

How to Tell *Your* Story as the Story of *My* Feminism: Notes Toward Solidarity

Editorial

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There are so many ways we can fall flat on our faces when trying to act in the name of solidarity, no matter how noble our intentions. There are ways our solidarity can painfully bruise those we are trying to support. Lately, when discussing – with my students and colleagues – the ongoing “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests in Iran, Russia’s attack on Ukraine, earthquakes in Turkey and Syria or the University and College Union industrial action in the UK, amongst many other pressing issues and crises of our times, ‘solidarity’ has become a particularly flailing word. A word of futility, of inadequacy, of failure, and often also of manipulation, of self-interest, of dishonesty. The performative gesture of joining in with the chorus “enough is enough” is never enough, is it?

Many people who grew up in the former Soviet Union, including myself, still associate the word with the fake propagandist slogans that were used to impose Soviet power in the east of Europe and spread Soviet influence on the global South. ‘Solidarity with the working people!’ or ‘Solidarity with the women of the East!’, referring to the women in the “Soviet East” who were then presented as models of female emancipation to convince women in the Global South of the benefits of socialism. When the demand to show solidarity masks a vicious game of power, you become cynical. All these statements that in principle sound important and are worth fighting for become just hollow words, emptied of any meaning. Given how difficult it is to shake off that icky feeling of insincerity and deception, I wonder: how can we reclaim a term that is such a powerful expression of human empathy and connection, when for so many people – including many feminists – it remains inextricably linked to a particular moment in history during which it was (mis)used by authoritarian forces?

Solidarity has been and continues to be an important word for feminist practice that keeps coming up at every turn, yet it escapes an easy definition. As Lola Olufemi says: “It’s a slippery concept, it moves about, it unites and divides the movements we are part of” (Olufemi, 2020:136). At its core, solidarity suggests working together and supporting each other across differences to tackle oppression beyond borders and across continents. It evokes a sense of empowerment, collectivity, visionary thinking in coalitions towards a more just future.

For feminism, solidarity is a praxis, “a doing word” (Olufemi 2020:134) that contains a relational ethos. In a recent editorial of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, guest editors Ayşe Gül Altınay and Andrea Petó invite us to think feminism and solidarity together as “feminist+solidarity”, adding the + into the phrase as

a reminder of the many other frameworks of analysis and action that have helped feminism grow: The anti-slavery, anti-colonial, anti-war, anti-capitalist, human rights, minority rights, economic justice and racial justice movements that have accompanied feminisms globally; the LGBTIQ+ movements that have deepened our understanding of the workings of gender and sexuality; and the ecological and climate justice movements that remind us of our interconnectedness not just with each other but with all species, with all life, to name a few. (Altınay and Petó 2022: 478-479)

In line with the Open Forum papers in this issue, I also want to acknowledge the role of transfeminism in these debates and to draw attention to the importance of keeping “an open-ended, liminal conception of gender” (Pan 2022:1) when talking about feminism and solidarity. Reflecting on the urgency of embracing trans-feminism in the face of the ongoing conflict between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary radical feminists, Maja Pan argues that it is only through connecting feminist solidarity and trans identities that “trans women can be recognised as subjects of feminism” (Pan 2022:1). Hence, feminist radical solidarity needs to go beyond normative inclusion.

Thinking feminism and solidarity together suggests that feminism requires an expansive solidarity and vice versa – solidarity is most expansive when feminist. At the same time, we must remember that many feminist solidarity discourses tend to be permeated by “Eurocentric assumptions of Western feminist practice and its too easy claiming of sisterhood across national, cultural, and racial differences” (Mohanty, 2003:12) which we need to actively resist. Performative solidarity can be as hollow as manipulative solidarity, especially as life becomes increasingly virtual and governments everywhere move to make it harder to protest. What are the modalities for expressing solidarity? How do we avoid the performative slippery slope? Indeed, how do we grow, develop, nurture, sustain feminist ‘solidaric consciousness’ when so many divisions seem to be deepening within/between communities, countries, regions? How can we reinvent this word to cultivate and sustain co-thinking, co-acting, creating radical openness to the struggles of others?

In my work on carving out space for postsocialist feminism within transnational feminist discourses (Koobak 2013; Koobak 2018) I have been set on telling “my story as the story of my feminism” (Rooney 1996:18), arguably the strongest narrative in feminist politics. I have been very focused on claiming difference, claiming a voice for feminisms in postsocialist Eastern Europe that would not be subsumed under Western feminism. Now when I reflect on that work though, I want to make it more capacious, to go beyond the mere repetition of a critique of Western feminism, beyond a claim for inclusion, and towards an openness to “learning from other resisters” (Lugones 2010:253). This means going from the starting point of “my story as the story of my feminism”, to what Ellen Rooney has suggested is Gayatri Spivak’s approach: embracing “*your* story as the story of *my* feminism” (Rooney 1996:18) without making it one’s own, “engaging with, retelling and ethically and imaginatively inhabiting other people’s narratives.” (Landry and MacLean 1996:16). Maybe this is the route that can take us to a kind of feminist solidarity that is more than an empty performative gesture - one that makes sure we don’t glide over differences, that acknowledges the anger that someone else’s story evokes in us as our own.

But this is not an easy route to follow. And it might not even be the route we *should* follow. Here, I am also reminded of Tina Campt’s reflections on adjacency which I want to suggest challenge the assumption of shared subjecthood within claims to solidarity. Specifically, Campt analyses what she calls “the black gaze” not as the viewpoint of black people, but rather as “a particularly challenging point of view that confronts us with the precarious state of black life in the twenty-first century” (Campt 2019, para 2). She suggests that unlike empathy and solidarity, adjacency is about the spatial positioning of Black and non-black people that doesn’t entail putting oneself in place of another or sharing another’s pain but demands the affective labour of relating across difference - “it shifts the optics of “looking at” to an intentional practice of *looking with and alongside*” (Campt, 2019, para 2). Adjacency thus denotes a reparative practice that requires accountability, doing the work of “positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession” (Campt 2020). Such affective labour requires that we keep searching - constantly and consistently - for language and concepts that reflect our different positionalities and complicities.

Many of these discussions about solidarity which arise in wildly different contexts serve as unwavering proof that despite realisations how we constantly fail to stand by and with each other in challenging moments, we need to keep doing more. No matter how futile resistance feels in the face of atrocities and despair, no matter how inadequate our support for

causes we believe in seems, we cannot stop saying enough is enough. Even when we know that demonstrations are not enough, even when we know that slogans and banners are not enough, even when we know that the material contributions we are able to make are but a drop in the ocean. For us as feminists, the labour of solidarity also requires a continuous effort to be mindful of the implications of the connections we create with others and of the stories we tell of our feminisms.

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