



All About Women Festival: Q&A with Koa Beck

1. What prompted you to write *White Feminism*?

A lot of my own navigation of white feminism, I often took for granted; I often just thought about it as a professional skill set, particularly given the professional spaces I've navigated. But when I was EIC of Jezebel, I started speaking a lot more publicly as stipulated by my job. (This was in 2017 and early 2018, mid-#MeToo and coming off two years of Women's March.) When I sat on panels and was in public conversations, there would always be a young person who would raise their hand and ask me directly about "white feminism," specifically using that word. Usually, they would be describing running up against white feminist ideologies and practices with friends, colleagues, or family while attending events like Women's March or in engaging in "feminist" discussions with their peers. They tended to describe deeply personal dynamics and asked me for advice. What I always wanted to tell them (in a much longer format than I was allotted in a panel) was that, while personally hurtfully, there is a very long history of the exact dynamics they are describing. I wanted to take their personal circumstances and put them against a historical backdrop to broaden the understanding of white feminism and also what this approach to gender equality is based on.

My book is an attempt to do this.

2. How do you define White Feminism?

I define white feminism as a very specific approach and ideology towards achieving gender equality that pulls considerably from colonialism, imperialism, and some pieces of white supremacy as well in addition to labor exploitation. White feminism encourages advocates to accrue individual power, wealth, and

autonomy as markers of “feminism” and aspire to these practices to be seen in this movement. I find it can be practiced by anyone of any race, class, or gender.

3. The title of your book is bold, and some would say shocking. Could you give us some insight on the title of your book?

In my country, “white feminism” has been a very polarizing term (and it sounds like it is in yours too). I have found in my life that people either recognize the term and its dynamics immediately, or they get very defensive and uncomfortable by the term. I was adamant that “White Feminism” be the title for this work (and my editor agreed) to tap into this exact polarization. I also wanted to access both readerships: people who are familiar with the feeling of white feminism, and those who are on the other side, perpetuating it. While “white feminism” seems to be a term that has popped up a lot more in the US, I have found that there hasn’t been a prominent working definition as to what defines this ideology, what principals it is founded on, and why these strategies are fundamentally different from other movements. So even if you are a reader who intuitively knows what white feminism is, I want you to have a deeper understanding of this practice than just a flippant joke about Lena Dunham or *The Wing*. Similarly, if you’ve never considered white feminism in “feminist” spaces, or perhaps are one yourself, I want you to understand front to back how harmful this approach to gender equality has been to women and non-binary people.

4. Could you tell us about the process you took on writing the book?

I’m a deeply voracious reader and so a lot of texts, works, and books that have been formative to my own understanding of feminism and gender are cited here. In some ways, I feel like I have been unintentionally researching this book my entire life. But I was only able to accomplish the detailed, historical scope of this book after being awarded the Joan Shorenstein Fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School. Through that opportunity, I was able to take advantage of Harvard’s many, many archives (digital and physical) to look at socialist feminist texts, Black feminist texts, and also representations of feminism across many types of media. I was also able to analyze many of the strategic differences between white feminists and many other movements: industrial feminism, consumer activism, Black feminism, Chicano feminism, and more. Very intentionally, I wanted to cite these movements to demonstrate white feminism’s ideological weaknesses, and also the enduring reasons so many immigrant women, queer advocates, working-class women, and women of color have broken away from white feminism or founded entirely different movements altogether.

5. In the process of research for your book, was there an aspect of history that stood out to you the most?

Prior to doing the research of this book, I interpreted many commodified attempts at feminism, like branded tote bags, t-shirts, key chains, mugs, etc, as a very new sanitization of radical feminist politics. I learned this is completely untrue: white feminists in the US basically did the same thing in the 1900s by advocating suffrage pins, flags, hats, luggage tags, ornaments, as well as an official suffrage blouse and “womanalls.” Partnering with consumerism to convey the urgency of feminist politics has always been an enduring strategy in white feminism.

6. What has the response been towards your book? Has this surprised you?

It has been uniformly positive, which has been surprising to me. I did anticipate much more antagonism when presenting this ideology and the avenues by which we have facilitated “feminism.” I’ve also received lots of positive reader responses from both people who have identified as white feminists and see both themselves and their politics reflected in the book, as well as women of color, queer women, and fat activists who say they have a greater understanding of why they have eschewed certain “feminist” spaces.

7. In your book you talk about moving towards a different movement of feminism, what course do you hope this takes?

I hope this book incentivizes many to reconsider their feminist consciousness from a place of basic need, rather than lofty educational opportunities, elite experiences, and business enterprise. I also hope readers end this book encouraged to think more collectively in how they challenge patriarchy, rather than defaulting to white feminist credos of hyper individualization.