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Moral Subjects in White Spaces: Impossible Solidarities

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Abstract

This article explores women of colour's struggles against white spaces in anti-austerity, anti-fascist, and migrants' rights movements in Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, London, Madrid and Paris. We argue that solidarity is denied by white activists who resist women of colour's practical demands to take race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status seriously as an organising strategy. These demands are misinterpreted as emotional pleas for care and, crucially, as threats to the fantasies in which white activists place themselves as the eternal moral subjects and agents of their activism. Focusing on emotional expressions of solidarity can therefore fatally undermine the pragmatic work required to build solidarity. It is unclear how women of colour activists should pursue solidarity as a goal when their interests are misrepresented by their white comrades. Yet solidarity remains an impossible necessity in a cost-of-living crisis and far-right emergency.

Keywords: activism, Europe, intersectionality, solidarity, women of colour, whiteness

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Introduction

In our six-nation comparative research project, *Women of Colour Resist*, which examines how women of colour activists in Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, London, Madrid and Paris

organise and mobilise against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights, we found activists struggling to build and sustain solidarity in their activist spaces. This is to be expected. Solidarity is the emotional connection and political practice that binds activists together so that they can work collectively to make radical change. By 'solidarity', we draw on Sally Scholz (2008: 10): 'political solidarity is a moral relation that marks a social movement wherein individuals have committed to positive duties in response to a perceived injustice'. Solidarity is both an ethical disposition and a series of acts. Developing and maintaining solidarity is one of the most difficult challenges that activists face. Although solidarity is highly prized, the emotions that make solidarity possible are fraught. Working collectively, activists must try to develop a shared identity and a common purpose. However, these negotiations about who activists are and what they should do are beset by unequal power dynamics between activists derived from hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status (Combahee River Collective 2014; Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Further still, these intersecting inequalities are overlaid by difficult emotions such as fear, anger, frustration and distrust as activists seek to resolve how power operates between and among their comrades.

Solidarity is both an emotional and practical problem that activists must confront to build a new world. To do solidarity, activists must feel it. In feeling solidarity, activists must address pragmatic questions about leadership, decision-making, dissent, strategy, tactics, organisational form and coordinated action (Ruiz-Junicio 2013; Whittier 2021; Einwohner et al 2021). In this article, we explore the sociology of emotions and feelings and use these terms interchangeably. We recognise the pioneering work of affect theory (Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2014) and acknowledge the resonances with our work. However, we position ourselves in the literature focused on the empirical study of emotions in social life, specifically the scholarship which challenges us to take seriously racialised emotions (Mirchandini 2003; Emejulu and Bassel 2024; Evans 2013; Bonilla-Silva 2019; Wingfield 2010, 2021).

We argue that focusing on emotional expressions of solidarity can fatally undermine the pragmatic work required to build solidarity, which is the key sociological contribution of this article. Practising solidarity through emotions distracts from structural and organisational problems that weaken the solidaristic bonds between activists and unhelpfully encourages individualised and personalised responses that deepen alienation between activists (Srivastasa 2005). In our project we found that women of colourⁱ activists fail to build solidarity in their activist spaces because their practical demands for intersectional recognition—taking race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status seriously as both a political analysis for understanding a particular grievance and as a viable strategy for collective action—were misinterpreted by their white comrades as an emotional plea for assuagement and care.

We have long argued that women of colour's misrecognised claims-making are a form of epistemic injustice (Emejulu and Bassel 2017a; 2017b; 2024). This article expands this point to better understand the dynamics of this misrecognition in activists' organisations and networks. We argue that the majority of the activist spaces we studied operate as 'white spaces' which reproduce white supremacy whilst simultaneously claiming to be non-racialised (Anderson 2015; Evans and Moore 2015; Brunsmas et al 2020; Embrick and Moore 2020). White spaces are defined as a 'social space where whiteness goes

unquestioned...They are spaces where culture is deployed in ways that secure white racial interests and subordinate non-whites' (Brunsma et al 2020: 2002). We argue that these white activist spaces (re)produce white moral subjects who, by the very nature of their activism, self-define as 'good people' who are self-evidently 'egalitarian' in their social relations. As a result, these white moral subjects are deeply resistant to both women of colour activists and their intersectional claims-making because they threaten white activists' moral accounting of themselves as radical egalitarians and their self-interest in maintaining their power in activist spaces. We argue that solidarity is not merely unlikely under these circumstances, but impossible, and that women of colour activists cannot and should not attempt to transform these spaces to make them genuinely open and democratic for different kinds of activists. Our pessimistic assessment is supported by the empirical evidence we will present in this article. As is sorely needed in academia, we embrace humility and thus we will not offer prescriptions and/or solutions to activists who find themselves in this intractable position. Instead, we bring light to this impossible problem and engage in dialogue with both activists and academics to more precisely consider the problem and, perhaps, this will lead us down a path of transformation.

We begin this article by discussing our project methods. We then turn to an elaboration of both white space and the racialised emotions, identities and relations these spaces produce and demand. In so doing, we argue that a focus on emotions in solidarity work can only account for racialised emotions of denial and exclusion of non-white Others. Finally, we move on to discuss our empirical findings which demonstrate how women of colour activists encounter and negotiate white spaces and the negative impact this has on their solidarity work.

Europe in crisis: Project methods

Women of Colour Resist is a six-nation comparative research project exploring how women of colour activists in Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, London, Madrid and Paris organise and mobilise against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights. Since the 2008 economic crisis, we have been analysing how the crisis of capitalism intersects with racial hierarchies in Europe (Emejulu and Bassel 2017a; 2017b; 2020). Our work has established: a) institutional actors' and activists' steadfast refusal to recognise the dynamics of white supremacy in their work and b) the seemingly routinised and persistent economic insecurity and precarity of women of colour. Thus, we are confident in extrapolating Charles W. Mills' foundational argument about the existence of racial hierarchies and their pernicious effects in terms of reproducing systemic racial, class and gender inequalities across time and space (Mills 1997; 2007; Pateman 1988). While there are specific dynamics at play in each national context it is possible to identify this pattern that is shared across borders.

Given that women of colour find themselves in precarious social and economic circumstances—they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, more likely to work in temporary, part-time and low-paid work on insecure contracts, more likely to live in poor housing with an insecure tenancy, and less likely to have savings and a viable pension—we have always been interested in how women of colour are subjected to structural violence but also how they make themselves subjects for radical social change (EIGE 2019; Emejulu and Bassel 2017a; forthcoming 2026). Because women of colour find themselves at the centre of a maelstrom, dealing with falling living standards, navigating class hierarchies,

being the target of far right rhetoric and policymaking and negotiating hostile borders, it is crucial for us to understand their agency in this moment.

To that end, we recruited 6 research assistants to undertake 6 case studies—1 in each city—of women of colour’s anti-austerity, anti-fascist and migrants’ rights activism. Our research has demonstrated that we cannot isolate their intersectional claims-making from the rising tide of fascism in Europe and their experiences of everyday bordering. We therefore selected these three areas as entry points into what are in fact complex and overlapping milieux in which issues cannot be easily separated. For example, in our study of anti-austerity activism in London, a long-standing anti-gentrification campaign was interconnected with an anti-racist struggle against stop and search tactics by the Metropolitan Police. In Copenhagen, women of colour’s migrants’ rights activism was intertwined with anti-fascist opposition to the fascist political entrepreneurship of emboldened far right groups during the 2019 Danish general election. These porous movements allow the articulation of complex political subjectivities of women of colour from diverse ethnic, racial, class and gender, sexuality, citizenship backgrounds, engaged in intersecting struggles with middle and working class white comrades.

Research assistants were all fluent in English and the local language(s) and had strong connections to specific activist milieux. They focused on issues they knew were of particular importance in these communities and recruited interview participants they knew to be leaders in these areas. This paper draws on 167 one-to-one interviews and focus groups with activists conducted by the research assistants. Interviews in each case included: 1-2 focus groups with activist women, 3-4 semi-structured interviews with formal (those with a named position within the campaign: spokesperson, organiser, etc) and informal (those without a position but are important influencers and connectors) leaders of these groups; 6-8 semi-structured interviews with rank-and-file activists. In addition, research assistants undertook observations of various meetings and protests and social media analysis (Emejulu and Bassel 2021). While not the focus of this paper, this material provided background information for our analysis here. This article focuses specifically on interview data, so we can situate the narratives shared within participants’ lived experiences.

All fieldwork was conducted between May 2019 and January 2020. Luckily, our fieldwork concluded right before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but our data analysis has been subject to several delays because of lockdown and illness. Interviews explored challenges and opportunities of activism and campaigning, the political environment and hopes for the future. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes. In some cases, research assistants interviewed activists they already knew while in other instances they reached out to participants they did not know but knew to be key players. These pre-existing relationships, or lack thereof, were noted for each interview enabling us to place the interaction in its interpersonal as well as local and national context.

Research assistants transcribed recorded interviews verbatim and translated them to English when required. Their contributions were essential to provide explanations of context-specific terms and events. For our data analysis, we use a deductive thematic approach noting patterns in the data and their frequency but also paying careful attention to participants’

counter-intuitive insights and experiences that challenge our notions about what women of colour think and feel about their activism and solidarity work.

All data were collected in accordance with ethical processes of researchers' institutions and received ethical approval and we were guided by the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. All quotations used in this article are pseudonymised. These quotations have been selected to exemplify specific issues that occur in each case and/or across cases, and we note when there is divergence of views within and across contexts.

White spaces, racialised emotions

Constructing an activist group is an experiment in world-building. By 'activism' we mean collective action in public space to make social change. Identifying a problem and joining together with like-minded others to take action to address the grievance requires a radical imagination and the political will to create a new and, perhaps, better world. Particularly for those activist groups who practice prefiguration—attempting to live the values and social relations of the new world one's activism seeks to bring into being—it is crucial to interrogate the norms, values and culture in this ostensibly 'new' world created in the microcosm of their activist spaces. By 'activist space' we mean the physical and psychic locations where activists gather to strategise, socialise and take collective action. Activist spaces are meant to represent and reinforce the ideals and the mundane everyday realities of being an activist and doing activism. In these spaces, activists are thinking and learning together about the world and themselves to take effective action to make change. In white dominated left-wing spaces, particularly in the areas we explore for our project—feminist, queer, anti-fascist, anti-austerity, migrants' rights—this world-building is grounded in white supremacy. To be clear, these white dominated left-wing spaces are neither colour-blind nor postracial (Goldberg 2015). As David Theo Goldberg (2006: 336) states, in Europe 'race is to have no social place, no explicit markings. It is to be excised from any characterising of human conditions, relations [or] formations'. Though we recognise the importance of the study of postracial and colour-blind societies (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Sayyid 2017), we find the operationalisation of the concept of white space better captures the complex dynamics of emotions, activism and solidarity that we analyse in Europe. Further still, the stunning electoral success and mainstreaming of the far right discourses in public life complicate any presumptions about a postracial or colourblind Europe (Emejulu and Bassel 2024; Mudde 2019; Mondon and Winter 2020).

These radical left activist spaces are 'white spaces' in that they 'entrench white norms, beliefs, values and logics that racially organise these spaces... White spaces work to facilitate patterned behaviours that normalise white resource-hoarding, racially oppressive hierarchies and the routine subjugation of people of colour' (Embrick and Moore 2020: 1937). The radical left spaces we studied for our project operate as white spaces because of a racialised conception of normativity which structures the possibilities of the activist subject. To be a woman (both cis and trans) or non-binary, to be a socialist, to be an anti-fascist, even to be one who welcomes and supports refugees, is to be a white subject. Whiteness is implicit; it functions as the taken for granted subject position that stands in for and is treated as interchangeable for the activist subject.

White left politics imagines alternatives to the gender binary, to heteronormativity, to the welfare state and to capitalism. However, what it cannot effectively imagine is a viable alternative to and the displacement of whiteness. We argue this is for several interconnected reasons. Firstly, whiteness is constituted by its normativity. Whiteness claims universality. For the left, this translates as being both the agent and the subject of these politics. For example, the hegemonic constructions of women, womanhood and femininity is whiteness. As has been long argued by women of colour activists and scholars, mainstream feminism encodes whiteness in both the analysis of the problem of patriarchy and as the organising principle for feminist resistance (Combahee River Collective 1977; Carby 1980; hooks 2000; Hill Collins 2000; Lewis 2019). White women are the universal subject to understand inequalities under patriarchy and it is in their interests that the mainstream feminist movement organises its strategies and tactics. The 2017 Women's March in both Washington, DC and London were at first organised solely by and for white women in reaction to Donald Trump's surprise presidential election victory and his then imminent inauguration. It was only in reaction to sustained criticism from feminists of colour on both sides of the Atlantic that the Women's March finally reorganised and reconstituted itself as intersectional (Emejulu 2018). That there might be other kinds of women (or those who are read as women but who do not identify as such) that might be harmed by the incoming Trump Administration and that white women should organise with them in solidarity rather than on their behalf was seemingly unimaginable to the original Women's March organisers.

Secondly, there can be no alternative to the universal white subject position in left politics, particularly in class antagonisms, because doing so exposes whiteness to particularity and temporality which in turn delegitimizes its normative pretensions (Bhattacharyya 2018; Robinson 2019). Whiteness is a power relation not only through the control of material resources but in how it represents itself as having dominion over and existing beyond time and space. Even though we can accurately date the invention of race to the colonial encounters of the 15th century, whiteness represents itself as timeless and enduring (Goldberg 2006; Mills 2007). However, once whiteness is subjected to time, its power begins to erode. This is true too for left politics that ostensibly disavow such white supremacist machinations. Take for example the politics of time, class and austerity. Since the 2008 economic crisis, austerity has been constructed on the left as a 'new' and urgent policy problem because of the very real cutbacks to welfare states which has immiserated millions across Europe and the USA (Clarke and Newman 2012; Emejulu and Bassel 2017a). However, countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America have long endured disastrous experiments in austerity since the 1980s imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Blad et al 2017). Further still, austerity has been a daily reality of working class people of colour in Europe and the USA since before the 2008 crisis with precarious labour, unaffordable housing and poorly resourced public services being the standard, not the exception, for many groups (Emejulu and Bassel 2017a; 2020; Strolovich 2023). White anti-austerity activists in both Europe and the USA, have been notoriously resistant to thinking intersectionally about dramatic fundings cuts to welfare states (Standing 2017; Eschle 2019). Infamously, UK Uncut, one of the first large-scale anti-austerity activist groups to emerge in response to the then 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's austerity programme, refused to acknowledge intersectionality as part of its class analysis of welfare rollbacks which in turn spawned the creation of Black Activists Rising Against the Cuts (BARAC) and Sisters Uncut, two explicitly feminist of colour-led activist groups organising against cuts

(Emejulu and Bassel 2017a). Temporal politics disorients, destabilizes and displaces whiteness, it offers another way of thinking, doing and being in the world. Taking seriously those already being harmed by the crisis of capitalism and a poorly functioning welfare state—particularly poor and working-class women of colour—and attempting to work in solidarity with them from the start was refused because the white subject being harmed in the immediate moment was and must be the animating force for activism for groups such as UK Uncut.

These dynamics of whiteness help us understand why and how white dominated left-wing activist spaces function as white spaces. ‘Whiteness is normal, everything else is an exception which reinforces a racial order that prioritises and centralises the experiences of whites’ (Brunsma et al 2020: 2007). Understood on these terms, white left activist spaces are designed specifically for white epistemological and ontological security. Though never explicitly stated, these spaces are for the comfort, safety and enjoyment of white activists to freely experiment with different ways of being and to organise and mobilise for their interests. The presence of activists of colour in white spaces is an existential threat because, through their intersectional claims-making, these activists intrude on the racial fantasy of white dominion and destabilise the fiction of white normativity. Intersectional claims-making forces white activists to reckon with the idea that their utopian world-building ‘is neither possible nor universally desired’ (Srivastasa 2005: 56).

Because the moral accounting of the white activist self is jeopardised through the presence of and demands by activists of colour, these intruders must be ejected from white spaces. The strategy by which activists of colour are excluded is through the leveraging of the emotional norms and relations which structure the space. ‘Any challenges to whites’ faux civility... will elicit emotionally hostile responses... Whites’ racialised emotions are deployed as a mechanism of racial control’ (Brunsma et al 2020: 2003). It is here, in the response to women of colour activists’ demands that we see how an emotional approach to solidarity can be its undoing. Because white spaces are designed for white comfort and security, activists of colour’s pragmatic suggestions about how the space might change to make it more welcoming for people of colour and thus make collective action more effective by involving more people—such as changing leadership, decision-making processes and shifting strategy and tactics—are interpreted as personal attacks necessitating an individualised and emotional, not structural, response.

The deployment of racialised emotions operates in two ways. Firstly, the emotions arise from a fundamental misrecognition of women of colour activists and their interests. Sometimes white leftists assume that critique of their practices is one made based on individualised harm and thus personally respond with empathy and care. Here it is important to note the sleight of hand that takes place. When activists of colour seek remedy for the intersecting exclusions they experience in white activist spaces, this is not *merely* a demand for a different approach to care in the personal relations between activists. It is also an attempt to transform the culture and practice of the entire group so that these kinds of interpersonal harms are minimised. The reason why a focus on empathy and care does not solve the problem is because it is actually changing the subject. As Srivastasa (2005: 44) persuasively argues in her analysis of the racialised emotions white feminists deploy against feminist of colour:

Empathetic expressions often revolve around an individual's self-image rather than organisational change...empathy about racism implies that the problem belongs to women of colour and requires only the sympathetic feelings of white women...it emphasizes unequal relations of power.

Caring relations, whilst welcomed and should be fostered in egalitarian spaces, are nevertheless insufficient to the enormity of the task of building genuinely open, democratic and intersectional activist spaces. Feelings of empathy and care on their own cannot address organisational practices which produce both individual and structural harms. This does not mean that caring relations are unnecessary for radical change. They are essential but must be mobilised in a different way. Empathy and care must be reconceptualised to include organisational change. White activists can effectively demonstrate their empathy and care not through sweet words but by responding to the intersectional demands of their women of colour comrades by disrupting normative whiteness and transforming the norms and culture of the activist space. By 'intersectional demands' we mean political claims that seek recognition and action on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality and legal status. Intersectional demands eschew singular understandings of inequality—such as attempts to separate class, for example, from other interconnected inequalities. Feelings must be harnessed to transform how activists relate to each other.

However, because white spaces are constituted by white normativity for white comfort and security, there is a limit to the interpersonal care and empathy that can be offered to women of colour activists, leaving the conflict unresolvable. In response to this failure, other kinds of racialised emotions are enacted against activists of colour to either quell intersectional demands or, using racialised emotions such as fear and anger, force the exit of women of colour activists from the space. Because white left-wing activists are invested in an egalitarian self-identity they have carefully crafted for themselves, Srivastasa (2005) argues that white activists, particularly white feminists, are deeply committed to thinking of themselves as non-complicit in oppression. Because of their feminist, socialist and/or anti-fascist politics, there is assumption on the white left that this means they are not implicated in white supremacy. This dedication to the idea (if not the reality) of non-complicity in individual and structural harms—especially in supposedly egalitarian activist spaces—means that many white leftists are resistant to intersectional demands. By adopting an identity and practices of an activist, this becomes evidence of being 'a good person'. And it is white activists' self-defense of being 'good people' that is the key to understanding the dynamics of exclusions and the failures of solidarity in activist spaces.

A commitment to *already being good* disallows discussions of women of colour's intersectional demands because this means white activists are simply *not good enough*. The carefully constructed moral self-identity of white activists which is incubated and protected in white activist spaces is at risk and thus activists respond with anger and fear—a defensive posture to maintain a coherent identity as a radical egalitarian. As Kleinmann (1996: 48) found in his study of the identity constructions of activists in alternative medicine, an activist observes: 'We become so invested in our beliefs as radicals or 'good people' that we cannot see the reactionary or hurtful consequences of our behaviours'. These emotionally hostile responses clearly signal that intersectional demands are unwelcomed and unneeded. At this

point, women of colour activists are confronted with a choice: drop their demands and stay in the space or exit the space for another more amenable to their perspectives and experiences. In either case, the outcome remains the same, the white space and the white activists' moral identity as good people are secured.

With our project context and methods explained, we will now turn to analyse our findings in relation to activist white spaces, racialised emotions and the resistant moral identities of whiteness that they foster.

Whose space? White space? Our space!

One way of exploring women of colour's activism is through their interactions with like-minded activists working on similar issues. We have particularly focused on multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-class left wing spaces and large coalitions which link together different activist networks to try to better understand how women of colour activists position themselves in these spaces and negotiate complex dynamics with different kinds of comrades. A persistent theme across all six project sites is how women of colour activists are deeply frustrated with their relations with their white comrades and ultimately leave the space because they find it hostile and unwelcoming. Although all activists find coalition work threatening because it entails conflict and compromise (Reagon 1983; Whittier 2021), we argue that women of colour activists are subjected to racialised conflict through the defense of white space.

Unlike in our previous work, in this study we have noted a small shift with some white leftists, particularly white feminists, becoming more open to anti-racist and intersectional analyses and practices. However, this new openness is extremely limited whereby racism is only understood as interpersonal conflict and as individualised learning opportunities for white activists. This mixed race migrants' rights activist organises with a multi-racial, multi-class group focused on anti-deportation and migrant survival work in Madrid. Speaking in 2019, she argues that solidarity is impossible when anti-racism is understood on such narrow terms which centres white activists' feelings:

We are in Spain right now at a turning point. We're moving very slowly. We are starting to talk about race. And very slowly there is an interest in hearing other voices.... But there has been like zero real solidarity... because what I've seen here, is that white feminists ... see anti-racism as an opportunity for personal growth or personal enrichment through knowledge, but not actually the liberation of people of colour. So I don't think that we can talk about solidarity on these terms.

A key conflict in this group is women of colour activists wishing to avoid the organisation positioning itself as a 'white saviour' with a patronising relationship with the undocumented migrants with whom they work. Whilst this group understood the critique and wished to take it seriously it could only be implemented on these personalised terms which, ironically, did not lead to any significant organisational changes but re-centred white activists and their racialised emotions.

We see similar dynamics at play in Berlin. This mixed race Afro-European anti-austerity activist speaking in 2020 discusses how many of her white comrades are increasingly

engaging with key texts in the Black radical tradition but that their growing understanding of intersectionality and white supremacy remains firmly rooted in theory and does not lead to organisational change:

This trendiness of solidarity and diversity at the moment—it's something that's being said all the time, and there's no follow-through whatsoever...Everybody's quoting Audre Lorde and bell hooks and James Baldwin...Yet nothing, nothing is actually changing! One of the girls said: "Let's read this chapter by bell hooks" — we have readings and then we discuss them [in her activist group]— And so, we read it and it was fantastic. And then none of its principles are actually turned into any kind of introspection or action of how we should go about it.

In Copenhagen, this Afro-Danish anti-racist activist is explicit in her agenda of diversifying her activist group so that it better represents and is more welcoming to people of colour. Like the other activists in Berlin and Madrid, she has encountered resistance to her attempts to transform her organisation even though the group is explicitly committed to anti-racism:

I think generally we [women of colour activists] have this approach that...we want to build bridges...in this white organisation.... But I think we have come to the conclusion that it is not easy to build bridges...Do we need to be harsher so people don't mistake who we want to hold space for? What I am striving towards working more [on] and is that who we are holding space for is not white people, because there is enough spaces existing for them, you know?...When we collaborate...what is foremost in our minds is people of colour, so that they know there is always room for them here.

This activist believes that an essential part of her activism is not just supporting undocumented migrants but also dismantling the white space of her organisation. Because, she argued, to truly work in solidarity meant that her organisation had to be transformed so that it lived up to its purported principles of egalitarianism and anti-racism.

At this point, we would like to pause and note this double burden that women of colour activists must shoulder. Not only must they struggle to build a new world but they must also struggle to transform the very groups they work in to make them genuinely democratic and intersectional (Emejulu 2022; Sudbury 1998; Bryan, Dadzie, Scafe 2018). As this Berlin-based mixed race activist notes, this double burden is an unresolvable dilemma: 'If we [women of colour activists] don't educate, how will things ever change... And at the same time, it's a lot of pressure, it's really tiring'. Importantly, she goes on to note how she may be more empowered to challenge leftist white spaces because one of her parents is a white German and her critique is seen as more legitimate by white activists than if a refugee woman articulated similar demands:

I have the extra burden...I can navigate this space because my mother is white. Because I have this whole family that is white and they also need to be educated, they have all kinds of weird opinions. And maybe the emotional burden of heritage that I have puts me in a position whereby it's more my role to educate than maybe another person, who is...you know? I think it's a less precarious situation than an African woman who came from, say, Cameroon, who doesn't really speak German...So, in

that sense I think it's more down to people like me, maybe, to try and bridge that gap, maybe.

Whilst there are some spaces where some white activists are more open and willing to discuss anti-racism and intersectionality, albeit on very narrow terms, more typically and in line with our previous research on this topic, we found a complete resistance to taking intersectionality and anti-racism seriously as both a political analysis and an organising strategy (Beaman 2022; Christoffersen and Emejulu 2023; Siow 2023). In Paris, this French Maghrebi feminist activist was fed up with how the leadership in her multi-racial and multi-class anti-austerity activist group was dominated by elite white men. Rather than critically reflecting on why women of colour and other marginalised groups had less power or were missing altogether in this 'egalitarian' setting, her white comrades reacted with anger that their leadership was being questioned:

I learned a lot of things about the left and its limits. I learned a lot of things about the profound lack of humility of the radical left in France. And of the tropes they still have, that it is upper middle class white men who think they are going to save everyone else!

Particularly in the French context in which Republican values dominate, it is not surprising to see radical white activists refusing anti-racist and intersectional critique since these perspectives are positioned as fundamentally 'anti-French' and an illegitimate importation of divisive race politics from the United States (Mwasi Collectif 2019; Delphy 2015). As this Afrofeminist activist in Paris notes, what she finds most galling about operating in white activist spaces is that deliberative dialogue was the norm in trying to make changes to her network's culture—until she brought up racism and white supremacy. Instead of critical debate, her white comrades dismissed her and refused to listen:

In the very beginning I thought I could change everyone's mind, that through debating, you can change everyone's mind. And above all I learned that in fact, that there are people [who] you can't [convince]! In fact, you can speak to them for hours and hours, you can show them studies, you can show them statistics, you can share personal experiences, and nothing works! The fact of debating with people to change their minds, I find it is much more [effective] with Black women like me [who have similar experiences], than with white people... So as things have progressed, I mainly concentrated my energy on my community.

As per usual in these frustrating and exhausting situations of not being listened to or taken seriously, women of colour activists opt to leave white activist spaces and organise separately with other activists of colour. Across the Channel in London, even though there is a long and storied tradition on the British left of organising around anti-racism and intersectionality (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018), we see similar dynamics at play: a trenchant defense of white space. As this Black gender non-conforming migrants' rights activist recounts, due to ugly disagreements about their activist group's constituency and its organising strategy, they abandoned this space to work directly with migrants on anti-deportation and survival work:

Like a lot of the reasons for me moving away from...white-centred

lefty spaces are because I'm like who the fuck is going to the churches, who is going to have the arguments with someone...who spends most of her time at church and that is where she finds community...I just feel like that is where the work needs to be done...It makes no fucking sense for me to be over here organising with these white middle-class lefties who will never be able to speak to my aunt or be able to go into those churches and that is where my position is most fucking crucial.

The refusal to engage and organise with people of colour on their own terms and in those spaces they created by and for themselves is a repeating pattern across our six research sites. There is a particular disregard and dismissal of religious institutions and faith-based groups by some white leftists, assuming that people of faith, as a whole, are reflexively and inevitably opposed to their agenda. Rather, it is in these grassroots organisations where many comrades and accomplices can be found because they have direct experiences with the British border regime. But to meaningfully build solidarity with migrant-led groups requires a compromise in the security and comfort of white space which many of the activists will not contemplate.

Staying in London, this Black trans LGBTQ+ rights activist found that her white queer comrades resisted her attempts at organisational change to expand the group so that LGBTQ+ folks of colour felt welcomed. Because of her comrades' unwillingness to self-reflect and consider organisational changes, she felt she had no choice but to exit the space:

So that's why I divested [from that space], because I was coming with ideas...and like once they feel you with your...Black skin...coming for a leadership role, suddenly they're throwing obstacles in the way...I mean, you know, they just freeze you out. And I don't think they know they're doing it. They don't know that that's what they're feeling, is this Black fear. [They think to themselves], "Oh, here she comes. Oh, it's a lot. Oh, here we go. Is she related to Malcolm X?" Once I feel that white fragility and I know that they're not reading...going to therapy, talking about it, I'm just like, all right, you do you. I don't need to be here.

White denial extends to policing how women of colour activists name grievances and even to how they self-identify. For this mixed race anti-austerity activist in Paris, speaking in 2020, she notes how any discussion about intersectionality was closed down by her comrades who insists on speaking about class or gender but never race and certainly not how class, race and gender intersect:

The question of class is readily accepted [by her comrades]. It is *the* battle, it is everything. After that comes the question of gender. That goes a bit better because there are a lot more [white] women [in this organisation]. But the question of racism it's... basically there are a lot of people still stuck in the 1980's 'touche pas à mon pote' [literally 'don't hurt my mate', the 1985 slogan of the anti-racist organisation SOS Racisme], so they [her comrades] take a paternalistic approach [to race]!

This white refusal of her intersectional claims is denial of her lived experience as a racialised working class woman and her legitimacy within her organisation:

Well, as a racialised woman, and on top of that, coming from a working class background, everything overlaps. Sometimes it's hard to know where the attack is coming from, actually. And anyway sometimes it's both! Sometimes it will be a racist comment, tinged with classism... Sometimes it will be classism, tinged with racism. It is really intertwined!

Finally, white activist space is defended through the strategic deployment of organisational norms which delegitimise groups not au fait with these practices to prevent them from making changes. This Afrofeminist migrants' rights activist in Berlin discusses how a group of straight cis migrant men from Africa and Asia were summarily dismissed in their attempts to build solidarity with an anti-borders group dominated by white anarchists because they were unfamiliar with the 'correct' language to use when talking about gender and sexuality:

I think that there are many taboos, broadly speaking on the left, which are preventing solidarity. So, for instance, there is the expectation that organisations all will use the same kind of language. I think there is classism inherent in that, because many people do not have the language and do not feel confident. And these people are simply verbally marginalised from many discussions. I have seen men who are seeking solidarity and offering solidarity marginalised from conversations... I've seen these people being publicly humiliated [by white activists].

The ways white activist spaces operate is nuanced and complex. Sometimes the activist space is open to discussions about racism, white supremacy and intersectionality—but only on narrow terms which personalise the problem and find solutions in white people's emotional repertoires. Other times, the space, even though it is nominally anti-racist or, at least, non-racialised, is closed to any discussions and seeks to force the exit of activists of colour. Regardless of how these white activist spaces are configured, the outcome is the same: women of colour activists become increasingly frustrated and disillusioned in trying to change the space and then ultimately leave to work with those activists more amenable to intersectional analyses and practices.

That these patterns repeat across country, milieux, language and activist histories demonstrates the robustness of white space in a European context and warns against activists of colour attempting to change these spaces. Perhaps it is surprising that we so clearly advocate for activists not to attempt transformations in these organisations. As we (2020; 2024) have argued, activists are exhausted and, for the most part, are living precarious lives. Their energy and goodwill are not an infinite resource. They cannot and should not shoulder these burdens alone. For these activists to protect their time and their peace of mind, they should direct their energy where it will be most effective—and that is not in white activist spaces.

It is our view that revolutionary white activists must take up the mantle and transform their spaces if they are serious about solidarity. This is no small feat, in fact, it is the work of a lifetime. But it is essential if leftist activists want to be effective in building the world of their dreams. Women of colour activists are by no means perfect. We (2020; forthcoming 2026) discuss how the spaces they build by and for themselves also reflect issues of internalised racism, colourism, gender hierarchy and trans/homophobia. Everyone has work to do to build solidarity and combat economic insecurity and the far right threat.

Conclusions

In this article we have examined how white spaces operate in leftist European activism and what impact this has on women of colour activists seeking to build solidarity. White spaces are those in which whiteness is normative and unremarkable. These white spaces are built by white activists who are deeply committed to egalitarian ideals. However, once women of colour enter these white spaces and start critiquing them, the fictions of some white activists are exposed.

It is in the challenge to white normativity, and with it, white activists' assumptions of their own egalitarianism and radicalism, that conflict occurs and solidarity is seemingly impossible. Rather than take seriously and seek to resolve women of colour's demands, the white space and the white actors therein, are mobilised against the perceived threat to white security and comfort. Sometimes, women of colour's challenges are misunderstood and their structural demands for change are heard as a plea for white empathy. Other times these demands are dismissed outright as illegitimate and counterproductive. In these responses to women of colour's demands, the goal is to protect the morality and goodness of white radicals and the fantasies they have created which place them and other white groups as the eternal subject and agent of their activism.

We are pessimistic as to whether both the construction of white activist spaces and their trenchant defense can be resolved. In our work on a related theme, we found white activists, even in intersectional spaces co-created by white and women of colour feminists, unwilling to work together on equal terms with their counterparts (Emejulu 2022; Emejulu and Bassel 2024). The problems of white normativity raise serious issues about the possibilities of solidarity and whether it is realistic to build and sustain it over time with a diverse group of activists. Whilst solidarity is an important aspect of activist labour, it is unclear how women of colour activists should pursue this goal given that their interests cannot seem to be fully understood by their white comrades.

Other possibilities may be lost in the futility of pursuing solidarity in these white spaces. Other imaginaries are being enacted, prefigured outside of this zero-sum vortex of whiteness. For instance, some Francophone Afrofeminist activists are recasting the foundations of solidarity in their work (Emejulu and Bassel forthcoming, 2026). As discussed by panelists at our project report launch, activists are undertaking strategic cooperation with some white activists that explicitly rejects emotional engagement, working toward a timely and specific goal and then dissolving what is a transactional, not emotions-based, relationship.ⁱⁱ

Here we have brought the failures of white spaces to the fore rather than prescribing alternatives to activists. These patterns are confirmed over time, across place and in different languages and areas of activism. The rejection of solidarity condemns white activists in these spaces to repeat a failed history of political morality that excludes and dominates while claiming to emancipate all. Within, outside of and despite these spaces, women of colour activists struggle for a different now and tomorrow, knowing that inaction is not an option. Solidarity may be, in this moment, an impossible necessity in the context of the multi-crises we all must confront.

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ⁱ We avoid a narrow and exclusionary view of women, and thus include cis and trans women as well as non-binary femmes. We draw on our previous work (2017a: 5) to define ‘women of colour’ as women who ‘experience the effects of processes of racialisation, class and gender dominations as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status’. We recognise that this terminology does not travel seamlessly across the geographic and linguistic boundaries of this study and generates debate within as well as across contexts.

ⁱⁱ Launch of project report *Women of Colour Resist: Exploring Women of Colour's Activism in Europe*, online event, 14 December 2021. Project website: <https://www.wocresist.com/>