'This book is not only important for what it tells us, but for what it asks of us.' AMAL AWAD

# WHITE TEARS BROWN SCARS

RUBY HAMAD

‘*White Tears/Brown Scars* is a powerful and scholarly critique of white-privileged ‘innocence’. This is essential reading for anyone surprised that 52% of white women voters chose Trump. Hamad has written a devastating analysis of ‘the white Damsel’ and the way her tears and dual status are routinely weaponised against much of the globe. If (racial) ignorance is bliss, then this book is a shattering of some supremely comfortable white illusions about race and gender, in Australia and beyond.’

Melissa Lucashenko

‘Reading *White Tears/Brown Scars* is not an easy experience, but it is a life-affecting one. Despite Ruby Hamad’s remarkably concise but insightful review of racism, colonialism and life in the modern West, this is a deep exploration of how our circumstances, behaviours and unconscious attitudes shape power dynamics and our existence as humans on a planet we ravage daily.

This is also, more specifically, a nuanced, multi-layered portrait of the place of white women in the West, their role in upholding white supremacy as a norm, and how they relate to women of colour.

As an Arab woman growing up in the West, I had come to accept, too often, the demeaning treatment I received from my white peers, without interrogating it. For me, and for many like me, it has been a case of quiet survival, never raising ourselves too high because when we do, we threaten not only the structures we co-inhabit, but the relationships that work as long as the power imbalance is maintained.

It is not correct to say that Hamad’s book is simply eye-opening or a revelation. It is an uncovering of so much we have hidden away, afraid to acknowledge even to ourselves. Reading this book, it occurred to me how deeply women of minorities internalise their experiences of mistreatment or discrimination.

What you read in Hamad’s book cannot be unread or overlooked or forgotten. But commendably, this book is not a self-pitying rant with no way forward. It prompts every reader to revisit their experiences through a revised lens, but not to remain in a state of anger or repose. This book asks us all how we can live together. It asks not just how we can do better, but how we can do right so that humans, no matter their class, their skin shade or their cultural conditioning, can claim a place in society that is fair and just to all.’

Amal Awad

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MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS
An imprint of Melbourne University Publishing Limited
Level 1, 715 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
mup-contact@unimelb.edu.au
www.mup.com.au

First published 2019


Text design and typesetting by Megan Ellis
Cover design by Peter Long
Author photo courtesy Onni Elliott
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

9780522875584 (paperback)
9780522875591 (ebook)

For the forgotten ones

ضربني وبكى
وسبقني واشتكى

*He hit me and wept …*
*Then he was first to protest*
Arab proverb

# Contents

# Author’s note

Writing about race is a fraught business, as is writing about gender. Words and phrases you assume would be easily received exactly as you intended them are bafflingly interpreted as something else entirely. Concepts like the definition of racism itself, arrived at over generations of painstaking scholarship, research and experience, are stubbornly brushed aside in favour of ‘the dictionary definition’.

This note sets out the main terms and concepts I use throughout this book, both for the benefit of the reader and to safeguard as best I can against misrepresentations made in bad faith. My own experience as a media writer of eleven years’ standing tells me that this will almost certainly occur regardless, but consider this my best attempt to ward off that regrettable inevitability.

I have opted to use ‘brown’ in the title, both as a poetic licence indicating a catch-all for all those people who don’t qualify as ‘white’, and to indicate where I place myself in the race scheme of things. However, ‘brown’ (in which I include all non-black people of colour) will be differentiated from ‘black’ throughout the book. It is important to understand that virtually all terms used when discussing race are imprecise because race is an imposition, not a biological reality. As such, who is white and who isn’t is not as simple as it once was. While often used to denote the skin colour of Europeans in relation to Native Americans and (enslaved) Africans, ‘white’ is better understood as an indication of racial privilege: who is considered white is less about how pale they are (many Arabs have fair skin) and more about whether they are the right kind of pale. Whiteness is more than skin colour. It is, as race scholar Paul Kivel describes, ‘a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence [are] justified by their not being white’.[1]

Whiteness is the privileging of those racial, cultural and religious identities that most resemble the typical characteristics associated with fair-skinned (Western) Europeans. Consequently, the terms ‘white’ and ‘people of colour’ are not descriptive—they are political. When we talk about ‘white people’, we are not really talking about skin colour but about those who most benefit from whiteness. When we talk about ‘people of colour’ we talk about those who are excluded. I continue to have misgivings about the terms—due to the proximity of ‘people of colour’ to ‘coloured’ as well as the danger it can collapse the needs and issues of certain marginalised racial groups into others—but the lack of better terms necessitates their use at times. Expressions such as ‘non-white’ imply whiteness is a neutral default, and it can get cumbersome and redundant to list the various categories of ‘brown’, ‘black’, ‘Asian’, ‘Arab’ and so on individually.

Speaking of Arabs, perhaps surprisingly, ‘Arab’ turned out to be one of the most contentious and vexing terms used. This usage is admittedly imperfect since what constitutes an ‘Arab’ is a continuing debate, and not all of these peoples—such as many Egyptian Copts and Lebanese ‘Phoenicians’ (Canaanites)—accept the Arab identity itself. The reasons for this are complex but

important to acknowledge. Identity remains a work in progress in the cradle of civilisation. I explain why throughout the book, but for now, I use the term ‘Arab’ broadly to indicate not just ethnic Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula, but also Arab-speaking populations in North Africa and the Levant. These regions include countries that now have an Arab-speaking majority who may not necessarily be of Arab descent.

A content note: some of the out-of-use historical terms employed by colonisers to degrade women of colour are reproduced in this book in order to discuss their meaning and usage. I have chosen, however, not to reproduce certain slurs that are still in widespread use and/or are particularly heinous, though I concede that this is a fine line and a subjective one at that.

Finally, a note on the featured interviews. I spoke with more than two dozen women from across the Western world during the course of writing *White Tears/Brown Scars*. Not all of them are directly quoted, but all of them informed the shape of this book. It has been quite the eye-opener to discover how similar the experiences of women of colour who have never met can be. Some of these women I know personally and/or professionally, some I’d previously interacted with on social media, others were either referred to me or contacted me directly asking to participate. Interviews took place in person, by telephone, via Skype, and in a few cases over email. Where an asterisk appears beside a name, the interviewee has chosen to remain completely anonymous, and where there is a first name only, that is her real first name.

# Part 1

# The set-up

# 1

# When racism and sexism collide

*How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.*

Richard Dyer[1]

*We talk about toxic masculinity, but there is also a toxicity in wielding femininity in this way.*

Luvvie Ajayi[2]

I almost missed the message in my 'other' Twitter inbox from a journalist in the United States asking to speak to me about an article I'd published in *Guardian Australia* three months earlier. The piece had proved to be very popular and very polarising and had resulted in far more global attention than I was used to or felt comfortable with, and, still reeling from it all, I assumed she was messaging me to ask if she could interview me for a story. I cautiously agreed to supply my email but was unprepared for what came next.

Lisa Benson, an Emmy-winning African-American television journalist in Kansas City, was writing to me not to request an interview, but to let me know that shortly after my piece had been published in May 2018, she had shared it to her private Facebook page, where two white female colleagues, Christa Dubill and Jessica McMaster, had seen it. The next day, Dubill and McMaster complained to management and Lisa was suspended immediately for 'creating a hostile working environment based on race and gender'. Shortly thereafter, her contract was terminated.

A little backstory: Lisa had already sued her television station employer for racial discrimination, alleging her race was used to determine which stories she was assigned. This includes being sent on her own to interview a Ku Klux Klan member in his home, a situation that was uncomfortable and possibly unsafe. A separate lawsuit was brought by another colleague of hers, a male African-American sports anchor who claimed he was routinely passed over for promotions in favour of less qualified white men. Lisa was still working for the organisation while awaiting her court date, and told me she had shared the article in the hope that her colleagues would understand and empathise with her situation. Instead, it appears they used it as a handy justification for getting rid of a 'problem' employee who'd inadvertently broke one of white Western society's unspoken but most binding rules: don't challenge or even acknowledge implicit racial bias—or if you do, be prepared to suffer the consequences.

The article that apparently cost Lisa her contract and brought us into each other's orbit was titled 'How white women use strategic tears to silence women of colour'.[3] It was one of hundreds I've written over the past decade or so while I've been working in the media. This one, however, was a particularly painful and personal column to write, drawing on an emotional and

psychological journey during which I had slowly (perhaps too slowly) and devastatingly come to realise that the way society saw me, the way people interpreted and responded to my behaviour and my words, had very little to do with me as a person, my intentions or the situation at hand, but everything to do with their ingrained perceptions of me based on my ethnicity. I highlighted what I had by then come to realise was a pattern so predictable it worked like a blueprint, predetermining how interpersonal conflict between women of colour and white women plays out.

Brown and black women, I wrote, are deeply impacted, often without realising it, by the grind of living in a society that does not recongise, let alone reward, their value. Overwhelmingly disbelieved when they try to shed light on their experiences of gendered racism, the lack of support they receive adds to the initial trauma, leaving them questioning reality as well as themselves. Most devastating is when this happens in interactions with white women, often women they consider friends or at least friendly. Drawing on the notion of what author Luvvie Ajayi has referred to as the weaponisation of white women's tears, I outlined how, when challenged by a woman of colour, a white woman will often lean into her racial privilege to turn the tables and accuse the other woman of hurting, attacking or bullying her. This process almost always siphons the sympathy and support to the apparently distressed white woman, helping her avoid any accountability that may be due and leaving the woman of colour out in the cold, often with no realistic option—particularly if it is a workplace interaction—but to accept blame and apologise.

At the time of writing the column, I was attempting to make sense of a number of conflicts I'd had that followed this unwritten script and left me wondering why, whenever I tried to approach a white female friend or colleague about something she had said or done that had had a negative impact on me, I somehow always ended up apologising to her even though I was certain I was the one who had been wronged. With diminished confidence and second-guessing my own recollection and interpretation of events, I was left floundering, either angry and unheard, or terrified I would lose a friend or a job if I didn't back down.

It was the work of black and brown women that helped me dissect what was happening. Women like FeministGriote on Twitter, who wrote a fantastic thread about the experiences of the many black women who have 'a story about a time in a professional setting where she attempted to have a talk with a WW [white woman] about her behavior & it has ended with the WW crying … The WW wasn't crying because she felt sorry and was deeply remorseful. The WW was crying because she felt "bullied" and/or that the BW [black woman] was being too harsh with her.' The end result, due to the potency of white women's tears, is that the black woman is left with the options of either apologising or risking being 'blackballed' or fired. The world doesn't stop for the tears of black women, FeministGriote concluded, and it is up to white women to stop this destructive behaviour.

I shared these tweets as well as Ajayi's blog post on my public Facebook page, asking brown and black women if they'd experienced anything similar. The response was so overwhelming that it was clear the phenomenon was not a bug in our society but a feature of it. One Arab woman, Zeina, shared her experiences of being 'petted' by older white women, drawn to her thick, curly, waist-length brown hair. One at her workplace 'kept touching my hair, pulling my curls to watch them bounce back. Rubbing the top. So when I told her to stop and complained to HR [human resources] and my supervisor, she complained that I wasn't a people person or team member and I had to leave that position for being "threatening" to a co-worker.'

What makes white women's tears so potent and renders black and brown women so apparently 'aggressive'? In her blog post, Ayaji explains that white women's distress is 'attached

to the symbol of femininity … These tears are pouring out of the eyes of the one chosen to be the prototype of womanhood; the woman who has been painted as helpless against the whims of the world. The one who gets the most protection in a world that does a shitty job overall of cherishing woman.'[4]

Ajayi's words struck a chord with me and led me to look back over my life, forcing me to recognise with some degree of horror that what many people see when they look at me is a generic facsimile of an Arab, someone without their own inner world. As I explained in the column, it was not weakness or guilt that had led me to capitulate to these white women so many times but an awful realisation that I could not win, that there was simply no way I could convince others to see the issue from my perspective. 'The manufactured reputation Arabs have for being threatening and aggressive follows us everywhere,' I wrote. 'In a society that routinely places "wide-eyed, angry and Middle Eastern" people at the scenes of violent crimes they did not commit, having a legitimate grievance is no match for the strategic tears of a white damsel in distress whose innocence is taken for granted … Whether we are angry or calm, shouting or pleading we are always seen as the aggressors.'

Of course, I was nervous about writing all this—so nervous I considered withdrawing the piece. When my editors sat on it for two weeks I was convinced they were aghast I could have even written such a thing, and told myself it was for the best it remained unpublished. This was not because I don't stand by it—I do. Rather, it was because I knew there would be resistance to its contents and the inconvenient truths it spoke. I knew I would be falsely accused of dividing the feminist movement and of racism against white women. And I knew it would be another mark against my name in the suffocatingly white Australian media space that loves to extol the virtues of 'diversity' but had already been slowly marginalising my public presence year after year. Even knowing all this, when the editors finally gave it the green light, asking only for a minor change to update the opening paragraphs, I knew I couldn't withdraw it and that these kinds of things have to be said precisely because they make people uncomfortable in the best way—the way that forces them to examine their own implicit biases and question their own relative power and privilege.

Even so, I was unprepared for the response. It got off to a slow start because the Northern Hemisphere was still asleep and Australia, as ever, rarely acknowledges the value of anything unless it has an international stamp of approval. By the end of the day, however, the piece had been picked up by *The Guardian* in the United States and the United Kingdom, and then all hell seemed to break loose. I was already bracing myself for those people I knew would be willing and able to misrepresent my ideas—not just to discredit the column as a piece of writing, but to discredit me as a person—but I had assumed the backlash would be contained to Australia and, within that, mostly to feminist circles, where the audience would at least be familiar with many of the concepts described, such as 'white tears', which has gained currency across the internet and in activist spaces as a riff on 'male tears'. Neither of these concepts mocks legitimate distress: they refer to the fragility with which some individuals who belong to a dominant group respond when their dominance is questioned. More on white fragility in a moment, but suffice to say that what I thought was going to happen both did and did not happen.

I was vilified, but not only by local feminists. It seemed everyone—from overt white supremacists to 'classical liberals' to progressives—had something to say about the article, and I was accused of everything from 'bullying an entire race of women' to setting back the cause of feminism to being responsible for the election of Donald Trump. What I did not predict was that the backlash would be global and would even rouse the ire of prominent conservatives, such as

Jordan Peterson. The furious response was so swift, with an undercurrent so violent, coming from so many directions, that I was unable to keep up with it. Overwhelmed, I impulsively deactivated my Twitter account and wrote a panicked midnight email to *The Guardian* begging them to take the piece down in the hope it would make it all stop and I could go back to being just another moderately successful Australian media writer and not the contemporary equivalent of Hitler. That is not my hyperbole, by the way—I was literally accused of being as genocidal as the Nazis.

I knew my editors wouldn't see the email until the morning, so the more pressing question was how to sleep in this anxious state, convinced as I was that my career (and possibly my safety) was surely over. But then my natural stubbornness and self-belief reasserted itself and it struck me that this was precisely the reaction the online mob wanted—for me to be afraid, to be sorry, to try to take it all back, to beg for forgiveness. More importantly, I knew that even if I did apologise and retract the article, it wouldn't be enough and the mob would never let me live it down. They weren't acting out of genuine critique and disagreement: they were acting out of an entitlement and fury that I had so publicly challenged their self-ordained superiority. I had taken something that was common knowledge among communities of colour and lobbed it like a grenade into one of the bastions of white liberalism, naming it loudly and clearly in one of the most recognisable mastheads in the Western media. I also knew, from watching women of colour before me who had been publicly humiliated and bullied by thousands of people online, that an apology would not placate the bullies—even if I meant it, which I certainly would not—and would only validate their narcissistic injury. They would use it to attack me again and again, to discredit everything I said and did from that moment on. I fired off another email to my still blissfully sleeping editors, instructing them to ignore the previous one, then reactivated my Twitter account to cheekily let the world know that I definitely was not sorry and wasn't going anywhere, by posting a link to the Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers classic 'I Won't Back Down'.

And that's when the turnaround began. The hate mail and threatening tweets gave way to messages of support and encouragement, again from all across the world. White women told me they had seen this very thing happen too many times; some told me they were ashamed to say that they themselves were guilty of it. Men of all races wrote to say that they either knew all too well what I was talking about, or that I had given them a framework through which to interpret behaviour they had noticed but could not fully explain. But most importantly, there were the testimonials from women of colour, the very people I had written the article for in the first place. There were Arab women, and African-American women, and Indigenous women, and Asian women, and Latina women, and Native women who shared the piece again and again, telling me their own stories, their own tragedies, about their stolen years when they had wondered why this kept happening to them and if they were 'going crazy'.

It's become a cliché for writers to note that online haters are far louder than lovers, that detractors can't wait to tell us exactly what they think of us (not much!) while those who value our work often opt to do it quietly. But for the first time in my career, and on the piece where I had perhaps least expected it, the positive response tipped the balance and shouted down the very loud, very outraged and very numerous haters. My column had reached its rightful audience. It was at that point I realised this was bigger than me. Bigger than my piece.

But what, exactly, is 'this'?

The term 'white fragility' was coined by sociologist Robin DiAngelo to describe the defensiveness into which many white people retreat in any discussion that reminds them of their

race. DiAngelo, who is a white American, has worked as a diversity trainer in the United States, crisscrossing the country to run workshops for mostly white people on how they can contribute to a more racially inclusive workplace. In her 2018 book *White Fragility*, she describes white fragility as a state of stress set off by the discomfort and anxiety white people feel when their internalised sense of racial superiority is challenged:

> Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offence. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy.[5]

It is crucial to understand what we are talking about when we talk about 'white tears'. The kind of distress we are analysing may well feel genuine, but it is neither legitimate nor innocent. Rather than denoting weakness, DiAngelo writes, it signals power: 'Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness … it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.'[6]

DiAngelo explores white fragility in explicitly race-based workplace interactions between women, but the issue goes further back in history and deeper into the present and it is important to look at gendered racial dynamics beyond the professional context. These dynamics also shape and taint interactions between white women and women of colour in social situations. The catalyst need not be explicitly about race: the act of being challenged or politely disagreed with or, heaven forbid, 'called out' by a woman of colour *about almost anything at all* is enough to raise the defences and trigger a reaction based not on the immediate situation but on the mechanisms of white fragility.

Race is not something that can be untethered from everyday life. It is always there, whether acknowledged or not. And until we reckon with it, it will continue to wreak havoc on all our lives. More important—and I can't emphasis this enough—is the response from onlookers, for it is how they choose to interpret and respond to the conflict unfolding before them that determines the outcome and reinforces the respective behaviours, dooming them to be replayed again and again. When I began this book, my central question was: What happens when racism and sexism collide? My answer requires that we begin with the notion that the extent to which we, as individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds, correspond to the stereotypical features associated with our gender in the minds of others is the decisive factor determining how they perceive us and treat us. It impacts our lives in ways many of us may have never considered. Whatever the intersection—be it gender identity, sexuality, disability, or something else—every experience of marginialisation is made more acute when race is thrown into the mix.

I came to write that original *Guardian Australia* article through a process of piecing together different interactions with various women over a number of years that always seemed to turn out the same way regardless of how I handled them. Whether I was angry or disappointed, confrontational or apologetic, just the act of critiquing or disagreeing with a white woman was perceived and then punished as though I were a bully.

I need to stress that the interactions I discuss in this book—my own and those involving other women—are all incidents where the woman of colour is responding to the actions or words of the white woman or women. It is not about women of colour demanding the right to 'bully' white women, nor is it a claim that women of colour are always blameless; both assertions have been levelled at me, and both are ludicrous. It is about the way in which women of colour who attempt to address an issue that is detrimental to them in some way almost invariably come up against a wall of white fragility so immovable, so lacking in empathy, so utterly unrepentant, that the first few times it happens, you naturally assume you are imagining it, that you are the problem, that you should have gone about things differently and you will go about things differently from now on. So you do. You adjust your reactions, you try to play nice, you watch your tone. But it keeps happening—angry, sad, yelling, begging, it doesn't seem to matter—until at some point you, as a woman of colour, realise in shock that regardless of the facts of the situation, the real problem isn't even about you. It is how white society regards you. It is how white society treats you. Because you, as a woman of colour, do not measure up to their image of what a woman is and should be in order to be believed, supported and defended.

Many white women reading this now will know exactly what I am talking about, because this very thing happens between men and women: the condescending dismissals, the exaggeratedly mystified claims of unprovoked hysteria and unhinged emotion, the gaslighting. What I and many women of colour before me, and no doubt after me, are asking is that white women open their minds and hearts when women of colour talk about the double whammy we are dealt. That even as we agitate against the sexism of a male-dominated society, because it is also a white-dominated society we are also assailed with racism, and often this comes from white women who turn their sanctioned victim status on us. White women can oscillate between their gender and their race, between being the oppressed and the oppressor. Women of colour are never permitted to exist outside of these constraints: we are both women and people of colour and we are always seen and treated as such.

As a black woman, Lisa Benson does not experience sexism in the same way white women do, nor does she experience racism in the same way as a black man. Rather, she is subjected to both racism and sexism at once, a compounded form of oppression now known as misogynoir. Similarly, because I am an Arab woman my work has made me a frequent target of online abuse, including epithets such as 'whore for Hezbollah' and declarations that I 'have clitoris envy as well as penis envy' (an allusion to female genital mutilation). The details and severity often differ, but what is common about the experiences of women of colour is an unspoken assumption that we always lack a defining feature of womanhood that white women have by default.

When Lisa first reached out to me, I was overcome with intense guilt about what I had done to her, that she had lost her job because of me, that I should have known better. But this reaction is itself internalised racism, scolding people of colour for whatever bad thing happens to us, telling us it's our own fault, keeping us in check by taking away our will to speak. Self-blame is a potent teacher: it can drain your self-belief, make you want to hide, compel you to beg for forgiveness even when you have done nothing to be forgiven for, all in the hope you can somehow undo the abuse, the scorn, the injustice and go quietly back to where you were before.

Only … where were we before? Where was I before I wrote that article? Where was Lisa? We were unknown to each other on opposite sides of the world, both of us attempting to assert and defend ourselves, only to be branded 'combative' and 'bullies'. Even before we speak, women of colour are positioned as potential aggressors. Look closer at the interactions you see at work, on social media, at social functions. Make a note of just how often a woman of colour who

stands her ground, demands respect, or gives anything less than overwhelmingly positive affirmation to others is met with harsh rebuke and swift ostracism.

This nexus of race and gender, which can feel less like an intersection on a road being travelled and more like a permanent address to which we are chained, means that women of colour are rarely given the benefit of the doubt, and even more rarely considered worthy of sympathy and support. If we are angry, it is because we are bullies. If we are crying, it is because we are indulging in the cult of victimhood. If we are poised, it is because we lack emotion. If we are emotional, it is because we are less rational human and more primitive animal. A white woman may well be punished for an emotional outburst when interacting with men, but if she is engaged in a terse interaction with a woman of colour and she becomes emotional, by which I mean either angry or distraught, with or without actual tears, the deeply embedded notions of gender and femininity are triggered and it is the white woman who is likely to be vindicated.

How so? Because, as academic and author Richard Dyer writes, 'White people set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail.'[7] Over the course of centuries, as the proponents and beneficiaries of colonialism, whites have set the standards both for humanity as a whole, embodied in the white man, and for femininity that is designed to complement the white male and so is embodied in the white woman. In settler-colonial societies—and it is countries that began as settler colonies that are my greatest focus in this book—women were assigned dual roles and regarded as protected victims but also unsuitable for governing alongside white men or of living freely. When white women attempted to assert themselves, as the white suffragettes (themselves frequently openly racist) discovered for many a decade before they finally succeeded, they were treated with derision and accused of being unnatural. Married women were legally considered property, and rape within marriage impossible—the marriage contract was itself irrevocable consent. But when white women were perceived to be threatened by Indigenous or enslaved populations, and this was a manufactured threat to keep both the Natives and white women in their place, then they were jealously guarded as white men have always guarded what they consider to be their property, and the men of colour who were alleged to have threatened or abused the white man's 'property' were punished severely, disproportionately and horrifically. It is impossible to say how many innocent black men in the colonies that became Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Australia and the United States were jailed or killed on the pretext of having victimised a white woman.

This culture of fear has stayed with us. This weaponisation of White Womanhood continues to be the centrepiece of an arsenal used to maintain the status quo and punish anyone who dares challenge it. Western society is built on a foundation of profound inequality that persists but that many people remain invested in denying, and though less attention has historically been paid to the role of gender in the construction of race and racial dynamics, as well as in the global interactions between the West and 'the Rest', I want to address how women of colour fit into this dynamic. Although strides in legal rights and some gains in 'diversity' and representation have been made, what our society has yet to confront seriously is what I believe is the greatest obstacle to liberation and equity: the conscious and unconscious biases against women of colour that we all carry and that are shaped and cemented by years of socialisation into a system that is fundamentally racist and sexist.

In order to understand these biases and the damage they cause—as well as how they are so ubiquitous that they remain invisible to many—we need to study the stories that occur at the intersection of race and gender in a capitalist society. For it is at this very junction that the biases governing all our lives come into play, shaping and tainting interactions between women but also

reflecting wider society in the process.

# 2

# Lewd Jezebels, Exotic Orientals, Princess Pocahontas

## How colonialism rigged the game against women of colour

*The oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another. Smoking, going to the baths, painting her eyelids and drinking coffee—such is the circle of occupations within which her existence is confined … What makes this woman, in a sense, so poetic, is that she relapses into the state of nature.*

Gustave Flaubert describing Egyptian women to Louise Colet, 1853[1]

*I know the track from Spencer's Gulf and north of Cooper's Creek—*
*Where falls the half-caste to the strong, 'black velvet' to the weak—*
*(From gold-top Flossie in the Strand to half-caste and the gin—*
*If they had brains poor animals!, we'd teach them how to sin.)*

Henry Lawson, 'The Ballad of the Rouseabout', c.1900[2]

In March 2012 Alana, a young fan of hit dystopian fiction series *The Hunger Games*, logged on to Twitter under the now-defunct handle @sw4q to share her thoughts on the first film instalment of the much-loved trilogy. *The Hunger Games* world is a post-apocalyptic future where people live permanently on the edge of starvation. As described by the author, Suzanne Collins, many of the main characters range from dark-skinned to, as in the case of protagonist Katniss Everdeen, olive-skinned. In the movie adaptations, Katniss is played by blonde actor Jennifer Lawrence, who dyed her hair brown for the part. As Alana would demonstrate, the early debates over whether or not Lawrence was too white or too curvy to play the near-emaciated Katniss quickly gave way to something far more insidious.

One of the book's most adored characters is Rue, a twelve-year-old innocent whose violent death is avenged by Katniss. Even before the film hit cinema screens, fan forums were rumbling with discontent—a rumbling that would rise to a roar within days of the film's release as more and more fans took to social media to vent their fury at the casting of young black actor Amandla Stenberg as Rue. In the novel, Katniss is instantly drawn to Rue, who seems to remind the older girl of her own younger—though fairer—sister Prim: 'And most hauntingly, a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes but other than that she's very like Prim in size and demeanour.' In keeping with the book's descriptions of the other characters, Rue's race isn't expressly stated or emphasised—a deliberate literary device meant to indicate many generations of race mixing. However, with dark skin and eyes, it's reasonable to assume she is at least likely to look black.

Well, not according to many of the book's fans—including Alana, who tweeted, 'Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the innocent blonde girl you imagine'. It was one

of hundreds of negative comments posted across social media and fan forums that became so ubiquitous they were compiled into a Tumblr blog named Hunger Games Tweets. Many of the tweets were like Alana's, somewhat sheepish but frank about their prejudices, while others ranged from confusion: 'Why is Rue a little black girl?' to outright hostility: 'And for the record, I'm still pissed that Rue is black. Like you think she would have mention [sic] that?'

Of course, 'she', meaning Collins, *did* mention that and what was most disturbing about these tweets, aside from their point-blank refusal to see 'some black girl' as an innocent child, was the ease with which self-professed fans of the trilogy ignored the obvious cues placed by the author by defaulting Rue to white in their imaginations, and then reacted with fury when the film's producers followed the descriptions laid down in the book. The attachment to the ideal of blonde female innocence was so strong that young white fans had turned Rue into an archetype the author had deliberately set out to subvert.

As if to prove this was no mere fluke, two years later a similar outcry greeted a 2014 remake of beloved Depression-era musical *Annie* starring Quvenzhané Wallis. As the *Hunger Games* furore was raging in the background, eleven-year-old Wallis was wowing audiences and critics with her acting chops. At the ripe old age of nine, she had become the youngest-ever Oscar nominee for Best Leading Actress for her star-making turn in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a role she performed at the age of six. This mattered not, however, to many fans, for whom the notion of a cheeky imp like Annie embodied in the figure of a black girl seemed impossible to countenance. The resulting outrage inspired an exasperated internet meme that quipped: '500 years of white Jesus and one black Annie and you still mad?' It's true this case differs from Rue's in that the character of Annie was historically written as 'white'; however, she is not based on a real person. And in any case, given the fictional nature of both films as well as the general lack of representation for women of colour on screen, far more important than any appeals to accuracy is what the sheer scale and venom that greeted the casting of two pre-teen black actors as characters that white people felt ownership of reveals about a deep and ugly problem that goes right down to the very foundations not only of American society, but Western society in general —in particular, those societies that began as European settler-colonies.

The perceived incongruity of a Rue and an Annie who are both black and innocent—and therefore lovable—was not about respecting the source material, since the on-screen Rue was as the book described her. It was a resurfacing of the anxieties and entitlements of the white settler-colonial identity, an identity that has long claimed innocence for itself and guilt for everyone else. More insidious still is the association between female innocence and sexuality, which, although unspoken by the outraged fans, is nonetheless the driving force behind the refusal to see black girls as innocent and lovable. Despite being described as 'dark' in the book, Rue's undeniable goodness transformed her into a blonde white cherub in the minds of readers. From the very beginnings of settler-colonialism, innocence was forcibly stripped from black girls and women through a pervasive and endemic process of hypersexualisation and exploitation by white men that disregarded their personal autonomy, violated their bodies repeatedly, and then projected the responsibility for this fetishisation and objectification back onto the women themselves.

Throughout the slavery era and peaking in the antebellum South, the dominant image of the black woman was that of the insatiable Jezebel. Black historian Deborah Gray White explains: 'In every way, the Jezebel was the counter image of the mid-nineteenth century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudery, indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh.'[3] The

Jezebel was a sensual, animalistic creature governed by her physical sensations and carnal desires. Wildly promiscuous and perennially immoral, the word ‘no’ was outside her vocabulary. Dissatisfied with black male sexual partners, she eagerly sought out white men to copulate with; she was always there for the taking. So driven by sexual urges was she that raping a black woman was considered impossible, both legally because of her status as property and morally because there was no way she could not have wanted it.

The rape and exploitation of enslaved black women was not just rampant: it was endemic. The writings of former slaves such as Harriet Jacobs, as well those of sympathetic white women like abolitionist Sarah Grimke, paint a picture of black girls in their early teens getting routinely bribed with presents and ‘favours’, such as promises of better treatment, for agreeing to sex with white plantation workers or relatives of the owner; resistance was met with punishment by way of a whipping. ‘When he make me follow him into de bush, what use me to tell him no? He have strength to make me,’ one enslaved woman is quoted in the book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Such testimony led the authors to conclude that the rape of female slaves was likely the most common form of interracial sex.[4] The dehumanisation and hypersexualisation of black women was so systematic it was woven into the very fabric of society: their optimal breeding times were the topic of dinner conversations, and they were sold at market in little to no clothing as potential buyers prodded and poked their frequently pregnant bodies to assess their ‘breeding’ potential. Often forced to dress in rags, with legs, arms and sometimes chest showing, they provided a deliberately marked contrast to the fully and heavily clothed white women, which, as professor and cultural theorist bell hooks explains, both reinforced their supposed innate lack of chastity and morality and exposed them to more abuse: ‘The nakedness of the female slave served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability.’[5]

We cannot put a number on how many black girls and women were sexually abused, but we do know that such abuse was the defining feature of their enslavement, prompting Jacobs to proclaim ‘Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women’.[6] The abuse of black women served at least three functions: it terrorised the black population in order to reinforce white domination, it provided a source of continuous labour, and it was a sexual outlet that white men took advantage of in order to maintain the illusion of the moral superiority of white society in an era of supposed sexual chastity.

Were there willing encounters between white men and black women in this period? As many historians and critical theorists point out, any notion of consent has to be considered in the context of institutional slavery, where the power imbalance was distorted beyond what most of us can comprehend today. There were some long-term and possibly affectionate relationships, the most famous being that of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, who had six children together, all of whom, despite being so fair-skinned they could ‘pass’ for white, inherited their mother’s slave status. Though Jefferson never claimed them as his own, the six were all freed when they came of age at twenty-one. They were the only slaves he ever freed; according to the history books, they were absorbed into white society.

Hemings’ story demonstrates the paradox at the heart of white men’s attitudes to black women. Breeding between blacks and whites was ostensibly regarded as an abomination, and sex with blacks as beneath the civilised white, but the evidence of rapes and liaisons was clearly present in the growing population of bi-racial slaves, who were disparagingly known, as Hemings herself was, as ‘mulattos’, ‘coloureds’ and ‘half-castes’ (‘caste’ coming from the Spanish word for ‘pure race’). Bi-racial female slaves, known by such epithets as ‘fancy girls’,

were particular targets for the lascivious Jezebel trope, and were regarded as temptresses and competition by the plantation mistress for the affections of the master—and punished accordingly. They suffered both sexual abuse at the hands of the white man and physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the white woman. 'The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort,' wrote Solomon Northup in his famous memoir *Twelve Years a Slave.*[7]

This image of carnal, animalistic, purely sensation-driven creatures is not a footnote of history but the primary way in which white people in the nineteenth century distinguished themselves from other races and rationalised their right to subjugate them. With characteristic faux objectivity whites regarded themselves as the most highly evolved race, and by these self-serving standards of measurement they deduced that they were the only fully civilised society. The degradation of black women was taken as proof of the women's inherent lascivious nature, even though their sexualisation was forced on them and was conveniently used as evidence of the superiority of the white race, whose morality was embodied in the figure of the virtuous, chaste Christian white woman. White women were not clueless as to what was going on around them, try as they sometimes did to act as though they were. One entry made in 1861 in the diary of Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, a South Carolina plantation mistress, reveals: 'Under slavery, we live surrounded by prostitutes … Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattos one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.'[8]

They say first impressions last, and this certainly seems to be the case when it came to first contact after Europeans landed in West Africa to muscle in on the slave trade. African clothing, appropriate as it was for the steamy tropical climate, was interpreted as lewd nudity; the cultural practices and dances as orgy-like displays of naked lust. In what seems a classic case of projection, the ostensibly sexually uptight and moralistic Europeans projected their own anxieties about sex onto the bodies and minds of Africans—a projection that would not only cement the image of the lewd Jezebel in the minds of white society, but that continues to reverberate to this day as black women and girls continue to be regarded as less feminine, less innocent, less virtuous and more promiscuous than white women.

Worst of all, this divestment from innocence begins from when black girls are as young as five. In 2017, Georgetown University researchers analysed society's perception of black girls, surveying 325 Americans from a variety of backgrounds (though most were white and female). They found that black girls were more likely to be viewed as behaving and coming across as older than their stated age: 'participants perceived black girls as needing less protection and nurturing than white girls, and that black girls were perceived to know more about adult topics and are more knowledgeable about sex than their white peers'.[9]

And suddenly, it doesn't seem all that surprising that so many fans would react so viscerally to 'some black girl' playing innocent little Rue: representation has real world consequences. The Georgetown study also found that in one school district black girls were at least twice as likely as white girls to be disciplined by teachers for minor misbehaviour such as breaking the dress code or loitering in hallways, punished for disobedience, and cited for disruptive behaviour. These perceptions, the researchers concluded, force black girls into adulthood before their time.[10]

Black women are still paying the price of the Jezebel. The history of post-Columbus Western society, from North America to Australia to southern Africa, is one marked by the strict policing of racial boundaries that warned of the cataclysmic abomination of miscegenation but that white

men were nonetheless free to transgress, which they did liberally. I believe that this transgression and accompanying silence of white women is the defining feature of Western settler-colonial society, and yet, despite the historical record, Western society is as reluctant as ever to discuss it, let alone atone for it.

Part of the national mythology of the Australian identity, for instance, is one of hearty frontier men and women of upstanding Christian morals and superior European stock battling and ultimately taming the harsh, inhospitable elements as well as subduing the 'hostile natives'. In 'The Ballad of the Rouseabout' by iconic frontier-era Australian poet Henry Lawson, who himself worked as a rouseabout (an unskilled farm labourer), we get a glimpse of a vastly different social scape. Lawson devotes a stanza to the fetishisation of Aboriginal women by white men, presenting illicit sex as a conquest in which 'half-caste' women would surrender to the advances of the stronger-willed men while the dark-skinned 'full blooded gins' went to the rest. Any sense of shame at this exploitation is quickly allayed with the punchline: 'If they had brains, poor animals! We'd teach them how to sin.'

That Aboriginal women were not regarded as fully human is obvious from the slew of crude names used to refer to them and their objectification, terms that seem tailor-made to assuage any feelings of guilt that may have arisen: black velvet, gins, lubras, piccaninnies. White men with a sexual fetish for Aboriginal women were known as 'gin jockeys', while those who defied white norms and fell in love with them were outcast 'combos' and were even presented with burnt corks as a representation of their charred character. In short, white male settlers masked their violation of Aboriginal women with dehumanising language that positioned the women as inherently promiscuous, undesirable prostitutes too unintelligent to know right from wrong and incapable of being raped. The blame for their degradation was placed firmly on their own communities, who—unlike whites, of course—didn't respect 'their' women enough to keep them chaste.

What would this have looked like from the perspective of Aboriginal women? Historian Ann McGrath argues that some Aboriginal women were able to exercise a degree of agency as elderly women shared fond memories of their relationships with white men. There were consensual relationships and transactions, though these were often not honoured by the white men. 'From the time white men invaded our shores, Indigenous women's sexuality was … represented as something to be exploited and mythologised,' Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*.[11] With white people unable to accept Aboriginal customs on their own terms, Indigenous sexuality was judged through the lens of sexual deviancy. White society 'misunderstood and ignored the social and political ramifications of participating in the Indigenous protocol of exchanging sex as a means of binding white men into relations of reciprocity and obligation'. Conflict, Moreton-Robinson explains, occurred when white men 'did not behave like classificatory male kin who would have reciprocated with goods'. In other words, they took and gave nothing in return.

The sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men was an open secret during the frontier era, able to exist and persist as long as no one showed it for what it was in polite society. It was precisely this kind of attitude—do, but don't tell—that allowed it to continue for so long and eventually be given a 'civilised' rationale through the policy of forced assimilation that came to be known as the Stolen Generations: the removal of light-skinned Aboriginal children from their families for the purposes of subsuming them into white society. The degrading language and characterisations of Aboriginal women as dirty, immoral, disease-ridden and inferior allowed white men to rationalise flouting their own rules of racial separation. When the evidence—their

own children—could be denied no longer, those children were taken and forced to adapt to white society in a crude and traumatic attempt to 'breed the colour out'.

Like African women in what was to become the United States, Aboriginal women were blamed for their own victimisation. However, whereas the children of the former were funnelled into the slavery economy, those of the latter were first neglected and denied and then brought by force into white society. In both places, the labelling of black women as 'easy' served a double purpose: as well as absolving white men of any shame or wrongdoing by positioning black women as less evolved, animalistic and ruled by their own carnal desires, it differentiated black women from white women, thereby justifying the sexualisation of the former and the sexual repression of the latter. This false binary created between white women and all other women is the seed from which white supremacy was cultivated.

In her essay 'Black Velvet', McGrath reveals the extent to which Aboriginal women were objectified and sexualised. Ostensibly a reference to the skin of Aboriginal women, 'black velvet' is better understood as the entitlement white men felt to the women's bodies: some men refused work on remote farms unless sexual access to black women was part of the deal.[12] Any Aboriginal woman who consented to sex with a white man was automatically considered a 'prostitute', and the blame for her degradation was placed on her and Aboriginal men, who were regarded as having sold her. The archetype became so entrenched that it functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy and Aboriginal women and girls in 'respectable' employment, such as domestic servitude, were also expected to cater to the desires of the men of the house. Violence against Aboriginal women was not prosecuted: in a scenario that may sound all too familiar to many women today, one newspaper reported that the rape, torture and murder of an Aboriginal woman in the late 1800s was not prosecuted because the effects would be too detrimental … to the lives of the four white men responsible.

Like the American plantation mistress, white settler women were aware of what was going on and frequently took out their frustrations by blaming the victim. 'The black woman understands only sex, and that she understands fairly well,' scoffed the journalist and travel writer Ernestine Hill. 'She is easy for the taking.'[13] In 'The Squatter's Wife', suffragette poet Louisa Lawson—mother of Henry—laments the ill-treatment of white women on the frontier and alludes to black velvet as yet another of the many trangressions white men made … against white women:

> Bound to one who loves thee not,
> Drunken offspring of a sot,
> Even now at wayside inn
> Riots he in drink and sin,
> Mating with a half-caste gin.[14]

In the new world of European settler-colonies, the labelling of non-white women as promiscuous and animalistic was both the rationale for white supremacy and the key weapon in its arsenal, and it was there where it was applied most ruthlessly. It was not, however, where it was born.

In his classic critique of Western representations, *Orientalism*, the late Palestinian-American academic Edward Said presents a scathing account of how the West constructed an image of the Orient that positioned it as the antithesis of Europe: uncivilised, backwards, barbaric, carnal, weak and feminised. The Orient refers to all that which is not the Occident or West, though Said focuses predominantly on the Muslim and Arab-speaking world. The exotic presentation of a

mysterious, inscrutable Orient, Said argues, helped Europe to define itself as everything the Orient was not: civilised, progressive, compassionate, chaste, strong and masculine.[15] This status as the most highly evolved race, the only race that truly saw and honoured differences between the sexes by respecting the virtue of women, was all the justification Europeans seemed to need to export with much gusto and little mercy this view of animalistic, oversexed, non-sex-differentiated inferior races to wherever they decided to colonise—which was literally almost everywhere. The only countries to have escaped some form of European control are Japan, Korea, Thailand and Liberia.

It may be difficult to believe now, but Arab and Muslim women were also sexually objectified in this manner. In his private letters, French author Gustave Flaubert described Egyptian women as machines who don't discriminate when it comes to sexual partners. Her life of immorality rendered the Arab woman little more than an animal in nature, unlike the superior white European woman to whom Flaubert's letters were addressed. As far back as the seventeenth century, no doubt influenced by the fantastical and embellished tales of the *1001 Arabian Nights*, European writers were producing work on the so-called Orient that imagined it as a land where the taboos of Europe did not apply, full of barbaric unintelligent men and secluded but sensual harem-dwelling women. In 1696 Jean Dumont published *A New Voyage to the Levant*, in which Turkish women appeared to him as 'charming creatures … made for love'. Even the veil, which back then was not limited to Muslim women, was transformed into an accessory of seduction by the Western imagination. To the Italian writer Edmondo De Armicis, the veil was a toy Oriental women used 'to display, to conceal, to promise', while the English aristocrat Lady Montagu described it as a tool that provided anonymity and could disguise love affairs. Rather than the symbol of oppression it is now frequently assumed to be, Montagu suggested the veil gave women the 'entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery'. She had a higher opinion of Islam and the Orient than her male contemporaries, claiming that Turkish women she met in the bathhouse were so horrified by the sight of her boned corset they described it as a box in the shape of a woman's body. These Turkish women then deduced that English men must be far worse husbands than their own for tying their wives up in such a thing.[16]

This presentation of unrestrained Oriental sensuality was not benign. Such representations allowed Western men to project whatever erotic fantasies they had of the exotic Orient onto those women, serving as a means of simultaneously desiring and systematically devaluing the Oriental woman and her culture. As historian Hazel Simons puts it, 'This domination over the native women was part and parcel of European man's power and control of her native land.'[17] Flaubert's Egyptian muse was the courtesan Kuchuk Hanem, whom he described as 'a beautiful creature', albeit a 'fleshy' one with 'slit nostrils'. As she snored in a Cairo bed beside him, he 'thought of my nights in Paris brothels and I thought of her dance, of her voice as she sang songs that were for me without meaning and even without distinguishable words'.[18] To Flaubert, Kuchuk was a stand-in for all Near Eastern women, most of whom he would never even see, let alone get to know. In comparing her and them to the brothels of Paris he is essentially categorising all Oriental women as 'prostitutes', and I do want to stress here that I am not disparaging sex work but highlighting the negative perception of sex work and even sex itself as a hallmark feature of Western society in that time (and arguably still in ours). To look at Oriental women only as sex workers or in relation to sex while at the same time making references to the inscrutability of their dances and language is to again place them on a lesser rung of humanity,

one that is close to nature and far from civilisation.

Near Eastern women were perceived to live a life of both seclusion and sexual excess in their hidden-away harems, and this likeness was reproduced again and again in literature, drawings, posters and even postcards destined for Western eyes and Western consumption.

Interestingly, nineteenth-century Iranian travel writers to Europe represented European women through a similarly distorted and highly sexualised lens, describing them as 'generally pantsless and without a veil', making assertions such as 'virgin women are rare' and claiming people can 'commit fornication ... in any place' without any consequence. Clearly these representations were not realistic depictions of nineteenth-century Europe but an indication that those Iranian writers, like the Orientalists, 'see or imagine the relative sexual freedom of the Other'.[19] They also indicate that wherever one seeks sex and adventure, one can find it. The key difference between them is power. The power imbalance between the West and the East meant the West had the power to keep producing reductive representations and pseudo-knowledges of the 'mysterious' East until those representations came to seem more real than the real.

This power-driven 'knowledge' had disastrous consequences for all colonised women, and none more so than Native Americans. Unlike enslaved black women, Native women were not represented as lewd wantons, but they were nonetheless sexualised and stereotyped through the Princess Pocahontas myth. More than just a Disney princess, Pocahontas was a real woman in history whose story has been appropriated almost beyond all recognition.

As Disney and the popular Western imagination would have it, Pocahontas was a young, free-spirited maiden deeply attracted to the handsome explorer John Smith, whose life she saved by throwing herself between Smith's neck and her father's axe just as the Algonquian chief went to execute the Englishman. As mediator between her people and the white man, the Disney Pocahontas cuts a dignified but magical figure. She is the quintessential noble savage who is so close to nature she can leap through waterfalls unscathed, talk to animals, and paint with the colours of the wind (whatever that means). She understands the inevitability of white civilisation and begs her father to make peace as she falls in love with Smith, who she naturally chooses over the unappealing warrior that her father Powhatan has picked out for her. In the sequel, subtitled *Journey to a New World*, Pocahontas willingly volunteers to sail to England to represent her people before royalty, during which she falls in love with another white man, John Rolfe. After successful negotiations with the crown (of course), they sail into the sunset back to Virginia, presumably to happily ever after.

Except not quite. The real Pocahontas was only ten years old when the middle-aged Smith landed in Jamestown, Virginia. The two never had a sexual relationship, and it's highly unlikely she ever saved his life given the only record of that incident is in Smith's own highly embellished writing, in which he presents himself as the object of many a Native maiden's affections and claims to have been saved in the same way more than once. Her real name was Motoaka, meaning 'flower between two streams', likely a reference to her people's lands, and Pocahontas ('playful one') was her childhood nickname. She did go to England, marry Rolfe and have a son with him, but only after she'd been kidnapped and held in captivity for a year. Converting to Christianity, she took the biblical name Rebecca and was hailed by white society as a successful 'civilised native'. Motoaka never saw her family again: although she and Rolfe did set sail for Virginia from London, she fell ill and died before the ship had even left the Thames. She was twenty-one years old. Her body was not returned home but buried in England, her grave subsequently forever lost following a churchyard fire.

The Princess Pocahontas myth represents a passive sex symbol, the 'Good Indian' who unites

the white man and the Native, the civilised and the savage, the past and the future. But—and this is a big but—through her attraction to white men she also affirms the superiority of white society over her own, and so functions as tacit permission for whites to conquer, assimilate and destroy Native culture. Even her 'princess' status was a fabrication (it is not a role that exists in Native cultures) that imbues the Pocahontas legend with gravity and weight, making her enthusiasm for white society all the more meaningful. As the young, sexy, virginal and animal-like mediator, Pocahontas represents the feminised and inferior Native's willingness to be dominated, penetrated (quite literally) and civilised by the superior masculine white society, as though agreeing to her own erasure and demise.

This imposed legacy of passive submission to erasure continues to haunt Native women today. Angel is a Cherokee and Lakota woman in her early forties with Irish ancestry on her father's side. Communicating online, I asked her what she thought was the main stereotype holding back Native women. Without hesitation, she replied it was the Princess Pocahontas myth, which, she says, reduces Native women to either sex symbols, mystical creatures who can talk to animals, or even to animals themselves. 'I mean, she is a cartoon, we are real people, we don't fucking talk to raccoons and trees!' Angel joked, exasperated.

What's no joke, however, are the real consequences this stereotype has had. The sexualising and animalising of Native women through the perpetuation of the Princess Pocahontas myth is occurring in a context where violence against Native women is so rife that they are up to ten times more likely to be murdered than non-Native women.[20] According to the Indian Law Resource Centre (ILRC), violence against Native women has reached 'unprecedented levels', with four in five Native women in mainland USA and Alaska experiencing violence and one in two experiencing sexual violence. Ninety-six per cent of reported sexual violence against Native women is committed by non-Natives. Incredibly, until 2016 Native Indians on tribal lands were not permitted to prosecute non-Natives despite the fact that the Census Bureau reports non-Indians now comprise 76 per cent of the population on tribal lands and 68 per cent of the population in Alaskan Native villages. Such prosecutions remain a challenge in practice and, as the ILRC states on its website, 'it is unacceptable that a non-Indian who chooses to marry a Native woman, live on her reservation, and commit acts of domestic violence against her, cannot be criminally prosecuted by an Indian nation and more often than not will never be prosecuted by any government'.[21] Add to that data from seventy-one US cities that found 506 murdered or missing Indian woman and girls as of November 2018, and it's easy to see that what is happening to Native women and girls in North America is nothing short of catastrophic. Society just pretends it isn't happening, because the invisibilisation of Native Americans has long been the preferred method of dealing with their deliberate and violent erasure.

The lingering legacy of Princess Pocahontas—the willing exotic princess who chooses intrepid and strapping white suitors and white society over her static, dying culture and community with its unattractive, war-minded men—is a false construction that conveniently gives consent for the eradication of her people. A clear line can be traced from this to the deafening silence around the modern violence against Native women and girls.

The Native Princess myth has taken slightly different forms through the years, falling in and out of favour depending on the needs of the white majority. In *Broken Arrow* (1950), James Stewart's first foray into westerns, she is embodied in the character of Sonseeahray ('Morningstar'), a teenage Apache 'maiden' played by white actor Debra Paget. Sonseeahray meets Tom Jeffords, our almost middle-aged hero, played by Stewart, while she is undergoing a tribal custom in which she becomes the 'Painted Lady', providing wise counsel beyond her

tender years and even able to cure ailments: pulling his injured hand to her heart, she tells Jeffords it 'will never hurt again'. A few days later, she is a normal Native teenager once again and their courtship begins. Like Pocahontas, she rejects the Apache warrior her parents and the chief, Cochise, have chosen for her and marries Jeffords instead. Tragically, but entirely predictably, she is shot by a white settler who breaks the fragile peace treaty Jeffords has brokered with his 'blood brother' Cochise. Her death, we are gravely informed in voiceover, was the seal needed so that peace would hold. Sonseearhay was the sacrifice the Natives had to make, perishing in order that white society might live without guilt or consequence.

Such passive sexualisation in the form of preference and sacrifice for the sake of white men—and therefore civilisation itself—also dominates the historical representation of East Asian women. The quintessential China Doll is submissive, eager to please, obedient and permanently pleasant; she lives for no reason other than to make her white lover happy. Nowhere has she been embodied quite so roundly as in the most-performed opera in the United States today, Puccini's classic *Madama Butterfly*, based on a one-act play that was in turn based on an 1887 smash-hit semi-autobiographical French novel, *Madame Chrysanthème*, by Pierre Loti. Butterfly's love for the US naval officer Pinkerton is both her saving grace and her undoing. The fifteen-year-old concubine is merely a brief infatuation for him. She is a tantalising creature he wants to possess, knowing full well that embracing her will 'crush her delicate wings', but he is also aware that she is ultimately a toy, something with which to pass the time until he marries a proper American woman. Setting Butterfly up in a house overlooking Nagasaki, Pinkerton leaves for the United States promising to return. She spends years pining for him, during which those around her try to convince her he won't be coming back. Eventually he does, but with his wife Kate in tow and only to pick up the son that Kate has agreed to raise. Through the white gaze, becoming a white man's concubine both humanises Butterfly, compelling her to convert to Christianity and designating her as worthy of temporary love, and renders her worthless without him. She must sacrifice herself, and this she does with her grandfather's harakiri knife—but not before placing a small American flag between the fingers of her young, blond son.

It's not subtle. The China Doll renders Asian women—and Asia itself—submissive, primitive, carnal, adoring of white society and, like Princess Pocahontas, preferring white men over those of her own people. Her life is given meaning by the affections of the white man, and this love requires total submission. It's the victory of West over East, told in such a way as to make total surrender appear not only inevitable but desirable. 'I am following my destiny,' says Butterfly, 'and, full of humility, bow to Mr Pinkerton's God.'

More than half a century after Butterfly made her debut, she was updated in the stage musical *Miss Saigon*, and more than 100 years after Pierre Loti's novel, her story was again fetishised in the cult-hit album *Pinkerton* by American indie band Weezer. The album chronicles lead singer and songwriter Rivers Cuomo's infatuation with Japanese women and culture, and though it is outright cringeworthy in parts—Cuomo appears to mimic a broken Japanese accent in 'Across the Sea', which recounts his fan letters from an eighteen-year-old Japanese schoolgirl—there is also an element of self-awareness. In the final song, 'Butterfly', Cuomo plaintively sings of being a young boy catching a beautiful butterfly, trapping it in a Mason jar, and leaving it to die of neglect. Weezer's Pinkterton then does something no Pinkerton has done before: he apologises. The song (and album) ends when Cuomo, borrowing lyrics from Puccini's opera, admits he lied when he promised Butterfly he'd return in the spring when the robin builds his nest. 'I'm sorry,' he repeats, leaving the door to redemption slightly ajar. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Unfortunately, this regret is tempered by the song's self-pitying tone, with its chorus lamenting

our hero's inability to hold on to what he wants as it slips away. Here, 'slips away' is a euphemism for death. Cuomo's Pinkerton is sad but it is Butterfly who actually suffers. How's that for an analogy for the West's relationship to the Rest?

Non-white women as the object of the white male power fantasy, it seems, are simply expected to sacrifice themselves. This sexually available, eager-to-please and infantalised sex object can be traced back to Britain's opium wars with China in the mid nineteenth century. The conflicts got their name because the Brits trafficked opium into China with the intention of creating mass addiction. It worked: more than 12 million Chinese became addicted, and entire cities along the coast were decimated. As Europe widened its territory and indulged its sexual fantasies, it cemented the stereotype.

The China Doll lives on in the mystique that South-East Asia holds for white men. In particular, the twentieth-century encounters between American military men during the Vietnam War were—unsurprisingly considering the circumstances—centred around sex work, giving the Americans, much like Flaubert and his Egyptian courtesan before them, a skewed perception of all Asian women. And they took that perception home with them. This image has so dominated Western views of South-East Asian women that it became a key driver of Thailand's sex industry. Sex tours of South-East Asia remain hugely popular among white men, which ensures that the distorted image of Asian women persists.

'This is what they expect me to be,' Billie*, a 31-year-old community services worker in Sydney, tells me, the strain showing on her face. Increasingly ostracised at work by male colleagues who expect her to be unfailingly polite, smiling and immediately responsive to their workplace needs, she says that if she fails to comply, they quickly become hostile, leaving her feeling 'as though it's my job to make them comfortable'. As a result, Billie, who is Filipina and Anglo-Australian, has started limiting her range of expressions and emotions. The unofficial role of helper she was silently assigned without her consent is one in which anger, dissatisfaction or even simple withdrawal is not tolerated. If her co-workers feel she is not smiling enough at them, or is not talkative enough, or she walks to her desk without saying hello to them, she is accused of being aggressive and unfriendly. Billie did not realise she was echoing the horror of those long-dead Turkish women at Lady Montagu's corsetry when she described her work life as akin to being 'kept inside a box'; the roles, of course, are flipped. If she tries to escape the box by not acting sufficiently chirpy while deferring to her male co-workers, she goes 'from being the helper to the aggressor'. In other words, if she won't play the watered-down version of the China Doll, she becomes something far worse: the dreaded Angry Brown Woman.

This is how colonialism rigged the game against women of colour. For centuries, the West has regurgitated representations of colonised women that came to be accepted as more real than the real. Jezebels. Black Velvet. Gins. Harem girls. China Dolls. Pocahontas. All of these reduced complex human beings to cardboard cut-out sexual objects with no agency and whose conquered sexuality was de facto justification for white supremacy. Colonialism rigged the game against all colonised women by reducing them to caricatures that were at once desirable and disgusting, conveniently allowing white men to both sexually abuse them and render them beneath sexual abuse.

This degradation served as both metaphor and rationale for the inevitable march of Western civilisation. 'When women's sexuality is surrendered,' wrote Said, 'the nation is more or less conquered.'[22] In all cases this submission was an indictment on colonised men, who were presented as barbaric but weak, unable to control their women and even willing to sell them into prostitution. Whereas the white man honoured white women as paragons of virtue, colonised

men showed ‘their’ women no respect, making it all the easier for white men to help themselves to them. Even films such as *Broken Arrow* that claimed to give a positive depiction of Native Americans took backhanded digs at the perceived lack of masculinity of Native men. When Stewart catches his doomed future wife gawking at him as he shaves by the river he laughs kindly at her confusion, explaining this is what white men have to do—unlike Indian men, who didn’t grow facial hair.

The history of white society as shaped by the ventures of colonialism is a history of white men objectifying, exploiting and abusing colonised women while simultaneously denying it was happening and blaming it on colonised men when it did. But it doesn’t end there. Most devastatingly for women of colour today, when it was no longer enough to rely on the stereotype of oversexed, submissive and wanton harlots, the colonisers created binary archetypes into which racialised women were and still are forced to fit. These binaries, as we shall see, have evolved over the years to fit the changing needs of white supremacy, ensuring that it is women of colour and not the descendants of the corset-wearing white women who remain trapped inside that box.

# 3

# Angry Sapphires, Bad Arabs, Dragon Ladies

## Boxed in by the binary

*We are the easiest to get discredited. It's a well-known fact. So he went back attacking the two women of colour in the hopes that he could discredit us.*

Salma Hayek on Harvey Weinstein, 2018[1]

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is something of a phenomenon. In the 2018 US midterm elections, the then 28-year-old bartender, who had never before run for office, took on long-time incumbent and Democrat Caucus chair Joe Crowley to pull off the biggest upset in the primaries. She went on to win the seat for the 14th congressional district of New York City and become the youngest-ever woman in the United States Congress.

AOC, as she soon became known on Twitter and beyond, is a quintessential millennial in that she is savvy and prolific on social media. Quickly amassing well over two million followers on Twitter within two months of taking office, her timeline is replete with witty rejoinders and bold challenges to the status quo. When a reporter from a conservative magazine described her shock victory as a perfect example of the importance of the Electoral College, tagging her in a tweet warning that without it, 'the people who voted for her would make decisions for [all] of us', Ocasio-Cortez tweeted back: 'Ah yes, God forbid a diverse working-class district … actually have equal say in our democracy as your weird uncle with questionable racial beliefs who shares fake conspiracy memes on Facebook.'

It's unsurprising, given not only her lightning-quick rise to stardom but her unapologetic Democratic Socialist stance, that AOC has become a favoured target of the Republican right. They have attacked her for everything from her college-era video re-enacting a dance scene from *The Breakfast Club* to her inability to afford to rent in Washington, DC when she first moved there. Her prolific online presence and penchant for clapping back on social media when attacked in the traditional media have led to a litany of highly questionable charges being levelled against her, including being called a 'leftist Donald Trump'. The supposed evidence for this assertion includes being a 'media scold' because she criticised the CBS network for failing to hire a black journalist as part of its hyped 2020 election coverage team.

Attacks from the right are sadly routine in this era of unbridled culture wars. More unexpected was the revelation in a *Politico* report in early 2019 that members of the Democratic Party were 'living in fear that AOC will send a mean tweet about them'.[2] It's an extraordinary piece of reporting not least because some of those apparently terrified of the then-29-year-old freshman congressional representative actually put their names to it. Warning Ocasio-Cortez that

she is in for a lonely and unproductive time in Congress if she continues to 'attack her own people', Rep. Emanuel Cleaver reprimanded her, 'We just don't need sniping in our Democratic Caucus', and Rep. Grace Meng ventured, 'It's not unreasonable for people to wonder whether she will come after them.' *Politico* calls Ocasio-Cortez an 'enigma' who is 'very friendly in person, chatting up fellow lawmakers and security workers in the Capitol as she's tailed by admirers and reporters', but whose Twitter persona 'frequently snaps at critics and occasionally at fellow Democrats'. This, said the reporter on her Twitter account, @rachelmbade, has made some Democrats 'afraid of AOC & her massive Twitter following', with two comparing her Twitter use to Trump's and one telling the reporter that he likes AOC and 'wants to give her advice but he's worried she will mean-tweet him'.

What is fascinating here is how little Ocasio-Cortez had to do to get likened to Trump, who apart from being the *president* has a notorious Twitter output that includes everything from threatening nuclear war to calling journalist Harry Hurt a 'dummy dope' and Republican senator Rand Paul a 'truly weird … spoiled brat without a functional brain'. AOC's tweets have bite, and though they are often critical, the attempts to equate her with the deliberately outrageous and elaborately offensive Trump betray an effort to paint a picture of her as the quintessential Angry Brown Woman.

The younger cousin of the Angry Black Woman, the Angry Brown Woman is not critical: she is vitriolic. She does not disagree: she attacks. She is not confident: she is aggressive. She is not assertive: she is scary. She is, by sheer virtue of her inherent nature, permanently, well, angry —not because of anything that has been done to her, mind you, but simply because that is what she is.

There is a cruel logic to the stereotype of the Angry Brown Woman. As Billie discovered in Chapter 2, it is a trap that neuters the capacity of a brown or black woman to get emotional or frustrated about anything that happens to her. If she does, she is proving all her detractors correct. Her anger naturally invalidates whatever she is saying or is upset about, since 'anger' is just her normal irrational state. The Angry Brown Woman and Angry Black Woman are dehumanising, self-fulfilling prophecies that keep brown and black women boxed into the narrowest range of human experiences. If a brown woman should happen to snap, it is gleefully held as 'proof' of her 'mean' character, ensuring that both she and her arguments are summarily dismissed. When Harvey Weinstein issued a statement denying the sexual assault allegations made against him by Salma Hayek and Lupita Nyong'o, even though he'd ignored earlier accusations made by white actresses, Hayek told an interviewer at Cannes that Weinstein knew women of colour would be easiest to discredit: 'It is a well-known fact. So he went back, attacking the two women of color, in hopes (that) he could discredit us.'[3]

The Angry Brown Woman is the binary opposite of the hyper-sexual colonised woman. Her existence is a testament to the endless capacity racism seems to have to shapeshift, adapt and reinvent itself with changing circumstances. Whereas the archetypes of lascivious Jezebels, exotic Orientals, submissive China Dolls and Princess Pocahontas emerged as colonisation was taking hold and served as a means of rationalising the subjugation of women of colour along with their lands, the Angry Black Woman trope emerged in the wake of Abolition, when white supremacy became threatened for the first time. With blacks legally free and rape of black women now technically a crime, the Jezebel was no longer sufficient to keep black women in their place. But, as bell hooks argues, because slavery had so thoroughly devalued black womanhood through the Jezebel, it simply paved the way for further archetypes that continue to inhibit black women today.[4] A new means of limiting the ambitions of the black population

emerged in the form of the Jim Crow segregation laws in the South—the state and local laws that enforced racial segregation from the late nineteenth century until 1965—which saw a proliferation of minstrel shows featuring caricatures of black women as either self-sacrificing 'Mammy' figures, later symbolised by Hattie McDaniel in the movie *Gone with the Wind*, or emasculating Sapphires.

The Mammy is asexual, always puts the needs of her white bosses and their children first and, most importantly, never gets angry. The Sapphire, by contrast, is irrational, sarcastic, cruel and angry towards white people and the black men in her life. The Mammy was a means of neutralising black women, presenting them as lacking agency, obedient and grateful. Meanwhile, the minstrel caricatures ridiculed black men as bumbling buffoons and black women as grotesquely masculine. Large of body, loud of mouth and bitter of tongue, they were depicted with exaggerated red lips and rough, wild hair. Although these representations emerged immediately after the Civil War, the Sapphire gets her name from the 1920s radio program *Amos 'n' Andy*, where Aunt Sapphire provided such a perfect embodiment that the archetype was named after her. Directing most of her frequent ire at her hapless husband, Sapphire was a double whammy that took aim at both black women who were masculinised and black men who, emasculated by their angry wives, were feminised. Once again the racialised notion of sex difference (or lack of it) was employed, this time to reassert the white dominance that had been threatened by Abolition.

The Mammy/Sapphire binary gave black women a choice: be the good black woman who knows her place (Sassy Black Sidekick, anyone?) or be the bad Sapphire, who must inevitably be punished. The Angry Black Woman stereotype is both prophecy and prison. Anger is a normal and healthy response to sustained mistreatment. By characterising all black women as inherently angry, the stereotype denies them the majority of human emotional experiences and ensures that when they do get angry, it is not interpreted as a response to aggression or provocation but as an act of aggression in itself, an act that is intrinsic to black women.

The Angry Black Woman and Angry Brown Woman are tools of gaslighting, a key feature and technique of emotional and psychological abuse. The very existence of these tropes should serve as a warning sign that women of colour are living their entire lives in an abusive relationship with whiteness. 'I'm incredibly afraid to be by myself in work spaces (because) I'm constantly trying not to fall into stereotypes,' Danai*, a thirty-something Zimbabwean immigrant to Australia, tells me. As with Billie, traumatic experiences at work led Danai to diminish herself lest she draw further attention and ire. Despite regular mistreatment, she rarely complained, not even when she saw 'people I had trained given promotions ahead of me'. When she borrowed a pen from a colleague and forgot to return it, he snapped that this was exactly what the African woman before her had done: 'Is this something you do in your culture—take people's things without returning?' Danai says she was routinely compared to other black women, and for two years was even called by the name of another African former employee, ostensibly because both were 'very loud'. But, she protests, 'I'm soft-spoken and quiet.'

'No one has had their identity socialised out of existence like the black woman,' bell hooks writes in *Ain't I a Woman.*[5] While hooks refers to black women in America, Danai's story also supports this assertion. She treads on eggshells, constantly aware of her dark skin when she interacts with white people—which, since she has lived in Australia for two decades, is almost every day. She exercises such 'extreme caution around whiteness' that she is finding it easier to avoid attempting friendships with white women altogether: 'The most I do is just (say) hi and smile. That's it. My friends would describe me as someone who used to be super friendly, always

smiling and trying to find good in white people, but that's changed now.' After taking maternity leave, Danai kept delaying going back to work because 'it would destroy me emotionally'. She eventually chose to resign rather than return. She has yet to seek other employment 'because of the racism I fear is waiting for me' but refuses to apply for unemployment benefits, preferring to survive on her husband's salary because she fears perpetuating the stereotype of black people on welfare.

'Happiness is limited when racism is in your face every day,' she says. Danai has learned to mitigate this trauma by reading the work of activists and writers who, she says, validate her experiences and help her stop second-guessing herself. Validation is a need almost all humans share. When broader society refuses to validate women of colour, it becomes vital for us to share our experiences with each other as a means of coping with these damaging archetypes, and to help us recognise the gaslighting techniques and stereotypes that keep us in a subordinate position.

Serving more or less the same function as the Sapphire but with a hypersexual twist is the Dragon Lady, the anti–China Doll. Unlike the Sapphire, the Dragon Lady is sexual and feminine but deceptive, cunning and malicious: she uses her sexuality to get what she wants, only to callously discard her prey when she is done. First personified by the female villain in the popular 1930s *Terry and the Pirates* comic strips, and played by Asian actor Anna May Wong in the film adaptation, the Dragon Lady spun out of the 'yellow peril' fear that swept much of the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Victorian-era anxieties about sex merged with the xenophobic belief that the West will become, as Australian ultra-right senator Pauline Hanson infamously warned a century later, 'swamped by Asians'. The term yellow peril was coined by Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II in the 1880s following a nightmare in which he saw the Buddha riding atop a fire-breathing dragon that was threatening to invade the great cities of Europe.

As well as inspiring dozens of films over the decades, cementing her as a reality in the minds of anxious Westerners seemingly always on the lookout for the next great racial threat, the Dragon Lady epithet is frequently applied to Asian women in positions of political power. When Soong Mei-Ling, the wife of ruler Chiang Kai-shek, died in 2003, an article marking her passing in *The Guardian*, titled 'The sorceress', described her as 'the beautiful and extremely powerful Dragon Lady wife of China's autocratic ruler'. According to the author, Jonathan Fenby, Soong was not content with merely ruling China with her husband: she dreamt of ruling the world. Naturally, she sought to do this by using her uncanny ability to seduce Western men—'even … a would-be American president'. Fenby describes Soong in typical Dragon Lady style as 'one of the most beautiful, intelligent and sexy women' any man was likely to meet. He recounted one incident where she allegedly scratched her long, painted fingernails down a hapless man's cheeks so deeply that 'the marks remained for a week'.[6]

Recent hit offerings such as *Always Be My Maybe* and *Crazy Rich Asians* indicate some improvements in the screen representation of Asian women, as Sandra Oh noted at the 2018 Golden Globe Awards. However, shades of the Dragon Lady can still be seen, both in female characters who explicitly use sex to attain political power—see Weng Meigui, the adulterous wife of the Chinese ambassador in Australian political TV series *Secret City*—and in characters who appear inordinately obsessed with their careers. The latter includes—ironically—a pivotal scene in medical melodrama *Grey's Anatomy* where Dr Cristina Yang, played by Oh, is so desperate not to lose her mentor, who also happens to be in love with Oh's white boyfriend. Cristina looks almost as surprised as the other (white) woman when she literally offers to give

him away to her: ‘Fine! Done! Take him!’ Overall, the character of Cristina does seem to buck both the Dragon Lady and China Doll stereotype, unlike Lucy Liu’s character, Ling Woo, in the late 1990s/early 2000s show *Ally McBeal*. Ling Woo uses her beauty and sexuality to get ahead in her law career and is stereotypically cold and ruthless. Nonetheless, that *Grey’s Anatomy* scene links the Dragon Lady to East Asian women in competitive and high-stress professions. In doing so, it betrays an unspoken implication that they don’t really belong there, they don’t play fair, and everything they’ve achieved can be explained by their lack of emotional attachment and their willingness to use, abuse and discard white Western men—an absurdly inverse relationship to the historical reality.

‘There seem to be only three choices for East Asian women,’ says Sharyn Holmes, a 41-year-old Asian and Anglo-Australian who works as an anti-racism coach and consultant in Queensland. ‘We can be the submissive girlfriend (China Doll), the evil girlfriend (Dragon Lady) or a literal animal.’ With the latter, Sharyn is referring to the character of Nagini from the Harry Potter universe. In the original series, Nagini is the embodiment of evil: a giant, sinister snake who is eventually slain by the unlikely white warrior Neville Longbottom, leading to the defeat of her master and companion, Lord Voldemort. In *Fantastic Beasts 2*, released in late 2018, Nagini is revealed to have been a human woman placed under a blood curse; she is played by South Korean actor Kim Soo-hyun (also known as Claudia Kim). East Asian actors are not exactly prolific on our screens, so when one of them turns into a giant reptile before our eyes, the links to the Dragon Lady are glaring whether or not they were consciously intended by author J.K. Rowling. ‘Is this really all I could have hoped to be in my life?’ says Sharyn, who doesn’t expect or wait for an answer from me. ‘We can never play the role of the maiden, we can only hope for the small roles. It really inhibits us from getting into these fields. It’s a real headfuck.’

Are things looking up for the younger generation? Maybe. Lara Jean, the Asian-American heroine in the thoroughly enjoyable Netflix teen rom-com *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, is ultra-romantic and eminently likable. She has a doting white father and a Korean mother … whose acquaintance the audience never gets to make as she is already dead. The storyline involves a love triangle with two white boys, one of whom is the ex-boyfriend of Lara Jean’s older sister Margot, who ‘threw [him] away’ when she left for college because he was ‘no longer useful’. Hmm. Incremental progress is fine but we must be wary if it begins to look like assimilation.

The sexuality of women of colour is either amplified or negated depending on its usefulness to whiteness. AOC is Puerto Rican and her congresswoman status saw her quickly cast as an Angry Brown Woman rather than the most common archetype associated with Hispanic and Latina women: the Spicy Sexpot. You’ve all seen her. She is loud and passionate, with a quick, fiery temper that is softened by her sex appeal. With her curvy body, glossy dark mane and gleaming olive skin (Afro-Latinas have no real place in this derivative image of what a typical Latina looks like), her sensuality turns what would otherwise be regarded as unpalatable anger into manageable zest. And that’s the point: there’s no need to take a woman, her opinions or her legitimate concerns seriously when they can be dismissed with an ‘Oh, you’re so cute when you’re mad’ wave of the hand.

The Spicy Sexpot trope has its roots in the mid nineteenth century and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty ended the Mexican-American war in 1848, but not without first conceding the entirety of Alta California to the Americans. Alta California is now comprised of California, Nevada, Utah and parts of Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. Racial violence occurred before the ink was barely dry. Between 1848 and 1928, white mobs anxious

about economic competition lynched at least 597 Mexicans in the south-west, mostly in territory that had recently been Mexican. One of them was Josefa Segovia, the only woman ever to be lynched in California. She had killed a white man who was part of a group who'd broken into her home and attempted to rape her. Given the emphasis on women's virtue, the successful defence of her honour by a married woman should have resulted in praise. But Segovia was Mexican and this sealed her fate: condemned as the criminal aggressor, she was hanged in 1851.[7]

Crimes of this magnitude reverberate in traumatised communities for generations. Incredibly, although far fewer Mexicans were lynched than blacks would be during the segregation era, their smaller population meant they were even more likely to be targets of vigilante mob violence.[8] The lynching of Mexicans was driven by the philosophy of manifest destiny: the belief that US settlers were ordained by God to expand across the entire North American continent. To aid this expansion, Mexicans were depicted in newspapers and films as all-round uncouth people. The men were criminals, dim-witted, dirty and untrustworthy, and the women were singled out—in shades of the Dragon Lady—as sexually manipulative, cunning, promiscuous and without morals. The 1920s star Lupe Vélez, for example, was described in the American press as a Mexican Spitfire and 'Just a wild Mexican kitten'. Her response: 'I'm not wild! I am just Lupe.'[9]

By 1922, Mexicans had so tired of this degradation that they issued an embargo on Hollywood films that contained the crude depictions. That the Mexican government went to the extent of banning US cultural products reveals that the old adage 'It's just a film!' belies the serious impact that media representation has. People may know they are watching a fictional story, but the way in which 'otherised' groups are portrayed comes to be seen as very real. How people are represented matters because it is in popular media that our social world is both constructed and reflected back at us. Popular culture, wrote the late, great Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, is 'one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.'[10]

To see this hegemony in action, consider that ten years after the Mexican embargo, keen to soothe tensions as part of his New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ushered in a new era of diplomatic relations and representation with the 1933 Good Neighbor Policy. Suddenly, Mexicans, and Latin Americans more broadly, were no longer dour and cunning criminals but jovial, colourful and—in a sly nod to the fruit trade that was so important to the US economy—overwhelmingly tropical. Enter Carmen Miranda, 'the Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat'. Unsurprisingly, Miranda came to be as resented by her fellow Brazilians, who felt she ridiculed and misrepresented their culture, almost as much as she was loved by American audiences, who delighted in her caricature, which reassured them that their southern neighbours were silly and harmless.

The Spicy Sexpot is still a fixture on our screens. From Gabrielle (played by Eva Longoria) in *Desperate Housewives* to Gloria (Sofia Vergara) in *Modern Family*, she provides an alternative to the ubiquitous Latina maid, although the two tropes appear to come together in the more recent *Devious Maids*, the title of which probably says it all. This is no shade on those actresses: they are who they are. The problem is when their appearance is used to reduce millions of women of the various races and ethnicities that populate the twenty-one countries of Latin America into one hot-blooded, objectified sex symbol. Not only does this erase the racial complexity of the region, it leaves real-life Latinas anxious about their looks and their behaviour as they struggle to either confound or conform to the archetype. 'Men I have gone on dates with

expected me to display maximum cleavage from the start, expressed concern over ever getting into an argument with me for fear of my "passion" coming out, and complimented my curves at every turn,' writes Irina Gonzalez on the website Hip Latina. 'It felt as if my anger and passion were taken as a joke because it's simply an expected part of my personality to be "passionate" like Sofia Vergara (and) "angry" like Michelle Rodriguez in *The Fast and the Furious* … Why can't I just be a human who happens to be curvy and is passionate, sometimes angry, occasionally loud and rarely sexy?'[11]

The answer is because stereotypes dissolve any requirement to take certain people seriously or to empathise with them. As Richard Dyer said, the way people treat us depends on how they see us.[12] Images gleaned from the news media, movie screens, books, magazines, postcards, advertisements and anywhere else images can be found combine to give us the false illusion that we can know almost everything there is to know about certain people just by looking at them. This illusion is magnified when these certain people are rare enough to come across in real life that our assumptions and biases are never seriously challenged.

There is a huge discrepancy between the way white audiences tend to view portrayals of minorities and how members of those minorities view the portrayals. In her analysis of audience responses to the depiction of Native Americans in the popular 1990s television program *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*, anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird found that, whereas white audiences felt the Cheyenne characters were positive and authentic, Native audiences saw them, in the words of one respondent, as 'caricatures … not human beings with their own language, their own thoughts, their own feelings'.[13]

Indeed, although Native women often held positions of prestige and influence within their traditional communities, the hallmark of their depiction on-screen is an abject lack of complexity. When they weren't Princess Pocahontas, they were the Dumpy Squ*w. Usually nameless and unimportant—in 1980, Lakota/Dakota actress Lois Red Elk revealed that she'd never played a role that actually had a name—the squ*w was a drudge; a sexless, unattractive workhorse who was relegated to the kind of manual work that white women were considered too highly prized for. Native Americans regard the term as a slur, and have been lobbying for years to have place names that include it renamed. The word 'squ*w', explained Mohawk woman and Native rights activist Suzan Harjo on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* back in 1992, comes from the Algonquin word for 'vagina', and 'That'll give you an idea of what the French and British fur trappers were calling all Indian women.'[14]

If Princess Pocahontas was the noble savage who desired and succumbed to the white man and his ways, the squ*w was the enslaved drudge whose joyless and thankless life was the reassurance that white society was doing Natives a favour by 'saving' them from their own dying and degraded culture. If any resisted, it was only because they didn't know what was best for them. 'They can't see that our system has any advantages over their own, and they have fought stubbornly against the innovation,' complained the US Department of the Interior in 1897.[15]

As of 2015, there remain at least 1000 places in the United States with the word squ*w in the name. Mountains, creeks, meadows, even large rocks are testament to the disdain held by white settlers for the original inhabitants of the land. Despite the law being on their side, Native activists have found it exceedingly difficult to get the names changed. 'I really didn't think it would be this hard,' Teara Farrow Ferman, from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, told the *New York Times* in 2015. 'I didn't think that we would still be disputing this after so much time.'[16] Twenty years earlier, Jonathan Buffalo of the Meskuakie Settlement

in Idaho was similarly incredulous: 'It degrades our females. We've been degraded for 500 years and to the general public they're walking around thinking that they did something great by naming a creek or a river Squ*w. It stings a little … We're not angry, we know what it means. But we have to educate the general public.'[17]

When it comes to educating the public on representation, also having our work cut out for us are Arab and West Asian women. Change for all racial minorities is slow, but in an era some insist on defining as a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, for the 'Middle East' this change has been almost non-existent.

As the uptight, performative morals of the Victorian era gave way to the Roaring Twenties and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and Western women shed their restrictive clothes and inhibitions, the representation and perception of the 'Arab world' changed dramatically. The cultural revolution sweeping the West corresponded with—indeed, is directly linked to—the rise of religious fundamentalism and a 'return to Islam' in the Arab world. Whereas the first few decades of the twentieth century saw Egyptian women and those throughout the Levant begin to shed their traditional dress to the point where it looked to be dying out altogether, the second half saw the adoption of a veil that was far more conservative than ever before. As renowned Egyptian-American academic Leila Ahmed notes in her book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America*, this new veil, like the new Islamism championed by the Muslim Brotherhood, was more restrictive than the one Arab, Turkish and West Asian women in general had traditionally worn and had begun to discard in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Rather extraordinarily, in the white Western imaginary, the positions of Arab women and white women were effectively switched as Arab women ceased being represented as sexually insatiable harem dwellers whose veils doubled as tools of seduction. Rather than the slovenly opposite of the chaste, white Victorian European woman, Arab women came to be seen as they are largely seen today: sexually repressed, frigid, virginal, burdened by virtue, shame and family honour, and more or less silenced—ironically, pretty much the things that supposedly made white women so special for so long.

This audacious switcheroo by no means indicated a change in the inferior status of the Arab world. Since the underlying logic of Orientalism is to position the Orient as the eternal binary opposite of the West, now that the West approved of sexual liberation the Arab world had to be condemned for not being sexually liberated enough. As Robin DiAngelo quipped during her talk on white fragility in Sydney in 2018, 'Racism doesn't have to be rational, it just has to work.' Boy, has it worked.

My family hails from the Levant region of what is geographically West Asia but was once known to Europeans as the Near East and has since been subsumed into the so-called Middle East. That the name 'Middle East', which literally identifies a region of many diverse languages, cultures, religions and nations only insofar as it is positioned relative to the West, is still in common usage indicates not only how Eurocentric but how anti-Arab our social world remains. There is no longer a Near East, and the term Far East has dropped out of favour, but the Middle East remains, forever trapped in a kind of non-existence, suspended in time and space and only coming into view and relevance when the West deigns to pay it some attention, with usually disastrous consequences. To Arabs, it's *al-Sham* or Greater Syria: literally, 'the land to the north'. Though my father's side of the family is Lebanese and my mother's is Syrian, these are different nations today only because France and Britain joined forces in 1916 to divvy up the spoils of the defeated Ottoman Empire in what became known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement. Just like that, a heterogeneous province in which people had been living relatively (and I do

stress *relatively*) peaceably with each other for centuries was literally drawn into the modern world of the nation-state, in which hastily conceived national identities were superimposed over cultural and lingual ties, and nationalism battled with religion for loyalty. It's never had a moment's peace since.

The Near East, so geographically close to Europe, has long occupied an outsized position in the Western imaginary. Centuries before Sykes–Picot it was regarded as both a formidable foe and an inferior land of heretics. Over the centuries, the West fashioned an image of the so-called Middle East that existed more in the imagination of Orientalists than it did in the Orient, and constructed its own flattering self-image in the process. Whatever the East was, the West was not. Through the works of Western travel writers, colonialists, artists, diplomats and 'experts' who positioned Arab and other Eastern cultures as barbaric, backwards, violent, animalistic, lewd and oppressive of women, by default the West became advanced, merciful, civilised, moral and respectful of women.[18]

Here is where it all comes together. For all its assigned savagery, the East was also feminised in the Western imagination—meaning, naturally, that the West was masculine. This is not as contradictory as it may appear. The peculiar logic of Eurocentrism was fuelled by the rise of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, which regarded true differentiation of the sexes as a status that had only been achieved by the more highly evolved white Europeans. Although brown and black bodies were designated female and male, the science promoted by the American School of Evolution regarded sex difference as a racial characteristic and argued that only white European-derived people had evolved to the point of having distinctly separate male and female brains and dispositions. According to Kyla Schuller, associate professor of race, gender, and science studies at Rutgers University, the prevailing scientific thought at the time regarded this crucial sex difference between men and women to be behind the development of rationality and reason, which to the scientists was a hallmark feature of (Western) civilisation.

Racialised people, in other words, lacked the proper differentiation between men and women required in order to be rational and, therefore, civilised. In her stunning analysis of nineteenth-century race, sex and science, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, Schuller outlines the ways in which binary sex was regarded as both cause and effect of reason—which only white people had—making binary sex itself a function of race. To the leading evolutionary scientists of the era, the supremacy of Western civilisation lay firmly in 'its ability to restrain animalistic impulses and maintain sexual differentiation of the civilized'.[19]

Binary sex is both function and feature of white supremacy. That is not to say that other cultures did not have their own ideas about gender and what constitutes a man or a woman. Nor is it to deny that these gender roles may have been oppressive in their own right. It *is* to say that the West imposed its own definitions as a uniform measure and, unsurprisingly, everyone else came up short. This is why Western representations of Arab and Asian men over the centuries have seemed to contain baffling contradictions—simultaneously depicting them as monstrous and violent *and* emasculated and androgynous. Their alleged inferior evolution justified the so-called white man's burden, the self-assigned responsibility to civilise the uncivilised races of the world. Whether or not this was fair was regarded as a non-issue since, as Edward Said grimly summarised, by sheer virtue of belonging to a subject race their fate was to be subjected.

African women such as Sara Baartman, the so-called 'Hottentot Venus', were exhibited across Europe as examples of defective, oversexed and undercivilised black women. Baartman's body was regarded as a physical manifestation of her inferior culture, and this 'inferiority' was then rationalised to justify colonisation. This self-appointed responsibility to save racialised

women by bringing them true civilisation muffled the incredible violence imposed on their bodies. It was also a complete fabrication in more ways than the obvious: white Europeans colonised the world on the presumption that they were 'civilising' it, but by strictly policing both race and sex, they did everything in their formidable power to prevent non-whites from 'catching up' to them.

White people set the standard for humanity by which they, and only they, could succeed. And this standard meant a strict hierarchy that placed white men at the top with white women just below them, followed by men of colour, and then women of colour occupying the lowest rung. I do not mean to say here that all women of colour's experiences are exactly the same or that there is not a discrepancy in privilege among them, only that whatever their race or ethnicity, women of colour are always considered below both white people and men of colour. White women were the beneficiaries of a status higher than that of people of colour but subordinate to white men, and it is this very status that enabled colonialism to succeed. The American School, explains Schuller, acknowledged that both thinking and feeling—sentiment—were crucial to evolution and civilisation; however, too much sentiment led to sentimentality, which could hinder objective thought. To solve this dilemma, evolutionary race scientists effectively split the civilised, aka white, body in two. To the male half went the higher intellectual faculties of reason, logic and objectivity, and to the female went excessive sentimental responses and the accompanying tendency to irrationality and impulsivity. Women would take on the role of feeling, of sympathising, of 'letting emotions override the facts', leaving men to carry on the important work of intellectual endeavours and empire-building. In this way, Western civilisation would be secured and stabilised.

This race–sex hierarchy is demonstrated in the attitudes of Lord Cromer, the nineteenth-century British imperialist who oversaw the occupation of Egypt and who was a scathing critic of the status of Arab women. Cromer had ambitions to restructure Egyptian society and politics along European lines—that is to say, he wanted to save Arab women from Arab men. Do not mistake him for a feminist: not only did he fiercely oppose the education of Egyptian women, he was a vociferous opponent of suffrage for white women. Indeed, not only was he a founding member of the British Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, he served as president. Cromer scoffed that Islam 'degraded' women by secluding them behind veils whereas Christianity 'elevated' them, but also fearmongered about calamities that would strike if suffrage were to 'dethrone woman from that position of gentle yet commanding influence she now occupies … and substitute in her place the unsexed woman at the polling booth'.[20] To Cromer, a woman who voted was no longer a woman. This battle of the sexes—his words—would create confusion and discord in every British family, leading to a breakdown of the sex binary. Any inversion of the natural separation of the sexes, he warned, would echo across the Empire. Cromer opposed veiling not out of sympathy for the women who wore it, but because it had a corrupting effect on Arab men: it was a 'fatal obstacle' that prevented Arab men from achieving rationality and civilisation as European men had done. If we apply Schuller's argument, we can see that in Cromer's imagination, Arab women and Arab men had not attained the evolutionary ability to adhere to their proper gender roles. This made them uncivilised.

Schuller argues—and I agree—that this is the foundation of our modern notions not only of race but of gender. The sex binary is not purely about biology: it is about assigning character traits according to sex and using these, in turn, to rationalise racism. White women were regarded as more emotional and closer to nature (and therefore closer to people of colour), relieving white men from the burdens of emotion in order that they may pursue reason and

rationality. This is why Cromer both claimed to want to 'free' Arab women *and* denied them education. To him, a free woman was nonetheless subordinate to a man, but she was subordinate in the right—white—way. Even for Western women, higher education (as well as suffrage) was so vehemently opposed by so many white men for so long because any attempts to transgress the man/woman binary was considered not only a threat to white patriarchy but to Western civilisation. The binary permitted white men to ruthlessly abuse women of colour with no consequence: as civilised men, they were spared any burden of guilt or remorse since it was literally regarded as their rightful role not to feel sympathetic or sentimental. The refrains of 'facts, not feelings' and 'civility' that dominate our contemporary public discourse are rooted in this racialised and gendered enforcement of white supremacy. These refrains are not designed to facilitate robust and good-faith debate but to avert it, so that white society can continue to separate emotion from intellect to its own benefit and to the detriment of everyone else.

The Western perception of Arabs, including Arab women, remains overwhelmingly negative. A Lebanese friend of mine recently posted a Twitter poll asking whether her followers thought Arab women were liked or disliked by the public. She was careful to emphasise that the question wasn't whether they themselves personally disliked Arab women but how they felt others perceived us. Out of 188 anonymous votes made over a 24-hour period, 86 per cent responded that Arab women were disliked by the public. It wasn't a scientific poll by any means, but it certainly painted a bleak picture. It is also supported by more stringent research into the representation of Arabs in Western media, the most famous being the late Lebanese-American professor Jack Shaheen's 2003 study, *Reel Bad Arabs*, which was later made into a documentary.

Readers are likely familiar with many of the Islamophobic tropes that have dominated Western perceptions of Muslims since the events of 11 September 2001. They regard Muslims as irrational, dirty, bloodthirsty, 'stupid', emotional, immature, violent, fanatical, subjugated, oppressed, manipulative and terrorists. What readers may not know, however, is that all of these derive from already-existing perceptions of Arabs. When he analysed more than 1000 depictions of fictional Arab screen characters, the results were so overwhelmingly negative—only twelve portrayed Arabs in a positive light—that Shaheen subtitled his study 'How Hollywood vilifies a people'. Arabs, he found, were routinely portrayed as 'heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics through common depictions of Arabs kidnapping or raping a fair maiden; expressing hatred … and demonstrating a love for wealth and power'. Only 5 per cent of Arab film roles depicted Arabs as 'normal, human characters'.[21]

Not enough has changed since *Reel Bad Arabs*. In its 2018 analysis of small-screen representation, the US-based MENA Arts Advocacy Coalition found that out of 2052 series regulars, only 1 per cent were from a MENA (Middle East and North Africa) background. Of this 1 per cent, 78 per cent were presented as threats.[22] Only 8 per cent of shows have regular characters from a MENA background, and more than three quarters of those are terrorists, tyrants or secret agents, trapping Middle Easterners in a binary of either friend or foe of the West. British-Iranian actress Nazanin Boniadi has trouble bucking this typecasting: her biggest roles to date are as a security analyst on *Homeland* and a sleeper agent on *Counterpart*.

When actors from Arab backgrounds make it to our cinema and television screens in non-stereotypical roles, their ethnicity is almost always whitewashed: how many people are aware that Catherine Keener, Salma Hayek and Wendy Malick have some Arab ancestry? Apart from *Bohemian Rhapsody's* Rami Malek and *Aladdin's* Mena Massoud there is a dearth of openly Arab North African actors in the public eye. Alia Shawkat has an Iraqi Arab father, however, her signature role is that of rebellious daughter Maeby Fünke in *Arrested Development*. For the most

part, it seems that to be successful as an Arab in the entertainment industry requires passing for white: *American Pie* star Shannon Elizabeth's career took off after she dropped her Lebanese surname, Fadal. Speaking of *Aladdin*, the 2018 Broadway production of the music theatre version of the film boasted a very diverse cast, but none was from an Arab or Iranian or other Middle East background. It was *1001 Arabian Nights* without the Arabians. Two of my favourite TV shows of recent years, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *The Good Place*, both feature an effortlessly diverse cast where black, white, Jewish, South Asian, South-East Asian and Latinx characters all mingle as they do in real life. No Middle Easterners, though.

It's no real surprise, then, that many Americans and white people in general regard Arabs as violent and threatening. There seems no lower limit to how disparagingly Arabs can be discussed in the news media. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman amused himself by using the popularity of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* as a hook to take a swing in a column titled 'Crazy poor Middle Easterners'.[23] In it, he blamed all of the region's problems on its refusal to 'leave the past behind', as if endless foreign intervention had nothing at all to do with the ongoing conflicts in the region. Meanwhile, studies have found that negative depictions of Arabs and Muslims (the two are routinely conflated, making it both necessary and impossible to try to separate them) have been steadily increasing.[24] This duality—Arab villainy offset only by absence—creates a very lopsided caricature of what it means to be an Arab. Either we are terrible people or we just don't exist.

This has created a highly skewed perception of Arab women that relegates us to what I call 'Pets or Threats': we are positioned as helpless, repressed victims without agency or a voice worth listening to, desperately in need of a white saviour to rescue us from the clutches of our Bad Arab kin; or we are Bad Arabs ourselves, threats that must be contained and kept in our place. If we are not one, we must be the other. There is no room for complicated human experiences when it comes to the lives of Arab women. In *Beyond Veiled Clichés*, Palestinian-Australian author Amal Awad interviewed dozens of women in the Arab world and in Australia, unmooring them from the stereotypes that dominate how the West views them and taking particular aim at the assumption that Arab is synonymous with Muslim, as well as at the perception of Arab women as uniformly frigid, conservative and fundamentally at odds with all things considered West and modern. 'It's not "Western" to want love or physical connection,' she writes.[25] Two years down the track Awad tells me she still encounters much resistance to Arab women telling their own stories. Even though self-representation is increasingly seen as vital, Middle Eastern women continue to be largely excluded from this forward momentum.

In such a climate, any woman of colour who manages to achieve a measure of success and influence in her life is a testament not to the acceptance of this society, but to her own talent and determination to keep going in a society that will do anything it can to stop her. Through a series of distorted and self-serving representations and repetitions, the West created a series of binaries that came to be seen as immutable laws of nature—if they are even seen by many at all. Man/woman. East/West. Civilised/savage. Binary oppositions, oversimplified as they are, leave no room for individual distinctions and complexity. The existence of a binary means that one pole in the structure is almost always going to dominate. It is better to be a man than it is to be a woman, and if one must be a woman then it is far better to be a virgin than a whore. It is better to be from the West than the East and white is better than black, but if you can't be white then it is better to be as close to white as you can.

With these differences being marked out and then exaggerated through science, art, literature

and politics, racial meanings were created and rigidly policed. The dichotomy separating white women from all other women was initially and ruthlessly enforced through the imposition of hypersexualised and submissive stereotypes on brown and black women. Over time, as Western society changed and the colonised began resisting white supremacy, additional archetypes were created and imposed with the same zeal and ruthlessness. The cold-hearted Dragon Lady uses her sexuality to deceive and destroy. The hot-blooded Spicy Sexpot's curves and broken English take the smoke out of her fire. The Bad Arab is judged by the sex she supposedly doesn't have and the sensuality she is cut off from feeling: Awad recalled to me how the attitude of one male boss in her old newsroom workplace changed towards her once she stopped wearing the hijab: he became far harsher in his criticisms of her work and more inappropriate in his verbal interactions, such that during one disagreement he told her to 'Get fucked' before smirking, 'Oh that's right, you *can't*.'

Likewise, the emergence of the Sapphire did not transform the way black women were seen: it merely added another unfair dimension that continues to reverberate as black women and girls are still regarded as less feminine, less innocent and more promiscuous than white women. One of my professional regrets is a column from 2014 in which I included Beyoncé in a round-up of pop stars who use sexual objectification to sell their music. But my feminism was colonised and I was viewing Beyoncé through the white feminist gaze, which filters out the centuries of degradation of black women's bodies and cannot see the revolutionary power of black women owning their bodies and sexualities after centuries of being exploited by others.

The bodies of black women are still being used as props. There seems no shortage of white pop singers who are keen to ditch their 'good girl' image for an edgy one and who use the culture and bodies of black women to do so, only to revert to their original demure persona when that phase has run its course. Women of colour are not free to cross racial boundaries in this way; their position is fixed. While white women such as Miley Cyrus and Ariana Grande can flirt with hypersexualised images derived from the Jezebel, the option is always there for them to return to proper white society, and they almost always do. The 'hooker with a heart of gold' film character, for instance, is invariably a pretty white woman who finds respectability again through the love of a white man.[26]

White women's whiteness can always help them find their way back to respectability; that option is not there for women of colour. But there is room for optimism. The emergence of the Sapphire and Angry Brown Woman is itself a telltale sign of resistance on the part of colonised peoples. The frankly absurd attempts to position AOC as the left-wing Donald Trump are a testament both to how well the game against women of colour has been rigged and to the fear that smart, gritty, talented and assertive women of colour strike in the hearts of the white establishment. Describing AOC as 'scary' and 'mean' is not random. Rather, these word choices tap into the centuries-in-the-making tropes of women of colour as inherently outside the realms of womanhood and respectability, negating any need to take AOC seriously.

Although a warning that Ocasio-Cortez's fledgling career can be sabotaged at any time since women of colour are so easy to discredit, these attacks also signal a sliver of hope that more women like her will find a way to rise above the mere scraps that our society expects brown women to survive on. AOC didn't come through the ranks of the white establishment of politics: she went directly to the people of the Bronx, New York, and it is they who elevated her and they who will decide whether or not to re-elect her come November 2020.

Yes, it is true women of colour have been the targets of a set-up of monumental proportions, something that amounts to nothing short of a covert war against us. But it is also true that these

attacks are their own proof of just how serious a threat to the status quo all women of colour really are. Should we finally harness our collective power—and I believe we can—not even a force as crushing as white supremacy will be able to hold us back.

# 4

# Only white damsels can be in distress

*I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America*.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, National Women's Rights Convention, 1866[1]

Mrs Cromer (no relation to Lord Cromer) was in a right pickle. Life on the frontier in Southern Rhodesia was monotonous, and with her husband away much of the time, as was the lot for most of those few white women who'd somehow been enticed to settle in the small and rather backwards colonial outpost, it was also lonely. To fill the long nights, she'd taken one of her black house servants as a lover, but as of that morning her affair was no longer a secret meaning that both she and her lover, Alukuleta, were in grave danger.[2]

By 1910 in Southern Rhodesia, domestic servitude, though far easier physically than the low-paying and backbreaking jobs in the mines and on farms, was nonetheless on its way to being one of the riskiest occupations a black man could have. African women were not permitted to work in white households as part of the relentless efforts to maintain racial 'purity' through segregation. The white population, who couldn't entertain the thought of not having servants since this would indicate a loss of prestige, hired black men instead. At the same time, anxieties about black male sexuality led to the introduction in 1903 of the death sentence for rape and attempted rape, a law that would be selectively and liberally applied to black men in the absence of logic and evidence.

What Mrs Cromer did next would not only seal the fate of her lover and that of hundreds of men after him, it would help to cement the construction of the white settler-colonial identity as one of white male ownership of property—which included white women. It also galvanised the white aversion to black male sexuality that shaped the form of political dominance across the imperial world.

Mrs Cromer knew she was in a compromising position. As the significant number of mixed-race children in the colony attested, white men frequently lived with black women as their 'concubines' and had them as casual sex partners with no repercussions. Their white female counterparts were afforded no such liberties. In the colonies as well as in Europe, white women were, as the late Australian historian Jock McCulloch notes in *Black Peril, White Virtue*, 'the subordinate members of a dominant race'. In Rhodesia this meant that a white woman who engaged in sexual relations with a black man was subject to a prison sentence and certain ostracism from the white community—an unthinkable consequence for most white women in an already remote landscape. To save herself, Mrs Cromer used the only get-out-of-jail-free card available to her: she accused her black lover of rape.

With roughly thirty black locals to every white settler, Southern Rhodesia was one of the smallest and most isolated British colonies. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, it would be gripped by a series of moral panics known as Black Peril. Convinced that African men were driven wild with uncontrollable desire for white women and were attempting to rape them en masse, the white population, under the guise of 'protecting' (white) women, executed at least twenty black men and sentenced hundreds more to years of hard labour. The overwhelming majority of the men were almost certainly innocent. The fear of Black Peril—the name whites gave to the spectre of black male sexual desire for white women—was so wildly disproportionate to the actual threat that historians now regard it as a kind of psychopathology.

While in Mrs Cromer's case there had been (consensual) sexual activity, the white anxiety ran at such a fever pitch that one of the Black Peril trials included an unfortunate man named Kuchi who had clipped the rear wheel of a white woman's bicycle with his own. She was knocked to the ground and he, understandably terrified at the repercussions, fled. In his haste he didn't realise he'd taken the woman's bike by mistake. So real was the white fear of Black Peril that the woman merely imagining that Kuchi must have wanted to rape her was enough to condemn him to a decade of hard labour.

Then there was the case of Miss Janette Falconer, a shop assistant who, in 1908, was walking to her lodgings after her late evening meal at a nearby hotel when she was alarmed to see an African man suddenly materialise beside her. She was pushed to the ground. 'My dress was a good deal torn. I was bruised considerably,' she later recounted. 'While I was screaming and struggling a gentleman came up. My assailant ran away.' The 'gentleman' who came to the rescue of this damsel in distress did not catch sight of her attacker, and it was left to Miss Falconer, a highly regarded single woman whose 'perceived asexuality' placed her in good stead with the jury, to identify him. She pointed out a black man, Singana (part of the policing of racial boundaries was to refer to black individuals by a singular name), who had happened to be in the police station at the time she was making her report. Despite the inconsistencies in her evidence and doubts over her ability to recall any identifying features of her attacker, Singana was found guilty of attempted rape and initially given the death sentence due to, in the words of the court, 'the seriousness of the attack'. But that wasn't the end of it. An inquiry into the case was launched by a sceptical official and it was eventually revealed that Miss Falconer had indeed being knocked to the ground that night—by an escaped baboon. The black man she saw just before the animal shoved her and jumped on her was its caretaker, Shikube. In a rare occurrence, albeit only after two trials and an inquiry, Singana's conviction was overturned.

What brought this situation about? Why the obsession with 'protecting' white women from the threat of rape by black men, given that such threats were almost non-existent? Not only that: in Southern Rhodesia, as elsewhere in the British Empire, white women rarely reported rape at the hands of white men, and when they did they were dismissed as either lying or 'asking for it'.

A clue can be found in the treatment of those white women who were not deemed worthy victims of Black Peril. While the jury was so excessively sympathetic to the distress of the apparently virginal Miss Falconer that they forgave her inability to tell a baboon from a man, according to McCulloch other allegations of attempted rape and rape made by white women against African men were met with contempt. These include the case of Miss Andrie Darvel in 1909, a single Frenchwoman who ran a coffee house in an area known for its brothels. Darvel claimed she'd successfully fought off her attacker. Unlike Miss Falconer, Darvel was cross-examined, during which she admitted to having been a little drunk at the time of the assault. These three factors—that she was single, ran a cafe in an undesirable area, and admitted to

drinking alcohol—combined in the eyes of the court to make her a prostitute unworthy of protection. The following year, Miss Mary Simm was raped in public in broad daylight; her body wore the signs of the forceful attack. Nonetheless, her status as an unmarried single mother led to an acquittal after the investigating doctor emphasised that he couldn't prove whether penetration had occurred since she was not a virgin. Finally, in 1913, Mrs Elizabeth Applebee, a middle-aged white widow who'd successfully taken over the farm of her late husband and chosen to remain single and live alone, saw her case collapse after her character was seemingly put on trial—again, a rare occurrence in a court system enthusiastic to convict black men.

All three of these women were humiliated by a court that disapproved of the way they lived their lives: free from white male authority. That financially independent and sexually active single women were excluded from the 'protected' class indicates that Black Peril was about controlling white women as well as subduing the black population. The relatively few white women who existed outside these parameters of virtue found themselves shunned by white society and disregarded by the law. The Black Peril moral panic was ostensibly geared at protecting white women's virtue and innocence, and these depended entirely on her chastity, sexual morality and—most importantly—financial dependence on white men. There were no such concerns for the virtue of black women, so attempting to rape them was not even considered a crime, let alone one punishable by death. In the settler-colonial context, class, sexuality, gender and race were becoming inextricably linked.

When news of Mrs Cromer's infidelity reached the authorities, they declined to commute Alukuleta's sentence. He received ten years rather than the noose, the court rationalising that the audacity that had led him to sleep with a white woman was reason enough to punish him. This was not, however, to protect the wayward wife but to avoid the scandal that the news of an affair between a white woman and a black man would inevitably bring. Black Peril positioned consensual sex between white women and black men outside the realms of reason and probability. That an innocent man received an intolerably harsh sentence remained of little consequence to powerful men who were more invested in maintaining white authority and the illusion of a pure white race than injustice.

Southern Rhodesia was not the only or even the first colony of the British Empire to outlaw sexual relations between white women and black men. In North America, laws banning such liaisons date back to at least the late seventeenth century. The first anti-miscegenation law, passed in Virginia in 1691, subjected a white woman who had a 'bastard child' by a black or 'mulatto' father to either a hefty fine or five years of indentured servitude. Again, this law revealed a glaring double standard, since no such law existed against a white man raping or engaging in consensual sex with a black woman (if such consent can be considered possible given the absurd power imbalance). In truth, sexual access to enslaved black women was a primary way of producing more slave labour for personal use and for profit.

Think about how dehumanised black people were in the minds of whites for this to happen. White men kept their own children as slaves or sold them to be enslaved by others, but were freed of any moral responsibility because the children's blackness automatically excluded them from white society. Children, it was expected, would remain with their mothers, regardless of the race of the father. This freed up white men to pursue and assault non-white women while doing everything in their formidable power to prevent black men from getting intimate with white women.

The slavery-era United States was similarly obsessed with the idea of uncontrollable black male desire for white women, to the point of paranoia. At one time, the punishment for attempted

sexual assault of a white woman by a black man included castration, and by the nineteenth century the antebellum South had imposed a death sentence for a black man who was convicted of raping a white woman, a crime for which white men received a short prison sentence—unless of course they were married to their victim, in which case it wasn't a crime at all. The rape of black women went unpunished because the lewd Black Jezebel archetype rendered black women inherently unrapeable.

Slaveowners anxious about the sexual desires of black men, however, were no more concerned about the welfare of white women than their Rhodesian counterparts. Their rage was fuelled not by anger at the violation of a woman's body but by violation of their property: they believed they owned the sexuality of white women as surely as they owned the bodies of black people. As historian Peter Bardaglio wrote in the *Journal of Southern History*, 'protecting this property was a key to preserving their position in society'.[3] As in Rhodesia, there was scepticism for any claims made by white women who lacked a 'respectable' sexual history. The Arkansas appellate court of 1855 gravely pronounced that the only type of white woman who would willingly have sex with a black man was one who had already 'sunk to the lowest degree of prostitution'. Sex work, if it has not yet been made abundantly clear, was reviled not so much because it implied dubious ethical character as because it allowed white women a degree of independence that most could not access. White male settlers, it seems, hated the very idea of a white woman who had no need of them, and so they set about constructing a society that made it almost impossible for her to be so. As an anonymous letter to the editor of South Carolina's *The Rosebud* put it in 1832, 'If a female possesses beauty, wealth, and, in short, all the accomplishments which wealth can purchase … without VIRTUE, she is "nothing worth". Her accomplishments may be admired by some for a little while, it is true; but she will never be truly esteemed.'[4] There was literally nothing, not a thing, that a white woman could ever have that was worth more than her sexual virtue, and this obligated mandatory chasteness and sexual vulnerability. At the same time, black women were considered fair game; and this created an unbridgeable and lingering binary distinction between women. If the most important thing a woman has is virtue, and only white women can have virtue, then by definition only white women can be women.

Undoubtedly, this binary, which essentially justified the brutalisation of black women through the corresponding overprotection of white women, placed white women on a pedestal. It was a lonely pedestal that could easily double as a prison. Since their sexual innocence was the most valuable asset they had, white women were treated as though they required constant supervision, ostensibly for their own protection. Once the northern states had abolished slavery in the early 1800s, the cotton-fuelled agrarian economy of the South rose so astronomically that by the time of the Civil War, had the South been a separate country its economy would have been the fourth largest in the world. During this antebellum period, racial boundaries in the southern states were strictly policed and higher-class white women were (theoretically at least) not permitted to travel without an older male chaperone. The burden of representing the inherent superiority of white civilisation fell not on the shoulders of white women, but firmly between their legs. As long as upper-class white women performed their ordained role of the 'angel of the house', were impeccably chaste, and were vulnerable to the mythologised sexual whims of the uncivilised black population, then they had to be defended, protected and shielded from view by white men. This placed them in a fundamentally and inherently inferior position; like children, they were subordinated through their dependency on their masculine protectors. Also like children, they were expected to be obedient: spousal physical abuse was an acceptable means for

a white husband to rein in a recalcitrant wife.

For all these white fears and anxieties, sexual assault by black men was not a common occurrence either before or after Abolition. Because slavery ensured white supremacy and black men were a source of free labour, white fear had not yet resulted in the kind of moral panic seen in Rhodesia or the lynching of Mexicans following the end of the Mexican-American War. This all changed after Abolition. With black men theoretically enfranchised and no longer legal property, the perceived threat to the status and power held by white men grew as they became obsessed with miscegenation and its potential to erode their status. These fears of being 'replaced' manifested in the increased persecution of black men, and shockingly brutal attacks on them skyrocketed. Lynching was driven largely by the fear of interracial relationships between white women and black men and the impact mixed-race offspring would have on white supremacy. Once again, the rampage was wildly disproportionate to any actual threat.

White women were integral to this spectacle of violence. Apparently not in need of protection from witnessing torture and murder, they were encouraged to attend lynchings, which often had the atmosphere of family picnics. Women can be seen smiling in many of the postcards that were fashioned from the gruesome scenes and sold for a dime a dozen in corner stores. The images show mangled black bodies burned alive or hanging from trees while white people swarm around mugging for the camera. How could they be enjoying this? The answer is, I believe, that the white women were smiling because they knew it was occurring on their behalf. The extent to which white men were prepared to go to protect their bodies and their virtue gave them a vested interested in maintaining themselves as a protected class. It was a source of power, albeit one with inherent limitations.

As for the smiling white men in the pictures, the self-satisfaction was simple: the more black men they eliminated in ever-more-horrific displays of sadism, the less likely surviving black men were to consider liaisons with white women or to challenge white men in general. The violence went virtually unabated and unchallenged because any white person who opposed it was quickly silenced by accusations of failing to protect white women.[5]

Not that fear was a reasonable excuse for such silence. The most important contemporary work on lynching comes from the pioneering black female journalist Ida B. Wells, whose investigative reporting was integral to documenting and spreading word of what was happening in the southern states. Wells was justifiably scathing towards those 'men and women in the South who disapprove of lynching and remain silent on the perpetration of such outrages', denouncing them as criminal participants, accomplices and 'accessories before and after the fact, equally guilty with the actual law breakers who would not persist if they did not know that neither the law nor militia would not be employed against them'.[6]

Between 1877 and 1950, at least 4075 black people were lynched; about 200 of these were women. Wells proved herself to be well ahead of her contemporaries by arguing that lynching and rape were first and foremost a means of terrorising the black population into submission in order to reassert the control over the bodies of black men and women that emancipation had taken from white men. There was much resistance to the documentation Wells provided (she was fired from her teaching position, only to use her extra spare time to write more articles), but from our vantage point in the present it should be as clear to us as it was to her that lynching was motivated primarily by the desire to undo the rights Abolition had ostensibly granted black people.

The simultaneous 'protection' and subordination of white women were integral to the professed logic of lynching. Black women were raped without consequence by white men

because their blackness placed them outside the construction of womanhood. Black men were killed with impunity because of perceived transgressions against the virtuous bodies of white women, which white men still regarded as their property. In this way, lynching and rape reinforced the racial and gender hierarchies of the Jim Crow era that had been constructed during slavery. As black academic Hazel Carby puts it, 'white men used their ownership of the white female as a terrain on which to lynch the black male'.[7] As in other European colonies, only white men were free to cross boundaries with impunity. As white men, they decided they could have sexual access to the bodies of both white and black women and reserved the right to guard this access by terrorising the black population, all the while projecting their own sexual violence onto their victims. The concept of white women's virtue is a corollary of white men's sin: by keeping this false image of impeccable White Womanhood alive, white masculinity was absolved of its terrible crimes and black sexuality could be demonised and mythologised.

Such was the absurd imagination of the white man, wrote the psychiatrist and cultural theorist Frantz Fanon in 1952, that 'no longer do we see a black man; we see a penis: the black man has been occulted. He has been turned into a penis: he is a penis.'[8] This reveals the underlying anxiety and cause of the violence and hatred directed at black men by white men: white men feared that white women would willingly enter into sexual relationships with black men, and that their mixed-race children would threaten the economic and social dominance of white men.

To understand race in the settler-colonial context, we must understand the centrality of sex. It all came down to sex: who was allowed to have it, when, and with whom. It was through sex work that some white women were able to assert financial and social independence. It was through rape that slavery was enforced and reinforced. And it was through sex that whiteness and white male authority could be both bolstered and undermined. Segregation, lynching and Black Peril all occurred for the same reasons: to keep white men on top. White society, then, hinged on the myth of 'protecting' white women from rape, but in reality, what they were really 'protected' from was their own liberation and any capacity to form meaningful relationships with people of colour.

Miscegenation was reviled not because it was unnatural or against God's will as claimed, or because white people really thought black people were dirty; it was feared because it threatened white male domination and white supremacy, which hinged on maintaining a fictional notion of racial purity as a mask for economic and political power. White people are not united by a shared ethnicity: they are united by access to institutional power. This fiction of a white race unravels as soon as we consider that 'white' is the only racial category where any mixing automatically excludes one from the racial group. Indeed, for a long time the South's one-drop rule meant that just 'one drop' of black blood, even going back several generations, could, and often did, leave even the fairest-looking white ostracised from white society. Any white-appearing person who socialised with black people was viewed with mistrust and suspected of attempting to 'pass' as white in order to access white entitlements and privileges. A popular genre of romantic fiction in the Jim Crow South revolved around the 'tragedy' of a white Southern belle or gentleman who discovers on the eve of their wedding day that one of them is 'black'; the wedding, naturally, has to be called off. As Jewish-American sociologist Abby L. Ferber explains, 'The frequency with which these revelations occurred immediately before the individual was to be wed highlights anxiety over ensuring racially pure reproduction.'[9]

The situation was similar in other settler-colonies. Historian Ann Stoler has written

extensively on the construction of race, gender and white society in European colonies in South-East Asia and Africa. What they all had in common, she argues, was the double standard that allowed white men to have sex with and rape colonised women while white women were not only expected to remain sexually virtuous but were charged with policing the overall sexual morality of their community. White women had little to no contact with the local colonised populations, and as such their perceptions of brown and black sexuality likely had even less relationship with reality than those of white men.[10] As in the cases of Miss Falconer with the baboon and poor Kuchi with the wrong bicycle, some of those white women who accused Indigenous men of attempted rape in the most absurd of circumstances probably genuinely believed they were telling the truth.

Unsurprisingly, similar anxieties arose in all the colonies regarding the 'safety' of white women; these concerns intensified whenever the white population perceived their control to be threatened, regardless of whether the threat was coming from within their own white community or from the restless colonised population. So, for example, when colonised men from Papua to Algeria to South Africa began to agitate for their civil rights, the number of rape charges (conveniently) increased. These 'attempted rapes' include a Papuan man who happened to be not far from a white residence, a Fijian man who had the misfortune of entering the hospital room of a female European patient, and an African servant who paused outside the door of his sleeping white mistress. If merely being in the same vicinity as a white woman rendered colonised men vulnerable to accusations of attempted rape, writes Stoler, then this effectively means that 'all colonised men of colour were potential aggressors'.[11] And, naturally, all white women were potential victims who had to be closely guarded, their movements restricted, their innocence protected, their distress alleviated.

Colonial Australia did not see a similar degree of sexual moral panic, although some historians note that Aboriginal men in Queensland were regarded as a threat to white female settlers. Like African women and enslaved black women in the Americas, Aboriginal women were considered unrapeable. White ignorance about Aboriginal cultural practices imposed a Christian supremacist morality on Aboriginal peoples and their traditions. Unable to view the world outside their own narrow lens of experience, white colonialists regarded Aboriginal culture as immoral and permissive. Consequently, white men abused and objectified Aboriginal women so often that the women came to be seen as good for little else. Like their counterparts elsewhere, white women in Australia were excluded from positions of authority, leadership and most occupations. Charged with the upkeep of the family home and the burden of carrying the honour of white civilisation, they often spent much of their time in isolation. And so 'white woman' as an archetype was one of racial purity, Christian morality, sexual innocence, demureness and financial dependence on men all rolled into one. To step off this pedestal meant no longer being regarded as a 'woman'.

One of the earliest critiques of White Womanhood comes from one of the most deliberately underrated figures of the suffragette era. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a poet, journalist and fiction writer, and a formidable presence on the abolitionist speakers' circuit. In 1866 she gave a far-sighted speech at the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention in New York City before a crowd that included key suffragist figures Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. 'We are all bound up in one great bundle of humanity,' she declared, 'and society can't trample on the weakest and feeblest among its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.' Harper compared the white man's treatment of the black man to white women's treatment of black women. 'You white women speak of rights, I speak of wrongs,' she asserted. 'I do not

believe that giving white women the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of society. I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies.' She argued that the condition of the poor white men of the South was a direct consequence of the law favouring rich slaveowners: in oppressing enslaved black men, white men also paralysed the moral strength of the nation and the rights of lower-class whites. Likewise, in the North, white women were turning away when black women, including Harper herself, tried to hail streetcars in great cities such as Philadelphia only to find that the conductor refused to let them ride. 'Have women nothing to do with this?' asked Harper. She answered her own question by recounting the story of a conductor who instructed all his passengers to exit the tram when a black woman hopped on. They all—including the white women—complied and the car was sent back to the station. 'While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.'[12]

In other words, white women, including the suffragettes, were still trampling on society's weaker members. The key, then, to white women's liberation lay in whether or not they considered black women to be women like themselves, and in using this recognition as the first step in building a newer, fairer society that didn't trample on its weakest members. Sadly, those white women didn't, and arguably many still don't. Rather than rejecting the concept of white women as virtuous 'dew-drops' inherently equipped to right all the wrongs of their white male counterparts, as Harper implored, white women have largely chosen to navigate and bolster the existing system to gain some advantages, which necessarily have had to come at the expense of people of colour. And this has meant adopting the persona of the damsel in distress.

Perhaps no story encapsulates this more clearly and tragically than that of Emmett Till. The fourteen-year-old from Chicago was visiting family in 1955 Mississippi when he was accused of whistling at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, in a convenience store. He was abducted by a group of white men who included Bryant's husband, beaten to death and dumped in the Tallahassee River. His killers were acquitted by an all-white jury. In 2018 Bryant recanted her testimony and admitted that Till had neither whistled at nor harassed her in any way. This is the power of the white damsel in distress.

It is a power that is not in the past. We see this modern-day dynamic of white women's innocence and virtue used as a justification for the oppression of brown and black bodies in the rhetoric of our politicians. US president Donald Trump invoked the protection of women as a rationale for demonising the so-called 'migrant caravan'—the dehumanising name given to the thousands of people who in 2018 attempted to make their way from Central America to the US border on foot in the vain hope of finding safety and security. He conjured up the image of the white damsel, saying, 'Women want security. Women don't want that caravan', echoing the messages of slavery, segregation, Black Peril and more recent white supremacist literature.

In 1997, Ferber published *White Man Falling*, a discourse analysis of newsletters and magazines printed by white supremacist groups. What she found, along with a preoccupation with 'saving' Western civilisation and restoring the reputation of the white Western male, was an obsession with policing the bodies of white women and the borders of 'white' countries. 'America is being invaded by a deluge of legal and illegal non-White intruders: swarms of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Negro, Oriental and Jewish scum who are thronging across our wide-open borders,' thundered one publication, arguing that this 'unarmed invasion' threatened the white race because of the possibility of white women 'crossbreeding with inferior specimens', which would lead to the end of the white race through the contamination of white blood with

'inferior blood'.[13] The logic of policing racial boundaries, while rarely stated so explicitly these days, is not new. It is the foundation that all settler-colonies were built on.

The white damsel has enjoyed an online resurgence in this era of viral memes, and the past couple of years have seen a proliferation of white women caught on camera in the United States calling the police on black people for simply existing. The white women who do this are either oblivious to or unbothered by the potential consequences for black people. 'Permit Patty' achieved viral status after calling the police on a young black girl selling water outside a busy sporting stadium. Another damsel in distress was 'Cornerstore Caroline', who, reminiscent of Carolyn Bryant and Emmett Till, wrongly claimed a twelve-year-old black boy had sexually assaulted her in a New York grocery store. Security footage revealed that his backpack had lightly brushed her when he strolled past, oblivious to her presence.

White women in apparent distress have called the police on black people for everything from sleeping in the student lounge of their own college dorms to waiting in line for the restroom at Starbucks. But perhaps no meme exposes the dangerous fiction that lies at the heart of the white damsel in distress trope than 'BBQ Becky', the viral meme that achieved something of a symbiotic relationship with my *Guardian* article on white women's tears. The day after my piece was published, a slew of followers on Twitter tagged and linked me to the footage, which at forty minutes was surprisingly lengthy for a viral video, swearing that it demonstrated my piece in action. In it, the middle-aged white woman who would quickly come to be dubbed 'BBQ Becky' can be seen on her mobile phone angrily requesting police show up to eject a black family barbecuing in a park in Oakland on a Sunday; she allegedly said they were using the wrong kind of barbecue for the area. After many words of consternation between Becky and the white woman who is filming her, a defiant Becky physically refuses to return a business card belonging to the other woman and storms off. The camera follows her, and the transformation in Becky's demeanour is remarkable to witness. In a matter of minutes, she goes from assertive to combative to aggressive to defiant, and finally, when she spots and rushes towards a bewildered-looking white male police officer, becomes the white damsel in distress. Bursting into tears when she reaches her apparent rescuer, she manages to heave out a few words between gulping sobs: 'I am being harassed.'

This incident that so clearly demonstrated my thesis—that white women are not only aware of their privileged status in society but use it to surreptitiously manipulate and dominate people of colour, only to resort to the damsel in distress archetype of white female innocence and victimhood when challenged—was a remarkable coincidence. It led many people to read my article who may not have otherwise come across it, and vice versa. One person messaged me to say they had been sceptical of what I had written until they saw it play out literally before their very eyes in the form of BBQ Becky.

The original damsel in distress trope was a way for white women to exercise some limited power. I say 'limited' not because it didn't have far-reaching effects—just ask Emmett Till's mother—but because it required white women to adhere to strict rules to be accepted. The damsel is an infantilised woman whose purity and innocence is both inherent and sanctified, leading to her perceived reliance on men and to the obsession with virginity that persists even in a Western world that is supposedly sexually liberated. The damsel ensured that white women were at least considered human, even though it came at the cost of relegating them to subordinate status.

But it did so by ruthlessly excluding non-white women from the construction of womanhood. It is not that non-white women were considered inferior to white women: it's that they were not

considered to be women at all. The damsel can only be white. Only white women were considered worthy of protecting, because only white women could ensure the continuation of a 'pure white race'. Black women, Indigenous women, Native women, all colonised women were similarly regarded as lacking in innocence because their bodies were already freely, openly and liberally transgressed by white men. White women could achieve acceptance by behaving in certain ways—or pretending to. Racialised women, however, as the case of Josefa Segovia demonstrates in Chapter 3, were doomed no matter what they said or did.

When white women invoke the damsel, they resurrect this bloody history. This is what makes white women's tears so damaging and, yes, so violent when they are turned against people of colour and especially, as is increasingly often the case these days, against women of colour.

White women's tears have little effect on white men—just ask Christine Blasey Ford, whose emotional testimony was not enough to prevent her alleged abuser confirmed to the US Supreme Court—because they were never designed to implicate white men. This is why sexual violence by white men was rarely punished historically and why to this day so many white people still react so blithely to sexual assault and domestic violence perpetrated by white men, even when the victims are white women. This is why a self-confessed 'pussy grabber' can be elected president of the United States. To be a white man in this white supremacist construction of society is to have the right to sexual access to all women, while at the same time sequestering the bodies of white women to prevent men of colour ingratiating themselves into white society.

A white man raping a white woman is not a threat to white male power, and if it destroys or threatens to destroy the woman's life then so be it. And this, I believe, is why, despite all our claims, our society still does not take violence against women seriously. When perpetrated by white men, frequently either such violence is ignored or the blame is heaped onto the victim. It is only when white women are violated or even imagined to be violated by non-white men that white society suddenly seems to find its moral compass.

This is not to say that men of colour never assault white women—they do—but the scale of the white fear of brown and black men raping innocent white women with no repercussions is a gross perversion of the historical reality, whereby it was white men who raped brown and black women with impunity. White fear betrays deep-seated anxieties about white men being 'replaced' at the top of the racial and gender hierarchy and white society collapsing; I don't mean the total destruction of society here—merely it no longer being solely in the control of white men and women.

White people as a collective still fear sharing power and status. They fear no longer being the special race. The Enlightened race. The civilised and civilising race. This is obvious to anyone watching the rise of right-wing 'populism', the alt-right and the resurgence of the neo-Nazi movement. Perhaps, as many people of colour half-joke, white people fear being treated the way they have long treated the minorities they have subordinated. At the very least, there appears to be a complete denial that the only thing that has made white people 'superior' is their own insistence that they are.

The damsel in distress reveals that from the beginnings of settler-colonial societies, race was gendered and gender was raced. Only white men were Man and only white women were Woman. For hundreds of years, excluding women of colour from womanhood has been key to maintaining this racial hierarchy, and white women have been both privileged and subordinated by it. It seems clear to me that this is why it is women of colour who remain most marginalised and most at risk of violence and discrimination. There are other intersections, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability, that each deserve their own extended treatment of

how they intersect with whiteness—and it is my hope that *White Tears/Brown Scars* inspires more books of that nature—but add race into the mix and every single one of them becomes exponentially more prohibitive and dangerous.

Looking back over the history of race and gender, it is startling to see how it all came down to sex—or, more specifically, to the regulation of sex in order to sustain structural power. White supremacy is economic and political domination through the policing of racial purity. For it to succeed and appear natural at the same time necessitated the manipulation of the image of virtuous white women to present the white race as one of impeccable morals, far superior to the sex-crazed and animalistic inferior races, and therefore the peak of civilisation. At the same time the damsel's true purpose was to prevent the races from mixing and procreating freely, equally and happily. The damsel in distress is always white because in order to justify white men's self-granted right of access to the body of any woman they chose, regardless of how she felt about it, only white women were considered capable of being in distress: of being raped.

Think about this for a moment. Rather than consider respecting the bodies of brown and black women, white men and their female accomplices removed them from the concept of womanhood and humanity altogether. Chivalry (carrying white women over puddles, protecting white women by restricting their movements and suppressing their sexuality) imprisoning brown men, lynching and executing black men, raping colonised women—all of these acts bolstered white male and, by extension, female power while conveniently absolving white people of any wrongdoing by permitting them to project their own sexual violence onto black and brown men. And to punish them ruthlessly.

When I think of this history, I think of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The handsome but hedonistic anti-hero sells his soul to the devil and, rewarded with everlasting youth and beauty, embarks on a decades-long rampage knowing that his portrait hidden in the attic will bear the scars and sin of his cruel and criminal behaviour. As the years pass, Dorian stays young and beautiful while his pictorial likeness becomes withered and grotesque as every irredeemable act he commits, from callously breaking a lover's heart to murder, is recorded on its passive body. Eventually, faced with the true horror of his crimes and the knowledge he has been damned to hell, Dorian attempts to destroy the painting, only to fatally stab his own heart.

The crimes of white supremacy have not gone unrecorded. They are etched into the bodies of brown and black people the world over. Our scars, past and present, physical and emotional, bear witness to the violence white men and women insisted they were not inflicting. White society marked the bodies of women of colour as a receptacle for its sins so that it could claim innocence for itself and, as the chosen symbol of the innocent perfection of whiteness, the white damsel with her tears of distress functions as both denial of and absolution for this violence. From Mrs Cromer to Carolyn Bryant to BBQ Becky, the white damsel in distress has never shied away from damning people of colour in order to bolster her own status and help white society prosper at our expense.

But absolution is not for the perpetrator to grant, and white people will eventually have to reckon with the true horror of their own brutal history. Frances Harper's challenge rings as clear in its truth now as ever, whether white women are ready to face it or not. For women of colour to be free of racism and for white women to be rid of patriarchy, it is the damsel who must be damned.

# Part 2

# The pay-off

# 5

# When tears become weapons

## White Womanhood's silent war on women of colour

*I will lash out and do whatever I need to do to get you to stop challenging me. And so if that's cry, I'll cry.*

Robin DiAngelo, 2018

Mary Beard is no stranger to social media storms. The Cambridge professor, or 'Britain's best-known classicist' as she's known, has said she regards a prolific online presence is part of her responsibility as an academic. This means she has frequently drawn the ire of Twitter's troll patrols.

In 2017, the historian who counts ancient Rome among her specialities responded to alt-right figure Joseph Paul Watson, who had mocked a BBC cartoon depicting a family in Roman Britain with skin tones ranging from pale to black by tweeting, 'Thank God the BBC is portraying Roman Britain as ethnically diverse. I mean, who cares about historical accuracy, right?' Watson was undeservedly assured in his mockery. Ancient Europe was far more diverse in its history than our current concepts of identity assume. Beard let him know about Quintus Lollius Urbicus, a governor of Britain who'd been born in what is now Algeria. This unleashed a barrage of abuse against Beard, whose qualifications were somehow deemed irrelevant. Twitter users who knew better dismissed her perspective as political correctness gone mad and accused her of trying to rewrite history, treating her to a torrent of aggressive insults 'on everything from my historical competence and elitist ivory tower viewpoint to my age, shape and gender'.[1]

But on 17 February 2018, Beard posted a tweet that ignited a different kind of storm, one in which she played a different role—though perhaps her past experience with trolls did not lead her to see it this way. In response to the unfolding scandal involving Oxfam aid staff abusing sex workers in the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Beard tweeted, 'Of course one can't condone the (alleged) behaviour of Oxfam staff in Haiti and elsewhere. But I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain "civilised" values in a disaster zone. And overall I still respect those who go in to help out, where most of us [would] not tread.'

It's a particularly disappointing tweet coming from a history professor. The backlash was immediate, this time from people of colour. One of these critics was fellow Cambridge scholar Priyamvada Gopal, who took exception to Beard's apparent minimisation of the brutality of colonisation. Gopal wrote a Medium post outlining to Beard why her tweet was being criticised, calling it an example of a 'genteel patrician racist manner' that is pervasive in academia and noting with disappointment that 'this is the more progressive end of the spectrum'.[2]

Twitter pile-ons can be so over the top that separating the wheat of legitimate critique from

the chaff of abusive trolling can sometimes feel like an exercise in futility, so I have no doubt that much of the criticism levelled at Beard got unnecessarily nasty. Nonetheless, there are attacks and there is constructive criticism, and Beard seemed to make no differentiation between the two. Apologising not for the content or implications of her tweet but for attempting to inject 'nuance' into the discussion, she posted a teary selfie, pleading, 'I'm really not the nasty colonialist you think I am … If you must know I am sitting here crying.'

This is where things took what is a now-familiar turn. Writer and academic Flavia Dzodan marvelled at Beard's 'white feminist tears' and commented on 'the extent of sentimentality people will go through, debasing themselves if necessary, in order to sustain their ignorance, bigotry or both', and Anaïs Duong-Pedica described Beard's tearful display as 'a typical white woman's move to innocence'. Others quickly came to the defence of Beard, namely white feminist journalists such as Helen Lewis, who claimed Beard wasn't playing the victim but just being 'honest', and Hadley Freeman, who dismissed the criticism of Beard as 'the textbook definition of bullying: mocking someone for showing weakness'.

These defenders really, *really* didn't get it. In this context, Beard's tears were not a sign of weakness: they were a reminder of her relative power. It is significant that of all the times she has been dragged on Twitter, usually by sexist, racist trolls, this is the first and only time—when her critics were women of colour—that she responded by publicly crying.

Most disappointing is that Beard clearly is intimately knowledgeable with how women's voices as a whole have been silenced and marginalised from power. In fact, she literally wrote a manifesto on it: *Women and Power*, published in 2017. And yet, when it came to criticism even from fellow academics and feminist writers who warned her she was contributing to the silencing of non-white women by dismissing their concerns, she was unable to see past her own innocence and victimhood. Her tears made Gopal and other women of colour critiquing her seem all the nastier and more irrational—Gopal in particular became the target of vicious attacks. The entire incident demonstrates how easily white women can slip between their 'one up' and 'one down' identities.

When I first wrote about it, I did not know that this has been a subject of academic study for much longer than the topics of white women's tears and white feminism have been in the public eye. In 2007, researcher Mamta Motwani Accapadi, then a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Houston, wrote a paper called 'When white women cry: How white women's tears oppress women of colour' in which she argues that white women's experience of gender is shaped by their race as much as that of women of colour. Just as black and brown women are caricaturised by the negative images governing society's perception of their racial communities, so too are white women's experiences 'shaped by internal expectations and external perceptions of what it means to be a woman within each of these racial communities'.[3]

White women's racial privilege is predicated on their acceptance of their role of virtue and goodness, which is, ultimately, powerlessness. It is this powerlessness—or, I would argue, this *appearance* of powerlessness—that governs the nature of White Womanhood. 'Put in simple terms, male privilege positions the nature of womanhood, while White privilege positions a White woman's reality as the universal norm of womanhood,' Accapadi continues, 'leaving a woman of colour defined by two layers of oppression.'[4]

To put it even more simply, women of colour are both too racialised and too gendered to be taken seriously or treated with respect. So while the apparent emotional distress of a white woman sees onlookers flocking to soothe that distress, women of colour are perceived in a negative way that regards them as lesser women. 'When a Woman of Color acts,' explains

Accapadi, 'her actions at some level reflect upon her racial community, and she cannot centrifuge her racial identity from her womanhood.'

By posting a close-up of herself literally crying, or at least appearing to be, Beard pivoted from her one down identity—woman—to her one up identity—white, and from her usual public role of feminist agitator to the 'powerless' role of the damsel in distress. Not only did she perpetuate the derogatory rhetoric about 'uncivilised' non-Western countries, but the moment she began crying, the entire tone of the incident necessarily shifted. It was no longer about what she had said or why it had upset many people of colour: it was about her feelings. Her innocence. Her victimhood. Her strategic White Womanhood.

It is presented as helplessness and sentimentality, but it is a power move. The power of the damsel is that she provokes the protective urge. Whoever is making her cry must be the one at fault (unless it is a white man—but more on that in the next chapter). At the same time, the reductive archetypes governing the representation of women of colour also kick into play. Angry. Scary. Cold. Aggressive.

This doesn't mean the tears aren't genuine, even if they are strategic. I have no doubt many white women genuinely feel they are being attacked simply by virtue of a woman of colour disagreeing with them. 'White people are so rarely ever outside of our racial comfort zones and we've been warned all our lives not to go outside of our racial comfort zone, and we come to feel entitled to racial comfort,' Robin DiAngelo explained to me when I interviewed her during her US book tour in the summer of 2018. 'So if you challenge any of that … we can't handle it, our capacity to handle that is basically zero. And I will lash out and do whatever I need to do to get you to stop challenging me. And if that's cry, I'll cry. I might not even be consciously thinking about that but that's how it works.'

In other words, the tears may well be genuine, but that does not make them innocent and harmless: the opposite, in fact. 'As soon as I cry all of the resources are going to go back to me, and you (the person of colour) are going to be bad. And that's why I think it's a form of bullying,' DiAngelo continued. 'I bet you put up with way more racism from white people every single day than you bother talking to us about. And why don't you bother? Because you're probably going to get punished worse. So it's just a beautiful form of white racial control. You stay in your place, and I stay in mine, then I get to claim you as my friend, my co-worker—see how I'm not racist? But (only) as long as you don't challenge my identity and my position.'

DiAngelo is right, of course: I do put up with a lot more racism than I bother to point out—and I am someone who writes about racism for a living. In fact, I would say there is barely a woman of colour alive today who hasn't been on the wrong end of a white woman's tears multiple times in her life, and with far worse consequences than those faced by Professor Gopal in her challenge to Mary Beard. Gopal's status as a high-profile academic, as well as her self-admitted privileged upper caste background in India, mean she isn't subject to the same consequences as women with less status, although racism does make her job more strenuous than it would be otherwise. It has only been in the process of writing this book that I have begun to gain an understanding of how pervasive this experience is for the majority of women of colour living in the West—how much it shapes, limits and mars their lives and, most frustratingly, how little recourse they have to seek accountability from those who do it to them.

Perhaps few conflicts are more ubiquitous and contentious for women of colour than the one that arises due to the insistence of white women on playing with their hair. Zeina, the thirty-something Palestinian-Canadian from Chapter 1, has lived in Australia for about five years. She says she has had the same hairstyle—long, thick, curly brown hair to her waist—since her late

teens, and a common occurrence is white women touching and playing with it. ‘Only white people touch my hair,’ she told me. ‘Only middle-aged white people, white women, touch my hair. I have never, ever had a black woman or an Aboriginal woman come up to me, or a Chinese person. Even in Canada, you know we have a lot of Japanese tourists, and they take pictures with everyone, they’re like “Can I take a picture with you please? You look so exotic”, but if you say no, they won’t. They’re very polite. But these (white women) just walk up to me and put their hands on my hair and I’m like, “What the fuck are you doing?”’ She laughs, but it’s out of frustration rather than amusement. ‘They say, “Can I touch your hair?” and they touch. It’s not a question, because they’re not pausing—it’s in the process of them already touching me … It isn’t asking permission whatsoever … they just do what they want anyway.’

The fascination with curly hair is not harmless. It is performing playfulness while sending a loud message. One recent incident for Zeina took place in a tourist gift shop, where an older, white-haired woman approached her and said animatedly that while people with curly hair ‘hate’ it when she touches their hair, she can’t help herself and has to do it anyway. ‘This woman … she said to me, “Can I pet you?” while she was touching my hair.’ Zeina pauses. ‘She said “pet”.’ At this point I remark that it sounds a lot like a display of power and domination, as if they are showing her who’s the boss. ‘Who’s boss—exactly!’ she exclaims. ‘I feel like they’re trying to show me who’s boss because I’ve already said no, and they just do it anyway and they pet me—like, they actually pet me like you pet a puppy … If I turned around and petted her head, she would not accept it. She would swipe at my hand, or step back, or she would have a reaction … They are taking charge of the situation. It doesn’t really matter if I say yes or if I say no, it’s just not part of the discussion. She wants to do this—she’ll do this.’

So what happens when ‘she wants to do this’ at work? Zeina describes her interaction with that co-worker at an old job of hers in Canada when they were both in the bathroom. ‘She comes out of the stall and touches my hair before she washes her hands, and I’m going to throw up. Like, I feel disgusted. So I complain, and she turns it into some kind of reverse racism thing. She’s saying to the supervisor that I’m making it an uncomfortable working environment, I’m making it toxic or hostile because I’m not being friendly. That I should have manners, and I be more open to being kind with my co-workers.’

When Zeina made her complaint, she says her supervisor asked her to ‘Let this go’, and HR responded by asking whether or not the co-worker had punched her or sexually harassed her. When Zeina said no but that the touching was still uninvited and inappropriate, ‘they said I was acting aggressive, and that I wasn’t a team player … Somehow, I was the guilty party in this.’ She ended up losing that job after bringing up the incident again at a staff meeting. ‘I’m like, please, we need to talk about boundaries and personal space, and what’s sexual harassment and what’s racism.’ The management agreed to undertake sensitivity training, during which a video was shown featuring a woman with dreadlocks instructing colleagues not to touch each other’s hair. ‘She burst into tears,’ Zeina says of her co-worker, ‘and said we were obviously shaming her and targeting her in front of the rest of the department … She complained to HR about it, HR decided I owed her an apology, and they said I had to apologise in front of everybody in a meeting, the same way I had “humiliated” her in front of everybody. I refused … and then I gave my resignation.’

Not only did her workplace not try to change her mind about resigning, Zeina says they were pleased to let her go. Her manager thanked her for the resignation, saying, ‘Have a great last two weeks, bye.’ Zeina believes this was because ‘they were so shocked that I’d stood up for myself that they were just relieved I was going to go. Nobody had ever called them out on their soft

racism before … they were just so happy to see me go.'

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Zeina's experience is where all this occurred: she was an immigration officer for the Canadian Ministry of Immigration and had worked there for seven years. If this seems surprising (it certainly did to me), perhaps it shouldn't given that even in areas servicing brown and black people, the overwhelming majority of positions are held by white people. Zeina's workplace was no exception. 'It was around 80 per cent white people,' she says of her time at the ministry. 'We had one Sikh guy, there was me—I was the token Arab—and one Asian person, but it wasn't very diverse ... I mean, the department had fifty-one people and we had five people who were non-white.'

If there is any field where you'd logically expect this kind of thing not to take place, it would be in the aid and not-for-profit sector. However, in early 2019 the sector was rocked by allegations of a 'toxic working culture' at Amnesty International, one of the most recognised non-government organisations (NGOs) in the world.[5] A report commissioned following the suicide of two of Amnesty's UK staff members found routine bullying, harassment and discrimination against racial minorities and LGBTIQ workers, as well as favouritism and nepotism in the hiring and promotional process.

'The non-profit and philanthropy sector is really based on privilege, and that implies white privilege a lot of the time,' Kristina Delgado tells me. The 27-year-old recently started her own coaching and consulting business, Hearts on Fleek, aimed specifically at the aid and non-profit sector, after she grew disenchanted with the sector's racism and favouritism. She sums up her experience of bringing up race issues as a 'narrative of taking victimhood' away from people of colour to undermine their allegations: 'It positions us not as a target of racism but as an agent of racism. So whenever I bring up something to do with racism, I'm targeted as the person being divisive and making something up, and I'm the one with the problem. Even though there's a lot of training that teaches that reverse racism isn't a thing, it's still culturally and socially reinforced whenever you bring it up.'

Kristina, who lives in Germany, is from the Bronx, New York. Her mother is Indigenous Salvadoran and her father is from Puerto Rico and has Palestinian Arab heritage. Though she identifies as Latina, she describes herself as ethnically ambiguous looking, which, she says leads to objectification and tokenisation. 'I was working at a humanitarian NGO in Turkey serving Syrian and Palestinian refugees,' she recalls. 'The founder of the organisation was a white woman who had the money to fund such work but no previous experience. I have a background in Arabic language, international development and public health and that's why she took me on. She tokenised me often to get legitimacy with the community, although I don't identify as Arab.'

Kristina told me that the organisation sought to dictate the needs of the community by the founder's 'white, privileged standards' rather than to 'empower them and see them as true partners to develop and sustain programs geared towards their own needs. She wanted to offer yoga classes to newly arrived refugees from Syria who did not have access to food or healthcare!' Kristina says she felt compelled to speak up against what she regarded as an abuse of power and white privilege that was affecting the running of the organisation. 'I confronted her about her attitude—the harm she was producing by seeing this community of displaced people as objects of charity rather than complex humans capable of deciding their own needs … and that she was catering to herself rather than them. She cried, called me a racist monster for calling her out, [and] left the room. The other white women I worked with told me I needed to stop being so sensitive and stop looking at race.'

Kristina says her job became so stressful she was hospitalised and eventually forced to quit,

only to then find herself having similar experiences elsewhere. Increasingly, she found that white women used their tears to police how she expressed herself and what issues she could discuss: 'I am a trained communicator and negotiator [but] I'm labelled as being divisive or an angry brown woman.' In another incident, when she was part of a Fulbright Fellow cohort that travelled to Turkey and one of the few non-white women in her group, she found herself part of a subgroup of four women of colour who spoke up about Islamophobia and racism in the organisation only to be literally labelled 'The Angry Brown Girl Club'.

'It demerits what we say and overlooks our professional, academic and lived expertise. When white women cry it also makes them able to leave the conversation and choose not to listen, whereas women of colour do not have the ability to choose to leave a conversation when we have made someone uncomfortable by simply expressing our truth. White women believe that their womanhood puts them on the same level of oppression as (us) and that's where the conversation stops. They seem to believe in equality to the point that they are more interested in having the same power and privilege as white men rather than dismantling oppressive attitudes and systems for all. It's angering because I'm on their team but I don't understand why our narratives can't bolster each other up, and why my lived truth must be made palatable for their needs.'

Kristina sees differences between the United States and Europe: 'Germany … they have this horrible past and they have more cultural reckoning with their abuse of power from World War II, so there's generally more openness.' This openness, however, doesn't seem to extend to her industry: 'It's still there within the sector, the social impact sector … trying to tell people you can't talk about race whatsoever. I think in the American context it happens no matter what you're engaging with; here, I feel a bit better because Germans (are) in many ways more willing to sit through it and listen, whereas in America, we've never had a reckoning with our history of slavery and colonialism, imperialism, global interventions—you name it—so we've never had a chance to look at our own backyard, whereas Germany has.'

Another country that hasn't had a reckoning with its colonial foundations is Australia. Rashida* arrived as an Afghan refugee after living in refugee camps with her family. Now in her thirties, she has had similar experiences to Kristina in the non-profit sector. Despite being Afghan, not Arab, she has frequently found herself to be her organisation's media 'face' and 'voice' for any issue to do with the Middle East—a tokenism she says has not translated to respect and promotion. Like Kristina, she has found herself in uncomfortable work meetings in which she is the sole woman of colour surrounded by white female colleagues who can't or don't understand why she brings up racism and representation.

Strategic White Womanhood isn't limited to the workplace, though it does seem to be particularly prevalent there. This dynamic plays out in social settings also and can be especially devastating when it happens between friends. 'It completely floored me, Ruby,' Rashida's voice drops in the middle of our phone conversation. For all her frustrations at work, it is an interaction with someone she believed was a good friend—'one of my closest'—that has impacted her the most. On a night out with friends, all of whom also work in the aid sector, which is an admittedly stressful vocation, one of them, recently returned from India, brought up her 'yoga journey and spiritual awakening'. Rashida, who was born in India and lived there with her family before they were granted visas to Australia, asked the friend if, given the work she did, she'd thought about the direction yoga has taken in the West: 'The studios are full of white women and the prices are not really reflective of the ethos I think yoga is meant to be about. So I asked her if she'd thought of that and whether it came up when she was in India.'

What Rashida thought was a casual question to a good friend quickly turned. 'I have never in

my life experienced such a level of defensiveness,' she says, her voice cracking. 'It was like, how dare I even question something so important to her in her journey—this is something that helps her deal with the stress of her work.' Though Rashida had tried to initiate a general conversation on appropriation, her friend 'completely centred herself … All I'd asked her was if she was conscious of that side of it … I was completely perplexed and the whole conversation spiralled to the point where she just up and left the pub. All my friends there were also white, and they told me I was rude to even bring it up, it was important to her and I was way out of line.'

Like so many other women of colour who have been in this position, Rashida blamed herself. 'I thought, okay, it's clearly me. I'm crazy. I should shut the fuck up because I am losing all my friends.' However, when she talked it over with other people of colour in her life, the feedback was very different: they all told her she was completely within her rights and had nothing to feel bad about. Still, she did not want to lose a friend she'd known for more than a decade: 'I told myself, I can't make a big deal of this. Our friendship is worth much more than me making an issue out of it.' She sent her friend a long letter of apology, which was accepted, but the friend told her she had felt 'very attacked'.

The situation did not sit well with Rashida, and she eventually ended the friendship. 'If I couldn't have this conversation with someone I saw as progressive, as an ally, who had worked in refugee migrant community spaces …' Her voice trails off. 'The mob mentality backed her up and made me feel like I was totally in the wrong. Lucky I had PoC [people of colour] friends I could use as a sounding board to make sure I wasn't crazy, otherwise I probably would have retreated from my public position.'

The disbelief and sadness in Rashida's voice were familiar to me, both because I have felt the same things when trying to unpack my own interactions with white women who I thought 'got it' when it comes to race, and because I have heard them in the voices of so many other women of colour with startlingly similar experiences. It is as though there is a literal textbook.

All of which is to say, her now-former friend's behaviour may have come as a shock to Rashida, but it is not surprising that she reacted the way she did. The spirituality and wellness scene seems to see more than its fair share of this dynamic. Full disclosure: I have practised yoga for close to two decades and even taught it for a few years when my writing career was just starting. In that time I have seen its popularity explode across the West and, with this popularity, a distinctive rise in participants' competitiveness and ego, as well as a fixation on appearance and nailing advanced poses, all of which were once considered anathema even to Western yogis. Nonetheless, many of those drawn to yoga and other areas of the wellness sector take to heart the idea of spirituality and the desire to be seen as good, ethical people. Given the scene's deserved reputation for exclusivity and cultural appropriation, it is a breeding ground for conflict between women of colour and white women.

Around the time we spoke, Kristina was meant to feature on a spirituality and wellness podcast to discuss white privilege and how it manifests in that subculture. She told me: 'The podcast host, after following me on social media—which I try to be really mindful and kind on—thought I was too angry. I made her too uncomfortable, and she disinvited me.' I asked whether the host had used those exact words—angry and uncomfortable—and Kristina replied, 'Yeah … we had already done one recording where she was uncomfortable … I do think there needs to be respect and kindness when you are having these dialogues, because the process of unlearning white privilege and white supremacy is hard. I'm in a relationship with a white man, and it was really hard for him to reckon with his complicity in all of this. So I have some compassion for that, but at the same time I am respectful but don't back down and say it how it is.

‘But the podcast host was trying to talk about colourblindness in wellness and spirituality, and I was like, “Well, that’s really ignorant. If you’re colourblind you’re not living in reality. You have a privilege to be colourblind, [but] I’ve never been given that.” And she just didn’t want to move past her discomfort and victimisation. I think white people have discomfort from their white privilege, and then when you have conversations about these issues, that discomfort suddenly ruptures, and they see that as discrimination against them because they’ve never had to operate in a system where you have to own your discomfort. If you’re a person of colour, it’s just something you reckon with … and it’s kind of a release and a healing of these stories by bringing them to light. But the response from white people is [that] I always get labelled as an angry feminist, angry activist, angry brown woman.’ She pauses. ‘It’s terrible, because I think I’m pretty chill when it comes to this stuff.’

The spirituality scene’s cultural appropriation of Eastern traditions and religions is a particular sore point. Sharyn Holmes, the diversity consultant in Queensland (see Chapter 3), writes in online spaces about what she calls ‘the cultural appropriation of language, costume, dress and practices in the whitewashed New Age spirituality movement’. The topic of cultural appropriation, she says, is a big trigger of white fragility in white women who see themselves as spiritual: ‘They go into denial and become defensive. They don’t respect boundaries and will claim they are being attacked.’

When Sharyn recently put up an Instagram post about cultural appropriation, white women reported it as racist towards them and it got taken down. ‘For spiritual white women, their triggers are words like “tribe” and “namaste”,’ she says, laughing. ‘Namaste is a Sanskrit word that has been popularised in Western yoga classes. Although Indians and other Hindus use it as a common greeting to say hello as well as goodbye, Western yoga has transformed it into something mystical and seemingly profound. When women of colour such as Sharyn point out this kind of thing, white women use defences like “We are all human” and seem ignorant that oppression still exists today.’ If Sharyn calls them out online, they often refuse to engage with her directly but will ‘bring in another white woman as an ally’ who will then attack Sharyn and any woman of colour who agrees with her. ‘White women will gaslight us, they will sealion even weeks later,’ she says. ‘Sealion’ refers to the online phenomenon of trolling someone by persistently asking for more evidence and continuing a debate behind a facade of politeness and civility. ‘They infantilise themselves. They take on these childlike qualities of “Oh, I’m being hurt by the big bad wolf” to mask their manipulation and their emotional and psychological abuse of women of colour.’ Women of colour are left with little in the way of recourse. ‘White women can feel and express the full spectrum of human emotion, but brown and black women can’t feel sad or angry that someone has hurt us. We have to live life on that line … It’s hard to take care of yourself when you are constantly receiving messages saying you’re not worth it. You start to feel like you’re not worth it. It is so, so important that we set boundaries and say “There’s the door—can you please leave?”’

Like Danai in Chapter 3, Sharyn says the work of women of colour has helped her to contextualise her experiences, particularly that of Catrice M. Jackson, the author of *Weapons of Whiteness*. Whereas Sharyn used to second-guess whether race was a factor in her interactions with white women, now she sees that it has always played a role. ‘They don’t see me as a woman but as something lower,’ she confesses. ‘Their behaviour is very strategic and very carefully orchestrated. They think they are so superior to us that we can’t see their behaviour for what it is. But we know now. Women of colour can see. We know the secrets. We just need to build our own platforms—collective platforms. We need to work together.’

Sharyn describes white women as 2IC—second-in-command to white men, a role they know they hold and do not want to relinquish. ‘They are not willing to give up this power. We see this in how they treat women of colour.’ She pauses, then: ‘White women just need to wake up. White women, please look at your behaviour and how you’re treating other people. Look at your language and how you take up space and your unwillingness to not do that.’

Several of the two dozen or so women I spoke to in the course of writing this book told me that their treatment by white female work colleagues became so bad they felt they had no choice but to leave their job. Any attempt to draw attention to their situation only led to further blame and ostracism. ‘Being victimised when you’re seen as “strong” is really difficult, because no one believes you,’ writer and feminist organiser Nadine Chemali, a 38-year-old Lebanese-Australian, sums up. ‘I was told consistently that I was a problem. Any time I raised anything or suggested anything, I was being “aggressive”.’

The women I spoke with said that on a few occasions former co-workers would get in touch months or even years later to apologise and say they finally understood what had been happening. They would say, ‘I’m sorry for not seeing it’ or ‘Sorry I didn’t believe you’. Of course, by then the damage had been done to these women’s livelihoods and psychological wellbeing. Not only had they been subjected to covert, unacknowledged workplace bullying, but they were invariably blamed for it when they tried to bring it up.

Speaking to these women of colour in all corners of the globe, I found it startling how the same words were used again and again by others to describe them and wear them down: toxic, bully, hostile, troublemaker, aggressive, irrational, divisive. Accusing her of ‘creating a hostile work environment based on race and sex’ is exactly how the two female colleagues who complained about Lisa Benson said they felt about her after the African-American journalist posted my article to Facebook (see Chapter 1). In sharing the article, Lisa’s manager claimed she had ‘made broad, unfair characterisations of white women as a group based on their race and gender, conveyed that white women as a group behave differently than black women, and suggest[ed] a bias towards a particular group which undermines the role of a journalist (and) violated the principles of the social media policy’.

I have thought long and hard about what to call this phenomenon, this very dangerous performance of womanhood and innocence. In many ways, this weaponisation of white women’s distress seems a corollary of toxic masculinity, and I wonder if it isn’t appropriate to call it simply toxic femininity. Toxic masculinity, though now ubiquitous in feminist theory and popular feminist writing, originated in psychology studies and refers to the stereotypical norms and behaviours adopted by men that are associated with traditional masculinity. They include, explains Michael Flood, sociologist and associate professor in gender and sexuality studies, ‘the expectations that boys and men must be active, aggressive, tough, daring, and dominant’. Toxic masculinity, he says, is bad both for men and women, contributing to ‘gender inequalities which disadvantage women and privilege men … Narrow and stereotypical norms of masculinity constrain men’s physical and emotional health, their relations with women, their parenting of children, and their relations with other men.’ Poor health, violence, sexism and homophobia are all linked to toxic masculinity.[6] But toxic masculinity is not specific to white men, and femininity is not the same as womanhood. While toxic masculinity can help explain the structural inequalities between men and women, it doesn’t account for racial inequality and most racial violence (though it certainly impacts on violence against transgender people of colour).

White privilege applies to white women just as it does to white men. The behaviour I have described is certainly toxic, but it is a toxicity of the specific concept of White Womanhood

rather than of generalised femininity. Whiteness has ensured that certain norms and behaviours are still implicitly regarded as the domain of white women. And white women's tears are a cynical invocation of a type of womanhood whose historical role was to be not only conventionally and acceptably feminine but also the civilising force in frontier societies, the moral judge, the prototype against which all other women were judged and found lacking. The peak of human evolution.

This behaviour is more than just toxic. It's a performance of womanhood that is designed to empower a white woman at the expense of a woman of colour for the benefit of white society. It's not about femininity and masculinity and how one should behave to be sufficiently feminine or masculine, but about who counts as a woman and who counts as a man. Who counts as a human. Womanhood and manhood are things you intrinsically either have or do not have, and our settler-colonial history has determined they are something that only white men and white women have.

Strategic White Womanhood makes personal what is political. It reframes legitimate critiques as petty gripes. It takes the onus off the structures and systems that hold back women of colour and places it firmly on the behaviour or perceived behaviour of the women of colour. It took me many years to understand what was happening in interactions and conflicts I'd had with white women over the years. I couldn't understand why and how I would end up apologising to them when I knew they had wronged me and done me harm. I couldn't grasp what would make someone I considered a friend lose her temper with me in a split second and with a contempt so sudden and vicious it left me breathless, and tell me I was being 'mean' to her because I'd simply said that as a white woman she could not know what racism feels like.

More than any other, it was a now-former friend, Anna*, who brought this into focus for me, who set me on the journey of deconstructing White Womanhood and exposing its silent war on women of colour. Anna and I had an explosive and—to me—utterly bewildering Facebook interaction. She is Anglo-Australian but spent many years in the Middle East, where she met and married an Arab Muslim man before moving back to Australia. Although we'd never met in person (and this is where I caution against assuming that people you know purely in the online world are genuine friends), we'd had many long conversations online and on the phone. With a keen interest in conflict and resolution, she avidly followed the Syrian Civil War and expressed what I still believe were genuine concerns for Syrians, even though I didn't quite share her perspective on the Middle East. Talking about Syria in public has proven to be difficult for me as much of my mother's extended family still live there. It is such a fraught issue that genuine discussion is impossible while smears and misplaced outrage are the norm.

On this occasion in early 2018, I felt compelled to say something as it was the day after US president Donald Trump launched strikes on Damascus following an alleged chemical attack on a rebel-held town. Anna expressed support for the strikes in a post, which I found jarring, and I told her—*calmly*—that I was confused given that the United States' act signalled a possible escalation of the conflict and further suffering. I was rebuffed as an aggressor who was hurting her and had to be publicly humiliated for it: the damsel requires her retribution. Merely by letting Anna know that although I understood she cared for Syrian civilians, her stance was disappointing to me, I inadvertently unleashed a demonstration of strategic White Womanhood that brushed aside the actual issue—the air strikes—and turned it into a supposed attack by me on her 'just for being white'. The result was a torrent of abuse hurled *at me* on a Facebook thread. Assuming faux victimhood, Anna told me to watch how I spoke to her, mocked me about previous relationships I had discussed with her in confidence, and accused me of bullying and

demonising a ‘mother who does not deserve this abuse’. And guess what? Guess which issue didn’t get addressed again? My query as to why she would support a possible escalation of war in a country not her own.

Now, the personal opinions of readers as to which one of us was ‘right’ about the Syrian conflict is not the issue here. The point is that she deflected my statement on her political position regarding a situation that affects me but not her by turning the tables to implicate my supposed behaviour. The political was reduced to the personal. Strategic White Womanhood is a spectacle that permits the actual issue at hand to take a back seat to the emotions of the white woman, with the convenient effect that the status quo continues. White women’s tears are fundamental to the success of whiteness. Their distress is a weapon that prevents people of colour from being able to assert themselves or effectively challenge white racism and alter the fundamental inequalities built into the system. Consequently, we all stay in the same place while whiteness reigns supreme, often unacknowledged and unnamed.

It’s a familiar scenario for Middle Eastern women when it comes to Western foreign policy. We routinely receive a complete lack of empathy and understanding whenever we broach the subject of our ancestral lands where, for many of us, members of our extended family still reside. Of course, my conflict with Anna was but a minor example with no bearing on any actual political outcome, even though it was the incident that more than any other provided the light bulb moment that helped me decipher what had actually been occurring all this time in my interactions with white women.

More important than this single incident is how similar scenarios play out again and again, everywhere from the virtual pages of social media to the hallowed halls of the highest power.

On US TV panel show *The View* in March 2019, Meghan McCain, daughter of the late senator and Vietnam War veteran John McCain, gave a performance of strategic White Womanhood when she claimed that freshman Democrat congresswoman Ilhan Omar had made allegedly anti-Semitic tweets in which she’d criticised the relationship between the United States and Israel. ‘I take the hate crimes rising in this country incredibly seriously, and I think what’s happening in Europe is really scary,’ McCain trembled. ‘And I’m sorry if I’m getting emotional.’ That’s when the tears started. ‘Just because I don’t technically have Jewish family [who] are blood-related to me doesn’t mean that I don’t take this seriously. And it is very dangerous … What Ilhan Omar is saying is very scary to me and a lot of people.’

This didn’t go down all that well with much of the public, with some even taking the liberty of linking McCain to my *Guardian* article. This was a heartening outcome, indicating that we may be approaching a kind of tipping point where we can recognise and rebuke such behaviour when we see it. McCain played the victim, assuming persecution that was not her own, and steered the conversation so it was purely about Omar’s alleged vices—completely erasing what Omar had actually said (she had clumsily criticised the pro-Israel lobby) as well as the political context. McCain played the role of the toxic white damsel whose job is to personally exhibit distress so that white society can project its vices onto ‘scary’ women of colour and continue on its merry path, unhindered by the implications of its own violence.

Ever since I published my piece on white women’s tears and their strategic weaponisation to silence women of colour, I have seen the issue explode into the public consciousness again and again. Friends and followers continue to send me examples of white women’s tears in action, the article itself is still making the rounds, and one young woman of colour, Alana Kingston, even jokingly turned it into a verb on her Twitter account, @filo_pastry, as in: ‘Today I got white women teared by my bf’s [boyfriend’s] mum’. Several women have told me that although they

had experienced the exact scenario I laid out, some of them multiple times, they did not really understand what was happening until they read my article. While the weaponisation of white women's innocence and distress against men of colour—in particular black men—was widely recognised, there was less material linking that kind of behaviour to interactions between white women and women of colour. 'I spend hours and hours talking and fielding (questions) and explaining to white women behind the scenes,' Nadine Chemali says of the online feminist group she runs. 'I wasn't able to identify it though, until (your article) gave me the terminology.'

Anjali*, a Sri Lankan woman in her mid-thirties living in Australia, had a similar experience. 'I kid you not: there have been three instances in my life where it took me years to come out of a depressive funk, and I had no way to contextualise it,' she says, 'other than to say, "You know what? Shitty things really, really happened to me. Why do these things happen to me? Why am I the only person going through things like this?"' By 'these things', she means being undermined by the unspoken race politics in the workplace. 'It's a zero-sum game. An absolute zero-sum game, where (white women) are not willing to listen ... For me the critical thing is to help women of colour in particular to see it, understand it and not be crushed by it—because it crushed me, it crushed you,' she says, referring to me, 'and it's about how we make sure other women don't get crushed.' Doing my bit to ensure as many women of colour as possible don't get crushed is the purpose of this book.

Anjali describes a recent situation in her workplace where a white co-worker who was relatively new to the office as well as the country, having moved to Australia from New Zealand, was emotional in a meeting when she outlined why she didn't wish to work on a particular project with Anjali, claiming that despite Anjali's more senior position in the organisation, she herself had superior experience. 'She undermined my authority at every step and my seniority in the organisation. I had to step away. Because I knew if I went after her, I'd be attacked (for making her cry). I stepped out of the situation … and some of the things she said really stung, but you know one of the things running through my head was your article: "White women, they will strategically use tears, do not make her cry, do not give in to her, she is baiting you".' Anjali says she refused to react to the woman's accusations until their manager finally stepped in and told the co-worker to stop repeating herself. Because Anjali had not reacted in self-defence, even though she had every right to, her co-worker had only been able to repeat the same provocations over and over until it became obvious what she was doing. That's not to say it would turn out this way in every instance, but it is interesting that Anjali took such a tactic after becoming aware of what such interactions actually signified. 'The thing is … if I had taken the pugilistic approach, I would have made her cry. And I had every right to take the pugilistic approach and stand up for myself. But I was in an audience of two white women. Guess which way that would have gone?'

What Anjali means is that against the tears of a white woman, a brown woman like her stood no chance. White women's tears work against women of colour, regardless of the situation and who instigated it, because of the history associated with them. The one thing that white women have had that set them apart is their assigned innocence and virtue. But these were purely symbolic, existing not in the world of material reality but in the same world of representation that created the archetypes of Lewd Jezebels, Bad Arabs and Dragon Ladies. Edward Cope, a prominent American evolutionary scientist in the nineteenth century, once said that if white women were a nation men would have long ago invaded them too.[7] In a similar vein, bell hooks recounts that although white American men in that era appeared to revere the virtue of white women, they didn't seem to like them very much.[8] In other words: it's all a performance, a

facade. But it is a facade that white women have insisted on sustaining.

The role of White Womanhood in the maintenance of white-dominated society is far more pivotal than historians have traditionally granted, and the women's public displays of emotion serve a crucial purpose. White Womanhood is, as Kyla Schuller summarises in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, the stabilising structure of whiteness, and the Western concept of sex difference itself is a racialised one. White dominance is asserted and maintained through biopolitics: the notion that population management rather than direct control over the individual is the key to maintaining social equilibrium. '[B]iopolitics fosters the life of the population as a whole by identifying those groups whose continued existence would threaten its economic and biological stability and who thus must be allowed to die,' she explains.[9] Schuller calls this the 'sentimental politics of life', or the notion that only the feelings of the civilised individual matter. And the civilised individual is, of course, white. The fundamental role of White Womanhood in this system is to feel, and express those feelings so that women's emotions become the focus of attention, leaving white men free to think—and act.

This history is long and it is brutal. In 1836, a white woman by the name of Eliza Fraser was shipwrecked off the coast of what is now called Queensland and taken in by the Indigenous Butchulla people on K'Gari island. When she eventually returned to white society she claimed to have been kidnapped and ill-treated—until her honour was saved by white rescuers. Her story was not corroborated by fellow survivors, who disputed her account, saying they'd been rescued from certain death and treated very well. Nonetheless, Fraser's claims of mistreatment were taken seriously by authorities and were the justification given for the massacre and dispossession of the Butchulla from their traditional home. Most gallingly, K'Gari was renamed after her and is now called Fraser Island.

Today, we can see the cynical adoption of the damsel persona in political leaders like ultra-right Australian senator Pauline Hanson. Despite her powerful position (she is reported to rule her party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, with an iron fist), Hanson adopts a speaking style that can best be described as a fragile quiver. In March 2019, Al Jazeera dropped a bombshell investigation called 'How to Sell a Massacre', in which Pauline Hanson's chief of staff James Ashby and One Nation senate candidate Steve Dickson were caught on tape attempting to secure $20 million in donations from the National Rifle Association in the United States in return for watering down Australian gun laws. Hanson, who was filmed suggesting that the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, in which thirty-five people lost their lives to gun violence, was a government conspiracy, fronted the media to defend her men and accuse Al Jazeera of interfering into Australia's democracy. 'I know Steve Dickson. He is a family man … he is a good man,' she said in her usual quivering tone, prompting one bemused Australian man to comment on Twitter: 'Why does Pauline Hanson always sound like she is going to cry? I don't know how to feel.' This confusion is the point. White women's tears are designed to trigger the protective urge in white men. They mask what she is actually saying with a veneer of vulnerability, fragility and, most of all, innocence.

Just one month later, Hanson did cry before the media. In late April, footage emerged of her 'good family man' groping strippers in a Washington DC club and making derogatory remarks about Asian women being worse in bed than white women. In a televised interview on *A Current Affair* on 30 April, Hanson broke down, describing all the 'shit' she has to deal with from the men in her political party, the very men she chooses to surround herself with in the party she runs. It seems Hanson, who has warned of Australia getting 'swamped by Asians' and 'swamped by Muslims', is a perennial victim, a damsel who happens to be in politics rather than a

politician.

Biopolitics is a deeply academic term but I think people of colour need to be well acquainted with it as it answers one of the key questions that white people invested in this system use to try to trip us up: 'If racism is so bad, how come you're successful?' The answer is that biopolitics creates a society that makes it far easier for certain segments of the population to thrive while others are vulnerable to marginalisation. This means some of us in the latter category can slip through, but this is a testament not to the willingness of society to accept us but to our own often exceptional ability to navigate a rigged system. This is why people of colour, and especially women of colour, have to be twice, three times or even six, seven, eight times as capable as white people in order to get half as far. The system was designed to make it as hard as possible for us, but in such a way that white people can pretend the barriers simply do not exist.

Western feminism as it currently stands is simply not equipped to deal with this reality. It is crucial here to understand that the history of Western feminism we have inherited, rooted as it is in the politics of the nineteenth century and the struggle for suffrage, is a tradition that embodies this racial and gendered hierarchy. The white feminist battle is not one that aims to dismantle the hierarchy but merely seeks to ensure that white women join white men at its helm by agitating only against those limitations imposed on their sex. After a white woman conflicts with a woman of colour, the battle is done for the time being for the white woman. The woman of colour is sufficiently chastened and the white woman turns her attention back to invoking a non-existent sisterhood in order to keep fighting 'patriarchy'. But it is a patriarchy they themselves have just ensured will continue, because their weaponised tears are a form and function of it. This kind of behaviour is more than just toxic: it is a key way by which whiteness asserts and retains its power. By keeping the old structures in place, white women's innocence and virtue serve as the front line of white civilisation.

The insidiousness of this strategic White Womanhood is that it masks power. It is power pretending to be powerless. Women of colour, for instance, have even reported being 'white women teared' at work by their managers. 'Generally the experience is harder with people who are my superiors … the white tears come in full bloom there,' says Kristina. By tearing up, white female bosses can mask their power to their subordinates and use their White Womanhood to discipline the other woman, to continue the charade and the lie that is the supposed inherent innocence and goodness of white women and the aggressive nature of brown and black women.

'I really wanted to believe that systemic racism in the workplace did not exist on such a personal or insidious level,' Nadine says. 'White women had always appeared to be my allies. But I think back to high school where I was called "mean" for being honest or teased for not understanding some cultural nuance. White women are chipping away at the positives of our identity because we are unable to understand or we refuse to assimilate to their way of communicating.'

School is also where it began for New Zealand writer Shamim Aslani. The 33-year-old, who is Maori and Iranian, recalls being 'reprimanded' for her 'aggressive approach' throughout primary and high school. Whenever she tried to assert herself to her white peers, she would make so many 'cry' that she eventually internalised their criticisms and blamed her own 'inability to communicate softly'. The incident she most clearly remembers was at a school camp when, at the age of twelve, she tried to correct some friends' pronunciation of the Maori word *Mahurangi*. 'I remember everyone laughing at me,' she says, 'and I responded to a particular friend with "It's not a white word, it's a Maori word" and she cried. I was called racist and told off for the tone I'd used.' Shamim was the only student in her class from either a Maori or Middle Eastern

background, and the incident hit her hard. ‘This tactic that essentially derails grievances happens from a really young age. And it’s been a consistent theme in my life.’

White Womanhood is the vanguard of whiteness. It is through the distress of the damsel, projected outwards, away from white men and away from white power structures, that whiteness retains its dominance. It is more than toxic: it is strategic and deadly. The tears and accompanying claims of emotional pain are only one weapon in the arsenal of White Womanhood. Meghan McCain, for example, freely oscillates from strategic tears of distress to cynical outbursts of entitled anger—whatever works best in the moment. Another clip from *The View*, from January 2019, shows her slamming her open palm forcefully on the table and shouting over her co-hosts, ‘I am John McCain’s daughter! I’m not someone who sits here and is okay with racism in any way whatsoever!’

I call McCain’s bluff just as I call the bluff of all white women who claim to be above racism—not necessarily because they are consciously and avowedly racist, but because it is simply impossible for any white woman to be genuinely ‘not okay with racism’ when we as a society have not yet reckoned with the fact that White Womanhood is itself a racist concept.

# 6

# There is no sisterhood

## White women and racism

*We are trying to solve the problem with the natives … the only thing I can see would (be) to get the children right away from their parents and teach them good morals, clean habits & right from wrong & also work in industries that will make them more useful.*

Annie Lock, Australian missionary, 1929[1]

*No uncivilized people are elevated till the mothers are reached. The civilisation must begin in the homes.*

'Mrs Dorchester', Women's National Indian Association, 1890[2]

On 6 October 2018, the US Senate confirmed Brett Kavanaugh as an associate justice to the Supreme Court of the United States. His nomination had not been without major controversy. A few months earlier, when it was revealed that his name was on the short list, Christine Blasey Ford, a psychology professor, claimed he had sexually assaulted her at a high school party back in the 1980s. Despite two other women stepping forward to allege sexual misconduct by Kavanaugh and a committee hearing in which Ford gave emotional testimony, he was sworn in after a vote of fifty to forty-eight.

On 21 September a posse of seventy-five seemingly all-white women, many wearing 'Women for Kavanaugh' T-shirts, had convened in Washington to profess their support for the embattled nominee. Led by his former colleague Sara Fagen, the women held a press conference to denounce Ford's allegations as 'false' and inconsistent with Kavanaugh's 'character'. Kavanaugh, Fagen declared, 'is a person of honour, integrity … and strong moral character. He is a good father, a good husband and a good friend. He's been a strong mentor and to all of us a good friend.' And just like that, we had gone from the damsel in distress to the 'damsel in defence'. (I owe this wonderful turn of phrase to an anonymous follower of mine on Twitter who has given me permission to use it here.)

These seventy-five women weren't alone. A poll by Quinnipiac University published online on 1 October 2018 revealed that only 46 per cent of white women believed Ford compared to 83 per cent of black people and 66 per cent of Hispanics (no gender breakdown for non-whites was provided).[3] That only 32 per cent of whites believed Ford was telling the truth reveals a stunning discrepancy not only between whites overall and people of colour, but between white women and people of colour.

What makes so many white women, in the midst of the #MeToo movement, dismiss out of hand the allegations of an accomplished and respected white woman who said her assault took place when she was only fifteen years old? The Kavanaugh debacle came a year after the almost-

election of Roy Moore to the Alabama Senate. Despite numerous credible allegations of him sexually assaulting underage girls, a stunning 63 per cent of white women voted for him (even more than the 53 per cent who voted for Donald Trump). His narrow defeat was made possible only because of the voting patterns of people of colour, most specifically black women, 98 per cent of whom voted for his Democrat opponent and the eventual victor, Doug Jones. Then, of course, there is the 45th president of the United States, who one month out from the election was seen on an old video bragging about grabbing women 'by the pussy'.

These voting patterns of white women have stunned white women and women of colour alike. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, many feminists and writers both in and outside of the United States (including myself), who were expecting a vastly different outcome, concluded that white women who voted for Trump had chosen to side with their race over their gender, that they prioritised being white over being women. We were wrong. These women are not 'gender traitors' choosing their whiteness over their womanhood, as we thought. Rather, they are *performing* their womanhood. White Womanhood, as Kyla Schuller argues, has been a key stabilising feature of Western civilisation, in which the role of the woman is to smooth 'over the flow of sensation and feeling that makes up the public sphere, ensuring that white men remain relatively free from the encumbrances of embodiment and are susceptible only to further progress'. In other words, they take one for the team so that 'our anger at white women conveniently spares the white male voter', who supported Trump and Moore in even larger numbers. The problem with white women voters 'is the problem with women as a category in the first place'.[4]

What exactly does Schuller mean by white women smoothing over the flow of feeling so that white men may progress further? This, perhaps: 'My Pete's no monster!' screams the headline above an April 2019 report alleging Australia's Home Affairs minister, Peter Dutton, and his family had received threatening emails.[5] Dutton is widely reviled for, among other things, his punitive asylum-seeker policies, for referring to a female journalist as a 'mad witch' in a text message and accidentally sending it to her, and for when he was immigration minister, calling Lebanese Muslim immigration a 'mistake'. The copy by journalist Renee Viellaris talks about Dutton's wife Kirrily's 'emotional plea for the hate to stop', and the accompanying picture shows the couple, both smiling for the camera, her hand resting on his chest protectively. 'He's a really good man. He's a really good father,' she implores. The alleged threats made against Dutton are one thing, but using them to whitewash his public record by presenting him as a virtuous father and victim is another. This is how White Womanhood stabilises white society: by turning the tables, downplaying its violence and ensuring power stays firmly in white hands. 'Women for Kavanaugh' indeed.

Throughout settler-colonial history, white women have aided and abetted the spread of white supremacy—a fact for which they have all too often been given an undeserved pass. The original edition of *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Anne Summers' withering account of the history of sexism in the Australian colonies, published in 1975, had the subtitle *The Colonisation of Women in Australia*. The book referred only to the experiences of white women. Summers has responded to criticism of her exclusion of Aboriginal women—whose country it is that was actually colonised—by arguing that dialogue between white women and Indigenous women is a relatively recent phenomenon. This may well be true, but who is responsible for this lack of communication? In any case, lack of dialogue does not make erasure acceptable. The book gives an important history of the subordination of white women, but it chafes against the binary they were placed in—a variation of the virgin/whore dichotomy—by positioning them as either

victims of male misogyny or perpetrators who internalised this misogyny and then wielded it like a weapon, not against the Indigenous population but against other white women.

Compare this to the work of Aboriginal women writers and academics such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who states that from the perspective of Aboriginal women, all white women have benefited from colonisation,[6] and Melissa Lucashenko, who maintains it is white racism, not sexism or misogyny, that is the dominant form of oppression experienced by Aboriginal women.[7]

More recently, in *You Daughters of Freedom*, historian Clare Wright takes a deep dive into Australia's suffragette movement to shed light on white women's role in shaping this nation, a role that has been suppressed in our male-dominated history. Wright does acknowledge that the vote for white women came at the expense of Aboriginal and non-white immigrant women. *The Commonwealth Franchise Act* of 1902 that granted white women the vote also explicitly barred Aboriginal people, Asians and Pacific Islanders from voting, with the sole exception of Maoris in the hope that New Zealand, which did not similarly discriminate against its Indigenous population when it came to the vote, would eventually change its mind and join the newly established federation. But in her clear affection for the subjects of her study, Wright skirts around the role that white women played in consolidating white identity at the expense of Indigenous women. Of a post-suffrage Australia, she writes: 'It was now a nation that had reverse-colonised the landscape of ideas: the ideas of freedom, representation, and democracy that were the cornerstones of the new twentieth-century democratic state.'[8] Apart from its own unfortunate use of 'colonise', this sentence is emblematic of a public discourse that does not recognise the inherent tension between Australia's history of violently exclusionary politics and its claims to be a world leader in freedom, democracy and the 'fair go'. Regardless of intent, this reduces the clear racism from a fundamental feature of Australia's system to an unfortunate bug. To put it another way, the struggle for suffrage was part of, rather than merely adjacent to, the crusade for a White Australia. The 'freest girls in the world', as Australian suffragettes were called, demonstrate that the gains made by white women all too frequently consolidate white power by further disenfranchising people of colour.

It is true to say that white Australian women were subordinated in white society. It is not true to say they were bystanders to the colonial enterprise, and it is certainly not accurate to imply they were victims of comparable standing to the colonised populations, as the original subtitle to Summers' book did. In fact, white women were often among colonialism's most vociferous proponents. Had Summers widened her scope a little, she would have seen that there was a third role white women played in the Australian colonies: that of the Great White Mother. It was through harnessing the Great White Mother that white women were able to access a form of limited power through maternalistic intervention in the lives of Aboriginal women.

Margaret D. Jacobs uses the term 'maternal colonialism' to describe the role played by white women in the removal of Indigenous children from their families in Australia and the American west. Focusing on the sixty years from 1880 to 1940, Jacobs uncovers a history of white women far removed from the usual image of steadfast pioneers who were ignorant of the reality of the colonial project. As in other colonial outposts of empire, white women in Australia quickly learned to navigate white colonialism to their advantage, leveraging their status as both a subordinate class and a privileged class to 'simultaneously collaborate with and confound colonial aims'. When it came to the removal and institutionalisation of Indigenous children, colonialism was 'largely a feminine domain, defined primarily around mothering, particularly

targeted at Indigenous women, and implemented largely by white women'. White women decided that the removal of Indigenous children was 'women's work for women'.[9]

In the American west and on the Australian continent, Indigenous child removal followed a similar pattern. White women drew on both their own sense of superiority as white Christian mothers and the derogatory representations of colonised women to justify their self-appointed fundamental role in 'civilising' the Indigenous population. Flouting the general rule against white women working outside the home, they argued this work was necessary so that the Indigenous population could be absorbed into white civilisation. In America they formed organisations like the Women's National Indian Association to fulfil their aims. In Australia the Women's Christian Temperance Union—some branches of which were active in the suffragette movement—and the Women's Service Guild appointed themselves spokeswomen for Indigenous mothers without seeking input from those on whose behalf they sought to speak.

White women maternalists leveraged their roles as White Mothers even though many of them were single and child-free. They claimed that because they were women, they were much better placed than white men to understand and respond to the needs of Indigenous women and their children. This professed valorisation of motherhood did not extend to Indigenous mothers, whom they disparaged as sexually immoral and unfit for motherhood. If white women were the only true women, then by the same token white mothers were the only true mothers. They saw their role not as depriving Indigenous children of their families but as 'rescuing' and 'saving' them from their uncivilised parents. Indigenous women, claimed the maternalists, invoking the trope of the drudge, 'make slaves of themselves for the men', as Helen Gibson Stickdell, a missionary in Idaho, complained.[10] Similarly, the Australian anthropologist Daisy Bates asserted of Aboriginal communities: 'All of their laws were formed for the convenience and well-being of the men only.'[11]

In other words, Indigenous society did not properly adhere to white notions of sex difference and sex roles. Indigenous women did not fit the white model of womanhood and this made them either victims or perpetrators. They had different cultural norms around sex, which made them immoral. They laboured outside the home to help provide for their families, which made them enslaved drudges. Ironically, the white response to this perceived oppression was to oppress them.

Let's repeat that. Because colonised women did not adhere to cultural roles akin to White Womanhood, white women assumed they were oppressed, and this status was used to actually oppress them further. One could fairly say that Indigenous cultures were not oppressive enough of women for the liking of white society. White women criticised everything about Indigenous motherhood, from how they carried their babies to the structure of the homes they raised them in. In the end, the only thing that could 'save' these children was for white women to take them. According to Jacobs, between 1908 and 1937 some 58 to 78 per cent of workers in Australian missionary organisations were white women, and two of these organisations were founded and run primarily by white women.

'The Indian child must be placed in school before habits of barbarous life have become fixed,' declared Estelle Reel, who served as superintendent of Indian education for the Office of Indian Affairs from 1898 to 1910, 'and there he must be kept until contact with our life has taught him to abandon his savage ways and walk in the path of Christian civilisation.'[12] Reel fancied herself such an advocate for the Native American community that she gave herself her own nickname: the Big White Squ*w. Not only did she employ a slur to ingratiate herself as an

honorary member of the communities she was attempting to destroy, but she threw in an extra insult by alluding to her superior size. Similarly, notorious Australian missionary Annie Lock declared in 1929 that the only hope for the Aboriginal population was to remove their children and put them in service of the white population to transform them into model citizens.[13]

The underlying motive for Indigenous child removal diverged. Americans, writes Jacobs, were keen to end the ongoing wars with Indians who were resisting encroachment on their lands. Australians were motivated to 'breed the colour' out of 'half-caste' children, who were considered to be a 'burden' and a 'menace' to society. Neither the state nor the Great White Mothers could stop sexual contact between white men and Aboriginal women, so they sought to deal with the so-called 'native problem' in two ways: by isolating the 'full-bloods' until they died out—which they assumed was inevitable—and by absorbing the 'half-castes' to make them useful to white society. The boys were 'apprenticed' as labourers and the girls as domestic servants.

Where the two countries did not differ was in the duration of separation of child from mother: in both cases it was to be permanent. By 1911 every Australian state barring Tasmania had enacted some form of legislation permitting forced removal, and by 1921 some 21,500 Native American children were housed in boarding schools or had been placed with white families as labourers. In a remarkable feat of coincidence, I am sure, it turned out that what was best for Indigenous children also happened to involve free labour for white families.

The colonial maternalists encountered resistance from Indigenous women, so much so that Reel complained the Native woman was 'much more opposed, as a rule, to allowing her children to accept the white man's civilisation, than is her spouse'.[14] Those women who fought to keep their children, as well as those children who were taken and later grew up to object to the policy, were condemned as ingrates of 'unfortunate character' and 'morbid disposition'. One such woman, the Native writer, poet and activist Zitkala-Sa, a Nekota Sioux, wrote powerful but poetic critiques in such luminary titles as *Harper's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* during the first few years of the twentieth century. 'On account of my mother's simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up … like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends … Now a cold bare pole I seemed to be, planted in a strange earth.'[15] When Reel got wind of Zitkala-Sa's essays, she wrote a chastising rebuttal. After 'receiving the greatest care and attention of many good missionary women and having the Government spend many thousands of dollars upon her education (she) has seen fit to write an article which has attracted some attention on account of its unjust character and the morbid disposition of the unfortunate girl'.[16]

Ingratitude is a common theme in white women's responses to the resistance of colonised women. Turning the tables and accusing the Indigenous women whom they themselves were wronging in a catastrophic way, white women used their more powerful status to silence the other women, essentially gaslighting them into submission. In early 1920s Western Australia, fifteen-year-old Daisy Corunna was taken to work as a servant for Alice Brockman, who later removed Daisy's own daughter, Gladdie, and placed her in a children's home at the age of three. Moreton-Robinson quotes from Daisy's testimony: 'What could I do? ... I wanted to keep her with me, she was all I had, but they didn't want her there. Alice said she cost too much to feed, said I was ungrateful. She was wantin' me to give up my own flesh and blood and still be grateful. Aren't black people allowed to have feelin's?'[17]

Apparently not, and certainly not if those feelings clashed with the goals and aims of the state

and the white maternalists. Sometimes, as in the case of Estelle Reel, the maternalists were more zealous than the state, while in other cases, particularly in Australia, they pushed back against the authorities. This was not out of empathy with the Indigenous mothers: while they supported the removal of Indigenous children, white women generally objected to the rhetoric of 'breeding the colour out' because, argues Jacobs, 'they believed it encouraged extramarital and extra racial sex and sanctioned male sexual privilege'.[18] It was not until decades into white maternalism, when white women like American Constance DuBois and Australian Mary Bennett had a change of heart, that the policy of Indigenous child removal came under scrutiny and met resistance from the white population.

We must be wary of any rhetoric from white women that follows the narrative of 'rescuing' and 'saving' brown and black women and children. Today we can see the after-effects of white maternalism in the attitudes of white women such as Jenni White, a columnist for the conservative US website *The Federalist*, who wrote a baffling column published in January 2019 titled 'The worst racism my children have faced came from black peers'. In the article she claims her two daughters, whom she adopted from South Africa, are being raised in a house that does not see colour because 'Why would I raise them to identify with a specific race as if being members of the *human* race weren't enough?' As if racism only exists because black people identify as black. She then claims that this allegedly hideous racism from black people has included being asked by their black pastor if she is educating the girls about their culture. White, who claims to be a '*staunch* believer in Martin Luther King' (the emphasis is all hers), says that once her daughters were brought to America, 'they became Americans. Not African-Americans, not black girls.'[19] Assimilation and absorption into the default that is whiteness continues to be the frame from which many white women view women of other races.

Perhaps no incident has demonstrated this to me more in recent times than the case of Rahaf Mohammed, the eighteen-year-old Saudi Arabian woman who in early January 2019 barricaded herself in a Thai hotel room in an attempt to get to Australia to seek asylum. Rahaf claimed via Twitter that she was fleeing the guardianship system that rendered her a permanent minor, and that her parents would kill her if she was forced to return to Saudi. Immediately, activists in the West, led by white women in Australia, started a #SaveRahaf hashtag on social media. White Australian female journalists described Rahaf as 'terrified', defining her as a victim rather than as a brave young woman exerting agency and seeking to liberate herself.[20] The prominent white female senator Sarah Hanson-Young tweeted that Australia was morally obliged to offer Rahaf 'sanctuary and the chance to live free of discrimination in a country that respects women & girls'. Apparently, Hanson-Young was suffering from a bout of temporary and very specific amnesia in which she'd forgotten that she had just penned an entire book, *En Garde*, detailing the sexism and misogyny she had experienced as an elected official at the hands of her own white male political peers—the very men to whom she was now appealing to 'save' Rahaf.

So intense was the media attention that Canada beat Australia in offering Rahaf a refugee visa and, as Australian media responded with characteristically churlish claims that she had 'snubbed' us, she flew to Toronto. Upon landing and dressed in a 'Canada' sweatshirt, she was immediately flanked by two triumphant white women, including Canadian minister of foreign affairs Chrystia Freeland, who were there to greet and parade her before a rapturous media. An op-ed published in the *Globe and Mail* followed on 11 January 2019 crowing about Canada's 'moral leadership',[21] and within days media were monitoring Rahaf's social media, approvingly noting her short skirt, glass of red wine and breakfast of bacon and eggs.[22] Subtle.

That Saudi Arabia has long been a staunch Western ally, that the weapons the Saudi government uses to oppress its civilians and launch wars on neighbouring civilians are sold to it by Western governments, and that the Saudi crown prince had himself less than a year earlier toured the United States, where he was feted by movie stars and media moguls alike, became irrelevant. Although Egyptian-American feminist Mona Eltahawy, who championed Rahaf's cause, did try to pay proper respect to the young woman's courage, Rahaf quickly became a symbol of something much more important than her own personal quest for independence: she symbolised the victory of the maternalism of white women, who had rescued her to bring her into the fold of civilisation. Once again, the aims of the state and the aims of white maternalists had meshed to ensure the West had won, this time scoring a small but symbolically powerful victory over the barbaric Orient. It is most audacious: the West helps make the Saudi government's draconian rule possible and then generously 'saves' one Saudi woman from this very oppression, using white women as its mouthpiece.

Also left out of the narrative of saviourdom were the Indigenous women in Canada and Australia who most certainly are not the beneficiaries of 'moral leadership' and do not benefit from any chance to live free of discrimination. In 2018, Aboriginal women made up 34 per cent of the prison population despite comprising only 2 per cent of the overall population. Some of these women are now free, but only because the unpaid fines that landed them in jail have been paid off by a crowdfunding campaign founded by Debbie Kilroy, a former prisoner turned prison abolitionist. Meanwhile, in Canada, as recently as 2018, Native women were alleging forced sterilisation. This is part of the reality of life in white society for colonised women that the white women who acted as the faces of the #SaveRahaf movement were complicit in whitewashing. Once again, white women used their privileged status to mask the crimes white society commits against the bodies of brown and black women, this time appropriating the story of a young Arab woman's daring bid for freedom in order to present the West as the bastion of women's liberation.

The language of the White Saviour is not one of liberation or sisterhood: it is a language of imperialism. Nothing gives away a White Saviour Complex like white women rallying to 'save' brown women despite the gruesome history of what 'saving' has entailed. White women have to free themselves from the lingering notion that white supremacy has socialised them into—that they know what is best for non-white women and their job is to save us from ourselves. This must occur before they can even begin to think about their membership in a sisterhood that is capable of freeing all women from patriarchy. 'Maternalist politics, though professing a concern and sisterhood with all women, did not promote equality between women, but reaffirmed class, racial, and religious hierarchies,' Jacobs writes.[23]

In Southern Rhodesia, white women reaffirmed class, racial and religious hierarchies as they organised to leverage the Black Peril panics to their advantage. Women's groups such as the Rhodesian Women's League and the Federation of Women's Institutes began to chafe against white male authority not by rejecting racial segregation but by enforcing racial hierarchy and purity, supporting laws barring cross-racial relationships in the hopes of curtailing liaisons between white men and African women and improving their own status at the expense of the black population. In the early decades of the twentieth century, only 6000 white women were living in the colony. Of these, 1200—20 per cent—signed a petition condemning the legal decision to commute the death sentence of a black man who had been convicted of a sexual crime to life imprisonment. These women's groups also organised against concubinage, denouncing sexual relationships between white men and black women as a threat to white

superiority on the grounds that miscegenation led to an erosion of respect for whites among the black population. They pressed for an extension of the death penalty to white men in an attempt to end all and any relations between white men and African women, even if consensual, and even though black female sex workers relied upon such liaisons for income in a white-dominated society that had completely upended their own way of life.[24]

Also petitioning the courts as a means of asserting their rights at the expense of other women were female slaveholders in the United States. In *They Were Her Property*, Stephanie Jones-Rogers debunks the long-cherished myth that white women were largely shielded from the day-to-day realities of slavery. Jones-Rogers uses the testimony of formerly enslaved people gathered in the 1920s and 1930s and corroborates their accounts with newspaper records, court documents and written records by white men and women. She uncovers a history not of benevolent mistresses ignorant of slavery's brutality, but of slaveowners who were heavily invested in their 'property'.

White women, Jones-Rogers discovered, learned from a young age of their future role as mistresses and grew into this role, treating their parents' slaves as both companions and subordinates. Often when a black woman gave birth, the master and mistress would allow one of their own daughters to 'claim' the baby as her future servant. White parents often bequeathed human property to their female children, with land usually passing down to the males. Despite the legal custom of coverture, in which a woman becomes 'covered' by her husband much as a bird covers its young under its wings, subsuming both her identity and property into his, white women went to great lengths to guard their human property. Legal contracts were drawn up before wedding vows were exchanged, determining that she would have 'sole and separate use' of her slaves. White women did not hesitate to take their husbands to court if they felt he was encroaching on her rights as an owner of human property—and they frequently won. They also took charge of the disciplining of their slaves. If they thought their husband was too harsh, they would intervene to stop him. If they thought him too lenient, they would oversee the punishments themselves. 'Master talked hard words, but Mistress whipped,' recalled George C. King of Lexington, South Carolina, whose former mistress would 'whip (his) mammy 'til she was just a piece of living raw meat'.[25]

When enslaved people could bear no more and attempted to flee, it was often their female owners who placed notices in newspapers offering a reward for their return—with explicit instructions not to return the slave to their husband. Jones-Rogers shares a notice placed by one such woman, Elizabeth Humphreyville of Mobile, Alabama, on 8 March 1846, seeking the return of her pregnant slave Ann with a $50 reward. Suspecting her own husband was responsible for the disappearance and was pretending to be the owner, Mrs Humphreyville cautioned the public 'not to trade for her as the titles to said woman is in me *alone*' (emphasis in original notice).[26] For white Southern women, 'slavery and the ownership of human beings constituted core elements of their identities'.[27]

The term 'mistress' has come to have an almost benevolent quality that suggests total dependence on a woman's brothers, father and sons. Jones-Rogers rejects this, arguing that 'mistress' as used in the antebellum South was more akin to its original English meaning: 'In Western Europe, a mistress was "a woman who govern[ed]; correlative to a subject or to [a] servant". She was "a woman who ha[d] something in [her] possession" … A mistress also exercised "dominion, rule, or power".'[28] In other words, from the perspective of slavery a mistress was the equivalent of a master. There were social conventions and legal obstacles, to be

sure, but slave-owning white women had legal means to challenge these, and they often won. Like their maternal colonialist counterparts, these female slaveowners both confounded and collaborated with the prevailing legal and social customs, navigating their identities as white women both to challenge their subservient role and to leverage it to their advantage.

The sexual abuse of black male slaves by white women, for instance, was far less common than that of black women by white men, but it did exist. Despite the restrictions placed on white women—their sexuality was regulated by both law and culture, with women facing far greater legal penalties for adultery—they still flouted both law and custom, entering into sexual relationships with enslaved black men. Again, whether these can be considered consensual given the power imbalance is extremely doubtful. In the same way that contemporary feminism frames rape and sexual assault of women by men as an exercise in power and control, this frame can be applied to sexual liaisons between white women and enslaved black men. 'I have never found a bright looking colored man, whose confidences I have won … who has not told me of instances where he has been compelled, either by his mistress, or by white women of the same class, to have connection with them,' wrote the abolitionist military commander Captain Richard J. Hinton around the time of the Civil War.[29]

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written in 1861, also spells it out. The daughters of the plantation owners, she wrote, 'know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves'.[30] In other words, white women propped up the very system that oppressed them by leaning into rather than rejecting their role of damsel—an inherently subordinate role—in order to exert control over those with less power and status than them. Today, when white women invoke the damsel to silence women of colour with unfounded accusations of bullying and aggression, they repeat this very cycle, ensuring we all remain trapped in it.

With this history, it's not surprising that the marginalisation of women of colour by white women was rife in feminism's first wave. The white supremacy of many of the giants of the suffragette movement is becoming well known. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave her famous speech at the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, she demonstrated exactly what she meant by 'all men and women are created equal' when she blasted Man for withholding from Woman 'her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners'.[31] Stanton was an abolitionist and worked alongside the great Frederick Douglass, but that didn't stop her from referring to black men as 'Sambo'. Furious that the Fifteenth Amendment would ratify black men's enfranchisement before that of white women, she embarked on a Lord Cromer–like tirade in the pages of the newsletter she edited alongside Susan B. Anthony, asking, 'What will we and our daughters suffer if these degraded black men are allowed to have the rights that would make them even worse than our Saxon fathers?'[32]

Douglass was invited to speak at the 1848 convention but no such invitations were extended to black women, setting the tone for the treatment of black women by white suffragettes. In the North, they excluded black women from their meetings and activism on the grounds it would offend their white sisters in the South. At the 1913 suffragist parade in Washington, DC, black women were asked to march in their own segregated rally—an invitation Ida B. Wells refused. Meanwhile, black-and-white images from a suffragist parade in New York City that same year show what appears to be at least one white woman in a Ku Klux Klan–like cape and pointy hat.[33]

White women were no strangers to the Klan. In her recent book *The Second Coming of the KKK*, which looks at the movement's revival in the 1920s, Linda Gordon coins the term 'bigoted

feminism', arguing that white women demanded membership in the KKK seeking their own right to inherit property and be legally protected from domestic violence. At the same time, they supported political figures who advocated for restricted immigration and white supremacy.[34] These women did not see any disconnect between their agitation for their own rights and their denial of the rights of black and brown women. In 1923, national Klan leader Hiram Evans formed the WKKK, which means exactly what you think it means.

Even outside of the Klan, white women defended and propagated white supremacy in both covert and explicit ways. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae notes in *Mothers of Massive Resistance* that it was white women who were at the forefront of the grassroots white resistance to school desegregation in the mid twentieth century. Warning that it presented a threat to the integrity of the white race, white women stoked fears of miscegenation and cautioned that black and white children would mix, socialise and eventually reproduce.[35]

By this time, the faith of the scientific community in the ability of humans to direct their own evolution by monitoring and controlling their physical sensations had given way to genetic determinism—and white women were at the forefront of the eugenics movement. The nineteenth century was dominated by the scientific belief that humans could acquire new traits from their surroundings that they would then pass on to their children. This led to, among other things, a mild panic in the South that white babies who had a black wet nurse would 'inherit' negative traits from her. It also compelled slaveowners to whip heavily pregnant slaves by digging a hole for her stomach and forcing her to lie face down; this, they believed, would prevent actual physical harm to the foetus while at the same time creating a lasting impression that would make the future slave less likely to resist their enslavement. The twentieth century, on the other hand, marked the rise of genetic determinists such as Gertrude Davenport, wife of the more famous Charles Davenport but also an accomplished biologist and avowed eugenicist in her own right. Eugenicists were obsessed with achieving evolutionary perfection. However, they believed this could be reached not by controlling sensations but by controlling the reproduction of 'undesirable' women. The women deemed too 'unfit' for reproduction were not only those with a degraded racial status but also the white disabled, poor, mentally ill, queer and/or gender-queer. The eugenics movement—which, disturbingly, appears to be making an intellectual comeback—reveals that white supremacy is a project that cuts across all these oppressions.

No analysis of any form of subjugation in a Western context is complete without an analysis of the role played by whiteness. To put this another way, every form of oppression that exists in the Western world, including class, is one of white supremacy and its zealous ambition to scale the peak of human civilisation and evolution. The white women of history have been given a pass for their role in colonialism and the institutionalisation of white supremacy. We say they were 'of their time' and didn't know better, or assume they acted out of either fear or ignorance. The truth is that calling them women 'of their time' can be a legitimate excuse only if there were no serious challenges to their racist worldview in their time. Of course there were such challenges. Douglass, upon learning of Stanton's diatribe against the Fifteenth Amendment, responded:

> When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lampposts; when their children are torn from their arms and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.[36]

Douglass's words ring like a harbinger of those of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (see Chapter 4), uttered almost twenty years later and also largely ignored by white suffragists. The treatment of Harper and another key figure of the abolitionist and suffragist era, Sojourner Truth, demonstrates the extent to which white women deliberately marginalised and excluded their black counterparts. Truth's speech 'Ain't I a Woman?' is one of the most famous of the era. It also never happened—at least not in the form historians have long believed.

Born into slavery in 1797 and dying a free woman in 1883 having escaped her slave master at the age of twenty-nine, Truth did give a highly regarded speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, but it is doubtful the phrase 'ain't I a woman' ever passed her lips. Published in April 1863 in the *New York Independent* newspaper by white suffragette Frances Gage,[37] the transcription ascribes a crude Southern inflection to Truth's speaking voice, is liberal with the use of the N-word, and presents her as somewhat comical. The speech as reproduced by Gage certainly appears to be one of the earliest known challenges to what we now call 'white feminism', as well as to racism. Gage's Truth directs her arguments to both white women and the white men who deny them freedom, in order to challenge the notion that women are inherently weaker and lacking in intellect and so unsuitable for enfranchisement or positions of authority.

When Truth notes that despite being a woman she is neither carried over puddles nor helped into carriages, she seems to be rejecting the mores of white society that regarded women as necessarily helpless damsels who were in need of constant male protection. 'That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place. And ain't I a woman?' When she points to her own muscular arms, fashioned from all those years spent ploughing, planting and gathering crops—better than any man—and when she recalls how she could 'bear the lash as well', she is directing her audience to acknowledge the strength and resilience of women. And when she immediately follows that with her ability to bear thirteen children only to see most of them sold into slavery, she reminds her audience that this strength does not negate her womanhood: 'when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman?'

Except Truth did not have thirteen children: she had five, one of whom died in childbirth. She was not born and raised in the South but in upstate New York, and she spoke only New York Dutch until the age of seven, giving her a Dutch accent rather than a Southern drawl. Though she was uneducated, as many born in slavery were, she reportedly prided herself on her English-speaking ability despite it being her second language.

Another version of Truth's speech exists, published by Marius Robinson in his abolitionist newspaper *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* on 21 June 1851 just one month after it was given. Robinson was a friend of Truth's and she is reported to have approved of his transcription, which he titled 'On Women's Rights'. Robinson did not ascribe a Southern slave accent to Truth, nor does he present her as unserious and simple. Robinson's Truth does not drop the N-word and though there are some similarities with Gage's version, such as the biblical references peppered throughout and her references to her own physical strength, the famous 'ain't I a woman' refrain is gone. Also missing are the references to white women and mud-puddles, but whether this is because Robinson removed them or Gage embellished them we have no way of knowing. His version begins with the striking line 'I am a woman's rights'.[38]

Gage is said to have admitted taking liberties with Truth's speech to make her more appealing to the American public.[39] In other words, she appropriated her. Gage exaggerated

Truth's racial difference in order to subtly diminish the black woman while advancing the cause of white women. What historians have interpreted as a black woman asserting her womanhood and humanity appears, in fact, to be a white woman contending that if a black woman is capable of all that Truth has experienced, then who are white men to deny white women their rights? Gage's version of the speech was included in Stanton's *History of Woman Suffrage*, first published in 1881. It's not difficult to see why Truth—particularly Truth as represented by Gage—appealed more to the white suffragettes than did Frances Harper: the latter did not shy away from implicating white women, and demanded they address their own racism before any collaboration could occur. This was likely the kiss of death for her relationship with them. *History of Woman Suffrage* seemed to prove Harper's point that 'if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America' by leaving her out of it.

It dishonours Truth's legacy to ignore these discrepancies, particularly given her speech was used to serve an agenda other than her own. This becomes even more pertinent given that we still see this kind of appropriation of the work of women of colour by white feminists today—perhaps most glaringly when white women adopt a self-serving 'intersectional feminist' identity, both as a shield against criticism from women of colour and as a weapon with which to silence us by claiming we are causing division in the sisterhood by raising issues of race within feminism, as though they are intrinsically incapable of racism.

There is no sisterhood. How can there be, when white supremacy has done such a thorough job of setting White Womanhood apart from the rest of us? There's a division all right, but it is not caused by us. Yes, there is much for white women still to fight for, but consider that every single obstacle to their advancement is placed there by white society, by their own people. Meanwhile, women of colour have to not only battle white patriarchy and that of their own culture, but must also contend with colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism and other forms of racism. Given white women have never had to deal with racial and colonial oppression, it is not surprising—though it is certainly regrettable—that so many of them still regard feminism as a movement purely concerned with gender, leaving women of colour to keep trying to draw their attention to the ways in which various oppressions affect our lives. Until white women reckon with this, mainstream Western feminism cannot be anything more than another iteration of white supremacy.

White women and white feminism must also grapple with the history of white women's tears being used to demonise black sexuality, and all the false allegations of rape this entails, while at the same time participating in the sexual degradation of colonised women and using this degradation to justify further intrusion into colonised women's lives and further violence inflicted on their bodies and communities. This, I believe, is the link white women who agitate to end the sexual violence committed by men against women are missing.

Not believing white women like Ford who make allegations—no matter how credible—against white men has its roots in this tragic and unpalatable history: usually, when white women made rape claims against black and brown men *they were lying*, and white men knew they were lying, because the cry of rape and attempted rape was itself a ruse for justifying white racial violence and fortifying white economic, social and political domination. Sure, this gave white women a measure of power over black men and over women of colour that they lacked in other areas of their lives, but it also ensured they stayed right where they were, sandwiched between white men and men of colour in that racial and gendered hierarchy, with women of colour lagging below. White men have been socialised by centuries of white supremacy not to believe

the sexual allegation claims of white women—unless the accused is a man of colour.

Let's revisit the words of Kavanaugh's damsel in defence, Fagen, who said Ford's allegations had to be false because Kavanaugh 'is a person of honour, integrity … and strong moral character. He is a good father, a good husband and a good friend.' Rape allegations are not and never have been regarded as being about the act of rape at all but about the 'character' of the man accused of it—character being a euphemism for race. Men of colour were not (and largely still are not) regarded as honourable, moral, good fathers and good citizens. Punishing them for rapes they may or may not (often not) have committed served as a means of punishing them merely for being who they were, which is none of the things that white men like Kavanaugh and his damsels claim him to be. In a town hall meeting on the 2008 US presidential campaign trail, Republican nominee John McCain responded to an older white voter who said she 'can't trust Obama' because 'he's an Arab'. McCain shook his head, saying, 'No ma'am. He is a decent family man.' The unspoken implication, whether explicitly intended or not, is that Arab men are none of these things.

The claims of women of colour, on the other hand, are not only disbelieved, they are rarely even noted—because, having surrendered their sexuality to white civilisation long ago, they have long been positioned as lacking innocence. This applies whether the alleged perpetrators are white men or men of colour, as lawyer and academic Anita Hill discovered more than twenty years before Ford when she made allegations against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and had to watch him be confirmed regardless. This is what feminism must reckon with before any notion of a global sisterhood can even be on the table, let alone before white women can accuse us of dividing such a sisterhood.

White women are not like other women not because their biology makes them so, but because white supremacy has decided they are not. White women must cast aside white supremacy in all its covert as well as explicit forms, and regain the humanity they lost the moment they started to accept the fallacy that their 'race' makes them better than the rest of us. Only then can feminism as a truly global project aimed at bettering the lives of all women emerge, be those women white or of colour, trans or cis, not women at all but non-binary, poor or middle class, disabled, neurodivergent.

It all leads back to the same place, and that place is the rift that European colonialism deliberately created between women, making white women complicit in the racism they have since been all too eager to blame solely on white men. Because, as Jones-Rogers reminds us, white women were not passive bystanders to the racial crimes of white men: 'They were co-conspirators.'[40]

# 7

# Pets or Threats

## White feminism and the reassertion of whiteness

*For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt.*

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 1984[1]

July 2017 saw two big announcements in the world of pop culture. First, after a worldwide search, Egyptian-Canadian actor Mena Massoud was cast as Aladdin in director Guy Ritchie's live-action adaptation of the animated Disney film. After decades of being relegated to playing terrorists, religious fanatics, machine-gun fodder and double-crossing agents, an actor from an Arab-speaking background was set to play a bona fide romantic leading man—almost unheard of in Western cinema since the heyday of Omar Sharif.

Just days later, it was revealed that for the first time in *Doctor Who*'s 54-year history the beloved time-travelling TV alien was to be played by a woman, Jodie Whittaker. This was greeted rapturously by many—mostly white—women. So rapturously, in fact, that the celebration quickly overshadowed Massoud's landmark casting. For weeks afterwards, *Doctor Who* dominated social and online media as white feminists raved about how a female Doctor spelled empowerment and representation and *equality for women at last!*

I suppose, despite the ample bandying-about of words such as 'intersectionality' and 'inclusion', that it was too much to ask of white women to understand that, for many Arab women, the casting of an Arab Aladdin could be an equally, if not more, important milestone. As Jack Shaheen showed in his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, since the days of the silent screen, Hollywood's portrayal of Arab characters has been so relentlessly negative it has completely skewed the perception of Arabs in the American and broader Western imagination. This is what people need to understand about representation: it has real-world effects. A positive casting decision like the Aladdin one was more than just a landmark 'first': it was a sign that Arabs, seemingly the final diversity frontier in Hollywood, were perhaps finally on the verge of breaking through and breaking down that destructive stereotype. Indeed, a few months previous, another Egyptian-American, Rami Malek, had been cast as Freddie Mercury in the Queen biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, a role for which he'd eventually win an Academy Award.

Frustrated at the lack of traction this significant moment was getting, I watched as, once again, white women triumphantly transformed what was a personal victory for them into a supposed win for all women. More and more, I was wondering whether most, if not all, white feminists—which does not mean 'any feminist who is white' but refers to feminists who

prioritise the concerns of white, middle-class women as though they are representative of all women—are even listening to women of colour when we say we experience race and gender simultaneously rather than as distinct and separate impositions.

Like many other female writers, I am privy to more than my fair share of online trolling, and, as I wrote in Chapter 1, it is the rare occasion when this abuse is not both gendered and racialised. More than once, I've been accosted on Twitter by white men demanding to know if I still have a clitoris. This kind of misogyny is not only steeped in racism, it cannot be divorced from it. More recently, a troll account on Twitter dispassionately informed me that my supposed 'ethnic animus' and 'hostility towards feminine women' stem from what must be an overabundance of testosterone. In a throwback to nineteenth-century scientific racism, this gentleman had concluded that the size of my chin was too large to belong to a woman, which meant that I must be at least partly male.

Since I cannot separate my experiences of racism and sexism, sometimes I will identify more with my race than with my gender: in fact, increasingly so. I'm aware the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp is not without problems in its portrayal of the Middle East. However, director Guy Ritchie does attempt to redress some of the virulent Orientalism of its predecessors, such as editing out some of the more objectionable lyrics referring to the fictional Agrabah as 'barbaric'. Yes, the story is still a Western construct but let's analyse it not just on its artistic merit but through Stuart Hall's framework that looks at pop culture as a key site of power and hegemony. Watching *Aladdin*, I certainly did not feel I was seeing an authentic Arabian tale but nor did I feel that I was witnessing Arabs being mocked and ridiculed—and after 100 years of consistently degrading cinematic portrayals, this is actually saying something. There is much room for improvement of course; trusting Middle Eastern filmmakers with the story would no doubt have resulted in a more layered and convincing film, one that perhaps would not have inserted Bollywood-style dance sequences into a story set in the heart of Arabia. But this is the nature of progress: it is simply not possible to go from the kind of portrayals of Arabs—and Middle Easterners more broadly—we are used to seeing to the kinds we desperately wish to see. In this light, *Aladdin* does represent a step forward.

Not least because to me, an *Aladdin* movie with an actual Arab lead is far more indicative of social progress than a female Doctor, who, let's be honest, was never going to be anything other than white because, whatever barriers are still facing white women, their representation on screen and in other spheres of public and professional life has been steadily improving.

In this context, the singular focus on the casting of a female Doctor—and again, let's be real for a moment, a thin, blonde, conventionally attractive and youngish woman in a leading role is hardly the first brick of the revolution hurled through the window—left me feeling at first cold and then steadily resentful as white women kept the limelight firmly fixed on their heroine, leaving the *Aladdin* casting, with its two brown romantic leads and a black genie to boot, to drop from the headlines and public consciousness within days.

The *Aladdin/Doctor Who* discrepancy was one of the formative events that led me to conclude that what I was witnessing was more than a white-led feminist movement unsure of how to make room for brown and black women, but something far more destructive. It was the first time I allowed what had been an unpleasant, sinking feeling that had been secretly niggling at me for some time to formulate itself into an actual question. What if the problem wasn't just that us brown and black feminists needed to speak louder because white women were still not hearing us? What if it wasn't that we needed to spell out our issues more clearly and calmly so as not to alienate them? What if the real problem was that our white feminist colleagues were

consciously, deliberately and loudly talking over us, shouting us down, snatching our microphones and undermining our progress?

There were other hints, of course. Like many other Aboriginal women in Australia and black women in North America, the writer and trade union activist Celeste Liddle, an Arrernte woman from the Central region of Australia, was cautious in her enjoyment of the small screen adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian feminist treatise, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although she liked the show, she was put off by the effusive praise from reviewers and lay feminists alike lauding the program's vision of a bleak, bloody future that *might* happen to women. As Liddle noted in a comment piece she co-wrote with me for *Guardian Australia*—in which we threw down the gauntlet to white feminists, asking them to either practise what they preach or stop preaching it—not only were the bodies of black women mined to perpetuate slavery and colonialism for hundreds of years, but the children of Aboriginal women are still being taken away by the state.[2] Indeed, in November 2018 the conservative New South Wales state government introduced legislation to make adoption without parental consent easier, limiting the time children can spend in out-of-home care to two years. With two of five children in such care Aboriginal, this policy is creating legitimate fears of a new Stolen Generation.

The violence imposed on women's bodies in Atwood's dystopia has already been visited upon the bodies of black and Indigenous women many times over. Atwood herself has revealed that she researched and included only injustices that women have already suffered, so though the storyline is fictional the peculiarities of the misogynist violence are very real. Liddle is not the only black woman to have pointed this out. And yet, it appears that white feminist leaders still have not got the message. Almost exactly a year after our joint piece, *Guardian Australia* published an extract from a speech by Anne Summers, still one of Australia's most prominent and prolific feminists, who wrote that in the age of Trump, 'It is no exaggeration to say that the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, something we once saw as a dystopian fiction, is now a distinct possibility in modern America.'[3]

Does misogynistic violence really not count until it is inflicted on the body of a white woman? To see these pieces published in the same outlet a year apart was a sad indication that the conversation between white feminists and feminists of colour in Australia was not only not progressing but was, in fact, regressing. Given that more women of colour are being published than ever before, how can this be?

Throughout my media career, I've been a big proponent of visibility and diversity. I've repeatedly used my columns to critique the lack of brown and black people on television, in the media, in movies, even on the catwalk, not because I view these as important ends in themselves but purely on the assumption that more visibility will translate into more access, acceptance and eventually power for all people of colour. Now I wonder whether, in plugging diversity, I haven't been inadvertently selling something of a false idol. In her 1984 book *Sister Outsider*, the now-iconic black feminist academic and author Audre Lorde warned us not to mistake tokenistic inclusion for material change. Tokenism, she explained, 'is not an invitation to join power' but an empty gesture designed to placate and even silence our demands for more equitable treatment.[4] Close to forty years later, I fear we haven't got her message.

I am well aware of how important representation and diversity are, both to those being represented and, more broadly, as indicators of social progress. What I have observed in feminist circles over the years, however, is that shallow markers of representation and diversity are serving as substitutes in lieu of much-needed progress. It's an illusion I don't think I fully

appreciated until I was submerged in the relentlessly giddy and frequently hostile feminist discourse surrounding the 2016 presidential election campaign of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Because the United States is the world's sole superpower, its internal elections are of more global importance than most. And because the United States has been deeply invested in the Middle East for many decades now, those of us connected to that region have no real option but to be invested in US politics. As secretary of state during Barack Obama's first term, Clinton continued the interventionist policies of many of her predecessors. Arguably more hawkish than Obama—she voted in favour of the Iraq War, which she later described as a 'business opportunity'—Clinton has what I can only describe as a deeply Orientalist attitude towards the Middle East region. During a campaign speech, for example, she boasted about having imposed the 'toughest sanctions in history' on Iran during her tenure, and laid the blame for the Israel–Palestine conflict firmly at the feet of the Palestinians.[5] This speech betrays the failure of many Westerners to consider that the primary victims of hardline foreign policies in the Middle East are not the governments in the region but the civilians. Iranians have suffered greatly under the sanctions, and Palestinians live under intolerable restrictions of their freedom and civil rights in the Occupied West Bank, and under such disastrous conditions in Gaza that the small strip of coastal land that has been under siege from Israel and Egypt since 2006 has been described as an open-air prison by the United Nations.

As I tried to outline at the time, I did not see these types of statements as a reason for feminists to withdraw support entirely from Clinton given the alternative, but I did request many times, to no avail, that feminist writers and leaders (particularly in Australia, where it wasn't even our election!) temper their rhetoric away from excited declarations that a Clinton victory would be a win for the rights of all women and minorities everywhere, which many Arab and other non-white women found alienating, and to cease with dismissive retorts that any critique of Clinton was inherently sexist and therefore irrelevant.

As it turns out, white feminism's Middle East problem has quite the history. According to academic Sara Salem, way back in the 1920s frustrated Egyptian feminists—including Huda Sha'arawi, who was famous for defiantly removing her face veil on a Cairo train platform in protest at women's segregation, and who had been drawn to the suffragette movement—stopped working with Western feminists when it became clear that resisting imperialism and championing national liberation were not on the latter's list of priorities. Egyptian feminists, writes Salem, felt their Western counterparts 'were not putting into practice the democratic principles that they consistently spoke of and encouraged' by failing to speak out against the colonisation of Palestine. In fact, some Western feminists were actively supporting the very colonial projects Arab women were attempting to resist, and so disappointed Arab feminists, for whom gender justice was inseparable from national liberation, turned to African and Asian feminisms, where colonialism was a primary focus.[6]

How sad to see that 100 years later, this remains the case. White feminists still overwhelmingly approach the oppression of women as one informed primarily if not solely by gender, and, as a result, they cannot seem to conceive of imperialism as a feminist issue—if they think of it at all. The Arab world has been hit with military interventions and political sanctions, both before and after Clinton, which clearly attests to the entrenched nature of Western foreign policy. Clinton was furthering an already existing policy, not creating a new one, but how hard was it, really, to simply say, 'Yes, we read your words and we see your pain and we won't gloss over Clinton's stance on the Middle East'? How difficult could it have been to simply refrain from implying over and over again that all women should be With Her? How complicated to

simply acknowledge why some of us couldn't find anything to get excited about when we knew our relatives and communities in the region were still going to suffer no matter who became president?

To do so would have required white women to recognise and acknowledge their own privilege, as well as the role Western women have played in the continued suppression of Arab women's freedom. It would have required them to stop viewing oppression only through the lens of gender and to acknowledge that Arab women, like all women of colour to various degrees, are oppressed by white racial dominance as well as gender, and that this means there are times that gender is not, as Salem put it, the 'master factor' in our decision-making. It would also have required white feminists to accept that they too are marked by racial difference, that they are not raceless, and that their race privilege is predicated on the continued oppression of brown and black women across the globe.

Far easier, of course, was to continue to extol Clinton's virtues, gloss over her vices, and allow feminism itself to be further absorbed into Western power structures. So fraught is this, so fragile is the feminism of white women, that to merely have the audacity not to feel represented by Clinton was interpreted as an attack *on them*. Lina, a thirty-something Palestinian-American from Washington, DC, says she feels 'completely alienated from white women in America' even though 'on the surface our values may seem aligned'. She tells me her Palestinian identity makes her feel as though there is no place for her in American politics: 'The two-party system does not represent me, protect me or value me, and because of that, I don't have hero worship (of) politicians like Obama or Hillary Clinton.' For the most part, she finds liberal white feminists either unwilling or unable to listen, let alone validate her perspective. 'They don't want to hear it, and they certainly don't want to hear about the suffering these politicians have contributed to.'

Across social media platforms, Arab women, in attempting to voice their legitimate fears for their peoples—and I have both witnessed and experienced this firsthand—were left without any recourse as the tables were turned and they found themselves framed as bullies and abusers of white women, who felt victimised 'just because they support Hillary Clinton'. There was no distinction made between the so-called Bernie Bros, the supporters of Bernie Sanders who blamed Clinton for their own hero's loss, and feminists of colour, who were merely requesting not to be forgotten in all the giddiness: we were all sexist and deranged Hillary haters. Days before the election,Van Badham, a *Guardian Australia* columnist with whom I repeatedly clashed on social media during the campaign, wrote a column called 'Time to hail Hillary Clinton—and face down the testosterone left', in which she did not deem it worthy to mention that women of colour had repeatedly challenged her uncritical support of the presidential candidate.[7] Not only were our views dismissed during these interactions, we were then erased from the discourse altogether.

Let's be clear: when Badham writes that Clinton's 'tenure as secretary of state was characterised by her unprecedented centralisation of gender equality strategies', she is not only silencing any Arab woman who puts forward a legitimate, thoughtful critique of Clinton, just as her white feminist forebears did to Arab women a century ago, she is channelling the maternalism of those frontier white women who came before her, and the Orientalism of those white men who have always insisted they know Arabs better than we can ever know ourselves. Moreover, she is doing so in a way that voids our voices by erasing our femaleness, attributing any opposition to Clinton to masculinity, essentially exiling us from feminism and womanhood altogether. It seems that to whiteness, the size of my chin isn't the only indication of my apparent excessive testosterone.

This breakdown of communication between white feminists and Arab women was repeated during the pandemonium surrounding the release of the *Wonder Woman* superhero film. If this seems like an odd juxtaposition, that's because it is. It is also perfectly reflective of the odd moment we are in in contemporary feminism, where there appears to be no distinction between reality and fiction or between politics and pop culture when it comes to what signals our empowerment and our progress. Released in mid-2017, just months into President Donald Trump's first term, *Wonder Woman* seemed to function as something of a painkiller, a soothing balm to take the sting out of Clinton's shock defeat. Hillary may not have been our Very First Female President, but all is not lost, for here comes Diana Prince, our Very First Female Superhero in her very own blockbuster!

Predictably, the fanfare was accompanied by a suffocating expectation that all women would be enthusiastic and active in their appreciation. But again, this only exposed the refusal of white feminists to listen to Arab women. The 'Wonder Woman empowers all women' rhetoric quickly became alienating to many of us given the staunchly anti-Palestinian sentiments previously expressed by Gal Gadot, the star who plays her. When I wrote a rather conciliatory column outlining why Arab women were feeling unseen by the uncritical joy around the film, concluding not with a call to boycott it but with a small request that white women show empathy and understanding towards those women of colour who didn't feel represented or empowered by it, the overwhelming response on Australian social media was for white feminists to assume the role of victim.[8] They denounced me as 'racist' (because Gadot is Israeli), lectured me on intersectionality, and accused me of being divisive and destroying the sisterhood. One woman even insisted that I was wrong and whether I liked it or not (I evidently did not), Wonder Woman 'empowers ALL women'.

What can be said in response to comments such as this? How do you force people to see you and hear you when their own self-image hinges on pretending you are not even really there? In *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes that Aboriginal feminists have been regarded by white feminists as either 'assimilated or angry'. I believe this restrictive binary applies to other women of colour too, as all too often our attempts to challenge white feminists are met with hostility and our disagreement with accusations of divisiveness. There is no denying it: white feminists have learned to silence us by claiming that our pain is hurting them.

Why do white women struggle to read and apply the words of women of colour? Lorde answered this question almost forty years ago. Calling out the reluctance of white women to recognise women of colour as women and yet different from themselves, she challenges them to drop their defensiveness and their imposition that gender is the master oppression. 'For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt,' Lorde explains. 'To allow all women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex.'[9]

In other words, white women largely ignore the writing of women of colour because their own self-image can only be maintained by viewing and treating assertive or, God forbid, critical women of colour as problematic stereotypes, as aggressive and angry bullies who don't appreciate all that feminism has done for them. The alternative would be not only to accept the limitations of their own feminism but to admit that their progress has come—and continues to come—at the expense of other women.

People are fond of describing forward-thinking people as 'ahead of their time'. I think this is

a mischaracterisation that feeds a false belief in an inherently linear social progress where change is inevitable, as if people are naturally inclined to change and some of us just happen to change before everyone else. As much as Lorde's words seem prescient today, it would do her a disservice to describe her this way. No one is really ahead of their time. If anything, such people are exactly *of* their time because they have the capacity to diagnose the maladies of their era and prescribe the remedies. Nothing is inevitable, and no progress is ever assured. It is the generous wisdom and searing insight of thinkers like Lorde that drag us kicking and screaming into the future. The problem is just how stubbornly resistant to this medicine the rest of us are: it's not merely that we are behind them, it's that we all too often resent those ahead of us for what they tell us about our society and ourselves. And our response is to either ignore or silence them.

It is this resentment and desire to silence, I believe, that is behind much of the fragility with which so many white women still respond to the work of brown and black women. I would go further than Lorde and argue that white feminism has a vested interest in ignoring the work of women of colour not only because ignorance is a shield from feelings of guilt, but because as long as they can feign this ignorance, then their white privilege is never seriously threatened. It's not just complacency: it is a deliberate choice to uphold whiteness.

What Lorde outlined in *Sister Outsider* is what, a few years later, law professor Kimberle Crenshaw would define as 'intersectionality', which refers to the intricate nature of oppressions that meet to create new, compound forms of oppression that are experienced acutely by those who have more than one marginalised 'identity'. Like Lorde, Crenshaw made a point to include economic disempowerment in her analysis; in fact, it is essential to it. Building on the work of black feminists before her, she used the case study of a lawsuit brought against General Motors in 1976 by a group of black women who alleged race and gender discrimination in the car manufacturer's hiring process.[10] At the time, the assembly plant restricted all women and black people to certain—and separate—roles. The problem for black women was that the jobs set aside for women were off limits to blacks, and the jobs open to blacks did not permit women. Black women seeking work at GM were in limbo as there was clearly no job they could even apply for. Even so, they lost the case, with the presiding judge saying only gender or racial discrimination could exist, not both at once.

Despite mainstream Western feminism's claims to embrace it, intersectional theory is being betrayed. When intersectionality is untethered from Crenshaw's critical analysis of society's institutions and power structures, it succumbs to neoliberalism and morphs into a superficial declaration of identity that prioritises the individual and can serve as a kind of shield from legitimate criticism. More than once I have been scolded by a white woman who believed that because she identified as an 'intersectional feminist' and an ally, she couldn't be racist.

Perhaps it was inevitable that intersectionality would be turned against women of colour and used to stifle their dissent—even the dissent of black women, the very group whose feminism gave us the illuminating metaphor. It certainly isn't the first time that an initiative aimed at improving the lives of racial minorities has been appropriated by white power structures. The closer to power a person is, the less their 'identity' is held against them. White women, by virtue of sharing the same prized racial characteristics as white men, are more easily able to transcend patriarchal, gender-based oppression. Their proximity to white men gives them, as Lorde pointed out, access to 'a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools'.[11]

What makes this all the more frustrating is that white women have been able to chip away at the chains that bind them through the tools gifted them by people of colour. The calls for

'diversity' are the most obvious example of this. The civil rights era was the momentous event that made the 1960s counterculture and the second-wave women's liberation movement possible. Subsequent initiatives, such as affirmative action and workplace quotas, have long included greater gender diversity among their aims. Sadly, however, it appears that they have overwhelmingly benefited white women, and often to the detriment of everyone else. Affirmative action is viewed through a racial lens because of its origins in civil rights, with many white people claiming that it unfairly benefits blacks at their expense. It is white women, however, who have most reaped its rewards, despite the fact that gender was not part of the policy's original 1960s incarnation. In 2006, Crenshaw wrote in the *University of Michigan Law Review* that the toxic discourse that denounces affirmative action as an entitlement of undeserving blacks 'is simply a gross distortion of the reality … given the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action have been Euro-American women'.[12] Her claim is supported by evidence from various state departments. In 1995, two decades after the launch of affirmative action in the private sector, a report by the California Senate Governmental Organization Committee found that white women occupied 57,250 managerial positions in California, more than the number held by blacks (10,500), Latinx (19,000) and Asian-Americans combined (24,000).[13]

For all the 'I'm With Her' and 'The Future Is Female' high-fiving floating around, it's becoming increasingly apparent that merely having more white women in powerful positions isn't going to result in a more just and equitable world. This reality continues to be glossed over by the rhetoric of 'empowerment' and 'lean-in' corporate feminism. When jockey Michelle Payne became the first woman to win the famed Melbourne Cup in 2015, her victory speech, which included the admittedly rousing line 'Women can do anything and we can beat the world!', thrilled women across the country. It also demonstrated the difference between equality and liberation. Protests against the Melbourne Cup, billed as 'the race that stops a nation', become steadily louder with each passing year as more Australians find it difficult to ignore the violence inherent in whipping and dominating animals into submission. As such, as I asked at the time in my Fairfax Media column, 'Should we celebrate every victory by a woman as a win for women?' Equality, I argued, is when (usually white) women share power with white men and beat men at their own game, as Payne did. But liberation is more than equality for some in an unjust system: it necessitates rethinking the entire system itself.[14]

Whatever gains white feminism is making for women, liberation is not one of them. Sure, more women are 'leaning in' and advancing further and further in positions of power, and many of them are adopting feminist principles, or at least feminist rhetoric. But they are not showing significant signs of any intention to discontinue the same inequitable system. Indeed, despite being its greatest beneficiaries, white women in the US are the likeliest group to object to affirmative action: the claimants in most US racial discrimination lawsuits resulting from affirmative action are white women.

In Australia, affirmative action has only ever been legally tied to gender discrimination, with the key piece of legislation being the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act* of 1986, which required private sector organisations with more than 100 employees to provide evidence of efforts to eliminate gender-based employment discrimination. This and other legislation, such as the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*, have, along with feminist activism, seen a steady rise in the number of women in managerial positions. But just as in the United States, they have not necessarily resulted in good news for racial minorities. Australia does not keep US-style statistics broken down along racial lines. However, the Human Rights

Commission's *Leading for Change* report, released in early 2018, revealed that 97 per cent of CEO positions and 95 per cent of other senior managerial positions were held by people from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds; of 372 executives, only eleven were from an Indigenous or non-European background.[15]

The whiteness above is noticed by workers below. Sonia*, a forty-something woman of colour (she asked me not to include her ethnicity for privacy reasons), has been employed in the same medium-sized private sector firm for a decade. She is a mid-level manager, a position she only achieved after nine years despite consistently positive performance reviews and above-average results that, she tells me, were frequently better than the men and white women promoted ahead of her. Following a restructure several years ago, she has seen a handful of white women promoted or newly hired into senior managerial positions, disrupting the previously male-dominated leadership team. Any hopes, however, that a more gender-diverse management team would improve her working life were quickly dashed. 'It used to be a boys' club,' she says. 'It felt like no matter how hard I worked, I wasn't going to break through. I had to get results three times as good as my (male) co-workers just to be considered for a promotion.' This illustrates that adage well-known by marginalised groups: we have to be more than twice as good to go half as far. 'I finally managed to get promoted only to find it is now a white club.'

What Sonia says has happened in her rapidly changing workplace is that as the male managers, including the small number of men of colour, either left or were let go, many of them were replaced by white women. In that time, the cultural diversity of the entire workplace has shifted, with newly hired employees and contractors being almost uniformly white. Whereas before, women of all races, including white women, were absent from management, now there are white women in leadership positions; however, this newfound power is not trickling down to women of colour. Rather, in an apparent display of inverse intersectionality, the privilege of white women is intersecting with the power formerly held exclusively by white men and fusing to create an even more impenetrable, compounded barrier for non-whites, undermining any prospect of female solidarity in the process. Sonia had hoped that the restructuring would result in an easier pathway ahead for her—she describes her new, white male boss as 'fair and supportive'—but has found her progress stymied by the new management, who, she says, are less likely than ever to reward or even acknowledge her ongoing achievements. Convinced she never would have made it even as far as she has if the company had operated this way when she first joined it, Sonia now feels she is on borrowed time, and is considering her future prospects. 'I broke through the boys' club,' she says, 'but I don't think it is possible to break through this white club.'

'White people still run almost everything,' the *New York Times* Australian bureau intoned in 2018 in a devastatingly brutal report on cultural diversity in Australia's workplaces.[16] Perhaps few industries demonstrate this more than the one I have worked in as a freelancer for more than a decade: the media industry. Australia's media is overwhelmingly white, and this includes the recently risen feminist media—even those sites that pride themselves on 'intersectionality'. It is ironic, to say the least, to witness the way in which the writing of black and brown women has benefited white women most of all. In recent years, as print media has been dying off and online success has become measured less by content quality and more by page clicks and shares, exploitation of freelance writers has become rampant in more ways than one. It is virtually impossible for most freelance writers to make a liveable income solely from writing, and as competition between sites has become increasingly fierce, with new websites popping up seemingly every week, women have been increasingly expected to garner those coveted page

views for their editors in one of two ways: by writing intensely personal confessionals of suffering and trauma, or by firing off ‘hot takes’—speedy, superficial and strident screeds responding to some issue or event that has appeared in the 24-hour news cycle.

A few years ago, when my writing was beginning to attract both positive and negative attention, I confessed to a former editor that given the nature of online abuse and trolling of brown and black women, I was a little afraid I would inadvertently write something that would effectively finish my career by sparking a level of outrage and misrepresentation that I did not have the platform to recover from. My editor looked a little peeved at my apparent lack of trust in her judgement and replied, ‘Come on, Ruby, that’s what I’m here for—to make sure that never happens.’

I think of this conversation often when I come across hastily written clickbait, which is becoming more and more prevalent. Writers are pressured to write quickly, often to a brief they themselves didn’t come up with. Increasingly, regardless of the tone and content of the article itself, it is given a striking but provocative headline designed to appeal to fans and haters alike, and then the author is left to deal with the backlash alone, with little to no support. For freelance writers this can be isolating and demoralising. As someone who researches media as well as works in it, I fear that what I am witnessing in this ‘outrage bait’ trend is an abrogation of the responsibilities of a good editor.

The past few years have seen a flurry of articles targeting cultural appropriation: the adoption of certain aspects of another, usually maligned culture and praising it, flouting it and even claiming it as one’s own. Cultural appropriation is not mere exchange or appreciation, it is the separation of certain cultural markers from their origins that are celebrated only when white people adopt them. Cultural appropriation is Chanel selling a $2000 boomerang (yes, really) while the Aboriginal population in Australia is still denied sovereignty and a treaty. It is Israel marketing itself as the home of falafel and tahini even as it places millions of Palestinians under occupation and siege, denying them self-determination and dignity. Ditto wearing feathered headdresses to Coachella and Glastonbury while Native American women are kidnapped, raped and murdered in staggering numbers. But white women wearing hoop earrings? Not so much.

When I see ill-conceived takes accusing, for instance, Rihanna of appropriating Latinx Chola culture for sporting razor-thin eyebrows on the cover of a fashion glossy, I see possible exploitation. I see a publisher who has perhaps failed to protect her writer. A good editor would have predicted the inevitable and frankly justified social media backlash that would come with denouncing a black woman for ‘stealing’ another’s culture. The writer even acknowledged that ultra-thin eyebrows have been featured in black cultures, seemingly negating the entire argument of the piece itself. The unfortunate thing is she did make a good point: that Latina women in LA who sport the same thin eyebrows would be suspected of belonging to a gang known as Cholas. But, let down by a particularly inflammatory title that set one group of women of colour against another (‘I’m Latina and I find Rihanna’s skinny eyebrows problematic’[17]), the piece seemed designed to draw in ‘hate-readers’. It was outrage bait.

This trend in feminist journalism not only fails writers, it fails readers. It denies us the opportunity to engage in important issues with the seriousness and truth they deserve. When I see shallow hot takes, I wonder if the editor or publisher hasn’t deliberately set the writer up for a fall. Good editors must be attuned to the zeitgeist and anticipate possible backlash, and some things should not make it past them. As my old editor—seemingly now of a dying breed—was alluding to, sometimes writers need to be told ‘no’ for their own good. Instead, they get tossed in the deep end without so much as a life jacket while the website bathes in the clicks and the cash.

To paraphrase the MIA. song, all they want to do is … *click* … and take our money.

It is in this exploitative environment that brown and black women take often enormous personal and professional risks to highlight how their experiences are shaped by an ostensibly progressive movement in which their hopes and expectations of support and solidarity are frequently undermined. We discover the hard way that white supremacy and patriarchy are replicated and implicitly defended within mainstream activism.

Miss Blanks is a black trans rapper who has spoken out about racism and sexism in her industry. She led the charge against a male musician with a history of troubling behaviour towards women only to find herself erased from her own activism. 'Trans women of colour are not "perfect" victims,' she wrote in an April 2018 opinion piece. 'My voice was dismissed as invalid while prominent white voices were amplified … I received little to no support … from white feminists (and) allies … and it leaves me disappointed as my experiences become questioned and vilified.'[18]

Is there a single woman of colour reading this who has not had a similar experience? Yet despite such pleas as this, mainstream feminism in Australia continues to be dominated by white women who seem impervious to constructive criticism even as they reap the rewards of the hard work of women of colour. The infamous *Guardian* piece of mine that spawned this book, for instance, may have gone viral globally and been widely discussed by progressives and feminists in the United States and the United Kingdom, but it was met with stony silence by mainstream feminism and progressivism in Australia—the very people I most needed to see and respond to it. Even more frustrating was when I couldn't get local media, with the sole and notable exception of NITV (National Indigenous Television), to pick up the Lisa Benson story. A black Emmy-winning journalist in America allegedly losing her job after sharing an article about racism written by a fairly well-known Australian author was a bona fide news story. Or it should have been. However, despite media interest from overseas outlets, including the BBC and Yahoo News, it quickly became apparent that Australian media just wasn't interested. Truth be told, I still don't understand why. I would like to know why the journalists I have known and worked alongside for the past ten years didn't think it mattered. Why none of the editors whose careers I helped along with the huge readership so many of my pieces brought them contacted me. I think Lisa deserved better and, frankly, I deserved better too.

On top of indignities such as this, and despite all the work so many women of colour have been undertaking, we still see whitewashed fiasco after whitewashed fiasco, with women's leadership conferences, feminist magazines and panels offering white women up as the future. It's become a repetitive script: we point out oversights and exclusions and white feminists promise to 'do better', then they promptly make the same mistakes over again. And still, women of colour are expected to remain polite, supportive and even deferential lest we mark ourselves as 'angry' rather than 'assimilated' and find ourselves squeezed out of feminism altogether.

Of course, magazines and media conferences are not themselves the goal of progress, and they can't be substituted in lieu of grassroots change, but they certainly provide an indication of where we are at. A few years ago, a young, white and very enthusiastic organiser of a women's rally asked me to give a short speech at her event, gushing that I would surely have a tale to tell 'that will make people cry'. I realise she thought she was being flattering, but is this really what white women think the role of brown and black women is? To serve them our trauma to feed on in exchange for a brief moment of pity? It still astounds me that despite my many years' experience in the media, my academic qualifications, the many articles I have written, the conversations I have started and the contributions I have made to public discourse, that white

women, some of them half my age, look at me and see only someone who can tell them a tale of woe that will merely serve to reinforce their position of racial dominance and superiority over me and women like me.

If feminism is nothing more than white women publishing our words for their benefit even as they withhold actual power from us, then what is the point of all this? What is the point of the articles we have written denouncing whitewashing, and blackface, and lack of authentic representation? What is the point of this book? Perhaps this repetition of our stories is itself 'the point'. When feminist media continues to seek out and publish the words of marginalised women only for us to have to keep repeating ourselves so many years later, it's not difficult to conclude that feminist media has become a site of exploitation. What is this if not a cruel demonstration of Toni Morrison's famous declaration that the very serious function of racism is distraction? It is not enough for us to be 'visible', to be on the agenda: we also have to help set it.

White women keep apologising, telling us they will listen, they will improve, but they never do. And women of colour are losing patience. Because the white women can't not know. After all the years of viral articles, hashtag movements and marches instigated and led by women of colour, white women simply cannot claim they do not know what it is they are doing to us that is driving us away from them. It is irrelevant how many important articles women of colour write if the demands made within them are not met. Feminism and progressivism in general continue to let us down by substituting viral reach for material change, asking us to be content with repeating ourselves over and over regardless of the impact this has on our emotional and mental health. We are expected to be content with getting our ideas out there only to see them quickly appropriated by white women as they join white men in the halls of power—the very same halls that oppress and exclude us.

There is no recourse for women of colour who have been burned by white feminism. Internet call-out culture, often accused of 'silencing' powerful white voices, is far more likely to be successfully utilised to further ostracise brown and black women. Those of us who attempt to make our grievances public—myself included—are met not with empathy and support but with derision and 'blacklisting'. This is how whiteness reasserts itself: through a white feminist movement that aligns itself with diversity and inclusion to get white women through the door but then slams it shut in brown and black women's faces.

The well-known phrase 'The right eats other people's children, the left eats its own' is misleading. The right has no cause to 'eat its own' because, although varying in their degree of social conservatism, those aligned with the right (and much of the centre) essentially share a common worldview: the primacy of whiteness and the free market system, and the maintenance of both. The left (and I use this term very broadly), if only theoretically, seeks to challenge current power structures and the dominant economic system, and although this should inherently mean challenging whiteness, that is not exactly high on the list of priorities of many white leftists. Consequently, what is increasingly apparent is that left and right will unite in a tacit display of white solidarity when it comes to ensuring that people of colour do not threaten white privilege to any significant extent.

How else to explain the normalisation of white supremacist rhetoric that occurs when the media defends giving a platform to far-right figures such as Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos? Or the way in which white journalists insisted on dominating even the reportage of Islamophobia, racism and white supremacy in the wake of the Christchurch massacre, where a white man livestreamed himself killing fifty-one Muslims while they were at prayer in their mosques? Even after years of journalists and writers of colour warning about the legitimisation

of white supremacist rhetoric, only to see our worst fears come to pass, we were still pushed aside as white Australian journalists scrambled to control the narrative. In the process, they completely absolved all but the most virulent right-wing media from culpability and ensured the debate around racism remained firmly mired in the tired old culture-war narrative of left versus right. But white supremacy is not a left/right issue: it is the very foundation, the structure, the roof and the contents of our society. Racism is not so much embedded in the fabric of our society as it *is* the fabric.

The right sees us as threats and their scorn is relentless unless we assimilate, disavow our own cultural heritage and pledge allegiance to whiteness and 'Western civilisation'. The left will claim to be our 'allies', but only as long as we implicitly accept an inferior position and never attempt to get ahead of ourselves, let alone ahead of them. As long as we play the part of their pets. And that means allowing our hair to be stroked or playing the passive silent victim or acting the role of the non-threatening sassy sidekick.

When we fail to keep up our end of the unspoken bargain, when we tug at the invisible leash that whiteness and white feminism have secured around our necks, then that solidarity is revoked and White Womanhood ensures it is always us, and never them, who pay the price for speaking out. Turns out, they too saw us as threats all along.

# 8

# The Lovejoy Trap and the rise of righteous racism

*‘Sister, I will give my child to you, that I will never have back again.’*
*‘This child will be claimed; as soon as possible; how soon I do not know.’*
*‘Oh cruel poverty!’*

Notes pinned to the clothes of newborns left on the steps of the New York Foundling, c.1870s, from *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018)

‘Kerri … you’re sounding quite racist right now.’

These seven words uttered on Australian morning television ignited a media firestorm in the aftermath of the 2019 Invasion Day rallies across the country. Spoken by Yumi Stynes to perennial commercial television presence Kerri-Anne Kennerley during a panel discussion about the validity of the protests and whether or not Australia should ‘change the date’ of the national holiday, they followed a stunning invective by Kennerley castigating the thousands of marchers who’d turned up to support the protests organised by Aboriginal activists.

‘Has any one of them been out to the outback where children, babies, five-year-olds are being raped? Their mothers are being raped, their sisters are being raped, they get no education. What have you done?’ she thundered, looking straight down the camera lens before making an X with her forefingers. ‘Zippo.’

With four of the five panel members white, it unsurprisingly fell to the sole person of colour —Stynes—to challenge these assertions. ‘I’m sure that’s not remotely true, Kerri, and you’re sounding quite racist right now.’

Kennerley’s response was to look pained and inform Stynes she was ‘so offended’. When Stynes repeated her assessment, amid jeers from the studio audience, the *Studio 10* host Sarah Harris attempted to smooth things over as Kennerley shot back, ‘Just because I have a point of view doesn’t mean I’m racist.’

The audience was clearly on Kennerley’s side, as, by way of their silence, were the other four panellists. It seemed a straightforward case of white tears and white fragility. But I believe there is more to this one.

Japanese-Australian Stynes was once a fixture on the small screen as part of the defunct morning show *The Circle*. On that program, back in 2012, she faced a furious backlash from the public after making jokes about an Afghanistan War veteran pictured shirtless by his swimming pool. ‘He’s going to dive down to the bottom of the pool to see if his brain is there,’ she quipped, while fellow host George Negus wondered if the buff former SAS soldier was ‘not up to it in the sack’. Though they both claimed they were jokingly referencing his beefcake appearance, across the media it was widely reported that the two hosts had mocked the soldier’s sexual prowess because he and his wife were undergoing IVF treatment. Stynes—but not the white, male Negus

—received death threats and a social media backlash so intense she quit the show. Two years later the relevant media outlets issued an apology to both Stynes and Negus, stating they'd reported incorrectly.[1] Meanwhile, Kennerley has remained on our screens and despite making some dubious comments of her own, such as referring to young women and teens who get sexually involved with famous footballers as 'strays' who have been 'throwing themselves at famous sportspeople for years', has never seen anything approaching a similar-scale public backlash.

The conflict between Stynes and Kennerley came after a string of inflammatory statements about race made by white women on Australian morning television. In 2016 presenter Sonia Kruger declared she wanted a ban on Muslim immigration, and two years later serial offender Prue MacSween called for Aboriginal children to be taken from their families in 'another Stolen Generation'—but only for their own sake, of course. Neither woman apologised or retracted her statements, and I mention them to contextualise both the calibre of public discourse on Australian breakfast television and to suggest that, given the furore both incidents inspired, it's highly doubtful the producers weren't at least aware that Kennerley's comments could potentially spark backlash.

Also setting off alarm bells was the content of Kennerley's rant, her implication being that child abuse and rape are uniquely rife in Aboriginal communities. Then there was her tactic of using this apparent concern as a means of diverting discussion away from the actual matter at hand: Australia Day, and whether it was appropriate to be celebrating the date that the First Fleet landed in what came to be called Sydney Cove, thus marking the start of the ongoing colonisation and dispossession of First Nations people. This also happened to be the argument du jour among internet trolls targeting writers and activists online.

I know this because not three days earlier I had been caught in a similar trap when an account I didn't recognise decided to vent his displeasure at me. I had simply shared (without added comment) an image to my Facebook page of an oversized Aboriginal flag set against a cloudless blue sky, taken at one of the huge Invasion Day rallies. Calling me a 'vile bitch' who used Aboriginal issues to 'fuel hatred against whites', the troll told me to 'calm my Arab ass down' (not that I'd actually said anything) before asking me, 'What have you done for Aboriginal people? When was the last time you went to these remote communities?'

This is an ethical bait and switch. What the internet troll had done and then Kennerley had repeated is target non-Aboriginal people who show support for a movement run by Aboriginal activists, baiting us by accusing us of not doing enough and then switching the focus of the debate entirely. Suddenly we aren't even discussing Australia Day—we are defending ourselves against accusations of being inhumane and uncaring about 'real suffering', most especially that of children. As an added bonus to themselves, they get to occupy some sort of moral high ground by doing nothing but accusing others of not doing enough. I call this type of bait and switch the Lovejoy Trap. Helen Lovejoy is the prim cartoon wife of Reverend Timothy Lovejoy on *The Simpsons*, and the star of an enduring meme for her performatively anguished wail emitted during a community debate on whether or not to reintroduce prohibition: 'Won't somebody please think of the children?!'

Funnily enough, exhorting well-meaning people to 'think of the children' is exactly how this diversion first took hold.

In the mid nineteenth century, Charles Loring Brace was a young social reformer and reverend with a wish to cleanse New York City's Lower East Side of its 'street Arabs'—Eastern European immigrant children from impoverished families. He also had a fervent belief in the

power of transforming these unwashed street vagrants of the rapidly industrialising city into useful domestic labourers. In 1853, Brace founded the Children's Aid Society (CAS), which would go on to become the most prominent and praised child welfare organisation in the United States. Its crowning achievement was its 'placing out' plan, in which up to 100,000 Irish, German and Italian American children were sent on 'orphan trains' out west to serve as labourers in rural homes. Around half of these children had at least one living parent, indicating that 'orphan' was less a state of material reality and more a state of Brace's mind.

Kyla Schuller argues that Brace's audacious vision, ostensibly a program to lift the children out of poverty, was in fact an example of the prevailing scientific belief that humans could direct their own evolution.[2] Poverty was seen not as a consequence of capitalism and industrialisation, but as a moral failing on the part of the child's parents. Removing them from that toxic environment and exposing them to good, hardworking American families would not only satisfy capitalism's endless requirement for cheap labour, it would transform them into worthwhile members of the community. It would make them white.

By now, it will likely surprise you not an iota to learn that anyone who objected to this white-ification of almost-white immigrant children was accused of not caring about lifting the kids out of poverty or of cleaning up the crime-ridden tenement neighbourhoods of the city. The real aim, however, was to redesign the demographics of the Lower East Side. That so many of those children did not fare very well in their new homes was largely irrelevant: this was a project that aimed at repairing capitalism's growing reputation for callousness, and at bringing young Irish, German, Jewish and Italian children into the bosom of white civilisation. The program was so successful that many CAS-inspired child welfare organisations popped up with similar programs, which ran until the late 1920s.

Brace's pioneering use of the Lovejoy Trap shifted the entire frame of the debate in favour of the CAS. Before his intervention there was antipathy towards removing children from their free parents (there were, of course, no such qualms when it came to children of the enslaved). He is now generally praised as a radical and a progressive by social welfarists, but Schuller brilliantly outlines how his philanthropy was fuelled less by humanitarianism and more by his desire to turn 'street rats' into productive, 'civilised' humans. His vision served as a prototype for the Indigenous child removals that became official policy in Australia and the United States. By cloaking it in the rhetoric of child welfare, Brace was able to counter any objections with the accusation that his critics did not care about the wellbeing of children. What did it matter that some children still had living parents when it was their future that was at stake—a future that could be spent as a productive member of white society rather than following in the footsteps of their primitive parents? 'The separation of children from parents, of brothers from sisters, and of all from their former localities, destroy(s) that continuity of influence which bad parents and grandparents exert,' rationalised Brace at the time.[3] He was doing it for their own sake, you see. *Won't somebody please think of the children?*

Well, somebody did. By the 1870s poverty was considered so shameful that poor white families were voluntarily surrendering their newborn infants to the wicker cradles set up for this very purpose on the steps of charity organisations across the city. Many pinned heartbreaking notes to their baby's clothing, promising to return and collect them when they could afford it. Brace's vision had successfully convinced poor white parents that their poverty-stricken status meant they had forfeited their parental rights to their own children.

The Lovejoy Trap is not limited to children. In fact, it has been particularly effective when it comes to the sexual assault—both real and imagined—of women of colour, albeit only in very

specific circumstances. It seems that the one time settler-colonial societies are concerned enough about gender-based violence and sexual assault to do or say much about it is when the alleged perpetrators are men of colour and the proposed solution involves some kind of intervention into those men's communities and countries. As Gayatri Spivak put it, 'white men are saving brown women from brown men'.[4] This phenomenon has long been used to rationalise intervention in the Middle East, as in the case of Lord Cromer's adventures in Egypt (see Chapter 3). More recently, since the 1990s, Western wars against Arab, Balkan and Central Asian nations have been pinned to the pretext of saving brown women from sexual violence. Ironically, at the same time there has been growing recognition of the feminist argument that rape itself is a weapon of war. What this means is that by 'saving' brown women from sexual violence, Western countries staging interventions and incursions have actually been exposing the women to greater risk of the same.

In November 2001, First Lady Laura Bush gave a radio address linking the 'war on terror' and the US invasion of Afghanistan, begun on 8 October, to the 'severe repression against women' in that country. '(The) fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women,' she declared.[5] While her words may sound feminist, what numerous scholars and authors have pointed out since is that they demonstrate how governments can and do appropriate 'feminist rhetoric without undergoing legitimately feminist transformations'.[6] There was something missing from the first lady's speech, and from subsequent reports from the US State Department, and from media reports with such sensationalistic and familiar titles as 'Lifting the veil,[7] which focused on the repressive policies of the Taliban—including the denial of education to girls and women and the denial of freedom of movement and access to health care. What was missing was the historical context of how the Taliban had come to power, and the role that Western powers had played in their rise. The Taliban emerged from former US allies the Mujahideen ('holy warriors'), who were partly funded by the United States in order to counter the Soviet invasion in 1979.

There is a Western tendency to view Islamist extremism as both intrinsic to Islam and as popular among Muslims, but groups such as the Taliban enjoyed only very minimal support from the Afghan population before the war against the Soviets. Ten billion US dollars in military aid and ten years later, when the United States walked away from the country immediately after the defeat of the Soviets, the stage was set for the Taliban to take charge, and take charge they did. Without this crucial context, including the willingness of Western powers to look the other way when it came to human rights abuses of their allies, the blame falls to Muslims themselves, and the subsequent demonisation creates more, not less, suffering for Muslim, Afghan and Arab women. On one level, it is not surprising that there is such widespread fear and antipathy towards Islam when politics and history are omitted from the official narrative. In the absence of information, the gaps are filled with religion: if this is happening, it must be because Muslims have an inferior and violent culture. Or so the thinking shaped by centuries of Orientalism goes. The 2001 invasion may have deposed the Taliban officially, but not only do many of their repressive policies survive, they are also still active in two thirds of the country and control significant swathes of it.

More ironic still is that the status of women in Arab and Muslim majority countries is used as a rationale for military intervention even as the military itself is an unsafe place for women. Sexual assault reports in the US military have risen every year since 2012. By framing Western and Western-allied soldiers as the saviours of brown women, the military appropriation of

feminism essentially excuses what should be inexcusable. As sociologist Josh Ceretti argues, not only is rape a weapon of war, it is a weapon of warriors: an endemic issue that has simply not been taken seriously by the military.[8] On the relatively rare occasions when sexual assault by US servicemen has been prosecuted, whether the victims were their own peers or civilians, it is overwhelmingly black servicemen who have been charged and convicted. The trouble with shining a light on this selective justice is that it becomes nearly impossible to object to such disproportionate punishment without opening yourself up to accusations of failing to protect women and of defending rapists. Sound familiar?

Ceretti focuses primarily on incidents involving the US military in the 1990s, but the selective and self-serving prosecution and condemnation of men of colour for sexual crimes against women of colour—again, whether real or imagined—also played out in Australia in the lead-up to World War II. In 1936, a series of outraged newspaper reports detailed the 'poaching' of Aboriginal women by Japanese pearlers. There was much consternation and outrage that Japanese fisherman were engaging in sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women and paying for the services of Aboriginal sex workers. Apparently keen to preserve the entitlement they felt to the bodies of Aboriginal women, white men accused the Japanese of sexual exploitation and abuse of Aboriginal women, previously the prerogative of white men. Once again, pointing out the hypocrisy of demonising Japanese men when white men had been doing this very thing for decades would only have led to accusations of defending forced prostitution and the abuse of Aboriginal women. There was such a scandal that Australia closed its waters to all foreign pearling craft and established a base off the Northern Territory from which Japanese luggers were shot at with machine guns to prevent them entering Australian territory.

Historian Liz Conor notes the hypocrisy of the sudden flurry to 'protect' Aboriginal women from alleged abuse by Japanese pearlers given there had been 'decades of unheeded reports of violence towards Aboriginal women by white pearling masters'.[9] Whereas any accusations made against white men had long been dismissed through the rhetoric of 'black velvet' that regarded Aboriginal women incapable of virtue and chastity, no such defence was mounted for the Japanese men. The authorities intervened in such a way that positioned the bodies of Aboriginal women as their property. Once again, white people set the standards that ensured their victory.

It seems like a no-win situation. Not only does the Lovejoy Trap divert the focus of conversation entirely, it perpetuates the myth of the demonic and insatiable sexuality of brown and black men, a myth that permeates all our cultural artefacts even where you may expect it the least.

The award-winning documentary *The Hunting Ground* (2016), directed by Kirby Dick, produced by Amy Ziering and—ironically—distributed by the Weinstein Company, exposed the shocking pervasiveness of sexual assault across US college campuses. It featured on-camera interviews with survivors from a diverse range of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, some of whom had been assaulted by their peers at the most prestigious colleges in the country. For obvious reasons, the film did not feature either interviews or images of the alleged perpetrators. Except for one.

Towards the end of the film, one survivor recounts her alleged assault at the hands of Jameis Winston, a former star quarterback for the Florida State Seminoles. Winston is black and his accuser is white. This, of course, does not mean he didn't do it, and I'm not commenting on the allegations themselves or even the outcome. Rather, it's the power of representation and history that comes into play. Against the historical backdrop discussed throughout this book, and towards the end of a film that has spent well over an hour showing the pervasiveness of sexual

assault and the reluctance of authorities to take serious steps against it, the filmmakers chose to show moving images of only one of the accused: a black man. *Representation matters*. And how people are represented matters most of all. People believe what they see more readily than what they hear. What we saw in *The Hunting Ground* was that black male college students were menacing their white female peers, despite the fact that most of the other perpetrators were white. That may not have been what was intended, but as we should all know by now, intention and outcome are not the same thing. It's Black Peril all over again.

This optic was repeated a couple of years later in the fictional *Riverdale* TV series, a live-action adaptation of the classic *Archie* comics. In a nod to the #MeToo moment, an early storyline revolved around the harassment and assault of female students at the hands of the school football team. Again, although many boys from various racial backgrounds, including white, were implicated, only one was shown both taking advantage of a (brown) girl and getting his comeuppance. In the revenge scene, the virginal blonde Betty Cooper, dressed for some reason as her own 'evil'—and therefore dark-haired—doppelganger, traps said football star in a hot tub and comes close to drowning him. Again, he was not the only accused, but he was the only accused we saw with our own eyes; and we saw him both humiliating a brown girl and getting punished for it—by a white woman.

This imagery cannot be divorced from the context of white settler-colonialism. It cannot be divorced from the violent history of slavery and segregation and lynching; the history of Emmett Till, and the damsel in distress, and the white saviour. Yes, black men do assault women, but this does not negate the fact that such repetitive imagery taps into a long, bloody history and serves to perpetuate the biases and fears of white society: that black and brown men pose an outsized threat to the safety of women. This is why the Lovejoy Trap works so well. The hidden recesses of our collective unconscious already position black and brown men as violent, sexual threats. The main difference now is that the frame has widened from just 'protecting' white women to include white women *and* white men saving women of colour from men of colour.

Rape survivors are never going to get the uniform justice they deserve until we unmoor the abuse of women's bodies from these colonial-derived prejudices and ambitions. In our public discourse, rape is often less about the crime itself and more about its usefulness to institutional power. Does it serve power to prosecute the rape or to ignore the rape? To reward the rape or to deny the rape? The answer all too often depends on where it lies in relation to current—that is, white—power structures. Bilal Skaf, the Lebanese-Australian ringleader of the notorious Skaf gang who assaulted several young women in Sydney in 2000, was sentenced to more than fifty-five years' jail in 2001. The presiding judge described the crimes as 'events you hear about, or read about, only in the context of wartime atrocities'.[10] Hardly. Only six years prior, Anglo-Australian rapist Geoffrey Michael Haywood had been sentenced to just six years for leading the gang rape of a teenager in Burnie, Tasmania. The victim, known only as 'Leia', told media Haywood had put a knife to her throat and said, 'I should kill you, you slut', before threatening to make the sixteen-year-old schoolgirl dig her own grave.[11] Skaf's victims, despite coming from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Anglo, Greek and Aboriginal, were depicted in the media as innocent white victims of racially motivated crimes. Leia, on the other hand, who survived Haywood's assault only because the ute in which they were travelling to what he intended to be her burial site crashed into a tree, was degraded in court as a drug-taking liar who had fabricated the allegations to avoid being punished by her parents.

To grasp just how contemptible the Lovejoy Trap really is requires an understanding and awareness of settler-colonial history. After centuries of the abuse, exploitation, objectification,

dehumanisation and assault of women of colour as both a tool of colonialism and a justification for it, and with the effects of all this not yet in the past, the apparent urgent concern of otherwise apathetic or even hostile white people for the safety of children and women of colour is something to behold. The hypocrisy is astounding, and the self-serving sense of righteousness is almost impressive in its audacity.

Even worse is how well it works. Kennerley and her morning crew succeeded in reframing the debate just as Brace did before them, just as the Bushes did, just as those military courts have done. On television, in the pages of newspapers and all over social media, Australia Day was forgotten, as was the fact that the Invasion Day rallies were organised and led by Indigenous activists. The debate became all about whether or not it was fair to label what Kennerley had said as racist, and the supposedly 'bullying' behaviour of Stynes. To the conservative media and much of the public, the woman of colour was easily cast as the aggressor who had 'attacked' Kennerley for nothing other than expressing sympathy for those poor hypothetical women and children, the 'real' victims of unnamed but violent Aboriginal men. Within hours, a former television executive had written an op-ed explaining that Stynes 'attacking' Kennerley was exactly why he 'would not allow Yumi on television' when he'd been in charge.[12] When Stynes cancelled her appearance the following day, the program brought in two Aboriginal women—one conservative, the other progressive—to hash it out instead. Because if there is one favoured pastime of white Australia, it is seeing two women of colour fight it out for their entertainment. Meanwhile, the other hosts of the program mocked Stynes for not turning up to work, something Stynes later said 'would have been like walking into a trap'.[13]

Sadly, she already had. There is still so much debate about what white fragility is and what racism is. The issue is never out of the public discourse, and I think we are foolish if we don't take into account that those who desire to maintain the status quo and reject the full humanity of people of colour, and whose aim is to ensure our continued subordination and maintenance of their privilege, are likely listening to our conversations with the aim of appropriating them. Appropriation is and always has been a key tool of power.

What I am trying to say here is that I don't think this was a straight-up case of knee-jerk white women's tears and white fragility triggered by unexpected accusations of racism. Rather, it appears that it played out in an all-too-predictable fashion. The producers likely wanted fireworks, a heated 'debate' about racism that would get the public riled up, featuring a perennially excused white woman who had never before had to account for her inflammatory comments, and a brown woman who'd already been publicly shamed and hounded. What they got was more akin to a handheld birthday sparkler: it was not the angry showdown that much of the media presented it as. Regardless, those who seemed determined to inflame the incident pretended it was New Year's Eve. If anything, the woman who exhibited palpable anger was not Stynes but Kennerley. And though much is made of the fact that women in general are discouraged from expressing anger, researchers have found that once race is thrown into the mix, white women's anger is not received or punished in the same way as that of women of colour. Because race was so firmly on the table, this 'showdown' was not between two women but very much between a virtuous white damsel and an angry brown woman.

Stynes' mainstream television career is probably finished, at least for the time being. Not that she'd be all that keen on returning, all things considered. She again became the target of death threats and intrusive photographers lurking around her home. The country once again showed itself incapable of discussing Australia Day in a rational and compassionate manner. And, most gallingly, the lack of any context about the issues experienced by rural Aboriginal communities

permitted the notion that child abuse and rape are an intrinsic cultural problem in Aboriginal communities in a way that does not exist in white communities to again be propagated and cemented in the public's mind. To this end, one of the five panellists, Joe Hildebrand, even wrote a column using the incident as a means of launching into why it is wrong to talk of the settlement of Australia by the British as 'colonisation' when they did not intend to hurt Aboriginal people. He insisted there was no deliberate genocide and even went so far as to state that the events of the Stolen Generations were conducted with 'good intentions'.[14] This is the power of the Lovejoy Trap. It had succeeded in regressing our public discourse from the National Apology in 2008, in which Prime Minister Kevin Rudd admitted government culpability for the 'indignity and degradation' inflicted on the Aboriginal population, to reasserting colonial claims of virtuous pioneers who'd had the best interests of their victims at heart.

Stynes took a stand during what would have been a very hostile experience, even though that stand did inadvertently set off the Lovejoy Trap. Later, she told media she felt she had to say something because she knew she couldn't let down her friends and colleagues of colour. As a collective, we need to analyse cases like this—not just the aired segment itself, but how it was followed up by the studio, by the other panellists, by the media and in the ensuing public debate. I keep returning to the words of Salma Hayek: women of colour are the easiest to discredit. Stynes was the only person on that panel likely to object to Kennerley's line of argument, and when she did she was immediately painted as the aggressor in much of the popular press. Producers read news sites. They follow social media. They watch television. They know where the zeitgeist is and they know what ignites it. By now, they would know what white tears are and what white fragility is. With all this context, it is extremely difficult for me to accept that they had no inkling of a real possibility of conflict, given the social and political climate in which the panel was taking place.

This is why every time a scandal like this erupts, as they seem to be doing with increasing regularity, the admittedly understandable calls for individuals such as Kennerley to be sacked aren't going to solve the problem. The problem is that she and others who have made similar statements have institutional backing. For all the talk about how offensive it is to call someone a racist, it doesn't seem to do much harm to the career of white people. If the Lovejoy Trap's job is to trick us into abandoning the actual discussion at hand, then the key to resisting it when we see it happening is to steer the conversation back to the topic. To fight it, we have to first name it. I don't know how else to deal with this kind of professional gaslighting—or what we could call in these circumstances 'gas-whiting', because it involves deliberate attempts to subvert the reality of people of colour. These arguments are not made in good faith. They are about winning the fight, setting the agenda, shutting down the other side.

The next day, Kennerley was asked to comment about the incident. She replied that it was just work and at the end of the day she leaves work behind and goes home. Perhaps that is possible for her, but it isn't for Stynes and it certainly isn't for the Indigenous communities who were the target of her comments. Women of colour can't leave these things at work; we can't ever just leave our race behind. Our public discourse is an illusion. Those of us who enter into it in good faith and with earnestness are often met with irrationality, entitlement, hatred and endless shifting of the goalposts. People of colour can't win at this game—and it is a game. The Lovejoys and the Gas-Whiters are playing to win: we are playing because we can't afford to lose.

In white societies, people of colour are used as a wedge. Immigrants are given promises of acceptance and assimilation, such as the citizenship ceremonies pointedly held on Australia Day that encourage us to identify with the nation-state rather than with the First Nations. These come

with implicit threats of ostracism if we don't comply. Yet, at the same time, we remain excluded from the inner circle. Stynes may have appeared to have penetrated the inner circle, but it was a tokenistic inclusion that could be revoked at any time if she dared to step out of her box. Well, she did step outside the box and her inclusion was revoked.

Through no fault of her own, Stynes' appearance not only was exploited to shift the frame of the debate in favour of whiteness, but also reaffirmed in the minds of white Australians that brown people, particularly (angry) brown women, will never really be one of them. This two birds/one stone approach is just one of the ways in which white domination maintains itself. What is even more saddening is how often and how deeply people of colour buy into it. Across the world, whiteness has become so attached to the symbols of privilege, wealth and status that it no longer even needs European-derived white people themselves to perpetuate it.

# 9

# The privilege and peril of passing

## Colourism, anti-blackness and the yearning to be white

*[On] September 10th I went to bed a white guy; September 11th, I woke up an Arab.*

Dean Obeidallah, Arab-American comedian, 2007[1]

If there is one thing I am grateful for regarding my 1990s adolescence, it is that hair straightening irons hadn't yet been invented. No doubt I'd have destroyed every last follicle on my head if they had. As it was, forced to consider other ways to make my natural curls conform, I settled on spending hours at a time in front of the television brushing my hair as straight as I could get it. Starting when the curls were still wet from the shower and eying with envy the suitably straight-haired residents of mid-1990s Summer Bay, the fictional locale of *Home and Away*. I'd methodically repeat the motions, pulling every last stubborn curl straight until they were dry and hung down to the middle of my back rather than their usual position just below my shoulders. To the untrained eye it looked like I had dead-straight hair.

I don't remember how many times I put on this personal performance but I do remember very clearly the fervent hope it would work *this time*, that somehow this time my hair would stay straight and neat and bouncy. Looking hopefully into the mirror, I'd shake my head vigorously from side to side but, rather than cascade down my shoulders, my stubborn locks would surround my head like a brown halo of bouffiness. I'd managed to brush the curls out, but that wasn't going to change my hair's stubborn inclination to fly away and voluminise. Another personal failure.

When I think of that young girl, I am struck not only by her patience (it takes hours to brush long wet hair straight!) but by her completely unfounded hope that she could change a fundamental physical feature just by brushing it away. Back then, I didn't really think much about why straight hair was so desirable and my own thick brown ringlets that seemed to cover every bit of space on my scalp were not, just as I never questioned why Angel and Bobby in Summer Bay didn't have to brush their hair straight for hours or agonise over the size of their nose. Whiteness was invisible. White people just were. They set the standard and we had to try to meet it. If we couldn't meet it, well, that meant there was something wrong with us; it was our fault, not theirs. We were the ones who had to change.

Whiteness is more than skin colour. It is a system that privileges those racial, cultural and religious identities that most resemble the typical characteristics associated with the white Western Europeans who created the system in their image. And this system of white supremacy is now so ingrained it can exist without white people. Colourism—the discrimination and

prejudice against darker-skinned people of colour (often from within their own communities) and in favour of those whose physical features are closer to those set by Western beauty standards—plagues virtually all communities across the globe.

My own fair-skinned Syrian mother still acts horrified when I let my olive skin see any sun: *samra*—brown—is not considered attractive. A few years ago a Latina woman in the United States whom I interviewed for a story on colourism explained that among Latinx immigrants, darker skin was seen as an indicator of poverty. 'There is an incredible amount of shame about being a migrant farm-worker,' she told me, 'My mom didn't want us getting *prieta*—dark-coloured or tanned. We would wear a long-sleeved shirt with a long-sleeved dress shirt over that, heavy blue jeans, gloves, a large hat and sunglasses. And the temperature would be in the 100s [30+ C].' Years later, this woman took up waterskiing and her mother would still get upset, just as mine does. 'Every time I would visit her, she would make an awful face and say I "look so *prieta*".'

*Samra. Prieta*. It seems there's a tacitly derogatory word for it in every language. In India, antipathy towards darker skin is so rife that a recent study found 70 per cent of both male and female respondents wanted to date a fair-skinned partner.[2] According to the research team at Hindustan Unilever, the British-Dutch–founded corporation behind Fair & Lovely, India's most popular skin whitening product, '90% of Indian women and girls view skin lightening as a "high need"' because 'it is aspirational, like losing weight. A fair skin is like education, regarded as a social and economic step up.'[3] But why would so many South Asian women come to think this way? At least part of this yearning to be fairer can be put down to the aggressive marketing of the products, the makers of which would be on the lookout for such attitudes. Typical marketing features potential suitors choosing fairer-skinned partners over their darker rivals, and it doesn't stop at merely promoting lighter skin. The implication is that these products can transform their users' entire lives.

Indian actor Abhay Deol wrote an op-ed for the *Hindustan Times* in 2017 criticising advertising that 'preaches that we would get a better job, a happier marriage, and more beautiful children if we were fair. We are conditioned to believe that life would be easier if we are fairer.'[4] Although in 2014 the Indian Advertising Standards Council banned television ads depicting darker-skinned people as inferior, the products persist, as do their campaigns, and they remain wildly popular. Although most users of lightening products are women between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five, there are reports of girls as young as twelve using Fair & Lovely. Its availability throughout the subcontinent and even as far as South-East Asia and Australia has seen the Asia-Pacific region become the biggest market for skin whitening products. There are even products designed to lighten the skin on the labia and, alarmingly, inside the vagina. The adverse health effects are significant and well known even to many of the products' users, with skin cancer, permanent pigmentation, liver damage and mercury poisoning just some of the potential consequences. And yet, according to Zion Market Research, the global skin whitening products market was worth approximately US$4.5 billion in 2017 and is projected to reach more than US$8.5 billion by 2024.[5] The main driving factor behind this phenomenal growth? '[I]ncreasing consumer consciousness regarding their physical appearance.' Other key markets include parts of the African continent, where 77 per cent of Nigerian women, 59 per cent of Togolese women and 27 per cent of women in Senegal use creams and lightening agents such as Whitenicious.[6]

Marketing alone cannot explain the obsession with lighter skin. Where advertising is most

effective is when it taps into already-existing insecurities and desires. This, after all, is why sex is used to sell everything from cars to clothes to real estate: that desire has to come from somewhere. Colourism has a long relationship with colonialism, with each fortifying the other. Skin colour has been associated with both attractiveness and status for two reasons. First, it implicitly signifies a life not spent labouring in the fields under the hot sun, and second, it was the colour of the ruling class. Like many people, I was long under the impression that Indian colourism was rooted in the caste system, with lower castes being darkest and higher castes lightest. However, Indian scholars such as Neha Mishra, head of legal studies at the University of Bangalore, dispute this, arguing that the earliest classifications we associate with the caste system were based on job occupation rather than skin tone, since skin colouring itself varied from region to region. Over time, the four original caste classifications outlined in the Rigveda, the collection of ancient Sanskrit hymns dating back to at least 1500 BC, spawned thousands more castes and sub-castes, leading to a vastly more oppressive system in which, rather than castes being arranged according to skin tone, preference was given to light skin across all castes. So while some castes are higher than others, in each individual caste those with lighter skin fare better than those with darker skin.[7]

Mishra argues that pre-colonisation India showed no visible prejudice based on skin colour, citing the ‘dark-skinned heroes’ of the Rigveda as evidence. Even after the Muslim Mughal conquest and empire, the status of the lighter-skinned ruling classes was based on their pre-existing Arab and Persian ethnicity rather than their skin colour: having been persistently ruled by fairer-skinned foreigners for hundreds of years, lighter skin became associated with status, wealth and privilege. However, it was not until European colonisation that discrimination according to skin colour became discernible, rife and institutionalised. European colonialism consolidated this by—in contrast to their Mughal predecessors—claiming ‘themselves to be a “superior” and “intelligent” race; consequently, they were born to rule the “inferior” and “black coloured” Indians who were more akin to crude animals than humans’.[8] Indians became excluded from restaurants and schools, and jobs were distributed to lighter-skinned locals first, essentially founding a segregation system based on Western ideals of beauty and intelligence. The foundations for this system were laid down as far back as the late 1600s, when the British East India Company founded its Fort St George settlement. They gave it the name White Town, distinguishing it from the nearby Indian settlement that was named—yes, you guessed it—Black Town. And so the binary was born.

Colourism brought violence to the Indigenous population in Australia under a converse rationale where it was the lighter-skinned children who were targeted for separation from their families and forced into assimilation into white society, which usually meant labouring and domestic servitude. Today, Indigeneity is determined not by skin colour but ‘by heritage, acceptance by an [I]ndigenous community, and active participation in the affairs of that [I]ndigenous community’.[9] Aboriginal people report experiencing colourism and social exclusion from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous people who judge their Indigeneity solely on their skin colour. Social exclusion is a key factor in determining overall mental health and, as a 2016 study by the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses found, when the authenticity of their identity is questioned, the resulting feelings of belonging neither here nor there can exacerbate the pre-existing psychological distress caused by ‘unresolved grief that is associated with multiple layers of trauma that span many generations’.[10] Mental health distress is significantly higher in Indigenous communities than it is in the non-Indigenous population, both

in Australia and globally, manifesting in higher morbidity rates, a health and income gap, and criminalisation.

Too black or not black enough: colourism does not always directly involve black people, but at its core it is driven by anti-blackness, by the desire to distance oneself from blackness in order to be included in whiteness.

Colonialism ravaged Africa in a multitude of ways, one of which was the growth of a mixed-race population who were regarded as particularly threatening due to their aesthetic proximity to whites, and punished all the more for it. In Southern Rhodesia, human beings were taxonomised. To be white was a status determined not solely by skin colour, and white-skinned people who lived in poverty were also excluded from white society, regarded as an embarrassment and potential contagion. The children of an African mother and a European father were isolated, referred to as 'half-castes' and usually resided with their mother unless the father wished to have them educated, in which case they were separated from their mother permanently.

The children of 'half-castes' were categorised as 'coloureds', and it was they who were perceived as a particular threat to white society. Regarded as neither black nor white, they often formed their own communities. Sometimes, those with paler skin were able to mingle with white society and deny their links to the African population, and many coloureds attempted to attain the status of whiteness by disavowing their links to blackness. Schools were opened specifically to segregate coloureds, and those mixed-race couples who sought to enrol their children in white schools were treated with disdain and anger. White parents threatened to pull out their children if a child suspected of being coloured was permitted to enrol, no matter how white-skinned the child appeared. Since there was often no way to visibly tell if a child had mixed-race lineage, if a family were known to associate with any coloureds this was held as proof of their own identity, and their children were barred from schools attended by white children. Mixed-race parents, even those who were well-off financially, who wanted to educate their children had an uphill climb and resorted to denouncing their African lineage in order to do so. One such parent, Mrs Maggio, mother of Grace Maggio of Ardbennie, admitted to having coloured grandparents but nonetheless felt it would 'be a disgrace to the British to put a child of English and Afrikaner persons into a Coloured school'. So internalised was her racism that Mrs Maggio opted to end her daughter's education rather than see her enrolled in such a school, which was perceived to be a hotbed of future criminals. The supposed propensity to criminality of blacks and coloureds made white-skinned children with mixed lineage social outcasts if their status was discovered, perceived as they were as carriers of 'a racial inheritance which made their misclassification a danger to their classmates'.[11]

This process of people of colour consciously and unconsciously divorcing themselves from black people in an appeal for acceptance from white society continues to manifest today. In Australia, the recent cynical attempts by the conservative Morrison Government to force local governments to hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day despite the growing resistance to that national holiday drove a wedge between immigrant communities and the Indigenous population. In 2017, a billboard advertising the holiday featuring two smiling young Afghan girls wearing hijab and waving handheld Australian flags caused a furore in pockets of the white community who were incensed at the inclusion of hijab-wearing Muslims (the young girls were referred to by some as 'women', once again demonstrating the perceived lack of innocence of girls of colour). The billboards were taken down, only to create a counter-backlash and a crowdfunding campaign to reinstate them. Enough money was soon raised to do so, but it came at the expense of necessary solidarity with Indigenous activists. Sadly, when faced with a choice

between white acceptance and black solidarity, too many people of colour still choose the former.

The term colourism was coined by African-American writer Alice Walker, and in North America its origins are firmly rooted in slavery. In the antebellum South, skin tone began to dictate the slavery experience, with lighter-skinned slaves more likely to be assigned less physically taxing work in the house but also more likely to be hired out as 'fancy girls' and sold into sex slavery markets. The lascivious Jezebel archetype ensured they were not seen as trafficked and abused prostitutes but as willing competition for virtuous white women.

In late June 1864, *Harper's Magazine* ran a feature aimed at a Northern audience whose enthusiasm for the Civil War was waning as they questioned whether they had a stake in it all. Under photographs of newly freed child slaves, the caption read 'Emancipated Slaves White and Colored'; it served as a reminder to those Americans who still associated slaves only with black skin that children born to enslaved women, although fathered by white men across two or more generations, were also legal property. '[They] are as white, as intelligent, as docile, as most of our own children,' the copy read. The images were turned into postcards and sold to shore up support for the war and to fund homes for the now-free children. Some children even embarked on tours of the North alongside famous Abolition figures such as the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, who, with newly emancipated six-year-old Fanny Lawrence, whom he'd adopted, standing beside him, thundered to his audience at Brooklyn's Plymouth Church: 'The loveliness of this face, the beauty of this figure would only make her so much more valuable for lust. Let your soul burn with fiery indignation against the horrible system which turns into chattels such fair children of God! May God strike for our armies … that this accursed thing may be utterly destroyed!'[12]

Post-Abolition, these 'white' slaves meant two things: that there were white-passing former slaves with black heritage mingling with white society, and that those who could pass for white often had to divorce themselves from the black community, as in Southern Rhodesia, in order to avoid the wrath of those 'real' whites who were still seething about losing the war. Those known to be or suspected of trying to 'pass' were discriminated against nonetheless.

Passing had markedly different connotations then from what it does now. To pass now does not refer to 'falsely' pretending to be white, but to benefit from privilege on account of having lighter skin, whether or not one's racial heritage is known. It is also a process that is actively encouraged by the dominant white society keen to assimilate 'problem' ethnic communities. In the post–Civil War United States, however, fearful whites who abhorred the thought of sharing their wealth and status with anyone with 'black blood' sought to ensure that didn't happen. White people who socialised with black and 'coloured' people were regarded with suspicion, and black and coloured people who socialised with whites were regarded as fraudulently 'passing' in order to access white entitlements and privileges that they did not deserve.

That outwardly-appearing white people could be enslaved or otherwise excluded from white society is not as surprising as it may now appear to some of us. The intervening centuries have so cemented the association between race and skin colour that the history tends to be obscured: racialisation was a deliberate process, not an organic one. And in some rare cases, just as apparent whites could be excluded, non-whites could find their way into whiteness.

A few years ago I tutored an undergraduate course in Global History and one of the case studies in the textbook was that of a European travel writer's visit to the colonies in what is now South America sometime in the eighteenth century. The racial hierarchy in Spanish America was so rigid that there were no less than sixteen categories in the *casta* system. Where a person fell in

the system affected everything from their occupation to their social status to their marriage prospects. At the top were the *peninsulares* (Spaniards or other Europeans born in Europe), followed by the *criollos* (Spaniards born of European parents in the colonies). *Mestizos* were of mixed Native and European descent, *castizos* were mostly European with some Native, and *cholas* were mostly Native with some European. *Pardos* were mixed European, Native and African, and, it will likely surprise no one to note, on the bottom rungs were *mulattos* (mixed African and European), followed by *negroes* (blacks). The existence of such an intricate taxonomy implies the difficulty inherent in crossing economic and social boundaries. This was a system designed to protect privilege and wealth and keep people firmly in their place. The system in Brazil was somewhat looser, designed to allow some mobility for lighter-skinned mixed-race people but to keep those with darker skin on the bottom rungs. Nonetheless, the European visitor in the textbook was stunned to come across a dark-skinned *mulatto* official in a small town in what is now Brazil. Even more surprising was the lack of scandal caused by this clear transgression of the racial boundary. Eventually, the visitor could take no more, 'Excuse me, but isn't your governor a *mulatto*?' he asked some locals. 'He was but he isn't anymore,' his hosts replied. 'How can a governor be a *mulatto*?'[13]

I still marvel every time I think about this anecdote. The rhetorical question put to the scandalised European wasn't 'How can a *mulatto* be a governor?' since this would indicate the impossibility of a bi-racial man ever attaining the position, but 'How can a governor be a *mulatto*?' This means that even racial classification for visibly 'coloured' people in Latin America in the eighteenth century was not an intrinsically biologically fixed category: by sheer virtue of becoming a governor, he was no longer considered a *mulatto*. He had somehow transcended his inferior status.

Dig a little deeper into this history, and we discover that the racial categories we take as a given and obvious feature of our world were themselves brought into being by a process of deliberate racialisation. At the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Europeans did not go to Africa to enslave Africans because they were black but because, as historian Paul Lovejoy (no relation to Helen, of course!) argues in *Transformations in Slavery*, it was a source of supply with an already-existing trade.[14] Over the centuries, and as new laws were written and rewritten to justify their enslavement, black Africans came to be seen as a slave class. The categories of white and black were invented to justify slavery, rather than slavery being justified by virtue of the enslaved people being black.

Slavery in Africa goes back much further in history than the trans-Atlantic trade. In fact, it began almost a millennium before the Portuguese and Spanish turned up on the African coast, with slavery in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa already a feature of life. Domestic African slavery differed greatly from trans-Atlantic slavery, but it was no less devastating for those who became enslaved, either by other Africans or by the later Middle Eastern traders. There were, however, two key differences between domestic African and Middle Eastern slavery on the one hand, and the later trans-Atlantic slave trade on the other: racialisation and economic rationalisation. Before the Europeans, no one had justified slavery on the grounds of either racial inferiority or economic necessity.

That does not make the pre-existing slave trades benign. The trans-Saharan trade associated primarily with Arab traders was not as brutal or as prolific as the trans-Atlantic trade, and in many cases slaves were afforded a significant amount of mobility that was simply impossible in the Americas. However, these differences meant little to the victims of it, such as the 1600 captured Africans who died of thirst in a single trip when their caravan hit trouble crossing the

Sahara; they would certainly contest any claim that non-Atlantic slavery was ‘not so bad’. Likewise, separation from family and kin for the purposes of forced labour or military service was hardly a pleasant experience, regardless of how specifically physically brutal some trades were over others. However, it is those important differences that affect the impact that slavery’s legacy has today. Over the 1250 years of the trans-Saharan trade, some 2500 enslaved Africans per year were transported to what are now North Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, first by Indigenous North Africans and then by Arab traders. This is roughly the same number that were exported in the 300 years or so that the trade to the Americas operated—which indicates just how prolific American slavery was and how it changed the course of history. But statistics can’t tell the whole story of slavery’s legacy.

The trans-Saharan trade was begun in pre-Islamic times by Indigenous North African dealers and was continued after the Islamic conquest. In Africa, writes Lovejoy, ‘Africans owned Africans’. However, they did not enslave their brothers: ‘they enslaved their enemies’.[15] There was not yet any notion approaching a pan-African identity, which, like Pan-Arabism, eventually came about as a response to colonialism and an attempt to resist it. Domestic slaves were usually prisoners of war but could also be captured in raids, and were usually destined for the military or agricultural labour. After the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the trans-Saharan trade continued and was used primarily as a way to widen Islam’s reach and circle of influence. Slavery was regarded as an opportunity to educate and convert pagans to Islam, upon which they would (theoretically but not always) be freed. It was illegal to capture and enslave Muslims (as well as Christians and Jews, who were regarded as ‘people of the book’), although this did happen.

This process of emancipation or manumission was also a feature of domestic African slavery, where being enslaved did not necessarily indicate an inherently degraded moral status. Female slaves were generally used as concubines and upon having their master’s child would be in a kind of semi-enslaved state, unable to be sold again but technically not free until their master died. Their children were born free. Other enslaved Africans ended up either in the military or, for those especially unlucky, as eunuchs. Eunuchs fetched a high price because the surgery was so brutal that only one in ten survived it.

By the nineteenth century slavery was rife across all of Africa, was still going in parts of the Middle East, and had spawned a minor trade across the Indian Ocean to the subcontinent. But it was the trans-Atlantic trade and slavery in the Americas that historians call ‘a particularly heinous development’.[16] The key features setting European slavery apart were not just the sheer volume or the generally more brutal aspects: in the Americas, slavery had a racial and economic imperative that was lacking elsewhere. These two factors—race and capitalism—mean that it is the legacy of trans-Atlantic slavery that most impacts the modern world, as race and uneven distribution of wealth and resources continue to benefit the Western world over the global south.

The racialisation of slavery and its pecuniary place in American society meant it wasn’t a minor feature but what that society was constructed around. As Stephanie Jones-Rogers writes, Southern society was a slavery society not just in the sense that slavery existed, but in that it was fundamental to how white people perceived themselves: as slaveowners. The submissive status of blacks became not just acceptable but both necessary and right in order for white people to live their lives. Their identity as white people hinged on slave-ownership and white superiority.

The diaries and personal letters of female slaveowners reveal emotional reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865. ‘Slavery was done away with and my faith in God’s Holy Book was terribly shaken,’ wrote one. ‘This is a most unprecedented robbery,’ wrote another. Some white women who knew their wealth and status depended on slavery wept even as their

former slaves celebrated. ‘I hope you starve to death,’ one sulked, ‘for it’s going to ruin me to lose you.’ Some took the extraordinary step of simply not telling their slaves they were free; on remote plantations, owners continued to extract free labour for years after Abolition. Others took their slaves and ran. One white couple fled to Cuba, where they opened a sugar plantation and forced their slaves to work there until Cuba too abolished what had become known as ‘the most peculiar institution’.[17]

The point of all this is not to rehash the past for the sake of it, nor to score points in a misguided debate. We need to understand how and why the past still affects us so deeply. Slavery occupied a fundamental place in the economic and social life of the Americas that it did not elsewhere. The economic dependency on slave labour, and the racialisation that structured society in relation to blackness are its two enduring legacies, and these legacies now permeate the entire globe. Over time, the racialised perspective on slavery penetrated Arab attitudes also. Despite the fact that in the peak years of slavery in the Middle East region slaves were sourced from a multitude of places (including Europe), Arabs and Persians came to see slavery as a black issue too. Racism and colourism are now shamefully huge problems in the Middle East, and the pejorative for black person—*abeed*—is also the word for slave.

The after-effects of slavery on Africa are untold. Millions of its young people were forcibly migrated both domestically and internationally, with those bound for the Americas utilised against their will not only to extract wealth for their owners but to cement the capitalist system as the global one. It was their transportation and forced labour that created the conditions for the Industrial Revolution and the ascendency of Europe. As international traders increased their demand for slaves, the nature of slavery within Africa also changed as more and more were used on American-style plantations and to mine resources, and as African warlords used slavery to consolidate their power. The economy of Africa eventually became so dependent on slavery that when it was abolished, it left the continent—the last to be colonised by Europe—weak and unable to deflect the Scramble for Africa.

Ironically, abolitionism helped Europe to conquer Africa, with Europeans using the abolition of domestic African slavery as a rationale for colonising that continent. Africans born under colonial rule were ‘born free’, according to the colonial rulers, and could not be enslaved. Missionaries and reformers used abolitionist rhetoric to appeal to Africans, and the formerly enslaved who escaped their bondage often returned to their homes as Christian converts. It was not, as many ahistorical revisionists like to claim, empathy or a moral desire to end slavery that turned Europeans into abolitionists: it was the incompatibility of African slavery with capitalism, as industrialisation sought to transform the global economy to one based on a wage labour system. Paradoxically, the legal abolition of slavery in Africa signified not liberation for all but submission to colonial rule.[18]

Although slavery absolutely still exists today, its legality does not; it is no longer an institution. Its legacy, however, lives on in the Middle East as it does across the West. In recent years the Dutch character Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) has come under fire. The companion of Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas) is traditionally played in festivities throughout the Netherlands by a white performer in blackface and a bright Moor costume, reflecting Piet’s status as a servant from Muslim-era Spain. As controversy grows over the character, who remains hugely popular with schoolchildren, defenders claim his blackened face is merely meant to signify soot from climbing down the chimney to deliver presents. One wonders why, in that case, St Nick himself never has such a problem or, indeed, why Piet’s clothing is not similarly stained, or why he has big red-painted lips. Cries of ‘What about the children?’ are used by adults to defend the

practice. Less known than Piet is the Iranian character of Haji Firuz, who makes his annual appearance at Narooz, or Iranian New Year, dressed in bright red clothing and with a painted black face. Iranians claim he acquired his black face as a result of his role as a Zoroastrian fire keeper. Like the Dutch, Iranian defenders of Firuz seem unwilling to admit he could be black because he represents an enslaved African, even though he has his own rhyme that includes the lines 'My master hold your head up high / My master, why don't you laugh?'

Whiteness can and does exist even in the absence of white people. The election in January 2019 of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil, who immediately marked the Indigenous population for erasure if they refused to adapt to capitalism and accept logging and mining on their land, is a continuation of the elitism in Latin America that has long worked in tandem with whiteness. During the post–Mexican War period, even as other Mexicans were being lynched, many Mexican elites—'pure' Spanish *peninsulares*—were marrying white Anglo-Americans to form and consolidate power over *mestizos*, *cholas* and Afro-Latinx.[19] We can be both targets of racial abuse and perpetrators of it. Kim Crayton, the founder of #CauseAScene, a podcast and initiative advocating for racial diversity in the US tech industry, says two of her worst experiences of being 'white women teared' happened with other non-black women of colour. 'I know all women of colour get it from white women,' she told me during a Skype conversation, 'but we get it from everyone. It comes from everywhere.'

Like internalised misogyny, internalised racism is real, and it causes enormous damage to ourselves and to others as we strive to present ourselves as white as possible in order to access the privileges associated with whiteness. Appealing to whiteness is intrinsically anti-black. When we veer towards one end of the binary structure, whether deliberately or not, we implicitly but necessarily devalue the other side of the pole. And eventually it will catch up with us. Prior to 9/11, Arab-American comedian Dean Obeidallah did not see his Palestinian heritage as pertinent to his life; he felt and was treated as 'white'. Following the attacks, however, his Arab heritage became an issue for others if not for him, prompting him to perform a stand-up routine on how he 'went to bed a white guy' the night before 9/11 and 'woke up an Arab' the next day.[20] Identity may be about how we see ourselves, but racism is always about how others see us, regardless.

There is an inherent peril in passing as white or almost white: this apparent inclusion can be revoked at any time. One young, white-passing Arab woman told me she'd worked for a couple of years in an office without her race coming up, where she felt like one of the gang of almost all-white colleagues, but after she casually mentioned her Lebanese heritage, she turned up one day to find her desk had been unexpectedly moved. Arabs, like some other racial minorities, can slip under the radar, but it requires never bringing up our heritage, never demanding more or challenging the negative depictions of other Arabs, lest the ire be turned towards us.

I'd be lying if I said I knew how to reconcile all of this. I'm well aware that whatever our own experiences of colonisation and racism-induced intergenerational trauma, non-Indigenous people of colour in Australia are also the beneficiaries of Indigenous dispossession. We too live on and appropriate stolen land. I'm also cognisant of the racism and colourism in Arab societies, of the Filipina and other Asian maids mistreated by their rich employers in the Gulf States (and increasingly in Lebanon), who regard them more as indentured servants than employees. It did not escape my notice on a trip back to Lebanon that the workers cleaning the windows and washing the dishes in the hotel were darker than the receptionists and the waiters. Yet I am also aware of the tendency to collapse all Arab societies into one and all of Arab histories into one singular, ahistorical narrative. Arabs living in the West occupy a strange position where racism against us is not necessarily always overt or visible, depending on how close to white we present,

of course—but the flip side of that is we are often left flailing without much support from 'allies', as though we are not white enough to be white but not quite brown enough to be 'real' people of colour. 'Am I too ethnic or am I not ethnic enough?' is how Egyptian-American actor Rami Malek put it. The US State Department still lists Arabs and other Middle Easterners as 'white'. This sometimes feels like the worst of both worlds: we are subjected to racism and discrimination, often implicit and difficult to prove, but without the solidarity from progressives that other people of colour can turn to.

The litmus test here is how progressives react when an Arab woman disagrees with them. Some of the most personal and vicious online abuse I have experienced has come from progressives and socialists, who, furious that my perspective on the Middle East does not align perfectly with theirs, will mock everything from my heritage ('a troll who claims to be Syrian') to my character ('vile, toxic human being [who] exploits other people's suffering for profit'). These kinds of attacks from people I'd have expected to be supportive of women like me, given their professed leftist sentiments, have become so frequent it feels pointless for me to even ask them what exactly they are referencing. Even worse is that they so rarely get pulled up on their behaviour.

This isn't a pity party, nor am I suggesting that Arab women have it the 'worst'. I'm only pointing out the inconsistencies and contradictions. Just as it morphs over time, racism shifts across situations, takes different shapes, depending on who it is being directed against and why. An Arab woman who wears hijab or otherwise presents as visibly different will almost certainly experience overt racial vilification, be it at work or on the street. Arab women such as myself who are more ethnically ambiguous and less easily identifiable as Middle Eastern are more likely to escape this explicit daily bigotry, but we are also more likely to be dismissed or demonised in progressive circles that pride themselves on tolerance, diversity and inclusion, precisely because we are not quite different or other *enough*. I've seen Arab women shouted down by white women online simply for challenging a white woman on derogatory language she has used to describe Arab men and Arab culture. The subtext here is that we are not sufficiently victim-like to warrant recognition. Following a bizarre incident in which a young Palestinian-Australian journalist had taken exception to me using my Twitter account to promote my own work (?!), a young white self-described socialist took great pleasure in telling me I had been 'put in [my] place' and he 'wouldn't want to undo the good work of a Palestinian woman'. A good Arab victim does not talk back or challenge her white saviours. She is a pet, not a threat, be that perceived threat a physical one or, more likely these days, an intellectual one. She is also willing to seek white approval by attacking other women of colour in a misguided attempt to make her way up that racial hierarchy, until she too crosses that invisible line and is discarded. This too is part of the privilege and peril of passing.

'Arab' is not even a racial or ethnic category; rather, it denotes a shared culture and language. In turn, languages and cultures vary significantly across the region, making the word 'Arab' itself, as an identifier, a testament to the inadequacy of our racial literacy and vocabulary. It doesn't allow for these differences in power and identity or history. What does it mean to be an Arab when the notion of a pan-Arab identity did not exist until the early decades of the 20th century? Led by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, countries in North Africa and the Levant, whose populations had not previously identified as 'Arab' despite speaking the language, became Arab almost overnight as national liberation efforts intensified and secular leaders sought to confound both Western powers and contain the burgeoning Muslim Brotherhood. What does it mean to be an Arab when there are so many dialects and variations of the language?

(There are thirty modern varieties.) What does it mean to be an Arab when you come from a line of people indigenous not to the Arabian Peninsula but to the Levant, when you still carry the DNA of the long-dead Canaanite culture even though you speak Arabic and your people long ago converted to the Arab-founded religion of Islam or to Christianity? What does it mean to be an Arab in a region where persecution is often based not on race or ethnicity but on religious sect? What does it mean to be an Arab when your lands were colonised first by the Arabians, then by the Ottomans, then by the Europeans, and finally by capitalism itself?

What, then, is an Arab? Do we even know who we are anymore? Sadly, and ironically, this impossibility of pinpointing what constitutes an Arab makes it all the easier to essentialise us, to regard us as one heaving, swarthy, generic mass. Seen one Arab, seen them all. Perhaps the most astounding comment posted under one of my articles (and I've seen plenty) was the one in which, responding to my claim that white people struggle to feel empathy with Arabs, the commenter haughtily informed me that neither he nor the majority of Australians cared 'what splinter of Arab you identify as or want others to be identified as'. Given he had just proved my point through his utterly dehumanising metaphor, the comment was perplexing to say the least. Once again, I was reminded of Edward Said's critique of T.E. Lawrence's adventures in the Middle East: 'We are to assume that if an Arab feels joy, if he is sad at the death of his parent or child, if he has a sense of the injustices of political tyranny, then those experiences are necessarily subordinate to the sheer, unadorned, and persistent fact of being an Arab.'[21]

When we are not being reduced to our race, we are being excluded from it. Ever since Rachel Dolezal, the white woman who 'identifies' as black, imposed herself on our consciousness, I have noticed white people increasingly attempting to dismiss lighter-skinned people of colour as 'transracial', as if we too are white but pretending to be something else. It is something I see most frequently levelled at Aboriginal women in the public eye, as well as something I've personally experienced. After so many decades of being told to go back to where I came from, of being ridiculed for my hair or my eyebrows, for the size of my eyes or shape of my nose, I am now bemused when I am told I am actually white. Too Arab or not Arab enough. Reducing us to our race or erasing us from it altogether. Threat or Pet. It's not logical, but it works.

It is these kinds of experiences that make living in a white society as a non-white person feel like we are in an abusive relationship from which we cannot escape. And as in all 'good' abusive relationships, one of the key tools of abuse is gaslighting, or the deliberate subversion of someone's reality to make them question their own experiences, interpretations and, eventually, sanity. It is gas-whiting to take the focus away from the abuser's racism. This denial of our racial difference, even as we are simultaneously vilified for being different, means we receive very little empathy when we are on the receiving end of rather horrific abuse.

Colourism, anti-blackness and the shame of slavery are reminders that, although we share many similar experiences, racism manifests differently depending on our racial and ethnic heritage. The African slave trades were not only a European affair, and the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades also affected the course of Africa's history. Those of us who are not African must likewise contend with this history and where we fit into it. It may be the peculiar legacy of Euro-American colonialism and slavery that cemented racism and capitalism in the global consciousness, but our ancestors played a role too. This role lives on in the anti-blackness and colourism that also manifests outside the Western world, and eventually turns itself back on us. Those of us who are non-black and non-Indigenous people of colour cannot divorce the racism inflicted on us in the West by white people from the anti-blackness and colourism that live on in the lands our parents left behind.

Our world is only getting smaller, and as the West continues to set the standards for wealth, success, beauty and status, then the rest will continue to chase what the West has. And this means they will continue to adopt whiteness, if not white skin itself, as an ideology in the misguided hopes of catching up.

# Conclusion

## The turnaround

# 10

# Brown scars

*Without your article I would simply have been another black woman who filed a racial discrimination lawsuit—and lost.*

Lisa Benson, 2019

It was late in the Sydney evening of 8 February 2019 when a friend of Lisa Benson's tweeted from Kansas City to let me know the jury had just begun deliberating the two lawsuits Lisa had brought against her former employer, KSHB-TV Channel 41. She also informed me that throughout the trial the defence had kept referring to my white tears piece as 'an attack on white women'. Lisa's former employers, with whom she had worked for fourteen years and who'd sent her flowers when she gave birth to her son, had depicted her in court as angry and hateful.

The jury of eight, which included no black jurors and only one of colour, found against Lisa in her original racial discrimination claim but, in something of a twist, they found in her favour in the claim of retaliation she had filed against KSHB-TV's parent company, E.W. Scripps, after it terminated her contract. Lisa's lawyer, Dennis Egan, had argued that her termination was retaliation for filing the original claim—under the guise of objecting to her sharing my article to her Facebook page—and the jury agreed.

Though I was disappointed for her to lose the main case, I was buoyed that the undue punishment she'd received for sharing that piece was acknowledged and rebuked. Retaliation for asserting ourselves is something women of colour are well acquainted with but it is not often that this retaliation is even acknowledged, let alone penalised. The jury's finding that she was 'wrongfully terminated' means, once the legal process is complete, Lisa should be compensated for lost income.

But progress is neither smooth nor linear. In early April, just weeks after the trial concluded, Christa Dubill, one of the two women whose complaint led to Lisa's termination, was promoted by KSHB-TV to lead evening newscaster.[1]

'I still to this day don't understand why this article was so offensive,' Lisa told reporter Toriano Porter of the *Kansas City Star* shortly after her trial. 'And I believe this particular article shared a viewpoint of women of colour that we're not having conversations about, but we should be having conversations about.'[2] Lisa is doing just that. She runs anti-racism workshops and plans to self-publish a book about her experience. 'My goal now is to help normalise discussions about racism,' she wrote to me via email. 'I'm not 100% completely sure of how I'm going to do it but I truly believe it is part of my purpose.'

Like many women of colour, Lisa understands that race does not run parallel to other factors in our lives. Rather, it has been the key means through which white society secures and

maintains its privilege. From the lynching of Mexicans in the mid nineteenth century to Black Peril in Southern Rhodesia to Black Velvet in Australia, to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to the contemporary rise of the far right across the Western world, Brexit to Trump to Pauline Hanson, race has been used both to cement the economic disempowerment of people of colour and to divert attention away from the cause of this disempowerment by rooting it in biology.

Responding to claims of racism by pointing to the economic conditions of the white working class—what I call classwashing—is tempting. But there are at least three glaring problems with this: classwashing excludes people of colour from the working class; it blames working-class whites for racist voting habits; and, in so doing, it absolves them, and white society in general, of responsibility for these habits. It is because they are disenfranchised. They are uneducated. They don't know any better. We need to just hear them out. On and on the classwashing goes.

But this is a tale as old as colonialism. In 1997, well before 'identity politics' became the hot-button issue it is today, renowned Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi wrote an essay called 'Why keep asking me about my identity?' that placed the struggle over history and the struggle over identity as part and parcel of the struggle over power. 'It is those who possess military and nuclear power and economic power, those who invade us and take away our material and cultural sustenance, those who rob us of our own riches and our labour and our history, who tell us what our identity is.'[3] The antipathy across the political spectrum towards 'identity politics', which now seems to describe any mention of race whatsoever, betrays this entitlement to categorising identity, as if it is the prerogative of white society alone to decide what other people are and can call themselves. To be a person of colour, especially a woman of colour, was never something that those who set about racialising the world saw as anything to be proud of. Our claiming and taking actual pride in what was meant to be an insult has seen white society once again try to set the standards for humanity by dismissing our attempts to define and advocate for ourselves as divisive posturing. For conservatives, 'identity politics' supposedly divides the population by inhibiting national cohesion. This is merely a euphemism for assimilation into the white default. For progressives, 'identity politics' divides the left by shifting the focus away from a class-consciousness. This is a false allegation that belies the link between race and class. The Combahee River Collective, a 1970s Black Feminist movement, knew this. They organised to articulate and advocate for 'the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives'.[4] Such is the degraded status of black women that if they were free, declared the Collective, everyone else would also be free.

This is why women of colour are the easiest to discredit: silencing us keeps the system ticking along.

This does not mean our racial identity is all that matters about us, nor that we should confine ourselves only to our lane. Our lives do not run parallel. Neither, if we want to be exact, do they intersect: they are inextricably intertwined. I sometimes get accused of such things as being an example of 'identity politics at its most feral', but I've never advocated for a public discourse where only members of certain groups can talk about those groups. To say, for instance, that only Arabs can talk about Arabs will not get us out of the box that relegates us to either Pet or Threat, because the flip side of 'only Arabs can talk about Arabs' is 'Arabs can only talk about Arabs'. What I do advocate for is for all groups to have a say in how our society functions and, most of all, for each to shape how they are represented, for us to be believed when we show the world who we really are.

Race and racism have always been about power and economics; about identifying,

exaggerating and even inventing points of difference in order to justify brute power and economic oppression. Whiteness is and has always been fluid. To be white is less a state of biology and more a state of proximity to formal power: it is access to an exclusive club. And every step of the way, White Womanhood has been a key instrument in perpetuating white power. White Womanhood is intimately, inextricably tied to white supremacy. It has acted as a buffer between white male power and the rest of the population, absorbing criticism and buttressing those politicians who perpetuate the system. It has been used to whitewash the crimes of whiteness, from Indigenous child removals to the rationalisation of imperialist wars. Under the guise of maternalism and its contemporary incarnations of the White Saviour Complex and the Lovejoy Trap, White Womanhood has functioned as the maternal arm of empire. 'White women civilised,' writes Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'while white men brutalised.'[5] When the Australian Federal Police (AFP) raided the home of a female journalist in June 2019, AFP acting commissioner Paul Gaughan sought to reassure concerned journalists that 'extra care' had been taken in the operation. When searching her underwear drawer, he reassured journalists, 'We ensured, due to her privacy, when that search of that particular location in her house was undertaken, it was done by two female officers'. I guess it's fitting that white feminism's shallow grasp on intersectional theory would lead to what I only half-jokingly call 'intersectional fascism'.[6]

White Womanhood ensures that women of colour cannot break free of the box fashioned for us by the binary archetypes constructed as our placeholders without our consent or consultation. White women have never been mere bystanders to white history: they have played a pivotal role in masking as well as perpetuating the cruelty and hypocrisy of white society, adopting first the persona of the damsel in distress in need of white male protection, and then pivoting to the defence of white society whenever its authority is even slightly challenged. Today, white women continue their role by gas-whiting women of colour, accusing us of attacking them, of dividing the sisterhood, of doing the work of patriarchy. These accusations are all manipulations designed to disempower our resolve and cause us to question ourselves so that we may accept lies as truth. But tears and distress are only one side of strategic White Womanhood. There is also anger, punishment—both seen and unseen—and sometimes, perhaps most biting of all, silence and marginalisation: the ultimate invalidation is when they simply pretend we are not there. This too is power in all its brutality.

When white women silence women of colour, they act not only in their own defence but in defence of whiteness. Damsels in distress and damsels in defence are one and the same, and both are illusions. White society has constructed representations of racialised people that serve whiteness, casting women of colour as Lewd Jezebels, Dragon Ladies, China Dolls, Black Velvet, Native Princesses, Drudges, Bad Arabs—on and on the list goes, and it is to these representations that white people react in their interactions with women of colour. They don't see us; they see only the caricature they have constructed in our stead. This means that the opposite must also hold true. If white people regard and treat us as mere constructions of their own making, filled not with human complexity but with all the vices that white people insist they do not have themselves, then they too are also constructions, representations of what they would like to be that they have come to accept as true. White people assign themselves all the virtues they deny us—goodness, morality, intelligence, civilisation, innocence—and will viciously defend this innocence against anyone who dares to challenge it. But, as academic Sara Salem noted, this innocence is not defensible and is not even innocent: 'To remain innocent means to

remain ignorant; and this is a wilful, active process, not an accidental, passive one.'[7]

White society is all about these constructions. The facade. The image. The words. The pretence. There is no tangible distinction made between reality as a physical, sensory experience, and white society's representation of reality through words and image. In a society built on self-serving representation, saying something is the same as doing it—even worse if what is said is detrimental to the facade that white society has constructed and fervently tells itself is true. People of colour have never systematically oppressed white people but this has little meaning to whiteness, which, having never experienced it, regards racism as existing in nothing else but words. This is how white people can accuse people of colour of anti-white racism with a straight face: the actual deeds of a racist society, the power imbalance, dispossession, physical and sexual abuse, incarceration, enslavement, discrimination, and so on—all of that is irrelevant. It's only what is said that counts, and a frustrated person of colour sarcastically calling a white person 'mayonnaise' is regarded as a transgression akin to the N-word.

It is why Adam Goodes, an Indigenous former Aussie Rules footballer and Australian of the Year, was booed relentlessly by crowds and scolded by sports officials and commentators alike for 'throwing' an 'invisible spear' (it was meant to signify a boomerang) during a short dance he used to celebrate a goal in front of a particularly hostile crowd in 2015. The fallout was astronomical in both its outrage and its pettiness: a short burst of celebratory mimicry was interpreted and punished as if Goodes had declared a full-blown race war and fired the first weapon. In the eyes of many white Australians—and in just five seconds—Goodes had somehow managed to commit a more egregious deed than the 230-odd years of colonialism that preceded it. His triumphant, choreographed symbolism was treated as a literal act of violence in a way that whites have never been prepared to treat their own physical transgressions against the bodies of Indigenous people. How absolutely extraordinary.

Despite all its complexity, everything in the world is presented to us filtered and interpreted through the reductive lens of the white imaginary, which was designed and implemented to benefit white people. This is why, as I wrote, 'whether angry or calm, shouting or pleading, [women of colour] are always perceived as the aggressors'.[8] Until these constructions and archetypes are brought crashing down nothing will change, because white people filter reality through this lens, whether or not they realise they are doing so. More troubling still is when people of colour buy into it. Any change has to start with two things. First, women of colour must become consciously aware of the limitations forced on them, that these limitations are designed to keep us on the lowest rung of the hierarchy, and that we need to collectivise to bring them down. 'Without your article,' Lisa told me, 'I would simply have been another black woman who filed a racial discrimination lawsuit—and lost.'

Second, white women have to acknowledge the unfair advantage their race has given them not just in the sense they have white privilege, but in the sense they have participated in a system where their womanhood is itself a privilege and a weapon. Only then can the process of dismantling the archetypes begin. Judging by the research I uncovered in writing this book, I fear the opposite may be true: white women are more powerful than ever but they cling to the role of the damsel in order to both exert and deny their power.

Throughout *White Tears/Brown Scars*, I have used words that suggest women of colour are being abused both consciously and unconsciously by white women. I hold to this. Women of colour are in an abusive relationship with whiteness more broadly but especially with white women, who pivot between professing sisterhood and solidarity with us based on gender identification, and silencing and oppressing us by weaponising their White Womanhood to keep

us boxed into the binary.

A few years ago, I researched and wrote a series of long-form feature articles on mental health, abuse, addiction and personality disorders. I interviewed dozens of people diagnosed with mental health conditions as well as clinical and research psychologists and psychiatrists, and I was particularly struck by a remark made by one neuropsychologist. We were discussing personality disorders and how some patients with antisocial personality and narcissistic personality disorder, who are unwilling or unable to admit they have a problem, may use therapy as a means of improving their manipulation skills. I asked if he'd had any patients who'd done this and he said yes. When I asked how he knew, he replied, 'You watch what happens over time.' Watch their relationships with people. Watch the conditions of their lives. The nature of their interactions. If there is no visible and significant improvement, then it is reasonable to conclude that they are gaming the system.

I believe this is a fitting analogy for white society and racism. Watching what has happened over time, it is clear that though there have been some reluctant adjustments, these are not enough to shake the foundations of what white society was built on. Not only is white domination as strong as ever, but it is becoming increasingly clear that a great deal of white women do not want it to change; that they will support women of colour only so long as we do not threaten their position above us on that false hierarchy of their own making.

This is abuse. To oscillate wildly between kindness and cruelty, allyship and marginalisation, feminism and racism is abusive. It is narcissistic. Indeed, clinical narcissism is a useful framework through which to unpack racism. To be clear, I am not suggesting all white people are clinical narcissists; in fact, I am sceptical that this personality disorder exists at all as something we can define as a mental illness of the individual. It's just that the criteria of clinical narcissism also eerily apply to whiteness and racism. Briefly, these criteria are grandiosity and self-importance; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited power, brilliance, beauty and success; self-belief in their own special and unique status that can only be understood by other similarly special people; a need for excessive admiration; a sense of entitlement; interpersonally exploitative behaviour; envy of others and/or the belief others envy them; arrogant and haughty behaviours; and a profound lack of empathy.

Every single one of these applies to whiteness on a fundamental level. Every one. There is the grandiosity in declaring Western civilisation to be something unique and exceptional and the best thing that ever happened to the world. There are the claims that white people are solely behind all the great scientific inventions and art and literature of the world. The excessive need for admiration manifests in such things as the refusal to consider the insensitivity of the date of Australia Day, and the insistence that American Exceptionalism has made the USA a 'light unto all the nations'. The sense of entitlement and abject lack of empathy are palpable to all people of colour and have been noted throughout this book. Most breathtaking is the inability to accept even the slightest criticism. Often, it seems whiteness is not content to simply think itself superior but insists on pressuring the rest of us to agree: 'Love Australia or leave.' By 'Australia', they really mean 'whiteness'.

In my research, I have discovered that I am not the first writer to liken racism and whiteness to pathological narcissism. Catrice M. Jackson, author of *Weapons of Whiteness* and *The Becky Code*, who is a licensed professional counsellor and mental health practitioner, also lays out the similarities. And Greek-Australian novelist Peter Polites, in his debut novel *Down the Hume*, about an abusive relationship between a disordered white man and his Greek boyfriend, says he deliberately set out to make the relationship a metaphor for white Australia.

White settler-colonial society could not bear to face its own history, so it invented an entirely new one instead—one in which colonialism was not a traumatic invasion but a benign settlement that brought the gift of civilisation. That same psychologist defined a narcissist to me as 'someone whose inner world feels inadequate and so they overcompensate with grand displays of wealth or prowess or kindness. They are overcompensating in the external world to fill in the interior hole, and sometimes that results in exploitation of others.' Is this not white fragility? And how can there not be an inadequate inner world at the core of white society when white people have been lying to themselves as well as to us for so long? How, when white identity is based on a false construct that emerged from colonisation and that instilled in white people the mass delusion that they are innately superior and completely innocent, despite their legacy of oppression and denial of the humanity of people of colour? Are white people alone in having a history of violence? Not at all. But they do seem uniquely incapable of admitting to it. And while other cultures and civilisations have also engaged in war and conquest, none has done so in such a way as to span the entire globe and become so dominant that their entire identity, as both a society and as individuals, hinged on perpetuating the divide between themselves and those they have conquered.

Although Islam has a reputation for being spread by the sword, the Islamic conquests were generally a more gradual transition, with conversion occurring over a span of generations. The earlier ancient Persian Empire did not annihilate the local traditions of those lands it brought into its kingdom; in fact, when they came across what they considered superior ways of doing things, the Persians abandoned their own practices and copied these. A key factor differentiating European settler-colonialism from all empires that came before it is that, in most cases, although the king who required his tithe had changed, the lives of the ordinary citizens went on much the same as before.

Throughout settler-colonial history white women have had a choice either to uphold this disorder we call white supremacy and thus their own subordination, or to reach across and take the hands of women of colour in order to work towards the liberation of all. Not only have they, as a group, invariably chosen the former, but they have done so with at least as much gusto as their white male counterparts. In *Black Peril, White Virtue*, Jock McCulloch writes that in Southern Rhodesia the arrival of white women in the colony coincided with increased competition for land, wage labour and urbanisation, leading many historians to—in his opinion unfairly—blame the women for increased social tension and segregation. Likewise, historian Ann Stoler notes that the entry of white women into colonial communities accentuated and enforced racial privilege and segregation: 'Male colonizers positioned European women as the bearers of a refined colonial morality … The presence and protection of European women was repeatedly invoked to clarify racial lines. It coincided with perceived threats to European prestige, increased racial conflict, covert challenges to the colonial order, outright expressions of nationalist resistance, and internal dissension among whites themselves.'[9]

When I read such analyses, I wonder whether these historians are being overly kind or overly cautious. Is it more likely that this was purely coincidental, or that when white women join white men in the ranks of power, whiteness coalesces, hardens and grows exponentially? White Womanhood consolidates white domination. Colonialism needed white women to succeed, and white women ensured it did. Today, we see white women joining white men, and in some cases overtaking them, in the halls of power. US voters may have missed out on a female president, but four of the top five weapons manufacturing firms in the US now have white women CEOs. White women head the top three CIA directorates, including director Gina Haspel, who, as part

of the extraordinary rendition program under the Bush administration back in 2002, oversaw a secret prison in Thailand that used torture techniques such as waterboarding to interrogate suspects. White women have senior leadership roles in Homeland Security, National Intelligence and the FBI. The head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, responsible for building and maintaining the USA's nuclear weapons, is a white woman. The undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs, who oversees billions in US arms sales and negotiates and implements international weapons agreements, is a white woman.[10] In the 2018 midterm election campaign, and in a far cry from the ethos of the song 'Born in the USA', another Bruce Springsteen song, 'The Rising', provided the soundtrack for a Democratic advertisement featuring 'women rising', consisting of mostly white female Democratic congressional candidates who had served in the military in the Middle East. Why the Middle East has to suffer for women in the West to 'rise' is a question still in need of an answer.

Are we to say that white women are rising in these ranks at a time when the United States just happens to be involved in several conflicts in the Middle East, or is it more likely that white women are once again confounding white patriarchy while collaborating with its imperial aims? What does it mean for the rest of us that white women can be in control of almost all of the weapons belonging to the world's most powerful country and still claim to be an oppressed group on the same level as other women? Can white women and women of colour even find common ground when we live in a world where the conditions under which white women live are so fundamentally different from ours? Can white women understand and identify with us when they don't know what it means to be crushed by white supremacy? What long-term benefits can we hope for from #MeToo when white women have not yet accounted for the history of their tears being used to condemn innocent men of colour—how do we move on from centuries of white women weaponising their tears against us to a future where we believe all women? These are not rhetorical questions, and my challenge to white women is that they start answering them.

Every problem white women face—even climate change—is a problem caused by their own society. And climate change and environmental degradation are yet more predominantly white-caused problems for which communities of colour bear the brunt. In March 2019, NPR reported that 'air pollution is disproportionately caused by white Americans' consumption of goods and services, but disproportionately inhaled by black and Hispanic Americans'.[11] A few weeks later, an article on the Women's Agenda website boasted that 'When women make decisions the environment benefits'.[12] The story was referencing a study of environmental management organisations in Tanzania, Indonesia and Peru—so, in other words, when *women of colour* make decisions, the environment benefits.

This is a common strategy of white feminism: to align with women of colour when it suits, to trumpet a non-existent sisterhood in order to appropriate our work and advance the myth of a better world run by women. The truth is that it is women of colour, *most especially Indigenous women*, who are at the forefront of environmental rights, because their own rights are inseparable from the battle for the environment. The World Resources Institute maintains that protecting Indigenous lands is among the most successful methods of fighting deforestation and climate change: remove such protections and environmental catastrophe is unavoidable.[13] This makes the battle for land rights deadly. From 2002 to 2015, some 1237 eco-activists were killed for defending (mostly) Indigenous lands; at least 40 per cent of those murdered were Indigenous. The year 2017 proved to be the deadliest yet: around four activists per week were killed

defending land and environmental rights.[14] Several of those killed were high-profile Indigenous women in Latin America, including Berta Caceres, Lesbia Janeth Urquia and Efigenia Vasquez. To dress this up as a warm-hearted girl power story in order to advance the cause of white feminism not only trivialises their work, it erases the danger such women are in. 'Sometimes I feel we Indians are alone in this fight to protect our nature—everyone's nature,' Brazilian land rights and environmental activist Maria Valdenice Nukini told Reuters in 2015.[15]

Sometimes I wonder when we reached the point of no return that led us so far from home, both figuratively and literally. We are not at home in this racialised, globalised world. We are all living the wrong life. Surely the fact we are destroying this planet that sustains us is evidence enough of this. Was there some event in the past that could have gone differently so that European colonialism did not get the traction it needed to sweep the globe? What if Queen Isabella of Spain had not purged the Moors? What if she'd never funded Christopher Columbus? What if the Indigenous Taino people on the island of Guanahani had killed Columbus on sight rather than make the mistake of trusting and agreeing to trade, only to be so fatally betrayed?

Then I try to imagine what the world could have looked like if we hadn't been blown so wildly off-course. I'm not suggesting we'd be in a utopia or that everything was all roses before white people took it over. What I am saying is the world would look vastly different. In the modern era, Western civilisation developed without the persistent interference and domination of external powers; the rest of the world did not. The economic backwardness and draconian laws against, among other things, homosexuality that are associated with the 'third world' are a result of colonialism. Europe drained the global south of its resources and implemented a penal code that many have now come to mistakenly think is cultural. How ironic. Where would we be if Western Europe had not taken it upon itself to confer subhuman status on us in order for it to subdue the entire world? Well, for starters, there would be no Islamic State and no fundamentalist theocracy in Iran: the latter was a consequence of the Western-instigated coup that toppled Iran's secular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in the 1950s; and the former emerged from the ashes of the second Gulf War. The Saudi monarchy that white women are so keen to 'save' Arab women from would not have had the financial and diplomatic means it needed to spread its joyless, punitive interpretation of Islam across the Muslim world, decimating local practices and traditions in the process. In the 1980s, Arab-American academic Laura Nader wrote that the status of women in the West has been used by Arab and Muslim patriarchs to further restrict the rights of women: presenting white women's status as one of wanton degradation, they hold Muslim women to a virtuous and unattainable ideal of chastity and modesty.[16] Are we going forward or backward?

We certainly can't go back and try again, but we can commit to forging a different future from the one we are currently screeching into like a trackless train. At various points throughout history, it has been somewhat understandable, if deeply regrettable, that white women chose to remain tethered to whiteness. They were isolated in the colonies. They had a lack of legal rights. They were subjected to puritanical Christian morality. This is no longer the case. There is no reasonable excuse that remains for white women to continue to turn their backs on women of colour. There is no excuse for women's organisations that tokenise racialised women. No excuse for white women to greedily consume the benefits of 'diversity' when they come at our expense. No excuse for ignoring imperialism in the Middle East. No excuse for weaponising their distress against us when our pain is always denied.

White women have a choice. It is a choice they have always had to some degree, but never

before have they been in such a strong position to make the right one. Will white women choose to keep upholding white supremacy under the guise of ‘equality’, or will they stand with women of colour as we edge ever closer to liberation?

Time is running out. We live on a finite, fragile planet, and as impending economic catastrophes threaten to merge with climate change and human conflicts, the white Western obsession with singular power, cultural superiority and racial purity will only become more unsustainable. Women of colour are still listening to white women just as we always have, but we are no longer waiting. As the women I spoke to while writing this book demonstrate, women of colour are forming collectives. We are creating our own platforms, forging new paths. We are not taking our oppression lying down. The scars we have inherited from our ancestors have fused with our own to make us stronger; it is through their true grit as well as our own that we will get louder and bolder as we transform this society that for so long has hinged its success on ensuring our failure.

For five centuries white society has forced women of colour to dwell in its shadows. But our true lives are calling us—so bring the sunscreen, because scars turn brown when they are exposed to sunlight and no longer will we be denied our place in the sun. White women can dry their tears and join us, or they can continue on the path of the damsel—a path that leads only to certain destruction for us all.

# Acknowledgements

This book would not have been conceived let alone written if not for the suggestions and encouragement of many women of colour, in particular black women in the United States, whom I've never met. I first had an inkling that 'that' piece was different to everything I'd written before when one of these women, the writer Clarkisha Kent, shared it on social media with the quip, 'Never thought I'd see White Women Tears on a wheat-y platform like the *Guardian*. But lo and behold, here it is. Good morning. Let's shake the table like Ruby Hamad today.' Within days, multiple women were imploring me to seize the moment and turn it into a book. It would not have otherwise occurred to me that there was a book in this and that I could be the one to write it but to echo Clarkisha, lo and behold: here it is.

To my editors at *Guardian Australia*, Gabrielle Jackson and Svetlana Stankovic, I want to say there was no other editor at that time that I would have pitched that article to, and perhaps none that would have published it. Thank you for your willingness to look ahead. Much credit also to my agents Alex Adsett in Australia and Rachel Crawford in New York, who took a chance on a first-timer and pushed me past what I thought I was capable of achieving.

I was one of the last authors signed to Melbourne University Publishing by the great Louise Adler, an honour dampened only by her departure a few months later. Louise, thank you for bringing me into the MUP stable; it is both daunting and gratifying to be included among such a formidable group of authors and I hope *White Tears/Brown Scars* is what you thought it could be. Thanks also to my editors Sally Heath and Katie Purvis for their spot-on suggestions and patience with this rambling novice whose sentences could run for entire paragraphs. This book was written and published during a turbulent time at MUP and I am humbled everyone involved, in particular Louise Stirling, and publicists Emma Rusher, Tessa Connelly and Brendan Fredericks ensured this turbulence did not affect their enthusiasm for the book nor the outcome. In the face of difficult subject matter and choppy conditions, working with MUP has been nothing but a joy.

My family, especially my sisters Mariam, Rania, and Zehna, have always been my sounding boards, my biggest fans, and my most honest critics. Their words and wisdom are also contained within these pages. Thanks also to the friends who've managed to put up with me despite the lack of familial obligation. Amal Awad, the sageness of your advice is matched only by the kindness with which it is delivered. Morgan Bell, more than any other it was you who got me from there to here. And, once again, thank you to Steven Muschalik for never giving up on me.

Finally, this book stands on the shoulders of giants, many of whose vital work I quote within, and many others who have been all but erased from history. To all the women of colour who have been mocked, bullied, blamed, tokenised, ostracised, blacklisted, ripped off, shut up, let down and left behind: I see you, I hear you, I am you. This book has ended but our stories continue so let's shake the damn table—let's wake the world.

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