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White Feminism Falls Short

by Caitlin Brennan

(English 1101)

White feminism, with its lack of intersectionality, is really just thinly veiled white supremacism. Look around at the faces of these movements, listen to their voices; what do you notice? Almost all, if not most, of the feminists we hail are white — straight, white, cisgendered women — and their brand of ‘equality’ was never intended for everyone. Despite more recent, visible strides towards equality, much of which have garnered feminists’ media attention, a lot of said coverage and its subsequent calls for action, despite their well-intended nature, fall short of the mark. Unsurprisingly, white women’s equality doesn’t extend to women outside of their immediate, able-bodied, straight, lily-white world. Their failure to understand inequality, beyond how it extends only to themselves keeps white feminists’ version of ‘feminism’ rooted in an oppressive and exclusive history of white supremacism.

What is white feminism? What is intersectional feminism? “The Huffington Post describes white feminism as a subcategory of the feminist movement that tends to prioritize the advocacy and oppression of white, heterosexual and cisgender women” (Huffington Post qtd. in Oxnevad). In brief, white feminism is ‘equality’ — created *by* white women, *for* white women — rebranded as ‘feminism’. Alternatively, the idea of intersectional feminism goes beyond the average white woman’s immediate securities. Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘intersectional’ as “related to the way in which different types of discrimination ([i.e.] unfair treatment because of a person’s sex, race, etc.) are linked to and affect each other” (“Intersectional”). Given these definitions, intersectional feminism applies to feminism in that it is feminism “with... consideration of class, race, age, ability, sexuality, and gender as intersecting loci of discriminations or privileges” (Zimmerman 54). In short, intersectional feminism acts as a true platform of equality, managing to understand certain overlapping depths and characteristics of a person’s overall identity. Using these classifications as a lens, the contradictory ‘feminist’ model emerges as an umbrella term, encapsulating many conflicting feminist gospels. Knowing this, oversimplified categorization remains impossible; instead, the boundaries of these separate beliefs become clearer when you look at the history of feminism as a series of waves.

Everyone’s first introduction to feminism differs based on their own background and — in some cases — their privilege. According to Constance Grady, the expression itself is “now a major object of cultural discourse — which has led to some very confusing conversations because not everyone is familiar with or agrees on the basic terminology of feminism.” She writes that the idea that more than one subcategory of feminists had taken shelter in the feminist roster dates back to “1968 when a New York Times article by Martha Weinman Lear ran under the headline ‘The Second Feminist Wave’” (Grady). After its initial adoption, Grady explains, this “wave metaphor became a way to describe and distinguish between different era and generations of feminism.” Conversely, Grady does admit, “The wave metaphor can be reductive. It can suggest that each wave of feminism is a history of different ideas in wild conflict.” Despite feminism’s overall goal of equality and unification, using ‘wave’ terminology “can reduce each wave to a stereotype and suggest that there’s a sharp division between generations of feminism,” (Grady) namely illustrated by the furthering dissonance between white feminism and intersectional feminism.

Grady clarifies the ‘first wave’ of feminism dating back from “1848 to 1920” as having originated during “the West’s first sustained political movement... the suffragettes of the late 19th

and early 20th centuries.” Regardless of its supposed ties to the abolitionist movement, the suffrage movement, and the overshadowing work of “Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony eventually established itself as a movement specifically for *white* women, one that used racial animus as fuel for its work” (Grady). You see, Stanton and Anthony were racists, motivated by their animosity for black men who received the right to vote before they did (Grady). Admittedly, Anthony is quoted having written, “I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro” (“Celebrating”). This is unmistakable racism and bigotry on her part. A characteristic both white modern day feminists and white scholars all too willingly forget. As the suffrage movement went on to fight, furthering the rights of white women while largely ignoring black women, when their efforts finally amounted to the 19th Amendment of 1920 (Grady). Moreover, despite proclamations that the Amendment finally granted all women the freedom to vote, rampant racism continued to prevent black women, and black Americans overall, from voting (Grady).

The 19th Amendment also excluded Native women — despite having been here long before white women — since Natives were not recognized as United States citizens until the Snyder Act of 1924 (“Voting”). Even then, “with the passing of this citizenship bill, Native Americans were still prevented from participating in elections because the Constitution left it up to the states to decide who [had] the right to vote” (“Voting”). In fact, it wasn’t until 42 years after the 19th Amendment passed that each U.S. state recognized the voting rights of Native Americans (“Voting”). Still, despite all such laws and regulations, the rules written on paper were not fully enforced and protected for several decades due to racism and further discriminations on the parts of both white American people and the (majorly white) American government (“Voting”).

Following the first wave, Grady explains “The second wave of feminism [started] with Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which came out in 1963.” This wave began to center on the anger and dissatisfaction of housewives “who passed it along through a whole chain of well-educated-middle-class white women with beautiful homes and families. And it gave them permission to be angry” (Grady). The second wave’s victories for white women included: equal pay, educational equality, and greater control of their reproductive health care (Grady). More importantly, Grady says, it extended into the realm of female perception, “changing the way society thought about women.” Even though “the second wave cared about racism too... black women increasingly found themselves alienated from the central platform of the mainstream women’s movement” (Grady). Put simply, many of the concerns for white women existed in a privileged realm distinctively estranged from the concerns of black women. While white women found solidarity in fighting for jobs outside of the domestic sphere, black women were continually typecast as nothing more than low lowly domestic workers (Grady). Whereas white women wanted access to “contraception and abortions”, black women wanted to stop the genocide actively being committed against them, and disabled women as well, via deliberate racist and ableist forced sterilization (Grady). The truth is, these two issues, while interconnected, are not the same. They are not on the same level and, to be frank, do not register with the same importance. White women wanted to further their autonomy, while black women desired some level of autonomy, period. The second wave may have attempted to positively affect all women — including women of color — but it merely succeeded in furthering the divide between white and non-white feminists.

As for the third wave, Grady writes, “It is almost impossible to talk with any clarity about the third wave because few people agree on exactly what the third wave is, when it started, or if it’s still going on.” So, if the third wave is undefined, how do we categorize, or even recognize, the fourth wave? According to Tegan Zimmerman, “intersectionality is the dominant framework being employed by fourth wave feminists [which] is more apparent on social media” (54). Zimmerman argues that “the fourth wave is characterized by an intersectional feminist framework, exemplified when analyzing the discourses on racism, feminism, and... representation” (54). The phrase itself,

become popular with Amanda Fortini's: "The Feminist Reawakening: Hillary Clinton and the Fourth Wave" which "brought acute sexism and gender-centric issues to the forefront" (Fortini 2008 qtd. in Zimmerman 55). Zimmerman believes the fourth wave's only obvious difference is its roots in social media technology, however, "the fourth wave, inevitably, to be a new wave, must also distance itself ideologically" (56). Consequently, the fourth wave must possess notably different beliefs and when compared to the third wave in order for there to be a fourth 'wave' at all. So what exactly are these distinct differences or additions in ideology? For some, it's the direct fundamental contribution and response of minorities in feminism.

Women of color, when asked about feminism, "agreed that the practice of intersectional feminism has been more commonly accepted within feminist circles as the best opponent to 'white feminism'" (Oxnevad). In fact, the concept of intersectional feminism "was [originally] developed by [a] black feminist... to help people understand what it's like to be affected by multiple forms of power and injustice at the same time" (Poo qtd. in Oxnevad). Simply put, "White feminists are often unaware of and unwilling to admit their privilege within the feminist movement" which alienates and ignores women who, for whatever reason, fall outside of the cookie-cutter binary. Nyar Afrika, a black, queer, woman explained her frustration with white feminism, saying "White feminism is a class of its own. It's funny. It's a joke. It's hilarious. It's comical and it doesn't give a shit about you as a black woman" (Afrika). She elaborated that "In white feminism, the concept of unity as a show of support for 'women's issues' is usually based on white, middle class, cisgender, able-bodied women. Not queer women. Not black women. Not poor women. Not women who work as sex workers or strippers. Not women who live with disabilities. Not the uneducated woman struggling to make ends meet. No. It's all about 'one size fits all'" (Afrika). Essentially speaking, a white feminist is not necessarily a white woman. And while yes, white feminists are, in fact, more often than not, white women, white feminism is not about the race of the so-called activist, rather the race of everyone else the activist has yet to fully and truly care about. White feminism isn't about feminists being white; it's about those so-called feminists' failure to care about those who are not.

In order for white feminists to grow beyond white feminism, they need to acknowledge their own privileges — whatever those may be. If you are white — that's a privilege. If you are straight — that's a privilege. If you are — cisgender, not overweight, not disabled, not mentally ill, are middle-class, have access to higher education, have autonomy over your body, live in a first-world country — each one of these things, is another layer of privilege you have as an advantage over someone who does not. *That's* the point of intersectional feminism. It is recognizing how all these layers, all these aspects impact women, in different degrees, but *always* at the same time. The second part of intersectional feminism has to do with challenging the inequality and injustices that exist within and beyond your power which make up the unjust framework of our and other societies. Now that you know this, you have a choice, you can ignore the information presented, and take the side of the oppressor, or you can stand up, and raise up the voices of the oppressed. When white feminists speak up, they need to speak always acknowledging these layers, always acknowledging their privilege. To remain silent would be to side with the oppressive historical narrative plaguing women who do not fit the straight, white, cisgender, able-bodied mold.

Unfortunately, more often than not, even when presented with this information, "White feminism and white privilege not only presents social constraints to the feminist movement, but [actual] political threats, as well" (Oxnevad). For these reasons, white feminism cannot and will not save the world, as it has been proven to, time and time again, promote and protect the interests of other privileged, white women. For example, "52% of white women voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election... with a reporting 94% of black women having voted for Hillary Clinton" (CNN qtd. in Oxnevad). More than half of the United States' eligible white female voters, consciously elected a male candidate who, while perhaps protecting one of their best interests, had not only publicly condemned and ignored but mocked the needs of the marginalized. White women made their stance

very clear. If the feminism in question does not directly benefit them, they're not interested in standing up for it. On the other hand, black women, who have to face both misogyny and racism on a day-to-day basis, made the point of standing up against a candidate who was explicitly both sexist and racist, doing what was within their power to protect not only themselves, but women of *all* colors. *That*, my friends, was a display of intersectional feminism.

White feminists' failure to be intersectional despite being confronted with their privileges and their related intersects have shown their decided willingness to put their whiteness before their womanhood. Since their brand of feminism focuses only on affirming empowerment for white women, it doesn't end up promoting equality, just "whiteness." It is because of this paradigm, if your feminism isn't intersectional, if your feminism is, in fact, white feminism, there is little left to hide the fact it is merely thinly veiled white supremacy — not the promotion of femininity, but rather the promotion of white superiority. In the words of Nyar Afrika, "Unless it's intersectional, fuck it. Stay away from it."

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