

# cate young

Friday, 10 January 2014

## This Is What I Mean When I Say "White Feminism"

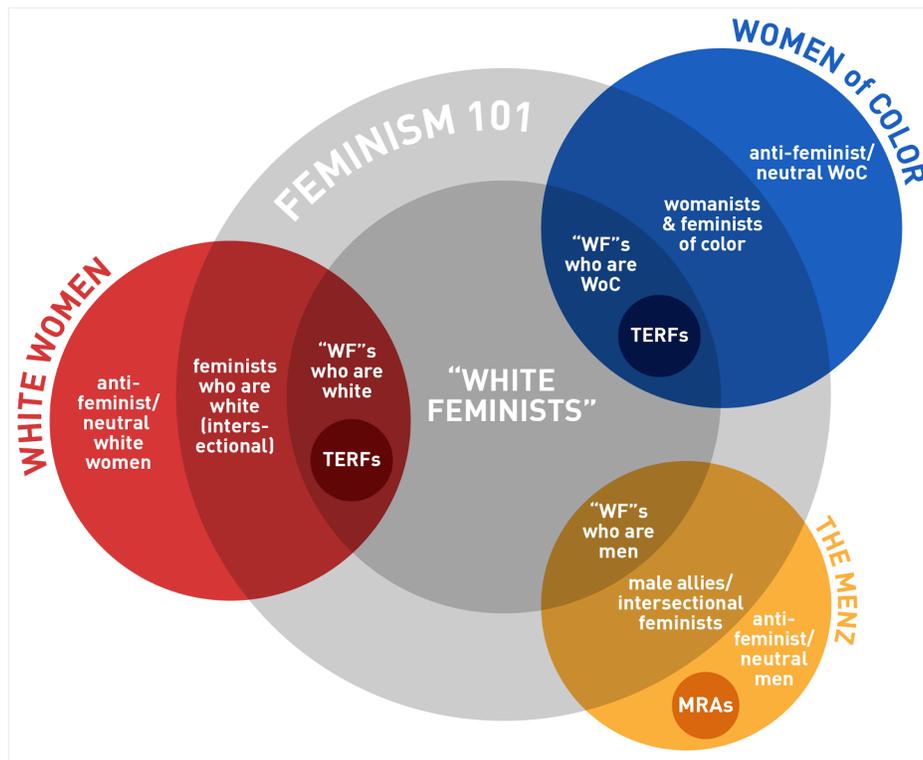
Well this is a post I've been meaning to write for a while.

Every single time women of colour talk about "white feminism" or "white feminists" within the context of discussions about the way that the mainstream feminist movement privileges whiteness, we deal with an onslaught of defensive white women insisting that *they personally* are not like that, and would you please say "some white women" and not make generalizations?

What those women fail to realize is that by making that request, they are exemplifying Mikki Kendall's [#solidarityisforwhitewomen](#) battle cry; by once again insisting that a conversation created to facilitate discussion about the issues of WoC, be centered around the feelings of white women.

Now, I understand the impulse to get defensive. It can be very off-putting to feel attacked for a transgression that you know yourself not to be guilty of. But in the context of social justice and movement building, if you're feeling attacked, it probably means you're having your privilege challenged, not that you are a bad person. As I always say, "*If it doesn't apply to you, then it's not about you. If it's not about you, then don't take it personally.*" Being a good ally means recognizing that sometimes your input is not needed or wanted, and that it's incredibly inappropriate to demand that a marginalized group, (in this case, WoC within the feminist movement) restructure a conversation that is happening to serve their needs, in a way that is more "comfortable" for the very people they are mobilizing against. That is the *very definition* of flexing one's privilege.

To that end, let's talk about the term "white feminism." I even had a fun little diagram\* made to help explain myself. ([H/T to PSF](#)) But before I continue, I want to be very clear that everything in the next few paragraphs is my personal interpretation of this term, and is an explanation of the way that I personally use it. I cannot and do not speak for other women of colour on this issue.



"White feminism" does not mean every white woman, everywhere, who happens to identify as feminist. It also doesn't mean that every "white feminist" identifies as white. I see "white feminism" as a specific set of single-issue, non-intersectional, superficial feminist practices. It is the feminism we understand as mainstream; the feminism obsessed with body hair, and high heels and makeup, and changing your married name. It is the feminism you probably first learned. "White feminism" is the feminism that doesn't understand western privilege, or cultural context. It is the feminism that doesn't consider race as a factor in the struggle for equality.

**White feminism is a set of beliefs that allows for the exclusion of issues that specifically affect women of colour. It is "one size-fits all" feminism, where middle class white women are the mould that others must fit. It is a method of practicing feminism, not an indictment of every individual white feminist, everywhere, always.**

When I talk about "white feminism," I'm talking about the feminism that [misappropriates womanist thinkers](#) like Audre Lorde to declare that keeping white women's racism in check is "bashing." I'm talking about the feminism that [cheekily denounces](#) "twitter feminism" as useless, without considering that twitter is the main medium through which less economically privileged women (usually women of colour) can put their feminism into practice and gain access to and engage with like-minded women. I'm talking about the feminism that publishes an article [advocating for forced sterilization](#), completely disregarding the way in which forced sterilization was used as a tool of genocide against black and native women. I'm talking about the feminism that thought holding a writer's [retreat at a former slave plantation](#) was a swell idea. I'm talking about the feminism that throws women of colour under the bus in the [quest for body diversity](#) and acceptance. I'm talking about the feminism that thinks barging into a Maasai community and ["breaking barriers" is feminist](#), disregarding the work that actual Maasai women are doing to help achieve equality on their own terms, and obviously parading its class privilege along the way. I'm talking about the feminism that insists that ["Muslim women need saving"](#) and refuses to acknowledge that cultural differences mean different, culturally specific approaches to feminism and equality. I'm talking about the feminism that thinks [not "leaning in"](#) is the only thing standing between women and economic success. I'm talking about the feminism that [defends The Onion](#) when it calls a little black girl a "cunt". I'm talking about the feminism that celebrates Tina Fey, [Lily Allen](#) and [Lena Dunham](#), but tears down Nicki Minaj, [Beyoncé](#) and [Rihanna](#). I'm talking about the feminism that [pats itself on the back](#), but doesn't apologize after supporting a known abuser of WoC feminists who confesses to his transgressions. I'm talking about the feminism that did [all these things](#) in the space of one year.

I'm talking about the feminism that disregards the fact that whiteness is a privilege that is not afforded to all women.

As Thought Catalog's [Chelsea Fagan](#) succinctly puts it:

*"I know that some of the feminists on this website have build their whole identity/self-worth/value around being The Biggest Victim, but get a fucking grip and recognize how good we have it in this world. Sometimes you are going to be slighted because you are a woman, but it will never be because you are a WHITE woman, and we just have to accept the fact that this is a slice of the Blame It On The Man Pie we do not get to take. UGH."*

When I talk about "white feminists", I'm talking about the people who fall into the darkest portions of the venn diagram above, and *only* those people. If you know that as a feminist, your beliefs fall into the middle portion of those little coloured circles, then *keep it to yourself*. By insisting we explicitly redeem you personally whenever we talk about a system that disadvantages us, you place yourself firmly into white feminist territory. Every rule has exceptions, but we'd never get anywhere if we had to list every single one whenever the rule was brought up in conversation.

Think you're the exception? **Show don't tell**. You don't get a cookie for declaring yourself an ally. Yes, "white feminist" is a pejorative term, and I will continue to use it as such. But it's also a term that means a specific thing, and derailing the community building efforts of WoC in order to declare yourself "one of the good ones" in fact, makes you exactly the kind of person we're pushing against.

[I am more than aware that this diagram does not accurately reflect every single theoretical possibility, and of its mathematical limitations. It is simply meant to be an easily understandable visual representation of my assertion that not every white woman is a "white feminist" and not every "white feminist" identifies as white. It's purpose is as a reference, not statistical fact.]

**ETA:** "What people don't seem to get is that "White Feminism" is *feminism for white people*, and never exclusively *feminism by white people*. It's more about who it benefits exclusively than who is perpetuating it exclusively. It's really not as much of an accusation as people are making it out to be, more like a word for the institution we're trying to separate ourselves from." -[TheWhistlingFish](#)

Posted by [Cate Young](#) at [3:09 pm](#)



Labels: [Black Feminism](#), [Feminism](#), [Intersectionality](#), [SIFWW](#), [White Feminism](#), [Womanism](#)

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160 comments:



**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 4:24:00 pm

The thing that surprises me most about the "all white feminists aren't like that!" moments are the exact parallel with "all men aren't like that!" Feminists get really tired of the latter, so why can't we see the problem with the former?

As always, great blog post. I especially love the handy diagram you created.

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**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 4:25:00 pm

What does TERF stand for?

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**Bex** Thursday, June 30, 2016 7:14:00 pm

I believe an acronym for 'Trans exclusionary radical feminist'  
Almost exclusively used as a pejorative against feminists who object to trans women exerting male privileged attitudes in womens/feminist spaces.  
At least that is my contextual understanding of the term.



**JeZaBoRoh** Friday, July 01, 2016 5:15:00 pm

Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist

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[Reply](#)



**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 4:48:00 pm

Thanks! I was always kind of unclear how to be better while still being white, other than shutting up and saying nothing. This really helps. I'm shocked that so many people who define themselves as feminists ignore the fact that they're using the same diversionary

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**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 5:13:00 pm

I like the diagram, and thanks for your explanation. I see that Tina Fey put everyone under the bus. I don't find her quote funny, but I don't see the bigger issue (as I do, for example, in those that criticize Rihanna or Beyoncé but are OK with Miley).

Also, I got what MRA meant, but what are TERFs standing for?

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**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 5:32:00 pm

Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists

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**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 5:40:00 pm

With Tina, the issue is that she is posing body image as a problem that only WW face. Not all black and latina women have bodies like Bey and JLo. She juxtaposes them as enemies of body acceptance when the fetishization of their bodies is a symptom, not the problem itself. And TERFS means Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists.

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**Cate Young** Friday, January 10, 2014 5:50:00 pm

Thanks for the explanation of the terms, and the issue with Tina's quote. I don't think she put them as enemies of body acceptance, but I