The Trouble with White Feminist Theologians?
Decentring White Normativity in Feminist Theology

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Abstract
Feminist theology has provided a critical hermeneutical lens through which to interrogate hegemonic and hierarchical social and theological structures. Yet, can feminist theology itself be charged with the same paradigmatic problems it seeks to challenge? What exactly do we speak of when we speak of feminist theology? More importantly, who are we speaking of? Drawing from Kyla Schuller’s seminal volume, ‘The Trouble with White Women: A counter-history of feminism’, this article seeks to uncover the foundational connections between the historically ‘white feminism’ of Schuller’s counter-history and feminist theology, examining how, and indeed if, feminist theology contests or colludes with this problematic legacy. Considering post-colonial and intersectional feminist perspectives which trouble epistemological normativity, this article asks, is it possible to decentre, from the centre?

Keywords
Feminist, feminist theology, white normativity, post-colonialism, intersectionality

Introduction
‘Feminism has long been fractured by an internal battle fought along the lines of racism, capitalism, and empire . . . Recognising the distinctions among forms of feminism has never had higher stakes than it has today’ (Schuller, 2021: 2).

In her seminal volume ‘The Trouble with White Women: A Counter History of Feminism’, Kyla Schuller (re)presents the stories of foundational feminist figures and their perhaps relatively unknown histories. While charting the significance of their
respective works in the creation and shaping of feminism as a movement, Schuller also reveals that hidden behind their greater-known victories is a troubling past, one which can be shown to have actively promoted the interests of an elite few over the many. Schuller proposes that these histories reveal that the self-designation of ‘feminist’ does not automatically equate to a prioritisation of gender equality. Rather, she contends it has historically been, and continues to be, used to conceal a prioritisation of race, heteronormativity and economic privilege within feminist movements (Schuller, 2021: 2). Feminism, she argues, has a murky past – one which has spoken over, erased and, both covertly and overtly, harmed other women – particularly women of colour. Providing a ‘counter-history’ to the predominance of these central figures, she uncovers the parallel stories of women who were concurrently making substantial strides in advocating for equality not only on the grounds of sex but of race and sexuality: a history of feminism which, she argues, has been deliberately concealed.

Schuller’s work is thought-provoking and revealing. In reading Schuller’s counter-history of feminism, however, I was struck by another oft-overlooked facet of the white feminist historical narrative and one which she herself references only peripherally: its relationship to theology. The names within this volume were not unfamiliar to me – rather, some, such as Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Daly, were also formative feminist theologians. While Schuller makes the compelling argument that feminist history has obscured the diversity of women who were sharing the dialogical space with (white) feminist heroes, in the same sense, I suggest that (white) feminist history has also minimised or disremembered its theological and religious underpinnings. Moreover, as I will go on to argue, the intersection of white feminism with feminist theology is not a historical past, but a very real present with entanglements reaching beyond these disciplinary boundaries.

In *The Trouble with White Women*, Schuller begins by sharing the statistic that in the 2016 US Presidential elections, 53% of white women voted for Trump, many of these self-declared feminists (Schuller, 2021: 1). While this fact may seem, in and of itself, unremarkable (or indeed irrelevant), Schuller notes that it exposes many deeper, more tangled issues about how, and who, feminism is defined by. In today’s political climate, electoral battles are increasingly won or lost on issues of gender rights. With reproductive rights, wage equality, gender-based violence, and issues of trans and LGBTQIA+ rights at the political forefront, the contribution of feminist perspectives to such discourses has arguably never been more important.

What is perhaps striking about the statistic above is that 79% of white evangelical Christian women in the United States make up 53% of women voters (Cassese, 2020: 169). While Schuller notes the correlations between race and class within this particular white feminist demographic, I suggest that she perhaps misses the significance of religiosity in this statistic. I propose that both in Schuller’s history, and the current feminisms she frames this history within, assertions of Christian moral authority are in fact foundational to the social and political perspectives presented. Writing from a post-colonial perspective which troubles the hegemony of western empiricism in theology, feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan (2007) asserts that ‘we can point to the enormous influences of the Christian Right in conservative politics and in shaping the agenda for the nation’, and the ‘critical role’ feminist theologians have in responding to this (p. 152). This leads
This is certainly an incendiary question. In the asking, I do not at all propose that white Christian feminists are *de facto* racists (nor *de facto* Trump supporters). Certainly, I recognise the discomfort this question might provoke. However, I suggest that it is vital that we ask such uncomfortable questions of ourselves, even when we may not like the answers. I do not presume to provide such answers here. Rather, what I propose is to ask perhaps more difficult but necessary questions. In what follows, I attempt to re-trace our feminist theological roots in the light of Schuller’s revelations, considering what legacy the history of these central feminist figures has left in our theological thinking. In so doing, I ask, what are the implications of this legacy for feminist theology today? Are we innocent in our ignorance of such a past, or as practical theologian Courtney Goto (2020) challenges, rather guilty of subconscious ignoring? (p. 139). 

Moving to a reflection of how we come to know what we *think* we know, I examine how epistemology within feminist theology is created and sustained. I then consider the question; does feminist theology, subconsciously or otherwise, maintain a tacit ‘whiteness’, by its juxtaposition to feminisms which are declaratively not white, not cis, not heteronormative? If so, how do we decentre this unspoken ‘whiteness’ without co-opting, appropriating, or speaking in the voices of others? Moreover, can we? Finally, I ask if, as Schuller proclaims, there is ‘a problem with white women’, what does this mean for feminist theology?

**A Theological Counter-History**

Drawing from key figures identified within Schuller’s counter-history, I begin by considering their respective significance to feminism and examining how their particular feminisms can be shown to have been shaped by theological convictions. While Schuller systematically contrasts several prominent white feminists with notable concurrent non-white, non-cis feminist theologians, my intent will rather be to highlight some of the key names which she problematises within this dialogue, selected by their relevance, and broader epistemological significance, to feminist theology. In so doing, my intention is not to further ignore the contributions of the forgotten feminists Schuller artfully represents but rather to contribute to Schuller’s broader critique of white feminist history from a theological perspective.

Turning first to the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, I explore the religious underpinnings of her evocative fiction and the influence of emotions-based narrative on subsequent trends in feminist theological writing. From here, I look to Elisabeth Cady Stanton, examining how her own complicated faith journey can be shown to have shaped her politics, writing and subsequent theological contribution. Finally, I consider the legacy of Stanton in Mary Daly’s work and Daly’s subsequent influence on the work of Janice Raymond. While it is Raymond who is the focus within Schuller’s counter-history, with Daly referenced only peripherally as her mentor, I will instead look to Mary Daly as exemplifying the trajectory of feminist theological thinking connecting these two (often polarising) figures.
Harriet Beecher Stowe

The daughter of one of the most renowned clergymen in the United States in the early nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was born into a family of reformers. It is perhaps of little surprise, then, that she would go on to become one of the most popular and well-known female abolitionists of her time. In contrast to other forms of advocacy, which focused on political pressure, Stowe’s approach was distinct in appealing instead to emotion as a catalyst for social change. In contemplating anti-slavery debates, what struck Beecher was that the human stories behind slavery remained untold. Schuller (2021) notes Stowe’s conviction ‘that sympathy with the travails of the less fortunate ought to guide all public and private life decisions- and this emotional identification depended upon reading of the brutality they experienced’ (p. 50).

Circumventing the restrictions on women’s involvement in social and political issues, Stowe instead wielded what she considered the most effective tool in women’s activism: the pen (Hedrick, 1995: 279). In 1848, Stowe published ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’, the first literary fiction to draw on the life of a slave as the central protagonist. Centring around the plight of newly sold ‘Tom’, Stowe’s sentimental writing juxtaposed the suffering inflicted upon Tom and the other slaves he encounters, with the morality and nobility Tom demonstrates in the endurance of his hardships. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was also perhaps the first public (albeit discrete) acknowledgement of the sexual abuse inflicted upon female slaves (Schuller, 2021: 54).

Theodore Hovet (1974) observes that many historians consider Stowe’s writing as responding to whatever social or political issue was most prominent at the time, with slavery merely being the topic du jour. This is certainly implied, if not implicit, in Schuller’s account of her work. However, when taken within the broader context of Stowe’s extensive body of writing, it is clear that there is a central thread running through her work, and one which is deeply theological. Slavery, for Stowe, was symptomatic of a greater theological issue: the expansion, and misapplication, of Presbyterian influence on institutional life. Hovet (1974) comments that Stowe believed ‘that this church, a church which had woven itself into the fabric of American society, had made statements and committed acts which became models for the society as a whole in its dealings with slavery’ (p. 172).

From her position within this growing denomination, she observed with concern that its focus had seemed to have drifted too far from Christian principles of love to a preoccupation with expansion and moral conformity. She became deeply critical of the ‘outward’ movement of the church as ‘institutional and impersonal’, in contrast with the ‘inward’ movement of faith as ‘emotional, experiential, and real’ (Hovet, 1974: 171). Joan Hedrick (1995), in her biography of Stowe, notes that ‘the hierarchical institutions Stowe attacked depended on separations between the public and the private, head and heart, the system makers and the victims of systems’ (p. 280). This dichotomy between ‘outward and inward’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ can be seen to form the foundations of Stowe’s feminist theology.

While the ‘private’ was broadly considered the inconsequential realm of women’s domesticity, Stowe sought to reclaim the sanctity of women’s domestic and maternal lives as a vital source of theological potential. Women’s experiences and emotions, she
argued, were silenced, and yet they embodied the love, patience and nurturance that was inherent in the true Christian character. Her own experience of navigating these dualistic worlds – writer and theologian, wife and mother – strongly informed this theological conviction. Indeed, while she her most notable literary contribution is often considered to be ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’, Stowe (1873) wrote prolifically on women’s experiences, and of female spirituality. Her volume *Woman in Sacred History*, a devotional account of women in the Bible, offered a ‘midrash’ of biblical re-telling and poetics which sought to authentically illustrate women’s spiritual lives (Hedrick, 1995: 60).

It is not difficult to see the legacy that Stowe’s particular theological contribution has left within feminist theology. The dichotomous nature of the domestic sphere versus the public, the sacred versus the secular and the need to creatively respond to such theological tensions has been an enduring theme within feminist theology. Feminist theologians such as Bonnie Miller McLemore (1994) and Claire E. Wolfteich (2017) have argued for the generative potential of the maternal everyday as a site of theological potential and resistance. Furthermore, Stowe’s use of imaginative literary fiction as an emotionally evocative expression of theological silences could arguably be considered an early form of the theopoetic approaches demonstrated in the works of Rebecca Chopp (2001), Heather Walton (2007) and Mayra Rivera (2015).

However, it is precisely Stowe’s use of fiction, emotion and empathy which Schuller (2021) proposes is deeply problematic for feminism past and present (p. 52). She points to ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ as exemplary of white feminism’s pity and paternalism masquerading as compassion and solidarity. While Stowe’s publication claimed to depict the lived experience of slaves, she herself had never been to the plantation south in which her story was set. Her portrayals were instead strongly informed by her perceptions of and encounters with slaves in her own employ. Schuller (2021) argues that as a result, Stowe’s own representations are ‘a mixture all too common among white portrayals of African Americans as naïve, highly impressionable dependents in desperate need of white women’s guiding hands’ (p. 53). This, she further, reduces the black subject to an object of mere sympathy while elevating the emotional reactions of the reader as morally superior.

In evoking the spilling of tears, Stowe saw the transformative potential of moral renewal, yet this renewal was aimed at white readers who could fulfil their salvific potential. In this sense, Schuller argues, sympathy cannot be read as empathy but rather as paternalism. She wryly comments that the ‘public value accorded to white women’s tears today flows from these earliest days of white feminism’ (Schuller, 2021: 51). Stowe’s legacy highlights the dangers inherent in privileging, whether deliberately or unwittingly, white women’s voices as morally authoritative, or even morally neutral. Such privilege, as I will go on to explore in the work of Elisabeth Cady Stanton, whether implicit or explicit, can all too easily be weaponised towards the rights of the individual, over the rights of the many.

**Elisabeth Cady Stanton**

In 1848, Elisabeth Cady Stanton co-organised one of the first public events dedicated to women’s rights. Presenting the ‘The Declaration of Sentiments’, modelled after the
‘Declaration of Independence’, she proposed 11 resolutions seeking to obtain legal, social and religious equality for women. Advocating for a deconstruction of male-dominated structures creating unjust conditions on the lives and value of women, she, like Stowe, was a foundational voice in asserting that the personal is political. Exactly which person, and indeed which women, were valuable to Cady Stanton, however, perhaps revealed more about her moral and political commitments.

For several decades, Cady Stanton aligned herself with abolitionist movements, petitioning against slavery. Schuller (2021) notes, however, that this commitment was less ethical than tactical (p. 28). In furthering the cause for universal suffrage, Stanton was convinced that the emancipation of one would be the emancipation of all (Ginzberg, 2009). Her underlying convictions, however, were brought sharply into view when the Fifteenth Amendment, a legislative change granting suffrage to all men regardless of race, looked to become a reality. Incensed that former slaves would hold legislative power ahead of women, Cady Stanton abruptly changed course. Racial equality, it would seem, was a means to an end for Cady Stanton, rather than a moral imperative.

Reversing her position of support for universal suffrage, Cady Stanton decried that in granting male suffrage to former slaves, congress would ‘make their wives and mothers the political inferiors of unlettered and unwashed ditch diggers, boot-blacks, and barbers’ (Stanton, 1869, cited in Schuller, 2021: 19). Appealing to the very constructions of femininity she had argued so vigorously against, Cady Stanton weaponised the ‘white woman in peril’ narrative, warning of the untold violence black men might reap on white women with their new-found political freedom. While Stowe used white women’s tears to evoke sympathy, Cady Stanton used them to evoke fear. While she successfully created a ‘universally subjugated woman’, her politics were deeply individualist: she wanted equality, but equality for elite white women, to be equal with elite white men. Schuller (2021) wryly notes, ‘Elisabeth Cady Stanton, in other words, invented white feminism’ (p. 19).

However, as Maureen Fitzgerald writes in her foreword to a 1993 edition of the ‘Women’s Bible’, for Stanton’s ‘religion is private, is political’ (Oppy, 2009: 71). Of Puritan inheritance, Cady Stanton grew up in a deeply Calvinist household. Strongly shaped by a belief in predestination, theodicies of original sin and having endured the tragedies of repeated bereavements, salvation was an ever-present worry in the Stanton household. However, it was to be a revivalist conversion programme overseen by the Reverend Charles Finney, which would prove a defining point in her spiritual life. While Finney rejected predestination, his foreboding testimonies against humanities ‘total depravity’ and assertions of the individual’s responsibility for their own redemption, or damnation, would prove incapacitating for Cady Stanton (Ginzberg, 2009: 24). Unable to cope with the weight of her own salvation, Cady Stanton faith was thrown into turmoil. This is often cited as a turning point in Cady Stanton’s religious life and, indeed, a turning away from religious life altogether. The strictness of the religious demands she had been exposed to terrified Cady Stanton; demands which, she recognised, were significantly more stringent for women.

While Cady Stanton was undoubtedly disillusioned by ‘formal’ religion, her disillusionment was in part rooted in her increasing awareness of how biblical authority was being used to justify the subordination and devaluation of women’s religious position. In
the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’, she argues passionately against women’s assumed subservience within the Church declaring,

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church (1848).1

In contrast to her colleagues Susan B Anthony and Lucretia Mott, who preferred to focus their attention on political progress, Cady Stanton was deeply concerned with women’s religious life. Her theological concerns met with disapproval from her contemporaries – the minimisation of her theological contribution is perhaps in no small part a result of the distancing of her feminist theology from the Women’s movement itself. While they stood firm in their rejection of secular male authority, Cady Stanton’s rejection of religious male authority seemed a step too far for her collaborators. Undeterred, she avowed, ‘there is nothing more pathetic than the hopeless resignation of woman to the outrages she has been taught to believe are ordained by God’ (Stanton, cited in Oppy, 2009: 77). In response, she published The Women’s Bible in 1895.

The Woman’s Bible was foundational in being one of the first feminist exercises in biblical hermeneutics and exegesis. A systematic analysis of texts specifically relating to women, Cady Stanton’s work refuted the position that the Bible was the unaltered word of God: instead, she argued, its principles had been skewed by male authorship to preserve male authority. The text was ground-breaking in its examination and reconstruction of women’s biblical position. Of particular criticism were Genesis passages relating to Eve, in which Cady Stanton rejected both her subordinate position as man ‘helpmate’, and the blame attributed to her in doctrines of original sin (Oppy, 2009: 77). In methodically refuting biblical justifications for women’s subordination, Cady Stanton sought to offer a religious blueprint for social and political equality.

This work can undoubtedly be seen as laying the groundwork for subsequent feminist biblical criticism. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutics of suspicion builds on Cady Stanton’s position that the Bible is not a divinely directed doctrine but rather a product of human interpretation within a particular historical context. Echoes of Cady Stanton’s denunciation of androcentrism within the bible can be all too readily heard in Rosemary Radford Ruether’s (1983) assertion that ‘the naming of males as norms of authentic humanity has caused women to be scapegoated for sin and marginalised and in both original and redeemed humanity’ (p. 19).

While Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether moved beyond Cady Stanton’s model of biblical exegesis, emphasising the importance of Christian women’s undocumented histories and experiences in providing a counter-historical feminist consciousness of faith, Cady Stanton’s work can discernibly be seen to shape the parameters within which such analysis could emerge. Indeed, feminist theologian Mary Daly actively credits Cady Stanton in Beyond God the Father, lauding her de-mystification of women’s ‘false naming’ in biblical narratives of sin. Cady Stanton’s impact and influence on

1.  THE DECLARATION OF SENTIMENTS AND RESOLUTIONS.pdf (womenshistory.org).
Daly’s work, as I will now examine, would go on to solidify her place in both the feminist theological narrative and in Schuller’s counter-history.

**Mary Daly**

It is worth noting that my analysis of Mary Daly in this theological counter-history is perhaps a reverse of Schuller’s. While Schuller gives attention to Mary Daly, she does so in the context of Janice Raymond, her PhD supervisee, as a formative influence on Raymond’s radical feminist politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. While Daly is treated tangentially in *The Trouble with White Women*, I choose to focus on Daly, rather than Raymond, for arguably the same reason: that her influence as a feminist theologian was formative in the creation of Raymond’s own brand of feminism, and subsequent (predominantly white) feminist movements.

Mary Daly’s own feminism had its theological roots in her Catholic upbringing. Similar to Cady Stanton, Daly’s education was predominantly faith based. Like Cady Stanton, Daly was also unable to pursue the educational attainment she so fervently desired in the United States. Unlike Cady Stanton, however, Daly was able to go on to further study in Europe, obtaining not one but three doctorates in sacred theology, philosophy and religion. Her European education coincided with the Second Vatican Council, an event which sought to examine and address the Catholic Church’s understanding of and relationship to the challenges of the modern world. However, while this was a significant moment in Catholicism’s history, Daly watched in dismay as the Church’s relationship with its own female adherents remained largely untouched.

Her first notable publication, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Daly, [1968] 1975), built on some of the foundations we can see in Cady Stanton’s ‘Woman’s Bible’, in its critique of the androcentrism present in the hierarchies, language and dogma of the Church. Much like Cady Stanton, Daly rejected the biblical justification of such inequalities by re-appraising the narratives of Eve and Mary. In illuminating and resisting these injustices, Daly proposed that the Church could offer an equal space to women, and radically regenerate Catholicism as a tradition. One of the first Catholic treatises on such a topic, ‘The Church and the Second Sex’ offered a significant contribution to a theological hermeneutics of suspicion and argued passionately for the full recognition of women in the theological space.

However, a mere 5 years later, Daly herself declared the futility of this particular endeavour. In her preface to a later reprint of this work, she scoffs that a woman ‘asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person’s demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan’ (Daly, [1968] 1975: 10). Christianity, she had come to conclude, was antithetical to the flourishing of women. Re-defining her philosophical stance as ‘post-Christian’, she nonetheless continued to work as a Professor in Jesuit run Boston College for some three decades. Her hard-fought obtainment of this position is perhaps one of her most significant feminist theological legacies, opening the door for feminist academics in a hitherto male-dominated theological discipline (Hedrick, 2013: 457). However, not content with mere access, Daly utilised her academic position to actively prevent male access to her courses, a move which would subsequently result in a lawsuit and obligatory retirement.
In sharp contrast to her early, more hopeful complementarian position, Daly’s later work was firmly fixed around a male/female binary and one which was declaratively anti-male. Daly proposed that there was a universal experience of ‘woman-ness’ in the shared condition of oppression under patriarchy but also a universal feminine ‘essence’ which had been deliberately concealed. In her later works, most notably *Beyond God the Father* (Daly, 1985) and *Gyn-Ecology* (Daly, [1978] 1990), she juxtaposed her belief that women’s inherent mysticism, spirituality and generativity was diametrically opposed to men’s ‘necrophilic’ – death giving – nihilism. As Schuller (2021) notes, it would be Daly’s fervent belief in the dichotomous natures of male/female which would go on to influence and inform the work of Janice Raymond, for whom Daly was, Schuller comments, ‘feminism incarnate’ (p. 200). As mentor and PhD supervisor to Raymond, Daly’s avowal of the essential irreconcilability between men and women deeply shaped Raymond’s feminist position, a position which would ultimately underpin the development of the TERF movement (or Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists).

Intensely critical of what they perceived as medicine’s male grip on psychiatry and reproductive technologies, both Daly and Raymond were vehemently against what Daly terms the ‘Frankenstein phenomenon’ of transsexuality (Daly, [1978] 1990: 70). Transsexual women, in Daly and Raymond’s terms, were not women, but rather, acts of violence against women by ‘deviant men’. Echoing Cady Stanton’s construction of the white woman in peril, Raymond argued vehemently against the inclusion of trans women in single-sex spaces, contending that ‘women’ are only safe, where ‘men’ are absent. Raymond’s politics were deeply divisive, and dangerously effective. In the 1980s, she was asked by the Raegan administration to contribute to a consultation on the ethics of gender-affirming surgery: a consultation which ultimately would withdraw state coverage for such procedures and allow private insurers to do the same (Schuller, 2021: 202). Despite some 40 years having passed, it is not difficult to recognise the influence and reinvigoration of essentialist feminist beliefs in contemporary debates. The widespread rolling back of gender-affirming care in the United States, and indeed the blocking of the Gender Recognition reform in Scotland some mere months ago, affirms that, while perhaps not as overtly radical as the work of Raymond and Daly, gender essentialism remains pervasive.

The problem of Daly’s, and Raymond’s, claims of a universally female experience of sexism is that their extremely broad concept of a universal female was ultimately built on a very narrow construction of ‘woman’. While many feminist theologians, and indeed feminists more broadly, would uphold Daly’s critiques of patriarchy as structurally embedded, the ways in which patriarchy is experienced by, and enacted upon, different women in different contexts vary considerably. Schuller (2021) comments that

In fact, fetishising the identity of Woman as the basis of feminist politics actually makes it more difficult to recognise sexism as a structure of exploitation and extraction. For sexism is not merely the silencing, interrupting and overlooking of women. Sexism is the use of the male/female binary as an instrument to monopolise social, political, and economic power- and those assigned female at birth are not its only victims. (p. 9)
In an open letter to Daly in response to the publication of ‘Gyn/Ecology’, womanist thinker Audré Lorde famously critiqued Daly’s neglect of racial differences in women’s experiences of oppression, and indeed, Daly’s own racialised construction of the feminine divine. Despite finding the mysticism in Daly’s theology ‘permissive and enabling’, Lorde was disillusioned by what seemed like her wilful neglect of women of colour, writing, ‘As an African-American woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized, but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman’ (in Hedrick, 2013: 479).

Lorde recognised, however, that what appeared to be deliberate racism and essentialism in Daly’s work was perhaps rather the result of both a deeply Western and deeply Catholic unconscious bias present in Daly’s scholarship (Hedrick, 2013: 460). That she may in fact have been guilty of poor scholarship was arguably more personally offensive to Daly’s intense academic pride than critiques of racism or essentialism. Moreover, that she might be blind to her own ontological partialities, ran counter to Daly’s self-perception as a radically progressive feminist thinker. Lorde’s acknowledgement that the construction of our knowledge is profoundly implicated in our potential reconstruction of knowledge highlights precisely the challenge raised by Schuller. In neglecting to critically reflect on the historical roots of her feminist knowledge, she concludes that we risk repeating history.

Ignorance or Ignoring in Feminist Epistemologies?

Is the counter-history of white feminism, then, really a counter-history of white feminist theology? Have these feminist thinkers demonstrated that the ‘problem’ of white women is really a problem of white Christian women? Yes and no. Schuller herself does not seem to think so. Rather, the only significant attention she gives to the relationship between theology and feminism is in her description of Pauli Murray, a black theologian and activist. Murray held a pivotal role in overturning Jim Crow legislature and in cementing Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited employment discrimination because of race or sex. In demonstrating how multiple axis of power and oppression coalesced to create multiple inequalities, Schuller (2021) notes that Murray laid the foundations for the formation of intersectional feminism (p. 170).

Much like Cady Stanton and Beecher Stowe, however, Murray’s political and legal activism was underpinned by her deeply committed spiritual life. Indeed, Murray went on to become the first African-American woman Episcopal Priest in 1977. Referencing the complementarity of Murray’s religiosity with her feminist convictions, Schuller (2021) notes that ‘in uniting her politics with faith, she continued a long traditional of feminist activism that cultivated a relationship with the divine as the ultimate Arbinger of justice’ (p. 182). For Schuller, then, the relationship between theology and feminism seems unproblematic: mutually reinforcing, even.

2. I use the term ‘black theologian’ here as this is how Schuller frames her; however, it is worth noting that Murray herself did not identify with the label ‘black’, preferring to self-designate as ‘negro’, or simply, ‘human’ (Schuller, 2021: 170).
Yet, as I have demonstrated, the ontologies of the white feminists I have explored above were also undoubtedly shaped by the Christian contexts from whence they came. This reveals a theological counter-history which is deeply implicated in the kind of white feminism Schuller problematises: a counter-history which, I propose, Schuller herself neglects. Although not all of the white feminists Schuller critiques can be seen to uphold religious convictions, two common threads can be seen to run through their feminist positions: the assumption, or construction, of a ‘universally oppressed woman’ (and one which is characteristically white, cis and middle class), and their presumption that as exemplars of this ‘universal women’, they have the implicit authority to speak for all women. This essentialism is not only a problem for secular feminism, but also a problem for feminist theological thinking. As Cady Stanton and Mary Daly have demonstrated, such a reductionist analysis of oppression serves to afford white women a ‘victim status’ under patriarchy, while remaining ‘oblivious’ to their own ‘class and racial privileges’ (Pui-lan, 2007: 146). Schuller notes that such feminisms rely on ‘a single axis of power in which sexism is the basic, underlying, most fundamental social inequality. Capitalism and colonialism, and the racism that fuels their engines, lie relatively inert’ (Schuller, 2021: 197).

As I have argued above, these positions are inherently shaped by their ‘contexts’. In this sense, I argue that it is neither theology nor feminism which replicate the ‘trouble’ with white normativity in and of themselves; rather it is determined by the contexts in which they meet and the ways in which they are employed. In her 2016 volume Taking on Practical Theology: the idolization of Context and the hope for community, Courtney Goto (2016) problematises the very concept of ‘contexts’ as irretrievably shaped by their socio-cultural locations; locations which, subsequently, have a profound impact on the formation of knowledge. Irrespective of whether the feminist positions articulated by Schuller’s white protagonists can be evidenced as theologically based, they share a particular ontological context which is deeply interwoven with practices of objectivism, colonialism and Christianity. Pui-Lan (2007) notes that

Working out of a liberal paradigm, many Western feminist theologians subscribe to the Enlightenment ideals of the liberty and equality of human beings, without being aware that such values were espoused by the middle class during their ascendancy in Europe, and were not applied either to the lower classes, the minorities or the colonized. (p. 146)

Despite being cognisant, and indeed deeply critical, of the hierarchically male Christian contexts within which they were writing, the white feminist thinkers discussed above articulated their positions by employing the very same epistemological tools and habits used by the hierarchies they sought to challenge. Goto describes this reproduction of colonial paradigms of knowledge as ‘not knowing, what we don’t know’. On the surface, this seems an innocent enough mistake – being ignorant of our shortcomings is not necessarily the same as wilful epistemological harm. However, as Goto (2020) goes on to caution, ignorance often rather disguises an unconscious practicing of ignoring:

Consider how easy it is to assume that ignorance refers to something we don’t know, and if we don’t know, we can’t be held responsible. However, the meaning of ignore suggests that we ourselves have been practicing not-looking and not-finding. (p. 139)
The result is an epistemic conformity, a preservation of what is assumed to be normative and, therefore, true. However, as Robin D’Angelo (2018) notes, discourses of normativity rely on a universal standard, and one which is implicitly white (p. 2). This assumptive normativity, Schuller asserts, is exactly the problem with using the term ‘feminist’ uncritically. The standalone term ‘feminist’, she further states, is a myth which implies an assumptive centrality from which all other ‘feminisms’ (womanist, queer and post-colonial) depart, the result being that the ‘centralness’ of white cis feminism goes unnamed, unspoken and unquestioned (Schuller, 2021: 122).

Decentring, From the Centre?

Margaret Kamitsuka (2007) observes that feminist theology has generally responded to this problem in one of three ways: deference, inclusion and solidarity (p. 11). The first, perhaps in recognition of ‘knowing what we do not know’, defers such conversations to those ‘outside’ of the centre. By not speaking for it, such an approach presumes a surrendering of dialogical authority. However, as Goto has cautioned, deferring engagement with issues of race to those ‘outside’ of the ‘white normative paradigm’ instead reinforces its authority by placing the responsibility on the ‘other’ to provide an answer (Goto, 2019: 355), and perpetuates harmful practices of ignoring (Goto, 2020: 145).

The second approach, inclusion, involves the conscious practice of reading, listening and appealing to diverse ‘feminisms’ to attempt to broaden our disciplinary boundaries. However, by its very etymology, ‘inclusion’ implies subsuming something into what already is; that is, incorporating a sub-narrative, into the (white) meta-narrative (Copeland, 2021: 399). Finally, ‘solidarity’ operates as a practice of listening empathetically, and standing alongside, feminists from minority communities. However, as Harriet Beecher Stowe has evidenced, no matter how well-intentioned, practices of solidarity can often reinforce the very power differentials they seek to overcome by an essentialist eliding of difference.

Schuller considers that one of the answers to the ‘trouble’ with white feminism is instead a declaration of difference. While minoritised communities have had to self-declare their difference in order to claim space, ‘whiteness’ has remained unmarked, serving to further ‘other’ identities which are already marginalised. Proposing a declarative white ‘self-naming’ Schuller (2021) asserts that, ‘naming this individualist, status-quo driven paradigms “white feminism” refuses its claimed universality and identifies who benefits the most from its approach’ (p. 3). This position is one which feminist theologians such as Susan Thistlethwaite (1989) and Ellen T Armour (2009) argued decades ago, advocating for ‘white feminist theologian’ to be categorised alongside other self-named feminist theologies, as both rejecting the ‘unmarked marker’ of whiteness and also allowing for more nuanced articulations of difference.

There is undoubtedly value in such an etymological turn. As a method of decentring, I affirm and support its intention. However, much as I am loathe to admit it, the naming of myself as a ‘white feminist’ provokes an uncomfortable reluctance. The pre-fix ‘white’ feels inherently racist to me: as though by declaring myself ‘white’, I am affirming an opposition, or antagonism, towards people who are ‘non-white’. Perhaps representative of the political climate referenced earlier, discourses of ‘whiteness’ often have an implicit
nationalism therein and one which is inherently hierarchical. Womanist bell hooks (1982) questions the utility of such racialisation, proposing that such divisions only function to polarise race, and further entrench racism (p. 156). Kamitsuka (2007) furthers that ‘unless white feminists are willing to delve into the issues surrounding racial privilege, such self-naming will not only lack substance but will work to reinforce the privilege it is supposed to acknowledge and de-centre’ (p. 11). In so much as ‘feminist’ is not a contextually neutral term, neither then, is ‘white’.

Goto (2019) proposes that the very suggestion that we are in a present position to move “beyond white normativity” is a fiction, so entangled and pervasive is its effective on our consciousness (p. 359). Just as it has taken generations to embed, she warns, so too will it take generations to erode. I share Goto’s scepticism that etymological hierarchies can be dismantled from the top down. Similarly, discourses of inclusion, and indeed, solidarity, are often empty platitudes without a genuine understanding and awareness of the lived experiences of others: an understanding which is arguably impossible to obtain without personally having felt the weight of multiple axis of inequalities. As Audré Lorde (1984) attests, ‘the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house’ (p. 116).

**Difference, Identity and Intersectionality**

If it is impossible to decentre, from the centre, how then do we begin to untrouble the trouble with white women? (And indeed, with white women theologians?) Schuller proposes that for feminism to move beyond its inherent (or inherited) whiteness, it requires critical analysis of how intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality and socio-geographic locations sustain and preserve multiple forms of oppression and the ways in which those in the ‘centre’ continue to benefit from these. She examines how black feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Audré Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1982) built upon Pauli Murray’s formative work in the 1960s on the multiplicity of structural inequalities by drawing attention to their ‘intersectionality’; that is, the ‘simultaneity’, ‘complexity’ and ‘irreducibility’ of overlapping systems of oppression on multiply marginalised identities (Schuller, 2021: 170). Recognising that identities are rarely singular, intersectionality rejects the privileging of one discourse of oppression over another and the elision of difference this creates (Daly’s universally subjugated woman, for example).

Crenshaw (1989) notes that ‘feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize experiences of people of colour have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur are mutually exclusive’ (p. 1242). Rather, she notes that women of colour often face dual discrimination because of their race and their gender, which neither black men, nor white women, will likely experience in the same way. Add issues of class, sexuality, or religion and the layers of marginalisation become even more complex still. Lesbian womanist theologian Renée Leslie Hill (1999) notes the impossibility of separating these identities, declaring ‘I have stopped trying to acquiesce to the demands that I choose between my race, my gender and my sexual orientation as a starting or ending point for protest against personal or communal experience’ (p. 138). Such characteristics, Crenshaw and Hill posit, while
different, are indivisible. Singular self-declarative identities such as ‘white’, ‘black’ or ‘feminist’ thus become insufficient in adequately attending to difference.

Some, however, consider that it is precisely this attentiveness to the complexity and simultaneity of difference that makes intersectionality a particularly difficult tool to wield. With the infiniteness of potential coalescing ‘categorisations’ of identity, some argue that this complexity risks fragmenting identities to the point where no commonality of experience can be found (Carastathis, 2014: 309). Moreover, in considering the ways in which some identities are ‘multiply marginalised’ in ways that others are not, intersectional approaches may risk a hierarchical classification of oppression in which some are unequal, but some are more unequal than others. Schuller, however, argues that ‘Intersectional feminism rejects white feminisms biopolitical mandate to advance oneself through dispossessing others. Instead, it focuses on the needs of the most marginalised as the best vantage to power in all its complexity’ (Schuller, 2021: 171).

From Murky Pasts to Uncertain Futures

With this problematic past looming over our present future, I have posed the question: what does ‘the trouble with white women’ mean for feminist theology? As Schuller’s counter-history has explored, white feminism has a murky past, replete with racism, paternalism and essentialism. As I have sought to demonstrate, (white) feminist theology is not only influenced by this inheritance but is in fact implicated in it. As Courtney Goto and Kwok Pui-Lan have evidenced, these ontological biases are not remnants of history, but rather are ever-present in the ways we enact, and re-enact, epistemological conventions. Practices of deference, inclusion, self-declaration and even solidarity, as I have explored, do not resist these conventions: rather, I have proposed, they can all too often reinforce them.

With the post-secular turn evident in our current socio-political landscape, and the lines between religious and political authority being increasingly blurred, white epistemological legacies can be seen to shape policy in tangible, and often, dangerous ways. Wren Radford (2017) notes that ‘while these may appear to be largely theoretical concerns, ethical relationships with others are at the heart of liberative praxis; attending to injustices in our communities, societies, and world deeply impacts theological approaches and practices’ (p. 130). Thus, the challenge for feminist theology is not merely theoretical, but rather has very real implications beyond academic discourse.

In considering these challenges, I have asked, is it possible to decentre white feminist theology, from the centre? While a definitive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article, and indeed beyond the scope of a single person, I suggest the answer is – probably not. What then, or who, can? The post-colonial theologians I have touched upon above trouble the epistemic hegemony of white feminism by drawing attention to the colonial vestiges of power concealed within such discourses and theessentialness of voices from ‘the margins’ in decolonising these. The intersectional feminists emphasise that even those identities considered ‘marginal’ not singular and distinct, but are often multiple, and thus impacted by systems of power which are structural, overlapping and similarly multi-layered.
Do such approaches then resolve the problem, from the outside, in? While Schuller (2021) is deeply critical of white feminism’s failure to interrogate its own shortcomings, she cautions that simply relying on other feminisms to fix its problems places the burden of responsibility on these to ‘save’ one of the very systems which has oppressed them (p. 251). White feminism, she furthers, must not defer responsibility to, but rather, be in dialogue with, diverse feminisms to move beyond its problematic history. Radford, cognisant of the power differentials which remain even in dialogical encounters, questions how theologians operating within a white Western paradigm can engage ethically with different voices. Kwok Pui-Lan (1992) considers that

as women theologians trying to appropriate each other’s work, we must come to terms with the differences shaped by our faith traditions, cultural presuppositions, and social locations. Our diversity must be seen as our strength and our particularity must be cherished as the unique gift each of us can bring to the dialogical table. We must cultivate our capacity for listening, so that we can have shared pain, shared anger, and shared strength. (p. 102)

What is clear is that for feminist theology to move beyond its ‘whiteness’ and creatively and effectively engage with the challenges present in a post-secular world, it is going to need every tool in the box. The stakes are simply too high.

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