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"Harvesting our collective intelligence": Black British feminism in post-race times

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SYNOPSIS

At the heart of the contingent and critical project of black British feminism is the postcolonial impulse to chart counter-narratives and memories of racialised and gendered domination. This paper takes up this challenge by exploring the struggles of a new generation of black British feminists, 30 years after the landmark publication of Feminist Review's special issue *Many Voices One Chant* and the edited collection *Black British Feminism* which followed. The paper explores the changing articulation of black British feminism at a time where foundational categories such as 'blackness' as a political construct continue to have purchase but where new forms of activism are more fleeting and contingent in response to the changing post-racial terrain.

Introduction

This paper considers black British feminism against the context of the publication, 30 years ago, of Feminist Review's special issue *Many Voices One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives* (Amos et al., 1984). Interweaving my own autobiographical reflections with narratives of a new generation of black feminist thinkers and activists, this essay does not attempt a genealogy of black British feminism. Rather my aim is to trace the continuities as well as the emergence of new affiliations, entanglements and forms of activism under which the terms of black feminist engagements are being simultaneously re-awakened and reconstituted. At the recent Goldsmith's Black Feminist workshops and seminars[1] and the Cambridge conference, *A Vindication of the Rights of Black Women*,[2] I was struck by the continued desire for the articulation of a body of scholarship recognised as 'black British feminism' and the need for a place to call 'home'. At these events two generations of black feminists were elated at our coming together and the opportunity, as one young black woman declared, "to harvest our collective intelligence".

While I have long been consumed by the passionate desire to celebrate black feminist scholarship and the critical social justice project it embodies, the vulnerability of this movement I cherish was driven home to me in no uncertain terms. I organised a national seminar *Black Feminism and Postcolonial Paradigms* (Mirza & Joseph, 2010). While it was welcomed by many, one email from a young black woman stood out, she declared, "Thank you for organising this; I thought black feminism was dead!" I had to ask myself the question, has black feminism as a movement become fragmented, atomised and cut adrift in these post-race/post-feminism neoliberal times? Is black feminism, as Suki Ali (2009:81) provocatively asks, "past its sell by date?"

To answer this question we have to address the double problematic of the inter-relations between post-race and post-feminist sensibilities and how they are framing black British feminism today. In post-race times it is argued that in contrast to the 'colour line' that defined the 20th century, the embodiment of 'race' through skin colour is no longer an impediment to educational and economic opportunities (Kapoor, Kalra, & James, 2013). The election of Barack Obama and evidence of a rising black middle class in the USA and post imperial Europe has been hailed as signalling the coming of age of the post-race era (Goldberg, 2013; Lentin, 2012). The pernicious discourse of 'white hurt' that accompanies the 'multicultural backlash' of the post-race discourse sees equality for people of colour as an unfair advantage rooted in political correctness — and that those who are 'really discriminated' against are the displaced white majority (Gilroy, 2012). Post-feminism, post-race's sisterly

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discursive turn is also similarly framed by a vengeful patriarchal disavowal of gender injustices. The high-visibility 'have it all' tropes of freedom and equality now attached to this generation of young women is taken as evidence that feminism as a movement is now irrelevant, and should, like a 'bad memory', just fade away (McRobbie, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity is skilfully re-secured as young women, recast as the ideal 'docile subjects', are interpellated through popular culture and discourses of success, choice and empowerment into a seductive new 'sexual contract' (McRobbie, 2007: Ringrose, 2012).

The argument now is that movements like black feminism – which appear to hold fast to the foundational categories of race, class, and gender – are no longer viable in neo-liberal post-equality western democratic societies (Mohanty, 2013). Given the destabilising effects of advanced free market capitalism, new technology, and hyper securitisation post 9/11, it is argued that we need new ways to theorize the border crossings of new and affective transnational gendered identities that go beyond static historically rooted epistemological formulations (Puar, 2007). If this is the case then why do women who are racialised still remain one of the most economic, social, and politically disadvantaged groups nationally and globally (Mohanty, 2003a; Nandi & Platt, 2010)? Furthermore, if we are 'beyond gender and race' then why are we witnessing a new generation of black and ethnicised women[3] who are 'coming to voice' in no uncertain terms, especially through their use of social media? In the last decade 'subaltern' groups, like black feminists, are "harvesting their collective intelligence" in the virtual world using websites like Blackfeminist.org[4] and the twitterfeed #solidarityisforwhitewomen to organise and express what being a black British feminist means today.

In this paper I take an autobiographical narrative interpretative approach, reflecting on the social media exchanges and academic gatherings I have encountered in the past 3 years (2011–2014).[5] A reflexive and experiential positioning of the 'self' in theory is fundamental to a black feminist praxis and the autobiographical narrative method is a powerful tool as it draws on individual stories to illuminate the collective effects of discursive processes that construct our social and political worlds (Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield, 2000; Mirza, 2010). My aim, as the postcolonial feminist critic Gayatri Spivak (1988:297) councils, is to "plot a history" of black British feminism in post-race/post-feminist times, tracing continuities and speculating about future possibilities and opportunities from a personal perspective.

A Vindication of the rights of black women: making conscious 'black' political spaces

In her forceful exuberant opening speech at the conference, *A Vindication of the Rights of Black Women*, Pricilla Mensah (2013)[6] – student at Cambridge – questions the racial inclusiveness of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 seminal feminist text. The challenge, she explains still remains, "… the pursuit of Black women to find their 'own', unbound by racist, sexist stereotypes" (sic). Mensah's fresh articulation of Sojourner Truth's 19th century black women's plea, "Ain't I a woman?" (hooks, 1981), highlights black feminism's genealogical concern with the dehumanising gendered racist construction of the 'black woman' across time and space (McKittrick, 2006). Situating the 'story' of black British feminism and how it is being re-made in the British national context requires an understanding that disrupts the sedimented chronology of first, second, third waves that is cemented into the canon of white feminist historiography. Clare Hemmings (2011) argues that as feminists we need to challenge our 'linear generationalism' in both how we tell *the story* of our nostalgic past (lamenting the loss of a politics now gone), but also in how we occupy the brutality of the present (where the past is abandoned as irrelevant to understanding the present). Being attentive to the political grammar of feminist storytelling is important if we are to interrupt the dominance of white feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return that situates black and lesbian feminism firmly in the second wave past (Hemmings, 2011). The political grammar of such linear narratives also seek to contain the 'dangers' of the black feminist intersectional challenge to white feminism in the third, and now fourth wave present (Clark Mane, 2012). As postcolonial feminists Alexander and Mohanty explain, to focus on our genealogies, legacies and futures does not suggest a frozen or embodied inheritance of domination and resistance,"… but a constant thinking and rethinking of history and historicity … which has women's autonomy and self-determination at its core" (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997:xvi).

What marks black British feminism out is not its riding of the uneven 'waves' of mainstream feminist phaseology, but the continuities marked by the constant flow of 'life lines' that are 'thrown to' successive generations to ensure our group survival in this life (Ahmed, 2013). One such 'life line' was *Feminist Review's* special issue on black British feminism. Thirty years ago, *Many Voices One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives* (Amos et al., 1984) was a bold and strong dialogue about the critical scholarship and activism of a postcolonial generation of black British women united in their marginality from politics and white feminist theory.[7] In their article *Challenging Imperial Feminism*, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar exemplified the height of this critical time with their searing analysis of white feminism's ethnocentric subversion of the discourse around the family, sexuality and the peace movement (Amos & Parmar, 1984). Similarly Amina Mama in *Black Women the State and Economic Crisis*, mapped the clear-sighted, lucid project of the restructuring of the postcolonial British capitalist state where black migrant women were (and are) disproportionately employed in low paid, low status work (Mama, 1984). *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Bryan, Dadzie, & Scafe, 1985), which followed a year later marked our unique British activist canon.[8] It charted the foundational grassroots struggles of black British women in OWAAD (Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent) whose call to Afro-Asian unity was a conscious political response to the racism inherent in the feminist, trade union and antiracist movement.

Black British Feminism (Mirza, 1997) embodied the 1990s feminist concerns with decentring identity and incorporating post-modern difference. The collection of writings opened up a moment of radical possibilities. Re-thinking African and Asian identity as fluid, complex and fragmented, the book incorporated the tensions inherent in ethnic, sexual, political, and class differences under the multiracial signifier 'black'. The use of the term 'black' for black British feminists has been another 'life-line' that reaches back over 70 years- to the 1940s when it evolved as a conscious political act uniting African and Indian anti-colonial liberation activists in their solidarity against