Intersectionality as a new feeling rule for young feminists: Race and feminist relations in France and Switzerland

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Abstract
Black feminist theory and theorizations by feminists of colour have identified and explored emotions linked to race and racism in feminist movements, especially in the US context. Building on this literature, this article explores the changes in feminist emotional dynamics linked to race which have been brought up by the relatively recent adoption of intersectionality in feminist movements’ discourses in two European countries, France and Switzerland, which are both often described as ‘colour-blind’ contexts. Drawing on Hochschild’s concept of feeling rules, we argue that intersectionality has changed the ways feminists are legitimately expected to feel about race and racism within feminist movements in both contexts. As feeling rules vary according to the members’ positions within the movement, we contend that these changes in emotional dynamics contribute to redefine feminists’ relations and feminist membership along racial lines. Based on interviews with young feminist activists in France and Switzerland during mobilization processes characterized by a prominent use of intersectionality, we observe how intersectionality discourses bring about new feeling rules in relation to race and racism. These feeling rules differ for white and non-white feminists: while intersectionality has led young white feminists to self-education and self-critique, racialized feminists often expressed mixed feelings about intersectionality and its use, in particular by white feminists. Importantly, these changes in feeling rules have allowed racialized feminists to renegotiate their relations with white feminists and their emotional content, as well as their position within the movement.

Keywords
Emotions, feeling rules, feminist movements, feminism and race, intersectionality

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Feminist emotions such as anger, joy, elation, or even rage have been portrayed in academic and popular accounts of feminist movements as a positive and essential fuel for the movement, triggering activists’ involvement, boosting collective action, and often providing the origin of consciousness raising (Chemaly, 2019; Cooper, 2018; Traister, 2018). These ‘good’ emotions are often contrasted with less appealing ones, those which do not bond feminists together but rather are portrayed as disuniting them, such as distrust, defensiveness, and disappointment directed at other feminists. While these ‘bad’ feelings are manifest in various historical contexts and may crystalize around various issues – such as sex work (Agustín, 2008; Ward and Wylie, 2017) – they have been particularly elicited by pervading racism, lack of intersectional praxis, and failure of inclusivity in and by feminist organizations. Feminist emotions about race have been particularly well described by Black American feminists such as Audre Lorde, who analysed both the legitimate anger and disappointment of feminists of colour as a means to engage and demand discussions about racism in the movement, and the defensiveness and ‘white guilt’ of white feminists, used as strategies to avoid addressing the issue of racism and power relations within the movement (Ahmed, 2014; Bassel and Emefulu, 2017; Carby, 1982; Lorde, 1997; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). In other Western contexts, studies also have underscored how white feminists’ emotions such as defensiveness or nostalgia help sustain white privilege in feminist organizations and block anti-racist work (Frankenberg, 1993; Hurtado, 1996, 2019; Rowe, 2000; Srivastava, 2006).

While these emotional dynamics have been well documented, we may wonder if and how they change over time and depending on the context, in particular given the rapid and wide adoption of intersectionality as a central feminist grammar in recent decades in many countries (Cho et al., 2013). If emotions are central to the deployment of racism and anti-racism within feminist movements, how may intersectionality disrupt and transform pre-existing emotional repertoires? Can intersectionality achieve what Sara Ahmed has stressed as a crucial issue within feminism; that is the possibility for feminists to ‘receive the anger of other feminists’? For Ahmed (2014), receiving anger is both a political action and an emotional state. This possibility calls into question ‘the conditions under which it is possible for just hearings to translate into action’ (p. 178) and entails accepting ‘that one’s own position might anger others and hence allows one’s position to be opened to critique by others’ (p. 178). By looking at how intersectionality might change feminist emotions, or, to borrow the conceptual vocabulary forged by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, how it may change feeling rules within feminist activism, we hence propose to investigate the emotional labour performed by intersectionality and its political consequences.

In this article, we explore this question in a specific context, that of young feminists’ activism in France and French-speaking Switzerland. Indeed, both contexts share a late and uneven adoption of intersectionality in feminist discourses and practices, where intersectionality is heralded by a majority of young feminists in their 20s but unevenly adopted institutionally by mainstream feminist organizations (Emefulu and Bassel, 2015; Larcher, 2017; Lépinard, 2014). Both cases thus allow for analysing how the recent adoption of intersectionality shapes new feeling rules and relations between feminists along and across racial divides. We first develop and discuss the concept of feeling rule to show how it may enrich our feminist theorizing about feminist emotions and provide
a conceptual vocabulary to articulate emotions, positionality, and social relations of power within feminist movements. We argue that intersectionality encourages young white feminists to develop a form of self-education, self-criticism, and self-scrutiny about racism, which, however, does not always lead to new types of relationships and alliances within the movements. Non-white young feminists express frustration about the persisting lack of intersectionality in practice, but also satisfaction at the spaces and legitimacy that this claim has created for them in a context traditionally inhospitable to self-organizing on the basis of racial minority identities. While they criticize the appropriation of intersectionality by white feminists, they do not display defensiveness towards intersectionality – an emotion which has been evidenced in other contexts (Nash, 2019). Notably, intersectionality allows them to renegotiate their relations with white feminists, and the feelings attached to those relations.

**Race, feeling rules, and relations in feminism**

Participants and analysts of feminist movements have long explored the emotions that drive feminism (Ahmed, 2014; Guenther, 2009; Hercus, 1999; Hesford, 2009, 2013; Hooks, 1989; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Importantly, feminist theorists of colour have repeatedly called attention to the emotional repertoires which characterize relations between feminists across colour lines. They have pointed both at how anger grows among feminists of colour due to the consciousness of pervasive racism in the movement and also at how white feminists react with anger to discussions about racism, or deflect accusations with defensiveness and ‘white guilt’. In her preface to the landmark volume *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga emotionally recalls a meeting with white feminists in Boston: ‘dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over’ (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981, p. xv). Audre Lorde (1984) also develops the role of anger as what lies between white and non-white women and between feminists: ‘Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger’ (p. 128). In her famous text, ‘The Uses of Anger’, she remarks upon how white women, faced with that anger, often choose defensiveness or guilt (see also Breines, 2006; Frankenberg, 1993). Both reactions hinder change and objectify those who have waged anger as a means to communicate and initiate change (Lorde 1984: 130). Bernice Johnson Reagon’s famous speech on coalition and her warning that coalition brings fear and discomfort is also an analysis of the role of emotions in feminist activism which has resonated in many contexts (Brown, 1992; Reagon, 1998; Smith, 2000). Black feminists’ analyses of emotional dynamics in the context of the US second wave challenged the prevailing feeling rules in the feminist movement at the time. They attempted to provide a new framing of the social situation and, accordingly, to promote a new type of emotional work adapted to this framing.

Arlie Hochschild (2012 [1983]) has defined emotional work as a process of regulating feelings in the private sphere and everyday social life as well as in the workplace, in order to render them appropriate to a given social situation. While Hochschild’s concept has shed new light on the emotional labour performed at work, in particular by women, to produce an emotional state in the client, emotional work is also, and first, a work on
the self to manage one’s own emotions in a given social situation. Following Hochschild, we can understand emotions and the management that they demand from us as the ‘bottom-side of ideology’: the ways in which we feel we must suppress, exaggerate, or nuance specific emotions in certain circumstances is the product of social structures and of our place within them (Hochschild, 1979, 2012 [1983]). This emotional work is regulated by feeling rules, which delineate ‘a zone in which one has permission to be free of worry, guilt or shame with regard to the situated feeling’ (Hochschild, 1979: 565).

We draw on Hochschild’s work to focus on how new emotional rules can emerge and impose themselves for the purpose of dismantling an existing emotional regime. Our perspective pays particular attention to the work and efforts made by feminists to change the emotional dynamics according to their positionality within the relationships at stake. It explores how intersectionality reconfigures emotional rules through a new grammar that dictates a control of white activists’ emotions, a reorientation of feelings, in order to make the movement more hospitable to race-related issues and to addressing racism.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, we argue that feeling rules in feminist movements both indicate and are the product of the power relations which structure movements. As Hochschild (1979, 2012 [1983]) underlines, emotion is where individual, status, relations, and group connect. As feeling rules depend on one’s position in a social structure, feminists are not expected to legitimately express their feelings in the same way depending on their position within the movement. What is more, Hochschild notes that emotions are always a contribution to a group: by consciously working on one’s emotion, one attempts to confirm one’s membership and relations to the other members of the group. Looked at in this light, feeling rules and emotional work within feminist organizations and movements indicate patterns of membership and give cues about the relationships between feminists and their potential transformation. While Hochschild did not insist on the political nature of these relations, as she rather focused on how emotions sustain social arrangements and social structures, we argue, following other approaches of emotions such as the phenomenological account proposed by Sarah Ahmed (2006, 2014) or the cultural and historical account of affects based on race such as Gloria Wekker’s (2016) exploration of ‘white innocence’, that emotions also sustain and mediate political relations: changes in feeling rules in feminist movements are the result of political change and conflicts, and they express specific political relationships among feminists.

Accounts and analyses of anger and defensiveness between feminists about racism are often rooted in second-wave activism, and more often than not in the US context. We therefore may wonder to what extent they still apply to contemporary European contexts. Racism structures European societies and feminist movements, and certainly similar emotions still define the contours of relationships across hierarchies of race among feminists today (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019; Joly and Wadia, 2017; Larcher, 2017; Wekker, 2016). Coalition work is still especially tiring and emotionally challenging for those groups with less power (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Cole and Luna, 2010; Lépinard, 2020). Nevertheless, we must also be attentive to the ways in which new feeling rules may emerge. In particular, given the rapid and wide acceptance of the political and theoretical vocabulary of intersectionality in many corners of feminist and queer activism in Europe (Evans, 2016; Evans and Lépinard 2019; Irvine et al., 2019), we could expect the
emergence of new feeling rules; that is, new emotional vocabularies tied to the concept and practice of intersectionality.

Indeed, as a political vocabulary that articulates the interlocking nature of oppressions and the centrality of racism (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hancock, 2016; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), does intersectionality contribute to new forms of feminist relations and shape new feeling rules? Recent scholarship has shown that there is a ‘desire’ for intersectionality on the part of young white feminists as intersectionality is heralded as a central tenet of feminist activism in many corners of Europe. This desire however rarely translates into concrete changes, and the lack of intersectionality is also routinely, and maybe rhetorically, lamented by white feminists (Evans, 2016; Reger, 2012; Schuster, 2016). Gloria Wekker (2016) notes, for example, that while intersectionality was introduced into the Dutch context in the late 1990s and was embraced by gender studies and feminist movements, ‘[it] has not blossomed to become the radical and inclusive intervention it initially promised to become, if an equal engagement with race, as is the case for gender, is taken as criterion’ (p. 71).

While discourses lamenting the inability to achieve intersectionality reveal an avowed desire for and an emotional investment in intersectionality on the part of young white feminists in many European contexts, the other emotions attached to intersectionality – its praxis and the relationships it may create or break – remain a relatively uncharted territory. Analysing the discourses of participants in various locations of the Women’s Marches of 2017, Zakiya Luna (2020) emphasizes that whether or not the participants ‘felt’ that the March was intersectional ‘enough’ varies greatly and depends heavily on their concrete social and geographic location. Also studying the 2017 Women’s March, Jessica Gantt-Shafer et al. (2019) note that the Marches’ progressive adoption of an overt intersectional discourse prompted discomfort for some white feminists. Hence, intersectionality may be desired, felt, or feared, and it may generate specific feeling rules which are context-dependent. We propose to explore these in more depth in the contexts of France and Switzerland.

A contested and inhospitable terrain: The adoption of intersectionality in France and Switzerland

The increasing use of intersectionality in European countries raises the issue of race relations in the European colour-blind context of ‘racelessness’ (Bhavnani, 1993; Boulila, 2019a; Lentin, 2008; Theo Goldberg, 2006), particularly in France, where republican universalism and laïcité make it difficult to raise the issue of race and/or religious differences (Bertossi, 2012; Cesari, 2006; Guênif-Souilamas, 2006; Mazouz, 2017). Despite a different historical colonial legacy, that of a ‘colonialism without colonies’, Switzerland is no exception to the rule of ‘racelessness’ (Boulila, 2019b; Cretton, 2018; Michel, 2015; Purschert et al., 2016). These postcolonial national contexts, and their specific acknowledgement or disavowal of racial identities, shape the way intersectionality is appropriated and used by feminist activists (Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud, 2012; Lépinard, 2014). In that respect, France and Switzerland provide important case studies to explore how intersectionality may contribute to establish new feeling rules in feminist
movements in a context where systemic racism and the relevance of categories of race, within feminist movements and in the broader public debates, has been historically invisibilised, silenced, ignored, or openly denied.

However, despite a similar colour-blind political context, France and Switzerland have different immigration regimes, as well, and more importantly, different histories of feminist mobilization. While we cannot detail here the historical trajectories of feminism in these two contexts, we underline first that feminist activists in France and francophone Switzerland share, at least since the 1970s, a common transnational space, with a circulation of common feminist references, figures and important exchanges on social media. Second, they also present important differences in their recent histories, with French feminism having experienced profound divisions around issues of race and racism, such as Islamic veiling, since the early 2000s, while the Swiss movement has not experienced such deep divides in its recent history.

This analysis focuses on the two contexts of France and French-speaking Switzerland, drawing on interviews with young feminists in their 20s, participant observations, and critical document analysis. Twenty-three semi-structured interviews have been conducted; 13 with feminists actively involved in the Swiss women/feminist strike of 14 June 2019, and 10 with active French feminist organizers, all between October 2018 and October 2019. The interviewees were recruited through participant observations during feminist meetings for the feminist strike in Switzerland from October 2018 to October 2020, and in France during feminist mobilizations in 2018 and 2019 and on social networks. Our positionality as white feminists interviewing and observing mobilizations probably elicited more sharing of emotional states from white feminists than from non-white feminists. However, we openly acknowledged during the interviews or participant observations that we recognized the importance of racism and of race issues in feminist activism, which encouraged an open sharing of emotions around intersectionality. This does not mean that no power relations structured interviews, as a line was indeed drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them/you’ with several non-white interviewees. We are thus aware that there are limitations to the data we collected and acknowledge that other types of interview settings might have allowed for other discourses to be disclosed.

The exceptionally successful Swiss feminist strike gathered more than 500,000 persons in the streets of a tiny country with a population of 7 million. The feminist mobilization for this strike was intensely marked by discussions about intersectionality and inclusivity, which were finally included in its federal manifesto. In Switzerland, most of the interviewees are young and white and most of them explicitly identify as such, while only two interviewees are non-white and identify as such. Most of the interviewees took an active part in the feminist strike collective in the French-speaking canton where the strike was launched. While we focus on francophone Switzerland, the feminist strike movement was coordinated federally, and its manifesto including intersectionality was elaborated at the federal level, suggesting that our analysis may hold true at least in part for German-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland.

In France, the interviews were conducted during the mobilization for the 24 November 2018 demonstration celebrating the day for the elimination of violence against women, and during the 8 March 2019 demonstration in Paris. Four of the 10 French interviewees are non-white, all of Maghrebi descent, and 6 of them are white. Both events
are recurring occasions for French feminists to push their political agenda but also to organize their differences and conflicts around inclusivity and intersectionality. As a result, feminists organize two separate demonstrations on each date: one with mainstream/mostly white feminists, and another one self-identified as intersectional. For the Paris march on 24 November 2018, feminists organized together under a new collective identity and structure: NousToutes (all of us), a movement launched by a prominent feminist advocacy organization close to the socialist party. However, divisions rapidly emerged around long-standing issues of the Muslim veil, racism and Islamophobia, and sex work. These conflicts resulted in a separate coalition of feminists, named NousAussi (us too), including self-identified intersectional feminists. The two ‘opposing’ camps participated in the Paris march in visibly separate parades and with different mottos, banners, and discourses. As this recent example attests, the reclaiming of intersectionality by French racialized feminists has challenged white and ‘universalist’ French feminists by calling attention to race and racism and making it a ground for political organization, a move that directly runs against the grain of French republican universalism (Belkacem et al., 2019; Chauvin and Jaunait, 2015).

In both Switzerland and France, young feminist activists have increasingly used intersectionality as a central claim and concept in their political discourses. However, the use of intersectionality has generated different forms of conflicts or tensions within these two contexts, with more open discursive violence, resistance, and anger in France, which has led to separate movements, and a more consensual formal adoption in the Swiss context, which has led to a unitary platform and demonstration. Despite these notable differences in the dynamics of the adoption of intersectionality, we show in the following sections that intersectionality contributes in both contexts to forge new feeling rules and that these rules and the emotional work they entail aim at creating and sustaining new types of political relationships among feminists across hierarchies of race. First, intersectionality encourages young white feminists to express self-criticism and self-awareness. Young non-white feminists also relate in emotional ways to intersectionality. They express frustration and tiredness at the lack of intersectionality or at its appropriation by white feminists, but they also regard it as a crucial tool to change their place within the movement and their relations with white feminists: intersectionality gives them collective power, and a deep sense of legitimacy to vocally assert their claims and identities in a context which has silenced them for too long. In that sense, intersectionality brings excitement as well as new rules to express anger between white and non-white feminists. We explore more in depth the manifestations and meanings of these new feeling rules in the following sections.

Intersectionality as self-education and self-critique for young white feminists

We explore here the ways in which intersectionality sets new feeling rules for young white feminists who discursively centre their attachment to a feminism which takes into account the interlocking nature of oppressions and the value of inclusiveness. The fact that white feminist interviewees identify as white is a first indication of the changes
brought by intersectionality in Switzerland: the vocabulary of intersectionality has fuelled the need to acknowledge their positionality and privileged location. For most of these young white feminists, intersectionality is presented as a necessity, an imperative – often portrayed as a generational break with elder activists within the movement, a phenomenon also observed in other contexts (Stolz et al., 2020). Young white feminists in both contexts expressed the need to self-critique their movement on the basis of the absence of racialized women, and detailed their efforts in self-educating about intersectionality.

Sophie,6 a graduate student in a Swiss university, comments on the work she put in self-educating on intersectionality as she became involved in the organizing for the women’s strike:

On intersectionality, I had to think a lot. When we were writing our charter, I was put in charge of looking for numbers on THE topic about which I did not understand anything! I was wondering ‘why do we have to talk about racism, about LGBT and so on . . . in a feminist manifesto’ so I had to read a lot of reports and stuff, and it started to make sense, and that was a great moment, it was very cool . . . I learnt a lot, and it confronts you to your own blind spot!

All the young white feminist interviewees recalled a learning curve in their efforts to adopt an intersectional feminist identity. With the feeling that they somehow manage to embody this new feminist identity comes emotional reward. Adopting this feminist identity may also entail educating other white women, especially older activists. Léa, a student in social work in a Swiss university, recalls how her participation in the movement led her to successfully educate an older white activist about intersectionality:

There’s one, older, who was great, we were in a working group together and then in a big meeting, she brought up the intersectional discourse that I had had in the group, and that she didn’t know before. That was a crazy generational exchange!

Similarly, Alice, a young student in a Swiss university, mentioned a vivid discussion in which some activists wanted to include in the strike’s charter a claim regarding bodily freedom, as a critique of religion, a thinly veiled hint at their own opposition to Islamic veiling practices. This claim was rejected by several activists including Alice on the grounds that this type of discourses, which function as rescue narratives often deployed to ‘save’ Muslim veiled women – a trope largely documented among European and US white feminists (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bracke, 2012) – were unacceptable. In this case, the emotions which fuel these rescue narratives, such as compassion or pity, are now policed and regulated – here prohibited – by young white feminists.

Intersectionality also entails a new feeling rule of self-criticism and self-scrutiny with respect to the descriptive and substantive representation of non-white women in the movement. One of the first things that Alice mentioned in her interview was the importance of self-criticism when discussing the success of the strike: she expresses both her happiness at the scale of the mobilization and the need to be self-critical of the movement on the basis of an intersectional critique:
I am happy with the way this movement is going, but at the same time, I’m critical of it because I see some weaknesses, and for me, it is difficult to be both at the same time. I know that in Geneva, an antiracist collective came once or twice, left and never came back again.

Her self-critique alludes to the composition of the movement – mainly white, middle, and upper-class women, many of whom have university degrees – and to its inability to attract racialized and working-class women. Maeva, a young student doing her undergrad in political science, mentions similar issues:

I asked myself a lot of questions. I’m a bit afraid that this strike is being carried out by privileged people. I am a white woman, I am a cisgender, heterosexual woman and I am not disabled or anything. It’s difficult because thinking about migrant women made us believe we were inclusive, but in fact we didn’t even consider all the other discriminations, because we don’t live them . . . that’s it.

This self-critique resonates with the words of Laure, a social sciences student involved in the university campus-based collective:

Let’s say among the really active people, there is no racialized person. We made the effort of going to look for them, and then the question is, did we do it properly? And then, why didn’t these people come? These are questions that I have asked myself but that I don’t have an answer to so I don’t know how to continue my sentence.

Alice, Maeva, and Laure all express self-critique in the name of intersectionality. They point both to the absence of non-white feminists in the mobilization process, and to its impact on the content of the claims: while intersectionality, anti-racism, and issues relating to migrant rights made their way onto the strike’s platform, they feel that as white feminists, their social positions and their privileged experiences did not put them in the best position to analyse and push for those issues. Hence, intersectionality implies a critical emotional work on the self, checking one’s omissions and ignorance to prevent them from performing symbolic and discursive exclusions. This self-scrutiny of one’s own ignorance because of one’s position of privilege as a white feminist is illustrated by a discussion among 50 or so participants within the feminist strike collective on how to best oppose a referendum proposing to ban full-Islamic veiling in public space in Switzerland. During this discussion, a young white activist proposed to draw cartoons as part of the campaign material against the referendum but asked Muslim feminists who were present to agree to give feedback on the drawing as she acknowledged that she was afraid of maybe drawing a culturally and racially insensitive cartoon given her positionality and lack of knowledge on the issue. Muslim feminists thanked her for her carefulness and agreed to check the cartoon before its publication. Her request for approval and her willingness to not be overbearing, which manifests itself in her fear of not being appropriate, can be interpreted as form of recognition of an awareness and a new feeling rule which acknowledges the non-universality of the white standpoint.

However, there is also a clear limit to this self-critique: it may run into a dead-end. As Laure evocatively suggests before, she does not know ‘how to continue [her] sentence’. When self-criticism leads to self-blame and powerlessness, a type of emotion
also observed by Ruth Frankenberg (1993) with American white feminists in the 1980s, the emotional work performed by white feminists seems to in fact defeat intersectionality’s purpose of not only confronting privileges but also forging different relations and alliances between feminists. Indeed, Alice, Maeva, and Laure all expressed dismay and powerlessness when faced with the need to forge stronger relations with racialized and less privileged feminists.

What is more, in the Swiss context, contentious feeling rules seem to coexist – which for Hochschild (1979), is the sign that a transition is underway (p. 567). Young white feminists are still positively emotionally attached to the success of their mobilization and feel joy and elation for the strike despite its lack of intersectionality, while they harbour mixed feelings and self-criticism. These young white feminists acknowledge the failure to include non-white feminists, but this lack does not lead them to consider the movement itself a failure, despite their commitment to intersectionality. This finding echoes other analyses of young white feminists’ relation to intersectionality as an object to be desired but also presented as ever elusive because of the supposed inability to convince non-white women to participate in white feminist organizations (Evans, 2016; Schuster, 2016). This gap between desire and reality has also been interpreted as a form of hypocrisy, a non-performativity (Ahmed, 2006) and a subtle way to maintain positions of white privilege within the movement. Notwithstanding these analyses, we propose to interpret these mixed feelings as expressing, like Hochschild suggests, positions of privilege and centrality within the movement that allow ownership of success while acknowledging failures considered as ‘partial’.

The French case offers a contrasting picture: with a movement structured by a history of deep divisions on Islamic veiling and in which racialized feminists have recently begun to self-organize in more efficient ways, the feeling rules and emotional work around intersectionality are noticeably different.

Indeed, Justine, a young white French post-graduate and feminist activist recalls how, during the organization of the 24 November march in her local chapter of NousToutes, a young non-white lesbian started a debate about intersectionality at the first meeting and questioned the patronizing vocabulary used by the participants to talk about immigrant and racialized women living in the suburbs. Emotional discussions rife with anger ensued:

There was a lot of woow, very tense and virulent exchanges, with accusations about trust and so on, it went really badly! It was complicated, and very quickly it escalated in intensity (. . .). Following these vivid, violent and racist exchanges, with other friends we tried to take control to silence the Islamophobes and to marginalize them.

In France, the vocal opposition of non-white women within the collective led to a different type of feeling rules as anger was freely and violently expressed, on both sides, but primarily as a means to transform the relationships between the members of the collective and between feminists in general, leading Justine to take active part in silencing racism. She notes that the emotional context rapidly evolved as the relationship shifted in favour of racialized feminists:
Then an Afrofeminist collective joined us, and during a discussion about veiled women, they said ‘the veil is not an oppression in itself, and there will be veiled women during the march and that’s it’. And even for [white] feminists who are a little bit colonialist, Islamophobic etc., it’s hard to tell organized Black women, like ‘no, but you don’t understand anything, you’re wrong’, in that context it was not possible.

As they self-organized, French racialized feminists came to occupy a different position in the mobilization and in relation to white feminists, which transformed the feeling rules by making it illegitimate to express anger against intersectional claims.

**Changing the feeling rules of the game: Racialized feminists’ use of intersectionality**

The adoption of intersectionality carves out and delineates a new zone, in a context historically reluctant to consider race as political, one in which racialized feminists can express their feelings of frustration but also which allows them to renegotiate the relations with white feminists and their emotional content.

Non-white feminists often expressed mixed feelings in relation to intersectionality in both contexts, acknowledging not only the success of the adoption of the concept but also the continuing need to transform practices and relations between white and non-white feminists. Ines, a law student and non-white feminist activist involved in a lesbian-bi-trans feminist collective in Paris, reflects on the organization of the 24 November march against violence against women and the demand from the white organizers to focus on one and only one claim:

> They’re like ‘no, we have nothing else to say, just stop; this concerns all women, regardless of their skin colour’, this speech is really not tenable anymore. I can’t understand that they still express it, it’s absurd. It’s kind of always the same thing over and over again . . .

Ines not only expresses frustration and tiredness at the resistance to adopting intersectionality, but also notes that intersectional and more radical feminist collectives have gained more ground, and that a new generation is forging new feminist relations, in her words ‘It’s another feminism’ when compared to the ‘catastrophic relationship’ her organization had with mainstream/white organizations a couple of years before.

Estelle, a young Swiss self-identified Black feminist and student, also notes the legitimacy that intersectionality gave to her presence in the organization of the Swiss strike, underlining that nobody ever contested her analysis and discourse. Nadia, the cofounder of a Muslim feminist association in France, also noticed how intersectionality helped her organization carve a space in the movement:

> We can say that it’s a certain success that we’ve managed to put this term [intersectionality] in the spotlight, you know, and that many associations have appropriated it . . . obviously it’s very cool because we’re seen as legitimate people to talk about it [as racialized women], you know. Therefore, we’re very much invited . . . so we have spaces that are created to be able to talk about this.
However, despite this newfound legitimacy brought by intersectionality, several interviewees also felt betrayed and annoyed that intersectionality is being misappropriated by white feminists, something Nadia firmly condemns:

Then clearly, as usual, um . . . the word is completely misused, it’s taken up by white women, you know, it was created for Black women, we don’t even remember why it was created, we don’t even mention it as usual, we invisibilize the work of racialized women, we make it a buzz word, and in the end, we don’t change anything in practice, you know. We see that too, you know it’s so cool because then there will be Black women, Asian women in your pictures and then you’ll feel fresh but in reality, it won’t change anything in our lives, so we’re actually still in the same fight, even if we feel things are changing.

Nadia thus expresses mixed feelings: she observes a positive change but also clear annoyance at the misuse of intersectionality. While Nadia’s feelings echo the defensiveness described by Jennifer C. Nash (2019) when she analyses ‘Black feminism’s proprietary attachments to intersectionality’ (p. 3), Ines has opted to not use the term intersectionality for the same reasons: ‘it’s been overused and reappropriated wrongly and by anyone, and it became a kind of distinction tool basically to prove that you’re a good feminist without even trying to figure out what it really means’. While expressing this critique, Ines and Nadia both testify that the feminist context in France is changing. In particular, their place in the movement cannot be denied any more in the name of ‘universalism’.

French racialized feminists still struggle to occupy a more central place within the movement, as the heated negotiations for the organization of the 24 November 2018 march attest. Intersectional feminists from NousAussi wanted to be visible on an equal footing with those of NousToutes. A few days before the march, Ines expressed determination and anger about the difficult negotiations for her group to be placed at the forefront of the demonstration:

For us it is important that the most precarious of us, the most invisible in feminism, can be at the front of this march to express their struggles. Because those struggles are never heard, because those struggles have been stifled, because those struggles were silenced again this year ( . . .) they want us to have no banner, no signs, nothing. We, of course that’s not what we’re going to do at all. So, these are negotiations that are super difficult, and they don’t make it easy for us at all.

While stressing the tense and heated atmosphere of these discussions and negotiations, she mentions that a non-aggression pact was concluded in order to avoid any violent acts between feminists on both sides during the march:

There were discussions about a non-aggression pact between NousToutes and NousAussi to make sure that there will be no attacks between the activists, we basically made sure that in our parade, thanks to our security service, no one would attack their activists and they had to assure us too, or at least promise us, that there would be no aggression from their members towards us. Because in NousToutes there are some very angry women ( . . .) and very racist, who are hyper violent and I use that word because some have already come to blows. And really, I think for
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some of them it’s unbearable to think that veiled girls are taking the lead in this protest, so we try not to talk about it publically because we’re not serene and we don’t want to panic people before the march.

While anger and violence have been endemic between feminists in France on the issue of Islamic veiling and sex work in particular, the increased legitimacy granted to racialized feminists has led to changing the rules of the game and to regulating that anger and violence. It also entails, on the part of Ines and her fellow activists, emotional work to regulate fear and panic among racialized feminists confronted with the possibility of the eruption of racist violence. This emotional work testifies that racialized feminists bear much of the emotional cost of regulating violence and attempting to transform relations with white feminists.

These changes in feeling rules attest to broader changes in membership within the movement and in relationships among feminists. Ines and Nadia both mention the importance of intersectional alliances as a more long-term goal. Nadia also highlights the importance of self-organization and its articulation with forging new alliances:

If we create solidarity among ourselves, if we support each other, we take up more space, then we become more powerful. We’re for self-organization, so of course we’re going to support others, we’re going to create alliances!

Excitement and joy are palpable as Nadia describes what the future holds for her intersectional feminism, with the feeling of ‘becoming more powerful’ and the capacity to negotiate new feminist relations, build solidarity, and self-organize. Similarly, self-empowerment and the related possibility of positively valued alliances with white feminists are reflected in the discourse of a Muslim feminist collective based in francophone Switzerland. As they campaigned since 2020 against the referendum to ban full-Islamic veiling in public space, the collective forged a strong alliance with the Swiss feminist strike, both in francophone Switzerland and at the national level. Their manifesto and press releases always claim an ‘intersectional feminism and solidarity’ which demands both that ‘no one speaks for us or is paternalistic towards us; that no one tries to instrumentalize us to justify a racist or sexist policy’ and importantly also stress ‘full and unconditional solidarity between all women, regardless of their life situation, legal status, spiritual choice, sexual and gender orientation or disability situation’ (Foulards Violets, 2020: 22.). The fact that the feminist strike, the most important feminist movement that Switzerland has witnessed in the past decade, unconditionally supported the Muslim feminist collective, acknowledging the centrality of racism in the proposed referendum, laid the ground for not only a powerful political alliance but also the shared expression of positive emotions of joy, pride, togetherness, and love on various social media and during demonstrations. Intersectionality became here a positive sign of identification, relaying positive emotions.

Of course, as these contrasting examples attest, the new feeling rules generated by intersectionality depend on the context. But from our case studies, we observe that the language of intersectionality helps delineate a zone in which non-white feminists are free and legitimate to express criticism towards white feminists in contexts where racism is not
explicitly addressed or where discussing it has been actively opposed. It thus helps redefine relations between white and non-white feminists, including with new rules about how to manifest and regulate anger. This reconfiguration of feminist relations thus implies not only the transformation of existing relations but also the possibility of creating new relations in intersectional coalitions, which mediate new emotions such as joy and love.

Conclusion

Drawing on various examples, we have shown that intersectionality generates new feeling rules for young white and non-white feminists in France and Switzerland. We have observed that when white feminists are a vast majority with no sustained relations with racialized feminists who are only loosely self-organized, as is the case in Switzerland, the emotional work performed is confined to self-educating and self-criticism from white feminists, who often underline their powerlessness, lamenting the absence of racialized feminists. However, as the context changed, and Swiss Muslim feminists organized in 2020 to oppose a ban on full-Islamic veiling, a successful coalition was built which was sustained by ostensible emotional display of support, love, pride, and joy, despite the ultimate failure to derail the ban. In France, where conflicts about intersectionality have been openly displayed and where racialized feminists have increasingly self-organized, young white feminists also participate in the renegotiation of relationships along racial lines by actively policing the emotions and politics of other white feminists. Intersectionality has also opened opportunities for non-white feminists to renegotiate their place in the broader feminist movements, and to transform relationships with white feminists, both allowing for the open expression of anger and leading to its regulation on the terms negotiated by non-white feminists.

Guilt, fear, anger, and defensiveness on one side, anger and tiredness on the other, were the emotions most commonly described by scholars looking at feeling rules between white and non-white feminists during the second wave in the United States in particular. The new emotional repertoires that we have described here indicate that intersectionality may be shifting the ways in which young (and other) white feminists address the issue of racism and inclusivity. While the feeling rules that we describe are context-dependent, as the comparison between France and francophone Switzerland suggests, and while we cannot generalize from this analysis about what type of feeling rules intersectionality may trigger in other contexts, we think that our results call for a more systematic study of this issue in order to broaden our understanding of the work performed by intersectionality in transforming feminist movements and relationships between feminists as well as patterns of conflicts and alliances.

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Notes
1. An important francophone Feminist journal, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, was founded in France in 1981 and then ‘migrated’ to Switzerland, with a Franco-Swiss editorial board at the end of the 1990s.
2. See the accounts of the Swiss women/feminist strike in the interview with Vanessa Monney and Maria Pedrosa in Delage and Gallot (2020: 173–180). Also see the website of the Swiss feminist strike: https://14juin.ch.
3. In this context, the strike manifesto was the core mobilization tool as it was widely discussed and modified during the numerous collective meetings to prepare the strike.
4. The small number of non-white Swiss feminists among the interviewees is representative of the current Swiss feminist movement, based on our participant observations at feminist strike meetings and mobilizations.
5. One French interviewee was a white queer person, and all the other interviewees, in France and Switzerland, were cisgender women. It is also noteworthy that all of the French and Swiss interviewees are either students or have already graduated from college, mostly in humanities.
6. All interviews were anonymized.
7. The referendum lost with 51.4% of Swiss voters in favour of the ban, a share which decreased during this time, in part thanks to the successful activism of Muslim feminists.

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