



Entitlement racism and its intersections: An interview with Philomena Essed, social justice scholar

Philomena Essed and Sara Louise Muhr

abstract

Everyday discrimination, for example in the form of everyday racism or everyday sexism, is a concept that has motivated and influenced the debate about how a racial hierarchy controls the way organizations are structured and practiced. In this interview, social justice scholar Philomena Essed reflects on the relationship between her early work on ‘everyday racism’ and her newly theorized concept ‘entitlement racism’. She wisely links this move to current political developments and to other ‘isms’ and ‘phobias’ such as sexism, classism, homophobia and Islamophobia. As such, an intersectional approach lingers all through the interview, and towards the end of the interview this link is succinctly unfolded by Essed and explicitly addressed in a way that surprises and amazes the interviewer as much as herself.

Introduction

Organizational scholars have for quite some time been occupied with the structures and dimensions of everyday (or subtle) discrimination (e.g. Deitch et al., 2003; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011), most notably perhaps in the form of everyday sexism and everyday racism. Authors have persuasively demonstrated how raced and gendered power hierarchies are constructed and reinforced through normalizing everyday practices such as jokes, storytelling, generalizations or even so-called compliments. In and of themselves, these practices can be said to be ‘innocent’, ‘insignificant’ or ‘just for fun’. However, when they are continually reiterated, they become culturally normalized and end up functioning as systematic discrimination against minorities, which reinforce majority privilege

(Ahonen et al., 2014; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Liu and Baker, 2016; Muhr and Salem, 2013).

Social justice scholar Philomena Essed has been a defining figure in the debate about everyday racism (see e.g. Essed, 1990, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2013; Essed and Goldberg, 2002; Essed and Hoving, 2014; Essed and Trienekens, 2008). As most race and discrimination research is conducted at a macro level, her remarkable and ground-breaking 1991 book *'Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory'* initiated and cemented the value of a micro perspective, as she analyzed the everyday intersectional gendered social construction of race and racism in the Netherlands and the US based on interviews with Black women. She brilliantly demonstrated how racism is practiced through everyday subtle and accepted behavior.

Lately, however, the political discourse has changed. It has become more acceptable to speak about other people in racist, sexist, homophobic or Islamophobic terms. Discrimination that, just ten years ago, was wrapped 'nicely' in a politically correct tone or a 'funny' joke is now being uttered straight out. As an illustration of this, take for example the more and more rough anti-Islam rhetoric that has become almost mainstream in the daily media, as well as the socially accepted sexist behavior in online fora – such as Trump's self-declared right to 'grab them by the pussy', which was excused as 'locker room talk' – and finally the explanations and normalization of sexual harassment, as we have seen in the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the following responses to the #metoo campaign. Opposite everyday racism and sexism, these examples are out in the open, without any effort to disguise them, and are used in a way where the offender often claims a right to be able to behave in this way.

It is as if we have forgotten about history. It is as if our belief in equality, individuality, progress and welfare has numbed our sense of justice and left us with a postfeminist, color-blind and christonormative illusion (see Ferber, 2012). Highly sexist or racist statements and jokes are being normalized. The problematic issue here is that after decades of decolonization and feminist battles, people seem to believe that 'we are equal' and thus regard feminist or anti-racist activism as 'unnecessary' or 'hyper sensitive'. However, we argue here that it is not unnecessary or hyper sensitive to react to racist or sexist behavior. It is perhaps even more necessary than ever, now that 'locker-room' talk and racist jokes are becoming legitimate discourse. So, what characterizes this new discourse? What makes it different from earlier ones? What does it produce? How does it influence people? What can we do about it?

To investigate these questions further, we reached out to social justice scholar Philomena Essed, who is Professor of Critical Race, Gender and Leadership Studies at Antioch University. Professor Essed is a key and founding voice in the scholarly debate on everyday racism and gendered racism, and she has shown a lifelong commitment to social justice including issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability and religion.

Key publications include the now seminal books **'Everyday racism: Reports from women of two cultures'** (Hunter House, 1990), **'Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory'** (SAGE publications, 1991) and **'Diversity: Gender, color, and culture'** (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

In April 2016 Professor Essed came to Copenhagen Business School, where she gave a keynote on entitlement racism and was part of a panel discussion on refugees and the transformation of societies. The keynote was commented by discussant Professor Martin Parker from University of Leicester (as this is published, University of Bristol). Following the event, Philomena Essed was interviewed by Sara Louise Muhr, and the interview was transcribed and edited by Muhr and subsequently commented by Parker. The interview with Essed follows below and the comment by Parker is published as an individual piece following the interview (in this issue).

The interview

Sara Louise Muhr:

How did you first come to think about the concept of entitlement racism?

Philomena Essed:

There is one event that I know in retrospect triggered a great deal of thought: the 'racist cake' event in Sweden in 2012. I was in a classroom in South Africa, co-teaching a methodology course with three or four colleagues. Because it was a day-long course, we would take turns, while the other facilitators would be sitting at the back of the room of a class of maybe 40 students. And it was my turn to sit at the back of the class and observe. Suddenly this noise came from one of the computers, which was being used by one of the other facilitators, also at the back of the room. She was probably checking her emails or something, which was fair enough. I could hear her click a button, and suddenly this enormous scream tore through the room. All faces turned into her direction. She frantically tried to get rid of the screen, but because she was nervous she couldn't find the button. And from the computer came these screams and then laughter and then another spine-

chilling scream. For what seemed to be a long time, but was probably only 30 seconds, she struggled to get rid of the noise. Later, when I asked her what had caused the commotion, she said, 'Well, it was this horrible thing in Sweden'. It turned out to be a news item about the then minister of culture in Sweden, slicing a cake shaped as a big black woman. She had to stab into the vagina area in order to cut the cake. The artist was hidden under the table, his head stuck inside the cake's head, and once the minister cut the cake, the artist screamed [that was most likely the blood-curdling scream that Professor Essed had heard in class, red].



This incident triggered conversations about whether this was art, was it permissible, what do you do about it. I had never before been engaged with such issues in relation to art. I know how important it is to have artistic freedom and freedom of expression, but it just made me think: why did the artist, even when in subsequent public interviews he identified as Afro-Swedish, why did he choose this format to say what he wanted to say? The artistic point was to protest FGM [female genital mutilation, red], but he could have chosen other formats. For one, why did he have to use an adult's body, when FGM is something that happens mostly to girls or young women, and also why in this stereotypical and demeaning way? But when I discussed this, some people would just say 'art is art, you cannot

question art'. And I thought, 'well, hang on a minute; in the name of art, you are allowing racist images...' But I let the matter rest.

Then there was another bothersome development about the same time. Islamophobia had been normalized in the Netherlands. You could say anything ugly you wanted to about Muslims, about perceived Muslims. It got to the point where I could not bear it any longer and I just needed to write about it. This became the article 'Intolerable humiliations' (see Essed, 2009), in which I, being very cautious, argued that if you humiliate a culture, you humiliate everybody who identifies with that culture, and you dehumanize that group. And then what? What do you expect the group to do? Feel happy about it? Or to also respond in a way that is public as well? And that might be a very unpleasant response. I compared the dehumanization of Muslims, in the Netherlands in particular targeting Moroccan immigrants, to a sort of cultural assassination. It's a big word, but that is what it comes down to at the end of the day. That you want to see a culture or a religion completely erased. And I just thought to myself, how could it be OK for the Dutch to express ethnic-religious hate and disgust publicly, a discourse that is so ugly?

Then came the whole debate about Zwarte Piet, the Black Pete figure in the Netherlands¹, and whether it was a tradition that should be kept or stopped [out of respect for black people, red.].



¹ In the Netherlands Santa Claus has a little helper called Zwarte Piet. On December 5th people paint their faces and dress up as Zwarte Piet, which has caused a huge debate about whether this is 'just tradition' or a highly racist way of practising racial suppression.

Native Dutch responses flying across social media and other public spaces were so racist, so viciously hateful, even murderous in many ways. Calling for people to be hanged, to be pushed into the sea [for suggesting that the way Zwarte Piet was portrayed was racist, red.]. Not all responses were like this, of course; they ranged from concerns about why we have to change our very culture or tradition to death threats. And I thought, something is wrong; there was no real protest against the fact that you cannot say these things.

I realized, deeply, how something has been shifting, which pointed me to the idea of entitlement racism – that people feel they are allowed to say whatever they want, whenever they want, about whomever they want, in the name of freedom of expression. And it becomes relevant in terms of freedom of expression. Not only where it is against a particular person, but also where it is against representatives of a particular culture, and in that sense against that culture, or against that quote unquote race, at the same time. But, you know, in the 2000s anybody who wants to, who has the basic skills and technology to participate in social media, can access all the information they want in order to know what racism is about. You are being asked not to use the Black Pete figure because it is experienced as demeaning. Thoughtfully, many would say, we don't want to take away your tradition, only this one figure. There are other ways to celebrate Santa Claus; there are other ways to honor what is otherwise a lovely family tradition of fun, exchanging gifts and sharing joy. Taking away Zwarte Piet doesn't have to diminish that. You can make the iteration, if people continue to argue that the ways in which the figure of Zwarte Piet is used are racist, that it reinforces racism, why is it then so difficult to discontinue that part of the tradition? Many more (Dutch) traditions have been changed in the course of history, in order to achieve more gender equality, better health care, education for all and so on.

Similarly, what is so difficult when people say, 'Don't use the N-word'? What difference does it make to you, to not use it? There are plenty of other words. But apparently, people feel *entitled* to do so. I connected this to the boundless degree of tolerance for other forms of racist expression, such as the mushrooming degree of Islamophobia across Europe. Combining all these aspects illuminated to me that gradually the door has been opened again for boundless expression of race-related racism as well. Before, it was a taboo to say something about skin color; you would make a detour so as not to have to mention color. And I am not saying that that was better, but you at least had a sense of 'We don't do that', and that has turned into, 'So why should we not be able to do that? What is your problem?' This new boldness I wanted to capture with the notion of entitlement racism. That people seem to feel that they have the right to offend – that the freedom of expression is interpreted not as a freedom to be used for the common good, to be used in a way that does not humiliate others, but as a license to offend. And that

has included, for instance, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who gave a speech in 2005 in Germany, in which she in so many words claimed her right to offend². Let's stop here for a moment and ask: What is dignified in offending people? Why do you think you deserve respect for doing that? Why can't we instead point at a problem, urge for dialogue about this? Yes, we can and should protest against what we see as injustices, concerns, violations of norms and values. But do we really have to humiliate others in doing so? Humiliation causes scars that are very difficult to heal. So, these were some of the considerations that encouraged me to look at whether there has been a shift in the way that racism is expressing itself. And one could say, yes, Islamophobia has opened the gates towards more open anti-black racism as well. But at the same time, because we are living in times where, in principle, a body of knowledge is available to inform you what racism is about, and yet you continue to use these now more open forms again, you must feel that you are entitled to do that.

SLM:

How do you think people have responded to the concept of entitlement racism?

PE:

Usually at talks I give, often international, or teaching about it, there is an aha-effect of recognition when I describe entitlement racism as racism in the name of freedom of expression. Actually, I haven't used it that much yet – I think once or twice in the Netherlands – although I've just written a new introduction to the reissue of my very first book on everyday racism for a broader audience. It was first written in Dutch in 1984. In order to make the leap from 1984 to 2017, I wrote a new introduction and also added a chapter on entitlement racism. The notion was very difficult to translate into Dutch. So, I still have to see how the Dutch audience will respond to that. But internationally, it has been an eye-opener most of the times.

SLM:

It is interesting that you added a chapter on entitlement racism to the *Everyday Racism* book. Could you elaborate on the difference? Or on how the concept of everyday racism has somehow evolved into entitlement racism?

² See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ayaan-hirsi-ali/defending-the-right-to-offend_b_7104960.html

PE:

Well, in 1984 everyday racism was often expressed more covertly. But everyday racism is not by definition implicit and covert. It depends on the country and time of history. It seems that entitlement racism is reshaping everyday racism. Or, actually, it has become a form of everyday racism.

SLM:

Yes, and maybe also less embarrassing?

PE:

I agree, because when you feel entitled to say these things, you don't have to feel embarrassed by the points you make. Thirty years ago, people would feel embarrassed. But now many think they have the right to say these things. And of course, this is not general across the public. It is contested. Some people will engage in it and some will not. But there are certainly more than in the past who feel that it is OK to make these overtly racist statements – in the name of freedom of expression.

SLM:

I assume you believe in freedom of expression as well, so how do you suggest that we work with both freedom of expression and also a care for each other – or a care for not offending each other?

PE:

Freedom of expression is hugely important, especially at the moment, of attempts – in US, in Turkey, in France, in the Netherlands – and unfortunately successful attempts, to establish authoritarian regimes, advocating 'I say so and you do so'. Characteristic for these regimes, – look at Turkey, for instance – is that intellectuals, journalists, artists and activists – those who use freedom of expression professionally, whether critical or not – become the first targets: from being detained, to losing your job, to maybe even being assassinated. So, we know how extremely important it is to live in a country where you have freedom of expression – and freedom of expression can never be taken as a given, because it can be snatched away from you. We have to continue to be alert about, to fight for and to treasure this freedom. Having said this, once you have this freedom in your country – or in your environment – it becomes important not to claim it all the time, but to use it *responsibly*. And by responsibly, I mean that you use it in a way that does not unnecessarily humiliate others. And yes, sometimes being offensive

or taken as such can be unavoidable, but one doesn't have to humiliate. Although the line between offence and humiliation can be very thin. I am not saying that you can never say something that is blunt or hard – sometimes that is necessary. But caution is needed not to humiliate, because that is what causes wounds. If you are offended by something, or you don't like it – again, the line between offence and humiliation can be very thin – you can also shrug your shoulders, or think, 'Ah well, it wasn't that bad'. But if it leaves an emotional scar – and that is what humiliation does – it takes longer to heal. And that is why we don't need to be reckless or claim the right here and now that you can say anything you want. Such absolute individualism borders on narcissism and desensitizes to the needs of others. It sort of diminishes your emotional intelligence, because it reduces the ability to empathize, empathy being the ability to perceive the world from another point of view besides your own. Empathy is a form of intelligence, emotional and often at the same time cultural. You don't need a PhD for that. It develops through care about others, making observations throughout live and everyday learning whether or not in formal school settings. If your emotional intelligence fades as a consequence of, for example, increased violence in society, it becomes easier to dehumanize others. And once that process takes on, the dehumanized are perceived as not relevant to society... not relevant in life, which makes their lives dispensable in your eyes. Not even worthy of being... It is a downward spiraling path once you open the door of dehumanization.

SLM:

So, there is a notion – and probably a very difficult notion – of ethics here, isn't there?

PE:

Absolutely. Morality is knowing good from bad, and ethics is the theory you attach to honoring what society has agreed is good and respectable and caring and responsible behavior. The ethics involved here is basically to respect that another human being deserves to be, even when you totally disagree with or even despise what they are doing. It is important to distinguish between the inherent value of life, and the value, or lack of value or dignity, of certain behavior.

SLM:

There is this very difficult notion of ethics behind this. Because if you ask who is to decide – who is to decide what is humiliating or not and who is to decide what is good freedom of speech and what isn't – that is where it begins to get tricky. Do

you try to stay away from those kinds of questions, or do you try to engage with them?

PE:

No, I don't try to stay away from them. Basically, I think that there are at least two indicators of when something is humiliating: if the person feels humiliated, and if society thinks that what happened is humiliating because you are being demeaned. And again, the line between being demeaning and humiliation is sometimes invisible, although these are different concepts. A very important indicator is to find out whether a person *feels* humiliated. If you have reasonable cause to feel that you have been humiliated, then one has to take it seriously. The second question, then, is to explain why. Why does it make you feel humiliated? And then, as a person who has said or done something that another person has experienced as humiliating, you can take the responsibility to listen to what is being said. The question then is, what does this feeling of humiliation say about you. Could it be that it triggers a very particular experience, something that has happened in your life that makes you feel humiliated, whereas another person would not find it humiliating at all? Let's see whether this is particular to the person or whether others of the same group – in case of racial humiliation – would agree about the humiliating nature of the act. Is this something that society at large would see as humiliating as well? Finally, yes only *finally* and not as the starting point, there is the intent of the person who has done something that has been experienced as humiliating. The mistake we often make is to look at intent and motivation first, which sort of ruins the conversation, because, sure, it would routinely be 'I did not mean it that way'... although with entitlement racism, the intent is also to offend, if not to humiliate. That is also why I call it entitlement racism. And the intent here is an extended intent, as in, you could have known, but you were indifferent, too lazy, or you didn't care enough to inform yourself.

SLM:

And I guess this is where it becomes very important that discrimination – or humiliation – happens when someone feels discriminated against. Because with acts classified as 'everyday racism', it would in principle be enough to say, 'You are actually discriminating against somebody'. Maybe the offender didn't know, and maybe this kind of exposure or clarification would make the person reconsider. However, in entitlement racism, the person who is racist feels entitled to be racist, and the concept is arguing, I suppose, that this person has less interest in seeing the other person's point of view. And isn't that the problem?

PE:

That is a problem with entitlement racism, yes. Although I avoid calling a person racist – I would rather call *behavior* racist. A sense of entitlement indicates also a backlash against a sense of being a victim of your own goodness – the complaint that ‘I cannot say anything anymore without being called a racist’. I am referring here to the aggressive response to antiracism, when any moral statement about racism used to be ridiculed disparagingly with ‘don’t give me that political correct blah-blah’. This is typically also the mode of populism and can be early signs of fascism: feeding into a sense of victimhood among the population at large in order to identify and destroy those who stand in the way of authoritarian regimes to rise. It’s like feeling relieved about not having to care about the impact of what we say. Whereas with many other things in life, if you want to achieve something, you don’t just go and do it. You often think, ‘What is it exactly that I want to achieve by doing this? Am I contributing to that, or making the situation worse?’ In many other instances in our lives, we think more carefully about the possible impact of what we are about to do. But in acts of entitlement racism, it becomes: ‘I don’t care about it, I am just going to say it, because this is how I feel’. It is my right to express how I feel. At this point change is urgent. And it might come not in the least because of ugliness-fatigue. I think people might grow tired of the ugliness around us. Ugliness wears on you to the point where you might question why we are doing this to ourselves? Do I really have to say these ugly things when nobody is forcing me to say them?

SLM:

Yes, and that is exactly why I wanted to ask you about how you see this in relation to more recent events – Trump, Wilders, the Women’s March, as well as the whole debate about the pussy hat.

PE:

Those ‘pussy grabbing’ statements were clearly cases of entitlement sexism. Like: ‘not only have I said it, I am certainly not even going to apologize’. And from the responses, you could see that there were a lot of people who thought: this is too much. There is already increasing exhaustion about what Trump is going to say next. There is only so much people can tolerate in terms of ugliness. You get tired of it, but then there is also the danger that some people might withdraw feeling ‘let him do what he wants; let them do what they want. I am just not going to participate in any of this’. It might also be that people begin to change their language and become more careful. One of the people who is really good is Rokhaya Diallo from France. She is a journalist and actually was exposed to a

mixture of entitlement racism and sexism. In her work, she actively defends the dignity of people of color, the dignity of religion, and fights against discrimination in France. An amazing woman. Very active, organizing one critical event after another. As a result, she received threatening emails, one of which called for her to be raped. Which is of course absolutely sexist, and given that she is black and because of the kind of work she does, you cannot separate it from race either, or from racism. She hired a lawyer and initiated a court case, but at the same time, it prompted her, parallel to her case, to conduct a journalistic investigation of women who had been exposed to threats on social media because of the work they do. She pictured, for example, the only woman in a tech environment and one of the ministers of France, and how they dealt with social media threats. The result was an incredible documentary, which reported her case in relation to a larger phenomenon. And those are the kinds of examples that point in the direction of where we need to go. We can do something constructive as well with dismal experiences. And in the end, it turned out that the person who had called for this grave violation of her bodily integrity was in a way a pretty powerless person. She felt sorry for him as the \$2,000 fine he would have to pay was going to be a lot of money for him. And as a viewer of the documentary it wasn't either that you felt like, 'Oh, we got him'. It was a sad situation. But because of the fact that she had embedded her own story in a broader context, it went beyond just going after this one person. Which I thought was a beautiful example of what you can do in cases like this.

SLM:

So, what are we to do? What strategies can we follow? Both as individual people and as a society?

PE:

As individual people, we become more than individual people depending on the profession we have. When you are in your classroom, you are the professor, but you are more than a professor: you represent your discipline, you represent your university, you are in a leading role, and that has a larger impact than a one-on-one discussion with your neighbor next door. People in responsible positions and in leadership positions – from the teacher to the pastor, to the representative in parliament, to the prime minister – have a responsibility to give and to live a different example. Beyond one-person-with-larger-impact kind of interventions there are also legal ways, although I think that legal ways should be the last resort and not the first resort. Or maybe not the last resort, but let me put it this way: it doesn't have to be the first resort. Because a) when you go legal the case will be

limited by the confines of legal language, and b) other interests get involved as well.

SLM:

Yes, it might take the entitlement away, but not the racism?

PE:

Exactly. Whereas, leading by example is one thing everybody can do. And then I think there could be codes of behavior in the workplace, whether that is a university or somewhere else. Engage in – and initiate – conversations about what is acceptable and what is not and how you can help people to immediately respond with, ‘This is not OK’. Because often when you are a witness you do not necessarily agree, but sometimes you might feel afraid to say something too. There is this wonderful book by Kristina Thalhammer and others (Thalhammer et al., 2007) called ‘*Courageous resistance*’, about conditions needed for people to become courageous resisters as a life style or to courageously resist situationally. It has to do with socialization and with the kind of country in which you live. With societal norms, with family values you grew up with. With your networks, and whether you only identify with a ‘we’ group when considered homogenous, or whether your ‘we’ group includes others than just the people who look like you. Whether according to quote unquote race, ethnicity, gender – make sure that our ‘we’ group is a broader group. And the more diverse the ‘we’ group, the less you will be inclined to engage in humiliating behavior or exclusionary behavior or discrimination against someone who does not look exactly like you.

SLM:

So, a ‘we’ group that is broader than a single category?

PE:

Sure. And you know, even when parents have given bad examples you can also take this as the kind of leadership you do not want to imitate. Those things can be done without any big revolutions. They are not about putting people in jail; they are not about shaming people. They are just efforts to providing a better example. Of course, much can be done at an institutional level as well, by actually protesting – by boycotting a certain product or a certain TV network, which are careless about these things. Boycotting a certain program that engages in entitlement racism.

SLM:

That was also the point with the Women's March. It started as a small idea, but ended up as a huge worldwide activist protest. They had never anticipated that it would become this big.

PE:

And this is a very nice example of action across categories. It started with two women – one in Hawaii and one on the east coast, I believe, of the US – who discovered that they wanted to do the same thing. Women needed to do something, women needed to march. And they were two white women if I am correctly informed. But at a very early stage, they realized the march would not be really good and impactful if it was only a one-category thing – that is, if it involved only white women. So immediately they reached out to be more inclusive, realizing that inclusiveness among women meant, among other things, more color. With more color and more backgrounds, you also bring in specific issues often not recognized as (white) women's issues, like racism, immigrant status. These experiences are as relevant as gender or cannot be seen as separate from gender. As a result, the march developed into a really broad agenda. But up for improvement still. The other month I got invited for a talk about entitlement racism and gave as an example how the Women's March movement had functioned differently in making coalitions. However, some participants in the audience questioned the movement's inclusiveness – one example pertaining to the deliberate exclusion of issues relating to Palestine. I felt shocked and very disappointed. At the same time, I don't think this discredits other ways in which the march could be inclusive, including a range of issues – the environment, race, poverty, disability. There were so many people involved in the movement who could unite around the fact that we are all worthy human beings. So, it was very broad, though not sufficiently so.

SLM:

It's interesting that you say this, because there was a quite a lot of criticism afterwards about it being very white. Did you hear that as well?

PE:

I did, but at the same time that was not altogether true. I think there were some things around the way it started that weren't really acknowledged. It started around the quote unquote 'pussy' thing, and when Trump was making these remarks, he surely wasn't thinking about black pussies, he was thinking about white pussies. And few, if any, white women pointed out that the issue was racialized. The

dimension of race that was involved was sort of circumvented because of the segregated lives throughout US history. And it would not have made it better either if Trump had meant black and white ‘pussies’. But it raised a degree of resentment among certain black women, who said, ‘Yeah, now suddenly you can protest, but when it was about “Black Lives Matter”, where were the white people?’ It is not altogether true that no white people were involved – there were sympathizers and empathizers. But it is also true that police violence, directly and indirectly, is affecting the lives of many, if not all, black women as partners, mothers, grandmothers and not in the least as targets of police violence themselves. It wasn’t taken up among white women as a feminist issue, as a women’s issue. But it [Black Lives Matter] *is* a women’s issue, because of the devastating impact of racism on black women and their communities as a whole and there has been a lot of police brutality against black women adapted to the fact that these were women and not men – involving groping and inappropriate sexual behavior and what have you.

SLM:

Yes, and it was interesting how the pussy hat went from being a sign of activism and rebellion to being a sign of repression and whiteness.

PE:

Personally, I wasn’t enchanted by the pussy hat, but, ironically, in racially segregated US, there was the unspoken normativity of white privilege, that is white pussies to be selected worthy of being groped. Although a very dubious privilege.

SLM:

At the end here, I want to ask you about intersectionality. You talk about it very indirectly, as an intersectional term. Because you talk about racism, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, etc. – you even mentioned entitlement sexism at some point in this interview. So, in what way would you say that entitlement racism is intersectional?

PE:

It depends. Let me take a step back first. I continue to feel less than comfortable with the term intersectionality. In a policy sense, I have no issue with using it, because in that context it is not a scholarly concept, it is a frame to acknowledge that gender has other dimensions to it. For example, gender is a diverse gender and is not a white gender and policy makers should act accordingly. That much is clear. When it comes to conceptual thinking, the very notion of intersection suggests having arrived from different routes, as if they are separated and, whoops,

suddenly they meet. And even though the literature has become more nuanced over the years, the very term brings us back all the time to the idea of originally separate categories. I feel more comfortable with a whole-person approach. Now back to the phenomenon of entitlement. It has something very masculine about it – the sense of self-importance. And men – or earlier, boys – are often socialized to feel more important than their sisters. Even feminist women fall into this trap somehow, when they allow sons to challenge them and to seek their limits more so than girls because boys are boys and you just don't want to have that fight. Too many boys grow up with the idea that 'I can do everything I want'. I mean, the quintessential example got rewarded big time. He ended up in the White House with behavior tolerated or applauded by too many, because he is male, because he is a *white* male. The sense that you are entitled to do all these things because you want to, is very strong in the socialization of boys. Then there's the assumption that care – that caring about another person – is a soft, feminine, hence less valuable trait, which brings in a gender dimension as well. Being sensitive to the needs of others is another so-called soft trait associated with femininity. Not surprisingly, any survey or other research that has crossed my desk throughout the years, involving gender comparison for participation in or support of fascist ideas scores significantly higher among (white) males. The notion of class is part of entitlement theory as well, because if you grow up with clear limits to what you can afford financially – and if the ceiling is low – you learn from early on that not everything is possible, that you have to be careful in your consideration of what you do with your money, and that there are other people who have more than you. Growing up with class pain can contribute to sensitivity to other forms of social exclusion that hurt. At the same time, economic deprivation might not make you sensitive at all, when conspiracy myths, populism, orthodox and homogeneous environments create Others as enemies. You may feel threatened, convinced that 'they' are stealing your job, for example. Neither does a middle-class upbringing necessarily create less sensitive people. So, class can work in different directions. But the whole idea of entitlement, of claiming your right, is based on a middle-class experience. The very notion of rights is more accessible to the middle class than it is to the quote unquote lower class or economically challenged classes or the formally less educated people. And of course, there are layered assumptions to the way entitlement racism is expressed. Comparing a black person to a monkey, as happens a lot in Europe, as I also wrote about in the article on entitlement racism (Essed, 2013) implies two things. First, that the life of a monkey is not important at all – that human beings are way more important than animals and that Blacks can be treated as animals. Related, and importantly, that one can ab/use animals to serve the needs of human beings (animals of a higher order). Much, although not all of this can be traced back to religion: The Judo-Christian tradition or philosophy that animals are less than human beings. Note, that I am not saying

just bluntly that animals are the same as human beings. That is not the case. Yet, to preserve so many things as the privilege of human beings only, and not of other animals, is not fair. It is not just, and it has led to a lot of destruction of nature, of the environment, and unnecessary suffering of animals, etc. So here that dimension comes in. Unpacking what happens in the name of racism reveals that there are multiple entitlement dimensions involved. It is not just racism that happens, but at the same time a number of other elements are being reinforced. In my article on cloning the physician (Essed and Goldberg, 2002), I try to unpack this relatedness of entitlement. I did not yet recognize it as entitlement there – entitlement theorizing came later to me – but I was close with notion of society’s privileges or preferences – what I call the preferred categories, the preferred values, the preferred traits and the preferred characteristics. These preferred attributions are more generously associated with masculinity and even more when combined with whiteness and with high education and high economic status, even more when associated with the Christian religion, with being European, and so on. It is a whole package. You cannot just tease race out. You know the whole package starts to move if you pull and push what you think is only race.

SLM:

Yes, I really like that – especially as how you formulated it makes intersectionality a term that becomes unnecessary or even superficial. I mean, it cannot capture the complexity of what is in the term ‘entitlement racism’. Because if you try to capture all these facets, you will decrease their impact or their value. They become less important, in a sense.

PE:

Yes, and it was a very nice question you posed, because it also allowed me to see more clearly that entitlement as such is very classed, gendered, ability based, and so on. I mean, many categories are already in there when you read that through race as entitlement racism. Although it can feel as the opposite of everyday racism, it is not. Entitlement racism is on its way to becoming more mundane, more everyday.

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