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Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins are supremely admirable, and the acceptable white faces of Australian feminism

Anger expressed by black women activists is seen as toxic, divisive and polarising

Grace Tame And Brittany Higgins. 'Loud Black women are considered rude and uncouth while angry white women herald a new frontier in feminism'.

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I've been thinking about Grace Tame a lot in the last few weeks.

Wondering how to talk about her with the admiration she deserves, while asking questions about why she in particular has become the face of modern Australian feminism when there are so many other women – Black women in particular – with so much to say and with so many difficult and heart-wrenching stories of their own.

Her response to journalists who published photos of her as a teenager goes some way towards explaining it – she is simply remarkable.

Still, there are deeper questions about the overwhelming sense that her anger is authentic and true and acceptable, when so often, the anger expressed by Black female activists is seen as toxic, divisive and polarising.

I have been wondering about the risks of revealing my private ambivalence about the place she and Brittany Higgins occupy in the national conversation because often white people don't like to hear hard things about how race functions in this society.

It is easy to be accused of making this about race, to be or to be dismissed – ironically for being angry – simply for broaching the topic. It is especially difficult when the entry point into the conversation is a woman who is so supremely admirable.

So perhaps, as a starting point, let me be clear that this is not about Grace Tame the person. I am interested in the place she occupies in the national conversation about women's anger.

In recent weeks, Tame's anger has spawned a thousand think pieces about respectability and rage. For much of her time as Australian of the Year, Tame referred to prime minister Scott Morrison primarily using his first name. It was designed to bring him down a notch and it was highly effective. Each time I watched her call him Scott, I wondered what might have happened had I done the same.

While I have been full of admiration, each time Tame has earned the spotlight for her acts, I have imagined the response if I had behaved that way, or if any number of Black and Indigenous women in the public domain had dared to do the same.

Tame has certainly had her critics, but her actions have sparked a national conversation that has been carried out with the kind of care I only wish was on hand when angry Black women are in the spotlight.

On the other hand, I have yet to see Black women's anger greeted with the same kind of public solidarity or sympathy. And yet, Black women have been expressing anger for years as they address racist police and education systems, as they try to create opportunities for themselves and face the double burden of sexism and racism.

Our anger is not seen as strategic, or tactical, or worthy of analysis. Instead, it is racialised, seen to spring from our "nature". Like so many negative emotions, anger is seen as an essentialised trait, part of the insidious racist idea that Black people "feel", while white people "think".

This was evident in the case of Tanya Day. Her family were confident, beautiful, and clear in their storytelling. And yet the country did not mobilise to end deaths in custody, nor did they mobilise to put an end to the wanton harassment of Aboriginal women in public spaces which so often leads to these deaths in custody.

To be sure, there was solid coverage of the case, but the anger of Tanya Day's family at the injustice of their treatment was not amplified in the same way in the media.

Instead, over the past year, I have watched the exaltation of angry white women who have finally understood the limits of respectability. I have watched as a narrative emerges of white women as fighters, as eloquent challengers of the status quo, as upholders of the feminist legacy with little to no reference to Black women who have been doing this for years. As with so many other issues, the racial double standard is stark.

To be sure, there are also costs to speaking out. I spoke with a friend the other day who was called intimidating and excluded from office socialising because she firmly told a co-worker to stop touching her hair every time they passed her desk. She wasn't angry, just irritated.

But her response was seen as aggressive, and she understood the contours of managing that perception. Speaking out made her a racial threat; the kind of problem this country is still not ready to deal with.

Her experience was a stark reminder that Black women have been expressing rage for years, and have often had to deal with the fallout of those expressions alone and without widespread support.

To be sure, Tame can't help that she is petite and blond. She has done nothing to exploit those attributes and has been clear and pointed in her critiques of patriarchy.

What is worth pointing out though, is that Tame's elevation to heroine status is indicative of a women's rights movement that can still only hear hard truths when they are delivered by white women.

Her ascendancy is also indicative of a media environment that creates darlings based on its own image of itself. Last year, Morrison's admission that his wife had asked him to consider Higgins' story through the eyes of a father sparked media outrage. I found it hypocritical.

Higgins and Tame's stories were well received for many reasons, but surely one of them is that for many journalists, Tame and Higgins are relatable.

Women journalists covering the Canberra beat know women like Higgins or consider themselves to have been proximate to her – smart, educated, ambitious and walking the halls of power. Women across the country hearing of Tame's story of grooming at a Christian school, find her relatable. They care – in part because yes, she reminds them of themselves and other women they know.

It is obvious that white women's anger follows racialized lines, and that the media follows the stories journalists can relate to. Angry white women herald a new frontier in feminism, while loud black women are considered rude and uncouth.

There is no denying the importance of Tame and Higgins's stories.

But it is just as important to question their centrality, to ask why their stories have so much traction when there are so many women whose fights for justice have been long and serious and just as compelling as those of Tame and Higgins.

There has been a lot of talk this year, of a reckoning; of Tame and Higgins as the faces of the future.

Some of these words have been hard to hear; not because I don't wish them to be true, but because of how tone deaf they are. There is most definitely a reckoning, but it is one that does not include covering the stories of angry Black women.

There is no reckoning for Australian women if the media and the public aren't able to listen and relate to the stories of Aboriginal women, women in hijab, women whose skin is far "too" dark, and women who live on the wrong side of town; who can't go to university and who will never report from parliament or file stories in newsrooms.

Black women in this country have always stood at the forefront of struggles for justice and equality.

From land claims to housing wars; from the fight for citizenship to environmental campaigns, the toughest activists, the most eloquent analysts and most fearsome critics are those who stand outside the circle of power; those who would never be invited to Canberra, those who have been raised in communities for which they have had to organise and fight and rage and keep strategic silences.

It's not just "nice" to include these "other" women in the public discourse; it's essential. This isn't a matter of patting Black women on the head and recognising their struggles.

It is about accepting that Black women have pioneered the landscape of courage.

Tame may be the acceptable face of rage, but everywhere you look there are Black women who continue to be punished for loudly wearing their anger.

A real reckoning might aim to fix that.

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