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The Problems with Feminist Nostalgia: Intersectionality and White Popular Feminism

Abstract

Contemporary feminisms are ineluctably drawn into comparisons with historic discourses, forms of praxis and tactical repertoires. Whilst this can underscore points of continuity and commonality in ongoing struggles, it can also result in nostalgia for a more unified and purposeful feminist politics (Hemmings, 2011). Kate Eichhorn argues that our interest in nostalgia should be to understand feminist temporalities, and in particular the specific context in which we experience such nostalgia (2015). Accordingly, this paper takes up the idea that neoliberalism and populism, which have given rise to both neoliberal feminism and femonationalism (Rottenberg, 2014; Farris, 2017), have produced a series of contestations regarding the purpose and nature of feminist politics, as expressed by white popular feminism in the UK. This paper examines two dimensions of feminist nostalgia: first, nostalgia for a more radical form of feminist politics – one not co-opted by neoliberal forces, not individualistic and not centred around online activism; and second, a nostalgia for the idea of ‘sisterhood’ – a time before white feminists were called upon to engage with intersectionality or be inclusive of trans-women. We analyse these themes through analysis of white popular feminism produced in the UK between 2010-2020, cautioning against a feminist nostalgia which neglects to engage with the radical politics of intersectionality.

Introduction

Feminists often compare past, present and future manifestations of feminisms. Of course, not all feminists engage in this process and the extent to which they do so may be shaped by their social location, ideological leanings, and the nature of their involvement in feminism. These dialogues are, on one level, an exercise in history and memory, one undertaken by activists across social movements (Kubal and Becerra, 2014). For feminists, such a dialogue can challenge, disrupt and/or sustain contemporary praxis (Hemmings, 2011), with the past sometimes invoked to reject or repudiate the present (Funk, 2013) and vice versa (Henry, 2004). In other words, memories of the movement shape our emotional ties to the past, present and future (Hesford, 2013); one way of thinking about these emotional ties is through the prism of nostalgia, an under-utilised concept within feminist theory.

Drawing in particular upon the work of Svetlana Boym (2001, 2007), this paper proposes a new framework for thinking through different dimensions to feminist nostalgia, specifically concerning a loss of radicalism and sisterhood.¹ We situate this current ‘wave’ of feminist nostalgia for radicalism and sisterhood, as being partially produced by the rise of both neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) and femonationalism (Farris, 2017), which we argue has produced, and in some cases legitimised, some forms of white feminist nostalgia. The paper explores these themes through analysis of white popular feminism produced in the UK, i.e. that produced by white feminists whose ideas circulate in mainstream sources (Banet-

¹ We use the term radical here not in relation to ‘R’adical feminism, but rather as a descriptor to denote an ‘alternative view of the world’, radical politics identifies the problem but effectively changes the way in which society is structured (Pugh, 2009).

Weiser, 2018); in this case, articles published in *The Times* and the *Guardian* newspapers between 2010 and 2020. We begin the paper by discussing our understanding of nostalgia, tying our analysis of the concept to key themes within the literature, especially those developed by Boym; next, we establish our methods and methodology, before moving onto the empirical analysis. We finish with a concluding discussion, cautioning against white feminist nostalgia, which we argue can serve to undermine the radical possibilities of intersectionality.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a social emotion grounded in the politics of timekeeping; one which, while looking backwards, is rooted in, and produced by, fears and anxieties in the present (Davis, 1979). Writing in the late 1980's Bryan Turner identified the multi-faceted nature of the concept, which intimates historical decline, the absence of moral certainty, the disappearance of genuine social relationships, and a weakening of personal authenticity (1987). These features, although context specific, are a useful way of thinking about the concept, especially for social movement scholars interested in patterns of continuity and moments of rupture. However, feminist scholars have hitherto been reluctant to engage with the idea of nostalgia, unsurprising perhaps given its implicitly pejorative nature (Bonnett, 2009); indeed, Kate Eichhorn describes nostalgia as 'taboo', a 'feeling that dare not speak its name' (2015). Feminist scholars have instead focused on 'storytelling' (Hemmings, 2011; Wånggren, 2016), examining shared experiences, memories and histories, without, necessarily, invoking nostalgia (Polletta, 2009; Ahmed, 2004; Scott, 2011), a task which this paper is concerned with.

We explore two manifestations of feminist nostalgia in white popular feminism: first, nostalgia for a more radical feminism – one not co-opted by neoliberal forces, not individualistic and not centred around online activism; and second, a nostalgia for the idea of 'sisterhood' – a time before white feminists were called upon to engage with intersectionality or to include trans-women. Each of these broad-based themes, and their particular dimensions, reflect both a deep emotional nostalgia for an imaginary past as well as a level of dissatisfaction with current feminist praxis. These two manifestations can help reveal a resistance to contemporary feminism and in particular to intersectional feminisms. We do not suggest that these dimensions are mutually exclusive, there are some obvious points of overlap, nor do we argue that these are the only forms of feminist nostalgia. The nostalgia expressed by white feminists which we explore below, is in many respects nostalgia for an *imagined* form of feminism, one which overlooks past debates about race and the impossibility of sisterhood (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981) or trans inclusion (House and Cowan, 1977), and which denies the radicalism and creativity of the present.

The current wave of feminist nostalgia expressed in UK white popular feminism is, we argue, *partially* produced by the twin crises of neoliberalism and populism and more specifically, the subsequent spawning of both neoliberal feminism and femonationalism.² Catherine Rottenberg conceptualises neoliberal feminism as a strain of feminism which has been co-

² We recognise that feminist nostalgia is produced partially, but not wholly, by context; for instance, we do not wish to suggest that context can be offered as a justification for structural forms of discrimination or oppression such as transphobia or racism.

opted by neoliberal forces; a feminism which recognises gendered inequalities but disavows the social, cultural and economic forces that produce this inequality; essentially converting structural analysis into individual problems (2014). Meanwhile, femonationalism, as theorised by Sara Farris, captures the ways in which nationalistic regimes and politicians use gender equality to advance Islamophobic or anti-immigrant policies and messages, concomitantly some feminists are using right-wing discourse and nationalist rhetoric to attack religion, and in particular Islam, in the name of women's rights (2017). The rise of these two strains of 'feminism', has created the conditions within which the current iteration of feminist nostalgia has been produced. This context has, to a certain extent, legitimised some forms of white popular feminist nostalgia which we interpret as being both resistant to intersectionality and refusing to acknowledge the radicalism within the present. We elaborate further on our concept by situating the dimensions in relation to Svetlana Boym's important work on nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym's 'Nostalgia and its Discontents' outlines three key aspects to nostalgia. She argues that nostalgia is coeval with, not opposed to, modernity; that it is not a feeling of longing for a place, but for a different time; and finally, that nostalgia can be forward looking in spite of its associations with the past (2007). Boym's vocabulary is suggestive for our work, particularly when she writes 'the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future' (2007). Recognising that the foundation of nostalgia may be in fantasy, whether that is our own fantasising about the past's possibilities, or that we construct fantasy from our limited understanding of the truth of the past, Boym locates nostalgia in wishful thinking that might not be adduced from what *really* happened. This idea resonates with the nostalgia we develop throughout this paper, which is engaged with a form of the past that did not exist, prioritising specific imagined aspects of feminism that, manifesting within the present day, would lead to a more exclusionary form of the politics. As we see it, the nostalgia we describe in relation to a context of femonationalism and neoliberal feminism, is one that longs for feminist methods and sisterhood that were always fraught with difficulty, but are not acknowledged as such. Hence, those experiencing nostalgia are not reaching for a past utopia of activism, but instead, enacting a flawed remembering as a form of criticism of the present.

Usefully, Boym makes a distinction between melancholy and nostalgia in regards to feelings of loss that might be experienced in relation to objects or experiences from the past. She writes that melancholy 'confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness,' while nostalgia 'is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory' (2007). This conception is central to our methodology, in which we have analysed public expressions of loss that particularly emphasise community and collective experience. The current strain of nostalgia that we identify within feminism is one that constructs an understanding of the past around the perception of lost collective activism and identity, something that is lamented in public and widely circulated platforms, such as national newspapers like *The Times* and the *Guardian* which we analyse below.

Whilst collectives have always been significant within feminist activism, the community nature of nostalgia has worrying links to the affect's original formation in relation to nationalism. Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia* that 'individual longing is transformed

into a collective belonging that relies on past suffering to transcend individual memories' (2001: 15). Although tracing nostalgia's emergence in 18th century soldiers displaced from their homeland, Boym's exploration speaks to the way in which longing can become a form of collective belonging. This nostalgic belonging in contemporary feminism is primarily a commitment to 'not now,' a critique of the present that asks not for a return to the past, but for the return of *methodologies* of the past that would reify exclusionary norms of a society feminism purports to critique. An expressed longing for the return of the sisterhood, is to hope for a future of sameness in a present moment that is perceived to be too divisive. This is not dissimilar to the way in which Sara Ahmed describes nostalgia and nation in her blog post 'Fascism as Love,' in which nostalgia arises from what might have been – critically, not what was. She writes nostalgia is 'the loss of an object, whose existence can only be a matter of past tense, as well as a form of utopia, that images the return of the object in the future.'³ The feeling of loss that we identify in our definition of nostalgia is for sisterhood and more radical politics. Nonetheless, it seems important to note that the origins of nostalgia are tied to ideas of nation, and that in this particular era of femonationalism, there is a troubling resurgence of an exclusionary patriotism. Whilst feminists who are critical of the current iteration of feminism can also be critical of femonationalism and neoliberalism, there are coalesces between their attachment to objects of the past, and the attachments associated with nationalism.

There have, of course, been numerous rehabilitations of nostalgia for feminist aims. Although Eichhorn identifies many feminist theorists working on temporality and the past distancing themselves from nostalgia, including but not limited to Hesford (2013), Freeman (2010) and Hemmings (2011), she offers up an ambiguous possibility for the affect. She writes against Boym's original conceptualisation of nostalgia as a form of longing for home, stating 'the nostalgia in question here, then, is not easily mapped on to other types of nostalgia but rather is one that denotes a longing for a potentiality that exceeds the desire to return home and arguably exceeds any simple form of capture' (2015: 262). Eichhorn understands feminist nostalgia as a rejection of home in favour of a reaching backwards for potentiality. This work is continued by Meagher and Runyon (2009), who write towards a 'reparative' nostalgia. Their article 'Backward Glances' claims that whilst nostalgia seems to be at odds with a movement that emphasises progress, 'a reparative relationship to nostalgia allows us to take seriously the capacity of feminist attachments to the past to function as rich affective resources for our present and imagined future' (2009: 344); they describe nostalgia as 'a turn to the past to locate resources for identity, agency or community, all of which are felt by the nostalgic subject to be lacking in the present' (2009: 350) and warn those rejecting nostalgia that the past was neither naïve nor essentialist compared to the present day.

In light of Meagher and Runyon's warning against a present-day reduction of the past as naïve, and their urging for a reparative nostalgia, it seems imperative to clarify our position on the affect. We agree with Boym that nostalgia is inherently engaged with the present moment, and that it is prospective, with the turn backwards informing how feminist activism may turn forwards. We also believe that nostalgia is mobilised within this contemporary feminist moment collectively, which is realised by the multiple voices in mainstream media calling for a return of old methodologies, which we outline below. However, the nostalgia we

³ <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/11/09/fascism-as-love/> [accessed 10.2.21]

identify finds an absence of sisterhood and radicalism a failure of contemporary activism, *because* of current inclusivity, not in spite of it. The calls for a return to sisterhood emphasise a desire for sameness and shared orientation, aims that are impossible for a feminism that hopes to acknowledge intersectional forms of oppression and welcome trans women as part of the political struggle. We argue that the particular past objects for which nostalgic feminists yearn help to perpetuate exclusionary norms, and mirror the formation of nationalist nostalgia, which is ultimately aimed towards reifying borders, protecting specific identities, and othering those who sit beyond these perceived boundaries.

Methods

This paper focuses on the presence of feminist nostalgia in popular feminism in the UK, during the period 2010-2020. Following Banet-Weisser (2018) we define popular feminism as that which is produced and circulated via popular and mainstream sources, translating into 'accepted' feminist discourse. We emphasise the 'whiteness' of this feminism in recognition of the ways in which popular feminism is used to sustain hegemonic white feminist ideas and projects, underpinned at times by an implicit, if not explicit, rejection of intersectional analysis (see Phipps, 2020). We focus on popular feminism produced by white feminists because they have significant reach and influence, but also because the nostalgia which they invoke is specifically tied to whiteness and to white privilege in particular; their feminist nostalgia betrays an impatience with intersectionality and a desire for an imaginary past form of feminism untroubled by identity politics or by difference amongst and between (cis) women.

Feminism is relatively high profile in the UK, and there has been a sustained period of feminist activism since 2010 (Evans, 2015; Chamberlain, 2016; Emejulu and Bassel, 2017; Phipps, 2020), as such, there is a well-established number of feminist journalists and commentators producing popular feminism. During a similar period, and in the wake of the 2008 economic crash, the UK has accelerated its promotion of neoliberal policies (for instance through welfare cuts), and during the run up to, and the aftermath of, Brexit, it has embraced a degree of populist politics. In order to explore the presence of popular feminism in the UK we undertook a content analysis of two newspapers' coverage of feminism: the *Guardian* and *The Times*. The papers were selected for a number of reasons: they are major world newspapers and well-established publications; published daily, they have international audiences with a readership of 35.6 million per month for the *Guardian* and 16.6 million for *The Times*;⁴ both employ prominent feminist journalists (who represent a range of different feminist strands), and regularly commission pieces by freelance writers on the subject of feminism; they have over the years sought to publish articles that discuss the 'state' of feminism; and they represent different ideological leanings, the *Guardian* on the liberal-left and *The Times* on the centre-right.

Using Nexis we searched for articles, published in the two newspapers between 1st January 2010 and 1st January 2020, which included the term 'feminism', this initially yielded a return of 4,180 articles for the *Guardian* and 2,129 for *The Times* (the analysis of which is well-beyond the scope of this paper). We narrowed the search further by restricting our search to

⁴ For circulation data see <https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/2020/jun/17/new-data-shows-guardian-is-the-top-quality-and-most-trusted-newspaper-in-the-uk> and <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/the-times> [accessed 4.2.21]

those pieces which had the term ‘feminism’⁵ in the heading, thereby trying to ensure that feminism constituted the, or a, main theme of the piece (rather than say a throwaway reference) - this resulted in 474 articles for the *Guardian* and 109 for *The Times*. The articles crossed a range of different sections including, *inter alia*: news, life and style, arts, interviews, sports and opinion. We initially scanned all 583 articles to cut any that, despite the title, didn’t really focus on feminism - this left us with 187 articles (150 for the *Guardian* and 37 for *The Times*).⁶ We undertook a close reading of those pieces to pull out the themes of nostalgia we were interested in exploring, namely: criticisms of contemporary or modern feminism, a longing for a more radical form of feminism, and a desire for a more collective or unified feminism. Of course, there were many pieces in our sample which were not wholly or solely critical of contemporary feminism, indeed there were some which were wholly or mainly positive, however for the purposes of this paper we use illustrative examples taken from this sample to explore the idea of feminist nostalgia.

As noted above, we identify two main themes of feminist nostalgia concerning radicalism and sisterhood. The following sections explore these themes and their particular dimensions, before discussing why this turn to nostalgia is so problematic for intersectional politics.

Radicalism

Writing in 2010, Linda Grant identified second wave feminism as ‘the most profound revolution of the twentieth century,’ a claim she restated in 2012 when she observed that ‘young women today have little or no idea’ of what life was like for older women, though some of the examples she includes would be all too recognisable to some young women.⁷ Indeed, contrasting the revolutionary past and the mainstream feminism of today was a common approach in our sample, for example Hadley Freeman, writing in 2016, laments the chasm between the ‘choice feminism’ of today with the revolutionary movement of 40 years ago.⁸ We have identified this contrast as constituting a form of ideological nostalgia for radicalism; this can be illustrated in a piece by Julie Bindel about Andrea Dworkin, arguing that we need to return to her visionary thinking in order to halt the deterioration of feminism, with its emphasis on ‘sloganeering’, ‘fun’ and its individualism.⁹ In our sample we identified a range of ways in which nostalgia for radicalism was explored, principally through a critique of the following: co-optation; individualism; and hashtag feminism.

Co-optation

⁵ We used the term ‘feminism’ rather than ‘feminist’ or ‘gender’ in order to analyse material directly related to feminism as an ideology.

⁶ Examples of those that had feminism in the title but which we excluded were typically interviews or reviews where feminism was mentioned but was not the focus, we also cut letters from readers on the basis that whilst they constitute an intervention in a debate they are neither commissioned nor produced by the *Guardian* or *The Times*

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/aug/22/baby-boomers-will-hutton> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/12/twitters-tales-of-sexism> [accessed 4.2.21]

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/19/from-shopping-to-naked-selfies-how-empowerment-lost-its-meaning-feminism> [accessed 4.2.21]

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/16/why-andrea-dworkin-is-the-radical-visionary-feminist-we-need-in-our-terrible-times> [accessed 16.6.2020] The invocation of Andrea Dworkin as the sine qua non of radical feminism is especially interesting given that she is often used to defend trans exclusionary feminism a position which she did not herself hold.

For some feminists, especially those on the left, current iterations of feminism are insufficiently radical. Many of the pieces in the *Guardian* broadly agreed with Nancy Fraser's caricature of feminism as the handmaiden to neoliberalism, an argument she made in the *Guardian* in 2013 and at greater length in her book.¹⁰ This turn towards a more corporate or mainstream feminism is perhaps best illustrated by the attempts by *Elle* magazine in 2013 to 'rebrand' feminism, which resulted in the publication of several pieces by writers including Laurie Penny, Hadley Freeman and Lucy Mangan, on the problem of undertaking such as exercise.¹¹ Writing in 2016 Eve Livingston laments the brand of 'corporate feminism' which focuses on the representation of women in the boardroom, arguing that 'feminism should challenge inequality at its roots rather than simply change its figureheads.'¹² In a similar vein, Molly Redden writing about International Women's Day in 2017 observes that 'Feminism is having a mainstream moment, but it is, in the opinion of the organizers and many others, corporatized.'¹³ Stephanie Convery, in her review of Jessa Crispin's book (*Why I am not a Feminist*), identifies the 'limited' possibilities of mainstream feminism, particularly for women on the left who desire a more radical form of politics, one better equipped to resist the threats of neoliberalism;¹⁴ themes also addressed by Eleanor Robertson in her exploration of why modern feminism is 'failing.'¹⁵ Meanwhile, writing in *The Times*, Rosemary Bennet notes that the 'Golden skirts' (those women who reach positions of power) had little impact on wider society or on the fortunes of women more broadly.¹⁶ The critiques made by many of these writers are also of the wider corporate culture, and the impact that it has had on the movement and in particular the turn towards a more individualistic form of feminist politics.

Individualism

The perception that feminism has become overly individualised was a very common theme in our sample and has had considerable purchase amongst white feminist writers, who have sought to distance what they perceive to be the inward gaze present in contemporary feminism, from past radical forms of feminism. Writing in 2017, Suzanne Moore laments the 'depoliticisation' of contemporary feminism, which she argues is part of the 'journey *from* radicalism *to* self-help' (our emphases), similar to the themes she had identified in 2014 concerning 'selfie feminism.'¹⁷ Moore's critique of self-help chimes with what Charlotte Raven and Janice Turner identify as a form of 'narcissism' amongst contemporary feminists,

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal> [accessed 3.2.21]

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/07/feminism-rebranding-man-hater;>
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/12/feminism-does-not-need-makeover-rebranded;>
and <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/nov/16/feminism-rebranding-lucy-mangan> [accessed 4.2.21]

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/28/corporate-feminism-women-glass-ceiling>
[accessed 3.2.21]

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/a-day-without-a-woman-strike-feminist-protest-trump>
[accessed 4.2.21]

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/08/jessa-crispin-is-right-to-critique-modern-feminism-but-her-book-is-a-missed-opportunity> [accessed 27.4.20]

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/mar/10/modern-feminism-language-policing-twitter-gender-equality> [accessed 15.2.21]

¹⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/obsessions-of-wealthy-female-elite-betray-feminism-pxx5schm65s>
[accessed 11.2.21]

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/12/spare-selfie-school-feminism-women-always-give-too-much-information-suzanne-moore> [accessed 15.2.21]

one intimately tied to the idea of identity and personal appearance, or 'preening' as Clare Foges describes feminists in *The Times*.¹⁸ Indeed, the perceived emphasis on the individual has prompted many of the writers to reflect upon how this signals a shift in terms of feminist analysis. Reflecting on the radical politics of *Spare Rib* (a UK feminist magazine which ran between 1972-1993), Tanya Gold argues that contemporary feminism has become 'too personal, too confused with consumption. It has I think become divorced from politics.'¹⁹ Meanwhile, younger feminists, such as Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, argue that fourth wave feminism 'needs to transcend questions of individual identity.'²⁰ Leaving aside the idea that feminism has become 'too personal' (a charge at odds with the notion of the personal is political), for both Gold and Cosslett, contemporary feminism has become too embroiled in individual-level analysis

Hashtag feminism

Writing in *the Guardian* Meghan Daum identifies both a lack of radicalism and a lack of anger visible in (online) feminist protest, Daum frames this as generational, frequently positioning older and younger feminists as constituting two different (and distinct) movements using different tactical repertoires. Daum laments the absence of women protesting in public, writing 'today, the angry, ranting woman with the folding table is gone from the sidewalk.' Daum's nostalgia for the 'folding table' of feminist politics stands in sharp contrast to the opacity of digital feminism which she perceives. In this instance the nostalgia for radicalism is conflated with tactical repertoires and in particular the rise of digital activism. Julie Bindel expresses similar sentiments, contrasting the role of public protest, 'the lifeblood of feminism', with online protest, urging feminists to 'ditch the armchair and keyboard and grab the placard and loudhailer with both hands.'²¹ While Helen Lewis chastises Laura Bates for being 'too nice' in her latest book, which is written 'firmly in the vocabulary of contemporary online feminism', a characterisation which presents online feminism as intolerant and too focussed on safe space policies.²² Invoking the work and ideas of Shulamith Firestone and Andrea Dworkin, Suzanne Moore lambasts younger online feminists for being too 'smiley' and 'polite.'²³ Writing in defence of hashtag feminism Laura Bates resists the nostalgia of a more radical and effective past, noting that contemporary feminists are 'told that they are fighting the "wrong" battles' arguing that, 'it is equally reductive to suggest they shouldn't be using the "wrong" platforms.'²⁴

The dimensions of nostalgia for a radical past which we have illustrated above concern the ways in which contemporary feminism is perceived to have drifted toward the mainstream,

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/06/charlotte-raven-feminism-madonna-price> [accessed 4.2.21]

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/29/feminism-test-spare-rib> [accessed 3.2.21]

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/29/fourth-wave-feminism-play-top-girls-feminism> [accessed 15.2.21]

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/14/heroes-misbehaviour-inspired-feminism-public-protest> [accessed 2.4.2020]

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/20/girl-up-laura-bates-review-feminism-follow-up-everyday-sexism> [accessed 15.2.21]

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jan/15/suzanne-moore-time-to-get-angry> [accessed 15.2.21]

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2015/feb/06/sharing-stories-of-sexism-on-social-media-is-21st-century-activism> [accessed 15.2.21]

thus losing its revolutionary and radical potential. In the following section we flesh out a distinct but related theme which we have identified, nostalgia for sisterhood.

Sisterhood

Writing in *The Times*, Janice Turner issued a plea for feminists to embrace a ‘forgotten Seventies feminist principle: sisterhood’;²⁵ for Turner, like other writers in our sample, the idea of sisterhood loomed large over a feminist movement which was perceived to have become too fragmented, not least as a result of the insistence on acknowledging difference amongst and between feminists. And yet, while many of the writers in our sample, claimed to want a return to more collective or ‘sisterly’ feminist politics, at the same time they appeared to be advocating *exclusionary* feminism through both the whiteness of their feminism and a rejection of intersectionality, as well as an emphasis on cis-women first. Very often this was evidenced through a critique or rejection of intersectionality. Feminist nostalgia for collectivism expresses itself through a language that can be *a-priori* problematic, none more so than ‘sisterhood’. Sisterhood is often tinged with a sense of romance within feminist history (cf Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful*) and yet as a political and linguistic device it has been used to obscure and deny the important differences between women in relation to class, race, disability and nationality (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981) and more recently in relation to gender identity. The nostalgic attachment to sisterhood speaks to the longing for a collective sense of identity, with an implicit, if not explicit, desire to suppress difference in favour of a universal voice. And yet, a nostalgia for collectivism as expressed through calls for sisterhood is undermined by both a failure to reflect upon the dominance of white feminism as well as explicit calls for trans-exclusionary politics. As with radicalism, we identified different strands within this nostalgic desire for sisterhood: a criticism of intersectionality; and calls for a return to a cis-women first approach.

Intersectionality

The rise of intersectional feminism has resulted in more critical attention being paid to white feminism (Olufemi, 2020), this in itself has been a point of contention for some feminist writers who reject or repudiate the idea of white feminism as well as the call for them to engage with intersectionality. Thus, intersectionality itself became synonymous with contemporary feminism, a feminism which many of the writers in our sample found wanting.²⁶ For instance, reviewing the state of modern feminism in 2013, Suzanne Moore observed that ‘one of the problems with the jargon of intersectionality is that it splinters’ calling for a ‘back to basics’ feminism;²⁷ similarly, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett criticised academic feminists for using ‘alienating terms such as “intersectionality.”’²⁸ Meanwhile, in 2017 Eleanor Robertson declared that ‘Nobody knows what intersectionality means’, in a piece

²⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/why-twerking-is-a-feminist-issue-9qbbxm6dhkz> [accessed 15.2.21]

²⁶ There were of course some examples in our sample of pieces written by Women of Colour who advocated for intersectional analysis and identified feminism’s problem with race e.g. Eliza Anyangwe’s 2015 piece on misogynoir and the failure of mainstream feminism <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/05/what-is-misogynoir> [accessed 4.2.21] or Roby Hamad and Celeste Liddle’s 2017 piece on why feminism is failing at intersectionality <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/11/intersectionality-not-while-feminists-participate-in-pile-ons> [accessed 4.2.21]

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/01/women-gain-feminism-diana-rigg> [accessed 15.2.21]

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/25/feminism-make-space-for-half-arsed> [accessed 15.2.21]

entitled 'Feminism's problem with jargon.'²⁹ Jane Martinson, contrasting favourably the website Mumsnet for its 'soft' feminism with the 'young media- savvy fourth wave', depicts intersectionality as an abstract idea divorced from the realities of lived experience, 'Many of the Mumsnet feminists I talked to said they had always been "feminists" but not "academic" ones - as if a discussion of intersectionality and gender theory were the real ways to define themselves as believing in equality, rather than the way they chose to live their lives,'³⁰; it is interesting to note that Mumsnet has long been a site that has been described by transgender rights activists as being particularly hostile.³¹ While the practice of translating intersectional theory into practice was also criticised, especially any call for feminists to reflect upon their privilege, which according to Zoe Williams is comparable to the 'right-wing tactic' of 'hyper-individualising' every argument.³² The criticisms of intersectionality were, on one level, about expressing a desire for unity amongst and between women and yet, this desire for unity and collective identity was notable in its absence when related to the issue of trans women and their inclusion within the movement.

Cis-women first

Nostalgia for an imaginary unified sisterhood is also present in those rejecting, either implicitly or explicitly, trans-inclusive feminism. We repeat that this nostalgia is for an *imaginary* past, debates over trans-inclusion have long been part of feminism. The normalisation of this position has been particularly prominent in the *Guardian*, for example its Editorial response to proposed changes to allow people to self-define their gender included typical transphobic rhetoric regarding the threat of 'male-bodied' people in changing rooms; although the paper was forced to take down a piece from its website written by Julie Birchill in which she described transgender people as 'dicks in chicks' clothing.'³³ Writing in 2020, Susanna Rustin defended her 'gender-critical' position, and insistence on sex-differences, rejected the use of the term 'cis-gender' and sought to situate herself within a 'Beauvoirian feminism' that was at odds with the gender-feminism of thinkers such as Judith Butler.³⁴

The nostalgia for a (cis)woman-first approach was brought to the fore recently through arguments over trans-rights which erupted during the planned celebration of the 50-year anniversary of the first Oxford Women's Liberation Conference.³⁵ The fallout resulted in many feminists who had been active in the women's liberation movement arguing that contemporary, and younger, feminists had failed to recognise the purpose of feminism, as

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/30/intersectional-feminism-jargon> [accessed 4.2.21]

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/aug/30/mumsnet-social-media-forums-feminism> [accessed 15.2.21]

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jun/13/mumsnet-transgender-row-feminism-tougher-forum-rules> [accessed 15.2.21]

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/18/are-you-too-white-rich-straight-to-be-feminist> [accessed 17.6.2020]

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/02/guardian-editorial-response-transgender-rights-uk> [accessed 1.2.2020] and <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/14/observer-withdraws-julie-burchill-column> [accessed 4.2.21]

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/30/feminists-anti-trans-idea-sex-gender-oppression> [accessed 4.2.21]

³⁵ Oxford historian and women's liberation activist Selina Todd was asked not to provide the thank you address on behalf of the Oxford History Department after objections were raised by other speakers concerning Todd's links with Woman's Place UK.

expressed by *Guardian* journalist Suzanne Moore, “I feel a huge sadness when I look at the fragmentation of the landscape, where endless fighting, cancellations and no-platformings have obscured our understanding of who the real enemies are.”³⁶ The fragmentation Moore identifies often plays out as a cultural war between established feminists, and a younger generation who typically advocate a more trans-inclusive feminism.³⁷ As a post-script, it is worth noting that in 2020, staff at the *Guardian* signed a letter of complaint to the Editor complaining about the transphobic content in a piece that Moore had written, this eventually led Moore to resign.³⁸

Conclusion

This paper has set out our contextualised theory of feminist nostalgia, and illustrated its different dimensions as evidenced in white popular feminism in the UK between 2010-2020. It is striking in a time in which there is growing awareness of intersectionality and difference amongst feminist activists that this should be a period which is seen as lacking radicalism and too focused on identity. The radical nature of much intersectional activism has been widely documented, along with the important role that intersectional analysis plays in interrogating global capitalism and global inequality (Collins and Bilge, 2016). That the backlash to contemporary feminist politics is largely driven by white feminists is instructive, indeed in some respects the rejection of contemporary feminism signifies a desire to maintain control over the direction and agenda of feminist politics. Intersectional feminist praxis offers the radical politics needed to combat and resist the challenges of the current period, namely neoliberal feminism and femonationalism populism.

Nostalgia, as we understand it, is not necessarily tethered to a specific time or wave of feminism but is rather yearning for an imaginary past feminism in order to resist or repudiate the present. While nostalgia gestures to the past, it is almost atemporal in its longing for a form of feminism that could only be understood as ‘not now,’ prioritising types of activism over actual time periods. This ‘not now’ is twofold. In the first instance, it reads as generational critique, in which nostalgia is purely a means by which to criticise and reject contemporary forms of activism. This is particularly true of longing for a (cis)woman-first feminism in a time of increased intersectionality, as well as a desire for sisterhood that has long been considered problematic. Not only are these objects of nostalgia asynchronous with this contemporary, they are deliberately aimed at countering a feminism that emphasises inclusivity.

The second version of ‘not now’ could be read as a reaction to populism and neoliberalism as contexts for a contemporary feminist movement. The nostalgia for feminist methods that predate the present moment are also a nostalgia for a wider context that allowed for greater divisions between market concerns and feminism; had less conflation of Western feminism with anti-Islam agendas; and predated the monolith of social media. Again, this form of

³⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/commentisfree/2020/mar/02/women-must-have-the-right-to-organise-we-will-not-be-silenced> [accessed 3.3.2020]

³⁷ Of course there are also those older feminists who advocate a more inclusive sisterhood e.g. Polly Toynebee writing in 2016 urged ‘let’s welcome anyone into the sisterhood’
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/14/feminism-must-embrace-trans-people-parliament-equality-gender-barriers> [accessed 4.2.21]

³⁸ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/patrickstrudwick/guardian-staff-trans-rights-letter> [accessed 15.2.21]

longing is atemporal and counter to feminism's productivity; to yearn for a feminism that has been untouched by both neoliberalism and populism is longing for the impossible. Furthermore, it may reflect a frustration on the part of feminists who, having invested in state institutions as the site for social transformation, acknowledge the inexorable influence of neoliberalism, and increasingly populism, on social politics. Nostalgia for a different social and political context ultimately overlooks the radical contemporary activism taking place in response to these very contexts. What does returning to placards achieve if a significant amount of contemporary life is conducted online? What does the woman with the folding table on the sidewalk achieve that an online petition – more widely circulated – does not?

Nostalgia, therefore, is tied to a time in which particular feminists felt theirs were bodies that mattered, both in public visibility and in regard to their biology, overlooking that white popular feminism still has very public platforms. None of the critiques of contemporary feminism developed through the lens of nostalgia aim to make the movement more open, dialogic, and radical. Rather, it is an *intersectional* lens which produces radical feminist analysis which, through its emphasis on social justice and focus on structural power dynamics, is better equipped to identify, interrogate and resist the threats to the most marginalised posed by both neoliberalism and neoliberal feminists, as well as by populists and femonationalists.

The harmful effects of neoliberalism, particularly post-2008, have been well-documented by feminists, including: the exacerbation of existing material inequalities for marginalised women (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017); the problematic promotion of market-based solutions for social and political problems (Fraser, 2013); the integration and normalisation of consumerism as aspirational feminism (Rottenberg, 2014); and its damaging implications for radical intellectual critique (Mohanty, 2013). Meanwhile, populist nationalistic politics has presented new challenges and revived old threats, including: the use of gender equality and women's rights to advance anti-Islam agendas (Farris, 2017; Lépinard, 2020); attacks on women's reproductive rights (Franklin and Ginsburg, 2019); and the demonization of refugee women (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Schuster, 2020). In such a context, the voices of white feminists, which are relatively privileged, have continued to dominate popular feminism (Phipps, 2020), attempting to both set the agenda and create and recreate fantasies of the past.

The misappropriation of feminism by neoliberal regimes and some feminists, which present self-improvement and personal responsibility as feminism (Rottenberg, 2014), and by populist politicians and some feminists, who seek to tie nationalism and nativism to the preservation of women's rights (Farris, 2017), serves to divide women and minorities. Unfortunately, this division is echoed within feminism, with some white feminists yearning for a time of supposed greater radicalism (both ideologically and tactically) but also one of greater exclusion (Phipps, 2020). Certainly, feminism has been historically positioned as somehow above the inequalities and exclusionary norms of wider society, yet this particular moment has ushered in a politics *reflective* of societal divisions and exclusions (Ahmed 2016). Calls for a return to radical politics, (cis)woman-first agendas, and an emphasis on the

sameness of sisterhood, opens the possibility of feminism mirroring a wider white nationalist solipsism that is thriving under the rise of femonationalism.³⁹

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers of this current wave of feminist nostalgia is that it replicates the politics of the regimes it seeks to oppose i.e. neoliberal feminism and femonationalism. For instance, a feminism which does not adopt an intersectional lens is surely in danger of returning to a form of solipsistic white feminism. Meanwhile a failure to account for privilege and difference could perpetuate white resistance to addressing nationalistic and even nativist form of feminism, as feminists work collaboratively with right wing governments to, for instance, further marginalise the trans community. The presence of nostalgia within this current moment, one in which increasing numbers of feminist and queer movements are forced to think about power, privilege and difference within their ideologies and movements, is cause for concern. In sum, the nostalgia we have identified in white popular feminism is particularly troubling because we are in a moment when there is increasing awareness and engagement with intersectional thinking and praxis.

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³⁹ Nadiya Ali has written about high profile white feminists in the UK and US who often defend their racism (or indeed transphobia) as 'truth-telling' <https://mediadiversified.org/2018/02/06/jess-phillips-lena-dunham-and-white-feminism/> [accessed 4.5.2020]

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