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Elora Halim Chowdhury

University of Massachusetts Boston, elora.chowdhury@umb.edu

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Global Feminism

Feminist Theory's Cul-de-sac

Elora Halim Chowdhury

University of Massachusetts Boston

elora.chowdhury@umb.edu

Abstract: Global feminism has been critical of the earlier notion of “global sisterhood” and its uncritical attachment to commonalities of women’s oppression around the world. However, in this article I argue that global feminism curiously remains inadequately accountable for its differential attitude toward issues of difference and inequality among communities *within* the U.S. versus those alleged differences and inequalities *across* the U.S. borders. Consequently, global feminism, using a universal human rights paradigm, constructs for itself the role of the heroic savior, reminiscent of colonialist civilizing mission (Abu-Lughod 2002) and in line with current U.S. imperialist interventions. Strategies for countering this newly proliferating global mission of feminism can be found in the intertwining of the rich efforts of U.S. anti-racist/Third World feminisms and Third World/transnational feminisms. These discourses can offer a conceptual framework that make central the twin projects of simultaneous undoing of race and nation, and interrogating intra-national and international—within and outside the U.S. nation—hierarchies in order to forge more equitable global connections across multiple borders.

This paper uses, as a point of departure, feminist sociologist Marnia Lazreg’s article, “Development: Feminist Theory’s Cul-de-sac” (2002). There, she makes an astute observation in regard to postmodernist feminist theory’s limitations in transcending national, cultural and political boundaries when addressing the issue of ‘development’ and its ‘phenomenological referent’ *women* in non-European/North American contexts. Following her cue, I will explore the trajectory of global feminism—a subset of feminist theory arguably more expansive and subsuming of the issue of development—from the vantage point of

the U.S., 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 U.S.

The post 1990s discourse of global feminism, I argue, has to be understood in the conjuncture of three distinctively identified yet interconnected strands of contemporary feminist theorizing. From “sisterhood is global” to U.S. Third World/anti-racist feminisms to transnational feminisms, the landscape of feminist theory has always been expansive in vision, scope and reach. In 1995, published at the cusp of the Fourth

Elora H. Chowdhury is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at UMass Boston. Chowdhury’s fields of interest include critical development studies, Third World/transnational feminisms, and feminist ethnography. Her work has appeared in various journals including *Meridians: Feminism Race & Transnationalism* and the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. Currently, she is working on a book project tentatively entitled, “Transnationalism Reversed: Development and Women’s Activism in Bangladesh.”

World Conference on Women in Beijing, Amrita Basu's influential anthology *The Challenge of Local Feminisms* decisively departed from earlier attempts to internationalize feminisms that used the lens of universal patriarchy to foreground 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 and Western subject, Basu's work drew attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences, and movements around the world. Most importantly, she questioned the analytic frameworks of Eurocentric feminist theory, which portrayed women in non-Western contexts predominantly through the lens of development and modernization.

However, what this collection did not adequately address is hegemonic feminist theory's comparable elision of complexities and multiplicities of women's experiences and histories within the U.S. nation. Nor did it address the further divisions/distinctions between U.S. anti-racist/Third World feminisms and Third World/transnational feminisms. At the heart of this curious distinction, I will argue, lies the problematic and inadequately theorized split between anti-racist and post-colonial feminist pedagogies. At a time of militarized war and U.S. empire building—as Chandra Mohanty (2006) has characterized the contemporary moment—it becomes ever more important to carefully examine the ways in which feminisms are deployed to further different political agendas as well as feminist complicity and dissent to those agendas. The contemporary discourse of global feminism has to be understood at the junctures of these three strands—"sisterhood is global," U.S./Third World, and transnational feminisms—and as not only subsuming of them, but also as aiding the consolidation of hegemonic feminism in the service of U.S. imperialism.

In a recent essay, Amy Farrell and Patrice McDermott (2005) noted that the sys-

tematic attention to "global feminism" in the U.S. occurred simultaneously, on the one hand, with increasing domestic "backlash" against mainstream feminism and, on the other, with the proliferation of anti-racist, anti-heterosexist, and anti-Eurocentric critiques of normative feminism, which involved systematic attention to intersectional and transnational analysis in women's studies scholarship. Thus, the turn to "global feminism" served to deflect attention from fractures within domestic feminisms across lines of race, class, and sexuality as well as the trenchant critiques of narrowly conceptualized articulations of gender inequality globally. Further, it served to consolidate an imagined unified white/hegemonic U.S. nation in which global feminism is complicit.

Global feminism has been critical of the earlier notion of "global sisterhood" and its uncritical attachment to commonalities of women's oppression around the world. However, in this article I argue that global feminism curiously remains inadequately accountable for its differential attitude toward issues of difference and inequality among communities *within* the U.S. versus those alleged differences and inequalities *across* the U.S. borders. Consequently, global feminism, using a universal human rights paradigm, constructs for itself the role of the heroic savior, reminiscent of colonialist civilizing mission (Abu-Lughod 2002) and in line with current U.S. imperialist interventions. Strategies for countering this newly proliferating global mission of feminism can be found in the intertwining of the rich efforts of U.S. anti-racist/Third World feminisms and Third World/transnational feminisms. These discourses can offer a conceptual framework making central the twin projects of simultaneous undoing of race and nation, and interrogating intra-national and international—within and outside the U.S. nation—hierarchies in order to forge more equitable global connections across multiple borders.

Feminist scholars and activists frequently used the term “sisterhood” invoking powerful notions of female solidarity and interconnections across cultures and nations albeit through the creation and representation of unequal feminists and female subjects. Implicit and explicit divisions are implied in the discourse of “global sisterhood” between “feminists” and “other women”—where the assumption seems to be that feminists inhabit one world (the Western one) whereas other women live elsewhere and are *not* feminist or unequally feminist. Further, the idea of internationalism is tied to the notion of America within mainstream feminism in the US, obscuring its own fragmented communities and divisive race issues. The persistence of a unified nationalist discourse (“America is democratic, American women have freedom of choice”) attempts to keep alive the idea of the hegemonic white America as the “greatest nation in the world,” and (white) American women as its benevolent and lucky citizens. Below, I will use two arenas to point out the convergences and divergences of global, U.S. anti-racist, and transnational feminisms: 1) the political economy of feminisms in the academy; and 2) the politics of global feminism.

1) POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FEMINISMS IN 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, preemption, privilege, authority, exclusiveness, exclusion, inequity and dominance. The rewards for compliance under duress and direction are indeed considerable and for the unmarked few wel-

come and rewarding. (KarunaKaran 2006, p.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. Being a part of the women’s studies academic establishment is tied to the levels of structural power available to differentially located participants. In other words, relations among feminists are shaped by a political economy of the academy. In this section, I would like to explore these relations 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.

Recently, as a result of designing, planning and teaching with a group of faculty a new interdisciplinary and team-taught Human Rights course at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, I have been very much thinking about education as emancipation and transformation. In so doing, I have found Paula Moya’s work on multicultural education particularly significant. In her essay, “Learning How to Learn from Others” (2002), Moya lays the foundation towards conceptualizing a truly multicultural and democratic educational system based on cooperative cross-cultural inquiry. Underscoring the incontrovertible connection between education and ideology, she lists eight principles that educators and researchers must adhere to in the interest of promoting democratic, culturally diverse and pluralistic society. The justification for such a society, she concludes, would be both epistemic and ethical.

Among the eight principles of a multi-perspectival and multicultural education, the ones that I as an instructor of Women’s Studies—in an urban public institution serving large numbers of working class,

immigrant, racially and ethnically diverse students—find most compelling are “(a) creating conditions in which students feel empowered to work toward identifying those aspects of different cultures that are most conducive to human flourishing; (b) structuring of curriculum to give greater emphasis to the cultures and views of non-dominant groups; (c) incorporating pedagogical strategies that are aware of and attend to the power dynamics of the classroom, which reflect larger societal inequalities; (d) recognizing conflict as inevitable and necessary and a potentially creative force” (Moya 2002, pp.144-147).

Historically, Women’s Studies as an academic discipline emerged out of conflict and has occupied an oppositional space in the academy foregrounding questions of oppression, privilege, difference, inequality and power. Intersectionality as a theoretical approach to illuminate multiple and interlocking axes of oppression shaping social, political, and economic processes globally and the consequent implications for individuals, communities and societies form the bread and butter of contemporary Women’s Studies education. Arguably, it is also the discipline that makes explicit questions of authority, location, audience, and ‘relations of ruling’ that structure the intimate relationship between identity, experience and knowledge.

Therefore, Moya’s principles for a democratic society should be coterminous with Women’s Studies pedagogy and curriculum. To what extent Women’s Studies educators and researchers have embraced these principles, with what level of success, and what consequences and implications remain open questions. For instance, keeping up with the trends in globalization, and multinational corporatization of higher education, most Women’s Studies programs currently or in the recent past have been hiring in transnational/global feminism specific tracks. While mainstreaming of minority Women’s Studies became a phenom-

enon at least since the late 1980s, its obvious connection with globalizing Women’s Studies (i.e., making visible the connections in the histories and struggles of women from different communities including US women of color and Third World women) still remain elusive. In such a climate then, teaching courses such as “Women in Global Perspectives,” “Gender Development and Globalization” and “Transnational Feminisms”—all of which often taught as electives as opposed to required courses—pose a number of critical challenges.

First, these classes tend not to attract adequate numbers of students who are majors and minors in Women’s Studies, even though they serve the university well because they meet General Education requirements of diversity towards graduation—thereby attracting a wide number of students from different disciplines and backgrounds. Given the survival of Women’s Studies programs, which are still not considered legitimate by the academy, depends on steady enrollment of students, the university administration has to be convinced of their importance. Although the courses enroll students, they do not produce high numbers of majors and minors hence they do not necessarily assert women’s studies as a strong and valuable part of the university.

Second, students enroll in these classes expect to learn about distant, exotic, and foreign cultures whose practices and peoples’ lifestyles are fundamentally different, separate, and implicitly inferior than “ours” in the U.S. Add to this the complication of an ostensibly racialized body of a “Third World” instructor, situating these courses within the rubric of the otherwise normative Women’s Studies space becomes ever more difficult. Even the most theoretically savvy Women’s Studies student can be resistant to relinquishing the idea of US exceptionalism and its close relative, First World benevolence. The leadership in Women’s Studies programs and depart-

ments remain overwhelmingly white women who are at times unaware of—and at other times defensive and hostile to criticism regarding—experiences of women of color and ways to decenter hegemonic knowledges and at the same time integrate different histories and frameworks of knowledge production in relation to academic power structures. In such a context, the democratic principles of true multiculturalism as suggested by Moya unwittingly transmogrifies into the presumed harmony of what a colleague of mine once described as “Benetton feminism.”

While I laud and have benefited from the recent turn in hiring Women’s Studies PhDs exclusively by Women’s Studies programs/departments as opposed to joint appointments which previously privileged discipline-trained scholars, the flipside of this trend has been academic isolation and territorialization. The Women’s Studies PhD is still somewhat of a beast having no easy or identifiable ties to any department save its already marginalized resource-poor home. Departments would rather develop their own courses and other initiatives rather than welcome cross-listing or collaborating with Women’s Studies—which they deem unable to provide discipline-specific training. While interdisciplinarity is often celebrated in rhetoric its implementation across disciplinary and departmental divides remain elusive. Hence, the newly minted Women’s Studies PhD, housed exclusively in Women’s Studies, is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

Another issue to reckon with as more programs hire Women’s Studies PhDs is the standards for evaluating the interdisciplinary Women’s Studies PhD/faculty tenure review process. If we concede that the interdisciplinary training produces something new, that it pushes the limits of disciplinary thinking, what should be the criteria for its evaluation? Those tenets of Women’s Studies that we have fought for—collaborative research, scholarship and teaching, inter-

disciplinary training, action research, self-reflexivity, accountability to ones’ research communities, are not necessarily celebrated by traditional standards of academic review.

I certainly do not have the recipe for actualizing Moya’s democratic principles; however, I raise some practical and knotty circumstances in which those principles are put into practice. Like Moya suggests, the task is not only to enable non-dominant perspectives to emerge but also to create conditions where those will flourish and transform the normative, and the dominant as well. In this dynamic interaction, conflict is inevitable. As educators, administrators and researchers committed to progressive social change we must confront and engage the winds of change, and not become entrenched in our own positions of (relative) comfort and privilege.

2) POLITICS OF GLOBAL FEMINISM

In the fall of 2005, I was invited to attend a luncheon organized by a colleague in the university in the honor of a woman journalist from Saudi Arabia who at the time was visiting the U.S. 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*’ critical and investigative reporting. We should be thankful, she said, 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. She reminded our guest of the oppressive regime in her country that did not even allow women to drive. This came on the heels of the reports on Special Envoy Karen Hughes’ statements in Saudi Arabia 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” (September 29, 2005). It appeared that our host had not read the *New York Times* articles that bemoaned Hughes’ ill-placed remarks, and the indignant responses they invoked from the Saudi audience. Moreover, our host, declaring herself a champion of global feminism and one 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 U.S., 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 manifested in FGM), and benevolent global feminism (that help women who are victimized by their cultures, their men, and their states). In other words, global feminism is co-opted into a narrative justification of Western liberal notions of democracy, and used in the service of reconstructing/reconsolidating its civilizing mission.

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 U.S. Since the late 1970s, the women’s movement—and by this I mean the mainstream liberal feminist movement—in the US witnessed backlash from conservative forces and stagnation, with few recruits from the younger generation. The political gains that had been made regarding affirmative action, and in the spheres of women’s education, employment and sexual rights were beginning to be challenged by conservative court appointments. In addition, they argue, “Com-

mercial feminism,” or the cooptation of feminism by corporations and ad agencies, cast a shadow over earlier mass and grassroots feminist engagements. At the same time, the 1980s brought on a plethora of critiques by and for feminists of color, gay and lesbian, and anti-racist, white feminisms (Sandoval 2000). Within this “divisive” and conservative environment, global feminism and the idea of “internationalism” served a strategic function. The problems defined by this turn appeared as obviously oppressive—female genital cutting, enforced veiling, or trafficking in women. Mainstream US feminist organizations could use these causes to mobilize their constituencies, attract new and younger members, gather resources, and perhaps most importantly legitimize their existence in the context of larger political discussions around the role of U.S. as the beacon of humanitarianism.

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 concern for oppression of veiled Muslim women, genitally mutilated African women, impoverished Indian women—but rarely an American counterpart figure. Many students have difficulty in maintaining an intersectional analysis of inter-national 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 U.S., in discussions of women’s lives “elsewhere” that critique is often lost as women in the U.S. become a singular individual with freedom to choose in opposition to her victimized singular Third World counterpart. I say this not to demonize students 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 has argued that “the intrusion of postmodernist feminism of Eu-

rope and North America into the field of development” can be temporally associated with how “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, p.130). However, instead of engaging critically with these critiques, she posits that Western feminism reified and neutralized them. I would argue further that the attention to global feminism is coextensive with more and more anti-racist feminist voices critical of the 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). Although these critical views have infused newer debates and ideas, and even have been incorporated into academia and international organizations, they have served to neutralize the conversation by espousing a perspective of inclusion and pluralism over unequal power relations and conflict.

Inderpal Grewal (1998) 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 (518). Instead of attending to the critical questions raised by these genres—anti-racist and Third World feminist scholarship—they are often “neutralized by prescriptions and normalizations aided by elite Third World women themselves—the so-called ‘gender experts’” in the global feminism apparatus. 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

into global feminism is left unquestioned, as is the desire to “fashion other women in their own image” (Lazreg 2002, p.130-133).

Making central the plight of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian women while not questioning its own feminist interventionist desires—and simultaneously demonizing Brown/Third World/Muslim states, men, and cultures—global feminism aids the U.S. 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. Examples are Hilary Clinton condemning women’s human rights abuse in China in the World Women’s Conference in Beijing; Laura Bush speaking on behalf of oppressed women in Afghanistan; Special Envoy Karen Hughes speaking to women of Saudi Arabia on Western women’s freedom to drive. In this way, U.S. feminists support U.S. foreign policy strategies and interventions. Through their examination of leading human rights reports, including Human Rights Watch World Report and Amnesty International Annual Report between 1993-2002, Farrell and Mcdermott 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 between our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals. American diplomacy must integrate and advance all of these goals together” (Quoted by Anuradha Mittal in CommonDreams.org, accessed March 10, 2006). The braiding of democracy, development, foreign policy, and human rights, and the types of implications drawn from it, are supported by the mission of

U.S.-centric global feminism, which in turn fits into the mission of the U.S. imperial nation. This is a moment that 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 U.S. that have exacerbated oppressive situations world over. It also deflects attention away from domestic fractures and impact of structural inequality on various minority communities.

As global feminism has gained momentum and prominence in the 1980s and 1990s it has been a key player in global human rights advocacy operating through international aid organizations and political and legal mechanisms of the United Nations. Admittedly, the U.N. is not a monolithic structure—U.N. organizations working on women's development are themselves marginalized. U.N. 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 2003, 119). I would further suggest that 'Other' woman is in conflict with woman 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 and 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 pro-

motes international organizations as the saviors when marginalized men, as a group, also lack systematic access to resources and decision making power, and are left out of the purview of development and international human rights policy. *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." Although important, the women's human rights struggle universalizes the category "women" and addresses issues of women's access, rights, and justice in limited ways. Grewal cautions, "The struggle to keep various kinds of difference alive in the women's human rights arena is a difficult one," made even more difficult by the asymmetries of power within states, nations, and global feminist networks (p. 505-507).

Scholars like Mallika Dutt, however, defend the human rights paradigm in the use of global feminism by suggesting that one can move beyond these criticisms by calling for pragmatic use of Human Rights as a tool to put pressure on states. However, the idea that nation-states will/can provide for all its citizens has also been thoroughly questioned (Ezeilo 2005). In the context of states failing to provide for its citizens, particularly the poor, women and children, International NGOs utilizing global feminist and human rights frameworks provide tremendously important services and occupy a critical role in the world—yet these institutions are not free of national and global power structures or U.S. geopolitical agendas.

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 abuse as an avenue to garner funds from international aid agencies as well as use international law (UNCEDAW) in order to put pressure on the government to enact policy changes on the ground. Most of these abuses are what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003) has called of the *spectacular* kind: acid throwing, fatwa (religious decrees against women by rural clergy) for example, but not the every-day 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 but minimally on the social/economic arenas. This I think is an example of the danger that uniform norms 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 increasingly championed as the development panacea. While on the one hand, microcredit enterprises do provide economic opportunities to poor disenfranchised women in the rural South, 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). Moreover, it opens up access to the private lives of poor women through mandatory conditions and charters that are meant to discipline NGO- constituencies in exchange of credit (Karim 2004). Manufactured success stories of “misery to heroism” signifying empowerment through speech appear in colorful brochures and websites making

the “beneficiaries” of such development and human rights schemes interchangeable (Lazreg 133). This empowered speech of course fits the logic of global feminism whereby the poor rural women of the South serve as ventriloquists and participants in their own betterment.

b) *NGOs in developing countries are often led by local women, and do important work at the community level, no doubt.* However, structurally they are positioned such that they transmit powerful values of Western-dependent development and global feminism. As part of the 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 participant, 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 (136-141). These stories transform women’s lives into discourse, describe women’s survival stories as a linear process from misery to heroism/empowerment and are often interchangeable across geographic location. Lazreg urges instead to do away with this will to recover alternative feminisms or minority identities which by default then become interchangeable by the dominant logic of global feminism’s incursion to find the heroic stories of “Other” women’s agency. Such a quest results in ventriloquist retrievals of other voices so that we (the sufficiently Westernized, liberated, educated, feminists) can talk about them (who has spoken in a medium intelligible to us) as empowered. Why not, she suggests, instead simply address “women’s accounts of struggles to survive?” (137).

c) *Participating in transnationalized policy advocacy entailed by global feminist interven-*

tions 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 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 not altogether clear. 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. The “saviors”—usually, Northern based transnational feminist organizations, the US state department, or international development and human rights organizations—tend to fetishize the “authentic” voice limited as it may be to the “call for help” (Dutt, Grewal 1998). Community based organizations in the global hierarchy tend to represent the “authentic” voice of grassroots practices in a celebratory way, uncritical of the complexity and power relations of their positioning. As a result, the hegemony of First World agenda interests and their policies are reproduced through these networks and the professionalization of activist work leads to further divisions between “community activists” and policy advocates, and the creation of new “cosmopolitan classes” (Grewal 508).

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 sustained by one another in a proliferating business “setting up shop as gender consultants and trainers.” 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” (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.”

Gayatri Spivak has criticized the U.N.-sponsored World Conferences on Women held in Beijing in 1995 as representing a kind of “global theater” that puts on a show of global unity in spite of the absence of many women, notably the poor, and engaging in colonialist strategies and power relations. According to Spivak, these conferences further the image of global unity yet obfuscating the premise of the conferences, which is the “unspoken assumption of the U.N. that the South is not capable of governing itself” (Bergeron 2001).

The limits of such organizational structures on feminist practice need to be analyzed. While we cannot diminish the hard and difficult work of feminists it is important to recognize 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 has said, such institutional structures enable feminist alliances and transnational networks, yet impede the development of autonomous feminist practices and movements. Feminist visions of equality challenging masculinist relations of power may be disingenuous because of the power relations they obscure.

Lastly, I would like to address the question of a rigorous feminist solidarity.

First, global feminism must move beyond 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, transforming the lives of minorities and women in the U.S. and elsewhere. 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 and rethinking. Ella Shohat has 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. This integrated approach to feminism demands a productive interweaving of feminism, anti-racism, and postcolonialism, or bridging dialogues among Area Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women’s Studies with one another, which she regards as being currently “held in mutual suspicion” (Shohat 2001, 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 U.S. with those in other parts of the world to better counter the economic, social, and political forces at play in the U.S. as well as to shape the role US institutions play around the world. This is a broadening of feminist politics to challenge U.S. foreign policy around a politics of military aggression, benevolence and sympathy to a politics of engagement and social justice. It is a broadening of foreign policy and human rights advocacy—tied to trade and investment, moral imperialism, and neo-colonial development aid—to solidarity, redistribution, and global equity.

Perhaps it is time to resurrect the vi-

sionary potential of U.S. 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” (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. (63)

This conceptual framework, I would argue, is the creative bridging of U.S. Third World Feminism and Third World/Transnational feminism. It is what Corinne Kumar also defines as South Wind: “To discover the hidden knowledges of the South in the South; of the South in the North...to creating new political visions that are responding to the complexities of reality, more critically, more creatively” (167).

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