



Feminist
Theory
& Activism
*in Global
Perspective*

Abstracts
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I. Local/Global Interrogations

Feminist research and activism on violence against women: linking local and global

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Since the 1980s, my research and advocacy work have been inspired by Western feminist theory and the battered women's movement. During the 1990s, the Milosevic dictatorship of the war in the former Yugoslavia isolated Serbia, but feminist links did not cease to exist. This new reality brought survival problems to all of us living in Serbia, while also representing a new challenge for feminist activism and research. In this difficult time I introduced feminist methodology into my own research. War rape, refugees, the impact of war on domestic violence, abused women who kill and the suffering of imprisoned women during economic sanctions, were all topics that I found it important to engage with in both my research and activist work, and feminist methodologies seemed the only suitable way to do this.

During the most difficult time, i.e. at the beginning of 1990s, women's solidarity both in Serbia and worldwide looked to be the only bright spot amid the overall despair. Although before the war I had good relations and support for my work from other feminists both locally and globally, support during that time was especially significant. Owing to the support by feminists from Switzerland, Canada, UK and US, I had an opportunity to travel in spite of the strict visa regime, which enabled me to learn about international feminist theory and activism, to bring that knowledge and experience back to Serbia and to use it to advocate for legal and other changes in the lives of abused women. I also had the opportunity to publish my work and make the suffering of women from the former Yugoslavia more visible worldwide, and, thus, to contribute to the improvement of transnational/global responses to violence against women in war.

Unfortunately, not all feminists were supportive and able to look at Serbian women – either victims, researchers or activists - without wearing an ethnic lens. For some of them, accepting the differences among women meant non-recognition of women's common interests rather than admitting and encompassing differences in positions and ways of oppression of different women. This was the dark side of global feminism in the 1990's, when some feminists took for

granted men's war games and divisions and abandoned some women because they were, as Stiglmeier wrote, "wives, daughter and sisters" of men from the bad side.

In this paper, I will present the experiences of doing research on violence against women, and at the same time producing changes - within myself, as well as within other women and the broader society, and discuss how helpful global feminist dialogue and networks were for producing these changes locally.

Feminist Studies in African Contexts: Some Notes on Liberatory Research Praxis

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I have spent the last decade working collaboratively with colleagues in different African locations to build intellectual community around the goal of strengthening the feminist politics of gender studies in African universities. Key challenges that have confronted this project have emanated from the international development arena, the national political arena and the institutional cultures of postcolonial universities. The advances of neoliberal economics, militarism and intensifying cultural/religious fundamentalism have profoundly affected intellectual landscapes and academic freedom globally, with particular import in an Africa framed by its marginalisation within hegemonic manifestations of globalisation. The higher education sector has been profoundly affected by the diminution (and in some cases collapse) of the African state and the public sector, with negative consequences for the articulation of national and regional development alternatives, including those instigated by women's movements and inspired by feminism. As a result, research and publication capacities in general have been severely depleted in material and human terms, and the intellectual space for research has become increasingly constrained, as much by neoliberal economic imperatives as by political expedience born of apparent opportunities.

In response to this landscape the African Gender Institute, primarily defined as a teaching department in dire need of feminist theorization grounded in African realities, for strategic and pedagogic purposes, has developed collaborative pan-African research and publishing work, including the academic journal *Feminist Africa*. This paper sets out to document and reflect on some of the ethical, methodological and practical challenges of establishing transnational feminist research and publishing practices in African contexts acutely subjected to the contradictory effects of globalization. These reflections are framed by an interest in what it means to sustain (rather than simply assert the desirability of) a dynamic connection between feminist research and activism in contemporary postcolonial conditions.

Brazilian feminisms and their central and peripheral questions

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In this paper I intend to introduce some questions faced by contemporary Brazilian feminism as a context for a critical discussion about what we nowadays denominate as the local and the global.

Beyond a geopolitical dichotomy, I suggest thinking of these differences from the point of view of the tension between central and peripheral forms of feminism or between what is chosen as central and what is kept in marginal zones. My reflections begin from two temporally distant experiences of feminism: the first as a young activist of Brazilian academic feminism in the 1980s, which was an era marked by the expansion of the Brazilian military dictatorship; the second as a professor and researcher in the field of gender studies. This second experience also involved my work as sub-editor and editor of *Revista Estudos Feministas* (Feminist Studies Review) in Brazil from 2000 to 2008. Nowadays it is possible to think about the feminist field as a quite plural and diverse territory, that includes not only organizations, groups, movements and Non Governmental Organizations turning to specifically feminist guidelines, but also an intense academic activity, hugely increased from the 1980s with private and public financial support for research (mainly coming from the Ford Foundation, rather than Brazilian governmental agencies) and by an integration of feminist demands into public politics and the institution of governmental agencies, which take as a reference point the new national Constitution of 1988.

More than post-colonial, Brazilian society is markedly a post-slave-ist society, in which, despite a narrative that idealizes the nation through a myth of racial democracy, there are still marked social and economic divisions in terms of ethnicity, gender and class. Black women constitute the huge majority of those on or under the poverty line. *Mother-centred* and *mother-focalized* families are a marked characteristic of the popular social classes in Brazil. One of the key critical questions to be considered is how have these specific characteristics of Brazilian society been represented in mainstream Brazilian feminism.

My personal observation is that the questions of poor, worker, black or indigenous women have featured only tangentially in concerns of Brazilian feminism (as they have in some Latin-American-wide feminist forums as well). More than the questions raised by global feminism (for instance the fight for abortion legalization and reproductive rights) that overlie the local-national questions of Brazilian social formation, it seems to me that what we have here is a reproduction of an unequal movement among central and peripheral questions, which in some ways reproduces the dominant logics of a post-slave-ist nation.

II. Trans/National Intersections

Solidarity and Agency, or What Can Transnational Feminist Theory Learn from Regional Feminist Activism?

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In the context of the discussion about transnational feminism I want to take on board the potentialities of regional feminism in theory and activism. In the light of some recent theoretical considerations of the relevance of regionalism in the period of globalisation I find it relevant and even urgent to examine how regional activists’ perspectives could contribute towards the development of a more comprehensive transnational feminist theory.

Regional feminist networks, I want to argue, can extrapolate the local ethnic and religious contradictions more profoundly because they can be much more focused and productive in examining the hierarchies between different ethnicities and their different attitudes towards genders that are still preserved within local and national contexts. Such tensions are more complex and difficult to grasp when discussed from within a transnational framework. Thus I assume that the regional feminist perspective could supplement the work of the feminist networks on the local and transnational level. While regional feminist knowledges can produce much more relevant instruments for locating urgent issues, regional activism can produce more concrete actions for addressing and reconciling the ethnic, religious and gender contradictions in local, regional and transnational feminist contexts.

The potentialities of regional feminist perspectives will be explored in the context of feminist theory and activism in Southeast Europe and the Balkans region.

In theoretical terms I suggest looking at the potential interweaving of the theoretical term *agency* and the activists’ calls for *solidarity* which, even though very different, have some reciprocal relations and meanings. I consider these two terms as important concepts that can help us understand how positive changes take place even in the most patriarchal societies and regions.

Feminism, Colonialism and Nationalism in Contemporary Indian Drama

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This paper will address a set of interrelated issues. On one level, it will address the relevance of feminist historiography's insistence on examining complex social relations that structured women's lives under colonialism in India. Additionally, it will address the usefulness of such critical modes of analysis for reading literary-cultural texts that account for varied feminist positions which arose within the framework of anti-colonial nationalism. In so doing the paper will examine the ongoing importance of reading literary-cultural productions as important sites for retrieving women's agency and intervention in dominant systems at local levels, and for offering the capacity to generate a larger dialogue on such issues. Drawing on plays such as Tripurari Sharma's *Aziz-un-Nisa. San Sattavan ka Qissa (Azizun Nisa. The Tale of '57*, first performed in 1998 at the National School of Drama, New Delhi) about a Courtesan's participation in India's "first war of Independence" against British colonial rule in 1857, this paper will examine the ways in which such dramatic enactments uncover the role of the subaltern woman in political struggles and nationalist movements, and interrogate the limitations and possibilities of the nationalist paradigm for feminist analysis. The paper will also examine the implications of representing such stories at a time when political parties have appropriated female figures in anti-colonial liberation struggles for competing communal, class and self-interested nationalist agendas.

Violence against Women:

Expanding Understandings ... Limited Perspectives

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This paper will draw on my empirical research with women on the issue of domestic violence and my realization that violence against women perpetrated by their husbands as a phenomenon, is interconnected with the violence of life that women experience in very many different ways.

This paper will focus on the problems with applying a simplistic understanding of violence against women where women are always victims and men always the violators. This sort of singular definition does not recognize the intersections of violence with the phenomena of poverty, or with processes of accelerated change with inherent potentialities of violence as in structural adjustment programmes and globalization wherein the society is witness to a great churning of class, caste and ethnic interests that divide men and women, and that additionally, by implicating women as violators themselves or as accomplices in violence against 'other' men and women, take away the validity from feminist claims of an overarching simple subjectivity of victim and victimhood for all women.

Yet, in the background of a strong but currently listless feminist movement that continues to try to make the State and civil society recognize the need to ensure that women as a category are neither made victims of the development process nor left out of development gains, postmodern insights on difference and contradictions are not necessarily seen in a positive light in the feminist circles. On the one hand the women's movement has expanded its outreach to women from all sections of society, not just middle class urban, educated women; on the other hand, the movement currently is confronted with conflicts and stalemate in defining its core issues and its strategies. These struggles in our movement for instance have come to fore in the form of a great divide on the subjects of personal law, communal identities, a uniform civil code, and more recently on issues regarding prostitution or sex work and the moral and/or livelihood concerns of 'bar girls'. Defining violence in this context is no longer easy, for behind the politics of definition lies the conflict of interests between different categories of women and men constituting the civil rights movements in the country. What violence is and what, strategically and politically, should not be projected as violence are concerns that, even while they divide or paralyze the women's movement in India, have lessons for the transnational feminist movement.

Across the Mediterranean: a new Italian literature

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The articulation of literature is a form of violence on the same level as that of the formation of the nation, to which it is always connected. Literature from the outset of modernity has always belonged to the nation; in order to define it a geographical border and a dominant culture that gives name and substance to its most disparate expressions is required.

This paper examines the impact of migrant women's writing in Italian on the necessary reformulation of modern Italian literature, culture and history. This postcolonial reconfiguration of contemporary 'Italy' emphasises the complexity of transnational intersectionality, developed and exposed in the poetics of these women writers. Such writings promote a series of critical dialogues that simultaneously displace and relocate European concerns with national cultures and identification on an altogether more extensive and less guaranteed series of maps. On the cusp of the Mediterranean, moving between multiple worlds, the poetics of these writings profoundly contribute to an interdisciplinary and intercultural understanding of a transnational feminism in the making.

III. Theoretical Trans/formations

Rights, Feminism, Nation

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Wendy Brown has stated that the ‘most difficult thing ...to do now is to simultaneously work in a national and a post-national way’ (2006). Her point is compelling: the fact that we currently inhabit a world where nations are waning, in terms of both sovereignty over their citizens, and the nature of transnational power, is inescapable. At the same time, it is unlikely that local struggles, and national identities that emerge historically, politically and culturally from those struggles, will evaporate in the call for global activism. In this tension between the national and the post-national, an ‘interregnum... where power still traverses both circuits’, it is important to still focus attention on ‘the containers that nation states offer’. Brown’s point is that to understand and develop productive ways of thinking about the process of inevitable loss of specific political, civic or cultural experience, to understand ‘What is allowed to live when something else dies?’, the nation still has meaning for engaged analysis.

This is particularly important for feminist politics. It is well understood that the global challenges to nation states over the past 30 years, and the changing economic and cultural imperatives that have resulted, have managed to recast feminism. Feminism as a local politics within a nation state like Australia, for example, no longer has currency in a time dominated by rights competition and international law. It is cast as both a rent seeker, a minority group competing for resources and legal acknowledgement beyond its share, and, at the same time, as irrelevant and outdated, as politically dead.

I wish to explore these ideas in this paper, using domestic law as a site in which local struggles over gendered rights, resources, culture and identity have been fought, and continue to be fought. I will use family law as an example, and history as a method for effectively understanding the dimensions of the present, to argue Australia’s engagement with debates offered by feminism about women’s rights since the 1970s, and what they should look like legislatively, tells much about Australia’s commitment to pluralist democratic rights more generally today. This frame also opens up a series of broader questions of relevance to the ‘interregnum’: What will the Australian nation allow? What are its limits in a post-national world? And is it possible to use the law to decipher the paradoxes and nature of the apperception of gendered injustice that exists in the contemporary moment?

Teaching Feminism in post-Oslo Palestine: Welcome to the Third Wave

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Since 1996 and the founding of Birzeit University's MA Program in Gender Studies, I have been teaching some version of the introductory course on feminist and gender theory to first year students. The overall period has been marked by momentous transformations in the Palestinian life in the occupied territories, and ultimately an epistemic crisis of the Palestinian national project. In the late 1990s, at the height of the PNA's state building project, the overwhelming trend among students was a strong attachment to the premises of liberal feminism and its corollary – a disdain for Marxist feminism (seen as passé and part of a wider failed Left) and discomfort with more critical post-modernist (or post-feminist) approaches. Besides the wider context at the time, the specific career trajectories of many students also gave them a powerful stake in liberal feminism, based as they were in NGO's and PNA Ministries where donor funding was profoundly altering the discourses and practices of women's local activism in line with mainstream global agendas.

With the demise of Oslo, the subsequent territorial and political fragmentation and collapse of Palestinian society and polity has led to a parallel transformation among students' stakes in, and reaction to, various feminist and gender theories. In addition, the Program has attracted an ever growing diversity of students; religiously identified students from a variety of regional backgrounds in the West Bank now match or even displace the dominance of the Ramallah secular-identified NGO/Ministry cadre. While in the past, non-secular students (for want of a better term) often identified with the essentialism of radical feminism, those who still identify with it tend to do so because it presents in their view a deeper critique of the gender order in Palestinian society. Overall, what the current crisis has enabled is to open a space for students to re-think the very possibility of grand projects – be they feminist or not. Secondly, it has allowed them to relate more strongly to concepts of masculinity and femininity (rather than women and patriarchy) as more relevant to an understanding of gender and other relations in their own society in the current circumstances. The latter has also increasingly allowed male students to find a place within "gender studies" and within the local politics of gender. Finally, what is most shared by students across the religious/ secular divide is an urgent need to find some form of agency given its total absence in current Palestinian political life. Surprisingly, it is aspects of post-modernism, Butler's theorization of performativity; and interactionist approaches to gender that seem to students to be the most powerful frameworks towards that quest.

Introducing Women's Studies: Twenty-first Century Dilemmas for Feminist Teaching in the Caribbean

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Walking past classrooms and through halls on campus at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, I passed posters making statements about sexual harassment, domestic violence, pornography, rape and contraception. It was late November in the first semester and these posters were everywhere: some disturbing, some advertising events, some handmade, some downloaded from the internet, some with graffiti, some torn down and drifting across the concrete.

They were the outcome of a 'popular action' assignment in an Introduction to Women's Studies course at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to poster campaigns, the students also organised a public workshop on female condoms, created popular theatre on reproductive rights, facilitated a session on consciousness-raising, and held interactive activities on issues of all kinds. There were 92 students in the class and their visual impact was undeniable, but what was going on behind this scene?

Stepping back, this paper explores how these 'popular actions' came into being, their impact and ensuing debates that emerged. It also uses them as a lens for reflecting on academic feminism, the changing meaning of 'gender', issues raised when engaging men, the politics of Women's Studies and the role of activism in identifying and addressing continuing issues of gender justice.

My overall argument is that Women's Studies and Gender Studies are and remain tools for feminist consciousness-raising and movement-building. The current challenge is to identify the strategic ways that feminist analyses and politics can usefully speak to our contemporary Caribbean context. Our teaching should help create the changes still needed to improve women's and men's lives and create more just relations in both public and private spheres.

In the first section of this paper, I reflect on the 'popular actions'. Although the course has been offered by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) at the UWI since the mid-1990s, this paper enters when the assignment was first introduced in 2006. It discusses the rationale for the assignment, students' initial responses and connections between course material and students' ideas for their actions. It also highlights skills learned, bases for reflection, and the assignment's impact on students in the course and on the campus. Finally, it explores key lessons learned about pedagogy, engaging men, strategies for consciousness raising and academic feminism.