

White feminist stories: Locating race in representations of feminism in The Guardian

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Abstract: The last decade has witnessed an increased visibility of grassroots feminist activism in Britain. This article concerns the representation of such activism in the left-leaning newspaper The Guardian, and focuses on issues related to race and whiteness. Drawing on anti-racist critiques of "white feminism", the article presents a close reading of three articles which have appeared in recent years. Combining a content and narrative analysis, the article unpicks underlying assumptions about British feminism, and identifies three specific narrative techniques which are problematic in relation to race. These construct contemporary feminist activism as 1) a continuation of a white feminist legacy, 2) a unified movement of "like-minded" individuals, and 3) "diverse" and "happy". Presented as common sense, these narratives erase power differences between women, as well as a multitude of feminist organising in Britain, including Black British feminism. While anti-racist feminists repeatedly challenge such representations, including occasionally on The Guardian's own blog, this appears to have little effect on the dominant constructions of feminism in the more prominent news and feature articles. This resistance to change highlights the continued unequal power relations between white feminists and feminists of colour, and the persistence of whiteness in defining feminism within mainstream liberal media.

Keywords: British feminism, representation, race, whiteness, The Guardian

The last decade has witnessed an increased visibility of feminist activism in the UK. This article concerns the representation of this contemporary movement in the liberal left-leaning British broadsheet newspaper The Guardian, and focuses specifically on race. Drawing on some key anti-racist feminist critiques which engage with issues of race and representation, I will present a close reading of three Guardian articles (from 2008, 2010 and 2012) which tell stories about contemporary feminist activism in Britain. My analysis will draw out some of the narrative techniques which dominate the feminist discourse presented in The Guardian, and which are problematic in terms of racial justice.

While this article is primarily about media representation, representations of feminist activism in The Guardian are produced through interaction with activist feminist communities. Problematic representations of feminism in The Guardian therefore sheds light on some of the wider politics of race within contemporary feminism in Britain. As the analysis will highlight, a white norm structures the dominant public narrative frames through which contemporary British feminism is understood. This white normativity is repeatedly challenged and resisted by feminists of colour and anti-racist feminists, including, occasionally, in The Guardian. However, such resistance (as I will discuss in the next section), is either contained or co-opted in ways which indicate the continued unequal power relations between white feminists and feminists of colour, and the power of whiteness in defining feminism within mainstream media.

The article begins with an overview of representations of feminism in The Guardian. This will be followed by a discussion of anti-racist feminist critiques which raise important points in relation to feminism, race and representation, and which guide my own analysis. I then briefly introduce the Guardian articles in turn, using a content analysis approach, answering questions related to representation in its most explicit sense: Who is represented in these articles? Which feminist groups are focused on and which campaigning issues are presented as central?

In the second part of the analysis, I look at the three articles together, drawing out the key narrative techniques used to construct contemporary feminist activism. Analysing how stories about feminism are told, paying particular attention to taken-for-granted assumptions, allows us to expose what Clare Hemmings (2005; 2011) calls the “political grammar of feminist storytelling.” Here, I focus on what work this political grammar does in terms of locating race and racism within – or, more commonly, outside of -- narratives of feminist activism, asking: What “common sense” assumptions about feminism are made? What implications do these have in terms of race? In particular, I focus on the framings of 1) contemporary feminism as a continuation of a white-defined feminist past, presented as universal, 2) feminism as a unified

community, and 3) feminism as “diverse” and “happy.” These narratives erase power differences between women (including, but of course not limited to, race) as well as a multitude of feminist organising and theorising in Britain, past and present. They both shape and reproduce dominant trends within British feminism which centre white women as the rightful subjects of feminism. To conclude, I will address why these narratives matter to feminist politics.

Feminism in The Guardian

The Guardian has a history of positive coverage of feminist politics from the late 1960s onwards (Kira Cochrane, ed. 2010a). It is the only British newspaper which regularly documents feminist activism and has been consistently publishing articles documenting a “new” or “young” feminist movement in Britain since 2006 (Jonathan Dean 2010, 395). This coverage is almost universally supportive in tone; as Kaitlynn Mendes has found, of all UK (and US) newspapers, The Guardian is “undoubtedly the most sympathetic to feminism” (Mendes 2011, 147). The paper counts a number of explicitly --- predominantly white --- feminist journalists among its staff, and also commissions (pro-)feminist content written by freelance journalists, “experts”, bloggers and activists. Its consistent coverage and pro-feminist approach lie behind my decision to focus on The Guardian in my research.

The intertextuality of media and activist feminist discourses should not be underestimated. Articles about feminism by Guardian journalists are often generated through interaction with feminist activists as these communities overlap in terms of actors, networks, and friendships. It is therefore rarely a case of disengaged journalists writing about activists. So while this article analyses media representations of feminist activism, these also form part of a wider feminist discourse. In other words, these are also feminist representations of feminist activism, and need to be held accountable as such.

The most sustained work on representations of feminism in The Guardian in the last few years -- particularly as these relate to racism and whiteness -- has been done by feminists (of colour) online. As just one example, one of the articles I analyse below was critiqued on the Black Feminists blog at the time of its publication (Adunni Adams 2012). On a few occasions, critiques by feminists of colour of white feminists’ racism have also been published by The Guardian. In particular, comment pieces by Renee Martin (2010), Chitra Nagarajan and Lola Okolosie (2012), and Okolosie (2013) published on The Guardian’s “Comment is Free” blogⁱ, should be noted for their direct challenges to the dominance of white definitions of feminism. Unfortunately, such comment pieces appear to have a limited effect on the narratives of feminism presented in the more prominent and regular news and feature articles. The positioning of black feminist

perspective as comment --- i.e. opinion --- is significant in highlighting how such challenges are framed and contained.

Critiques of white feminism

My analysis of feminism, race and representation is based on an engagement with critiques by black feminists and feminists of colourⁱⁱ of what is often referred to simply as “white feminism.” Writing in the early 1990s, Razia Aziz defined this term as “any feminism which comes from a white perspective, and universalizes it” (Aziz 1992, 296). White feminism is not any feminism espoused by white feminists, but rather an articulation of feminist politics which is inattentive to histories of colonisation and racism, and thus “subsists through a failure to consider both the wider social and political context of power in which feminist utterances and actions take place, and the ability of feminism to influence that context” (Aziz, 296). “White feminism” as a descriptive term has been revitalised and gained increasing traction also in recent discussions online. Reni Eddo-Lodge, writing in response to the defensive resistance to the term put up by many white feminists, spells out the link between white feminism, whiteness and white supremacy, describing white feminism as “the feminist wing” of whiteness, “a ubiquitous politics of race that operates on its inherent invisibility... positions itself as the norm... [and] refuses to recognise itself for what it is” (Eddo-Lodge 2014). White feminism thus theorised is rarely a conscious political position, but the result of white feminists’ failure to recognise their specific location as white or to position themselves and their politics in the social and historical context of white supremacy. It rests predominantly on what Ruth Frankenberg (1993) called a colour- and “power-evasive” discursive repertoire, which is central to the reproduction of whiteness.

Even when white people learn about racism and learn to recognise whiteness as a racist political structure, this does not, as Sara Ahmed (2004) notes, necessarily challenge racism. For white people, recognising whiteness (as that which has previously been invisible to them) is often understood as in itself an anti-racist act (as the racist white does not ‘see’ whiteness). Yet, as Ahmed suggests, such declarations of “anti-racist” whiteness is just another way in which “whiteness gets reproduced” (Ahmed 2004). As Aileen Moreton-Robinson found through her research on white academic feminists, even when her research participants claimed an anti-racist awareness, they mobilised a “middle class white woman” subject position “structurally located in a white cultural system that exists as omnipresent and natural yet invisible” (Moreton-Robinson 2000a: 147). Even though Moreton-Robinson’s participants positioned themselves as race-aware, they reproduced whiteness through failing to interrogate their own racialised power and privilege.

One way in which white feminism is reproduced is through the marginalisation of the scholarship of feminists of colour, where their concepts and theories remain unrecognised within dominant feminist knowledge communities until they are taken up by white feminists, who, through institutionally racist structures and political citational practices become credited as originators. Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012) and Sirma Bilge (2013) both note this process in relation to white feminists' adoption and appropriation of the concept of intersectionality as something which becomes unmoored from its black feminist genealogy. As a white feminist, my usage of the term "white feminism" --- a term which is in everyday use among feminist of colour --- within an academic journal situated within a white-dominated academic feminism similarly runs the risk of being complicit in such white forms of knowledge production. I take this risk because I believe the term is important for what it reveals about whiteness as a structuring force within dominant forms of feminist politics. But it is vital that white feminists who use this term as a form of analysis hold on to and cite the term's development by feminists of colour naming a structure of feminist politics which systematically excludes them.

There is of course a long history of critical engagement with the many ways in which white feminists have reproduced racial inequality through marginalising, silencing, tokenising and/or misrepresenting the knowledges and experiences of women of colour (e.g. Carby 1982; hooks 1982 and 1984; Amos and Parmar 1984; Mohanty 1988; Moreton-Robinson 2000b; Srivastava 2005). In an article about white women's "loving, knowing ignorance" about women of colour, Mariana Ortega notes how the important messages of such critiques, which white feminists now eagerly quote to demonstrate their "Third-Waveness," are "forgotten at the very same time that they are viewed and repeatedly brought to light" (Ortega 2006, 58). This repeated "forgetting" of the messages of critiques highlights the ways in which white feminists still hold power to shape feminist narratives: Even when anti-racist critiques are quoted by white feminists, these are incorporated in ways which do not threaten their dominance.

Ortega describes her engagement with texts such as Audre Lorde's much (mis)quoted "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (in Lorde 1984) as "an exercise in archaeology, an excavation of important texts that somehow have become ruins," in order to emphasise the contemporary relevance of many such critiques, regardless of when they were written (Ortega, 58). Similar to Ortega's strategy, I here "excavate" three anti-racist feminist critiques from the last 30 years, which, because of their focus on representation, are highly relevant to my own analysis. If we understand representation as being about the production of knowledge (Stuart Hall 1997), it is clear that issues of representation have been central to challenging whiteness within feminism.

The first text, "White Woman Listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood", by Hazel Carby (1982), was written as a response to the white-dominated women's liberation movement in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Carby --- alongside other black feminists --- argued that the women's liberation movement did not account for power differences between women, nor the impact of racism on black women's lives in Britain. Relating this to representation, Carby highlights how white feminist narratives of women's history which fail to locate these experiences in terms of race and class render invisible the experiences of black women: "...when they write their herstory and call it the story of women but ignore our lives and deny their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing history" (Carby 1982, 223). Carby's explicit demarcation of "history" from "herstory" constructs white feminists' failure to account for black women's experiences (and white women's oppressive relationship to black women) as colluding with dominant forms of knowledge production (i.e. that of white men). As white feminists are in a position of power in relation to Black feminists, this exclusion has a silencing effect on black women.

Around a similar time in the U.S. context, Audre Lorde's open letter to Mary Daly (1984) challenged Daly to account for her problematic representations of women of colour in her well-known book *Gyn/Ecology*. Why, Lorde asked, did Daly only include non-white and non-European women in her work as "victims and preyers-upon each other" (Lorde 1984, 67)? Lorde writes of her own words being "misused" and "utilized ... only to testify against myself as a woman of Color," by Daly quoting them only in her chapter on "African genital mutilation," while excluding them from other chapters where they could have been equally relevant (Lorde, 67--68). This leads Lorde to ask whether Daly "ever really read[s] the work of Black women" or whether she just "fingers through them for quotations" (Lorde, 68). Lorde's critique highlights how Black feminists' work, even when white feminists claim to engage with it, is frequently appropriated in problematic ways. Often, it is used by white feminists to legitimate their own positions, simply becoming further cultural capital accrued by white feminists to maintain their positions as ultimate authorities on feminism.

The third text, Ien Ang's "I'm a feminist but... 'other' women and postnational feminism" (2003 [1995]) responds to white feminists who have, in a limited way, attempted to take on board critiques such as Carby's and Lorde's. Whereas Carby addresses a white feminism which is wholly ignorant of the experiences of black women, and Lorde addresses a white feminism which can only construct women of colour as victims, the feminism which Ang speaks to is one which has attempted to "include" women of colour as agents. Writing within the Australian context, Ang highlights how white feminists have responded to women of colour's criticism with a desire to make feminism more "inclusive":

As a woman of Chinese descent, I suddenly find myself in a position in which I can turn my 'difference' into intellectual and political capital, where 'white' feminists invite me to raise my 'voice', qua a non-white woman, and make myself heard. (Ang 2003 [1995], 190)

Ang criticises this "politics of inclusion" approach, as it still fails to alter power relations between differently positioned feminists: Premised as it is on a centre and a periphery, the most entitled members remain at the centre, making decisions about who else to "include." In this way, Ang argues, white feminists act as the rulers of a multicultural nation, where "too often the need to deal with difference is seen in the light of the greater need to save, expand and improve or enrich feminism as a political home which would ideally represent all women" (Ang, 203). In addition to remaining within a power-evasive frame, Ang highlights how the inclusion of women of colour's "voices" can be used by white feminists to demonstrate a multicultural diversity which is more about image than reality, and implicitly acts as a defence against any further critiques.

Drawing Carby's, Lorde's and Ang's work together, key issues related to feminism, race and representation are identified. Carby's critique highlights a failure on the part of white feminists to acknowledge that black women exist, and that their histories and experiences differ from that of white women. Lorde similarly points to a silencing of women of colour's agency within white feminist narratives. Her letter also highlights the problems of misrepresentation and appropriation which occur when white feminists use women of colour's work only to legitimate their own. Ang questions the ways in which women of colour have become visible within feminist discourse. For both Lorde and Ang, the question of why white feminists include the words and "voices" of women of colour, is foregrounded. Is it truly about wanting to hear what women of colour are saying, or is it a cursory attempt to prove credibility as someone who has addressed race, while still maintaining a position of power to define feminism?

These texts identify three (intersecting) patterns of problematic representations: 1) silencing and marginalisation, 2) visibility in the form of inclusion politics, and 3) appropriation and misrepresentation. Moving on to analyse the Guardian articles, I will show how such patterns are embedded also within these contemporary representations of feminism. As such, they are instrumental in perpetuating feminist narratives which continue to centre the white feminist subject.

Representing the new feminist activists

The three articles under discussion, "Let's make some noise" (Sian Norris 2008), "Feminism is not finished" (Kira Cochrane 2010b) and "Feminists hail explosion in new grassroots groups" (Alexandra Topping 2012), all portray contemporary British feminism as an activist movement. My aim is not to single

out individual journalists for critique, but rather to look at how a field of feminist discourse is mapped out through which particular narratives and logics emerge (a newspaper article is of course also the end product of an editorial process involving several people and institutional conventions). In this section I briefly present a content analysis of each article, focusing on who and what is represented.

The earliest article, from November 2008, is framed through a profile of the Bristol Feminist Network (BFN). It begins by describing a meeting where BFN members are compiling the results of a project collecting media representations of women. The article describes how “new feminist networks [are] forming around the UK,” and includes the Glasgow Feminist Network, The Waves (Cardiff), Edinburgh Feminist Network and the London Feminist Network as examples of these new groups (likely chosen to reflect geographical diversity).

“Lads’ mags” are presented as the number one focal point for contemporary feminists, although the article also stresses that feminists organise “around an incredibly broad range of issues,” specifically identified as abortion rights, equal pay, violence against women, and the sex industry (framed as porn and prostitution). The predominant focus on the sexualisation of culture, and the framing of sex work as porn and prostitution (defined as “male violence against women” by one of the activists quoted) signals a gender-only focus, with sexual exploitation of women presented in isolation from intersections of race and class.

There is no mention of ethnic diversity or race within the article, and it can be assumed that most of those interviewed for the piece are white (because these are majority-white feminist groups). While this is not a problem in itself, the framing of the article as representative of new British feminism --- as “chart[ing] the rise of the new feminist networks” (my emphasis) --- participates in a white-washing of feminist activism, where feminists of colour are marginalised, if not erased altogether.

In sharp contrast, the second article, from July 2010, painstakingly represents feminist activism in Britain as multi-ethnic and diverse. The picture accompanying the online version of the article depicts Million Women Rise, an annual march in London led by women of colour. The majority of the women in the picture, chanting or singing, are black and Asian. Coupled with the headline “Feminism is not finished”, the picture is clearly aimed to illustrate a racially diverse feminist movement.

The article, at over 2,000 words, is the most in-depth piece of the three. It begins with a profile of a young feminist, involved with the group Sheffield Fems, whose enthusiastic activism is described as marking her as “exactly the type of feminist” celebrated in the 2010 book Reclaiming the F Word (by Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune). This sets the scene for the article: While relatively new “converts” to feminism are quoted, the expertise and analysis of feminist

activism is provided by a core group of high-profile feminists, with the words of Redfern and Aune, Natasha Walter (journalist and author), and Kat Banyard (founder of UK Feminista and author) framing the content of the article. These white women are positioned at the centre of the new feminist movement.

Two feminists of colour, Suswati Basu and Shahida Choudry, feature prominently within the narrative of the article. Basu is profiled about half-way through the article, with a whole paragraph highlighting her involvement with various groups. While described as “embod[ying] the movement’s drive and excitement,” Basu is not in fact herself quoted. Shahida Choudry is the subject of the final two paragraphs. Described as “a 40-year-old mother, who lives in Birmingham and has worked in the domestic violence sector throughout her career,” Choudry is quoted as saying that although her work “has been driven by feminism, it’s only recently that I’ve started to frame it like that.” But the reader is not invited to speculate as to why Choudry has only recently found the language of feminism relevant. And while, as a domestic violence professional, she is clearly an expert on women’s rights, she is not framed as such. Instead, her affective experience of feminism is prioritised, quoted as describing the “amazing” feeling of marching down the streets as part of Million Women Rise.

Throughout the piece, feminists are portrayed as being concerned with range of issues, albeit starting again with “lads’ mags”. Other campaigning issues mentioned include LGBT rights, climate change, sexual objectification, political representation, sexual violence and the criminal justice system, the sex industry and porn, violence against women and abortion rights. A vague reference to “international issues” is also made.

The third article, published in April 2012, focuses on young women, beginning with a profile of a teenage girl who has started a feminist group at her school in London. She is pictured alongside other members of her group in the online version of the article; the majority if not all of them white. As the article progresses, other grassroots feminist networks, including UK Feminista, Object, Anti-Porn Men Project, Orkney Feminist Network and the Slutwalk marches, are also named. Kat Banyard and UK Feminista are positioned as the experts on current feminist activism (the article concludes with a brief Q&A with Banyard), alongside Object, a campaigning group against the sexual objectification of women. A representative of the Fawcett Society (a long-established “women’s equality” campaigning organisation) is also called upon to provide expertise on the state of women’s rights in Britain. In a similar vein to the first article, there is no attempt to represent racial diversity, nor to reflect on differences among women in general and feminists in particular.

In terms of feminist issues, this article resembles the previous two. The young woman whose “story” frames the article is described as having been spurred into action after seeing “lads’ mags” sold in her local corner shop, the

sexualisation of culture again framed as the primary reason why young women are turning to feminism. Recent attacks on abortion rights and sex education are also mentioned, and in the final paragraphs the economic effects of government cuts and the gender pay gap are highlighted. Yet these issues are raised in a quotation from the Fawcett Society representative, not by young activists themselves, who are portrayed as relentlessly preoccupied with sexual objectification and porn.

While race is absent, the article emphasises other forms of diversity, describing how the new feminists “do not fit easily into stereotypical moulds: young and old, men and women, urbanites and country dwellers.”

The political grammar of Guardian feminism

Having outlined whom and what are included in these articles, I now shift attention onto the underlying narratives which construct feminist activism in particular ways. My methodology draws on that of Clare Hemmings’ (2005; 2011), whose work interrogating how “feminist stories” are told, has usefully focused attention on the “political grammar” which structures the narratives of western feminist theory. Hemmings presents an analysis of articles in feminist journals, focusing specifically on “gloss paragraphs, introductions or segues” which tell a story about the historical development of feminist theory. It is, she suggests, by homing in on those narratives which most often go unremarked upon that we can identify underlying assumptions about what constitutes the (his)story of feminism (Hemmings 2011, 18). By unpicking these assumptions, we are better able to see what is taken as “common sense” and given truths, as well as what is repeatedly written out of history. Questioning such perceived truths can often tell us a great deal. Here, I am interested in what they tell us about who has the power to define feminism, and about the place of race, racism and whiteness within these definitions. The discussion which follows homes in on three such “common sense” narratives which are consistent across the articles, and highlights their problematic effects in terms of race.

Narratives of continuity: Picking up the baton from a white feminist past

One common narrative emphasises the continuity of contemporary feminist activism with earlier feminist movements, most prominently with those of the 1960--1980s. An explicit link to this history is established in the 2008 article, with the BFN described as “a natural extension of the consciousness-raising groups that sprang up during the 1970s and 1980s” (Norris 2008). At another point, an older feminist is paraphrased as describing the BFN as “represent[ing] a new generation for her,” positioning young feminists as the metaphorical daughters of her generation. Already in its title (“Feminism is not

finished”), the 2010 article asserts that contemporary feminism is a continuation of an ongoing movement. The increasing visibility of feminist activism is pointed to as evidence that “we seem to be entering a new heyday for British feminism,” and new feminist books are described as “repackage[ing] longstanding arguments” (Cochrane 2010b). In the 2012 article, Banyard is asked how contemporary protests are “different from the first wave of feminism.” Her response emphasises that while technology and socio-economic and political formations may have changed, “the fundamentals of feminist activism remain the same” (Topping 2012). I am not suggesting that establishing a connection to earlier feminist movements is problematic in itself, as presenting contemporary feminism as an ahistoric phenomenon would make little sense. But two assumptions require unpicking within this narrative logic.

First, the feminist past which is presented as universal is in fact a very particular history. The reference to consciousness-raising groups, for example, invokes the white-dominated women’s liberation movement of the 1970s. Although many different forms of “consciousness-raising” are practised within social movements, the particular type of consciousness-raising groups referenced here emerged as a central staple of the women’s liberation movement in 1970s Britain, and such groups tended to be predominantly white (Gill Philpott 1982 [1980], Sue Bruley 2013, 731-2). Similarly, when the second article claims that new feminist books, all written by white women, repackage earlier feminist arguments, a completely white feminist lineage is created between contemporary and historical feminist theory. The invocation of “first wave” feminists, also point to a specific white-defined Anglo-American lineage, which has divided feminist history into distinct “waves”. This is a contested metaphor which has been critiqued for erasing different genealogies of activism by women of colour, for example by Kimberley Springer who, writing in the US-context, highlights how extensive histories of black feminism are “drowned out by the wave” (Springer 2002, 1061). In all these examples, an element of a specific white feminist history is used to stand for a universal feminist past.

Secondly, the narrative of continuity with earlier forms of feminism rests on an assumption that this chronological evolution has been devoid of conflict or contestations over what feminism is and who it belongs to (and who belongs to it). This assumption, in combination with the fact that the past referenced is a particular white-defined history, re-inscribes whiteness into contemporary feminist activism. This narrative relies on the understanding of feminism as something already clearly defined, so that it becomes simply a case of young feminists “picking up the baton” and taking the movement forward. This logic has problematic resonances. By focusing on promoting a feminism which already exists, the narrative grants authority to those forms of activism which are recognised as “feminist” by normative white standards, while marginalising or

erasing unrecognisable forms from the narrative. It thus places limits on what feminism is and can be.

Significantly, this narrative participates in a forgetting of different histories of women's activism, in particular black and Asian women's extensive organising in post-war Britain, including (but by no means limited to) the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), which held a number of national conferences in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Julia Sudbury 1998). Black British feminism as a self-defined political movement, which emerged prominently at this time, is also erased (Valerie Amos et al 1984 (eds); Heidi Mirza 1997 (ed); Ranu Samantrai 2002).

The multitude of anti-racist critiques of white feminism which took place within activist networks during the 1970s and 1980s are also absent from this narrative. A more complex feminist legacy of difference, conflict and power struggles is erased, including conflicts and acrimonious splits within activist groupsⁱⁱⁱ. The combined erasure of histories of women of colour's activism, as well as conflicts and struggles over (anti-)racism within white-dominated feminist communities, leads to the marginalisation of feminists of colour's contributions to the development of British feminism.

Narratives of feminism as unified community

A second narrative frames feminism as a community, where an emphasis on unity and sameness takes priority over any recognition of difference. This is particularly evident in the 2008 article, in which the building of a supportive community is constructed as so central that it appears almost as an end in itself. The BFN is described as "bring[ing] together people of all ages to talk about feminist issues and plan direct action," and as offering "a space where women can talk freely about how discrimination affects their daily lives" and "the chance to meet a large group of like-minded progressive people" (Norris 2008). A similar point is stressed in the 2012 article, where a young feminist is quoted describing her relief at finding "all those like-minded people together ... you just think: 'Wow'" (Topping 2012). Feminist groups are portrayed as spaces which offer relief, support and refuge from a politically hostile and alienating society. The repeated use of the descriptor "like-minded" also constructs these spaces as free from conflict and differences of opinion. The focus on "lads' mags" in particular highlights the falsity inherent in this representation. As anyone invested in (British) feminist politics will attest to, the focus on "lads' mags" and pornography as objects of protest is in no way universal, and feminists have such highly divergent approaches on these issues that activists with opposing views rarely organise together. Anti-porn and 'lads mags' activism has also been heavily dominated by white feminists. As Chitra Nagarajan writes on the Black Feminists blog, while the pornography industry is deeply racist as well as sexist,

“[m]ainstream feminist discourse ... rarely includes race analysis” and black women are “rarely contacted when events on pornography are organised” (Nagarajan 2013).

The 2010 article is the only one out of the three which recognises differences between women as a potential challenge. However, this challenge is still framed within the “community” narrative, as it centres on the question of how widespread the new movement is, with the solution premised on bringing more women “in.” Natasha Walter’s words frame this discussion:

...but the questions we’ll all be asking ourselves over the next year are: how wide is this new wave? Will it touch people beyond the usual suspects? Will it galvanise energy more widely in the grassroots – bring in other classes, women of other backgrounds? (Walter in Cochrane 2010b)

Walter’s quote positions women from “other classes” and “other backgrounds” as outside of feminist politics, and as passive audiences waiting to be “brought in.” Rather than framing their exclusion as a result of race and class oppression, the article presents their outsider-status as inevitable, with the solution premised precisely on the type of politics of inclusion that Ang objects to. The white and privileged feminists at the centre of the movement are implied as innocent and blameless in this process. As Walter is further quoted:

I’m not saying that women [in the movement] aren’t asking these questions. So it’s not a criticism of what’s going on, but it’s the challenge. I feel that we’re beginning to see more happening, but at the moment it’s still quite focused in narrow areas. We need to see it spread. (Walter in Cochrane 2010b)

The “spreading” of feminism as defined by white women is presented as common sense. Underlying this narrative is an assumption that all women benefit from being part of the feminist community. Looking at this narrative through the lens of race and difference, it is clear that differences between feminists are overlooked in order to construct a picture of a harmonious community. This familiar narrative is one which has been repeatedly interrupted by activists occupying marginalised positions within such communities. Speaking to a mainly white feminist festival audience in California in 1981, Bernice Johnson Reagon warned that political spaces designed as places of safety set themselves up to fail or make themselves politically irrelevant. Premised as they are on sameness, they collapse when “different” people enter and refuse to fit within already established parameters for inclusion. Johnson Reagon’s essay, subsequently published in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, argues that progressive feminist politics must instead be based on building coalitions across difference. Truly coalitional spaces, she notes, feel nothing like “home” – in fact you are more likely to feel out of your depth and like you might “keel over any minute and die” (Johnson Reagon 1983, 356). Biddy Martin and Chandra

Mohanty, similarly suggest that any “notion of feminism as an all-encompassing home” is inadequate, and potentially dangerous in its failure to recognise difference (Martin and Mohanty, 1986, 192). Both Johnson Reagon’s and Martin and Mohanty’s critiques highlight how people whose identities are marginalised within political communities are unlikely to experience such spaces as safe and comforting. Constructing them as such is not politically neutral but perpetuates a power-evasive narrative centring white women’s belonging within feminism.

Narratives of a diverse and “happy” feminism

By “happy” feminism, I mean two things. One is the relatively straightforward observation that these articles present an idealised representation of feminist activism. A BFN meeting is described in terms of its “bustling atmosphere,” the network described as going “from strength to strength” (Norris 2008). Young feminists are described as “having enormous energy, ambition and idealism, and in many cases are doing brilliant work” (Cochrane 2010b) and as “passionate and unafraid to take direct action” (Topping 2012). The enthusiastic language constructs feminism as a wholly positive force and, linked to my previous point, emphasises affective experiences of affirmation and belonging. Anti-racist critiques which position white feminists as oppressors of women of colour become unintelligible within this narrative.

The other aspect of “happy” feminism engages with Sara Ahmed’s work on diversity. Ahmed describes “diversity language,” as it is used by (higher education) institutions, as a “‘feel good’ politics” (Ahmed 2012, 69), with “diversity” invoked in mission statements and brochures to make claims about success. Claims to be “diverse” imply that organisations have succeeded in eradicating institutional inequalities. The imagery and vocabulary of diversity, and in particular ethnic diversity, therefore often preclude any discussion of continued inequalities such as racism. In one example which resonates closely with feminist activist communities, Ahmed observes how white-led LGBT organisations have claimed “diversity pride” in ways which silence discussions about racism within LGBT and queer communities. She suggests that “diversity becomes a technology for reproducing whiteness: adding color to the white face of the organization confirms the whiteness of that face” (Ahmed 2012, 151).

Ahmed’s observations are useful for examining how “diversity language” is employed in The Guardian’s representation of feminism. The 2010 article in particular promotes the “diversity pride” narrative, with the prominent featuring of women of colour to visually represent the feminist movement. The description of Suswati Basu as “embodying” the new feminist movement (without quoting any of her own words) reveals an anxious desire to portray a multicultural movement. As with the picture of Million Women Rise, it is women of colour’s bodies in particular which are being visualised to represent feminism^{iv}. When a

space is dominated by white people, people of colour's mere presence can be used as a shield from critique, and to demonstrate diversity. In Ahmed's words, whiteness is "the world as it coheres around certain bodies. We [people of colour] symbolise the hope or promise that whiteness is being undone" (Ahmed 2009, 41).

While the 2008 and 2012 articles construct feminism as a much whiter affair, elements of diversity language resonate across these pieces also, in particular through the emphasis on a national diversity of feminists and a diversity of issues (Norris 2008), and the description of feminists as "young and old, men and women, urbanites and country dwellers" (Topping 2012). Whether explicitly (or implicitly) addressing race, or focused on other facets, a language of diversity is used to demonstrate the strength and positive character of feminist activist communities.

While I am not suggesting that feminist activists are portrayed as simplistically "happy" (a lot of the activists are described as spurred by anger), I am using this descriptor in order to emphasise the affective dimensions of these representations. The idealised positive depictions of a strong, passionate and diverse feminist movement has an emotional pull, and such positive affect forecloses the possibility of naming such "unhappy" issues as continued racism within feminist spaces.

Conclusion

While this article has focused on a small sample, I suggest that these articles are indicative of a hegemonic trend, with similar narratives and assumptions mobilised widely across The Guardian's feminist discourse. Through broader research on feminism in The Guardian, I have found depictions of British (and Anglo-American) feminism vacillating between almost exclusively white and a diversity discourse premised on a white-defined politics of inclusion^v. This is not to suggest that these narratives remain rigid and unchanged. In fact from 2008 to the present, there has been a marked shift towards representing feminism as a more racially diverse movement. The link to activist feminism is clear here, as this shift reflects increasing levels of discussion about racism within activist communities during this time, forced onto the table by feminists of colour. The formalisation of the Black Feminists group in 2010 and its central role in promoting an explicitly named intersectional politics is particularly significant (e.g. Black Feminists 2013). We can see this beginning to have an effect also on the Guardian discourse. For example, in December 2013 (after I wrote the first draft of this article), a lengthy feature article declared the arrival of "the fourth wave of feminism" (Cochrane 2013). The article represents a racially diverse constituency of feminists tackling a broad range of issues, including (state) racism, and also claims that the majority of activists whom the

writer spoke to “define themselves as intersectional feminists.” This, undoubtedly, is progress, and the result of persistent challenges by black feminists to the dominant whiteness of British feminist communities. Yet the specific narratives I have identified above have not in fact significantly altered in this piece. The concept of intersectionality becomes incorporated --- one might say appropriated --- and represented as a central organising principle of contemporary feminism when in fact the term has been strongly resisted and vocally dismissed by many white feminists (e.g Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett and Holly Baxter, 2012; Moore 2013). This retrospective recuperation of intersectionality follows the same narrative of inclusion as the 2010 article, used to demonstrate the progressiveness of contemporary feminism while simultaneously erasing feminists of colour’s work to get it on the agenda in the first place. This narrative of “expanding diversity”, as Mary-Jo Nadeau identifies in a different context, suggests that “moments of inclusivity appear as autonomous developments disconnected from the context of broader struggles” (Nadeau 2009, 9). It leaves the stories of anti-racist feminism untold and thus whiteness unchallenged.

Why do these white feminist stories matter? I suggest that deconstructing these narratives is important not only for contesting their white-washed accounts of history, but even more so for what they reveal about the present. As Hemmings suggests in her delineation of the historiographical approach to feminist storytelling, interrogating how particular stories come to dominate shines light on contemporary power structures within feminism: the power to define a particular narrative as the story of feminism “enable[s] a particular present to gain legitimacy” (Hemmings 2005, 118). Thus, we see how the dominance of narratives which centre the histories, experiences and comfort of white feminists legitimates the contemporary representation of white women as the central feminists subjects. Although feminist activism is being increasingly represented as inclusive and diverse, it is clear from the narratives which frame these representations that the discourse of white feminism remains intact. As the inclusion narrative leaves whiteness unmarked at the centre, the practices of white feminists are never under scrutiny and their politics are not questioned for the ways in which they may exclude or discriminate. Returning to Aziz, it is clear that these articles construct a white feminism which is inattentive to white women’s particularity as well as oblivious to their role within structures which perpetuate racial inequality.

Considering the many years of critique feminists of colour have mounted against white feminism, the occlusion of these histories of activism throughout the Guardian’s feminist narratives --- perpetuated through the narratives of continuity, unity, and diversity --- is not simply an oversight or a lack of knowledge. Rather, it points to a deep unwillingness to attend to anti-racist critiques of white feminist racism in the present. It reveals a deep anxiety and desire to keep hold of the power to define feminism on white terms. Although

challenges to these representations will become increasingly difficult to ignore, for now the whiteness of mainstream media provides white feminism the necessary legitimacy and power to keep reproducing itself.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Irene Gedalof and Lani Parker for helpful comments on early drafts of this article. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers for supportive and constructive comments.

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ⁱ 'Comment is Free' pieces are often only published online, but (usually shortened) versions are also sometimes printed as editorial pieces in the paper.

ⁱⁱ I alternate my usage of 'black feminists' and 'feminists of colour' throughout the article, in recognition that these descriptors mean different things in different contexts, and in attempt to respect self-definitions. Black feminism in the UK is predominantly used as a political category including all racially minoritised feminists, whereas in the US context, it refers mainly to a political project by African American feminists.

ⁱⁱⁱ The breakdown and subsequent split of the *Spare Rib* collective over issues related to racism, Zionism and anti-Semitism in 1982-3 is perhaps the most well-known of such conflicts (*Spare Rib* collective 1983).

^{iv} Notably, in 2010 *The Guardian* published a feature about Kat Banyard, which was accompanied by a smaller sidebar listing "the next famous five young feminists". The list included Basu as well as four white women. Basu was the only person pictured ("The Next Famous Five... Young Feminists" 2010).

^v As I am currently exploring in my wider research, the politics of race and representation in *The Guardian* become slightly more complex when including its coverage of women's activism in other countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, but this is outside the scope of my analysis here.