

Emma Dabiri, *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Coalition*. London: Penguin, 2021. 157 pp.

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In her new book, Emma Dabiri aligns herself with writers like Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017), Ibrahim X. Kendi (2019) and Ijeoma Oluo (2019), along with other “black”, as well as “white” (see DiAngelo 2021), intellectuals in suggesting to those of us who often consider ourselves non-racialized people (but whom Dabiri more appropriately qualifies as “people racialized as ‘white’”) suitable lines of action to halt the injustice inherent to the current general understanding of the world under the rubric of “race.”

An academic and media professional, Dabiri is a “black” Irish woman, an experience which in her first book, the acclaimed *Don’t Touch My Hair* (2019), she said was akin “to hav[ing] almost unicorn status. Except everybody loves unicorns” (a perception bound to change in an increasingly multicultural Ireland, yet still painfully true as she explains in this current work). After the success of her first book she went on to publish *Twisted: The Tangled History of Black Hair Culture* (2020), and two years

later in this latest offering Dabiri continues to illustrate the black experience in its wide diversity. Her new work is entitled *What White People Can Do Next* because, as she states: “You are not responsible for what your ancestors did. You are, however, responsible for what you do” (91). In the manner of a compass, in this short yet highly pedagogical reflection, Dabiri succeeds in providing a few clues as to how to move forward in a complex world still deeply tamed by racial categories. Categories which, as she demonstrates, have much to do with capitalism and the need for certain elites to maintain their status and possibilities for wealth accumulation—as they have done for centuries. This scenario having begun at the time of the emergence of the label “race” coupled with that of “whiteness”—both of which she traces back to the early British colonies in Barbados and Virginia. Dabiri soon provides evidence that, as Toni Morrison (2019) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), among others, have previously pointed out, “race” is not the father, but rather the child of racism. It is for this reason, as stated above, that she takes the trouble to deconstruct “race” from its base, in order to show its constructedness, as well as its redundancy in today’s world.

Dabiri’s main point, reflected in her subtitle, is replacing the idea of allyship, which has gained currency in anti-racist circles—especially since the fatidic death of George Floyd and rise of the Black Lives Matter movement—with that of coalition. For all its alleged advantages, the idea of allyship, she feels, is insufficient and full of pitfalls: “‘Allyship’ being described as a ‘selfless act’ exacerbates the division, assuming a fundamental and immutable separateness between ‘different’ ‘races’, offering charity at the expense of solidarity” (14). This accounts for the bulk of Dabiri’s argument: that the notion of allyship needs to be challenged because it smacks of handouts, rather than of a genuine commonality that emphasizes socio-economic inequalities and systemic forms of oppression. Allyship, she claims, is too close to the dangerous trope of the white saviour, and the world has had enough of that. By contrast, she proposes invigorating the notion of coalition, whereby groups with different characteristics and interests come together in order to achieve superordinate goals. Coalitions will allow the identification of these common goals, such as the fight against racism. And racism, she is quick to note, is not an isolated plague that needs to be defeated, but rather it goes hand-in-hand with sexism, class privilege, homophobia and ecological problems, problems sustained by that series of binarisms which emerged and thrived under “white”, colonialist, imperialist, capitalist worldviews and dispositions. Today’s world, Dabiri reminds us, requires a full awareness of intersectionality, not only the intersectionality of identities, but also of “issues” (25): hence the need for

coalitions across all sectors. Coalition means, briefly, “seeking to unite and empower all disenfranchised groups” (16), and coalition building is “a vision wherein many people can see their interests identified and come together for a common good” (26). Dabiri provides examples, among them the actions of The Black Panthers in their time: promoting and accepting coalitions across various boundaries, among them “race,” because “in racially diverse contexts, such coalitions are often more destabilizing of the status quo than strictly segregated groups” (17). Thus, while Dabiri’s focus is on “race,” “whiteness” and racism, and she never loses sight of this, the political width of her discourse reaches further; an expanded horizon which is both pertinent and refreshing.

One important point she makes is to denounce social media platforms where political action is diluted rather than stimulated. Many of us will certainly feel satisfied with voicing therein our dissatisfaction (pun intended) or our complicity with the state of affairs, with specific events or with concrete ideas, and this, she insists, is exactly what deflates our energy to act in the real world. Furthermore, Dabiri warns of the perils of identity politics when, rather than producing palpable change, it isolates people in their own identity havens, reminding us repeatedly that intersectionality (again, both in terms of identities and of issues) needs to be put at the forefront. This is a strategy that has stood the test of time since, for instance, “the underpinning framework of black liberation was more inspired by revolutionary socialism and international anti-imperialist solidarity than the debased form of online identity politics that we see today” (143). Identities, she insists, need to be perceived as what they are: fluid and contingent. This is a universal statement, yet it is worthy of particular emphasis when it comes to the way “black” identities are perceived and represented, particularly vis-a-vis “white” ones. To this end, “Stop reducing black people to one dimension” is one of the principal exhortations of her text, though not the only one.

This is because the problem is that we know what we don’t want, but we do not really know how to achieve what we do want. We need an actual plan of action, conceived under the banner of coalition and not allyship, and where the sense of mutuality replaces charity (148). Each of the thirteen brief chapters of Dabiri’s essay moves in the direction of achieving this end. She commends us to: stop the denial of racism and the false equivalences between forms of oppression which bear different levels of stress; systematically interrogate both “whiteness” and capitalism; leave behind and denounce the white saviour syndrome—abandoning our guilt insomuch as it risks hindering action—as well as pull people up on racism (systemic and institutional changes being urgently necessary, but alongside a personal commitment at the most basic

level, such as speaking out against racist jokes); educate ourselves with respect to racism and forms of oppression by reading the right intellectual writers (Baldwin, Davis, Fanon and many others are kindly invited into her text), but also by paying attention to the *fugitive* forms of music, culture and art made by black people “who refuse to accept what has been refused” (64) to them (“*fugitivity*,” she explains quoting Stephano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), “is the radical counterpoint to inclusivity within the dominant framework of oppression,” (quoted in Dabiri, 2021, 66)); redistribute resources (which does not simply mean giving up white privilege at a personal level but rather working in the right direction at institutional levels through civic actions like voting and, once again, forming coalitions); and, finally, “recognize that this shitting is killing you too” (127), meaning: the jargon and world divisions occasioned by “race” and “whiteness” not only demean non-“white” people, but also those of us who, to go back to the beginning of this review, “are racialized as ‘white’”—as well as the world at large.

This review is replete with inverted commas, and so it must be. Dabiri’s proposal is that we mark as “under erasure” all those pernicious categories which were introduced by the infamous world order we need to get rid of: the sooner the better for all. Thus, those of us interested in working towards this shared goal—briefly put: putting a halt to colonialist systems of thought and representation—need to be alert to the danger of reinforcing exactly those categories we are trying to erode and remove, something which often happens not only through the mere use of the labels of the old world order, but even when we are consciously trying to abate or undo them. The many useful suggestions provided by this book may be a good way to start putting in place, as Dabiri requests, a post-activism which takes the form of “an overarching politics of change” (150), focused against categories like “race” and “whiteness”, but also against other labels brought about by capitalist systems of oppression that spring from the fact that capitalism and “race” are close cousins, similar to other abhorrent binarisms. The danger or difficulty of this very necessary politics of change is, however, that it is “a form of politics which does not provide short-term gratification” (150). This may be so, but this should not—will not— stop us from trying.

There are still many answers to be found after reading *What Whites Can Do Next*, but importantly many crucial questions have been formulated in these brief disquisitions. An initial road ahead has been outlined; certainly it is just one among many, but it is one which seems promising. This is Dabiri’s motto: “We have to at least attempt to imagine outside and beyond the race logic inherited from a long-dead elite European men, and conceive other ways of dreaming, living and being” (142).

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