

White Friend

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I am talking to a woman of colour about the racism she has experienced in her academic career thus far. She has a lot to share. The more experiences you have, the more you have to share. She talks about two instances in which she is identified as having “a chip on her shoulder.” This expression “chip on her shoulder” has come up often in my data: it can be used to imply that the one who complains does so because she is bitter, that her grievance is really a grudge.

Chip, chip; chip: if we keep chipping away at the old block it is not surprising they keep finding the chips on our shoulders. What is most unsurprising is often what is most hard.

In the first instance she is told she has a “chip on her shoulder” by the head of human resources. It was during a meeting to discuss a complaint she had submitted about racism, bullying and misogyny in her department. She had collected testimonies from around 20 people; the complaint was a collective. She describes: “they treated the submission as an act of arrogance on my part.” It is as if she put a complaint forward as a way of putting herself forward; a complaint is often treated as self-promotional. I have shared her experience in previous [posts](#). Her account has taught me a lot about how those who complain are dismissed and how this dismissal can rehearse the problem that the complaint is trying to address: for instance, how women of colour are often positioned as embittered (or even envious), as if we are talking about racism because we are sore or as if we are projecting a personal failure onto a system. It is a form of racism to say that racism does not exist. We can know this, but still have to deal with the consequences of this.

She talked to me about another occasion in which this expression is used. Here the setting is more familiar; it her familiar. It is an academic setting. She is giving a paper on the emotional labour of diversity work. It can be exhausting to talk about what is exhausting. We often do what we do to make sense of what we do. A white feminist academic in the audience responds in a hostile manner saying she had “a chip on her shoulder.” If making complaints can take you into meetings with human resources, what you encounter there is often the same thing you have already encountered in academic settings.

Talking about racism means dealing with the racism articulated in response to what you are talking about. Which also means: you end up doing more emotional labour the more you talk about doing emotional labour. The labour of dealing with racism is not only about dealing with those who articulate racist views or who respond in a hostile way because you are talking about racism. That labour is often performed in relation to many others, including those around you who you might have expected to be more sympathetic. In this case, she had to perform that labour in responding to two white academics she understood to be her friends. They were also her white allies: in their academic work they both offered critical perspectives on race. She has reasons to expect them to “get it,” to have understood what had gone on, and to give her support. “Getting it” is important to solidarity work – so many experiences are made harder if other people do not, cannot, or will not “get it,” get what is going on. She said that although her white friends and allies had heard what had been said;

they “could not recognise it.” Often non-recognition works by giving explanations for something in such a way that what is explained is *explained away*. An explanation can be saying: away! Go away! They say: “she got wrong-footed;” “she didn’t understand;” “we like her.” Wrong footed is used to imply the white woman who had just made a muddle of her words. Racism is often heard as an error message, as inexpressive or as not expressing how things are: what a person is like; what an institution is like. Their friendship with a white woman (“we like her”) stops them from recognising the racism experienced by a woman of colour who is also their friend. She describes to me what she would have liked to say to them: “you’ve just witnessed somebody abuse somebody because they have expressed their experience of racism and your problem is you can’t hear what you’ve just heard.” “We like her” as a statement of affection ends up being a performance: we like her; we are like her.

The white friend appears as a figure created through a relay of messages: her white friends cannot hear racism when it is expressed by their white friend. Perhaps they can hear racism when it is articulated by those who are further away: we might think of how critical often depends upon distance. I will return to the problem of critical white friends in due course. Hearing racism further away might be what enables them not to hear racism closer to home. The racism they cannot hear is then treated as if it is not there. She said: “they probably deleted it from their memory.” This deletion is what enables them to stay loyal to a white friend, to maintain an idea or investment of her as a good person who would not say or do what they are committed to opposing.

What else is being deleted? Who else is being deleted? We need to think of how she as a woman of colour she does not delete the experience from her memory; she is telling the story to me, after all, another woman of colour, who “gets it” because I have been there. We need each other if we are to live with what we get. And what some delete, others retain. *We also retain the memory of the deletion.* We know what we are being told: that out of loyalty, white allies can and do abandon us. Loyalty might be to a white friend, to a colleague, but can also work more abstractly as loyalty to some “we,” which might be a sensible “we,” a sense of shared project, or to an institution. Perhaps an institution too can be retained as a good thing, a warm and inclusive thing, *through repeating and sharing such acts of deletion.* (1)

We also learn: loyalty can be how some do not, or even will not, notice the violence that happens right in front of them. What else does loyalty stop us from noticing? Is loyalty how spaces are occupied by what and who is screened out? These questions will stay with me as I work through the material of complaint.

Even to use a word like racism is to be heard as complaining not only in the sense of being negative or mean but also in the sense of being self-promotional; a sore point as a point that is pushed. Racism is often directed all the more to those who complain all the more about racism. Racism is not just an idea about who is worth what or more, about how higher and lower become properties of persons organised into clear and distinct groups. Racism is how ideas are expressed in or through actions; how some try to make others smaller, less significant; less valued. This is why the judgement of getting above yourself, above your station, or ahead of yourself is so

often racialised. Even talking about racism can be heard as making too much of yourself. (2)

In another instance a black woman has a meeting with a white colleague who has just become her new head of department. This colleague refers to the “history” between this black woman and a former head of department, another white woman. She says: “I want you to reconcile with her because after all she is my friend and colleague and all she ever did was write you some long emails.” Note how the former head of department is evoked possessively as colleague and friend (“my friend and colleague”). This white woman by expressing her desire for reconciliation (“I want you to reconcile with her”) is also offering an interpretation of events (“all she ever did is to write you some long emails”). As I noted in an earlier post on damage limitation, responses to harassment often work to *minimise* harassment; when superficial solutions are offered a problem is treated as superficial. A key tactic for minimising harassment is to present harassment as a style of communication: long emails might be annoying, but the implication is that they are not harmful or serious (3). Harassment is often treated like a point of view shot: as what you can see from where you are located or because of where you are located; a way of interpreting a situation rather than being a situation. This is how harassment can disappear by being treated as a conflict between perspectives. This is also how to describe an experience as harassment can be deemed to become a harasser, as the one *imposing* your own perspective onto others.

It is important that the appeal is being made by a white woman on behalf of a friend and colleague; her white friend. This white friend enters the scenario as a figure, loaded with value and significance; she is appealing. Why is this figure so appealing? What work is she doing? What do learn from how and where and when she turns up?

It is not simply that the white woman is saying what she wants (“I want you to”). This expression of desire is also a management tactic: she is giving an instruction; she is telling a black woman, who is also a colleague (but importantly is *not addressed* as a colleague), what to do, and what to say. The work of reconciliation often falls upon those who have been harassed – she has to *reconcile with her*. Reconciliation is also restoration of a “we” premised on warm and fuzzy feelings of friendship and collegiality. The problem here is not simply that those who are harassed are expected to do the work of reconciling themselves to the situation they are in (to reconcile with her as reconciling yourself to a situation) although that problem is quite a problem given that the situation is the harassment (reconciliation with her as reconciling yourself to being harassed by her). Reconciliation does not just happen once you have reached a certain point in a longer sequence. Reconciliation is often there from the very beginning as an expectation or appeal. In other words, the expectation she will smooth things over or keep smoothing things over is how she is required to maintain a relationship that is damaging. An expression of desire for reconciliation might appear to be a friendly gesture. There is nothing friendly about this gesture. If she does not return the desire for reconciliation, if she is not willing to smooth things over, moving on, getting along, getting on, she becomes the one who has not only damaged a connection but refused to repair the damage. The perception of her as causing damage justifies and perpetuates the harassment.

Reconciliation can thus be a form of harassment. You can experience an expectation as a pressure (the pressure is that the same pressure as the pressure in oppression): to let it go, to let go, to get over it. I have been thinking about this too: how complaints are often deemed as what you are doing when you fail to be conciliatory, a word that can also mean being unfriendly; as if rather than complaining you could have just talked something through.

This is rather like that old multicultural fantasy: the fantasy that if only we could get closer we would be as one.

The expectation of reconciliation does not seem to lift at any point: it seems to be there all along. Many people have talked to me about the role of weak or empty apologies in the complaint process. In one case a professor makes an apology to a student who had lodged a complaint against him for bullying. His apology was unsolicited. But it was inserted into her complaint file in a way she experienced as deeply intrusive. An apology can be how somebody tries to pull themselves out of a critique or a complaint. An apology can be a form of self-justification as well as given as an instruction: I didn't mean it! Move on! An apology can even be an extension of the behavior that someone is supposedly apologising for. She describes: "I think they thought I would accept it as a real apology. Reading it, it is not an apology. He did exactly the same thing he used to do in seminars.... I am just going to capitulate in such a tone that tells you that I don't believe a word you are saying, therefore not giving you the respect of recognising that you might have a valid point."

The person who apologises does not have to say *what* they are apologising for, or if they do say, they can do so in such a way that the problem is made slight or becomes about how someone is affected rather than what that person caused: you might apologise for hurting someone's feeling, which rather conveniently make the hurt feelings the problem (as well as the obstacle to reconciliation) rather than the fact that you acted in a way that undermined another person. An apology in the case of bullying can be a form of bullying; you can be telling someone how little you think they are worth by appearing to concede in such a way that intonates that their complaint is not "a valid point."

To appear to recognise your role in a problem can be how recognition is withdrawn.

When you are involved in complaint, you are often surrounded by weak and non-performative apologies. Perhaps one person can offer an apology as a way of asking another to "move on" because of what an apology does not require: any meaningful recognition of that person's complicity in the violence the complaint was about. My own feeling is that apologies (as with other apparently "friendly" gestures) are so often used because they can be how some people maintain a fiction they acted in good faith despite the evidence of their role in bullying and harassment or in silencing complaints about bullying and harassment; in other words, apologies can allow people to get themselves out of doing the much harder work of recognising their own role in situations they are nevertheless able to identify as bullying and harassment.

An apology can make something and somebody seem small. Reconciliation (rather like harassment) is often about belittling: you try and make something be smaller than it is. *To treat an injury as small is to treat a person as small.* That treatment is

also about who gets to be bigger, who is allowed to take up more space. You can end up being where you are judged to be: taking up less space because it is exhausting to be or stay in that space.

When the harassment is made small, the harasser can be treated as the injured party; if it is slight, they are the ones who have been slighted. This is why the white friend is evoked quickly as an injured party. What Gloria Wekker (2016) has called “white innocence” is central to the redirection of sympathy. We could think here of the role of *white tears*, expressions of hurt and grief that are often shared. [Luvvie Ajayi](#) offers a powerful and astute analysis of how white women’s tears are “weaponised,” tears can be used to “shield white women from consequences.” [Ruby Hamad](#) explores how “legitimate grievances of brown and black women are no match for the accusations of a white damsel in distress.” When white innocence becomes white injury, affection becomes instrumentalized. In order to maintain that innocence, that sense of injury, those who complain about racism become the real harassers; if they didn’t mean it, racial grievances are not only grudges they are mean.

Being mean is not simply a judgement one person makes about another. That judgement gets passed around; it becomes a rumour that spreads, information travels faster along the well-used paths of academic networks. The singularity of the white friend quickly becomes a collective; a network of feeling, did you hear, poor her, how mean! Whiteness can function as a wall of sympathy. It is not just that sympathy is extended by being restricted; how some are kind to those deemed of the same kind. *The gesture of being sympathetic to a white friend is the same gesture as the gesture of being hostile to those who complain about racism.* So many stories have been shared with me about this: how if you are involved in any way in a complaint about racism or racial harassment that implicates a colleague, other colleagues turn away from you; you are “dropped” from invites, removed from references and from the ordinary sociality that makes up so much of our professional lives. Sympathy as removal.

It is the same gesture.

When a door is closed, the same door is being closed.

The affection between white friends is how racism is not heard, or if it heard, it can be how racism is either deleted or deflected as an injury to those accused. As Fiona Nicoll argues “The very idea of suggesting that someone might be racist has been elevated into a crime to rival (if not displace) racism itself” (2004, 20). The displacement of racism is the enactment of racism.

A white friend might explain how critical white subjects displace the racism in order not to recognise it; a white friend might be the one deemed hurt by an accusation of racism; a white friend can also be the one who expresses racism. A Muslim woman of colour describes such an experience:

I had a white friend who was also a colleague – we worked at the same university. We worked together, we helped each other. But there was a tension, an increasing tension. I felt it was about race, sometimes you just feel it. Anyway one time it

really came to a head. She said something like: tell me what to think about Muslim women who wear the face veil. I struggled to answer, because I just wanted to say that was a totally inappropriate question, and then she told me what she thought, that she couldn't meet their eyes, she couldn't make that feminist sisterly connection. Eventually we stopped communicating. Later I saw one of her papers when it was published – she had removed references to my work. I actually checked the earlier version because I could not quite believe it! And that has happened with stuff since. You watch yourself be removed by someone who you had thought of as a friend. Now she writes on race: she is cited for her work on race.

Sometimes racism is a feeling of tension; you know it's about race, even if you can't quite put your finger on it. The tension can then come to a head, rather like a boil. The racism that is already there, just below the surface, blubbing away, is expressed (4). Her white friend seems to be asking a question of her and there is no doubt that "that question" is a problem: it is a problem to ask her Muslim friend what to think about what other Muslim women do. We are familiar with the problem: it is like when white teachers ask questions about race and their gaze keep landing on the one student of colour in an otherwise all white classroom. Oh how many times we have to squirm our way through and out of these loaded questions! To have to receive that question is how you are made responsible for it; a question as how race becomes about you, and how you become a question.

A question can be a load.

But even if that question is a problem a question is not really being asked. She is using a question (what should I think of Muslim women who wear the face veil?) in order to tell her friend what she thinks. Questions can be assertions in disguise. And what is being asserted? White feminist solidarity is asserted as a universal. White sisterhood becomes about meeting each other's eyes; it becomes a demand that other women unveil in order to share a sense of sisterhood. Those women who do not participate in a white feminist universal become barriers; a barrier can be the concreteness of a difference. The requirement for friendship might be that women of colour participate in their universal. Participation might require putting aside our particulars, our differences; becoming available as a resource.

So many stories of racism are also stories about plagiarism; they are about the relative value given to different people but they are also about the appropriation of other people's work. Perhaps white colleagues can make use of words by cutting those words off from bodies – it is easier to use the words, to make them appear as your words, when those who wrote them disappear. Or it might be that some white scholars despite their anti-racist scholarship (or even though their anti-racist scholarship?), have a sense of entitlement: *a right to use or have something*. Perhaps people of colour become data that can only be converted into theory, into capital, by a white academy. I suspect the figure of the white friend appears in different stories of removal and deletion because she operates from a sense of entitlement; it is about who is at home, who gets to be at home. If, as I noted earlier, persons of colour becomes more of a problem when they are closer to home, then critical white subjects who work on race might require scholars of colour they cite to be further away. Not all white people who do critical work on race act like this. *But we need to learn from the fact that it is possible to do critical work on race and act like this.*

Harassment can also be understood as hardening of *that* history, a history of entitlement, a colonial as well as patriarchal history, a history of who gets to do what; who is deemed entitled to what; who is deemed entitled to whom. These hard histories are not just out there; they are in here. They are not just about what happens in hostile institutions; they are about what happens in spaces we might otherwise experience as warm and intimate. A hard history can be between friends.

1. In the project I will be considering in much more detail the problem of how academic network operates as friendship networks. This problem can be about how academics call upon their friends to do certain kinds of work – from writing positive references or reviews of their work to supporting or defending them in harassment cases. It can also be about how friends are appointed into roles within departments; here a “friend” might refer not only to someone we know well but someone we imagine we could get know well. A “could be friend” is someone you could like, liking is often about likeness; a hire as about hiring those who are alike.
2. In future posts, I will offer *a close up lens* on racial harassment as a method of belittling. I have been glad to read important recent work on racial harassment as it operates within universities by Kalwant Bhopal, [Nicola Rollack](#) Shirley Anne Tate and Heidi Mirza.
3. It is worth noting that physical as well as verbal harassment can be presented as styles of communication. For example, when a member of staff made a complaint after a head of department physically accosted her in a corridor he was described in the report (that cleared him of any wrong doing) as having a “direct style” of management. That description can also provide a justification of behavior: physical harassment as blunt speech. I will return to how physical and verbal forms of harassment are treated as styles of communication in future posts.
4. Thinking about complaint has led me to become interested in writing more about the sociality of *expression* – of how things “come out” or are squeezed out in the thickness of everyday worlds.