introduction

The papers presented in this special online issue of Feminist Review (FR) were first delivered at our thirtieth anniversary conference 'Feminist Theory & Activism in Global Perspective', which was held at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London in September 2009. This was the first occasion on which the FR Collective invited its international corresponding editors to London in order to publicly present and discuss their work with a UK-based audience. As the conference title suggests, our main aim for the conference was to address some of the links and tensions between the academic field of gender, women's and feminist studies, developments in feminist theory and the work of activists and policymakers, and to do this with a focus on the transnational and the global contexts within which all this work takes place. We hoped the conference would contribute to challenging and problematizing those familiar dichotomies, such as western versus non-western, northern versus southern, theory versus activism and local versus global. Rather than reify or reproduce these dichotomies, we hoped to explore their inter-articulations and entanglements, while recognizing the persistence of structural inequalities, differences and tensions in the positioning and power of feminists located in their specific national, cultural and disciplinary contexts.

Some of the specific questions we asked our contributors to address include:

(1) Why is feminism still globally resonant?
(2) What are the debates and challenges prevalent in specific regions and linked to specific disciplines?
(3) How do we integrate feminism in our own work?
(4) What does global feminist dialogue look like?
(5) How is transnational feminist theory being produced?
(6) What is the relationship between transnational feminist theory and activism?

Our corresponding editors’ responses to those questions are presented here following the structure of the three panels held during the course of the conference.

Panel one, ‘Local/Global Interrogations’, includes contributions from Amina Mama, Sonia Malouf and Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic. All three papers think through the dynamics of local/global entanglements by also reflecting on the inter-articulation of the personal and the collective. In her paper, ‘What does it mean to do feminist research in African contexts?’, based on her experiences at the African Gender Institute (AGI) in Cape Town, Amina reflects on the politics and possibilities of building a feminist intellectual
community in the African region over the past decade, and on some of the ways in which innovative feminist methodologies have been developed in research undertaken by the AGI. Sonia’s paper, ‘Brazilian Feminisms: central and peripheral issues’, reflects on her experiences in the Brazilian women’s movement since the 1980s to rethink the local–global dynamic through considering the tension between central and peripheral forms of feminism, or between what is defined as central and what is kept in the margins in contemporary debates in Brazil and in Latin America more generally. Vesna’s paper, ‘Feminist research and activism on violence against women: linking the local and the global’, based on her 20 years experience working on violence against women issues in Serbia, reflects on the ways in which both links and contestations with ‘global’ feminisms have informed and affected her own work at the local level. In all three papers, what also emerges is an attention to the ways in which feminist understandings of gender are interrogated when considered in its inter-articulation with differences of race, ethnicity, class and geo-political location.

Panel two, ‘Trans/National Intersections’, includes papers by Lidia Curti, Nishi Mitra and Suzana Milevska, as well as a response from Gulsum Baydar. In this panel, we hoped to consider some of the ways in which the ‘national’ both intervenes and is problematized in extra- or trans-national dynamics. Lidia’s paper, ‘Transcultural itineraries in women’s literature of migration in Italy’ considers some of the ways in which new migrant and diasporic literatures in Italian open up what it means to be Italian to new voices and preoccupations. Nishi’s paper, ‘Domestic Violence Research: Expanding Understandings but Limited Perspective’ tracks the ways in which a national Indian women’s movement against violence is fractured and complicated both by differences within the nation and by global political and economic inequalities. Suzana’s paper ‘Solidarity and Intersectionality: what can transnational feminist theory learn from regional feminist activism’ draws on her experiences in the Balkan region to consider the potentiality of a regional focus to feminist theorizing and activism, as a way to both supplement local and transnational feminist work and to address some of the persistent tensions between gender and ethnicity that both local and transnational spaces may sometimes fail to adequately take on board. As Gulsum remarks in her response to these papers, ‘Agency and Solidarity in the Age of Globalization’, each productively problematizes our understandings of both collectivity and subjectivity, opening out to ‘a fresh notion of feminism which is not necessarily based on the consolidation of fixed gender categories and pre-given notions of community and communal setting’.

Panel three, ‘Theoretical Trans/formations’, includes papers by Ann Genovese and Gabrielle Hosein, and a concluding response from Tina Campt. Ann’s paper, ‘National Legislation and Transnational Feminism’ explores the tension between recognizing location and conducting transnational feminist politics by considering the difficulties that Australian feminist praxis must confront if it is
genuinely to engage in transnational feminist conversations. Through a careful examination of the making and reforming of modern Australian family law, Ann tracks the ways in which the making of national law is capable of accommodating or resisting gendered, and raced, claims for rights protections and recognitions, and articulates the theoretical challenges this poses for feminists. Gabrielle’s paper, ‘Caribbean Feminism, Activist Pedagogies and Transnational Dialogues’ reflects on her own experience of feminist pedagogy in the classroom to ask which discourses of North American feminist teaching and movement-building translate to the specificities of the Anglophone Caribbean context, which do not, and why. As Tina suggests in her concluding response, both papers invite us to ask ‘what the transnational does or might do, rather than allowing us the complacency of thinking of it as an identifiable object or set of relations we can identify as already present and awaiting discovery’.

She invites us to consider the transnational as an open and ongoing project where we must continually ask which discourses get consumed where and to what effect, which discourses ‘cross boundaries, what forms of power enable their passage, and perhaps most importantly, when, where and in what ways do those passages fail’. We present these papers to you as part of that ongoing project.

One of the missing voices from the conference was our Palestinian corresponding editor, Rema Hammami, who teaches at Birzeit University. Rema lives in East Jerusalem where she can only live as a Palestinian with a residency permit from the Israeli authorities. Her residency expired shortly before the conference and at the time of our meeting, she was still waiting to have it renewed. Under these circumstances, she could have come to the UK, but would not have been allowed to return to Palestine afterwards. Her story has been a stark reminder to all of us here in London and the UK about the very real challenges, structural problems and inequalities, as well as the everyday hardships and forms of violence that feminists have to endure in many places in the world. We very much hope that Rema’s contributions to the ongoing debates among feminists on the questions posed by the conference might appear in future issues of FR.