

[00:00:17.740] - VO

*On the Engender: Scotland's Feminist Policy Podcast.*

[00:00:27.140] - Alys Mumford

Hello, and welcome to *On the Engender: Scotland's Feminist Policy Podcast*. I am Alys Mumford, and as everyone, I'm here with the wonderful Amanda Aitken. Hi, Amanda.

[00:00:35.740] - Amanda Aitken

Hello.

[00:00:36.540] - Alys Mumford

Let's dive straight in with some good things to cheer ourselves up. Have you got anything good you can tell us about?

[00:00:43.740] - Amanda Aitken

Some good things. I went to the beach this weekend because it was four days of glorious sun in Glasgow-

[00:00:53.650] - Alys Mumford

I said, good things. I don't need reminders of climate change.

[00:00:57.210] - Amanda Aitken

Oh, yeah. Well, that's true. But you know - the whippy I had that Irvine Beach was really good. It was really nice to be out in the sun at the weekend, and so yeah - just had that first moment, where spring starts to hit and you're like, "Oh, winter does end."

[00:01:18.650] - Alys Mumford

It was genuine heat in this sun. It is not just a picture of a yellow thing in the sky. Yeah.

[00:01:25.100] - Amanda Aitken

Exactly. But yeah, how about you, Alys? How about you?

[00:01:29.060] - Alys Mumford

Well, I realised I heard there's an Engender good thing. I don't know if we've shared it with listeners, but we have a new executive director that started at Engender called Catherine Murphy and so members will have received an email. But we may have listeners who aren't Engender members - do join if you would like to.

[00:01:47.700] - Alys Mumford

But yeah, that's really exciting. It's been a period of quite a lot of uncertainty at Engender and lots of general busyness, so it's great to have someone in post. Thanks to Engender's board who've done lots of work to make that happen. We will be introducing you all listeners to Catherine once she started properly. She's currently doing a phased start so she could finish up other things she'd already committed to. So, we will be introducing you to her on the podcast before too long. But yeah, that's a really, really good news for Engender.

[00:02:21.140] - Amanda Aitken

Yeah, that's true. That's such great news. Yeah, I'm looking forward to getting to know her more and having her insight on the podcast in the coming episodes also.

[00:02:29.900] - Alys Mumford

Absolutely. Hurrah. So, on the podcast, we're not going to talk too much more on this episode because this really about sharing with you a recording of an event we held with Professor Akwugo Emejulu and journalist Assa Samaké-Roman on International Women's Day, which was a brilliant event. They were discussing Black feminism in Europe. It was such a powerful conversation to watch and be able to witness. We were really delighted they were both able to join us.

[00:02:56.780] - Alys Mumford

Amanda, you couldn't make it on the night, but I know you've listened back to the recording since.

[00:03:01.020] - Amanda Aitken

Yeah, I listened to that the recording since and so great. You're going to love it. Yeah, unfortunately, I couldn't make it to the event. I was positively riddled with COVID. But I am over that nearly now.

[00:03:15.330] - Alys Mumford

There's our positive thing to start. But not COVID, positive thing to start the podcast. Yeah, now, you will get a chance to hear it, too. We were joined, as I said, by a Akwugo and Assa. Assa Samaké-Roman, some of you may know. She's a French journalist covering Scottish politics, current affairs, and culture for both French speaking media and in *The National* here in Scotland. Her first book, *Ecosse: Hadrien et la licorne*, was published in 2020. She co-produces the podcast *Ecosse Toujours* and is currently working on the launch of *La Revue Écossaise* magazine about Scotland in French. I'm sure you can all tell, but my French is excellent.

[00:03:54.920] - Amanda Aitken

I mean, I was away to say - I'm glad I didn't have to do that intro.

[00:04:01.340] - Alys Mumford

I haven't at all been practising. And Akwugo Emejulu, many of you know Professor Akwugo. She's a professor of sociology at the University of Warwick, but is resident here in Scotland, again, hurrah. Her research interests include political sociology of race, class, gender, and women of colour's grassroots activism in Europe and the United States.

[00:04:23.740] - Alys Mumford

She's written lots of books, including *Fugitive Feminism* and *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain*. She was talking about the book she co-edited *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*. Without any further ado, we'll hand over to them.

[00:04:41.500] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Akwugo, welcome. How are you?

[00:04:44.220] - Akwugo Emejulu

Hi, Assa. I'm very well. Thank you so much for having me, and thank you, Alys, for the invitation to speak. This going to be really great. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

[00:04:53.090] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Me, too. Me, too. How do you feel today on International Women's Day? I have people all day long wishing me have a very happy International Women's Day. Is this something that you say you feel particularly happy today?

[00:05:08.970] - Akwugo Emejulu

Oh. Maybe I'm just a terrible person. But I, luckily, do not have anyone in my life who wished me a happy International Women's Day. I have to admit, I don't know if that's actually something I would say to someone, like wishing them happy Eid, or Christmas, or whatever, or something. I don't know if that's something I would do.

[00:05:29.370] - Akwugo Emejulu

I also don't know if I feel particularly happy because there isn't a lot to be happy about at the moment, whether that is the cost of living crisis, whether it's the war in Ukraine, whether it's endemic police violence. There's a lot that is challenging us at the moment. So I have to admit, but I'm feeling a little down, I will say. But also, I would never wish anyone a happy International Women's Day.

[00:05:57.570] - Akwugo Emejulu

I will say just very briefly, for those people on Twitter - I'd like to know who actually configured this bot. So, whenever some hypocritical corporation posts a tweet on International Women's Day, the bot

will automatically tell you what the pay gap is at that organisation. And so I think it's really good to kind of hold people to account. I think it's important we have both of these ideas in our mind that yes, hooray, celebrating women, I mean I guess. But it's more importantly to say, "Well, the people who are making all of this noise, what are they not doing? Why are they making this noise in order to obscure some really disappointing practices within their workplaces?"

[00:06:38.970] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Absolutely. I completely agree with you. Back to our subject for this evening, which is your book. Could we start by just talking about how the book came about? Can you tell me more about the whole process?

[00:06:53.570] - Akwugo Emejulu

Oh, sure. The book was actually born out of a series of events that I've co-organised since 2016 called *Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Colour in Europe*. Those events were held... I co-organised the first event with Francesca and a number of other colleagues when I was still at Edinburgh, and then we carried on in order to edit the book.

[00:07:20.330] - Akwugo Emejulu

But let me just say a little bit about those series of conferences. Those conferences were really born out of deep frustration because as an academic in Europe who does work on gender and politics, for years, I would go to a bunch of specialist conferences full of feminist political scientists in Europe. For the most part, no one was willing to talk about the experiences, the particular experiences of women of colour and the particular experiences of Black women in Europe.

[00:07:58.750] - Akwugo Emejulu

Not only would I be one of the only Black women in the room—that's just how it is—but it is also this wall of resistance to actually acknowledge that, first of all, Black women exist, women of colour exist. We have a particular kinds of politics that sometimes overlap with white women, but more often than not are in conflict with white women. There was a resistance to talking about that. And so out of losing my mind at one of these sessions, I said, "I'm going to organise something that's for us, but also to show them that we're here and we're doing politics in this really interesting way." These events were these opportunities for women of colour activists from across Europe to come together to talk about key issues, to strategise, to network; but also to have fun, and to eat together, to dance together, to do all of these things; and just be a space for learning, for radical education, but also for respite, and for rest. That was something that was really important for all, for me, and all of the co-organisers I've worked with over the years for that project.

[00:09:11.530] - Akwugo Emejulu

That being said, given that this event... There were three iterations of this event, and it might come back pandemic pending, but let's see what happens. The book was born out of these events of meeting and hearing from a number of Black women across Europe who are doing really interesting work on a range of different topics, which I'm sure we'll talk about.

[00:09:36.040] - Akwugo Emejulu

It was really important to Francesca and me to capture these experiences, and also as a way to hopefully supplement the archive of Black feminist activism in Europe to say, there are people doing great work, and let's capture this moment so that the people who come after us won't have to go through what we went through having to relearn and excavate a particular moment in time in terms of the history of Black feminism in Europe.

[00:10:04.030] - Assa Samaké-Roman

You've touched on so many subjects that we're going to talk about tonight, but the first thing I want to ask you about is about the title of the book. I think it's really powerful. It may be a bit silly, but made me think of a French song by a French singer from 1980s called France Gall. The song is *Résiste. Prouve que tu existes. Resist. Prove that You Exist.*

[00:10:28.870] - Assa Samaké-Roman

This a song that is called to be active, and fight for yourself, be an agent for change, never give up. There's a sense of urgency, I feel, in the song, but also in the title. Is that the feeling that you had writing and co-editing this book? Is it a wish that you have for all Black women in Europe to resist and prove that they exist? Is this something that you see Black women on the continent do everywhere and every day?

[00:11:00.030] - Akwugo Emejulu

*To Exist is to Resist* is one of those chance slogans, memes - I'm not sure what you would call it. That is something that's present within Black feminist and Afrofeminist politics. It's taken inspiration directly from the activists themselves. The activists themselves say, by not living on my knees, by not laying down and giving up, by persisting in a context that Audre Lorde talks about, "To survive in America is like living in the mouth of a dragon." That's one of her famous quotes.

[00:11:38.290] - Akwugo Emejulu

And so the idea is, you getting up and being out in public space, you just going about your daily life in spite of the things that want to harm you, in spite of the things that want to kill you, is something important. It's also, and I should say, none of this theoretical. We can look at what's going on at the Ukrainian and Polish border, where Black folks who are literally fleeing for their lives are being turned away or being turned into second-class citizens.

[00:12:06.150] - Akwugo Emejulu

It's one of those things to exist in these overwhelming spaces of whiteness means something. We can read a politics from that. We have to take that seriously in our everyday lives and in our politics.

[00:12:21.070] - Assa Samaké-Roman

It seems it's such a paradox and it's a recurring theme in the book, the fact that Black women in Europe are both invisible, so as you said that we're not really taken seriously, the experiences of Black women in Europe. But at the same time, they're also hypervisible. As you said, people are being turned away while they're fleeing war in Ukraine. There have been so many, also controversies and debates about Black women and women of colour in Europe over the past few years. It's really difficult to navigate this world where Black women are stuck between these extremes, isn't it?

[00:13:05.560] - Akwugo Emejulu

Yes. I think that Gail Lewis, the Academic, talks about this wonderfully, about this idea of absent presence. This strange, contradictory phenomenon, as you say, about this idea of being invisible. You're not seen, not taken seriously. Your politics are not taken seriously. You're not really heard or you're patronised, but then you're also hypervisible.

[00:13:30.920] - Akwugo Emejulu

You're hyper visible in terms of being criminalised, in terms of being noticed you're a Black body in White spaces, and so you're given this negative attention. It's the worst of all worlds in these ways. I think that is a really complicated and difficult way to navigate.

[00:13:51.170] - Akwugo Emejulu

But I guess I will say that whilst this difficult, what this idea of not being able to be seen clearly does is that it creates a different space in which Black women occupy, that we can come together, build solidarity, and develop particular kinds of activism and politics that speak to our interests and needs. I guess, for me, that's something really important to emphasise that it isn't all doom and gloom. So, I was just at an event via Zoom, so I have not left this chair for several hours. But on honouring bell hooks. An so, bell hooks has one of her most famous texts called *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. bell hooks, so much of her work is talking about the power of what it means to be on the margins, so to be outside the white gaze. To be able to - marginality can be used as a space for rest and recuperation, can be used as a space for strategising, and organising, and developing solidarity. This idea of invisibility, hypervisibility is really nuanced and complicated. And so I want us to hold on to that idea.

[00:15:05.630] - Assa Samaké-Roman

What I loved about this book is that it's not just, as you said, about doom and gloom and painful experiences, it's also about inspiring each other, taking care of ourselves also, and existing and being able to find a place and find a voice. It's not that often is it that Black women and women of colour are portrayed like that?

[00:15:30.850] - Akwugo Emejulu

Well, I guess it depends on where you read, where it's one of those things where I opt out of a lot of things, where if Black women and other women of colour are not seen as active agents, then this not a space that I will be in and these are the waters I will swim in, as it were. So, I don't know. I guess, we're very lucky at this moment that not only is there feminism, more broadly speaking, is very trendy and fashionable at the moment. So we're having very different kinds of conversations that we would have been having five years ago and certainly 10, 15 years ago. For me, it's a transformation in working with students, where 15 years ago, no one would admit to being a feminist. Everyone thought feminists were man haters, bra burners, all the rest of it. It's a totally changed landscape. For me, it's been very interesting to teach through this shift in consciousness.

[00:16:29.040] - Akwugo Emejulu

And so for me, it's the idea that there are all of these opportunities to have really interesting and important conversations. They aren't happening. But I think more often than not, for those conversations that are inclusive, that really push people, and then have other ways of thinking about the possibilities of existence aren't necessarily happening in the spaces you might think they are.

[00:16:56.030] - Akwugo Emejulu

For example, I was saying before about some of the frustrations I've had about working with people who profess to be interested in feminist politics, even a conversation like this at Engender is something, that unfortunately, sad to say, is actually very unusual. But I'm happy to be here, and I'm happy that we're having this conversation. So thank you, Alys, for this space because certainly, this something that's not typical, particularly in a Scottish context, but unfortunately, I'm sorry to say, in the Scottish feminist scene more broadly.

[00:17:28.660] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Yeah, we'll come back to that a bit later. I'm going to talk about that and address all these questions more thoroughly. Is there or other common denominators between the experiences that Black women have all across Europe? Because we live in very different countries. I certainly feel that my experience being Black here in Scotland is very different from my experience being Black in France.

[00:17:56.690] - Assa Samaké-Roman

I think my experience as a Black woman here is very different from the experience of a English speaking, Black woman who's been brought up here. So, you know, can we really find some common points between all these experiences?

[00:18:13.810] - Akwugo Emejulu

Well, before I answer that, can you just tell us more, what have you noticed as the difference between being in France and being in Scotland?

[00:18:23.410] - Assa Samaké-Roman

What generally say is that in France, I am first and foremost Black, whereas in Scotland, I'm first and foremost French. But this the thing. It's practically as if I was giving a break on my Blackness here. People don't notice that.

[00:18:42.280] - Assa Samaké-Roman

It's really strange. People don't notice that first. They notice an accent, then they notice my nationality. I know that my nationality because it's Western-European nationality. It's quite valorised. People like France. It would be very different if I was a Black person coming from an African country, I feel. But yeah, it's a totally different experience.

[00:19:08.070] - Akwugo Emejulu

Yes, I completely agree with that. For people who don't know because I'm sure they're like, "Why does Engender have this American who's at this English university as part of their Scottishness, whatever?" I actually lived in Glasgow and I've lived in Glasgow for 20 years. Recently, I was down in England for a couple of years, and I moved back out of horror, and so I needed to come back.

[00:19:29.790] - Akwugo Emejulu

Just in case people are wondering, "Why are you speaking to this random character?". So, I agree. I've actually never felt more American than being in Scotland. That's the thing. It's because first people are like, "Okay, we obviously see that you are not from here and you are clearly from elsewhere." Then people want to hear the accent, and then once they can place you. Actually, I've said this a lot that you can actually see people visibly relax. And so I know if I was - even though I have a Nigerian name, I know that if I spoke with a Nigerian accent, that I would be treated very differently in Scotland. I'm very confident about that, but having this American accent means that people treat me very differently. It's very different than how I was treated done in England.

[00:20:15.860] - Akwugo Emejulu

But in terms of the issue that common experiences across Europe, there are a lot. I think what's important for people to understand is that the Black feminist and Afrofeminist movements are connected. They cross borders, they cross ethnicities, languages, and religions. I think that's something that's really important to emphasise, that folks are in a constant conversation with each other about strategy, about tactics, about experiences, about relief, about joy, about all of these different things. I think it's really important to emphasise that.

[00:20:57.020] - Akwugo Emejulu

Whilst there are these kinds of differences that we've talked about about... I think Scotland is very unusual, to be honest, in comparison to a lot of other European countries. I've said this before, but I think it's important for folks to realise that in Scotland, the dynamics are different. Because when we talk about who the other is, for many European countries, the other is the Black or Brown migrant, or the Muslim, or the illegal immigrant, whereas in the Scottish context, the important other is the English.

[00:21:31.850] - Akwugo Emejulu

That actually takes a lot of heat off of a lot of different kinds of people. Not to say that this some wonderland, but what it means is the starting position of a lot of these conversations are very different. As a result, you haven't seen the kind of, we call them political entrepreneurs, these far right political entrepreneurs, they haven't been able to gain a base in Scotland because the significant other are the English, which is something that's very interesting.

[00:22:00.240] - Akwugo Emejulu

Going back then to this idea of these common experiences, a lot of the really interesting work in Black studies at the moment talks about this idea of anti-Blackness. Unfortunately, anti-Blackness is global. No matter where you are, you experience very similar experiences.

[00:22:19.840] - Akwugo Emejulu

We talked before about the idea of hypervisibility and invisibility. Those things are a common experience for lots of Black women. Just to highlight specifically for those who might not experience this, the classic thing is walking down a European street and having people walk into you, or people expecting you to move out of the way for them. That is such a common experience that people expect you to move out of the way when you're on a sidewalk, or pavement, as it's called here.

[00:22:53.230] - Akwugo Emejulu

This is the ways in which Blackness, the ways in which we embody Blackness or Blackness is read on us, we see it in these kinds of dynamics. Whilst we might all be speaking different languages, and might have all have different experiences of the social welfare state, might have different class positions, what we know is that Blackness is, unfortunately, to be feared. What that means is Black women have a different relationship to femininity. Those are the kinds of experiences that bind us together, and so we can speak a common language when it comes to something like Black feminism.

[00:23:36.470] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Obviously, we have all these common experiences, but I find that there's such a wealth of terms to qualify Black women's identities, Black women's activism. Afrofeminism is one of these terms. Curiously enough, this not something I've really encountered that much in the UK. Every Black woman who's an activist, I know in France, probably would call themselves Afrofeminists, but not really here.

[00:24:05.360] - Assa Samaké-Roman

I'm not sure people understand the differences and the nuances between Afrofeminism and Black feminism. Would you mind, maybe walking us through what both of these terms mean?

[00:24:17.530] - Akwugo Emejulu

Oh, sure. To start with Afrofeminism, I think that's really important because that might not be a term that is familiar to Anglophone speakers, but it's not exclusive, but it is a dominantly Francophone approach to feminism. I think that's something that's important to bear in mind. What we see in thinking about Afrofeminism is a sustained conversation between folks in Francophone Europe, and on the African continent, and in the Caribbean, which is a slightly different kinds of orientation in conversation than you would see in Britain and in other European countries, I will say.

[00:25:08.640] - Akwugo Emejulu

This sustained conversation about the struggles of police violence in France have resonances, and similarities, and patterns to what you see on the continent and what you see in the Caribbean. To resolve what's happening in the old Imperial Metropole requires a conversation and intervention in the old colonies. It's this conversation. It's a much more specifically anti-imperialist conversation, I believe, which is slightly different than Anglophone Black feminism, where the terms of citizenship are more settled, but certainly not perfect.

[00:25:58.310] - Akwugo Emejulu

I think the other thing to supplement this is particularly in the British context, where there's an ability to talk about race, even though things are still terrible, that means that the way that you can organise, there are different kinds of possibilities than what you have in France, where, for those who don't know, officially in France, race and racism do not exist.

[00:26:24.020] - Akwugo Emejulu

Whenever I tell my students, my students don't believe me. They're like, "But that doesn't make any sense. How can that be?" I was like, "People have been prosecuted for talking about state racism. We would call it here institutionalised racism. People have been prosecuted for that."

[00:26:38.910] - Akwugo Emejulu

What that means the possibilities for organising, that doesn't necessarily stop Afrofeminist activists from going out and doing interesting things, but the ways in which you orientate yourself are different because you have a different framework to think about your activism. Does that make sense? Is that helpful to people?

[00:26:57.310] - Akwugo Emejulu

Because in order to get into it, we have to get into this long history of the particularities of the French Empire, which is different from the British Empire, which has a direct effect on the ways in which people do their activism and the way that they think of themselves and they're belonging. I think their belonging to their various nation state, I think, is actually something very interesting and important.

[00:27:20.120] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Yeah, that's really clear. Sometimes it feels as if Black feminism, Afrofeminism in Europe was a new thing. If you listen to some politicians, if you listen to some journalists, basically, what they're saying is that we are importing some debates that are happening in the United States. Here in Europe, we are far ahead of that. We are in a post-racial society or we live in the area of universalism, which is something that is quite popular at the moment.

[00:27:54.230] - Assa Samaké-Roman

It's as if racism, misogyny, misogynoir, also, which is a term that I've been reading quite about these past few years, as if this was not a societal issue. Basically, racism, sexism, it's solved in individual choice. It's just like these people were mean to Black people. Whereas, it's not really that.

[00:28:18.460] - Assa Samaké-Roman

So, what I found interesting in the book was those chapters talking about creating an archive, writing our own history. Why is this so important in your opinion?

[00:28:31.420] - Akwugo Emejulu

Understanding the history of Black feminism in Europe is about understanding European history, that Black feminism has always been part of European history. People don't seem to believe that. People think that Black feminism or Black folks popped up either in the post-war period or in the '70s and '80s, these different waves of migration that somehow we just arrived and then we're here.

[00:29:00.460] - Akwugo Emejulu

But to understand and to properly contextualise Black feminism requires an understanding of various European imperialism practices, but then also the anti-imperialist movements, of which Black women were leading at that time. These resistance efforts, we're talking about since the 18th century.

[00:29:23.800] - Akwugo Emejulu

But this not a history that Europe wants to talk about because it's actually actually quite embarrassing that when you think about the enlightenment period, and this time of liberal humanism, and this idea of human flourishing. When you actually read, which I think you should read Kant, I think you should read David Hume, you should read these people. They will tell you directly that they're not talking about Black people and Black women in particular, that we are not fully human, that the ideas of the enlightenment are for a select few.

[00:29:58.070] - Akwugo Emejulu

That's really important to understand that particular kinds of withdrawal, and exclusion, and erasure of which Black women and other radical and revolutionary forces have been fighting against, literally for centuries. But I think it flatters an idea of "European values" to think that the problem of race and racism and white supremacy isn't an American problem, and whenever anyone talks about race in a European context, they're just importing American race politics.

[00:30:32.460] - Akwugo Emejulu

I'm here to tell you that Europe murders Black people in jails and prisons, as I will keep saying and will keep reminding people that literally the borders remain close to African students fleeing Ukraine to this day. Borders are still closed to them. And so this also tells us about what European values are. I think we have to be honest about not valorising these ideas because once you walk away from valorising these ideas, these European values of democracy, and freedom of expression, and all the rest of it, then you can see more clearly those people who are drowning in the Mediterranean, those people who are drowning in the English Channel. You also see then more clearly the kinds of activism that has always been there in order to resist these kinds of border regimes, and also to resist these kinds of hideous exclusionary politics, all done in the name of Europe.

[00:31:33.930] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Is it surprising that sometimes it's people who identify as left wing, progressive, liberal, even feminists who push back the most against that, and just don't really see the points of Black women having a voice, bringing their activism and ideas to the table, and changing them also?

[00:32:00.070] - Akwugo Emejulu

Well I will say, this why the archive is so important, and protecting and preserving the archive, but also adding and expanding the archive is so important. Because once you understand that this is one of the main sources of conflict within radical spaces, it doesn't make it any better, especially when you're experiencing it. But at least you know that you're not crazy and that all of your feminist, Black feminist foremothers also went through the same problem of trying to get ostensible radical and revolutionary

white allies, particularly white feminists, to work together. This is an ongoing issue and problem.

[00:32:49.580] - Akwugo Emejulu

I've been studying women of colour's activism for 15 years. The problem of solidarity between different racial and ethnic groups is the stalking horse of my research. I've yet to do a project where people don't throw their hands up in frustration and exhaustion to say, "I cannot get these revolutionary, radical white folks to take race seriously."

[00:33:16.740] - Akwugo Emejulu

What we know is, and because this what our foremothers had to deal with as well, is that there's a sense that race and to a certain degree, gender and sexuality, are superfluous to the movement. These are the old communists, the old school socialists, who say, "When you talk about race, and to a certain degree, when you talk about gender and sexuality, you're splitting the movement. You're splitting the workers because it's all that matters and your relationship to the means of production."

[00:33:46.170] - Akwugo Emejulu

That's not wrong, but also, it does matter in terms of your relationship to the means of production are also determined by your race, your gender, your sexuality, and your disability. Give me a break. When we're talking about feminists, there are a lot of feminists who are absolutely resistant to thinking of themselves white feminists, to thinking of themselves as racialised because they think of themselves as beyond or without race and their politics beyond and without race. The only people that race really attaches to or has meaning for are Black and Brown folks. Our job is to say, "No, no, no, even if you don't talk about race, race is still here."

[00:34:31.920] - Akwugo Emejulu

I was asked to give a talk for the First Minister's National Advisory Council for Women and Girls, and I said this. People were very resistant. They nodded, but you could see that they were very resistant to taking that on board.

[00:34:45.160] - Akwugo Emejulu

That's the struggle where lots of well-meaning people say they want to work in solidarity, but the reality is they don't want to confront some uncomfortable truths about the nature of their politics.

[00:34:58.840] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Yeah. It's a very awkward conversation to have sometimes in the activist circles, in feminist organisations, it's not always easy, so I completely relate to what you've just said. Now, I want to talk about you as an academic with an interest in race, gender, and class.

[00:35:17.920] - Assa Samaké-Roman

I don't know if you realise this, but if you were teaching at the French university at the moment, you'd probably be canceled by the government. You have two people in government who are none other than those in charge of education and higher education who have been very publicly attacking professors of humanities and social sciences and accusing them of Islamo-leftism, whatever that means.

[00:35:48.200] - Assa Samaké-Roman

They would call you an activist academic, which in their view, is very, very wrong because they say you can't study something while being part of it or having a very active interest in it. Do you feel there is a contradiction between being an academic and activism? Do you think academic work and activism should be kept strictly separate?

[00:36:12.100] - Akwugo Emejulu

Well, I'll first say that, to be honest, I have colleagues who have said that to me in the past. Whilst it absolutely is, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say a witch hunt that's happening in French academia, but then also, you see this in other spaces as well, this idea of these anti-feminist, and anti-gender, and illiberal forces targeting particularly feminist academics and anti-racist academics. Do you see that and spreading across Europe?

[00:36:44.770] - Akwugo Emejulu

I do wonder, we'll see how long this government, as in the government at Westminster, lasts, because we can see traces of that forming at the moment. But is there a difference? Well, I guess if we go back to the old idea that the personal is political, the old feminist idea that the personal is political, then look, I'm not really prepared to have this long conversation about this. I am in my academic position, and I have these particular interests because, first of all, it's super interesting, but more importantly, no one, for the most part, is interested in studying these movements.

[00:37:25.590] - Akwugo Emejulu

I'm not saying there's some great people, Vanessa Thompson in Germany, there are folks all over who are doing great stuff. But one would think, I'm just saying, that feminist political scientists and feminist sociologists across Europe would be interested in these kinds of mobilisations, particularly in light of the massive protests, the Black Lives Matter protests, that we saw, not just across America, but across Europe, talking about the very particular deaths in custody in various European countries.

[00:37:56.420] - Akwugo Emejulu

The fact that we do not see a lot of people studying this tells us that even in this moment, where I'm sure many of our participants went to one of these demonstrations or protests. Even when people are participating in this are still not seen as real knowledge or knowledge worthy of close, careful academic study. I just reject that.

[00:38:20.930] - Akwugo Emejulu

I guess you're never going to get from me some long justification of what I'm doing. It's like, look, I'm doing it. If you don't like it, please go away from me. You know what I mean? It's like, "Sorry." And the idea that one should be alienated from the thing that you study is super old school and I don't really have a lot of time for that.

[00:38:40.610] - Akwugo Emejulu

What gets me up in the morning is hoping that I'm making a difference with my students,. But then also in the research that I'm doing that I'm hoping to leave a legacy so that the people who come after me, that it's easier for them to exist in academia and do work that challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions within academia.

[00:39:07.400] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Before we open the session to questions from people attending, I wanted to end on a more, let's say, artistic inspiring notes. Doing my research for this event, I found that you made a playlist a few years ago of songs that remind you of the protests for Black lives. I was wondering if you had songs that spring to mind when you think about Black women's activism, more particularly, and activism in Europe.

[00:39:38.560] - Akwugo Emejulu

Oh my God, man, I wish I'd gotten this question in advance. But you've actually done something really terrible because I'm now going to maybe bombard you with various playlists I have. You actually dug your own grave here, I'm sorry. Because now, you're going to be spammed with music from me because I'm a super nerd when it comes to this stuff.

[00:39:59.120] - Akwugo Emejulu

I think a couple of things that pop in my mind: *Mississippi Goddam* by Nina Simone, *Young, Gifted, and Black* by Aretha Franklin. Oh, gosh. Some stuff by Solange, I think. But her voice is really mmm - but people love her for whatever reason. It's fine. It's fine.

[00:40:20.750] - Akwugo Emejulu

I'm just trying to think. I'm trying to think who have I been listening to recently? And does it have a little feminist bent to it. No, I think a lot of what I've been listening to recently probably is not appropriate. I think people will be shocked I've been listening to it. I don't know if I can out myself for some of this stuff that I'm listening to, but it's not really politically correct. So I'm really sorry.

[00:40:40.870] - Assa Samaké-Roman  
It's fine.

[00:40:42.870] - Akwugo Emejulu  
Is it fine? Okay.

[00:40:43.870] - Assa Samaké-Roman  
It is. It is.

[00:40:44.580] - Akwugo Emejulu  
Okay, because it's a lot of trap music and I have bunch of other stuff, which if you're really listening carefully to the lyrics, you're like, "This really problematic." But anyway, that's another story.

[00:40:54.260] - Assa Samaké-Roman  
How important is creative expression and art in shaping our imagination and understanding ourselves and the world? This something that you have witnessed in Europe, Black women doing activism through the medium of art and creativity.

[00:41:14.160] - Akwugo Emejulu  
For sure. Look, let's take it back to the old communist phrase, "We want bread and roses." I think that's what's so important about this, that it's not just about survival. We want beauty, and art, and music, and all of these kinds of things.

[00:41:30.280] - Akwugo Emejulu  
I don't know if I've studied a Black feminist activist network, where folks don't have some artistic... They themselves or artists or have some artistic expression that they do. You know, I'm just so inspired - so [inaudible 00:41:44] collective that are in Paris that I'm sure you know very well. Before demos, they have these sign making parties, where they get people together and they make the sign. Their signs are always very evocative, always great. It's this moment of joy, and solidarity, and this community building before the protests, which could go one way or the other, depending on what the police are like that day, right. You always have these moments of pause and critical reflection that happen through the process of making something creative, which I just think is so important, I think, and too often overlooked when we're thinking about activism.

[00:42:26.340] - Assa Samaké-Roman  
Yeah, exactly, and that was going to be my next question. Often, we oppose different kinds of activism as if you had proper activism being in the streets under the rain, and in the wind, handing leaflets to people, knocking on doors, demonstrating, going on strikes. Obviously, this activism as we know it. But sometimes if anything else, is either superfluous or futile. What are your thoughts about this?

[00:42:56.340] - Akwugo Emejulu  
Well, that's actually really interesting because that has been not problem for me, that's been something I always want to push back on within academic circles. Because when we think about social movements and activism, we oftentimes are thinking about those spectacular displays on the streets, right. But of course, first of all, that ignores all of the hidden, unsexy, boring, but actually essential work that happens behind the scenes that makes it possible for people to be out on the streets, right.

[00:43:32.370] - Akwugo Emejulu  
The people who are doing all of those undercover, we call it care work within these movements, most likely women, who are making the tea, doing printing for those flyers, keeping the WhatsApp group going, and maintaining your Instagram page, all that boring drudgery is activism, but it's hidden and it's devalued. That's really important.

[00:43:56.840] - Akwugo Emejulu

But also, I've always maintained that we have to have a broader idea of what activism is that includes issues to do with mutual aid, self-help, self-advocacy because that oftentimes is not considered real activism. But in fact, that's where you find the vast majority of Black women and women of colour who don't think of themselves as activists, but are doing the essential work of helping their community survive. That oftentimes is never thought of as activism. But in fact, that is crucial. I just think that's crucial, whether that's lots of English language classes, food bank stuff, all of these kinds of things are activism. Just so folks know, as a result, I have a very broad idea of activism. People joining together who are doing interesting things in public space. That's my definition because that's the only way that you can capture the spectrum of activity that Black women are involved in. Especially when, for the most part, they will not necessarily name themselves or identify themselves as activists. That's really important to understand.

[00:45:07.520] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Finally, what do you think the future holds for the Black feminist movement in Europe and where does post-Brexit Britain fit into this?

[00:45:16.920] - Akwugo Emejulu

Oh, gosh. Well, your guess is as good as mine. Who knows? I want to try to be optimistic. Things aren't looking great for Europe at the moment and folks will be resisting and doing their thing. I want to be optimistic, but things aren't looking great for anybody. Who can say?

[00:45:35.950] - Akwugo Emejulu

I think regardless of the catastrophe or the disaster, there will be people there to do what the state won't do, and do what fellow citizens won't do, which is protect the despised and disrespected others. To be honest, Black feminists have always been doing that. I assume they will carry on doing so.

[00:45:56.950] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Thank you very much. I see one question from someone attending who is asking you, I would be interested to hear about political Black feminism in 2022. What does it mean for people like me who are South Asian and have grown up with political Black feminism?

[00:46:17.900] - Akwugo Emejulu

The perennial question in the British context of political Blackness. It's funny, I guess. I don't know who this person is, but it's very interesting because there's been a decisive shift away from talking about political Blackness. I think that's probably right because think the idea of people claiming Blackness, but not being people of African descent is deeply problematic.

[00:46:45.770] - Akwugo Emejulu

I think it's possible to say we don't need a concept such as political Blackness because really what people are trying to get at are the particular kinds of social conditions, particularly in the '60s, '70s, and '80s in Britain, where the shared experience and the shared identity of being a post-colonial subject is what I think people are getting at when they want to evoke an idea of political Blackness. You're trying to get at a sense of solidarity between different kinds of people of colour. Look, get with it. I'm all about that. I organise these events on Black feminism and the politics of women of colour in Europe in order to bring together different kinds of women of colour in Europe. I got a lot of flack for it from some Black feminists who said, this should be for Black women only. I said, I've been in Scotland for 20 years.

[00:47:45.720] - Akwugo Emejulu

And you know, Scotland, there aren't a lot of Black folks here. What you see in activist spaces is the very thing that you're talking about, the sense of solidarity between different kinds of people of colour and different kinds of women of colour coming together to organise. I wanted to honour the tradition that I have been living in for a while.

[00:48:06.110] - Akwugo Emejulu

So whilst I don't think it's helpful or useful because also what it does is just mean you're arguing of people about political Blackness, when really what you want to do is have a conversation about

solidarity because there are lots of shared experiences of being a person of colour in a European context. I would just say, why do we need this term anymore? But what we can say, what we can hold on to is that sense of solidarity. I think that's what's important.

[00:48:34.260] - Assa Samaké-Roman

We have a second question, loving listening to this discussion of creativity and resistance, we know that Black creators are kept from jobs, roles, showcases, et cetera, particularly Black women. How can we better equip unions to support Black women, often freelancers with specifically equality and diversity-based exclusion?

[00:48:56.190] - Akwugo Emejulu

Well, the first thing is not to rely on the unions to do those things. The unions have been notoriously terrible on these issues. I would say that part of the job is how do you bring together these freelancers into an organisation, group, or network in order to more effectively collectively bargain for their interests? Then hopefully, you can approach the union as a group and to pressurise them to take up your interests and concerns.

[00:49:32.180] - Akwugo Emejulu

For me, it's one of those things, where the unions, particularly in the British context, have a terrible track record on all of these issues. And so these guys are not, mostly guys, these guys are not going to be in your corner automatically, despite what they say. They have to be pressurised just like the rest of these cultural institutions who thrive on the precarious labour of creatives.

[00:49:56.740] - Akwugo Emejulu

Just to give an example, it's not the same, but my good friends and colleagues, Lucy McEachan and Catriona Duffy, who are the co-directors of Panel, which is a feminist curation studio, they've been working with makers in order for makers who are disrespected and precarious creative workers who don't have a lot of status, they've been working with makers to help bring them together to put pressure, both on the Scottish Government, as well as Creative Scotland, for them to get recognition, but then also for them to get specific funding streams because you have all the other creative arts have their own streams and recognition, but you don't have that for makers.

[00:50:42.060] - Akwugo Emejulu

I think that's a really interesting model to think about in terms of thinking about Black and women of colour precarious creative workers. I hope that answers your question.

[00:50:52.020] - Assa Samaké-Roman

Another question just popping on my window. Thanks for a brilliant discussion. I found what you're saying about Black women activism really important. As a white feminist organiser of things like union speaking and rep protests, events, et cetera, I'm always seeking to include Black women's voices. Is there a risk of imposing a particular version of activism by doing this?

[00:51:15.290] - Akwugo Emejulu

I don't think there is because it's one of those things, where if you're open... I suppose what I'll say is more often than not, what we see is that people will think that Black women and other women of colour who are active in public space, who are doing various things, but who are not doing activism, are somehow not really activists. I think the job is to be as open as possible and to reach out and try to connect with people who you think are doing really interesting work, and also who's not a maniac. Like, I don't know. I just feel like there's a standard of, are they nice and are they doing interesting stuff? Who cares whether they call themselves an activist. The question is, are they bringing people together to make some positive change? I think keeping an open mind about that is at least half the battle.

[00:52:12.080] - Akwugo Emejulu

Then I think that also avoids the problem of tokenism that you're looking for some Black woman's voice. What does that even mean, voice? Really what you want is someone's labour, their intellectual labour, their hard graft.

[00:52:27.520] - Akwugo Emejulu

And so the question is, how can you reach out to them in a way that's open, welcoming, inclusive, but then also ensuring that the thing that you want to achieve is actually in their interest, too? And the question is, do you have the ability to talk it out with that person to say, if that's not quite in their interest, can you change a wee bit so you can bring them on board and so you can work together?

[00:52:49.080] - Akwugo Emejulu

Really, it's just about flexibility on all sides here in order to build the solidarity necessary in order to go out and make change.

[00:53:09.270]

[Jingle]

[00:53:09.270] - Amanda Aitken

Thanks so much to Assa and to Akwugo for this incredible and engaging conversation. I was sad that I couldn't listen to it live, but I loved all the questions that came in after. And yeah, Akwugo leaving on a message of, if you just believe that the people who were putting on events or the people who are doing work, doing activism, if they're inviting Black women to engage with that, then as long as it's in the interest of Black women, as opposed to just being a voice because you want a Black voice there, that's truly believing that everyone's there for the same reason. If not, then how do you shift to make it so.

[00:53:51.020] - Alys Mumford

Yeah, I think it ties in. I feel like it's been a bit of a theme in the podcast episodes we've done lately, where we've been talking to Kirn about participation and lots of these themes about how do we do this properly, how do we make sure that feminism is working for and with everyone that it should be. Yeah, just a really great conversation.

[00:54:16.910] - Alys Mumford

We're not going to do our own recommendations on this episode because we want to just recommend finding out more about Assa and Akwugo's work so you can follow them on social media. Assa is @terfele—I may not be saying that right—T-E-R-F-E-L-E. Akwugo is @akwugoemejulu. That's A-K-W-U-G-O E-M-E-J-U-L-U, and we will put links to those in the show notes as well.

[00:54:42.060] - Alys Mumford

Of course, you should buy or borrow *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*. It's a really, really great book. It's quite short chapters, which I enjoy because my attention span is short. But basically, it's a range of interviews, or creative pieces, or essays, or letters between people from different countries in Europe and different folk working for Afrofeminism, Black feminism, and exploring.

[00:55:10.170] - Alys Mumford

Just a whole range of issues from natural hair through to racist traditions like to quote "Black Pete" in the Netherlands and the challenges that Black mothers particularly face in being the arbiter of those things within the family. Just a huge amount of food for thought. Really, really great book. Again, we'll put a link into the show notes for that and highly recommend.

[00:55:37.490] - Amanda Aitken

Thanks again to Assa, and to Akwugo, and to you listeners for listening and for coming to the event. Until next time, another episode soon. But until then, take care.

[00:55:52.970] - Amanda Aitken

*On the Engender* is hosted by Alys Mumford and produced by myself Amanda Aitken. The music featured throughout was written and performed by Bossy Love. To find out more about the work of Engender, head to Engender Scot or follow us on Twitter @EngenderScot, and be sure to click Subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss the next episode.