

## **open space**

# **108 | so you're a black feminist? interrogating the self both in and out of cyberspace**

Sidra Zabit-Foster

Writing this piece has been a real challenge. I had recently assumed the title of black feminist as a result of a rapid consumption of the literature and cultural critique by black authors I found at home and under my fingertips online. I assumed the title easily and without thought, simply feeling comfortable in that space and without questioning myself. So when I tried to write a piece on feminism it started out with superficial, confused observations that didn't take me anywhere. In order to write something of substance, I was forced to start the long and often difficult process of self-interrogation that requires exposing oneself, unearthing deep insecurities and complexes. In this piece I ask first how and why I identified with black feminism, and second how the need for self-analysis translates into writing and online feminism. I have inherited this awareness of black feminism from my mother, a fiercely intellectual woman, lawyer and activist who during the 1970s was a member of the Brixton Black Women's group. Growing up with her words and books and listening fascinated to her discussions of race and gender with her fellow sisters, instilled in me a sort of abstract consciousness. But when it comes to writing on feminism, does this abstract consciousness have validity? Is it enough that I am aware of the dual oppression of race and gender or do I have less claim to write here because I have not struggled in the same way as our mothers, and because I have certain privileges?

These questions go to the heart of intersectionality, one of the most popular topics in feminism today. This theory examines the converging oppressions related to gender identity, race, class, sexual orientation, body-ability and so on. Therefore, it is by questioning the self and its axis of privilege that we can attempt to achieve a liberating intersectional feminism. Online black feminism has been pivotal in promoting and exploring intersectionality through free platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr and WordPress, where feminists can

engage with each other. Guerrilla Feminism, for example, founded by writer and activist Lachrista Greco, has a policy of only publishing or linking to articles written by marginalised, minority voices and monitors all contribution spaces to ensure that no one engages in phobic activity. Such online spaces require that contributors writing on any topic be intersectional, self-questioning and aware of 'privileges' in order to avoid silencing and excluding 'the other'. Thus, it is necessary to now give a full presentation of myself, so that in examining my own relation to black feminism I do not speak for or over others but instead speak as and to them. I am a mixed-race, 22-year-old woman, born in London to a Pakistani mother and a white British father. I am positioned on several axes of privilege that include but are not necessarily limited to being cisgendered, able-bodied, middle class and privately educated. In considering notions of colourism/shadism I could also list my 'mixedness' as a privilege as I am relatively light brown. Listing my attributes in this way has already demonstrated some of the problems of identity politics; first as it is possible both to benefit and be hindered by our different identifiers; and second, as one can experience privilege unconsciously; the idea that I may benefit from my lighter skin tone only occurred to me at the time of writing.

Having accounted for myself here I can now hope to situate my story not as a representation of, but as one contribution to, the black feminist experience, to which others can either relate or object. While I can now easily reel off a list of nouns and adjectives to describe myself, in my typically turbulent teenage years, the need for a single word definition played more strongly on my mind. Going to a predominantly white private school, my social circles were somewhat predetermined and inevitably my race was a clear demarcation in the friendship group. Although I say with confidence that my closest friends did not have an issue with it, perhaps because in this instance class was more of a determinate factor and I was clearly one of them, I could not, however, avoid being the butt of the odd 'casual racist' joke, or having the occasional assumption made about my family, based purely on ignorance and inflammatory media coverage of Islam. At this time, although I was aware of the differences between my white friends and myself, I was as yet unable to articulate my discomfort or even understand it myself. It was only subjectively that I questioned where on the colour spectrum I fell, and tried to find an indisputable label for myself. This is not to say that my childhood was fraught with doubt and despair; on the contrary I shared a joyous adolescence with my friends as we navigated the same first experiences with boys, drink and our bodies. Only in some respects did my insecurities differ and have the added prism of race and what I can now identify as euro-centric standards of beauty. I recall one instance: in the standard way that teenage girls project their own insecurities, we once as a group sat and graded each other's facial features. Unsurprisingly, when it came to marking our noses, the smaller more slender nose was considered the most enviable.

It was after starting university, which promised new experiences but greeted me with a startlingly homogenous student population, that I began to devour black feminist texts. In theories of intersectionality, post-colonial theory, transnational feminism, Marxist feminism, I found the language to explain to myself things I had felt but not understood, and furthermore to deconstruct the social and cultural prisms that caused my discomforts. These texts gave me the language I needed to explain in constantly frustrating conversations with those, even other feminists, willing to see gender but not race as a social construct and fervently denying ever seeing my race or allowing it to be part of the conversation. Half English, half Pakistani, half white, half brown, third-generation immigrant origin, British Asian, Pakistani British. There seems to be no adequate term for what I am, no box to tick, no phraseology that fully incorporates me and doesn't have an implicit 'othering' effect. 'Mixed' deviates from the standard white; 'British Asian' is a separate type of British, a lesser British. The impossibility I faced of finding a singular identifier became almost liberating and is reflected in the plurality of my existence. Neither brown nor white, both included and excluded from the community, I could even begin to play with definitions, exposing people's assumptions when they hear my accent, or gleefully watching people squirm while they guess the countries I could be from (Pakistan always coming fifth or sixth behind the more palatable Spain, Brazil, or other such dusky places).

If feminism involves a constant process of evaluation, both of the external and the internal, autobiography becomes especially important to black feminism as it situates the self within the social and political landscape. To this end, we must go further than merely describing our own histories, and also reflect on past experience, and honestly examine anything problematic in that past. I recall two incidents, occurring within a few hours of each other, on a group holiday with mainly white friends that dramatise the uncertainty of my coloured existence. Sitting around a dinner table, one man, a relative stranger, made a comment about 'Pakistani girls'. Deeming them to be too chaste, too religious, not the 'cool' exotic type of foreign girl; he was nevertheless quick to let me know, 'Not you though, you're ok'. In this instance, he had included me within the middle-class acceptable community, as his statement was directed to everyone. My participation in the group made me complicit in this dialogue, but simultaneously excluded half of me from his world, and 'othered' the version of myself that includes my cousins, my aunts, my mother. While I knew in the moment that his words were full of ignorance and prejudice, I am conscious now that in fact what unsettled me more was that this stranger had epitomised in one instant, the exact complex I felt about my family. There were times when I was younger that I HAD wanted to distance myself from family members I considered weird and embarrassing, two adjectives any 13-year-old fears. I DID want to be accepted as whiter, more normal. This scene characterises first the instability of my position as a mixed-race woman in the eyes of others (read whites), but moreover the internal confusion I felt over my identity

and the plaguing guilt of my collusion in the desire for whiteness. The second incident involved a white female friend who, on finding out that I had two sisters and just one brother, asked whether my parents were disappointed and would have preferred all male children. This question has the potential to undermine my entire existence. My Pakistani family have roots in England going back to 1961. All children and grandchildren were born and raised in London and are fully integrated in the cultural and social institutions of Britain. So the question threw me off guard. Not only had she made an offensive generalisation of Islam, she knew that my mother had married outside the Pakistani community; that I wasn't raised in a religious manner, that I drank, that I partied, that all in all I did not fit the stereotypical description of a Muslim Pakistani woman. Yet she had not allowed those indicators to seep into her subconscious and was only able to see the fact that I had brown skin and must therefore have some deep, dark pain that she could not possibly understand and must pity. Moreover, as I proceeded to laugh it off and explain my origins to her, the question had the dual effect of making me complicit in a denial of my Pakistani roots. Not wanting to upset the harmony of the remaining few days of the holiday, I didn't explain why the question was offensive, thus denying the legitimacy of not only my family but also my Pakistani heritage. These examples evoke the temporality and the instabilities of identification, which demands singular expression and refuses the apparent cohesions of race, gender and class.

So how does this inability to locate a fixed identity translate into online feminism? The relative anonymity of cyberspace calls into question authenticity and authority. Does the need to present oneself become more or less important online? How can people be held accountable when there is no way of authenticating an author's identity? Twitter is arguably the most important online tool for marginalised voices. Unlike blogs, which are good for creating a network of articles and links to related subjects but usually require a person to actively search for these spaces, Twitter has the ability to direct anyone to any tweet through related hashtags, thus pushing previously unheard voices or issues into the mainstream. However, the compacted nature of the Twittersphere encourages misinterpretation and results in constant accusations of privilege between feminists, when by definition the form often obscures a writer's identity or intentions. How do we 'do' intersectionality in 140 characters? It is not always possible to know in a few words whether someone is already an informed ally. The popular hashtag feed *#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen* demonstrates this problem. Launched by online black feminist Mikki Kendall, it was intended to be a discussion between those affected by the latest, problematic manifestation of mainstream feminism. Using the Twitter shorthand, we are able to expose how often the views of black feminists are dismissed and we are told the racism we experience just 'isn't a feminist issue'. However, it quickly became apparent that some tweeters were misunderstanding the meaning of the conversation, some were getting caught up in hostile exchanges

and some had started their own offshoots such as #SolidarityIsForStraightWomen or #SolidarityIsForCisWomen. At what point do these repetitive exchanges become counterproductive? While it is important to point out oppressive and exclusionary behaviour, the danger of online discussion is that, perhaps spurred by anonymity, it can quickly descend into aggressive and insular arguments between complete strangers, thus contaminating both individual participation in feminist discourse and feminism as a whole. Online black feminism functions effectively as a response to the failure of white feminism to acknowledge privilege, but we must avoid being drawn into ever smaller, more singular groups, divided along different identifiers, as this diminishes our strength as a movement. Calls for privilege-checking, particularly in the infinite realms of the internet, can be futile because they are calls to either state an identity without analysis or to disgrace an/other's feminism and breed in-fighting. Instead we must encourage each other as much as possible to be aware, to be informed and to constantly interrogate ourselves in order that we recognise our differences, yet find universal understanding in our common experiences.

### **author biography**

Sidra Zabit-Foster holds a bachelors degree in Russian and French from University College London, with particular focus on gender studies and post-colonial theory. She is an active feminist online and in the streets.

doi:10.1057/fr.2014.22