ment for gender parity. And before this can happen, white women must reckon with just how much white privilege has influenced feminist movements and continues to influence the agenda of feminism today. These are not novel suggestions, but they are ones that have been ignored with alarming obstinacy.

I am tired of the pretense of engagement even as the white feminists in power cling to their fear, their filters, the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they include and exclude. I want to be able to meet at a wine bar and have an honest conversation about change, about transformation, about how we can bring a failed system down and build a new and better one.

CHAPTER ONE

In the Beginning, There Were White Women

In 2007, the much-celebrated feminist playwright Eve Ensler wrote an essay for *Glamour*. "I have just returned from hell," it began, going on to detail her visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she had met "girls as young as nine who had been raped by gangs of soldiers." According to its title, the article is about "Women Left for Dead—And the Man Who's Saving Them," but this is not immediately clear.

Even while detailing the anguish of Congolese women, Ensler manages to keep the attention on herself. "How do I convey these stories?" she asks. "How do I tell you . . .?" "I stay for a week at Panzi. Women line up to tell me their stories." Having just recounted a horrific story about "Alfonsine," rather than inviting the reader to reflect on that story, she writes: "I look at Alfonsine's petite body and imagine the scars beneath her humble white clothes. I imagine the reconstructed flesh, the agony she experienced after being shot. I listen carefully. I cannot detect a

drop of bitterness or any desire for revenge. Writing about the surgery that is needed to repair the fistulas suffered by so many women victims, again she centers herself, saying, "**I** sit in on a typical operation. . . . **I** am able to see the fistula." And so on.

Her repeated emphasis on what she herself is doing and hearing, rather than on what she sees and hears, strongly suggests that her goal is to show the crucial role that she, a white woman, is playing in the lives of these women. She is eager to enlist the rest of *Glamour*'s readership as well; they can write to the president of Congo, or they can donate to the hospital where the rape victims are being treated and the rehabilitation center where "they will learn to become political leaders," through Ensler's own website.

Ensler's article in *Glamour* demonstrates how the white savior complex intersects with feminism in the twenty-first century. A white woman takes on the task of "speaking for" raped and brutalized "other" women, positioning herself as their rescuer, the conduit through which emancipation must flow. It is also an example of how the plight of "over there" exists as a foil against which the successes of women in the West can be judged. "How lucky we are," readers of Ensler's article are encouraged to conclude, mournfully shaking their heads at the circumstances of women who live in less civilized parts of the world. It is notable that the naming or erasure of the indentities of women of color is entirely at the whim of the white women telling the story. In cases where people should be mentioned by name, say the nurses and other medical staff (but which may draw attention away from the white woman's central role as savior), they are left out; in others, where confidentiality would be helpful, such as not photographing victims like "Nadine," we are told that she has agreed to be photographed if her name is changed.

The 2020 Annual Letter issued by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provides another example of this calculated and deliberate phenomenon, particularly as it relates to the optics of white women benevolently helping Black and Brown people.[1] The first image used in the report sets the tone: it features Melinda Gates bending down to meet the eyes of an unnamed Black woman wearing a mask and lying on a hospital bed. The subject's anonymity is typical of this kind of iconography. We may assume that the name has been omitted to protect the woman's privacy, but the pattern continues. Even when the people of color depicted are appearing in their professional capacity, providing rather than receiving care, where there would be no need for anonymity, their names are left out. Bill and Melinda themselves, the only white people in the photos, are the only people ever named. A visit to the Gugulethu Health Clinic features unnamed Black and Brown "staff." The section on gender opens with Melinda Gates flanked on either side by two unidentified, diminutive Brown Indian women.

So effective is this mode of virtue signaling that it has even caught on as a trend on dating apps. A website called Humanitarians of Tinder is devoted to pictures of valiant and loving and oh-so-adventurous white women (and some men) dishing out hugs, cuddling babies, and partaking in customary "native" dances.[2] The same template used by Ensler and Gates to harvest public approval

or drum up financial backing is now reapplied to the task of attracting sexual partners. As ever, the Black and Brown faces are mere props in a white enterprise.

Not just a recent cultural style limited to dating apps, fashion magazines, and billionaire philanthropists, this habit of centering the white woman when talking about the emancipation of women of color has a genealogy. The "white feminist savior complex," rooted deep in epistemology and in history, took shape in the colonial era. In the home countries of white women, nineteenth-century gender roles and enduring male privilege constrained their freedoms significantly. But setting off for the colonies allowed these women a unique kind of escape. In India or Nigeria they had a significant advantage: white privilege. Still subordinate to white men, they were nevertheless considered superior by virtue of race to the colonized "subjects." This superiority automatically granted them greater power and also greater freedom.

"I am a person in this country! I am a person," wrote an effusive Gertrude Bell to her parents in March 1902.[3] She was writing from Mount Carmel in Haifa, where she had come to learn Arabic and get away from the unkind tittering of London society. Bell's outburst was revealing. In her thirties and with a penchant for falling for the wrong men (they were either poor or married or dead or all three), or not falling for them at all (she friend-zoned more than one wealthy prospect), she was far too old still to be single. In a society that expected matrimony and motherhood of its women, this rendered her functionally redundant.

Home reminded Gertrude of her failings, the damning deficiency of having tried and failed at landing a husband. In the exotic East, there was plenty of room for London ladies who had aged out of the marriage market, and as Gertrude soon learned, the privileges of empire more than made up for the disadvantages of gender. Indeed, she was a "person" in Jerusalem, because unlike at home, her whiteness placed her above most of the rest of humanity. No Brown man could control or question her as she traipsed the bazaars in her straw hat and white dresses or chastise her for riding a horse like a man.

Bell's example reveals how some of white British women's very first experiences of freedom beyond home and hearth were caught up with the experience of imperial superiority beyond the boundaries of Britain and Europe. Contrary to the customary slow slog of history, Britain's empire had swelled rapidly through the nineteenth century, and British women had become citizens of empire. At a time when white women were still the legal property of their husbands, the opportunity to taste a little of the power that was usually withheld from them was evidently too tantalizing to resist subjugating others. As one woman put it, "it was an escape from the old stereotyped existence whose comfortable, commonplace round we had run till it had become altogether monotonous and humdrum."[4]

Ironically, or perhaps simply staying true to the political pedigree of the family that supported her financially, Bell herself was opposed to women's suffrage; in 1908 she would serve as the honorary secretary of the Anti-Suffrage League.[5] It makes sense that Gertrude was in it for herself, her rugged individualism at odds with any collective effort.

The idea that *all* women were equal to men and could do what she could do made no sense to her at all. Her faith was in her own exceptional nature.

Bell's opposition to suffrage did not much matter, for there were many other women pursuing the suffrage cause, and they, too, would benefit from their racial superiority as they tended to their lesser sisters across the empire. If Bell found in the breadth of Britain's domain a freedom of movement and lifting of gendered constraints, these suffrage campaigners saw in the very existence of colonized native women the availability of a politically expedient moral contrast. The subjugation of women, they argued, could only be the practice of uncivilized cultures like the ones that had been colonized by the British.

In her 1851 essay "The Enfranchisement of Women," Harriet Taylor conjured a picture of the unemancipated woman in the minds of her readers: the "Oriental or Asiatic" woman who was kept in seclusion and was hence "servile-minded."[6] Later suffragists went much further; one pamphlet from 1879 argued that "if the physical health of a woman is admittedly impaired owing to confinement in a limited space, her mental health also suffers through legislative disabilities . . . it is unfair to deprive her of political liberty and as in the Oriental mode shut her up in four walls."[7] Others used terms like "abject subjection" and "our cruelly crippled sisters in the East" to describe the hapless women they imagined as desperately needing their attention and assistance.

A whole cultural discourse thus highlighted the position of colonized Black and Brown and Asian women within the colonial universe. In the eyes of Victorian society, "Eastern women were doubly inferior being women and Easterners."[8] Even so, white women who traveled to South Asia and the Middle East were very interested in visiting them. Since the female quarters of any wealthy household or palace were known as the zenana, these visits were known as "zenana visits."

Bell herself managed several zenana visits with the famed Eastern women, encounters she records with almost snide condescension in her book *Persian Pictures*. During her first encounter, at the Sultan's palace itself, she finds the conversation lacking despite the efforts of the French interpreter, noting that all their hostess seemed able to manage as a response is "a nervous giggle, turning aside her head and burying it in a pocket handkerchief"[9] The lasting image of the Persian woman as a tittering idiot does not fade despite the appearance of two daughters who speak of their studies in French and Arabic. By the end of it all, Gertrude has determined everything, even the snacks served (lemon ices), to be unsatisfactory. Ever glad to be white and English, Gertrude and her friend take leave of the three ladies who stand gazing after them from the canvas walls. "Their prisoned existence seemed to us a poor mockery of life as we cantered homewards up the damp valley." The sun, Gertrude notes contentedly, has dropped below the horizon in Persia, "bearing the fullness of its light to the Western world—to our own world."

The "zenana visit," was already very much in fashion throughout the eighteenth century, when the first colonists and occasionally their wives set out for the mysterious "Orient." Their novelty wore out a bit as empire ground on, and they became more commonly a stop on the Western

tourist route, but the legacy of those intrusions lived on in the form of nineteenth-century feminist rhetoric situating these other women as their inferiors. Most of the women who wrote pamphlets preaching white women's enfranchisement and certainly most of those that consumed them had never been to the East. It is even more doubtful that they had met any of the women from the harems and seraglios against whom they wished to contrast their own condition. The power of the comparison came not from the truth of any of Eastern women's actual conditions but from the imaginative currency of whiteness and non-whiteness. Believing themselves to be superior, white women argued that they deserved higher status and more freedoms than colonized women. That potent "us" and "them" became an indispensable lever for white women pushing for their own emancipation.

The *Glamour* magazine of the 1860s, *The Englishwoman's Review*, was launched to create a platform for this very argument: that white British women, now the leading ladies of empire, should have lives that were visible, free, and politically meaningful, in contrast to the sequestered, conquered, invisible women of the East. It was impossible, after all, that the lives of British women be defined by constraints and constrictions similar to those faced by the lesser women of the world, who had yet to be civilized.[10]

The question of exactly *how* uncivilized Indian women really were raged on for years in the pages of the magazine. This argument cut both ways: on one hand it appealed to pity and the generosity of rescuers (*See how badly Brown men treat Brown women? White men would never be so barbaric*) and it also made an appeal to white dominance (*Whatever Brown women have, white women must have more and better*). The writers of the *Englishwoman's Review* saw their screeds and essays as the material of the continued ascendancy of feminism in Britain, and themselves as "workers in a women's cause who were making history."[11] Some, like the author Bayle Bernard, thought that the wretched Indian women living the "sunless airless" existence were nevertheless educable and hence redeemable, which is why all Englishwomen inside and outside India should "throw their hearts into the work [of educating them] and determine never to rest until they have raised their sisters to their own level and then may the women of India at last attain a position that is honorable to themselves."[12]

Other articles critiqued the use of words like "primitive" or "uncivilized" about people of color and colonial subjects, though of course even these did not include the actual participation of the women in question. Such women were divested of politics of their own, useful only "when explained, modified and put to feminist use."[13] Just like Eve Ensler and countless other white feminists today, Englishwomen writing in these colonial gazettes sought to speak for the women they were trying to save. Then and now, the virtue of saving women of color entitles white women to bylines, enhancing their reputations and elevating their professional status, with no reference to the irony of this transaction.

Whatever the sincerity of the *Review*'s debates about lifting up Brown sisters, in practice they functioned as a glue that united a vast variety of British women under the imperial umbrella, all of them believing in and projecting

the vision of imperialism as a benevolent force. As Ensler's bravery in traveling to Congo renders her the altruistic heroine of her report, so the nineteenth-century Englishwomen who decamped to the colonies proved to all the others who stayed at home that empire was not simply the project of the British *man* but that it belonged to women as well. In this "feminized" imperialism, the duty of the imperial woman was to stand with the men who served the empire in shouldering "the white man's burden." An ad in the *Englishwoman's Review* from January 1888 said it all: "An Opening for Women in the Colonies" beseeched readers to offer their services to colonial peoples because their plight, particularly that of Indian women, should be a "special and deserving object of feminist concern."[14]

The white women who arrived in the colonies to build girls' schools or to train teachers were ill prepared to cope with basic cultural differences—for instance, in clothing. If European feminists are terribly annoyed at Muslim women who insist on covering up their bodies today, they were equally annoyed by the lack of coverings worn by Hindu women then. Annette Akroyd was a British woman who set off for Bengal to build a school (inspired by an encounter almost identical to the one described by Ensler two centuries later as the reason she had made her journey to Congo). She found the sari, as a garment, both "vulgar and Inappropriate" as it left women, in her view, semi-nude. "There must be a decided change to their lower garments," she complained in a letter home after her arrival, "for they cannot go into public with such costumes."[15] Even when she encountered a well-to-do Bengali woman, she likened

the way that she dressed and sat to a "savage who had never heard of dignity or modesty."

The white women, ostensibly there to help their colonial sisters reach their potential, were quick to use signifiers like clothing and posture as evidence that Brown women were limited by an innate primitivism and that because of this they were in urgent need of white assistance. Meanwhile, by the mid-nineteenth century, almost fifty years before Gertrude Bell arrived in the colonies, Indian women had already created reform-minded women-only organizations. By the 1870s Indian women were already publishing their own magazines that dealt with women's issues with such gusto that the "Women's Press" emerged in the North Indian province of Maharashtra.[16]

In the 1870s, Indian women such as Pandita Ramabai, Soonderbai Powar, and Krupabai Satthianadhan were translating literary texts from English and other European languages into local languages and were active in speaking against their own subordinate role within society.[17] By 1882, not long after Akroyd's ill-fated trip (she soon gave up on the school and got married instead), there were 2,700 educational institutions for girls in India, with a total of 127,000 students and fifteen training schools for teachers.[18] A couple of years later, in 1886, Swarnakumari Devi began the Ladies' Organization, and she was followed in 1892 by Pandita Ramabai, whose Sharda Sadar was dedicated to the education and employment of women.[19] A decade later, the Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club held its first meetings under the auspices of Ramabai Ranade. From the 1890s onward Indian women were graduating

from Indian colleges and universities and agitating for increased educational opportunities.

And in 1905, around the time that Gertrude Bell was discovering her personhood and her superiority to the silly, cloistered women of the East, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the wife of a Bengali civil servant, penned one of the leading feminist texts of Indian literature in English, "Sultana's Dream"—in which the protagonist is transported to a wondrous world without men, where only women run the show. The story was fiction but it reflected the strategy of "separatism" that Indian women had adopted in their organizations, which did not allow men to hold any of the high offices.[20]

On the odd occasion when a white feminist did come into contact with actual Brown women, the results were almost tragicomic. In one such encounter, the Egyptian feminist writer Huda al-Sha'arawi was approached by a Frenchwoman, Mlle. Marguerite Clement. Clement and her friends wanted to deliver a lecture to aristocratic Egyptian women in Cairo about the Western and Eastern attitudes toward the veil. To ensure that these aristocratic women actually attended the event, Clement asked al-Sha'arawi to find someone older and more important to sponsor it. Through al-Sha'arawi's efforts, Princess Ayn al-Hayat Ahmad was persuaded to fill that role. On the day of the event, however, the princess ran late and the white women in charge of the event decided to begin without the presence of the honored guest, prioritizing the British notion of punctuality over the Eastern values of hospitality on one level and actively asserting the right of the white audience to begin proceedings when

it suited them. The princess's eventual arrival with her royal entourage caused a commotion that interrupted Clement's lecture and peeved the Western women, who felt the words of one of their own should not have to compete with the arrival of an Egyptian royal, or rather that notions of white etiquette should be privileged over those of the Egyptian women. Eager consumers of the reviews and periodicals that situated colonized women as their inferiors, these white "feminists" began to criticize al-Sha'arawi, and Egyptian women at large, for not knowing proper etiquette. Al-Sha'arawi, in turn, was upset by this cultural condescension toward the Egyptian women who were present, and toward her personally.[21]

There was an element of white fragility in the encounter as well, where white women could not bear being told to pause proceedings until the royal guest had taken her seat without becoming immediately defensive at the suggestion that they were being disrespectful. Then there is the issue of demanding that whiteness remain central: self-righteous indignation about lateness may appear very reasonable, but punctuality, like all qualities, does not have absolute and universal value. Its importance is culturally coded and points in this case toward asserting the supremacy of the white way of doing things as the correct and only way. In cases that involve a bringing together of disparate groups, then, there is the question of whose norms should be respected, whose baseline adopted by all. This is what is meant by "centering whiteness." And such seemingly trivial impulses signal the direction of much more far-reaching ones, revealing the intentions of one group to make the rules for the other.

In non-Western cultures, important guests are often late, and the other attendees duly wait for them as a mark of respect. This is an alternate etiquette to the Western one, neither inherently more right than the other. But for the white women at the lecture, punctuality—prized by white Western culture, at the nub of Protestant and capitalist values of productivity—could not simply be considered a rule for white and Western people: it must be imposed on everyone else too.

The knee-jerk defensiveness of the British women upon being interrupted by al-Sha'arawi is a telling display of white fragility. It demonstrates the discomfort felt when people of color, seen as inherently inferior or in need of help (despite their material condition and experience), fail to show adequate gratitude to their white saviors, expose the shortcomings of those white people implicitly or explicitly, or point out the reality of their racial privilege. This internal discomfort is weaponized externally in any number of ways: as anger, victimhood, a refusal to cooperate or communicate.

Race and feminism are nowhere more integrally connected than in the fight for women's suffrage. It is possible to even argue that the claims of the suffragists were taken seriously only *because* they existed within and against the more troubling prospects of having to grant citizenship to Black, Brown, and Asian men who had been colonized and, in the case of some parts of the world like the United States, enslaved.

Most British suffragettes made no bones about tying their right to vote to their racial identity as Anglo-Saxons. The archival materials of the age are full of evidence of this

noxious truth: the suffragist Charlotte Carmichael Stopes began her account of British women's "historical privilege" by citing the "racial character of our ancestors."[22] Helen Blackburn, who published her own history of the women's suffrage movement, glibly agreed, attributing the early equality of the sexes in Britain to "Anglo-Saxon superiority over all the Indo-Germanic races." Millicent Fawcett, who, like all other British suffragettes, thought that representative government had begun in England, asked the rhetorical question, "Why should she (England) not continue to lead as she has led before?"[23]

As the early twentieth century began and British suffragettes drew closer to winning the vote, they wanted their lesser colonized sisters to engage in a parallel struggle. But the politics of women in the colonies at the time, particularly in India, were geared toward winning freedom from colonial rule. Indian feminists like the poet Sarojini Naidu, among scores of others, adopted Mahatma Gandhi's famous slogan: "India cannot be free until women are free and women cannot be free until India is free." Naidu was a leader in the "Quit India Movement," demanding the British leave, or "quit" her homeland. She and hundreds of other women party members participated in civil disobedience and were arrested and jailed by the British.[24]

Meanwhile, British suffragettes refused to support the fight against colonial domination abroad. Even though at home they were fighting the dominance of men who claimed that women could not govern themselves, they reinforced/joined/parroted/echoed these men when it came to arguing that Indians were incapable of governing themselves. They wanted the Indian suffragist women's

movement to look and behave exactly like a mini version of their own struggle, and saw the support of the Indian independence movement as a traitorous abandonment of the women's cause.

While refusing to support Indian women in their political goal of self-rule, British suffragettes insisted that they were allies in the project of getting women the vote in a country where no one, male or female, was free. The words of one Indian woman protesting a conference convened by British women could well have been spoken today: "I disputed the right of the British women to arrange a conference on Indian social evils in London, where all the speakers were British and many of them had never even visited India," said Dhanvanthi Rama Rau. "We (Indian feminists) were already assuming responsibility ourselves and we were sure that we could be more successful than any outsiders, especially those that were ignorant of our culture."[25]

Seeing that the Indian feminists were not playing ball, the white suffragists decided to go about fighting for Indian women's right to vote (but not freedom from colonial subjugation) themselves. In 1917 the "Women's Indian Association" was founded in Southern India, geared toward the specific project of getting the franchise for Indian women. The founders of the organization were mostly white women, even including theosophist Annie Besant.

From the beginning of the organization's existence, the leadership of the committee began to lobby various British parliamentary members. They included a radical Jewish MP, Edwin Montagu, who they hoped would support their proposal for franchise for Indian women. In 1918 the proposal to extend the franchise to Indian women was presented before the Delhi Congress. The proposal passed with support from now Dame Millicent Fawcett.

Ultimately, however, white women could not win the franchise for Brown women from white men. In 1918, Viceroy Lord Chelmsford, along with Edwin Montagu, convened the Southborough Franchise Committee to interview Indian women regarding the feasibility of women's franchise. In 1919, the committee, which had only interviewed women in the provinces of Bengal and Punjab, declared that it had not found support for the vote among Indian women. The reason was obvious. Indian women wanted the vote, but in a country free from colonial subjection to the British. What indeed was the power of a vote in a country enslaved? Indian women knew that once the struggle for independence was won, their own right to vote would come with it, as the Congress Party had promised in 1931 that they would provide all women with the vote when they came to power.[26] When the British finally left India in 1947, both the countries created in their wake (India and Pakistan) granted the vote to women in their constitutions.