editorial

100 | recalling 'the scent of memory': celebrating 100 issues of *feminist review*

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Our hundredth celebration issue of *Feminist Review* (FR) has taken inspiration from a 2009 colloquium entitled 'Race', Gender, Postcoloniality, organised by Yasmien Narayan (in collaboration with the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*), to celebrate the work of Avtar Brah on the occasion of her retirement from Birkbeck, University of London. As the day unfolded, one contributor after another made reference to a particular example of Avtar's work, her 1999 article 'The Scent of Memory' published in Issue 61 of FR, *Snakes and Ladders: Reviewing Feminisms at Century's End*. As those of us in the audience who were members of the FR Collective listened, one of the day's contributors, Gail Lewis, reminded us that Avtar invites her readers to 'write back' to the questions she poses in that remarkable piece: questions about racialisation and diaspora, about home and belonging, about politics and personal lives, about the psychosocial dynamics of subjectivity and identity. In that moment, the idea for this issue was born.

Avtar is the longest-standing member of the current FR Collective and has been central to the Collective's historic and ongoing conversations and contestations about a feminist knowledge production that is always attentive to the challenges of intersectionality, and one that combines scholarly rigour with political commitment. 'The Scent of Memory', published at the turn of the new millennium, is exemplary of that kind of academic labour. And yet we, the Collective, had not yet explicitly taken up Avtar's invitation to write back to her compelling article. What better moment to do so than in celebration of our hundredth issue?

The issue begins with a reprint of 'The Scent of Memory', followed by two contributions from that 2009 colloquium, Les Back's interview with Avtar on her life and work, and Stuart Hall's closing address, 'Avtar Brah's Cartographies: Moment, Method, Meaning'. Following on from these, members of the Collective and other contributors take off from and write back to different aspects of 'The Scent of Memory'.

Avtar was, in one sense, herself 'writing back' in this article to Tim Lott's autobiography *The Scent of Dry Roses* and to its inclusion of a suicide note his mother Jean had written at the age of 57 in March 1998, describing her alienation at what the new Southall (in West London) had become for her, a white woman – a space of hate and ontological anxiety. Southall connected Avtar to Jean. The changing landscape of Southall has been a key anchor in Avtar's work, as a place of political creation, agitation and contemplation of diaspora space. Moreover, the fear, resentment and loss experienced by white people at the arrival of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean residents into the area was a key element of Avtar's doctoral research in the area in the 1970s, which included qualitative interviews with white families – a study of whiteness long before the establishment of this subfield of ethnic and racial studies. How boundaries are drawn and the possibilities of crossing them beyond closed identitarian notions of 'us' and 'them', or as Avtar puts it in Punjabi, the *ajjabi* (other, different), *ghair* (strange) and '*apna/apni*' (ours), remains a central concern of not only the article, but also Avtar's broader work. She has continued to activate an openness to new formations and collectivities, while recognising the lived nature of the violence of race, gender and class. What is perceived as the *taking* of public space in Southall (and the UK more broadly) forms a part of the mediations sparked by Avtar's reading of Jean's suicide note. The response to the Dominion Centre, which became a South Asian Cinema after it was bought by the Indian Worker's Association, exemplifies the visceral reaction to the new arrivals as a threat to existing origin stories of local community (Brah, 1999: 14–15). Brah's contemplations are layered by the political memory of the racist stabbing of Gurdip Singh Jaggar, a 15-year-old boy, outside the Dominion Centre in 1976. Avtar takes us to the National Front march through Southall in 1979 and the galvanisation of anti-fascist forces, bringing together white, South Asian and Afro-Caribbean protesters, both in the counter march and at the funeral of Blair Peach, killed at the event by the police, where elderly South Asian women grieved for him as 'our son'. This white teacher became for them an *ajjabi*, a stranger who has different ways but holds the promise of becoming a friend, or even *apna*, 'one of ours' (*ibid.*: 19). The political mobilisation generates new positionalities that work across the hard closed-in lines of insiders and outsiders, and the violence that seeks to push 'them' out and away from 'us'. 'Us' and 'them' are changing and shape-shifting associations and categories, with deep emotional and material consequences. Indeed, Avtar's own search for what the contours of Jean's pain were in her life (both familial and suburban), as well the complications and the intimate everyday exchanges she may have shared with the new settlers of Southall, does the work of making Jean *apni* (of her own) for Avtar.

Southall is also the focus of two contributions to this issue, each exploring the existence of those who migrated, faced racism but were not defined by racism

(Hall, 2002). In 'The Sound of Memory', Tej Purewal conducted a rare interview with her aunt and world-renowned singer Mohinder Kaur Bhamra. We hear how she sang, performed and made music albums from Southall in the post-war period. Listened to across the global South Asian diaspora, her lyrics included newly written verses on migration, nights of labour in the UK, as well as the togetherness produced in *gidda* sessions between women. Southall also features in Nirmal Puwar's discussion of a little known film, *Aaj Kaal*, made by Asian elders within a community education project that Avtar directed over 20 years ago. She reflects on the mediations that informed this performative ethnography, as well as the dynamics and practices of telling with film, offering a different enunciation of British social scenes and public spheres. The social and affective properties of *gidda* feature as an aspect of scenes produced in British front rooms, as do the meeting places generated in British seashores and day centres for the elderly. By excavating Avtar's project, Puwar pushes us to consider the creative possibilities of the work we do. Steeped though we are in ethical dilemmas of exchange, *Aaj Kaal* reminds us that we don't only have the flat page of paper available to us as a mode of pedagogy.

The entangling of auto/biographical memory with broader processes of gendered racialisation in 'Scent' becomes a starting point for a number of pieces in the issue. In 'Working-class Whiteness from Within and Without', Lyn Thomas provides an auto-ethnographic response to 'Scent of Memory'. Writing through a series of memory scenes, she connects out from Southall to her white working class routes in Wolverhampton, the constituency of Enoch Powell, whose 'Rivers of Blood' speech presented a heavy spectre of doubt over the right of 'immigrants' to exist in the UK. In 'The Sense of Memory', Suki Ali both contrasts the diaspora space of her own upbringing in a mixed-race family in a southern seaside English town with that of the Southall explored in 'Scent' and digs deeper into the complex workings of memory suggested by Brah's piece. In 'Acrid Text: Memory and Auto/biography of the "New Human"', Joan Anim-Ado revisits the bitterness of not-belonging and the painful possibilities of resistance through a powerful assemblage of memory 'graffiti'.

The complex spaces and processes of belonging in diaspora space explored in 'Scent' are taken up in different ways by other pieces in the issue. In 'Racialisation, Relationality and Riots: Intersections and Interpellations', Ann and Aisha Phoenix take inspiration from 'The Scent of Memory's' discussion of gendered/racialised interpellation to consider the ways in which these psychosocial processes are at work in two contemporary spaces – a maternity ward in Tower Hamlets and the media coverage of the 2011 riots. In 'Interruption, Reproduction and Genealogies of "Staying Put" in Diaspora Space', Irene Gedalof starts from the figure of the mother that Brah evokes at the beginning, returns to throughout and ends with in 'Scent', to stage a series of interruptions to the ways in which the reproductive is thought in contemporary accounts of Britishness

and belonging. Nira Yuval-Davis' contribution 'An Autochthonic Scent of Memory?' revisits and offers a new conceptualisation of the dynamics of defining places of belonging and not-belonging that run through Brah's meditations on Southall of the 1970s and 1980s. Creative responses to the themes of 'Scent' are offered in Laleh Khalili's poem 'In Exile' and in Catherine O'Flynn's short story 'Blossomtime', in which the embodied sense of living in places of exile and of diaspora space are evoked.

The diversity of the modes of response to Avtar's invitation to write back also attests to the rich methodological complexity of the article that inspired them: psychosocial readings of the diaspora space of Tower Hamlets and of the recent riots; retheorising the figure of the mother in contemporary accounts of Britishness; auto-ethnographic accounts of memory in relation to whiteness and mixed-race identities; creative riffs on home and not-belonging; revisiting and revaluing the place of diasporic cultural productions in film and music in the space of Southall. Together they reflect on the different ways of being in academia. While Avtar worked on her PhD in Southall, she was also becoming an activist, going on to co-found Southall Black Sisters. She saw the importance of political mobilisation without romanticising this work or espousing an anti-intellectual stance. She has called on different disciplines in her work – stretching from stratification studies to psychoanalysis and cultural studies. Her 'slow burn' approach to pedagogy and community education is quite a contrast to the speeded-up production chain that academia is heading towards in the contemporary context. Academic positionality in relation to the writing of political events is a complicated issue. It can be a view from afar or caught up in ethnographic romanticisation. Where and how does it intervene? What are the stakes? How can we deepen comprehension of difficult times while working towards change without gesturing towards 'saving the natives' (Chow, 1993)?

While writing back to 'The Scent of Memory', the pieces in this collection also speak to each other, producing echoes in both substance and style. The autobiographical is a key aspect of Thomas's and Ali's articles, as it is in the discussion of the film *Aaj Kaal* by Puwar. The ethics of research and writing don't go away with the use of creative methods, using film or by engaging in personal biographical stories. Memory work is always of the now, as much as of the then, an active form of remembering and practical recollecting.

The unruly and multi-vocal figure of the mother reappears across the issue in different guises. Her material practices of mothering can make her an agent of racialisation as explored by Phoenix and Phoenix, of grappling with the after-effects of racialisation as evoked by Anim-Addo, of entanglement in the reproduction of raced, classed and gendered subjectivities and identities as remembered by Thomas, Khalili and Ali. As metaphor, she can be pressed into service in the work of tracing exclusionary and restrictive genealogies of belonging, as an emblem of sameness; conceptualised from a different point

of view, as Gedalof argues, she might be seen as confounding that logic of the same and offering a messier, more promising genealogy.

How we understand genealogies of 'staying put' is another recurring theme. Unpicking the discursive, experiential and theoretical instabilities and complexities of the white British/English 'we' is a preoccupation for Thomas, Gedalof, Phoenix and Phoenix, and Yuval-Davis, and each offers insights into the different ways and different levels at which this work of producing a 'we' operates in the diaspora space of Britain. A further set of echoes are produced by working through the entanglement of not-belonging with emplacement – in Anim-Addo's evocative term, of being 'new-in-dis-place' – as explored in different ways by Ali, Puwar, Purewal, Khalili and Anim-Addo herself.

Stylistically, there are also some interesting echoes across the issue – from Anim-Addo's 'graffiti' to Gedalof's 'interruptions', from Thomas's 'memory fragments' to Phoenix and Phoenix's staging of two sets of discourses and practices against each other, the issue offers a series of refusals to present seamless stories, smooth narratives that offer closure and resolution. This refusal of the seamless is fitting in an issue inspired by 'The Scent of Memory', which is itself a stylistically innovative 'meditation through a series of questions'. It is also fitting for an issue more broadly inspired by Avtar, whose work on diaspora space has been consistently committed to defying 'the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts' (Brah 1996: 196).

We hope that this resistance to closure, and the spirit of Avtar's original invitation to 'write back', are also reflected in this issue, and will inspire further answers to her question 'What do you think'?

references

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doi:10.1057/fr.2011.67