

The Problem of Empathy: Sarita Srivastava on Feminism and Antiracism

CHLOE G

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What is Antiracism?

- **Antiracism** is a political philosophy and practice that is committed to addressing racism as a **systemic problem**.
- Racism as a **systemic problem** illuminates that racism is pervasive within society, and that **racist discourses** affect the entirety of social systems
- **Antiracism** promotes the idea that racism is present in our everyday languages and practices
- Racism is seen as an **active political project** that is rooted in imperial and colonial history
- Employing **antiracism** means to address racism as a collective political and social issue, rather than one of personal morality
- Srivastava suggests we must challenge the historical and **socially constructed** roots of racism to produce a more ethical and equitable society for all



University of Calgary. (2025). Anti-Racism, EDI, and Positionality [Photo].

The Social Construction of Feminism

- White feminism in Canada is historically rooted in **imperial** and **colonial** history, and thus representations of morality within White feminism are **racialized** and **gendered**.
- White feminist **moral identity** was constructed as benevolent and innocent during the **first-wave**, which became equated with the identities of a “good feminist” or a “good person”
- Assumptions of benevolence and innocence can lead to the creation of **heterotopia** - a distinct social space within a movement which adopts a specific moral code based on shared ideas and values
- White feminists view their networks as “good places” incapable of wrong doing, and thus inherently **non-racist**
- **Antiracist** challenges to feminist organizations are thus taken as an attack on White feminist **moral identity** - an identity imbued with moral significance - and are commonly rejected on the premise of **nonracism** - an idea which views racism as individual acts rather than a systemic issue pervasive in everyday life.



Bettmann, O. (1971). Let's build a feminist movement grounded in solidarity [Photo].



CoDesign Collaborative. (2024). *Empathy: Interviews* [Photo].

Promoting Antiracism

- Emotion is not inherently negative, but care must be taken not to derail conversations concerning racialized power dynamics
- **Looking inward** and **personal reflection** enable broader societal change and foster the shaping of values of specific communities and the self, but do not ensure a **static antiracist ethic**
- **Racism** must be viewed as a political and organizational problem, rather than an individual definition of character
- A process of **personalized antiracist ethic - self-examination, declaration, and regulation** of one's **racist beliefs** - leads an individual to eventually be able to accept and live with the fact that they might be racist, rather than fearing it
- Ultimately, racism needs to be addressed as a collective **political and social issue**, rather than one of personal morality
- **Antiracist feminism** aims at destabilizing historical links between racism and innocence

The Problem of Empathy

- Challenges by **antiracist activists** to feminist **heterotopias** are often met with emotional responses by White women characteristic of an **"emotional attachment to innocence"**
- Expressions of **empathy** towards victims of racism revolve around the morality of the individual expressing it, rather than enacting structural change
- Expressing **empathy** serves to reify White feminist **moral identities** as "good", "benevolent", and "innocent", while positioning racism as a problem exclusive to women of colour
- While emotional aspects of solidarity are vital to developing supportive communities, expressions of empathy and emotion can provide an **unsteady foundation** on which to enact larger social change.



Centre for Antiracist Research. (2025). *Antiracism Starts With You* [Photo].

Reference

Srivastava, S. (2005). "'You're Calling me a Racist?' The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism." *Signs*, 31(1), 29-62.