



# At the kitchen table with my ancestors

Feminist Theory

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## Abstract

This short personal essay focuses on the possibility of passing feminist thought and action from one generation to another within a family. Inspired by Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series*, I imagine a roundtable with my matrilineal ancestors. I examine the question of what constitutes feminisms and whether my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother considered themselves feminists in a place where it is not always easy to be a feminist: former Yugoslavia and its diaspora. I argue that the stories about my ancestors that I heard growing up made me a feminist and, alongside my readings and activism, shaped my understanding of feminisms, even when my ancestors themselves might not have considered themselves feminists.

## Keywords

intergenerational feminisms, Yugoslavia, personal essay, memory, African-American feminism

Is anyone born a feminist? Was I? How did I become a feminist? Listening and reading, watching and analysing, marching and shouting – these were the active acts that informed my understanding of feminisms. Engagement with feminist writers, artists, activists and scholars shaped my feminism, but this does not answer my initial question – how did I find feminisms? I reflect on these questions while contemplating Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), which was displayed on three walls at the 2023 exhibition dedicated to this African-American artist at the Barbican Centre, a performing arts centre in the Barbican Estate in London. I have seen the series innumerable times, in exhibitions, books and online. Still, I cannot walk past the series; instead, I immerse myself in it.

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At the centre of each of the 13 photographs is a long wooden kitchen table, a ceiling lamp that illuminates it and casts shadows into the room and a changing number of chairs surrounding the table. In some images the artist is alone at the kitchen table, in others she shares the table with a man, then a girl, another woman and eventually with two women – quotidian kitchen scenes.

The questions about my feminism come to me in this moment of observation and immersion. The kitchen table is laden with meaning and emotion. Like in many other places, in former Yugoslavia the kitchen is a highly gendered space. The preparation of food as part of care work, a form of unpaid and frequently undervalued labour, a determinative aspect of social reproduction – oh, how many feminist debates, theories and, yes, battles revolve around this room and the table! The kitchen table can be a symbol of unequal gender dynamics. We see that in some of Carrie Mae Weems' photographs. But, equally, we see how the kitchen table can constitute an affective space for female-identifying persons. It becomes a space for sharing stories, caring and laughing. The kitchen table, as an extension of the kitchen, has been a battlefield for feminists for many generations.

In my childhood, I would sneak into the kitchen when my mum, her female friends and relatives sat there, doing chores, preparing food or simply having coffee. I would become all ears, busying myself with cleaning the green beans, peeling potatoes or sitting there as quietly as possible, attentively listening to the adult women's conversations. Like in Carrie Mae Weems' photographs, the women would form a circle around the table and their intimate bond would be visible to any external viewer. How many times did I feel pride rising in my chest to form part, albeit a silent part, of this circle?

At kitchen tables, I would hear stories about my maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, who died when I was a toddler and before I was born, respectively. Due to their premature deaths, I never got to sit around a table with them and ask them whether they considered themselves feminists or how they felt about shaping me as a woman and feminist. I imagine the four of us, my great-grandma, my grandma, my mum and I, sitting around a large wooden kitchen table, not unlike Carrie Mae Weems, absorbed in our conversation. They, my ancestors, share their stories, knowledge and thoughts on feminisms with me while our hands busy themselves preparing the *zimnica*, pickled vegetables and sauces that will be stored over the winter and pulled out for meals daily.

Great-grandma Bojana casually mentions:

When I was in the partisans,<sup>1</sup> all the women would prepare meals collectively; that was our time. Those years were hard, but there was a sense of purpose and fulfilment, too. We knew our shared goal was liberation from the *ustaše*<sup>2</sup> and the Germans, although we did not see too many of the latter around here, it was the *ustaše* mainly. Survival, finding our children again, and liberation were our main goals back then. I am not sure how many of us were concerned with socialism. That came later. The women were in charge of cooking, nursing and minding the children. By the time I joined, the movement had grown and we women were mostly in liberated villages, not the woods anymore. We didn't question this division of labour; we were used to it. But what had changed in comparison to the pre-war period was that our

voices were heard. In reunions and gatherings we spoke up, not all of us but our representatives. There were a few strong and rhetorically accomplished women who made the men listen to them. I know of other women, like Neda Božinović, who had taken to arms and fought alongside men. All of us learnt how to use rifles, but I was relieved I never had to point it at another human being. I was tired of all the violence, especially after my husband and first-born son were killed by the *ustase*, after I fled the camp in Germany, I was just done with the violence and hoped for the end of the war and liberation. I don't know whether that is what you, Ana, call feminism. We called it survival.

Grandma Stana presses her lips tightly and mumbles:

Liberation of the country did not mean liberation from pain and suffering. It did not mean the end of poverty or the end of chauvinistic male violence. I loved going to school, I loved learning and I loved learning languages in particular. And how awful it was for me to leave school so early because of our poverty and because of the need to help out financially. If it weren't for the restrictions of poverty, I wouldn't have gotten married at 18. I am so happy for you, Ana, that you got an education, that you and your mum both did. I suffered a lot at the hands of your grandpa. He loved you a lot, but I am not sure he ever loved me. Most of our life was a struggle for survival. My mother had to fight for liberation from the *ustase* and Nazis, I had to fight for survival as a poor woman in Socialist Yugoslavia. There were no words to describe the violence I suffered at home; the words hurt more than the kicks and punches. Constant vigilance to not say the wrong word, to not look at him in the wrong way, to not burn the meals, to not serve them too late. No one cared. It was normal, most women that I knew back then went through the same things with their husbands. At least mine was a good father. He didn't raise his hand against his child, he supported his daughter and we worked hard so she could graduate from secondary school and university. I wanted her to have a better, safer life than I or my mother had. I thought a proper education would be key to that.

'It was true, for a while at least, before the war broke out. The next one, the war of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> I cannot believe all of us had to go through wars, including you, Ana', my mum Ankica adds bitterly.

At least we were allowed to cross the border to Austria and seek safety there. It meant safety from the violence of rifles, grenades and other weapons. But not safety from xenophobia, from isolation, from a lack of a support system. I had to shoulder most of the burden, despite your dad's presence. He worked, he worked hard, but everything else was my responsibility. I know that you, Ana, now call it reproductive labour; I did not have the terminology to describe it. All that I could do was learn how to handle it, how to survive without losing my mind and how to ensure that you would never be in my shoes. I think that's what I learnt from my mum, and she learnt it from hers: make sure your daughter does not have to endure everything that you had to endure; equip her with the knowledge and skills she needs to have it better and easier. Even if things happen that are out of our control, like wars. I am not sure whether that is feminism. I don't consider myself a feminist, neither did my mum or


grandma, but this is what we believe in and what we practise. Is that feminism? You'll have to tell me.

I step outside of this imaginary conversation around the kitchen table; I am back in the Barbican, looking at the *Kitchen Table Series*, surrounded by strangers. In a recent blog post titled 'Being a feminist in difficult places': Balkan Feminism, Maria Faciolince (2019) claims that the Balkans are a difficult space for feminism. I can only partially agree with this claim; patriarchal structures are firmly rooted in Balkan societies and families, but feminists have been around just as long (Milica Stojadinović-Srpkinja, Draga Dejanović, Jelena Dimitrijević). My matrilineal feminism did not start with my great-grandma Bojana. I am sure her mum, grandma, great-grandma and so forth were already feminists, even if they did not understand themselves as such. We, or I, have lost their stories but not their teachings.

In their writing, Slavenka Drakulić (1992), Lepa Mladjenović (2024), Audre Lorde (2017) and bell hooks (1986) urge us to talk to each other and, most importantly, listen to each other. I did not have the chance to listen to my grandmother and my great-grandmother directly, but I listened to the stories that my mother told me, and to the conversations between her and her female relatives and friends. Even when our lives were disrupted by war and forced migration, those stories accompanied us, bridging gaps and creating continuity. Iva Nenić (2018) stresses the relevance of transgenerational feminist cooperation and transgenerational feminist memory in former Yugoslavia, given the continuous disruptions and reconstitutions in the region since the early 20th century. As states form and re-form, ideologies shift and ethnic tensions resurge, the sharing of stories and experiences across generations is an effective tool for continuing feminist resistance.

A continuation of my female ancestors' resistance is how I define my own understanding of feminism. Their stories, resistance and care planted the seed of feminism early on, even when they never used the term 'feminist'. My own experiences and my engagement with feminist theories from across the globe solidified my feminism, a feminism deeply rooted in critical Socialist feminist history and decolonial ideals.

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## Notes

1. Yugoslav Partisan: communist-led anti-fascist resistance to the Axis powers in occupied Yugoslavia (1941–1945).
2. *Ustaše*: a Croatian, fascist and ultranationalist organization, active between 1929 and 1945, founded by Ante Pavelić.
3. Yugoslav Wars: 1990–2001, a series of ethnic tensions resulting in civil wars across the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. These wars led to the violent disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into six independent and one partially independent countries. Simultaneously, these wars led to the transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism.

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