

BOOK REVIEW

Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism

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What’s wrong with “mainstream feminism”? How does #MeToo sediment white, bourgeois, cisgender heteropatriarchy? These are the questions that propel Alison Phipps’s analysis of contemporary mainstream feminism in *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*. Thinking in the immediate wake of the viral #MeToo campaign in 2017 and the recent rise of the far right, Phipps considers how “mainstream feminism” in the Anglo-American context works in concert with the rise of the far right and the perpetuation of white supremacy. Phipps sets out to show how and when mainstream feminism bolsters ideologies and practices that harm the most vulnerable of women. It is clear that *Me, Not You* is a caution about the consequences of twenty-first-century white, bourgeois feminism—the kind bent on “leaning in,” the kind rooted in carceral responses to sexual violence, the kind built on trans-exclusion.

Of course, such a critical position is not new, and Phipps does not claim that it is. Rather, influenced by “the words and actions of Black feminists and other feminists of color, trans women and sex workers (and women who fit two or more of these categories)” that already show us the trouble with white bourgeois feminism, Phipps traces its latest manifestation in mainstream feminist movements against sexual violence (4). Such tracing is no small feat, and it makes the project ambitious. She attempts to weave together numerous events and moments in recent history, and the key discourses embedded within them, to expose how white supremacy, trans-exclusionary and anti-sex work “feminisms,” and the far right come to the fore in the era of #MeToo (not to be confused with the Me Too movement started by Tarana Burke). If there is one thing to be gleaned from *Me, Not You*, it’s that mainstream feminism works in dynamic ways to shore up systems of domination and relations of privilege and oppression. In many ways, Phipps is successful in exposing the trouble with mainstream feminism, but in some instances that I will discuss in what follows, a slower analysis and prolonged engagement would help develop the key claims of the book. It’s unlikely that *Me, Not You* will convince any “feminists” dedicated to trans-exclusion or anti-sex work politics, but other feminist readers in both the general public and in academic contexts are likely to appreciate the project. The theoretical import of the book can be found in the conceptual tools Phipps uses to describe and analyze mainstream feminism: the logic of “me, not you,” the economy of outrage, and the war machine. These conceptual tools will benefit interdisciplinary analysis on sexual violence, white supremacy, whiteness, feminist activism, and trans-exclusionary and anti-sex work feminisms.

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As a book about mainstream feminism, it is about “mostly Anglo-American public feminism” that includes the “popular feminism” or “the feminist ideas and politics that circulate on mainstream platforms,” as well as “institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism: the feminism that tends to dominate in universities, government bodies, private companies, and international NGOs” (5). Although comprising diverse actors and a disjointed movement, mainstream feminism matters and should be of concern, Phipps claims, because it “tends to set the agenda” for what counts as a feminist concern and who counts as the proper subject of feminism (5). The definitive feature of mainstream feminism is what Phipps calls political whiteness. After laying out the key motivations, terms, and aims in the “Introduction,” Phipps stages her account in six chapters, which each details different dimensions of the logic and habits of mainstream feminism. She concludes by directly addressing white feminists, insisting on the importance of examining how our own feminist habits may reproduce and enable the reactionary feminism that bolsters the far right and exclusionary politics.

In chapter 1, “Gender in a Right-Moving World,” Phipps contextualizes the theoretical aims of the book, showing how mainstream feminism and #MeToo in particular collide with conservative, far-right politics. She begins the first chapter with Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony to the US Senate Judiciary Committee, but Phipps’s primary interest in Ford’s testimony is not to draw attention to the way white heteropatriarchy operates to support and protect Brett Kavanaugh (although she reminds us this is undeniably a familiar example of “the right of powerful men to abuse women with impunity”) (13). Phipps considers another connection of concern for many feminists, the resonance of Ford’s testimony with that of Anita Hill, which happened twenty-seven years earlier. However, instead of highlighting the similarities between Ford and Hill, which white feminists may be quick to do, Phipps draws attention to the anti-Black racism operative in Hill’s treatment and the way Hill, “like many Black women before and after her . . . played a pivotal role in putting a key feminist issue on the agenda” (16). For Phipps, the Hill and Ford testimonies should be read as “book-ends” of an era defined not by increasing feminist awareness, but a time productive of “huge inequalities and insecurities” deeply related to gender and race, ultimately giving rise to a “new war on women” (16, 17). This new war on women, Phipps insists, is the consequence of the late stages of neoliberal capitalism wherein rising violence against women, especially women of color, manifests as a way to reassert white supremacy. There also emerges “the ongoing war on ‘gender ideology,’” which attacks gender studies and the so-called identity politics of feminism, anti-racism, LGBT activism, disability activism, and others, all of which threaten the gendered order of white, colonial, cisgender heteropatriarchy (21). The simultaneity of these wars amounts to a new form of defending and protecting racialized gender arrangements and traditional notions of white womanhood in particular. What is central to this defense, Phipps suggests, is a far-right weaponization of “the idea of ‘women’s safety’ against marginalized and hyper-exploited groups” (30).

It’s worth sitting with the details of this chapter as Phipps’s sense of political urgency about their effects often results in cruising too quickly through their connections. This isn’t to say she’s wrong, but rather to affirm her very point. There *is* indeed much going on now that should be understood as the latest materialization of the history and violence of white heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism. But Phipps occasionally states rather than explains her claims. She insists, for instance, “Right wing attacks on feminism and Gender Studies are a defence of the heterosexual nuclear family,” but she doesn’t explicitly unpack the charge. Rather, Phipps immediately turns to what the

attacks are also indicative of: racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, racial capitalism, and so forth. It's not that a sympathetic reader like myself is likely to disagree with Phipps, but to agree does require an understanding of *how* exactly these right-wing attacks do defend the heterosexual nuclear family. To be fair, though, Phipps is clear that her aim in this chapter is to frame the broader political context in which #MeToo operates, and it is evident that it is a complex and troubling landscape for mainstream feminism.

In chapters 2 and 3, Phipps accounts for the logic and grammar of mainstream feminism. Chapter 2, "Me, Not You," focuses on the racial politics of #MeToo. Phipps claims #MeToo is structured by a narcissistic logic wherein white women's concerns and voices, the "me," take precedence over and erase the voices and concerns of women of color, that is, the "not you." Of course, this is not a new phenomenon, and one well documented by Black feminists, but Phipps's attention to the "me, not you" logic will certainly be of interest for scholars thinking about the ways white women monopolize the politics of "speaking out" against sexual violence. In particular, the "me, not you" frame points out how it is that mainstream feminism relies on an isolated, narcissistic subject to continually recenter white women's victimization. Moreover, Phipps draws attention to how the feminist history of this logic, from its emergence in the "first wave" and persistence in the "second wave," entrenches a specific conception of rape and resistance in mainstream feminism. As Phipps accounts for it, in mainstream feminism, rape is taken to be a war against white women wherein the "key weapon was the penis," and the primary response is a carceral feminism that shores up colonial racism (44). This is a myopic view of rape and sexual violation, Phipps insists. It not only sidelines the experiences and resistance efforts of the most marginalized women, but it also sets up a paradigm of victimization where white women can only be victims and never perpetrators of oppression and violence. This logic of "me, not you" propels white women's voices and experiences to the forefront, and it is the grammar of political whiteness, or "the systematic privileging of bourgeois white women's wounds *at the expense of others*" that drives the racial logic of mainstream feminism (80).

In chapter 3, "Political Whiteness," Phipps considers how political whiteness infiltrates a whole host of narratives, shaping the mainstream understanding of sexual violence against women. At its core are three key grammar rules: "White feminists are 'everything'" (62), the white, narcissistic self is *the* wounded self (67–72), which sets up white womanhood as *the* imperiled feminist subject, and a white feminist "will to power" (76–81). For Phipps, these "rules" of political whiteness show that white women's victimhood is not mutually exclusive of white supremacy; in fact, on close examination, the rules reveal the very way white women's feminist reactions to sexual violence, even to their own experiences of sexual violence, "speak" the language of white supremacy. There is a grave political outcome to such speech: only white women get to weep and express outrage in public, and the dominant conversation remains "one between white women and white men, about who is more wounded and who is in more control" (80).

In these early chapters, Phipps insists on the importance of challenging the "white woman as pure victim" paradigm at the heart of #MeToo. She suggests it reveals a "political and emotional splitting: one can be a victim or a perpetrator, but one cannot be both" (81). She successfully shows that this splitting is a significant feature of the arsenal of political whiteness and mainstream feminism, but there's more to unpack here. For instance, it's unclear what Phipps means by perpetrator in this instance. What kinds of perpetrators are white feminists? How does Phipps understand the difference, if she believes there is one, between perpetrators of rape against women and

white feminists as perpetrators of white supremacy? Such conceptual clarity would better explain the kind of harm and violence Phipps is claiming white feminists enact. It's also surprising that she doesn't explicitly thematize mainstream feminism's complicity with the sexual violation of more marginalized persons, even though there are a few moments in the book where she gestures to it. Nevertheless, what is compelling about her insistence that a white, bourgeois woman can be a victim of rape and responsible for perpetuating gender-based oppression against more marginalized women is that it suggests the need for more nuanced discussions of the relation between gender, race, and rape and sexual violation with regard to survivor experience in particular. It shows the importance of sustained discussions in feminist scholarship on rape that discuss how whiteness operates in the aftermath of sexual violation and how whiteness shapes the experience of and public response to the trauma of rape.

If understanding the logic and grammar of mainstream feminism underscores the way whiteness structures and propels the popular feminist agenda, in chapter 4, "The Outrage Economy," Phipps accounts for the method used to achieve dominance: "the method of generating outrage" (83). For Phipps, mainstream feminism wields outrage in a reactionary way that either fails because it is merely performative, is a kind of investment capital to gain visibility, and is a way to "price out" the most marginalized women. The problem with such outrage is that it reifies dominant white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal logic. The claims Phipps makes here are not new, but her framing of the reactionary politics of mainstream feminism is a helpful way to understand how various expressions of outrage, and outrage at sexual violence in particular, work to solidify a reality of violence against the most marginalized women. Take, for instance, the way Phipps accounts for the outrage of trans-exclusionary feminism using "the experience of rape" to construct trans women as predatory and dangerous (103). The reason trans-exclusionary feminist outrage is effective in the public realm, Phipps suggests, is because it shores up "the threatened (white) femininity of the abuse survivor," which is the very image of womanhood that white-supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy must protect (103). The method of outrage thus creates an economy of "good women" and "bad women" that creates "feminism's own 'war on women,' where some women are subjected to poverty, violence, and prison in the name of defending other women's rights" (109). This war is precisely why Phipps wants us to think about mainstream feminism as a war machine. In chapter 5, "White Feminism as War Machine," Phipps suggests mainstream feminism's outrage is a misuse of anger and is best understood as a white rage that aims to socially, professionally, or physically kill individual men rather than restructure the status quo. For Phipps, mainstream feminist outrage enacts a will to power for privileged white women; it gives them "the opportunity—and drive—to seize some power for ourselves" (131) such that the mainstream feminist grab for power is bound up with the necropolitical logics of white supremacy. More concretely, mainstream feminism wages a war *for* white women, mobilizing "punitive state and institutional power," which positions the most marginalized women in the line of fire.

Phipps connects mainstream feminism to the far right precisely on this point that privileged women's rage and drive for power can turn the most marginalized groups into enemies. Chapter 6, "Feminists and the Far Right," considers the way mainstream feminism works in concert with the far right to wage war against transgender women and sex workers. Phipps captures the main claim of this chapter when she writes:

Trans-exclusionary and anti-sex work feminists represent peak political whiteness. They magnify mainstream feminist narcissism, not only centering themselves but

also acting as gatekeepers who withhold the designation of “woman” from others. . . . In the bourgeois mentality, neither the “unnatural” or the “unrespectable” woman can ever be a real woman. Instead, these women become the enemy. (151–52)

It’s no coincidence such “unnatural” and “unrespectable” women are the far right’s enemies too. To make sense of this connection and alliance between mainstream feminism and the far right, Phipps reminds us that we have to remember that both rely on the grammar of political whiteness and wage campaigns against sexual violence that reproduce white-supremacist, bourgeois, cisgender heteropatriarchy.

Me, Not You concludes with a “toolkit” of six questions for white feminists, as a way for us to keep ourselves and our feminist politics in check, and to help pursue and support an abolitionist feminism and dismantle our longstanding alliance with political whiteness. This concluding gesture is a reminder that the aim of Phipps’s project is not merely diagnostic. Her account of mainstream feminism is a call for white feminists to turn to ourselves, to consider how and when we have participated and continue to participate in political whiteness. The conclusion reminds the white feminist reader not to distance herself from the trouble with mainstream feminism, since it is white feminists who are most likely to have our voices and agendas centered in the public realm. Certainly, Phipps’s point is not that all white feminists work in ways to uphold carceral feminism or to support the far right, but she does suggest we should be wary of thinking we haven’t, won’t, or couldn’t.

Overall, there is a lot to commend in Phipps’s consideration of the contemporary politics and problems with mainstream (white) feminism. Phipps covers a lot of ground in this book, thinking at the intersection of gender, race, and class in relation to a multitude of political issues, popular discourses, and significant moments in contemporary public feminism. She also offers new conceptual tools that should prove helpful for scholars in addressing when and how race and gender collide in the twenty-first-century politics of sexual violence. Readers immersed in philosophical discussions of sexual violation may want Phipps to go further in an explicit discussion of how #MeToo conceptualizes the harm of rape, especially when she draws attention to its limited view of the key weapon of rape, though it is clear that Phipps’s main intention is political commentary, and the value of this shouldn’t be overlooked. Phipps makes a solid case for the ways that mainstream feminism today, in its aims to protect and secure the lives of girls and women, bolsters serious antifeminist commitments that harm the most marginalized and hyper-vulnerable. For Phipps, it’s “high time” we white feminists answer to this new manifestation of the legacy of white feminism (171).

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