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The frontiers of sisterhood: representations of black feminism in *Spare Rib* (1972-1979)

Donna Chambers and Rob Worrall

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, and lifted over ditches, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place. And aint I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And aint I a woman? I could work as much as and eat as much as a man – when I could get it!- and bear the lash as well! And aint I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off into slavery, and when I cried with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And aint I a woman? (Sojourner Truth, 1851, cited in Carby 1996, p. 64).

Introduction

The often cited words of Sojourner Truth at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio underlines how racism ensures that the way in which black women's gender is constructed and lived is materially different from white women's. Whilst the multiple oppressions faced by black women have been recognised since the slavery era with terms such as 'double oppression', 'interlocking oppression' and 'triple jeopardy' (Guy Sheftal, 1995) it took more than 130 years before it was given the now popularized term 'intersectionality' by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). For Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the way in which racial and sexual subordination are inextricably linked. Crenshaw argues that it is this failure to understand the mutually reinforcing relationship between racism and sexism, that led to the significant elision of black women's experiences from both the discourses of feminism and the discourses of anti-racism.

This chapter is fairly unique in its use of black feminist theory (Love, 2016) as an organising framework for undertaking a critical interrogation of the (her)story of the black woman and how she has been (re)presented in the most iconic British feminist magazine of the 20th century – *Spare Rib* (SR). Through critical investigations of the first eight years of the magazine 1972-1979, a period which was central both to the emergent women's liberation movement and also to the development of radical black activism in Britain (Sudbury, 1997; Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006), we problematise the way in which the black woman has been portrayed both in terms of textual and visual narratives. The key questions

which we seek to explore include: what is the extent of (in)visibility of black feminist issues during this era? What key concepts/issues are seen as central to the lives of black women during this initial eight-year period and how and to what extent did these change? Who was invested with the authority to speak about black women's issues? The chapter is divided into four sections – the first is a necessarily brief discussion of black feminist theory(ies) including its (re)conceptualisation for the British context. The second outlines the methods used in our analysis. The third interrogates how black women's issues are (re)presented in SR during its first eight years. The final section summarises the key ideas emerging from the chapter, and reflects on both the magazine's development after this initial eight-year period and on the research process. It is hoped that the explorations in this chapter will shed light on the treatment by SR of issues of intersectionality particularly between race and gender during this period, one which was of importance for the emergence of a women's liberation movement in Britain ostensibly dedicated to reaching out to *all* women.

Exploring Black Feminism(s)

Crenshaw (1989) argues that a feminist theory that excluded black women could not simply be addressed by 'inserting' black women into an already defined analytical structure' (p. 140). Alternatively, she suggests that what is required is a dismantling of the entire feminist framework. For her part, Collins contends that

using the term 'black feminism' disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective 'black' challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women (2001 p13).

It is evident that while both Collins and Crenshaw agreed with the need for a black feminist movement they perhaps disagreed on how this could be achieved. Indeed, Collins (1990) had earlier recognised that black feminist thought is itself not homogenous, but encompasses a diverse set of contradictory meanings and tensions, a point that is supported by Hamer and Neville (2001). A key tension within black feminism surrounds the problematic question of who has the authority to speak as a black feminist. Are all women of black African descent black feminists based on their lived experiences as black women regardless of whether or not they consciously identify as feminists? If this were the case then black feminism would be reduced to highly tenuous biological categories (black and woman) devoid of any feminist consciousness (Collins, 1990). If the possession of a 'feminist consciousness' (rather than biology) is accepted as an essential marker, then this would imply that both men and (white) women could be black feminists. Guy-Sheftall (1987) suggests that blackness (in a biological

sense) and the possession of a 'feminist consciousness' means that some notable black men such as William E.B. DuBois could be identified as black feminists. However, she also argues that there are some features that distinguish black feminism – the experiences of black women with racial and gender oppression resulting in problems and needs different from both white women and black men; and the struggle by black women for equality on the basis of gender **and** race, which engender a black feminist sensibility. In this sense Guy-Sheftall's notion of black feminism encompasses both experiences and ideas (Collins, 1990). Yet this understanding of black feminism remains problematic as it is still underpinned by a biological determinism (blackness) (Collins, 1990).

The 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective (Combahee River Collective, 1978) is seen as a seminal moment in the development of the black feminist movement particularly in the United States. In this statement the Collective describe their politics as a struggle against 'interlocking oppressions' that are racial, sexual, heterosexual and class driven. It is evident that Crenshaw (1989) borrowed from this notion in coining the term 'intersectionality.' The Collective intimated that black feminist movements predated the emergence of (white) feminism and indeed there had been a long history of Black women activists. They also acknowledged the evolution of a black feminist presence in tandem with the 'second wave' of the American women's movement which began in the late 1960s and also with the movements for black liberation in the 1960s and 1970s (such as the civil rights, Black Panther and black nationalist movements). However, they express their disillusionment with all of these liberation movements due to their sexism, racism and elitism which had led to the marginalisation of the black feminist presence.

This ground-breaking statement of the Collective implicitly suggests that only African-American women can be black feminists (based on their personal and political experiences) despite the fact that they argue that 'any type of biological determinism (is) a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic' (Combahee River Collective, 1978 p214). According to Collins such biological determinism, by presenting an essentialised and immutable view of race 'masks the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping conceptions of race' (1990, p2). At the same time, the Collective's perception of feminists is more flexible and wide-ranging and includes radical feminists (who subscribe to biological determinism in their belief that only women can be feminists) and those feminists who believe that only individuals who have undergone a political transformation can be feminists (technically anyone) (Collins, 1990). Yet despite these ruminations we are still left with the question of who then can be a Black feminist? For to have a solely politico-ideological definition of black

feminism risks negating the importance of the personal experiences of black women which is integral to understanding their distinct oppressions. On the other hand, to focus only on biology is to risk inscribing a natural determinism onto what is a socially constructed concept of 'race.' Collins seeks to address these problematics, first by acknowledging that they exist and then by deriving both a theoretical and experiential definition of black feminism as:

Specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it (1990, p 3).

While this definition provides an operating framework for discussions of black feminism, it does not escape the strictures of race as a biological category as it suggests that only African-American women can be black feminists. This creates its own exclusions, notably of women who are from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (such as Asian and Latin American women) and who nevertheless experience similar oppressions within what is a predominantly white, male, patriarchal society. It does not escape a reductionist interpretation of 'blackness' which Collins was anxious to critique. Nevertheless, this definition by Collins does speak to the need for 'reality' to be constructed and interpreted by those who actually experience it – in other words black feminism only exists when black women are able to give voice to their own experiences of oppression and discrimination and to seek for change themselves. However, we need to return to the question of the meaning of 'black' for if one agrees that race is a social construct and cannot be reduced to biology then it opens up the political underpinnings of the notion of 'blackness' which goes beyond women of African-American descent.

It is this wider conception of 'blackness' that is embraced (though not universally) within black British feminism which emerged from a different historical context than its American counterpart. It sought to expand the discourse on blackness to include all peoples (and not only those of African descent) from the British postcolonial diaspora who had been silenced in discourses of 'Britishness'. For black British feminists being black is not about race, but is rather seen as the development of a shared consciousness by all the 'others' who had been objectified within the context of British whiteness. Blackness is a 'self-consciously constructed space where identity was not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship' (Sandoval, 1991 cited in Mirza, 1997, p 3). Mirza went on to suggest that to be black in Britain is to share a common 'space of marginalization' which is inhabited

by a diverse range of postcolonial migrants united by their desire to dismantle the racialised discourse of Britishness through strategic collective action. It is within this context that black British feminism emerged as a 'conscious coalition' which represented a 'meaningful act of identification' for black women in Britain (Mirza, 1997, p 4).

Thus, black British feminism, as a social and political project seeks to empower black women to reclaim their agency and to contest the sexualised racialisation of the system in which they exist. Mirza speaks of black feminism rather than black feminism(s) to suggest that the political movement that had been consciously developed had a single purpose – that is, to reveal the elisions and stereotypical (re)presentations of women defined as 'other' in the context of a gendered, racialised and sexualised discourse. Unlike black feminism in America, black British feminism valorised polyvocality (in terms of who can be defined as 'black') but within a 'conscious construction of sameness (ie black feminism)' (Mirza, 1997, p 21). Yet, Mirza acknowledges that this political notion of blackness is not shared by all as it is seen to erase religious and ethnic differences between and among postcolonial migrants in Britain which is key to the construction of identity and belonging. Indeed, Aziz (1997) argues that more than half of South Asian people did not identify as 'black'. She suggests that cultural identity matters and what was required instead was a 'feminism of difference' that took account of the 'actual historical differences in the nature of colonialism, imperialism, racism and representation – and how these are appropriated.' (Aziz, 1997, p 74). Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1990) also suggest that while there are struggles that affect all migrant women in Britain, some struggles are specific to particular ethnic groups and Phoenix (1990) contends that black people of Asian origin have different gender experiences than black people of Caribbean origin and thus need to be dealt with separately.

We have so far very briefly discussed the main tenets of black feminism and the key dialectics which exist within this political project both within America and in Britain. This discussion has provided a theoretical framework which has informed our analysis. So it is against this background that we seek to understand the framing of black women and black feminist issues within the first eight years of a magazine formed with a commitment to reaching out to 'all women, cutting across material, economic and class barriers to approach them as individuals in their own right' (*Spare Rib*, Issue 1, 1972). But before doing so it is important to discuss the methods we used in our analysis.

An overview of methods

We undertook a critical diachronic analysis of the early period of SR which involved detailed reading of every issue of the magazine since its inception in 1972 up to and including 1979. This amounted

to a total of 89 Issues, covering over 4,000 pages. We conducted our analysis from the digital editions of the magazine which are freely available on the website of the British Library. The geographical focus of SR was predominantly on women in Britain, but by Issue 6, December 1972 the magazine's editors decided to feature women in other countries starting with Cuba. Still, overall the magazine's coverage was specific to women in Britain and did not normally differentiate between black women and white women but rather, treated women as a homogenous group, with similar issues and concerns. Indeed, in our exegesis of the magazine in the period under review, we found that there was limited coverage of black women especially of black British women. However, this is not to say that black women were absent from the magazine's narratives and images.

Therefore, in our re-reading of SR we sought to ascertain what specific topics were discussed with regard to black women, how extensive these discussions were (in terms of the amount of coverage), who were the authors or producers of these discussions (that is, who was invested with the authority to speak?), and finally whether narratives had changed over this eight-year period. In so doing we have taken account of both the text and the visual images (photographs and illustrations). Importantly, we looked for what was included as well as where there might be silences or omissions as what is not said is as important in the context of representation. We divided the eight-year period into two four year periods (1972-1975 and 1976-1979) with each author examining one of these periods, highlighting relevant narratives and images. We then exchanged our raw data and notes on the periods we covered in order that we might review each other's interpretations for consistency. Finally, we met together to discuss and agree on key themes emerging from the data. What we present in this chapter is a snapshot of data from the magazine as the word structures of this volume do not allow for the provision of more extensive evidence.

The framing of black women in Spare Rib

From our analysis three key themes emerged that reflect how black women were predominantly (re)presented in SR between 1972-1979 – black women as cultural icons; the Third World black woman; and the working class black woman in Britain (predominantly Asian).

Black Women as cultural icons

In our re-reading of SR we found several images, album reviews, articles and interviews with iconic black women singers primarily from America but also from Britain including Bessie Smith, Dianna

Ross, Etta James, Joan Armatrading, Aretha Franklin, Linda Lewis, and Millie Jackson. This focus on black women cultural icons suggests the existence of a binary opposition between culture and knowledge with the former seen as inferior to the latter. In other words, black women have culture while white women have knowledge (see for example Mignolo, 2009 on decolonisation). While most of the album and concert reviews are favourable with regard to the quality of these women's music, we found several instances where the language used in the reviews appear to reinforce racist stereotypes. The first example of this is in Issue 4, October 1972 where there is a one-page article (p.16) about the life of Bessie Smith, written by a male author (Alan Balfour) and titled '*Bessie Smith: the gin soaked queen from Chatanooga*'. The focus of the article is on the tragic life of Smith, her upbringing in the ghetto, her alcoholism and her early death in a traffic accident. Throughout the article the word 'negro' is used to refer to black people in America. This is despite the fact that the word had been considered to be derogatory since the 1960s in America with the rise of the Black Power movement when the word 'black' was preferred to express political identity (Oxford English Dictionary, no date). The tone of the article while it focuses on the negative aspects of Smith's life, seems to display a paternalistic sympathy to her plight as a black woman in the context of a racist American society.

Bessie Smith appears again in Issue 8, February 1973 where there is a largely positive review of Smith's album titled '*Nobody's Blues but Mine*', written by Carmel Koerber. This article again speaks of the oppressed condition of blacks in America that had led to the emergence of the Blues as a musical genre. Interestingly there is the use of the word 'Black American' to describe black people in America, but in the same article Smith is referred to as 'a negro and a woman'. This use of the word 'negro' in both of these articles on Smith when it is clear that an alternative, more acceptable word ('black') was in use in the 1970s demonstrates a lack of awareness or understanding of racist terminologies and their effects. Clearly both authors demonstrate sympathy for the plight of the 'negro' woman in racist America, but they do not demonstrate a concomitant awareness of black liberation movements in America and their reframing of black political identity.

There are several other Issues which contain album and concert reviews. There are also numerous advertisements promoting new albums by black women including in Issues 53, 63, 68, 72, 74, 75, 77, 81, and 84. Issue 68, March 1978 has a review by Jill Nicholls and Val Wilmer of a concert by Millie Jackson at the Hammersmith Odeon in London. In this review which covers about three columns from pages 36-37 they portray Jackson thus:

She was mock-masculine in black bowtie and suit with spangled silver waistcoat and lapels...On record she's often very moving but on stage it's clearly not

romance she's singing about but sex, and the sex war. She spells out the hype in sexual relationships, then turns around and demands equal satisfaction. No way is Millie Jackson a feminist...Yet unlike other Black 'sex symbols', she doesn't prowl. Millie Jackson strides around the stage.... Her whole act is full of self-parody... These are real capitalist sex relations, not the feudalism of romance. It's a competition between the men and the women, and between the women to catch the men... Her parody of the-man fuck- 'Up-down up down, and thinking he is something'-is brilliant, and her cunnilingus routine, where she discusses the role played by various kinds of beard is hilarious. Although a lot of her politics are wrong - her anti-gay remarks were just a means of scoring a cheap laugh -her on stage attitude and the idea of self-determination she projects make a change from the usual 'stand by your man' line in Black music.

Our re-reading of this story suggests that both reviewers are militant feminists who are anti-male. Jackson's anti-gay stance while it is condemned, is thus parenthesised, the latter not seen to be as worthy of discussion as Jackson's anti-male positioning. The tone of the review is largely supportive of the explicit vulgarity of Jackson's performance which parodies men but the reviewers simultaneously indicate that Jackson is definitely not a feminist, thereby denying her their own feminist credentials. The reviewers suggest that Jackson is a welcome change from other black women singers who are supportive of their men while they nevertheless (re)present her here in what black feminists would describe as a stereotypical portrayal of black women as 'jezebels, mummies and sapphires'¹ (Hamer and Neville, 2001, p 24). We argue also that the reviewers in this article project a power relationship over the black woman which is based on racist stereotypes and which denies her a legitimate role in the feminist project. Indeed, more positive portrayals seem to be dependent on black women artists conforming to the reviewer's notion of the feminist ideal (e.g. Issue 77 – pp 33-34). In this Issue Joan Armatrading is lauded as being very important to feminism - 'Hearing her albums in feminist households is like finding milk in the fridge.' Whilst on the other hand she is criticised for not making her political stance clearer and the reviewer projects a role onto Armatrading which suits her own agenda by pleading 'I respect that she doesn't want to be a token feminist singer — a restrictive role for anyone. But I wish she'd see how important it is to us for those rare sympathisers in power positions to come out as such'.

¹ A sapphire is a caricature often attributed to how Black women are portrayed particularly in cinema and the television as loud, bitchy, rude, overbearing, and emasculating.

A review of an Etta James concert in London (Issue 74, September 1978), written by Val Wilmer starts out with the following:

When Etta James straddles a ceiling support and leers suggestively at her audience, the indications for women are not particularly positive. Nevertheless, she is one of the few black women Rhythm and-Blues singers to survive in the rawest state. Her act reflects what is expected from her in ghetto clubs all over America — plenty of sexual innuendo and little subtlety with it.

Wilmer goes on to note:

Her appearance in this country was long overdue but some people in the audience at Dingwall's last month were disappointed. They interpreted her self-mockery and crude sexual displays as acting out the role of 'white man's black woman'. In fact, the reverse was true. James treated her audience as though she was on her home ground, and if this meant an assertion of dubious values, at least she was being true to herself and not putting anybody on... She's explicit, god knows, but she is also 'don't give a shit' personified.

Here Wilmer reinforces another stereotypical image of the black woman as being hypersexual and animalistic (Springer, 2002) with references to James as **straddling** the ceiling support, **leering** at the audience and as exhibiting 'crude sexual displays'. Wilmer refers to James' 'dubious values' as her being 'true to herself'. Wilmer by speaking **for** James, assumes some authority over who the 'real' Etta James actually is. Further, in what appears to be an attempt to validate herself among black women, as being 'right on' as it were, Wilmer compares Etta's powerful ownership of black singer Erma Franklin's 'Take A Piece Of My Heart' with the 'colonised' 'masochism' version of Janis Joplin. Another example of the reviewers speaking **for**, and **about** black women and inscribing their own expectations of what 'feminism' should look like is in Issue 72, July 1978 where there is a review of a Diana Ross concert. Here, Ross is accused of projecting an artificial version of what 'black success' is like. There is an irony here - who is the reviewer to say what 'black success' should look like?

Black Women in the Third World

As previously indicated, Issue 6, December 1972 is the first time that SR featured reports on women in other countries and many of the subsequent reports largely focused on women in the Third World starting with Cuba but also included Japan. The first report which focuses on Cuba is titled '*On being*

a woman in Cuba' and is written by Yvonne Roberts who apparently wrote the article based on a visit to Cuba and interviews with a handful of Cuban women. The report runs over four pages and includes several photographs of Cuban scenery, the inside of a hotel and photographs related to the Cuban revolution of 1959. Interestingly there are no pictures or images of Cuban women and only men are clearly discerned in two of the photos (apart from images of the male Cuban revolutionary leaders on posters and billboards). It is interesting that in this report on Cuba the women there are represented as a homogenous group, ignoring the racial tensions that existed in Cuba and the history of the country which was steeped in Spanish slavery and colonialism.

The article focuses on celebrating the 1959 socialist revolution in Cuba and its allegedly largely positive consequences for (all) women and men in the country. There are sweeping generalisations about 'the Cuban woman' while admitting that the country is not one of 'absolutes'. The following quote which concludes the article is written using third person pronouns, making constant reference to 'the Cuban woman' as 'she' and 'her' which in itself is an objectification of Cuban women at the same time that the writer is arguing that 'the Cuban woman' as a sex **object** is fading:

Cuba is not a country of Absolutes; its commitment to change is self-evident. Thus, the Cuban woman admits that she misses certain goods and may even complain but essentially her attitude on any question of 'self-sacrifice' is one conditioned by her memory of the past and her aspirations for the future. Not only that, she is very well aware that the very existence of rationing and the absence of the need to make the Hard Sell, has operated in her favour...the concept of woman as a sex object is gradually fading from public view.

There are also several anthropological accounts of women in the Third World including - Issue 25, July 1974, where there is a two- page feature story on the Amazons in Dahomey, Africa in which anthropologist Eva Meyerowitz's recounts the results of her research on this group of women. She apparently wrote four books on the subject thereby establishing herself as an 'authority' on the lives and history of these Amazonian women. In addition, Issue 26, August 1974 has a three-page article written by Madi Gray titled '*Women militants – Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau*' which purports to represent a compilation of notes Gray had taken 'when she met and talked with women militants in Mozambique and Angola and after spending nine months in Tanzania'. Gray's article starts by stating that:

In colonial countries women suffer from a double oppression. Like men they are exploited and oppressed by those who wield the power. They are also taught to

be inferior and to consider themselves objects to serve men, the former function of which has long been perverted to serve the invader's needs.

It is significant that whilst Gray does demonstrate some understanding of the notion of intersectionality, she appears to believe that this concept has relevance only in colonial countries and not in British society. In this 'othering' of the colonial woman, she fails to acknowledge the impact of racism (one consequence of colonialism) on women in British society.

In Issue 29, November 1974, there is a three- page feature story on Olive Shreiner, described as a 'South African novelist, feminist, socialist and free thinker' all qualities which no doubt fulfilled all the criteria of a 'true' feminist. The story is by SR writer Ann Scott who interviewed Shreiner's biographer, Ruth First. First indicates in this biography that Shreiner recognises that after the Boer War there was a conspiracy between Boer and Briton for the oppression of the African majority. Indeed, when the South African Women's Enfranchisement movement was formed, Shreiner resigned as a sponsor 'on a very important point of principle when they changed the definition of women to read **white** women' (emphasis in original). However, when First is asked by Scott whether Shreiner had made any contacts with African society and African women, she responded in a way which, while it seems sympathetic to the Africans, nevertheless objectifies them:

She had stray conversations with African women, but made no systematic study of their society or social institutions. Remember these are the days before serious anthropology. In any case, in her time in South Africa Africans were not seen to be people – they were creatures or in Afrikaans - *skepsele*. But for most of her life it was very difficult, if not impossible to have an equal contact with Africans or to get close enough to African society to study it.

In Issue 27, September 1974 there is a feature article on Indian women which reports on a visit to India by Anne Doggett who had returned from a two-month visit to Bombay, Delhi, and the Himalayas. The title of the story as written on the cover page of this Issue is '*India: eve-teasing, widow burning*'. In this report Doggett addresses the status of women in India as she saw it and not from the voices of the Indian women themselves. Apparently her report is based on her own observations and talks with a handful of women 'in political organisations.' In a subsequent Issue of the magazine (Issue 29, November 1974) there is an angry letter from one of the regular SR writers, Amrit Wilson who is herself of Asian heritage and who contended that there were several inaccuracies in Doggett's account. In Wilson's riposte, titled 'Racist Sensationalism?' she makes some pertinent arguments about Doggett's story:

She could have tried talking to a few ordinary women instead. Could she speak any Indian language? I am sure women from a white country would not be described from such an outside viewpoint. It is as though a group of women had been described by a man who watched them but never spoke to them.

Wilson's letter is followed by an apology from Anne Doggett who admits that there were indeed inaccuracies in her story but in her defence says that she did not read the article before it was published. She takes responsibility for this but still blames SR for what she describes as 'glib journalese'.

The apartheid regime, racism and sexism in South Africa are also concerns which preoccupy the magazine throughout the period under review as witnessed in the many news articles, reports, reviews, images and advertisements (see for example Issues 15, 20, 24, 32, 39, 40, 42,50, 51, 54, 60, 65,81). This obsession with women in the Third World is said by Carby to be Eurocentric and reflects the elision in British feminist theory of the experiences of black women in Britain, instead 'trundling 'Third World women' onto the stage only to perform as victims of 'barbarous', 'primitive' practices in 'barbarous', 'primitive' societies' (Carby 1996, p 72). It is Eurocentric as it assumes that the liberation of women can be furthered by adopting a 'Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labour' (Carby 1996, p 72). We believe that Carby's arguments are largely accurate although admittedly a few of the articles focus on women and their issues from a Third World perspective as in Issue 79 (Feb 1979), where there is a main feature (three pages) by Jill Nicholls who interviews a high profile black feminist from the developing world – the Egyptian Nawal el Saadawi. It is a significant article because it recounts the voice of a woman from the south active in helping other women from the south through a UN advisory role, writing and specific projects. In addition, one of the themes we found in our own analysis of the magazine is 'black working class women in Britain' albeit that the focus tended to be on Asian women as we discuss in the next section.

Black working class women in Britain

In this context, most of the articles concern Asian working class women and documents their discrimination in the workplace and also their struggles against discrimination. Racism is portrayed as a key factor contributing to their poor treatment while cultural barriers are said to impact on their ability to liberate themselves from these conditions. The first such lengthy article appears in Issue 17, November 1973 and covers almost five pages (17-21). It is written by a group of writers (Rosie

Boycott; Christine Aziz; Geoffrey Sheridan) and is one of the news items titled '*Lottery of the lowest – Asian families in Southall*'. It speaks about the poor working conditions of both Asian men and women in Southall, London but focuses particularly on the women who work in atrocious conditions at the airport and whose lack of English language competence is seen as a key barrier to their political organisation. The authors cite one Nerys Williams who is said to run:

English classes for immigrant women and seems to know every Asian family living in Southall. She explains, 'The problems that these women encounter when widowed or deserted are in no way similar to those experienced by their Western counterparts. Their situation is intensely aggravated by their lack of English and their total passivity and reluctance to act positively. This gives one the mistaken impression', says Nerys, 'that they are uncooperative. This is merely the result of a lifetime of servitude and dependence upon the immediate family, husband and children. To have to function suddenly as an independent, thinking person and to be economically responsible for the rest of the family is a great strain for them. They are completely lost and helpless.'

This account of Asian women is reductionist and fails to take account of Asian women's agency as documented in the magazine itself through its discussion of the strike action taken by these women. Indeed, there are many other instances of articles which recount Asian women and their struggles for liberation in the workplace including Issue 21, March 1974 which speaks to a strike at Mansfield Hosiery (this involved both male and female Asian workers). Written by Bennie Bunsee, what is interesting about this article is how it juxtaposes the conditions of white women workers (who were said to constitute the largest percentage of the 60% strong women workforce) with those of their Asian counterparts which is said to be materially worse. Asian women's agency is also evident in one woman in particular, Jayaben Desai (Issue 60, July 1977 pp. 6-7 and 46), who in an article entitled '*A Nice Power*', can be seen as an Asian hero. This article does at least challenge white assumptions about passive Asian women dominated by a male patriarchy as '60% of strikers are women and they have challenged the traditional role assumed for them as passive tea makers'.

There is much coverage of immigration and the Immigration Act which is said to be both racist and sexist and particularly discriminates against Asian women who wish to bring their husbands from Asia to Britain. In one of the first references to the discrimination inherent in the Act, an article in Issue 25, July 1974, covering two pages and written by Amrit Wilson (who appears to be one of the few Asian writers for SR) is titled '*Racism and sexism – how they are linked under the Immigration*

Act.’ In this article Wilson alludes to the concept of intersectionality and how the experience of Asian women immigrants is different from those of their white counterparts under the Act.

We found several other discussions of immigration and the Immigration Act throughout the eight-year period (Issues 38, 40, 41, 42, 54, 71, 80, 81, 83, 87, 88, 89). Clearly this is envisaged as one of the key issues affecting black women particularly as they relate to Asian women and marriage.

There are less references to Caribbean (West Indian) immigrants and the discrimination they face in the workplace. One such reference however is in Issue 17, November 1973 where there is an article titled *‘Racism, discrimination and the unions’* written by Geoffrey Sheridan. It documents the strike at Standard Telephones and Cables by largely Caribbean workers, half of whom are said to be women.

It is not until issue 87 (October 1979) that we see a significant feature article covering four pages (42-45) on the black feminist movement in the UK. Here there is a report on the first national black women’s conference held by the umbrella Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD). There is also indirect mention of intersectionality – with the term ‘triple oppression’ being recognised as a key motivation for the establishment of the organisation and for convening the conference. It is stated in the article that the conference was held ‘to discuss some of the many issues which concern us because we are black, female; working-class or all three’. OWAAD indicates that the conference is of historical significance because of the ‘achievement of bringing together Asian, Afro and Indo-Caribbean, African and Black sisters born or brought up in Britain’. Of note is the fact that the cover page of this Issue has photos of black women either protesting or in discussion at the conference and photos of black women also appear within the article itself. Moreover, the article has been written by OWAAD and the three organisations that are featured in the article. Incidentally the groups are different in how they interpret the black women’s liberation struggle, with AWAZ – the Asian Women’s Movement - being clearest on its doctrine, that is, a Marxist interpretation of oppression with racism ‘as a class and not a moral issue’, and where Asian women’s involvement in the white feminist movement has ‘convinced them that the roots of their oppression is very different from white women’. This article is noteworthy as it demonstrates that SR was at last giving voice to black feminist movements in Britain without the filter of a white woman’s perspective.

Summary and Reflections

In this chapter we critically explored the discourse of black feminism which is distinctive from white feminism as it recognises the intersectionality primarily between race and gender but also a range of other identifications such as social class. We discussed the historical roots of black feminism in America and suggested that the black feminist movement in Britain, while it has no doubt been influenced by developments across the Atlantic, is mediated by the experience of colonialism. Black British feminism is also a much broader movement as it problematises the concept of 'blackness' to include all women from the postcolonial diaspora who face similar oppression and exclusion from the discourse and practice of 'Britishness'. This wider interpretation of 'blackness' necessarily includes women of African, Caribbean, Asian and Latin American heritage. Indeed, black British feminists argue that the term 'black' is not a biological construct but is a statement of political identity and kinship. We also suggested that neither white feminism nor black feminism represent singular narratives as there are many tensions within these discourses. While recognising the complexity of black feminism we nevertheless felt that it represented an appropriate theoretical framework within which to analyse the extent to which SR engaged with black women and their concerns during the initial eight years of its existence.

Our findings revealed that there is relatively limited coverage or awareness of black women's issues and black feminist theorising whether from America or from Britain. However, where there are references to black women the narratives are largely written by white women who presume to write **about** and **for** black women. We also found that many of the topics covered converge around three main themes – black women as cultural icons, the Third World black woman and black working class women in Britain. The focus on black women as cultural icons serves to reinforce racial categorisations of black people as excelling in music and sport but having limited intellectual prowess. Reviews of black women singers also often bolster stereotypes of black women as 'jezebels, mummies and sapphires' (Hamer and Neville, 2001, p 24) and as hypersexual and animalistic (Springer, 2002). These black women artists are also often specifically criticized for not conforming to reviewers' images of the 'ideal' feminist. Interestingly, the black women cultural icons are predominantly of African American or African/Caribbean British heritage and there is a silencing of Asian and other black voices within this context. The focus on Third World black women is paternalistic and Eurocentric with many of the writers presuming to have the authority to speak about black women in these countries often from essentialised anthropological perspectives. The discussion of black women in Britain largely focused on Asian women and many of the topics covered under this theme centred around black working class women and the discrimination they faced in the work place (many leading to strikes) and also the racism inherent in the Immigration Act.

While we noted that the coverage of black British women's issues increased in the latter years of the period under review it is not until Issue 87, October 1979 that we witnessed a feature article that focused on black women's political organisation in Britain and which was written by black women themselves. This is important as according to Kimpton Nye (no date) in the previous year (1978) at the Women's Liberation Conference in Birmingham strong antagonisms emerged between feminists of different persuasions leading to an ideological rift in the movement. By the beginning of the 1980's, Kimpton Nye argues those women who felt silenced by the (white) feminist movement (including black women, Jewish women, lesbian women) had begun to actively challenge its reductionism in a 'proliferation of identity politics'. These challenges led to a split in the feminist movement and in the SR collective, and according to Thomlinson (2016: p 2) a disintegration of a coherent national movement by the 1980's with 'debates around race representing an existential crisis for the movement'. By February 1982 the SR editorial had introduced a series of articles about racism in Britain and the magazine had finally started to listen to black women's voices as a regular occurrence. Black women became a part of the SR collective and by Issue 135 (October 1983) black women also had editorial control in a special 'black women's issue' (Kimpton Nye, no date)

Our discussions in this chapter have been confined to the first eight years of the magazine and we have been selective in those articles that we have included in this chapter. We do not believe these to constitute limitations because our aim is not generalisation, but to provide a snapshot of plausible interpretations of the magazine's (re)presentations of black feminism during this initial period. Further, we would argue that subjectivity is inherent to research and as a black Caribbean woman and a black man of mixed African and European heritage we have not 'bracketed out' our subjective locations from these interpretations.

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