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The Pedagogy of Difference: Co-producing Feminist Consciousness across Borders

By Patricia Mohammed¹

Abstract

How has a movement built on the consciousness of sisterhood become so fragmented between the end of the 20th and into the second decade of the 21st century? As different political tendencies, widely varying economic conditions and cultural dissimilarities emerged in global struggles to achieve diverse visions of women's and gender equality, the current feminist movement appears to be characterized by chasms between the east, west, north and south rather than viewed as a movement whose basic tenets are parallel across racial, geographic and social barriers. By looking at lived examples of confrontations, and through a deliberate process of self-reflexive questioning, this paper looks at what elements might sustain the global nature of the feminist movement into the future. Through a re-examination of key authors who have identified differences wrought by geography and culture, among them Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes", and in conversation with two feminist scholars from North America and India, the author interrogates the concept of difference and argues that confronting and accepting difference might teach us more about our "sameness under the skin" and about the continued building of consciousness across borders.

Keywords: Global feminisms, Crossing Borders, Co-producing consciousness, Under Western Eyes, Refusal to be homogenized, Pedagogy, Difference, Caribbean, India, Women

Regarding Difference

In May 2017 I was asked to do a keynote address to the Third, World Conference on Women's Studies, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on the theme of "Building Resilience: Dialogue, Collaboration and Partnerships across Our Differences". The conference triggered a conundrum that I believe feminism faces as a movement as it reconstitutes itself into twenty first century modernity. One of the dominant ideas of second wave feminism was sisterhood, a sense of a

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common cause in women's equality, if not gender equality, shared by women. All movements begin with inspiration and innocence so it was not unusual that as the demands of feminists expanded globally, the movement also began to render up fissures. One of the primary cracks in the edifice of feminism is that of handling differences among women. Whose authoritative voice represented all women? Did cultural, geographic, and economic differences create new hierarchies between and among women? Feminism aims for an eradication of inequalities yet it has itself produced an unevenness of perception or ranking among women and between societies and cultures. "Through the inequalities, the criteria for evaluating liberation becomes defined by the powerful" writes Diana Fox, "ultimately rendering them a neo-colonial trap rather than a true engagement of differences and explorations of potential solidarities".² The influence of the shadow of the west dominates the feminist landscape, and the benchmark for equality emerges as a western-defined set of gender practices, roles, attributes and behaviours. Rather than creating a singular or shared vision or feminist goal, this feminist monopoly on ideas, has infused dissension, fragmentation and downright rejection. It is not unusual to still hear in countries as far as Belize, Guyana, and Namibia the refrain that "feminism" is foreign, meaning imported from the west and not relevant to the women (and men) of these societies.

The experience of attending the Colombo conference and meeting women from across the world, especially a critical mass drawn from the East, forced anew a reckoning with some fundamental questions that have preoccupied me. 'What brings feminists together and what keeps the feminist movement fragmented and undermined globally?' 'What sustains a movement and what causes its disintegration?' Niveditha Menon, one of the delegates at this conference wonderfully framed the root cause of this fragmentation at the Colombo setting: "How can we talk to each other through difference? What language can we share when we are coming from different subject positions and, nowadays, what comes down to identity position? How do we build a shared political feminist emancipatory imagination when we are functioning from spaces radically different (geographically or otherwise) from each other?"

I engaged Diana Fox from Providence, USA and Niveditha Menon of India, both of whom were centrally involved in this conference, in discussion during and after the conference, and interrogate the works of other authors to stimulate thought and explore the consciousness producing effects that allow us a serious reckoning with some idealistic notions that, for many of us, sustain the feminist movement. I write this as a polemical paper, in conversation with many scholars and with no attempt to arrive at rarefied conclusions.³

The goal of feminist knowledge is not that of essentializing gender politics or universalizing global sisterhood. I would like to think that we, scholars and thinkers and activists, feminist and sympathetic others, can place ourselves in the second decade of the twenty first century into what Nira Yuval Davis calls "transversal politics" This is politics informed by "First, standpoint epistemology, which recognizes that from each positioning the world is seen differently, and thus that any knowledge based on just one positioning is 'unfinished' – ... that the only way to approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings". The second relevant concept within transversal politics is "the encompassment of difference by

² Email conversation with Diana Fox, Wednesday 4th April, 2018.

³ The final version of this paper was recast as a dialogue with two feminists, one from North America (Diana Fox) and one from India (Niveditha Menon) in an effort to straddle the boundaries of difference. I am grateful to both of them for sharing their comments and thoughts openly with me, and as far as possible I have integrated their responses in their own words. The idea of framing the paper in this way came from Diana Fox who read the first draft and suggested that this format of an open ended conversation was itself a unique way of presenting these ideas in order to invite reflection and further discussion.

equality. This means the recognition, on the one hand, that differences are important...that notions of difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality”. And Yuval Davis stresses, “Such notions of difference are not hierarchical”.⁴

Fully supportive of its aims to meld differences within the feminist movement, my keynote address in Colombo was titled “Other People’s Lives: Exploiting Difference”. I argued that while difference among groups, geography, and culture had been “exploited” in the past to separate peoples, and thus had itself created distances and divergencies in the feminist movement, we could also view differences as valuable to comprehending a new feminist order, employ what the knowledge of this difference brings to us as variations of struggle rather than assuming we must all march to the beat of the same feminist drum. Styled for more emotive delivery, the paper was an impassioned plea for placing ourselves in the condition of the other, and accepting this difference as the first reality we must contend with, to bridge the divide between and among different culture and racial groupings. I argued that the firm acknowledgment and acceptance of difference would allow for partnerships based on a philosophical platform of equality. Individually and within societies, nonetheless “We would continue to perform our race, class and gender through society’s mechanisms of gender construction, processes that are largely learnt in context...while we move to accept difference, or as Jacques Derrida would have this, a “sameness that is not identical”.⁵

Diana Fox pointed to the obvious flaw in this statement: “It is a bit of an irony to argue for differences yet to also assert that we can in fact place ourselves empathetically in the position of the other”.⁶ There is some resonance in this response with Maria Lugones proposal for “an identification based not on presumed sameness, but on recognition of the other, and an openness to transformation of the self”.⁷ Agency in change is the prerogative of the individual, a western liberal concept that does not hold water even in the west. Maria Lugones argues that current western modernity “implemented European understandings of gender and sex, erasing the various conceptualizations of sex and gender that pre-existed European modern/colonial gender systems”. I emphatically do not agree that the concept of gender was absent from a binary opposition that existed in all societies at all periods, and not always with a hierarchy of privilege and status. The evidence of both gender and of cultural resistance shows that there were not only erasures, but syncretisms, as well as resistance to erasure via underground practices, the responses were neither monolithic nor passive.⁸ To accept that western modernity could suppress all that came under its hammer is to assume that *we*, meaning individual groups of women and men, *we* meaning a global feminist movement, and *we* meaning disparate individuals, do not and have not exhibited individual or collective autonomy, and an inherent capacity to resist manipulation by distorting external forces. The history of continuous global unrest for centuries is ample evidence of this.

What was in retrospect missing from my Colombo keynote address was a detailed counter

⁴ Nira Yuval Davis *Soundings* Issue 12 summer 1999 pp. 94-95.

⁵ Excerpt from Keynote Address, Patricia Mohammed, Colombo conference, “Other People’s Lives: Exploiting Difference” May 2017.

⁶ Email Conversation with Diana Fox, April 4th, 2018.

⁷ Maria Lugones 2003. Playfulness, “world”-traveling and loving perception. In *Pilgrim-ages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, cited in Alison Weir “Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics, *Project Muse, Hypatia* vol. 23, no. 4 (October-December 2008), p. 112.

⁸ The best example I can draw on, unrelated to gender specifically but clearly illustrative of syncretism and adaptation is the emergence of *vodun*, *santeria* and *candomble* as blends of Catholicism and African religions when the latter was outlawed under periods of colonial slavery in the Haiti, Cuba and Brazil.

argument acknowledging the uneven nature of power relations that mitigated against group resistance or the individual will to change.⁹ I agree fully and as argued by Iris Marion Young, that symmetrical reciprocity cannot be achieved simply by imagining ourselves in place of the other, as asymmetries are themselves created because of variances in histories, culture, sex, ability and, among other elements, age. As Alison Weir sums this up, "... transformative identity politics are politics of self-critique and self-transformation of a we" placing the burden of transformation more on ourselves as on the 'other' we want to reach.¹⁰ Diana Fox readily admits to the positions that "northern feminists find themselves in. I am continually involved in this process" she writes, "and it is always necessary for those of us who, because of national origin are a part of the source of the asymmetry, to be reminded of this".

Niveditha Menon considers how she has contended with difference from an ethical perspective as an activist and scholar.

From the time that I started working in the area of gender studies, the conversation of feminism has been dominated by the idea of difference – working through difference, engaging with difference, or transcending difference. I don't think we have found a satisfactory answer to the question of difference. I think this is primarily because of the way in which difference presents itself. Because difference is relational and is defined by power, there is always a contextual creation of difference that, perhaps, cannot be expressed by an abstraction of it. The theorising of difference has always highlighted the importance of context, precisely because regardless of how we might 'want' to theoretically engage with difference, the lived experience of it is very different.

My central engagement with difference therefore comes in the field. For the past three years, I have been interviewing women who have been part of collectives in Mahila Samakhya (a woman's empowerment programme). They are strong, articulate and spirited women who are always willing to talk about their lives, the interesting and difficult things that they have done, and the various ways in which they resisted the patriarchy in big ways and small. I am often amazed at the open way in which the women share their stories with me, and I always come back inspired by their lives.

However, it is very clear to me, even in writing this, that I am representing them – that in doing so, I am drawing so much power over the way people can know them. Based on my class, caste, my English writing capabilities and the access to an academic space, I have the power to mold the way people perceive them. So, in the very act of meeting them and documenting their lives, the difference between us is drenched in power, something I am very conscious of when I writing about them.

⁹ Not because I am unaware of the presence of power in every exchange, but because some speaking occasions require us to present visionary possibilities beyond the limits of our human frailties.

¹⁰ Alison Weir "Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics, Project Muse, Hypatia vol. 23, no. 4 (October–December 2008), p. 112.

And yet, when I think about my interactions with them – when they hug me, when they bless me, when we laugh together about the silly things that both of us have done, or the silly things that I say (and I say a lot of silly things), I don't *feel* the difference. Recently, when a woman hugged me at the end of a very emotional interaction, I didn't feel the yawning social gap that exists between us. I felt like we had travelled together and the hug was a marker of this journey. It doesn't feel like she and I are different.

And yet, I know that we are. Yet, I know that in writing about them, I am usurping their right to represent themselves in the spaces where I am writing about them. Yet, I know that they share these stories with me so that people do know about them. And yet, I know that while I get to tell their stories, they do not get to tell theirs (or even mine, for that matter.) And yet. . .

And it is in these continuous loops of *And Yets* that any understanding of the relationship between us can be had. It is the understanding that we have to be constantly conscious of the fact that no matter how close our relationships might be, there is a social world outside of our interaction (that gets recreated in our interaction) that dictates the rules of our interaction. Those rules assign both of us to different sets of experiences that I cannot change, even if I desperately might wish to.¹¹

I am particularly moved by Menon's revelations as they echo perfectly with many moments of connection with women and groups whom I have encountered in their own settings, either in the classroom, in activist work in communities, or in in several Caribbean islands carrying out consultations towards the formulation of national gender equality and equity policies. The engagement with the rules of difference across boundaries of class, ethnicity, nation, economic divides and across masculinity itself forces a reflexivity about the inevitability of power in social relations, and at the same time must also free us from becoming immobilized as a result of such reflection.

In the Colombo keynote address, I had short-circuited the moral and philosophical debates on transformative identity politics in the theme by shunting aside, for the moment, the main binary implicit in difference feminism (Gilligan, 1993, MacKinnon, 2006), i.e. that located in the difference of women from men and the binary of nature versus nurture, to another concept of difference, that which differentiated groups of women (and men) based on the unequal ethnic relations wrought by nation history and systems of patriarchy, all of these sometimes combined. The latter conception of difference has also generated even more persistent binaries: developed versus underdeveloped, civilized versus the barbarian, Christian versus pagan, all of which were underscored as evidence of western superiority through discourses of eighteenth century western enlightenment thought.

These precepts undoubtedly influenced the geopolitics of feminism and was perhaps the primary trigger for Chandra Mohanty's classic essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" which was first published in 1986. The clause "under western eyes" which formed the first part of the title of this essay was a brilliant one, capturing the essential theoretical and political crux of relations between western women and the rest of the world.

¹¹ Email correspondence Niveditha Menon, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Bangalore, India 16th April, 2018.

Mohanty's "under western eyes" had seized on this signifying capacity of the west to homogenize and diminish huge blocks of culture into another essentialist binary that was thought to typify the global feminist movement.

Mohanty demonstrated that by constituting a category of women as Third World and assuming this category is a "single monolithic subject", Western feminism has been guilty of another form of colonizing, erasing historical and geographical differences and establishing dominance through a moral standpoint of informed knowledge and progressive praxis. As an example, in cultures where there are more restrictions on women's sexual and reproductive autonomy, societies in which women have more obvious rights and access to services appear as superior to those who do not. Though Mohanty is careful not to paint "Western feminism" as itself monolithic, the primary signifiers of western versus non-western that are invoked reinforce the binary of the west versus the rest, the same binary that it attempts to deflate. Thus the questions that are raised by activists and scholars remain still bound by the binary that the dominant western discourse has imprinted on mentalities. In my keynote address I used the example of Muslim women wearing the *burkha* as an example of how this binary is reproduced. The wearing of the *burkha* in public by Muslim women in France was banned by the European Court of Human Rights in the interests of everyone "living together" in 2010. Shami Chakrabarti, director of the UK human rights pressure group Liberty, said the ban "has nothing to do with gender equality and everything to do with rising racism in western Europe".¹² The wearing of the *burkha* or *chador* remains a problematic one not only in France but in different societies, and are viewed by western women in particular as extreme control over women's bodies and mobility rather than as protections that are offered to women within Islamic culture. Beyond this, there is much written by women who wear the *burkha* or *chador* who have redefined its use in a multiplicity of ways, claiming agency over its definition and reclaiming the symbolic referents that make sense within their cultural frameworks.

Made in the West

A refusal to be categorized or homogenized prompts Lizabeth Paravasini-Gerbert to write in a finely crafted essay "Decolonizing Feminism: The Homegrown roots of the Caribbean Women's Movement": "It is commonplace ...to speak of our history, our literature, the quality of our feminism or lack thereof, as if we constituted a homogeneous block, an undivided, unfragmented and unfragmentable entity—a knowable, understandable, whole. Caribbean feminism is often discussed in much the same way, as something graspable, perceptible, complete—perhaps different from US and European variables but nonetheless comprehensible, unequivocal".¹³ How could differences that were so palpably evident in the anthropology of nations well into the early 20th century become so evaded and erased in a relatively short time? In its appeal to the universality of gender inequality and discrimination, there were major elisions that have not served feminism as a social movement at all well.

In the 2017 Colombo conference site, Niveditha Menon had in fact raised the ethical dilemma that still troubles the epistemic space of Indian scholars and activists from the Asian subcontinent. Menon asked "How can narratives of violence not be used as indicative of backward

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/01/french-muslim-women-burqa-ban-ruling>

¹³ Lizabeth Paravasini Gerbert, "Decolonizing Feminism: The Homegrown roots of Caribbean Women's movements" in, *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*, Consuelo López Springfield (Ed), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, USA, p. 4.

women, and not reinforce the idea of South Asian women as victims of underdeveloped countries to be rescued by developed ones?” he elaborates further: “My point is also about how we, as South-based scholars who have come to represent ‘other’ South-based survivors of violence—have to constantly move against the dominant discourse of ‘death by culture’ (as poignantly referenced by Uma Narayan) when we speak of violence. What thin lines do we have to walk, then, given our own power of representation over the ‘other’--the survivor’--to Western Eyes, as well as the culpability that we have in evoking a particular form of ‘survivor’ that provides no space for multiplicity of experience and agency?”¹⁴

Not only are feminists within societies separated or differentiated by class, ethnicity or cultural groupings but across nations, the burden of being “under western eyes” still obtains for those who carry the designation of “Third world women” in current geopolitical formation. The main ideas outlined in Mohanty’s now classic paper persist as a powerful conceptual framework or point of departure for those who write and work from small or culturally marginal societies.¹⁵ Her critique had nonetheless extracted a moral responsibility on those who used, funded, or generated research projects or data collection and those who underwrote publications on feminism in the western publishing houses for societies deemed “developing and under-developed”. In her new publication *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory Practicing Solidarity* (2003), written nearly two decades after the first landmark essay, Mohanty shifted the focus of her preoccupation with how “the “West” colonizes gender” to “the way that gender matters in the racial, class, and national formations of globalization”. She focuses attention more specifically on the emancipatory potential of the feminist project globally for social justice, racial, class and gender equality by appealing for a transcendence of borders that preoccupy feminist scholars and activists within the silos of their societies or institutions. As Diana Fox puts this “I perceive Mohanty as levying an on-going critique of Morgan’s assumed global sisterhood, and instead issuing a call to generate coalitions and solidarities across borders anchored in conversations that build mutual understanding, producing analyses that are simultaneously situated and systemic—systemic critiques of institutions and structures of global capitalism and hierarchies of the corporate academy that produce a flattening of differences”.¹⁶

Such ideas for crumbling boundaries and rejecting a flattening differences present a twenty-first century manifesto for feminism that one can have little quarrel with. It advances the mantra of the second wave feminist movement, “sisterhood is powerful” (Robin Morgan, 1970) which Morgan herself updated with “sisterhood is forever” to ensure that despite divergences and differences, there is a global call to unity. I am puzzled however, by the processes by which these optimistic declarations translate into collaborative, cross-cultural possibilities for global transformations and the necessary resilience required of the feminist movement both within a society and across borders.

In *Feminism without Borders*, Mohanty presents a rational visionary framework within which she proposes feminist goals can be achieved. She identifies two projects to be tackled: *first*,

¹⁴ Email correspondence with Niveditha Menon, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Bangalore, India November 27th, 2017.

¹⁵ See for example Abeer Al-Sarrani and Alaa Alghamdi “Through Third World Women’s Eyes: The Shortcomings of Western Feminist Scholarship on the Third World” Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, *Analyze – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* • New Series • Issue No 2 / 2014, <http://www.analyze-journal.ro/library/files/alaa.pdf>, and Kvinna till Kvinna (Sweden) and Women for Women International (USA), 2013. “Western NGOs representation of ‘Third World women’ - A comparative study.” <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:632032/fulltext01.pdf>

¹⁶ Email with Diana Fox November 8, 2017.

dismantling the distinctions and hierarchies that have been made between Western feminism and Third World Feminism in order to solidify the global project as one without borders. The *second* retains the need for autonomous feminist concerns and strategies to be applied, a recognition that there were no universal prescriptions for gender oppression or discrimination, although she stresses that transnational feminist solidarity remains the cornerstone of a struggle that must transcend time and space.

Writing from an African feminist perspective, Amina Mama fully endorses this position. “It takes integrity and courage to listen across boundaries, to hear and respect the multiple languages of gender and sexuality, marked by the striations of other dimensions of power and status. Unless we link collective organising with coherent feminist consciousness informed by sound theories of gender oppression and change, we easily become subject to an identity politics that will keep us divided. By strengthening feminist consciousness, we strengthen the collective will to change”.¹⁷ Mama proposes that feminist writing and publishing is a key route to conscientization, to engage the collective consciousness within societies or regions and claim ownership of theoretical explanations and cultural specificities, while also proposing common grounds for solidarity with others. A review of journal issue titles of *Feminist Africa* of which Mama is the Editor, affirms this exercise of inward looking, outward stretch. *Feminist Africa* 3: “National Politricks” (2004), 10: “Militarism, Conflict and Women’s Activism” (2008); 11: “Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power” (2008); 12: “Land, Labour and Gendered Livelihoods” (2009); 13: Body Politics and Citizenship (2009); 14: “Rethinking Gender and Violence” (2010); 17: “Researching Sexuality with Young Southern Africa Women” (2012); 19: Pan-Africanism and Feminism (2014) and 22: “Feminists Organizing - Strategy, Voice, Power” 2017. All of these journal issues grapple with concerns that are raised within the context of feminist struggles and through an African feminist epistemological lens. In *Feminist Africa* 11, “Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power”, Hanan Sabea “demands re-engagement with the paradigmatic “order of things” through which questions of Africa, nation, gender, and location are imagined. Her invitation is to see past the prefixes of “trans” (-national, -continental), “inter” (-disciplinary, -dialogic) and “post” (-feminist, -colonial, -state) to discover the operation of homogenizations which recolonize, re-monopolize, the gaze on the sheer complex and multi-gendered realities of work, mobilities, and meaning”.¹⁸ This journal is incisive in its intent. The journal policy establishes that is “...guided by a profound commitment to transforming gender hierarchies in Africa, and... targets gender researchers, students, educators, women’s organizations and feminist activists throughout Africa. It works to develop a feminist intellectual community by promoting and enhancing African women’s intellectual work”. One might of course ask the question, where do the boundaries of Africa lie, and where might we find their feminist intellectual community located. The Africa referenced above is by no means the homogeneous terrain constructed by the west. Yet there is an emblematic Africa that has been conscripted across borders.

There is an inescapable contradiction in the call for a collective consciousness without an interrogation of the basis for this collective position. The default position of feminism is an essentialist one when collectivities are congregated. By virtue of being female the appeal is to sisterhood, by virtue of being female from a geographical location often there is a silencing of

¹⁷ Amina Mama *Feminist Africa* Feminists Organizing – Strategy, Voice, Power, Special Editorial “The Power of Feminist Pan-African Intellect”, Issue 22, 2017, p. 1.

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, “Editorial: Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power” *Feminist Africa*, Issue 11, December 2008, p. 7.

difference in order to represent the idea of communal strength or national identities that the media finds easier to handle and the global metrics of inequality can better grasp. Mohanty's "feminism without borders" admits to these complex realities and argues for the need to *construct* similarities or perhaps solidarities—that they are not inevitable, but are built and elicited through dialogue and engagement in the creation of relationships. She argues that the process of engagement creates points of intersection that are necessary to combat the very powerful forces of oppression, neocolonialism and neoliberal assumptions that infringe upon individual and group rights and freedoms.

To some extent this addresses Menon's ethical dilemma because it allows for women across borders to acknowledge that violence is not exclusive to underdeveloped nations but is systemic across class, race, color, and nation. In this respect the issues of violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights have certainly been two primary platforms which have admitted to universality with difference, as the cultural manifestations of violence and sexual and reproductive rights have much in common yet might differ considerably in their varied contexts due to gendered cultural expectations and practices.

"Feminism without borders is not the same as "border-less" feminism" writes Mohanty. "It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real..." How these ideas are translated in different settings must be part of this dialogue of difference and the dismantling of borders. Diana Fox elucidates the multiplicity of interpretations by example. She writes "Mohanty published an article in *Signs* in 2013, ten years after *Feminism without Borders* which is a fascinating reflection on how that book has been interpreted in three distinct settings—Sweden, Mexico, and Palestine, and how, in each context, there were distinct takes on her message. Interestingly, the Palestinian feminist view saw a justification for militant feminism—they rejected any suggestion of coalition building with both Israeli and Palestinian women who sought mutuality, highlighting a complete rejection even in the construction of a global sisterhood. Indigenous feminists in Mexico, by contrast, highlighted the importance of transcultural feminism and the politics of solidarity to create alliances, work which depends for its success on difficult conversations that articulate differences and actively construct points of intersection. Building solidarities must be contingent on explicating differences; however, there is simultaneously an assertion of overlapping conditions that surface through systemic analyses."¹⁹

Building solidarities: "Even this conversation in we are currently engaged is a product of that concept"²⁰

To deconstruct the monolith of feminism itself requires a close circuit assessment of how gender scholarship and knowledge production in feminism has emerged, how activisms are framed within borders and across global boundaries, what theoretical insights are gleaned and what bridges were crossed that maintain the global connectivity and political relevance of feminism as not a single movement but as a multiplicity of movements still underscored by some common goals. A herculean task at the very least! What does all of this bring to the feminist tactical boardroom or to the groups of isolated feminist organizations and grassroots movements, to gender

¹⁹ Email conversation Diana Fox, November 2017.

²⁰ Email Niveditha Menon 16th April 2018.

studies scholars struggling away with definitions, concepts and theories in universities across the world?

For one thing I think it defuses the underlying philosophy through which global gender equality is calibrated, that gender equality has gained ascendancy in first world countries because the gender violations experienced by women in south Asia, Africa, poorer communities in the south and in the Caribbean persist as the benchmarks of inequality. Recent developments in the United States more so in the “Me Too”²¹ phenomenon that has targeted sexual politics within the film industry has demonstrated that sexual harassment remains a seething area of gender inequity that the west has openly disclosed and vented globally.²² “There is a feeling about the fragility of gains that have been made that is emerging” notes Fox, “and it serves as a reminder that assumptions of a huge gap between the western feminist self and the so-called third world other is not as large as once thought. ...From my standpoint in the U.S., I think this is absolutely true—particularly in the current political climate of opposition to Trumpism where not only the “Me Too” movement, but women’s marches, anti-gun marches, climate change marches, and “Time’s Up” movements are recalibrating assumptions about so-called western advancement vis-à-vis women’s oppression in the rest of the world. US hypocrisy is stark for participants in these movements—it is not possible to see gender equality only in relationship to the “non-western other”. For Fox, “The solidarities in marches around the world underscore the ways in which our realities are a bricolage, an increased interlinking of local, national, and international networks. For increasing numbers of people there is a global framing of the meaning of community—constant and intense interconnections based on communications and movements of people”.²³

This strikes a real chord. We wondered in the Caribbean (at least I did) how the “Me Too” movement would ignite. Sexual harassment is one of the more difficult areas to legislate. Yet as if the mood of no nonsense had caught on through a process of osmosis, around the 2018 Carnival season the public was warned by a police spokesman that “Thieving a wine,” translated as gyrating on someone’s else’s body in public fetes, (especially at Carnival when the assumption is that everything is allowed in this libidinous festival), is behaviour which is now considered assault under the Summary Offences Act in Trinidad and Tobago, with penalties that could lead to imprisonment for three to six months.²⁴ There is of course a lot of discussion and disagreement on how a “wining” assault can be proved. Nonetheless, the actual passage of such an act is in my view a signal of how this society is dealing with the increasing demand by women and some men, that ultimately, the individual’s right over their body is sacrosanct. This acknowledgement of the state demonstrates how even Enlightenment values of individual rights are constantly being introduced and becoming embedded in new cultural contexts. This is an outgrowth of societal or national responses, a sycretism of the application of struggle in a new setting involving resistance and responses that are culturally acceptable, and does not have to be regarded as the imposition of western individualism over collectivism. It builds imperceptibly on the famous Clause four of the Sexual offences act debated in 1986 which created the offence of rape within marriage, a revolutionary step for a Caribbean society to take in 1980s, again, one that had been introduced from the Sexual Offences Act previously passed in Canada as a result of the militancy of feminists

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/31/the-guardian-view-on-metoo-what-comes-next>

²² Although we must not assume that only women in the west take up the mantle on behalf of others. See for example <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/it-s-a-man-s-world-7-sexual-harassment-cases-that-rocked-india/story-TJ4sebHtBlmn2oEkJpJCHO.html>

²³ Email Diana Fox, April 4, 2014.

²⁴ ²⁴ <http://newsday.co.tt/2018/01/20/reckless-outburst-by-machel/>; <http://newsday.co.tt/2018/01/18/you-could-get-charged-fined-for-wining-like-that/>

in that society, but in Trinidad it engaged the population with the debate that again challenged the conjugal contract with individual rights. Both of these attest to the fact that one action leads to another and another and these often cross geographic boundaries.

In another incident that occurred also in February 2018, a public lecture delivered by the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus in Barbados was disrupted by a group of female protesters. “The protest came in the wake of recent controversy and criticism over the handling of a case in St Vincent involving 22-year-old former model Yugge Farrell who is charged with using abusive language towards the wife of Finance Minister Camilo Gonsalves who is the son of PM Gonsalves. The young woman, who has alleged that she was involved in an extramarital affair with Camilo Gonsalves was twice sent to the country’s mental health centre for evaluation though the prosecutor did not present any evidence that such an evaluation was needed”.²⁵ The protesters were self acclaimed feminist scholars, members of two women’s groups in Barbados, the National Organization of Women and Life in Leggings movement. “We do not like misuse of power, we will not show deference to politicians or prime ministers because we are in solidarity with our sisters and our brothers across the region”²⁶ protested the women, while security intervened to silence them. From my point of view, this public shaming and naming, specific to the context, can also be read as the ripple effect of the “Me Too” movement, gathering storm across boundaries. It is important to note here also the first Me Too statement was made by an African American woman, also underscoring the heterogeneity of western feminism that is taking on global resonance in local settings.²⁷

Is it possible to develop geographically grounded feminist theory and responses to struggle and at the same time to forge transnational feminist links? Sue Ann Barratt’s paper, presented at the Colombo conference, addresses the now global problem that women face of online sexual harassment and misogyny. Her analysis of the specific comments men make in the online forum needed to be explained clearly through very Caribbean notions of respectability which are ingrained through the linguistic and idiomatic expressions that have policed notions of female respectability. For example in one of the cases she deals with the female character whose name was Therese Ho who suffered for having this surname in typical Trinidadian male tongue-lashing. “*Never trust a girl with the last name ho*”.²⁸ This paper renders up new methods by which struggles are being waged in the contemporary period not only within societies in their own damaging vernacular but globally by a complex and sophisticated set of media networks that have found new means to define and reify differences of all kinds. In this brave new world, the optimism of feminist struggle continues as we create new ways to establish and maintain difference and at the same time build bridges of solidarity.

Constructing a “new sisterhood” across all sorts of borders that is not based on naïve notions of sameness under the skin must confront the limits still posed by real and imagined power that people possess and exert over others.

Paying attention to difference, then, is critical, as long as the real contours of power in shaping discourse are made clear, at least, to those who wield the power.

²⁵ Gonsalves interrupted by protesters during Cave Hill lecture, Amanda Lynch-Foster, amandalynch-foster@nationnews.com, Added 23 February 2018.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/15/me-too-founder-tarana-burke-women-sexual-assault>

²⁸ Sue Ann Barratt, Reinforcing Sexism and Misogyny: Social Media, Symbolic Violence and the Construction of *Femininity-as-Fail*” Paper presented at 3rd World Conference on Women’s Studies – 2017 “Building Resilience: Dialogue, Collaboration and Partnerships Across Our Differences”, 04th - 06th May 2017, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Precisely because of the power differentials between women, it is easier to create horizontal alliances than to engage vertical alliances. ... Of course, the vertical alliances are much more difficult to navigate because I have to constantly be aware of and question the complicity of feminist privilege in these [academic] spaces. And that is sometimes a harder battle. It is sometimes harder to deal with one's own role as an oppressor than it is to deal with the ramifications of being oppressed. And it is precisely because of this reason that one has to constantly engage with the way in which we create solidarity.²⁹

The two components difference and power, remain central not just to feminist battles, but to a range of current global confrontations. Feminisms are not exempt from these erupting forces, they are transformed and implicated in ways that continue to create the basis for further difference. Yet solidarity and sisterhood underpin the concept of equality that the Global Gender Gap and the UN CEDAW committee calibrates. And in individual societies, small and large feminist groups, women's organizations, LGBTQI movements and politically motivated politicians continue to stretch the boundaries of gender to some goal that is continuously envisioned around acceptance of difference.

“What would this acceptance of difference look like” asks Diana Fox? Niveditha responds “To be truly honest, I do not know. ...I sometimes think it is an idea—an idea of a better world. And I think what keeps us fragmented is the very same idea—the idea of a better world—because our better worlds are, and perhaps, have to be different”.

What continues to elude are the lessons to be conveyed through difference. What do we hear when we ask or learn about other peoples' experiences? What are the expectations that we subconsciously require of those we encounter? In the intricate network of surfaces that connect us as individuals, academics, writers, feminists, travellers, conference goers, internet explorers and the multiple identities we possess, difference remains the central motif. When will difference become inauthentic and create the pathways for reciprocal solidarities?

²⁹ Email conversation Niveditha Menon, 16th April 2018.

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