The narrative reproduction of white feminist racism

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Abstract: White women's racism has been the topic of many critiques, discussions and conflicts within British feminist theory and politics over the last fifty years, driven by women of colour's insistence that white feminists must take on board the significance of race in order to stop perpetuating racism. Yet still today, feminist academia and activism in Britain continues to be white-dominated, and to participate in the reproduction of racism and whiteness. This article examines the role of dominant historical narratives of feminism in enabling this reproduction, arguing that there is a direct correlation between how the feminist past is constructed in relation to race and racism and how feminist theory and politics are articulated in the present. Focusing on three contemporary feminist texts which address feminism itself as a subject, it highlights three techniques used in these texts that, it is argued, are commonly employed in the narrative reproduction of white feminist racism. These are 1) the erasure of the work of British feminists of colour, 2) white feminist co-option of work by feminists of colour, and 3) the narration of feminist theory and politics as having 'moved on' from racism. These techniques lead to the evasion of the topic of white feminist racism, both historically and in the present. They also reinforce the construction of British feminism as a story which belongs to white women. The article argues that in order to work towards ending white supremacy, white feminists must relinquish control of the feminist narrative and stop moving on from the topic of white feminist racism.

Keywords: British feminism; racism; whiteness; historical narratives; black British feminism; women's liberation movement

The problem of white women's racism has been the topic of many critiques, conflicts and discussions within British feminist politics over the last fifty years, driven by women of colour's insistence that white feminists must take on board the significance of race if they are to stop perpetuating racism. Although, as Julia Sudbury points out, 'black women ... struggled to have their voices heard' in the early days of the women's liberation movement (WLM), the ascendance of an autonomous black women's movement in the latter part of the 1970s enabled a more 'coordinated attack on white hegemony [through which] white feminists were forced to take note of the serious challenge posed by black feminism' (Sudbury, 1998: 199). Women of colour's critiques of the whiteness of the WLM brought to the fore that the movement was taking place against a backdrop of huge struggles around racism and the re-conceptualisation of the British nation in the wake of African, Caribbean, and Asian decolonisation, and called for white feminists to engage with this context as well as white women's entanglement with the history of British imperialism (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1982). Yet, as I will demonstrate, the histories of British women of colour's feminist scholarship and activism, of their critiques of white feminists, *and* of white feminists' racism, are overwhelmingly absent from, or presented as marginal to, the dominant narrative of British feminism's recent past. This erasure leads to the continued prevalent construction of British feminism as a story about and belonging to white women.

In this article, I will argue that there is a direct correlation between how the feminist past is understood in relation to race and racism and how feminist theory and politics are articulated in the present. I make this argument by exploring how narratives of British feminism's recent past (which I am defining loosely as encompassing the last fifty years – e.g. the mid-1960s onwards) are constructed, as well as how the relationship between feminism, race and racism is addressed within specific feminist texts and discursive sites. Paying attention to how dominant narratives are constructed, I argue, can usefully shed light on how racism continues to be reproduced within feminist politics, theory and spaces in the present.

To illustrate this argument, I analyse three relatively recent books written by British feminist academics and activists: *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change* by Angela McRobbie (2009), *Why feminism matters: Feminism lost and found* by Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward (2009), and *Reclaiming the f word: The new feminist movement* by Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune (2010). These books have been chosen because they focus on feminism itself as a subject: they grapple with questions of what feminism is, what it was and what has happened to it, and what the authors want it to be going forward. Although they are not historical in approach, each of the texts construct narratives of feminism's recent past in articulating their broader arguments, and I will highlight how these narratives are constructed in ways which affirm white authority over the British feminist story. Let me stress, however, that my critique is not of the authors as individuals or of the texts as somehow unusual. My argument is rather that these texts are illustrative of wider trends in the academic and popular narrativisation of British feminism¹.

Although my primary focus is on the narratives themselves, these cannot be separated from the social, political and cultural contexts in which they are produced – in particular the institutional whiteness of British academia and publishing (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Bhopal, 2015; Flood, 2015). My argument is thus not that these texts are problematic because the authors are white, but because they in some ways (and not all in the same way) participate in the reproduction of a hegemonic *whiteness* within British feminism (it should be noted that I am also white).

If white supremacy is the structural domination upon which the modern Western world is founded and upon which it continues to operate (Mills, 2003), whiteness is how white people move through this world. As Nicola Rollock suggests, whiteness 'allows White people to proceed in everyday practice without recognising or being conscious of their own racial positioning' (Rollock, 2012: 518). In this article, I aim to contribute to the interruption of whiteness, specifically as it is reproduced within dominant forms of feminism. I use the term 'white feminist racism' to describe a form of

¹ I have demonstrated this more comprehensively in my broader research (Jonsson, 2015).

racism and gendered whiteness which is specific to feminist politics, and which can be understood only by recognising white feminist politics as entangled with white supremacy and histories of slavery and colonialism. As Hazel Carby argued in 1982, 'white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanism of racism amongst white women' as '[t]his more than any other factor disrupts the recognition of common interests of sisterhood' (Carby, 1982: 232). By locating the development of white-dominated British feminist politics within its colonial context, it is clear that white women's rights and freedoms have often been gained on the backs of women of colour (see e.g. Burton, 1994; Carby, 1982; Davis, 1982; Ware, 1992). White feminist racism is reproduced when this history is not adequately accounted for and reckoned with.

My analysis is informed by Black British feminist scholarship and other literature by feminists of colour which draws attention to the ways in which racialised, gendered and classed structures and discourses interact to position women differently in relation to white supremacist and patriarchal systems of oppression. Black British feminism emerged from a number of different historical trajectories, and encompasses diverse fields of theory and activism (see e.g. Amos, Lewis, Mama, & Parmar, 1984; Bryan *et al.*, 1985; Grewal *et al.*, 1988; Gupta, 2003; Harrison, 2012; Mirza, 1997; Samantrai, 2002; Sudbury, 1998). Yet, as Suki Ali notes, too often, when women of colour are not 'erased entirely' from narratives of Western feminism, they are included in such a way that they are 'reduced to the role of critiquing the central emergent field' set out by white, middle class women (Ali, 2007: 194). It is important therefore to state explicitly here that although I am drawing mainly on texts or parts of texts which critique white feminist discourse and practices (because my focus is on whiteness), black British feminism and women of colour's scholarship and organising in Britain must not be understood in any reductive sense as a 'response' to 'white feminism'.

The term 'black' has most commonly been used within black British feminism as a political term inclusive of all people targeted by racism, and my references to black British feminism and the British black women's movement use the term in this way. Rather than representing essentialist

categories, Avtar Brah suggests that 'black feminism' - and 'white feminism' - are best understood as 'historically contingent ... fields of contestation inscribed within discursive and material processes and practices in a post-colonial terrain' (Brah, 1996: 110-111). Brah's analysis foregrounds how 'black' as a 'political colour' (ibid: 114) has no essential meaning or purchase, but should be understood as having been forged through political struggle for (primarily) African Caribbean and Asian solidarity against racism in 1970s and 1980s Britain. Similarly, Nydia Swaby describes 'political blackness' as '*a politics of solidarity*; nothing more, nothing less' (Swaby, 2014: 13). Both Brah's and Swaby's theorisations stress that the term's continued relevance cannot be assumed or pre-determined, and it is important to recognise that it continues to be contested and critiqued. As Denise Noble puts it, 'complexities are often obscured' by the term and it 'increasingly ... naturalizes a political consensus that may not always exist or in all times be appropriate' (Noble, 2014: 55). In a similar vein, Kehinde Andrews demonstrates how the term can lead to a problematic erasure of the 'politics of resistance' and significance of 'African Diasporic Blackness' (Andrews, 2016: 15).

I use the term 'race' to signify, in Yasmin Gunaratnam's words, 'the organizing category around which has been constructed a system of socio-economic power, exploitation and exclusion – i.e. racism' (Gunaratnam, 2003: 4). Paul Gilroy argues that we have reached a historical moment of 'crisis for raciology, the lore that brings the virtual realities of "race" to dismal and destructive life', presenting us with the opportunity for its destruction, and ultimately the transcendence of race (Gilroy, 2004: 11-12). Yet while the category of race has no essential foundation, it is something undoubtedly real and experienced, continuing to function as a 'technology' of exclusion, exploitation and subordination (Sheth, 2009). In order to recognise both the realities of racialised experience as well as the destructiveness of the category, I follow Gunaratnam's suggestion for a 'doubled' research practice, 'in which researchers need to work both *with* and *against* racial and ethnic categories' (Gunaratnam, 2003: 29). Thus I use the category to reflect its continuing effects in structuring unequal social relations, while simultaneously highlighting its origin in the system of racism.

In the following section, I will explain why I focus on narratives, as well as clarify my methodological approach. Following this, I will outline the narratives which the three texts construct about feminism's recent past. I will then highlight, in turn, three techniques used in these texts, which, I argue, are commonly employed in the narrative reproduction of white feminist racism. These are 1) the erasure of the work of British feminists of colour, 2) the co-option of the work of feminists of colour, and 3) the narration of feminist theory and politics as having *moved on* from racism.

A note on narratives and methodology

Ewick and Silbey define a narrative as having three features: 1) it 'relies on some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters', 2) 'events must be temporally ordered... [and] presented with a beginning, a middle, and an end' and 3) 'events and characters must be related to one another and to some overarching structure' (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 200)². Social movement researchers have focused attention on the collective and personal narratives of activists, arguing for the significant role storytelling plays in the production of collective identities and solidarity within social movements (e.g. Guzik & Gorlier, 2004; Polletta, 1998). Narrative, Guzik and Gorlier argue, 'represents an essential operation in the elaboration of feminist identity, at both the group and individual level' (Guzik & Gorlier, 2004: 109). Stories, they emphasise, are deeply political:

Narrative counts as a practice of remembering. Through the selection of events and their integration into coherent stories of a time past, the narrator actively assembles a history or

² Social scientists do not tend to distinguish between a 'narrative' and a 'story' (Riessman, 2008; Polletta, 1998), whereas scholars working within literary and linguistic traditions usually do (Cobley, 2014: 3). As I am looking at data where there arguably *is no story* outside the narratives which are presented (as opposed to, for example, a novel, where a story with a beginning, middle and end can be narrativised in different ways), I do not distinguish between stories and narratives and use the terms interchangeably.

histories that not only come to represent the past but also connect to a particular present (ibid: 96).

Equally important, I would argue, narrative counts as a practice of *forgetting*: the narrator assembles a history which *excludes* particular events and stories in order to maintain a coherent identity and position in the present.

Narratives, then, are sites of struggle, a point clearly illustrated, for instance, in recent online debates about feminism and racism, where feminists of colour have used Twitter and other social media tools to challenge white feminists' racism and platforms (see e.g. Dzodan, 2014; Eddo-Lodge, 2012; Kendall, 2013). Such conflicts often centre on who has the power to control narratives. Stories about feminism tell us about the storyteller's assumptions about who 'owns' feminism and who are the central subjects of the story (Kaba & Smith, 2014; Park & Leonard, 2014).

Methodologically, I draw particularly on Clare Hemmings' (2011) approach. In analysing stories that academic feminists tell of Western feminism's theoretical development, Hemmings picks out traces and fragments of narratives constructed across (often brief) segments in articles published in feminist journals. This allows her to unpick what she calls the 'political grammar' of feminist storytelling; attending to the structuring and content of these stories, she demonstrates how three parallel narratives of 'progress', 'loss', and 'return' have become dominant within Western feminist theory³.

³ Progress narratives emphasise a shift from an essentialist (read: racist, homophobic, etc.) 1970s feminism to a sophisticated, post-structural feminist present, while loss narratives emphasise a radical and political 1970s feminism which has been depoliticised and institutionalised in the present. Return narratives combine elements of both progress and loss narratives, but ultimately argue that poststructuralism has gone too far and that there is a need for feminists to 'return' to a more politicised focus on external, material structures (Hemmings, 2005, 2011).

Using the same method, I searched the texts under analysis here for any segment or section which told a story about feminist history or which alluded to feminist history. I also searched for any material which discussed race or racism, whether directly or implicitly. In a similar way to Sara Ahmed (2012), who describes following the word 'diversity' around as a methodological approach, I followed words such as 'race', 'racism', 'ethnicity', 'difference', 'diversity' and 'intersectionality' around within these texts, to see what they revealed; i.e. what context they were used within, what stories they were part of, and what work they were made to do.

White feminist stories

McRobbie's (2009), Woodward and Woodward's (2009), and Redfern and Aune's (2010) books all address the state of contemporary gender relations as well as contemporary feminist politics in Western, Anglo-American and/or British societies (locational emphases vary across and within different parts of the texts). I begin the analysis here with an overview of the historical narratives which are constructed within the three texts. As the discussion will highlight, the narratives constructed vary across the texts, as does the visibility of feminists of colour and white feminists' racism. But there are also significant similarities, as will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

In her widely-cited and influential book, McRobbie argues that a combination of cultural and political forces in the West are colluding in a complex form of backlash against feminism, with authentic feminist politics giving way to a hollowed-out 'post-feminism'. In this moment, McRobbie argues, feminism has 'at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated' (McRobbie, 2009: 12). She uses examples from Anglo-American popular culture to demonstrate how feminism has been incorporated and taken on board, while it is at the same time vilified, to ensure it will never be a viable political movement again.

Kath and Sophie Woodward, mother and daughter, wrote their book together, as they explain, in an attempt to create an inter-generational dialogue about Western feminism past and present. They question what they see as a divisive antagonism between 'second wave' and 'third wave' feminists, and through their work aim to move feminist theory forward while retaining key concepts from the past, arguing that 'the feminist past is a resource in understanding the present and in the development of ideas' (Woodward & Woodward, 2009: 165). Through a dialogue with each other and with feminist theory, the authors are concerned with 'rescuing' what they consider to be key concepts from 'second wave' feminism, summarised as: 'the feminist polemic and writing with a political agenda; an understanding of patriarchy; repoliticising the personal; and bringing back a politics of difference' (ibid: 168).

With a clear activist focus, *Reclaiming the f word* aims to promote feminist politics to a mass (primarily non-academic) audience⁴. It describes the activism of what Redfern and Aune describe as a 'new feminist movement' in Britain, based on a survey which they conducted with 1,265 self-identified feminists (Redfern and Aune, 2010: 221). As they explain in the introduction, the authors 'want to show [that] feminism is liberating, diverse, challenging, exciting, relevant and inclusive' (ibid: x). The book represents contemporary feminist activists in a solely positive light, with an aim of inviting others in: 'Welcome to the new feminist movement' they conclude their introductory chapter and 'Why not come join us?' they ask in the last one (Redfern & Aune, 2010: 17).

Similar to the way in which contemporary feminism is represented in celebratory terms, they describe the feminist past in a very positive way, stating:

This isn't going to be one of those "new feminist" books that reiterate negative stereotypes about 1970s' feminism and position younger feminists in opposition to it... Whilst

⁴ A second edition of this book, with the subtitle updated from *The New Feminist Movement* to *Feminism Today*, was published in 2013. My analysis is based on the first edition.

recognising that second-wave feminism wasn't perfect, in our experience younger feminists are quick to acknowledge their debt to older feminists. (ibid: xi)

Emphasising the continuity between the feminist past and present, Redfern and Aune structure the book into seven chapters in homage to the seven demands of the British WLM. Their argument for 'reclaiming' feminism (their seventh demand) also highlights the continuity the authors construct between the WLM and the contemporary movement: 'Feminism has a proud history and we've all benefited from it', they claim, arguing that feminism of the recent past has been unfairly stereotyped and degraded (ibid: 207 and 204-220).

With their references to the feminist past limited to the WLM, Redfern and Aune's representation of recent feminist history is clearly – albeit implicitly – white, something which they allude to at a few points but never really address. In particular, in a discussion about religion, they assert that '[j]ust as black women felt excluded by a feminism in which white women's experiences were taken as the norm, so religious feminists (many of them Asian, black and mixed ethnicities) feel that secular feminism denigrates an integral part of their identity...' (Redfern and Aune, 2010: 154). That black women 'felt' excluded by a normative white feminism has not in fact been previously discussed. Yet it is presented with the presumption that the reader is already aware of this history - and it is clearly history, as evident by the past tense. No further details are provided.

In contrast, McRobbie places anti-racist politics (and thus – at least implicitly - women of colour) as central to feminist politics from the start of the 'second wave'. Tracing post-war feminist activism as emerging from the Left, she suggests that feminist politics in Britain in the 1970s were much more deeply intertwined with anti-racist and class struggles than contemporary depictions of the movement allow for, and that 'these intersections have shaped the field of feminist scholarship and also women's and gender studies courses' (McRobbie, 2009: 25). She argues that the backlash against feminism has involved a 'process of undoing' of the connections between feminist and anti-

racist politics, as well as other movements against oppression, and that this is a crucial element of the new gender regime:

Feminism's wider intersections with anti-racism, with gay and lesbian politics, are written out of the kind of history which surfaces even in serious journalism, and the feminism which is then vilified and thrown backwards into a previous era, is a truncated and sclerotic anti-male and censorious version of a movement which was much more diverse and open-minded. (ibid: 9)

While she concedes that 'that which is being undone, is, and possibly always was, fragile and seemingly torn apart by internal conflict', McRobbie argues that the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, together with other social justice movements, 'did nevertheless constitute a terrain of radical political articulations, comprising groups who perceived inequities and oppressions across the boundaries of sex, race and class, none of which were self-standing' (ibid: 30).

Another narrative which McRobbie constructs is that of academic feminism, following an initial surge of development, 'finding it necessary to dismantle itself':

For the sake of periodisation we could say that 1990 marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory. At this time the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists like Spivak, Trinh and Mohanty among others, and by feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway who inaugurate the radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body... (ibid: 13)

The reference to 'post-colonialist feminists' and the interrogation of 'representational claims' suggests that racism is an underlying cause of the dismantling process McRobbie describes here. I will return to this point below.

Woodward and Woodward's narrative of the feminist past, based partly on Kath's involvement with early women's studies courses, focuses mostly on academic feminism and education. The dominant sentiment they convey is that of feminism as a site of affirmation for (all) women, describing women's studies courses as 'often life-transforming, through their validation of women's experiences and intimate and private social worlds' (ibid: 4). They also critique what they see as a 'third wave' contempt for 'second wave' feminists, pointing out that 'the third wave often defines itself as pro-sex and multi-ethnic, as a critique of the perceived whiteness of the second wave' (Woodward & Woodward, 2009: 50). They go on to challenge this perception:

I-Sophie⁵, well versed in the critiques of the second wave, was surprised when I first saw I-Kath's [sic] collection of *Spare Rib* magazines, from the 1970s and early 1980s... and noted how prominent the discussion of race and accusations of racism were in these magazines.
(ibid)

Their narrative acknowledges that women's studies and 'second wave' feminism have been subject to critique, and they claim that they do not wish to 'overstate the achievements of feminist politics or to underplay the persistence of patriarchal and postcolonial practices of exclusion' (ibid: 15). They also point out that '[s]ome of the criticisms of women's studies in the academy have been framed by its ethnocentrism in relation to the politics of race' and go on to note the 'productive' 'theoretical shifts' within feminist theory which have occurred as a result of engagement with theories that interrogate this ethnocentrism and whiteness (ibid: 16).

Across the three texts, then, we find some significant differences in the narratives which are constructed of the recent feminist past; from an un-problematized, inspirational, white WLM in Redfern and Aune, to an anti-racist and socialist 'second wave' in McRobbie, to a supportive and

⁵ When expressing an opinion or reflection as individuals, the authors identify themselves as 'I-Sophie' and 'I-Kath'.

joyful, although admittedly ethnocentric, women's studies culture in Woodward and Woodward.

Yet, as I will elaborate on in the following sections, the texts all employ a number of similar techniques which ensure the continued centrality of white feminists to the story of feminism.

The erasure of British feminists of colour

In a recent oral history interview, discussing her co-edited book *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Grewal et al, 1988), Gail Lewis reflects:

[The book] is so little known in this country, and yet in the States it was taken up much more [...]. But I think that's absolute testimony to the ways in which - the limits to which - black women's work could be seen [as] coming out of Britain, was seen as central to feminist politics in this country by feminists - by white feminists. And when they went into the academy and formed all of this Women's Studies network [...] they looked to the US for their women of colour scholarship and not to Britain and they've not picked it up and I feel very resentful about it actually. Not so much on a personal level, but for it being a sign of the way in which, the limits to which, the movement here could really take us on as part of the movement, I think, was shown in what happened in the academy in this country.⁶

Lewis' comment highlights how the foundations of feminist academia in Britain were formed through the marginalisation of black feminist theory (Mirza, 1997: 9-11; Young, 2000: 48), and they are an instructive starting point here. Although the texts under analysis vary in emphasis on race and difference, what is overwhelmingly clear across all the narratives is the almost complete erasure of

⁶ Sisterhood and after: An oral history of the women's liberation movement, 'Black feminist texts', <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/view.html#id=143433&id2=143140>, last accessed 12 September 2015.

the perspectives and scholarship of British feminists of colour from the histories presented. In Redfern and Aune, the only black women visible in the narrative of the past are those who - unnamed and uncited - are briefly noted as having 'felt excluded' from the WLM (Redfern and Aune, 2010: 154). Woodward and Woodward's narrative marginally improves on this, as their point about 'theoretical shifts' in relation to 'ethnocentrism' is referenced with two articles on intersectionality written by British feminists (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2003), although they are not discussed any further. When Woodward and Woodward briefly engage with scholarship by feminists of colour at some other points, they primarily rely on texts from North America. And although, out of the three texts, McRobbie most extensively engages with theories by feminists of colour, it is again notable that these theorists – such as the aforementioned 'post-colonialist feminists' (McRobbie, 2009: 13) - are predominantly situated in the US academy, and almost none are from Britain.

This erasure of British feminists of colour has problematic effects on the feminist politics and theorisations articulated in the texts. For instance, Redfern and Aune construct the historical narrative in such a way that the white-dominated WLM comes to represent *the* universal feminist past, creating one definitive origin story for modern British feminism, which all contemporary young feminists are indebted to, including feminists of colour. This not only erases different historical legacies and trajectories of women's political activism, but it also suggests that feminists of colour should appreciate and feel indebted to a movement which to a large extent excluded them, as Redfern and Aune themselves allude to (which is not to deny that there *were* women of colour involved with the WLM) (Redfern & Aune, 2010: 154).

Although McRobbie's narrative suggests a more racially diverse constituency of 'second wave' feminists, the simultaneous erasure of British feminists of colour creates a contradiction, which becomes evident when she reflects on how early feminist research was flawed in its foundation:

Looking back we can see... how particular [the binary opposition between femininity and feminism] was to gender arrangements for largely white and relatively affluent (i.e.

housewifely) heterosexual women. While at the time both categories [of the 'housewife' and the 'ordinary woman'] had a kind of transparency, by the late 1980s these came under scrutiny ... The concept of the housewife in effect facilitated a certain mode of feminist inquiry, but we were at the time inattentive to the partial and exclusive nature of this couplet. (McRobbie, 2009: 13)

When claiming that categories such as the 'ordinary woman' and the 'housewife' originally seemed transparent, McRobbie is clearly writing from a privileged white woman's position, as for feminists who did not come from these backgrounds, the categories were never transparent in the way that she suggests. As Carby highlighted in 1982, pointing to white feminists' ignorance of black women's experiences, "[i]n concentrating solely upon the isolated position of white women in the Western nuclear family structure, [white] feminist theory has necessarily neglected the very strong female support networks that existed in many black sex/gender systems" (Carby, 1982: 230). Thus McRobbie's reflection on feminists' original inattentiveness to differences between women appears to contradict her assertion that feminism was already anti-racist. The use of 'we' is also instructive, with the 'we' at the beginning of the paragraph, who are looking back, the same 'we' who towards the end of the paragraph were 'inattentive' to race and class exclusion in the 1970s - in other words, white (middle-class) feminists. The continuity of this 'we' indicates the white (middle class) feminist as the central subject of McRobbie's narrative, both then and now. The topic of feminists of colour's marginalisation within academic feminism is thus avoided, a point I will return to in the following section.

Despite noting 'theoretical shifts' in relation to 'ethnocentrism' and 'whiteness', the lack of any in-depth engagement with scholarship by feminists of colour leads Woodward and Woodward to go on to reproduce the same exclusions all over again. This becomes clear in their chapter arguing for a 'grown-up' politics of difference, in which they assert:

What is most important for our project is the need to engage with the diversity of feminist critical thinking and to explore rather than reject a whole host of feminist interventions which so productively address the problems and the possibilities of difference. (ibid: 87-88)

Yet the 'different feminist voices' which they draw on are all white, and the chapter attends to sexual/gender difference only, without discussing race, despite suggesting that debates about difference were 'central to feminism in the 1980s' (ibid: 87), which strongly implies an engagement with racialised difference. Writing in the late 1990s, Ann Phoenix reflects on such debates:

The often heated debates about difference and identity among feminists, black activists and academics (who, of course, overlap) were productive of exciting new ways of conceptualizing the difference/identity couplet. These allowed both the recognition that contemporary societies are characterized by difference and that a focus on difference as complex allowed better analytical purchase on understanding societies and subjectivities than was allowed by a dualist focus on difference as bipolar. (Phoenix, 1998: 860)

Phoenix goes on to argue that there is now 'widespread agreement that identities (and hence differences) are plural and intersecting, rather than singular...' (ibid), suggesting such an approach to difference has become hegemonic. Yet despite the fact that Woodward and Woodward describe their chapter as a dialogue between feminist theory from both the 'second' and 'third' wave, arguing that 'a politics of difference can be reconstituted through an exchange between different versions of feminism and different feminist voices' (Woodward and Woodward, 2009: 109), the 'diversity of feminist critical thinking' which they draw on completely excludes the work of feminists of colour. Not only does this delimit their own theorising, but the exclusionary effects of theorising a '*grown-up*' politics of difference using only white feminist theory are clear. The marginalisation of women of colour's feminist theories becomes complete in the final chapter, which includes an all-white list of feminist 'key thinkers' (ibid: 166).

Lewis' point that white feminists avoided black British feminists by 'look[ing] to the US for their women of colour scholarship' is clearly illustrated in the texts analysed. The shifting of attention away from *British* feminists of colour becomes a form of evasion, i.e. a way for white British feminists to avoid taking black feminists 'on as part of the movement'. Rather than dealing with the content of the direct critiques of the British WLM and of white British feminist theory, engaging with women of colour's scholarship from the US simultaneously enables white feminists to position themselves as knowledgeable about race and racism *and* avoid being implicated in the critiques that they cite. Such distancing is a discursive move which functions as a claim to innocence, a point I will return to below. It is also an erasure of the specificities of intersections of sexism and racism in the British (post)colonial context, including the continuing legacy of colonialism in structuring relationships between differently racialised women. Illustrating one significant fault line, Denise Noble demonstrates how government policy in 1930s and 1940s Britain and the Caribbean produced 'the colonized woman ... as a racialized category of female, working-class labor' in opposition to the white British 'housewife', who was primarily valued as a mother and 'whose principal role in the immediate postwar era was to contribute to the global hegemony of Britishness and Whiteness' (Noble, 2014: 73). Understanding such specificities is crucial for undoing white feminist racism in the contemporary British context.

White feminist co-option of feminists of colour's work

The marginalisation and erasure of women of colour's scholarship often operates in tandem with the co-option of women of colour's work. The types of co-option that I focus on here reflect a change in the predominant ways in which white feminists today engage with feminists of colour, as opposed to how they did thirty or forty years ago. Black feminist critiques from the early 1980s highlight how the dominant white feminist theories at the time did not acknowledge race or the position of women of colour at all. In 'White woman listen!' (1982), Hazel Carby demonstrated how white

feminist theories failed to account for the roles which slavery, colonialism, and imperialism have played in constructing gender relations. She pointed to the invisibility of black women in white women's theories, arguing that "[i]t is not just [black women's] herstory before we came to Britain that has been ignored by white feminists, our experiences and struggles here have also been ignored" (ibid: 219). Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984) similarly critiqued 'white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist or radical feminist perspective' which they argued 'does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning' (Amos & Parmar, 1984: 4).

Today, the dynamics have – to an extent – changed, as Yasmin Gunaratnam and Heidi Mirza touch on in a recent conversation about black British feminism (Mirza & Gunaratnam, 2014). Gunaratnam reflects that the wide uptake of the concept of intersectionality 'has become a form of anti-racist capital for some white feminists, a currency that nods in the direction of black feminist concerns but that does very little to dismantle racial thinking and privilege' (ibid: 128). Relatedly, Mirza points to how 'Black women's "difference" is interpellated into the hegemonic whiteness of liberal feminist and multicultural post-racial discourses of inclusion where it is "cooled out", absorbed and accommodated' (ibid: 129). Their comments point to the fact that while white feminists today are familiar with the concept of intersectionality and the importance of race as an analytical category, this knowledge is often used in ways which continue to centre whiteness and benefit white feminists. Rather than engaging with black feminist theories in ways which transform white feminist theory and praxis, they are simply subsumed and contained within the same overarching white framework.

The co-option that Mirza and Gunaratnam describe can be found in Redfern and Aune's analysis, despite it being attentive to the intersection of gender with race inequalities. The authors position themselves as knowledgeable about race and difference by describing women's experiences in contemporary Britain as structured not only by gender but also by other social divisions, including

racism. They point out, for instance, that 'racist, classist and ageist beauty ideals exist alongside patriarchal ones' (Redfern & Aune, 2010: 19). Additionally, while their feminist past is represented as white, Redfern and Aune are keen to represent contemporary feminism as 'diverse', stressing at one point that the ethnic breakdown of their survey participants 'broadly reflects the make-up of the UK population' (ibid: x and 208).

Mary-Jo Nadeau's (2009) study of the literature produced by a national women's organisation in Canada helps illuminate what is troubling about Redfern and Aune's narrative. Examining the story which the organisation constructs of its history, Nadeau finds a 'subtle, yet persistent, tendency of white multiculturalist narratives to substitute for anti-racist histories' (ibid: 6). The under-representation of women of colour within the organisation during its early years is noted within the text, but rather than interrogating how hegemonic whiteness and white feminists' racism maintained their exclusion, the narrative focuses instead on women of colour's increasing involvement as 'an ongoing and progressive succession of *inclusivity*' (ibid: 11). Such a narrative erases the histories of anti-racist challenges led by women of colour coming from both within and outside of the organisation, and instead 'moments of inclusivity appear as autonomous developments' (ibid: 9). This, Nadeau argues, re-affirms the position of white women at the centre of the organisation – as the ones who continue to define the narrative.

Reclaiming the f word similarly promotes a narrative of feminism as one of increasing inclusivity. Contemporary feminist politics are situated as a natural progression from the 'second wave', which is described as an innocent and inspirational – yet, clearly white - movement. Yet the text lacks a narrative of how feminism has changed from being white to its contemporary diverse manifestations. The lack of a narrative of change within feminism, and the invocations of an innocent and influential feminist past which contemporary feminists are indebted to, leads to the presentation of the authors' own more intersectional perspectives as a continuation of earlier forms of feminism. By writing out the histories of struggle over race, difference and exclusion in the recent

feminist past, while at the same time claiming an inclusive and diverse present, the text fails to acknowledge *from whom* the authors have learned to be attentive to difference and privilege. Erasing the histories of struggle by feminists of colour against white feminist racism, while claiming knowledge of the insights that have been gained from such struggles thus co-opts the work of feminists of colour.

Through a slightly different rhetorical move, Woodward and Woodward *do* acknowledge that white feminists in the past articulated an ethnocentric feminist theory. Yet, as detailed in the previous section, they simultaneously produce a theorisation of difference which excludes the significance of race and scholarship by feminists of colour on this issue. How to make sense of this erasure when coinciding with a claimed attentiveness to whiteness? What becomes evident by tracing discussions about race, whiteness and ethnocentrism across the book is that these coincide with clusters of citations of work by (predominantly US) feminists of colour. Resonating with Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000) findings in her study of (Australian) white feminist academics, Woodward and Woodward thus position race as a topic which belongs solely to people of colour – and conversely, people of colour's theories are primarily only seen as relevant when they pertain to race. As Lola Young points out, 'many white feminists now recognize that somehow, somewhere their awareness of 'race' as an issue ought to be signalled in their intellectual work', yet at the same time they continue to understand it as a 'black woman's thing' (Young, 2000: 49 and 59). This enables white feminist academics to simultaneously position themselves as knowledgeable about theories by feminists of colour, yet continue to centre whiteness in their theorising.

A similar (re)centring of whiteness is evident in McRobbie's final chapter, in which she argues that 'the feminist post-colonial classroom' within the 'global university', while a site of deep uncertainty, is also one of possibility for the affirmation of feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009: 164-7). Focusing on her own classroom in London, where she teaches feminist and post-colonial theory (with the majority of her students being young women from overseas), McRobbie enters a hypothetical

dialogue with Spivak, to reflect on the exclusions and power dynamics within this space. Yet, by engaging with a US-based Indian feminist of colour, and by focusing solely on her relationship with her international students and on exclusions at a global level (e.g. do these young women's presence in London simply mark out 'a narrow opportunity structure for middle-class daughters ... leaving behind them a de-populated lower middle-class no longer able to provide teachers in areas of poverty and illiteracy'? (ibid: 164)), McRobbie evades confronting the fact that the global post-colonial feminist classroom in Britain exists in the context of an institutionally white academy where scholars of colour are under-represented, and subject to racist discrimination, over-scrutiny and micro-aggressions (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Bhopal, 2015; Mirza, 2015; Rollock, 2012; Tate, 2013).

In calling for 'ways of counter-writing the academy that draw attention to the absence of Black British research students ..., tenured Black British colleagues ... and Black British professors', Joan Anim-Addo notes how 'the silence of white feminists resembles collusion, evoking again, this time for the twenty-first century, the question: 'Am I not a woman and a sister?'' (Anim-Addo, 2014: 56). Anim-Addo's comments point towards the absence of white feminist attention towards addressing the material, structural exclusion and marginalisation of women of colour in the academy. In the contemporary context, this often coexists with an increased (if still limited) attention to women of colour's *scholarship*. As Cecily Jones observes, 'many of my white colleagues are prepared to integrate 'race' into their teachings, but even the most radical appear unable to perceive the world from anything other than their white perspective' (Jones, 2006: 154). Through positing a *post-colonial* feminist theory as integral to the feminist classroom in the twenty-first century, McRobbie positions contemporary British feminist academics as having incorporated the theories and critiques of the 'post-colonialist feminists' mentioned earlier in the book (McRobbie, 2009: 13). Yet the fact that a disproportional majority of those feminist academics are white, and that they are complicit in the continued exclusion of scholars of colour, goes unaccounted for. Such silence produces complicity in what Anim-Addo (2014) describes as 'Black absence' in the academy.

Albeit through different techniques and emphases, in each of the texts there is a reinforcement of whiteness as norm, which reflects the hegemonic trend within British feminist academia and activism more broadly. The use of feminists of colour's work functions to further legitimate the authority of white feminist scholarship and analysis, and serves as a reassertion of white feminist dominance.

The imperative to *move on*

In her discussion of progress narratives of feminism, Hemmings highlights a problematic imperative to leave the racist (and homophobic) feminist past behind:

To be ethical subjects of feminism, we *must* leave the past behind, then. All that is narratively required is to bracket out specific reference to what has otherwise been assigned to the 1980s, namely the black and lesbian feminist epistemologies and ontologies whose absent critiques haunt the theoretical present. (Hemmings, 2011: 56)

This need to break with the past, to claim that feminism *may have been* racist in the 1970s and 1980s, but has since *moved on* to an enlightened, anti-racist present, is a well-rehearsed narrative in contemporary Anglo-American feminist discourse (see also Brandzel, 2011; Wiegman, 2012). In the process, as Hemmings identifies, the actual anti-racist critiques which were made in the past (and continue to be made) must be erased from the narrative, because to deal with their content would mean to continue to deal with racism within feminism.

We can see such a narrative operating in all three texts. In McRobbie's text, we have a distinct 'turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory', 1990, when 'the representational claims of second wave feminism [came] to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists' (McRobbie, 2009: 13). This 'turning point' functions to mark a clear moment of race

awareness on behalf of white feminists, after which a self-critical, non-universalising analysis is implied. This narrative technique is also evident in Woodward and Woodward's reference to 'theoretical shifts' around ethnocentricity, whiteness and intersectionality (Woodward & Woodward, 2009: 16). The authors do not expand any further on the topic, and hence, the 'shifts' are implied to be complete. Similarly, their argument for a 'grown up' politics of difference positions the authors as having arrived at a definitive point of theoretical maturity. Redfern and Aune's presentation of the contemporary feminist movement as 'diverse' and 'inclusive' also indicates that the exclusion black women might have 'felt' firmly belongs to the past (Redfern and Aune, 2010: x and 154).

This resistance to hearing anti-racist critiques is evident also in the evasive and passive language which the texts employ: black women 'felt' excluded (white women did not necessarily *exclude* them) (Redfern and Aune, 2009: 154), second wave feminism 'wasn't perfect' (ibid: xi), critiques and exclusions are 'postcolonial' (McRobbie, 2009: 13; Woodward and Woodward, 2009: 15), and white feminist theory criticised for its 'ethnocentrism' (Woodward and Woodward, 2009: 16). These phrasings enable a glossing over of the topic of racism, a point highlighted by Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson in 1986, when they critiqued the use of the term 'ethnocentrism' as a rhetorical technique used by white feminists to divert attention away from racism (Bhavnani & Coulson, 1986: 81). Lola Young has similarly critiqued the use of "'postcolonial'" as a way of aligning racial issues with those of gender' by highlighting the exclusion of black British feminists from 'postcolonial literary canons' (Young, 2000: 47). Describing theories and critiques as 'postcolonial' can thus become another way of not naming racist exclusion.

The desire to indicate that white feminists have moved on from racism can be connected to an investment in innocence. As Sarita Srivastava's research with (Canadian) feminist organisations (2005) demonstrates, anti-racist critiques tend to be met by white feminists with defensiveness, denials, anger and tears. Srivastava notes how it is the self-image of the white feminist as a *good*

person – her ‘moral identity’ as feminist - which is understood as fundamentally challenged by claims that she has done something racist (ibid: 30). She suggests that this investment in being innocent is formed through three intertwining threads: ‘[1] historical and gendered representations of racial innocence and superiority ... [2] feminist ideals of justice and egalitarian community and [3] national discourses of tolerance, benevolence, and nonracism’ (ibid: 34). Thus, feminist ideals of ‘egalitarianism’ and constructions of feminist movements ‘as social, political, and moral communities’ interact with colonial, national political imaginaries to produce (white) feminist communities overly preoccupied with ‘morality and self’ (ibid: 35 and 31; see also Fellows & Razack, 1998).

Maintaining the continuity of an innocent white feminist subject position, however, requires that racism within feminism be constructed as an unfortunate and unintentional blip in the overall story. The unintentionality is key: the only way in which a white feminist can accept that she has done something racist and still maintain her self-image as a feminist/good person, is by mitigating this fact through appeals to good (not racist) intentions and/or having been indoctrinated by a racist, patriarchal society not of her own making. Thus there is a constant desire to move on from confronting evidence of racism as something which has been integral to white feminist politics since its inception.

Yet ‘moving on’ is part of how racism is reproduced. Sara Ahmed observes that when she talks about whiteness, white people respond by asking her how they can resist it:

To respond to accounts of institutional whiteness with the question “what can white people do?” is not only to return to the place of the white subject, but it is also to locate agency in this place. It is also to re-position the white subject as somewhere other than implicated in the critique. (Ahmed, 2007: 164-5)

Ahmed suggests that the desire to turn so quickly towards the need for a resolution is evidence of a resistance to hearing about racism – another form of defensive response, which risks ‘not hear[ing] anything at all’ (ibid). Such a response by white feminists indicates a desire to *move on* from the moment of anti-racist critique, and to move away from confronting their investment in white supremacy. The process of moving on is, in other words, a refusal to be held accountable for white feminist racism.

Conclusion: Relinquishing control of the narrative

Attending to the construction of historical narratives about British feminism, this article highlights the important role these narratives play in shaping contemporary feminist discourse. I have demonstrated how the dominant stories which are told about British feminism’s recent past to a large extent erase women of colour’s intellectual and activist histories, including the content of many anti-racist critiques which have been made of white-dominated feminist politics. When white feminists do engage with women of colour’s work, there is a tendency towards co-opting it in ways which legitimate the continued centrality of the white feminist subject. Additionally, whiteness is reproduced through the repeated framing of racism as something which may have existed in the feminist past (although always unintentionally), but which has now been moved on from.

In 1984, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar argued that ‘[t]he “herstory” which white women use to trace the roots of women’s oppression or to justify some form of political practice is an imperial history rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods ... ignoring the fundamental ways in which white women have benefitted from the oppression of Black people’ (Amos and Parmar, 1982: 5). Although white feminists have made gestures towards acknowledging the need to dismantle racism within feminism by telling different histories and confronting the benefits white women accrue through the system of white supremacy, such gestures have not gone far enough. To

do this work, then, white feminists (and I include myself here) must stop repeating the familiar colonial gestures of inclusion – by, for example, adding black feminist histories into pre-existing white narratives. Such a process will simply add another chapter to the long history of white feminist co-option of women of colour's work. Instead, white feminists must, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson's puts it, 'theorise the relinquishment of power so that feminist practice can contribute to changing the racial order' (Moreton-Robinson, 2000: 186). As narratives are sites of struggle over power, one way in which white feminists might begin to do this work would thus be to relinquish control of the narrative of feminism (while recognising that this is still inevitably an expression of power, as one can only relinquish something when one has it in the first place). Crucially, this relinquishment requires a resistance to moving on. To end the narrative reproduction of white feminist racism, white feminists need to *stop* and give this story their full attention.

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