



On Prisons, Borders, Safety, and Privilege: An Open Letter to White Feminists

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There is no role for the white liberal [in social change]; he is our affliction. -James Baldwin, 1963.

In 1983, when I was in kindergarten, white (Jewish) lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich implored a white-led feminist movement: "Without addressing the whiteness of white feminism, our movement will turn in on itself and collapse." Twenty-five years later, I'm dubious about a movement -- "ours" or otherwise -- that has not only failed to honestly and consistently address its whiteness but has also, in so doing, become something far less than a movement for social change.[1]

My comments here are hugely influenced by critiques of white feminism put forth over generations by women of color,[2] critiques I'm guessing you're familiar with. Maybe you're even nodding because you feel like you've reckoned with them. Maybe it bums you out that past generations of white feminists had such a white-supremacy/class-privilege problem. Maybe *This Bridge Called My Back* was required reading in your first women's studies class and you know all about "intersectionality," making a point in your feminist projects to "include" the voices and issues of women of color, working-class and poor white women, and maybe even trans folks and members of other groups historically marginalized by dominant feminisms. I'm pretty sure about all this because many of you have told me so -- in personal conversations and workshops, in your books and blogs and â€

Yet it doesn't look to me like you've really reckoned with those critiques. It looks more like you appropriate or tokenize them, using their language while continuing to center white, class-privileged women's experiences in your "feminism" and engaging in political work that upholds and strengthens white supremacy and economic exploitation -- sometimes directly undermining the social-change work of feminists of color.

And, yes, you deserve some concrete examples of that, which is why I'm writing. My intention isn't to repeat the critiques of feminists of color, but to offer some specific instances in which I, a white, class-privileged feminist who is often privy to your conversations and who can identify with the experiences and perspectives of privilege, have recently seen this playing out. At this particular historical moment, it seems to happen frequently around the disconnect between white feminists' notions of "safety" as an ideal we should organize around, and, on the other side of the not-so-fun funhouse mirror, organizing by feminists of color around policing/prisons and immigration/borders -- issues that expose the fantasy of "safety" as a product of privilege; issues that feminists of color have increasingly centered in their activism

while white feminists seem to be struggling to understand whether they are feminist issues at all.

Prisons (or, Safety for Whom?)

In recent years, members of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence have incisively and repeatedly critiqued the white-feminist-led antiviolence movement for its reliance on (and, thus, complicity with) the U.S. criminal-legal system, which uses the rhetoric of "safety" to destroy communities of color, squash dissent, and create profit for private corporations. Yet the primary macro-level strategies of the white-feminist-led movement against domestic violence and sexual assault continue to rely on this system, with a major focus on legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act and the push for hate-crimes laws to include gender and sexual orientation.[3] On the micro/personal level, I have repeatedly seen white, class-privileged feminists unhesitatingly call upon police to protect and serve them; have listened to white feminists advise each other on which "authorities" to go to for protection from stalkers and other abusers; and so on.[4]

At both the macro level of feminist movement strategy and the micro/personal level of individual actions, I'm struck by the apparent lack of awareness of the prominent critiques made by feminists of color of law-and-order approaches to ending (or, even, finding "safety" from) violence. To be a self-identified feminist activist apparently unaware of (or, worse, deliberately skirting) the current work of not only INCITE! but also feminist icons like Angela Davis and numerous other voices calling for abolition of the prison industrial complex as a key element of social change seems to me to be part of a movement that is not only disconnected from but also damaging to some of the most vibrant and potentially liberating social-justice organizing happening today.

Yet â€ I know, I know.

One night in the summer of 1996, when I was eighteen, my (white, female, ex-gutter-punk) roommate and I rushed together to call the police when we were startled by a Peeping Tom outside her bedroom window. It was like a reflex, just what you do. We didn't pause to consider other possible responses -- and, after two LAPD officers promised to put our apartment on their regular patrol for the next few weeks, we gave no thought to what that added police presence might mean to our mostly Black neighbors. I was interning with the Feminist Majority that summer, working to defeat an anti-affirmative action state ballot initiative. By the night of the Peeping Tom incident, I had been confused for weeks about why the multiracial coalition of feminist and racial-justice groups that started out working together to save affirmative action "for women and people of color" in the spring had split into two, the (mostly white) feminists in one camp and the racial-justice groups in the other. One of my co-interns had overheard a prominent leftist civil-rights attorney, a woman of color who was working with a former coalition organization, say, "The road to hell is paved with feminists." I thought our work at the Feminist Majority was good and just and concerned with racial as well as gender equality; I didn't understand.

On September 26, 2007, the NYPD used excessive force in the absurd (but not atypical) arrests of two members of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project -- an organization that works on behalf of low-income people of color who are transgender, gender

nonconforming, or intersex -- when they questioned police officers' treatment of a young Black man outside an East Village bar where they were celebrating SRLP's fifth anniversary. The next morning, NOW president Kim Gandy released a statement titled "Expansion of Hate Crimes Law Necessary for Women's Safety." NOW's statement that morning was a clear, and tragic, example of the ways privileged so-called feminism is not only disconnected from but sometimes undermines grassroots struggles for social change: who is made safe by strengthening a violent law-and-order system? And what does strengthening that system have to do with ending violence? Why was a major feminist organization's message that morning about strengthening court/legal/police power rather than supporting the arrestees from the SRLP?

(This seems naive, right? It seems silly -- preposterous, almost -- to imagine that a huge national organization like NOW would issue a quick public statement in support of those SRLP folks, and of course the hate-crimes announcement was probably long-planned and the timing vis-à-vis the SRLP arrests totally coincidental and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera -- but why should it seem silly? That it does is my point: dominant, white-led feminist movement is consistently unresponsive to the grassroots while it works within and strengthens the very structures that violently maintain social hierarchies.)

In the summer and fall of 2007, I found myself invited to participate in a slew of meetings and conference calls organized by small, new majority-white "feminist" groups around the United States; over and over again, members wondered earnestly how they could draw more women of color to participate in their projects. Around the same time, I read and heard a whole lot of white feminist media makers explaining that "we" need to show young women "why feminism matters." Sometimes I asked them why, in the face of a series of egregious, in some cases highly publicized examples of state violence against marginalized people (e.g., Jena 6 and the New Jersey 4), prominent white feminists are MIA in and largely ignorant of the work and analyses of major, often feminist-of-color-led movements against state violence? And, I wondered, what is your feminism for, and why does it matter? Because feminists of color don't seem to need convincing on that point -- they're engaged in profound, intergenerational, cross-cultural grassroots work that is transforming not only feminist movement but all social-change movements.[5]

Borders (or, Who Crosses, and Who Cares)

Prominent white feminists often say they are organizing against violence, for safety. So where have they been while working-class immigrant women have been pulled from their homes and workplaces, often separated from their young children, in immigration raids across the United States in recent months?

Brownfemipower of [Women of Color Blog](#) has written extensively about how popular white feminist bloggers failed to quickly and substantially cover the specific damage done to women during a major immigration raid in New Bedford, Massachusetts, early last year. New Bedford was not an anomaly: immigration raids -- many of them marked by multiple forms of violence, including surprise attack; immediate separation of parents and their young children; racist and sexist abuse of people held in binary-gender-segregated immigration-detention facilities; deportation itself; and the creation of the constant fear that the next one could happen

anywhere, anytime -- are *happening all the time, all over the United States*.

Immigrant communities are living in near-constant fear, with little "safety"; women and trans and gender-nonconforming people are suffering gender-based violence at the hands of federal immigration officials; and the movement for immigration-policy reform is arguably the largest mass movement in the United States today.

Where are white feminists?

As far as I can tell, white feminists' "solidarity" with the immigrants' rights movement amounts to occasionally featuring a woman who works at an immigrants' rights nonprofit in a publication or panel, and occasionally mentioning a sensational case of violence against a particular immigrant woman on a blog. I was at the mass May Day marches for immigrants' rights in 2006 and 2007 in Los Angeles, and I saw no notable presence of any of the major U.S.-based feminist organizations. In 2007, I could find no mentions of the upcoming marches, or report-backs the next day, on popular feminist blogs. Hundreds of -- some places millions -- of people were on the streets for social justice. Where were white feminists?

Even coverage of outrageous cases of state violence against immigrant women has been scarce in media created by white feminists. In July 2007, a trans woman named Victoria Arellano died after being denied AIDS medication and proper health care in an immigration detention center for men. White feminist media makers mostly missed the story -- though it was reported in the *Washington Post*, the *L.A. Times*, and other major media outlets. It seemed simply not to register as a feminist issue.

Confused by this, I mentioned it on an e-mail list where most of the active participants are white, self-identified feminist journalists. That day, they were discussing the demise of GreenStone Media -- a liberal/centrist, white-, rich-, celebrity-dominated "women's" radio network founded by Jane Fonda and Gloria Steinem, et al. The conversation, which started as a call for a moment of silence to collectively grieve GreenStone's short life, broadened into a discussion of the scarcity of funding for feminist media, which led to a few mentions of *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* -- the incisive, grassroots-organizing-focused anthology by INCITE! Some folks even expressed interest in forming a reading group to discuss the book. Meanwhile, my questions about feminist media makers' lack of attention to Arellano's story were largely blown off. When a couple of these journalists did eventually mention Arellano's story on their blogs, the focus was on violence against trans women of color (framed as perpetual victims), with no analysis connecting the story to movements to abolish the prison system or defy the legitimacy of national borders.

What, I wondered, is the feminist media they so desperately want funded for? That the conversation for a moment veered toward *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* was only more disturbing: a book by radical feminists of color calling for mass, autonomous movement building as an alternative to the state- and capitalism-based "nonprofit industrial complex" that has co-opted social-change activism was being plucked for possible use (co-optation?) by privileged and powerful advocates of precisely the kind of liberal/reformist so-called feminism that has relied on and actively developed that structure.

No, I thought, the revolution will not be funded. And also: the revolution would not have been broadcast on GreenStone Media.

A Call to Challenge Prisons and Borders of All Kinds (or, What Is Feminism For?)

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, class- and skin-privileged French feminists railed against misogynist Humanism and worked to demonstrate that women were just as capable as men of rational, moral thought. But they were ignorant of the lives of most women of their time -- and thus managed to put forth a feminist analysis and activism that missed the witch hunts. This is not an anomaly or something I dug up from an obscure corner; this bit of European feminist history was handed to me in an essay by Adrienne Rich, written during my lifetime, still widely in print. Maybe you've even read it?

I thought about calling this an open letter to liberal feminists, or to mainstream feminists, or some other things, but I finally decided on the adjective *white* -- not because race is the only defining difference between the liberal/reformist so-called feminism I'm critiquing and more radical social-change-oriented feminisms, but because I see many of the strains of this argument threading together around whiteness -- if by whiteness I can mean not only skin privilege but also straightness,[6] liberalism[7], a sense of entitlement to safety (especially within existing social structures), and other markers of an identity and worldview shaped by assimilation to power. Because, of course, whiteness is no essential fact; it is a construct, a lumping together of different people and practices into a dominant, powerful whole.

I'm using *whiteness* here to talk broadly about assimilated identities and assimilationist politics, which undermine movements for social change. As white people in the twenty-first century, we can't undo or deny the skin privilege we have been granted via generations of erasure of cultural differences and assimilation to power. But as white feminists, if we are working toward profound social change, we can choose not to engage in political work that is about assimilation to and achieving "safety" or "empowerment" or "freedom" of movement within existing power structures -- especially when those structures (e.g., militaristically enforced national borders, the prison industrial complex) are designed to make others unsafe, and unfree.

I wonder again: What is your feminism *for*? If it is for disruption and redistribution of power across society (i.e., not just for women like you), it cannot be so ignorant of, exploitative of, and even counter to the prison-abolition and immigrants' rights movements -- not only because marginalized women are involved in and affected by those struggles, but because they are where some of the most significant challenges to power are being made today.

Privilege is a kind of poison -- insidious, it obscures, misleads, confuses -- and this is part of how power is maintained, as well-meaning privileged people miss the mark, can't clearly see what's going on and how we're implicated, are able to comfortably see ourselves as not responsible. Liberalism and assimilationist politics are safe ways for privileged people to believe they are fighting the good fight; liberalism and assimilation, I think, are privilege's -- power's -- instruments.

When I was in fourth grade, in the fall of 1986, my (mostly white, mostly wealthy) class spent a few weeks debating California ballot initiatives. I was assigned to argue the pro side on an initiative to make English the official state language. I took the sample ballot and voter guides home and studied them dutifully, then presented an argument that included the statement "If I moved to China, I wouldn't expect them to speak to me in English." I was a kid whose universe was populated mostly by white liberals. I made this argument knowing nothing about colonialism, the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, global economies, and many other things -- and no one, not one of the "liberal" adults at home or at school, mentioned any of these things in response to my argument. I simply got a good grade, as usual, for following instructions and formulating a coherent argument that fulfilled the debate guidelines I had been taught.

On the afternoon of May 1, 2007, I stood with a friend on the sidewalk outside MacArthur Park in L.A., where immigrants' rights advocates had relaxedly gathered after a long day of marching. A cop decked out in riot gear told us -- the only white people in sight -- "You'd better get out of here; we're gonna clear everyone out." We talked back, asked whether he was gonna tell everyone else and what he was gonna do if we stayed put, rolled our eyes, wondered if these rows of LAPD officers wielding batons and guns were really about to enter the park unprovoked, and stayed where we were. Minutes later, the cops did indeed enter the park, where they brutally shot and shoved to disperse the crowd, injuring many. The next day, my friend and I wondered why we didn't think of calling or texting our friends inside the park to warn them about what was looking increasingly likely to happen. Inexperienced because of privilege, we hadn't thought well on our feet, and we'd been in a certain denial about how bad things might get; we'd been pissed and well meaning, but not useful. ("I'm wearing flip-flops," my friend said to me with sad eyes as we walked away from the park that night, after the violence. We'd shown up feeling that safe. I hope my eyes told her, "I know, I know . . . ")

What keeps me connected to feminism is a radical history of multi-issue, multitactic activism that goes by that name. I know of no other social-justice tradition that has so frequently linked so-called private with so-called public political struggles, art with organizing. And that is why I find politics of privilege that call themselves feminism -- those that would work uncritically within existing power structures, even strengthening them; those that co-opt the revolutionary work of feminists of color by superficially "including" them in a movement that leaves privileged women and their priority issues at the center -- so frustrating.

And that I could call that frustration heartbreaking has a whole lot to do with my own whiteness. I'm inclined to give white feminism, white feminists, the benefit of the doubt. I know what it's like to mean well and yet fuck up, to not get it when the critique means me, to be on the side of power while I intend to challenge it. And after more than a decade in this movement, I know too well why that civil-rights attorney I mentioned up there said, "*The road to hell is paved with â€*"

If feminism is about social change, it is about recognizing that safety in this society is a fantasy afforded only by assimilation to power, and the cost of that fake safety is the safety of those who cannot, or will not, access it. If feminism is about social change, it is about radically challenging prisons and borders of all kinds.

If feminism is about social change, *white feminism* -- a feminism of assimilation, of gentle reform and/or strengthening of institutions that are instrumental to economic exploitation and white supremacy, of ignorance and/or appropriation of the work of feminists of color -- is an oxymoron. And it is not a thing of some bygone era before everyone read bell hooks in college. It is happening now; you might be part of it.

[1] In a recent radio interview with Thenmozhi Soundararajan, author Chip Smith talked about critique as a form of mutual support through which privileged people who believe in justice can hold each other accountable. My friend and collaborator Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, an activist writer, has called critique a form of love. The white-middle-class culture I was educated in frames it, especially among girls, as scary conflict to avoid at all costs. I'm writing this letter in part to unlearn that lesson, to learn instead to critique with love and hope, to put it out there and find out whatever that's worth.

[2] Especially, in terms of contemporary critique, *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* and discussions with feminists of color and white feminists actively engaged in antiracism work.

[3] An obvious parallel here is the way the rhetoric of "safety" is used in the so-called War on Terror to justify imperialist military violence -- which itself is backed by some people who identify as feminists for supposedly "saving" women from the violence of their (in the imperialist reading) especially violent cultures.

[4] *Our Enemies in Blue*, Kristian Williams's history of modern U.S. policing, thoroughly documents how U.S. law enforcement has been developed to protect the privileged classes at the expense of poor people and people of color, from slave patrols to vagrancy laws to today's "broken windows" theory.

[5] I'm thinking of the radical visioning around healing and social transformation that is being done by groups working to end sexual violence such as UBUNTU; the movement-altering intervention of INCITE!'s critique of the nonprofit industrial complex; Vandana Shiva's call for "another relationship ... as citizens of the earth ... not of owning, not of private property, but of caring, of giving, of responsibility"; challenges to the gender binary posed by a prison-abolition movement that thoroughly includes the prison system's enforcement of gender and sex norms in its analysis; and the long-standing work around gender justice in indigenous struggles against global capital such as Zapatismo -- just to name a few.

[6] Meaning not any particular sexual identity or type of relationship but the binary-gender-dependent norm of "straightness" that suggests there even, naturally, is such a thing, and including "straight-gayness," or assimilated we're-just-like-you gay politics and identities as distinct from radical-queer politics and identities.

[7] As opposed not to conservative but to progressive or radical or liberationist.

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