

Introduction

Theorizing Transnational Feminist Praxis

RICHA NAGAR AND AMANDA LOCK SWARR

Arundhati Roy follows in the traditions of Nehru, Gandhi, and many others. She is . . . using her position as an artist to fight for those who do not have a voice and is prepared to suffer the consequences. . . . These are qualities worthy of the highest praise.

—Kevin Baker, quoted in *The Guardian*, Friday, March 8, 2002

The global left media celebrates Arundhati Roy as one of the most influential Third World activists resisting U.S. empire. Such celebration, however, does not mean that Roy's intellectual voice and her political analyses have emerged in isolation from the struggles of activist communities—particularly, the Narmada Bachao Andolan—where she has learned many political lessons and developed her analytical frameworks as a part of collectives and movements. In other words, the limelight bestowed on a single activist does not change the reality that all activism is collectively constituted. It is the community of struggle that turns an activist into a hero; the labor of the activist cannot be abstracted from the community.

In much the same way, all academic production is necessarily collaborative, notwithstanding the individualized manner in which authorship is claimed and assigned and celebrity granted to academics as isolated knowledge producers. Undergraduate classrooms, graduate seminars, workshops, conferences, academic peer reviews, and fieldwork-based knowledge production are all examples of the everyday collaborative spaces and tools through which academics create knowledges and learn to speak to various communities inside and outside of academia. These spaces are also excellent reminders of an inherent contradiction that exists in the U.S. academic establishment: the system relies on the rhetoric and vitality of intellectual *communities*, while at the same time privileging a structure of *individual* merits and rewards

that is premised on a denial and dismissal of the collaborative basis of all intellectual work produced within the institution. This general tendency in the U.S. academy is made more pronounced by a celebrity culture where an internalized need to present oneself as an individual academic star often translates into a drive to abstract and generalize, frequently in opposition to those who are seen as immersed in “grounded struggles.”

The assumptions and fallacies of a model based on the notion of an individual knowledge producer in academia (feminist studies included) are useful starting points for an interrogation of three sets of dichotomies critical to rethinking the meanings and possibilities of feminist praxis: individually/collaboratively produced knowledges, academia/activism, and theory/method. Such interrogation can also serve as a meaningful entry point from which to consider the relationships between local and global as well as to revisit the politics of authenticity, translation, and mediation with an explicit aim of extending ongoing conversations about the meanings and possibilities of transnational feminist engagements.

This volume is an initial step in what we see as our long-term collaborative journey with one another and with collaborators in other academic and nonacademic locations (e.g., Swarr and Nagar 2004; Nagar and Swarr 2004; Bullington and Swarr 2007; Sangtin Writers [and Nagar] 2006) to reflect on the meanings and implications of these three dichotomies in relation to transnational feminist praxis. We note two phenomena that have been in mutual tension. On the one hand, growing interests in questions of globalization, neo-liberalism, and social justice have fuelled the emergence and growth of transnational feminisms in interdisciplinary feminist studies. On the other hand, ongoing debates since the 1980s over questions of voice, authority, representation, and identity have often produced a gap between the efforts of feminists engaged in theorizing the complexities of knowledge production across borders and those concerned with imagining concrete ways to enact solidarities across nations, institutions, sociopolitical identifications, and economic categories and materialities.

We reconceptualize collaboration as an intellectual and political tool to bridge this gap, with possibilities that exceed its potential as a methodological intervention. We suggest that interweaving theories and practices of knowledge production through collaborative dialogues provides a way to radically rethink existing approaches to subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation. Although such concepts as *transnational feminist studies* are sometimes invoked as if a subfield with shared meanings and assumptions exists, we suggest that the two phenomena noted here have constituted transnational feminisms as a diverse and diffuse field where hierarchies and

practices pertaining to knowledge production have been unevenly treated in theoretical interventions. We argue for a transnational feminist praxis that is critically aware of its own historical, geographical, and political locations, even as it is invested in alliances that are created and sustained through deeply dialogic and critically self-reflexive processes of knowledge production and dissemination. We actively resist celebrity/expert politics while recognizing the limits of this resistance.

In this introduction, we first consider key approaches to the transnational by interdisciplinary feminist scholars in U.S. and Canadian academia. Next, we discuss these inquiries into the transnational in relation to practices of knowledge production by examining the interstices of the three sets of dichotomies identified: academic/activist, theory/method, and individual/collaborative. Finally, we analyze two texts published in the 1990s that have become canonical in transnational feminist studies to explore the manner and extent to which they address these concerns and to identify some critical points of engagement and departure that might broaden and deepen the imaginaries and practices associated with political dialogues and intellectual production across borders. These three points of inquiry allow us to grapple with the ways in which collaborative praxis is marginalized in dominant institutional spaces of the academy and to imagine how such praxis can become a rich source of methodological *and* theoretical interventions and agendas that can begin the process of identifying and re/claiming those spaces. In the last section, we situate our arguments in relation to the process, structure, and specific contributions that have come together in the making of this volume.

The *Transnational* of Transnational Feminisms

Generally speaking, the popularization and embracing of transnational feminisms as a discourse in feminist/women's and gender studies has coincided with a commitment to address the asymmetries of the globalization process. Yet, it would be incorrect to suggest that the term *transnational* has the same salience in South Africa, India, Egypt, or Brazil as it does in U.S. and Canadian academic feminist studies. Similar to concepts of "women of color" feminisms (e.g. The Combahee River Collective 1982), "third world" feminisms (e.g., Mohanty et al. 1991), "multi-cultural" feminisms (e.g., Shohat 1998), "international" feminisms (e.g., Enloe 1990), and "global" feminisms (e.g., Morgan 1984), *transnational* as a descriptor has emerged out of certain historical moments in the U.S. and Canadian academy. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, the ways in which the deployments of transnational

feminisms continue, or depart from, the intellectual and political legacies of women of color/third world/multicultural/international/global feminisms. At the same time, however, it is critical to be aware of the limits engendered by the overuse of *transnational*. Indeed, as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue, the term *transnational* “has become so ubiquitous in cultural, literary and critical studies that much of its political valence seems to have become evacuated” (2001: 664). This makes it necessary to consider briefly the various deployments of the idea of the transnational and how they feed visions of feminist praxis and collaborative knowledge production.

In a discussion of transnational sexuality studies, Grewal and Kaplan (2001) specify at least five kinds of foci where the term *transnational* has gained currency: (a) in theorizing migration as a transnational process; (b) to signal the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state in the current phase of globalization; (c) as a synonym for *diasporic*; (d) to designate a form of postcolonialism; and (e) as an alternative to the problematic of the global and the international, articulated primarily by Western or Euro-American second-wave feminists as well as by multinational corporations, for which “becoming global” marks an expansion into new markets.

It is in this last sense that we are concerned with the idea of transnational feminisms in this chapter—as a conceptual framework that strives to liberate itself from the political and intellectual constraints of international feminisms and global feminisms. Whereas international feminisms are seen as rigidly adhering to nation-state borders and paying inadequate attention to forces of globalization, global feminisms have been subjected to critical scrutiny for prioritizing northern feminist agendas and perspectives and for homogenizing women’s struggles for sociopolitical justice, especially in colonial and neocolonial contexts.¹

In the North American academy, transnational feminisms emerged, in part, from postcolonial critiques and introspection that is often linked to the writings of authors such as Mohanty (1986), Lazreg (1988), and Trinh (1991), who highlighted the contradictions and dangers inherent in a feminist project where “difference” is only allowed to unfold according to external standards and within an external frame of reference. “Under these circumstances,” wrote Marnia Lazreg,

the consciousness of one’s womanhood coincides with the realization that it has already been appropriated in one form or another by outsiders, women as well as men, experts in things Middle Eastern. In this sense, the feminist project is warped and rarely brings with it the potential for personal liberation that it does in this country [U.S.] or in Europe. (1988: 81)

These and similar works critiqued the hegemony of a monolithic notion of “Third World women” as passive victims and underscored the need to highlight Third World women’s activism and agency, as well as to recast the category of Third World women to imagine new forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations (Mohanty 1986). The result was a series of exciting academic interventions where questions of modernity, emergence and circulation of global identities, transnational formations, and the relationships between the local and global became topics of sustained debate and discussion in a continuously emerging field of transborder feminisms.

At the same time, we suggest that considerations of the specific ways in which particular transnational collaborations and solidarities can be articulated, enacted, mediated, translated, and represented in and across the borders of the northern academy—as well as the consequences, losses, gains, and possibilities of such imaginaries and practices—have remained largely peripheral or implicit in these discussions. Similarly, these conversations have not sufficiently grappled with the goals, agendas, and visions of different forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations as facilitated and constrained by specific institutional spaces and practices. We seek to create more spaces for a critical interrogation of these issues.

As a working definition that tries to bring these questions to the forefront, we propose that transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time.

Instead of investing ourselves in claiming feminism, then, we suggest that grounding feminisms in activist communities *everywhere* is a means to interrogate all forms of implicit and explicit relations of power (e.g., racist/classist/casteist), and to contest those power relations through ongoing processes of self-critique and collective reflection. This definition can serve as a starting point for refiguring the three sets of dichotomies we have identified, with an explicit aim of inserting and specifying collaborative praxis in theorizations of transnational feminisms.

Refuting Individualism and Reclaiming Collaborative Praxis

Marginalization of praxis has been a recurring theme in academic discussions. Generally speaking, praxis is understood as the processes of mediation through which theory and practice become deeply interwoven with one another. It is often traced back to Paulo Freire's (1993 [1970]) concept of liberation as praxis—that is, the cycle of action, reflection, and action through which human beings work to transform their worlds. In feminist engagements, the idea of situated knowledges has provided an important focus for reflections on praxis and on the mutually constitutive nature of the intellectual and the political. For those immersed in the challenges of transnational feminisms, such reflections have frequently revolved around the limits and possibilities of writing, as well as positionality, intellectual and political accountability, and representation. Here we revisit some key approaches to these questions with an eye toward the manner in which the dichotomies of academia/activism, theory/method, and individualism/collaboration have been confronted, problematized, or retained in these engagements.

Vexed questions about the theoretical absence and empirical presence of the Other, the authority and privilege of the writer and the representer, and the provisional nature of all knowledge, have been most intensely debated in the context of postcolonial critiques of ethnographic knowledge production. These critiques, in turn, intersect with broader critiques of the manner in which social scientific and humanities knowledges are produced in and from the ivory towers of academia, and the exclusions that emanate from this process. Two broad themes can be discerned in these critiques. The first relates to the dichotomy between academic intellectuals and sources/subjects of knowledge. It has been argued that academics tend to speak to problems constituted by their disciplines, which limits the relevance of academic knowledges to struggles on the ground (Dreze 2002; Messer-Davidow 2002). Furthermore, this disjuncture between disciplines and what is labeled as “the ground” is exacerbated by researchers from the North who tend to read “over the shoulders of natives,” not “alongside natives” with the result that hidden experts are always at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge production (Crapanzano 1986, quoted in Lassiter 2005: 5).

The second theme in these critiques pertains to the isolated realms of theory, method, and knowledge dissemination. Historian Tom Bender (1998) argues that a categorical distinction between production and popularization of knowledge accelerates professionalism while ignoring how diffusion of knowledge is a central part of making knowledge(s). This distinction is intimately connected with—and has played a role in constituting and

perpetuating—the separation of (a) theory from method and (b) research processes from research products. The end result is a compartmentalization of questions pertaining to praxis and intellectual and political accountability (Enslin 1994; Poitevin 2002).

Feminist scholars' attempts to engage with these two themes have led to the development of three specific practices:

1. *Engagement with positionality and reflexivity*, where the concept of positionality refers to the ways in which a researcher's position in terms of gender, race, class, among other categories, shapes the content of research and critical self-reflexivity becomes a tool to produce a description of that positionality;
2. *Representational experiments* that seek to interrupt the researcher's own authority by incorporating or juxtaposing multiple "voices";
3. *Enacting accountability*, which for many interdisciplinary social scientists has translated into such practices as sharing of interview transcripts, life histories, and finished academic products with informants/subjects; and which has involved wide-ranging engagements with questions of how to write for multiple audiences, and of mediation, translation, and reception.

Although these practices have advanced feminist engagements with dilemmas of representation in several ways, each practice also suffers from serious limitations. First, approaches to positionality often assume transparent reflexivity in ways that the very desire to "reveal" multiple, complex, and shifting positionality of the researcher freezes identities and social positions in space and time, foreclosing an analysis of the manner in which identities and locations of those who produce knowledges are constituted and negotiated in and through the process of knowledge production itself (Rose 1997; Nagar and Geiger 2007).

The second practice of creating representational experiments seeks to operationalize self-reflexivity by challenging the idea of a master narrative or authoritative accounts and by experimenting with genres. However, it runs the risk of becoming what Johannes Fabian (1990) refers to as a regrouping of "anthropologists" to save the representor's privileges—a critique that can be applied more broadly to academics than merely those who carry the burden of anthropology. To put it another way, dialogic motifs in academic writing do not necessarily advance dialogues with so-called research subjects/subalterns. Rather, they often reproduce these distinctions, and run the risk of being dismissed by some academics as atheoretical narratives.²

Finally, the practice of accountability through such means as sharing interview transcripts, life stories, and academic products is a worthy goal that has the potential of advancing dialogues, but given the institutional and time constraints faced by academics in an environment of “accelerated professionalism” (Bender 1998), it rarely finds the legitimacy, encouragement, or resources that it deserves to prosper as a rigorous practice.

With respect to the understanding of praxis that we want to elaborate here, perhaps the most important limitation shared by all of the three approaches mentioned here is that although each attempts to engage with subjects on the ground, the hierarchy of knowledge producers and knowledges remains intact. The status of the academic researcher as the “true intellectual thinker” remains undisturbed, along with the hierarchies that elevate theory, research, and academic knowledge production to a higher plane than method, outreach, community-based conversations, and nonconventional academic writing. Not only does this hierarchization relegate the nonacademic collaborators to the second tier of knowledge production, it also automatically labels as “methodology,” “activism,” “atheoretical,” or “unscholarly” most efforts that seek to destabilize or advance academic frameworks on the basis of dialogues and conversations outside academia. This hierarchy is further reinscribed by class; for instance, even when funding is available in academic settings for activist-academic partnerships, the academics’ agendas and methodologies remain dominant in almost all cases (Barndt 2007).

This inevitable process of hierarchization serves to reinforce the three dichotomies named at the outset—between academics and activists; between theory and method; and between individual and collaborative processes of knowledge making. Looking at the relationships among these categories simultaneously—of the individual, the academic, and the theoretical, on the one hand, and of the collaborative, activist, and methodological on the other—suggests how dialogic praxis is pushed to the margins. At best, the critique that emerges through praxis gets reduced to another form of representational device or labeled as “participatory action research,” and, in the process, gets bureaucratically controlled or abstracted from its embeddedness in lived struggles. At worst, academic gatekeepers discount such critique as “activism” and relegate it to a community outreach activity on the individual academic’s *curriculum vitae* or annual report. And we are left again with a recurring problem: academic knowledges that dominate and languages that exclude, to safeguard the closed interpretive communities that have become constantly shrinking fiefdoms forbidden to the uninitiated (Said 2002).

By framing the challenge of collaborative praxis in terms of three dichotomies, we do not want to duplicate the problems that inhabit the binary of global and local. Local and global are often imagined in ways such that, rather than being seen as mutually constitutive and permeable constructs, the global is viewed as an oppressive network of power structures and the local becomes an innocent victim. The local also becomes a pure source of oppositional consciousness and a space of resistance to the global. In strikingly parallel ways, there is a danger of constructing the “academic” as the “global” and the “activist” as the “local,” and of similarly conflating the “collaborative” and the “methodological” as victims of individually produced knowledges and theories.

Our argument for dismantling the three dichotomies, then, is not about a simple reversal of hierarchies and systems of valorization. Rather, we suggest that transnational collaboration should become a dynamic construct through which praxis can acquire its meaning and form in a given place, time, and struggle. Like our collaborators in this volume, we resist the inclination to position transnational feminisms as some teleological end result of progress narratives. Instead, we work within a crisis of representation that relies on critical transnational feminism as inherently unstable praxis whose survival and evolution hinge on a continuous commitment to produce self-reflexive and dialogic critiques of its own practices rather than a search for resolutions or closures—not to reproduce exercises in narrow “navel-gazing” but always in relation to overlapping hegemonic power structures at multiple temporal and geographic scales.

Revisiting *Scattered Hegemonies* and *Feminist Genealogies*

As a way to generate new conversations that are committed to envisioning and advancing transnational feminist praxis, we want to reconnect our focus on praxis and knowledge production with current theorizations of transnational feminisms. We begin by considering two texts that are often viewed as canonical in defining and conceptualizing transnational feminisms: Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994) and M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997). The decade following their respective publications has not lessened their influence in scholarship and pedagogical contexts. How do these two texts approach questions of collaboration in transnational feminist theory?

Scattered Hegemonies intends to problematize feminist theory and consider the usefulness of “postmodernity.” Grewal and Kaplan’s central questions

are: “(1) What kinds of feminist practices engender theories that resist or question modernity? [and] (2) How do we understand the production and reception of diverse feminisms within a framework of transnational social/cultural/economic movements?” (1994: 2–3). For these two authors, decentering feminism and allowing for multiplicities is critical. They suggest that analyses of the relationship of “scattered hegemonies”—defined as “the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject”—to gender relations will serve to reduce generalizing northern dominance (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 7).

Feminist Genealogies, by comparison, addresses feminist approaches to colonialism and possibilities of feminist democracy and “aims to provide a comparative, relational, and historically based conception of feminism, one that differs markedly from the liberal-pluralist understanding of feminism, an inheritance of the predominantly liberal roots of American feminist praxis” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xvi). Their articulation of feminist praxis is particularly relevant to our discussion here:

To talk about feminist praxis in global contexts would involve shifting the unit of analysis from local, regional, and national culture to relations and processes across cultures. Grounding analyses in particular local, feminist praxis is necessary, but we also need to understand the local in relation to larger, cross-national processes. (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xix)

Alexander and Mohanty push us to move toward a transnational vision of praxis itself that allows us to understand not only their articulation of this concept, but their analysis of the ways praxis necessarily works with processes that move through and beyond the global/local dichotomy.

Clearly, there are substantive differences between these two texts in the intentions of their respective projects. The subjects of each of these books also differs; while Grewal and Kaplan’s collaborators focus primarily on published texts, the contributions that constitute *Feminist Genealogies* are concerned primarily with authors’ involvements with activist movements. In terms of our present concerns, both volumes disrupt the divides between academia and activism and between theory and method. However, it is in considering the individual/collaborative divide that we find the most relevant differences between these texts. Grewal and Kaplan “believe that we must work collaboratively to formulate transnational feminist alliances” (1994: 1) and forged alliances with one another and with the volume’s contributors to form a “writing community.” Furthermore, their own activist work has informed their understandings of gender and geopolitics. They inform the

reader, “Many of our close allies are not necessarily represented by essays in the collection but their work with us in study and writing groups is reflected in these pages” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 2). These collaborations influence the text in deep ways; as Grewal and Kaplan state, “Rather than attempt to account for or definitively circumscribe either ‘theory’ or ‘practice,’ the essays in this collection engage political and narrative strategies as they proliferate in transnational cultures” (1994: 28).

Alexander and Mohanty similarly collaborate with the volume’s authors, while at the same time highlighting their accountability to the communities with whom they produce both activism and knowledge(s). They write: “In collaborating with the authors, each other, and other sisters and comrades over the years, we have come to know the critical importance of figuring out our communities to which we are accountable” (1997: ix). Alexander and Mohanty (1997: xiii) further suggest that, through their process of working together, “we now know that our best ideas are produced through working and thinking together.” *Feminist Genealogies* attempts to intervene into the space of praxis while taking the notion of collaboration in a different direction than that articulated in *Scattered Hegemonies*. Alexander and Mohanty (1997: xx) write:

Individual analyses are grounded in the contemporary crisis of global capitalism, suggesting that these particular contexts are the ones which throw up very specific analytic and political challenges for organizations. Here, no false dichotomy exists between theory and practice. We literally have to think ourselves out of these crises through collective praxis and particular kinds of theorizing.

This collective commitment to “think ourselves out of these crises” returns us to the dichotomous constructions that have concerned us in this chapter. It challenges us to ask whether the hierarchical relations between theory and method and the oversimplified dichotomy of academia and activism can be subverted through intellectual productions that refuse to separate the two. In the instance of *Feminist Genealogies*, “the sustained and collective work that has gone into producing it is itself a reflection of a way of doing politics, a mode of organizing that interrupts the more pervasive ‘professionalized’ production of scholarship. . . . In other words, all the authors connect their work to feminist communities in struggle—their work flows from this connection” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xx). However, as Ella Shohat points out in *Talking Visions*, a less-cited but similarly crucial contribution to what she terms “multicultural feminisms,” the reality that connections,

borders, and passports are under surveillance is a constant reminder that some connections are easier to make than others in a world “simultaneously undergoing globalization and fragmentation” (1998: 15).

How does contemporary scholarship within this increasingly codified field help us to redefine the boundaries of *transnational feminist collaboration* when all three of these terms are highly contested? In their more recent work, Kaplan and Grewal frame their interventions as operating within a “transnational feminist cultural studies” framework (2002). For them, this approach offers “an interdisciplinary site [that] can provide a space for critique and production of new sites of knowledge” (2002: 67). In this chapter, and in this volume more generally, our claim is that transnational feminist studies is a necessarily unstable field that must contest its very definition in order to be useful. As M. Jacqui Alexander pointed out, “. . . the very category of the transnational—which has itself been put to multiple uses—*continues to be haunted by relativist claims that effectively reinscribe dysfunctional hierarchies* and obscure the ways in which national and transnational processes are mutually, though unequally, imbricated” (2005: 183, emphasis added). This reinscription is at the heart of the paradoxes of transnational feminisms. Perhaps we can take heed of Butler’s (1993) earlier cautions and recent discussions of queerness (Eng et al. 2005) that remind us that queer studies, when operating ideally within its own principles of self-critique, can never fully be articulated or defined. Along similar lines, we suggest that (a) transnational feminist collaboration must be critically interrogated as we simultaneously work to define it as a set of slippery and contingent terms, and (b) that this should be done not with the primary purpose of generating new debates in narrowly defined academic circles, but to forge the kind of connections that Chatterjee (2009) invites us to imagine,

connections [that] chafe against the *realpolitik* of geopolitical mappings [so that] . . . we/i might begin to conceive of hemispheric linkages within the deepest epistemic and affective logics of empire and violence. Then, we/i can conceive the shared cosmologies of suffering which bring together a displaced mother from New Orleans with another mother from an Indian plantation, each mourning her dead child. One is dead from the impacts of state violence and neglect, the other from starvation. Perhaps our task as activist/scholars is to tie the threads of such connected suffering, across spaces of embodied difference, with ethical purpose and reflection. Perhaps, then, we can *together* mourn, hunger *and* create global knowledges—*global literacies*—in the service of social transformation, compassion and justice. (146, emphasis in original)

Extending the Discussion

Attending to these conceptual complications, this volume provides a systematic discussion of the possibilities of collaborations that consciously combine struggles for sociopolitical justice with feminist research methodologies, thereby extending the meanings and scope of transnational feminist theory and practice. This collection emerges from a twelve-year-long intellectual partnership between the editors that has included our own collaborations as feminist teachers, students, and coauthors in the U.S. academy, as well as dialogues between us about our respective engagements with grassroots activists and struggles in India and South Africa. As we worked through the debates about feminist theories and methods in U.S. academia and their intersections (or absences thereof) with the ongoing debates in the sites of our feminist activism, research, and creative work in the global South, we often found ourselves mingling questions of access to drinking water with those of access to antiretroviral drugs, and the languages and spaces of “empowerment” and poverty with those of intimacies and sexualities.

Throughout these conversations, however, we kept returning to the productive but troubling relationships between academia and activism, to the contradictions of the growth of “transnational feminisms,” and to the dilemmas we found in our own North/South collaborations. Paradoxically, however, the spaces to address these concerns in our graduate and undergraduate classrooms seemed to be forever shrinking despite the emergence of a feminist studies professoriate in the global North, on the one hand, and the rise of transnational feminist discourses, on the other.

From these ruminations evolved the idea of organizing a two-day workshop on transnational feminist praxis. This workshop, held at the University of Minnesota in fall 2006, featured eight papers authored by feminist scholars in the North American academy who have been thoroughly immersed in questions pertaining to collaborative praxis. The papers were circulated beforehand and each was assigned to a scholar from the University of Minnesota whose own research interests intersected with the paper, and who provided careful reading and critical commentary on the paper, before opening up the discussion in a public forum (attended mainly by graduate students and scholar activists). In addition, the authors also spent time learning about each other’s political and intellectual trajectories. These conversations sowed the seeds of new partnerships, and the participants decided to develop the papers into chapters for a collaborative volume. Each paper presented at the workshop was exchanged with and reviewed by two other contributors to the collection, while four new chapters were added in

the process of making this volume, at least in part, because of the conversations that the workshop triggered. The following questions animated our initial inquiry:

- What forms can transnational feminist collaboration take and what limits do such forms pose?
- What are the relationships among collaboration and transnational feminist theories in creating new spaces for political and intellectual engagements across North/South and East/West divides?
- Can collaborative practices consciously combine struggles for intellectual empowerment and socioeconomic justice while also attending to the problem of how northern academic engagements inevitably produce “difference”?

What finally emerged from these dialogues was a set of chapters that addresses the complexities and challenges of multiple forms of collaboration: across geographical, linguistic, and socioeconomic borders; between activists and academics; and across institutions and “fields” of feminist academics and NGO workers.

The chapters of this volume collectively suggest that collaboration is not merely a set of concrete strategies or models with ethical dilemmas and conceptual difficulties that must be addressed and attended to. On the contrary, collaboration itself poses a theoretical challenge to and potential for rethinking transnational feminist frameworks by creating new spaces for political and intellectual initiatives beyond disciplinary borders, academic/ artistic/ activist divides, and North/South dichotomies. At the same time, the authors resist an impulse to celebrate collaboration as a panacea and remind us that for collaborative praxis to retain its critical edge and radical potential, collaboration itself must be subjected to continuous critical scrutiny so that it can oppose the paralyzing effects emanating from the institutionalization of both academia and activism.

As conversations unfolded among the contributors to this volume, the objectives herein came to be threefold. The first was to conceptualize feminist collaboration as an intellectual and political practice that allows us to grapple with the possibilities and limitations of theory as praxis and insists upon problematizing the rigid compartmentalization that separates research from pedagogy, academic from activist labor, and theorizing from organizing and performative arts. Our second goal was to combine theories and practices of knowledge production through collaborative dialogues

that invite us to rethink dominant scholarly approaches to subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation. Last, but not least, the contributors sought to explore how feminist approaches to collaboration can allow us to articulate transnational feminist frameworks and to simultaneously create new spaces for political and intellectual initiatives across socioeconomic, geographical, and institutional borders. Our collective efforts to reconceptualize transnational feminist collaboration in this volume consider how collaborative praxis is marginalized in dominant institutional spaces of the academy, while also imagining the ways in which such praxis can become a rich source of theoretical *and* methodological interventions and agendas that can begin the process of identifying and re/claiming those spaces.

Part 1 of this volume, *Decolonizing Transnational Feminisms*, takes up paradoxes of language and meaning that concern all of its contributors. This section opens with M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critical exploration of the category of *the transnational*, interrogating the genealogy of this category in women's and LGBTT/queer studies in the U.S. and Canadian academy.³ As part of their larger project to think through the political and epistemological struggles that are embedded in radical transnational feminist praxis, the authors analyze the work that this category does in particular feminist contexts; its complex relationship to colonial, neocolonial, and imperial histories and practices on different geographical scales; and the specific material and ideological practices that constitute the transnational at this historical juncture and in the U.S. and Canadian sites we as feminist thinkers occupy ourselves. To those who embrace the label of *transnational feminism*, Alexander and Mohanty pose the crucial question: when is the transnational a normativizing gesture and when does it perform a radical decolonizing function? In the next chapter, Jigna Desai, Danielle Bouchard, and Diane Detournay approach this same problematic by suggesting that we must see the working definitions of transnational feminisms as necessarily open and contingent, rather than as static and prescriptive. The authors explicate *praxis* and propose that transnational feminist praxis and collaboration must be understood as critically compromised and embedded within their very sites of analysis and critique. For these authors, understanding transnational feminism as having completed its intellectual mission is a mistake; rather, transnational feminism should provide a self-critique and means for understanding rather than codifying globalism.

If all knowledge is embodied in dialogue, then the dimensions of what must constitute the specific politics of accountability, representation, and

positionality must also emerge through the particularities of a given collaborative process. At the same time, a commitment to collaborative praxis also requires a serious critical reflection on who is or is not deemed to be a legitimate knowledge producer, which spaces, institutions, and languages get included or excluded from practices of knowledge making, and with what results. In part 2 of this volume, *Dialogical Journeys*, the authors continue to engage with the challenges posed in part 1 of the book, but framed in terms of political and intellectual journeys that continue to evolve through dialogues marked by continuous self-critique, unlearning, and relearning.

The section begins with Geraldine Pratt's chapter authored in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of BC and *Ugnayan ng Kabataang Pilipino sa Canada/the Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance*. They reflect on the practices by which they attempt a reversed flow of knowledge from activists to expert and how this involved moving from a national to transnational frame of reference. Sam Bullington and Amanda Lock Swarr also unsettle hierarchies of knowledge production by considering the authors' navigation of their ten-year relationship with each other and with South African LGBT rights and HIV/AIDS treatment access activists. Both of these chapters present different sorts of dialogic exchanges, examining what it has meant to cultivate often contentious and complicated multiple collaborations over space and time, while interrogating the meanings of collaboration and building trust in historically exploited communities.

Linda Peake and Karen de Souza's contribution investigates the dialogic journeys of their political, intellectual, and emotional labor as collaborators, working over the last fifteen years in the Guyanese women's organization, *Red Thread*. Focusing primarily on questions of race, institutional location, and NGOization of development, the authors explore the feminist production of knowledge; the links between activism, social change and research; and dimensions of power that speak to silences within *Red Thread*. The *Sangtin* Writers—Reena, Richa Nagar, Richa Singh, and Surbala—delve into the same themes, but rather than centering on the distinction between academic and activist labor, they participate in the coproduction of dialogical/dialectical relationships between theory and practice, the lettered and the unlettered, and the fields inhabited by people's movements, NGOs, and academic scholars in analyzing the political transformation of *Sangtin*, an organization conceptualized as an NGO for rural women's empowerment. The authors of this chapter map the archaeology of *Sangtin's* evolution into a peasants' and laborers' movement and reflect on the ways that this shift throws up larger questions pertaining to women's issues, feminist politics, and transnational collaborations.

Part 3 of the volume critically engages questions of transnational feminisms and praxis through a thematic focus on Representations and Reclamations. The section opens with reflections by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Ananya Chatterjea, Hui Niu Wilcox, and Shannon Gibney on Ananya Dance Theatre's production *Duurbaar: Journeys into Horizon*. During the Transnational Feminist Praxis workshop in September 2006, participants attended this performance, which was followed by a discussion that centered on the themes of praxis, intersectionality, representation, embodiment, and funding. The dialogue that started in this space eventually resulted in the dancers' coauthored chapter for this collection. In it, the authors highlight how this choreography articulates a form that, while still recognizable in a South Asian aesthetic, resituates itself as it settles in different bodies and is deconstructed and hybridized to tell a complex, diasporic story. The writers claim that it is only through the constant negotiation of interpersonal relationships, a deep investment in learning each other's histories, a shared political vision, and plenty of sweat labor that collaboration and artistry can be created.

Similarly highlighting difficulties of artistic representation and collaboration, Deborah Barndt reflects on the VIVA! project that has engaged partners from four NGOs and four universities in Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, the United States, and Canada in a collaborative research process focused on community arts and popular education processes. Recognition of the tension between embodied practice in community arts and a pervasive use of disembodied technologies to document and discuss this practice leads the VIVA! partners to imagine a model that envisions research as historical and cultural reclamation. In the final chapter of the book, Rachel Silvey returns us to the question of normativizing versus radical functions of transnational feminisms by reminding us that transnational praxis is characterized by a complex politics of representation, privilege, and positionality, and always runs the risk of unwittingly reinforcing the deeply problematic power relations that it seeks to disrupt. Focusing on a collaborative film project based in Indonesia and the United States, Silvey reconsiders definitions of feminist research, pedagogy, and outreach, while reflecting on the often conflicting agendas that different actors invest in reinforcing and challenging specific representations. Analysis of the complex possibilities and limitations of dance, the arts, and film as processes, products, and pedagogies are elements of both defining and undefining transnational feminist praxis.

Throughout this collection, the engagements of the contributors variously echo Alexander and Mohanty's critical call to grapple with the necessity of moving "away from the academic/activist divides . . . to think specifically

about destabilizing such binaries through formulations of the spatialization of power and to recall the genealogy of public intellectuals, radical political education movements, and public scholarship that is anchored in cultures of dissent” (Alexander and Mohanty, this volume, 26). At the same time, the contributors point out the dangers of reifying collaboration or alliance work and turning it into a universalism or a panacea. The point here is not to encourage a codification or institutionalization of collaboration in the same ways that both intersectionality and the notion of transnational are being codified and disciplined. For collaboration to remain a dynamic and generative concept, it is critical to retain the incoherent, contingent, and contextual nature of such praxis. It is not that there should not be any room for individually produced knowledges and theorizations in transnational feminist enterprise—it is more that such enterprise will remain incomplete and impoverished in the absence of the kinds of collaborative spaces that we are seeking to open. Claiming more spaces for dialogic praxis necessitates constant renegotiations and retheorizations of power through alliances, languages, and critiques that disrupt dominant logics and imaginaries—not simply by resisting the celebration of the “expert,” but also by creating radicalized practices for institutional transformations and sociopolitical justice.

Notes

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1. Our analysis of the deployment of *transnational* overlaps with the five intellectual foundations of transnational studies identified by Khagram and Levitt (2008: 2): empirical transnationalism, methodological transnationalism, theoretical transnationalism, philosophical transnationalism, and public transnationalism. However, we also insist on blurring and complicating the borders that place empiricism, method, theory, philosophy, and public/private in clearly separate domains.
2. It is interesting to note that labeling scholarship as “atheoretical” is taken to be a much more serious charge than deeming it irrelevant to “action.”
3. The contributors to this volume make different choices about the acronyms to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, intersexed, and queer communities. We follow their respective formulations here.

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