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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Atmospheres and Activism: Rethinking Solidarity Politics

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Abstract

How and why does left solidarity fail women of color? Given the rising tide of far right extremism, this is an urgent question for social movement actors who wish to build sustainable coalitions for progressive politics. In this paper, we examine the dynamics of solidarity via a novel approach to the study of “atmospheres.” While scholars of emotions have identified the importance of atmospheres in social and political life, they are unable to answer their own important question: What do atmospheres make possible politically? We bring together the concept of racialized solidarity with the sensuous inequalities of activist spaces. We identify visual, sonic, somatic, and emotional inequalities that work together to produce what we name as the racialized atmospherics of activist spaces, in which the mood is systematically mobilized against women of color.

Keywords: women of colour; activism; Europe; atmospheres; racialization; solidarity

Introduction

For more than 20 years, we have analyzed how left solidarity fails women of color activists (Emejulu and Bassel 2010; 2014; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2020; 2024; 2025; 2026). Women of color activists working in white-dominated anti-austerity, migrants’ rights, feminist, trade unionist and anti-fascist activist spaces across Europe and North America consistently report how they have been systematically silenced, undermined and/or driven out of center and radical left activist spaces that bill themselves as open, inclusive and egalitarian. That these inequalities persist across time, space and activist milieux tells us something important about the political, social and emotional dynamics of left social movements. We

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argue that these spaces are primarily created and policed through contingent and excluding forms of solidarity grounded in white supremacy (Emejulu and Bassel 2024; 2025; Hooker 2009).

However, studies on social movements, intersectional solidarity, and women of color activists oftentimes overlook the nuanced and complex practices of community and coalition building, which take the availability and quality of solidarity for granted, with solidarity, as both a concept and social practice, not sufficiently problematized and interrogated (Ciccia and Roggeband 2021; Tormos 2017). In this theoretical intervention grounded in our observations and analyses of our empirical work studying women of color activists in Europe, we seek to better understand the oftentimes degraded quality of solidarity available to women of color activists and explore how a heady mix of emotions, memories, histories, and ideas about the future interact to produce toxic atmospheres that women of color activists are forced to navigate. We draw on our previous work (Emejulu and Bassel 2017a, 5) to define “women of color” as women who “experience the effects of processes of racialization, class and gender dominations as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status.” We avoid a narrow and exclusionary view of women, and thus include cis and trans women as well as non-binary femmes in this definition. We recognize that this terminology does not travel seamlessly across the geographic and linguistic boundaries of our work and generates debate within as well as across contexts. However, we and many of the activists with whom we work are committed to the political category and strategic essentialism of “women of color” precisely because it is an expression of solidarity between differently positioned racialized women that must be struggled for and constantly (re)negotiated between different actors and across different activist spaces (Emejulu and van der Scheer 2021; Luna 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015).

We argue that before women of color enter a white-dominated activist space, they have already been constituted through a white political imagination that cannot conceive of them as fully human and thus on equal terms with white people (Emejulu 2022; Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2016; Spillers 1987). Once women of color arrive in an activist space, we argue that they are captured by the white gaze, which not only visualizes them as disruptive foreign bodies but applies various inspecting lenses to their dissonant presences to police and control them (Alcoff 1999; Puwar 2004). Further still, an emotional and sonic color line works in tandem to carefully listen and emote, through anger, fear, and sadness, to any perceived threat to the status of white people in the activist space (Hochschild 1979; Stoever 2016).

In short, white-dominated center and left activist spaces are constituted by a “racialized solidarity” which refuses reciprocal relations of trust and obligation to racialized groups (Hooker 2009). Racialized solidarity is always contingent on maintaining the racial hierarchy of domination and exclusion. According to Hooker, under a regime of white supremacy, there is no solidarity but racialized solidarity in a racial polity. We go further and argue that to understand how racialized solidarity is made possible, we must pay special attention to the sensuous inequalities of activist spaces. Examining how the visual, sonic (denoting sound), somatic (denoting the body/embodyment), and emotional operate to produce what we name as the *racialized atmospherics* of a given activist space is essential to understanding how and why left solidarity spectacularly and

consistently fails women of color activists. A visual, sonic, emotional, and somatic color line operates in white-dominated activist spaces in which women of color are subjected to various relations of surveillance and subjection that are, paradoxically, represented and understood as solidaristic bonds, or, at the very least, not hostile social relations. By racialized atmospherics, we mean this oftentimes unacknowledged regime of control — silence, looking away, tense bodies, (over)attentive listening, discomfort, awkwardness, fear. It is an ambience, a vibe, a mood, a knowing in the body that this space is not for women of color, even though what is spoken might suggest otherwise.

Racialized atmospherics are a haunting of activist spaces — that which is unspeakable, “you do not belong here,” but must be conveyed through glances and gestures (Abraham and Torok 1986; Rashkin 1992). We borrow from, but are not bound by, psychoanalytic studies which understand “haunting” as a traumatic legacy of repressed harm and violence from the past that cannot be spoken, but should be, to overcome shame and stigmatization. In this way, racialized atmospherics are re-made in each discrete activist space but are a product of histories of violence — colonialism, slavery, racial capitalism, gendered racism — which is why and how they haunt (Alexander-Floyd 2023; Jordan-Zachery 2017). Racialized atmospherics are the ghosts of the past relived and revived through material and sensuous inequalities of the misremembered present so that they will shape and haunt the future. In this way, racialized atmospherics are like the weather: always with us, in the background, eroding our bodies, our goodwill, our trust and our faith in ourselves and each other (Sharpe 2016). Crucially, however, hauntings prompt action for resolution. As Julia Jordan-Zachery (2017, 65) notes: “haunting requires, in essence demands, attention by stating that what one has ‘repressed, blocked or confined’ is still alive and near resulting in a ‘something-must-be-done’ feeling.” Hauntings interpellate in terms of forcing a confrontation of the past and an attempt at reconciliation in the present and future.

Racialized atmospherics are inevitable under a regime of white supremacy, but they are not totalizing; there is always a possibility for resistance. For women of color activists, we see these ambient resistances take many forms: the oppositional gaze in which they look back, look again, and disrupt the white gaze of surveillance and control (hooks 1992). Back talk, as hooks (1994) conceptualizes it, or, in psychoanalytical terms, as Alexander-Floyd (2023) discusses the importance of speaking the unspeakable, resistance also means articulation: to bring the secret and unacknowledged harm to the surface for a reckoning. Women of color also refuse sensuous domination by persisting in spaces (at great personal cost) and by exiting spaces to create different possibilities for solidarity and resistance to the rising tide of far-right extremism and continued economic immiseration. Through that exit is an alternative world, constituted by different atmospheres, histories and relations not centered on white comfort, security and domination.

While our analysis is grounded in Europe, we argue that racialized atmospherics and resistances to them are present in other spaces and places and have relevance across the globe and beyond the experiences of women of color activists. Further, any good theory will be inspired by a group, in our case, women of color, and applicable elsewhere. This article is an attempt to rethink

ideas of solidarity drawing on the particular experiences of women of color activists in Europe. We seek to learn from history, which shows us that there is a consistent and recurring problem to confront in terms of taking women of color seriously as political agents. While sometimes this is temporarily resolved, as seen in the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter protests in 2019 and 2020, as the current far-right backlash in Europe and North America shows us, these expressions of solidarity are fragile and fleeting. We wish to investigate theoretically why this might be the case and what this means for political actors of all stripes who care about solidarity and progressive politics.

In the first section of this article, we analyze different meanings of solidarity in a European context and then discuss Hooker's concept of racialized solidarity in greater detail. In the second section, which is the heart of the article, we explore the concept that we have coined, racialized atmospherics, and discuss how it is constituted by four sensuous inequalities related to sight, sound, embodiment, and emotions. We conclude the article with a discussion about the various strategies women of color activists use to resist racialized atmospherics.

Racialized Solidarity: Contingency and Conditionality

In thinking about how left solidarity fails women of color, we started by doing a literature review of how solidarity is conceived and practiced in Europe. Institutional actors, activists and scholars alike have constituted solidarity in such a way as to leave out large swathes of people, given Europe's history of colonialism and slavery. Indeed, as we reviewed the founding documents of the then European Coal and Steel Community and later, the European Union, we found these elisions of history, memory and people. We then turned to some of the big beasts of European political science to see how our fellow scholars thought and wrote about solidarity (for example, see, Bauman 2000; Habermas 1990¹; Stjernø 2005). There too we found an under-theorizing of solidarity in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and legal status,² and the usual forgetting or misremembering of European history, with no mention of colonialism and slavery (Hesse 2007; 2014; Shilliam 2021).

Undertheorizing, forgetting and misremembering solidarity permeates current empirical studies. These gaps in European understandings of solidarity appear to be the result of a focus on social and civic solidarity and a generalized neglect of political solidarity. We note a persistent concern about the European Union's democratic illegitimacy, whether as linked to its weak solidaristic bonds between member states (Pittoors 2024) or to the complexities of constructing and maintaining a meaningful "European identity" for EU citizens in relation to how they feel about the "abstract" entity of the EU and the implication this has for EU governance and legitimacy (e.g. Verbalyte and von Scheve 2018; Verhaegen 2018). A longstanding issue relates to EU citizens' affective ties beyond nationality and ethnicity, what they understand by solidarity and how the EU is constantly balancing the hope of greater cohesion with the threat of fracture and dissolution (e.g. Gaižauskaitė, Egner et al. 2024). Meaningfully discussing

solidarity beyond class — specifically as intersecting with race, ethnicity, gender — is relegated to an optional methodological “etcetera,” secondary to the (hegemonically) masculine institutions that are the “real” sites of power and legitimacy, as contrasted with presumably essentialized soft, “feminized” notions of emotion (fellow feeling) which were largely taken as a private matter.

This article was going to be a reluctant take down of such omissions, elisions, and neglect. We were hesitant to do so because there was something fundamentally wrong with taking Europe’s colonial amnesia as our starting point. We did not want to, yet again, read women of color back into Europe’s histories, forcibly inserting their belonging and insisting on their presence and importance. That was the wrong tact as it further reinforced women of color as aberrant and foreign. As an African American woman and a Greek-Canadian woman living in the United Kingdom, we are keenly aware of how “foreignness” is wielded by powerful actors to dismiss the political claims of outsiders. We did not want that power relation guiding our analysis in this article. Instead, we seek to dissect the entire concept of solidarity and think about why it can be systematically denied to entire populations but still be considered a useful idea for thinking about democracy, collective identities, collective action, trust, reciprocity and justice.

Luckily, Juliet Hooker was several steps ahead of us. In her excellent book, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, Hooker (2009, 5–6) argues that:

the social fact of race shape[s] the practice of solidarity ... existing racial injustice and inequality pose a fundamental obstacle to the development of solidarity, while it is also precisely the absence of such solidarity that makes it seem improbable, if not impossible, that racial justice will ever be achieved.

We are primarily interested in the dynamics of political solidarity. Following Sally Scholz (2008, 10), we define political solidarity as “a moral relation that marks a social movement wherein individuals have committed to positive duties in response to a perceived injustice.” We do not identify solidarity as a kind of deference to the oppressed by more powerful groups (Kolers 2016), although we recognize the usefulness of thinking about solidarity in this way. Rather, we are interested in how individuals and groups are called to action to address a grievance even when they are not directly affected by it. Thinking about political solidarity like this is fascinating because it draws out many of the tensions and contradictions of activism, such as the difficult balancing act between altruism, comradeship, and self-interest, and also spotlights how hard community and coalition-building can be when activists’ motivations are unclear and multifaceted.

Solidarity is both a disposition and a series of acts. Solidarity is a process of first imagining and then making real the ties that bind you to others. The catalyst for joining together is the identification of an injustice and how it interpellates individuals to take action, even if they do not personally experience the injustice. A bond is forged through the development of a collective identity to take collective action to resolve the identified grievance. Like Scholz and Hooker, we make a distinction between political solidarity and other forms of solidarity,

notably social solidarity (the shared kinship, ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic bonds that connect individuals in a community) and civic solidarity (the rights and responsibilities that citizens have to each other and to the polity).

However, taking “the social fact of race” seriously in thinking about solidarity means that these distinctions between different kinds of solidarity — political, social, and civic — miss the point since their shared conceit — the ability to recognize a stranger as oneself and build relations of trust and reciprocity with them — are destabilized under a regime of white supremacy. Hooker argues that solidarity will *always* be attenuated in a racial polity since it is not possible for some strangers to ever move beyond their status as Other. Indeed, racialized strangers in the racial polity are essential for white identity stabilization and community-building since they serve as the border, the boundary, the delineation between “us” and “them.” “We” cannot fully understand and identify with ourselves without the presence of “them,” the forever Other who gives “us” meaning. As the late Charles W. Mills (1999) long argued, in a racial polity in which a racial hierarchy is brutally enforced, the “white we” is made possible by the demarcation of the “racialized Other.”

To be clear, in a racial polity, the racialized Other is not simply an outsider or a stranger; they are sub-human and cast outside the boundaries of care and protection. Akwugo Emejulu (2022), Sylvia Wynter (2003), and Hortense Spillers (1987) argue that Black people specifically have never been constituted as human in the white imagination. The dehumanizing process of racialization disrupts many taken-for-granted notions about what activism, solidarity, justice, and care mean and how they are practiced.

It is not typical that racialized Others would be identified with and cared for by white people — thus a key building block for operationalizing solidarity is missing from the outset. If solidarity is the ability to develop fellow feeling for another, when that other is subjected and racialized, they cannot be met on equal terms as a fellow, and it is difficult to develop feelings besides that of fear, hatred, and distrust. As Mills (1999, quoted in Hooker 2009, 7) argues:

In a racial polity, empathetic feelings will travel weakly, if at all, across the color line; white empathy will refuse to enter Black skin ... the racial other will be seen as Other, an opaque entity not to be identified with, and the boundaries of full membership in the community will terminate with the boundaries of the white population.

Hooker contends that if there is debate about who is human and thus who is a legitimate member of a given political community, then it follows that any kind of solidarity on offer — social, civic but especially political — will be degraded if it is even available at all. She contends that racialized solidarity is the driving force of political relations in any racial polity.

Racialized solidarity is the practice of “differential sympathy” under a regime of white supremacy (Hooker 2009, 40). There is a moral and ethical gap, a yawning spatial and imaginative chasm, between the white we and the racialized Other, which means genuine solidarity has never been present and will always fail (Hooker 2009, 43):

The norm for political relations has never been equality, which has not existed for racially subordinated groups or indeed even for dominant groups, who have come to expect unequally distributed material advantage and political power as both natural and morally legitimate.

Crucially, Hooker reminds us that because of persistent spatial segregation in racial polities, there are few opportunities for white people to meet racialized Others in everyday life in which those Others can be sufficiently humanized (from a white perspective). These material distances have psychic and emotional consequences of further interrupting any ability for many white people to develop political imaginations about the good society and commonwealth that include, much less benefit, the racialized Other. “Solidarity is based on fellow feeling but ... it is also more than just an emotion, it is also a normative orientation that drives us to action on behalf of others” (Hooker 2009, 30). As a result, reciprocal feelings of trust and obligation as well as actions for the public good by individuals, groups, and institutions are restricted to whites only.

Taking racialized solidarity seriously means that we must wrestle ideas of contingency and conditionality away from Richard Rorty (1989) and consider how solidarity is made to be a precarious enterprise for many women of color activists in Europe. Political solidarity as it has been conceived and theorized in political theory and operationalized through various European and North and South American polities across time and space literally does not exist — it has never existed. It is quite literally a white fantasy (Schulman 2025). Instead, what has been theorized and practiced is a contingent solidarity of differential sympathies and allegiances which serve only to reinforce the racial hierarchy and benefit white racial interests.

Unmooring ourselves from the fictions of solidarity means we can more clearly ground our ideas and practices in what is and, more importantly, *what could be*. Indeed, refusing to engage in magical thinking about solidarity creates possibilities of thinking and doing politics differently. In refusing to be complicit in the mistruths of solidarity, we can map more accurately and honestly how it actually functions to poison grassroots politics and social movements.

To be clear, highlighting the persistent problems and obstacles to solidarity does not mean we believe it to be impossible. One of our key inspirations for our work is documenting how different kinds of activists manage to work together *despite* the problems of solidarity they experience. We are not fatalistic about solidarity’s shortcomings but realistic about how and why it consistently fails women of color. This article is an analysis of these failures, not as a way to dismiss solidarity but rather to find a path forward so that women of color and other activists feel less alone and disenchanting in their struggles for justice.

Racialized Atmospherics: Sensuous Inequalities

We argue that racialized solidarity is the unacknowledged social relation and emotional register in white-dominated center and radical left activist spaces in Europe. Women of color activists must navigate this miasma, akin to the

infamous fog on the Thames that shrouds London in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. We contend that racialized solidarity is facilitated by the racialized atmospherics of a given activist space. We define "racialized atmospherics" as the prevailing mood of a space, in which the feeling and meaning of a space are understood and experienced on racial terms. Although mainstream media tends to use the phrase "racially charged" as a way to obscure blatantly racist acts, particularly police violence, we find that racially charged is an ideal concept for capturing that psychic, emotional, and somatic frisson that structures a space and informs everyone in it about the space's meaning and purpose. Racialized atmospherics are a structure of feeling, to borrow and adapt from Raymond Williams.

Urban studies and human geography have taken an atmospheric turn, apparently. While we will not wade into those debates, we think there are some important ideas circulating in those disciplines that we need to incorporate into our conception of racialized atmospherics. According to Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 2), an atmosphere: "is not just how places and events feel ... it is also what they mean ... atmospheres link experiences to meanings and how people [carry] those meanings forward in their imaginations." In this way, atmospheres are both emotional and somatic, rational and imaginative, ephemeral and persistent. Atmospheres are ambivalent, contingent, and temporal as they simultaneously elicit a range of emotions from the individuals that encounter them but are also co-produced by the emotions, memories, and imaginations that individuals bring into a given space. There are different kinds of atmospheres that are generated based on history, culture, and context. In our discussions of atmospheres, racialized or otherwise, we are not suggesting that there is a single atmosphere or that atmospheres are always positive or negative. They morph and change depending on time, place, and the individuals involved, which we explore elsewhere empirically. Atmospheres are ambivalent since they are composed of the conflicting and overlapping thoughts, feelings, histories, and memories of different kinds of people in spaces and places.

Atmospheres, then, are the effects of space-time. As Sumartojo and Pink argue, atmospheres are co-constituted by history, context, individual and collection actions, emotions, and senses of the people in a given space. Atmospheres "reach backwards (memory, history) and forwards (anticipation, imagination) in time" (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, 56). Thus when any of us walk into a space, we both encounter and bring history with us. And when we leave a space, we take its atmosphere with us. We carry a psychic, emotional and somatic load — the memory and feeling of the previous space — with us into the next one. And the next. Thus, atmospheres can be seen as cumulative. Note the harm that this accumulation can do, particularly with those atmospheric encounters that are negative and exclusionary; these moods weigh us down and start to haunt us and all other spaces we enter, infecting and instilling that atmosphere with the nightmares of the past and fears of the future. Here we see clearly how a racialized atmosphere might work and how an atmosphere might operate as racially charged.

Atmospheres are not causal, however. Atmospheres do not have agency. Rather, they are complex reflections and conjoinings of the histories, emotions,

thoughts, and gestures with which individuals imbue a given space. As Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 4) remind us:

Atmospheres are never self-determined. They do not themselves change or exercise causality ... Atmospheres cannot make people feel particular things, precisely because it is the way that people feel about things that make atmospheres perceptible: anticipation, foreknowledge and pre-existing views of different material and immaterial elements play a crucial role in how atmospheres are co-constituted and perceived.

Thus, attempting to describe the mood, vibe or feeling of a given space — the atmosphere, in other words — is a shorthand way of trying to parse the complex relationships between history, memory, emotion, and gesture which different people bring into and out of the space at any given time and which work in tandem to invite particular thoughts, experiences and feelings from others. In their analysis of vibes, in which they subsume the concept of atmospheres, Watson (2025, 13) argues that studying the vibes of a space is to highlight the “generative ambiguity” of social and political life that “is less than a coherent, rational or logical process” and that scholars need to take seriously and “[grap-ple] with ambiguity.”

Further still, atmospheres help shape collective identities and group boundaries. Indeed, atmospheres can be thought of as a boundary-making process:

Atmosphere coheres groups in particular space-times ... collectives are brought into being by way of atmosphere ... when these experiences are not comfortable, familiar or apposite or do not tap into narratives or histories that are known to us, they can work to exclude, to subtly communicate non-belonging to those not enrolled in them (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, 122).

When folks say “the vibes are off” in a particular space, they mean that either the atmosphere was mobilized against them by others to make them feel uncomfortable and force them out, or, as we will discuss at the end of this article, they refused to be enrolled into the atmosphere of the space and chose to exit as a form of ambient and somatic resistance.

In the boundary-making of atmospheres, we can see the contours of racialized solidarity. How activists think and feel about a particular space is co-constituted by all the people in the space and the weight of the memory, history, and anticipation of the space. We argue that racialized atmospherics constitute a haunting (Abraham and Torok 1986). “Haunting unfolds in temporalities where present and past collapse” (Langford 2016, 3). This haunting happens via repressed and misremembered histories and memories in activists about the legacies of slavery, colonialism and white supremacy which, in turn, beckon vengeful ghosts who demand acknowledgment and recognition. However, “power is associated with silencing the past ... bringing into the open that which is hidden may lead to [change] but it may also lead to powerful regressive forces being unleashed” (Good, Chioyenda, and Rahimi 2022, 441).

In this article, we focus on what regressive forces feel like in ostensibly left activist spaces. We contend that these repressed memories, histories and anticipations are racially charged via the sensuous inequalities at play. These sensuous inequalities make racialized solidarity possible, and taking Sumartojo and Pink's (2019, 122) unanswered question to heart — "What does atmosphere make possible politically?" — we now turn to explore four interconnected sensory experiences³ that make racialized solidarity possible: racial seeing, the sonic color line, racialized embodiment, and feeling rules. We argue that these four sensory experiences are simultaneously acts of racist violence but also ephemeral ways of knowing which invite women of color's compliance, ambient resistances, or a combination of both.

Racial Seeing and Visual Register of Race

Hooker (2009) argues that to understand racialized solidarity, it is essential to map the dynamics of racialization. Political solidarity is held ransom by the looking relations of race. To practice solidarity means that democratic strangers must have mutual and reciprocal regard for each other to forge a collective identity and take collective action which benefits everyone. However, through the lens of racial seeing, which is fostered in a racial polity, reciprocal regard is impossible because the visual markers of difference between strangers function as powerful symbols of non-belonging. By "racial seeing," we mean those looking relations in which individuals and groups are ascribed subjected and dehumanized meanings based on their physical characteristics. Crucially, through a lens of racial seeing, whiteness remains unmarked and invisible so that the imposition of inequality on racialized bodies is unidirectional. This is a key practice of white supremacist power and an important aspect of crafting the racialized atmospheres of a given activist space.

In a racial polity, difference is hypervisible and over-determined, and whiteness is unmarked in defining who is seen (and see themselves) as the heroes in the script of activism. Physical characteristics are taken as a shorthand for one's humanity and moral worthiness. Race then is the practice of boundary-making, of dividing "white us" from the "racialized them" and signaling who to care about and who to cast to the wolves. From this kind of crooked moral accounting, a racialized solidarity is forged. Through the practice of racial seeing, differential sympathy, rather than the identification of a shared grievance, is the animating solidaristic principle that organizes collective action. Crucially, the ocular politics of racial seeing mandate some white people to be blind, or at least, to be strategically unsighted to the reality of the racialized Other's views, experiences, and emotions. "As a result of racial seeing ... not only will whites be trained to be less concerned about the pain and suffering of non-whites, but the fact of that pain and suffering will itself be difficult for them to see" (Hooker 2009, 7).

For example, Nirmal Puwar (2003), alongside a range of Black women parliamentarians in the House of Commons at Westminster (Mohdin 2023), consistently document their unequal treatment as the result of racial seeing. When Black women Members of Parliament (MPs) are in restricted spaces reserved for MPs only, they are challenged by their fellow white MPs and Westminster

staffers. Being a Black woman is not commensurate with being an elected official, so that when Black women MPs seek to conduct any business in relation to their job as a politician, they are subject to doubt and challenge simply because the ocular politics of race make it unbelievable that these women are politicians. From being confused with other Black women politicians, to being mistaken for a cleaner or being denied entry to or expelled from spaces reserved for MPs, Black women politicians in the House of Commons report unequal treatment based on racial seeing.

Given the epistemic violence of racial seeing, it has far-reaching implications for the good society. Hooker argues that solidarity is, at least in part, a practice of looking. One looks to other democratic strangers to see themselves. One looks at the world around us, identifying both problems and a range of solutions. One also looks to the future, to possibility, to what the world could be and joins together with others to try to bring that new world into being. Through the lens of racial seeing, it is difficult to envision and imagine otherwise. In a racial polity which demands racial seeing, much of what we can envision are different ways to uphold the racial hierarchy in which white racial interests, security, and comfort are at the center and vigorously defended. Racial seeing is essential to the creation of racialized atmospheres and is a destructive dynamic in activist spaces.

Bringing this hegemonic unsightedness to a space that is ostensibly about radical social change is a deep contradiction that can never be reconciled. A racialized atmosphere is at least partly created by particular kinds of white activists who undertake boundary-making, a sorting of racialized moral worthiness in their radical spaces through their looking relations, particularly via the white gaze. The white gaze is a form of looking relations that captures, controls, consumes, and surveils through a process of racialization. The white gaze inspects non-white bodies and finds them wanting — different, deviant and dangerous (Yancy 2008). This deviance is always understood as a threat to white security, comfort, and power and thus must be controlled, surveilled, and, more often than not, eliminated. Puwar (2004), in her landmark study of racialized bodies seemingly out of place in white-dominated institutions, argues that the white gaze operates via noticing who is in the room and taking steps to closely monitor and control those bodies through a repertoire of looking: glances, staring, looking away. These ocular politics of noticing race and crucially forcing the racialized person(s) to notice another's noticing is a way of seizing control of a given space and imbuing it with an atmosphere of hostility, anxiety, and fear for those caught in the white gaze.

The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear

Working in tandem with racial seeing is another hegemonic sensuous inequality, Stoever's (2016) incredible concept of the "listening ear." The listening ear is an indelible way of being and interacting in a racial polity. The listening ear posits that sound is racialized and an important racial marker of difference. Stoever argues that the United States (the country in which she theorizes the politics of sound) over-emphasizes the visual register of race and racial seeing. While these

are crucial dynamics to understanding the nature of inequality, our sense interactions are not so isolated from each other. Sight and sound are mutually dependent in the process of dehumanization and reinforcing racialized solidarity. Sound is an important landscape by which moral accounting of harm and care is practiced and is central to the development of racialized atmospherics.

The listening ear is the process by which an unmarked white subject judges the difference between noise and sound, irrationality and reason, danger and safety. In other words, it is yet another boundary-marker of sorting and classifying the human from the subhuman, another way to reinforce belonging and non-belonging in a racial polity organized via the racial hierarchy. “Through the listening ear’s surveillance, discipline and interpretation, certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural and right” (Stoever 2016, 7–8). The boundary-marker that the listening ear draws is what Stoever names as the “sonic color line” in which “white” sounds are welcomed, encouraged, heard and understood as melliferous and pleasing. On the other side of that line, “Black” sounds are illegible, received as noise, a distraction, irrational and threatening to the taken-for-granted sonic pleasures of the white listening ear. “The sonic color line produces, codes and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race as well as see it” (Stoever 2016, 11).

The politics of gentrification demonstrate the power of the sonic color line and the listening ear. As the novelist and essayist Xochitl Gonzalez (2022) argues, “the sound of gentrification is silence”:

I soon realized that silence was more than the absence of noise; it was an aesthetic to be revered. Yet it was an aesthetic at odds with who I was. Who a lot of us were ... The [white] people complaining clearly thought they were trying to enforce a sonic landscape that they deemed superior, but what they were really doing was using shame to exert control ... And they were demanding that the rest of us change to make them more comfortable.

The gentrification of formerly Black and Brown working-class neighborhoods by white middle-class professionals is a struggle over housing, ownership, belonging, and community which, at least in the early days of gentrifying a given neighborhood, plays out over which sounds are deemed pleasing and acceptable and those that are categorized as a noisy nuisance. From the banning of a longstanding East Austin Latino car club (Holley 2021) to the stoppage of a corner shop playing go-go music in the historic Shaw neighborhood in Washington, DC (Walker 2019), we see how the listening ear is used by white gentrifiers to enforce silence—and the displacement of Black and Brown residents.

We can see clearly how the listening ear can be brought to bear in radical activist spaces and how it contributes to racialized atmospherics. In related work, we define some white activists as fundamentally mishearing or misunderstanding the intersectional social justice claims of their women of color comrades (Emejulu and Bassel 2017a). This has been understood as an epistemic and communicative injustice. While that is part of what is going on in these spaces, the listening ear perhaps better captures the dynamics beyond the

inequalities of recognition as posited by Fraser (1995) and Young (1990). This is because white activists are, in fact, listening very carefully and fully understanding what is being said. The listening ear, like the white gaze, is surveilling and inspecting. Stoever (2016, 11–13) argues that the sonic color line is:

a marker of race's im/material presence ... [which enables] some listeners to hear themselves as "normal" citizens or ... "reasonable" while compelling others to understand their sonic production and consumption—and therefore themselves—as aberrant.

The issue is not a failure of articulation on the part of women of color activists nor a failure to listen on the part of white activists. Rather, this is an issue of white parrying and defense. Via the listening ear, what is being heard is forcefully cued to be reinterpreted and reclassified as noisy, irrational, and illogical speech acts. The claims-making of women of color activists fall on the wrong side of the sonic color line — they are a noisy threat that must be deemed unintelligible for the present and future safety and comfort of white activists.

The Somatics of Racialized Embodiment

The third aspect of racialized atmospheres is the somatics of activist spaces and the dynamic processes of race-making that take place when women of color enter, exist, and ultimately exit these spaces. In her classic text on racial embodiment, Linda Alcoff (1999), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, identifies a white "habitual body" for and around which any particular space is built. The sorting of habitual bodies from dissonant ones happens through a process of racialization in which visible racial differences are assigned moral significance, and this differential morality is imposed on racialized bodies. Race and differential morality are (re)enforced via the banal actions of everyday social interaction: "Race operates pre-consciously on spoken and unspoken interaction, gesture, affect and stance ... greetings, handshakes, proximity, tone of voice all reveal the effects of racial awareness, the presumption of superiority vis a vis the Other" (Alcoff 1999, 18). Racialization is always a violent process, not least because, as Alcoff (1999, 18–23) argues:

racialization structures the visual sphere and the imaginary self and can block the development of coherent body-image ... One finds oneself in the world ahead of oneself, the space one occupies as already occupied. One's lived self is effectively dislodged when an already outlined but very different self appears to be operating in the same exact location.

In other words, as Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1986) argued more than 60 years ago, racialization impedes a racialized individual from truly knowing oneself outside of the logics of the racial hierarchy. One is preceded by a racial fantasy fashioned in the shape of you, and you are compelled to occupy that body, that shell, that puppet, that not-quite-human mask.

Racialized embodiment, however, is always a double bind. As Fassin (2011, 422) argues, “the ascription to one’s skin color produces two racial subjects with one sentence: the one who is assigned to his Blackness and the one who, by assigning, reveals his whiteness.” Racial assignation imposes a symbolic violence on the body and, crucially, as Hooker (2016) argues, denies the possibilities of alternative identities and belongings. Racialization forecloses any kind of radical future by making solidarity nearly impossible since identity imposition also has a “moral memory” — a condemnation of the racialized Other — of “disqualification and stigmatization” (Fassin 2011, 423) which in turn further justifies discrimination, violence and the lack of solidarity. Via the somatic politics of racialized embodiment, we see clearly what happens when racial seeing and the listening ear combine: they create a monster, a caricature, a parody of the Other that the Other is compelled to embody and perform.

In Frantz Fanon’s (1986) famous example, he demonstrates the power of racialized embodiment. As he is walking down a postwar Parisian street, a white child shouts, “Look, a [n-word]!” In this moment, Fanon recalls, he is debased and dehumanized. Who he is, a Martinican psychoanalyst living in Paris, is torn from him, and he is forced to wear the mask, embody a racist caricature of himself forged for him by this white French child, and be, at that moment, alienated from himself.

In activist spaces, the racialized body is perceived, heard and felt as “dissonance; a jarring of framings that confuses and disorients ... [this body] disrupts and interrupts” (Puwar 2004, 42). The racialized atmospherics are thus configured by the rendering of the racialized body as unneeded and unwanted — a “space invader” (Puwar 2004) whose political knowledge, based on the embodied struggle to survive, is selectively consumed at white discretion. Through the inspecting and surveilling of the white gaze and listening ear, the racialized body is made to embody its own alienation from itself alongside being made to feel as an unwelcomed, dangerous stranger upon whom regular, even casual violence can be enacted in activist spaces and never recognized as such. The oppressive atmosphere of awkwardness and discomfort expressed via glances, gestures, and careful listening compels the unwanted racial body to conform to its assigned, subjected role or to leave the space and carry the memory of the racialized atmosphere to the next encounter. Because racialized bodies have been fashioned as unworthy and unknowable besides the fact of “belonging to other places,” they are deemed a threat because “they bring with them indefinite possibilities” (Puwar 2004, 51).

Feeling Rules and Emotional Domination

Finally, emotions are regulated and controlled in specific and strategic ways that reproduce racialized atmospherics in activist spaces. We (Emejulu and Bassel 2024; 2025) have analyzed the role of feeling rules in these activist spaces. We draw on key literature that establishes the ways in which “social rules” require emoting in specific, expected, and predictable ways in a given situation (Bonilla-Silva 2019; Hochschild 1979; Wingfield 2010; 2021). These “feeling rules” are hegemonic and produce a taken-for-granted common sense to

which individual responses must be reconciled through “emotion work.” Dominant ideologies are thus reinforced. Feelings are repressed through racialized and gendered feeling rules, whether in the workplace (Evans 2013; Wingfield 2010) or, for our purposes here, shaping the racialized atmospherics of activist spaces.

The sociologist Adia Wingfield (2010) demonstrates how feeling rules are enforced in her empirical work examining how African American professionals negotiate their workplace dynamics. While the emotional norms of the professional office oblige all workers to conform to particular feeling rules in terms of how they express themselves, she found that Black workers were held to different standards in terms of what was considered tolerable emotional displays. For instance, the need to always be pleasant and congenial is a feeling rule imposed on most office workers by bosses. However, for Black workers, conforming to this rule was expected even when they faced racial bias in the workplace. As Wingfield (2010, 257) explains:

For many of these professionals, being one of very few Black workers means they stand out at work and, because of this, they feel that their very presence elicits many statements and behaviors that they believe are expressions of racial bias. Consequently, these workers often find it very difficult to adhere to the organizational requirement that they display a pleasant demeanor.

Further still, the unequal access to expressing anger is a longstanding feeling rule that many Black people in white majority settings experience. As Wingfield (2010, 259) notes:

Black professionals ... suggest that the feeling rules that guide the expressions of anger do not apply to them ... a different set of feeling rules apply to them altogether wherein they are not permitted to show anger under any circumstances. They cite numerous examples of white workers who have openly expressed feelings of frustration or annoyance in ways that they believe are simply unavailable to them as Black employees. Respondents argue that as Black professionals, they would be punished for displaying anger in the same ways their white colleagues do.

Drawing on Wingfield’s influential work, recent studies consider how feeling rules travel to European contexts, e.g. the everyday emotional negotiations of young Brown men in public Danish settings, and “how the category ‘brown’ is activated and given meaning in relation to the right to express anger in a Danish and broader European context” (Özkaya 2025, 437). In Özkaya’s study, “anger is legitimized or delegitimized not only by how it is expressed but by who expresses it and the racialized, gendered and classed conditions in which it is expressed” (Özkaya 2025, 437). Anger is an inherited “good” for young white Danish men who can use this emotion to defend and define themselves and legitimize their masculinity. This contrasts with how anger is a source of inequality and repression for young working-class Brown men, where, in the words of one participant:

“My parents have always taught us not to show anger to them [white Danes] because then they think we are criminals, and the police will come” (Özkaya 2025, 428).

These feeling rules pose a specific threat to women of color activists in Europe. As we argue (Emejulu and Bassel 2024), emotions are controlled and decorum is policed in activist spaces through a white bourgeois ideal of being seen as companionable and affable. This is particularly insidious for women of color activists. Intersecting inequalities in work, housing, and everyday life can only be discussed in a non-threatening, non-accusatory way that does not generate feelings of guilt or complicity for white comrades. Women of color activists’ articulations of their grievances but also their hopes and desires for the future are therefore effectively censored. Women of color violate the “good manners” of activist spaces. An “emotional color line” separates and dominates women of color activists, rendering their emotions as an illegitimate distraction (Cvetkovich 2012, 132). Here we can see the racialized atmospherics in action. Women of color are invited to be emotionally repressed if they wish to exist in these white-dominated activist spaces. However, women of color activists are exhausted by this fog of denial and repression and thus, more often than not, exit these spaces. They carry this memory, their experiences and these dynamics to the next space.

We now turn to explore the possibilities of women of color’s ambient resistances to racialized atmospherics and consider how this might challenge racialized solidarity to develop new approaches to solidarity building.

Resistance, Refusal, and Exit

Racialized atmospherics are produced by the multifaceted process of racialization through the mobilization of the interconnected sensuous inequalities derived from sight, sound, somatics, and emotions. Even though women of color activists are enveloped in this ambient violence, they are not robbed of their agency. Instead, we identify several strategies activists can and do use to try to transform the moods of activist spaces with the goal of making them more open, welcoming, democratic and liberatory.

Refusing Enrolment

As Sumartojo and Pink (2019, 122) remind us, atmospheres cannot *make* us feel certain things. Rather, atmospheres are more of “an invitation to attune” to the norms and logics of particular spaces. Consequently, atmospheres are inherently unstable and elusive:

Marshalling atmosphere to define groups in terms of common feeling is unpredictable and can be, paradoxically, both more and less persuasive ... Atmosphere is not understood or made sense of uniformly ... While they can appear all-encompassing or immersive, there will always be moment when they do not take hold, in which we resist, ignore or undermine them.

Atmospheres are not totalizing. Rather, atmospheres request our consent and participation in the shared meaning-making of a particular space. A racialized atmosphere invites women of color activists to see, hear, and feel themselves as a subjected Other through the sensuous inequalities of a violent ambiance. For those activists who decline such invitations, this refusal to be enrolled into a racialized atmosphere can be understood as psycho-somatic resistance politics. We argue that women of color activists' psycho-somatic refusal politics take three key forms: (1) the oppositional gaze, (2) defiant sounds and bodies, and (3) exit.

In her classic text on Black women's spectatorship and looking relations, bell hooks (1992, 115) argues that looks can be seen as "confrontational, as gestures of resistance ... one's gaze can be dangerous ... there is power in looking." Since Black people have historically been denied their right to look at the world as they please as part of the dynamics of racialized looking relations in racial politics, the ability to look, examine and scrutinize is a counter-hegemonic practice of power: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality ... even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze ... opens up the possibility of agency" (hooks 1992, 115).

The practice of looking at oneself outside and against the white gaze and looking at, recognizing and re-humanizing fellow Others is how Black women and other women of color activists practice what hooks (hooks 1992, 115) names as the "oppositional gaze": "all attempts to repress our right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze." The oppositional gaze is both a refusal and an assertion of agency. This gaze refuses the inspection and surveillance of racial seeing which dehumanizes as it racializes. The oppositional gaze insists on looking and analyzing the world, in hooks' case, on Black women's terms of history, memory, and lived experiences. The oppositional gaze is a foundation practice of Black feminism, and we see it in the creation of the Movement for Black Lives, Say Her Name, migrant survival work, prison and police abolition, and in the insistence on Black joy, pleasure, and rest (brown 2018; Hershey 2022). In each of these spaces, activists shift the focus to revision themselves and their comrades to humanize, care, and protect those who have been racialized and subjected.

This assertion of an alternative and counter worldview is how Black women and other women of color remake themselves as agentic subjects. It is important to note that the oppositional gaze does not necessarily counteract and neutralize racial seeing and the white gaze but rather it shifts the space-time of a racialized atmosphere and repositions women of color activists in different temporal and spatial modes of being and seeing. The oppositional gaze, the insistence on looking back, is a refusal to be a passive object and participate in the white racial fantasy of differential sympathy. This is one way women of color become agentic in white-dominated spaces. And while the oppositional gaze will not necessarily dissipate a racialized atmosphere, it is the lever that allows women of color activists to refuse to be enrolled and enveloped in a poisonous ambiance of subjection.

Closely connected to the oppositional gaze is that of defiant sounds and bodies. As Sharpe (2016) argues, it is essential to recognize the "insistent Black

visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being.” Although the sonic color line transforms women of color’s demands, claims-making, and mere existence in white-dominated activist spaces into noise and disruption, there is always a strategy of talking back and to keep talking until one’s demands are heard, met, or, at least, very hard to ignore. This is a siege strategy of attrition and mutual exhaustion, but it is another psycho-somatic way in which women of color activists refuse to be enrolled in a racialized atmosphere that renders them illogical, irrational space invaders. As always, bell hooks (1989, 5–9) is useful here:

“Back talk” or “talking back” meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion ... To speak when one was not spoken to was a courageous act – an act of risk and daring ... [To talk back is] the expression of the movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

Refusing to be silent and undertaking speech acts that compel people to listen (even if they refuse to act) is the practice of making defiant sounds and becoming defiant actors. Indeed, the “liberated voice” speaks and forces others to listen and take note despite the “listening ear” attempting to transform these speech acts into noise. “Noise” can be redeployed as a strategy of disruption against racialized atmospherics and the dominant group seeking to mobilize an ambience of exclusion.

Finally, exiting the activist space is a dramatically corporeal way in which women of color activists refuse to be enrolled in a racialized atmosphere. Leaving a space of violence and degradation is not “giving up,” “losing the fight,” or “being anti-social.” Instead, it is a process of self-reclamation: it is a strategy of evading and escaping being rendered Other and being alienated from oneself via the racialization of the activist space. In so doing, new opportunities, ways of being and ways of seeing are made possible by leaving. Taking flight is always risky, but it creates possibility outside a given racialized atmosphere. As Emejulu and van der Scheer (2021, 16) remind us, “refusal is always generative. Refusal is not an anti-politics, a politics of apathy or political nihilism, instead, is it a revolutionary process of creating alternative spaces and practices to create new possibilities.”

To be clear, exit does not solve the problem of sensuous inequalities. It only puts these dynamics into abeyance. And because atmospheres are reproduced by the individuals in a given space, that atmosphere can always reform in another space and time. Exit might be a short-term measure, but this strategy of withdrawal creates the conditions for rethinking problems and solutions.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued for the necessity of our novel approach to the study of “atmospheres” in politics and the marginalization of women of color in European social movements, opening also the possibility to explore the specific workings of “atmospheres” with other groups and contexts in and beyond Europe in future research (see Wingfield [2022, 210] on extending research on

race, gender, and emotion work to other groups). Our approach brings together Hooker's (2009) concept of "racialized solidarity" with our theorization of the sensuous inequalities of activist spaces. We thus overcome two challenges of existing work: on the one hand, the lack of engagement by social movement studies with the powerful yet ambiguous role of atmospheres and the persistent hauntings of activist spaces, which drive out marginalized groups; on the other hand, the need to bring home the political consequences of atmospheres to those engaged in this emerging area of study. With our approach, it becomes possible to grasp the persistence of exclusion and racial violence in activist spaces and the alternatives women of color forge for themselves.

Racialized solidarity is the practice of differential sympathy. The so-called structure of feeling on offer here is that of boundary-making, which makes it precarious and challenging to build and sustain reciprocal relations of trust and obligation with racialized groups. Instead, racialized solidarity is always concerned with protecting and reproducing the racial hierarchy of domination and exclusion.

Racialized solidarity is facilitated by the racialized atmospherics of white-dominated activist spaces. By mobilizing sensuous inequalities related to sight, sound, embodiment, and emotions, the mood of an activist space can be used to silence, undermine, and exclude women of color activists. Through racial seeing, solidaristic bonds are interrupted, and a white gaze of inspection and surveillance is deployed to watch and protect the space against visibly different, deviant, and dangerous Others. The listening ear assesses and reconfigures women of color's voices and demands as troublesome noise to be banished from the space. Racialized embodiment imposes a degraded and stigmatized identity onto women of color activists, which aims to dehumanize them and void their claims-making. Finally, feeling rules are enforced which attempt to discipline women of color activists into emoting in ways that do not disrupt white comfort and security. An emotional color line is drawn which legitimates white emotional needs for safety and undermines women of color's emotional demands for justice and parity. These sensuous inequalities are the constitutive elements of racialized atmospherics that attempt to envelop and enroll women of color activists into their own debasement and subjection.

However, since racialized atmospheres are not totalizing, women of color can and do resist the sensuous inequalities deployed against them and create new and different possibilities for themselves by looking and talking back and exiting spaces. It remains an open question whether this is effective enough to overcome or at least neutralize racialized solidarity. Rather, we think it is better to think of these resistance practices as fleeting, ambivalent moments of possibility. Fragile, temporary glimpses of another world, another way of being, another kind of solidarity.

Notes

1. While Habermas, in some of his later work, does engage with ideas of ethnicity in relation to solidarity, we think he is pushed to do so via his debates with Nancy Fraser, which we think further supports our point about intersecting ideas of solidarity, particularly in relation to race, being broadly neglected in the European context.

2. Note the exception of Nancy Fraser in her long-running debates with Habermas. Though, of course, she is not writing from a European perspective.
3. In considering sensory experiences and inequality, we do not wish to reproduce ableist language and ideas. We refer in this article to real-world effects of the metaphorical register of sight and sound that we identify at work, and recognize that there is no easy resolution to what one of our reviewers correctly identifies as the risk of inadvertently using excluding language concerning sight and sound and potentially ableist assumptions of sensory impairment among activists. We thank the reviewer for pushing us to make this clarification. Further elaboration is required here in dialogue with Black disability studies, understanding disability within the context of white supremacy (Schalk 2022), to further navigate this challenge.

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