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Book Review Essay: Me Not You: The trouble with mainstream feminism

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Me Not You: The trouble with mainstream feminism.¹

Reviewed by Rachel Phillips²

At the time of writing this review, it is June 2020. The Black Lives Matter movement has seen a global reinvigoration due to the tragic murder of George Floyd. In the UK, there seems to be a genuine sea-change in the perception of racist police violence as a uniquely American problem. Despite the risk of COVID-19, thousands upon thousands of people gathered this month to protest the UK's complicity in American police violence as well as recognising the UK's own history of racism. Streets were renamed, statues of slave traders were torn down and books written by people of colour about racism and white privilege topped the Times Best Seller list. There has rightly been wide-spread criticism regarding social media 'black-outs' and 'anti-racist reading lists' representing the be-all and end-all of anti-racist action, or as Phipps puts it in a recent blog³, 'a pre-made panacea'. Despite this it is true that for many the process of deconstructing racism must begin with an awareness and critical understanding of individual racialised privilege.

Therefore, though Phipps could not have known at the time, her book *#Me, Not You* is a lens through which to understand the current activism protesting systems of racial capitalism. Examining 'political whiteness' – which is 'produced by the interaction between supremacy and victimhood' (Phipps 2020:6) – is an essential first step for many, with *#Me, Not You* offering an opportunity to be guided through the contextualisation and current anxieties of white feminism. Her discussions of carceral feminism and the concept of 'political whiteness' are integral to understanding and sustaining the current cultural moment. Through the author's explorations of these three issues – heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism – and with the understanding that 'sexual violence is a pivot' for these intersecting systems, politically white feminism is demonstrated as 'failing to interrogate two of the three' (2020:161). This book will particularly interest feminist scholars, as well as those in media studies more broadly, and those looking at forms of digital activism. It will also interest anyone who is invested in examining their own privilege; reckoning with how white feminism has historically marginalised and excluded already marginalised communities; understanding the intersections of harmful identity-based discrimination; and meaningfully decolonising the academy.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its use of language. Phipps never strays into the polemic, nor does she overcomplicate her argument with unnecessary jargon or examples. Instead, in an overt rejection of deliberately obscure, navel-gazing academic style, each chapter's subject matter is calmly delineated, each section flowing seamlessly into the next. Perhaps due to its linguistic accessibility, *#Me, Not You* needs to be considered in terms of its placement in both the scholarly and more mainstream literature. It can be read alongside texts such as *Living a Feminist Life* (Ahmed 2017) and *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Olufemi 2020) for readers who wish to further examine what anti-racist, anti-carceral, revolutionary feminism should look like.

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³ <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/articles/what-do-we-do-me-not-you/>

Equally, this book can and should be enjoyed alongside more 'mainstream' texts such as *Hood Feminism* (Kendall 2020) and *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge 2018). There are relatively few books that address the shortcomings of white feminism as directly as Phipps, but my hope is that the original interventions made in this book herald the start of sensitive scholarship in this area.

Despite the relevance of this text to the current political situation, it is not the #BlackLivesMatter movement that Alison Phipps takes as her central object of analysis, but rather the #MeToo movement. This is used as an event to understand many of the concepts Phipps delineates throughout this book – from colonial and carceral feminisms, to white feminine fragility, to the outrage economy. The book starts with an examination of *Gender in a Right-Moving World*, from the central standpoint that women have, and continue to be, treated as a commodity. She draws explicit links between the 'hoarding and defending [of] resources' and how men have historically asserted the right 'to 'take' and 'have' women while they grab, hoard and defend economic resources' at the same time as 'weaponis[ing] the idea of (white) 'women's safety' for the same political ends' (2020:21).

Leading from this, Phipps then examines the concept of *Political Whiteness* – where 'lost entitlement becomes victimisation' (2020:69). Two discussions in this chapter are particularly novel: firstly, her discussion of the use of water metaphors to describe the #MeToo movement, linking this to the idea of white women's tears being a powerful performative tool. Secondly, she examines the implications of the term 'sexual misconduct', noting that it does not reflect systemic abuses of power, but rather individual sexual behaviour. As ever, these discussions feed into the overall argument: pointing out that racially or sexually marginalised individuals are often automatically sexualised, Phipps notes that these individuals are likely to be at risk if the source of white tears is deemed to be individual sexual behaviour and moral panic ensues.

Drawing on this discussion of moral panic, Phipps devotes a whole chapter to *Feminists and the Far Right*. Here, she (with the help of Dzodan's 'settler-colonial mentality' perspective⁴) deftly links together trans-exclusionary feminism with colonial resource-hoarding and marginalisation of the Other. Although this chapter is quick to point out that trans-exclusionary radical feminists have shared stages with those keen to resurrect 'race science', the argument could benefit from more theoretical underpinning and examples – as it stands, this chapter feels a little disconnected from the rest of the book. Perhaps there could have been more explicit links with the previous chapter, *White Feminism as War Machine*, and the discussions of white women's rage.

This criticism aside, it is clear that years of activist work on sexual violence within universities has deeply informed *#Me, Not You*. Phipps notes that the propensity towards 'call out culture' and 'naming and shaming' leads to short-term institutional reputational damage, but often little by the way of concrete action to tackle and dismantle systems of sexual oppression. In her chapter that specifically examines #MeToo, as well as her chapter on *The Outrage Economy*, Phipps wryly notes that the personal is not only political, but increasingly economic: the trauma narratives of the (predominantly white) survivors of sexual violence carry enormous economic and cultural currency in the mediasphere. And increasingly, women are 'priced out' of this economy, if they are marginalised on the basis of their identity (2020:69).

Throughout, drawing on established Black feminist thought, Phipps frames the current industrial-prison complex and resultant carceral feminism as a fundamentally racist construct that sustains violence. One of the more compelling theories Phipps draws on is that of 'necropolitics'

⁴ Tweet posted at 9:49 a.m. on 4 February 2019.

(Mbembe 2011) – the political power to decide who deserves to live and die. She draws explicit links between the disruption of bodily boundaries experienced by those in the carceral system to those who are victims of sexual violence and calls for ‘alternative forms of accountability and governance that are not based on domination, hierarchy and control’ (Phipps 2020: 163).

So, what to do, then, when it has been established that violence cannot be ended by violence? What to do, when the available options for tackling sexual violence are violence at the hands of the media with little resultant systemic change, or fundamentally racist violence at the hands of the state? Phipps outlines in her introduction that her theoretical framework will not seem particularly novel to those who are well-versed in Black feminist thought or abolitionist theory. She also carefully positions herself and her motivations for writing her book, stating that her intent is not to be one of the ‘good white people’, performing a ‘whiteness that is anxious about itself’ (Ahmed 2004). Indeed, performative anxiety and activism is one of the subthemes running throughout the book, with Phipps borrowing from Ahmed again to end her work with a call to action in the form of seven critical questions white feminists must ask of themselves as they move towards an abolitionist mindset, and away from white feminism:

1. *What do I know?*
2. *Who am I speaking for?*
3. *Who benefits?*
4. *What are my motivations?*
5. *Who am I with?*
6. *Where are we going?*

Echoing the words of Audre Lorde, Phipps’s final question to the reader is:

7. *What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint on another woman’s face?*

It is this toolkit and especially this final question that we, as feminists, will have to reckon with as we address not only the fallout from the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but also the disproportionate impacts Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are experiencing as a result of COVID-19. Previously unimaginable borders are being drawn as a result of this crisis – between countries; cities; those with job security and those who have lost it; the young and old; between families and friends. Now more than ever, we need to develop and enact an intersectional feminist praxis – and *#Me, Not You* is one of the tools we will need to use.

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