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## Book Review Essay: White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind

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***Book Review Essay: White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind***<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Venell<sup>2</sup>

The term “white feminism” is not new. The cultural conversation has reached a point where “white feminism” is shorthand for an exclusionary strain of empowerment that centers the lives of affluent, white, cisgender, heterosexual women. In *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*, Koa Beck defines the concept of white feminism as an ideology, charts its historical formations, and discusses the strategies that maintain its dominance. Beck argues that “white feminism” is a persistent force shaping American feminism, not a recent turn. The book uses examples from the past but makes few new historical insights. Rather, Beck reframes stories to reveal the operations of white feminism. At weak points, the book skims existing literature in cultural studies, gender studies, and sociology, preserving the density of academic research without its depth by quoting extensively. At its best, Beck brings her established voice as a cultural critic to analyze corporate culture and white feminism at the executive level. In terms of impact, the book could re-educate practitioners of “white feminism,” and could be excerpted for use in introductory-level college courses. That is, if the book resists commodification and assimilation into hegemonic feminism.

*White Feminism* makes parallel arguments with several recent titles, namely those sharing a critique of white feminism and written for a wide audience. The similarity in titles with Mikki Kendall’s *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (2020) invites a comparison that cannot be ignored, but their contrasting perspectives makes all the difference, as I explain in the final section. Ruby Hamad’s *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color* (2020), also historicizes and analyzes cultural dynamics between white women and women of color. The latter text diverges from Beck’s exact characterization of white feminism as an ideology that likely, but not necessarily, extends from one’s racial identity. (Beck will argue that not all feminists who are white are *white feminists*.) Beck’s argument, particularly her analysis of women’s media and corporate culture, also intertwines with aspects of Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018) and Andi Zeisler’s *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (2016).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beck, K. (2021). Book Review Essay: *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*<sup>1</sup>. New York City, New York: Atria Books.

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<sup>3</sup> For readers who seek more history-oriented texts that focus foremost on people and movements excluded from white feminism, *A Black Women’s History of the United States* by Diana Ramey Berry, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, or Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History, Second Edition: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (2017) will offer more details to flesh out decades of social justice issues and activism that are alluded to, but largely exceed the scope of Beck’s argument.

In contrast with these titles are the mainstream white feminist texts with which *White Feminism* is also in conversation. Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) is cited throughout, and the concluding part of *White Feminism* enters the space of professional memoir/guidance, albeit in opposition to Sandberg's style of advice. Miki Agrawal's *Disrupt-Her: A Manifesto for the Modern Woman* (2019) also perpetuates the individualistic, self-optimizing trends that Beck evaluates. All of the aforementioned books were released through popular presses, and have a wider, quicker influence than the academic works Beck cites. Still, there is one, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018) by Catherine Rottenberg, that should be included as a peer text.

The title *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to the Influencers and Who They Leave Behind* suggests a stronger historical approach than the actual organization of Beck's argument. There are 21 chapters of varying lengths and research methods divided into three parts. Part I: "The History of White Feminism" delves into 20<sup>th</sup> century history, but the chapters in general do not seek to establish a chronological history of white feminism. Rather, Beck begins with the concept of white feminist ideology, and re-reads historical examples to reveal the borders of that ideology.

In one such example, what is traditionally read as racism within the suffrage movement is represented here as an early instance of white feminist strategy. In Chapter Three: "Separate but Unequal: How 'Feminism' Officially Became White," Beck describes Alice Paul's stance on the inclusion of African American women in the 1913 Washington Woman Suffrage Procession. Beck paraphrases general history, primarily citing secondary and tertiary sources: Paul, concerned about how the march would appear to other white people in newspapers, stayed silent despite queries from African American women's groups. In telling this story, Beck identifies silence as a perennial strategy of white feminists when asked who is included in their marches, campaigns, and magazines. Reframed here, it is not that those white, upper-middle class suffragettes were *not* practicing racism in attempting to discourage African American women's participation. For Beck, it is that they were *also* practicing what could be called white feminism in its earliest formation.

Beck references suffragettes throughout the text to remind readers how white feminism measures freedom against the rights and privileges of well-off white men (that is, aspirationally), and not in solidarity against the disenfranchisement and oppression shaping the lives of working class and non-white women. Because the goals of white feminism are set in a dynamic with white patriarchal wealth and power, they can change across history while maintaining the same distance from meaningful solidarity with other groups. This representation of white feminism thus allows Beck's chapters to range in their evidence, at times disjointedly, as they reference different time periods and different conflicts.

In effect, the wide-ranging examples of white feminism's exclusions in Part I serve to mark the limits of white feminist ideology. Put differently, they appear here in the service of delineating white feminism's boundaries. Following the story of the 1913 suffrage march, other issues raised in Chapter Three include the failure of the National Organization for Women (NOW) to defend African American family structures from criticisms launched by the Moynihan Report; NOW's indifference toward their own Women in Poverty task force over time; the current lack of mainstream awareness about sexual violence statistics among Native women in North America; and the insensitive use of "conquer" to describe goal-achievement in women's media today. In

each example, Beck argues that the narrow focus of white feminism prevents diverse inclusion in the movement, and shapes media attention of issues as they are framed through the experiences of white women. However, Beck pivots from example to example with such brief and straining transitions that the illustrations risk becoming interchangeable, each reduced to acting as a demonstration white feminism's damage. This pattern continues throughout the text, particularly in Part I. The personalities, committees, statistics, and justice movements that fall—or are pushed—outside the purview of white feminism are more instructive than their appearance here. Yet in order to sustain her critique, Beck compels the reader to focus again on the ideology that excludes rather than the myriad of subjects excluded. White feminism dominates and consumes popular attention. *White Feminism* mirrors that consuming ideology because Beck does not allow the reader to look away for long, even where her historical examples point toward the existence of more radical and inclusive alternatives.

After Beck introduces the restrictive scope and tactics of white feminism, she develops her critique of the more recent neoliberal turn in Part II: “White Feminism™: When the Movement Went Corporate.” In Part II, earlier mentions of women's consumerism and branding finally bear fruit in the author's discussion of capitalism. Additionally, Part II is stronger because the author's methods change. She gives her examples greater context, there are fewer invocations of disparate historical moments within a chapter, and, although her critique of neoliberal feminism does draw from academic work on the subject, Beck speaks from an insider's perspective on the twisted shape of feminism in contemporary corporate culture.

In order to accommodate a brief history of neoliberalism, Part II roughly covers the 1970s to 2021 (with occasional backward glances at the white suffragettes), but the emphasis is on popular culture in the past decade. Beck traces the rise of (white) feminism as a trend, defined broadly, claimed by many, and stripped of ideas that would disrupt the status quo. This form of popular feminism and its antecedents have been criticized under many names, each one a variation on liberal feminism *lite*: equality feminism, choice feminism, empowerment feminism, and, as Andi Zeisler adds in *We Were Feminists Once* (2016), “‘pop feminism,’ ‘feel-good feminism,’ and ‘white feminism.’”<sup>4</sup> For Beck, however, it is the apex of white feminism as an ideology, not just a moniker, and its practitioners have achieved a position of corporate control over the narrative. In the world of women's media, white, upper/middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual women define the representation and boundaries of proper feminism.

It is in this arena of women's media that Beck imparts her most original insights, likely because of her own background as a journalist and former editor for popular women's magazines. Her aggregate work experience and particular subject position as someone perceived to be white and straight, but who is neither has led to her occupying the very spaces where white feminism's boundaries are articulated and reinforced. She theorizes white feminism with a clear view of the machinery, detailing how her interview subjects and senior managers alike rely on shared language and strategies of redirection to claim a feminist (brand) identity while upholding policies that exclude and exploit marginalized genders, the working class, and people of color. In Chapter Fourteen, “Performing Feminism at a Desk,” Beck best explains how white feminism prioritizes

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<sup>4</sup> Zeisler, Andi. *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*. PublicAffairs, 2016. xiii.

power above rights, which renders the socioeconomic and political struggles of non-*white feminists* incoherent and irrelevant to feminism as they define it.

This prioritization of power over rights is true on a larger scale, as white feminism reaches beyond the corporate world and, indeed, the reach of the corporate world extends beyond the office building. In the increasingly corporatized language of popular culture, where each neoliberal individual has a brand identity, seeks to increase personal productivity, and works hard on their side hustle, a woman embarking on any capitalist project is seen as inherently feminist.<sup>5</sup> Within this misunderstanding of feminism, power is the goal, and money is power. If those equivalencies lack philosophical nuance, it is because capitalism glosses over complexity, not the author. Beck works through recent examples of corporate abuse of employees from economic exploitation to sexual harassment, arguing that there is a fundamental incongruity between capitalism and feminism (more broadly, human rights). When feminism is claimed as a brand strategy, the challenge for white feminism is to reconcile a public feminist face with corporate capitalist practices. As Beck illuminates, one deflective tactic of white feminism at the executive level is to explain exploitation and harassment as part of the process of rapid, impressive growth. Women occupying the real management positions (the kinds of positions to which *#GirlBoss* alludes) strategically align themselves with the structures of the company that make it profitable, not feminist, further institutionalizing white feminism while narrowing its scope to women in leadership.

The point at which Hillary Clinton was elected president would have become the culmination of white feminism within Beck's argument, but the reality of Donald Trump's election in 2016 shifts her critique toward the possible implosion of white feminist expansion. The Women's Marches of January 2017 stimulated political engagement, and opened conversations about inclusion and equity *within* feminist activism. Beck seizes this moment to begin Part III: "The Winds of Change." Although she keeps white feminism at the center of her analysis, she uses the final section to outline "pillars of change." At this point in the text, it is a relief to shift focus away from white feminism, which has co-opted nearly all discussions of feminism within the book as it has in mainstream media.

And yet, Beck's proposed pillars range from instructive to perplexing advice. There may be no action that is effective for both the people facing financial insecurity and the affluent white feminist executives. Still, Beck's suggestion that we use social media differently—and in a personally risky way—to disrupt how corporations view and can use the platform is not in line with the collective-power strategies of non-*white feminists* in Part I, or the anti-capitalist ethos of Part II, or the author's own critique of white feminism's hegemonic presence in those corporate-owned online spaces. Here again, the argument is strongest when Beck theorizes her own experience in the corporate world. She offers tangible examples for supporting employees from a senior position, and guidelines for employees trying to make changes in an organization. Beck refutes the trailblazer myth, the popular sentiment that one heroic woman can cut a path for others to follow, and advises employees to work to change policies that outlast them rather than seek individualized arrangements with management. What unites these examples is that they are best addressed to white feminists themselves, or fledgling white feminists who are growing disillusioned with corporate culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Beck 140.

Beck's conclusion is fitting if we imagine most readers of the book to be *white feminists*. She outlines the pillars of change, and, after revealing white feminism to be utterly lacking of sustainable feminist values, Beck explains that she cannot tell a reader the next step, just that the action must be collective. She does not propose looking into intersectionality, gender diversity, or socialism, for example, as areas to explore in the world outside white feminism. Against white feminist ideology, she writes, "the revolution will not be you alone,"<sup>6</sup> and urges readers to make their way beyond the borders of that ideology. It is a hopeful ending that is consistent with the rest of her argument.

As the latest in a line of critiques of neoliberal feminism and the operations of whiteness, this book does not stand out on its own. The personality of the author as a cultural critic who has honed a specific voice will likely distinguish the book more than the arguments she makes therein. For readers seeking more nuance in conversations about social justice, a detailed explanation of what it is not (white feminism) is helpful, but not a sustaining answer. This is not a problem inherent in the nature of criticism. Although Beck's characterizations of white feminism are thrilling at times when her evidence and insight are aligned and original, the overarching critique too often performs the same exclusions of white feminism by keeping it always in the center of the narrative. This approach starkly contrasts Kendall's *Hood Feminism* (2020), which quickly dispenses with the type of feminism it is not and devotes its pages to outlining what collective feminist activism could look like. The books complement each other, but *Hood Feminism* offers a richer overview of the movements that exceed such a narrow focus. Ideally, *White Feminism* will find a receptive audience, and the book will become a conduit to learning more about the transformative potential of feminist activism.

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<sup>6</sup> Beck 235.

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