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“Does feminism have a generation gap?”

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This article explores a number of instances when generation is invoked and discussed in three feminist blogs: the UK *The Vagenda* (2012–), the US-based *Crunk Feminist Collective* (2010), and the UK *Feminist Times* (2013–14). More specifically, it examines how generation is discussed in terms of a feminist identity, especially in relation to intergenerational conflict. I contextualize a textual analysis of these blogs within a conjunctural and intersectional understanding of generation. That is, I look at how these narratives of intergenerational feminism are produced or emerge from specific UK and US historical conditions, and the organization of social forces within them. I also look at how they map on to popular media discourses about generation. In addition, this article explores the ways in which generational identity intersects with categories of race, gender, class, sexuality and place.

I have chosen these three blogs because they usefully intervene in and illustrate key concerns around generation, intersectionality, and coming of age in the neoliberal conjuncture. Significantly, none of these sites are funded through advertising or brand sponsorship, and in this way their online practice is coterminous with their feminist politics. However, the obstacles that online feminist writers and editors face in corporate-run digital spaces are part of the subject of this article. *The Vagenda* blog is pertinent because the editors are white, heterosexual “millennials” who articulate a new brand of feminism that is distinct from what they characterize as a privileged (and implicitly white) previous wave. Located in London, UK (although not originally from there), they partly speak to and against a popular feminine metropolitan culture. In contrast, *Crunk Feminist Collective* are US-based and define themselves as belonging to the “Hip Hop generation.” They are part of a growing network of feminists of colour who advocate for and develop intersectional theory by blogging, including *Colorlines, The Feminist Wire, Racialicious, Black Girl Dangerous* and Janet Mock’s Blog (see Collins and Bilge 106). *Crunk Feminist Collective* situate their feminist politics within the context of a white supremacist neoliberal landscape, and the representation of their generational identities explicitly intersects with other axes of oppression. For these reasons, this blog is a productive case study in relation to *The Vagenda*, whose generational identities are articulated quite differently. Finally, *Feminist Times*, which I focus on to
a lesser extent than the other two blogs, presents itself more as an online magazine. It ran for less than a year but is worthy of analysis because, as a feminist enterprise which pays its contributors, it could not compete financially within branded and corporate-run digital spaces.

**Why generation?**

Generation is a slippery concept. It is used by politicians and policy makers, as well as the mainstream media, to centre issues such as class and race. For example, the characters of the millennial and the baby-boomer circulate in the mainstream media, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, in order to personify certain ideologically driven anxieties about contemporary culture (Little). Those who were born on or before 1980 and are coming of age in the neoliberal era are conventionally known as Generation Y, or the millennials. They are often constructed as narcissists who are pathologically obsessed with social media and high-end brands. Simultaneously they are represented as suffering from the selfishness of the post-war baby-boomer generation who have apparently contributed to rising house prices, job scarcity, and other socio-economic obstacles that hamper young people’s trajectory into adulthood. This is evident in such inflammatory book titles as David Willetts’ *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children’s Future – And Why They Should Give it Back* (2010) and Neil Boorman’s *It’s All Their Fault* (2010). Generation is also employed to scaffold inaccurate and often politically charged historical narratives. This is evident, for example, in the framing of feminist history as an evolutionary series of waves (Hemmings). Furthermore, within feminist contexts, it can invoke sameness. In other words, a blanket theory of generation assumes that feminists born around the same date have similar experiences of gendered oppression, regardless of race, class, sexuality, place or disability.

Despite these critiques, this article also argues for the productivity of thinking through and with the category of generation. In other words, it is useful to examine the various ways in which generation is talked about and deployed, particularly in the media. Furthermore, I want to suggest that generation can be a powerful analytical and intersectional tool. This is especially the case when we use the concept of generation alongside the framework of the conjuncture. Thinking about generation within what Doreen Massey – following Antonio Gramsci – calls a “conjunctural analysis” is fruitful, because it locates generational identities within the context of wider, and often contradictory, social and historical forces. In Massey’s words, “A conjunctural approach leads us to examine the movements of the different instances in a social formation” (Massey 102). The conjuncture is partly about periodization, but it also understands historical change as contingent, conflicting and partial. Because of this, a conjunctural analysis does not frame history as evolutionary or predetermined. This renders the framework useful when applied to narratives about feminist generations as it understands history as being open to political actors, thus offering opportunities for intervention.

This conjunctural analysis of feminist generations is located within an intersectional understanding of identity. In other words, the concept of generation has explanatory force when making sense of identity categories, but it only does so when read alongside other vectors of oppression such as race, class, sexuality, place, and disability. For example, much of the mainstream media discourse about baby-boomers and millennials focuses on white middle-class generational identities which are located primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom. This has the effect of erasing experiences of, for example, working-class young people or young people of colour who do not fit in to the mainstream media characterization of the millennial. Simultaneously, generational location can intensify someone’s experience of other intersecting forms of oppression: *when you’re born does matter*. As Patricia Hill Collins and
Sirma Bilge argue, “Race, class, gender, and citizenship categories disadvantage many groups under neoliberal policies, yet, because age straddles all of these categories, young people’s experiences of social problems are more intensified” (Collins and Bilge 117). Collins and Bilge focus on age rather than generation because they are discussing the contemporary neoliberal moment. As I discuss towards the end of this article, age and generation can be thought of as different but related categories.

In addition, I locate the textual analysis of these blogs within the discipline of women’s writing, and note the affordances as well as the misunderstandings that can occur when writing feminism online. Digital feminisms are sometimes framed as radically different from previous generational articulations of feminism. However, as Jessalynn Keller argues in the context of girl blogging in the United States, online activist blogging is part of a lengthy tradition of feminist media production (Keller 2). Even though the networked site of the blog, as well as the fact that it is in constant process, forges a distinct type of feminist conversation and politics, there are still continuities as well as conversations with earlier feminist writing; although this might depend on how the bloggers forge and represent their generational identities. In addition, the writers and editors of these online sites practise their feminisms in online and offline spaces so I am keen not to offer a reductive analysis which celebrates a new kind of online feminism, one which is ontologically distinct from what can only be an imagined narrative of a coherent feminist past.

Rosi Braidotti’s description of feminist timelines as “zigzagging” is pertinent here as I am also critical of using linearity as conceptual tool to define intergenerational feminisms (Braidotti 4). Nevertheless, this article argues that the relative newness of these media platforms for feminist activism and consciousness-raising raises fascinating questions. How does participating within what critics call the networked society enable, transform, inflect or circumscribe the ways in which feminists can write to and about each other? How does the platform of the blog or online magazine affect the kinds of dialogues that feminists can have? How do feminists write in tension with pervasive branded cultures? This article explores conversations that these feminists hold around generation, it locates digital feminist writing as both a continuation of and as distinct from other modes of writing feminism, and it examines the productivity of looking at how historical periods shape one’s feminist politics and what effect this might have on intergenerational dialogue.

**Feminist generations**

Feminism is frequently talked about in terms of generation, both by feminists and the mainstream media. It is often framed as intergenerational conflict by deploying the familial metaphors of mothers and daughters – or more recently grandmothers (Walker; Henry). The wave metaphor is sometimes invoked in order to distinguish different generations of feminists: from the suffragettes, through the “second-wave” Women’s Liberation movement in the 1970s, to the “third wave” in the 1990s, culminating in the contemporary resurgence in feminist activism, which has been called by some commentators the “fourth wave” (Cochrane). However, the use of waves to describe the multiplicity of feminist activism through history has been critiqued. Erin Sanders McDonagh and Elena Vacchelli argue that the “concept of temporal ‘waves’ of feminism serves to create a version of feminist activity that is presented as monolithic, and neatly ensconced in a clearly defined and delineated period of time.” They maintain that temporal metaphors should be replaced by “a more geographic understanding of feminist activism” (Sanders McDonagh and Vacchelli).

The wave metaphor is also viewed problematically by Kimberly Springer (“Third Wave”) who asserts that the wave analogy is untenable when thinking about black feminist activism; it obscures the historical role of race in women’s organizing during the antebellum and abolitionist
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periods, as well as in the civil rights movement. Springer suggests that for black feminists, “The recuperation of the self in a racist and sexist society is a political enterprise and a Black feminist one that deprioritizes generational differences in the interest of historical, activist continuity” (Springer, “Third Wave” 1061). Moreover, the narrative of waves has functioned to whitewash feminist histories. Within a queer feminist context, Jack Halberstam argues that casting conflict “in the mother–daughter bond” is “transhistorical, transcultural, universal,” and that it ignores “the instability of gender norms, the precarious condition of the family itself” as well as “the many challenges made to generational logics within a recent wave of queer theory on temporality” (Halberstam). In her interviews with self-defined radical feminists, Finn McKay argues that because women of different ages identify with radical feminism so conflicts between feminists should be discussed in terms of political differences rather than generational ones, and Rosalind Gill argues that framing feminism in generational terms seems “to risk pulling us back into polarized positions characterized by mistrust and suspicion on both sides (and why are there always only two sides, rather than three or four generations?)” (Gill 612).

When feminists criticize each other using generation, these instances are often picked up in the mainstream media and exploited. For example, the media report and foreground moments when feminists disparage each other, homing in on instances of generational hostility in order to amplify them. Using the trope of the catfight between women of different ages is a key way in which feminism is depicted as it is effective in locating feminism in the past, as no longer relevant, while simultaneously framing differences between activists as insurmountable (McRobbie). This has the function of personalizing feminist politics, locating it in the private sphere. Moreover, domesticating feminism in this way means that political difference is recast as a bicker or a row, rather than the performance of adversarial politics; adversarial politics being (still) a legitimate male performance. This is not to say that feminists themselves do not use generation as a call to arms. Indeed, generation is debated in different ways in all three blogs that I am looking at here.

**The vagenda and millennial feminism**

The UK blog *The Vagenda* (hereafter referenced as TV) is run by two friends in their twenties, Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Coslett, who work out of their kitchens. *The Vagenda* is a satirical take on women’s magazines, an industry where both Baxter and Coslett have interned. The tagline for their blog is “King Lear for girls” and in their editorial they state that

> It is not, as the tagline says, like King Lear for girls (that is just a quote we nicked from Grazia that was so CRINGE – as they’d put it – that we totes had to use it, tbh). What the Vagenda is is a big “we call bullshit” on the mainstream women’s press.

*(TV, “A Letter from the Editor”)*

They appropriate the hyperbolic language of postfeminism as circulated in women’s magazines in order to critique and disrupt the power of the magazines themselves, as well as the branded landscape of the neoliberal girl and its feminine constructions (Negra; Winch). But what they call their “sweary” feminism is also part of a counter-discursive “loud, proud, sarcastic” feminist sensibility used by young online feminists (see Keller 76). *The Vagenda* writes about issues as diverse as female Shakespeare characters, through to marriage and abortion, but its main source of material is popular culture, and more specifically magazines targeting a female demographic.

Internships, working out of the kitchen, feminist blogging and the postfeminist media landscape are typical of what the mainstream media represent as the millennial experience, and this precarity is key to *The Vagenda’s* articulation of a new kind of feminism that is distinct from that
practised by “our elders” (TV, “Girl Trouble”). The period that partly enabled the conditions of UK and US feminism in the 1960s onwards was defined by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth distribution through taxes. Those born in the United Kingdom and the United States after the Second World War – particularly if they were white and middle class – had more political representation in mainstream politics, partly because of the demographic bulge at this time but also because of the influence of the 1960s countercultural movement, as well as the supportive framework of the social democratic conjuncture. In contrast to this, young people forming their political consciousness under neoliberalism are alienated from the political process and tend not to vote, with the result being that the government can ignore them in terms of state aid, thus alienating them still further. The terrain where the so-called millennial generation forges their feminism is influenced by these contradictions. For example, in the United Kingdom these young people are witnessing the breakdown of the NHS, dwindling and insecure pensions, the withdrawal of state aid in the form of higher tuition fees, the imposition of bedroom tax, decreased levels of housing benefit and the withdrawal of Education Maintenance Allowances. At the same time they are caught up in circuits of debt and what David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs.” The Vagenda’s depiction of precarious working lives, as well as its resentment towards older feminists, is partly a result of being young in this neoliberal conjuncture.

The Vagenda asks: “Does feminism have a generation gap? And is that a problem?” (TV, “Girl Trouble”). It explicitly locates itself as a “new wave” and it pits this against a more austere one:

One of the things I love (and I mean LOVE) about this new wave of feminism, is that it features a range of women campaigning on different, varied issues. A war on many fronts, if you will. I see it as progress, as the feminist movement moving on from a time where you were essentially supposed to sign up to some kind of bullshit feminist charter in order to join the club. (TV, “I am Sexy”)

Feminism is cast here teleologically, moving from a “bullshit feminist charter” and exclusive “club” to a freer, wittier and more plural feminism. The editors note that as young women they experience generational hostility from older feminists: “As writers of The Vagenda book, we (and from what our friends/colleagues say, young feminists in particular) have come to see being criticised by our elders as an occupational hazard when writing about women’s issues” (TV, “Girl Trouble”). One contributor to The Vagenda with the initials “VH” (The Vagenda does not credit its authors with full names) writes in another post:

Here’s a manifesto I can get on board with: feminism isn’t a sliding scale. You don’t get rated out of 10 or have to sit an oral exam at the end of it. So just do whatever the fuck in your noble quest for gender equality, and don’t attack other women people for doing the same. (TV, “How to Tell”)

In The Vagenda blog we can see how wider historical shifts, which are personified in the mainstream media by the characters of the baby-boomer and the millennial, are mapped on to feminist generations. More specifically, the so-called second-wave feminist is framed as coterminous with the apparently privileged and selfish post-war baby-boomer. Significantly, The Vagenda pits its “new” feminism against one that is imbued with class privilege and as benefiting from a more robust public sector:

Much of this criticism (well, what which [sic] didn’t come from journalists who completely coincidentally ALSO WRITE FOR WOMEN’S MAGAZINES) came from middle class
women in their late middle age who were lucky enough to have benefited from much feminist consciousness-raising when they were attending their progressive Russell Group Universities – talk to a state school educated girl who grew up in the feminist vacuum of the nineties (hiya!) and it is, of course, a different story.

(IV, “On Bikini Body Bullshit”)

Second-wave feminism is located in a distinctly different and more fortunate era and is being produced and performed in the spaces of elite universities. These opportunities are framed as being denied to young feminists today. Significantly, a conjunctural analysis can productively excavate the antagonism that is being enacted here. It can widen the field of vision so that the conflict does not have to be between older and younger feminists but can be seen as part of a larger shift in social and historical forces. Indeed, this characterization of the old and young feminist in conflict dovetails with popular media discourses about the selfish baby-boomer generation, the prudish second-wave feminist, and the betrayal of one generation by another. It glosses over specific and often contradictory historical conditions, and how they impact differently on different people, thus deflecting from an effective critique of patriarchal power structures.

Blogging poetics

Random House published The Vagenda: A Zero Tolerance Guide to the Media in 2014, and it received unfavourable reviews in the mainstream press. (The front cover sports a supportive tagline from Jeanette Winterson which demonstrates that not all “elders” turned against Baxter and Coslett.) In fact, the book’s reviewers – typically it was women who were tasked with doing the write-ups – were of different ages. However, and significantly, Germaine Greer condemned the book in the New Statesman, casting its writers as “two young experts” who “yelp” their hyperbole but who reveal “a level of ignorance that is positively medieval” (Greer). Asking Greer to review the book could have been a tactical manoeuvre by the magazine’s online editors as she is frequently used to invoke a nostalgic feminism. Moreover, she can be relied upon to critique other feminists, thereby depicting both herself and those under attack as ridiculous. Because she has come to stand in for second-wave feminism – a clearly ahistorical positioning – she is symbolically harnessed as a divisive means to mock the feminist movement.

Part of the problem that The Vagenda faced when its book was reviewed, and which was not foregrounded, was that its writing originated in the blogosphere and its popularity sprang from a connection with this digital genre. Despite this, its publication was put under the journalistic scrutiny usually given to a traditional book, and which did not pay attention to the ways in which a blog – unlike the relatively static medium of the book – can become untethered from its host website and flow through social media networks. The Vagenda, like all blogs, is networked; it is in constant process. Its content is frequently updated, amended, commented upon, reworked. Furthermore, the design, layout, embedded links, and comments are intrinsic to the ways in which digital feminisms are read, as well as influencing how they are written. A blog can function as a hub and in this way can facilitate dialogue between multiple sites. Indeed, The Vagenda’s writing is specific to a “networked counterpublic” of feminist activists, and this is quite a different form of communication from journalism, essay-writing, nonfiction or even a feminist newsletter (Keller).

Hosted by the free platform Wordpress, the editors upload posts which are later archived and still accessible. Simultaneously they micro-blog on feminist issues using Twitter. They have a comment function which is open to all so that there are loops of feedback which in turn affect the activism they practise; their writing is part of a larger digital feminist conversation. Their language is the brash, sarcastic and “sweary” language of some digital feminisms that talk back
to postfeminist popular culture by using and amplifying its tone, partly to render the object of their critique absurd. It also creates affective links between feminists who are both beguiled but also oppressed by the power of women’s magazines. Their blog needs to be understood as part of the online feminist “phatic economy” (Miller). That is, a networked feminist consciousness is performed online through such contentless activity as the “like” button and pokes, as well as retweeting, links, memes, giffs; the objective is to be social as well as to share information. Furthermore, as women in their twenties, Baxter and Coslett are also operating in a precarious labour market where they must continuously promote themselves to garner attention and receive freelance paid work. In a creative economy, labour is largely dependent upon using strategies of self-branding, and blogging is a way to cultivate recognition from potential employers. Indeed, *The Vagenda* attributes its subsequent work for the mainstream press, television and other media outlets directly to its blog.

These are all partly generational issues as younger feminists are more likely to develop their feminist consciousness online through blogs and social media. This is not to say that older feminists do not converse or strategize digitally, but they are more likely to have forged their feminist consciousness in a considerably different media environment. Significantly, coming of age in a new conjuncture – including its mediated landscape – does impact upon one’s political identity, but in uneven and heterogeneous ways. Andra Siibak and Nicoletta Vittadini, following the sociologist Karl Mannheim, theorize the process of “generationing.” They argue that generationing is

> founded on historical events and the socio-techno-cultural milieu experienced in the formative years, as well as the development of the narrative of collective memories and frames of interpretation of “times”; and rituals and habits developed during the following stages of life.

*(Siibak and Vittadini 3)*

It is important to note that this process of generationing is not homogeneous. That is, not all young people coming of age in the neoliberal conjuncture harness the same collective memories or even have the same access to media. Because of this, understanding feminist identities in terms of generation has its limitations; that is unless we intersect the category of generation with other vectors of oppression. In addition, using digital media is often overemphasized in discussions of feminist generations. It is important to keep in mind that there are continuities in modes of feminist media production through different conjunctures; that feminist activism takes place in both online and offline contexts; and that there are differences in contemporary online participation among generational peers. The discussion of Hip Hop generation feminism below is an attempt to illuminate these synchronic generational differences.

### **Crunk feminist collective and hip hop generation feminism**

*Crunk Feminist Collective* (hereafter referenced as CFC) is a resource “for hip hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, in the academy and without.” Its members aim to create

> a community of scholars–activists from varied professions, who share our intellectual work in online blog communities, at conferences, through activist organizations, and in print publications and who share our commitment to nurturing and sustaining one another through progressive feminist visions.

*(CFC, “Mission Statement”)*
A hub for social justice organizing, *Crunk Feminist Collective*’s members explicitly define themselves generationally, rather than in waves. This is in order to ally themselves with the Hip Hop generation of social justice activists, as well as being an implicit rejection of the narrative of feminist waves. Situated within the Hip Hop generation, *Crunk Feminist Collective*’s members assert their intersectional politics and identities as feminists of colour, as well as noting how they have “come of age” in the neoliberal era: “our connection to Hip Hop links us to a set of generational concerns, and a community of women, locally, nationally, and globally” (CFC, “Hip Hop Generation Feminism”).

In her discussion of youth of colour and activism, Adreana Clay explores the various ways in which Hip Hop is a key component in the development of young people’s political consciousness, noting that it is an organizing tool and an important cultural art form. Moreover, Clay identifies some of the crises and contradictions that young people coming of age in the Hip Hop era face, and distinguishes these from those shaping the historical and political terrain inhabited by a previous generation of activists. These contemporary contradictions include the fact that the legislative gains of the civil rights movement are set against the persistence of racial segregation and discrimination. White supremacist power structures are evident, for example, in the extreme violence of police surveillance as well as the prison industrial complex, not to speak of the vast discrepancies in wages and employment opportunities between youth of colour and white young people. Another generational issue facing Hip Hop generation activists is that they must mobilize “in the shadow of previous social movement activists” (Clay 7; author’s emphasis), and that this “shadow” includes the mass commodification of the representations of these activists, such as T-shirts embossed with the face of Angela Davis. This “shadow” is evident in one of the discussions of intergenerational feminism in the *Crunk Feminist Collective* blog which I discuss below.

In contrast to *The Vagenda*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*’s writers define themselves most succinctly in relation to a feminist history. In their manifesto, they invoke their “feminist big sister Joan Morgan” who invited us to “fill in the breaks, provide the remixes, and rework the chorus,” but maintain:

> While our declaration of feminism pays homage to our feminist foremothers and big sisters, Hip Hop generation feminism is not just a remix but also a remake that builds on the beats and rhythms from the tracks already laid down, but with a decidedly new sound, for a new era. This, in other words, ain’t ya mama’s feminism. This is next generation feminism, standing up, standing tall, and proclaiming like Celie, that we are indeed Here. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

(*CFC, “Hip Hop Generation Feminism”*)

Significantly, the time in which they were born – which signifies their feminist identity by generation rather than wave – is crucial to the political thrust of *Crunk Feminist Collective*. Their concerns are specific to their generation and being women of colour in America:

> We are members of the Hip Hop Generation because we came of age in one of the decades, the 1990s, that can be considered post-Soul and post-Civil Rights. Our political realities have been profoundly shaped by a systematic rollback of the gains of the Civil Rights era with regard to affirmative action policies, reproductive justice policies, the massive deindustrialization of urban areas, the rise and ravages of the drug economy within urban, semi-urban, and rural communities of color, and the full-scale assault on women’s lives through the AIDS epidemic. We have come of age in the era that has witnessed a past-in-present assault on
our identities as women of color, one that harkens back to earlier assaults on our virtue and value during enslavement and imperialism.

(Ibid.)

The members of *Crunk Feminist Collective* define themselves and their politics as part of a specific historical moment. Their feminism is exhilaratingly marked against the neoliberal white supremacist and patriarchal “past-in-present.” *Crunk Feminist Collective’s* articulation of feminist generational difference can be understood in relation to the larger shifts taking place in some social justice activism among people of color in the United States, particularly in relation to Black Lives Matter. In her article “Black Lives on Campuses Matter: The Rise of the New Black Student Movement” Khadija White discusses the ways in which Black Lives Matter is distinct “from previous iterations of Black activist periods, most notably the modern civil rights movement” (White 88). One of these differences is that Black Lives Matter is a network rather than a movement. This is key when thinking about blogging as feminist activism; the blog is always connected and in process rather than being a static entity. White argues that there are continuities with previous black activist movements but that Black Lives Matter is defined by a radical self-care as well as “strong female leadership, an insistence on inclusion, and, among some parts of the network, a repulsion of the ‘respectability’ politics that had been a core feature of civil rights organising” (89). In their ethnographic work on social justice work, generation and black women, Carolyn D. Love, Lize A. E. Booysen and Philomena Essed note how younger women whom they interviewed in Colorado, whom they term “Millennials,” were much more open to working with LGBTQ communities than the “Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers” (Love, Booysen, and Essed 12). This is also something that is key to *Crunk Feminist Collective’s* political organizing. As one blogpost maintains: “Heterosexism is a structural impediment. Patriarchy is a structural impediment. Cissexism is a structural impediment” (CFC, “Say No to Noteps”).

The writers for *Crunk Feminist Collective* practise their feminism offline and online; they give talks, participate in protests, teach in universities, speak in churches, make films, among other political activities. Significantly, and unusually, there are no advertisements, pop-ups or brands sponsoring the site. This is a blog devoted to feminist activism without the compromises that inevitably come from having to refrain from talking about certain topics – sex, race and politics – in order to conform to the dictates of advertising companies. *Crunk Feminist Collective’s* site is maintained by donations (there is a click button for potential donors) and it is sponsored by Media Equity Collaborative. It is also crucial to locate the blog within a wider context of feminists of colour working towards social justice. *Crunk Feminist Collective’s* website has embedded links to Hip Hop artists, locating its feminist project within a broader generational culture that is not necessarily feminist but which shapes and reshapes feminist practice. By integrating links to Hip Hop artists, *Crunk Feminist Collective’s* members forge direct connections between the cultural forms that define their generational identity, as well as their writing. In addition, their content is inflected with Hip Hop – in its rhythms, lyrics, frequent intertextual allusions, and the socio-economic and generational terrain that is held in common. In their “Mission Statement” they define “crunk”: “As part of a larger women-of-color feminist politic, crunkness, in its insistence on the primacy of the beat, contains a notion of movement, timing, and of meaning making through sound, that is especially productive for our work together” (CFC, “Mission Statement”).
Participating in the online discussion around bell hooks calling Beyoncé a “terrorist,” the black feminist theorist Brittney Cooper, writing for Crunk Feminist Collective as “Crunktastic,” invokes the complexities of generational difference to explain her mixed response:

[bell hooks and Cornel West] both make our work possible. But if the rhetoric continues, the two of them may also become a cautionary tale in what it means for revolutionaries not to age well. (Yeah, I said it.) And with regard to their speaker’s fees, “I ain’t sayin they golddiggers, but . . .” (And check it: I think they should make their paper, because I don’t believe revolutionaries should live in poverty.) Anyway, we are all just trying to find our way here. My generation of intellectuals definitely could benefit from a more radical edge to our critique. But if the argument is that we have to violently mow down our icons, leaving a trail of their blood on the way to this new “radicalism,” then you can keep it. Because something about that sounds alarmingly like the patriarchal, black male-centered, radical Black radicalism of old.

(CFC, “On bell, Beyoncé and Bullshit”)

The writing delineates its contradictory responses: it is a homage to bell hooks; an allegiance to Beyoncé as black female cultural icon; a critique of the hierarchy of black academics indicated through their fees, gender and age; anxiety over “my generation’s” radical politics; a treatise against neoliberalism, among other insights. Cooper reveals the structures of her intellectual and emotional working through of a painful intergenerational moment. The invoking of Black Southern culture, Hip Hop references, brackets, asides, interwoven with the language of academia, layer the palimpsest of this particular online black feminist rhetoric. Feminist generations are positioned as contradictory, shaped through miscommunication and difference, but also in process and open to conversation – both because they are networked and also because Cooper’s response, which exposes its own paradoxes, is not closed.

Blogs are usually intensely personal and written in the first person. This mode of writing is amenable to black feminist autobiographical poetics as well as an intellectual politics that is grounded in experience. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, black feminist writing is less about mastering white male epistemologies than about “resisting the hegemonic nature of these patterns of thought in order to see, value, and use existing alternative Afrocentric feminist ways of knowing” (Collins 267–68). Cooper, writing for and with Crunk Feminist Collective, forges her own feminist writing located within the Hip Hop generation. Denied a consistent and prominent voice in the mainstream media, this is an example of radically networked media production.

**Digital feminist burnout**

The founder of Feminist Times (hereafter referenced as FemT), Charlotte Raven, was born in 1969 and therefore would be understood in the mainstream media’s framing of generation as a “Gen-Xer.” This term was coined by Douglas Coupland in his book Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (1991). This generation is demographically smaller than the millennials and the baby-boomers – the two generations it is represented as being sandwiched between – and consequently attracts less coverage in the media. However, as with the categories of baby-boomer and millennial this particular generational grouping is problematic, not least because the dating of generational cohorts is inconsistent. Moreover, Feminist Times does not define itself generationally as its writers are of diverse ages and from different generational categories. Feminist Times
Alison Winch offers a “pluralist platform for the stories and women often sidelined by the major magazines and newspapers” (FemT, “About Us”). The online magazine has an art director and the website is professionally and colourfully designed. Like Crunk Feminist Collective and The Vagenda, it is a brand-free space; its tagline is “life not lifestyle.” It aims to address issues of age, generation, race, disability, sexuality, trans identity, among others, while seeking (and paying) feminists with a multiplicity of identity formations to write for them.

Pertinent to this article, and in particular to the intergenerational antagonisms invoked by Greer and The Vagenda, is a piece by Lynne Segal on ageing feminists. Segal notes how feminist movements have always alienated older women:

In this country the Older Feminist Network was founded in 1982 by feminists, who felt that the women’s liberation movement took little notice of them or the challenges they faced as women in an ageist culture (including, so it seemed, the women’s movement itself).

(Segal, “Who’s Afraid of Old Age?”)

Age can be a structure of oppression in a different way from generation. In other words, whereas being born in the United Kingdom or United States after 1980 means that – dependent on social class and other intersecting factors – one has less state support than those born before, women born post-war must contend with ageism in the workplace and the fetishization of youth as beauty. Even if some of them might hold a relatively fortunate position in relation to pensions or home ownership, they still face public erasure. Segal argues, in relation to ageing women, that these “frightening figures are not incidentally female, but quintessentially so, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender” (ibid.).

Feminist Times was embroiled in what might seem like an intergenerational conflict. Raven wanted to revitalize the feminist magazine Spare Rib (1972–93) by appropriating its name. However, this resulted in a legal dispute with Spare Rib’s founders, Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott. Reading Rowe’s and Boycott’s position in The Guardian and in their blog, alongside Raven’s narrative of the case, it seems that the conflict was not so much about generation as about misunderstandings, missed communications and miscommunication. It is pertinent to note, however, the different ways in which Spare Rib and Feminist Times were funded, and how this links to a conjunctural analysis of generation. Spare Rib (which is now available through the British Library’s digital archives) was partly funded by the Greater London Council. It also had a price tag for each issue. That is, it was not free or expected to be free because it was a print magazine, competing in the print magazine market. Furthermore, it was able to exist because of the counter-hegemonic project of municipal socialism. Feminist Times, however, exists in the corporate spaces of digital culture where the assumption is that things are free. Of course, like much offline writing, online content is not free. Google’s and Facebook’s shareholders must be paid with users’ content and users’ data which are sold on to third-party organizations.

Branded spaces benefit from the unpaid labour of users who participate in the creation of content, as well as offering up lucrative data (Taylor). This inevitably feeds into issues of funding and ethical dilemmas about how to sustain a website and forge feminist connections while being dependent on business and advertisers. Feminists campaign against the ways in which corporations exploit people and land for profit, so how can they rely on these companies to fund their projects? Feminist Times (which, like The Vagenda, was kitchen based) funded itself through crowdfunding and a membership policy which was generated through direct debits. Importantly, it was committed to paying contributors. However, because it refused to compromise its politics, it was forced to “put the project on ice.” It was not able to continue.
the project while being “both ethical and sustainable” (FemT, “Feminist Times: My Feminist Times ‘Journey’”).

Similarly, in July 2015 The Vagenda posted that it was having a “summer hiatus,” and there have been no blogs since then, although the website is still live. It is noteworthy that The Vagenda is open to contributors but, partly because it is not funded by public- or third-sector bodies or by advertising, does not offer money or employment. The Vagenda’s editors cite the fact that “it’s a lot of work. It’s a full-time job, actually, and one that we’re not actually paid for. And that is part of the problem – the amount of time this blog needs is not time that either of the two of us can afford.” Situating themselves within a community of “feminist labour” they state that “you’re in it for love, not for money”:

And we are tired. We are ever so, ever so tired, and in order to prevent the burnout that afflicts so many feminist writers and to quote our mothers: we need a lie down.

(TV, “We Need a Lie Down”)

Inevitably feminist writing takes place online and offline and there needs to be a funding infrastructure so that feminists can be paid to write, as well as do the inevitable administration involved in sustaining a website. These case studies are evidence that sustainable and ethical models of online publishing that do not rely on corporate sponsorship, PR, or advertising revenue, and where work is remunerated, are essential. In the neoliberal conjuncture there is an ideological belief that not-for-profit political organizations and collectives should give away their labour without a fee, while corporations’ bottom line is to make profit, in this case from the networked society’s participatory culture. Nevertheless, the writers of the blogs discussed here are not remunerated for their blogging labour. This is clearly an untenable situation leading to frequent online feminist burnout (Martin and Valenti; Loza). Interestingly, both Feminist Times and The Vagenda participated in Elle magazine’s feminist rebranding exercise for Elle’s November 2013 issue. Working with advertising companies as well as Elle, both blogs created brief campaign logos designed to flow through social media. For Baxter and Coslett this was a positive experience. However, Raven found this a deeply uncomfortable exercise that revealed how far magazines like Elle were circumscribed and held to account by commercial enterprises. For Raven it demonstrated how far brand domination inevitably stifles politics and creativity.

Another crucial issue facing digital feminisms is archival. Feminist writing is part of the creation of feminism; it constructs, in Kimberly Springer’s words, “our reality” (Springer, “Radical Archives”; author’s emphasis). Springer argues, in relation to her worries about leaving the preservation of activist material to corporations like Facebook: “This shaping and documenting of our reality means that activists are building a foundation today that will allow future organizers to not have to reinvent the wheel” (ibid.; author’s emphasis). Working towards a more ethical way of hosting and enabling online feminist writing is also a means to preserve memory for future activists. Protecting feminist archives is fundamental because they have the valuable potential to run counter to the mainstream media’s one-dimensional and divisive feminist narrative. They would allow for the plurality of feminist collective writing to be accessible. Claire Colebrook maintains that “any feminist claim in our present is in harmony and dissonance with a choir of past voices” and we read a feminist text “not according to the time within which it occurred but to a time it might enable” (Colebrook 14, 13). It is for this reason, and not because we should reify an imagined past feminist history that we are indebted to, that paying attention to and discovering ways of archiving online feminist writing is vital.
Conclusion

The term “generation” can fit neatly into pervasive discourses of nostalgia or fear of the new. In other words, anxieties over a neoliberal networked society and the commodification of women by brands can be easily projected on to younger feminists who practise their politics online and who operate within (and against) the discourses of popular culture. Similarly, worries about the authenticity of one’s feminism or one’s authority as a feminist might be glossed over by blaming those who formed their feminism in a conjuncture with more resources and more political optimism. In other words, behind antagonistic narratives about “older” and “younger” feminists could lie tensions engendered by shifts in historical and social forces. Moving the focus away from the age differences of the feminists involved and looking at the broader political contradictions at work allows for a more nuanced understanding of patriarchy and the way it functions, particularly within online branded spaces.

Generational categories – personified by the baby-boomer, Gen-Xer and the millennial – are not homogeneous. The socio-economic and cultural location of today’s young people is dependent on vectors of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion, place. Ken Roberts argues that working-class young people in the United Kingdom experienced the devastating impact of neoliberal policies before those protected by their middle-class status. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker maintain that although the recession has been branded a “mancession” it has disproportionately affected women. In their manifesto – and throughout their content – Crunk Feminist Collective’s members articulate how the present neoliberal moment in the United States is experienced differently by women of colour because the socio-economic, cultural and legislative forms of white supremacist patriarchy intersect to impact disproportionately on them. Thinking about generation within the context of contradictory and specific historical conditions, as well as thinking about it in relation to other vectors of identity such as race and place, can be useful in understanding bloggers’ experiences and political motivations. It is through this understanding that intergenerational dialogue – including antagonistic dialogue – can progress.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1 In November 2016, after this article was accepted, Feminist Times was relaunched as an online monthly magazine via the digital publishing site “issuu.” Significantly, it has rejected some of the affordances of the blog format. There are no comment functions and the magazine will be issued on a monthly basis rather than being continually updated. Raven frames this as an intergenerational feminist strategy by stating:

Our new incarnation is tethered to the past because we want to receive something from feminism’s golden age. We owe it to those who came before us to get this right so instead of being updated daily, like a blog, we will be producing monthly issues. This will give us plenty of time to reflect on the content and work constructively with our writers rather than hit them with idea-sapping deadlines.

(FEM 001 5)

In addition, Raven aims to counteract the burnout experienced by feminist bloggers, as discussed above. We can see a deep concern around connecting to previous feminist publishing incarnations in Feminist Times’ attempt to connect with “our foremothers”: “Tethered proudly to the past, we are walking in the footsteps of our foremothers, respectful of their legacy” (FEM 001 3). Raven points out that there are no comment boards on the site as “I want to encourage a different kind of debate where there is time to reflect rather than fire off responses a mile a minute.” Instead, she offers an e-mail address and promises to reply “and, who knows, you could even become one of our contributors” (FEM 001 5).
“Does feminism have a generation gap?”

Bibliography


