In November 2017 the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, representing 700,000 female farmworkers and women in farmworker families across the US, wrote a letter of solidarity to the Hollywood women at the centre of #MeToo. ‘We do not work under bright stage lights or on the big screen’, the letter said. ‘We work in the shadows of society in isolated fields and packinghouses that are out of sight and out of mind.’ Nevertheless, it continued, ‘we believe and stand with you’. The question left unasked, taken up in discussions in the days that followed, was ‘will you believe and stand with us?’

This question inspired the Time’s Up initiative, a legal defence fund to help women in all industries fight sexual harassment. The first meeting was held at the home of actor Jessica Chastain – other white actors involved included Reese Witherspoon, Natalie Portman, Nicole Kidman, Amber Tamblyn, Jennifer Aniston and Margot Robbie. But women of colour were also at the forefront from the start. The founders of Time’s Up included National Women’s Law Center
Me, not you

president Fatima Goss Graves, producer Shonda Rhimes, actors Rashida Jones, America Ferrara, Eva Longoria, Lena Waithe and Kerry Washington, and director Ava DuVernay. Its first CEO was the former Atlanta city councilwoman and WNBA president Lisa Borders. In 2018 Time’s Up awarded $750,000 in grants to 18 organisations across the US supporting low-wage workers.

The profile of women of colour in such a mainstream initiative made Time’s Up a departure from the norm. Nevertheless, it was criticised for being an ‘exclusive club’ and concentrating too much on white celebrities. It was also accused of using activists of colour as window dressing: for instance, at the 2018 Golden Globes, when eight white Hollywood stars each took an activist (including #MeToo founder Tarana Burke and Alianza Nacional de Campesinas president Mónica Ramírez) as their ‘plus ones’. Time’s Up occupies a complex position in a feminist mainstream dominated by white and privileged women. Even when women of colour are in leadership roles, the pull of whiteness is strong.

This is the trouble with mainstream feminism, encapsulated in the title of my book: ‘Me, Not You’. This is, of course, a play on #MeToo. The #MeToo movement, started as a programme of work by Black feminist and civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, went viral as a hashtag eleven years later after a tweet by white actor Alyssa Milano. And mainstream movements such as #MeToo have often built on and
Introduction

co-opted the work of women of colour, while refusing to learn from them or centre their concerns. Far too often the message is not ‘Me, Too’ but ‘Me, Not You’. And, as I will write, this is not just a lack of solidarity. Privileged white women also sacrifice more marginalised people to achieve our aims, or even define them as enemies when they get in our way.

#MeToo is a movement about sexual violence, most of which is perpetrated by cisgender men. This book is also about violence – especially the violence we can do in the name of fighting sexual violence. When I say ‘we’, I mainly mean white women and white feminists. This book is addressed to my fellow white feminists; although it is dedicated to Black feminists, they will not need to read it.¹ For feminists of colour, the arguments I make here will probably be nothing new (and I hope this book will help ease the burden of constantly having to explain whiteness to white women).²

The ‘Me’ in the book’s title also refers to me, a white feminist writing about white feminism. Some of the views I write about I have previously held; some of the dynamics I write about I have participated in myself (and might again in future, despite my best intentions). I am ambivalent about writing about whiteness: I am concerned, as some readers might also be, that in critiquing whiteness from within, I am trying to absolve myself of my own. I am worried that I am trying to be one of the ‘good white people’, who perform what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed calls a ‘whiteness that is anxious about itself’ and see that as anti-racist action.³
And deep down, that might be the case. Whiteness is wily: white supremacy is so embedded in our psyches that we end up doing it even while we claim (and believe) it is what we oppose. You are entitled – even invited – to make up your own minds about my motivations. But regardless of why you think I have written it, I hope you find something in this book of value. And if not, I am happy to be told I am wrong: knowledge is always partial, and we learn through dialogue with one another.

My analysis of mainstream feminism comes from fifteen years of research on, and activism around, sexual violence. I am a white academic in this field, with all the privileges that entails. But my experience of it has been ambivalent and complex. I experience class anxiety in academia. My politics tend to differ from those of many other scholars and activists in my area, as well as (in other ways) from those of my family of origin. I am what Sara Ahmed would call a ‘willful child’: I do not fit in. I am also a queer woman with non-paradigm experiences of sexual trauma. To understand all these things, I have repeatedly turned to the words and actions of Black feminists and other feminists of colour, trans women and sex workers (and women who fit two or more of these categories). Their ideas are what Ahmed would call my feminist bricks – it has been my privilege to spread some mortar between them.
Introduction

**What is ‘mainstream feminism’?**

This is a book about mainstream feminism. And by this, I mean mostly Anglo-American public feminism. This includes media feminism (and some forms of social media feminism) or what media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has called ‘popular feminism’: the feminist ideas and politics that circulate on mainstream platforms. It also includes institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism: the feminism that tends to dominate in universities, government bodies, private companies and international NGOs. This is not a cohesive and unified movement, but it has clear directions and effects. In other texts, it has been called ‘neoliberal feminism’, ‘lean-in’ feminism and ‘feminism for the 1%’. This is because it wants power within the existing system, rather than an end to the status quo.

Mainstream feminism, exemplified by campaigns such as #MeToo, tends to set the agenda for parliamentary politics, institutional reform and corporate equality work. It tends to be highly visible internationally, because Western media forms are dominant across the globe. This profile and influence are the reasons why it is important to critique. But this mainstream movement is by no means the whole of feminist politics. I am aware that defining ‘feminism’ as white and privileged risks (re)constituting it as such, and I do not want to erase the fundamental contributions of feminists of colour. A founding assumption of this book is that the
mainstream Anglo-American movement is often taken to represent feminism, when in fact it does not.

White and privileged women dominate mainstream feminism. These demographics shape the movement’s politics, but are perhaps partially hidden by monikers such as ‘neoliberal feminism’, ‘popular feminism’ and the rest. In contrast, this book centres race, giving an additional reading of the movement at a time when white supremacy is being violently reasserted. There is already increasing discussion of ‘white feminism’, used to denote a feminism that ignores the ideas and struggles of women of colour. This book is based on the concept of political whiteness, which describes a set of values, orientations and behaviours that go deeper than that. These include narcissism, alertness to threat and an accompanying will to power. And perhaps most crucially, they characterise mainstream feminism and other politics dominated by privileged white people. They link movements such as #MeToo with the backlashes against them. And they link more reactionary forms of white feminism with the far right.

Political whiteness tends to be visibly enacted by privileged white people (but can cross class boundaries), and can also be enacted by people of colour because it describes a relationship to white supremacist systems rather than an identity per se. It is produced by the interaction between supremacy and victimhood: the latter includes the genuine victimisation at the centre of #MeToo and similar movements, and the imagined
Introduction

victimhood of misogynist, racist and other reactionary politics. I am not denying that mainstream feminism is rooted in real experiences of oppression and trauma. I am not saying that these experiences do not deserve to be taken seriously. But I am asking: how are these experiences politicised, and what do they do?

Sexual violence in the intersections

My analysis of mainstream feminism is grounded in the principle of intersectionality. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and other Black feminist scholars, this refers to the complex relationships that make up our social world – relationships between categories such as race, class and gender, and between the associated oppressions of racism, classism and sexism. These are produced by intersecting systems: heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism.

Patriarchy refers to the domination of women by men. This pre-dates capitalism (at least in the West), but capitalism embedded it by separating production and reproduction and making women responsible for the latter. Capitalism relies on social reproduction – creation of and care for human life – but doesn’t want to foot the bill. Historically, white bourgeois homemakers were confined, unpaid, to the private sphere. Working women have been (and are) over-represented in the low-status and low-paid caring professions which also reproduce human life. And even if they are family breadwinners, women perform the bulk of domestic
Me, not you

labour with little or no help from capital. Because we are seen as hardwired to care, as sociologist Maria Mies argues, our labour is exploited as if it is a ‘natural’ resource. Women’s work is not viewed as real work: it exists in the realm of ‘love’, not money. This is how capitalist patriarchy constructs gender.

Capitalist patriarchy is heteropatriarchy: it relies on the heterosexual nuclear family as an economic and reproductive unit. And as capitalism began to expand from the fifteenth century onwards, European colonialism and settler-colonialism exported this model of social organisation into most of the world. Common lands were subdivided into family plots; colonised people were defined as ‘less-than-human’ because they did not conform to the bourgeois nuclear family and its gendered separation of roles. Capitalism also was and is racial capitalism. It is built on the appropriation of Indigenous lands, enslavement of populations, and the ongoing exploitation of people of colour (women especially) as ‘expendable’ units of production and both biological and social reproduction.

Racial capitalism does not just create inequality based on categories such as class, race, gender, disability, age and nation – it relies on it. To maintain a stratified system, to ensure that the economically privileged can monopolise resources, some people must be relegated to marginalised economic or reproductive roles. Others must be placed outside the system completely – stripped of their humanity, to be dispossessed and eventually done away with.
Introduction

Violence against women is a pivot for the intersecting systems of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism. It results from the tussle for material and emotional resources, between commodity production and the reproduction of human life. Men’s domination of women, essential to social reproduction, is achieved through violence and the threat of it: at home, in the workplace and on the streets. Racial capitalist development relied on forced reproduction via the rape of enslaved women, and coerced reproduction via the expectation that women in general would create and care for the workforce. The ‘primitive accumulation’ of racial capitalism violently dispossessed women of land, resources and power to put them under men’s control, making them more vulnerable to violence (and this continues in neo-colonial contexts). Sexual violence is a form of terrorism that supports economic expansion. It kept (and keeps) conquered, enslaved and dispossessed populations in line.

But terror can also be generated through maiming and killing men of colour and impoverished white men accused of raping bourgeois white women. And it is this fact that mainstream feminist movements tend to minimise or forget. In colonial Australia, rape was a ‘violation of female purity’ punishable by death – politicians insisted that this was necessary to keep both Indigenous men and ‘disreputable’ white men under control. The story of the ‘white woman of Gippsland’, said to have been held against her will by Kurnai people in the 1840s, justified further brutalisation and
dispossession of Indigenous Australian communities that had already been brutalised and dispossessed. Following Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, white Americans used lynchings to terrorise and control free Black people. Rape of a white woman was one of the most common pretexts. And murder could escalate to massacre. In 1921 between 100 and 300 Black people in Greenwood, Tulsa, were killed by white mobs in a matter of hours after a Black man was falsely accused of raping a white woman in an elevator.

A key premise of this book is that acts, threats and allegations of sexual violence are all tools of oppression. Sexual violence is terror; so is the way it is tackled and policed. And (white) ‘women’s safety’ is used to justify violence against marginalised communities. This is a challenge for mainstream feminist movements against sexual violence, which are dominated by bourgeois white women.

This leads to the other key premise of this book: being a victim and being a perpetrator are not mutually exclusive. Bourgeois white women can be victims of sexual violence, but we are also perpetrators of race and class supremacy. Supremacy is expressed in the ‘care chains’ through which we exploit poorer women, often migrants and women of colour, to do the labour of social reproduction while we do more lucrative work. And it is expressed in the violence done in the name of ‘protecting’ us from violence, legitimating the hyper-exploitation and genocide of communities of colour.
Introduction

White women’s ‘protection’ is also at the forefront in a world moving rapidly to the right. ‘White power’, in the form of ideological fascism, border regimes and hoarding of resources, is being reasserted in response to economic and ecological crisis. And the difficult and painful questions this raises for mainstream feminism are at the heart of this book. While I do not hope or pretend to answer all of them, I hope this text might be a companion for other white women who, like me, are interested in doing their feminism differently. If that is you, please read on.