged position as white male german who certainly got spared a lot of injuries
- it is written in a for me foreign language and so definitely lacks some lingual sensitivity
- these are some very vague and dubious thoughts written and scribbled in a travel journal at couches, coffe shops and garages in Brooklyn and Oakland
- some of them seem very trivial, some too simplified and some like an easy talk but took me a lot of time bringing them to paper. And personally i think that's one of the challenges of my male whiteness i'm facing: my own fear of speaking and saying something dull about it.
- please read it as a journal and private email dialogue as incomplete and inelaborate it is and i'd be super appreciating your responses or feelings and especially your supportive critics.

who is melanie?

- I do sexual violence work and work on whiteness and also some art bent on melting power. im now a teacher at free school with kids and at an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-anti-semitic school for adults
- I grew up in the u.s., went to college in new york, and moved a few years after to berlin, which is quite amazing interms of a well-organized, resource-rich, dream-rich left scene. the only thing that really dissatisfies me here is that the scene is so theoretical and that there is such little diversity in germany and so few post-colonial voices and voices of people of color.
- I really don't feel good about my anti-racist praxis, and the fact that basically all my friends and students are white, even if most of my neighbors are Turkish.

Dear vinz and other whities,

Whiteness is radioactive. Even approaching this topic makes me shiver with fear of taking up too much space, of exposing myself and my racism. We have to expose and lay bare our racism as part of dismantling and overcoming it. But where is there space to unfold this toxic laundry, this nuclear waste spill of social garbage? I've internalized the anti-racist "do's and don'ts" messages about white, privileged people stepping back, taking up less space, and listening. Perhaps I am taking these 'do's and don'ts' too facilely, as interdictions rather than ways of reorienting myself and my relationship towards space, speaking, etc.

So this is always the struggle for me—the impossibility and absolute necessity of dealing with whiteness. If dealing with it is a lifelong struggle, I'm surely going to make mistakes. If I approach myself with accountability and forgiveness, then I think I can learn from these things. But how to forgive my whiteness? Isn't there something unforgivable about it? I am absolutely unable to stop being white. I cannot kill my whiteness, nor would I want to relate to a part of my subjectivity with the violence of "murder," even metaphorically. I can concretely and continually confront white privilege and racist situations, mobilizing my white privilege rather than pretending to dispose of it in "solidarity" with people of color. I'm not one for class or race 'suicide.' But I can't demolish racism faster than our society can continue to heap privilege and power onto my white skin. It is impossible and absolutely necessary for me to stop being white.

Dear friend Melanie,

First of all i wanna deeply thank you. for sharing your nuclear waste, for letting me look into your nucleus, for opening up and for opening this little therapy dialogue. second I wanna thank you for being so initiative. This is indeed sth. I always will admire about you. You threw the first stone and i will not leave you alone with that. That's for sure! And I hope i will have enough courage and ambition to stick to my words. I share your anger about the anti-racist do's & don'ts. about the pretentious reflection of whiteness as a problem of THE society but not sth. that also materializes within us. about the fears and evasions to transcend whiteness.

Well, of course, maybe we'll never reach that point of transcending race. But it's about trying it and opening spaces to acknowledge and to address our own racism.

you know, somehow, talking about this reminds me to a conversation we had about violence once. violent feelings and how to get rid of them. I had a time when I refused all forms of violence. I thought I could just simply decide to be nonviolent and everything would be fine. But then i made experiences that taught me that violence can be an appropriate way of dealing with situations, and i had these violent thoughts inside of me. I had anger and aggression and i could not simply talk that away.

So ... now I know that there ways to deal with that without hurting anyone. May it be by martial arts, HC or Punk, screaming, physical games or playful fighting with friends ... Maybe there are people out there, who are just naturally harmonic, peaceful and courageous. People who are just born with these features or are born in an environment that supports that.

But I am not! I am born into that body, that skin, these sexual features, this nation, this language, this social context. I wish i didn't, but I never made this choice. But I have to deal with that, and I have the choice now. This is actualy the very same thing we all share.

Back to the radical therapy. I think everyone deserves a social therapy. People who got hurt or traumatized as well as people who hurt or belong to dominant and privileged groups - i think those even more. e.g. since a while i tried to find a MRT group (Men Radical Therapy) in order to find a safe space to frankly address my feelings, concepts and reflections on gender. I wanted a space in which i can learn about me and others and grow up. I

know, there is sth fucked up about closed and imaginatory groups. And when somebody would tell me about a white, male group that talks frankly about their true feelings i had reasons to get disturbed. {Now, some shit is following but we're getting closer to the bottom line.} But still, when I talk about gender it would make a difference to me what gender the people in the group have or not. So how we talk about race also depends on the race identities in your room.

Yesterday i had a conversation with A. about a friend of her, named N., doing African Dance and about N's feelings towards it. She would really love it, the movements and the feeling of floating on and letting go. But however she also would feel awkward about herself as this white anti-racist girl that is really into African Dance now and feels so free and liberated. She also thought that some African Americans might feel 'weird' about and she wouldn't want that.

I said to A. that I would understand her feelings and that of course i would try to respect those feelings if people of the Black community would feel offended. The following conversation was more or less about my feelings as a white persons and that race of course matters to me. After all I'm trying not to be colour blind and to respect diverse backgrounds and so on. Finally the conversation ended abruptly when A. told me that there's some sort of of racism in my words. I'm still agitated about it.

But there some truth in it. If we treat People of Colour first of all as people of Colour (no matter if degrading or celebrating), if we see race first and not the individual then there is some racism in it. And when i take A.'s gauge on racism more serious than others because of her Blackness, then there is some racism in it. And when you scored 'good white persons points' when you know shit about people of colours' cultures, then there is some racism in it.

Well and damn i want other people to like me and think i am good person, and not like the other male primates, and not like the other white racists. So i try to prove that. It's just intentional. But can please somebody tell me that!!! Fuck

PS. I forgot ... I HATE SELF HATE MY SELFHATE HATEMYSELFHATE
but i love you for opening the space to say these wonderful words.
the good, the bad and the ugly

vinz

chintzy vinz,

a few things about therapy...maybe its because I've done a lot of work with survivors of sexual violence, that internal trauma and healing processes (both personal and collective) are something I think we need more of. it would make sense for me that there could be a group of white-identified people who could sift through this dirty laundry together. not that the group had to be closed to people of color, but as a former boss and mentor of mine once said, "people of color are too busy and heartbroken dealing with their own experiences of racism to listen to and support white people who are processing their experiences." although it could go the other way, as always. how do we acknowledge the trauma of dominant groups without comparing it to, equating it with, or belittling the trauma of oppressed groups?

ive been reading some stuff that makes me wary of making healing too personal, instead of collective, thus 'psychologizing, individualizing, and depoliticizing' the issue ('moving beyond white guilt,' edgington). it would be good to yoke it to political actions in the end and be accountable to people of color in this way - like having a 'white allies caucus' as part of a refugee group and then returning to the whole group and saying "hey, we were thinking about some of the best ways we can use our white privilege to be good allies - like using our physical presences to protect refugees from police at demonstrations, and so on." this is a way to check in with people of color about what role white people can play in supporting their work, without necessarily dragging them into an unwanted therapy session. some great examples of this are the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their allies group, Student Farmworkers Alliance. I can't say everything here about how cool the structure is, but check out their website.

so onwards - I think this example of the white girl going to the African dance class and feeling great and liberated, and then feeling guilty about it is such an important example of how race and our political consciousness of whiteness play out in our daily lives. I have to disagree with what you, and Assoka, said - that recognizing these dynamics is some form of "racism." I think calling this 'racism' is suggesting that we take a form of color-

blindness, that we not recognize the racial and power dynamics going on in the room of that dance studio.

I think we should sharpen our definition of what racism is. In my mind, racism is not interpersonal meanness or prejudice, nor merely historical injury. It is an ongoing a set of institutional, material, psychological, etc. systems which deprive people of color and grant unearned privileges given to white people. In our Western society, racism doesn't go "two ways"; there is no "reverse racism." A person of color could be prejudiced - could hold stereotypes or hatred for another person because of their race, like in Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing" : the Koreans hating the Blacks hating the Latinos hating the Italians - but this person could not, by defintion, be racist. Because racism is not equal opportunity - it grants privileges not just to anybody, but to WHITE people. I think we often lose the material side of racism -- that a much greater percentage of black Americans live in poverty and are imprisoned than whites, and so on - which can help ground us when we get into the tricky waters of interpersonal shit or representational racism.

I think the point is not WHETHER or not to consider race, but HOW we consider it. And how we approach each discrete event or encounter with different people. This is how we start to humanize ourselves and people of color - by recognizing differences between people of color, rather than seeing them as some homogeneous group. Some people of color might welcome a white women into the African dance setting as a sign of form of cultural exchange. Some African-Americans might use African dance as a form of constructing a black identity/ creating a safe space where a white person's presence might feel disruptive.

Which is to say, there is no hard and fast answer. In all likelihood, you may have people who feel both of these ways (and many other ways) in that dance class. So every class is perilous, and every attempt to negotiate the situation may end up failing someone. Can we :do the right thing," to make an unnecessary word play on the aforementioned spike lee film... is there a 'right thing'? 'righting a wrong'?

-m

Is cultural appropriation doing the wrong thing? And what are exactly the criteria that make cultural appropriation inappropriate? Would it mean in the reversal that whites should stay white? Isn't that based on a weird idea of essential, static and authentic cultures?

melurnee,

Interesting to see which direction this little dialogue takes through your response. I do kind of admire your ability of clear and structured views on these issues. It helps me grasp my more or less diffuse concerns and puts them into concepts, and overall, it helps me learning a language that surrounds me so much these days. But as a byproduct it also becomes a little harder for me to follow the thought lines I'm so used to and which I consider as something genuine mine. But let me jump on your train ...

First of all I'd like to leave the concrete example I came up with. I wanna avoid speculating too much about other people's experiences, you know. Still I think we can move on in our hermetic circle.

I totally agree with your definition of racism. And I agree that judging 'colour awareness' and sensitivity about cultural appropriation as something that inhabits racism doesn't really help understand the power dimensions of racism. It might lead to a very general conception of racism as something about interpersonal encounters. Though racist paradigms are of course based on personal encounters in its microcosms. This view might even be utilized to blur the crucial reality of racism as a system of one-way unjust distribution of economic, social, political and cultural etc. resources.

As I wouldn't call her (N. at the African Dance class) concerns about race and cultural appropriation a racist attitude. I still can comprehend that A. sees herself a racist dimension in marking, distinguishing and discriminating (in sense of different treatment) people due to their skin colour. And I can envision the irritation of getting reminded that you're not an individual anymore but treated as part of a group - specifically the "other" group. So I think it is absolutely necessary to accept and recognize her subjective approach to that. What this situation actually tells me, is, that it is not always simple to say whether a behaviour is racist or not. And when it comes to interpersonal encounters we all have pretty different herstories/histories and so approaches towards each other.

So can we finally conclude that there is no "right thing we can do"? And we all just have different perspectives on interpersonal encounters in a racist system? Or even opinions? I'm not sure but I guess Sartre wrote about opinions. And that people start to talk about opinions to evade questions or controversies. And that people believe

they accommodate the opinion and not the opinion them. Hell no! I hate closing with those kind of peaceful statements where just anyone can agree, nobody gets hurt and nobody stands for something.

In your last e-mail you asked me about the German discussion around "cultural appropriation". First it took me some time to understand what actually can be summed up under the term I would call in German "kulturelle Aneignung". So far I haven't really encountered a huge discussion as you described it at your university in NY. So I can't really tell whether I just didn't pay enough attention or if it is just not a hot topic. But I can tell you what I think about it.

I would totally agree that there is a white imperialist culture that strives to bleach anything else by a very effective arsenal of remedies. Cultural appropriation can be one remedy of exploitation and hegemony. But still there is something that's deeply troubling me about this idea. Are they again the questions WHETHER or HOW? What was the discussion within the left at your uni about? Is cultural appropriation doing the wrong thing? And what are exactly the criteria that make cultural appropriation inappropriate? Would it mean in the reversal that whites should stay white? Isn't that based on a weird idea of essential, static and authentic cultures? Can we only learn African Dance if we learn everything about its meanings, herstory/history and traditions?

This somehow reminds me to the early 20th century in Germany, when teenagers, beatniks, bohemians and ... started to listen to "entartete undeutsche Musik" like Swing, Jazz or Rock`n`Roll. And whether it was pre or post Nazi-fascism there was the same fear of spoiling the supreme national, traditional culture. It was the same fear of "Ueberfremdung des Volkskörpers" of the white, German lower and middle class that wanted to keep the national culture white and German.

I doubt that these youngsters and punks were entirely progressive. But these kids probably didn't care much about appropriate music or doing the right thing. At least they wanted to break out of given frameworks and just be reckless and have some fun.

And I can't say that postmodern practices of cultural appropriation nowadays is something off-mainstream or even underground. In a certain context bongo playing people with dreadlocks wearing indigenous jewelry and practicing Vipassana can be seen as the dominant

framework.

But even if the intention, context and power position of the swing youth is entirely different from new age hippies or and others, what is the effect on white spaces and spaces of colour, on essentialising and segregating culture? Maybe i'm totally misguided in this idea. But if we really believe in process, personal development and transcending boundaries, we should be really careful with each other, no matter what race or gender or any other position we have. And we should be very aware of ourselves pointing the finger at peoples actions that aren't clearly condemnable.

Since white supremacy is sth. very institutional and cultural i usually don't even notice the all-day structures and mechanisms of oppression. So when I finally do, i don't hesitate to get easily shocked and overwhelmed, even if it just a symptom of the larger problem. And feel really

righteous that i've scored another good white males point, when i can identify symptoms of oppression. And thats really fucked up because it just makes me feel differently but doesn't change anything about oppression.

Last week I went to a little indy cinema in San Francisco screening the film "Nothing but a man" as part of the Black History Month. In the afterwards discussion was rather a self-confirmation of how we all agree upon oppression and racist police brutality than a discussion. When an elder man asked the antiracist facilitator why young black men in Oakland are afraid of walking the streets, he got silenced by another white anti-racist who was dismayed how he can ask that question at all after what happened to Oscar Grant (killed by police). He just wanted to know, the man repeated, but never got an answer as some other people commmented how perfectly the camera perspectives in the film were chosen.

—v

this example of the white girl going to the African dance class and feeling great and liberated, and then feeling guilty about it is such an important example of how race and our political consciousness of whiteness play out in our daily lives

"why does everybody love black culture but nobody loves black people?"

dear vzz:

thank you for your letter. your English is really great. I mean, really nuanced. I love the Sartre quote, but still don't totally understand it. I wasn't intending a peaceful pluralist gesture ("we can all agree to disagree") but more a sitting uncomfortably inside irresolvable conflicts. but if both produce no action, than maybe you are right that they are basically the same.

this cultural appropriation thing has been coming up for me recently in my classroom [I teach adults who want to get their high school diplomas, which allows them to get higher-paying jobs or go study at a university]. We were talking about falafel shops in Berlin, run mostly by Turkish immigrants who came to Germany in the 1960s and 70s as 'guest workers' to help rebuild the country after the war. One student shared her own reflections on whether or not it would be appropriate to greet the shop staff, many of whom are Muslim, with the standard greeting in the Muslim world, "Asalaam aleekuum." "I don't know how they would hear it," she said. As appropriation or as a greeting of peace.

I agree that the category of 'authentic' national or ethnic cultures is getting pushed by globalization to a point where the concept basically implodes. (Although, many have made the good point that cultures have been in exchange and 'contamination' long before modernity, through the Silk Road, the Roman Empire, and so on. See Kwame Anthony Appiah's NYTimes Magazine article several years ago calling for a 'culture of contamination.')

In our class we mentioned the curious fact that falafel is not originally or 'authentically' Turkish to begin with – that they originally came from Lebanon. But if Turkish immigrants come to Germany and start selling a version of Middle Eastern food and, directly or indirectly, 'passing it off' as their own – doesn't it 'become' their own? Is something or someone 'less Turkish' by immigrating out of Turkey and adapting their lives to new material and cultural circumstances? Again, the whole concept of "Turkishness" starts to disintegrate.

But what I think also has to be preserved in this conversation is that because of global Western capitalist dominance (blah blah however you can describe this phenomenon we are all swimming in all the time), cultural exchange is not a fair, two-way street – unequal power relations still organize which cultures

arrive where, how, and who profits. The left at our university, which was very post-colonial and of a radical postmodern theoretical persuasion, had many conversations about personal cultural appropriation. Basic ideas : 1) the worst form of appropriation is to use someone else's culture to make money, and in a way where none of that money is shared with the people from that culture. 2) a second pretty bad form of appropriation is the dreadlocked hippie with batik from Ethiopia situation – to take from other cultures to form of your own personal identity, without understanding the political meaning or struggle or history of those people. 3) this one was more hotly debated—what to do about just general participation in the culture of other people – ex. capoeira, yoga. There was some idea that Western white folks should avoid 'teaching' these things, or positioning themselves as experts. 4) The "best" way would be cultural exchange in the service of political solidarity. But what happens when the people you meet in the rest of the non-white world don't have the same political beliefs as you or aren't interested in your notions of 'building solidarity' or don't conceptualize it in the same way as you? What happens when you go to Senegal and the people there want you to participate, purchase, and wear their culture, and then you return home to the critiquing eyes of African-American radical friends? It's fucking complicated.

Just as you shared Germany's context, we have to place this in an U.S. American context. When you think of forms of distinctly U.S. American music, styles which originated here, what comes to mind? Blues, jazz, rock and roll, hip-hop. Every single one of those music styles were pioneered by black musicians. And every single one was at some point white-washed (Elvis replacing Lil Richard as the King of Rock 'n' Roll) and sold as mainstream American culture, mainly for the profit of white record company execs and so on. There's a lot of fascinating components here that I can't explore in full – the racist fears of the 'danger' of the black body, its rhythm and its dancing, marketed and sold in the more innocuous form of Elvis' gyrating hips. So America has a distinct history of cannibalizing its own subcultures, erasing their particulars (that black musicians created this), and marketing it as "American culture." So there is a particular betrayal in the black community that structures this discourse in the U.S. "Why does everybody love black culture but nobody loves black people?" Roger Guenveur Smith ("Everything But the Burden: What White People Take from Black Culture, ed. Greg Tate.

When I first came to Berlin, I was relatively "trained" to be suspicious of white, apolitical hipsters partaking in black hip hop culture for 'edgy points' or 'irony points.' I have a shitty white-boy graffiti/hipster nike tennis-shoe store down the street from me whose offenses also include : gentrifying the neighborhood, offensive sexist imagery, nike shoes sourced from unethical labor, and the list goes on and on. But then I also see Turkish kids taking up rap, sometimes U.S. American rap, sometimes their own, and of course my inclination is always to have more leniency or restraint from condemning people of color and oppressed people when they appropriate culture. But in some way, hip-hop has gone global and so criticizing its use here is totally different than criticizing the way its used by white kids for boosting one's credibility in the U.S., since hip-hop was first born there and to some extent the older power dynamics remain.

But on the topic of this 'list' of 'worst to best' cultural appropriation behaviors, I want to point out the ridiculousness of this kind of rigidity. Because neither people of color nor white people are some hegemonic group that can agree on what behaviors are defined as racist or appropriating, and there has to be space for reflection and personal decision.

I'm convinced that when we as white people internalize suggestions for anti-racist practices in a way that is violent to ourselves—doubting ourselves, binding ourselves, repressing and silencing ourselves, trying to squeeze our 'evil whiteness' out of existence— we white people can often end up feeling wounded and angry. This is not to say that anti-racist practices for checking our own interpersonal behavior cause this or are responsible. I think it depends on how we internalize them: in a way that does damage to our person and subjectivity, or in a way that encourages a new subjectivity, an anti-racist one, to come into existence inside us.

to our continuing transformations!

be well,

melanie

But what I think also has to be preserved in this conversation is that because of global Western capitalist dominance, cultural exchange is not a fair, two-way street – unequal power relations still organize which cultures arrive where, how, and who profits

Growing up white

Sabrina Squires

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24 When I found out that the theme for Race Revolt 4 was whiteness, I really wanted to contribute, especially after the discussions in the previous issue about the frustration of how race was often left to people of colour to raise as well as a general lack of awareness around race issues and because race and queerness specifically seem to be receiving renewed attention in the London queer scene (the only one I know well enough to comment on) and academia. I have no intention of writing an academic piece, it may be reassuring to know! Despite my eagerness to write something, I found it difficult to do so, which is maybe not surprising as whiteness while such a dominating discourse and practise, is rarely explicitly discussed due to its privileged position as the 'norm' on which there is nothing to be said that is not apparent (or this is what the silence implies) and it is perhaps reflective of my own lack of explicit conscious thought on whiteness, that in part made this piece difficult to write, but also because of the disclosures it asks for (on which I will elaborate later), that show issues of race do not circulate around us, touching some bodies and not others; we all have a race.

I became aware of race and specifically my whiteness in the context of growing up around racism, where race meant not white. I don't remember any discussions within my family, among friends or at school about being white, what this meant, what it did and where it strayed. Growing up in small, predominantly working-class towns (within Northamptonshire, in the East Midlands) and in a working-class family really influenced my thinking on race and my wanting to write this.

My earliest memories of beginning to think consciously about race came from witnessing my father's racism. My father would frequently make racist comments in front of my mother, siblings and I (never to anyone who might challenge him, so I never heard his racism challenged growing up). His racist comments would often be made through my siblings and I, for example, if we put posters on our wall of black singers/actors etc he would call us 'nigger lovers'. It was peculiar this racism directed not at us, but through us. I don't think I often challenged my father on his racism, partly because he was violent and there seemed too many consequences to doing this. He also

made frequent sexist and homophobic comments, the latter I never challenged him on because I was afraid this would be read as a disclosure of my own sexuality to my father who said gays should be drowned at birth. Sometimes I would challenge his sexism because I read these comments as a flaunting of what he considered his 'right' to beat my mother and all the things that went along with it, trying to prevent her working, having friends, the endless emotional and mental abuse, but even then only through indirect counter comments rather than challenging its roots.

My father's racism was juxtaposed to my mother's gentleness, her encouraging us to be kind and respectful to all human beings and living things. My mother's sense of kindness and fairness despite of all the difficulties she has faced in her life, still astounds me. I think the formation of my young self surrounded by such extremes, but where one was always explicit and the other implicit, that it was my mother's good influence that more often than not was the implicit one, led to lots of ambiguous thoughts and feelings in me, especially as I never was able just to have this black and white reading of people as all good and all bad (even if this does make things easier).

The towns in which I grew up were predominantly white. I remember quite clearly when I was about 8 years old a black family moving onto the street where I lived at the time and this being considered unusual. They had a baby daughter, who was also called Sabrina. I would think about this little girl with whom I shared a name, about what her life would be like, where it might converge or diverge with mine and why.

When I was a couple of years older we moved to a town where Combat 18, an explicitly racist and violent breakaway group from the BNP were prominent. There was Combat 18 posters stuck up all around the town, which never appeared to be removed or if they were they were soon replaced with others. There was a significant Asian population in the town and I used to think what it must be like to see these posters everyday, as you went about your day to day life, trying to construct a sense of 'home' for you and your loved ones.

My closest friend at secondary school was a British born Indian girl. We often sat together in class and spent lunch time together. I remember she would show me magazines and point out which Indian film and pop stars that she liked, letting me listen to the latter's music and sharing Indian sweets with me. I did not tend to be very verbally expressive on more serious matters (mulling over them mainly in my own mind), but I do recall my friend talking to me about how she did not feel comfortable sharing these things with most of the other kids and my feeling honoured that she did with me. I think I also implicitly understood why she did not usually feel comfortable as I did not question her on what she meant by this. Racist terminology was quite common when I was growing up, at least among many of the children I went to school with, so I assume also their families and other adults in their lives. I remember quite clearly this incident in a class room where a group of boys used the term 'paki' in the presence of an Asian boy, then turned to him and said 'oh we shouldn't say that in front of you' and he said 'that's ok, I'm not a paki anyway, as I am not from Pakistan'. The comment made me feel a mix of disgust/discomfort/empathy at the same time - disgust because he went along with their comment, discomfort because I understood why he did it and empathy for the same reason.

These are moments that I remember quite vividly, where I did think about race and I share them to give some context to the article and my thoughts on whiteness. I am sure there are lots of different/similar/worse incidents that I don't remember/did not notice, but I do remember these, so I think that they must be significant in forming my thoughts on race.

I also know that these thoughts can not be separated from growing up white, working class, an (atypical) girl, unsure of my sexuality, but sure that I was not heterosexual and around domestic violence. I think that the relationship between class and race is particularly interesting, thinking of the phrase 'white trash' that is used against white working class people in particular. I have always thought this is such a racist term, this prefix of white to liken certain white bodies, those that fall short of the white ideal, that are white, but not white enough to the bodies of racialised others, as a form of insult by comparison, which already implies a racial hierarchy.

I do not think that I saw my whiteness as a privilege growing up, I think that I was more inclined to think about my lack of privilege in terms of class, gender and sexuality than my white privilege. Maybe I also thought that I did not have to, that the above meant that I was exempt from racism because I knew how it felt to be (an) other, which I think is not unusual but problematic. Of course, being white and female for instance is not the same as being white and male, as being white and gay is not the same as being white and heterosexual and so on, but being working class, female and queer does not cancel out whiteness. It is much easier to be aware of our lack of privilege rather than our privilege, as the latter requires our awareness of the lived realities of others while the former necessitates our awareness albeit to different extents - by the discomfort/interruption of the projection of our bodies into worlds not quite made for us. To ignore the white privilege we benefit from every day in the smallest and most indirect ways as well as in the more explicit and blatant ways is to be complicit with racism and also to lend our minds, bodies and mouths to those racist undertones that are the remnants of that uncritiqued privilege - that does harm too, in its avoidance of acknowledging the lived reality of racial inequality (and the way it intersects with other social markers, such as nationality, class, gender, sexuality and so on).

25

At times I have found myself in situations where someone makes a racist comment and they will look to me, presuming my allegiance as another white person and in that moment my silence would render me complicit with them. Silence is rarely the neutral position, silence does something too. It is too easy to say that I did not actively affirm their remark or do not share their opinion. Silence is not an option for everybody and I think it is important to remember this in those moments.

I sometimes find it hard to talk freely about race, which frustrates me - maybe for fear of revealing ignorance (remnants of those uncritiqued parts) or looking stupid, or being misunderstood, of being like my father, all those people and things I tried so hard to distance myself from, but I do not think that it is a good idea to think of these things in terms of distance, in that it hides from view the processes through which we 'become', making it easier to think that race has nothing to do with us because we are white and consider ourselves not to be racist.

Silence is rarely the neutral position, silence does something too. It is too easy to say that I did not actively affirm their remark or do not share their opinion.

Claire Hall

claireshall@gmail.com

I am in Colombia working with the Network of Solidarity with Colombia (*La Red*) doing what's called 'international accompaniment'. In practice I hang out with people who don't agree with **a)** the handing over of natural resources to multinationals companies while the workers are treated as slaves and surrounding communities scratch a living without land, clean water, education; **b)** and the use of the army and paramilitaries to make sure that this happens without any 'problems', ie silencing social resistance through violence.

The theory is that the presence of people with Western passports raises the political stakes for the government to shoot, threaten, arrest, kidnapp... people who speak out against **a)** or/and **b)** The stakes are raised by the work we do visibilising the roots of the Colombian conflict and by witnessing crimes of the state. We use the racist structures that value my life more to create larger space for others to do their organising work.

La Red was invited to accompany afro-colombian students in their second annual *enaguna* (**gathering**) in Buenaventura. I was asked to go and eagerly accepted the opportunity to expand my perspective of how racism weaves through the harrowing social injustice in Colombia and so I found myself, a white european woman, in a large lecture theatre with 300 politicised self-defining afro-colombian students.

Unsurprisingly I stood out. Bodily responses to my whiteness vary from warmth to mild hostility. I had never been in such a space. I suspect a similar space doesn't exist in the UK but have I really looked? I live in a predominantly afro-caribbean community and yet have never been to a community meeting there. Why here in Buenaventura but not in St Pauls? I could truthfully say that I was invited to this event, that I have an assumption that the black organisations in St Pauls are reformist and lost their shapr politics after the riots in the eighties. But I must also be self-critical. I have (had) unthoughtfull fears. What would I have to offer to to an afro-jamaican community as a white woman? How would my presence be useful? All too tellingly a third question comes later - what do I have to learn and gain?

In the UK my political identity was built inside a predominantly white activist community. My ideas of what was useful, valuable work to be doing were measured by me within this context. I see now that being able to make choices about which political projects I dedicate time to is a rare privilege. Most people are focused on what they want to change; it is what they do battle with each day just to survive. My freedom to choose springs from having been able to create a life where I have a good supply of time, a precious resource. How has being coded by society as white, and of course interconnected with class, got me here? How has white privilege made life easier for me?

My teachers believing in my capacity to achieve whatever I choose, parents instilling in me self-assuredness, policemen never stopping to search me in my neighbourhood while those of colour are harassed daily, getting jobs without ever having to worry that I will be discriminated against for being white, the confidence that I can live on very little money because I haven't lived with hunger and because at any point I could change this and get a job which would treat and pay me wel, to know that my parents will be there if I got seriously ill and had no money to live.

The ability to be know how to act so as to 'fit in' to different spaces in society like a rural pub, a meeting with a group of self-important white people, a posh party with canapes. Even if I don't like the space I know how to engage. And then as a white citizen of the UK I benefit our current quality of life in the UK that was built on the slave trade and the plunder of colonised countries through violence, justified with racist discourses.

It is my life to choose how I use my time yet also my responsibility to recognise and **act to change** how my privileges allows me more participation and thus power in social movements. Democracy is skewed, as in wider society, to those with more power.

Solidarity accompaniment is an action to change this but if I had thought about this while in Bristol I could hve taken action there too. The uprooting of my political identity woven with personal relationships gives me such a beautiful space to act differently, or rather to act with different people. I listen, learn and support others who have different perspectives and experiences. I accept my white privilege and instead of using it to further my own ideas, I use it to create spaces for those pushed to the margins. I translate the voices I

hear, I write up the stories I am told. I share my knowledge of UK politics and social movements to offer advice on how to access international work. I give people crash courses in photography and then give them my camera so they can take the photos they want the world to see. "We want this photo to be international to show people the horrendous conditions we are living in." I explain how to post articles on Colombia indymedia to people with limited Internet knowledge.

Back in hot, sticky Buenaventura, a port town with huge numbers of displaced black/afro-colombians, I emotionally experience the emergence of another question. How should I engage in this space, a self defined Afro space influenced by afro-centric political philosophy?

The discussions were fascinating, yet I felt unsettled. The visions to learn from african cultures and histories pushed my experiences, my contributions, my histories (both imperialist and of resistance) to the sides. I felt unsure

In the UK my political identity was built inside a predominantly white activist community. My ideas of what was useful, valuable work to be doing were measured by me within this context.

how I fit into this. It gave me a glimpse of what people of colour must feel much of the time, their stories ignored, their different historical and social perspectives pushed to the background. Hundreds of years of being made invisible, their desires to centre themselves in their afro-identity make emotional and spiritual sense. To have been robbed of your lands, to have your history erased, to fight to reclaim it is such a valid response. And I coped easily with being pushed to the margins. When does it ever happen to me? I have power in many spaces.

At the time I wanted to share stories of how we also resisted in Europe, that the Euro-centric models that you critique; education, hierarchies, religions, concept of the self, philosophies, were not imposed without a fight. We share more common history than you may imagine. But later, while reading *Settler: the mythology of the white proletariat* (J. Sakai) I realise that I don't actually know to what extent European social movements from the 15th century oppose the development of slavery on moral grounds, rather than economic grounds? Or did white British working class demand democratic rights so they could also benefit from slavery?

I want to have these conversations with these students. Does afro-centrism reflects the internalisation of the states narratives created to dominate us? Yet these are difficult conversatins to have. I must move forward with much awareness of how my whiteness has shaped my ideas. I had an immediate cliched white anarchist response to political visions for an autonomous Choco state, the predominantly black Colombian region. It is a response that fails to appreciate why afro-colombians as subjugated people at the margins of the Empire are inspired by revolutionary nationalism.

I think to ask what my white solidarity looks like for afro-colombians? But yet, it is not their job to tell me. I must shine spotlights on my daily experienes and see how white privilege shapes them. I will use my growing awareness to lead white horses to water and hope they learn the taste of their privilege. I will constantly acknowledge that people of colour experience life differently than me, and as such my actions of support on a personal level will be shaped

accordingly. Kathryn Shanley in "Thoughts on [US – my own addition for clarity] Indian Feminism" gives a great definition for tokenism "ignores the historical and cultural specificities of their own particular struggles and beliefs." I will start learning, quickly, how to spot this. I will challenge it when I see it. I will act in solidarity with people of colour without my own agenda,

I want to thank those who form part of Bridge called Home 'an incredible anthology of shared words which weave testimony and theory together to illuminate how sexism, racism and class shape lives; which is helping me weave my own testimonies and theories

Afternote

I have returned to this piece three times now and each time I hve squirmed at something I wrote and realised the fuckedupness of what I have said. I imagine there is more to be criticised and I really realise how much hard work I need to put in to scratch the surface of understanding white privilege,

¹ In my blog post I talk more about this racism. <http://gizzacroggy.blogspot.com/>

chavs and other white people i know

(with photos from the family album)

-by r

Chav, n. British slang (derogatory). “In the United Kingdom (originally the south of England): a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of a low social status.”

– *Oxford English Dictionary*

I grew up, and am living right now, in a white-dominated working class town. Just the other day, as I meandered from charity shop to charity shop, I spotted a bunch of young mums having a spat (you might be more familiar with this demographic as “pram-faces,” the working class fillies who get themselves knocked up). Being a (former?) working class girl—out of the slip-stream yet enmeshed in it still—I nipped over to eavesdrop; partly out of curiosity, but also as the unofficial class ethnographer and traitor that I am.

Scenario: One girl was laying into another OTT as a flock of them strolled along with buggies. Girl with big gob and small child was cussing, yelling, and being totally intimidating—getting right in the face of a sheepish-girl-with-stroller and calling her a “stupid fucking slut” etc. As far as I could tell, creeping alongside, it seemed much ado about nothing.

Then there was the taxi-driver’s comment, to my left-hand side. Addressing a guy in the doorway of a kiss-me-quick shop across the road, also bemusedly watching the scene, the taxi-driver spat: “Scum. This town is full of scum now.” I involuntarily shot him a look. I admit: I felt uncomfortable with this girl, ripping up the street with her aggression (and fuck me, I felt sorry for the kids).

But the taxi drivers’ comments freaked me out just as much as the girl: these ubiquitous acts of de-humanization—whether it’s calling the cops ‘pigs’ or the undereducated / despised young mums as ‘scum’—land like a punch in the gut to me.

Chavs have the whole benefit/ “underclass” thing going on. But is there a racialization of chavdom? They seem (in the popular imagination) to be unequivocally white, aka ‘white-trash’ in the States. Chavs fulfill clichés of baseball caps (and bats), ASBO’s, cans of stella, drug money, hanging out on street corners, mindless aggression, gnarly dogs, little education, little prospects, and dole-sucking “scum”. (Accompanied by the historical lament for the loss of bone fide, proud, working class culture). I speak with familiarity: a little chav blood flows through my line.

Because these clichés apply to my family background too (though we never grew up on a council estate and all the credit rating was, and still is, taken up on food, bills and nice presents for people’s birthdays, not widescreen plasma TV). Flash-back fifteen years and I was running round with the nasty-girls, off my head on cheap cider or speed, spewing all over the Street Fighter game, dodging store-detectives, picking fights, and modeling trackie bottoms and cheap gold from Argos (though I was smart and creative too, and quickly morphed out of the so-called chav-aesthetic and attitude).

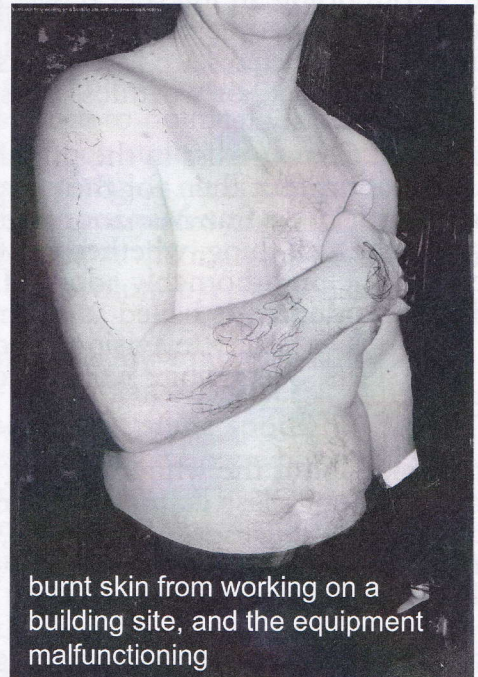
One of my much beloved big bros—an ex crim and recovering heroin addict—sports a British bull dog on his arm, which he got aged 14 whilst wearing his school uniform. My mum, a cash-in-hand cleaner on pension credit who left school at the same age, enjoys nights out on the lash, with smuggled booze in her bag, dressed as a bunny girl, cowgirl, school girl, bathing belle, etc—having a “mad time” with a gang of other like-minded 60 year old women, caught on a permanent hen night. My dad, a builder who is spiraled in twenty-year debt, once hid an axe under my brother’s bed to attack my mother’s new partner (he ended up pummeling him with his fists instead). Not all working class backgrounds are full of violence, drugs, prison, police raids, etc – but mine was. Just the other day my mother, myself, and everyone in our neighboring streets were profiled by the police for an attempted murder on our road, in connection with an attack nearby. The police now

know how tall I am, what colour my eyes are, what star sign I am, and whether I have any scars or tattoos on my body.

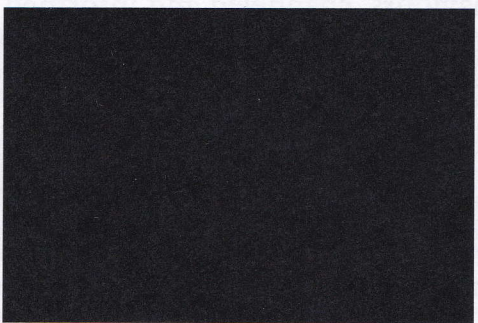
So why am I telling you this? Because I don't often see myself, or the specters of my past, represented amongst the backgrounds of people in the DIY feminist queer community: most folks are (unspeakably, in that they assume that I am too) middle class. For example, recently I've noticed folks say that they're living in a "rough" area...what they really mean is that they live in a working class neighbourhood for the cheap rent. Whilst thankfully no one has ever suggested a chav-party (come dressed as a chav!), like I witnessed at uni, I still feel big voids. I find it hard to stay loyal to a scene where there's unrecognized classism in all shapes and forms. I guess I feel amiss because even if people had shitty backgrounds of violence etc—which cuts across social class and ethnicity—few people are talking about it. I also need to understand how money problems and precarity have framed these particular issues in my life. Maybe it's about creating those oh-so-mythical "safe spaces": basically I feel less trust for people who don't speak about class, from whatever side of the social strata they are on.

You see, some (still not many) people are beginning to talk about their whiteness, myself included, but how many will also talk—intuitively, before being asked or compelled to—about how their whiteness is constructed around class (more than just saying: yes, I am white, I am middle-class...). I for one would like to know: how is whiteness shaped by your class privilege? This article was originally going to be a (angry) piece about the classism that I've experienced and the links I see to racist behaviour: key shared points around arrogance, interrogation, assumption, tokenization, demonization, unaccountability, being made to feel like a cunt/pariah for calling people up on their shit, etc. But I'm also tired of middle-class attributes such as politeness, and fudging over difficult issues (or just being guilty, as if that was the end point of one's ability to act). I am also more interested in understanding the ways in which I have internalized classism. (And I *have* internalized disgust and condescension, through circulating with middle-class people and culture).

In a newspaper article a few years back, Julie Burchill—radical feminist, *Times* columnist, and transgenderphobe—calls chav-baiting "social racism" (this confused me: wouldn't "class hate" be more accurate?). Then again, in 2004, the website www.chavscum.co.uk contained posts such as "Stupidity, alas, breeds stupidity" and "They have no shame because they have no brains - it really is as simple as that." In an *Independent* article that same year, Johann Hari unpicks the classism and "social racism" of mentalities like this: "No need to worry about redistributing wealth or investing in schools; there is simply a genetic sub-race of stupid, crude chavs who will always eat crap and think crap and can be happily ignored." A "Stormfront: White Pride World Wide" messageboard sees (white) chavs as trying to mimic black working class kids. One post threatens: "I would love to see the day when every chav is hanging from a lamp post with *I betrayed my race* written around his neck" (emphasis mine)."



burnt skin from working on a building site, and the equipment malfunctioning



sometimes i wince at the way class already marks you, in your hair, teeth, clothes, and mouth.



Among other moral-panics in the tabloids and broadsheets today, gums flap about the white working class failing and being failed: in the classroom, in the job-market, in the media, in culture. There's demonization, trivialization, and erasure (and, of course, a prop for right.wing agendas, stirring up racism within the white working classes and scapegoating minorities and whoever they can). From doing an internet trawl, and reading different articles and message boards on "chavs"—with people mostly saying it's not a class thing, it's a fashion choice, or a behavioural choice, and that chavs are just "twats" or "pikies" — one word gets repeated over and over again: "scum" ("low, vile, or worthless person or group of people" according to Merriam-Webster).

Strangely, "Chavs" exist in the popular imaginary as an archetype, without any real media representation (but then for the people who live with chavs, who they are is unavoidable). In an *Observer* article, Sarfraz Manzoor writes: "A media dominated by the middle class prefers fake chavs to the real thing, whether the fake is Vicky Pollard, as played by privately educated Matt Lucas, or the unfathomably adored Lily Allen. The privately educated Allen - daughter of an actor and film producer - is hailed as a female Mike Skinner... The only time real working-class whites are shown is as reality television fodder in documentaries where their role is to drink, swear and lift their skirts. See a white working-class person on TV and chances are they are a slapper, thicko, slob or racist."

In thinking about the white working classes, I have split loyalties. Truth be told, I hate aspects of chav & working class cultural consumption, affiliation, "ignorance" and aggression (not exclusive to this class)—red-tops, McDonalds, "casual" racism and xenophobia etc etc. I also deeply cherish working class values, such as loyalty, generosity, not being judgmental or pretentious, and having each other's back.

30 I have become obsessed with making imaginary field notes on white people's bodies and behaviours, channeled and informed through their assumed class (this verges dangerously on stereotypes, but can also be quite telling). I notice the subtleties of white skin, and how manual labour, being poor, and/or trapped in debt makes marks on people (where white is also the "unmarked race" in white supremacist societies). I am still unfolding an understanding of how racism and white skin privilege are metered by class, and how classism similarly demonizes and creates new "social groups"—based on appearance, behaviour, and socio-economic position—to treat people wrongly. Writing about her white trailer trash background in "A Question of Class," Dorothy Allison says pointedly: "we had been encouraged to destroy ourselves, made invisible because we did not fit the myths of the noble poor generated by the middle class... We knew ourselves despised." ww.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/skinall.html).

There are so many narratives about my classed-life that want to be committed to public, but I have so much figuring out to do as well: about how people can internalize "poverty mentalities" as well as live between the lines of class, precarity and government assistance; when family love and generosity (usually by women) equates to martyred self-sacrifice, and all the scripts of (old school) working-class motherhood which bolster this; how white working-class experiences relate to other positions and ethnicities; and how I want to be "upwardly mobile" without rejecting my background or uncritically embracing middle class values. I offer these thoughts and sketches as a way of bringing my class-ghosts back to life and to invite them to walk around with me some more in our DIY communities. To be evoked and understood in their complexity without being surrounded by anger or silences, but just for the reasons that they exist, they have consequences, and they shape me.



most things are shabby, passed on,
or bought on catalogue credit

Against "Race Traitor": Reflections on How (not) to Address the Fact of Your Own Whiteness

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"When indignation becomes a profession, when it secures my conviction of being right, it leads to righteousness, to opposition without risk. "I am always on the right side, I do not need to look further at to look further at the complexity of situations" (Francois Verges)¹

Introduction

The Editorial of the November 2008 issue of *Race Revolt* spoke with some frustration of the apathy of the white queer activist where race issues are concerned:

"from talking to other folk of colour, together we were getting an overriding feeling of talking and talking with no-one seeming to listen. [This issue] is an attempt to move away from the intense feelings of isolation that stem from mostly being the only ones raising issues of race and racism within alternative communities"²

This essay takes up the call to action implicit in the above quote. We need to disrupt the complacency with which (most) white people meet race, and their projection of race onto people of colour as 'their problem'. However, this disassociation from their own 'whiteness' by whites puts those white people (this writer included) who are attempting to address race and racism as 'their problem' at a loss for words and concepts to think whiteness through. The question that then presents itself as a first stepping stone in disrupting white apathy is 'How should white people- and specifically white activists- critically address the fact of their own whiteness?'. A possible answer is suggested by *Race Traitor*, an American journal whose philosophy is, in their own words :

"... first that the "white race" is not a natural but a social category and, second, that what was historically constructed can be undone"³

Race Traitor takes up the idea that race is created through social interactions, and that to be a 'race traitor' is to subvert the normal construction of race by practicing 'race treason' as a kind of strategic rejection of whiteness which involves acting in such a way "as would jeopardise their own ability to exercise the privileges of whiteness"⁴. So, for example, 'race treason' is practised by those white people who supported the rebellion against the Rodney King verdict, despite the fact that the verdict held in place structures equated with their own privilege, or, on a more mundane level, by the *Race Traitor* reader who when told by the white newspaper vendor that he

shouldn't be buying a 'black' newspaper, replied 'you must think I'm white'. In other words 'race treason' is about creating disruptive interventions into those assumed and habitual behaviours of white people which perpetuate (the idea of) the white race.

The logic behind *Race Traitor* is that if a critical mass of white people were to act in such a manner, in a way analogous to a counterfeit currency destabilising the ability to recognise authentic currency, the terms of race would become destabilised, leading to its dissolution.

Through this practice *Race Traitor* did the important job of drawing attention to whiteness in the American public arena, working against its naturalization and structural placing as a universal against which people of colour are defined as other- the situation which constructs race as a 'people of colour' issue in the first place. 31

It's direct and uncompromising politics served as an antidote to white apathy, as it recognised the need to "disrupt the functioning" of race as a social construct, and showed a "willingness to go beyond socially acceptable anti-racism"⁵. The idea that social change could be implemented through everyday encounters and in social interaction -a symbolic interactionist approach- empowered the readership to make interventions into racism in their everyday lives, and the formats that it supported - ranging from the publication of articles, reviews, fiction, and (of course) the practical acts of 'race treason' which it inspired, encouraged a creative and practical approach that served as an antidote to the over-intellectualization and elitism that a more purely theoretical approach might engender. All these positives should be remembered, and can be carried over by us into new forms of race activism.

However, the project is also deeply flawed. It exposes a problematic tension that arises when addressing whiteness- a tension between deconstructing race as an oppressive social construct and the need to make white people more aware of their racialization and its effects. For although *Race Traitor* may have drawn attention to whiteness as an identity that has

previously been rendered invisible, it simultaneously sidestepped actually inhabiting that identity and, significantly, the means by which it did so was to adopt a 'black' one instead.

As Ware has observed, the symbolic interactionist approach enables a disassociation from certain aspects of whiteness:

"...it plays on the contradiction between 'being' as ontology and 'being' as behaviour or performance. By raising the possibility that one can stop being white, this phrase suggests that the socially constructed raciality of the would be traitor can be unpicked from her or his physical and psychological identity and discarded"⁶

This means there is no self-reflexivity about whiteness in the text, no attention to how, through their own assumptions and mode of writing and acting, they may be reinscribing the oppression they seek to undo.

32 Furthermore, *Race Traitor* works on the assumption that by declaring oneself as 'not white' one actually becomes 'not white' in a sense. This move calls to be examined in more detail, not least because it reveals an irony at the heart of *Race Traitor*: that although it calls for the dissolution of white privilege in practice, this very move embodies and enacts the epistemological privilege of the white man to redefine what "black" and "white" mean.

In other words, mobility of identification is a choice that stems from privilege. Blackness is always fixed into being defined relationally to whiteness, but, due to the asymmetry of power, whiteness does not need to be defined in relation to blackness, because it exists as the universal, transcendental signifier. How would the scenario feel different if a person of colour was to declare they were 'no longer of colour' or 'white'?

Furthermore, in this bizarre scenario where the white person can choose to be 'black' without any relation to people of colour there is a marked absence of people of colour's experience shaping its political vision, as clearly illustrated by this quote from *Race Traitor*:

"Although it has sometimes been difficult to maintain a clear distinction, we do not see it as the job of the journal to monitor developments in the black community"⁷

A devastating omission. How on earth can white people develop anti-racist practice that is not engaged with developments in the black community? What then are the implications of declaring oneself 'not white' for the lived experience of people of colour? Does it not serve to erase a history of oppression? To gloss over (a discussion about) the lived material differences between the experiences of black and

white people? Are we not using a relative position of power to appropriate black identity? To absolve ourselves of responsibility for the racism that we have inherited within our white privilege, and simultaneously to shore up a divide and distance between white and people of colour? Could it not be said to fetishize rather than actually engage with black experience, and to in fact repeat the othering that it seeks to undo, through this gesture?

In other words we need to think about what this 'shedding of whiteness' looks like from a person of colour's perspective. Elsewhere, Sara Ahmed has discussed governments and institutions attempts to absolve themselves of racist histories through public apologies, and it seems to me that *Race Traitor* may be attempting a similar move, all be it with a radical spin on it, which attempts to displace the blame onto those 'other' nasty right-wing whites. Ahmed inserted the perspective of the person of colour back into the equation, making the point that although white people may declare themselves to have transcended or moved beyond racism, people of colour are still living the effects of that racism, and it is problematic for white people to declare what constitutes an end to racism⁸ because this needs to come from and be grounded in the experience of people of colour. Documents that are produced as part of whiteness studies, such as the *Race Traitor* journal, often fail to acknowledge and take as their guiding source the calls for a critically approach to whiteness which originated from such prominent black academics as bell hooks and Audre Lorde.

Activist Identifications

Race Traitor identifies itself with the figures of the activist and the abolitionist, and relates to social change through these identifications, looking back to Abolitionism as an earlier narrative of success, and seeking for it to be repeated through a contemporary, activist and implicitly anti-capitalist framework (which its suggestive language when describing whites and "race traitors" implies- for instance "the White Club"⁹ or "the executive board"¹⁰, and "counterfeit currency"¹¹ etc). These identifications structurally and ideologically shape *Race Traitor*.

I am interested in the activist identifications within *Race Traitor* as they serve as a useful moment of reflection upon our own activism. In their article 'Give up Activism', the anonymous writer made the following critique of activism:

"To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being at the forefront of the

practical struggle to create this change¹²

This description resonates with the vanguard status with which *Race Traitor* identifies itself, a status which relies on the use of an inflated activist rhetoric, one which explicitly identifies with radical abolitionist heroes of the past and with a teleological revolutionary narrative. Being seduced by this narrative may blind us to its implications: that within it the figure of the whiteman is elevated once again as the saviour of people of colour, and that through modelling themselves on the abolitionists the activist emerges as a kind of cultural colonialist who from their position of enhanced knowledge can disseminate the gospel of the revolution; a position which both silences the voices of people of colour and others those white people who aren't 'race traitors', as the unenlightened masses who carry the burden of the racism which the 'race traitors' have apparently transcended.

Activists are heavily invested both in the idea that they are 'right' and 'right on'. It seems likely that these assumptions are contributing both to the apathetic attitude towards race issues that Humey mentioned in her editorial to *Race Revolt* 3 and the defensiveness with which that challenge to Queer White apathy has been met in some instances. Addressing myself to the white readership- we are accustomed to queer spaces feeling comfortable- that's why we call them safe spaces, and we have worked hard to make them a refuge from the relative lack of understanding from the outside world. So of course it comes as a shock and a rupture to discover that this space is not safe for everyone; that people of colour are not feeling that their experiences and needs are not met within it. It is painful to realise that your comfort is earned on the back of another person's silence, especially when you have a personal investment in anti-oppressive thought and practice. But we need to accept that we are not neutral subjects: colonialism and racism are intertwined into the social, political and cultural fabric in which we grew up and now live, working on many layers and at varying degrees of overtness and subtlety. We carry them threaded through our beliefs and ideas. We can not leave them at the door of the Queer Space. We need to be committed to the ongoing process of deconstructing them before we can usefully say that we are anti-racists.

So, going back to the original question 'How should white people- and specifically white activists- critically address the fact of their own whiteness?' To conclude I would like to tentatively suggest some provisional and open-ended guidelines for white queer activists who want to work and think on anti-racist issues. In doing so I think we can learn from *Race Traitor's* mistakes:

1. Be self-reflexive about whiteness and think about how our assumptions and mode of writing and acting

2. Be cautious about declaring what constitutes an end to racism¹³- this should come from the experiences of people of colour.
3. Base what you do and what you write on an engagement with the scholarship of people of colour and the developments happening in the communities of people of colour.
4. Avoid the temptation to absolve yourselves of responsibility for the racism that you have inherited within your white privilege by projecting it onto 'other' white people.
5. Think carefully about who you might be excluding by invoking certain narratives, e.g. activist and historical narratives that privilege certain identities.
6. Sometimes it is best to stop saying and doing anything, to take up a little less of the space and airtime that our privilege affords us, and listen to what people of colour have to say.

Activist culture at times feeds the fantasy that social change is something that will happen somewhere and sometime far, far away, once enough of people have taken to the streets and palaces have crumbled. I think social change *is* happening here and now- but not always the way you want or expect it to. It often happens when you're not looking. It was happening in the editorial of *Race Revolt* 3, despite and perhaps because of the fact that the tone of that piece was angry and frustrated. It happened to us, mediated through us, the shifting lines of the possible felt through *and perhaps resisted by* the tectonic plates of our bodies. In that editorial Humey spoke about the need to feel uncomfortable and to sit in discomfort sometimes. Yes it is uncomfortable. If fully felt, and moved to action, it is also revolutionary.

¹ Verges, Francois, "Postcolonial Challenges" pp 186-204 in *The Future of Social Theory*, Gane (ed.), London:Continuum, 2004, p.188

² *Race Revolt*, issue 3, November 2008, Editorial

³ Garvey, John and Ignatiev, Noel, 'Towards a New Abolitionism: A Race Traitor Manifesto', p 346

⁴ Garvey and Ignatiev, *Race Traitor*, p.349

⁵ Garvey and Ignatiev, "Towards a New Abolitionism" in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, Mike Hill (ed.), p 349

⁶ Ware and Back, *Out of Whiteness*, p.154

⁷ Garvey and Ignatiev, *Race Traitor*, P.2

⁸ Ahmed, Sara, 'Declarations of Whiteness : The non-performativity of Anti-Racism' , *Borderlands e-journal*, Volume 3, Number 2, 2004

⁹ Garvey and Ignatiev, "Towards a New Abolitionism" in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, Mike Hill (ed.), p 346

¹⁰ Garvey and Ignatiev, , *Race Traitor*, p.13

¹¹ Garvey and Ignatiev, "Towards a New Abolitionism" in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, Mike Hill (ed.), p 348

¹² 'Do or Die', Issue 9, p.160.

¹³Ahmed, Sara, 'Declarations of Whiteness : The non-performativity of Anti-Racism' , *Borderlands e-journal*, Volume 3, Number 2, 2004

The meaning of my whiteness

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I hate my country.

I hate where I was born and where I lived until three years ago. I hate it because it is racist, sexist and homophobic. It is the most racist, sexist and homophobic country ever. I hate it.

When I go back the whole week the ten days the fortnight I'm there, I am constantly accompanied by a sharp feeling of discomfort. It is something quite profound and hard to describe.

It starts from the outside, from the feeling of being unsafe, physically under threat from the world around me. Initially, I am happy to be home, I am relieved it is warmer and not as dark as London. Immediately, though, I start walking around looking nervous, awkward and constantly on the look-out for something bad to happen. Last time I went, right in the centre of my town some guy got beaten and sent to hospital by a bunch of guys with shaved heads. Apparently, it was because he looked like a lefty (my mum told me on the phone, sounding worried). The time before, another guy got beaten to death in a near-by town by a group of neo-nazis because he wore his hair in a ponytail. A politician who now sits in government said on TV that that was bad, but not as bad as publicly burning Israeli flags like radical left-wing groups do.

The day I left last time, an 18 year old boy got beaten up with sticks and killed in the big industrial town in the North of my country. A bar owner thought he had stolen some biscuits and attacked him furiously shouting racist insults about immigrants. The boy was born there, but he was black. Last spring, just after the general elections, in the capital city of my country, a whole street of shops owned by Pakistani migrants was smashed. In the same city, a couple of months before (during election campaign) a gay bar was set on fire.

The feeling starts when I get off the plane and I am welcomed by a policeman looking stern and glaring at anyone not white daring to cross the border into my country. It sharpens on the train from the airport to my home where there's always some ticket guy ready to go off on a racist rant whenever anyone not white doesn't have the ticket on them or is just asking for information. Soon the reality around me changes face completely and I know with the whole of myself that I am not in nice liberal capitalist

utopia anymore. As I unwillingly start engaging with my surroundings, the feeling penetrates the inside. Immediately, it transforms into something intimate: an interrogation, an exploration inside me of who I am and of where that sense of self comes from.

I could say: I have been away for three years, when I come back, I just don't get what the fuck's going on. But I'd be lying. If you are born somewhere and are exposed to all the normal stuff around you growing up, went to school, watched TV, heard people talking in shops etc, then when something happens on such a massive scale, you know exactly what's going on and why. If you think you don't, it's because you're refusing to acknowledge that similar processes from those happening in the wider culture, are happening on a micro-scale inside yourself too.

A violent but structured explosion of repressed anger has taken over my country in the past few months (or has it been a few years now? When did it start? 1994? 2001? Anyone?) and it is directed at those who are not included within the confines of what is normal- determined by race, gender, sexuality and by politics (first and second generation migrants are the main targets though, and it is definitely them who are paying for it the most). That hatred and racism is fundamental to what we are as a nation. It's been carefully cultivated over the past fifty years. Of course I know why people are so bitterly xenophobic.

Racism is never a gut feeling, it is not an irrational fear that human beings will always have towards those who are different. That's bollocks. It is not a sign of ignorance or stupidity. There is nothing "natural" or "instinctive" about racism. Racism is a carefully devised political instrument. It is an abstract, sophisticate notion that exists thanks to specific institutional interventions on people's psyche, a violent distortion of people's emotions that necessitates the State apparatus, as well as a set of other devices like the media and the public sphere as a whole (ultimately in the ends of the State anyway), to continue existing.

For us, racism is what we have been given instead of a national identity. We were never one country in the first place. It was a geo-political calculation in the hands of the usual suspects (do you know how many countries exist just because someone in Britain decided they ought to and fiddled around with

borders on a map?) that decided it had to be a country. Then during the Cold War they decided it had to side with the West and they made it Western. Now we are Westerners. Only we aren't and we know we aren't really.

The racist violence that's everywhere in the country at the moment is the desperate attempt to include ourselves in the imagined community of the Civilised Rich White Advanced Rational Secular Neo-liberal Western Countries. Physically attacking the non-white bodies serves the purpose of telling them and ourselves that we do belong with the strong and the powerful and they don't.

Racism is also what the establishment has given us to deal with the painful memory of our own poverty and of our own diaspora (up until forty years ago only, people from my country my father my mother my grandmother my grandfather lived through exactly the same hell in Switzerland North America England Germany we are making people from Rumania Pakistan Tunisia Somalia live through now

The racist violence that's everywhere in the country at the moment is the desperate attempt to include ourselves in the imagined community of the Civilised Rich White Advanced Rational Secular Neo-liberal Western Countries. Physically attacking the non-white bodies serves the purpose of telling them and ourselves that we do belong with the strong and the powerful and they don't.

in our own country). Hating other immigrants is the best way of forgetting your own immigrant past. Beating other immigrants is the desperate attempt to beat the immigrant out of one's own self. Enciting hatred towards immigrants (through the media, from a seat in Parliament, from a Church altar) is the best way to ensure the whole collective experience of migrating to richer countries (the humiliations, the intense suffering, the displacement, the feeling that your voice has abruptly been stolen from you so that you stay in a corner silent) gets erased and that our whole history is suppressed.

That sharp feeling of discomfort is the way I think about my whiteness whenever I'm back home and it's suddenly visible. Or, I guess, that feeling presides over the politics, the history of my whiteness. Or perhaps it's the after taste of my own violent desire for whiteness. Growing up I was told in many different ways that where I was from was all wrong, but fortunately out there, very close to me, there were those that had it all right and very fortunately indeed we were now siding with the big boys so I could just go and join them at any point. It was only a question of watching them on TV and try to be

like them as much as possible, and then leaving this country for theirs as soon as possible.

Rereading this I am not sure what point I am trying to make. I am wanting to dissect my dreams and aspirations my imagery and desires the way I look at myself and at others. I am trying to look at all these things under the lenses of this massive construction on which so much of our world rests on: race. Still now that I've lived in the UK for a few years, sometimes I realize, although I am not even aware of most of the time, I still look at this country and at my friends who were born here with a sort of blind admiration that is the ultimate uncontrollable instinct of a colonised mind. I immediately shave my hair when it's growing a bit too long because I really do hate long hair and I tell myself it's the femininity I am rushing to get rid of. But then I wonder isn't the femininity intrinsically racialised anyway, after all it's not just a woman but rather a mediterranean woman that thing that I felt I was going to transform into if I didn't do anything about it, the thing I never ever wanted to be, that I needed to erase from my body.

I want to have collective conversations on whiteness and on what makes whiteness. I feel that like any tool of oppression and control, whiteness needs to be understood and explained first, isolated and rendered visible. Only then invisible white supremacist regimes can be contested and taken apart. I want to start talking about whiteness in concrete terms placing it in space and time distinguishing its various manifestations opening up its politics. I want to talk about our won whiteness. I am tired of indulging in lazy generic talk about "US&Europe and the rest of the world" "East and West" because I know it's more complicated than that, I know that these are ultimately neo-liberal constructions neatly cutting the world in two to then control it more easily. I want to look more specifically at our own communities' and countries' histories, at how they have created and managed unspoken white identities. I want to have conversations about how we see our bodies and other people bodies and how that view often reflects the agenda of a white supremacist regime. If you want to have these conversations too, let me know.

Piercing the whitening silence

by **Terese**, tersecrossingborders@gmail.com

A couple of months ago, Annika Spalding challenged F-word readers with the question 'Whose feminism is it?'¹ Disappointed with her experience of feeling like she 'stood out a bit' and had been 'overlooked' at a major feminist conference, she asked:

Is feminism reaching women who are living in poverty? Women who have come over to this country on a marriage visa and can't speak any English? Is feminism reaching young teenage mums? Is feminism reaching women who didn't attend university? Is feminism reaching women who choose not to work, regardless of whether or not they have children? Is feminism reaching women who do not have access to the internet? Is feminism reaching mums? Is feminism reaching women of colour? Really?

Her words echoed those of many frustrated women before her, and led me to wonder, once again, when are we going to stop going around in these circles? When are the white, privileged, cis-gendered, university-educated, able-bodied women who too often insist on dominating feminist conversations going to actually start listening? And following on from that, when are we going to start changing? Annika addressed many different issues in her article, all important and interconnected, but right here and now I want to focus on one strand in particular; namely, the ongoing racism and un-checked white privilege in many feminist communities in the UK.

I should mention at this point that I am a white middle-class feminist. I'm not saying I have all the answers or that I occupy any moral high ground on this matter, but I am saying that if we are to build real feminist movements in the UK, if this recent 'upsurge in feminist activity' oft-cited in *Guardian* lifestyle columns is going to mean anything to the women Annika wrote about in her article, white feminists have some serious shit to sort out.

But first, let's be clear that this is not a new discussion. Here's a letter from black feminist Jan McKenley, printed in an issue of the women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib* in 1980:

I'm beginning to feel invisible again within the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement], having to work myself up to making 'heavy' statements that will embarrass sisters in meetings – I can see the eyebrows going up already – "Not racism – that old chestnut again – it's so boring." Well, if it's boring for you, white sister.... I've got no monopoly on dealing with racism – it's your problem too.¹

This letter was published in the context of a changing women's liberation movement, marking a time when white feminists in the UK were being seriously challenged by Black women (I use 'Black' here in the political sense it was often used by anti-racist activists at this time, as inclusive of all non-white people), calling them out on their racism and role in perpetuation of a white supremacist society

Although, as is obvious from the letter above, this was not the first time Black feminists had tried to initiate these conversations, the rise of an autonomous black women's movement at this time made it harder for white women to ignore black women's voices. Black women pointed out that white feminists in fact often contributed to other women's oppression by prioritising only their own needs in their activism, without considering how they may be at odds with the needs of non-white women.

Throughout the early 80s a multitude of intense discussions and arguments took place, leading to both irrevocable splits as well as successful coalitions between women of different ethnicities. Reviewing the situation in 1985, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, while acknowledging that *some* white women were starting to change their behaviour, expressed her anger:

at the lack of support we [black feminists] received for our political work which did not

explicitly include the seven demands of the Women's Movement, and ... at the paralysing guilt of white women which serves to make us feel 'bad' for criticising them, rather than make them realise that their political work has to adopt an anti-imperialist and anti-racist perspective.ⁱⁱ

Fast forward 24 years (almost a quarter of a century!), and surely at the start of 2009, we are beyond racism in feminism, right? Well no actually, far from it. And what's even more depressing is how little the content of the debate has changed.

Yes sure, as mainstream society has changed in its attitude to racism, so has white feminism. Most white feminists these days know how to adopt a superficial language of anti-racism. But that is far from enough. As Humaira Saeed questioned in *Race Revolt*, a zine which focuses on 'race, ethnicity and identity within queer, feminist and diy-punk communities':

I wonder why so many feminist events use the words 'diversity' and 'inclusion' without ever considering the implications of these words. As though throwing them into the mission statement will make them real.ⁱⁱⁱ

Feminist conferences, demos, Ladyfests, discussion groups, mailing lists... they all too often pay lip service to being inclusive. But saying that you provide a welcoming and safe space for all women is not the same as making it so. Like Annika noted, when filling in the monitoring form at the feminist conference, "there wasn't even a box for me to tick!"

How is this progress? The lack of a box on a monitoring form may not seem like a big deal, but the problem is such 'oversights' reveal so much more. They reveal a lack of a meaningful anti-racist perspective which takes the intersection of oppressions such as racism and sexism as it's starting point. They expose white feminists' inability, or more correctly unwillingness, to put anyone other than ourselves at the centre of our organising.

I was called out on some silencing behaviour myself recently. I had failed to address the white-centricity of an event that I had been part of organising. The most infuriating realisation for me was that I already knew 'better', but had still let the sense of security and safety afforded to me by my whiteness (as well as a feeling of the inevitability of it ending up this way) lull me into complacency, taking the least challenging route.

Based on my own experience, I don't think that most white feminists today deliberately set out to be racist. But whichever way you look at it, white-dominated feminist spaces are littered with casual racism and marginalising tendencies. Because actually challenging racism, on both a personal and community level, working in coalition, developing accountable and sustainable anti-racist feminist politics, is *hard work*, and it is challenging to the core. And when it comes down to it, how many of us who were born white can truly say that we are ready to give up (as far as this is possible in a racist society) the privileges that whiteness gives us? I mean truly ready? Because we're basically talking about turning dominant contemporary UK feminism on its head.

We need to examine our goals and priorities, address our processes of organising, our relationships, our use and sharing of resources. We need to unlearn what we know, and then learn again, differently.

So I'm dedicating the rest of this article to thinking about some real basic suggestions for ways forward. I want to be clear I did not come up with these ideas myself; I owe everything I have learnt about anti-racist feminism from radical women of colour and Black feminists. Writers and activists such as Chandra Mohanty, Amrit Wilson, Southall Black Sisters, Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Angela Davis and many, many more are the women who have inspired me with their visions of what truly democratic and non-oppressive feminist politics could look like.

Decolonise feminism (because it isn't yours to own)

There's a popular misconception, happily reinforced by the corporate media, that white women invented feminism, and remain the true leaders and visionaries in the project to liberate women. For example, on the 80th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act, Rachel Cooke, lamenting the backlash against feminist gains in the *Observer*², managed to quote only white women on the state and priorities of feminism today. Even more disturbing, she ended her article with this anecdote:

Near my home is a shop that sells jewellery and rugs from Afghanistan. In its window at the moment is a pale blue burqa. It is displayed very cleverly on two crossed poles, so that it looks like some wonderful exotic bird. The other night, stepping off the bus, I walked towards it,

thinking how beautiful it was, the street light falling on it so softly, its tiny pleats collapsing so elegantly. For a few moments, I could not take my eyes off it. Then I remembered what it was, and I walked on, briskly.

After rendering non-white women completely invisible throughout her piece, she brings them forcefully into the limelight at the end, in the form of a burqa (there's not even a real woman wearing it!). What is this meant to achieve except to reinforce the patronising notion that white women (supposedly so much more liberated than Muslim women) need to lead the good feminist fight to save our Muslim sisters, the ultimate (voiceless) victims of patriarchy? Need I mention the pseudo-feminist pronouncements of the Bush/Blair administrations about saving the oppressed Afghan women to justify invasion in 2001, to prove the point that such faulty arguments are dangerous?

Anxious Black Woman³, a US-based blogger, addresses the heart of how we begin to decolonise feminism:

we do this by first decolonizing our minds and looking at women around the globe as our equals who are doing their own feminist theorizing and practices from which we can both benefit if we shared equally in our knowledge on how best to address gender oppression - especially in its intersections with race, class, sexuality, nationality, and imperialism.

She has also written a series of posts highlighting some of the rich history of early feminist pioneers of colour, including Claudia Jones, Marxist-feminist and one of the founders of the Notting Hill Carnival. Her work showcasing these feminist trailblazers, often completely erased from white-washed accounts of feminist history, along with her highlighting the feminist activism thriving in all corners of the world, completely debunks the myth that feminism belongs to white women. As she puts it, "I will not disavow the "feminist" label because I didn't get it coming through the back door" (although many other women of colour have disavowed that label, not because they're not interested in women's rights, but because of the bad name white feminists have given it).

If you find yourself using arguments such as "white middle class women have always led feminism because they have the time/education/resources/focus that Black/working class/Third World women don't", then you are using a colonised and revisionist version of feminist history. You only need to look back to the 80s to find that, in the UK, some of the most progressive, creative and challenging feminist politics was coming out of women of colour led projects, the anti-imperialist feminist newspaper *Outwrite*⁴ being one.

Take off the single-issue blinkers

Talking of imperialism, there is no way of being an anti-racist feminist in modern Britain without understanding this country's complex and ongoing legacy of colonialism. The erasure of Britain's violent imperial history from public consciousness, the arguments that we are all equal now and that racism is a thing of the past (and the myth that colonialism was only ever a benevolent project to spread civilization and good manners in the first place) are constantly perpetuated by the media, education system, and government. When white feminists accept this ahistorical view of a post-racial society (where racism only happens as isolated incidents rather than as continued institutionalised injustice and violence), we espouse a feminism which can only ever be relevant to white women.

It is only white (middle class, straight, able-bodied, cis-gendered...) women who have the privilege to separate out gender as a single axis of oppression, to only look at an issue from the 'gender angle'. So if you're serious about not wanting to exclude women of colour from your feminist analysis, forget about keeping your feminism 'pure'; (I think Latoya Peterson said it best in a guest post at Feministe, titled "Ewwww, You got your other issues in my feminism!"⁵). American feminist Jessica Hoffman wrote a powerful open letter to white feminists⁶ last year, in which she addressed exactly how a gender-only approach to feminist issues such as violence against women can be oppressive to communities of colour, as well as dismissive of the radical anti-violence work being done by organisations such as Incite!⁷. We need to be having these same conversations here.

In Britain in 2009, when we talk about women's rights, we need to be talking about the anti-immigrant rhetoric and violence against asylum seekers committed by the British state, about militarist and cultural imperialism, about capitalism, and the criminal justice system. In the current climate of xenophobia and racism, a white feminism which does not engage with these issues, leaves itself vulnerable to being co-opted by neo-colonialist and racist agendas and will continue to fail non-white women, in being not only irrelevant, but actually harmful.

So if you are wondering why there aren't any women of colour joining your feminist group, it probably isn't because they're not interested in women's rights, but because what you have defined as *your* feminist issues don't have much relevance beyond your own white body. When you talk or write about 'women' or how a particular issue affects women, ask yourself, which women are you talking about? How would it affect a woman who is not like you? Do you think that dealing with racism is a 'distraction' from dealing with sexism? Why?

Listen to women of colour

This one seems pretty straight forward, right? It's pretty damn fundamental, but is it happening?

Take Exhibit A, the feminist blogosphere. As Renee at Womanist Musings explains it, in a post titled 'WOC and the table scraps of feminism'⁸:

What I cannot fail to notice is that despite the fact that women of colour definitely have something to say, our blogs are not counted as major voice in feminism online. It is like we are some sort of "special interest group" who have completely divergent needs. That's right I'm saying it, white women are "the women" and we are just a side group looking for scraps.

This notion of women of colour being a 'special interest' rather than just 'women' or 'feminists' is one I have heard and read white feminists perpetuate. An overwhelming number of white feminists seem to think that Black feminist theory is only for Black feminists, race-focused blogs only for non-white people, etc. But by that same token would they argue that the blogs, groups and theory by white women is only for white women?

So some questions to ask yourself: Which groups or organisations are you involved with or support? How do you interact with women who are not white in your organising? How do you value their voices? If you read blogs, do you follow blogs written by people of colour? If you read feminist books, what ethnicity are the authors of the books you read? What ethnicity are your feminist role models? Why?

And finally, 'listening' is not the same as putting up on a pedestal or hero-worshipping. In the above post, Renee notes this tendency as well among some white feminists who do read her blog: the reluctance to comment and thereby expose oneself to the possibility of saying something ignorant. Truly listening means engaging with, reflecting on, having a conversation, and - of course - potentially disagreeing with; taking the risk of letting what you have heard change you.

Break down the silence

Silence is the reason why we are still in the same place we are today. The quotes from *Spare Rib* show that conversations between white and black women about racism and whiteness in feminism have happened before. But then white women fell back into the deafening silence which perpetuates white dominance.

The silence is also caused by the deep-seated fear and anxiety that most liberal white people seem to have in talking about racism in British society. The fear of saying the wrong thing, of offending or being racist, not knowing what to say or how to treat non-white people respectfully. It is the silence that is sometimes penetrated (usually in moments of crisis), but then it returns, until next time. It is the silence that we have to smash, and to keep smashing over and over. The conversations when we have them are useful, but it's not enough to have a workshop once a year, it has to be a constant and ongoing engagement. And we should not be waiting for activists of colour to initiate the conversation.

A good starting point is to accept that all white people in Western society are racist to some extent - it has been ingrained in us since birth. Let's not pretend we're all squeaky clean, but open up our minds and hearts to honest interrogation and the possibilities of change. Yes, we probably will say something stupid and ignorant - there's a good chance I've done so somewhere in this article - but unless we are willing to expose ourselves, there will be no progress. Unlearning racism is a continuous journey, I don't think it really ever ends. Questioning our own attitudes and behaviour, as well as those around us, has to become part of our everyday thought-process.

Learn how to criticise other white feminists

This is connected to silence, but I think it deserves its own heading because I am realising more

and more that this is absolutely key if we are to transform exclusionary white feminism into something which has radical and liberatory potential.

When a feminist group is white-dominated, the white women have the power to silence criticism by sticking together and denying (or more commonly, simply ignoring) that anything problematic has happened. Us white feminists need to learn how to challenge each other more; to push ourselves to raise concerns about racism when we see it (even if the person you're challenging is your friend!). When we organise together with other white women, we need to set up ways and time to talk constructively about race. So when we write that mission statement with those buzz words 'inclusion' and 'diversity', we need to think about what they actually mean, agree to continuously review how we are or are not achieving those aims. Otherwise there is no point including those words in the first place.

Learn from history

I've already written above about the importance of learning about the histories of activists of colour (a great place to start for recent history is the book *'Other kinds of dreams': Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* by Julia Sudbury). But let's also learn more about the lesser known parts of the histories of white feminists.

There is a fascinating field of historical research into white British feminists' involvement in the Empire, which includes work by historians such as Antoinette Burton, who found in her research that British feminists at the turn of the century "enlisted empire and its values so passionately and so articulately in their arguments for female emancipation" that they must be "counted among the shapers of imperial rhetoric and imperial ideologies".^{IV}

I'm not suggesting that we should forget about the achievements of these women. I'm saying, let's get real and not ignore the less flattering parts of feminist history. Let's not make historical feminists out to be saints.

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We also need to learn from what happened in the 70s and 80s. I wasn't around then (well not in feminist circles anyway), so I'm calling out to the women who were, in the hope that you will make that history available to us younger feminists in an honest way. The only way we can move forward in the conversation, is to learn from what's happened before and then build on that knowledge (plus document our own discussions where possible, for future reference).

To finish, I want to clarify that my aim in writing this is not to argue that 'we' white women need to 'bring more women of colour into feminism'. For one very obvious reason: they are already there. Maybe not in the white feminism as we have defined it, but as social justice, anti-racist, anti-imperialist activists, as radical women of colour and Black feminists. No, the reason I am writing this is because I want to see us white feminists make a serious commitment to transforming our politics and practices so that we can connect up with the other women and men struggling against all forms of oppression.

So the question I want to ask my white sisters right now is this: what is feminism to you? Is it a lifestyle, a way for you to have an outlet about the sexism in your life, as it affects you? Or is it the ongoing fight to radically transform society, to end oppression against ALL women, and ultimately all people?

¹ http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2008/09/feminism_of_tod

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/dec/07/women-equality-rights-feminism>

³ <http://diaryofanxiousblackwoman.blogspot.com/2008/03/decolonizing-feminism-reflections-on.html>

⁴ <http://www.feministactivistforum.org.uk/page32.htm>

⁵ <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2008/09/10/ewwww-you-got-your-other-issues-in-my-feminism/>

⁶ <http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/81260/?page=entire>

⁷ <http://www.incite-national.org/>

⁸ <http://www.womanist-musings.com/2008/12/woc-and-table-scraps-of-feminism.html>

ⁱ *Spare Rib* 101, December 1980.

ⁱⁱ *Spare Rib* 150, January 1985.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Race Revolt* 3, Autumn 2008.

^{iv} Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, 1994 (pages 4-5).

reflections on growing up white & middle class

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the women in my family think that a stalking raping pervert lurks behind every bush
that men are beasts and brutes
that a man can keep them safe.
they wanted george w. to hurry up and catch saadam so they could get on with their lives, free
of terror.
they live in expensive homes with peepholes and intercoms and alarms turned on and off with
four-digit memorized codes.
they're scared of serial killers, contagious diseases, and drug-crazed teenagers on marijuana
and they clean their homes with chemicals which give their children asthma.
they're nervous, then contemptuous when asked for spare change
they obsess about money even though they have no student loans, and they own their homes.
they go on expensive holidays, but aren't relaxed when they come back to the city.
they fake orgasm, fuck their spouse so he'll be in a good mood the next day, don't enter sex
stores or masturbate.
they ignore violence and incest, cannot cope with conflict, are highly skilled at changing the
topic, and excuse, caretake, cook and clean for abusive men...
gosh, i've learned a lot from them.
they think that they are liberated because they hold university degrees!
to them, "community" is this word you see on YMCA ads
they have strange ailments, which western medicine can't fix, and to deal with this, they take
pills which mask their symptoms.
they're always ready with opinions on who needs to gain or lose some weight.
they are completely satisfied with their lives

and do not

need therapy.

the women in my family sometimes make me wanna bash my head against a wall until i fall
unconscious. and if i did this, they would probably commit me to a mental hospital and tell the
doctors that i am a lesbian.
the women in my family take me in when i'm passing through town, wash my clothes, worry
about what to feed me, give me warm beds and hot showers, introduce me with pride to their
friends, ask me about my life and then sometimes listen to what i say.
when they're drunk enough, they can speak to me of old, old pain, but they don't mention it the
next day.
they're kinda curious about my acupuncture practice; they really wonder when i'll start making
big bucks treating sports injuries.
they praise my poetry, then remind me that i'll never make a living as an artist!
the women in my family were once poets, painters, dancers, musicians, singers, songwriters,
and seamstresses -
until they grew out of it.
i think they're mad as hell and don't know it.
i'm still waiting for them to start screaming.
and how to reconcile this stunted, choked small hope layered over by years of disgust and
mistrust?
'cause i'm not just angry - i'm also ashamed of them
and of all the parts in me that are just the same as them.
these women birthed me, gave me breath
they're what i've sprung from, parts of what i'll become
and i know that as each one remains in my cells
to hate these women
is to hate myself.

Gwyneth Lonergan

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A couple of years ago, I was walking to London Euston with my partner when an elderly woman struck up a conversation with us. She started out talking about the history of London, and where she'd live as a girl. Unfortunately, the conversation then turned to the immigrants who didn't know anything about the history of London.

I have been living in the UK for over 4 years, but my accent still betrays my North American origins. Anyone who has heard me speaking for more than a minute knows that I was not born in the UK. So I told this woman that I was an immigrant; our conversation then went like this:

Her: "But Canada fought in WWII"

Me: "Yes, but so did India."

"But Canada is in the Commonwealth"

"So is India."

"But Canadians are practically our cousins!!"

This privilege makes my life so much easier; it also makes me profoundly uncomfortable and angry. I hate it when people say xenophobic things in front of me and expect me to agree.

I then had to run off and get my train, so I didn't have time to tell her that I'm of French & Irish Catholic ancestry; my greatgrandparents would be appalled to find out I've married an English Protestant.

I have reason to believe the woman in question may have been mentally ill, but that only made her a little more blatant than most people. I've had this conversation, in various forms, again and again over the past 4 years; with cabdrivers, in restaurants, with colleagues, even with family members. People say appalling things about immigrants in front of me; not only is it assumed I won't take offence, it's assumed I will agree.

I am white.

I am white *and* Canadian.

And therefore, I am not considered an "outsider." I am honorary British; it is expected that I will accept being "one of us" and join "us" in fearing "them".

My experience as a white Canadian immigrant to the UK reveals a good deal about the ways in which British identity is racialised. My easy acceptance by white Britons is not due, in the main, to being Canadian and Canada's position in the Commonwealth. A friend of mine, a Canadian of Asian background, had racial epithets shouted at her on a regular basis during her time in the UK.

However, it's also not true that any and all 'white' people are automatically welcome in the UK. At the moment, we are witnessing the racialisation of migrants from Eastern Europeans. This should not surprise us; race is a social construct, and who is racialised and how this racialisation occurs shifts and changes. As I wrote above some of my ancestors were Irish; 100 years ago, I would have been one of "them."

I try to challenge people when they make xenophobic statements. My hope is that by reminding them that I am an immigrant, I'll force them to consider why *I* am welcome, while other are not; force them to recognise the racialisation of the concept of "migrant" and the racism of the immigration system.

The view that "Canadians are practically are cousins" reveals an important facet of the way racism works in modern Britain. Since the 1970s, xenophobia has increasingly been justified on the grounds of cultural difference. We are told that migrants (of colour) won't fit in, not because of their race, but because of their culture. Culture, in this context, is static

and fixed; it is just as immutable as the concept of biological race was 50 years ago. Furthermore, the only people whose culture is completely incompatible with British culture just happen to be people of colour. A white Canadian will have no trouble integrating; I doubt that the same assumption would be made of an Asian Canadian. Besides which, as a white person, I am perceived as able to shed the constraints of my old culture and embrace a new one, or find a way to harmonise the two. It's only people of colour whose lives are irrevocably dictated by "their culture." I am affected by the growing xenophobia in the UK, especially by the increase in anti-immigration legislation. I have no recourse to public funds, because I'm here on a spousal visa. In the current economic climate, this keeps me awake at night. My partner and I can't live on his salary alone, and the government is happy to see me starve. If I get unlimited leave to remain in May, it will have cost me over £1500 to marry my partner and stay in the UK. It seems every year, the government comes up with new hoops for me to jump through, new ways of making my life difficult; the Life in Britain test, a requirement that applicants for citizenship volunteer, etc.

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Yet, I can honestly say that while I've had horrible experiences with government regulations, my experience with actual government officials has been fine. My application as a non-national to marry my British partner was supposed to be processed in 4 to 14 weeks; it came back in 2 ½ weeks. Our trip to Liverpool to get my spousal visa was spectacularly uneventful. We were asked a few questions by a very polite immigration official, who then flipped through my paychecks, barely

bothering to look at them properly. What my partner and I were making at the time was *not* actually enough to support ourselves (not that we admitted this, of course). No matter; the official said that what was important was that I had a "steady job" and told us to come back in an hour. All told, it took us two hours, including the hour of waiting time.

We were the only couple in the room where both parties were white. When I came back for my visa, I waited while the same official, who was so polite at me, snapped at an African couple when they didn't give her their papers fast enough.

I believe that as far as the government is concerned, I am collateral damage of a racist immigration system. Because of my race and perceived cultural origins, I am welcome in the UK. But to formalise that in law would expose the racism of the immigration system. So I am subject to the same laws as "them", but their impact is mitigated by the tacit understanding of immigration officials, and most white British people, that I am one of "us".

This privilege makes my life so much easier; it also makes me profoundly uncomfortable and angry. I hate it when people say xenophobic things in front of me and expect me to agree. I hate that my No Borders activism is considered a slight eccentricity by many of my friends and colleagues. After all, what do asylum-seekers have to do with me?

Privilege is shifting and arbitrary; as I said above, 100 years ago, I would have been one of "them." And there's no reason why I (or any other privileged person) might not find themselves in the position of "them" at some point soon. Migrants' rights are frequently the "canary in the mineshaft" of human rights; history has shown that once it becomes acceptable to persecute and imprison migrants (which it has), all of our rights are at risk. So I worry, despite my privilege. I remember Pastor Neimoller. I know that only in a world without borders, where my acceptance is no longer dependent on my race, will I be safe.

Reimagining boundaries: race and class in D.I.Y. communities

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It feels like there is a lot of talk and - dare I say it? - conflict going on right now about race and racism in D.I.Y. communities. It struck me tonight, mulling it over in my head for the umpteenth time, that this issue has a lot to do with boundaries. Thinking about race and class forces me to reconsider the boundaries of D.I.Y. politics. Who is it for? For people like me? Shy, nerdy, indie kid, bookish, queer-ish, teen-turned-20-something (whisper it) white middle class girls?

I think riot grrrl (which was my first entry to D.I.Y. and any kind of radical politics) appealed to me as a teenager because it was a way I could be a feminist and still be me. I didn't relate to second wave feminism at all. I've since gained a lot more knowledge of and respect for it, but at the time, from what I was dimly aware of, it seemed too intellectual and too adult (too boring?) to have anything to do with me. Riot grrrl melded my love of punk rock and indie subculture with my emerging feminist consciousness. It boggled my mind, to be frank. It was probably the most exciting thing I'd ever come across. But this is not a love story.

This is an attempt to look at the way in which, when people feel on the outside of something, in creating alternatives we often build our own boundaries within which we feel safe, valued and connected. This is all well and good up to a point, but at what point does it simply recreate the boundaries that excluded us in the first place - shutting others out? At what point does it create its own form of oppression?

As a teenager, race and class privilege were things I was only dimly aware of. As a white girl in an overwhelmingly white town (in a white world), I didn't have to think about racism. Class, I was more aware of, in the sense that there were tangible yet unspoken differences between me and many of the people at my school, which meant I would probably go to university and they probably wouldn't (and I'm not talking about intellectual ability). It was not something that was ever articulated, and I still have trouble articulating it, but it was there all the same.

Alternative subculture, especially riot grrrl, seemed to valorise all the things I'd been pilloried for at school, all the things that were essentially me: nerdy, unfeminine, bookish, queer, into noisy music, a daydreamer and a thinker. But in the joy

at discovering others like us, we often value sameness. We invert the status quo, instead of realising the value of differences, which would be a real challenge to oppression. I see the challenge raised by people of colour within D.I.Y. culture as a challenge to reimagine the boundaries of D.I.Y. And I'm embarrassed to admit that I find it really scary. Scary, because I don't want to believe that the subculture and politics that I have found a home in is nothing more than a racist lie. If it were, I do not feel I could be a part of it, and that thought fills me with despair, because it's a place that makes me feel alive. Yet at the same time, I know that this is not what people of colour within D.I.Y. communities for the most part believe, because they are their communities too. What they want is for those communities to change: to be more reflective of who we all are, and to take racism more seriously. So why does that scare me? I think most of all, I'm afraid I'll fail. I'm afraid that it may not be possible to create a D.I.Y. subculture that includes everyone. After all, it's a *subculture* precisely because it doesn't include everyone. But if whiteness is a prerequisite for feeling included, then that is a big problem. What if those boundaries were different?

I used to feel a lot more optimistic about this issue. As an idealistic 19 year old, I embarked on my first collective D.I.Y. adventure: to organise a Ladyfest* in Manchester. My main aim was to make it more accessible and diverse than previous Ladyfests that I'd been to in Glasgow and London. It was roughly a year since September 11th, and I had been enraged and shocked out of my suburban white girl bubble by the virulence and pervasiveness of the racist backlash. People of colour grow up knowing that this racism exists, even when it's simmering below the surface, invisible to white eyes. They don't have the privilege of ignoring it, even when, for a few minutes of my teenage years, it was 'cool' to be Asian (and that was far from unproblematic in itself).

But for me, who had moved from my white suburb to a multi-racial city centre with 'cohesion problems' one day before 9/11, racism was a new discovery. Though nominally anti-racist (like all good middle class children of liberal parents), I had not yet seen racism for the pervasive and structural problem it was, at least in the present day. Racism seemed to belong to a past time, of slavery and the holocaust, or of isolated extremist individuals. Until then, I had thought it perfectly possible to

analyse and fight sexism without thinking about racism (I would leave that to someone else, I think I wrote in my first zine). But in this new environment and era, the strength of racist stereotypes, material inequalities and downright brainwashing was all too clear. And in a funny way, it made class inequalities more obvious as well. Although I've alluded to class differences at my school, they were not nearly so stark as here in the university district where I lived and worked, where white middle class academics barely brushed shoulders with the working class, urban, mainly South Asian population, as they zoomed out to their country retreats in their cars.

As I embarked on the L.F.M. project, enraged by war propaganda and everyday racism, which were

Furthermore, I also had (and still have) my own internalised sexism and homophobia to deal with (not to mention racism, classism, ableism etc etc!). Reading and talking to other feminists and realising I was one too had been a brilliant revelation, but it was not the end of the story. I was not now ordained feminist priestess to preach the truth of feminism to the less enlightened masses.

But what now? Where to go from here? My uncomfortable compromise was to continue to work within the limitations of D.I.Y., while also being involved in campaigns on a variety of issues. In fact, D.I.Y. and feminism slipped lower on my list of priorities as I increasingly devoted myself to the toppling of global capitalism... (I was a student at the time). But these endeavours still tended to

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both very gendered, I now realised it was impossible to look at gender in isolation. Or to put it more clearly, to organise a feminist movement which didn't address racism. Anti-racism was at the forefront of my mind but recent experiences had forced me to think about class, disability and global inequalities much more as well. I felt strongly that L.F.M. should consider these issues and be a platform for... well, hell, for *all* women. But as always, my actions failed to live up to my fine words. I have always been better at critique than at putting things into practice, better at forging utopic manifestos than getting on with the work needed to bring them into being. And I ended up playing a fairly minor role in organising the festival, focusing on my strengths: zine making and distribution. But I wasn't the only one with visions for a more inclusive Ladyfest - far from it. The main organisers, women of colour among them, put a *lot* of work in the service of this goal. In the end, I wouldn't say we failed. But it wasn't enough.

I think one of the most important lessons I learned from this experience is that you cannot simply create your own form of activism (which inevitably reflects your own interests, concerns and cultural heritage) and expect everyone else to join in. No amount of flying or polite emails will change that. And nor do I think they should. After all, why *should* all activists work in the same way? Isn't feminism - indeed all liberatory politics - about respecting and valuing differences? I learned that there is more than one way to be a feminist, and just because the women in my street or in my class didn't listen to Bikini Kill, go unshaven, or call themselves feminists, that didn't make them necessarily more oppressed or ignorant than me.

confine themselves to select groups of white middle class people in their 20s. And although there were high points in these campaigns, where I felt we were engaging in our local community and they with us, this didn't seem to be a priority for most of the people I worked with. They were more concerned with proving their radicalism by getting arrested in a muddy field and thus becoming a martyr (when you live a fairly comfortable, middle class lifestyle in the West, you have to get your thrills somehow, right?). This, coupled with a condescending attitude towards the 'ignorant masses' left a bitter taste in my mouth. So eventually I retreated into bitterness, apathy and, inevitably, 9-5 work.

It was about this time I started getting really into zines again. My politics had come full circle. Fed up of 'fighting' for a better world which seemed ever more elusive, and the problematic, almost missionary like attitude that was bound up with that, I wanted to put my energies into something more creative and affirmative, that would hold more personal resonance for me. D.I.Y. self-publishing beckoned. I had much less free time for activism these days, but along with my own zine production, I started volunteering in a radical bookshop/zine distro and organising zine festivals in Manchester.

I'm a lot more jaded (and realistic?) now than I was in 2002 about the limitations of D.I.Y. and its appeal. I am far more wary of evangelism and tokenism, of 'reaching out'. Such endeavours make me cringe. I would rather have a movement and community which acknowledges its limitations: that it is not 'the answer' to patriarchy and consumerism (or any other oppressive structure). Rather, it is asking another question: What would a

different world be like? Would it be something like this? Or rather, would it have some of these characteristics? We should never *ever* be complacent or self-congratulatory, never accept that this (or anything) is the end of the story.

But I no longer feel that acknowledging limitations is enough. It feels as much of a cop out as tokenism, or pretending nothing is wrong. During my degree in Women's Studies, I got frustrated by the continual focus on self critique by some theorists, as if through critique alone they could absolve the crimes of white supremacy. Or conversely, their attitude seemed fatalistic. 'We can't undo racism,' they seemed to say. 'We might as well just accept it.' That wasn't enough for me. Although I was and am well aware that there are no quick fixes to anti-racist practice, no 3 point plan, this just seemed like an intellectualised get out clause. I refuse to believe that anti-racism is impossible. If it is impossible, why do we even bother with activism - or with living - at all?

I got frustrated by the continual focus on self critique by some theorists, as if through critique alone they could absolve the crimes of white supremacy. Or conversely, their attitude seemed fatalistic. 'We can't undo racism,' they seemed to say. 'We might as well just accept it.' That wasn't enough for me.

Whilst ever sceptical of white-led 'outreach' and 'diversity' makeovers in any context, I remain convinced that D.I.Y. - indeed any community - should be a welcoming space, which can bend and twist, to reflect the identities of anyone who wants to be a part of it. This is what I think we should be focussing on now. People of colour have invested huge amounts of time and energy into shaping this movement. It is about time they got something back. It is about time white activists like myself went beyond guilt, beyond self-critique and began listening to what we can do to make D.I.Y. a space which serves and reflects all of its members.

How? Is an interesting question. I only wish I had the answers. But I do know that this will involve white and middle class people giving up a little safety, a little comfort. For too long, complacency, denial and - perhaps worst of all - resignation have bolstered that comfort zone. I do know that it will involve being open to questions and critique, without being paralysed by it, but galvanised and moving in creative friction with it. It will involve developing spaces (real/virtual/written/performed) that have more fluid boundaries, which shift in response to that friction, while recognising the very real social and material inequalities and struggles which separate us from each other. We already have some examples of this kind of creative friction in queer politics. Can we take inspiration from that?

I am afraid that this will not happen. I am afraid that D.I.Y. will repeat the same mistakes of second wave feminism, and the result will be bitter divisions and ultimately self-destruction. When I say destruction, I do not necessarily mean there would be no more D.I.Y. feminist or queer output, but we would lose some of our best activists/artists in people of colour, because they would back away from D.I.Y. and I would not blame them. The remains of D.I.Y. would be a boring, derivative shell of its former self. It would lose its radical edge.

I wish I were not so pessimistic. But I certainly do not believe that this result is inevitable. I believe this impasse is an opportunity to make D.I.Y. politics more vital and relevant than it has ever been. Feminists know better than anyone what a positive energy anger can be. Anger was the driving force of riot grrrl. I'm reluctant to admit, because I know they have caused others much pain, that recent debates in D.I.Y. around race have been strangely energising for me. They remind me of

strong anti-racist feelings which I'd almost forgotten I had. But they also remind me of ugly feelings, that most of the time I try to hide: guilt, defensiveness, fear, powerlessness... I was going to leave these out of this article, because, "Who wants to read about them?" I asked myself. But it would seem dishonest to leave them out altogether, and there have already been too many silences in racism's history.

Breaking those silences is an important first step. Writing and talking about these issues is energising. But I know that alone will not be enough. The anger that many people feel about the unexamined privileges of D.I.Y. is already pushing in positive directions (Race Revolt zine, for example). Autonomous groups are a positive development too. But what matters now is how white people respond. Will we have the courage to work through our fear - of reimagining boundaries and most of all (in my case) of making mistakes? Will we take the risks that people of colour are already doing, in order to survive? I have hope, but it is fragile, and not guaranteed. It will take more than these words to make it happen.

*D.I.Y. feminist arts and music festival that happens in different locations each year.

EMAILS FROM KEREM

Kerem Blumberg

keremblu@gmail.com

with Humaira Saeed
racerevolt@riseup.net

Dear Kerem,

how are you? are you still in new zealand?

am working on RR4 at the moment, it's coming together but i had a couple of concerns with it and wanted to ask you about it, if that is okay.

I really feel that there is more to say on whiteness than a clear line of privilege. And my thinking on this has very much been informed and challenged by your article for RR2 and emails you have sent, that have basically made me realise how complex this idea of whiteness is. and I wonder what assumptions are going on about what 'whiteness' is that we're having ideas about.

your article on israel made me think a lot about queer imperialism and how unconsidered some responses to israel can be. tied into this is my email calling for contributions to the poc issue of RR and you passing it on but not contributing because it was poc only. this makes me think about the lines...between poc and white and also how whiteness is operating somewhere like israel. it feels so much more muddled than white = privilege all over the world...where are the lines being drawn? Is whiteness different in different places? i'm not sure if i make sense, I am clearly also muddled. anyway, i was really wondering what you thought on this. if you have the time or inclination to send me words back that would be so amazing.

thanks kerem, i hope you don't mind me babbling at you,
take care

xxx

Hi Humeey,

I was absolutely stoked to get your email. Its kind of weird and nice at the same time to have some sort of relationship with someone I've never met. It was such a coincidence that on the same day i received your email i just borrowed RR3 from a friend who's back from the UK.

I've read most of it, and am so impressed by what everyone wrote. I liked that it's angry, unforgiving, unapologetic and upfront. (I guess that's my Israeli side showing here). Of course it's sad to hear how angry most people are, and that it reflects on the situation especially in the UK activist scenes, but when i think about the nearest thing i can relate it to, which is writing about feminism knowing men will also read, i feel like there's mostly anger that needs to vent out and not enough (ever?) that's been done. I was happy that i got an email from you after reading your disheartened article.

Anyway, knowing I wanted to reply to you anyway, I truly feel like I want to keep most of my thoughts about the zine in my head for now, since I don't feel like I even began to absorb or understand where this all fits into my life, activism that I do in NZ or Israel, my own prejudices or thoughts etc. I also felt like anything i feel like "doing" at the moment about race issues will not be good, or a solution etc. But I try to take in what the wimmin in the zine were talking about that annoys them, and make sure I just sit and think before I justify/defend/feel guilty etc. Im also beginning to be aware of how little I know and how much educating I have to find for myself.

I have to say that I did find it weird [on being asked to contribute to the poc issue of RR](I wasn't sure if the email was for me to contribute or to pass on) to even be suspected of not being white. I guess in Israel I'm so sure of my position in society, that it took me by surprise thinking maybe its not clear I was an Ashkenazzi Jewish Israeli (but its so good to have these things questioned and explanations demanded).

I guess in Israel, it's not as hard for me to get into the whole "privilege" position, that comes from being lighter-skinned, speaking Hebrew without an accent, getting a good education etc, but I find that less interesting somehow. I have been discussing and having thoughts about it with others and myself. I guess a lot is to do with Palestine, being occupiers, and trying to figure out what it means to have an "occupier's mentality" -but that's not all.

Here are some of my thoughts and rants:

-Having privilege in Israel is maybe not only about being "white", but also about being Jewish and an Israeli citizen. Russian immigrants here are probably "more white" than me, but their "Jewishness" is more "doubtful" than mine. Russian wimmin for example are seen stereotypically as being all prostitutes. Being Palestinian means you're probably a criminal, a terrorist, or for wimmin, probably just invisible- but also a citizen with rights (to an extent) if you live inside Israel. Being Black nowadays is probably being a refugee/migrant- illegal, foreign, kind of harmless and easily harassed or detained. Sometimes Ethiopians are mistaken for refugees but they have a blue ID and speak the language. If you're Asian you must be a work migrant. You work in the fields if you're from Thailand, as a caregiver if you're from the Philippines- less rights than a citizen, more than a refugee's. The list of such exact stereotypes goes on and on. I think if anyone says they don't assume about other people's lives by where they are from, how good their Hebrew is and what ID/papers they have, they are lying.

- When people talk about the Ashkenazzi Elite (white, middle class, educated, well off) no doubt it existed, or still exists (my grandparents are definitely of that racist elite), but people say that the Left in Israel consists only of Ashkenazzis, but it's not so clean cut. People here are from such mixed backgrounds that you can't assume things like that anymore. I used to have this guilt feeling of being this lefty from the arty wealthy white centre of Tel Aviv, until I realized that generalizing a whole community of activists to being "as white as me" was unjust. I think that people who are from both Ashkenazzi (European descent) and Mizrahi (Arab countries descent) backgrounds don't have such a hard time being this "mixed" ethnicity here coz most people in Israel are. My heritage is Polish, Hungarian, South African, Russian... you only need to start going back to get so mixed up about who's grandparents' parents came from where that you can usually get from the average person my age at least 4 different countries. So when I talk about my Jewish Polish tendencies (there's the stereotype of the Jewish Polish mother/grandmother who's really passive-aggressive, interfering etc.)it doesn't feel like an "invisible" white mentality that everyone understands. Many people do since it's their heritage too, but others have Moroccan mothers, Russian grandmothers, Persian grandfathers with mentalities and customs that I don't understand anything about.

- Israel is SUCH a racist country, that seriously sometimes it feels like a relief. No one here pretends they're not. I found it very hard in the UK where people are just as racist but polite/hide it. Police is racist but no one will be able to point the finger on exactly at which point. Here they shoot you because you're Palestinian and build roads for Jews only without apologizing. When you cross that racist border and condemn Israel or the army you are a traitor. In a way, you can pretend and seem like everyone on the street and therefore enjoy your Jewish white privilege, but you know that the moment you say anything political -that's it. It makes friendships much "easier" inside Israel. You don't go along thinking you have so much in common with people just to discover their real ideologies later on, it gets uncovered much faster. The privilege you "enjoy", especially in Palestine (being able to drive through checkpoints, have different consequences when arrested) is so obvious, that you don't for a second forget this privilege exist. Everytime you leave a demo at the end of the day while there's still shooting.

In Europe/NZ etc I find it really frustrating when people have this mentality like we're all the same really, and if we just explain to "them" what the right path is, we could all start the revolution tomorrow. I feel like there's something more realistic about knowing you probably have only one thing in common with many different groups of people. In the gay scene it's about fucking the same sex, in Palestine its about ending the occupation. Admitting that you probably don't have that much in common with people may be sad and disappointing, but I feel like it reveals people's true nature, and helps me find people who I really want to work with. I don't really like the "lets include everyone", "let's be less exclusive" mentality, when it compromises on how radical your group/politics is. I don't feel like I need to start a joint Israeli-Palestinian womyn's group just to discover that people disapprove of me because being queer is against Islamic/Jewish religion and that people don't want to think about animal rights issues because it interferes with "more important" issues, or will exclude "others" and "their different culture". That's not saying that there's no amazing queer/vegan/anarchist/feminist people from all backgrounds etc etc, but including people BECAUSE they are "different" or from somewhere else just to feel more diverse, feels hypocritical to me at this point.

-Talking to a friend who's half British the other day, we got to a discussion about UK activists, and (obviously not generalizing) we talked about how we feel that activists there kind of have this righteous mentality coz they never really colonized Britain (I know there's all the history with Wales, Ireland and Scotland though) and it seems like there's a real mentality of having the right to exist where they are. Like now NZ colonization is NZ people's problem, India is the Indians problem etc. There're problems with refugees and migrants coming TO the UK, but that's more about human rights, than anyone in the UK ever feeling like they have to take personal responsibility for things that happen around the world due to imperialism. And I'm not saying there necessarily is, but our right to live in Israel is definitely constantly questioned. By Palestinians, Pro- Palestinian/Anti-Zionist/Anarchist groups and activists, anyone else (which is almost everyone else) who has an opinion about Israel. Not forgetting that we as Israelis, and especially as anti-zionist anarchist Israelis have to deal with this question ourselves. I think privilege starts with having the right to the things you have, starting from your right to exist and live in the place you were born. I think the history of Israel shaped it in a way which doesn't make white/black, weak/strong, right/wrong so obvious. The oppressed oppress the even more oppressed, etc.

- And lastly: abroad I don't feel so white. In the UK I felt more comfortable seeing Muslim wimmin on the streets, when the language and customs feel more familiar to me than feeling like "one of the gang" with English speaking, pound earning, Brits. In NZ I just assume anyone I meet is a New Zealander unless they tell me otherwise, but I know I'm singled out when I start speaking. When I say I'm from Israel it's like everyone has an opinion, a question, a comment. "Where are you from" seems like the ultimate way of letting someone know you know they are not in the same place as you. In a way I'd much rather have people who know nothing about Israel then feel like people straight away think something about me but won't tell, or that they assume things about me. I'm white enough to hitchhike almost anywhere, but still feel weird in a room full of blond-blue-eyed-small-nosed people.

Anyway, it's getting late here... This is the longest email I've written in ages! I hope this answers some questions, but this is obviously just my opinion.. :)

Hope you are well, and hope to hear from you soon.

xxx
Kerem

hey kerem,

i'm very bad at replying promptly to emails i really want to reply to, as though leaving it longer will make the email better somehow. i'm not sure this will be a good one as i'm pretty sleepy. but i'll try!

anyway, i was so very happy to get your email, and so fast too! what stands out for me is your name, the reason why i thought you may not be white and the reason why i was referring to you as 'he' until hanging out with yaz who referred to you as 'she'. because i saw kerem as a spelling variation of the male muslim name karim and so read you as such. The assumptions we all make are just so striking!

what i'm wondering about is this idea of visibility, how power uses invisibility to operate. and it's so interesting what you say about whiteness in israel not operating in that way, that it doesn't have the same invisibility [as in the uk for example]. i was wondering if you had any more thoughts on that?

and it moves so! like your point about being in the uk and feeling affinity with muslim women because of cultural connections. how whiteness becomes a block to connecting somehow and because you are in the uk... i'm also thinking here about when i go to pakistan, my appearance should really make me invisible there but i am so visible! some kind of inner whiteness shines through to people, they can see i am a 'coconut' (brown on the outside, white on the inside) before i even open my mouth to speak my anglo version of urdu! being there once, someone commented that i had a gora (white person's) walk. can a walk be white?

but it is good to be challenged by ideas and by location. i do really feel that the moments of being so challenged that our brains feel stretched beyond comfort are the most productive places as activists. but maybe that just means i'm a bit masochistic!

thank you for reading my dear, i hope some of this makes sense,
take good care and be in touch soon, it's really great to be writing to you
humey xxxxxxxxxxxxx

hi humey

sorry for replying so soon.

Kind of feels like now I just wanna meet and talk, and email is a too little too slow. Ha! my name confuses again. you know when I emailed a contact I got from a friend to ask her to help me find a place to stay in croatia, the girl I emailed wanted to send me to some dodgy squat coz she thought I was just "some guy" from the email.

I tried to think a little more about the visibility invisibility power thing, and I don't think I have many new conclusions so far. (well it has only been one day..) But I feel, again, like Israel is different in terms of what the public consensus is and therefore wot the invisibility/visibility is. If in UK maybe activists can feel like they're "one of the public", just have a slightly different agenda, we feel like the enemy of the state.

Well, we are. There's a real mentality of "security above all" and that sets the agenda. Invisibility here is being assumed to be a soldier/ex soldier and have a whole load of experience/culture/language that derives from that. The moment you're not a soldier you're out of the consensus in a way. You buy your way into society here by going to the army. It's the pride of every Druze father, every Columbian work migrant mother. And being part of this blatantly racist, homophobic, sexist, hierarchical machine, is supposedly getting into this place of being accepted in society no matter what. It supposedly erases the differences, the backgrounds, ethnicities, languages, into this huge, uniformed melting pot of "contributing to society".

This is when you get the invisible acceptance wink of The System, which on its way treads on millions of Palestinians who get bombed, get beaten up or held at checkpoints everyday. On the backs of female soldiers who get raped by their commanders, soldiers who shoot themselves in the head with the gun they were given, scapegoats who go to prison for following their commanders criminal orders. And also on us activists who get detained, beaten up, shot at for saying our opinion.

Here we know that what we think is the opposite, we know that there's so much we CANT do or change. Like with the BNP example. I mean here we have crazy, religious, fanatic fascist settlers, who carry guns, who shoot and terrorize Palestinians, and there's nothing we can do about it. (except get beaten up as well usually). This idea of "we have to fight against them coz they are a threat to society" is unrealistic here. They actually are not a threat against Israeli society, just against certain groups who are not sheltered under the Army's embracing protection. The State and settlers do whatever they want, and we're too weak and have too little influence to be able to do anything about it. Moreover everyone knows that the settlers are crazy and dangerous and racist. Everyone knows the State decided to murder and detain and torture people in the name of security but we don't even hold the illusion that we can really change that.

I dunno if this makes sense. I know that, maybe unrelated to all of this, after the Gaza war, people here (after the endless occupation, the war with Lebanon in 2006) who opposed this war feel crushed. It's so hard to describe the frustration, anger and hatred that we feel towards this State and what it does. I wasnt even in the country and felt like its too big to handle. Too big of a burden to be the only ones here who care about people who get bombed while hearing and reading what the majority feel is legitimate defense. I accidently found myself in a demo in Auckland, and couldn't take this white middle class lefty shouting on the megaphone at me and some visibly Palestinian/Arab demonstrators about what's happening in Gaza. What the fuck does he know about it? What do I even know about what its like to live in Gaza?

Seeing racism and hatred on this level and feeling utterly powerless definitely has an effect on how I view the possibilities of changing things in the world. I feel much safer in smaller, radical, intolerent-to-liberal/facist-outsiders communities. And I feel that we shouldn't expect anything less than complete radical thinking and behaviour in our communities. I feel like among other feelings, anger drives us to resist injustices, and without it we wouldn't be able to take it to the next level and not give up. If we weren't angry here in Israel, we would be like everyone else in this goddamn country. Oblivious, apathetic followers. Crushing others while hardening our hearts.

Until next time,
Love & Rage
Kerem

The Blackface Minstrelsy Show: examining the representation of two of its female characters and their social significance

By Regina Knoll, rehgi_at_finnland@yahoo.de

Translated from German by Heena Patel, heena@riseup.net

The Blackface Minstrelsy Show, which was staged in many different theatres across the USA, was one of the most popular entertainment shows amongst largely white¹ audiences. It started at the beginning of the 1820s, reaching a high point at the end of the 1850s, more than a decade before the civil war in 1865. The Minstrelsy Show portrayed many fictitious characters from the black population- from the viewpoint of the white population, or how white people wanted them to be seen. The way in which these characters were portrayed only conveyed a small part of the everyday lives of black people. It is widely assumed that certain characteristics were created to work against the demands from the time after slaves had been freed, and to represent them as apathetic or portrayed as imitating the white population.

The portrayed characters were not invented by the Minstrelsy Show. The assigned traits had already been present for many centuries previously, partly socially and economically developed and last but not least as a result of colonisation. However, it must be noted that the portrayal of these characters had an immense and undeniable impression on the perspectives of many white people and also black people partly identified with the stigmatisations imposed upon them by the performances. The complex qualities of the individually created characters or even qualities of all the characters, were reproduced by the popular culture of the United States that developed later, and can also be found today in various cultural spheres worldwide.

Black people on the Minstrel Show stage were mostly portrayed by white male actors, who painted the visible parts of their bodies in black paint (a mixture of burnt cork and water), playing various characters during the show. The most famous male characters were Jim Crow, a poor man with a zest for life and oppositional character of the dandy-like Zip Coon, as well as "Old Darkie" and "Uncle". The most famous female characters were the all-self-sacrificing-for-the-white-family "Mammy" (also known as "Old Auntie"), the humorous carefree "Funny Old Gal" and finally the hyper-sexualised portrayal of "exotic" black women, symbolised by "Yaller Gal" (also known as "Wench", "Jezebel" or "Prima Donna"). I will be examining the characters of "Mammy" and "Yaller Gal". By doing so, I will show how the fictitious representation of these characters was carried out and which social and political goals were supposed to have been achieved with their portrayal.

The fictitious representation of characters before the civil war

The "Mammy" character was the counterpart to the male "Old Darky". Although loved by both white and black people, the character's presence had a very damaging effect on the black women slaves-turned-employees of white households. The main role of the Mammy was, as the name implied, to be a good mother and housewife for the white household living a hard life on the plantation. The character herself was portrayed as a big, dark-skinned black woman, grossly overweight, with large breasts and an oversized bottom. Her hair was mostly hidden under a headscarf. She spoke in an English dialect considered typical of black people at the time (even though it was actually mostly made up).

She came across as motherly, nice, always loyally defending the white family she worked for and denigrating her own, always in a good mood, strong, asexual, incapable of living without the help of the white family, religious, superstitious and because of the huge amount of work she had to do, unclean but not bothered about her outer appearance. (Christian 1980, p. 11-12.) It is also interesting to see that as well as fulfilling the so-called "female" role with her mothering and being nice, she was also assigned "male" attributes. The housework she did was strenuous and dirty. Her arms were not skinny and weak, they were muscular. Her hands were not small and clean, they were large and soiled. This discrepancy rendered the Mammy character sexless. In contrast to the Sambo caricature, Mammy was a hard worker, she didn't have any black friends or even any acquaintances outside of the white family. What is more, she belonged to the white family and thanked them for this by constantly cooking for all of the family members and fulfilling their every conceivable wish, by happily forgoing her own. Mammy did not want to be free- she was far too busy playing the role of surrogate mother or grandmother, running the house on her own and if she had to, sacrificing her own life for the sake of every single family member (Pilgrim 2000).

The counterpart to Mammy was portrayed by "Yaller Gal". This character united the white skin colour and the elegantly desired behaviour of a white woman with expected sexual energy and exoticism of a black woman. Whilst Mammy was portrayed as asexual and without gender, Yaller Gal assumed an oversexualised character, whose outer appearance corresponded to that of a white woman, which was the beauty ideal at the time. This character was explicitly created for white men, who greedily watched her act. They

projected onto her their exotic, probably never lived out desires onto this character who appeared to have a huge sexual appetite. (www.associatedcontent.com)

The reality: life of black slaves before the civil war

In documents which show the situation of plantation life before the civil war, it is assumed that the black employees had never been in the position to ever have run a white household completely independently, or to have had significant status within them. The fictitious character of the Mammy portrayed in fiction and folklore, proved to have been a creation of the white people of the Southern States, to redress the hierarchy between the white man and the black woman, and to counteract the demands for emancipation of slaves which came from the North. (Clinton 1982, p. 201-202). To suggest that a Mammy was employed by many white households, opposes the idea that only rich white people, and therefore only a small proportion of the white population, had the financial means to employ people in their homes as well as in the fields. Furthermore it is known that it was mostly mixed race slaves, who were very young that were taken on for domestic service, because less than 10% of black women reached the age of fifty. Most of them suffered from malnutrition and undernourishment, based on the fact that black people were mostly seen by white people as worthless and not deserving of nourishing food. Black people had also not been abandoned by their own families, but were so busy in the white households that they did not have time for their own family members, or were even forbidden from seeing them. (Turner 1994, p.44.) In light of these facts It is hard to imagine an overweight, older, very dark-skinned, jolly domestic employee, which the Mammy character represented—

As well as the character of the comical slave woman who was part of the family, the portrayal of the Yaller Gal was also formulated from the imaginations of white, primarily male perspectives. The stereotype of the exotic black woman originated from the first interactions between European travellers and African inhabitants. It was because of tradition and the heat of the tropical climate that they were minimally clothed in comparison to the Europeans. Unaccustomed to finding people almost naked, and with strictly puritanical-religious associations of nakedness with sin in the backs of their minds, the travellers described the people that they met as primitive. The nakedness of their black bodies provided a screen onto which they projected their hypersexualised portrayal of female as well as male bodies, inextricably linked with greed for sex and barbarism. This appears to be the origin of the Yaller Gal character, where the stereotypical portrayal of a young savage was used as an excuse for massive sexual assaults by the white master. Black slaves were not seen as individuals in their own right. They were the property of their white master, who was free to do what with them whatever he wanted to. The white

plantation owner was the hub around which everything and everyone revolved. He told the black woman who had been made into a slave that she was in a privileged position to act as his personal sexual plaything, and would only be a good slave if she catered to his whims. The master told his own wife that he could do nothing but obey the exotic primitive wishes of the black woman and had no control over himself. With the exceptions, white women were the black woman's worst nightmare in such a situation. Instead of approaching her husband about such an issue, the white woman would show her authority by physically punishing the slaves for what they had done or by selling them or members of their family to other people. (www.associatedcontent.com)

Causes of the discrepancy between reality and the portrayal of slaves

Although it is known that both of the characters described here were fictitious, it is important to look at the functions served by their portrayal within society. The Mammy character was supposed to fulfil two purposes. Firstly, like many other characters from the Minstrel Show, she was created in response to demands for equal rights which had come from the Northern States, giving the impression that slaves were not in oppressed, but carried out their duties voluntarily and willingly. Like the stereotype of the perpetually cheerful "Old Darcy", many white people tried to portray black people either as lazy, simple-minded or completely uneducated, and to deny them any possibility to live their lives without having to rely on the paternalism of the white households. The idea that black people could fall back into the ways of savages without the "education" and constant control of white people was not only used to intimidate those people made into slaves and deny them any human rights, but also to oppress revolutionary thoughts of equality. Furthermore, the Mammy character was not only supposed to show the success of white people's influence on black people, but also to provide an example of the "ideal woman", who was praised by society, if she could successfully combine household with motherhood. (White 1999, p. 58.)

Civil rights campaigners showed that one of the most brutal aspects of slavery was the physical as well as the psychological exploitation of the female body. Another purpose of the Mammy character was to play down this view. Portrayed as having deep black skin, (which at that point in time in the States was seen as ugly and unclean,) grossly overweight, old and muscular, of masculine stature, this character contradicted the fact that young light-skinned, thin slaves were taken in for domestic service. The asexual behaviour of the Mammy, however, had a clear message; no white master could feel attraction towards such a human being. This was a clear contradiction to the fact that sexual relationships, mostly forced using violence, but sometimes taking place with consent between both parties, existed between master and black worker.

The de-erotisation of the Mammy presented white women and white families with a false sense of security. What the Mammy character tried to stop, was supposed to be redressed by the Yaller Gal character. The frequent abuse of black workers made its way into the Minstrel Show. The representation of the uninhibited, hypersexualised “savages” was considered by white masters as an endorsement for them to mistreat and was used as an explanation for why those who were mistreated were not allowed to stand up to the master. Lastly, the “savages” were blamed for not being able to keep control of themselves. The tabooisation of sex in the strictly religious life in the USA and the unbridled power of the master was key in deciding what assaults took place. Furthermore, the Yaller Gal corresponded more to the prevailing idea of beauty at the time, of a white woman and not a black woman and represented the impossibility of black people being equal to white people. Black skin was not considered to be beautiful - the mixing of both colours or the equal placing of black people with white people however, received a higher status in society.

Representation of the Mammy character on the stage of the Blackface Minstrelsy show

The representation of female characters varied from the sexually provocative to the ridiculous. The roles were almost always played by white men in drag even though many actresses were to be found outside of the Minstrel Show in other theatrical performances. The most famous of these male actors were Francis Leon and Barney Williams.

The show not only offered its white male actors the chance to slip into various roles, but also to change their position within society. On the one hand, the transgressive change of skin colour (and thus of racial category) took place by painting over the white with black skin colour, and on the other hand, the gender of the man as conceived by society was swapped with that of the woman. This type of performance (travesty) allowed actors in this “clothing” to temporarily defy the stipulations of society, and to live out characteristics on stage which they could not in the real world. This masking enabled, furthermore, white amateurs as well as professional white actors with the help of parody and grotesque to publicly act on the stage against conservative and strongly religiously influenced suppositions about race, class and gender of American culture even if it was only for a limited amount of time. Additionally, they could not only live out what that they were not able or allowed to do in their everyday lives underneath the make-up, masking was also part of the show which could be abandoned afterwards, if no physical or psychological connection with the character being played was desired. Many of the actors who played Yaller Gal were teenagers who were considered to have feminine features, and androgynous physical characteristics such as smaller hands and softer skin and they used the show as a

space to express their “femininity”, homosexuality, or other practices related to gender or sexual orientations in public. The fact that these roles were played primarily by male actors does not suffice to explain the creation of female stereotypes on the stage. The reinforcement of the predominant male view was expressed in the composed songs and playful portryal (mimic, gesture) of the characters. Songs such as “Black Eye’d Susianna” (1846), “Belle of Baltimore” (1848) and “I’ll throw myself away” depict a knowing masculine view of the female sex, which accentuates the exoticness of a black woman and depending on whether desired or not, were rated as positive or negative. The result was a constructed image of women which was subordinated or hypersexualised - according to what was preferred - which restricted itself to domestic, sexual and social roles.

Conclusion

Both characters described here portrayed not only a contradiction to what really happened at this time, but also a contradiction to themselves. How black women were supposed to behave depended on their role and their observer. The portrayal was gender-related, and had various purposes to fulfil for its audience of white men and woman. The stage thus did not reflect the clearly structured hierarchy, but reinforced or contested actual facts, and created new ones in order to maintain power relations between class, gender and race.

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- I am aware that I am creating dichotomies with the terms “black” and “white” which imply stereotypical ideas. I will use these terms in conjunction with political categories to show that skin colour was and is the reason for differences, prejudices and for certain people, experiencing privilege.

WHITE AUSTRALIA HAS A BLACK HISTORY - THAT NEVER CEDED SOVEREIGNTY

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To be honest I get a bit uncomfortable when I talk about racism in Australia. It's just so messy. I feel like I want to apologise to everyone I speak to about it, as though I personally dreamt up colonialism and imposed it single-handedly. It's a common white guilt response, and it's pacifying, not clarifying- but I can't help but feel it. It's not to say that I don't have racist thoughts, I guess we all do, but guilt is just not that useful.

It's funny coz I don't feel like this about any other government act/ policy/ decision/ invasion. Usually I just feel angry, and then activated, and try to do something about it.

You know, leafleting airports to stop deportations, occupying offices of war profiteers, refusing to feel bad about my body, learning about silenced histories and then trying to have discussions with people around me. I try not to let things get too complicated- see a problem, see a solution, do my best. Sometimes my best isn't good enough; sometimes it's one heart at a time.

But it's hard to get educated when there's so much knowledge that has already been lost. Not Lost. Stolen, Destroyed, Spat on, Manipulated, Hijacked, Re-appropriated, Bleached, White washed. It's not as hard as I think it is, but I've definitely been kept from trying to learn.

I was talking with other activists last summer about 'that history lesson' that all 12 year old Australians get. The wise people of the Australian Educational Curriculum obviously decided that 12 years old is old enough to find out how 'our' fair land was really 'discovered'. It's the day when you start to resent that your primary school was littered with posters and story books showing big ships arriving on the shores of New South Wales only to be greeted by delighted black people covered in body paint eating kangaroos and smoked grubs. You think about those posters and feel really confused. You start to realise none of this is really yours, that you don't really belong here.

It goes like this. The teacher sits the class down after lunch and says something along the lines of "Everything you've ever been told about aboriginal people is a lie. The aboriginal people weren't pleased to see Captain Cook at all. He was in charge of killing thousand upon thousand, displacing countless nations, forcing communities to become police officers over their own people, stealing their children and placing them in white families, paying them in alcohol instead of money or food, the enslavement and sexual assault of women and children and elders, and the systematic destruction of the history and morale and forests and nature that belonged to everyone.... Sorry, but that's actually what happened.

We've only got one lesson on this so I'll keep it brief. Any questions?"

We all talked about our trip home from school that day. Some of us cried. Some of us felt defiant. Some of us echoed the racism of our parents, "it's still bad for them because they're lazy. They have a problem with drink." We all felt dejected. We were no closer to understanding what it was like for aboriginal people then, and we certainly weren't any closer to understanding what its like for them now.

We knew there were areas where lots of aboriginal people lived. But most of us hadn't spent much time out of the city centres, so our interaction with other people and places was sparse. All our streets had been 'cleaned up' for the Commonwealth games and later the Sydney Olympics. This 'clean up' had involved shifting all the homeless people, and aboriginal people who liked to hang out in the streets to smaller cities far away. We saw more aboriginal people busking in the mall covered in paint holding digeridoos than we did at work or on television.

We were all determined to ask our parents and find out what really happened, but they didn't have many answers.

I've pretty much struggled with it ever since, everything seems token. We ask the local elders if its ok to rent property in certain areas (Woolloongabba is a relatively cheap place to rent, but it used to be a grave yard for the Turrbal people), but we pay rent to land lords... and I'm not sure what we'd do if the elders said no...

I want to say it's not my fault

(I am hired ahead of you).

I want to say I'm doing my best

(I pay rent to a land lord that steals from you, or sleep in a squat that doesn't actively welcome you).

I want to say I'm not tokenising you

(We start our activist meetings with the familiar feel-good echo "We acknowledge that we meet on stolen land"... and then we talk about discos and dancing).

I want to say I'm sorry for what is happening to your land

(but I've never been that interested in environmental campaigns, and its hard to get about without a car...)

I want to show solidarity with you

(and I am and I'm trying, but it never feels like I can do very much...)

