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LOCATING GLOBAL FEMINISMS ELSEWHERE

Braiding US Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the trajectory of global feminism from the vantage point of the US, and its treatment of ‘Other Women’ in the service of its own hegemonic (re)construction and simultaneous occlusion of multiple feminisms both within and beyond the US. It also offers reflections on locating global feminisms instead in ‘alternate’ venues and avoiding reproducing the West as its predetermined default frame of reference. I am proposing to undertake a critique of global feminism in two ways: through how the discipline of women’s studies is organized and how global feminism is deployed politically. The analytical tools that help me take on global feminism are to be found in US anti-racist feminism and transnational feminism. That is, US anti-racist and transnational feminisms can aid in the analysis and shifting the politics of feminism.

Key Words ✶ global feminism ✶ third world feminism ✶ transnational feminism ✶ women of color ✶ women’s studies

In the fall of 2005, I was invited to attend a luncheon organized by a colleague in the university in honor of a woman journalist from Saudi Arabia who was visiting the United States as an Eisenhower Fellow. We had barely taken our seats when our host launched into a celebratory speech appreciating the ‘freedom’ of press in the United States, and particularly the New York Times’s critical and investigative reporting. We should be thankful, she noted, considering how in other parts of the world (notably the guest’s) the government controlled the media and the people had few options other than swallowing the filtered information fed to them. This came on the heels of the reports on statements in Saudi Arabia by Karen Hughes, Undersecretary
of State responsible for public diplomacy, regarding Saudi women’s lack of freedom. According to a *New York Times* article by Steven Weisman, ‘When Ms. Hughes expressed the hope here that Saudi women would be able to drive and “fully participate in society” much as they do in her country, many challenged her’ (29 Sept. 2005). It appeared that our host had not read the *New York Times* articles that bemoaned Hughes’s ill-placed remarks, and the indignant responses they evoked from the Saudi audience. Moreover, our host, declaring herself a champion of global feminism who sat on the board of various foundations ‘helping’ women in oppressed cultures, in an unrelated and illogical turn in the conversation invited me to a follow-up lunch with her to discuss the ‘issue of female genital mutilation’ (FGM).

I open with the above vignette because I want to probe the braiding of democracy (free media in the United States, an informed public in direct opposition to authoritarian regimes, and their compliant subjects elsewhere), freedom (of women to drive and support women’s oppression elsewhere such as FGM), and benevolent global feminism (that help women who are victimized by their cultures, their men, and their states). Imperiously demarcating the space between ‘us’ and ‘them’ first by establishing the USA as a ‘free’ society where human rights are respected, and second by assuming an affinity with ‘global feminism’ by declaring her concern for abused women in ‘other’ cultures, our host occupied the benevolent first world feminist position—seemingly oblivious to the US government’s role in creating or exacerbating harsh conditions for the women with whom she so wanted to be in solidarity. In this instance, global feminism was co-opted into a narrative justification of western liberal notions of democracy and used in the service of reconstructing/reconsolidating its civilizing mission. Sitting at the university cafeteria with my American feminist colleagues and our guest from Saudi Arabia, I was reminded of the importance of carefully examining the ways in which feminisms are deployed to further disparate political agendas that can be quite contradictory to feminist principals of equality, self-reflexivity, and reciprocity. At a time of militarized war and US empire-building indeed, the enactment of global feminisms within such seemingly innocuous spaces such as the academy can unwittingly bolster the project of US imperialism in the global scene.

As a teacher-scholar of global/transnational feminism, I felt compelled to write this article as a way to problematize contemporary constructions of global feminism in the US academy. Of particular interest here is the deployment of global feminism in fostering nationalism, claiming patriotism at a time of militarized empire-building when feminists should be wary of reverting to such positions. This article explores the politics of global feminism from the vantage point of the United States and its treatment of ‘Other Women’ in the service of its own hegemonic (re)construction and simultaneous occlusion
of multiple feminisms both within and beyond the United States. It also offers reflections on locating global feminisms in ‘alternate’ venues and avoiding reproducing the West as its predetermined default frame of reference. It is an attempt to locate global feminism ‘elsewhere’ not only in its geographic but also its positional orientation.

The post-1990s discourse of global feminism as charted by Amrita Basu’s influential anthology, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms* (1995), decisively departed from earlier attempts in internationalizing feminisms through the lens of universal patriarchy that foregrounded sexual rights/violence as the privileged site of its analysis. By pointing to the limitations in the earlier ‘global sisterhood’ model, and its normative liberal/western subject, Basu’s work attempted to draw attention to the heterogeneity of women’s experiences, and movements around the world. Most importantly, she questioned the analytic frameworks of feminist theory, which portrayed women in non-western contexts predominantly through the lens of development and modernization. What this collection, however, did not adequately address was hegemonic feminist theory’s comparable elision of complexities and multiplicities of women’s experiences and histories within the United States, nor the points of convergence (and divergence) between US anti-racist/third world feminisms and third world/transnational feminisms.

In this article, I will argue that the discourse of global feminism, although critical of earlier notions of global sisterhood and its attachment to commonalities of women’s oppression around the world, is nonetheless inadequately accountable to issues of difference and inequality among communities of women within the US border and curiously attached to so-called difference and inequality between communities of women across the US border. Consequently, global feminism using a universal human rights paradigm constructs for itself the role of the heroic savior of women in non-western societies. Countering this newly proliferating global mission of feminism lies in the intertwining of the rich efforts of US anti-racist/third world feminisms and third world/transnational feminisms and making central the twin projects of simultaneously undoing race and nation, and interrogating intra-national and international—within and outside the United States—hierarchies to forge more equitable global connections across multiple borders.

In following sections I undertake a critique of global feminism from the vantage point of the United States in two ways: through how the discipline of women’s studies is organized and how global feminism is deployed politically. In the final section, I argue the analytical tools found in US anti-racist feminist and transnational feminist scholarship can aid in shifting the politics of feminism. I use the metaphor of braiding deliberately to imply the necessary connecting (but not merging) of distinct strands of feminist theorizing that can lead us to a more powerful and coherent analysis of some of the pressing
challenges facing global feminism. Using the case of feminist collaborative work in South Asia, I suggest a different politics of global feminism, which does not necessarily center the West/US as its primary frame of reference. First, however, I begin with a discussion of the divergences and convergences of these two strands of feminist theorizing.

*Locating the Divide*

A feminist conference in the fall of 2005 at the University of Washington posted the following topic in the call for proposals: ‘Feminist Dialogues on Social Justice: Forging Articulations Across US-Based Anti-Racist and Transnational Feminisms’. The purpose of the conference was to conceptualize analytic and political connections across international and intra-national perspectives, communities, and movements in order to inspire analysis and reflections for studying historical and contemporary national and transnational systems of inequality. Such a call draws attention to the often unacknowledged distinction between women’s studies scholarship that theorizes axes of difference within the national border from that espousing a global context. In domestic spaces, the category of the nation is ignored; difference is constructed as if the nation-space is irrelevant. This curious divide has been noted as reflective of a framework of knowledge production rooted in Cold War politics. Kaplan and Grewal (2002) claim the genealogy of interdisciplinary programs such as American studies, area studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies in the United States must be understood in this context.

A discussion of this divide is taken up in the introduction to the Fall 2005 MIT electronic journal of *Middle East Studies* volume dedicated to Arab American Feminisms. Editors Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany take issue with the distinctive approaches of ethnic studies and area studies particularly in the United States. Citing the example of Middle East studies, they argue area studies in the US has historically espoused a model which focuses within the geographic boundaries of the ‘Middle East’, thereby reinforcing the notion that Middle Easterners/Arabs are foreigners to be studied ‘over there’ but not part of the United States ‘over here’. On the other hand, ethnic studies in the United States has focused on African-Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos/as, thus reinscribing a nationalist paradigm limiting possibilities for a more fluid understanding of identities and movements. Like area, American, and ethnic studies, women’s studies in the United States also reinforced boundaries of nation and state in its paradigmatic conception and utilization of categories like women of color to denote national minorities, leaving women in development and global feminism to denote women elsewhere.
Discrete categorizations such as these hinder feminist alliances. For instance, Abdulhadi et al. (2005) talk about the unproductive conversations in the listserv set up for the contributors to *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), which excluded Palestinian voices. Under the pretext of a soft relativism, Israeli and Palestinian perspectives were positioned on an equal platform, and the authors observed that racist attacks on Palestinians went unchecked even within a multi-racial context. Preference was given to a discourse of diversity and pluralism—assuming all voices are positioned on an equal platform—over that of conflict and inequality—reinforcing an apolitical multiculturalism. Furthermore, this is reflective of the limitations in ethnic and women’s studies to politicize nation in this volume even as it politicized race. At the same time, there are iconic conservative feminists like Phyllis Chesler (2006) who declare western academic and mainstream feminists have become tragically sidetracked by discussions of ‘personal body rights and sexual issues’ at the expense of taking a stand against ‘gender apartheid’ in the Islamic world where women are treated as ‘subhumans’. Both positions however—that of Chesler representing global feminist concerns and the listserv moderators a multi-racial perspective—fail to engage a geopolitical and historical analysis of feminists’ complicated relationships with one another, whether it is within the nation space of the US or beyond.

**Political Economy of Feminisms in the Everyday Space of the Academy:**

It is the microstructure of the women’s studies organization that is and will continue to be under duress and (direct)ion from the macrostructure to reproduce the patriarchy-driven macrostructural canon of unmediated power, pre-emption, privilege, authority, exclusiveness, exclusion, inequity, and dominance. The rewards for compliance under duress and direction are indeed considerable and for the unmarked few welcome and rewarding (Karuna Karan, 2006: 38).

The enactment of feminisms in the academy is ineluctably tied to notions of conformity and entitlement. Feminism, after all, is not a monolithic discourse and considerable historical and ideological differences exist between variously positioned feminists in the academy. Women’s studies academic establishment and those who staff it are positioned within various levels of structural power. In other words, relations among feminists are shaped by the political economy of the academy. The identities, polities, work, and value of diverse feminist academics are related to their historic, socioeconomic positions in society at large. In this section, these relations will be explored as they manifest
in and through the various praxes of women’s studies, which both produce feminist subjects and simultaneously shape their own self-production.

Kaplan and Grewal (2002) link the production of concept metaphors (Spivak 1996a: 44) like ‘Third World women’ and ‘women of color’ in US women’s studies and ethnic studies as having over time become representative of a homogenized figure of racialized and sexualized difference. The transnational model, they argue, moving away from the homogenized figure of difference and braiding a postcolonial and race analysis, pushes towards the interdisciplinary study of the uneven, unequal, and complex relationships among women in diverse parts of the world. It highlights women’s diverse needs and agendas in many cultures and societies, which are as complicated within societies as they are across nations.

Responding to Kaplan and Grewal’s argument, Sandra Soto (2005) has posited that the move to establish the transnational as the preferred rubric of minority studies runs the risk of subsuming and further marginalizing the study of ‘US Women of Color’. Given the hierarchies between ethnic and post-colonial studies in the US academy, Soto thinks transnationalism solidifies the academy’s already preferred allegiances to the latter in order to leave uncontested domestic fractures. This is exemplified in hiring practices of certain universities that prefer foreign-born faculty of color as ‘affirmative action hires’. At a gathering I attended of women of color in the academy and community in Northeastern University, a Chicana academic suggested that South Asians are often preferred by the US academy as more ‘worldly’ and ‘sophisticated’ than US-born women of color, namely African American and Latina candidates. Terms like ‘global’ and ‘transnational’ is code for hiring non-US women of color who are considered by academic establishments less threatening, not as political, and more compliant. This perception of South Asian or non-US candidates assumes that they are not politically involved in domestic debates and that the ‘global/transnational’ terrain is not linked to the national. Furthermore, the compliant, mediating, and ‘model minority’ stereotype perpetuated in this narrative puts US-born women of color and foreign nationals in competition with one another, and reaffirms the ‘perpetual outsider’ status of South Asians. More disturbing is what Soto refers to as the setting up of women of color and transnational perspectives in contradistinction to one another and a failure to appreciate or understand different modes of resistance across cultures. Assertive expressions like ‘speaking out’ and ‘being outspoken’ are associated with US women of color, whereas other modes of agency, resistance, and organizing (negotiating, subverting, manipulating, silence) are misrecognized and labeled as compliant.

Soto takes issue with one specific claim of transnational feminism as articulated by Shohat, Kaplan and Grewal, that existing approaches to difference within US women’s studies is incommensurate with transnational
approaches because the former’s trenchant allegiance to national boundaries is insufficiently dynamic. In addition, Soto finds the collapsing of the genealogies of categories like third world woman and US woman of color as a colonialist move much too homogenizing and thus forecloses the possibilities of productive conversations that might occur if one carefully and patiently teased out the subtle and historical differences in the emergence of these two strands. In a 2006 article exploring frameworks for feminist intercultural work, Vron Ware notes lumping non-US minorities in to the category of women of color also elides an analysis of western cultural imperialism and neocolonial interventions. Although unsatisfied with Wendy Brown’s analysis of the infamous women’s studies classroom at Santa Cruz as an ‘always already’ failing attempt to address women’s studies’ original subordination of race, leading to the reactive creation of the women of color course, Soto nonetheless agrees with Brown’s assertion: ‘distinctive models of power are required for grasping various kinds of subject production, yet subject construction itself does not transpire in accordance with any of these models’ (quoted in Soto, 2005: 119). Thus Soto concludes the ongoing necessity of studying women of color not in contradistinction or subsumed into the transnational but in tracing their distinctive genealogies for productive engagement. I agree with Soto and propose that while there are important points of intersection between histories and struggles of US women of color and third world women, and therefore potential for powerful alliances, collapsing the two in to one category smudges over the necessity of analyses around nation as well as race—the importance of which is all too clear in the example discussed earlier about the exclusion of Palestinian voices in the This Bridge We Call Home contributors’ listserv.

At the women of color-only gathering at Northeastern University, which took place amidst protests from university administration and the larger community who found such an endeavor to be exclusionary, one woman spoke bluntly about the ‘once over’ look women of color in the academy tend to give one another because tokenism gives rise to politics that suggests ‘there is only room for one of us’. bell hooks has long cautioned that women of color must confront ‘internalized racism’, which leads us to question our self-worth and to ‘vent anger and rage at injustice at one another rather than at oppressive forces, to hurt and abuse one another, or to lead one ethnic group to make no effort to communicate with another’ (hooks, 1984: 55). Women of color/third world women from varied ethnic and national groups learn to be competitive with one another and thereby perpetuate racist stereotypes and the vicious cycle of exclusionary processes.

The field of women’s studies in the academy has replicated the relational power structure. Within the predominantly white women’s studies circles, junior white women are thus accorded access to the white power superstructure through the ‘old girls’ network’. This is the consolidation of what one of my
colleagues called ‘neo-patriarchy’. Women of color on the other hand remain in token positions/tracks like women of color/global/transnational, lacking both the ‘parlor conversational’ (Hurtado, 1996) socialization and universalist applications of their work. In other words, women of color and transnational feminists can speak to only certain issues narrowly conceptualized by hegemonic feminism as ‘special tracks’ whereas white women, specializing in ‘feminist theory’ under the rubric of women’s and gender studies, are free to position themselves everywhere. In the everyday interactions and dynamics within women’s studies, the special-track bodies occupy a homogenized racialized and gendered space. Therefore, the modes of identity affirmation and politicization of white and women of color differ. Aida Hurtado suggests:

What this means is that, for white women, the first step in the search for identity is to confront the ways in which their personal, individual silence endorses the power of white men that has robbed them of their history. For women of color the challenge is to use their [alternative] traditions for specific political goals. (1996: 144)

I argue that Hurtado’s argument on relational privilege can be useful to better understand structural relations between not only white women and women of color but also among women of color, given the contested categorizations like ‘women of color’ and ‘transnational’ feminisms, and hiring of US and non-US minorities respectively in these ‘special tracks’.

Hurtado argues that white men relate to white women through seduction and women of color through rejection because they (white men) need white women to reproduce and maintain racial purity, whereas no such value is attached to women of color. She concludes by suggesting that the ‘spectator seat’ accorded to white women, who are closer to the center of power because of their value as reproducers and cultivators of whiteness, is not representative of true liberation, which can only happen through connecting struggles of differentially located women against the center of power—or, white male hegemony. We can extend this argument further by suggesting that white women also relate to other white and non-white women through seduction and rejection in the academic establishment, such as in women’s studies. The token positions on women of color and third world/transnational women within women’s studies spaces are similar to the ‘spectator seats’ awarded to white women that Hurtado speaks of. The struggles experienced by white women—often defined simply as ‘being a woman in the male academy’ are more easily understood and taken on by the white women’s studies establishment, whereas the ones faced by women of color and third world women are seen as divisive and therefore ignored. In this context, it is important to connect the struggles of US anti-racist and third world feminists—at times viewed as divisive—in order to envision a collective response to the hegemony of white feminism.
My intent here is not necessarily to rehash an age-old discussion on women’s studies’ ‘growing pains’ or divisions between white and non-white feminists or pedagogies. In fact, the pedagogical project of integrating international and women’s studies has been well documented in the collection *Encompassing Gender* by Lay et al. (2002) as well as *Twenty-First Century Feminist Classrooms* by Macdonald and Sanchez-Casal (2002). Rather, I am interested to illuminate the everyday interactions in women’s studies spaces and the political economy of feminisms that validate structurally and institutionally a politics that embraces pluralism, soft relativism, diversity management through harmonious coexistence over productive engagement with conflict, inequality, and asymmetrical power relations. A number of educators, Paulo Freire among them, have argued that education represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations (Mohanty, 2003). Academic institutions and education are sites where power and politics reflecting unequal and asymmetrical relations among social groups are played out. Education is not merely accumulation of knowledge that is bartered in the market for upward mobility, but there are critical issues at stake including the recovery of alternative, oppositional knowledges and histories of domination, as well as struggles of resistance and survival. Particularly in fields such as women’s studies, and ethnic studies, a definition of knowledge that is grounded in social justice and self-determination has been historically central. Oppositional at inception, these fields continuously run the risk of being assimilated and depoliticized in the academy. A feminism that reproduces and espouses such assimilationist politics is complicit in the maintenance of that which it claims to transform.

**Politics of Global Feminism**

In a sharply critical essay, Farrell and McDermott (2005) posit that global feminism’s focus on the human rights abuses faced by third world women must be understood within the context in which it emerged in the United States. These authors argue that the backlash aimed at US feminism in the 1970s from conservative forces resulted in stagnation in the women’s movement as well as disinterest from younger generations. Earlier political gains regarding affirmative action, and in the spheres of women’s education, employment, and sexual rights, were challenged by new conservative appointments in court. At the same time, suggest Farrell and McDermott, ‘commercial feminism’, or the co-optation of feminism by corporations and ad agencies, casted a shadow over earlier mass and grassroots feminist engagements. The 1980s also witnessed many critiques by and for feminists of color, gay and lesbian, and anti-racist,
and working class white feminisms (Sandoval, 2000). Global feminism and the idea of ‘internationalism’ presented a strategic diversion from a fragmented domestic politics. The problems defined by this turn appeared as spectacularly oppressive: female genital cutting, enforced veiling, or trafficking in women. Mainstream US feminist organizations found these causes easier to mobilize various constituencies and resources, as well as secure for themselves a niche in larger political discussions around the role of United States as the beacon of humanitarianism (Farrell and McDermott, 2005: 46–7).

Every semester, I experience a version of this brand of global feminism in my ‘Women in Global Perspective’ course where the discourse of human rights immediately raises a plethora of concerns for oppression of veiled Muslim women, genitally mutilated African women, and impoverished Indian women—but rarely an American counterpart figure. Many students have difficulty in maintaining an intersectional analysis of international and intra-national gendering practices. While the intersecting axes of race/class/gender is readily applied to analyze the conditions of women’s lives in the United States, in discussions of women’s lives ‘elsewhere’ that critique is often lost as women in the USA become a singular individual with freedom to choose in opposition to her victimized singular third world counterpart. I say this not to demonize students, but rather to bring into focus thorny debates in the field of women’s studies which are enacted in the micro-space of the feminist classroom.

Marnia Lazreg argued that ‘the intrusion of postmodernist feminism of Europe and North America into the field of development’ can be temporally associated with when ‘more and more women from the Third World began to examine critically not only feminist theory with its imperial claim to liberation but also development practices’ (2002: 130). I would argue further that the attention to global feminism is coextensive with more and more anti-racist feminist voices critical of hegemonic feminism’s inadequate attention to the intersectional approach, and to the ‘wounded attachment’ to gender oppression (preferably in the non-western contexts) as the central category of analysis (Doezema, 2001). However, instead of engaging with these critiques, Lazreg posits that western feminism reified and neutralized them.

For example, Inderpal Grewal (1998: 518) has analyzed the language and agenda of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers University as generalizing to the extent of ignoring historical context and contingency and pushing forward a framework of commonality of women’s oppression. Instead of attending to the critical questions raised by these genres—anti-racist and third world feminist scholarship—they are often ‘flattened’ and ‘normalized’ (Grewal, 1998: 130), aided by elite Third World women themselves—the so-called ‘gender experts’, a lucrative profession in the global feminism apparatus. Richa Nagar has beautifully demonstrated the exigencies of donor-driven
colonialist discourses of empowerment and the NGOization of women’s movement in her analysis of how middle class urban-based women’s networks are complicit in the continuing marginalization and silencing of poorer women living in rural communities in third world countries (Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006). Lazreg calls this ‘containment through inclusion’, which hinges upon searching and revealing more and more aspects of third world women’s lives to fit into the logic of global feminism. As a result, divisions among feminists on different sides of the global divide become neutralized, and the researchers’ own investment in global feminism is left unquestioned, as is the desire to ‘fashion other women in their own image’ (Lazreg, 2002: 130–3).

Making central the plight of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian women while not questioning its own interventionist desires, global feminism aids the US government’s political strategy of positioning America as the site of authoritative enunciations of freedom and rights whose representatives can judge the immoral practice of other nation states. Using the logic of global feminism, female US government representatives support US foreign policy strategies and interventions in the name of women’s rights activism. Through their examination of leading human rights reports, including *Human Rights Watch World Report* and *Amnesty International Annual Reports* between 1993 and 2002, Farrell and McDermott (2005) reveal that the attention of human rights advocates followed the same trajectory as US foreign policy interests during that era.

More recently, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has made co-extensive the interest of US national security, democracy, and development. In her view,

> The fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power. In this world it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines be-tween our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals. American diplomacy must integrate and advance all of these goals together. (quoted by Mittal, 2006)

The braiding of democracy, development, foreign policy, and human rights, and the types of implications drawn from it, is supported by the mission of US-centric global feminism, which in turn fits into the mission of the US imperial nation. This has brought about a surge of interest and activism on behalf of oppressed women around the world but without a parallel examination of historical and geopolitical machinations by the US that have exacerbated oppressive situations the world over. It also deflects attention away from domestic fractures and impact of structural inequality on various domestic minority communities.

As global feminism gained momentum and prominence in the 1980s and 1990s it was a key player in global human rights advocacy operating through international aid organizations and political and legal mechanisms of the United Nations. UN conferences on women have been criticized for their reliance on a western liberal framework whereby the ‘regional’ contradicts
the ‘universal’ and ‘women’ is in conflict with the ‘human’ (Rajan, 2002: 119). I would further suggest that ‘Other’ woman is in conflict with the ‘woman’ of the western liberal framework making ‘Other’ women twice removed from an international human rights regime. Scholars like Inderpal Grewal have critiqued the universalizing rhetoric of human rights and pointed to the ‘silences that are embedded within it’. First, human rights literature relies on a framework of a modernized first world that should go in and rescue, civilize and liberate those facing yet another crisis in the third world, always imagined as a ‘region of aberrant violence’. Second, human rights discourse presumes women only as individual, autonomous beings who can be rescued, rather than as members of families or other group identities. This demonizes socioeconomically disempowered men in particular ways as the oppressors of women, pits marginalized groups against and in competition with one another, and promotes international organizations as the saviors when marginalized men, as a group, also lack systematic access to resources and decision-making power. Third, this paradigm presumes that women can be identified as a group. In other words, to argue the collective rights of women ‘assumes women live their lives solely as women, a universalizing move that ignores the fact that women are not all gendered in the same ways’ (Grewal, 1998: 505–7).

Nevertheless, my own research on the state, NGO, and national women’s movements’ responses to violence against women in Bangladesh, reveals how women activists have been quite successful in using the platform of global feminism and naming certain types of violence against women as human rights abuses and using such as an avenue to garner funds from international aid agencies. They have also used international law (UNCEDAW) to put pressure on the government to enact policy changes on the ground. Most of these abuses are what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2002) has called of the spectacular kind: acid throwing, fatwa (religious decrees against women by rural clergy), for example, but not the everyday kind like domestic violence, poverty, nor exploitative labor conditions. Moreover, the ‘interventions’ funded and formulated have been almost entirely in the policy, legal, and medical arenas and minimally on the social/economic arenas. This is an example of the danger of uniform norms which disregard complexities of the situation on the ground and prioritizes certain issues over others.

I would like to point to three related consequences:

a) Development aid serving as human rights intervention gains direct access to the lives of vulnerable women. This is particularly the case in the discourse and practice of microcredit, being increasingly championed as the development panacea. While microcredit enterprises do provide economic opportunities to poor disenfranchised women, they also rely on patriarchal social structures and capitalize on women’s so-called ‘docility’ and ‘obedience’, making them safer credit baits, integrating
them into the ever-expanding tentacles of global capitalist development but doing little to disrupt macro economic and political inequalities or to transform unequal social structures of gender, race, or class (Feldman, 1997).

b) NGOs in developing countries are often led by local women, and do important work at the community level. However, structurally, they are positioned such that they transmit powerful values of western-dependent development and global feminism. As part of civil society, they have enforced the shift from viewing women as beneficiaries to participants in development. The subject status that is seemingly bestowed on these ‘Other’ woman participants, however, is vitiated by the assumption of a self constituted by the conceptual schemes and structure of global feminism. This is what Lazreg calls ‘the cul-de-sac’ of feminist theorizing where other women are intelligible primarily through the script of global feminism—‘a confessional mode to give marginalized women a voice, a romantic feminist act of creationism’ (2002: 136–41). These stories transform women’s lives into discourse, their speech as a sign of ‘empowerment’, describe women’s survival stories as a linear process from misery to heroism/empowerment, and are often interchangeable across geographic location.

c) Participating in transnationalized policy advocacy entailed by global feminist interventions requires connecting with diverse actors at the local, national, and transnational levels and framing feminist issues in ways that are acceptable to them. Mallika Dutt (1998) characterizes policy advocacy as a powerful yet limited form of feminist activism because it does not necessarily intervene at the level of cultural change. While gender has become currency in the global feminist arena, issues of inclusion and representation are highly contestable. Politics of global feminism complicates the ability of ‘grassroots/local’ advocates to influence the scope of ‘intervention’ which is determined by the more powerful ‘savior’ entity.

Lazreg sees the professionalization of gender and development—and I extend that argument to global feminism—as an alliance of academic and professional women working for INGOs doing development/human rights work in third world countries, facilitated by the UN decade for women and the types of global or UN feminism enabled by it. These two groups (academics and NGO workers), she says, are mutually sustained by one another in the growing field of gender consultancy, training, and advocacy. Lazreg argues that ‘the discourse of gender training may have resulted in empowering individual trainers, possibly at the expense of the women they intend to help’ (2002: 132). The acquisition of specialized knowledge obtained through various associate and graduate degrees in western institutions of
higher education is the measure of competency for these policy advocates and gender trainers who are the gatekeepers of development and feminism in the name of ‘women’s interests’. The proliferation of UN-feminism has been criticized by Gayatri Spivak (1996b) who likened the UN-sponsored World Conferences on Women held in Beijing in 1995 to a kind of ‘global theater’ that puts on a show of global unity in spite of the absence of subaltern women and reinforcing colonialist power relations.

The limits of such organizational structures on feminist practice need to be analyzed. While we cannot diminish the hard work of feminists, it is important to recognize that they too work within structures with dependent links to governments, donors, and other international organizations. This dependency in turn hinders bold critiques of structural inequality within feminist discourse. As Lamia Karim (2004) said, referring to the Bangladeshi context, such institutional structures enable feminist alliances and transnational networks, yet impede autonomous feminist practices and movements.

Lastly, I would like to address the question of a rigorous feminist solidarity. First, global feminism must move beyond a narrowly conceptualized agenda based on sexual rights and gender equality and call for change in development policy that would alter American foreign policy and distribution of wealth. This means moving beyond the narrative of ‘savior’ and ‘victim’, and of third world states, cultures, and men as ‘oppressors’ and figuring in questions around global inequalities, power relations, and self-critique as practices of critical reflection. To this end, Ella Shohat (2001) has poignantly argued that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but rather as part of a set of permeable and interwoven relationships (see also Donaldson et al., 2005).

Second, global feminism must reclaim the domains of development and human rights through a thorough focus on locally negotiated struggles with global implications. In other words, it must be accountable to women’s struggles of survival as opposed to fitting them into the ‘always already’ registers of patriarchal or ‘aberrant’ violence of the third world.

Third, global feminism must connect women’s struggles and experiences in the United States with those in other parts of the world to better counter the economic, social, and political forces at play in the United States as well as to shape the role US institutions play around the world. This is a broadening of feminist politics to challenge US foreign policy around a politics of military aggression, benevolence, and sympathy to a politics of engagement and social justice.

The question of a rigorous feminist solidarity has much to benefit from resurrecting the visionary potential of US third world feminism as defined by Chela Sandoval as a ‘differential coalitional consciousness’ or a ‘specific methodology that can be used as a compass for self-consciously organizing
resistance, identity, praxis, and coalition under contemporary U.S., late-capitalist cultural conditions’ (2000: 61). She continues:

... [differential consciousness] is a location wherein the aims of feminism, race, ethnicity, sex, and marginality studies, and historical, aesthetic, and global studies can crosscut and join together in new relations through the recognition of a shared theory and method of oppositional consciousness. The differential occurs when the affinities inside of difference attract, combine, and relate new constituencies into coalitions of resistance. (2000: 63)

This conceptual framework is the creative bridging of US third world feminism and third world/transnational feminism. Sandra Soto has suggested that transnational feminism be wary of its proximity to globalization and the risk of once again subsuming the discourse of US women of color/anti-racist feminism. While I agree with Soto, I also believe there is a greater need to braid these analyses—US anti-racist and third world/transnational feminist—in an attempt to broaden our understanding of globalization and global feminism such that alternative analyses are possible.

In her discussion of the possibilities of women’s studies, Robyn Wiegman (2005: 41) warns against apocalyptic negativity and uncritical attachment to feminist progress narratives by suggesting ‘contemporary feminism, in whatever formulation you name, is not adequate to the knowledge project built in its name’. She encourages feminists to delve deeper into the unknowability and contingency of various feminist projects and to engage with their ‘radical openness’ (2005: 57). A radical openness does not necessarily, however, preclude differential coalitional consciousness and resistance. It maintains distinctiveness of feminist genealogies, and struggles, yet makes use of their strategic alliances to counter totalizing discourses all the while attentive to their inherent vulnerabilities and ruptures.

**Braiding US Anti-Racist and Transnational Feminist Analyses**

In the summer of 2005, I was one of 18 fellows who participated in the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) Collective’s first Summer Institute, titled ‘Feminist Identities/Global Struggles’, hosted at Cornell University and led by Professors Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Earlier conversations with the FMS director had revealed the project’s visionary underpinnings and innovative design, emphasizing collaboration among scholars, administrators, and practitioners from across the United States and beyond. By espousing the goals of social justice and democratic futures, aiming to create scholar/activist networks, and fostering mentoring and community for and among minority scholars, FMS strives to transform academic institutions such that questions of difference and equity are more productively engaged.

This article was inspired in part by a question posed by the seminar leaders the first day at the institute and the subsequent conversations, events, and
transformation it engendered. We were asked to ‘Narrate events in your own personal, political and intellectual life that led you to the work that you do.’ We were asked to share not only our professional affiliations and fields of interest but also the definitive personal experiences that shaped who we were socially, politically, and intellectually. As a preamble to this exercise seminar leaders shared their own genealogies, following a discussion on the epistemological, pedagogical, and methodological expectations of the institute: its global/transnational premise; attention to knowledge production and feminist identities in global struggles in multiple sites; formations and role of social movement in nation states, first world imperial, and colonial contexts; assertions of autonomy, agency, and resistance to power; and creation of narratives, alliance, and coalitions.

Set against the progress narrative to which women’s studies is so attached, the syllabus did not yet again reproduce the oft-cited linear and Euro-centric history of the field nor try to present the attendant feminist theoretical schools arranged chronologically as liberal, radical, socialist, multicultural, and post-colonial. Instead, the anti-racist, anti-colonialist feminist pedagogies shaped the space of the seminar such that the narratives that unfolded from each participant reflected the braided realities of our histories, struggles, and experiences rather than (re)produce versions which compartmentalized feminist identities/politics in discrete categories. Participants across lines of race, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, age, and working in diverse higher education institutions and geographic locations confronted their social, political, and intellectual identities as feminists. It was women’s studies at its most effective, engendering community and reminiscent of Cherrie Moraga’s articulation of a ‘theory in the flesh’. Paula Moya said:

Implicit in these formulations [a politics born out of the physical realities of the lives of women of color] are the realist insights that the different social facts of a woman’s existence are relevant for the experiences she will have, and that those experiences will inform her understanding of the world and the development of her politics. (1997: 145)

Rather than assuming a self-evident relationship between social location, identity, and experience, Moraga and Moya are both careful to point out the emergent politics as theoretically mediated through the interpretation of experience.

My own story, for instance, reflected the complex and interconnected influences of a myriad of geographic, intellectual, political registers that contributed to its ongoing formation. I was born in an upper middle class urban family in Bangladesh with strong intellectual and political commitments during the war of liberation from then West Pakistan. Growing up in post-1971 independent Bangladesh, my own consciousness was formed by the stories told and retold by my family and larger community espousing strong nationalist, secular, and liberatory politics. As a Bangladeshi, I grew
up with an enduring sense of nationalist identity and rage against legacies of Pakistani and British colonialism. My father, who was an academic and political activist, deeply invested in the national development of Bangladesh, and was among the academics whose lives were targeted by the Pakistani army as part of a systematic strategy to crush the intellectual force of the erstwhile Bangladesh nation. My parents, like many of their academic friends and political allies, had to flee their home in the campus of Rajshahi University—a hotbed of student insurgency—and take shelter in a remote village in Northern Bangladesh with a peasant family who was unknown to them. Many nights during my childhood and even now, my mother and aunts would regale my siblings and I with memories of the hardship and fear they endured in the nine months of war, and the incredible kindness and generosity of the people who saved their lives. As a child born of war, I was particularly reminded of the bloodshed and destruction that gave birth to this ‘beloved nation’. It instilled in me a sense of responsibility as its citizen, and awe and respect for the previous generation whose struggles ensured the gift of that citizenship. It was perhaps because of this particular social and intellectual orientation that I was deeply influenced by the scholarship of both US women of color (writing against domestic hegemony) and third world feminist scholars (writing against western hegemony). And it was perhaps for this reason that I have always located my own feminist politics in the intersections of these two projects. Furthermore, the Feminist Identities/Global Struggles Institute offered a theoretical framework to articulate the multiple and contradictory historical and specific sites of our individual and collective struggles as well as possibilities to forge and chart complex (as opposed to simple and predetermined) feminist alliances and genealogies. This article is an attempt to elaborate on that vision and politics.

One of the most memorable moments for me in the Future of Minority Studies Feminist Identities/Global Struggles Fellowship was the opportunity to build bridges with feminisms diversely located and engaged with broadly defined struggles. I would like to refer to a particular conversation with peers from India and Pakistan respectively about the shared struggles of South Asian women’s movements yet the divisive and hostile politics of nation states. My Indian colleague shared her experiences of traveling to Pakistan in 2002 with the Pakistan India Forum for Peace and Democracy and the incredible generosity of the people and the strong kinship ties invoked despite the violent events of Partition and end of British Raj in 1947. During a previous trip to attend a regional Women’s Studies Conference in 2001, she recalled the deep sorrow and nostalgia expressed by a Pakistani storekeeper in regards to the violent cessation of Bangladesh in 1971 when he met my colleague’s fellow participant in the Forum from Bangladesh. We discussed how those feelings of nostalgia were not reciprocated in the Bangladesh side of the border where
Pakistanis were viewed with unforgiving distrust for the savage and cruel forms of violence they enacted on their ‘own’ people in then East Pakistan. My Pakistani colleague confessed how growing up in Pakistan she had not learned in the statist national history about the genocide or systematic rape of Bangladeshi women by the Pakistan Army in 1971. It was only after coming to the United States during her college years that she became aware of the underside of the nationalist history of Pakistan. In Ithaca, a ‘reconciliation’ emerged as a powerful connection across historical, temporal, geographic, national, religious boundaries.

Mary John (1999) stated that while the global perspective in feminism necessarily takes one beyond national boundaries, dominant forces preposition us to look in certain directions and not others. ‘Forging South–South linkages in an era of globalization has the potential of displacing the hegemony of the West as the default frame of reference’ (John, 1999: 202). I have already elaborated the failure of certain global feminisms of the West that assume the right to speak for women everywhere or on behalf of ‘other’ women elsewhere. Obscured in this Euro-centric global feminism are the plural conversations occurring between and among ‘other’ feminisms. One such example would be to examine alternate locations where unsuspecting alliances are being forged that are differently global. Global influences on the one hand have been rightly criticized as furthering the interests of the nationalist elites but at the same time not enough has been said on how those influences have also been used by marginalized groups like women, indigenous peoples, and gays and lesbians to articulate potentially subversive agendas. Sharpening the agenda of feminism, which previously has been narrowly conceptualized around questions of gender only, John defines this new move as ‘[addressing] how asymmetries and structures of privilege may have prevented solidarities; and to fight on many fronts to enable the development of more viable feminisms’ (1999: 200). I next offer a discussion on fledgling efforts currently under way to sharpen and give new direction to global feminism in alternative sites.

Bina D’Costa (2005) and Kavita Panjabi (2005) on South Asian feminist organizing efforts on reconciliation and justice around the gendered abuses of Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War are examples of a regional transnationalism. While women in the subcontinent contributed to the anti-colonialist and nationalist struggles, it would be an exaggeration to state that in the post-independence India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh context the questions of autonomy and liberation of women have been adequately recognized in the national development agenda. However, it is women who have been in the forefront of retelling the history of the violent birth of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh by retrieving the untold and suppressed stories and perspectives of millions of people.
Bina D’Costa opines that similarities among women’s movements in the Indian subcontinent were based upon the common colonial national legacy that utilized the situation of women for the existence of the nation state in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Regional gatherings and exchanges between scholars and practitioners on the subject of women’s rights have enhanced the development of a shared and coherent basis of networking among South Asian feminists. Building on the common cultural and traditional backgrounds and the shared history of nation-building, these networks have crafted innovative and groundbreaking ways of addressing the historical abuse of women and seeking reconciliation in the present. In fact, it was the South Asian feminist forum that first publicly addressed the question of gendered war atrocities, which even now remains unacknowledged by national governments in the region.

D’Costa cites the following statement from the South Asian Feminist Declaration which emerged at a regional women’s meeting in January 1989 in Bangalore:

We come from different countries in South Asia—Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Divided by geopolitical boundaries, we are all bound together by a common South Asian identity. This identity expresses itself both in the linkages we have with each other and in the struggles each of us is involved with in the women’s movement in our respective countries. (2005: 240–1)

The International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat is another instance when national and international women’s groups collectively responded to the horrific violence unleashed against the Muslim community (particularly against Muslim women) of Gujarat since February 2002. Members of women’s groups from India, Sri Lanka, Algeria/France, Israel/United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States came together in an exemplary international initiative that unraveled the historic, local, national, regional, and global conflicts that led to the unspeakable violence and its explicitly gendered/sexualized nature. This initiative urged accountability of the state and national government, the international community at the level of state, intergovernmental, and non-state organizations. They called for the utilization of international law codified in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that granted avenues to prosecute sexual violence, torture, and genocide as crimes against humanity. Particularly in light of the failure of the national legal system, internationalizing the issue was of utmost importance.

Women’s groups at the state, national, and international level are the ones who made explicit the ways in which women’s bodies are used as battlegrounds in nationalist and communal struggles, as well as pointed out the historical context of the Indian subcontinent where divisions along religious and community lines have led to violence and divisiveness of mammoth
proportions. They also generated conversations around how sexual violence against women can be effectively addressed by a legal system unequipped to deal with such crimes and framed the attacks against Muslim communities within the globalized and systematic attacks against Muslims particularly in the post-9/11 era.

Each member of the initiative had her own history of resistance that resonated with the events in Gujarat and made their participation in the panel deeply meaningful. In their report members reflected on memories of Nazi terror, the prolonged Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the consequences of Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria, war crimes in Bosnia, ethnic strife and war in Sri Lanka, the traumatic legacies of Partition and recurring sectarian violence in the Indian subcontinent. Gujarat massacre was for this group deeply personal, historical, political, and a moment to forge an alliance epitomizing women’s continued struggles for survival. In the report Nira Yuval Davis described it as

*Being part of a wonderful encompassing feminist collective experience, something I had not been part of for too many years, which helped us to find the strength and comfort with each other, and to remember to celebrate life as long as we can: [it was] feminist politics at its best.*

Rhonda Copelon said,

*. . . courage of the testifiers which together with the amazing energy, solidarity and organization of the women’s groups who came together across cultural lines to organize the IIJ and the growing significance of gender and sexual violence in international law and international arenas provides new hope.*

Vahida Nainar said, ‘The idea that it is possible to have an issue-based consensus among diverse groups was promising and exhilarating for future feminist actions against anti-democratic, nationalist, fundamentalist and patriarchal forces.’ The panel collectively opined that for them participation in the IIJ was both a way of re-establishing feminist transnational solidarity and mounting opposition to political processes that targeted minority groups. The work of a feminist politic, given the reality of global, national, and inter-community as well as intra-community power relations must present such a coalitional response to the scattered hegemonies affecting women’s lives:

*It is through intersectional analyses of discrimination and oppression that the potential of ‘transversal politics,’ which crosses the boundaries created by identity, might be realized. Transversal politics understand that the subject positions on which we base our thought and our responses are multiple and constantly shifting. Within this context, as activists we do not represent any one group at all given times; rather, we stand as advocates of a particular understanding of a specific situation and as mobilizing and organizing agents against discriminatory and oppressive practices. (IIJ, 2003)*

The IIJ offered recommendations to the international community, the Indian government, the Indian judicial system, and the Indian civil society.
D’Costa sees the role of South Asian feminism as key in mounting a movement to demand justice and reparation for women through establishing transnational linkages. Particularly in the last decade, feminists have explored implications of transnational forms of organizing for local women’s movements and transnational alliances made possible by globalization. Feminist scholars such as Valentine Moghadam (2005), Amrita Basu (2000), and Sonia Alvarez (2000) have talked at length of the ascendancy of a new form of international feminist activism in the 1990s, targeting intergovernmental organizations and international policy arenas and thereby attempting to achieve global leverage in gender policy on the local front. They recognize the culminating efforts in the UN conferences prompted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, women’s rights, and advocates around the globe to solidify their organizing efforts and to catapult their local agendas onto the world policy stages. They further acknowledge the efficacy of global feminisms in promoting changes in gender-related policy at the international and national levels as a result of the heightened participation of women’s rights advocates in international policy arenas. At the local level, South Asian feminist movements stand to gain insight from the strategies used to establish and maintain these networks and formulate their own strategies within the boundaries of international and national laws.

A fitting example is offered by Kavita Panjabi in her moving account of her journey across multiple physical, historical, and emotional borders in Old Maps and New. She recounts the Women’s Studies Conference in March 2001 in Lahore that commemorated the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Bangladesh:

On the 26th of March the air was heavy in memory of the thousands of women who had been raped by the Pakistani army in the Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation. Freedom has never come easy to us on this sub-continent. This morning started with Nighat, an untiring activist of the Pakistani women’s movement, reiterating a painful question. The question that she had been the first to ask of her nation in the seventies, the question regarding the now 30 year old silence that the Pakistani government had chosen as cover for its historic guilt, the question of when it would apologize to the women of Bangladesh for the mass rapes to which the Pakistani army had subjected them. The women’s movement of Pakistan had been the first and only collective force in the country to shoulder the responsibility of this painful history. The profound power of their humble apology—an apology for the crimes their army had committed against the women of Bangladesh—already bound the Pakistani women, across the breadth of the sub-continent, to their Indian and Bangladeshi friends. The question reiterated that day was regarding the silence the Pakistani people had chosen, to repress a history of guilt. (2005: 28)

D’Costa urges women’s movement in Bangladesh to productively link with the transnational networks to design and gain support to produce a report comprising the narratives of women’s experiences in the Liberation War as an important first step to reconstructing history and enabling justice. An exchange of information from such an endeavor would make accessible
materials in government and non-government archives as well as facilitate dialogue among various groups involved in the war in the region. Fragmented efforts in the three countries would only produce fractured versions of the shared colonialist and nationalist histories rather than an understanding of the region’s inextricably braided evolution. It would be an opportunity to begin crafting a future of mutual respect and sharing of responsibilities rather than one of mutual distrust and suspicion. It would be a step towards decolonization; moving beyond a framework where the West is always already the default frame of reference. It would be an alliance, a transnational resistance movement, a feminist politics born out of ‘a theory of the flesh’ with global transformative implications.

In conclusion, I have argued that the post-1990s global feminist discourse as manifested in United Nations, international, and local development NGOs, and human rights platforms can be historically connected to earlier western liberal feminist arguments surrounding global sisterhood. The contemporary global feminist discourse in erasing crucial bodies of work, namely the intersections and divergences of US anti-racist and third world/transnational feminisms, is unable to distance itself from the current imperialist project of the US administration in which academic women’s studies is also implicated. In the mobilization of global feminism in these sites (the US academy and global feminist politics), the very same hegemonies are (re)constructed, albeit with the integration of new actors and peoples. This hegemonic form of feminism erases internal fractures and critiques of multiply located feminisms. Alternate articulations of feminisms such as south–south solidarity practices that make use of creative braiding of intersectional and transnational analyses offer an opportunity to challenge imperial global feminism by decentering its ‘always already’ western/Euro-centric frame of reference.

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NOTES

1. A discussion of the genealogies of U.S. anti-racist/third world, third world/transnational, and global feminism is in order. Chela Sandoval defines US third
world feminism as a social movement that was developed by US women of color as an original form of historical and oppositional consciousness to the praxis that regulated the US social movements of the 1960s–1980s (Sandoval, 2000). This movement, she suggests espoused a vision of social justice with potential for building alliances among movements of decolonization across the US as well as globally. Sandoval states that this movement ‘enacted by an original, eccentric, and coalitional cohort of U.S. feminists of color was contained and made invisible through the means of its perception and appropriation’ (2000: 44–5) by a hegemonic feminist theory and practice partly because it represented varying internally colonized communities. These two strands of feminist theorizing stood in an uneasy relation with each other, espousing two different understandings of domination, subordination, and the nature of effective resistance. The writing of women of color gave credence to lived experience of women of color as different from white female and male experience in the United States, as exemplified by texts such as Hull et al. (1982); Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983); and ‘Aint I a Woman’ (1981). This genre of writing of ‘Sister Outsiders’ recognized a third, divergent, and supplementary category for social identity: a mestiza consciousness, ‘between and among’ the lines inhabiting an uncharted psychic terrain named ‘the Borderlands’. Here, I don’t mean to collapse the important distinctions among the theorizations of different women of color. My point is simply to draw attention to this genre broadly identified as US women of color feminism.

Hegemonic feminism, argues Sandoval, responded to this feminist theoretical challenge by characterizing it as mere ‘description’, ‘the special force of poetry’, purely experiential and non-theoretical. Furthermore, US third world feminism was bypassed, ignored, and even subsumed without adequate acknowledgment in later genres of poststructuralist feminist scholarship. It should be noted that many women of color identify their work as poststructuralist even if this genre is often associated with white theorists.

Third world/transnational feminism (Johnson-Odim, 1991) argues that feminism cannot be narrowly confined to a struggle against gender discrimination. Third world feminism posits that women’s struggles are simultaneously connected to community and nationalist struggles against racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation. Moreover, third world feminism has brought systematic attention to imperialism within international women’s organizing and structural violence against women wielded by international development and globalization schemes. Kavita Panjabi (1997) claims that, while there are structural similarities between neocolonial oppression in the third world and domestic oppression of race and ethnic minorities in North America, there are also critical differences between the two contexts based on political economy. She elucidates, ‘Women’s movements in the Third World have been compelled to address questions of gender politics not only in tandem with race and class relations but also in the context of the nexus between imperialist powers and the national state’ (Panjabi, 1997: 152).

Chandra Mohanty’s (1991) work drew attention to the false universalizing and masculinist assumptions of Euro-centric humanism, and to the dichotomies embraced in that framework. Drawing connections between the critique of white feminism by women of color and of ‘western feminism’ by third world feminists...
working within paradigms of decolonization, Mohanty called for the building of a noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders. The landmark international conference of which Mohanty was a co-organizer, ‘Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives’ (Urbana, IL, 1983) strove to open a space for third world/immigrant/marginalized scholars to be visible and intellectually intelligible beyond the framework of dominant Euro-American feminist scholarship. Building on her earlier focus, Mohanty (2003: 230) has more recently called for an ‘anticapitalist transnational feminist practice’ which foregrounds the possibilities and necessities of cross-national feminist solidarity and organizing against capitalism.

Nancy Naples (2002) points to the contested nature of various strands of feminist theorizing and urges a sensitivity and awareness of how ‘relations of ruling’ infuses attempts to represent diverse women’s lives and diverse locations with a singular categorization. Grewal and Kaplan (1994), like Mohanty, find the term transnational useful, particularly over the term global feminism as the latter ‘has elided the diversity of women’s agency in favor of a universalized western model of women’s liberation that celebrates individuality and modernity’. Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue for analyses that intertwine ‘the global and the local’ and choose the term transnational as a corrective to the notion of ‘global sisterhood,’ which, they argue, resurrect the ‘center/periphery’ or ‘first-world/third-world model’ of feminist organizing.

It is nonetheless important to trace the ascendance of what Sonia Alvarez (2000) calls a new form of global feminism in the 1990s. She traces its ascendance by targeting intergovernmental organizations and international policy arenas and thereby attempting to achieve global leverage in pressuring for changes in gender policy on the local front. Alvarez defines transnationalization as ‘local movement actors’ deployment of discursive frames and organizational and political practices that are inspired, (re)affirmed, or reinforced—though not necessarily caused—by their engagement with other actors beyond national borders through a wide range of transnational contacts, discussion, transactions, and networks, both virtual and “real”’ (2000: 32). In this sense, local and transnational forces shaping women’s movement dynamics are mutually constitutive and often impossible to disentangle analytically. She posits that women activists and NGOs engaged in transnational advocacy around the UN summits of the 1990s developed specific ways to insert themselves into the discourse of international women’s human rights—a discourse itself and increasingly so constructed through ‘transnational’ negotiations. What these negotiations veil, often, are the processes which bring women activists to the table, which are not devoid of contradictory and exclusionary practices nor attachment to Euro-centric universalist logic.

Although Alvarez recognizes the culminating efforts in the UN conferences prompting women’s rights advocates around the globe to solidify their organizing efforts and to catapult their local agenda onto the world policy stages, she also points to the less theorized ‘flip side’ of the ‘globalization of feminism’ and the impact ‘back home’ of local activists’ involvement in international networks and policy arenas. Elisabeth Friedman (1999) has termed these as the effects of ‘transnationalism reversed’. The heightened focus on policy advocacy in the 1990s
global feminist arena over earlier grassroots organizing models has deepened hierarchical relations within women’s movements where women of color in the US, and marginalized women in the global South once again find themselves on the peripheries of power.

2. It should be noted here that women of color is a self-designation that only later found its way into the academy. This category, although a distinctly US one, is used to denote national minorities and in certain contexts, to invoke transnational connections, women in the Global South.

3. Aida Hurtado contends that marginalized social groups in United States are arranged simultaneously in relation to the center of power and to one another, creating a social superstructure. Most power resides with upper and middle class heterosexual man, who relate to white woman and women of color differentially as they need white women to produce racially pure off-spring. Women of upper and middle class are most desirable, and working class white women are socialized to believe there is great advantage in ‘marrying up’. Having subordinate status, most white women are denied equal participation in public discourse with white men and socialized to a feminine mode of discourse, which may exclude them from equal participation in culture and politics, however allows them a spectator’s seat as ‘parlor conversationalists’. However, the majority of women of color remain outsiders to the center of power and are forced to develop alternative and subversive modes of participation. This power relation has impacted the way white women’s political consciousness about gender oppression has developed. Understanding women’s experiences through a narrowly conceptualized focus on gender oppression has set the agenda of the mainstream women’s movement. Women of color on the other hand have focused on broader agendas integrating racism, classism, and political economy. Thus, while there have been disparate agendas of women’s organizing efforts, the centrality of gender oppression has remained as a result of the hegemonic location of white women in the definition of feminism.

4. For a detailed discussion of the meaning and genealogy of the term ‘transversal politics’ see Yuval-Davis (2006).

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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