

# The lonely activist: On being haunted

The Sociological Review

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/00380261231179298

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## Abstract

In our six-nation comparative research project examining how women of colour activists in London, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen and Madrid organise and mobilise against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights, we found activists experiencing intense feelings of loneliness in their work. Emotional turmoil in activist spaces is to be expected since activists are mobilised to action precisely because of the deeply felt emotions about a particular social problem. However, we argue that activists' loneliness is a structural alienation born out of the operation of white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, queerphobia, ableism and xenophobia not only in wider society but especially in activist spaces. Women of colour activists are made lonely by the unspoken power relations effectuated through emotions. In trying to negotiate the feeling rules of their activist spaces, we argue that much of women of colour's emotion work is doomed to failure because many activist spaces are constituted by taken for granted dominations to which many women of colour activists are unable and unwilling to reconcile their feelings.

## Keywords

activism, emotions, intersectionality, race, women of colour

## Introduction

In our six-nation comparative research project, *Women of Colour Resist*, which examines how women of colour activists in London, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen and Madrid organise and mobilise against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights, we found activists experiencing intense feelings of loneliness in their work. By 'loneliness' we mean 'feelings of unwanted aloneness, seclusion and isolation that result

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from a lack of meaningful connection with human and non-human animals alike' (Magnet & Orr, 2022, p. 7). To put it another way, loneliness is a 'mismatch between the social connections we have and the social connections we desire' (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 25). This loneliness seems antithetical to activism since the *raison d'être* of activists is building community and solidarity to address grievances.

Emotional turmoil in activist spaces is to be expected (Gould, 2009). Agreeing what the problem is that needs to be addressed, building a collective identity amongst different kinds of people, deciding strategy and tactics to address grievances, taking collective action and reflecting on and responding to victories and defeats are all the complicated parts of doing activism and being an activist. Every step of this process is rife with (oftentimes irresolvable) conflict and tension. Further still, activists are mobilised to action precisely because of the deeply felt emotions about a particular social problem. Thus, activist spaces are awash with emotion – hope, fear, anger and disappointment (Nairn, 2019). However, alongside these fairly typical emotions, we found activists teetering on the brink of burnout and breakdown, sapped of their energy in responding to a multi-pronged crisis as their activism is undervalued whilst their paid work to keep themselves alive is precarious.

We have previously discussed how activists negotiate exhaustion and burnout (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020). We take this work further by examining how the impact of this exhaustion manifests itself as loneliness. We argue that women of colour's precarity must be understood as an emotional state for activists and that the persistence of their economic, social and epistemic insecurity appears to be eroding solidaristic bonds between activists. In this article we seek to explore women of colour activists' loneliness as not only 'unwanted aloneness' but the *social pain of dislocation*. Activists' loneliness, we argue, is a structural alienation born out of the operation of white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, queerphobia, ableism and xenophobia not only in wider society but especially in activist spaces. This shifts our thinking away from causes of forms of activist burnout, such as 'racial battle fatigue' (Gorski, 2019a, 2019b; Williams et al., 2019). While these causes are important in their own right, our focus is on what becomes possible when the emotional turmoil of activists is the starting point rather than the outcome to be explained. Ours is a methodology of precarity – as epistemic insecurity, economic insecurity – exploring its function as an emotion that shapes responses to crises. Loneliness is therefore interpreted not only as an individualised reaction to bad times, but as a call to action to fundamentally transform how solidarity is practised in activist spaces.

By 'activism' we mean individuals joining together to take collective action in public space to effect social change (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b). We avoid a narrow and exclusionary view of women, and thus include cis and trans women as well as non-binary femmes. As in our previous work, we 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' (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, p. 5). 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.

We begin this article with a discussion of racialised and gendered emotions as understanding the dynamics of feeling rules and emotion work in activist spaces is crucial in our examination of women of colour activists' feelings of loneliness (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Evans, 2013; Hochschild, 1979, 2012; Mirchandani, 2003; Wingfield, 2010, 2021). We then turn to explore two urban contexts – Berlin and Copenhagen – where we think these dynamics most clearly play out and discuss our methodology and methods. Finally, we discuss our findings, in which we demonstrate how women of colour activists in these two cities are made lonely by the unspoken power relations effectuated through emotions.

In trying to negotiate the feeling rules of their activist spaces, we argue that much of women of colour's emotion work is doomed to failure because many activist spaces are constituted by taken for granted dominations to which many women of colour activists are unable and unwilling to reconcile their feelings. Plainly, many left-wing activist spaces reproduce white supremacy. Women of colour's loneliness is derived from the emotional domination that takes place in these ostensibly radical spaces. Further, we argue that the domination that takes place in these spaces is 'unspeakable', in that it is denied and disavowed by their white comrades. Following Eng and Han (2000), we argue that these white denials constitute a haunting: the feeling rules of activist spaces promote amnesia about white supremacy, patriarchy and queerphobia, which is felt and experienced by activists as loneliness.

## Feeling lonely, feeling haunted

'Emotions constitute the bodily manifestation of the importance that an event in the . . . social world has for a subject' (Bericat, 2016, p. 493). Emotions are socio-political constructions experienced individually and collectively. In this article, we are interested in the sociology and politics of emotions and feelings – we use these two terms interchangeably.<sup>1</sup> Over the last 15 years in studying women of colour's activism in Europe we have consistently found that these activists experience exclusion and disillusionment because of the unequal power relations they must negotiate in white-dominated radical and centre-left activist spaces. Whilst we typically map these exclusions, we usually focus on what the activists do next – how they take action *despite* this domination. For our purposes here, because this was a recurring theme across six very different cultural contexts, we wish to focus on the loneliness and alienation activists felt in these spaces – regardless of whether they chose to tough it out or exited these spaces for pastures new.

In trying to understand the slippery power dynamics happening in white-dominated activist spaces, we needed the help of Hochschild (1979, 2012). Some exclusions taking place in these activist spaces are readily identifiable in terms of who is considered a leader, who is listened to and who is taken seriously. We know ideas about competency, ability and efficacy are deeply racialised and gendered and we found these inequalities in recognition (Fraser, 2000; Young, 1990) replicated in radical spaces (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b; Emejulu & Bassel, 2018, 2020). However, we were missing a key part of the exclusionary dynamics by not paying enough attention to the feeling rules of these activist spaces. Emotions are 'governed by social rules' that demand we emote in predictable and expected ways in particular social situations (Hochschild, 1979, p.

551). These 'feeling rules' mandate 'emotion work' in which we try to reconcile our individual responses to certain events to hegemonic emotional gestures. These emotional norms are another way in which dominant ideologies are reinforced and (re)presented as taken for granted and common sense. In her exploration of racial inequalities in the American workplace, Wingfield (2010, 2021) demonstrates how racialised and gendered feeling rules constitute emotional domination through the repression of Black workers' emotional expressions. As we will evidence below in our findings section, spotlighting the feeling rules in activist spaces brings into sharp relief all the complex processes of domination which result in women of colour's exhaustion, silencing and, ultimately, ejection from these spaces.

However, making visible what is demanded to be felt is only part of what is going on in the exclusionary practices in white-dominated activist spaces. We must also map how these feeling rules operate and which emotions, positive or negative, they elicit from activists. As Evans (2013) and Wingfield (2010, 2021) argue, feeling rules reflect and reproduce racist, sexist, classist, queerphobic and ableist norms of conduct and individual expression. Being seen as companionable and non-threatening, a white bourgeois ideal, is typically how emotions are controlled and decorum is policed in public spaces. And it is here, in the insistence on being affable, that we think feeling rules are most insidious for women of colour activists. The need to be seen as non-threatening in order to be taken seriously is how women of colour are silenced, excluded and made to feel lonely. The issues that women of colour experience – persistent insecurity and violence derived from intersecting inequalities in the labour market, the housing market and in the everyday life of the street – are rendered trivial when it is demanded that these issues should be discussed in a chummy, non-threatening way that does not make white comrades feel guilty or complicit – or, more typically and preferably, not discussed at all.

The need to discuss the processes and effects of racism, sexism, classism, queerphobia and ableism violates the rules of decorum of white-dominated activist spaces because these spaces are constituted by the very things women of colour are struggling against. Here we see how loneliness is produced in these spaces. Rather than loneliness being an individualised feeling of aloneness, in fact it is a manifestation of deep alienation in spaces ostensibly constituted by egalitarianism, camaraderie and solidarity. Loneliness is that emotional gap – a structure of feeling, perhaps – between the desire for community and companionship and the stark reality of how that longed for community actually operates. Loneliness then is a kind of sticky residue of feeling precarious and having no outlet to articulate and then take action to address this insecurity. To put it another way, we can think of these feeling rules as an 'emotional colour line' that separates and dominates women of colour activists rendering their emotions, and, crucially, the structures of inequalities that produce these emotions, invisible, unintelligible and, ultimately, unimportant (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 132).

Following Eng and Han (2000, p. 673), we argue that the loneliness women of colour activists experience, that deep alienation and contradiction in radical and centre-left white-dominated spaces, constitutes a haunting. Because the feeling rules of many of these activist spaces demand 'an enforced psychic amnesia' about structures of oppression and women of colour's institutional and everyday inequalities, a misremembering and denial of the past and present conjures a haunting that takes an emotional toll on all

the activists in the space, especially women of colour. The haunting is constituted by the repression of women of colour's emotions but also the inconvenient truths about the nature of inequality and the strategies and tactics of the particular activist group. As we have long argued, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the so-called 'precariat' in academic and activist analyses (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b). The precariat is assumed to be white, able-bodied and male (Standing, 2012). Indeed, the precariat appears to be the same group but with a different label of the workers who experienced mass unemployment due to the effects of deindustrialisation since the 1970s (Amin, 2011). However, the empirical evidence shows us that the precariat is constituted differently. Across Europe, where statistics are available<sup>2</sup> we know that women of colour are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed; more likely to be working in low paid, low skilled work and surviving on insecure contracts. They are also more likely to be living in insecure, overcrowded rental accommodation. And, because the precariat discourse is degendered as well as deraced, women of colour are also more likely to be doing the majority of household labour. Further still, they are more likely to be dealing with the harsh realities of transformed welfare states in which benefits are rapidly losing their value because of inflation and are subject to more punitive and stringent criteria to stop people from exercising their social welfare rights. And these dynamics really only apply to those who enjoy particular kinds of recognised legal status. Those undocumented and illegalised migrants who are, nevertheless, an essential component of the workforce doing the dirty and dangerous work many white citizens do not wish to do, are in even more precarious circumstances since they are so vulnerable to exploitative conditions in both work and housing (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b).

How then does our understanding of 'working class politics' fundamentally transform when we recognise that the 'working class' is not homogeneous and is, in fact, constituted by a large number of Black and Brown people of varying legal statuses? How does our sense of time, particularly in relation to austerity measures, shift when we think about who has been trying to survive on precarious and punitive temporary employment contracts and unliveable benefits since before the 2008 economic crisis? How do our ideas of European solidarity falter when undocumented migrants are drowned in the name of protecting welfare states? When women of colour activists attempt to discuss these dynamics in spaces in which the feeling rules dictate that this must be repressed, denied and misremembered, that is what we mean by a haunting. These inequalities, of course, do not disappear. They become unspeakable and in that silence, the haunting intensifies. The appeal to white ignorance and innocence is how this emotional repression is managed (Mills, 2007; Wekker, 2016). And women of colour are exhausted and made lonely by white comrades positioning themselves as ignorant innocents. Here is how loneliness is produced and why women of colour burn out and, more often than not, exit these spaces. Note that activists' exits do not put an end to the haunting as the haunting too is structural, it is an 'absent presence' that is essential to the functioning of left-wing radical politics at this moment (Lewis, 2017). Without the denial of women of colour's experiences, left politics would be illegible.

Before discussing our findings about lonely activists in detail, we will first turn to provide the context for our comparative project and discuss our methodology and methods.

## **Context and methods**

In this section we set the scene of multiple catastrophes engulfing Europe during the period of our data collection. Our framework for understanding women of colour's activism in Europe is informed by three interrelated crises: (1) The continuing effects of the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures which have sped up an ongoing process of shrinking, privatising and commodifying welfare states. (2) Europe's border crisis in which desperate people fleeing poverty and violence are pushed back, detained, made destitute and deprived of dignity and freedom in the name of protecting those shrinking welfare states. (3) The steady gains of the far right, both in terms of electoral successes and the co-optation and mainstreaming of these groups' ideas, discourses and policies by centre-left and centre-right parties and in popular and media discourses.

For the purposes of this article and in the interests of space, we will only be focusing on two cities in our study – Berlin and Copenhagen – which we think best illustrate the complex politics we are analysing, both in terms of activist loneliness and the broader social transformations related to austerity, the border crisis and the normalisation of the far right. While we note many resonances across cases, we are mindful of the significant variations across the contexts we explore. For this reason, we now carefully contextualise the specific moment and configurations of these crises.

### **Context**

The different contexts of our study demonstrate the varied effects of the 2008 crisis. In Germany during our period of data collection, while official discourse positioned the German people as 'teaching' austerity and fiscal prudence to 'lazy' and 'undisciplined' southern Europeans, activists in Berlin have, since the early 1990s, struggled against localised austerity measures in response to the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989. Indeed, the reunification of the city has always meant structural adjustments – whether in west Berlin and the loss of its well-paid manufacturing jobs or in east Berlin and the dismantling of its strong public sector (Lebuhn, 2015; Soederberg, 2019). After local officials' disastrous post-Wall land speculations threatened to bankrupt the city, fresh austerity measures were imposed in 2001, particularly the privatisation and commodification of social housing and a real terms reduction of the social welfare spending in the city. 'From 2001 to 2011, Berlin ranked last . . . among all 16 German federal states in terms of growth of public expenditure' (Lebuhn, 2015, p. 108). The availability, affordability and maintenance of housing have long been a source of contention and austerity measures post-2008 have only worsened already existing problems of gentrification and displacement. The activist group Kotti & Co, composed of an alliance of residents of a large former social housing block in Kottbusser Tor (affectionately known as Kotti) in Kreuzberg, is emblematic of anti-austerity housing activism in the city (Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Heidsieck, 2017).

Germany's approach to migration during the time of our fieldwork is best described as hypocritical and contradictory. Germany has long had a begrudging and exploitative relationship with migrants, from guest workers in the postwar period to asylum seekers today. In 2015 under the leadership of then Chancellor Angela Merkel, the country



welcomed 1 million refugees in response to the crisis in the Mediterranean sparked by the Syrian civil war. The so-called *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture) meant that longstanding anti-racist and migrants' rights activists, government-funded non-governmental organisations and new volunteers mobilised into action, organising to help newcomers settle into the country and rebuild their lives (Braun, 2017; Funk, 2016). However, that German welcome was always contingent and incomplete. More established migrants noted the differential treatment between them and the new arrivals.<sup>3</sup> The new arrivals observed the oftentimes patronising terms on which they were welcomed and how *Willkommenskultur* was also circumscribed by open hostility and sporadic violence, especially attacks on migrant reception centres, by far right groups. In Berlin, rather than compete against each other, many longstanding migrant activists and new arrivals worked in solidarity to call attention to Europe's border violence which is enacted simultaneously at Europe's fringes and at its core and which Germany's limited welcoming did little to address. Indeed, groups such as Lampedusa in Berlin – whose name has a double meaning in that the activists survived the mayhem on that poorly resourced Italian island *and* that border violence was a daily reality for them in the heart of Europe – joined an ongoing migrant-led occupation of Oranienplatz (the O-Platz encampment) in Kreuzberg to protest migrant detention, the lack of free movement, destitution and police violence in the city (Perolini, 2022a, 2022b).

The shock of Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), the country's far right upstart party, becoming the third largest party in the Bundestag after the 2017 federal elections must be understood in the context of both austerity and the Mediterranean crisis we outlined above. These political entrepreneurs have been able to leverage anger about the decimation of the post-Wall economies in former GDR areas and wrongly connect that to migration, especially after 2015 (Grimm, 2015). The 2017 elections saw voters from both the left (the Social Democrats [SPD] and Die Linke) and the right (Christian Democrats) migrate to the AfD. As a result, these mainstream parties tried to play catch up by pandering to right-wing populism and shifting political discourses, particularly around migration, to the right.<sup>4</sup> At the time of our data collection, the AfD's electoral success and its gonzo, attention-seeking tactics in the Bundestag emboldened its far right supporters in the city, with an increase in street harassment and violence against people of colour – including some of our participants who had been doxed and harassed. As with the other crises we have discussed so far, there was and continues to be an organised response from the left through a constellation of anti-fascist, anti-racist and migrant justice groups countering street propaganda and violence.

In Denmark, there are many overlaps with but also key departures from Germany in terms of how the tripartite crises have played out and in the activists' responses. During our fieldwork, the 2018 *Ghettopakken* (ghetto package) loomed large. This flagship social welfare policy of the centre-right coalition government (with parliamentary support from the far right Danish People's Party), led by then Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, created a carceral framework to forcibly 'integrate' ghetto residents' into Danish society and, by 2030, abolish all ghettos in the country (Olsen & Larsen, 2023). Since 2004 under successive centre-right and centre-left governments so-called 'ghetto strategies' were developed to tackle what the government saw as crime, disorder and the erosion of 'Danish values' in social housing in poor neighbourhoods (Schmidt, 2012). At

first glance, it might not seem like these ghetto strategies are connected to austerity measures, but, in fact, austerity is achieved through the Danish government's racialising social citizenship via the ghettos. In a departure from previous strategies, in 2018 ghettos were defined *primarily* as areas where the number of immigrants and 'descendants from non-western countries', regardless of their citizenship status, exceed 50% of the total population. Then, other criteria were applied solidifying an area's status as a ghetto: more than 40% of working age adults not in education, employment or training, higher than average numbers of residents with criminal convictions and lower than average levels of education.

Through a series of laws, the state has now eroded social citizenship for residents in these stigmatised areas. 'The Danish 2018 initiative stands out as one that explicitly targets ethnic minorities and limits their rights based on culturalist attributions of responsibility for a lacking contribution to the welfare state' (Seemann, 2021, p. 600). For instance, the state has the power to compel parents to send their children to 25 hours of mandatory Danish language lessons and exposure to Danish 'culture' or face benefit sanctions. If residents in these areas have family members living abroad, they are no longer eligible for family reunification. Welfare beneficiaries are also deprioritised for housing in these areas. Crucially, to achieve its goal of abolishing ghettos, municipal areas are compelled to reduce the numbers of welfare recipients in social housing and are legally obligated to prioritise available housing to those in employment and/or education. Municipalities are also mandated to reduce the number of social housing units. Failure to comply allows the federal state to take over the housing, privatise it and ultimately demolish it and disperse residents elsewhere. In the Copenhagen neighbourhood of Nørrebro, where some of our fieldwork took place, the struggle against gentrification and the displacement of migrant communities via the ghetto strategy brings together different kinds of activists – residents, anti-racist, anti-fascist, anarchists and trade unionists – in solidarity.

It is perhaps in the Danish case that we see most clearly how austerity, racism and xenophobia are fused together to placate far right populists. The concept of the ghetto has long been in use in Denmark, but it was not until the Danish People's Party entered Parliament in 1998 and started using it in debates that it began to morph and particular areas and groups reified. Importantly, the then Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a free marketer committed to lowering taxes and privatising and shrinking the welfare state, adopted the concept of the ghetto in a landmark 2004 speech about the erosion of Danish values and the development of parallel societies in social housing (Rasmussen, 2004). In so doing, he and his government helped to normalise the far right tactic of racialising social citizenship which, in turn, justified cuts to social spending.

By the 2015 federal elections, the Danish People's Party had solidified its success to become the second largest party in Parliament and used its power to help shape government policy whilst not being a member of the governing coalition. The migration of both centre-left and centre-right voters to the far right at least partially helps to explain measures such as the 2016 'Jewellery Law', which allows the Danish state to seize valuables from newly arrived migrants forcing them to help pay for their refuge and safety in the country. In response to the Syrian civil war and the chaos in the Mediterranean that we previously discussed, the centre-right coalition government did not, like their



counterparts in Germany, welcome migrants to the country but instead did the opposite and attempted to position Denmark as an undesirable destination for those fleeing war, terror and poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Our fieldwork took place during the 2019 federal elections in which the Social Democrats campaigned as pro-welfare and anti-immigration, a capitulation to and co-optation of the far right. The Social Democrats secured a minority government with smaller left-wing parties, in which they were obliged to ‘soften’ their stance on immigration. Also at this time, our research assistant and her participants had to contend with the disruptive presence of a newly empowered far right political entrepreneur, Rasmus Paludan, the founder of the Hard Line Party. His provocative and hostile demonstrations rooted in Islamophobia (for instance, his burning of the Quran), helped to shape Danish public debate and further mainstream extremist language. Cannily, Paludan and his supporters justified his actions by equating hate speech with free speech and positioned his actions within the realm of those cherished Danish values that policies such as the ghetto package are meant to staunchly uphold and defend. Here we see how the troubling drift to the right in Danish politics comes full circle in that mainstream parties who dabble in far right politics are robbed of authority to criticise and take action against those extremist ideas and practices that seemingly ‘go too far’. These far right discourses and policies have had very real effects on our participants, some of whom were forced from their homes when they were doxed and targeted by far right activists.

## Methods

Our fieldwork for this project took place between May 2019 and January 2020, predating both the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings across Europe and the United States in response to the murder of George Floyd. Our project focused on six sites: Berlin, Paris, Brussels (Francophone and Flemish communities), Copenhagen, Madrid and London. We selected these cities, where most of the research was undertaken, because of their long and rich histories of activism and because of their dense and varied networks of women of colour activists working creatively on anti-austerity, anti-racism and migrants’ rights. In this article, for the sake of space, we focus on Berlin and Copenhagen. Berlin is the home of longstanding Black feminist organisations such as *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* and ADEFRA – *Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland* and newer migrants’ rights groups such as Women in Exile and International Women’s Space. Copenhagen has longstanding migrants’ rights and racial justice groups, including *Almen Modstand* working to oppose the ghetto package and a chapter of Black Lives Matter, which has a strong focus on anti-detention and anti-deportation work.

Research assistants undertook wide-ranging data collection work including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observations and social media analysis in all six countries of the study. We specifically recruited research assistants who were multilingual and had strong relationships with their respective activist milieu. In so doing, we were able to access activist groups that purposefully keep themselves under the radar as well as more well-known groups. The research assistants, given their local knowledge, made their own decisions about the specific issues and grievances they focused on as they knew best which topics were of particular importance to these activist

groups. For this article, again in the interest of space, we focus only on the Berlin and Copenhagen interviews. In these two cities the research assistants interviewed 28 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 and rank and file activists.

We will now turn to explore activist loneliness in detail. Please note that all identifying details of activists have been anonymised and the activists decided how they wished to be described in our study.

## **Alone, together**

In analysing activist loneliness and the feeling rules in activist spaces, we want to demonstrate the dynamics of how women of colour activists find themselves alone and feeling isolated within their activist spaces and networks. We begin in Berlin, with a mixed race, Afro-European anti-austerity activist. This activist is part of a left-wing populist group focused on renewing ideas of social democracy, particularly in relation to rebuilding European welfare states and reviving ideas of social citizenship. As we discussed above, Berlin is in the middle of a severe housing crisis and so many anti-austerity activists in the city work against the creeping privatisation of public services and trying to address the cost of living crisis.

For this activist, she was at first excited to join this group because of her interest in social democracy and because this group is ‘very horizontal and democratic, from the bottom up. And so, there’s a lot of freedom for the local groups to do what they want, which is great.’ However, problems quickly emerged:

So I went to the local Berlin group and found it in really stark contrast to what the movement was about. So, it was basically white men. . . And I thought that was the end of my activism right there. [laughs] But then I spoke to a few women there and they had set up a women’s group and so I went to their meeting and then we started to have ideas on how we could develop ideas and then feed them back to the general, local groups. Cis-women. White women. Young women. Mainly. . . I guess class-wise it is also middle-class, at least.

As we and others have documented elsewhere, left-wing populist groups, despite their self-representation as ‘the people’ or the ‘99%’, in fact are constituted by a white male middle class elite who in turn attempt to universalise their identities, interests and ideas and are oftentimes extremely hostile to any discussions of race, gender and sexuality (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b; Emejulu, 2017; Maignascha et al., 2016). For this activist, she was surprised by the obvious contradiction of a populist group being almost wholly constituted by white middle class men and found temporary solace in a splinter feminist group. Predictably, however, the feminist group was also deeply problematic. A big point of debate and conflict within this group was around a manifesto which would set the terms for the following year’s activism. The populist manifesto, according to this activist, excluded race, religion and disability from its definition of inequality and she fought a lonely battle, against her erstwhile feminist comrades, to try to get an intersectional understanding of inequality included. As the activist recounts:

And so, [our group's] manifesto came out, and as I read it there was absolutely no mention of race. . . The only discrimination that was mentioned was gender and as I read it, it felt like even that was kind of like an afterthought. . . I think it was difficult for these women to realise that I'm also affected by race. In fact, I would say – until this moment in my life – I've been more affected by race than I have been affected by gender. . . I was apprehensive about sharing [my experiences]. . . with the women anyway, because this question of solidarity going both ways was a question mark to me.

Here we see how loneliness is produced and how activist spaces are haunted. Race and racism were denied by white comrades. However, this denial does not dissipate the fact of racism – rather we see white ignorance invoked as a way to manage the enforced amnesia about race. Being haunted by race, in turn, erodes trust and any potential for solidaristic bonds between this activist and her ostensible comrades. From these denials about race, we can gain insights into the feeling rules of this activist space and what is rendered unintelligible when these rules are violated. The activist recalls her emotion work at that time:

And I don't like to be confrontational, but when I really have to, I can be quite harsh. And I said: 'I'm really sorry, but I want you to understand that the main reason is that I want the word race in there, I want ethnic or other minority discrimination to be in there'. . . And they went completely quiet and then they didn't say anything anymore. And then I felt: 'Okay, so I'm alone with this thing again.' And so that's how it went, and I think that's the problem: They couldn't understand the issue. They really couldn't understand the issue.

[It is] tiring to always be the angry Black woman in the room who has issues, and everybody thinks that they're colour-blind and these are not really issues. . . And so, you constantly feel like you're explaining yourself. . . What you say is not factual, it's emotional or somehow can be second-guessed and questioned.

The activist expresses her loneliness clearly: because she violated the feeling rules of the space, she was 'harsh' and 'confrontational' – but really what she had done was to dare to insist on talking about race and intersectionality, even on apologetic terms, where it had been studiously omitted – she is left alone, she is abandoned by her comrades. Further still, she exhausts herself in trying to exorcise her haunted activist space – by speaking of and about race. Instead, she is branded the problem, she becomes that which haunts.

The following respondent, a migrant woman who is an anti-racist activist in the city, has a similar experience. Working in solidarity with groups of different racialised people of varying legal statuses is essential for effective activism in Berlin. However, this activist finds that many ostensibly anti-racist and anti-austerity groups are only composed of white Germans who do not work directly with people of colour. She argues that these groups are more concerned with the appearance rather than the practice of solidarity, a phenomenon she names as 'trickle-down justice':

[There's] this assumption that you can improve conditions for a group without considering the most marginalised members of that group. And thinking by improving the conditions for the

best out of that group. . . that it will trickle down. So, I like to call this trickle-down justice. The same way that trickle-down economics or supply-side economics, we know for a fact that none of that shit works. That the only way you can improve conditions for everyone is to improve the conditions for the people who have it the worst, you know.

Because she is made to feel lonely by pointing out the lack of intersectional solidarity among her white comrades, she has now stopped working with them. As with the previous activist, she becomes that which haunts these spaces because her observation of white supremacy is denied, disavowed and made unspeakable:

So many groups in Germany don't think about who within their communities have the shittiest conditions. They're worried about who's in the room. They're not worried about who can't afford to be in the room. And it's something that drives me insane. . . Like, I don't organise with white activists anymore. I used to do it. I don't do it anymore. I have nothing to do with them anymore. . . You are not improving conditions, if you are not improving conditions for the people who have it the worst. . . If people are acting like they're making great moves when they're moving the bar over for white women, cis-het women, or they're moving the bar over for documented people – they're not moving the bar at all. . . Even anti-racist organisations in Germany. . . they won't even blink an eye to the fact that they have fucking meetings and there's not a single person of colour in the room. They'll invite me to come and talk at something and they're all white people. And if I say to them, 'Hey, we got a problem', I get told that I don't know what I'm talking about.

This Vietnamese-German feminist activist experiences loneliness in the company of those white activists who seek to work in solidarity with her. Because these groups position themselves as ignorant innocents about the realities of racism in Germany, this activist is forced into a position of educating them, which she refuses to do. Instead, like the activist above, she is choosing not to be exhausted anymore by these dynamics and is strongly considering not working with white comrades any longer:

I think solidarity is too exhausting for me. . . All this activism and organising alone is really exhausting, that's why I don't feel like doing something with people to whom I have to explain basic things [like racism and white supremacy]. . . That's what I've been thinking about for a while now, whether I should stop with [solidarity]. I wonder whether it's so important to sit at the table. . . with these grand, mostly white people or actually white women. Then I just think: 'Do I want that at all or do I rather invest the energy I have now, the power, into community things or by working together with other initiatives?'

For the activists in Berlin, complex emotion work takes place about whether they will reconcile themselves to the inequalities embedded in white-dominated spaces. 'Solidarity' means that they must be emotionally dominated by their white comrades. For these activists, they would rather exit the space and/or reject working in solidarity than subject themselves to such domination.

In Copenhagen, we see similar dynamics at play. Our fieldwork took place during the Danish federal elections in which racism and fascism were a hot topic in public debates and yet, the women of colour activists in our study were nevertheless alone and haunted.

For this Black Danish anti-racist activist, she, in a way, has always experienced a kind of loneliness because she felt her Blackness constantly under attack since childhood:

I was raised in all-white spaces, I always felt at odds. I've always tried to defend my identity and who I am and why I belong and sort of just, like [have] people accept the way that I am. So I think, I've always been on the forefront in sort of truth-telling and sort of just basically being blunt about what kind of dynamics there exist between people and how people [try to] make me feel odd.

In her coalition work with a majority-white migrants' rights organisation, she continued her 'truth-telling' about the dynamics of race and racism and quickly found herself adrift and alone:

They don't ask the questions of who is in the power. . . who gets to make the decisions, how do we look like, how do we operate. . . how do we allow white supremacy to sort of thrive. . . They are really good at not engaging people of colour, not collaborating with people of colour and not funding people of colour.

Similar to the activists in Berlin, this activist appeared to violate the feeling rules of her activist space and thus she was branded a problem and her emotions were both misinterpreted and effaced: 'They [her organisation] were saying that we [the women of colour activists] were very aggressive, they wanted us to sort of repress the things we feel.' In order to stay in this space, she had to submit herself to being emotionally dominated. At the time of this interview, she was still contemplating whether to stay or leave this space.

Another Black Danish anti-racist activist also felt lonely in her interactions with her white comrades:

Many times when you are in white majority spaces, you are like the lone voice. . . because you are always. . . trying to manage white people's feelings. . . In all white spaces, you are always trying to figure out how you can diplomatically say something or do something, like, how can I say this, so these people will hear it and not just shut down, because they feel attacked?

This activist was forced to expend valuable time and energy to make her anti-racist appeals more palatable and acceptable to her comrades. She was also striving for that white bourgeois ideal of affability to seem non-threatening. Wingfield (2010, 2021) identifies this specific kind of emotion work as a form of emotional domination and the encoding of white supremacy into people of colour's bodies and psyches. What is particularly telling about this activist's emotion work with regard to her white comrades is that this work is in no way reciprocal. This activist offers valuable insights about the denial and policing of women of colour activists' emotional range. We return to the idea of an 'emotional colour line' (Cvetkovich, 2012): there are simply some emotions women of colour are allowed to feel and others that are off limits, that are effectively segregated and reserved for white people only:

We [women of colour] are just supposed to accept so much, like the things that we go through [racism and sexism], we are just supposed to be able to accept that. Not because we don't have

feelings, or are super-human, but it is just like, it is as if we are lower in the hierarchy. Well then, you are just supposed to accept that this is the way it is. . . And not because they [white people] don't understand the feelings, it is just that, we are not entitled to have that feeling. . . there is just this unspoken. . . sense of entitlement and a real sense of, 'well, you guys are down here and we are up here, ergo, your feelings are just not as valid as ours'. Like you know, 'these things are happening to you, yeah, but because it's us who are doing it, you just have to take it.'

Here we see most starkly the feeling rules that dominate women of colour activists, which produce and reinforce their loneliness. Women of colour are lonely because it is demanded and expected that they must feel alienation and dislocation in order to stop them from speaking out and disrupting the racism, sexism, queerphobia and ableism which structures activist spaces and the relationships and emotions that circulate therein. Women of colour must be emotionally dominated as this renders the inequalities in the activist space unspeakable, ensuring activism continues as usual.

Finally, this Korean-Danish racial justice activist discusses the emotion work she must do in order to be taken seriously by her white radical comrades. Here we see clearly how emotional domination operates, the high wire act she must perform to conform to the white bourgeois ideals of propriety:

I am very much aware of one of my ways to gain authority is that I actually apply some masculine traits in order to be heard more, which means that I am basically also very, very factual and very boring when I talk, but also can have an appearance of being a little square and a little bit abrupt and a little bit distant basically, because I'm very much aware of that they [white activists] use emotions as an argument for shutting me down, so therefore I can appear as a little bit colder, because I am very much aware of how I'm perceived emotionally. . . And that's why also a lot of people burn out, because then they meet too much resistance. . . and it is really sensitive, these emotional things, but you cannot, *you cannot* move forward if you are not able to shield yourself a little bit from that.

As we have seen in both Berlin and Copenhagen, 'shielding' oneself from emotional domination means not working in solidarity and/or leaving white-dominated activists and putting one's emotional energy elsewhere.

## Conclusions

In our study we found that white-dominated left-wing activist spaces are constituted by 'unspeakable' dominations to which many women of colour activists are unable and unwilling to reconcile their emotions. The feeling rules of these different spaces – anti-austerity, migrants' rights and anti-racist – promote racial denial and amnesia which generate women of colour's loneliness. We name this loneliness as a haunting because of the deep alienation and contradictions of radical and centre-leftist spaces, in which the intersectional inequalities of the past and present are misremembered and disavowed. These inconvenient, intersecting inequalities are to be borne in silence or refuted through the mobilisation of universal subjects and identities such as 'women' or 'the working class'. This haunting is structural. It is a requirement of the business as usual of spaces for which this absent presence is a foundation, grounded in white ignorance and



innocence. For this article we focused on activists' emotions as that gives us valuable insights into how solidarity is both conceived and practised in very different social and cultural contexts. Indeed, that the two cities we studied for this article, Berlin and Copenhagen, with different histories of activism, migration patterns and political institutions, could nevertheless display strikingly similar dynamics with regard to the excluding processes of racialised emotions, offers another example of how Goldberg's (2006) concept of racial Europeanisation operates.

Because we are interested in those unlikely and unexpected emotions in activist spaces – ambivalence, uncertainty and contradiction – we think loneliness can be a radical point of departure to fundamentally transform the theory and practice of solidarity (Emejulu, 2022). As we discuss elsewhere (Emejulu & Bassel, forthcoming), solidarity must be grounded not only in sentiment but in the practicalities of organisation-building. Solidarity is indeed a structure of feeling but it is also a commitment to practical action to make radical change. Creating a new world means an activist group rethinks its problem analysis, strategy and tactics, decision-making processes, leadership structures, organisational form and how it manages conflict and dissent. Europe is being rocked by interrelated crises that cannot be fully understood or effectively combated without an understanding of intersectionality, racism and white supremacy. These are crucial analytical frameworks and liberation projects to understand how and why the far right can use, to stunning success, the same playbook across the continent to demonise migrants, trans folks and various other 'undesirables' whilst simultaneously calling for the rebuilding of welfare states. Activists' loneliness contains the seeds of a different kind of left politics that we encounter far too rarely in our explorations of European activism. We have everything we need to exorcise these ghosts and transform these hauntings into pragmatic action for radical change.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank everyone who gave their time to participate in our project, and our research assistants: Dr Dominique Haensell, Mette Toft Nielsen, Dr Rose Ndengue, Imani Robinson, Dr Nicole Grégoire and Nadia Nadesan.

### **Funding**

The project was funded by the Open Society Foundation (OR2018-43276), November 2018–April 2023.

### **Notes**

1. Please note that we are not interested in the debates in affect theory, though recognise some of the connections with our work. Instead, we locate ourselves in a different literature focused on the empirical study of emotions in social life.
2. As has long been noted, due to many European countries' fascist history, the collection of statistics based on race are illegal. This is a particular problem in the two most influential countries in the European Union – France and Germany. As we and other authors have argued, using proxies such as geography, ethnicity and migration history not only masks the problem of racial inequalities but makes it very difficult for activists to argue for change without reliable data about institutionalised and everyday racism in the labour market, education, housing and health services.

3. At the time of writing in August 2022, these dynamics are playing out yet again in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainians fleeing war have been welcomed in Germany but unlike other migrants have been given full access and opportunities to the German state and economy in order to rebuild their lives. Free German language classes, free university, access to housing, the ability to regularise their status to work legally and permanently settle in the country – all the issues migrants' rights groups have long campaigned for – have been automatically granted to Ukrainians. What is more, so-called 'third country nationals', mostly African university students studying in Ukraine who were also evacuated to Germany, have been denied such opportunities and live with the threat of destitution and deportation.
4. Although note, in the most recent federal elections in 2021, the SPD and the Greens formed a coalition government and one of their policy goals is a so-called 'paradigm shift' in the country's self-conception to consider itself an 'immigrant society' given Germany's ageing population and chronic labour shortages that can only be resolved through migrant labour.
5. By way of underscoring the overt racism of this policy note that, at the time of writing, Ukrainians arriving in Denmark due to Russia's invasion are exempt from the Jewellery Law because, in the words of Danish PM Mette Frederiksen: 'Ukraine is in our immediate region. It is part of Europe. It's in our backyard.' Denmark, like Germany, will introduce special legislation to support Ukrainian nationals, including extending visas and changing the rules related to residency.

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