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HOOD FEMINISM

Notes From The Women White Feminists Forgot.

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Mikki Kendall

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MIKKI KENDALL is a *New York Times*-bestselling writer, speaker, and blogger whose work has appeared in publications including the *Washington Post, Boston Globe, Guardian, Time, Salon, Ebony, Essence*. An accomplished public speaker, she has discussed race, feminism, violence in Chicago, tech, pop culture, and social media on *The Daily Show,* MSNBC, NPR, Al Jazeera's The Listening Post, BBC's Woman's Hour, and Huff Post Live, as well as at universities across the US. In 2017, she was awarded Best Food Essay from the Association of Food Journalists for her essay on hot sauce, Jim Crow, and Beyoncé. She is also the author of *Amazons, Abolitionists, and Activists: A Graphic History of Women's Fight for Their Rights* and a co-editor of the Locus-nominated anthology *Hidden Youth,* as well as a part of the Hugo-nominated team of editors at Fireside Magazine. A veteran, she lives in Chicago with her family.

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For the hood that gave me the tools.

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INTRODUCTION

My grandmother would not have described herself as a feminist. Born in 1924, after white women won the right to vote, but raised in the height of Jim Crow America, she did not think of white women as allies or sisters. She held firmly to her belief in certain gender roles, and had no patience for debates over whether women should work when that conversation arose after World War II. She always worked, like her foremothers before her, and when my grandfather wanted her to stop working outside their home, and let him be the primary breadwinner, well, that seemed like the most logical thing in the world to her. Because she was tired, and working at home to care for their children was no different to her from working outside the home. To her mind, all women had to work. It was just a question of how much, and where you were doing it. Besides, like a lot of women of that era, she had her own creative and sometimes less than legal ways of making money from home, and she utilized them all as the need arose.

She mandated education for her four daughters, who gave her six grandchildren between them, and for any number of cousins, friends, and neighborhood children around, the mandate was the same. Her answer to almost everything was "Go to school." It never occurred to any of us that dropping out was an option, because not only was her wrath to be feared, her wisdom was always respected. High school was mandatory, some college strongly encouraged, and your gender didn't matter a bit. As with work, education was something she believed everyone needed to have, and she didn't much care how you got it, or how far you went, as long as you could take care of you.

My grandmother remains—despite her futile efforts to make me more ladylike—one of the most feminist women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing, and yet she would never have carried that label. Because so much of what feminists had to say of her time was laden with racist and classist assumptions about women like her, she focused on what she could control and was openly disdainful of a lot of feminist rhetoric. But she lived her feminism, and her priorities were in line with womanist views on individual and community health.

She taught me that being able to survive, to take care of myself and those I loved, was arguably more important than being concerned with respectability. Feminism as defined by the priorities of white women hinged on the availability of cheap labor in the home from women of color. Going into a white woman's kitchen did nothing to help other women. Those jobs had always been available, always paid poorly, always been dangerous. Freedom was not to be found in doing the same labor with a

thin veneer of access to opportunities that would most likely never come. A better deal for white women could not be, would not be, the road to freedom for Black women.

She taught me to be critical of any ideology that claimed to know best if those espousing it didn't listen to me about what I wanted, much less needed. She taught me distrust. What progressives who ignore history don't understand is that just like racism is taught, so is distrust. Especially in households like mine, where parents and grandparents who had lived through Jim Crow, COINTELPRO, Reaganomics, and the "war on drugs" talked to their children early and often about how to stay out of trouble. When the cops harassed you, but didn't bother to actually protect and serve when violence broke out between neighbors, lectures from outsiders on what was wrong with our culture and community weren't what was needed. What we needed was the economic and racial privilege we lacked to be put to work to protect us. Being skeptical of those who promise they care but do nothing to help those who are marginalized is a life skill that can serve you well when your identity makes you a target. There's no magic shield in being middle class that can completely insulate you from the consequences of being in a body that's already been criminalized for existing.

There's probably some value in being seen as a good girl. In being someone who values fitting in and embracing the status quo. There are rewards, however minor, for those who value being seen as that middle-class model of respectable with no inconvenient rough edges. I've never found my way there, so I won't pretend to be able to detail the value, or to judge those who

can fit into that mold. I've just accepted that I never will, that I'll probably never even want to cut away the parts of me that protrude in the wrong directions. I like not living up to the expectations of people who don't like me. I enjoy knowing that my choices won't be acceptable to everyone. My feminism doesn't center on those who are comfortable with the status quo because ultimately that road can never lead to equity for girls like me.

When I was a kid I thought there must be some way I could perform being good, perform being ladylike to the point of being safe from sexism, racism, and other violence. After all, my grandmother was so determined to make it stick, it had to mean something. What I discovered was that it offered me absolutely no protection, that people took it as a sign of weakness, and that if I wanted to do more than survive, I had to be able to fight back. Good girls were dainty and quiet and never got their clothes dirty, while bad girls yelled, fought, and could make someone regret hurting them even if they couldn't always stop it. Trying to be good was boring, frustrating, and at times actively hurtful to my own well-being.

Learning to defend myself, to be willing to take the risks of being a bad girl, was a process with a steep learning curve. But like with so many other things, I learned how to stand up even when other people were certain I should be content to sit down. Being good at being bad has been scary, fun, rewarding, and ultimately probably the only path that I was ever meant to walk. I learned that being a problem child meant I could be an adult who went her own way and got things done, because I am not so focused on pleasing other people at my own expense. My

grandmother was wise for her time, but not necessarily the best judge of what I needed to do. She embraced middle-class ideas of being ladylike because for her that was a path to relative safety. For me, it just left me unprepared, and I had to learn on the fly from my community how to navigate the world outside the bubble she tried to create for me. I am not ashamed of where I came from; the hood taught me that feminism isn't just academic theory. It isn't a matter of saying the right words at the right time. Feminism is the work that you do, and the people you do it for who matter more than anything else.

Critiques of mainstream feminism tend to get more attention when they come from outside, but the reality is that the internal conflicts are how feminism grows and becomes more effective. One of the biggest issues with mainstream feminist writing has been the way the idea of what constitutes a feminist issue is framed. We rarely talk about basic needs as a feminist issue. Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues. Instead of a framework that focuses on helping women get basic needs met, all too often the focus is not on survival but on increasing privilege. For a movement that is meant to represent all women, it often centers on those who already have most of their needs met.

As with most, if not all, marginalized women who function as feminist actors in their community even when they don't use the terminology, my feminism is rooted in an awareness of how race and gender and class all affect my ability to be educated, receive medical care, gain and keep employment, as well as how those things can sway authority figures in their treatment of me.

Whether it's a memory of the white summer camp teacher who refused to believe that my vocabulary allowed me to know words like *sentient* or the microaggressions that I experience in my day-to-day life, I know that being a Black girl from the South Side of Chicago makes people assume certain things about me. The same is true of anyone who exists outside an artificial "norm" of middle class, white, straight, slim, able-bodied, etc. We all have to engage with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be, and that makes the idealized feminism that focuses on the concerns of those with the most the province of the privileged.

This experience does not mean that I think of myself or anyone else as being so strong that human feelings need not apply. I am a strong person; I am a flawed person. What I am not is superhuman. Nor am I a Strong Black Woman™. No one can live up to the standards set by racist stereotypes like this that position Black women as so strong they don't need help, protection, care, or concern. Such stereotypes leave little to no room for real Black women with real problems. In fact, even the most "positive" tropes about women of color are harmful precisely because they dehumanize us and erase the damage that can be done to us by those who might mean well, but whose actions show that they don't actually respect us or our right to self-determine what happens on our behalf.

I'm a feminist. Mostly. I'm an asshole. Mostly. I say these things because they are true, and in doing so, the fact that I am not nice is often brought up. And it's true: I'm not really a nice person. I am (at times) a kind person. But nice? Nope. Not unless I'm dealing with people I love, the elderly, or small children.

What's the difference? I am always willing to help someone in need, whether I know them or not. But niceness is more than helping; it is stopping to listen, to connect, to be gentle with your words. I reserve nice for people who are nice to me or for those who I know need it because of their circumstances.

There are people in feminist circles who are nice, who are diplomatic, with soothing ways and the warm personality that enables them to put up with other people's shit without complaining. They have their lane, and for the most part I think they handle things well. But my lane is different. I'm the feminist people call when being sweet isn't enough, when saying things kindly, repeatedly, is not working. I'm the feminist who walks into a meeting and says, "Hey, you're fucking up and here's how," and nice feminists feign shock at my harsh words. They soothe hurt feelings, tell people they understand exactly why my words upset them, and then when the inevitable question of "She hurt our feelings, but she has a point—how do we fix things so that we don't harm a coworker, community, the company again?" comes up, the same nice feminist voices say the same things they had been trying and failing to convince people of before.

Only now people can hear them, because my yelling made folks pull their heads out of the sand. After the pearl-clutching about my meanness passes, what's left is the realization that they have wronged someone, that they have not been as good, as helpful, as generous as they needed to think they were all along. That's the point of this book. It's not going to be a comfortable read, but it is going to be an opportunity to learn for those who are willing to do the hard work. It's not meant to be easy to read,

nor is it a statement that major issues facing marginalized communities cannot be fixed—but no problem like racism, misogynoir, or homophobia ever went away because everyone ignored it. I don't and won't pretend to have all the answers. What I do have is a deep desire to move the conversation about solidarity and the feminist movement in a direction that recognizes that an intersectional approach to feminism is key to improving relationships between communities of women, so that some measure of true solidarity can happen. Erasure is not equality, least of all in a movement that draws much of its strength from the claim that it represents over half of the world's population.

I learned feminism outside the academy first. You could almost see the ivory tower from my porch, but while reaching it was supposed to be a goal, there was minimal interaction from the students and staff at the University of Chicago with the residents of my neighborhood, Hyde Park. For all practical purposes, between the university warning students away from engaging with the neighborhood and the lack of information about how someone could even begin to access the opportunities that the university offered to people who weren't us, the ivory tower might as well have been the moon. Getting a job as a caregiver, as a custodian, or in a dining facility was relatively transparent, but as for accessing anything else? There was no clear path. The feminism at the University of Chicago on offer to the low-income Black women living in the neighborhood might as well have been a scene from ***The Help***. The idea that we might have greater aspirations than to serve the needs of those born into a higher socioeconomic level didn't seem to be more than a fleeting thought for

most; for a very few who were committed to a sense of equity, access came with the price of respectability. It was like getting the proverbial Golden Ticket of Willy Wonka fame, only the odds were probably better at the Chocolate Factory.

Hyde Park has gone through a lot of changes, for the better in terms of services as the population grows, and financially for the worse as gentrification means the housing prices are going up and pushing out the very people who need those services the most. Resources for residents are pouring in as many long-term residents are being forced out. Currently, the university is slightly more welcoming to locals, but is still primarily interested in being accessible to those who are (or aspire to be) middle class or wealthy. I don't know how the new Hyde Park will engage with the locals who remain the working poor, but so far all signs point to heavier policing and a complete lack of interest in maintaining the area as mixed race and mixed income.

These days, although Postcollege Me is welcome and has, in fact, spoken several times at the University of Chicago, I doubt that the girl I was would be able to even see the ivory tower, because gentrification would have forced me so far away from this beautiful area. It wasn't until I went to college at the University of Illinois that I really engaged with feminist texts as things that were meant to provide guidance and not simply to be part of the same literary canon as all the other books in the library that reflected a world I had not been able to access. There were some exceptions, but so many feminist texts were clearly written about girls like me, instead of *by* girls like me. By the time I reached a place to engage with feminism versus womanism—the former

being paying more lip service than actual service to equality, the latter being closer but still not inclusive enough of people who were engaged in sex work, in vice, as a way to pay the bills and as a way of life—neither felt like they fit me or my goals completely. Girls like me seemed to be the object of the conversations and not full participants, because we were a problem to be solved, not people in our own right.

This book is about the health of the community as a whole, with a specific focus on supporting the most vulnerable members. It will focus largely on the experiences of the marginalized, and address the issues faced by most women, instead of the issues that only concern a few—as has been the common practice of feminists to date—because tackling those larger issues is key to equality for all women.

This book will explain how poor women struggling to put food on the table, people in inner cities fighting to keep schools open, and rural populations fighting for the most basic of choices about their bodies are feminist concerns, and should be centered in this movement. I will delve into why, even when these issues are covered, the focus is rarely on those most severely impacted. For example, when we talk about rape culture the focus is often on potential date rape of suburban teens, not the higher rates of sexual assault and abuse faced by Indigenous American and Alaskan women. Assault of sex workers, cis and trans, is completely obscured because they aren't the "right" kind of victims. Feminism in the hood is for everyone, because everyone needs it.

SOLIDARITY IS STILL FOR WHITE WOMEN

As debates over last names, body hair, and the best way to be a CEO have taken center stage in the discourse surrounding modern feminism, it's not difficult to see why some would be questioning the legitimacy of a women's movement that serves only the narrow interests of middle- and upper-class white women. While the problems facing marginalized women have only increased in intensity, somehow food insecurity, education, and health care—beyond the most basic of reproductive needs—are rarely touted as feminist issues. It is past time to make the conversation a nuanced, inclusive, and intersectional one that reflects the concerns of all women, not just a privileged few.

In 2013, when I started #solidarityisforwhitewomen, by which I meant mainstream feminist calls for solidarity centered on not only the concerns but the comfort of white middle-class women at the expense of other women, many white feminists claimed it

was divisive and called it infighting, instead of recognizing that the problem was real and could not solve itself. They argued that the way to fix feminism wasn't by airing its proverbial dirty laundry in public. Yet, since its inception, mainstream feminism has been insisting that some women have to wait longer for equality, that once one group (usually white women) achieves equality then that opens the way for all other women. But when it comes right down to it, mainstream white feminism often fails to show up for women of color. While white feminism can lean in, can prioritize the CEO level at work, it fails to show up when Black women are not being hired because of their names or fired for hairstyles. It's silent when schools discriminate against girls of color. Whether it is the centering of white women even when women of color are most likely to be at risk, or the complete erasure of issues most likely to impact those who are not white, white feminism tends to forget that a movement that claims to be for all women has to engage with the obstacles women who are not white face.

Trans women are often derided or erased, while prominent feminist voices parrot the words of conservative bigots, framing womanhood as biological and determined at birth instead of as a fluid and often arbitrary social construct. Trans women of color, who are among the most likely targets of violence, see statistics that reflect their reality co-opted to bolster the idea that all women are facing the same level of danger. Yet support from mainstream white feminists for the issues that directly impact trans women has been at best minimal, and often nonexistent. From things as basic as access to public bathrooms to job pro-

tection, there's a dearth of mainstream white feminist voices speaking out against trans-exclusionary policies and laws. A one-size-fits-all approach to feminism is damaging, because it alienates the very people it is supposed to serve, without ever managing to support them. For women of color, the expectation that we prioritize gender over race, that we treat the patriarchy as something that gives all men the same power, leaves many of us feeling isolated.

When the obstacles you face vary by race and class, then so too do your priorities. After all, for women who are struggling to keep themselves housed, fed, and clothed, it's not a question of working hard enough. They are leaning in, but not in search of equal pay or "having it all"; their quest for equal pay starts with equal access to education and opportunity. They need feminism to recognize that everything that affects women is a feminist issue, whether it be food insecurity or access to transit, schools, or a living wage. Does that mean that every feminist has to be at every event, know every detail of every struggle? No.

It does, however, mean that the language surrounding whatever issues feminists choose to focus on should reflect an understanding of how the issue's impact varies for women in different socioeconomic positions. The conversation around work, for instance, should recognize that for many people, needing to work to survive is a fact of life. We can't let respectability politics (that is, an attempt by marginalized groups to internally police members so that they fall in line with the dominant culture's norms) create an idea that only some women are worthy of respect or protection. Respectability narratives discourage us from

addressing the needs of sex workers, incarcerated women, or anyone else who has had to face hard life choices. No woman has to be respectable to be valuable. We can't demand that people work in order to live, then demand that they be respected only if they do work that doesn't challenge outdated ideas around women's right to control their bodies. Too often mainstream feminism embraces an idea that women must follow a work path prescribed by cisgender white men in order for their labor to matter. But everyone, from a person who needs care to a stay-at-home parent to a sex worker, matters and deserves to be respected whether they are in their home or in an office.

This tendency to assume that all women are experiencing the same struggles has led us to a place where reproductive health imagery centers on cisgender able-bodied women to the exclusion of those who are trans, intersex, or otherwise inhabiting bodies that don't fit the narrow idea that genitalia dictates gender. You can have no uterus and still be a woman, after all. Employment equality statistics project the idea that all women make seventy-seven cents to a man's dollar when the reality is that white women make that much, and women of color make less than white women. Affirmative action complaints (including those filed by white women) hinge on the idea that people of color are getting the most benefit when the reality is that white women benefit the most from affirmative action policies. The sad reality is that while white women are an oppressed group, they still wield more power than any other group of women—including the power to oppress both men and women of color.

The myth of the Strong Black Woman has made it so that

white women can tell themselves that it is okay to expect us to wait to be equal with them, because they need it more. The fact that Black women are supposedly tougher than white women means that we are built to face abuse and ignorance, and that our need for care or concern is less pressing.

In general, white women are taught to think of whiteness as default, of race as something to ignore. Their failure to appreciate the way that race and other marginalization can impact someone is often borne out in popular media. Consider the hamfisted misstep of Lena Dunham's HBO show *Girls*, which featured an all-white cast of twentysomething women and men living in Brooklyn, New York, being heralded as a show for all young women despite its complete exclusion of women of color. Or, more recently, Dunham and Amy Schumer's cringe-inducing conversation about whether Odell Beckham Jr. was in the wrong for not expressing any interest, sexual or otherwise, in Dunham while they were seated at the same table at the Met Gala.

Somehow the fact that Beckham was absorbed in his phone meant that he was passing judgment on Dunham's attractiveness, and not that his mind was simply elsewhere. Despite the fact that he never said a negative word, he was dragged into their personal narrative in part because of the unspoken assumption that he owed a white woman who wanted it his attention. Now, I don't expect Dunham or Schumer or feminists like them to listen to Black women or other WOC. It's not an innate skill for white people, and for white feminists who are used to shutting out the voices of men, it can be especially difficult to hear that they have the power to oppress a man. But that doesn't

change the history of Black men being demonized or killed for expressing an interest in white women. Nor does it change the negative impact that a white woman's tears can still have not only on a Black man's career, but on his life. The fact that Dunham apologized and that she didn't mean to do harm is pretty much meaningless. The harm was done, and her casual racist assumptions still meant Beckham spent days in the news cycle for imaginary body shaming.

When white feminism ignores history, ignores that the tears of white women have the power to get Black people killed while insisting that all women are on the same side, it doesn't solve anything. Look at Carolyn Bryant, who lied about Emmett Till whistling at her in 1955. Despite knowing who had killed him, and that he was innocent of even the casual disrespect she had claimed, she carried on with the lie for another fifty years after his lynching and death. Though her family says she regretted it for the rest of her life, she still sat on the truth for decades and helped his murderers walk free. How does feminism reconcile itself to that kind of wound between groups without addressing the racism that caused it?

There's nothing feminist about having so many resources at your fingertips and choosing to be ignorant. Nothing empowering or enlightening in deciding that intent trumps impact. Especially when the consequences aren't going to be experienced by you, but will instead be experienced by someone from a marginalized community.

It's not at all helpful for some white feminists to make demands of women of color out of a one-sided idea of sisterhood

and call that solidarity. Sisterhood is a mutual relationship between equals. And as anyone with sisters can tell you, it's not uncommon for sisters to fight or to hurt each other's feelings. Family (whether biological or not) is supposed to support you. But that doesn't mean no one can ever tell you that you're wrong. Or that any form of critique is an attack. And yes, sometimes the words involved are harsh. But as adults, as people who are doing hard work, you cannot expect your feelings to be the center of someone else's struggle. In fact, the most realistic approach to solidarity is one that assumes that sometimes it simply isn't your turn to be the focus of the conversation.

When feminist rhetoric is rooted in biases like racism, ableism, transmisogyny, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, it automatically works against marginalized women and against any concept of solidarity. It's not enough to know that other women with different experiences exist; you must also understand that they have their own feminism formed by that experience. Whether it's an argument that women who wear the hijab must be "saved" from it, or reproductive-justice arguments that paint having a disabled baby as the worst possible outcome, the reality is that feminism can be marginalizing. If a liberation movement's own representatives are engaging with each other oppressively, then what progress can the movement make without fixing that internal problem?

Feminism cannot be about pitying women who didn't have access to the right schools or the same opportunities, or making them projects to be studied, or requiring them to be more respectable in order for them to be full participants in the