

Beyond 'Reifying Whiteness' in Feminist Media Studies

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Keynote Address, Console-ing Passions 2023

This is the keynote address that I gave at the Console-ing Passions 2023 Conference, at the University of Calgary, reproduced in the form and style in which I delivered it.

Abstract: In this talk, I turn a black and transnational feminist reflexive eye on the field of feminist media studies, to surface for critical consideration a certain 'story that we tell' (Hemmings, 2005) about race, more specifically about the visibly dominant whiteness, in the global North, of the kinds of media texts and cultures that commonly comprise our objects of analysis. I show that there is a repeated critical claim to the effect that the texts and cultures 'reify whiteness.' Interrogating and faulting some of the variously methodological, epistemological and ontological premises and effects of the claim, I argue that it is itself performative: it contributes to the very reification that it decries, not least by seemingly serving to explain and justify why, in a given piece of scholarship, further questions about race cannot really be attended to. I argue that we need to go beyond reifying whiteness in feminist media studies, so that we can attempt to offer more complete and rigorous consideration of the racial politics of what we study and how, and indeed who we are, our various positionalities, as not only scholars of media but also audiences, consumers and users ourselves, too.

My talk this morning is concerned with what I will call a 'story' about race that, in my reading, is told too readily and too easily in a particular area of contemporary feminist media studies scholarship, namely the body of work concerned with mediated feminisms and femininities in the global North, in the context of neoliberalism – so postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and so on, and the new kinds of gendered subjects, technologies and practices of self, forms of work, cultural spaces, and media texts that accompany and embody and co-constitute these cultural formations. Arguably this is the single most predominant, even popular area of research in global Northern or Euro-American feminist media studies at the moment, and if so in feminist media studies more globally too, to the extent that study of the global North dominates the field as a whole.

In focusing on this particular area of feminist media studies in my remarks today, my suggestion or contention is not that the kind of telling of race that I want to surface and problematise is *delimited* to it, or *exemplified* by it, vis-à-vis the wider field. It may be that we can find the same kind of thing in other areas of feminist media studies. I can not say; this is beyond the scope of what I am able to speak to today. I am only focusing on the literature on contemporary mediated feminisms and femininities in the global North because I happen to be steeped in it, and to have a certain stake in it, and as such it is where I have come to encounter the particular pattern of claim-making and truth-building that I want to discuss. But this said, feminist media studies more broadly is implicated in my arguments, insofar as I think that there is a certain foundational and deep thinking about race and its mediation, and also racially minoritised subjectivity, that, as a field, we are yet to do, and we urgently need.

The story about race of concern, I argue and hope to begin to show, is one that we might find in the area of feminist media studies scholarship on which I am focused this morning

when the object of analysis, the thing being studied critically, is *'white,'* or at least is read or understood, and therefore also represented as such by the scholar trying to make sense of it. Let me emphasise this last point, I will come back to it: that sometimes, what we are talking about is a *reading* and subsequent representation of things as white, which is to say that other readings and representations might also be possible.

Schematically, the gist of the story is as follows:

a) It begins with the view and claim that 'the thing in question' is white. The 'thing' may be the cultural formation as a whole that is of ultimate or overarching concern, i.e., postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, popular feminism. Or it may be a particular instantiation or aspect of one of these formations that is the more immediate object of analysis – a particular media text, say, or audience, or kind of figure, or subject, or practice, aesthetic and so on. Or as is perhaps most common, the thing being looked at and deemed white may be multiple, comprising, for instance, both an overarching cultural complex and one or more of its constituent parts.

b) How and why is the thing in question white? How do we know, or on what basis can we say that it is so? In the story at hand, we find at least three possible answers. One is that the thing in question is white, we can understand it as such, because it is figured or populated by, or materialises on and through white bodies. Its embodiment is white, we can see this quite clearly. Its whiteness is manifest. Or, alternatively, and this is the second kind of answer: the thing in question is white, we can understand it as such, because this is the manner and meaning of its cultural and ideological *encoding*. It represents and embodies white values or a white aesthetic, for instance, or it appeals to white cultural sensibilities, and so on. In this case, as scholars how we see and know that the thing is white is by *decoding* it, via some kind of analytic reading. The third answer to the question of how and why the thing in question is white and can be understood as such marries the first two, i.e., the whiteness of the thing is both on the surface, visible, and beneath the surface, to be interpreted.

c) It follows in this story that, being white, the thing in question is addressed to and for white subjects – for white women, to be more precise. It interpellates white women; it is pitched to white women; it represents white women; it invites white women to see and produce themselves in its terms. To borrow Claudia Castañeda's (2002: 3) phrasing, it bodies white femininity forth. And so on.

d) The next line or verse of our story is that all the above makes the thing in question racially problematic *in effect*. Why? In a nutshell, because it means that the thing performs and represents and reinscribes the dominance of whiteness. It reasserts whiteness; it centres or recentres whiteness; it elevates whiteness; it reifies whiteness.

e) This is also to say, finally, that differently racialised others are 'excluded.' Or sometimes we find the sub-narrative that, racially minoritised others are *minimally* included, or somehow able to insert themselves, but if so, then, *per force*, it is on racially 'inauthentic' and constricted terms.

This is basically where the story ends. The end.

I should say that we would be hard pressed to find this kind of story that I am arguing is in the literature in the form that I have just briefly told it, and also put so plainly or baldly. Rarely do we find it as a particularly worked up or elaborated account, with all the parts and logics linked together or even necessarily expressed. Most often it is for the reader to connect the dots, to glean the logic, and implications. Also rare is for whiteness to be a particularly focal object of discussion anyway. Rather, as I will try to illustrate shortly with a few examples from the broad body of literature in question, we are more likely to find the foregoing kinds of claims

about the whiteness of things made only in passing: in and through brief, even throwaway remarks, scattered around in the discussion, as traces in the scholarly text, as analytic gloss. It is when we read *across* the literature, I think, that we might begin to see or apprehend that there is a pattern, that the small claims that we might encounter here or there in any given piece of scholarship stack up to something bigger and, in my view, something relatively recalcitrant.

It is for these reasons that I am using the language of ‘story’ rather than ‘analysis’ to describe and conceptualise the kind of claim-making and building in the literature of which I am speaking, although it is analytical in nature, or meant or offered as such. In framing it as a story, my intention is to suggest that it is a relatively pre-scripted and sedimented and thus ‘already known’ account about ‘what things are like,’ what the world is like, and as such it also has a certain pre-constituted or familiar plotment: one thing follows ‘obviously’ or ‘naturally’ from another; first this, then that; because this, then that. For these reasons, too, what we find is that the various small claims that add up to the story tend to be little argued or evidenced. More common is that they are just stated, asserted, recited, or, again, even left at the level of the implicit, before the discussion moves on.

I read and understand this story about race as offered in the literature with the aim of pointing out and problematising the continued cultural, ideological, representational and other structured and longstanding dominance of whiteness in the world, and therefore in the kinds of things that we tend to study in feminist media studies. I believe that it is meant to represent and enact a kind of intersectional feminist analysis. It is supposed to show that as a feminist scholar one is paying attention to race, one is not treating white women as ‘just women,’ one is not conducting what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989: 139) called a “single axis analysis.” Nonetheless, I am critical and sceptical. As I see it, from the variously structured and constituted standpoint in and from which I encounter the analytic tale in question, it is quite superficial and flawed for a number of reasons that I will propose. And even as it may be intended to the very contrary, it seems to me that it actually contributes *itself* to reinscribing the ideological and imaginative dominance of whiteness, by making whiteness effectively the whole story.

I am going to present a few illustrative examples from the literature of the kind of thing that I am talking about, after which I will flesh out my critique of it. But before I get to this, having just made reference to the fact that I read and am problematising the literature from a certain standpoint, I think it is necessary and important for me to say a few words about this. To use Patricia Hill Collins’ (1986) conceptual terminology, I would characterise my standpoint on the literature as that of an “outsider-within.” I am steeped in feminist media studies scholarship on mediated feminisms and femininities in a time of neoliberalism as I have already said, and the reason why is that my own research is on this topic. However, my research focus is not on the dominant global North, or Euro-American. Nor is it on whiteness. Rather the focus of my work and thinking is on Africa and African women, African feminisms, African femininities – *black* African – and all this as situated in and shaped by the transnational. So in other words, I come to what is a dominant body of feminist media studies scholarship – a body of work that I am obliged to read and know and engage with in order to do my own work and to be taken seriously in it – I come to it from an angle as it were, with the racially, culturally and geopolitically peripheralised sites and subjects of my own research in mind.

My off-centre view on the literature is not just academic, though. Thoroughly entangled, it is clear to me, is the personal too. I am not only a feminist media scholar of black Africa, I am also a black African woman, and in this enmeshed in transnational structures and vectors and sites of power myself, including those of ‘culture’ and ‘media.’ Given, for instance, the kinds of transnational popular media that that I consume personally, or at the very least (as is probably more likely) that I come across or come to know of, and given what I see and hear and know

that other black women in my social milieu watch or like or stream or follow etc., when I happen across claims in global Northern feminist media scholarship that, for example, the whiteness of some media text or culture or space is so thorough and potent and exclusionary that it leaves no or little room for those of us who are not white, it does not chime. From both my personal and scholarly standpoints, I can see, I think I know, that this kind of contention is not correct or complete. I think we need a different view, and certainly a more complex one.

Let me now turn to the literature. As I have already begun to say, I am going to present a number of extracts from published scholarship on contemporary mediated feminisms and femininities in the global North, in which, I want to suggest, we can see traces of the kind of story-telling around ‘whiteness’ that I have briefly outlined. I will either cite each extract directly or summarise the claim or contention to do with whiteness that it makes. In doing so, I will say a few words on the piece of scholarship from which each extract is derived to give some of the context needed to understand it. I will also offer my own brief commentary or questions on each extract, to begin to point your attention to the kinds of details that I think we need to reflect on and problematise.

As I present the extracts from the literature, I won’t attribute them to their particular authors, and I have also chosen to not project them on the screen as I speak, although I appreciate that this would probably make them easier for you, the audience, to follow. I made these decisions to try to anonymise and depersonalise the extracts as much as possible. In this, I was informed and inspired by Clare Hemmings (2011), in her book, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Similarly to Hemmings (2011), but of course at a very different scale this morning, my aim is to point out and critique a certain pattern of claims and thinking that we can find in a particular area of feminist literature. It is not to single out or fault any particular or individual scholars or authors, or to tie any one in particular to the pattern or problem. The extracts that I will be citing are only examples among others, and I read and present them as necessarily intertextual, by which I mean necessarily located in a feminist scholarly chain of citation, thinking, analysis and so on.

(1) To start, let us go back (way back) to the television show *Sex and the City* – the original, not the recent reboot. As I imagine many of us in the room today know and remember, both in feminist scholarly literature as well as in popular commentary, the manifest whiteness of the show, the fact that characters of colour, women especially, were really not included at all, was much remarked upon and criticised. According to one piece of feminist media scholarship on *Sex and the City*, the show is an example of postfeminist dramas that:

“selectively deploy feminist discourses as a response to cultural changes in the lives of their potential audience, an audience that is addressed as white, heterosexual, and relatively youthful and affluent.”

At this point in the article that I have just cited from, the author has not said or argued that *Sex and the City* is a white cultural text or phenomenon, or that they are reading or treating it as such. But it seems fair to presume that it is because the author deems the text white – or we might say because the text *is* white, *clearly* – it seems fair to presume that it is because of this that the author of the piece of scholarship in question proceeds to make the claim that *Sex and the City* addresses its “potential audience” “*as* white.” I think it is worth dwelling for a moment on the question of what the “as” in “as white” means or signals. Is it to say that the potential audience

is not necessarily white, but rather the *address* is, such that we might say that for those in the audience who are not white the address is ‘whitening,’ or inviting them to identify with or maybe even desire whiteness? I don’t know. The point is not developed, and whatever the author may have meant by the “as”, if anything in particular, a little later in the article they drop it, and instead assert simply and directly that *Sex and the City* is addressed to white women. The scholar does not argue or explain why, they just say it. It is treated as ‘obvious.’ They write:

“*Sex and the City* is addressed to affluent, white women as a segment of the market.”

(2) Consider a second extract, also on postfeminism, from a different piece of feminist media studies scholarship. The context to which this article refers is Western Europe. Very early on in the piece, explaining what they mean by postfeminism, the author says that postfeminism centres on the body and indeed:

“locates women’s identity in [their] bodily appearance – in accordance with valued and homogenised constructs of slim, toned, white, appropriately middle-class, femininity.”

Here we have the claim that, in short, postfeminism is tied to white bodies – also slim bodies, toned bodies, and so on. This is how it is figured, this is how it appears, this is how and where we find it. And why? Because postfeminism articulates with valued norms and forms of feminine embodiment which, in Western Europe, means white, slim, etc. This is a very common claim in the literature on postfeminism in the global North, in fact I would say it was an utterly central and foundational claim in the foundational literature. I think the more recent literature on postfeminism has moved beyond this kind of claim *empirically*, above all because there is now a fair bit of work on the cultural formation beyond the global North. But conceptually, and when the discussion *is* in reference to the North, I think this kind of thinking about the racialisation of postfeminism is still present, even if only implicitly, that the culture centres on whiteness. If so, among other things, it suggests the literature on postfeminism in the global North is perhaps not sufficiently engaging with or drawing on the literature on postfeminism elsewhere.

(3) Let us move beyond postfeminism. In an article analysing a popular neoliberal feminist media text, the author argues that the text and others like it promote notions and visions that women’s empowerment consists of women occupying positions of institutional power, corporate power in particular. They argue that although such popular texts have:

“a message thought to appeal to all women, [they] continue the mainstream feminist tradition of foregrounding the experiences and problems of middle- to upper-class white cis women...”

In terms of race, the author goes on to note that the corporate power that neoliberal feminism vaunts is also premised on the exploitation of the labour of people of colour. Following this, they suggest, concluding, that, in short, the kinds of neoliberal feminist texts in question in their analysis are:

“feminist texts of, for, and starring white women.”

What is of interest to me here is the claim that the texts are *for* white women. What does this mean, really? And what exactly is the evidence or argumentation for it? It is not said directly, and certainly it is not argued, but the premise and logic of the claim are clear, I think, and very similar to that in the extract from the piece of scholarship on *Sex and the City* that I discussed a

few minutes ago. The logic is that the popular media texts in question are *for* white women because they are *'of'* them – I take this to mean the texts are authored or produced by them – and they *'star'* them, they feature them, they centre white women's kinds of problems and experiences – some white women, we must qualify, because white women are not monolithic. This is how we arrive at the claim that the texts are *'for'* white women.

Set aside in the making of this claim is the author's prior suggestion, which I also cited, that the kinds of texts in question have: "a message thought to appeal to all women." Thought by whom, we might wonder, and why? For instance, is this how the popular texts are framed or marketed, as for "all women"? And given that the neoliberal feminist message that the texts promote can be summarised as 'corporate girl power,' can we really and so simply say that the message is for white women alone? Might this kind of message not indeed appeal to women across racial lines, and this, even if the material enactment or reality of corporate girl power is premised on the backs of *working* women of colour? Are there not also texts promoting such messages that are authored by and centring the experiences of women of colour? Are there not differences and relations of power between or among women of colour?

(5) My next example is very similar to the last, so I will just briefly summarise it. The object of analysis in this piece of scholarship is also a corporate feminist popular text. The scholar analysing it argues that its address is highly exclusionary because it is not to all women but rather upwardly mobile, striving professional types. As such, they suggest, this text and its form of feminism "reify" white privilege. I won't offer much commentary on this except to say two things: first, this is actually the first reference to race in the piece of scholarship in question, and it comes near the end of the work. So, in my reading, it comes a little out of nowhere. Two, as in the preceding example that I presented, the logic of and seeming evidence for the claim about the whiteness of neoliberal feminism disappears women of colour from the actual or imagined audience for this kind of feminism, i.e., from 'upwardly mobile, striving career types.'

(6) A different kind of example: In an article offering a textual reading of white, class-privileged, wellness influencers, the author argues that black women simply cannot relate to such women. Why? Because they embody white privilege, including normative white beauty.

(7) and (8): The last two examples I will present are very similar to one another, so I will put them together. Both consist of analyses of a set of white women's visual self-representations on social media: Christian influencers in the first example, and seemingly successful, class-privileged entrepreneurs in the second example. In both pieces of scholarship, the authors study the women's images, which show them leading happy, glamorous, beautiful lives, and argue essentially that the images show or communicate that whiteness is a necessary condition for said happy, glamorous, beautiful lives, such that the images are also promoting whiteness. To cite one of the articles, the contention is that:

"white elite-class heterosexual able-bodied femininity retains much of its power as the apogee of beauty and virtue."

Here, what I want to point to is the circularity and also empirical blinkeredness of such arguments: having looked only at white examples of a certain kind of thing, or way of being or staging being in the world, the conclusion is reached that whiteness is necessary for and vaunted by said thing or way of being. Interestingly enough, in one of these examples, which is a journal article, there is line in the body of the discussion responding to what seems to have been a suggestion from a peer reviewer that, actually, in terms of representations of 'happy, glamorous, beautiful' femininities on Instagram, there is more to the story than whiteness. Here the authors say:

“We would like to thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing out that some of the most popular accounts on Instagram reveal racially and sexually diverse celebrities.”

Let me now begin to pull together my commentary on and critique of the foregoing kinds of claim-making around whiteness in the literature, which by extension, are also claims about difference and exclusion from whiteness. My first point of critique is a basic empiricist one, and relates to the response to the anonymous peer reviewer that I just cited. The point is also one that was articulated 10 years ago in reference to the literature on postfeminism at the time, in a 2013 article by a scholar named Jess Butler. Butler’s (2013) article is entitled *For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion*. I imagine many people in the room are familiar with it. The point is quite simply that, empirically, at a manifest level, and also practically-speaking, many if not most of the kinds of objects of analysis in the body of feminist media studies literature that I am discussing – many of the kinds of popular media texts and discourses, the kinds of cultural spaces, the kinds of subjects and figures, the kinds of audiences and consumers and so on – *are not only white*. There are also examples or cases of these things in the world that we can see, to be found, that are otherwise racialised. And quite crucially, there is also scholarly research – not much perhaps, but some – that evidences this, including work that, as I have already said, is sited outside the global North.

As such, claims or suggestions or implications to the contrary that we might find in the literature, about the whiteness of it all, are basically empirically incorrect, and to use Jess Butler’s (2013: 48) words, “empirically unfounded.” As such, one of the several things that such claims do is invisibilise or deny the *actually existing* presence and participation of women of colour in a host of media cultures, audiences, spaces, discourses and so on, not to mention the *possibility* of their presence or participation. I began to suggest and query this in some of my comments on the extracts from the literature that I presented and summarised a few minutes ago. To be quite frank, I think it is a form of symbolic violence that the literature enacts.

If it is basically empirically incorrect that certain things are ‘white only,’ we need to ask: why do we find these kinds of claims in the literature? We can start by considering that one basic reason – a practical and literal reason – is methodological. The claims about the whiteness of things follow from the fact that the scholar making the claims is looking at, or referring to, or ‘sampling’ for their analytic purposes white examples or instantiations of the kind of thing or things in question – which, to repeat a point that I underscored as important much earlier in my remarks, might include examples or instantiations of the things in question that *they*, the scholar, reads or understands as white. Focusing on white examples or instantiations or embodiments of the things in the world that concern us as feminist media scholars is not a problem, of course. My argument today is certainly *not* that we should not be doing this in feminist media studies. Methodologically though, there is a problem in doing so while having failed or refused to look beyond or around or up from whiteness, to consider or see if there is or might be anything else out there, or perhaps seeing or noting that there *is* more than whiteness empirically or practically, but refusing to admit or take this seriously, on its own terms, in terms other than: ‘yes but... still whiteness... whiteness, ultimately.’ The problem is treating whiteness as the whole world of things as it were, as the necessary or inherent or inevitable sample universe, as the place where things necessarily begin and end, when in fact the empirical landscape is more variegated and complex – not to mention the theoretical considerations, to which I will still come.

With thanks to my close colleague and close friend Rachel O’Neill for suggesting this to me, we might call what I am describing and what ensues a kind of “methodological whiteness.” It goes something like this:

- a) The researcher begins from the premise that the things in question are white, perhaps for having only seen or being only aware of such examples or cases of said thing, or perhaps just assuming or imagining or maybe even ‘theorising’ that it must be so, or perhaps because this is what the existing literature says or suggests.
- b) Methodologically, whiteness then becomes a ‘sampling criterion’ for studying the thing. Whiteness becomes part of the form that examples or cases of the thing in question must take to be admitted for consideration.
- c) The researcher proceeds accordingly: they select and study white examples or cases of the thing in the world.
- d) And then, when the work is done, they arrive at the argument and conclusion, or really we can call it the confirmation, that *it is all so white out there!* And this is offered and meant as, among other things, a critical note about the continued dominance and exclusionary effects of whiteness!

In and for all this, there is a lack of researcher reflexivity, including consideration or discussion of positionality, which is yet another problem with the kind of story about race in the literature that I am calling into question today.

The problem and its causes are not just methodological, clearly. There are deep and prior epistemological considerations – deeply ideological ones, in fact. I think we need to ask ourselves, for instance: in feminist media studies, how and where in the world is it that we look for the kinds of things with which we are concerned, which we proceed to study? What form do we imagine or expect that these things do or can take, or what do we expect or imagine them to look like, such that we ‘recognise’ them when we see them? Where do these knowledges and presuppositions and imaginaries come from? What shapes and structures them? Because, certainly, they are structured. Invested, too. Do or might these ways of knowing and imagining and seeing cause us to miss certain things, to not see things that are also out there in the world, and that may perhaps be gleaned more easily or readily if one were to approach with a different kind of thinking, or from a different vantage? Necessarily our various positionalities as scholars and more are entangled in these questions and considerations, including, it seems to me, our various practices, tastes, horizons and so on as media *consumers, users and audiences, too.*

Let me give a quick example that I see, of how some of what I have just described has played out in the literature. I find it quite striking that it was not until Jess Butler’s 2013 intervention, really, that a figure like Beyoncé was seen or read or imagined in the literature on postfeminism as a postfeminist type – Beyoncé pre- her more recent turn to feminism, that is. How is this possible, I wonder, that Beyoncé did not enter the analytic frame earlier? If we look at how the postfeminist figure was described and theorised in the early literature, and hold this next to Beyoncé’s image and persona of the time, the congruence is quite clear and strong, I think. I wonder: is it that Beyoncé was just not on the radar of the feminist media scholars working on postfeminism at the time? Was she just not known or seen? Then I think: Is it because I am a young(ish) black woman myself that I really cannot imagine that this could have been so, because to *my* eyes, in *my* cultural world, Beyoncé has long been hyper-visible and spectacularised in popular media and culture? Or might her absence from view in the literature have been an effect of the literature itself, specifically of predominant ways of imagining, seeing, and theorising the racialisation and race politics of postfeminism (i.e., as white), such that a figure like Beyoncé became almost impossible to see in terms of postfeminism? If so, her absence from the literature was a performative effect of the literature itself.

There is yet another kind of methodological and epistemological problem in the kind of storying of whiteness of concern, to which I want to point. It has to do with the repeated and actually quite central line, of which I presented a few examples earlier, that, for being white (for whatever reason that it is deemed so), the thing in question is *for* white women, meaning, conversely, that it is *not* for women who are not white, or not really for them. In the few examples that I presented earlier and others like them that we can find in the literature, the methodological approach taken to the object or objects of analysis is basically textual: the scholar looks at and reads the thing in question, and in this way comes to understand and make assertions about its actual or putative whiteness. But in our field, it is basic is it not, it is ‘Media Studies 101,’ a point of caution that we emphasise to our students, that we cannot make claims and arguments and presumptions about the audience for having looked at and read *the text*. In particular we cannot make claims about audiences’ inner lives and feelings and meaning-making.

Given that we see this kind of thing being done in the literature, in claims that putatively white things are *for* white women, and therefore exclusionary and white supremacist in effect, we have to ask why? Why does such a basic methodological and epistemological precept of media studies seem to be so easily set aside? It seems to me that there is the suggestion or assumption, deeply, deeply, implicit to be sure, maybe not even really thought, that racial difference makes a difference to what we can know or claim about the audience via textual approaches. The putative difference seems to be that we already know and can be sure that racialised subjects can not, or maybe it is that they do not, engage, identify, relate with things *across* racial lines. Hence if we conduct a textual reading of some object or thing and see or confirm that it is white, we can say with some assurance that the thing therefore does not address or appeal to women who are not white, rather it excludes them, maybe even alienates and hurts them. Recall, for example, the claim in one of the extracts from the literature that I cited earlier, that black women simply cannot relate to white wellness influencers, which was made not for having heard this kind of thing from black women (via a method like interviews say), but rather for having read mediated representations of the white influencers.

As it so happens, my colleague and friend whom I mentioned earlier, Rachel O’Neill, has research on the very theme of wellness that shows how wrong and reductive the foregoing kind of thinking and assertion is empirically, epistemologically, methodologically and analytically. I would say that it is even dangerous actually. Rachel’s current project is on the wellness industry in the UK (see O’Neill, 2020, 2021, 2023), and in a short piece that she published some years ago in *Television and New Media*, she makes an argument for the need to employ: “more-than-textual methods to understand more-than-textual phenomena” (O’Neill, 2020: 630). I quite agree. She argues that by looking at the predominant images and representations of wellness and its practitioners in mainstream British media, it would be easy to think and conclude that the cultural space and industry are simply white, because this is what we would see, this is what the texts would suggest (O’Neill, 2020). It seems fair to assume that this is also what British wellness culture would look like if we were to broach it via social media, on a platform like Instagram say, in terms of the kinds of actors and accounts the platform’s algorithms would be likely to push the top.

But if we were to extrapolate from such textual evidence that the cultural formation or industry is white, and in this way racially exclusionary and so on, we would be missing much. In fact we would be wrong. Deploying ethnographic methods in her research, including participant-observation in wellness spaces and events, as well as interviews with women variously positioned in the community-industry as she calls it, what Rachel finds is that the scene is actually racially and ethnically mixed and diverse, which is by no means to say that it is not stratified in racial and ethnic and other intersecting ways. In her words:

While the industry's most prominent proponents are overwhelmingly white and upper-class, this is not to say that the appeal of and desire for wellness—understood as a kind of luminous good health and preternatural vitality—is limited to this cohort (O'Neill 2020: 629).

And why would it be, I would add? In addition to the fact that there are wellness practitioners who are not white, there are also women who are not white in the audiences and markets and maybe even fanbases of wellness practitioners who *are* white. And they are there for the wellness, not the whiteness.

This brings me to the final realm of critique of the kinds of small claims and story-building around race in the literature of concern to me today, which is that they rest on what I would insist is a flawed and grossly under-theorised ontology of race. We need to ask: what exactly is the nature of whiteness in the kinds of claims and story in the literature that I have been picking apart, particularly when what we are talking about are mediated representations and figurations and encodings of whiteness, and hyper-commodified ones to boot, created and circulating and visible, and variously for sale or selling things themselves, in the context of consumer capitalist media and culture? Whether we are talking about the fact of white bodies in particular media texts or spaces, or the predominance of white women's experiences and voices in particular kinds of mediated feminist discourses, or the prominence of cultural and aesthetic values and sensibilities that are hegemonically associated with whiteness, is it really a rigorous theoretical position to consider or argue that such things are *for white women only or properly*, ontologically speaking, constitutively, in their very being?

Can white discourses, practices, cultures, values, aesthetics and so on also be or become other than white, or are they moored or fixed irrevocably to whiteness, including white bodies? To say or suggest or imply the latter in our scholarship is to reify and fetishise and essentialise whiteness, which, among other things, as Sara Ahmed (2004) argues in her article 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,' is to cut whiteness off from the histories of its production and circulation. It is to fail to consider, or to forget, that if things are white it is because somewhere along the line they have been *made* so. We know the violence that has often accompanied this historically, and continues to, including epistemic violence.

I think that as a critical scholarly field, we need to be able to conceive, theorise and allow that cultural practices, discourses, values and so on that may be white, having been made white at some point, can or may also be, or become, otherwise racialised; that is to say, can or may also be, or become, part of the cultures and practices and value-systems and discursive repertoires and ways of being, etc. of racially minoritised 'others,' not least through the agentic, self-reflexive and desirous *making it so* of these subjects. I think as a field, we need to take more seriously, and treat with more theoretical rigour and respect, the fact and possibility that racially minoritised women may self-fashion, or desire to self-fashion, in ways that engage with and draw from white things, and as such are not simply or manifestly oppositional to whiteness. And with this, we also need to move past simplistic ideas – ideas that I also think are disrespectful actually – that if women of colour do such things, it means that they are 'mimicking whiteness,' 'wanting to be white,' 'losing their racial authenticity,' etc.

These kinds of claims are also in the scholarly story that I am interrogating today. They are highly problematic: on the one hand, they essentialise, delimit and even move to discipline or contain racially minoritised subjects and subjectivity and being and desire and practice. They also render the subjectivity of racially minoritised women if not singular (i.e., racialised), then dual (i.e., racialised and gendered), or at most three-fold (i.e., racialised, gendered and classed). But surely all women of colour (like all other subjects) are always much more, and more

complex, than this? On the other hand, the same kinds of claims have the effect of once again reifying whiteness, making it as if whiteness is on a pedestal for those of us who are not white. I think it is more accurate to say that, in terms of cultural life, it is rather that whiteness is proximate and familiar, and this *precisely as an effect of white supremacy*, as part of what it means to be racially minoritised in the first place, to live surrounded by whiteness.

Let me conclude. In my talk today, I have sought to show and argue that in the particular area of contemporary feminist media studies scholarship on which I have been focused, whiteness is being reified in and by the literature itself for a number of reasons, even if inadvertently or ‘innocently.’ As such, I argue that the literature itself is performative of the very claim that it makes that whiteness is dominant. What I mean by this is that the literature, too, contributes to said dominance. It does or enacts what it says; it is or becomes a case in point. It makes whiteness if not the whole empirical and analytic story about the things of concern, then the necessary, constitutive, beating heart of it. In and for this, racially minoritised subjects, cultures, practices, spaces and so on, as well as the complexity and depth of racially minoritised subjectivity, are variously overlooked, unseen, disallowed, reduced, flattened. Whiteness takes up all the space when it comes to race. ‘Others’ are othered (if seen at all). Thus, as I have already suggested, the literature itself enacts a kind of racialised violence.

If, as I have also argued, all this happens in and through what are actually meant or being offered as critique, in attempts to do a kind of intersectional feminism, then having just argued that the literature is performative in one way, I would also say that it is non-performative in another direction, in the direction of challenging white hegemony. My point here draws directly on Sara Ahmed (2004), in the work of hers that I referenced earlier, ‘Declarations of Whiteness.’ Ahmed’s (2004) argument, in short, is that a certain would be anti-racist and anti-white supremacist scholarly focus on whiteness in the end does not do what it says or intends. It does not meaningfully challenge or problematise or even interrogate whiteness, it just recentres it, it just reifies it.

We need to move beyond reifying whiteness in feminist media studies. This is the title and core contention of my talk today. I am not going to give prescriptions or suggestions about how we might go about doing so. Hopefully, in what I have said already there are some suggestions, including of things we perhaps ought not to do. I will only say one thing on how we might move forward, which is that, to do so we have *to actually want to*. I say this because, if I am perfectly honest, I am not sure that as a field we really do. I am not sure that we really want to grapple with knotty, inevitably discomfiting questions about race and the politics thereof in relation to not only the things in the world that we study but also who we are ourselves, as individuals, as scholars, and together or collectively, as a field.

I have charged with all manner of problems and failings the kind of story about whiteness that I have been discussing today: that it is often empirically delimited if not plain incorrect; that it is methodologically circular and unsound; that it lacks reflexivity; that it is theoretically under-developed. Please bear with me as I add one more point to the charge sheet: which is that actually, in fact, I do not think that it is a result or reflection of a serious attempt to think about race. I think it is for the most part a way of *appearing* to have paid attention to race, a nodding to the need to ‘do intersectionality,’ hopefully pre-empting some kind of possible intra-feminist critique, before the discussion moves on. So again, if we are indeed to move beyond reifying whiteness in feminist media studies, or seriously try to, we have to actually want to and be ready to do the work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organisers of Console-ing Passions 2023, at the University of Calgary, for inviting me to give one of the keynote addresses at the conference, and the audience for their generous engagement with the talk. I would also like to massively thank Rachel O’Neill for *years* of listening to and helping me develop the arguments that I proposed in the keynote, for sending me examples of feminist media and cultural scholarship that she came across that made the kinds of claims about whiteness that I was trying to problematise, and for commenting extensively on a draft of the talk.

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Biography

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