

Solidarity and Justice

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My first thought: what is ‘doing feminism’?

My next thought: ‘what is feminism’?

I suppose ‘doing feminism’ could indicate an orientation, a set of work that we undertake, an emotional connection, a way of thinking about the world and putting it into practice. Do I ‘do feminism’? I am unsure. I’m certain that I (try to) ‘do’ solidarity, and work towards justice and orient myself towards those others with whom I want to be in partnership. That I critique and question. That I try to enact a form of Jewishness—Jewish memory, history, politics, femininity and embodiment—that is beautiful and imaginative.

But in terms of how ‘feminism’ has developed in Australia, and particularly how it has developed in the last couple of years, I feel less and less attached to it, as a movement, or a way of defining and articulating what I do.

In a piece in the *Guardian* in March 2022, writer Sisonke Msimang wrote about the place that Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins have come to hold in the popular discussion, noting that ‘[w]hat is worth pointing out though, is that Tame’s elevation to heroine status is indicative of a women’s rights movement that can still only hear hard truths when they are delivered by white women. Her ascendancy is also indicative of a media environment that creates darlings based on its own image of itself’. She further wrote that it is ‘important to question their centrality, to ask why their stories have so much traction when there are so many women whose fights for justice have been long and serious and just as compelling as those of Tame and Higgins’.¹

1 Sisonke Msimang, ‘Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins are supremely admirable, and the acceptable white faces of Australian feminism’, *Guardian*, 7 March 2022, theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/07/grace-tame-and-brittany-higgins-are-supremely-admirable-and-the-acceptable-white-faces-of-australian-feminism.

Amy McQuire wrote in 2019 about the difference between the Black Witness and the White Witness. Starting from a description of the ways that white women—here, Kerri-Anne Kennerly—will centre themselves and their colonial worldview in order to dictate the terms through which Aboriginal lives should be understood and known, McQuire shows how colonial representations are a form of violence. They seek to dehistoricise and disconnect. On the contrary though, the Black Witness seeks to describe in order to connect and uplift:

We use this language to raise our young people and elders as resistance fighters and warriors in ways that do not victimise, but instead instil strength. Our communities are not ‘war zones’ of killing, but epicentres of survival. Our women are not helpless, but on the frontlines of battle, and our children are not the objects of neglect but the very reason for fighting in the first place. While the White Witness thrives on accounts of the brutalisation of black bodies, most commonly of black women and children, the Black Witness pushes these same black women to the forefront—they are the ones with the megaphones in the centre of the Melbourne CBD—in the very heart of white, respectable space.²

I have returned to this piece by McQuire a few times over the last couple of years, learning something new each time. If I am doing feminism, this is part of what it means to me: to return again and again to the words of First Nations people to learn what I can about different ways of seeing and knowing. To try to learn, as best I can, what anti-colonial thinking looks like. I want to ensure that I learn in an ethical mode that is never extractive. I hope this is what I do. I am unsure if I am successful.

For we know of course of the long history of white feminism in this country, of the ways that white women have located themselves at the centre, the way feminist movements have been an integral part of the broader colonial project. And we know that white feminist historians have been part of this problem too: that discussions of women’s histories have too often been merely discussions of white women’s histories, with Aboriginal women and non-white women relegated to a throwaway sentence or not present at all. This is a problem that persists today in our historiography.

2 Amy McQuire, ‘Black and white witness’, *Meanjin*, Winter 2019, meanjin.com.au/essays/black-and-white-witness/.

To do feminism, as a historian, in the year 2022 for me therefore is to try to not look towards those who are taking up the dominant hegemonic white spaces. So to do feminism, to write feminist history, is also to think deeply about what it means to be a Jewish historian—or a historian who thinks with and alongside some other Jews and some Jewish ways of knowing—in this time and this place, with connections around the world.

I write these words in May 2022, while the inquest into the murder of Gunditjmarra, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman Veronica Nelson at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in 2020 is taking place at the Coroner's Court, just down the road from where I am sitting. I have attended a few days of the hearing into her death in custody, following the call from Ms Nelson's family and from the staunch leaders who run the Dhadjowa Foundation, sitting in solidarity and support of Ms Nelson's family and community.³ I send my love and respect to them. They are suffering a loss that is beyond what should be possible. Ms Nelson must be remembered as they describe her, 'a deeply spiritual woman, whose connection to her culture was incredibly important to her', 'a helper ... she would give whatever she could to those who needed it', 'Veronica was resilient and had a fighting spirit. Veronica had a big personality and a beautiful laugh. She made the world better for those around her and she was deeply loved'.⁴

If 'doing feminism in 2022' is to have any meaning for me, it is in the recognition of my place within this settler colony; my gratitude towards the Kulin Nation for hosting this granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and stateless refugees on their Country; my deep respect to First Nations peoples for their continuous fight, generosity, knowledge, insights and world-making; my rage and grief at the ongoing murder and dispossession at the heart of this settler-colony; my commitment to turn up when needed; my certainty that studying and writing history, that respecting our pasts and our memories, that learning from the wisdom of others, can be powerful forces in helping us create the futures we dream of.

3 See *The Dhadjowa Foundation*, dhadjowa.com.au/.

4 'Veronica Marie Nelson: Inquest begins today', *VALS*, 26 April 2022, vals.org.au/veronica-marie-nelson-inquest-begins-today/.

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