"ON BLACK FEMINISM" :: A CONVERSATION WITH KRISTAL BRENT ZOOK

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Feminism has many faces, and women's struggles vary depending on factors including location, culture, sexuality, class, and race. The latter has historically divided white and black American women in their fight for equality. Black women's experiences are not only influenced by gender inequality but also by racial injustice. For instance, black American women are three to four times more likely than white American women to die in childbirth. And mothering black children comes with worries and fears that most mothers of white children will never experience. What, then, is black feminism and how does it relate to the white feminist movement?

I called Kristal Brent Zook, award-winning journalist, scholar, and professor, to learn more about feminist expressions in black American culture. Our conversation not only brings to light that "feminism" is not a universal concept, it also reveals some shortcomings in the mainstream feminist movements.

When I hung up the phone, I was left wondering how free and empowered white women can truly be if their sisters of color remain unheard? Is it not paramount to overcome this divide and unite so that we can address the plights of ALL women?

Felicitas Jaima :: Hi, this is Felicitas Jaima, I am calling from TRIBE de MAMA Magazine.

Kristal Brent Zook :: Yes, hi, how are you?

FJ :: Good. Thank you so much for being available!

KBZ :: Oh sure, no problem.

FJ :: I read that you grew up in Los Angeles and I am really interested in how your upbringing in your neighborhood – which, from what I read, was really diverse– how it influenced your outlook on life as a woman. What do you think made you feminist. Are there any experiences that you really remember from that time?

KBZ :: Yeah, I think you're probably talking about the Washington Post piece about growing up biracial?

FJ :: Yes, exactly.

KBZ :: Yeah, I mean, I think there's two things there. There's growing up in a really diverse environment which was like heavily global and international and not just, you know, domestic minorities but Armenian and Russian and Chinese and Vietnamese and everything. And the beauty of that, you know, just in terms of being a biracial black woman in the midst of so many different shades and languages and colors. So that's one thing. And then when you talk about feminism I think it's something slightly different because that really had more to do with my home upbringing I think, – just being raised by two generations of black women. My mother and my grandmother raised me. And I talk about this a lot because it's so key to, you know, anyone's social formation I think, in terms of seeing that, you know, seeing that experience. Seeing they were working class women, they were, you know, very independent women, very strong women, who, you know, taught us from a very early age survival skills and not depending on anyone, not depending on men for anything. So definitely my womanist consciousness or feminist consciousness comes from that upbringing I think. And then, you know, the racial and the ethnic comes from being in that environment. You know my mother and grandmother are African American, but I think I would have been very different if I had grown up in an all-African American community, which I didn't. It was highly multi-racial and multi-ethnic so that was the other part of that social formation.

FJ :: Yes, very interesting. And you talk about, in one of the other pieces that I read from you, the fluidity of racial identities – how one's identity can change over time and even from one situation to another, from one context to another. And that also for you it changed over the course of your life. As a child you would identify maybe as multi-racial first and then black second, and now as an adult you've come to identify as black first and multi-racial second. And so, in what ways do you think that racial identity plays into someone's version of feminism or your version of feminism?
I want to understand how feminism is different when you identify as black because obviously feminism oftentimes is targeted as a very, you know, white, mainstream movement. Where does black feminism fit in? That's really what I'm hoping to distill.

KBZ :: Yeah, and that's the loaded question, right? That's the million-dollar question because – well I'll tell you a little anecdote about that. When I wrote Black Women's Lives, my second book, it's Black Women's Lives: Stories of Power and Pain, that book was originally supposed to be a book that was gonna be in dialogue with white feminism. In other words, my first publisher asked for a book that would kind of, you know, be this conversation between black feminists and white feminists. And what I found when I started to do the reporting and really got out in the street and on the ground, was that black women didn't use that word all that much. The ones that I was talking to anyway, which was for example, a catfish plant worker who was a union organizer in Mississippi, an activist who worked against, you know, AIDS, or worked for AIDS education, I should say, it was a whole range of women. A filmmaker in Hollywood, and, you know, a CEO in New York who ran Soft-Sheen Carson at L'Oréal. You know, they weren't really using that word and those were the women that I wanted in the book and those were the women that I wanted to talk to. So I figured for me to talk to them and understand their life experiences, if that's not the word that they want to use, then that's not the work that I'm going to use. I wanted them to tell their stories and to feel comfortable talking about issues about gender with me, in whatever way they want to do that. So the book kind of took a different form than what it was originally supposed to be and it really wasn't a conversation with white women. It was more, you know, these are our lives. These are the lives that I'm portraying, sort of like take them or leave them. This is what they are interested in, these are their experiences, and these are their stories. And, so I guess to answer your question, you know, I think that there are intersections, you know, that there are plenty of people, plenty of black people who do coalition building and they work with women of all races and they're very good at that, and they're much needed. People who do that kind of work are much needed. They build the bridges and they, you know, they make the conversations happen across races. Not everyone does that and that doesn't mean that feminism or womanist consciousness isn't a part of other peoples' lives because it is! It's just not called the same thing, and I don't have a problem with that. I don't think that we need to force the word down peoples' throats and, you know, force them to have a conversation about it that they're not interested in, you know? So I think the main message that I



hope that I wanted people to get from the book was that it doesn't mean that they're not conscious of gender. Because every single one of the women in that book is very conscious of gender and the roles it plays in their lives, and has their own, you know, engagement in that struggle. It just doesn't look the way, you know, they just don't talk about it in the same way that someone else would talk about it.

FJ :: And why do you think that is? Do you think it's because of the different racial and cultural context?

KBZ :: I think, yeah [...] I think there is.... I'll just give you the example of Sarah White who is the union organizer in Mississippi that I wrote about. She led one of the largest strikes of black workers ever to take place in Mississippi history, in 1990 at the catfish plant. So she was one of the first people that I really wanted in the book. I said, why is it that I don't know about this woman, that I haven't heard her story? We've heard about, you know, Martin Luther King, and all of the marchers from the Civil Rights Movements, all these people who led movements for, you know, workers and for women, but I have never heard of her

in 1990. And the majority of the people who worked in that catfish plant in Mississippi were women, black women - the vast majority. Why hadn't I ever heard that story? And it really bothered me that I hadn't heard her story. So if you just start from that premise that, you know, here is a story about black women really, who are, you know, struggling to make ends meet and weren't seeing the kind of civil rights that everybody else would imagine they would have like they weren't even able to use the bathroom when they needed to at times. So, you know, that is a story about feminism and about gender struggle, but it's completely internal to that time and place and to those people who aren't interested in the word, or who weren't interested with me in the word 'feminism.' You know what I mean? Because it comes from a whole different context. That's the best way I can explain it is by example.

FJ :: So would you say that the context for feminism is, is it the association with mostly, you know, a white, mainstream discourse?

KBZ :: Oh yeah, absolutely. And, like I said, I don't want to be misinterpreted to say that there aren't black women or Latinas or all women of color who are involved in that movement because there are, definitely. But on the whole, yes, and I think the fact that it's largely associated with abortion rights and I say abortion rights because it is, it's not even largely associated with reproductive rights but rather abortion rights which is a huge difference a lot of times for women of color. Women of color are very much interested in reproductive rights, which includes the right to, you know, birth control, the right to healthcare, the right to a living wage so that you can parent if you want to, if you choose to, right? So all of these components are part of what historically has interested women of color, beyond just the simple, you know, right to an abortion.

FJ :: Right. That is very interesting, that makes so much sense. So, just going back a little bit, so would you say that, I think, you know, currently we talk about that we're in the fourth wave of feminism and that seems to be reflective a little bit of maybe the efforts of some of the women you mentioned who do try to cross some of the cultural and ethnic divisions. Do you think that's mostly what we see? Is there also a fourth wave of feminism, can you say that black women go through a fourth wave of feminism or is this again something that is really associated with the more mainstream feminist movement?

KBZ :: I mean, I'm not sure... You may know more about the fourth wave than I do. Because, you know, I may be (laughs) of a different generation because when I was writing a lot about these issues maybe just ten years ago, there was the third wave that was just coming about at that time. The fourth wave, like I said, you probably know more about what they're up to than I do (laughs). But, yeah, I think there are always going to be waves – there will always be new directions, new emphases, you know, new struggles, new ways of seeing things, you know, the struggle for gender equality and gender rights isn't going to go away anytime soon. Even with, even if we do have a woman president, you know, we saw that with having a black president. Having a black president doesn't mean that the struggle for racial equality just, you know, happened overnight; in fact, what we have seen is a lot of backlash through that. And I have no doubt that if we have a woman president, we will also see some backlash and possibly some setbacks. So there will be waves and waves and waves, but, you know, each time I think we do make progress and, you know, we do have new understandings of what needs to be done with each wave so I'm hopeful that whatever the next wave is doing is probably, you know, much needed in its own right. But the problem is that none of the waves can do everything and, you know, that's why you see a lot of frustration, people are always getting frustrated with, you know, 'well if I'm a feminist then I have to do this or have to be that.' You know, no! That's just..those are some of the things that that particular wave was interested in. I mean, you know, bra burning of second wave feminism was needed at that time, right? It was much needed. That doesn't mean that it has anything to do with, you know, the next generations of feminists or what they need. And that's fine!

FJ :: Right. Do you see any way the larger feminist movement should address the issues of African American women in order to maybe unite and gain larger momentum or do you think that is not even...that's beside the point?

KBZ :: I mean again, you're asking, that's the million-dollar question again. Yes, they definitely should, of course, you know, they should try to understand...try to do a better job of understanding the needs of all women and what all women are saying is important to them, is not necessarily the same thing as what, you know, the average, white, mainstream feminist says is important to her. So, I mean, historically, yes, mainstream feminism hasn't done a good job of that, that's no secret...has not done a good job of really listening and really incorporating those perspectives into its movement in a deep, substantive way.

FJ :: Yeah, well, I think I have come to the end of my questions although I could keep talking with you, that's really nice.

KBZ :: Oh thank you! Good talking to you, too.