

Black British Feminism:

For us at Feminist Review, it's hard to believe that thirty years have passed since the publication of the issue 'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives' (Amos et al., 1984). *Many Voices*, with its flamboyant pink four-handed goddesses dancing across the green and black cover, was one of the first attempts to 'provide a collection of perspectives' (p.1) of black British feminist thinking and projects. The content from 17 contributors, including Jackie Kay, Amina Mama, Ingrid Pollard, Shaila Shah and Melba Wilson, consisted of scholarly and activist writing, photographs, book reviews, a listing of black women's groups and poetry. As the vivid visual narrative in the compilation 'Images of Black Women Organizing' (Haq, Parmar and Pollard, 1984) illustrates, this discernible black British feminist presence – whether defiant behind placards or enjoying the communal reverie of guitar playing or silkscreen printing, signalled a palpable move towards a new critical cultural politics of representation. 'From what I recall, all these decades on, was the excitement of the moment and a wonderful sense of discovering each other and in the process finding ourselves too', Pratibha Parmar, one of the editors of *Many Voices*, commented recently. 'There was definitely a feeling that we were doing something that had not been done before, i.e. articulating and creating a forum for discussions and reflections on our intersectional identities. It was an opening to an expectation of the endless possibilities of our shared sisterhood' (Parmar, personal communication, 30 July 2014).

While *Many Voices* was one of the starting points for this issue on 'Black British Feminism', we are ever mindful of the dangers spinning an epochal

narrative of black feminist organisation. As the article ‘Sister to Sister’ by Ahaiwe and Burin, and other contributions to this issue suggests, although some of our engagements remain the same, others are reconfigured or at the least are differently situated. At the time of writing, we are witnessing upsurges of imperialist and sectarian violence in Gaza, Ukraine, Iraq and Syria. At ‘home’, austerity, the shrinking of the welfare state, devolution, anti-immigrant racism (see Erel and Reynolds, this issue), religious fundamentalism, increasing electoral support for the populist right and neoliberal governmentality, are all shaping social justice and feminist projects (Rowbotham et al., 2014). In addition, as Angela McRobbie (2009) has observed, with the contemporary ‘double entanglement’ of neo-conservative values and the liberalisation of ‘freedom’ and choice in the global economy, feminist ideas have been simultaneously and selectively absorbed and repudiated. What results, McRobbie surmises, are convoluted forms of backlash and a vernacular osmosis between post-race and post-feminist discourses. It is these relationships, in part, that the US-based scholar Mohanty (2013) sees at work in the misrecognition and domestication of black feminist critique in its travels across national borders, via academic and institutional cultures. A crucial feature of the depoliticisation of gender and racial justice imperatives for Mohanty concerns:

...the privatization of social divisions and the individualization of experience – the collapse of notions of collectivity into the personal and the transformation of power and political agency into acts of consumption. (p.986)

In Britain, Pragna Patel (Rowbotham et al., 2014), a founding member of ‘Southall Black Sisters’, a community group listed in *Many Voices*, has

identified the intimate articulations between neoliberal agenda and communalization as underscoring potent reactionary forces. With increasing state disinvestment in public services, the religious right, mining a political mandate from a crisis in the politics of cultural recognition, has now become providers of welfare. What Patel notices is how these providers use 'the language of anti-racism, human rights, equality and discrimination with consummate ease - to promote intolerant, misogynistic, homophobic and anti-democratic politics' (p.157).

It is important to recognise that these observations about the cooptation of radical and feminist thought by neoliberal consumer culture, corporate philanthropy, academia, and by sectarian and civil society organisations (Coogan-Gehr, 2011; Roychowdhury, 2013) are co-extensive with on-going feminist work. Although black feminist organisation has become more fragmented as a result of the erosion of public funding and fluctuating circuits of public and institutional hostility, we have not disappeared from political life, even though our identifications with feminism might not be articulated or are ambivalent (Craig, this issue). As contributors to this issue show, we are just as socially engaged and have continued to come together in a wide range of critical campaigns, from those on mental health (Munshi), religious fundamentalism (Dhaliwal) and environmental damage (Craig), to colourism and 'the politics of beauty' (Phoenix). Sundari and Pearson's paper 'Striking Women' is especially interesting as an invitation to reimagine black women's emancipatory politics across time and through different modes of animation and 'scenic understanding', to borrow Frogett and Hollway's (2010) expression.

Using oral history and archival research, *Striking Women* records the political activism of organised groups of South Asian women, focusing on industrial action at Grunwick, a photo processing plant (1976-78) and more recently in 2005, at Gate Gourmet, a company providing airline catering. The authors' manga style comic exhibition –from which stunning visual extracts are included in this issue - counters prevailing stereotypes of South Asian women as passive and housebound. This is the archive as 'intervention', an aspiration rather than a fortuitous collection of artefacts and memories of the past (Appadurai, 2003). Travelling with the exhibition, to schools and libraries, including the Feminist Library in London, the exhibition is activism, disrupting nostalgic and simplistic victory/defeat models of political struggle, as well as inciting new strands of intergenerational dialogue. Lataben's grandson was excited at the prospect of his grandmother being interviewed for the project. Poring over photographs, Lataben told him stories about the Grunwick dispute for the first time. "You!" he exclaims, full of pride, "I can't believe you went on strike, grandma!"

As Gayatri Gopinath's (2010) meditation on the queer diasporic archive reminds us, there are important differences to hold onto between the respective roots of the English word 'nostalgia' and the Greek word 'nostalghia'. Through the work of the anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis (1994), Gopinath distinguishes nostalgia as a sentimental longing that congeals and reifies what has been. In the words of Seremetakis, nostalgia 'freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present' (p.170). In contrast, *nostalghia* is a dynamic,

sensual and hopeful relationship to history with transformative potential. There are parallels here between *nostalghia* and Clare Hemmings' affective and textual practice of the 'recitation' of feminist theory as:

...not the telling of a new story, but renarration of the same story from a different perspective. It operates as a breaking open of the presumed relation between the past and present, rather than an instantiation of a new, fixed relations between the two. (p.181)

When the current issue first began to take form as an idea, we were curious about the ways in which earlier black and critical postcolonial feminist thought is inflecting contemporary practices and conversations, including what seems to be a discernible recitation and *nostalghia* for black feminist ideas and vocabulary (see Mirza, this issue).

We should, perhaps, state at the outset, one crucial difference between the impetus for this Issue and *Many Voices*. *Many Voices* came about through a suggestion of a member of the 1983-4 Feminist Review collective, who approached the prospective editors, Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar. Feeling that Feminist Review's readership at the time was 'predominantly white', Amos, Lewis, Mama and Parmar insisted on 'complete editorial autonomy' (Amos et al., 1984:1). 'We hope that in the future *Feminist Review* will include writings by and for Black women, so that this issue does not remain a token exercise', they wrote (p.1).

The them/us divide of this earlier time is at the very least, muddled here. Our invitation – to scholars, artists and activists to consider the meanings, affects and materials of black feminisms in their lives and work – comes from black

women within the *Feminist Review* collective. We also wanted to resist the temptation to confection the usual subject positions of established academic narrators, who look back on and offer an authoritative framing of founding moments and trajectories in the history of feminist 'field formation' (see Bouchard, 2012). What characterizes this issue then, is the writing of feminists from different locations. Several of the contributors are outside the academy and are new to publishing in academic journals; their contributions to the issue were supported through two years of collaboration and mentoring facilitated by Joan Anim-Addo.

Terms

Now, as in 1984, the terms under which we organise and converse are far from settled. They are inevitably 'discovered', reinvented and troubled, over and over again. In her evocatively entitled paper, 'Disparate in voice, sympathetic in direction', Nydia Swaby returns to 'political blackness', as it was used in the 1970s and 80s in Britain – often with a capital B. As Swaby makes clear, the term was performative and dialogic rather than literal. It did not signal biological or geographical origins or the unreliable sociometrics of phenotype. Rather, it has been storied as acting as a point for creating and mobilizing solidarities, however romanticised and imperfect, between those variously excluded as racialised others. And all at a specific historical moment that Stuart Hall deemed to be 'the moment of the diasporic' (2012: 29). For Hall, 'diaspora' is a signifier that operates under erasure; an inadequate but functional shorthand, forever haunted by the impossibility of representation:

The word both responds to and goes beyond the reductive boundaries of what at the time we knew as identity politics. Identities are

summoned up, mobilised, transformed and interrogated in this process. But the search, and even more, the discovery of an essential identity that would condense all the diasporic lines and provide a warrant for their trans-historical authenticity is doomed to failure.

(p.29)

Our contributors tend to deploy 'Black'/'black' in a similar sense in this issue – as a flawed signifier, and one that is also 'sweaty', as Sara Ahmed has called those hard-thought ideas and imaginings that glisten with 'the laboring of bodies' (2014: 18). In similar terms to discussions in the past, Balani, Barnard and Gupta worry about how the political epithet of 'blackness' can suffocate and flatten distinctions of racialisation and class - that may be contiguous but are not necessarily commensurable – and all the while serving to recentre whiteness and histories of colonialism as monolithic. What characterises these more recent discussions is the claiming of diasporic generational difference. 'It's that second generation culture, which is not tightly bound with ideas of a connection to another homeland, that feels like such a rich seam' Sita Balani says. 'I have no desire to go into celebratory raptures about Britain, but I do feel a sense of joy in the culture of the second generation, especially the more confrontational work. Something like the anarchic early Kureishi-Stephen Frears collaborations seem so distinctly British, Asian, Queer, Second Generation'.

With a different slant to generation, Joan Anim-Addo's essay 'Activist Mothers Maybe, Sisters Surely?' proposes 'a-filiative' and pluralistic 'kinship' as one basis for contemporary black feminist organising. Anim-Addo's resources are rich, ranging from Hortense Spillers' (1987) work on Atlantic

slavery and 'ungendering', to Françoise Lionnet's (1995) 'cultural metissage', to practices of 'other-mothering' within black Caribbean cultures. With a focus upon epistemic inequalities and absence, Anim-Addo considers the potential of caring collaborations between scholars and activists that can invent a 'place' of black feminism marked by 'creative dissent, pluralist affiliation and intercultural braiding'. Still, there is nothing inherently liberatory about such practices and structures of kinning or mentorship, that can be found in other less hospitable spaces, such as in the 'strange family' of the racialised and gendered criminal underworld (see Smith, 2012: 317). Neither does specifying ontological commitments (Quine, 1968) resolve the ethical and political challenge of the undecidability of the multiple referents that black feminism connotes.

Clive Barnett (2004: 522) has defined the Derridean notion of the undecidable as holding in tension the ethical demands of two distinct registers and times of responsibility, entailing 'the problem of holding together...an urgent responsibility to act and a responsibility to otherness in the form of maintaining the openness of the future'. Writers, such as Ahmed (2004) and Samantra (2002), privilege dissent and conflict as necessary grounds for the openness and dynamic political changes that black feminism always and urgently demands. Samantra writes, 'its lack of a fixed subject makes possible the continuing relevance of black feminism and makes that movement a model for a historically engaged yet open-ended community of belonging' (p.133).

Working to bring into being ‘open-ended’ socialities and political identifications across diverse histories and inequalities, and without recourse to an identitarian carapace was/remains a fraught task, as Nydia Swaby’s research on the history of black British feminism attests. Using interviews and papers held in the Black Cultural Archives in South London, Swaby researched accounts of the development and subsequent demise of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), established in 1979. An implicit heteronormativity is one of the factors that Swaby believes contributed to the dissolution of OWAAD¹, an early British forum for black feminists.

The injuries inflicted by heteronormativity within black feminist circles at the time, was a topic in the article ‘Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions’ (Carmen et al., 1984) in *Many Voices*, produced from 8-hours of recorded discussion. Gail Lewis, a participant in the conversation, described the Brixton Black Women’s Group as ‘rabidly homophobic’, while observing that the ‘Brixton group has got stronger in its feminism and less willing to compromise’ (Carmen et al. 1984, p.62, 64). The discussion is also and importantly a recognition of the complex attachments and accountability to the subject positions offered/demanded by black feminism at the time, as well as the problematic nature of the affective and political terrain the discussion travels. A frisson of fear and excitement flavours ‘Becoming Visible’, reflected in the content of the article, its title and authorship (only first names were used). A short introduction states:

We are all aware of how vulnerable we are making ourselves and putting our lives at risk in many ways, but it is only when we begin

to make ourselves visible that we can break the silence of our lives

(Carmen et al., 1984: 53)

In their group discussion in this issue, Sita Balani, Jay Barnard and Camel Gupta revisit *Becoming Visible*, interrogating questions of black queer legacies and the tensions between the terms of interpellation offered by the nomenclature of 'black' and 'of colour' and 'woman', 'lesbian', 'queer' and 'QTIPOC' (Queer, Transgender and Intersex People of Colour). Homing in on the vilification and distrust of bisexuality in the 1984 discussion, what the discussants in this collection highlight is the resilience of a developmental vocabulary in feminist spaces, whereby bisexuality and non-binary identifications such as female masculinity flash up as 'traitorous', 'immature' and 'unfinished'.

If the politics of representation has been critical to feminist politics, what Balani, Barnard and Gupta are also concerned with is the hardening of material inequalities in such a way as to set up complex paradoxes between cultural and material struggles. In turn, they see these paradoxes as affected by simultaneous but differential conjunctures, such as those between gender, sexuality, race and disability. The phenomenological experience of disability and illness, for instance, can fluctuate over a period of years, days or within a matter of hours, rearranging the temporary outlines and intra-actions of identity and experience². Here, matters of tempo and pace – such as in somatic changes – come to the fore, adding depth to longstanding feminist concerns about the nature of 'coeval' relationships - what it is to live with different others in the same time.

Elaborating from the ideas of the feminist activist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa, Michelle Bastian (2011) contends that a crucial challenge of coevalness is how to recognise the simultaneity of different histories and experiences while not subsuming them into a commensurable spatial and temporal moment. Although intersectional approaches have the potential to show how tessellated differences are lived at the same time, an implicit critique in Balani, Barnard and Gupta's conversation is the risk of eliding simultaneity with stability.

Lauren Craig's article 'Thinking Flowers?' pushes the conventional remit of intersectionality still further, beyond a sole focus on human bodies, to the concatenations of the geo-bio-social and to black feminist ontologies that trouble specieism and the human/non-human binary. Craig is a therapist, artist and social entrepreneur, working in the business of fair trade flowers in South London. In flowers she sees an archaic circle of life, now commodified in such a way as to maximize and exploit distances between growers, traders, retailers and consumers. Following the African diaspora through black feminist texts, activists and the business of flowers has brought Craig to diverse interlocutors, including the labour organisation 'Women Working Worldwide' (WWW). WWW's campaign on fair trade flowers is profoundly intersectional, where flowers are a focal point for tackling 'sexual harassment, lack of maternity protection, low wages, exposure to harmful chemicals, lack of unionisation, forced overtime and casual labour'³.

The black eco-feminism that Craig grapples with in *Thinking Flowers?* shares features with scholarly arguments on interspecies alliances and the more

outlandish countercultural sensibility of music and sci-fi that is Afro-futurism. Writing on interspecies, Julie Livingston and Jasbir Puar (2011) advocate critical attention to animals, plants, and the microbial as both non-human actors and 'racial and sexual proxies within actual, material, biological worlds' (p.4). Afrofuturism⁴, by contrast, pushes to the limits the unrepresentability of the dehumanization and trauma of the African diaspora, using cyborg fantasies and new technologies to destabilise racial alterity by detaching and scattering its familiar sensual signifiers (Ferrara, 2012). What is interesting about some of the recent British take up of Afrofuturism is its splicing with the geopolitics of the Anthropocene (Last, 2013). Work on the materiality of race and climate change, for instance, is offering an engagement with the politics of the 'prior' (Povinelli, 2011) within global justice movements, not only as indigeneity but as physiological difference wrought from long lines of alliances between bodies, animals, plants and climatic conditions (Gunaratnam and Clark, 2012). What prospects lie ahead for black feminist critique when we proliferate the base matter of the intersectionality of our lives, to take into account non-human forces?

Unfinished and unfinishing

It is clear to us that the second decade of the twenty-first century carries its own challenges, as well as novel opportunities for black feminist and intersectional politics. As Suki Ali (2007) has written, 'It has been argued that the single biggest challenge for feminism in the twenty-first century will be the negotiation of shared political and intellectual projects within a global arena' (p.197). As several of the contributors to this issue note, the extent and pace of such negotiations has been transformed by digital

technologies and on-line feminist writing and activism - or 'clickivism' as it is sometimes disparagingly known (see Okolosie, this issue). New technologies have brought new access points⁵ into transnational feminist conversations, affiliations, archives and initiatives, no longer confined by place, time, genre or indeed the body.

The movements between the past and the present of feminist organising are a vital part of the affective and technological production of this issue. Re-reading my own, now faded and worn copy of *Many Voices*, I was struck by the ongoing compulsions of this gutsy corpus of work and by feelings of sentimentality and loss. Only a handful of the organisations listed in *Many Voices* have survived. The Tamil Women's League, listed in the inside cover of the issue, was one my early activist experiences. The 'League' turned out to be run by one woman, Rajeswary Balasubramaniam, who was adept at convening public meetings, demonstrations and lobbying from a tiny council flat in North London, and invariably with a toddler in tow. As a young woman, on an all-white undergraduate degree in London and with no black women friends, I wept with marvelous relief at the discovery of these other existential coordinates.

Against the ebbing and flowing of black feminist groups over the past three decades, there are the ghosts of other losses: 2014 saw the deaths of Stuart Hall and Maya Angelou. Hall had been a mentor to both Pratibha Parmar and Valerie Amos at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and his work continues to be a lifeline for many of us⁶. Angelou's autobiographies were reviewed in *Many Voices* by Ingrid Pollard (1984). 'Maya Angelou at 56

packed more into her life than most of us do in two lifetimes', Pollard wrote, 'I hope she continues writing and performing for as long again' (p.117).

The 'finishedness' of *Many Voices*, its existence as a single, beautiful artefact, produced through face-to-face collaborations and writing, further substantiates its textured difference from this issue. Unrestricted by time and place, and in similar ways to the editors, the contributors were able to edit and discuss their writing on-line. Balani, Barnard and Gupta were particularly touched and moved by the materiality of *Many Voices* and the *Becoming Visible* discussion (a prized copy of the issue joined the discussants at the table):

There is also something to be said for the way concrete ephemera comes down to us. Ravinder Sethi, who typeset the 1984 discussion, leaves a moving postscript, a trace of her labour, signing off 'In Black Sisterhood'. The finishedness of that issue, its existence as a single, permanent act, is what makes it valuable. A digital file doesn't have the same gravity, but it is accessible and convenient.

Digitised content means that many readers can approach the current issue as a series of stand-alone fragments that only nominally constitute a 'collection'. For us, such fragmentation is an apt sign for the dialogic nature of the issue and its regard for what Gwendolyn Mae Henderson calls the 'interlocutory' character of black feminist writing. As Henderson's sees it black feminist writing is in hearty dialogue with both 'an imaginary or 'generalised Other' and 'with aspects of 'otherness' within the self' (p.118). And so, we offer this issue as an unfinished, provisional and partial conversation that we hope will

invite debate, opposition, controversy and even some points of recognition and pleasure.

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Notes

1. Clare Hemmings' (2011) has suggested caution in how the contributions of black and lesbian feminism in the 1980s are storied as losses within Western feminist progress narratives.
2. In her discussion of 'debility', Jasbir Puar (2009) advances a compelling argument for how new bioinformatic technologies are reconfiguring identity, the body and matters of intersectionality.
3. Of relevance here is eco-critic Rob Nixon's (2011) theorization of 'slow violence'; a violence 'of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (p.2).
4. The artist Martine Syms (2013) is among a growing number of black feminists who feel that Afrofuturism needs to sometimes get its head out of the cosmos. Syms' 'Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto', includes the rules, 'No forgetting about political, racial, social, economic, and geographic struggles' and 'No Mammies, Jezebels, or Sapphires' (see

<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/> last accessed 30 July 2014)

5. On-line worlds are also part of a distributed backlash. At the time of writing the #WomenAgainstFeminism meme and Tumblr and Facebook groups were in the ascendant (see: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/30/feminism-makes-women-victims-sexist-women-against-feminism>, last accessed 1 August, 2014)
6. Pratibha Parmar's tribute to Stuart Hall is a part of a collective memorialization of black British feminists, see 'Meeting Stuart Hall' <http://mediadiversified.org/2014/02/14/meeting-stuart-hall/> last accessed 30 July, 2014.

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