# FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

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CHIEF EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

# FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

**Sally R Munt, University of Sussex**
**Founding Editor**

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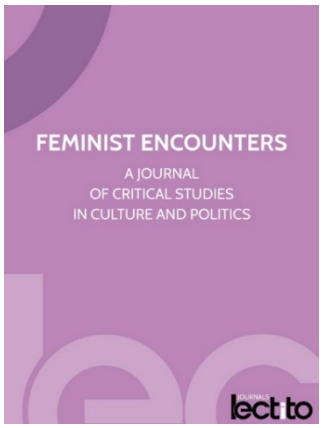

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# Feminist Politics and Activism in Reactionary Eras

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EDITORIAL

# Feminist Politics and Activism in Reactionary Eras

Srimati Basu [1]*, Akiko Takenaka [2]

**Published:** March 19, 2018

## INTRODUCTION

We started thinking about this issue while the world was astir with many instances of intransigent power going head-to-head with grassroots resistance (even though it was fresh in our memories following the 'Arab Spring' that mass uprising could soon lead to political repression). In the time that this special issue went from conception to completion, much has changed in the world of social movements, reactionary politics, and the impact of feminism: from manifest erosion of the rule of law, dislocations of war and the increase in socioeconomic inequalities, to growing populist anger across the political spectrum expressed in massive marches and State bans on gatherings, and the iteration of gender-based violence as a palpable force in the world. But the salience of feminist political influence continues to be a critical question within and beyond academia, ever more given public discussions of gender and power.

One can't help wondering whether focusing on feminist politics is an act of wishful nostalgia. Given proliferating assertions of post-feminism and feminist enthusiasm for neo-liberal agendas as well as a steady stream of challenges to mainstream feminism based on exclusions of race, caste, class, age, gender or sexuality, is feminism redundant, stuck or past its time? Including forms of women's activism and identification that contest the term 'feminism' or challenge its organising thrust allows us to think with alternate discourses through which gendered resistance is asserted and claims to belonging are framed (Mahmood, 2004). However, there are also indications that feminism is an emergent, revitalised discourse in the face of rising reactionary forces across the globe. Have feminist movements been, or can they be, unifying forces across divides of race, class, caste, nationality or religion, or have they fallen short in prioritising gender as a central problem? Are they rejuvenated, or transformed, by the fierce opposition they encounter?

We sent out the call for papers as a way to take stock of feminist politics within this charged landscape: to consider the historical and contemporary effects of feminism as a global force. This necessarily involved reckoning with who might speak in the name of feminism and who marks themselves as outside of it. In an expansive definition, 'feminisms' are variously understood as:

> … an idea, a set of political convictions, a mode of identification with other women, a way of being a woman, a collective identity available to men and women, a form of political mobilisation, a policy agenda, a legacy, a means of forging the 'we' that Beauvoir thought women lacked, a strategy for forging alliances and building allegiance, a praxis, a vision of alternative possibilities, an imagined community, a process of creating something new, a tactic for transforming social relations, an inclusive, participatory politics, and an expansive conception of justice encompassing economic distribution, political rights and liberties, collective responsibility, and dispute resolution. (Hawkesworth, 2006: 25).

But in being thus expansive, how are exclusions to be demarcated? Identifying with feminist action is a strategic asset and affirmative strength for many (Sinha Roy, Tice, Rios and Kano in this volume), while others reject the word as alien, imperialist or hegemonic, in some cases too direct and pragmatically dangerous (Cheema and Hossaini in this volume) (Hawkesworth, 2006: 25-26). Living in reactionary and repressive times might mean that feminism is hybridised, with people taking up new identifications and alliances that blur boundaries (Mason in this volume). Amrita Basu's new volume differentiates between '*women's movement* to describe organised social movements to challenge gender equality, including not only autonomous women's groups but also other social

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movements in which women have made feminist demands,' and '*feminism* to describe struggles that have the same goals but need not be organized women's movements' (Basu 2017: 5,6). This issue includes feminisms under all of these categories, plus other contexts where the term feminism is under erasure but where questions of gender equality are being negotiated.

Can we conceptualise meaningful solidarities across difference? We aim to understand the relationship between global, national and local feminisms, and map the connections and contradictions within these scales. Local feminist campaigns have called upon global norms and engaged in transnational advocacy, while groups have sought to do transversal international work through the UN Conferences and beyond. In conversation with the efflorescence of texts variously examining women's movements and feminist movements in local, national, regional and transnational scope, the ambivalent effects of globalisation and the relevance of human rights frameworks (Naples and Desai, 2002; Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Hawkesworth, 2006; Merry, 2006; Tripp, Casimir et al., 2008; Basu, 2017), these essays traverse the scales from local to transnational. Not only do we decolonise and de-centre feminism by looking at its forms within and between nation-states, but we understand it as a contested discursive site through which people negotiate many other identities.

We also interrogate the impacts of feminist visions and reforms. Do feminist notions of harm or well-being so infuse global and national laws and policies that 'governance feminism' (Halley et al., 2006) comes to operate as a form of power, or does the apparent prominence of feminist claims mask how little material effect they can have? With women 'simultaneously hailed as resourceful providers, reliable micro-entrepreneurs, and cosmopolitan citizens and positioned as disposable domestics, the exploited global workforce and as displaced, devalued and disenfranchised diasporic citizens' (Hawkesworth, 2006: 23), discourses of gender are obviously useful as strategies of global neoliberal governance. How do feminisms respond to the growing inequalities of class, region, race and indigeneity generated by such governance? Can feminist movements thrive within neoliberal regimes, or are they inevitably institutionalised or co-opted?

This special issue presents a portrait of the complicated valences through which feminism as a global force is challenged, vernacularised, inhabited and enacted. It presents both historical instances of feminist struggles to be a unifying force and contemporary dilemmas of feminist governance and activism. The papers show the reception of feminism filtered through various politics and identities, negotiations by feminists *and* by those covertly interpellating feminist ideas. Sinha Roy's theoretical essay represents the broadest scale, characterising transnational and regional feminisms through temporality, as an alternative to the spatial as the inevitable locus for examining movements. Rios and Tice's essays examine feminist politics in a national space where it is a well-established presence, in US movements' attempts to build institutions and alliances: in portraying the ways that critical goals of solidarity and intersectionality are challenged by local hierarchies of politics, privileges of race, class and national identity and by intransigent State dynamics. They depict both the transformative effects of movement work on identity, and the difficulties of enacting structural change. In the case of Russia, feminist politics continues to jostle for visibility and validation: Mason's close analysis of the range of political positions in Russia tracks how feminist activism is received and deployed through many kinds of identities and claims made against state repression. Kano's essay on Japan reminds us in counterpoint that the category of 'women's interests' is advantageous to shore up political and economic power for governments without necessarily empowering those it claims to help, that feminist movements must be vigilant in attending to forms of change. Hosseini's and Cheema's essays reveal the subversive effects of feminism in places where it dare not reveal a strong public presence: in the poetics of Iranian writers who create a feminine imaginary that defies masculinist representations, and through hesitant, even resistant student conversations about talk shows and real crime shows related to gender-based violence that are a new feature of Pakistani television.

In 'Bodies, Boundaries and Genealogies of Connection: Locating Networks of Feminism(s) in India/South Asia', Mallarika Sinha Roy focuses on the relationship between local and global women's activism and women's movements through foregrounding their temporal dimensions. Using a Foucauldian genealogical approach to examine case studies that span over three centuries and across two continents, Sinha Roy calls for understanding regional feminist politics in ways that are not confined by national borders and territorial boundaries.

In 'The Politics of U.S. Feminist Internationalism and Cuba', Karen Tice examines the solidarity activism of the Venceremos Brigades (VB), an anti-imperialist radical education and Cuban solidarity project, established by members of the Students for Democratic Society in 1969. Tice's analysis of the ways that these feminists negotiated tensions arising from intersectional relations of power in both the United States and Cuba offers valuable insights into the building of sustainable feminist networks across time and space.

In 'Co-option and Organisational Survival: Risks and Opportunities of State Attachment within the United States Feminist Antiviolence Movement', Aisha Rios explores the tenuous relationship between social movement organisations and the state through her extensive fieldwork at the 'Antiviolence Commission' (AVC) a quasi-state organisation that tackles domestic violence through a 'feminist, survivor-centered lens'. Rios details the process

 

through which AVC was politicised through the state's attempts to co-opt the organisation, and ways that AVC attempted to resist by appropriating various forms of state power to its own ends.

Jessica Mason adds an important dimension to analyses of the 'punk prayer' intervention by the feminist punk group Pussy Riot at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in 'Pussy Provocations: Feminist Protest and Anti-Feminist Resurgence in Russia', examining the performance as a 'provocation',:'a type of action that violates a norm in ways that seemingly *compel* one to respond, from the perspective of the person who has been provoked' (Mason, p. 2) that became an agent of political action. By shifting the focus from the act itself to a range of social responses from anti-feminist religious groups to anti-Putin political opposition groups to ambivalent feminist responses, the paper helps us to better understand the process through which certain activist events become the ground of social ferment.

How does a neoliberal government attempt to take advantage of feminists? In 'Womenomics and Acrobatics: Why Japanese Feminists Remain Skeptical About Feminist State Policy', Ayako Kano explores the ways that Japan's current neoliberal government selectively promotes women's activities for its ends—to boost the GDP, halt the decline of birth rate, and lift Japan's international standing. Based on her examination of state policies and feminists' responses, and by placing the current controversy within a longer history of feminism in Japan, Kano offers some possible directions for Japanese feminists to ensure lasting gains.

Mahrokhsadat Hosseini's close reading of Iranian poetry demonstrates that social activism is not always in a physical space. In 'Feminist Culture and Politics in Iranian Women's Post-Revolutionary Poetry', Hosseini draws our attention to ways that women poets in Iran have used their writing to make important feminist interventions into patriarchal culture, from identifying repression to imagining emancipation. Unlike the earlier generation of women who focused on conventional themes such as mothers and wives and depicted women as passive objects of desire, these feminist poets have given agency and sexuality to the female voice.

Munira Cheema examines another resistant space influenced by feminist discourse and the visibility of issues of gender-based violence. While religious conformity mandating a rigid gender order is a dominant public force in Pakistan, the new globalised space of varied television channels including call-in talk shows and true-crime shows functions as a feminist public sphere. In 'Talk shows in Pakistan TV Culture: Engaging Women as Cultural Citizens', Cheema analyses young female viewers' sympathetic, ambivalent or resistant responses to interactive TV that deal with topics such as religion, social issues, and crime as a form of cultural citizenship, a way for women to gain more awareness of inequalities and discriminations that surround them as well as to negotiate the constraints and possibilities of their lives.

As these summaries might indicate, our answer to the question about whether feminism is redundant, stuck or past its time is that it lives and morphs in many unexpected forms. We present these papers in the hope of encouraging conversations about the meanings, scope and futures of feminist politics and activism.

The editors extend heartfelt thanks to Amrita Basu for her generous help with conceptualising the special issue, to Karen Tice for reviewing the introduction for us with lightning speed, and to the many anonymous reviewers who made time to deliver thoughtful feedback.

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# Bodies, Boundaries and Genealogies of Connection: Locating Networks of Feminism(s) in India/South Asia

Mallarika Sinha Roy [1*]

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the scholarship on women's history, social movements in the wake of 'globalisation', and critical debates in feminism, this paper locates the historically-embedded networks of feminist politics that persistently shape contemporary feminism(s) in India/South Asia. This is an attempt to review the spatial dimensions of connections among the local, national, and global contexts, where gender becomes a foundational category for defining the relations of power. The critical debates on gender, space, and time have contributed to re-thinking the idea of region cutting across geo-political borders and bring the questions of memory within the study of territorial boundedness. How a territorial unit becomes an institutionalised entity of social, cultural, political practices and consciousness can provide an apt conceptual framework for unpacking structures of inequalities that feminist politics addresses. The historical memories have shaped not only the postcolonial nationalist discourses but also became critical for territorialised identities within and across national borders. With a focus on the manners in which discourses of gender violence travel and how unexpected connections among historical events construct different meanings for local and global and the local-global interface, this paper tries to situate the 'politics of space/time' in the region of India/South Asia.

**Keywords:** space, regional feminism, South Asia

## INTRODUCTION

In the age of viral videos, live newsfeed and 'trending' events it is not difficult to imagine how the boundaries between local-national-global are crossed in an instant. However, the spatial and temporal references attached to an event rely on intersecting flows of time and space, meanings attached to the local, national, and global in terms of gender, space and time, and actors situated through multiple markers like class, caste, ethnicity, region and gender. This paper wishes to understand such meanings within the context of the scholarship emerging on South Asian Feminism(s) and attempts to address how historically produced meanings of space impact on the notion of regional feminism. The thematic diversity of this special issue gives a space to articulate the local-global interface in the era of neoliberalism and seek new ways to interpret regional feminism outside the patchwork quilt of feminism(s) bounded by borders of nation-states.

My efforts to conceptualise 'the local', from the lens of space, hinge on two important debates in feminist thought around the definitions of 'global' and 'local', including their interface (Massey 1994; Staeheli et al 2004). The first one concerns the ways in which space becomes feminised as against masculinised time; and the second one reflects on the manners in which 'the local' gets written over by femininity as against the 'global' by masculinity. These thematic debates allow us to theorise regional feminism beyond a descriptive narrative of feminist politics within a conglomeration of border-sharing nation-states, and to probe whether region, as a conceptual category, remains too invested in the oppositional relationship between centre and periphery. Such queries situate the processes of social spatialisation with respect to difference, where it becomes possible to inquire whether creating the category of 'South Asian Feminism(s)' can have a larger theoretical significance.

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Defining 'South Asia' as a region becomes the first important task for such a project. The innovative methodological approaches and interdisciplinary content of 'South Asian Studies' reflect the geopolitical realities of this region in its 'modern' frame (Mathur 2000). For South Asia, modernity combines the experiences of colonialism with various strands of nationalist thought and political activism since the nineteenth century, which have shaped the postcolonial condition(s) of this region. The emergence of academic writing on the history, politics and practices of women in South Asia from 1990s has led to publication of several significant collections of essays on South Asian Feminism(s) in the past few years, creating an exciting new field of study (Loomba and Lukose 2012; Roy 2013; Kurian and Jha 2018). Problematising the historically produced spatial meanings of the 'local', the 'national' and the 'global', however, have rarely become the focus of many these richly detailed case studies on South Asia[1]. In this paper, South Asia refers to the historical formation of this region as the import of colonial British India, a spatial formation that has remained rather unexplored in South Asian feminist scholarship. In fact, the title of this paper includes India/South Asia to mark the rather messy historicity of this geo-political space – that this history is replete with accidents and transgressions, defying an 'origin'-al moment of South Asian Feminism(s) with birth of nation-states[2].

This paper draws from diverse source material to make sense of the spatialisation of South Asia, ranging from the travel-writing of women from nineteenth century Bengal, a contemporary visual text in the form of a documentary film made by a British film-maker after the gang-rape in Delhi on 16th December 2012, a feminist historical exploration of infamous Jack the Ripper murders in 1880s London, to critical feminist writings on Development discourses. The sources are, admittedly, uneven and the rationale for selecting them resides in the thematic questions addressed by this paper. They reflect the accidental connections in the writings of gendered travellers of a specific historical period in interpreting 'home'; unexpected similarities in modes of attaching meanings to social spaces inhabited by 'other' women at multiple intersecting points of time and space; and they displace the apparently acceptable critical feminist thinking on Development discourses. The methodology of the paper, thus, draws heavily from Foucault's argument for genealogy to approach the messy history of accidents, discrepancies, and incongruences. Foucault stated that:

> [genealogy] must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places…not to trace the gradual curve of their evolution but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles" and that "[i]t opposes itself to the search for "origins". (1991: 76-7)

But, he asserts, events are not to be found in 'a battle' or 'a treaty' but rather in reversal of forces and appropriation of vocabulary to use against those who had once used it. Transgressions and accidents and unexpected occurrences in the chain of local-national-global contexts are not to be treated as regular manifestations of an alternative set of events. Attaching spatial meanings to the genealogies of overlapping boundaries, and transgressive journeys of people and ideas requires probing the classification of certain spaces as 'local' and certain other spaces as 'global' within feminist politics. The hierarchy of places, which Foucault designates as 'the space of emplacement', can be mapped as series, or grid, or trees and the coded elements within a set can either be randomly distributed or be arranged according to single or multiple classificatory schemes (Foucault 1986: 22-27). The genealogical method allows for unpacking the single or multiple schemes of classification, establishing the points of connection and circulation of meanings attached with spaces and places. The sources, I argue, can be read in relation to one another as they articulate a deeper 'network that connects points and intersects with its own skein' (Foucault 1986: 22).

The first section of this paper sets out the conceptual context of the local-global interface in feminist scholarship, especially in the discourses of Gender and Development from 1980s. I have drawn from two critical

[1] Notable exceptions remain the works of Malathi de Alwis in collaboration with Jennifer Hyndman (2003; 2004) on the spatial nature of political violence and development strategies in Sri Lanka in the 1990s; Mary E John (2009) and Malathi de Alwis (2009) on the idea of 'postnational' to think through the transition from nation-space to globalization; and to a certain extent U. Kalpagam's work on colonial techniques of governance vis-a-vis production of knowledge (1995; 1997; 1999; 2000).

[2] South Asia, as a geopolitical entity consists of: India (independence achieved from Britain in 1947), Pakistan (independence achieved from Britain in 1947), Bangladesh (independence achieved from Pakistan in 1971), Bhutan (in 1910 the Kingdom of Bhutan signed the Treaty of Punakha that recognized the political autonomy of Bhutan from the British colonial rule in India and this treaty was a further consolidation of the Treaty of Sinchula signed in 1865), Nepal (in 1923 the British colonial rule in India recognized Nepal as an independent kingdom and in 2008 it became a federal democratic republic), Sri Lanka (became independent from Britain as the Dominion of Ceylon in 1948 and became Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972), Myanmar (Burma became independent from the British in 1948 and in 1989 the ruling military junta changed the name as Myanmar), Afghanistan (the history of Afghanistan is complex as it was never fully occupied by any imperialist force and yet has been vulnerable to aggressive machinations of several imperial powers throughout nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century), Maldives (achieved independence from the British in 1965).

 

feminist authors, Maxine Molyneux and Sally Engle Merry to make sense of the conceptual context as they represent two distinctive approaches to the local-global interface. Molyneux's foundational ideas of 'practical and strategic' gender interests open up the links between the political economy as well as the political sociology of developing nations and the immediate and long-term interests of women of such nations (1985; 2003). The question of 'women's interests', however, as Molyneux alerts us, is difficult to determine in developing nations since women as an interest group do not constitute a single category, but rather, women are aligned with several disadvantaged groups. This positioning of women helps in understanding the significance of difference within the category of 'women', but makes it quite impossible to think of 'women's interests' beyond the specific boundaries of nation-states. Merry provides an important get-away from this bounded concept of nation-state as the site of the local. She unpacks the processes of the local-global interface through the intermediaries: how 'universal' documents of Human Rights are interpreted in the local contexts of developing nations and how culture, especially in terms of the governing principles of law, emerges as an important factor along side the political economy of developing nations (2000; 2006). The emphasis on culture, allows on the one hand to critically review the notion of cultural difference beyond mere acceptance of diversity of cultural practices, and on the other hand, to locate the pitfalls in homogenising the 'culture' of all developing nations. The problem with Merry's framework, however, remains in her unquestioned reliance on the 'universality' of Human Rights, without probing how the idea of universal is a construct of a specific time, produced in a place and modified through machinations of the local-global interface in postcolonial nation-states. Depending on Molyneux's emphasis on difference and Merry's focus on culture, I have concentrated on the complexities of representing the women of South Asia beyond the stereotype of victim *par excellence*, which gets occasionally fractured by demonstrations of courage and resourcefulness (Jeffrey 1998). These complexities are framed by the diverse geographical spaces, involved in producing the knowledge about South Asian women, and the politics of knowledge production through which such spaces attain specific meanings.

The substantive argument of the local-global interface in the historical context of South Asia is elaborated in the second and the third sections. Doreen Massey has been the principal guiding force for these two sections for her pioneering work on gender, space, and place (1992; 1994). Massey has connected the spaces of development, not in the developing nations but in the developed ones, with the abstract ideas of development that equates with progress (2004: 5-18). Her conceptualisation of the time-space compression wrenches the notion of space out of its generalised recognition as stasis, as a passive entity waiting to be marked by time. Consequently, it becomes possible to trace the messy accidents, discrepancies, and transgressions in history, not only through time but through space-time compressions and investigate how spaces become hierarchical, how such hierarchies are sustained or are challenged. The second section analyses how different sets of ideas attached with spaces of 'home' and 'abroad' are evoked in travel-writings of two Bengali women in the nineteenth century – a queen from a princely state under British protection and a middle-class, upper caste woman from the British occupied Bengal presidency. The third section puts in contrast the documentary film *India's Daughter* (2015) on the victim of Delhi gang-rape in 2012 with the history of the Jack the Ripper murders in nineteenth century London (Udwin 2015; Walkowitz 1982: 542-574) to identify the accidental similarities in representing violence against 'other' women – either marked by class or by race – eventually revealing a network of historically produced meanings of social spatialisation. The conclusion is an attempt to bring together these diverse threads to my principal argument that regional feminism needs to move beyond spatial pluralism to ascertain the significance of marginality and produce conceptual formulations from regional contexts, keeping in mind the messy, uneven but contiguous power dynamics laden within the local/global interface.

## GENEALOGIES OF CONNECTION: THE LOCAL-GLOBAL INTERFACE OF SPATIAL DIFFERENCE

Maxine Molyneux's formulation of 'practical and strategic gender interests' in her study of women's participation in the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua (in 1979) remains a critical cornerstone in theorising the local-global interface for women in movements (1985: 227-254). Molyneux pointed out early in her essay that:

> a theory of interests that has an application to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for and benefit from social change must begin by recognising difference rather than by assuming homogeneity (1985: 232).

Her formulation of the two-fold gender interests was directed at this complexity of difference between the concrete realities of women's lives shaped by contextual contingencies and the abstracted ideological tenets of feminist politics. Molyneux's formulation has since generated interesting debates among feminist scholars regarding its efficacy in capturing the finer nuances of gender politics in women's movements as well as in

 

movements where women have participated collectively. Feminist scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds have made similar efforts to methodologically explain the diversity of women's experiences across space and time through making difference a part of the conceptual scaffolding for feminism (Moore 1988; Kandiyoti 1988: 274-290; Phillips 1998: 10-31). The significance of a feminist methodological approach lies in the focus of feminist research on difference, on noticing of the relations of power in the practical aspects of 'doing research' and power dynamics in the methods and purposes of knowledge production (Gorelick 1991: 459-477; Alcoff 1991-92: 5-32).

Critical explorations of difference, the relationship between difference and identity and the network of power involved in the production of knowledge had also contributed in a dialogue between feminism and the postcolonial situation. "The most significant collision and collusion of postcolonial and feminist theory occur", writes Leela Gandhi, "around the contentious figure of the 'third world woman'" (1998: 83). The figure of 'the third world woman' is complicated due to conflicting claims of patriarchy and colonialism, imperialism and nationalism, cultural essentialism and gender essentialism over her voice, body, actions, and vision. Any overzealous effort to recuperate the third world woman with a pristine history submerged in oblivion may surrender the critical view. Such a pursuit usually depends on marking the 'otherness' of the third-world women, and as a result the third world women's position becomes continuously written over by other meanings of power relations. It is important to flag up at this point of discussion that the figure of the third world woman may not necessarily inhabit a third world space, and yet she carries the spatial meanings 'third world' has accrued over the decades of decolonisation, and carries the legacy of colonies as gendered spaces. The relations of power embedded in spatial meanings, consequently, make space a critical factor in theorising the local-global interface. If the 'third world woman' is not to be treated simply as the protagonist of different 'case studies' and waiting to be incorporated within an abstract feminist knowledge and if the local is not to stand for case studies and global for the larger vision of change in the study of feminist politics, they must be framed in terms of overlapping boundaries, in terms of histories of transgression, in terms of unexpected similarities amongst disparate events.

Before going in the details of tracking the significance of spatial meanings in the local-global interface, however, it is important to briefly recount the ways in which the relationship between local and global, punctuated with national and/or regional, has been explained in the discourses of Gender and Development. These discourses have played a crucial role in shaping the ideas of gender equality and women's agency in Development bureaucracies of the global North – UN institutions and Donor Agencies –, among the Non Governmental Organisations working in the development sector in third world contexts, as well as among activists in social movements. Andrea Cornwall and Althea-Maria Rivas argue that by the mid-1990s a disjuncture between the academic feminist works on gendered relations of power and the policy discourses in the arena of Gender and Development became evident (2015: 396-415). While there was an emphasis in the academia to explore gender politics vis-a-vis the differences within which specific sets of gender relations take shape, the Development discourses had decided on one-dimensional interpretations of women's agency and empowerment in the third world. These interpretations relied on a two-pronged agenda: first, men and women are hierarchically placed where men are with power and women are without power, overlooking the contingent structural inequalities within which both men and women are placed; second, making poor women efficient workers or small-scale entrepreneurs with access to microfinances would serve the larger goal of community upliftment instead of enabling them to recognise and act upon the inequalities that control their lives. Despite a steady stream of critical reflections on the straitjacketed concepts of gender equality, women's agency and women's empowerment from feminist scholars, the Gender and Development terminology gained a certain level of acceptance amongst women's collective action groups as the policy discourses at the national levels advocated them and the banking and business sectors supported them.

Mindie Lazarus-Black and Sally Engle Merry's report on a symposium 'The Politics of Gender Violence: Law Reform in Local and Global Places' states at the beginning that the case of violence against women provides an excellent vantage point to analyse "how new discourses, laws, and practices about gender violence between intimates develop through local, national, and global processes" (2003: 931). The case of violence against women is indeed an apt point of analytical departure to understand the implications of the advocacy and practices of Gender and Development on the relational aspects of gender inequalities. If we remember that turning women's agency and empowerment into economic efficiency and keeping men 'out of the frame' as irresponsible sexually voracious deterrents in the third world contexts defined the local-national-global chain, it is imperative to focus on the sequential meanings produced by the power relations embedded in spatial differences. Merry has persistently argued that the secular and universal documents to ensure human rights for women, which are also 'global' in terms of spatial connections among local-national-global contexts, regularly define 'culture' as local, hence harmful for women. The notion of cultural differences among communities in third world nations produce an unease among the global law and policy-makers because such differences do not easily translate into the straitjacketed meanings of gendered violence. As culture and difference remain 'out there' in the unfamiliar semi-urban and rural hinterlands of third world metropolises, they become, ironically, homogenised as the dangerous unruly margins of modernity where women are brutally victimised.

 

Framing the local-global interface draws from these power dynamics that animate the relationship between the local and the global in terms of space. Time remains a major feature to unpack the dynamisms of space, but as Foucault puts it, "only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space" within the framing processes (1986: 23). As framing involves connecting seemingly disparate events through a sequential chain of meanings, following Foucault, it is possible to argue that the sequential chain of meanings is produced not only through time, but space as well[3]. In fact, Cornwall and Rivas call for (re)framing an agenda for changing UN policy discourses after the failure of current Gender and Development discourse, especially after the 'post-2015 agenda circus' (2015: 409). Cornwall and Rivas approach framing the troubled trajectories of women's empowerment and gender equality from the mid-1990s to 2015 with references to the journey of 'gender' as a term in the International Development agenda from 1950s, to feminist academic analyses of gender from 1970s, to feminist writings on women's empowerment from 1980s. These reference points connect different temporal junctures in the field of feminist reflections on gender equality and women's empowerment and, though obliquely, these references also connect the spaces from where these discursive points have emerged.

These spaces include: the North American university spaces where feminist academic discourses on gender were taking shape; the headquarters of donor agencies in Europe and North America where policies for Gender and Development were formulated; development projects in India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Kenya, and Brazil where the local structural inequalities contingent on gender relations were being written over by universalist notions of development; academic institutional spaces in the U.K and the U.S (and presumably in the universities of the third world countries where development projects were running) where critical feminist thinking on development studies were emerging; and women's activist groups at the grassroots in developing nations. The point I am trying to make is that these spaces are not merely geographical locations, unmarked by historically produced hierarchies. It is not surprising that the relations of power among these spaces have multiple dimensions. Feminist geographers have continuously engaged since 1980s to correlate the 'political' with 'cultural' economy, focussing on the parameters of classifying these spaces as local, national, or global in ways that often reproduce the hierarchies among geographical locations. My contention is, making space a principal category of analysing the global-local interface vis-à-vis the gender politics of development discourses will allow us to map how these distinctive spaces attain specific meanings in terms of local, national/regional, and global in feminist thinking and how the intersecting axes of time and space impact on the chain of meanings.

## DEAD WOMEN WALKING: GENDERING THE POLITICS OF TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION

Doreen Massey's *tour de force* exposition of the feminisation of space as against time, and the feminisation of place as against space, unpicks the assumptions that consider time as 'becoming' and space as 'being': rendering time as dynamism and space as stasis (1992: 65-85). Such a view of space, Massey argues, makes space de-politicised: an 'other' of History. Contesting the arguments that reduce space as a flat, immobilised surface over which time writes its narrative of movement, Massey contends for spatial dynamism that are:

> constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace (1994: 4).

This multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales is defined as time-space compression, and for Massey globalisation in its contemporary form is an example of time-space compression. She posits the politics of time-space compression in its gendered nature, which attributes static 'being' to space and dynamic 'becoming' to time in the same manner femininity is identified as passive and masculinity as active. Place, Massey argues, similarly becomes feminised as it gets equated with belongingness, and finally with 'home' as against the masculinised abstract space (1994: 7).

Massey claims that accepting space as mobile and not as an absence or a lack 'releases the spatial from the realm of the dead' (1994: 4). This expression has been the principal inspiration behind naming this section as 'Dead

[3] Framing has emerged as a powerful conceptual device in the social movement studies in the last three decades. The concept of framing renders seemingly unrelated events or occurrences within a sequential chain of meanings to "infer "what is going on" with the caveat that they are under constant revision based on new occurrences and unexpected actions by others" (Oliver and Johnston 2005: 188). The rich scholarship on framing has produced, over the years, a dialogue between the usefulness of framing as a cognitive ordering of events of collective mobilization and the ideological aspects of collective action where multiple modes of thinking, behaving, and interacting belie any calcified notion of mobilisation (Ferree and Merrill 2004; Oliver and Johnston 2005; Benford and Snow 2000). This critical scholarship is quite at the centre of rethinking the role and status of culture, ideology, emotion and volition in social movement studies, especially the contemporary social movements.

 

Women Walking' – where dead women refer to connected states of being and becoming. 'Dead Women Walking' is an attempt to indicate that women's history is not a mere compensatory effort to include dead women in the interpretations of a seamless past but rather about disconcerting fragments of transgressions that destabilise the very seamless-ness of narrating the past. The specific use of this expression intends to suggest that women's histories of travel, especially the 'counterflow' from the periphery to the centre, are about transgressions of several different kinds of social/cultural boundaries – that, quite literally, women of the past have walked across borders that were drawn to contain them (Fisher 2007; Sen 2005).

While unpacking the questions of the politics of locality and a global sense of place in the context of time-space compression, Doreen Massey has argued consistently that the view of place or the locality as bounded, fixed and, stable is problematic for its inevitable association with an untroubled sense of the past in the form of 'tradition'. In her debate with David Harvey regarding the meaning of place, Massey points out that Harvey's contention of conceptualising place or the locality as seamlessly coherent and tied up with a fixed identity fails to take into account that localities are not only constituted by the sharp contrast with what lies beyond but, are also constituted by the continuous interactions with that beyond (Massey 1994: 132-142). Massey's global sense of place, thus, follows the patterns of mobility – not only physical practices of crossing geographical boundaries but also the historically produced patterns of discursive and material transactions – between the global and the local.

The notion of unfixed and dynamic locality allows for an understanding of the local inclusive of the set of privileges prevalent in a specific location as well as the processes through which the spatial boundaries can become mobile. Feminist approaches to 'the local', consequently, can move beyond mere pluralism of the margins[4]. Attending to the problems of relations of power means taking into account the differences in structures and experiences of inequalities and they 'must be grounded in the particular configurations of structural inequalities that exist in each specific historical and geographical context' (Nagar 2004: 35). However, Nagar follows through with a corollary that some of the chief axes of inequalities like race, class, religion may be interwoven with other historical and geographical contexts, producing different braiding patterns of structures and experiences. Taking the example of debates on *mut'a*, or temporary marriage (a contract between a married or unmarried man and an unmarried, divorced, or widowed woman that is religiously sanctioned by Shia Islam) practices in Dar-es-Salaam in the early 1990s, Nagar explains how the 'local' stretches beyond its given geographical borders and how the socio-spatial practices continuously re-shape according to the shifting borders between local, national, and transnational.

This kind of mobility not only challenges the fixity of place or the local, but also the masculine/feminine binary that has often been associated with time/space, space/place, and global/local. Treating the above-mentioned categories as interactive rather than mutually exclusive becomes easier in the context of the scholarship on travel, especially histories of travel vis-à-vis gender. The framework of colonial modernity, utilised by feminist historians of South Asia to explain effects and impact of the British Empire on women in colonial and postcolonial times, considers the culture and practices of travel as important axes for the making of 'self' against the 'other' through constructions of 'home' and 'abroad'. "In the European culture of travel," writes Inderpal Grewal "mobility not only came to signify an unequal relation between the tourist/traveller and the "native", but also a notion of freedom" (1996: 136). This idea of freedom was strung in a metonymic chain of meanings with 'home' and 'civilised', where 'abroad' referred to despotic rules of unfreedom suffered by natives and home was civilised and free. Such spatial meanings of ideas, however, got disrupted when English educated 'natives' used them during their travels through the imperial centre. Krishnabhabini Das visited England in 1882 and in her travelogue she noted:

> Every Indian is, perhaps, curious to know about the person who is ruling over our India, who, despite being a woman, is running the entire British Empire, with the help of Parliament, with fairness, justice, and discipline. Empress Victoria does not wish ill for India, she is doing her utmost to ensure good governance for Indians; but she is not responsible for our colonized status – that, the royal scepter of *Hindustan*, the crown of India is now with Empress Victoria instead of *Hindus*. ([1885] 1996: 58-9, emphasis mine)

This excerpt from the chapter titled 'Empress Victoria and her Household' mentions the importance of the parliament in imperial governance and may seem quite consistent with the home/abroad and freedom/unfreedom binary, only in the reverse order. This reference is suggestive for the 'freedom' in 'civilised' England since 'parliamentary rule signified representational politics and the voice of the citizens' (Grewal, 1996: 136). Grewal

[4] Feminist engagements with transnationalism and space/place offer interesting insights into the conceptualisation of the local-global interface beyond adding 'empirical vignettes without attending to the particularities of each' (Pratt and Yeoh, 2003: 160). This paper draws from several such feminist works to formulate the principal thematic argument (Shohat 2001; Talpade Mohanty 1991; Alexander and Talpade Mohanty 1997; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Moghadam 2005).

 

argues that English women, even without any representation or voting right in the parliamentary system, participated in the discourse of 'civilized freedom' when they travelled abroad, precisely because their 'home' was defined by those two ideas. However, for 'native' women travelling abroad in the latter half of the nineteenth century the ideas of freedom were fraught with competing discourses of progress, tradition, and nationhood. From the 1870s social reform movements on the issues of women's emancipation were going through a critical period in British India as the reformers made efforts to forge an agreeable relationship with a gradually emerging nationalism. Krishnabhabini Das's appreciation of imperial good governance and her assurance to her readership that Empress Victoria does not wish ill for India contains an interesting twist in her conceptualisation of 'home'[5]. Das inhabits the intersecting points between home and abroad as she both celebrates and laments for the 'rulers' of civilised freedom. She wrote in her travelogue unequivocally that her greatest experience of 'abroad' or England was her sense of freedom, and yet she was equally willing to recover the lost Hindu glory at home. It seems that the multiple spatial scales of the British Empire as well as British India of her times constructed her belongingness, which contained an yearning for a civilised home that would ensure freedom.

During her stay in England, Krishnabhabini Das keenly observed the contestations and negotiations in the social relation of sexes, the limits of freedom imposed by class positions, and remained a loyal subject of Empress Victoria, willing to accept several qualities of class-based English ideals of modern womanhood in order to reform women in India. In her personal life, she defied the customary inhibitions of travelling abroad with her husband but experienced tremendous private loss as her only daughter was taken away from her because of her travel to England. She bore this loss stoically while living in England and devoted much of her energy in social reform for women. Her lucid description and pithy observations of life in England scrupulously avoids personal references, but her occasional verses are soaked in intimate details of her feelings – her sorrows about leaving a young daughter at home, her own sense of freedom, her zeal to improve the lot of women in India. This distinction in expressing her social and intimate 'self' alludes to the fragmented sense of 'home' and belongingness.

The contemporary scholarship on Indian women travellers supports the argument that Krishnabhabini Das was not an exception in interpreting the meanings of home and abroad. Her preoccupation with the 'woman question' remains a persistent theme of discussion in travelogues of Indian women, in fact among Indian men as well. Simonti Sen, a scholar on Bengal travel narratives in late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the editor of Das's republished travelogue, writes that constructing the ideal womanhood for Indian women, especially their emancipation from *antahpur* or *zenana*, occupied male social reformers and they relied on the virtues of the 'English Lady' from urban middle-classes, discarding different kinds of 'whorishness' of both aristocratic upper-class English women and 'London street girls' (2005: 138). Juxtaposing these concerns of Indian middle-class and largely Hindu upper-caste men and women, with Maharani Sunity Devi's experiences of her visit to England in 1887 can produce a rupture in the seemingly coherent narrative of Indian women traveller's observations of the 'abroad' and reflections on 'home'.

Maharani Sunity Devi was the wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar princely state and visited England for the first time in 1887 as an invited guest of the British Empire to celebrate the jubilee year of Empress Victoria's reign. In her autobiography Sunity Devi writes in detail about her travels, reminding her readership that except for Maharani of Baroda who had previously been to Switzerland, she was the first Maharani to visit England as the queen of an Indian prince (1921: 103). The snippets of her visit include an audience with the Empress, attending State Balls and Parties with European royalty, picnics in the country estates of English peerage, sharing evening tea with women members of the British royal family, and her happy times with her children and husband. At one point, she writes in great detail that at the State Ball she was invited by the King of Greece, the Crown Prince of Denmark, and the Prince of Wales to dance and she was so mortified that she had refused all of them (1921: 103-122). Sunity Devi never articulates why she had refused to dance even with the Prince of Wales, which her husband had told her was a command and not a request. It is, however, possible to surmise that the 'Indian-ness' of her self cautioned against overstepping that boundary. Even though she cheerfully describes her silk and brocade gown, her 'toilette' and the witticisms of Dukes and Lords directed at her, she stops short of the practice of dancing – a practice marked with non-respectable women in India. In spite of her entry into the English aristocratic life in the high noon of the British Empire, her growing familiarity with that life, and her immense privilege as a Maharani she stuck to an Indian virtue that distinguishes between respectable and vulgar femininity at her 'home'.

Sunity Devi and Krishnabhabini Das were 'native' women, albeit occupying very different locations in terms of privilege, who encountered modernity abroad and accepted it with a measured sense of appropriateness along

[5] Krishnabhabini was born in Kajla village of Baharampur in 1864 (a different historical assumption is that she was born in Chuadanga village in Nadia district) and she was married off at the age of ten to Debendranath Das. Debendranath's father was an advocate in Calcutta High Court and she came to live in Calcutta in 1875. She went to England following her husband in 1882 and first published her travelogue as a book *England –e Bangamahila* in 1885. She lived in England for a few years after publishing the book and after coming back became associated with social work for the enhancement of women's education.

 

with their locations at home. The multiplicity of social relations that constructed the time of modernity and the space of home, defined Sunity Devi's sense of respectability and Krishnabhabini Das's sense of freedom. These were rather contradictory in nature even though they referred to similar ideas of home. The incongruence of their construction of 'home' and 'abroad' present us two different scenes with unexpected connections. The genealogy of connection forms a bridge at this point of intersection between a reformist middle-class Indian woman and an Indian Maharani. Krishnabhabini Das was, nearly, an exemplar of the gentlewoman or *bhadramahila* of colonial Bengal, representing several aspects of colonial modernity. She was educated, enjoyed a companionate marriage, even though her family arranged it, and a wife devoted to her husband's aspirations to become an England-educated public servant for the British colonial government. Sunity Devi was the daughter of Brahmo social reformer Keshab Chandra Sen who advocated for women's education and mobilised for increasing the age of consent to marriage for girls. Sunity Devi's marriage to the prince of Coochbehar was at attempt of both the British government and the Brahmo social reformers who followed her father to bring in colonial modernity to the royal families of princely states and transform the patterns of governance. Then, it is not so surprising a link. It was Sunity Devi's father Keshab Chandra Sen, who exhorted English ladies in his address at the Victoria Discussion Society (in 1870, held at the Architectural Gallery, Conduit Street, London) to impart enlightened liberal education among their Indian sisters to make them good mothers, wives, sisters and daughters (Sen 2005: 140). The politics of location, consequently, played a crucial role in constituting the gendered subject of British India where class, caste, and religion became chief threads of weaving the idealised femininity across borders but were braided differently according to their historical and geographical contexts. The 'local' for the British India, or the 'home' of the emergent Indian nationalist discourses continuously stretched beyond the geographical borders that defined them. The borders were moving with discourses of governance, freedom, and inequality undergirded by the political economy of imperialism while the culture of travel was adding multiple layers of spatial meanings to perceptions of home, belongingness, and community.

It is interesting to note the references to the feminisation of spaces in the travelogues. The spaces of domesticity in India (*antahpur* and *zenana*), the streets of the imperial metropolitan centres, the public spaces of colonial cities, and the places designated for entertainment and pleasure – all had gendered meanings associated with either respectable or vulgar ideals of femininity. Feminist interdisciplinary scholarship has informed us that such gendered meanings bear a long legacy of complex relationship between gender and space. Colonial expansion intensified racialising and sexualising Europe's 'other', as the shifting boundaries of the known world from fifteenth century compelled stricter codification of knowledge through meticulous and tireless empiricism. Anne McClintock elucidates the time-space compression in colonial knowledge production through the application of Darwinism in the field of cultural history (1995). Such an application allows for placing the axis of time on the axis of space and categorise the people and cultural practices of the colonies not as geographically different from Europe, but rather as temporally different – making the colonies the living history of Europe, occupying the same geographical space and yet separated by time. 'Porno-Tropics' is the term McClintock has used to explain the masculinised fantasy of Europe towards the far-off places they had sailed to and then colonised. Her coinage of 'Anachronistic Space' refers to the trope that homogenises 'the stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies' and the sexual agency of women from working class in the imperial metropolis through feminisation of space. The next section makes an attempt to situate the impact of this particular system of knowledge that combined the politics of knowledge production with the politics of gender violence.

## "ANACHRONISTIC SPACES" OF GENDER VIOLENCE

It is quite heartening to note that the critical feminist scholarship on Gender and Development as well as on Violence Against Women have been arguing for local translatability of global laws to prevent violence against women and for accountability, non-discrimination and inclusion in practices of women's empowerment. However, in scholarly efforts to theorise experiences of third world women in movements or histories of women's movements in third world contexts, spatio-temporal specificities may fall off the maps that are often drawn on the scales of universalistic claims of modernity. Merry has located the discrepancy between the global conventions and local implementations in the processes of vernacularisation and indigenisation – processes that are adopted to make the global conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) effective within a local context through the use of existing cultural norms, values, and practices to frame the universal ideas of human rights (2006). She argues that the rather tricky position of translators makes them vulnerable to critique from both ends – their work may either not-enough-culturally-embedded to become effective, or not-enough-universal to attract international funding for projects. Merry lays out the dilemma without any ambivalence, "[t]his is the paradox of making human rights in the vernacular: To be accepted, they have to be tailored to the local context and resonant with the local cultural framework" (2006: 49). The clear division that Merry draws between the global North and by implication *local* South (even if the nomenclature is Global South)

 

including the emphasis on making human rights *effective*, accepts in this paper that the local will always be derivative of the global. Her position seems similar with, to quote from Susan M. Roberts, "…those who seek to valorize and champion the significance of place or the local in an era of globalization' and yet 'end up depicting the local as the playing field on which the global does its stuff" (2004: 130). Merry makes an effort to localise the global through the translators or 'intermediaries', who belong half and half to the local and the global, but her deliberate skirting of the self-critique of the human rights discourse (and by extension the development discourses) forces her to limit the 'case studies' in the location of projects, not in the location of project-funding.

Contextualising Merry's paradox, however, requires a close look at the set of historically produced meanings of spaces. Representing the figure of the third world woman in the local-national-global chain of contexts needs to take into account that spatial differences have historically been written in the universalist claims of modernity, and the contemporary global modernity is undergirded by imperial discourses of the colonised 'other'. Recognising the close connection between the colonial encounter and formation of Anthropology as a scholarly discipline marked the beginning of the postcolonial critique of Anthropology (Asad 1973). Fabian's remarkable thesis that the colonial system of knowledge production anthropologised space while historicising time initiated new methodological perspectives in writing the 'other' cultures with self-reflexivity (Fabian 1983; Marcus and Clifford 1986). As the 'fabulous geography' of ancient travel gave way to 'militant geography' of mercantile capitalism, the Enlightenment logic of knowledge production increasingly adopted the metaphor of gender violence – "the male penetration and exposure of a veiled, female interior; and the aggressive conversion of its "secrets" into a visible, male science of the surface" (McClintock1995: 23). The erotics of knowledge, residing in the lurid fantasies of 'Porno-Tropics', not only feminised colonies but closer to home, the spaces occupied by working-class women in the city of London, became gendered in the same manner colonies were feminised. There seems to be a legacy of 'Porno-Tropics' in the way Merry has indicated the homogenisation of the 'culture' of rural hinterlands of developing nations. From the production of dangerous desires of the feminised colony, the shift has happened in producing the rural hinterlands of the postcolony as the space where the male desire runs amok; and this unruly maleness is defined by race and class.

If we remember that disciplines like Area Studies and Development Studies came into existence with the demise of European empires, it is not difficult to perceive the haunting presence of the colonial systems of knowledge production in defining the hierarchy between 'the global' and 'the local' (Anderson 1998; Corbridge 1995). Feminist interventions in Development discourses, consequently, cannot presume that 'effective' change in culturally diverse yet conceptually singular 'local' can be engineered by the global universal. Mary Gilmertin and Eleanor Kofman have pointed out that geographical borders are drawn both historically and spatially, dividing the world – "…between colonizers and colonized; between the first, second, and third worlds during the cold war; and between the developed and the developing worlds as the cold war ended" (2004: 120). Unless the manner in which the metaphor of gender violence shaping historically produced gendered meanings of space are explored, the paradox of tailoring universal ideals of human rights according to localised cultural meanings will remain unyielding. Genealogies of connection acknowledge the complexity of gendered space vis-à-vis gender violence in multiple temporal scales because it looks for unexpected connections instead of 'origins' in the culture specific gender ideologies.

Let me begin with Leslee Udwin's controversial documentary *India's Daughter* (2015) on the Delhi gang-rape on 16th December, 2012[6]. The visual construction of Jyoti Singh as an excellent example of the new, aspiring lower middle-class in India who would like to grab the opportunities for upward mobility offered by the neoliberal economy continues the older feminist framework of essentialising third world women as victims *par excellence*. The film generated much discussion in the print and online forums and much has already been written about the neoliberal construction of the 'event' and the 'victim' (Dutta and Sircar 2013; Baxi 2014; Menon 2015; Nag 2015; Kaur 2017). Let me outline some of common threads of argument from these discussions. Udwin has made the clear division between the predatory third world men and the struggling third world women where the men unambiguously represent the remnants of an older social system that brutally prevents the new India from realising its full potential. Such a visual construction – through the words of her parents, her mentor, one of her rapists, and families of her rapists – relies on a strategy of representation typical of the 'global' feminist concern of 'speaking for' women from developing countries. While Udwin, possibly with a noble intention, hammers the viewer with the ruthless aspects of urban underclass masculinity and the abject poverty in the hinterland, from where male

[6] The release of Udwin's film in India got into a major controversy when several feminist activists in India raised a set of legal and ethical objections to the content (http://feministsindia.com/activists-discuss-concerns-over-indias-daughter/, Accessed 4 January 2018). Though the feminist activists mentioned that they demand restrictions on the screening of the film until the legal process of case gets resolved and not for the possibility that the film may hurt sentiments of Indians, the Indian government stopped the television telecast and all further screenings in India including a ban on DVD sales of the film. This led to serious difference of opinion among different feminist activists as the question of freedom expression became the issue of the debate.

 

migrant labour comes to haunt the urban spaces with thoughtless violence, there is rarely any attempt to understand the constitutive elements of brutal masculinity. *India's Daughter* designates the urban poor man with an indecipherable viciousness that realises itself through sexualising and mutilating women's bodies. The point I am making, however is that Udwin's representation of male violence on the streets of Delhi finds an uneasy but undeniable connection with the mythical 'Jack The Ripper' murders in the Whitechapel area of London in 1888.

Judith Walkowitz's meticulous account of the reactions and responses of Londoners to gruesome murders of five working-class women explains how a century-old crime has provided the vocabulary for drawing boundaries of women's mobility in the city-space (1982: 542-574). I would like to draw attention to Walkowitz's analysis of social reformers' responses to the Ripper murders in 1888 as they represent dominant forces that rationalised the murders as a warning for women who hovered on the borders of respectable femininity. Walkowitz notes that middle-class social reformers carried out different philanthropic activities in the poor and rough neighbourhoods of Whitechapel but they were overpowered by class-fear when the unemployed poor of London's East End began to hold demonstrations in the wealthy West End from early 1880s. The Ripper murders provided social purity reformers with the apt logic that working class women with loose sexual morality bring fatality upon themselves, and to be rid of the 'bestiality' provoked by such women, proper gender coding of the society must be upheld. Except for a few contemporary feminist voices such as Beatrice Webb, Josephine Butler, and Florence Fenwick Miller, the mystique of male violence prevailed in creating segregating gendered spaces in the East End after the series of murders in 1888. Walkowitz, however, notes that ragged caps were doffed and slatternly looking women shed tears when coffins of murdered working-class women passed through the streets of Whitechapel (1982: 560). The class-based solidarity around the murder victims indicates the acceptability of working-class femininity in the spaces they inhabited, which got delegitimised through a more patient reclamation of their 'lodging houses' by the real estate dealers. Walkowitz concludes her essay with 'take-back-the-night-marches, anti-rape hotlines, battered women's shelters, anti-pornography demonstrations, and prostitutes' rights coalitions' in 1980s England to mark the continuing struggle against the long shadow of Ripper murders and a call to feminists to uncover the complex realities that hide behind a simplified image of horrific male violence against women.

Udwin's documentary carefully avoids the same complex realities present in Delhi of 2012, creating an undifferentiated and unintelligible masculine ferocity daubed in poverty and squalor. The decline in agriculture, manifested through high levels of farmers' suicide, and the vulnerability of urban migrant labour, which is often largely a vast impoverished young male population, remain hidden behind a one-dimensional image of 'male violence'. Udwin allows for the same exceptional status to the father of the rape victim as, perhaps, the social purity reformers were allowed in the popular press in 1888 for their philanthropic efforts to address the plight of working-class women. The critical shift, however, in the discourse of male violence in Udwin's documentary takes place through a specific interpretation of 'women's agency'. The dominant public discourse of 1888 invoked predatory male violence to discipline the agency of poor, urban, working-class women; the 'global' feminist position in 2012 invoked the same predatory male violence, with a twist, to celebrate the agency of aspiring working-class women – the twist lies in the manner in which the 'global' feminist slips into the shoes of the social purity reformer, playing the privileged role of the rescuer of her violated 'local' sisters. The US premier of *India's Daughter* was strongly promoted by Hollywood stars who stated that the experience of watching the film was unpleasant but vital for creating awareness about realities of women's plight in developing countries. Hollywood actor Sean Penn's remark that the film compelled him to ponder over his manhood, and reminded him of a trip he had taken with his children to Tanzania tips Merry's paradox on its head – the heterogeneity of the developing world has to be tailored into a homogeneous narrative by the cultural translators from the first world in order to make an *effective* marketable product[7]. McClintock's reference to the metaphor of gender violence in the Enlightenment's logic of knowledge production also attains a different meaning as the erotics of knowledge shifts from penetrative gaze to protective watchfulness. Consequently, I would like to add to Merry's critique of the local translatability of global concerns, that unless the lens of contextual cultural analysis is equally turned in the direction of the global – the processes through which the global becomes equated with the North and hence becomes universal – knowledge production on violence against women would remain partial.

It is important to remind us at this point of analysis that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak exposed the revolutionary posturing of Euro-American feminism regarding the struggles of third world women in her critique of French Feminism and made the point emphatically that the first world feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged or superior as women (2008: 187). It is also important to remind ourselves that the sense of privilege in the authorial voice of *India's Daughter* gains legitimacy through the 'agency discourses' in the Development Studies and policy documents. Mary E. John has pointed out that the bilateral aid-donors and the World Bank had been projecting women involved in the informal sector of Indian economy as the primary candidates for 'agency' and 'empowerment' (John 1996: 3074). As the poor women are underwritten in the Development literature as people

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/22/meryl-streep-sean-penn-indias-daughter-oscars (Accessed 30 September 2017)

 

with incredible resourcefulness and managerial skills, poor men are being increasingly cast into the mould of degenerate brutes who squander away their potential and earnings. The critical shift in signification of poor women's greater need for access to resources from the earlier period of documenting women's role and contribution to economic development, John has argued, is in turning their exploitation into a narrative of efficiency. Udwin's depiction of Jyoti Singh and her family, thus, follows the script prepared jointly by the global feminists' self-styled task of 'giving voice' to their poorer sisters in the Third World and the neoliberal Development discourses of 'making visible' the incredible efficiency of women from poorer sections.

Let me conclude this section with a brief review of the impact of the Delhi gang rape on widening the contemporary discourses of gender violence in India. The immediate upshot was the institution of the Justice Verma Commission, which has since given its recommendations, to review the provisions of the laws concerning rape. While the revised rape law does not include several progressive recommendations of the Verma Commission, the intensity of the public outrage became more than an event to signify women's vulnerabilities in a developing country. It called for serious changes at various levels of governance – from gender-sensitive laws and public safety measures to policies directed at women. People on the streets reminded each other about past atrocities with slogans and songs and the presence of placards remembering *Shopian*, *Kunan-Poshpora*, and *Manipur Mothers* suggested the reclamation of 'agency discourses' through activism and re-signification of places marked with gender violence as memories of struggle[8]. The overwhelming attendance by young women and men in *Bekhauf Azadi* (literally meaning fearless freedom) night-marches across different cities in India marked a resurgence in the women's movement, bringing protesting bodies on the streets and debates on women's issues into the public forum. The calls for stronger securitisation and vigilante justice that also ensued indicated that the resurgence cannot be thought of as an unqualified celebration, but public debates are rarely ever so and yet the importance of such debates cannot be undermined.

## CONCLUSION: A CASE FOR REGIONAL FEMINISM

The geo-political entity of South Asia, as Saloni Mathur points out, is constituted by the radical diversity and the tenacity as well as fragility of South Asian nation states (2000: 90). Critical approaches to new region studies have emphasised that regions are neither 'out there' to be discovered nor passive entities created by adding some border-sharing nation-states; but rather are spaces constructed through several administrative, social, cultural and economic practices (Soja 1971, 1999; Paasi 2002; Agnew 2001; Allen et al 1998; Anderson 1998). Naming of concrete and symbolic landscapes through memory and heritage mark the process of institutionalising a uniform regional (which can also be national in certain cases) past. Ruptures in such social spatialisations are significant for tracing the territorial boundaries and borderlands. Erasure of internal inconsistencies within national contexts and cross-border overlap of memories, populations and social practices indicate limits to the usual understanding of the South Asian region as an assemblage of several different nation-states. Territorial boundaries and their porosity are key elements of rethinking regional history and how it shapes governance, economy and culture (Van Schendel 2005). In other words, a comparative understanding dependent on finding similarities and differences between national contexts is not enough to identify the converging issues at stake for regional feminist politics. It is equally important to see how regions are constituted within the wider discourses of feminist politics beyond/internal to national borders.

South Asian feminism has developed over the last three decades a rich and diverse scholarship on the region. The plurality of this scholarship has contributed, on the one hand, to a critical understanding of the imagined community of the postcolonial nation-state, and on the other hand, to a vibrant interaction among specific histories and shared experiences of 'doing' feminist politics as well as 'writing' feminist knowledge. Drawing from now classic works like Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1984) and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid edited *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989), contemporary feminist scholars of South Asia are expanding the field of study into, as Mrinalini Sinha puts it, a global perspective of gender that dislodges the limited and limiting Eurocentric definition of gender as a category of analysis (2012: 356-373). Feminist scholars like Afasneh Najmabadi (2005) and Oweyumi Oyeronke (1997) have paved the way to thinking about gender as contingent instead of a pre-given binary between men and women in Iran and the Oyo-Yoruba in Africa. Their

[8] Kunan-Poshpora refer to two villages in Kashmir where allegedly mass sexual violence against Kashmiri women were committed by the Indian Armed Forces in 1991 and Shopian refers to the town in Kashmir where two women went missing in May 2009 and later their raped and murdered bodies were recovered. Manorama was the name of a young woman from Manipur who had been sexually tortured and killed in 2004, allegedly by the Indian Armed Forces. The protest against Manorama's killing was perhaps the most spectacular demonstration by women in India when several elderly Manipur women had shed their clothes in front of Kangla Fort a few weeks after her death and held a banner with words 'Indian Army Rape Us'.

 

challenge to the Eurocenteric meaning of gender derives from the claim that the relations of gender in different spatio-temporal contexts are not 'local' variations of the 'global' Europe. Though it is impossible to deny the European 'Western' conceptual categories and knowledge paradigms, as Dipesh Charabarty reminds us, it is necessary to relentlessly question the presumed universality of the same and look for practices and theories that displace the fixed definitions with proliferating case studies (Chakrabarty 2000). Delinking gender from its European geographical location with a particular history serves the purpose of erasing the quotation marks from both local and global, making these two categories free from the burden of the history of colonialism as well as its haunting legacy in contemporary globalisation.

The significance of South Asian feminism lies in realising the enormous potential of the scholarship and diverse feminist practices for this project of displacing the 'global'/Eurocentric feminist position and formulating a global perspective for feminist knowledge and practices. Questioning the very definition of gender, tracing 'difference' in everyday practices of gender relations, exploring the fields of masculinities and femininities at different sites – historically and spatially –, delving into the collective trauma of political violence and its gendered impact on the people who share borders, bringing minor categories like sex work and queer politics within the discourses of postcolonial feminism, and tracking the 'counter-flow' of people and ideas from margins to centre constitute some of the important aspects of this project (Sinha 1995; Kapur 2005; Sunder Rajan 2003; Grewal 1996; Lukose and Loomba 2012). 'This project', Arturo Escobar wrote in his critique of imperial globality and global coloniality:

> has to do with the rearticulation of global designs from local histories; with the articulation between subaltern and hegemonic knowledge from the perspective of the subaltern; and with the remapping of colonial difference towards a worldly culture. (2004: 219)

In order to critically read the Gender and Development discourses in studying globalisation and to move beyond the feminist debate of translating global conventions/laws into local cultures/nation-states, it is important to produce scrupulous conceptual approaches from regional contexts. The revitalised women's movement is scripting new histories of shared desires and endeavours through developing critical paradigms of knowledge over and above the memories of partition, civil wars, militarised nationalism, and their gendered ramifications in South Asia.

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# The Politics of US Feminist Internationalism and Cuba: Solidarities and Fractures on the Venceremos Brigades, 1969-89

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## ABSTRACT

Despite US travel bans to Cuba, a wide spectrum of US feminist and radical activists defied and crossed geo-political borders to participate in unique modes of solidarity activism and alliances with Cuba revolutionaries. Based on the narratives of US feminist political travellers who joined the Venceremos Brigades, an anti-imperialist radical education project, this article analyses the difficult conversations about feminism, gender politics, homophobia, racism, cultural imperialism, revolutionary priorities, social change strategies, and intersectionality as well as the productive organisational linkages that were generated by this political travel. This article highlights how political differences were both managed and/or silenced within transnational activist encounters, and concludes by suggesting the import of these debates for building and sustaining multi-issue and coalitional affinities within contemporary transnational feminist organising and solidarity delegations.

**Keywords:** Venceremos Brigades, transnational feminism, solidarity delegations, cultural imperialism, geo-political border crossings

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1960s, and partly as a response to the liberation struggles occurring across the globe, many US activists claimed political kinship and linkages between US racial and class struggles and those occurring in Vietnam, Angola, China, Nicaragua, Chile, and Cuba. Embracing anti-imperialist and international solidarity discourses, many US radical left activists extended their analyses of injustice to include critiques of imperialism, colonialism, war, militarisation, and capitalism. By identifying themselves as part of an imagined international coalitional community of third world liberation struggles and solidarities, US radical activists increasingly participated in transnational circuits of travel as revolutionary travellers, solidarity workers, and witnesses traversing geo-political borders as members of brigades, study groups, and delegations to Vietnam, China, and Cuba.

A wide spectrum of New Left, Civil Rights, and feminist activists, with both shared and disparate political analyses, challenged the US imposed travel bans to Cuba.[1] This was the case despite the politically-conservative and imperialistic US political landscape and its securitarian policies of militarism, law and order, state and FBI surveillance of activist groups, and police repression during the era of Nixon, Reagan, and the religious right in the 1970s and 1980s. In this article, I focus on the Venceremos Brigades (VB), an anti-imperialist radical education and Cuban solidarity project, established by members of the Students for Democratic Society in 1969. The VB, a multi-ethnic and mixed-gender organisation, is the longest lasting political organisation dedicated to Cuban solidarity work having sent more than 8,000 US activists to Cuba over the past few decades. Despite a long history of ideological strife about race, gender, class, sexuality, cultural imperialism, and coalition politics, the VB is in its 48th year of operation. The VB remains committed to creating strategic unities among US radical activists and Cuban revolutionaries. Its goal is to foster anti-imperialist consciousness, internationalist solidarities and linkages through political education, and collective work, both with Cuba and within the US radical left.

[1] For excellent studies of the overlaps and differences in political priorities and organising strategies within and between the New Left, Civil Rights, and feminist organisations see Evans (1980); Van Gosse (2005); Spencer (2008).

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Travel to socialist Cuba as members of the VB generated a spectrum of emotions and reactions including praise, critique, and dislocation among US radical feminist activists. Not only were the Venceremos Brigades internally beset by tensions produced by US racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia but, for some of these feminist travellers, positioning themselves in solidarity with Cuban socialism was challenged by the vestiges of racism, sexism, and homophobia that they witnessed in Cuban social life and revolutionary priorities. Additionally, since the VB *brigadistas* lived and worked together in Cuba in very intimate conditions, they had not only to navigate the unfamiliar political and cultural ethos of revolutionary Cuba and language differences but they also had to traverse relational borders and the very contentious politics of power and privilege within the brigades. Additionally, some of the *brigadistas* struggled to bridge VB strict mandates governing cultural imperialism and how to reconcile their misgivings about Cuban gender, race, and sexuality politics without imposing US-centric notions of women's liberation.

This article is based on published oral histories of members of the VB, published and unpublished travel journals, radical left, gay, and feminist newspapers (*Triple Jeopardy*, *Off Our Backs*, *Gay Flame*, *Gay Community News*, *Ramparts*, *Great Speckled Bird*, *Liberation News Service*, *Black Scholars*), and organisational and personal archives. I analyse how solidarity travel encounters generated political divisions and factions but also, in some cases, productive debates, friendships, and rhizomatic networks that supported domestic US coalitional building among US activists across ethnic, gendered, political, and class borders. Although a few feminist scholars have analysed the politics of US solidarity delegations to Vietnam, China, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Chiapas, Mexico, such solidarity activism, especially that of the Cuban VB, has remained relatively understudied in feminist scholarship.[2] Many feminist scholars have argued that cross-border alliances and solidarity activism are essential forms of transnational praxis. They require ongoing political reflexivity, dialogues, accountability, and responsibility about domination, location, translation and representation, socio-political identifications, asymmetrical risks and resources, a priori simplifications of geographies, histories, and resistance, and unravelling the colonialist impulses of superiority, saving and rescue.[3] This article analyses how such exigencies were enabled and/or disabled on the VB.

The VB generated extensive debates about autonomous women's organisations, relationships to the state, beauty and body politics, and the relative importance of imperialism, classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia to radical solidarities. By exploring the affects and after effects of this personalised and embodied form of transnational travel and solidarity in Cuba throughout the 1970s and 1980s, I highlight the fault lines, silences, and tensions that occurred within the VB. I explore how intersectional relations of power including imperialism, sexism, homophobia, racism, and cultural imperialism were framed, prioritised, or dismissed within the VB and how such relations shaped the stories told by US feminist *brigadistas* about their engagements with Cuban gender politics and revolutionary processes. I discuss the impact of these tensions on subsequent personal and organisational linkages and schisms among US solidarity activists and their effects on their post-Cuba activism. In doing so, I hope to supplement the rich scholarship of radical left internationalism and anti-imperialist struggles as well as the work of scholars who have analysed the ways US activists, in general, responded to homophobia and racism in Cuba, by highlighting the understudied accounts of radical left women that explicitly claimed an identification with various US women's liberation groups.[4] The problematics and possibilities of cross-border delegations such as the VB and the forging of feminist anti-imperialist internationalism and solidarities to challenge conservative, neo-liberal, militaristic, and imperialistic politics are as urgent and relevant now as they were during the beginning of the VB. This is especially so in light of the continuing popularity of solidarity delegations as a contemporary mode of transnational feminist practice such as the recent 2011 delegation of Indigenous and Women of Color Feminists to Palestine. By analysing the accounts of radical US left feminists in Cuba, this article provides a critical lens for assessing feminist claims of transnational solidarities and border collaborations as well as affirms the ongoing importance of interrogating how one's national, cultural, political, and historical specificities can prefigure and limit transnational feminist solidarities.

## POLICIES, POLICING, AND PERILS ON THE VB

The Cuban revolution and its defiance of US power unleashed a complex emotional landscape of desire, yearning, romanticism, dread, repression, and critique across the US political spectrum. This highly charged affective political climate intensified the many schisms about armed violence, pacifism, and the primacy of

[2] Insightful studies of international solidarity delegations include Wu, 2013; Khasnabish, 2008; Hobson, 2016; Weber, 2006; Blackwell, 2014; 2011.

[3] For insightful studies of the tensions between women from the North and Global South see Johnson-Odim, 1991; Desai, 2015; Ghodsee, 2010; Falcon, 2012; and Mohanty, 2003.

[4] See Gronbeck-Tedesco, 2015; Latner, 2013; Young, 2006; Pulido, 2006; Gitlin, 1987.

 

oppressions among the disparate Cuban revolutionary travellers. At the same time, the attacks by the right-wing politicians on the VB, also produced organisational imperatives for unity based on rigid standards for behaviour while in Cuba, and the stifling of misgivings about the Cuban revolution.

Rebel Cuba was and is demonised by many in the US as a communist abomination that threaten-ed/s the security of the US. As a result, the VB, as a Cuban solidarity organisation, was subject to US governmental harassment. In 1970, for example, Mississippi Senator James Eastland, chair of the US Senate Committee on Internal Security, fearing the importation of Cuban socialism to the US, promised that the Senate Internal Security committee would prevent US political pilgrimages and solidarity brigades to Cuba to support the sugar and fruit harvests. Eastland asserted:

> We intend to light the shadows of this vicious operation [VB]; to drive from these shadows these missiles in human form--which have been fashioned on this communist island and fired at America. We want our people to be aware of the direct chain from Cuba which reaches into our cities, our campuses, our conventions, our lives which threatens the life of this Republic (US Congressional Record, 1970: 7465).[5]

Such rabid opposition to Cuba and the brigades played an important role in the VB's subsequent policing of Cuban critique and political dissent on the brigades, resulting in heavy-handed notions of what constitutes cultural imperialism, revolutionary priorities, and proprieties for the *brigadistas* in order to avoid co-optation by right-wing anti-Castro forces. By evoking the perils of cultural imposition to stifle internal critique, the National Committee of the VB used the politics of cultural imperialism to manufacture consent for its organisational agendas and priorities.

Despite this volatile climate of US hostilities towards Cuba and the surveillance of US Cuban solidarity activists, numerous mixed gender, multi-ethnic work and study exchanges crossed enemy lines to go to Cuba. In addition to the VB, exchanges were also organised by various US progressive and radical left groups including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Student Committee for Travel to Cuba, Fair Play for Cuba, Black Scholars, Antonio Maceo Brigades for Cuban Americans, Committee of Returned Volunteers, National Lawyers Guild, Vietnam Vets Against the War, Pastors for Peace, and the Center for Cuban Studies among others. Travelers to Cuba included members of the SNCC, Black Panthers, La Raza, Young Lords, Asian American Political Alliance, Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, Third World Women's Alliance, Quakers, and socialist/progressive university faculty/student groups.[6] Additionally, the Cuban government itself invited and organised exchanges with US radical educators and Black activists. These groups were by no means united by political ideologies, especially about revolutionary priorities and strategies regarding violence, machismo and sexism, racism, internationalism, and homophobia in Cuba and the US. They had many different motives and hopes for going to Cuba including seeking revolutionary inspiration for struggles back home, making concrete contributions to a socialist revolution, and becoming outlaws to US bans to challenge imperialism.

The first Venceremos Brigade in 1969 consisted of two hundred activists that encompassed a wide spectrum of movement organisations including the Black Panthers, La Raza, SDS, New University Conference, High School Student Union, Bread and Roses, Weathermen, and the Committee of Returned Volunteers among others.[7] This first VB brigade was designed specifically to politically, physically, and materially support the 1970 Cuban sugar harvest, and help undermine US imperialism by helping to stabilise the Cuban economy. Bernadine Dohrn, Karen Ashley, Diane Oughton, and Julie Nichamin, who were at the centre of the ideological splits within the Students for a Democratic Society and identified with the bellicose politics of armed struggle as espoused by the Weather Underground, were key players in organising the VB. [8] Some served on the National Committee of the VB in its early stages as well (Sales, 1973). Numerous skirmishes occurred between those VB members affiliated with the Weathermen and those who were not. Those affiliated with the Weathermen faction asserted that the accomplishments of the Cuban revolution since it violent overthrow of Batista in 1959 should galvanise US radicals to consider armed struggle to 'bring the war home'. Some years afterwards, Margot Adler vividly described the intensity of political exchanges between the highly macho members of the Weathermen and other brigade members over political actions:

[5] The VB was again the subject of Senate Hearings in 1972, which included testimony by FBI informants, to explore the question of whether or not the brigades constituted a threat to US internal security.

[6] On Fair Play for Cuba Gosse, 1993.

[7] The Committee of Returned Volunteers consisted of ex-Peace Corps activists who advocated that the Peace Corps should be abolished since its conservative practices supported corporate and imperialist interests.

[8] The Weatherman advocated militant armed struggle as the means for toppling white supremacy, imperialism, and capitalism. Women in the Weathermen organisation believed themselves to be members of a women's fighting army. They criticised feminism for its relative neglect of war, race, and class and advocated the position that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun and the struggle to use political power against the state is the struggle for our liberation' (Jacobs, 1970: 190). For more on the Weathermen, see Churchill, 2007; Boudin and Robbins, 1969; Jacobs, 1970.

 

> We spent ten days fighting over how to write a letter of support to the Black Panthers after one of their leaders was murdered in cold blood. The Weathermen held several meetings with us to explain their ideas to the rest of us (Adler, 1998: 247).

Conflicts between Weatherwomen and the *brigadistas* of the Boston-based Bread and Roses Collective anticipated the political minefields and ideological schisms that would repeatedly erupt within the VB throughout the 1970s and 1980s in regard to women's liberation. Members of the Weatherwomen as well as some other members of the VB National Committee were highly critical of the 'separatist' US white women's movements – their 'sad eyed sisters' who did not clearly define the enemy as US imperialism, capitalism, and racism. Instead, they focused on 'empty transitional demands' (Jacobs, 1970: 184-191). Further, the Weatherwomen argued that white women's focus on equal rights was racist since it did not promote an 'international insurrection against imperialism' (Honky Tonk Women in Jacobs, 1970: 185). More radically, they argued:

> We demand not Bread and Roses to make our lives a little bit better and shield us from struggle a little more but bombs and rifles to join the war being fought all over the globe to destroy the motherfuckers responsible for this pig world (Honky Tonk Women in Jacobs, 1970: 190).

Some members of the Boston-based Bread and Roses collective opposed domestic terrorism as a strategy. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that some criticisms of US feminism were well founded, especially after visits to Cuba and Vietnam helped to foster their understandings and commitments to internationalism. They confessed that their 'internationalism had been sporadic and apologetic' and that they had:

> ignored that imperialism is part and parcel of the very capitalism as it exists in the U.S. (…) The Weathermen pushed us to realise we must have a more complete class strategy for fighting and winning in this country (Bread and Roses Collective, 1970: 192-97).

The primacy of an anti-imperialist commitment shaped the overall policies of the VB. This included what I term their 'radical left cultural etiquette,' i.e., the norms that delineated the ideological commitments, behavioural, and work conventions for members of the VB. The National Committee of the VB asserted for instance: "This trip to Cuba will not be like the usual trips dedicated to radical tourism. People will be going to work--hard work" (*Movement,* July 1969:10). Julie Nichamin, a member of Weatherman, stated that the selection of potential *brigadistas* were made on the basis of how they felt about 'the revolutionary movement, about the kind of society we need in the US and in Cuba'. She reported: "We asked about the attitude towards the black subversive movement, attitudes towards the struggle of the Vietnamese people" (Bethel, 1970: 13). Recruitment processes were also designed to ensure equal numbers of white, black, and brown people. The latter two groups were designated as 'Third World peoples' by the National VB committee and given leadership roles on the brigades. Bernard Hughes, a member of the second VB brigade, critiqued this monolithic characterisation of the solidarities of Third World peoples, however, arguing that it was problematic to assume uncomplicated unities among Third World *brigadistas* since 'none of us had actually functioned as Third World people among other Third World people (…) There was lots of things we did not know about each other and there were many antagonisms' (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 20) (sic). As a result, a Third World caucus was formed on each brigade and in this context, Puerto Rican, Asian, Native American, Chicano, and Latin American women of colour offered 'Third World' seminars for each other, the Cubans, and white US brigade members. A member of the Asian caucus noted the separation between people of colour: "Asian communities have been isolated from the other Third World communities and for the most part people of the brigade don't know our struggles" (Louie, 2008). These seminars pointed both to the commonalities as well as the historical and cultural differences among Third World women.

The composition of the National Committee changed after the first year and included three women, five men, five people of colour, and three whites. This committee, like many subsequent VB committees, elaborated the goals of the VB to emphasise the importance of strategic unity among US radical activists groups. In 1971, the VB declared the following goals:

> To develop solidarity with the Cuban revolution and peoples of the Third World; To promote the political formation of the progressive forces in the US through the brigade process in Cuba and in the US; To educate the US movement to an anti-imperialist consciousness and to the necessity for and possibility of unity in strategic terms; To facilitate dialogue among different US movement groups as they work in the context of a common and constructive task (Venceremos Brigade, 1971: 4).

Would-be recruits were warned 'that the VB is not a left wing travel agency. Participation in Cuba is only one phase of the project. Just as important are the Brigade activities carried out in the US' (Venceremos Brigade, 1971: 4). Before leaving the US, new members of the brigades were required to participate in an orientation process that

 

was designed to foster 'strategic unities', 'anti- imperialist consciousness', 'an internationalist perspective', and 'collective work attitudes' (Venceremos Brigade, 1971: 11). The brigades were organised into regions and zones to facilitate post-Cuba, regionally based organising back in the states. In order to develop group cohesion and collectivity, regional brigades engaged in a variety of pre-departure group activities. Some groups studied Spanish together, some went on group camping trips, some organised fundraising activities, and others engaged in political activist projects such as building housing for US farmworkers. All VB travellers were required to attend pre-departure political education meetings that included films, readings on socialism and Cuba, and rap sessions to discuss their motivations for going to Cuba and their prior political experiences.

In 1971, the VB National Committee revised its guidelines to underscore the importance of subduing critique and dissent and strengthening unity. These new guidelines stated:

> The VB will not comment on, analyze, or attack movements within the US. Our propaganda will not be sectarian or derogatory. While understanding emotions play a role in propaganda, we must keep in mind the consequences of all of our statements. That is, we must struggle against romanticizing Cuba or seeming uncritical, or supercritical. VB propaganda should emphasize the growing unity of anti-imperialist movements (Venceremos Brigade, 1971: 4).

Despite these aspirations for strengthening anti-imperialist coalitions between US *brigadistas* while in Cuba and back in the US, implementing and sustaining these commitments to collaboration in practice would prove to be challenging. As we shall see, this vision for group solidarities and strategic unities was often stymied by sectarianism and compulsory politics.

Traveling as members of the solidarity brigades to revolutionary Cuba was far removed from the pre-revolutionary tourism that had included visits to casinos, nightclubs, beaches, and resorts. Breaching international border-crossing bans to work as cane cutters and fruit pickers for more than two months in Cuba was arduous. Even though the *brigadistas* of the VB were told that cutting ten feet high stalks of sugar cane in the heat would be gruelling, thousands embarked on trips to Cuba to do just that. For many *brigadistas* however, political and personal polarisations, combined with the intimacy of traveling and living in mixed-gender and interracial groups along with the daily political education activities, would, at times, prove to be as demanding as facing the sugar cane and the heat of Cuba.

## ON THE BRIGADES: REVOLUTIONARY HOPES AND INSPIRATION

Many US *brigadistas* have spoken of the deep emotional impact and political inspiration that their Cuban solidarity work produced especially for their personal and political growth. Many *brigadistas* noted that their experiences in the VB fostered an acute awareness of the international consequences of US capitalism, opportunities to widen their activist networks, build friendships, participate in study groups, and strengthen their affective connection to broadly construed, non-specific, notions of Third World struggles. At the same time, some *brigadistas* were more ambivalent about revolutionary change in Cuba and some were less optimistic about possibilities for strategic unities among US activists.

Numerous women of colour defined their Cuban experiences as pivotal for their political development. Members of the Third World Women's Alliance noted that their 1972 trip to Cuba:

> Helped us understand more precisely the relationship between those [Cuban] struggles and the struggles of Indo-Chinese people as well as liberation struggles within the US. It has helped us understand better just what imperialism means in the daily lives of the Cuban people and of people around the world. Above all, it has made it clearer what we must do in our day-to-day work (Triple Jeopardy, 1,4, 1972: 14).

Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, a member of the Asian American Political Alliance, noted:

> We cut Cuban sugar cane to break the US government blockade and show our solidarity with those cheeky brown folks who had the nerve to make a revolution right under Uncle Sam's nose. In the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, Watts, rebellions burning across the face of Urban America and Indian country and full-scale US intervention in Southeast Asia, the Brigade enabled us to hook up with young bloods from communities of color across the US or in the 'belly of the beast' as it used to be called back in the day (Louie, 2008: 260).

Another brigadista described the political allure of Cuba as an opportunity to learn about radical anti-colonialist and imperialist liberation struggles, observing that:

 

> We who participated in the civil rights movement, the battles for self-determination of Blacks, Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican people, the student protests, the anti-war movement, the fight for women's liberation, could never be convinced that our society could be healed without deep and fundamental change. We began to look outside the borders of the United States towards those who were already building societies of justice, equality, and human dignity: we were ready to learn from their examples (Venceremos Brigades, 1974: 3).

One African American *brigadista* was described as lamenting the fact that she had missed much of the early 1960's civil rights organising and that she was excited about the opportunity to be a part of the brigades in order to fight US racism:

> Now at last she can get to Cuba-her Selma (…) she sees a long struggle [against racism] in the offing, she wants to prepare her children for reality. The Cuba trip will help to do that (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 49).

Espaeranza Martell, a Puerto Rican activist, explained that:

> … for two and half months we worked, played, studied, and travelled around Cuba working shoulder to shoulder and learning from revolutionaries from all over the world (...) This trip to Cuba transformed and saved my life (Martell, 1998: 177).

Linda Burnham, a member of the Third World Women's Alliance, noted the significance of her Cuban travels, especially the VB's political education and collective work projects:

> What was positive about the experience is that there was a deep learning experience on the front end before we ever got there [Cuba]. There was a big emphasis on political education and trying to prepare young people to understand something about colonialism, something about US relations with Cuba-what US capitalism is about and how it functions in the world, and studying about racism. Being in the VB was the first time I had an opportunity to do fairly systemic political study. I think it really molded me as a political activist and also as someone who I think from that time forward sustained an international vantage point about what was going on in the world (Burnham, 2005: 17-18).

Although the VB was credited with fostering an international political analysis, at the same time it also imparted some difficult lessons about the fraught nature of VB's coalitional politics. Burnham concluded that:

> There were complicated and difficult lessons to be learned about internal political struggle, when everybody's supposed to be kind of on the same political agenda, but it does not quite work out that way (Burnham, 2005: 18).

Such cautions about the difficulties of sustaining coalitions across national borders and within the brigades were echoed by other *brigadistas*. Chicano activist Gino Lofredo argued that the challenges of overcoming the internalisation of capitalist sensibilities and the trouble caused by right-wing opposition to the VB made solidarities a contentious process. She noted:

> We joined the brigade as members of the Third World with a revolutionary seriousness that even surprises us, and we attended the first preparatory meetings and orientation classes. Gradually doubts begin to emerge: Is this an Amerikan-style traveling circus or an act of solidarity with the people of socialist Cuba? (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 365).

She also reported that the persecutions of the FBI caused:

> … a swamp of tensions, conflicts, ancient hatreds; an abyss of incomprehension, and all the other products of the capitalist society (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 365).

Finally, Frances Beal acknowledged the importance of Cuba for women of colour 'in terms of our kind of evolving consciousness around both race and class issues' and noted that:

> … some people had some differences about the speed at which some of these old problems were being addressed in Cuba. But I think that many of us witnessed in Cuba the possibility of a society in the future that was free of racism and the possibility of a society in the future in which women played an active and equal role (Beal, 2005: 44).

 

The uncertainties expressed by Beal about the pace of revolutionary change in Cuba would be echoed by many other *brigadistas* and, in some cases, produced deep disappointment with Cuban socialism.

## THE FRAUGHT POLITICS OF RACISM ON THE VB

> The Cubans will not tell us how we should make our revolution. And they expect the same from us. This is the essence of their position, one which is too often alternatively forgotten as we make heroes and scapegoats of them. If they influenced our internal politics it was because we weren't sure of ourselves, our movements, our analyses (Staffens, 1971).

Cuban racial politics produced a jumble of emotional and political insecurities for those identified with the US women's liberation movement. As the Bay State regional committee of the VB aptly noted, "problems such as racism, cultural chauvinism and sexism which exist among US people do not simply disappear because North Americans have touched socialist soil" (Latner, 2013: 59). Tensions arose between white women and people of colour on the brigades. Martha Trolin, a white *brigadista*, spoke of her misunderstanding with a Puerto Rican *brigadista* who explained that:

> … her PR movement had to be unified – men and women (…) she does not understand why we fragment our movement with Women's Liberation. She does not understand the problems of an alienated middle class (just as I do not understand those of the colonised). My concepts sound bourgeois to her and hers sound narrow to me (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 190).

Heidi Staffens, a white women member of the 4th brigade, argued that the brigade experiences brought US racism to the surface. Staffens recounted a story in which black men came to a meeting of white and Third World women (a designation used by the VB for all women of colour). None of the women dared to ask the black men to leave and she attributed this to both the insecurity white women felt about the revolutionary validity of the women's movement as well as the rampant racism on the brigades. Staffens concluded:

> We are afraid of Third World people, and are afraid of being called racists. We viewed Third World people as other than human – they were heroes, or noble savages – but they were not real people. They were not to be confronted by white people on important issues. The dynamic escalated and many whites and Third World avoided dealing with each other (Staffens, 1971).

Bernard Hughes, an African American *brigadista*, noted that racism was especially apparent in regards to African Americans on the brigades:

> The relationship between black and white North Americans in Cuba was basically the same as in the US. Whites avoided dealing with racism… White people related more easily to the Cubans than to black Americans. They didn't have the long history of being racist towards Cubans (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 198).

Hughes also pointed out that both at brigade meetings and in the cane fields many whites would not accept Third World Leadership and some tried to talk for black people in general. Alternatively, many white and black *brigadistas* believed that whites needed to confront their tendencies to become immobilised by guilt, shame, and fears of being labelled a racist. One white *brigadista*, writing anonymously about Third World solidarities and racism, asserted:

> In Cuba many whites learned that a united front cannot be formed simply by proclamation. In order for the Third World movements to unite and then join with the white revolutionary movement, aims and goals must be well defined (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 220-222).

Further, she urged white radicals to do their 'homework' and move beyond feelings of guilt and fear of accusations of being racists:

> Our obligation as whites is to attack the racist system in every way possible and at the same time expose the roots of that system, the capitalist economy. It is essential that whites analyze their own communities and see what its revolutionary potential is (...) Until we do this, unity with Third World people cannot but be superficial and opportunistic (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 220-222).

Although the importance of Third World leadership and solidarity were articulated as central goals of the VB, the realisation of these goals proved to be elusive as US racism permeated the relationships within the VB. By

 

positioning US people of colour as part of a generic category of Third World people, many white *brigadistas* could celebrate abstract disembodied notions of Third World solidarity at the same time that white racism on the brigades flourished.

## SEXISM, RADICAL COMPORTMENT, AND TRANSCULTURAL ETIQUETTE

Although the VB had taken a strong stance in 1971 on the importance of achieving strategic unity, maintaining non-sectarian positions, and refraining from attacks on various US liberation movements, the VB National Committee claimed the right to limit participation on the brigades not only for reasons of space and group composition but also 'comportment' (Venceremos Brigade, undated: 13). This nebulous category of 'comportment' or as I think of it, *radical left transcultural etiquette*, helps to reveal how notions of cultural imperialism increasingly were used to police and stifle differences of opinion about revolutionary practices, gender, race, and class priorities not only in Cuba, but also among US radical liberation movements and within the VB brigades themselves. Enforcing proper comportment allowed the National Committee to privilege certain political commitments and movements, mainly anti-imperialism, and, in doing so, to minimise gendered critiques of Cuba and the brigades themselves. The VB strongly warned that US radicals 'go to Cuba as guests, not as political tourists. We are there to express solidarity and learn about revolutionary accomplishments. This does not mean that we view Cuba as a perfect society, accepting everything the Cubans have done. The Cubans recognise that they have made errors and they are working to correct those errors. The course they have chosen may not always be what you have chosen in their place. But it is their country, their revolution' (Venceremos Brigade, undated: 13). The issue of US women's and Black liberation organising was highlighted as potentially troublesome on the brigades. The National Committee stated:

> Some *brigadistas* who are active in national minority and women's groups, for example, expect Cuban blacks to share the attitudes of Blacks and women in the US. We should certainly take advantage of our visit to talk with Cubans about why Cuban blacks view themselves simply as Cubans or why the Cuban women's movement views itself as part of the revolution rather than independent and adversarial. You must respect cultural and historical factors and avoid cultural imperialism while in Cuba (Venceremos Brigade, undated: 14).

Despite the construction of US women's liberation as potentially vexing to the VB, many US feminists, with deep affective attachments not only to socialist revolutionary change and anti-imperialism but also to various US women's liberation movements, joined the brigades. They faced numerous challenges including navigating internal brigade politics, bridging and understanding the enigmas of Cuban gender politics, and reflecting on the flaws and strengths of US women's organising. Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, a US Chicano activist who had travelled to Cuba with SNCC in 1967, described Cuban gender and sexual relations as a 'curious but not so surprising mix of past, present, and future, of revolution, and conservatism' (Martinez, 1969: 97-100). She concluded that the machismo of the revolutionary 'New Man' continued to overshadow Cuban women as 'organizers and producers' of revolution (Martinez, 1969: 97-100).[9] Likewise, Gene Bishop, a *brigadista* in 1970, recalled:

> We had come to Cuba with our heads full of the women's movement but worried about legendary Latin machismo, excited to see what it was like for women in a country in revolution. But when we tried to figure it out, it wasn't so easy…An underdeveloped country, a different cultural history, years of North Americans imposing their ideas on Cuba, and a Revolution in which some things changed so quickly that you could not pinpoint them minute to minute, all made it hard to translate the position of Cuban women into terms we could understand (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 246)

Bishop concluded that while there was no doubt that Cuban women were more liberated than before the revolution, there were still so many examples of women in 'traditional roles existing side by side with a revolutionary contradiction' (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 246.)

Many *brigadistas* did read Cuba with US eyes, using the prefigured lens of their respective US based gender priorities, ideologies, and frames. Some *brigadistas* were uneasy about the perceived failure to prioritise gender as a primary oppression on the island. They identified many gender troubles in Cuba, especially the lack of attention given to feminist consciousness-raising, the lack of autonomous women's organisations, gendered job segregation, and the persistence of Latin machismo. Many *brigadistas* also critiqued the problematic body and beauty politics they witnessed in Cuba including the performances by Cuban women entertainers in the brigade camps, the large number of beauty parlours in Cuba, and the importance of beauty and femininity to many of the Cuban women

[9] See Serra, 2007; Chase, 2015.

 

they encountered. Finally, many women on the VB wrestled with Cuban revolutionary patriarchies including the male-dominated power structures, and double standards, i.e., the expectation that women in Cuba should be, as Castro put it, 'doubly revolutionary' which some US activists understood to mean that although Cuban women were central to the revolution, they were not equal.[10] Mary Nelson, for example, concluded that Cuban women were valuable only because Cuba needed their labour to develop the revolution, not because the Cuban state was committed to gender equality (Nelson, 1968). Such revolutionary incongruities in regard to gender politics challenged some US feminist-identified *brigadistas* to rethink their fears of cultural imposition and their own deeply entrenched culturally-specific feminist priorities. One *brigadista* aptly noted that "Good, bad, liberated, non-liberated – our categories didn't work" (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 249).

Many US feminists critiqued hegemonic gendered and racialised beauty standards that became an important basis for their assessment of the Cuban revolution. Many feminist-identified *brigadistas* such as Mary Nelson critiqued Cuban fashion as an significant shortcoming of the Cuban revolution observing that there was "no shortage of women in heels, tight skirts, standard Latin sexy style" in Havana since Cuban women "[had] not discovered that they are already valuable" and that there should be less importance placed on pleasing men (Nelson, 1968). *Brigadista* Joan Berman also critiqued Cuban beauty practices from the standpoint of US women's liberation:

> In many ways Cuban women still live out their lives attempting to fulfill feminine standards. They have definite ideas about what is feminine. They spend a considerable amount of time making themselves beautiful, even in the rugged life of an agricultural worker (Berman, 1970: 12).

She critiqued the official state women's organisation, The Federation of Cuban Women's magazine, *Mujeres*, for including extensive fashion tips alongside its political education and for its proclamation that it was a 'feminine', not a 'feminist' organisation. She lamented that Cuban women did not see the relevance of US style women's liberation "though some understood it well enough but felt that in this moment it was more important to devote energy to tasks related to underdevelopment" (Berman, 1970: 12).

Barbara Rothkrug and Shari Whitehead were also troubled by the politics of beauty in Cuba, the sexual double standard, the continuing objectification of women, and a division of labour based on perceived gendered strength. However, they countered such perceived gender flaws by noting: "Few American women have such confidence in a future of meaningful work and security." They pointed out that in defence of beautification rituals, some Cuban women had told them that before the revolution only rich women could make themselves beautiful (Rothkrug and Whitehead, undated). Chris Camarano likewise noted the contradictions between revolutionary Cuba and the vestiges of pre-revolutionary days by observing that an article about a women's tractor brigade could be found side by side with a bikini-clad femme fatale in Cuban women's magazines. She argued, however, that 'it was hard to see fashion as a serious detrimental force' since fashion in Cuba did not serve a capitalistic consumer-commodity chain. She added:

> Cuban women do not come close to American woman's oppressive mania regarding her looks, her youth, her constant self-scrutiny, her agonising self-consciousness. There is simply more engaging things around, more important things for them to be about. The revolution has a way of making Revlon *et al.* irrelevant (Camarano, 1971: 55).

Later on in 1978, Alice Hageman and Carollee Bengelsdorf argued that dismantling capitalism would not be enough to topple gendered hierarchies. They argued that:

> …the systemic destruction of the bases of capitalism does not in and of itself spell the end of the patriarchal nexus. Revolutionary struggles must include the ideological realm and consciousness raising (Bengelsdorf and Hageman, 1978).

They concluded:

> Oppression still exists. It is obvious in almost every aspect. The same woman who drives a tractor or studies at a sugar engineering school must confront ogling men on the street (Bengelsdorf and Hageman, 1978).

They complained that revolutionary Cuba still had its beauty contests such as the National Heroine of Labor and the Star of the Harvest and they further pointed out that no Cuban women had taken their husbands to court for not complying with the Family Code for shared housework as was legally possible under the code (Bengelsdorf and Hageman, 1978).

[10] See Guerra, 2010.

 

Many Cuban women challenged US feminist critiques of their gendered positioning within the revolution. Disagreements with Cuban women about revolution and women's liberation were not uncommon. For example, one Cuban woman working on the brigades stated:

> I read all your Women's liberation pamphlets, but I do not really understand. Here we are already liberated--we do all kinds of work, we do what we want. Compare the situation now to before the revolution. (Levinson and Brightman, 1971: 246).

Chris Camarano also noted that gender was not the primary political identification for many Cuban women unlike many in the US women's movement:

> For a Cuban woman to see herself as a Cuban is not for her to deny she is a women. She is saying that her being a Cuban women and a revolutionary frees her to be other things as well; frees her from what Simone de Beauvior calls her mere 'otherness in regard to the individual male or male dominated society (Camarano, 1971: 57).

Despite these critiques, some US women *brigadistas* expressed admiration for the many achievements of the Cuban revolution for women. They celebrated the increased mobility and independence of Cuban women as well as their enviable material security. Despite Bengelsdorf and Hageman's comment above, they heralded the passage of the 1975 Cuban Family Code which mandated that men must share child rearing and domestic responsibilities, the availability of day care six days a week and twelve-week maternity leave, the major advances that had been made in educational and workplace equality, the provision of free birth control, abortion, education, health care, and support services for women workers including workplace laundries and preferences in grocery store lines. Moreover, many *brigadistas* were impressed by Cuban's women's deeply emotional, optimistic, and active engagement in the revolutionary process.

Some *brigadistas* felt that it was more important to address US gender troubles and organisational shortcomings including racism, separateness, and classism rather than focusing on Cuban flaws. Sue Baker, a *brigadista* returning from Cuba in 1970, noted that Cuba had made her 'rethink the idea of a separate women's movement since women and men need to work together for radical change (Baker and Salzman-Webb, 1970: 6). Others glossed over the perceived gendered blemishes in Cuba under the banner of refraining from cultural imposition and self-determination. One VB *brigadista* asserted: "I was struck by the incomplete nature of women's liberation and Cuban hostility to homosexuality (…) but it was not our job to tell Cuba what to do but to clarify our own revolutionary possibilities". Despite her allegiance to self-determination, she concluded that US women's liberation's 'challenge to conventional sex roles might be our unique contribution to international revolutions' (Whitman, 1972: 69). Others thought that time would allow for further revolutionary changes to the gender status quo. Chris Camarano noted that Cuba had destroyed an exploitative political system and had created a material base that deinstitutionalised male chauvinism, yet these changes 'did not immediately decolonize attitudes' and thus consciousness-raising struggles must be continued (Camarano, 1971: 58). Linda Gordon also argued that assumptions about the 'status of women' in Cuba were deeply problematic since 'status was a static word' and Cuba is 'not a country. It is a movement' (Linda Gordon, 1970: 14). The revolutionary inspiration that many feminists sought in Cuba was often tarnished by what they witnessed in Cuba. However, feminists on the brigades were never monolithic in their views of Cuba. While some were disappointed by the lack of complementarity of gender priorities between the US and Cuba, others *brigadistas* remained hopeful that change was on its way. However, as we shall see, the issue of homophobia would provide the most potent obstacle to strategic unities.

## THE EXPLOSIVE POLITICS OF SEXUALITIES

> Imagine a country where women's reproductive rights are guaranteed; free abortions, birth control and sterilization on demand, paid maternity leave and free pregnancy, birth, and post-natal health care. Add the idea that the country has a Legal Family Code that by law makes husbands responsible for 50% of the housework and childcare. Throw in that the government has dedicated itself to an ambitious expansion of public low cost day care centers and is working to eliminate violence against women. Now imagine that this country is also extremely homophobic; that gays are hassled by the police, it is illegal to demonstrate "erotic" behavior to members of the same sex, and most people think gays are mentally ill. Sounds like an impossible combination? Well that country in fact exists just 90 miles south of Florida, Cuba (Ferguson, 1980: 5).

As heated as were the issues raised by women's liberation and racism, homophobia and gay liberation proved to be even more intractable, generating explosive divisions within the VB National Committee, among the VB

 

*brigadistas* themselves, and within US radical liberation movements. While such tensions were directed towards Cuban sexual politics and homophobia, they reveal a great deal about intersectional politics, priorities, and dismissals that occurred within the radical US left, and gay and women's liberation groups. The politics of sexuality and homophobia produced some of the most virulent political critiques of the VB and Cuban policies. For many, this was a breaking point that could not be glossed over.

Cuba had a dark and haunted history in regards to homosexuality that included reprogramming camps for homosexual men in the 1960s, a gulag for removing gay Cubans perceived to be weak, counter-revolutionary subjects.[11] A member of the Atlanta VB observed simply: "Cuba has an insatiable appetite for everything but homosexuality in which they are as uptight as the US" (Goodman, 1970: 8). Although the reprogramming camps were eventually abolished, homophobia persisted. The issue of homophobia exploded in the early 1970's, sparked in part by a 1970 letter from a group of Cuban gays that was sent to US radical news services describing the repression, aggression, and social isolation they experienced in Cuba. Their letter was followed by an explosive resolution passed in 1971 by the Cuban National Congress on Education and Culture that condemned the 'social pathological nature of homosexuality'. It asserted that homosexuality should be contained by banning homosexuals from working with Cuban youth, and representing Cuba abroad (Blasius and Phelan, 1997: 408-409).

This resolution received extensive coverage in the US radical press that unleashed conflicting reactions among US movement groups.[12] Many were outraged while others struggled to straddle fears of cultural imperialism and their disappointments about the resolution. Gay activists continued to join the brigades but the issue of homophobia led to major rifts and changes in policy. In 1972, the National Committee of the VB revised its selection processes for the 5th brigade by allowing only those gay activists who demonstrated that they identified primarily with anti-imperialism and not just gay liberation. This decision was justified by affirming the importance of Cuban self-determination and the need to avoid US cultural imperialism. The National Committee stated: "Our policy is based on practical considerations of the VB position in Cuba, Cuba's position towards homosexuality, the political objectives of the VB, our purpose in Cuba, our position towards Cuban policies, and the past practices of gay brigadiers" (Venceremos Brigade, 1981: 98-100). The Committee also asserted that:

> The Cuban people as a whole do not accept homosexuality. There is no material base for the oppression of homosexuals in Cuba. They are not repressed in work camps or anything of that sort. But it should be clear that Cuba does not encourage homosexuality (Venceremos Brigade, 1981: 98-100).

Finally, it reminded its critics that the Congress report had involved the input of thousands of Cuban citizens who took the position that homosexuality is a 'social pathology left over from bourgeois decadence'. The Committee noted that this Cuban policy was formulated 'by the Cuban people for the Cuban people. It is not formulated for the US' (Venceremos Brigade, 1981: 98-100).

The National Committee alleged that some gay *brigadistas* had engaged in problematic breaches of political-cultural brigade etiquette that included 're-educating Cubans, outright attacks on the revolution, assuming the situation in Cuba must be the same as the US, and imposing US gay culture on Cuba' (as for example, by parading in drag in a Cuban town). It concluded that such behaviors revealed a 'lack of understanding of the position of *Brigadistas* in Cuba as guests of the Cuban revolution and lack of affirmation of the Cuban peoples' right to self-determination':

> While this does not mean we deny the importance of dialogue, we are not in Cuba to carry out confrontations over disagreements. As guests we must realize that internal questions can only be answered by Cubans, answers cannot be imposed by the outside.

The National Committee, however, did not impose a total ban on gay activists noting:

> There are gay North Americans who share our objectives. Our policy is not to exclude them though we require a clear understanding of revolutionary anti-imperialistic priorities and TOTAL [emphasis added] identification with the Political Objectives of the VB (Venceremos Brigade, 1981: 98-100).

These two events, the Cuban Congress and the VB's revised policy statement unleashed a political tempest. The US Gay Revolutionary Party swiftly condemned these policies as reactionary.

[11] See Lekus, 2010; Lumsden, 1996.

[12] The VB policy statement generated many political reverberations including a group of gay students at UC-Berkeley who protested a VB meeting on their campus. In 1976, the gay student caucus at the People's College of Law, tried unsuccessfully to prevent the VB from using school facilities until they revised their policy on gays. The Black and La Raza student caucuses both voted in favour of allowing the VB on campus. Also see Ferro, 1975 for a discussion about how the D.C. faggots successfully blocked a VB fundraiser because of its exclusionary politics towards gay liberation.

 

> The fight of the Cuban and other Third World peoples against the imperialism of the US and its lackeys cannot be won by maintaining attitudes of cultural and sexo-economic systems which support and are nurtured by sexism, male individualism, capitalism, and imperialism (…) Gay people are not one more group struggling for liberation. We are, and have always been considered the scum of the earth, but we are you; we are everywhere. The gay revolution is basic because it will destroy the sexual and social roles which are at the bottom of all exploitation, establishing the mutuality of relationship between all people (Jay and Young, 1992: 247).

The Gay Committee of Returned VB *Brigadistas* likewise released a fiery response to these two events:

> We, as gay North Americans who have identified and supported the Cuban revolution through our participation in VB, denounce the anti-homosexual policy formulated at the recent Conference on Education and Culture and endorsed by the Cuban government (…) We have supported the progressive economic policies of the revolution and have been excited and encouraged by indications of a developing cultural revolution towards the liberation of women in all areas of life. Inherent in socialism and socialist practice is the equalization of power among all people... It is each person's revolutionary responsibility to be critical of the racist and sexist institutions that perpetuate divisions among us. There cannot be a revolution, no truly socialist society, until we remove walls of self-hatred that separates us from ourselves and other people. A policy of ruthless and incessant persecution of gay people is contradictory to the needs of all people, and such a policy is reactionary and fascist (Jay and Young, 1992: 249-50).

These gay *brigadistas* also denounced the VB National Committee for its unwillingness to critique Cuban state sanctioned homophobia as well as its non-recognition of gay liberation politics and homophobia. The gay *brigadistas* concluded that the VB National Committee functioned as 'agents of a sexist hierarchy. They, in their liberalism, have not engaged in critical relationship with either the Cuban people or with the revolutionaries here' (Jay and Young, 1992: 249-50).

At the same time, other gay and feminist *brigadistas* glossed over Cuban homophobia by excusing Cuba since it was not mandating how US activists should approach gay liberation in the US. Heidi Staffens, for example, noted:

> Cuba is not North America. Our revolution will not look like the Cuban revolution. The system we are fighting is the same---its manifestations are vastly different. The Cubans recognise this--they are extremely interested in the Women's Liberation Movement and they have invited Gay liberation people to their country even though feminism has little meaning in Cuba and homosexuals are not part of their revolutionary program (Staffens, 1971).

Indeed, many activists believed that homophobia in the US, not in Cuba, was more important to confront. Additionally, many argued that ending the US embargo would help to eliminate homophobia and sexism in Cuba by alleviating underdevelopment in Cuba.

Not all *brigadistas*, however, were persuaded by the argument that the revolutionary process would heal homophobia. Gay activist Allen Young, who had participated on the first VB and served on the National Committee, denounced both the US left and Cuba for sidelining the issue of homophobia. Another gay *brigadista* noted the painful tensions that ensued about the Gay caucus on the 3rd brigade including the suspicions that gay people in general could not relate to Third World struggles. Despite these tensions within the brigades and with Cuba, she felt that there were moments when she felt deep revolutionary unity on the brigades despite:

> blacks thinking there might be racism, gay people knowing there was going to be anti-gay sentiment, women knowing that the woman's role in Cuba was pretty bad…yet there were moments when there was a connection, a real live connection (Jay and Young, 1992: 234).

Leslie Cagan, a gay *brigadista* who had gone on and organised numerous VB trips, was rejected from going on the VB's tenth anniversary brigade which she attributed to her coming out as a lesbian. Despite this exclusion and Cuban homophobia, she remained optimistic about the Cuban revolution.

> What is striking about Cuba is the ongoing nature of their revolution. What's working and what isn't, what can be done better, how do you not get caught in patterns that may shut off creativity, how do you keep a revolutionary process alive and dynamic? There is, in Cuba, a deep understanding that the revolution is not static, it does not begin and end on a given date. The sense of long-term struggle is something we in this country would do well to learn from. Go to Cuba and ask the hard questions. Experience a 30-year-old revolution in the process of continual growth and redevelopment. And then come back home and challenge the outdated, reactionary policies of our own country (Cagan, 1989: 32).

 

## CONCLUSION

Despite the many complications and barriers that accompanied their transnational travels and political actions, many *brigadistas* were deeply impacted by their VB experiences and the life-long friendships they made on the brigades. The reverberations of their travels included anti-imperialist activism and political education about Cuba back in the US, repeated travel to Cuba, and ongoing political exchanges with Cuban activists. The intimacy and deep immersion of the brigade experiences brought together an extremely diverse group of US radical activists who engaged in the emotionally intense process of interrogating political divides, geographic and relational borders, and the links between the local and the global while living in an unsettling and highly politicised transnational space.

Some *brigadistas* continued their solidarity work not only by writing about racism and Third World Women for the VB Educational Commission, but they also published accounts of their experiences in numerous radical publications such as *Off Our Backs*, *Journal of Women's Liberation*, *Triple Jeopardy*, *Souls,* and the *Black Scholars*. One of the most direct links between the VB and US women of colour activists was the founding of the West Coast chapter of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) that grew out of political networks and friendships established on the VB. The TWWA raised money for and sponsored the Los Venceremitos, a project that sent US children to an international summer camp in Cuba as guests of a Cuban youth organisation. The TWWA magazine, *Triple Jeopardy*, regularly published stories supporting the Cuban revolution. For example, it reported on US right-wing violence against Cuban solidarity groups including the bombing of the Center for Cuban Studies, the VB sponsored Cuba Expo: Festival of Revolutionary Change in NYC, and VB recruitment efforts. Activists such as Linda Burnham and Miriam Louie would continue to be key players in multi-ethnic organisations subsequent to TWWA including the Women of Color Resource Center. Significantly, Burnham organised subsequent solidarity delegations of women of colour to UN women's conferences in Nairobi and Beijing as well as the World Conference Against Racism.

Both the successes and political fractures that have accompanied the Venceremos Brigades provide important lessons for contemporary transnational organising. The VB has survived numerous political schisms throughout its long history and has proven to be both a forum and a flashpoint for thousands of US activists to confront questions of cultural imperialism, gender/sexualities, racism, and social change strategies. The VB provided opportunities for a diverse group of US activists to come together to debate strategies and barriers for building transnational affinities, for creating strategic alliances and unities among US social justice movements, for confronting the challenges of working across cultural-political-gender-sexual borders, and for subverting right-wing travel bans and blockades as well as challenging state repression and surveillance.

The VB's reading groups, group activist projects, Third World educational forums, political caucuses, and regional organisations provided numerous opportunities for a wide range of US activists to participate in unique and highly politicised projects of work and political education. The brigades made deep and lasting impacts on many radical activists, including life-long friendships and political connections, the consolidation of commitments to internationalism, anti-imperialism, and the importance of challenging classism, cultural arrogance, and reformism in US social justice movements.

At the same time, however, the VB was plagued by ideological rigidities, exclusionary politics, and the primacy of anti-imperialism over other forms of oppression. Over time *brigadistas* continued to challenge and defy the exclusions, dismissals, and the VB's destructive politics of assigning primacy to anti-imperialism and defining sexism and homophobia as secondary bourgeois concerns. The National Committee never completely controlled the terms of political and personal engagement. The opposition generated by the National Committee's policies on gender and sexuality raised pertinent questions about oppression, intersectionality, and coalition-building that must still be confronted today.

The resurgence of neoliberal-induced economic precarity, authoritarian politics, surveillance, police violence, incarceration, wars on terror, militarism, travel bans, and promised exclusionary walls loom large in our current moment, yet transnational border encounters from the North to the South are flourishing. Many US neoliberal universities are boasting of internationalising their curriculums while hundreds of organisations across a wide political spectrum claim to be without borders including Clowns Without Borders, Bankers Without Borders, and Entrepreneurs Without Borders. Ever-growing networks of feminist activists are engaging in transnational encounters. Some feminists are engaging in anti-capitalist/neoliberal and anti-imperialist global justice struggles while others have been complicit in neoliberal restructuring efforts and mainstreaming gendered reforms. As a result, an increasing number of individuals across a wide political spectrum are traversing geo-political borders and identifying as allies. Some feminist activists, however, fear that easy proclamations of solidarity, alliance, and allyship constitutes an 'ally industrial complex' a corruption of radical spirit and imagination grounded in romanticised and/or rescue/repair-oriented imperialistic humanitarianism (Indigenous Action Media, 2014). While the VB was far from an ideal prototype for feminist transnationalism and coalition building, many of the tensions

 

and lessons learned of these revolutionary left travellers remain timely and essential for building sustainable feminist networks across time and space.

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# Co-option and Organisational Survival: A Case Study of the Risks and Opportunities of State Attachment within the United States Feminist Antiviolence Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article articulates the unstable and contested context of domestic violence advocacy and activism through the experiences of feminist antiviolence professionals working at a quasi-state agency in the southeastern United States. In the context of the NGOization of the antiviolence movement, this agency's attachment to the state created opportunities to insert marginalized perspectives into the dominant public dialogue on and responses to domestic violence but ultimately facilitated threats against the agency's entire existence. Organizational survival and a commitment to antiviolence advocacy at the state level led to resistance strategies against state cooption in alignment with neoliberal discourses and practices. State attachment in this context presented ambiguous outcomes for the promotion of feminist, survivor-centered goals, but strategic connections to community-based groups and the criminal justice system presented opportunities for effective resistance against state cooption.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, antiviolence movement, feminist politics

## INTRODUCTION

What are the risks and opportunities of attachment to the state[1] for antiviolence professionals addressing domestic violence[2] in the United States? Scholars and activists have described the co-option of social movements, by way of structural or economic state attachment, as one strategy used by states to govern and regulate political organising. The case study presented here contributes to this literature on governmentality and the co-option of social movements in the neoliberal era by highlighting the paradoxical effects of state attachment for professionals working within the antiviolence movement.

At the chosen research field site in the southeastern United States, the convergence of the Great American Recession between the late 2000s and early 2010s and an increasingly controlling politically conservative state governor's office set the stage for political attacks on a quasi-state antiviolence agency's existence in 2009. Increased surveillance by the state represented a change from a previous decade when this agency was more autonomous from the state and could implement a more proactive policy and legislative advocacy. In this article, I will draw an analytical distinction between state and quasi-state entities, the latter of which I use to characterise the agency, the Antiviolence Commission (AVC).[3] The AVC was created in the late 1980s by a southeastern state legislature and was administratively attached to the State Department of Corrections for its first several years. The agency was officially accountable to and reliant on the state for its legitimacy and authority to oversee statewide antiviolence work. Day-to-day operations entailed direct monitoring and governance over those intervening to address domestic violence at the county and city level. The staff struggled with and resisted identification with the state, while also leveraging certain conceptualisations of the state and neoliberalism to resist state co-option. I use the analytical

[1] I designate the state as that which holds "the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, 1965) and also functions as an apparatus of governance over its population.

[2] I use the term *domestic violence* to define physical, emotional or psychological, economic, and sexual abuse perpetuated between intimate partners. I also recognise the use of an array of other terms by scholars and practitioners alike, such as gender violence and intimate partner violence, and that the social construction and usage of these terms have fluctuating meanings for diverse people.

[3] All names of individuals and organisations are pseudonyms.

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framework of governmentality as a starting point to interrogate the AVC's routine operations and the reactive discursive survival tactics in response to the political attacks (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Foucault, 1980).

In this article, I argue it is not only everyday practices but also exceptional moments of resistance against state co-option where spatial and vertical imagery can be deployed by quasi-state entities to produce conceptualisations of authority and legitimacy. These events reveal the risks of state attachment that the literature illuminates for an agency formally integrated within the state apparatus. What are the implications for antiviolence work situated in formal organisations politically and economically reliant on the state for survival, and what opportunities are provided by this co-location? The case presented here suggests state attachment may be less perilous when antiviolence agencies are allied with community-based groups and others closely affiliated with the socially powerful criminal justice system.

## NEOLIBERALISM, THE CO-OPTION OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND THE STATE

Scholars have critically examined the processes of neoliberalism[4] revealing the state's strong presence in the lives of its citizens, in spite of the popular 'less government' rhetoric espoused by neoliberal proponents (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Hyatt, 2001). The neoliberal push towards self-regulation, self-management, and consumer 'choice' among privatised options has not constituted an absolute retreat from state governance entirely. Instead federal and state government is still firmly situated in a position of authority and control over an array of regulatory agents who enact governance over citizens, such as increased surveillance and regulation of the poor (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Websdale, 2001) and the promotion of civil society entities that provide the services for which the state has renounced responsibility (Hyatt, 2001; Rose, 1990). At the same time, macro-level neoliberal political-economic policies have led to the scarce and uneven distribution of resources to NGOs in the United States. While NGOs have increasingly taken on the former role of the state as the provider of a socioeconomic safety net for marginalised communities, state allocation of resources to support this type of work has not been adequate. One route neoliberalism supports the governance of individual citizens at the state and non-state level, is by differentiating between those deserving and undeserving of particular services. Examples include social and legal conceptualisations of welfare dependency (Abramovitz, 1996; Cruikshank, 1995) and the construction of domestic violence survivors deserving and undeserving of social services (Allard, 2005; Lazarus-Black, 2007).

Scholars and activists have described the ways attachment to and reliance upon state funding creates pathways for state co-option beyond the outright surveillance and regulation of the population, which presents challenging paradoxes under the constraints of such a position. An extensive literature makes problematic the professionalisation of antiviolence advocacy and suggests in some cases this has come to represent the state co-option of political dissent (Kendrick, 1998; Markowitz and Tice, 2002; Schechter, 1982; Smith, 2007). Feminist organisations, while diverse in organisational ideology, goals, and structure, are one example of sites often governed by some form of state attachment, including legal incorporation and state funding (Martin, 1990). Susan Schechter (1982) offers an important early examination of the quest for increased funding within the antiviolence movement that led to the professionalisation and co-option by the state. Schechter vividly describes how advocacy within the movement gradually transformed from a volunteer to a paid position and how advocates became increasingly hesitant to challenge funders required a focus on services and measurable outcomes over social change goals. Another way the state co-option of social movements has been theorised centres on the transformational impact of state governance through NGO-isation. Madeline Adelman describes NGO-isation as 'the transformation of social movement activities from protest politics to policy work through the development and institutionalisation of social movement organisations (SMOs) – that is, NGOs that are tied politically and economically to the state' (2008: 512). While this term only came into popular use the last decade or so, Schechter's early work examined the *processes* of NGO-isation specific to the antiviolence movement.

When electing to formalise as organisations with access to socially and politically powerful actors connected with the state, professionals perceive their position as an opportunity to integrate marginalised perspectives into the policy arena and public dialogue with the hopes of shaping policy and programs (Reinelt, 1995). However, as Piven and Cloward's (1977) historical analysis suggests this is a flawed conceptualisation of the capacity of formal organisations to compel change in alignment with oppositional politics. Attachment to the state and the professionalisation it confers, may position antiviolence professionals in a way that organisational survival becomes inextricably tied to identity, that risks becoming a priority over more social justice oriented goals. This is particularly challenging in neoliberal contexts in which civic duty and volunteerism are understood as the most efficient route

[4] Neoliberalism represents a set of beliefs and practices characterised by the shift from the Keynesian welfare state to market-based strategies to address social problems that have gained strength through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. Self-regulation, self-management, and free market strategies are favoured over state provided social services in the name of individual responsibility and freedom (Harvey 2005).

 

to ensure societal well-being and produce social change, although civic engagement does not exist outside the control of the state as touted in the public discourse (Hyatt, 2001). For instance, Uzwiak's (2013) ethnographic research at a women's human rights NGO in the United States demonstrates how the staffs' belief in human rights work as fundamentally good interacted with neoliberal modes of governmentality, including managerialism and self-governance, to deter staff from standing up against mistreatment. The redefinition of the citizen under neoliberalism as a volunteer responsible for the work that was formerly a state duty was the context in which NGO staff tolerated negative treatment rooted in a fear of jeopardising their organisational work on women's human rights. Uzwiak characterised this as an 'embodiment of fear,' tied to a commitment to social justice in conjunction with neoliberal governmentality, which produced a disconnection between political stances and organisational practices.

Other scholars have demonstrated that the state management of political action has more ambiguous effects than totalising conceptualisations of neoliberalism make the effects out to be. Sandra Morgen (1990) has shown that outcomes of state attempts at management and control of grassroots organising are not always clear-cut, and often have contradictory effects on its targets of control. Her work describes how a grassroots women's centre faced regulatory practices through the use of state funding, but that funding enabled the onboarding of new staff and eventually led to a resurgence of feminist ideology and goals. Reinelt (1995) shows how engagement with the state not only poses risks but opportunities as well, and Abraham and Tastsoglou (2016b) also argue that the state's involvement in addressing domestic violence offers opportunities for justice, though not without pressure from external social movement actors. An example of social movement actors effectively working with government agencies is presented by Arfaoui and Moghadam (2016) who present the case of Tunisian feminist social movement actors able to work with government to increase awareness of violence against women and institutionalise policy changes. However, even these legal reforms did not consistently reflect realities on the ground and social movement actors were faced with opposition broadening the scope of advocacy beyond gender to sexual rights.

It is clear the state is implicated in the production and condoning of a continuum of interpersonal and structural violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois 2005) through the promotion of particular ideologies and practices, particularly within the criminal justice system, that manifest in racialised and gendered forms of sexual violence (Goet,t 2015) and domestic violence (Adelman, 2008; INCITE!, 2006). However, as Abraham and Tastsoglou (2016a) suggests, the state's role in regulating gender and violence, as well as the antiviolence movement, varies by historical moment and context. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) make a valuable contribution to theorisations of the state by describing states governmentality as actioned through particular symbolic mechanisms and practices, showcasing state verticality and encompassment, to 'help to secure their legitimacy, to naturalise their authority, and to represent themselves as superior to, and encompassing of, other institutions and centres of power' (2002:982). At the same time, they challenge the dichotomisation of state and non-state entities, calling for an exploration of the processes through which actors situated within an ever-increasing assortment of state, non-state, and quasi-state entities utilise claims of verticality and encompassment as an instrument of governance. I later use this theoretical framing to examine the AVC's use of discursive tactics to asserting spatial and vertical superiority over other state bureaucracies and resist state co-option.

## METHODS

For this case study, fieldwork took place in the southeastern United States working with the AVC staff and advisory board members, as well as with other antiviolence professionals connected to a larger network of domestic violence advocacy in the state. The field site is confidential in alignment with the consent process.[5] Ethnographic data was collected between January 2009 and October 2010 through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research.[6] I interviewed a total of fifty-three antiviolence professionals working at the state and local level; however, in this article I focus on my interactions and interviews with the six AVC staff, four AVC advisory board members, the statewide Coalition of Domestic Violence Agencies (CDVA)[7] executive director (ED) and lobbyist, one member of the state legislature, and a state-level bureaucrat who was also a former AVC member. Reviewing archival AVC documents strengthened my understanding of historical shifts in domestic violence policy, advocacy, and programming, and helped me interpret my observations in the field as reflective of long standing power struggles. Such documents included advisory board meeting minutes, protocols, and manuals that reveal AVC legislative and policy work and program development.

[5] This study was reviewed and approved for human subjects research by the Temple University Institutional Review Board.
[6] While these data were collected several years ago under a specific historical moment and the current political context has changed significantly, these findings are still relevant insofar as they suggest successful strategies to resist state co-option in the context of an increasingly hostile and conservative political environment.
[7] The CDVA provided policy advocacy and other support services for local shelters and other service providers in the state.

 

My entry point into the field was the AVC whose staff granted me access to their day-to-day work and archival records. I spent the majority of my time at the AVC office working alongside the staff, attending meetings, trainings, and other advocacy events. In this role I interacted with a diverse range of antiviolence professionals working at the state and local level and observed what came to represent two years of political attacks on the AVC's existence. I was provided access to informal spaces of practice and dialogue, illuminating the value of participant observation as a methodology. Cultural immersion, the foundation of participant observation, supports access to these critical sites (Fife, 2005). Unfortunately, I was unable to interview most legislators and bureaucrats within the Governor's Office, who were aware of my connections with the AVC, as my communication requests were ignored. I was able to interview one legislator and another bureaucrat deeply entrenched in the political attacks; however, they were both long-time avid supporters of the AVC. Therefore, I was unable to collect data that spoke directly to the motivation behind attacks on the AVC.

Coordinating local and state practice was accomplished at the AVC through a variety of practices, including the employment of a Statewide Community Coalition Liaison to support coalition development and act as a liaison between coalitions and the state. I went into the field with the plan to focus on the work of and relationships between the AVC and community coalitions. I was curious about the form of governance the AVC exerted over community coalitions. While this was a key focus of my research, the political attacks on the AVC lasting throughout the duration of my fieldwork took centre stage in many ways, expanding my gaze to the legislature and Governor's Office. Additionally, while there were also clearly racial dynamics present across and within community coalitions, in this article I do not analyse these specifically at this time, but am instead focusing here primarily on gender.

## RESULTS

### Education and Reform to Promote the Feminist, Survivor-Centred Agenda

Education and reform activities conducted by the AVC reveal tensions between a feminist, survivor-centred[8] analysis of domestic violence and depoliticised approaches to antiviolence work within the state. Providing a historical background on the AVC's intentional strategies to shape antiviolence practice and the interweaving power dynamics that constrain this work, foregrounds future challenges revealing the contested and unstable nature of their work. AVC staff and board members saw their formal position within state government and access to socially and politically powerful people as an opportunity to increase awareness of domestic violence across the state through a feminist, survivor-centred lens, but this was not without challenges.

The AVC was legislatively established with professionally diverse membership requirements to develop a coordinated statewide plan to end domestic violence. This plan included education and reform as a formal duty that in practice happened within a wide range of settings ranging from the very structured to the informal. Beyond formal education through the AVC's annual conference and other trainings, informal education efforts between AVC board members and staff was also a regular occurrence. In practice, the overall thrust of the informal education project centred on bringing a feminist, survivor-centred analysis to the attention of board members who were generally lacking such a perspective. A research subject shared a key goal of educating powerful judges and other criminal justice system representatives was to be able to send those newly educated, powerful representatives into public and private places of influence to transmit a feminist, survivor-centred perspective. Archival documents revealed the importance of a feminist analysis of domestic violence within the AVC's early work that was a key part of the staffs' analytical repertoires during my fieldwork. For example, meeting minutes from the AVC's second board meeting in early 1993 included an educational component in which speakers from three domestic violence shelters described domestic violence as the product of patriarchy, and articulated how societal norms and expectations about gender roles contributed to the oppression of women within and outside intimate relationships. The inclusion of an educational component helped establish a practice where the domestic violence advocate board representatives educated other board members on a feminist analysis of domestic violence even though the AVC was not explicitly a feminist organisation.

AVC staff and key board members participating in this informal education project juxtaposed with their own self-identified feminist lens against a board in which personnel were chiefly drawn from the criminal justice system.

[8] With an understanding that feminism has divergent meanings for different people, I define a feminist analysis of domestic violence in this particular context to take the identification of domestic violence as a product of patriarchy as central with an emphasis on survivor-centred approaches. Patriarchy refers to the institutionalisation of male authority over women and children within the organisation of the family and society, which holds gender is an important category of analysis. Survivor-centred practices prioritise survivors' experiences and knowledge, which includes trusting that they know their partners best and the most effective ways to stay safe. All of the AVC staff and key board members self-identified with this conceptualisation of feminism.

 

All staff, along with two advocate representatives on the board adopted a feminist, survivor-centred perspective and took on the role of educating the board members from the criminal justice system representing over half of the advisory board. AVC staff and members understood that a heavy criminal justice system representation was beneficial to the agency's mission. Gary, an AVC staff person, shared a relevant example when he surmised that all of the AVC's board chairpersons after the first two were judges because having a judge's support lent credibility:

You know when the [AVC] comes to a decision to have a judge be a chair there's just more weight behind it system-wise…So ideally you've got an agenda that's being heavily influenced by the [executive] director with a feminist tilt but then a judge kind of once a decision is made putting some institutional weight behind it. I think that's an advantage the [AVC] has that the [CDVA] doesn't have. They [CDVA] make a decision that's backed up by people society thinks is low on the totem pole in general like shelter directors and advocates.

Gary made explicit the socially ascribed power judges held in contrast to domestic violence advocates and shelter directors, which validated the feminist orientation held by the AVC Executive Director and other staff. While not always effective, there were moments in which the positive effects of this education work were illuminated. For example, a superior court judge and AVC member shared a story marking an impactful moment during an interview. He attended an AVC annual conference in the early 1990s, and the AVC board chairperson at the time spoke critically about the way the media portrayed a domestic violence murder. The chairperson posed the question: why don't we ask why he's abusing her? Why do we always ask why she doesn't leave? The judge shared 'that hit me with a sledgehammer' and led him to think differently about domestic violence, no longer 'blaming the victim' for the violence. This story demonstrates how one board member (believed being on the receiving end of the AVC's education project) enhanced his understanding of domestic violence.

For the AVC, reform was a central, early goal, and the AVC was successful in proactively supporting legislative changes up through 2003, such as legislation prohibiting mutual protective orders and establishing a 24-hour centralised database for statewide protective orders. Starting in 2004, in partnership with the CDVA, the AVC began shifting its attention towards new targets of education and reform work through a fatality review project. The project aimed to identify missed opportunities to intervene in domestic violence cases and better equip systems with the tools to support survivors. This work demonstrated there were important sites beyond the criminal justice system and social services where survivors could receive support, including faith communities, friends, and family. Explicit statements in the fatality review reports identified intersectional[9] inequities shaping the production of and responses to violence. Racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism were described as operating within the systems that respond to domestic violence, which hampered or deterred survivors from accessing support and resources.

**Unstable and Contested Context of Feminist, Survivor-Centred Antiviolence Work**

The AVC was legislatively created with term limits that ultimately showcased the unstable nature of its existence, which was exacerbated when the state increased interest in its activities. An increase in state surveillance signalled the beginning of attempts by the state to co-opt the AVC's antiviolence work which threatened to temper their feminist, survivor-centred agenda. Arguably, ideological differences within the statewide antiviolence advocacy community related to this agenda were leveraged by one of the state agencies threatening to co-opt the AVC as a tactic to consolidate their power.

When I asked Shannon during an interview why she felt the AVC struggled in recent years to pass proactive legislation, she argued the reason was 'the Republicans taking over in '05. That's truly the only explanation.' Shannon was the lobbyist for the CDVA[10] and worked closely with Kelly, the AVC's Executive Director, on state legislative issues relevant to domestic violence. The AVC was legislatively charged with monitoring and evaluating domestic violence laws and policies, which represented a core part of their work. Shannon's retelling of the organisation's history represented a defensive approach to advocacy beginning when Republicans gained control of the state legislature and the Governor's Office with the election of Governor Payne. Kelly also underscored limitations due to the perceived Republican Party's power over the executive and legislative branch of state government. She shared a common understanding among her colleagues that an explicitly feminist orientation was less possible under Governor Payne compared to previous administrations. She explained:

[9] An intersectional analysis of domestic violence has been emphasised by scholars and activists as an alternative to individualising, criminalisation approaches and deemed critical for effective critical examination of the overlapping role of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, citizenship, and other social identities in shaping manifestations of and interventions in response to violence (Abraham and Tastsoglou 2016a; Crenshaw 1991; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

[10] There is a statewide coalition for domestic violence agencies in each state while the existence of a statewide commission was more distinctive. The AVC staff were aware of other similar commissions or councils operating within respective state governments. The existence of the AVC and other similar groups, many of which founded around the same time, reflected growing interest in the establishment of coordinated community responses since the first formal development of such a group in Duluth, Minnesota in 1981.

 

When I was hired that orientation [a feminist, survivor-centred approach] was tempered by an awareness of a particular political climate because of who the governor was and because he had inserted himself into the hiring process is my understanding of how that happened and that had never happened before I came on board. He never interviewed the previous directors but all of a sudden he was interviewing me.

Governor Payne's more active involvement in the AVC's hiring process foreshadowed the tenuous nature of their position attached to and dependent upon the state for funding.

While the AVC was convened by the State Governor's Office and relied upon state funding, which conferred the office with some power over the AVC's work, in practice the AVC operated independently of the Governor's Office up until a gubernatorial regime change in 2003. AVC board members and staff identified a major internal shift in AVC practice from proactive to reactive legislative and policy advocacy efforts at that time. This change was identified as a direct result of the politically conservative Governor Payne's entry into office, which became increasingly more 'hands on' over his two terms. AVC staff regularly discussed hesitancy to propose new legislation because they were afraid that 'opening up' legislation may result in losing existing political gains, whereas in previous years the AVC regularly proposed legislation each legislative session. Missy, an AVC board member and shelter advocate representative, broached the issue at a quarterly member meeting in December 2009 but the AVC chairperson, also a judge, rejected her idea due to the fiscal climate. Missy later expressed frustration with what she perceived to be a hesitancy to propose proactive legislation because of the hostile political climate during an interview.

Increased surveillance from the Governor's Office culminated in legislative attacks to eliminate the AVC in 2009, which eventually came to represent two years of political battles that echoed the historically unstable and contested nature of the AVC's existence. These events were situated in a political-economic environment in which the economic crisis allowed legislators to seek spending cuts. Suspicious tactics led up to the attacks, signalled by avoidance and rumour, including the Governor's Office staff evading Kelly's questions about renewing the AVC's term limits. The AVC was legislatively established with term limits that had to be renewed every four years which were set to expire in 2010. She queried the Governor's Office about this expiration multiple times to no avail. Finally, after much avoidance, in early 2009 when she learned statements calling for the eradication of the AVC was nestled within a two hundred-page bill restructuring the State Department of Human Resources (DHR). Assorted rumours swarmed throughout the legislature, including inflated figures for their state appropriations, number of staff, and inaccurate claims their work was a duplication of services.

The AVC never received any straightforward explanation for its proposed elimination beyond it being a cost saving measure for the state. AVC staff interpreted these tactics as a strategy to veil the state co-option of the AVC's work because the DHR restructuring bill was widely accepted as necessary. The effect would mean the elimination of the AVC, including its staff and volunteer advisory board, and diverting only two of its fifteen statutory powers and duties to DHR. A second political attack attempting to co-opt the AVC occurred the next year during the 2010 legislative session. These events threatened to move four of the seven staff positions to yet another state agency, the Governor's Office for Child Welfare (GOCW), and effectively dissolve the AVC through consolidation. The AVC was concerned about the proposed move due to perceived ideological differences, one strategy the GOCW ED, Jane, who was employed to gain the support of shelter directors was to promise they would not be forced to address race, sexuality, or other 'political' issues if she were in charge. This was a successful strategy in manipulating ideological differences within the antiviolence community. Gary describes this depoliticising strategy:

I think a lot of this has to do with Jane saying I'm not going to talk about pro-choice stuff, I'm not gonna talk about racism. We're just gonna talk about victims- helping victims. We're not gonna talk about any oppressions and all these lesbians coming around. Everybody's the same…So I think a lot of that was motivated by racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Jane took advantage of the fact that some shelter EDs were resistant to talking about gender, race, and sexuality, which further validated the AVC's concern about the proposal to move the AVC's duties into the GOCW. Ultimately, this argument was not enough to sway most EDs but did compel some to relinquish their organisational membership at the CDVA, which was perceived by some to be a radical, feminist organisation. These events added ideological differences to accompany the other political and economic arguments for the GOCW's consolidation of power.

**Resisting State Co-option**

The AVC strategically characterised themselves as a state agency with the attributes of a community-based organisation, while leveraging neoliberal discourses on volunteerism, in order to successfully resist state co-option. Public resistance tactics included calling on constituents to contact their legislators aimed to correct the spread of false information about the agency. The AVC staff sent out mass email messages with speaking points, legislative updates, and calls to action. A major hurdle the AVC faced was that many legislators lacked basic knowledge about

 

the agency, which facilitated the spread of inaccurate information. In practice, the AVC operated as below the radar as possible during Governor Payne's two terms in order to avoid drawing attention to the agency rooted in concern they would be attacked in one form or another, similar to their hesitancy to propose legislation during this time. This may have inadvertently contributed to legislators' lack of familiarity with the agency.

Kelly lobbied at the Capitol nearly every day throughout the 2009 legislative session, which placed an inordinate amount of stress on her and the staff. Kelly witnessed inequities within the capitol firsthand. Leadership within the legislature was predominately white men, which did not reflect the composition of the state population and was problematic in a setting where committee chairs possessed enormous power over which bills were heard and emerge out of committee. Sexual harassment was widespread, and Kelly described interactions between male legislators and female lobbyists as disturbing. Men represented the vast majority of state legislators, which stood in stark contrast to their actual demographic composition within the state.[11] The racial and ethnic composition of the state legislature was also not representative of the population.[12]

A public legislative hearing on the House bill eliminating the AVC was a pivotal moment. One call to action was attending this hearing to speak on the AVC's behalf. Eleven speakers were strategically selected by AVC staff and board members in order to present a justification for their existence. Taken as a whole, the arguments demonstrated a creative use of scale and spatial imagery to validate the AVC's role. The AVC was described as the only state agency with a statewide plan to end domestic violence and was 'unique' due to a diverse advisory board composition representative of a range of city and county-level perspectives. A white male speaker, self-identified as a former perpetrator, referred to the AVC as a 'watchdog of the state.' He argued the AVC's surveillance of domestic violence policies and practices across the state validated its high reaching authority. Multiple speakers presented the AVC as a critical source of support for 'local communities' and described how AVC staff supported antiviolence work over the years. The AVC was also represented as a community organisation in its own right because board members represented different localities. The Executive Director of a domestic violence advocacy organisation for Latino communities, argued that much of the AVC's work was performed by volunteers who represented 'community members,' which she proposed sent the message that 'the community' is responsible for antiviolence work. Moving the AVC's functions to DHR would transmit the message that this work was the state's responsibility and would lead to greater fiscal responsibilities for the state.

Another tactic to demonstrate the AVC's value was to highlight their capacity to leverage volunteer labour through its advisory board and one staff position. Early in the legislative session Kelly asked Jess, the AVC Community Coalition Liaison, to send an email survey to all of the community coalition chairpersons across the state to document the number of volunteer hours members spent collectively on their work. Kelly aimed to quantify the 'free' labour Jess' one position was able to leverage, which appealed to neoliberal ideologies promoting volunteerism and a smaller, more flexible work force. This approach reflected an overall focus on the bureaucratic procedure of demonstrating 'measurable outcomes,' which showcased efficiency and cost savings by stretching the state dollar. Highlighting the AVC's work as 'free' volunteer labour in opposition to the notion of big government was an interesting discursive strategy when the AVC's entire existence was predicated upon their being a state agency.

Strategies to fight elimination represented a multi-pronged approach to legislative advocacy that showcased the AVC's value as a quasi-state agency with the attributes of a community organisation. The statewide response to the AVC's legislative calls to action was heard loud and clear as legislators were bombarded with calls, emails, and in-person visits. Kelly and Shannon heard legislators felt compelled by the response to support the AVC. Together they lobbied for a new House bill eliminating the AVC's term legislation and extending its life indefinitely, which ultimately died in the Senate Rules committee, but they were ultimately able to modify the language in the original DHR reorganisation bill to achieve a similar effect. These strategies were effective and the AVC was able to forestall eradication.[13]

**Questioning State Attachment**

In the midst of these struggles, the AVC staff increasingly questioned their attachment to the state, which they associated with institutions of power that participated in the governance of its citizens through both formal structures of the government and informal modes of governance deployed to monitor, regulate, and control populations. They spent a great deal of time during staff meetings and informal conversations discussing their formal role as a state agency and passionately differentiating themselves from other state bureaucracies. Two of their program activities that were a source of trepidation were their monitoring work over community coalitions

[11] In 2010 women represented only 19.1% of the state legislators versus 51.2% of the state population.

[12] In 2009 the state legislature was 22% African American versus 30% of the state population and 1% Latino versus 8.8% of the state population.

[13] The second round of attacks in 2010 required a different set of the resistance strategies that were also effective and are detailed in the author's dissertation.

 

and batterer intervention programs (BIPs).[14] As the staff sorted through these feelings, they reasserted the spatialisation of government of the state from above, highlighting the disconnectedness from the local and critiquing state actors' lack of knowledge of what is happening 'on the ground'.

While the AVC staff was uncomfortable with their role as a governing entity, historically the AVC did take actions to support, monitor, and direct antiviolence practice, particularly through their work with community coalitions and BIPs. For example, Jess was viewed as an authority on community coalitions and substantiated her expertise through the distribution of particular recommendations and resources. At the same time, through her interactions with community coalitions she used explicit strategies to resist a dictatorial image as herself as an agent of the state. She declared the diversity of localities across the state, and argued their organisational goals and structure should be reflective of this diversity. She joked about and directly rejected her authority over community coalitions during regular interactions. A push and pull between structured advice and qualifying authority was characteristic of Jess' approach. Her assertion of difference from the state represented an act of resistance in a context where her professional responsibilities included a governing role over community coalitions.

Staff had critical discussions about state sanctioned structural violence and structural inequalities embedded in the criminal justice system, which undergirded their trepidations regarding their role. A key area of the AVC's work that staff interrogated was their regulatory work over local actors and their embeddedness in the criminal justice system vis-à-vis the training, certification, and monitoring of BIPs. Amy, the AVC BIP Coordinator, questioned whether social change was possible when working through oppressive structures that produced and exacerbated social inequalities. While Amy problematised her participation in the BIP work and simultaneously her culpability in the regulation and surveillance of perpetrators, she felt constrained by her job requirements and statutorily defined rules for BIP certification. Even so, Amy believed their work did help to produce positive changes that improved safety for survivors and held perpetrators accountable.

The AVC staff struggled with their role but also harnessed imaginings of the state and aligned with neoliberal values through their survival tactics. This response was grounded in a fear of elimination and commitment to antiviolence work, which was not surprising given their precarious existence as demonstrated historically by their continued need to demonstrate their value. After two years of battles, the AVC was able dodge state co-option, but much time and energy was allocated to survival. This was so much so that they had to cancel their 2009 annual conference due to time limitations. Speculative conversations about why the AVC was under attack dominated day-to-day staff conversations and everyday practices were infused with resistance tactics that kept the struggle at the forefront of their minds. If Kelly asked the staff to create or review an email for distribution concerning the legislation battles, everyday work was temporarily put on hold to complete the task. There was a palpable sense of urgency in these requests. The staff was under an enormous amount of stress, not knowing if the AVC and their jobs along with it would be eliminated. By the end of 2010, four of the seven long-time staff voluntarily left their positions at the AVC, including the Executive Director, and the majority of long-standing board members were swapped out for new appointees.

## DISCUSSION

Just as the state secures its authority and legitimacy through invoking and reproducing images of verticality and spatial encompassment (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), the AVC appropriated these powerful claims and produced a similar effect. The linguistic strategy of identifying the AVC as a community organisation invoked neoliberal ideologies that praised civic participation and a reduction of big government (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Hyatt 2001). Martin (1990) also illuminates how conceptualisations of state power can be co-opted in order to fight injustices. Speakers at the hearing characterised the fact that the AVC was the only state agency committed to addressing domestic violence but characterised it as a unique, quasi-state agency because of the community representation and volunteer labour leveraged by it. By arguing antiviolence work belonged to the community not the state, there was an argument for the preservation of the AVC's volunteer advisory board. The AVC's capacity to claim such bilocality, as of and simultaneously below the state, reveals the socially constructed nature of the state and the community as sites of political action and sometimes opposition.

The tenuousness of the AVC's position calls into question the viability of feminist, social movement actors incorporated into formal institutions of state power, or indeed, that are state funded and therefore accountable to the state for their existence. While not an NGO, the AVC experienced similar paradoxes and constraints on their work compared with NGOs formally attached to and economically dependent on the state. AVC board members and staff were increasingly hesitant to propose legislation under Governor Payne's reign because they were afraid that doing so might open themselves up to losing past legislative successes. One way of interpreting this response

[14] Batterer Intervention Programs are a court-ordered program designed to rehabilitate perpetrators of domestic violence. The programs typically prioritise both the safety of survivors and holding perpetrators accountable for their abusive behaviour.

 

is through Uzwiak's (2013) 'embodiment of fear' framework, which describes how fear of jeopardising organisational work sometimes leads to decisions in opposition to ideological perspectives. Similarly, the AVC's commitment to their continued positioning as a state agency working with formal state structures to influence antiviolence practice across the state dissuaded them from proactive legislative advocacy grounded in fear they might lose their position. The problems posed by the NGO-isation of the United States antiviolence movement hold true at this site as well. Markowitz and Tice (2002) present a vexing conceptualisation of such paradoxes that raised important questions that helped frame my analysis. They posited that while feminist activists efforts to professionalise organisations have successfully enabled 'once marginal feminist voices to be heard in established centre of political power…such efforts have frequently contributed to the persistence or creation of social hierarchies within and between women's organisations, as well as a subversion—or more generously—a reorientation of social change agendas and strategies' (954). The AVC staff contemplated this and wondered if it was possible to produce positive social change by working 'through the system' without reorienting dominant social change agendas.

The AVC staffs' internal struggle with their state alignment speaks to the challenges of antiviolence work in the United States neoliberal context, and is exacerbated when coupled with the attempted silencing of race, gender, and sexuality within the broader anti-violence community. They willingly engaged with what Reinelt (1995) identifies as the 'politics of engagement,' which is tied to a belief in their ability to institutionalise changes in policy vis-à-vis their state attachment. This was envisioned not only through legislative advocacy work but also through education projects targeting a wide range of systems to reform popular understandings of domestic violence. The perception that everyone is equally at risk of experiencing domestic violence was a powerful notion permeating across a range of settings. Across a diverse network of domestic violence advocates and other professionals, the erasure of difference happened through the use of the label 'political' and an argument that all survivors' experiences were the same couched in 'discourses of equality'. The ways race, gender, sexual orientation, and class differentially impacts the experiences of survivors and perpetrators was deemed irrelevant and furthermore, too 'political'.

Scholars have addressed the dangers of claiming equality as a political strategy (Minker and Snider, 2006; Richie, 2000). Jane leveraged this construction of domestic violence by arguing issues related to race, sexuality, and other 'political' issues could be ignored if she were in charge of the AVC's and CDVA's duties. She used this tactic to sway shelter EDs to switch sides, which made combating her agency's attempts at co-opting the work of both agencies all the more challenging. Sociologist and African American Studies scholar Beth Richie (2000) has dealt with the prominent expression in outreach and education work in the U. S. antiviolence movement, 'it can happen to anyone', which represents an effort by activists to deter the individualisation of the problem among the general public. Richie argues the popularity of this truism has led to the erasure of race and class as meaningful analytic categories and produces a problematic emphasis on white, middle-class women as 'deserving' victims. Sociologists Minaker and Snider (2006) have examined the growth of gender-neutral analyses in public and scholarly attention to husbands as domestic violence victims in Canada, which has become a new 'common sense' (755). This understanding of domestic violence is substantiated by 'discourses of equality,' namely the socio-political preoccupation with declaring the false claim of equality in male and female experiences of domestic violence, which functions to conceal inequities. In fact, according to the 2011 United States National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, lifetime and 12-month prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking are higher for women than men (Breiding at al., 2011). I identify 'discourses of equality' as a tool used to erase difference and depoliticise the issue of domestic violence, in turn hampering the AVC's resistance tactics against state co-option.

Following Markowitz and Tice, did the AVC's reliance upon the state for funding and ultimate resistance tactics in the face of political attacks produce a 'reorientation of social change agendas and strategies'? The AVC's entanglements with Governor Payne's Office certainly allocated much time to fighting for survival, and the ultimate departure of over half of the AVC staff and all long-standing board members produced a loss of institutional knowledge. However, the agency was ultimately successful in avoiding state co-option, it still exists today, and was able to host their conference in 2010 and subsequent years since then. Proactive legislative and policy advocacy were clearly tempered during the years under Governor Payne's tenure, but for years preceding the attacks the AVC successfully advocated for changes to improve the implementation of laws and policies, and reform criminal justice system responses to domestic violence. As Goett's (2015) ethnographic research suggests, the limits of legal reform to address domestic violence are that such an approach favours controlling and criminalising marginalised communities, instead of pursuing more comprehensive strategies that are attentive to the intersectional inequities that produce and condone interpersonal and structural violence. With that said, the AVC was able to expand their focus while Governor Payne was in office, by establishing the fatality review project, grounded in an understanding that a focus on criminal and legal reform left out other important sites where routes to justice and safety might be achieved. This work did not directly challenge the dominant criminalisation and social service provision response

 

model in the state, but complemented it through a more holistic approach to interventions. The AVC was able to continue the fatality review project each year during the political attacks and annually since that time, raising attention to an intersectional analysis of domestic violence among its board members and representatives from various systems to present opportunities for system changes. These shifts provide evidence the AVC's education project was not derailed.

## CONCLUSION

While the unstable and contested context of feminist, antiviolence work attached to the state at my field site is clear, so was the AVC's capacity to co-opt discourses of power and authority leveraged by the state in order to resist a more robust state co-option. The AVC staff and board members were successful in institutionalising changes over the first ten years of their existence that improved system responses to domestic violence, although not always as successful as they would hope. The consensus amongst AVC staff and board members was they had much more work to do and while an uphill battle, if they were co-opted or consolidated more fully under a different state agency, outcomes for those impacted by domestic violence would surely be worse. The political attacks, while ultimately unsuccessful, illuminate the trappings of political and economic attachment to the state and the insidious ways barriers to social change are structured.

Although many scholars and activists have demonstrated the negative ramifications of professionalisation and the increased interconnectedness and reliance upon the state by NGOs, others highlight possibilities and benefits. For example, Markowitz and Tice (2002) describe the ways in which professionalisation has created space for marginalised voices representing social justice movements within sites of political power. Abraham and Tastsoglou (2016b) identify education as an opportunity conferred by the state's involvement in antiviolence work, which should focus on deconstructing essentialist understandings of social groups and making visible inequality and discrimination, including the state's role in perpetuating it. While Abraham and Tastsoglou identify opportunities available through the state's participation in antiviolence work, they also argue there is a need for more community-based efforts grounded in informal social support networks to compliment state investments. In fact, they argue such an education project will only be successful if there is continuous pressure from social movement actors.

Events in this case study have illustrated how there are opportunities presented by collaboration between state-based and community-level groups. These opportunities were illuminated when community coalition members lobbied on the AVC's behalf in response to the political attacks. Another way the AVC's relationship with community coalitions supported their ability to resist state co-option was when neoliberal ideologies lauding volunteerism were invoked based on the 'free' volunteer labour the AVC leveraged through community coalitions, which effectively represented the AVC as the antithesis of big government. Finally, the AVC's strategic inclusion of socially powerful criminal justice system representatives on its board, which was a recommended model for community coalitions, gave weight to their resistance strategies and education work more broadly. The present case suggests that structural attachment and economic dependence on the state presents risks of state co-option for an antiviolence agency; however, there are opportunities to oppose state co-option when leveraging spatial and vertical discourses of authority and legitimacy in conjunction with leveraging strategic connections to community-level groups.

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# Pussy Provocations: Feminist Protest and Anti-Feminist Resurgence in Russia

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## ABSTRACT

The Russian feminist punk-art group Pussy Riot sparked a remarkable series of responses with their provocative "punk prayer" in a Moscow cathedral in 2012. This article analyzes the social, political, and cultural dynamics of provocation (*provokatsiya*) by examining everyday conversations, speeches, articles and other linguistic acts through which Russian Orthodox, feminist, and left-leaning and liberal participants in the anti-Putin opposition made sense of Pussy Riot. A provocation violates norms in ways that compel observers to name and defend those norms. This process simultaneously invigorates norms and helps people shore up their own senses of self amid uncertainty. Yet what observers identify as the provocation — what norms are perceived to be violated — shapes what values they reinforce. Responding to Pussy Riot, Russian Orthodox activists asserted themselves as defenders of tradition against the forces of Western cultural imperialism, including feminism and LGBT rights. Yet most responses from the anti-Putin opposition focused on norms related to speech and protest rights, while Russian feminists were often reluctant even to claim Pussy Riot as feminist at all. Due to this asymmetry, Pussy Riot's feminist protest revitalized anti-feminism in Russia without a concomitant strengthening of feminist values among supporters.

**Keywords:** Russia, feminist politics, right-wing politic

## INTRODUCTION

> We consider the "punk prayer" an extremist crime, degrading millions of women of faith, and demand an appropriate legal assessment be given by society and those in power to this action. It is necessary to denounce this provocation, so that such antics are not repeated. Otherwise, our society can safely be characterised as terminally morally ill.

In March 2012 the Union of Orthodox Women, a Russian civil society organisation, released this statement in response to a performance almost nobody witnessed: the 'punk prayer' of the self-described 'feminist punk-art group' Pussy Riot. Five figures in bright dresses, anonymous under colourful balaclavas, had momentarily taken over the altar of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (CCS) in central Moscow, shouting a punk song whose lyrics attacked the intimate church-state alliance that increasingly limited women's and LGBT rights in Russia: "Mother of God, chase Putin out! Mother of God, become a feminist!" It lasted only about two minutes before the performers were escorted out by security. Combining video footage of this performance with material recorded elsewhere and including their tussle with the Cathedral guards, the Pussy Riot collective uploaded a finished video to YouTube on February 21. By March 4, two members of the group, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, had been arrested. They were soon joined by a third, Ekaterina Samutsevich. The video, along with news of the jailed women, continued circulating online[1]. With its rough, hand-made costumes, lyrics more shouted than sung, and a clear, even crude, feminist message, the group's performance evoked the 'Riot Grrrl' feminist punk rock movement that developed in the 1990s United States, remade for a 21st-century media landscape[2].

The Union of Orthodox Women deemed Pussy Riot's performance a "blasphemous act [that] insulted not only the feelings of the faithful, but also the heroism of our ancestors." Strong words for a song, particularly for one

[1] As of May 2017, the video and accompanying post about the action remains available at: http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html

[2] For a discussion of comparisons between Pussy Riot and Riot Grrrl, see Groeneveld 2015.

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that circulated mainly online and whose punk aesthetic had little resonance for the average Russian Orthodox believer. That an organisation created by the Russian Orthodox Church and with close connections to the ruling party — its leadership included members of the Russian Duma[3] — would level such words against a half-dozen artists who were relatively unknown outside art and activist circles seemed inexplicable. How could such a marginal group provoke such a strong backlash?

Over the year and a half following the punk prayer, I was conducting fieldwork on gender politics in Moscow amid a wave of mass protests against Russian President Vladimir Putin, primarily with feminist, LGBT, and leftist opposition activists who were working to persuade participants in the broader opposition movement to support feminist and pro-LGBT themes. Their goals included ending harassment of women and LGBT activists within the movement, adding stronger social programs such as better child care to the opposition's platform, and uniting against the Putin government's attacks on LGBT Russians. Even as the three arrested members of Pussy Riot disappeared into the Russian criminal justice system, the theme of Pussy Riot was nearly inescapable. My social media feeds — in Russian and in the English-language — flooded with debates about Pussy Riot. Opposition rallies and marches were filled with signs, chants, and even balloons referring to the group. Pussy Riot — an action, an idea, an iconic image — circulated through public events and everyday conversations, in mass media and online, in Russia and abroad. The case prompted a highly publicised court trial, prison sentences for two members, a new law to make offending religious sentiments a criminal offence[4], as well as sundry conference papers, books, documentary films, and even a concert featuring pop icons like Madonna and Blondie.

A growing body of feminist, social science, and area studies scholarship has shown how Pussy Riot's punk prayer and its aftermath illuminated key tensions that animated Russian politics and activism in 2012, in particular the repressive power of the Putin-era state, the influence of conservative Russian Orthodoxy and its relationship with state nationalism, and the central roles of gender and spectacles of gendered violence in the Putin government's consolidation of authoritarian power (Bernstein, 2013; Johnson, 2014; Rourke and Wiget, 2016; Schroeder and Karpov, 2013; Shevzov, 2014; Sperling, 2015; Tolstaya, 2014). Scholars have also examined what the Pussy Riot case reveals about new forms of feminist protest in Russia (Johnson, 2014) and globally (Baer, 2016) and how local feminist organising is transformed through transnational solidarity efforts and the circulation of prominent cases like that of Pussy Riot (Channell, 2014; Groeneveld, 2014; Wiedlack and Neufeld, 2014). These studies have underscored the remarkable ability of the Pussy Riot case to clarify key values in Russian and Western societies that are contested in contemporary politics. While previous studies have generally focused on what meanings people have ascribed to Pussy Riot and their punk prayer, this article examines how and why people made the Pussy Riot case meaningful.

Analysing how politically engaged feminists, participants in the anti-Putin opposition movement, and Russian Orthodox women interpreted and responded to the Pussy Riot case, I define and describe a phenomenon that may be central to contemporary reactionary politics: provocation (Russian *provokatsiya*). A provocation is a type of action that violates a norm in ways that seemingly *compels* one to respond, from the perspective of the person who has been provoked. In the Union of Orthodox Women's statement, for example, the punk prayer's offence to women of faith is so extreme that it is 'necessary' to denounce it, lest society itself be further degraded. This feeling of compulsion is central to the subjective experience of provocation: provocation seems to be an attack on one's worldview, one's values, and even one's own sense of agency: one seems to have no choice about whether to react. Crucially, provocation induces a sense of acute need to articulate the norms being transgressed, and at the same time functions as an opportunity to defend those norms, meaning that provocation has the potential to re-invigorate the very norms and values it is felt to challenge. As I show below, through their reactions to the provocations they identified in the Pussy Riot case, my interlocutors positioned themselves within an ever-shifting political field and asserted their own normative visions of how the world ought to be.

My analysis of the Pussy Riot cases focuses on the everyday conversations, speeches, articles and other linguistic acts through which the politically engaged Muscovites I worked with expressed and circulated ideas about Pussy Riot. I examine why Pussy Riot seemed to have a magnetic pull on conversation and what kinds of social and cultural work all that talk was doing. This analysis of Pussy Riot aims to explain provocation and how it can make certain political actions particularly resonant, eventful, and even 'viral' — which might seem like a boon to grassroots feminist activists like the members of Pussy Riot. Yet, as I show, the dynamics of provocation can limit a protest's ability to effect change, instead serving as a spur to reinforce the very norms that activists are challenging or to draw attention to entirely different values than the original activists intended. While this article focuses on

[3] For example, its advisory board includes Yelena Mizulina, head of the Russian Duma Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs. Mizulina is known for her leading role in passing legislation to criminalize so-called 'gay propaganda' and to decriminalize domestic violence, among other issues.

[4] Federal Law of the Russian Federation No. 136-FZ On Amendments to Article 148 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation to Counter Insult of Religious Beliefs and Feelings of the Citizens, Ros. Gaz., No. 6117, Jul. 2, 2013.

 

the implications of this process of crystallisation for feminist activism, a clearer understanding of the dynamics of provocation may help illuminate a variety of cases in which responses to a protest shift away from the protester's original intent. For example, in 2017 whilst American football player Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the U.S. national anthem to protest police brutality, opponents claimed his provocation violated values of patriotism, leading some of his defenders to focus on asserting their own patriotism in response. It is this dynamic of provocation that the present article addresses.

I collected conversations about Pussy Riot from March 2012 through to May 2013 amongst the politically active people I was working with, finding that three groups of interlocutors emerged based on how they responded to the Pussy Riot case: conservative religious activists; opposition activists who were opposed to Putin but who did not primarily identify as feminists; and feminist-identified activists. When conservative religious activists talked about Pussy Riot, that talk enabled them to assert their own positions as defenders of tradition against the forces of Western cultural imperialism and materialist values. These observers often framed their responses explicitly in terms of opposing Western feminism and ideologies of sexual freedom. Yet most responses from anti-Putin opposition activists focused on defending norms related to speech and protest rights vis-a-vis the state, often positioning the Pussy Riot defendants as particularly vulnerable as women — a set of responses that did little to defend the values of gender equality and LGBT rights the group explicitly emphasised in their performance. Meanwhile, other Russian feminists tended to position themselves as ambivalent toward Pussy Riot, focusing their interpretive energy on defining the boundaries of feminism and appropriate protest.

Furthermore, I argue that provocation is an important dynamic in reactionary conservatism, explaining how individuals who belong to a politically and culturally dominant group can experience their position as that of an embattled minority. In the case of Pussy Riot, the process of provocation illustrates how a feminist protest might energise an anti-feminist right wing movement without spurring a parallel resurgence of feminist mobilisation. Examining how and why "Pussy Riot" was circulated by these groups and others, I argue, shows the potential value and risks of provocation as a tactic for activists with few resources and marginalised causes. Provocation is a generative action, creating opportunities for challenging and renegotiating norms by unsettling them. At the same time, provocation can also induce a hardening of those same norms, producing continuity in how power is structured.

## THE PUNK PRAYER MOVES FROM CATHEDRAL TO STREET

I first encountered Pussy Riot at a political rally in honour of International Women's Day on March 8, 2012, just a few days after the arrests. The Russian liberal-democratic party Yabloko had organised a rally in downtown Moscow along with local feminist, leftist[5], and LGBT activists and organisations. The bitter cold numbed my toes as I joined other attendees filing through the police security check into the square around the Monument to the 1905 Revolution. The stoic faces of the doomed revolutionaries loomed above as the crowd grew. Activists, many of them Russians in their teens and twenties, passed out flyers, set up a sound system, and unfurled flags and posters: "Women make revolution, not soup!" and "For quality day care!" The crowd gradually grew to four or five dozen.

Suddenly, a cluster of people coalesced near the security gate. Voices rose. On tiptoe, I peered through the small thicket of cameras and microphones aimed at the scene. The police were trying to take an activist's poster for having an extremist slogan. The offensive message? "We don't need flowers when we're being arrested", a reference to the two Pussy Riot members who remained in jail and to the culturally conservative customs with which most Russians marked the holiday. Despite its origins in the 19th century women's movement, since the mid-20th century International Women's Day in Russia has typically been celebrated by giving gifts of flowers and chocolates to the women in one's life with little mention of feminism or women's emancipation[6]. The poster thus simultaneously rejected conventional femininity — "We don't need flowers" — while defending troublemakers who were clearly on the wrong side of the Kremlin. The rally organisers insistently defended the poster, brandishing a city-approved permit to express women's rights themes at the rally. For once the police desisted, letting the activist go and giving her poster back. The poster was propped up defiantly against the revolutionary monument for the duration of the rally, linking the rally to the Pussy Riot case in a kind of solidarity.

[5] Here, 'leftist' indicates activism ideologically and socially linked to global 'New Left' anti-capitalist movements. The leftist activists I worked with considered their politics distinct from old-guard communist organisations with origins in the Soviet system, more Occupy Wall Street than Communist Party.

[6] This depoliticisation resembles the shifts in the meaning and celebration of Mother's Day in the United States, which originated in the women's anti-war movement but by the mid-20th century had become a celebration of conventional motherhood through gift-giving.

 

Moments like this, in which someone referenced some aspect of the case, thereby circulating ideas about Pussy Riot, would punctuate protest rallies, public events, and everyday conversations around Moscow for months to follow. At first glance, this widespread circulation of Pussy Riot might appear to raise not only the group's profile, but also of what the group's members considered its feminist views. For example, the punk prayer's lyrics explicitly attacked the ways in which a close Church-state alliance threatened LGBT Russians' freedom and ridiculed the government's patriarchal, pronatalist policies:

> Black robes brag, golden epaulettes
> All parishioners crawl to bow
> The phantom of freedom is in heaven
> Gay Pride sent to Siberia in chains
>
> The head of the KGB, their chief saint
> Leads protesters to prison under escort
> To be sure not to offend His Holiness
> Women must stick to making love and babies […]
> Mother of God, Virgin, become a feminist
> Become a feminist, become a feminist (Pussy Riot, 2012)

The reactions provoked by Pussy Riot's protest show that their action was successful insofar as it drew national and even global attention. In the context of a country where mass media are increasingly controlled by the state, the simple fact that Pussy Riot's performance circulated among the public was noteworthy. As 'Olga,' a radical feminist and LGBT activist, wrote,

> Pussy Riot chose punk-rock and illegal partisan[7] performance because they were needed to express [the group's] position in conditions of bought-off and lie-ridden mass media, and likewise of conservatively oriented cultural institutions. They used a bright, postmodern, provocative uniform, which successfully contrasted itself with the formalised social consciousness. […] The bright uniform, taken from oil-punk, and above all, the provocativeness allowed them to attract the attention of various levels of society. And they started talking about Pussy Riot.

Olga was right: people talked about Pussy Riot. The provocations of the Pussy Riot case prompted people to talk about themselves, their own political predicaments, and certain kinds of values — but not necessarily the values related to feminism and LGBT rights that Pussy Riot's song lifted up.

The specific ways in which my interlocutors among Russian feminists, as well as in the broader anti-Putin opposition, felt compelled to respond to Pussy Riot tended to emphasise themes of civil rights and repressive state power, rather than the more pointedly feminist and LGBT themes raised in the group's song. Examining these responses through the concept of provocation illuminates how, despite mass circulation of and attention to the Pussy Riot case, these themes central to the group's song essentially fell to the wayside.

## MAKING SENSE OUT OF PUSSY RIOT: CLASPS AND EVENTFULNESS

The Pussy Riot case seemed to surface constantly during my fieldwork, an unavoidable topic of conversation. Yet my interlocutors rarely discussed the works and views of the group in and of themselves. More often they focused on the form the group's actions took, what they thought of the group, and how other people responded to Pussy Riot's performances, particularly the punk prayer. Similar to the linguistic process Susan Gal describes as a 'clasp' (Gal, 2007), comments about Pussy Riot asserted links between the speaker, Pussy Riot, and other topics. Through this process of rhetorical connection, a speaker creates a relationship between herself and the subject of her speech, and simultaneously places them both within a broader social/moral/political landscape. For example, the sign at the International Women's Day rally linked the sign-maker to Pussy Riot — "*We* don't need flowers when *we're* being arrested" — and implicitly set both in opposition to patriarchal holiday rituals and a repressive state. It is this quotidian linguistic work that created the political landscape of Moscow I witnessed in 2012 and 2013. Yet the fact that my interlocutors could discuss Pussy Riot in this way does not explain why they seemed compelled to do so or why the Pussy Riot case demanded attention.

[7] *Partizanskoe*, a reference to guerrilla fighters such as the Soviet partisans who fought within German-occupied territory during World War II.

 

To begin answering that question, I turn to processual or event-focused anthropology. Social events, from cockfights to initiation rituals, have long been of interest to anthropologists for what they revealed about cultural continuity and change, their "relation between a certain happening and a given symbolic system" (Sahlins, 1985: 153). Continuity was assumed to be a given, while what needed explanation were the variations, changes, and discontinuities (Robbins, 2003). This approach informs analyses of Pussy Riot that examine how the group's performance illustrated key themes in Russian gender and politics, the Pussy Riot-as-litmus-test approach. In a sense, it also informs the self-presentation of the Union of Orthodox Women, which interpreted Pussy Riot's punk prayer as 'a blasphemous act' — a rupture of norms — and presented its own members as defenders of "traditional values" — the very definition of continuity.

But this dichotomous approach risks taking for granted that such a thing as a 'given symbolic system' exists prior to and outside events, missing the ways in which social values and norms are constituted from moment to moment through social action, such as how people create and respond to an event. The need to avoid taking symbolic systems for granted may be especially acute in situations of conflict and profound uncertainty, such as war zones or periods of revolution. What could a 'given symbolic system' entail when an entire world has been shattered by war (Hoffman and Lubkemann, 2005; Das, 2007)? Similarly, across the former U.S.S.R. the dissolution of socialism and introduction of late-20th century neoliberal capitalism radically upset formerly stable systems of meaning, causing what has been characterised as a society-wide experience of liminality (Oushakine, 2004), or a dissolution of Soviet *doxa* combined with discursive destabilisation (Yurchak, 2006; Zavisca, 2011). In situations characterised by such uncertainty, it is not clear that an analytical distinction between continuity and change can even be made. The appearance of cultural continuity, such as the claim by politically active Russian Orthodox adherents that they are defending 'traditional' values, cannot be taken for granted because it is in fact "the product of effort," as Sally Falk Moore writes (1987: 727). Events are thus useful to analysts because they can make this process visible, providing "evidence of the ongoing dismantling of structures or of attempts to create new ones" (1987: 729).

I suggest that in such unsettled circumstances, the meaning-making power of events may be especially beguiling not only to analysts, but to the people trying to inhabit those liminal and uncertain worlds. As Hoffman and Lubkemann suggest, events have a "generative capacity" and "present themselves as moments of shifting possibility and constraint for the crafting of subjectivity" (2005: 324). Set within the shifting and confusing world of post-Soviet Russia, the Pussy Riot case was an event that invited a tremendous amount of meaning-making, rich in symbolism and occurring in a moment rife with eventful political action. From this perspective, the Pussy Riot case didn't merely crystallise key cultural themes or prompt changes in Russian politics and culture, but was an instrument for generating both. Furthermore, I argue, some events do more than merely present a moment of *possibility* for crafting selves and creating structures. When an event seems to transgress norms so radically as to threaten their destruction, it confronts an observer with a 'normative indeterminacy' so intolerable that the observer feels *forced* to make 'clasps', to engage in that process of interpretation and norm-asserting. Such an event transgresses the boundaries of the normative in a way that almost demands the observer articulate and reinvigorate the norm she feels to be threatened. This is, I argue, what the Union of Orthodox Women meant by 'provocation'.

## MEETING THE PROVOCATEUR

I offer this term with the caveat that calling something a 'provocation' typically implies a normative judgment, delegitimising the alleged provocateur by implying that s/he is only interested in sparking a response or starting a fight. Nonetheless, having examined how the term was used by my Moscow interlocutors, I propose it here as analytically useful to describe how a particular type of politically meaningful event unfolds, contributing to a deeper understanding of confrontational forms of political activism like Pussy Riot's punk prayer, and how they are made to matter. Provocation transforms a Pussy Riot — or even with someone else's commentary on Pussy Riot — from a mere object of conversation to an aggressive agent in the field of political action.

This sense of provocation was not only in use among Russian Orthodox activists. As my leftist interlocutors recounted and planned public events, the provocateur (*provokator*) was a common figure they referenced. For example, leading up to a Labour Day rally, one leftist group anonymously published instructions for members on a social media site. The author reminded readers that the purpose of their participation was to share certain carefully crafted messages with the public: the necessity of self-organisation of workers, a change in Russia's power structure, wariness of the liberals and media figures who named themselves leaders of the opposition movement. The article concluded with a warning:

> Don't get into senseless clashes with the police. Unfortunately, the authorities are not yet on our side. Stop the provocateurs who are trying to start such clashes or to call for them. If these clashes start anyway, try to lead away attendees along with your friends and acquaintances to a safe place. If for some

 

> reason even that becomes impossible, and it becomes necessary to oppose police violence and mass arrests, organise for self-defense, join together, give aid to the injured and support to the arrested with actions of solidarity.

A provocateur might interrupt a political action and prevent activists from pursuing their own projects. Note that the provocateur's power opposes, or even undermines, the activists' own desires and plans; they are instructed to try to avoid being drawn into clashes, but warned that such clashes might happen anyway. The provocateur thus holds the potential power to shape the actions of others contrary to their own intentions.

'Provocation' may also be used as an explanation or excuse for otherwise egregious behaviour, as when the Moscow police claimed that they were forced to make mass arrests during a public protest due to "provocateurs" in the crowd, or when 'Ivan,' a socialist activist, offered this explanation of a "comrade" who attacked an LGBT activist at a protest march:

> Unfortunately, right now many LGBT activists — and not just LGBT, by the way, but also anarchists, vegans, people who fight for animal rights, I don't know who else […] — in relation to other groups, [conduct themselves] very aggressively. Unfortunately, despite the fact that, say, at the Social March the comrade from the Left Front was clearly not in the right when he tried to rip the flag away from the girl who was carrying a rainbow flag, all the same, she was also being provocative.

Yet even dismissive uses of 'provocation' still carry the same understanding that provocation is characterised by a sense that the provoked person no longer has agency and has been made to respond against their own will. In Ivan's telling, it was not right for his comrade to rip a rainbow flag away from a fellow protester at the Social March; however, his assertion that "she was also being provocative" implies that it was the girl with the rainbow flag who caused the problem. The kinds of reactions that ensued from Pussy Riot's punk prayer show that most observers experienced their action or other aspects of the case as provocations in this sense.

## ANTI-FEMINIST REVITALISATION: THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX REACTION

What, then, did my interlocutors identify as the norms transgressed by Pussy Riot's punk prayer and its aftermath? One can start with the group's name, which despite being English and essentially meaningless in Russian, was readily understood as something crude by most Russians I talked to, whether or not they knew the English slang term[8]. The group's performance likewise seemed perfectly designed to cause a stir, transgressive in form, content, and location, as many academic commentators have noted. All the known members of Pussy Riot were young women. Their performance was not simply a protest of citizens against powerful political institutions, but a protest by young feminist women against institutions dominated by powerful older men. The gendered aspect of the case shaped how it was circulated and what people found provocative about it. As Anya Bernstein describes, media coverage of Pussy Riot's trial focused intensely, even erotically, on the three women defendants' bodies, which she argues "became vital sites for the enactment of sovereignty for a wide range of citizens" for whom the young women of Pussy Riot served as a sacrifice to sovereign violence (Bernstein, 2013: 222). Furthermore, the performance itself included crude and politically pointed language, dancing, and the use of musical instruments at the altar of an Orthodox cathedral. Crucially, the specific site of the performance, CCS, is closely associated with the Putin-era government's cultivation of Russian Orthodoxy as something close to a state religion and its reclamation of pre-Soviet history as part of official national identity.

Certainly members of the Union of Orthodox Women viewed Pussy Riot's action as an extreme provocation, reading their action as particularly degrading to women. The organisation's statement in late March 2012 linked Pussy Riot to moral decay and threats to core values:

> The recent outburst of a so-called punk group, which considers itself feminist, plunged the majority of citizens of Russia into shock. The blasphemous act insulted not only the feelings of the faithful, but also the heroism of our ancestors who died on the fields of battle in the Fatherland War of 1812.
>
> We consider the 'punk prayer' an extremist crime, degrading millions of women of faith, and demand an appropriate legal assessment be given by society and those in power to this action. It is necessary to

[8] Most often, the group's name was written in Latin characters, and occasionally it was transliterated (*Pussi Raiot*), but in conversation the group was always referred to as Pussy Riot, not a translated phrase. One of my former Russian language instructors, a member of the intelligentsia in his 60s, refused to refer to the group by name any time we discussed them, explaining that he did not want to "continue their performance".

 

> denounce this provocation, so that such antics are not repeated. Otherwise, our society can safely be characterised as terminally morally ill.

Provoked by Pussy Riot's punk prayer, the Union of Orthodox Women rhetorically established relationships between the group's action, their alleged allies and inspirations, and an imagined community of symbolically charged victims whose fundamental values were transgressed. First, they link the 'so-called punk group', Pussy Riot, to feminism. The two are then juxtaposed to the Union of Orthodox Women and "the majority of citizens of Russia," making clear that neither Pussy Riot nor feminists count as Russians, who have been 'plunged…into shock' by their provocations. Next, Pussy Riot's action is named 'blasphemous', not only un-Russian, but also counter to all that is sacred in Russian Orthodoxy and insulting to the ancestral war heroes to whom CCS was dedicated.

To understand the latter clasp, it is important to note that Pussy Riot's punk prayer was performed during the 200th anniversary of Russia's victory over Napoleon; CCS had originally been built to commemorate this victory. Under Stalin, the cathedral had been demolished and replaced with a public swimming pool, then in the 1990s it was rebuilt in gold-leaf and marble glory, with some government assistance, as part of the return of Russian Orthodoxy to the public sphere.[9] CCS's services for major Orthodox holidays are often televised and attended by prominent state officials. Throughout 2012, the Russian government and Orthodox Church collaborated on a series of commemorative events, including public and televised services at the recently rebuilt CCS and events such as the return to the cathedral of a sacred icon purported to have aided the defence of Moscow and Stalingrad against the Nazis. At the time of Pussy Riot's performance, CCS had been increasingly used to link the contemporary state to imperial history, the history of Orthodoxy, and the return of the Orthodox Church to public life after socialism — all values that this statement drew on, reinforcing an official narrative of historical and cultural continuity.

By prompting this process of naming and linking the communities and values under attack, provocations like the punk prayer can result in the clarification and revitalisation of the institutions and social norms they target. The Union of Orthodox Women's response asserted that Church, nation, and ancestors were not only all victims of the punk prayer, but that they were united in a shared community, the "majority of citizens" whose interest was the health of "our society." The statement constructed an entire moral world whose contours have been laid bare by the provocation of the punk prayer. The use of the term 'provocation' in this response helps illustrate the norm-revitalising process of norm violation. The authors worry that this "blasphemous act" is not an outlier, but a hint of worse to come. Pussy Riot far exceeded the limits of acceptable behaviour and did so in a particularly publicly meaningful place. Such an action must be answered, lest it invite further blasphemies and the erasure of norms altogether.

One key feature of a provocation, then, is that it threatens the social order through transgression. As Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova (2012) point out, transgression of norms in a symbolically rich performance is a key reason why the group's performance attracted such attention. Simultaneously, though, provocation presents an opportunity to assert what the social order is by claiming that it has been transgressed. In an environment of uncertainty, where norms are unclear and unsettled, provocation carries the potential to redefine what kinds of actions are possible and permitted. The provocation causes observers to feel they *must* respond in order to constitute and defend their preferred social order. In this case, the combination of location, form, and message of Pussy Riot's action appeared acutely threatening to many Orthodox women whose political projects are directed toward increasing respect for Orthodoxy and the influence of the Orthodox Church in public life.

Presenting at a major conference in October 2012 for Russian Orthodox women active in social and political work, 'Anna,' a retired schoolteacher, invoked Pussy Riot as an example of what she perceived as declining morality all around:

> We unfortunately in this year must talk about declines in morality, about declines in morals, about the demographic crisis, about the crisis in motherhood […] Young women break into a cathedral, put on so-called "punk prayers." […] That those who perpetuate the case of the movement Femen, as the movement is called by feminists, absolutely so to speak related to the feminist movement, are prepared to rip up holy crosses, and that is good to them. I would like to remind you again that the cross was— The first cross worshipped in Russia was raised by Queen Olga. It's not that today young women just behave themselves that way and that this happens. I think this is not simply a sad event. It was made by our terrible time. It was an attack on Orthodoxy and an attack also on us.

[9] The Cathedral also receives about 350 million rubles/year from the Moscow city budget (2013). Soderzhanie khrama Khrista Spasitelia v 2013 godu oboidetsia biudzhetu Mosckvy v 350 mln rublei. Gazeta.

 

Anna's organisation had released a statement online shortly after Pussy Riot's action expressing a similar set of associations:

> The main purpose of women—is it really causing boorish behavior, the satisfaction of vile passions, the desire for wealth? If this is really so, then it is a shame for all women. What kind of example will we leave for our descendants? What kind of families will they create?
>
> The concept of "women's happiness" is deliberately distorted in the eyes of the public, encouraging women to relate disparagingly to traditional family values, placing in the forefront only the cult of consumption and social self-realisation.
>
> Already now we see how actively feminist organisations support the idea of safe abortions, the LGBT community, sterilisation and other such things. Is this the defence of women's rights? Not one of them talks about chastity, about the right of a woman to give birth to a child, about fidelity and self-sacrifice.

Interestingly, Anna asserted a connection between Pussy Riot and the Ukrainian feminist group Femen, which had felled a large cross in a public action in Ukraine shortly after the sentencing of the three convicted Pussy Riot members. Femen was perhaps best known for actions featuring its young female activists appearing topless in public, often with messages written on their bodies highlighting issues such as sex trafficking. Anna establishes an opposition between Orthodoxy and feminists, a group which includes both Pussy Riot and Femen and which both signals and causes moral decline (see also Channell, 2014 and Zychowicz, 2011). At the same time, Anna allies herself and her audience with Orthodoxy, morality, and Russia. Her vilification of Pussy Riot and other "feminists" helps establish Anna's position as a defender of morality and the nation in a time of crisis.

As Anna's multifaceted clasp shows, the punk prayer was especially resonant because of its openness to further associations. A provoked observer could reach to a wide range of potential meanings to connect to the case and thereby a wide range of potential norms and values to reinvigorate. Yet that openness to clasps also meant that Pussy Riot's own goals and intentions exerted only a limited influence on the outcomes of their provocation. The highly contested questions of Pussy Riot's relationship to the anti-Putin opposition, and to feminism and other feminist groups, illustrates this symbolic openness. In particular, it illustrates how each observer's responses to the provocations of Pussy Riot enabled the action to reinvigorate the anti-feminist values described above, without having a parallel energising effect on values related to feminism and LGBT rights.

## STATE POWER, NOT FEMINISM: LEFT AND LIBERAL OPPOSITION REACTIONS

The asymmetry in which values were reinvigorated resulted from how sympathetic observers identified the provocation of Pussy Riot: which aspects of the event they considered provocations, which norms they believed were being transgressed, and which values needed defence. Many people within the anti-Putin opposition identified the authorities' repressive response to Pussy Riot as the fundamental provocation of the case, linking the group to repression at large rather than to problems facing women or LGBT individuals in particular. As a result, their defences of the group had little to say about feminism. Instead, people active in the opposition tended to interpret the Pussy Riot case in ways that reinforced values related to state power, and even to reinforce patriarchal norms by centering several members' status as mothers.

The response of self-proclaimed opposition leader Aleksey Navalny is illustrative. A lawyer, Navalny came to prominence through blogging about government corruption and had a substantial following in anti-Putin circles, though the leftist, feminist, and LGBT activists I worked with were concerned about his lack of interest in labour rights and his tendency to lean on nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. In a blog post shortly after the three Pussy Riot members were arrested, Navalny expressed a common liberal opposition response to the case:

> The action of theirs in CCS - it was idiotic and there's no disputing that. […]
> I, to put it mildly, wouldn't have liked it if at the moment when I was in a church, some kind of crazy girls ran in and started to run around the altar.
> We have an indisputable fact: fools who carried out some minor hooliganism for the sake of publicity.
> Now there are two main questions:
> 1. Have they committed lawbreaking of a character so dangerous to society, to hold girls behind bars?
> Obviously — no.
> 2. Are there circumstances that preclude holding the defendants in custody?
> Obviously — yes.

 

> Nadezhda Tolokonnikova has a small child. A four year old girl.
> Maria Alyokhina has a son who is five years old.
> There is no reason to hold them in detention. (Navalny, 2012)

As Bernstein (2013) describes, it was common for opposition members to raise the fact of Nadya's and Masha's motherhood as exacerbating what they saw as an oppressive state response to an 'idiotic' action. Not only did defences like Navalny's fail to link the group's action to feminist values, but they reinforced the rather anti-feminist notion that the women were more sympathetic and valuable as mothers than as political actors (see also Agaltsova 2014, Sperling 2014). Indeed, Navalny's interpretation refuses to attribute any political message at all to the group, instead simply calling them 'crazy girls'. Instead, Navalny focuses on the case as one more in a line of instances of unfair treatment of powerless citizens by a corrupt and powerful government, comparing the detention of Pussy Riot to recent criminal cases involving a bank official and a local government official, who received more lenient treatment for more serious offences.

> "[The Pussy Riot members] have been locked up in a cell for 60 days during the investigation of an offense for which it's not possible to give more than a sentence of five days' arrest. […] This is senseless and disgusting cruelty, much worse than their stupid, but minor hooliganism."

Even more sympathetic feminist responses often identified the state's punitive response as the primary provocation of the case. Olga gave me a copy of an essay she had written for a *samizdat*[10] feminist literary journal when I asked her what she thought of the group. Olga had trained as a historian but had made a career in media amid the crises of the post-Soviet period; her insightful analyses of contemporary politics drew on this professional experience as well as her academic training. About Pussy Riot's resonance with the public, she had written:

> They appeared in the needed time in the needed place and revealed those acute social problems which had long been brewing in society, but which nobody could quite so precisely poke a finger into. […] It is entirely true that if the three members hadn't been arrested, Pussy Riot would have remained a punk feminist youth group, an art-activist project, which would have developed within the frame of the youth culture-protest political movement. But their arrest—that continuation of their performance, a growth of their performance in the mass scale of the entire country—that's what made Pussy Riot a phenomenon.

This emphasis on Pussy Riot as examples of the Russian state's abuse of civil rights meant that while Orthodox women shored up anti-feminist values in response to Pussy Riot, Russians active in the opposition instead reinforced a worldview opposed to state oppression that lacked a particularly feminist component. For example, at the March of Millions opposition protest in September 2012, hundreds of participants had signs, balloons, t-shirts, and other materials echoing the group's multicoloured balaclavas. When I asked 'Dasha', a leftist activist in her late teens, why Pussy Riot was such a strong theme at this protest, she told me, "They're a symbol of repression now." Dasha explained that the Pussy Riot case demonstrated the excessive force being used by the authorities against protestors, including herself and many of her friends. She did not raise the issue of feminism or mention LGBT rights.

Echoing Dasha's linkage of Pussy Riot to other examples of state repression, many signs at the march mentioned the members of Pussy Riot alongside other opposition protesters who had been arrested on seemingly specious charges. While the Union of Orthodox Women viewed Pussy Riot as agents of a blasphemous feminism and pro-LGBT activism, these protesters viewed Pussy Riot's case as evidence of encroaching authoritarianism undermining norms of free political speech. In a way, it didn't matter what Pussy Riot's intended message had been: the fact that they had been imprisoned merely for singing in a cathedral was the provocation. This defence was powerful — but it did not bring feminism to the centre of the opposition movement in the way that Orthodox activists so tightly linked opposition to feminism with their defence of the Russian nation and the Orthodox Church.

One April evening as I walked with 'Alex' to his socialist organisation's weekly meeting, he asked me whether I found Pussy Riot's name offensive in English. I responded that it wasn't the sort of name I would mention to my grandmother, then asked what he thought of the group in general. Alex explained:

[10] 'Self-published', a term often used to refer to censored materials that were published by Soviet dissidents, and which contemporary activists occasionally use today. Indeed, their publishing practices have more than a little continuity with those of earlier dissidents. Igor's organization had acquired a large copy machine, which occupied a corner of their headquarters/office, and which they used to produce leaflets and sometimes journals like "No Means No!" They currently used a professional printer to produce large quantities of journals and their occasional newspaper, but in earlier periods they had had difficulty finding a printer willing to publish their materials.

 

> 'Our official position is not to support such actions because they are not helpful. This is just actionism. It doesn't express any message, especially to the common people, to the workers. They don't understand an action like this. But of course we don't support the excessive repression used against the group.'

Drawing on his own experience as well as his study of Marxist theory, Alex positioned the punk prayer as the wrong kind of protest, not aligned with him or his comrades, but the state's prosecution of the group as also in opposition to his positions. In other words, he wasn't exactly on Pussy Riot's side with respect to provocative punk feminist acts, but he certainly wasn't on the state's, either. While maintaining a sense that his group and Pussy Riot shared certain problems—repression by the authorities, difficulty in gaining political influence—Alex still created distance between Pussy Riot and his own group. Thus Alex's analysis and critique of Pussy Riot simultaneously functioned as a legitimation of his own group's tactics and ideology.

As Alex himself noted, he was expressing a position shared by others in his leftist organisation. Members of the group had discussed the case extensively and circulated their analyses not only in conversation, but also in written form, as in this excerpt from his comrade Igor's essay in the *samizdat* feminist journal "No Means No!".

> The persecution of anti-Putin "blasphemers" has caused a strong reaction in society. The growing movement of solidarity with the repressed underscores the rigidity and inflexibility of their pursuers among politicians and clergy. If the heiresses of "Voina,"[11] Pussy Riot, didn't quite cause a war in society, then they certainly became symbols of the spirit of rebellion in recent times. […]
>
> For critique, the weakest point in their performance in the Cathedral is the fact that their political 'message' was not in fact addressed to the mass of common workers, and so in many ways it hasn't found a real response among them. Why the imprisonment of some 'hooligans' should bother them remains unclear to the majority, while it's easier to explain to many why a performance in a cathedral ought to anger them.

Like Alex's statement, Igor's essay commented on Pussy Riot's performance while at the same time highlighting his own political expertise and position. This brief response to the punk prayer asserted relationships among a host of objects within the political-moral field: Pussy Riot, the ruling elite, Alex's group, the working class. To be clear, this leftist response to the Pussy Riot provocation was not anti-feminist or anti-LGBT; Igor was in fact a prominent activist for LGBT rights and made a point of including gender analysis in his other critiques of Russian capitalism and state power. But by and large my interlocutors active in the anti-Putin opposition tended to interpret and respond to the Pussy Riot case in ways that focused on state repression, not quite claiming Pussy Riot as connected to feminist or LGBT rights messages. The effect of this interpretation was to reinforce values related to democracy, free expression, a fair justice system, and (among leftists) class struggle, rather than reinvigorating a specifically feminist and LGBT-focused message and movement.

## AMBIVALENCE AND DISAVOWAL: RUSSIAN FEMINISTS RESPOND

Russian Orthodox responses to Pussy Riot placed them in the context of a struggle between provocative and threatening feminism and 'traditional values', resulting in a reinforcement of those values opposed to feminism and LGBT rights. Those who defended Pussy Riot within the liberal and left anti-Putin opposition connected the group to broader narratives of an oppressive political system, which reinforced neither feminism or an LGBT rights message, resulting in an asymmetry in responses to Pussy Riot's provocation.

This asymmetry continued with the ambivalence of feminist responses, which did not simply defend Pussy Riot as part of the feminist movement in a way that mirrored Russian Orthodox activists' opposition to Pussy Riot as part of the feminist threat to society. In their discussions of Pussy Riot, many feminist activists criticised the group as they defended other visions of what feminism represented and of what tactics were appropriate for feminist activism, asserting a certain distance between their vision of feminism and their understanding of Pussy Riot. Indeed, even the group's own closing statements at court, which cited a rich range of sources from Soviet dissidents to Dostoyevsky to the Bible, included almost no mention of feminism or women's rights themes (Alyokhina et al., 2012; see also Akulova, 2013), in curious contrast to the punk prayer itself, whose chorus was "Mother of God, become a feminist!"

The contest to define Pussy Riot's relationship to the rest of the feminist community was heated, similar to what Jessica Zychowicz (2011) found among Ukrainian feminist reactions to Femen. The reactions of some Russian feminists indicated that they experienced the punk prayer and its aftermath as provocations against two,

[11] Voina was a radical art collective active in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the 2000s and included Nadya Tolokonnikova among its members.

 

sometimes conflicting, values. On the one hand, they linked Pussy Riot's prosecution to their own experiences of repression and marginalisation by the Orthodox Church and Russian state. On the other hand, they often rejected claims that Pussy Riot represented Russian feminism, attempting rhetorically to shore up their own vision of the Russian feminist movement and its values and goals by distancing it from Pussy Riot's actions. At times, even the claim that Pussy Riot had something to do with feminism seemed almost as much of a provocation as their arrest. As Vera Akulova put it, "the perception of Pussy Riot among Russian feminists was extremely ambivalent" (2013: 282, see also Sperling, 2015).

Natasha Bitten, a journalist who ran an internet community for Russian feminists and had helped organise protests for abortion rights, expressed this ambivalence in writing about how the Russian and international media were responding to the Pussy Riot case. The Russian magazine *Snob* published an interview in which an expatriate Russian feminist seemed to claim that feminism in Russia had been almost dead before Pussy Riot appeared. Natasha responded with a defence of the Russian feminist movement that disavowed Pussy Riot as a feminist organisation.

> Russian feminists were accused of being stupid, ignorant, uninformed […] In all this goes unmentioned the fact that Pussy Riot, and in particular, those arrested for the action in CCS, distanced themselves as much from the ideas of feminism as from Russian feminist organizations […]. The group PR has in no way supported the struggle of Russian feminist groups against the anti-woman draft law of the Duma restricting the reproductive rights of Russian women. When the anti-abortion law was passed all the same, Pussy Riot announced that feminism in the Russian Federation doesn't exist, because the problem of abortion doesn't trouble anyone, didn't cause any mass protests, and wasn't publicized at all in mass media.

Unlike the Russian Orthodox women's responses, Natasha's statement attempted to separate Pussy Riot from the categories of feminism and Russian feminist organisations. She also compared the global attention Pussy Riot received to the difficulty other Russian women's groups had in getting notice for their struggles, for example when she had sought recognition from the UN Commission on the Status of Women of rights violations in Russia. For her, Pussy Riot's provocation was not that they attacked the Orthodox Church and not only that their punishment demonstrated a government edging into authoritarianism, but that their media success seemed to erase the rest of the Russian feminist community.

Similarly, Tatyana, a businesswoman and feminist, rejected the notion that Pussy Riot had anything to do with feminism when asked about the group during a press conference for an International Women's Day event in 2013, and even identified the group's provocation in terms not dissimilar from those of the Orthodox women activists described earlier.

> Understand, feminists are often associated with Pussy Riot, with Femen. We have no connection with these movements, and in principle, in my view of Pussy Riot and Femen alike, they have nothing in common with feminism. […] If you enter the space of an Orthodox cathedral, you should conduct yourself according to the rules that exist there, whether you're a person of faith or not.

Even members of Pussy Riot at times declined to link their actions with those of other feminist groups. Recall that the Russian Orthodox activist Anna equated Pussy Riot to the Ukrainian group Femen, asserting that they were both part of a broader global movement of feminists threatening traditional values. But in an interview after her release, Pussy Riot member Ekaterina Samutsevich rejected that clasp.

> Kseniya Sobchak: And how do you relate to Femen? Many believe that is your Ukrainian analogue.
>
> Ekaterina Samutsevich: No, I don't believe that is an analogue. They are entirely unlike us in form and even in their view of feminism. […] Our character is not a girl who takes her clothes off because she wants to look pretty for men. Femen doesn't hide this and writes that 'men want to see women, and so we appear. Through an image that pleases men, we will advance feminism.' […] We cover our faces. We have a rather androgynous image, a kind of being in a dress and colored tights. Something resembling a woman, but without a woman's face, without hair. An androgyne, resembling a hero from a cartoon, a superhero (Sobchak and Sokolova, 2012).

In contrast to the responses of many other Russian feminists, Samutsevich's response underscores elements of Pussy Riot's performance she connects to feminist goals: here, rejecting the notion that women must appeal to the male gaze. Samutsevich rejected the association that others had made between Pussy Riot and Femen. In doing so, she questioned the form of Femen's feminist activism—appealing to the male gaze—and thereby legitimated her own group's vision, an anonymous superhero whose gender is unclear.

 

Not all feminist responses to Pussy Riot involved total rejection of the group; however, they tended not to defend the group as representatives of feminism, nor did their responses tend to energise values related to gender equality or other specifically feminist goals. Particularly as the members' detention, trial, and imprisonment proceeded, the three arrested Pussy Riot members were instead increasingly framed as "conscientious political prisoners" by many feminists, similar to other participants in the opposition. These responses suggested that for many Russian feminists, the fundamental provocation of the Pussy Riot case had to do with state repression, prompting them to assert and reinforce norms related to the criminal justice system, rather than those related to the position and treatment of women in society.

'Alla,' a college student who had become interested in feminism and LGBT rights through participation in protests, expressed this combination of sympathy and judgement in an interview after the trial had ended when I asked what she thought about Pussy Riot.

> Alla: That's very complicated […] On the one hand, without a doubt they suffered unjustly. They were imprisoned absolutely illegally. That entire suit, all those charges, it was some kind of absolutely scary circus. On the other hand, to be honest, what they did was objectionable to me. That action was simply terrible in my view. […] I didn't go to a single action supporting them because I didn't think that what they did was acceptable.

In ambivalent responses like these, feminists tended to identify the core provocations of the case as Pussy Riot's transgression of norms of appropriate protest and the state's extreme and repressive response.

Even as activists like Alla and Natasha grew more sympathetic to the group's plight as their prosecution and imprisonment continued, their clasps continued to relate the Pussy Riot case primarily to that state repression, leaving aside the feminist and LGBT themes they might have raised.

For example, after meeting at a poetry reading marking the one-year anniversary of the punk prayer, Natasha and I walked back to the metro together, passing CCS on the way. Natasha pointed out the cathedral, recounting how she often walked by and overheard tour groups learning about the historical site. "Do you know what foreigners call it now?," she asked.

"No," I replied.

Smiling wryly, she answered, "The Pussy Riot cathedral." Despite all the efforts of the Church and state to repress and punish them, the group had nonetheless become embedded in the tourist landscape of Moscow. Even in this moment of sympathy, though, Natasha's comment emphasised Pussy Riot's impact on foreign tourists, not on Russian audiences.

The conflict around defining Pussy Riot's relationship to feminists and feminism shows how a provocation can gain wide notice and resonance as a result of its transgressive form, seeming to force people to interpret and respond to it, a potential boon to grassroots activists with relatively few resources to spread a message. Yet, as careful attention to the specific dynamics of provocation reveals, what message is spread and what values are normalised or reinforced is shaped by what people identify as the specific norms being transgressed. The fact that few of my interlocutors sympathetic to Pussy Riot, even self-identified feminists, associated the group with feminist or LGBT values meant that the latter themes were not being circulated strongly alongside positive messages about the group. In contrast, how Russian Orthodox interlocutors identified Pussy Riot's provocation and responded to it clearly connected the group to the feminist and LGBT rights movements. Where Orthodox responses to Pussy Riot's provocations reinforced anti-feminist and anti-LGBT rights values, connecting those values to Orthodoxy and the Russian state, Russian feminist reactions instead tended to distance Pussy Riot from feminism and even from Russia, instead emphasising a different set of norms related to state power and the court system. Together with the comments of leftist and liberal opposition activists that rarely raised feminism or LGBT rights at all, the net result was that the responses of those who supported Pussy Riot simply did not solidify and energise values related to feminism, women's rights, and LGBT rights in a way comparable to the revitalisation of anti-feminist, anti-LGBT values of Pussy Riot's Orthodox critics.

## FEMINIST PROVATION AND REACTIONARY RETRENCHMENT

Borrowing the concept *provokatsiya* from some of my Russian interlocutors, I have argued that provocation is a key concept for understanding the dynamics of confrontational and transgressive protest. In particular, understanding how provocation operates makes clear why provocative actions often result in widespread circulation of a protest or performance: a provocation is experienced as a transgression of norms so extreme that one cannot help but respond. But while a provocation may invite mass circulation, there is no guarantee that the meanings intended by the provocateur will circulate along with it. Pussy Riot's iconic uniforms, the transgressive location and subject of their action, and the symbolic richness of their performance encouraged the series of clasps

 

that made their performance circulate around Moscow, Russia, and the globe. But the fact that the performance of a feminist, pro-LGBT rights group was so widely circulated did not mean that feminism and LGBT rights themselves were revitalised in Russia. As I have argued, key differences in how Russian Orthodox activists, left and liberal participants in anti-Putin protests, and Russian feminist activists identified and responded to Pussy Riot's provocations resulted in asymmetries in which values and world views their responses reinvigorated.

The 'punk prayer' provided an opportunity for observers to examine and discuss the moral and political landscapes of contemporary Russia as they parsed the group's meaning. By defining Pussy Riot, they defined themselves. The form and content of their performance, as well as the nature of responses to the group, invited observers especially to consider questions of Church and state interaction, the state of feminism in Russia, and rights of free speech and religious observance. Pussy Riot became evidence of a shocking moral decline, of the failure of the opposition to reach the working class, of growing political repression under Putin's government, and of the marginalisation of feminism in Russia.

By being radically transgressive, a provocation has the capacity to spur people to reinterpret and realign themselves in moral and political fields. Yet the impossibility of controlling their responses means that the results of successful circulation are unpredictable. In the case of Pussy Riot's provocation, asymmetrical responses among Russian Orthodox activists, left/liberal opposition activists, and Russian feminists illustrate how an ostensibly feminist protest may run the risk of revitalising anti-feminist opponents without a concomitant strengthening of feminist values among supporters.

In a dark irony, the same qualities that helped the group's performance circulate—a combination of provocation and symbolic multivocality—almost certainly contributed to the state's arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment of Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Samutsevich. As Igor wrote, the case may even have been useful for the authorities in a time of increasing political unrest:

> It's impossible not to notice that the authorities were able to manipulate the religious and national sentiments of people, since this allows them to amalgamate social protest and decrease the threat of open class conflict. That's why, on the other hand, no matter how careful Pussy Riot were, the authorities could always represent this in a light beneficial to themselves, as they have done with all protests.

As the Pussy Riot cases shows, provocations have a remarkable generative power and can be tremendously productive in terms of social and moral revitalisation. But it is critical not to confuse generative capacity with a necessarily progressive, democratic, or feminist outcome. Furthermore, a close analysis of provocation reveals how the apparent cultural continuity of "traditional values" is in fact constructed moment to moment. Provocations that aim to shift an anti-feminist, anti-LGBT rights, or authoritarian status quo may in fact revitalise the very values they intend to confront.

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# Womenomics and Acrobatics: Why Japanese Feminists Remain Skeptical about Feminist State Policy

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## ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism and conservative ideology have come together in Japan as 'womenomics', a state policy to boost women's labour productivity as well as the nation's birth rate. Feminists have responded with scepticism to this policy, proposed by the strongly conservative and nationalist Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. The content of 'womenomics' includes a new law to promote the advancement of women to leadership positions, and reflects the government's concern for Japan's international standing. The demographic crisis of a rapidly aging society with a declining birth rate is another background to the policy. Policies to boost the birth rate have been hard to reconcile with policies to promote women in leadership positions in corporate life. The gendered division of labour and the structure of the labour market exacerbate problems as neoliberal reforms are introduced belatedly to Japan. The resistance to neoliberalism has come from conservatives, and thus feminists in Japan have had to perform complicated acrobatics. The long-term prospects depend on finding ways to promote equality in a potentially shrinking nation while continuing to resist the seductions of neoliberal state policies that purport to advance the interests of women.

**Keywords:** feminism, policy, Japan, neoliberalism, womenomics, equal employment

## INTRODUCTION

Japan has been living through a reactionary era and feminists have responded in complicated ways. Since the 1990s, the nation has been struggling through an economic and demographic downturn. Since 2012, the government has been led by a strongly nationalist Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō, who has been notorious for his attacks on feminist activism. Yet in recent years, he has also been selectively promoting women's activities to boost the GDP and the birth rate, as well as to lift Japan's international standing.

Of course it is not easy to define what the term 'feminist' might mean in Japan today: the category of 'woman', which can be assumed to undergird feminism, is crisscrossed by differences of class, sexuality, race, nation, religion and ideology. What is nonetheless undeniable is that there are individuals who identify themselves as 'feminists' and when they do so, they generally aim to promote women's interests, from the perspective that women's interests are not best served by the status quo. There are differences in tone and tactics, as well as of visions for alternatives to the status quo. These differences also include attitudes towards policies that seem to advance women's interests. Feminist ideas and practices have managed to survive in the current age by strategically appropriating official discourse to gain wider support. And in turn, policy makers have appropriated the discourse of feminism in order to achieve national goals of economic and demographic growth.

This dynamic is nothing new and has been analysed and critiqued by scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein as a dangerous liaison or an uncomfortable marriage between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2009; 2013; Eisenstein, 2005, 2016) [1]. Neoliberalism's emphasis on individual entrepreneurial freedom has been powerfully seductive to certain kinds of feminism, and thus the description is apt. Yet these descriptions are based primarily on feminist movements in the United States, Australia, and Western Europe. What is different in Japan's case? Could it be that feminism in Japan has yet to tie the knot with neoliberalism? And if so, is it now belatedly

[1] For a critique of Fraser, see Funk 2013, for a critique of Eisenstein, see Beneria 2011.

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facing that prospect, after having successfully pushed off advances from neoliberalism for several decades? Is feminism in Japan likely to continue to resist or to cave in to the pressure? Can the relationship be characterised as a complicated dance, even an acrobatics, or juggling act?

I will begin this paper by examining the Japanese government policy of Womenomics and the feminist responses to it. I will then place these contemporary phenomena in the context of the longer history of ambivalence among feminists about policies that purport to empower women and to achieve gender equality. After examining the current outcome of Womenomics policy, I will consider the possibilities for going forward, including hints for a better future that do not rely on the unhappy marriage of feminism and neoliberal state policy.

## WOMENOMICS AND PROMOTING WOMEN TO SHINE

The history of feminist activism in Japan reaches back to the late nineteenth century, and a lively stream of feminist expression and contention has swirled since then.[2] In the early years, women spoke up against prostitution and concubinage and sought political rights as well as protection for mothers. After World War II, feminists have focused on equality in the workplace as well as on securing state support for childcare and eldercare. These efforts have resulted in the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (1986), the Childcare Leave Law (1992), the Nursing Care Insurance Law (1997), as well as the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society (1999).

Many of these feminist victories were won in a conservative political climate, dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), hegemonic in Japanese politics for much of the period after World War II. Its policies have been far from monolithic, but observers agree that in recent years the LDP's leadership headed by Abe Shinzō has brought a new level of resurgence to conservative ideology. Previous administrations had conjured a Japanese-style welfare system that relies on the unpaid labour of women within the family and had also pushed for neoliberal reforms (Ōsawa Mari, 2002; Miura, 2016b), but under Abe, feminism and state policy have reached a new and more complicated configuration.

After Abe returned to power for a second term as Japanese Prime Minister in 2012, he started to deliver speeches with seemingly feminist themes. This was surprising because in his previous term a few years earlier (2006–7), he had spearheaded a reactionary backlash against feminism, attacking state-sponsored and grassroots initiatives for gender equality and sex education. This was part of a larger conservative backlash involving rightwing media, religious groups, and conservative politicians.[3] And yet, after returning for a second term, Abe chose to strategically sell an agenda with feminist overtones. This policy called 'Womenomics' was based on the claim that promoting women's greater participation in the economy would boost the Japanese Gross Domestic Product by 12.5 percentage point (Matsui et al., 2014: 5). Women were desperately needed in the workforce to reenergise the flagging economy. But they were also needed to give birth to more children in order to deal with the demographic crisis of a rapidly aging society. Dressed up in the language of 'making women *shine*', Womenomics seemed to be a policy to make women work harder than ever before, both inside and outside the home.

Beyond the goal of boosting the productive and reproductive labour power of women, what were the concrete proposals of Womenomics? An early slogan was '30 by 20', placing women in 30% of leadership positions in the economy and government by 2020, the year of the Tokyo Olympics. As I discuss later, this was a goal held over from the previous administration and was later downgraded when it became obvious that it would not be met in time. Another manifestation of Womenomics can be found in a law passed in 2015 and implemented in April of 2016 for the Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace (hereafter the Promotion of Women Law or PWL).[4] The main component of the PWL was the assessment of employers according to their efforts to 'empower women'.[5] This could be described as a very mild form of 'carrot and stick' approach – corporations and local municipalities would receive official approval if they ranked highly, would be eligible for

[2] For an overview, see Mackie 2003. For the decades up to 1945, see Sievers 1983. On the 'women's lib' decades of the 1970s and 1970s see Shigematsu 2012. For a recent anthology focusing on the diversity of feminisms in Japan see Bullock et al. 2018.
[3] For detailed discussion of the backlash, see Kano 2011, 2016; Yamaguchi et al. 2012; Yamaguchi 2006, 2014.
[4] The text of the law can be found from the website of the Gender Equality Bureau in the Cabinet Office: http://www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/about_danjo/lbp/index.html. The full (Japanese) version can be downloaded from: http://www.gender.go.jp/policy/suishin_law/
[5] Companies were asked to set numerical targets in at least one of four areas: increasing the ratio of women among those hired; lowering the difference in duration of employment of men and women; keeping the number of working hours reasonable for better work-life balance; increasing the ratio of women in management positions.

 

modest grants for pushing the initiative, and would presumably be somewhat embarrassed if they did not.[6] And yet, no clear penalties were indicated, and much was left to the voluntary initiative of the employers.[7]

Some male legislators responded to the PWL in a predictable fashion.[8] For example, Inoue Yoshiyuki, a conservative politician and former secretary of Abe, made an oft-heard comment against quotas as unfair, since they place gender above individual ability. Eguchi Katsuhiko, another politician known for his nationalist affiliations, asked whether gender equality in the workplace requires women and men sharing the same bathrooms and locker rooms, echoing a familiar spectre of gender confusion raised by the anti-feminist backlash arguments in the early 2000s (Kano, 2011). He also made various uninformed remarks suggesting that having a woman as a boss might create difficulties in the workplace, such as sexual harassment claims against friendly hugs – hugs are not common in Japanese adult interactions – and awkwardness around late-night entertaining of clients.[9]

How widely held are these kinds of conservative opinions? The most recent national survey from 2016 shows that 44% of men and 37% of women still agree that a wife should be primarily responsible for home and family, with the husband as the main breadwinner. While still rather high, it is certainly a much lower figure than in the 1970s, when 75% of men and 70% of women agreed with this gendered division of labour.[10] Surveys, however, do not fully capture the texture of public sentiment.

Anonymous online comments are by no means a scientific sample, but can offer glimpses into the id of a society, sometimes revealing attitudes and sentiments that cannot be expressed openly. They can show, for example, a continued lack of social consensus about having women in leadership positions in Japanese society. Particular individuals might welcome greater promotion of women, but this might actually arise from a feeling of resentment that women are currently shirking hard work, rather from a feeling that it is unfair to hold women back. Or, individuals might argue for the importance of women's roles in the home, but this might come from a sense of nationalistic fear about Japan's future, rather than from an appreciation of women's contributions per se. This can be seen in anonymous online comments to an article by Matsuura Tamie, one of the experts consulted on the PWL.[11] They include sentiments such as:

> First, they should ask each woman "Do you want to work? Or not work?" If they are honest, eight or nine out of ten would say "I don't want to work" (…) Women are quick to evade responsibility, and have no social conscience, so men are stuck in positions of leadership (lured with just a bit of prestige) which objectively makes them unhappy. Only a few masculinized women make a fuss about this, but most women are happy with the status quo in which men are sacrificed. This is the true state of gender inequality in Japan (…) This kind of inequality cannot be tolerated. Even if women don't want to, they need to be pulled into key leadership positions. Japanese men want to enjoy life more. I can't tolerate a society in which only women are so happy.

How to interpret such a tirade? Instead of dismissing it as risible, can we glean from it a sense of resentment, even fury, from men about what they perceive as gender inequality: too much work and responsibility for them while women relax at home?[12]

Another anonymous commenter argues, from a different viewpoint entirely, that being a good mother and raising the next generation is crucial for society:

> If outstanding women are pulled out of the home into corporate life, things will look dire in thirty, fifty years (…) The problems are clearly visible in Euro-American countries where women's social advance has been promoted (…) It's wonderful that some women want to shine in society, but unless there are a certain number of excellent women who want to shine at home rather in society, in the long term society and economy will decline.

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[6] For a description of 'carrots', see the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's webpage on the law: http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/0000091025.html

[7] In one limited aspect the PWL came closest to what is known in the U.S. as 'affirmative action' and in Japan as 'positive action': It explicitly allowed favouring women over men in promotion, but only if less than 40% of management positions were held by women. This measure also was left at the initiative and discretion of employers. This was justified by the argument that it would be counterproductive to force corporations to hire and promote women. Tamie Matsuura, quoted in Aoki, 2015.

[8] The meeting minutes are available from http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/sangiin/189/0058/18908060058019a.html (Accessed August 27, 2017)

[9] On masculinist workplace culture and entertainment in hostess bars see Allison 1994.

[10] *Danjo kyōdo sankaku hakusho* 2016: 75.

[11] Matsuura had urged a long-term view, cautioning that in the short term, promoting women equally might not result in visible financial gain (Matsuura 2015).

[12] On debates concerning the 'housewife' and 'labour,' see Kano, 2016, Chapter 4. See also Ueno 1994/2009.

Here home (*katei*) vs society (*shakai*) are understood as mutually exclusive, women are seen as crucial to the maintenance of home, yet the ultimate value is placed in society, and home is valued insofar as it strengthens society.[13] Moreover, the fear of socio-economic decline and comparisons with Euro-American countries betrays a fear of where Japan might be headed if feminist policies are carried out.

These statements reveal the lack of social consensus in Japan about women in leadership positions. There is a general consensus that women and men deserve equal respect, but many continue to believe in some notion of gendered suitability or division of labour. Thus they will say that *some* women might be ready for leadership, but it would be unnatural to slot a certain percentage into such positions. Many also insist that women are needed as homemakers and mothers, more than in the workplace competing with men. Thus we can locate a division between those who are pushing for women's leadership – either out of genuine belief in equality or because of how this affects Japan's international standing – and those who argue against such promotion of women – either to preserve Japan's 'traditional' way of life, or based on the claim that women wish to stay home. And while such divergence of opinions is found in the general populace, scepticism about what might be termed 'feminist' state policy are also surprisingly common among those who would define themselves as 'feminists'.

## FEMINIST AMBIVALENCE: INTERNATIONAL, DOMESTIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

What drove someone like Abe to propose Womenomics at this moment in time? Answering this question also allows us to understand why many feminists in Japan have been largely sceptical so far.[14] The background includes the international context of scrutiny over Japan's sexual past, the domestic context of an escalating demographic crisis, and an even longer history of state-feminist interaction.

Let us first consider the international context. In recent years, the Japanese government has faced international criticism over its response to revelations about the so-called military comfort women during the Asia-Pacific War.[15] The government had also received censure over human rights violations such as trafficking women in the contemporary sexual industry. Against this backdrop, in 2010, the government was chided by the United Nations' CEDAW Committee for lagging in gender equality, especially the lack of women in leadership positions. At the time, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was in power and promised to undertake 'positive action' with a goal of increasing female leaders in all sectors of society. Although the DPJ fell from power shortly thereafter, Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government continued in this line of linking international norms to domestic promotion of women.

It makes sense for policymakers under both the DPJ and the LDP to target the percentage of women in leadership positions, because this figure directly affects Japan's standing in global rankings. Historically, Japan has ranked high in the Human Development Index, measuring health, longevity, and level of education for women and men. But the Global Gender Gap Index ranks Japan closer to the bottom. Abe thus carefully chose highly visible international arenas to announce his Womenomics policies, such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, which publishes the Global Gender Gap Index. He also appointed five female members to his cabinet. Though their terms were short-lived, and the women were mostly known for sharing his conservative and nationalist views, Abe pointed out that this single act raised Japan's global ranking from 29th to 11th as measured by the percentage of women in cabinet positions (Schieder, 2014).

Transnational feminists have long been sceptical of Abe's performance in international arenas. Feminists in Japan had expressed solidarity with Korean feminists in bringing the issue of comfort women to public attention (Yamashita, 2008; Seo, 2018), collaborating to hold a powerfully symbolic Women's War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo in 2000. Abe had pressured the national broadcasting network NHK to alter coverage of this event, leading to a series of reactionary attacks on media outlets by politicians, pundits and vocal denizens of the internet. There was

[13] There is the possibility that one person is commenting in the guise of different people, but they are each fairly long-winded and detailed, and they argue with each other.

[14] Very few individuals who self-identify as feminist have expressed enthusiasm for Womenomics. On the other hand, a larger number of feminists have been involved in formulating the policies for gender equality in the workplace (EEOL), and policies for 'gender equal society.' The most prominent of the latter is Ōsawa Mari (Ōsawa, 2002, 2011). For a critique of such 'mainstream' feminist positions, see Yamaguchi et al., 2012, Yamaguchi, 2014, 2018.

[15] The terminology is part of the controversy. There is contention over the degree of military involvement, coercion, and compensation, as well as over the proper modes of apology, redress, and commemoration. 'Comfort women' is the English translation of the Japanese term *ianfu* and some object to it as euphemising sexual exploitation. While *Nihongun ianfu* (Japanese military comfort women) may be said to have become standard terminology among specialists, the term 'sexual slavery' is also used among Anglophone feminists. See Soh, 2009; Yamashita, 2008; Ueno, 1998/2004.

 

little wonder, then, that feminists in Japan were sceptical of Abe's seemingly pro-feminist performances in 2013 (Kano and Mackie, 2013).

Having thus seen the international background for the government's gender policy, let us turn to the domestic context for it. Although its policies might appear feminist on the surface, the administration is not moved by a genuine concern for women's human rights or gender equality as a principle of social justice, but by what helps the nation and its economy. Scholars have noted that Abe avoids using 'gender' or 'equality' or 'feminism' in his speeches, choosing instead *katsuyō* (utilisation) or *katsuyaku* (lively contribution), tapping women as assets for meeting national goals (Schieder, 2014; Miura, 2016a). At the same time, words like *katsuyaku* and *kagayaku* (to shine, to sparkle) are vague enough not to threaten anyone. This semantic strategy is not unique to the Abe administration: a similar calculus explains what has been rendered in English as 'gender equal society', a pillar of the government's gender policy since 1999. In Japanese, the term is *danjo kyōdō sankaku*, 'male-female co-participation and planning', carefully avoiding the contentious terms 'gender' (*jendā*) and 'equality' (*byōdō*), and thus avoiding overt feminism.

Rather than concern for gender equality, what is driving the policy-making is Japan's demographic crisis. Japan is facing a future with a declining population and a shortfall of working-age people. The labour shortage motivates the Womenomics' emphasis on pulling women into the labour force. Meanwhile, feminists in Japan are sceptical because they see 'working like men' to be a recipe for potential disaster. There is thus a grain of truth in the anonymous online commenter cited above, who saw the Promotion of Women Law as a measure to pull women out of their comfort zones and to place them in stressful positions of leadership – with its costs as well as its rewards. But when the cost is as high as death or suicide from overwork (*karōshi*) – as it has been reported in cases involving young women recently – most women have refused to welcome it. As we will see later, there is a longer history behind the feminist scepticism on policies mobilising women to work.

Finally, the Womenomics policy aligns only circuitously with birth promotion policies rolled out simultaneously. This combination only makes sense because addressing the demographic crisis requires boosting the birth rate as well as labour productivity. Abe's belligerently named "Task Force to Bust Through the Crisis of Low Birthrate" kicked around the idea of instilling the awareness of a 'proper childbearing age' into all women by distributing 'women's notebooks,' presumably designed to allow women to keep track of menstrual cycles and other such fertility-related data points.[16] This has been criticised as intrusive and paternalistic, and the idea was eventually dropped, although threats to women's individual control over their reproduction persist.[17]

Abe also proposed extending women's childcare leave to three years (from the current one to one-and-half years) to encourage women to withdraw from the workforce and be full-time caregivers of their infants and toddlers. This was also criticised as unrealistic and likely to lead to further workplace discrimination. This policy would directly contradict some of the goals of Womenomics, but it would save the government money it would otherwise have to spend on day care facilities. It can thus be described as a 'neoliberal' 'maternalist' policy, to borrow Miura's characterisation (Miura, 2016a). It emphasises the role of women as mothers, but also seeks to minimise the expenditures of the state, leaving individual women to shoulder the responsibility of reproduction. That this is proposed at the same time as Womenomics shows the potential incoherence of elements in Abe's gender policy, or the fact that they can be made to cohere only by women working harder: bearing and nurturing many more children by using the extended childcare leave, while somehow leaping over the barriers against women aspiring to leadership positions.

Another controversial plan, albeit receiving less public attention, relaxes regulations against importing domestic help from abroad. So far this has been approved only in Special Economic Zones. This plan, like the more established one of importing nurses for elder care, has both good, bad, and uncomfortable consequences from a feminist perspective. The outsourcing of care work and housework has been a crucial accelerator of women achieving leadership positions in many countries. Nannies, maids, and nurses for the elderly have freed many elite women to pursue education and career success – and yet this has led to the care drain and exploitation of third-world and non-elite women. Many feminists in Japan have thus been reluctant to embrace such a solution, and there is continued ambivalence about the outsourcing of housework and care work in general.[18]

The scepticism of feminists about Womenomics also needs to be understood in a longer historical context. The current response echoes earlier scepticism about the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of the 1980s as well as

[16] On the discourse around 'canonical pregnancy,' see Seaman, 2017.

[17] The history of state control of reproduction casts a long shadow here. See Kano, 2016, Chapter 2. Critics also pointed out that the Task Force was misguided in blaming women and their lack of awareness for the declining birthrate, rather than larger economic, legal, and institutional impediments.

[18] Feminist economist Adachi Mariko, for example, articulates the consequences of the global outsourcing of care (Adachi, 2007). See also Kaizuma, 2016 on the consequences of globalization on care networks.

 

the 'Gender Equal Society' policy since the 1990s.[19] Womenomics and the Promotion of Women Law remind many feminists of the war-time mobilisation of women, just as did the EEOL and GES policies. For example, the promise of 'employment equality' in the 1980s came coupled with withdrawal of measures that were seen as protective of women (such as banning overwork at night). The EEOL could thus be understood as mobilising female workers for economic growth. The promotion of 'gender equal society' in the 1990s was also seen as a way to recruit women for national goals, though it contained progressive potential in its early formulation. Feminist Hotta Midori points out that the Basic Law for Gender Equal Society resulted from a compromise among three interest groups: conservative politicians, business leaders, and feminists. Conservative politicians were happy with the status quo, business leaders wanted to hire more women if it was profitable, and feminists sought to challenge the sexual division of labour. Caught between the first two groups, feminists were required to perform a kind of 'acrobatics': in order to fight conservatives who believed women's place was in the home, feminists had to collaborate with business leaders who welcomed women into the workplace. And yet at the same time, feminists had to fight business leaders who assumed that women, just like men, should sacrifice their personal lives for the sake of the company. Feminists thus had to insist that women, as well as men, should balance work and family life, without thereby giving in to conservative politicians who would be happy to see women tied to home and family (Hotta, 2002). No wonder feminists felt discombobulated. And no wonder Womenomics elicited similar ambivalence.

The even longer history of the difficult relationship between Japanese feminism and the state also needs to be remembered. Before 1945, women had no right to vote and so little formal political power that they needed to collaborate closely with male politicians, as has been explained by historian Sheldon Garon (Garon, 1997). Because of this dynamic, and because certain women's interests aligned with state interests, many feminist groups collaborated with the state's imperialist and colonial policies and the disastrous war. Due to this history, independent women's groups have been much more cautious about collaborating with the state after the war. In short, groups that define themselves as explicitly feminist in recent decades in Japan have almost by definition been sceptical of government policy, though 'mainstream' women's groups have cooperated with the state in significant ways (Kobayashi, 2004; Murase, 2006; Kano, 2016).[20]

The acrobatics of feminist positioning have continued in more recent decades. Memories of the backlash against feminism led by Abe around 2005–2006 make activists especially weary. Reactionary times in Japan could refer to this period, or to the longer arc of the resurgence of conservatives starting in the 1990s. In so far as this resurgence is a 'reaction' against the progressive gains of the post-war decades, Japan has much in common with the United States where a similar backlash and turn to the Right happened in the 1980s. Yet the 1990s had also been a decade of important gains for women in Japan, including the Childcare Leave Law and the Nursing Care Insurance Law. And when we trace the history of the government's Basic Plans for Gender Equal Society, we can see how feminist discourse has been imbricated with gender policy in Japan, leading to a 'two steps forward, one step back' dance. When the First Basic Plan of 2000 laid the framework, it had surprisingly progressive elements, targeting the gendered household division of labour. This was attacked by conservatives as threatening the fundamental distinction between women and men. The Second Basic Plan of 2005 bore the brunt of the backlash and thus included language rejecting some of the more progressive elements of the previous plan. The Third Basic Plan of 2010 was presented during the Democratic Party of Japan's regime, and took another step forward after the backlash, especially pushing the greater participation of men in housework and childcare. This plan also announced the numerical goal of 30% for women in various leadership positions. Finally, the most recent Fourth Basic Plan of 2015 under Abe and LDP had to step back and downgrade numerical goals, as discussed below.[21]

## WHERE WE ARE NOW: NO MORE 30 BY 20

What have been the results of Womenomics? Women's labour force participation has indeed risen, but this is a complicated figure. Kathy Matsui, Chief Japan strategist at Goldman Sachs whose ideas inspired the policy, reports that the percentage of women who are in the labour force rose from 57% to 66%, surpassing the level of the United States at 64%. But she also notes that an increasing percentage of all workers are in the so-called 'irregular' positions, lacking job security and benefits.

As Miura Mari has described, the Japanese labour market is a 'gendered dual system', in which mostly male core members of the labour force have access to stable employment and full benefits in 'regular' (*seiki*) positions,

[19] On feminist debates about these policies, see Kano, 2016.

[20] For example, the International Women's Year Liaison Group founded in 1975 operated as an umbrella organisation for official women's groups and became a regular channel of communication between the government and its large membership base (Murase, 2006: 109).

[21] On the various Basic Plans and the background see Kano, 2016, Chapter 5.

 

while those who are on the margins – including women, the elderly, and increasingly young men also – are in so-called 'irregular' (*hi-seiki*) positions. Those in irregular employment include part-time but also full-time and contract workers, who often perform the same job tasks as regular workers. They are paid much less, however, and they can also be fired much more easily than those in the regular tracks.[22] The Japanese labour market maintains a strict division between regular and irregular work – few of those hired for the latter ever move into the former ranks. Most women take advantage of partially paid childcare leave, but when they return to work they often only find irregular positions.

One of the structural changes resulting from the neoliberal reforms in recent decades is that women in the regular but clerical (*ippanshoku*) track were eventually replaced by irregular workers. There is grave inequality of pay: for every 100 yen a male regular worker is paid, a female regular worker is paid 74.8, a male irregular worker 55.7, and female irregular worker only 50.4.[23] Between 1984 and 2011, the percentage of men in regular employment dropped from more than 90% to 75%, while those in irregular employment rose from less than 10% to 25% (Miura, 2016a). Thus one in four men are in irregular employment. Meanwhile, for women, the percentage of regular employment also dropped from 75% to less than 50%, while those in irregular employment surged from 25% to more than 50%. This means that even as more women enter the workforce, they are doing so increasingly as irregular rather than regular workers.

Because the Japanese welfare system is predicated on protecting employment for the (usually male) head of the household as breadwinner – what Miura calls the 'welfare through work' model – when regular employment declines and irregular employment rises, it becomes a major social issue.[24] The welfare safety net is not strong enough for this new reality. The 'welfare through work' model is also a 'male breadwinner' model. The on-going breakdown of this model seems to leave us with only a few options for the future: to try harder to shore it up, which is a reactionary move, or try to shift to a 'universal breadwinner' model, in which couples earn dual income and outsource much of the reproductive labour if they can afford to do so, or juggle and struggle if they cannot, as in the neoliberal USA (Fraser, 2013). The Abe administration seems to be torn between these two directions, with the forces of the conservative backlash pointing in the first direction and Womenomics pointing in the second direction. The end result is that women are being asked to do an impossible acrobatics act, to become breadwinners and leaders without being too threatening to men, to the traditional family system, or to their reproductive labour at home. As I will argue below, there are other alternatives, and it is important to keep those possibilities in mind lest we get caught between the false alternatives of a patriarchal past and a neoliberal future.

Meanwhile, another phenomenon accentuates the precariousness of women's economic situation. One of the most dramatic demographic changes in the last few years is that the percentage of women who marry is quickly decreasing. In the 1980s, the percentage of those who never married was less than 5% for both women and men. In 2015, those who had never married increased to 14% in women, and 23% in men. For women, the system has always been 'welfare through marriage to men who work': in other words, the Japanese welfare system has assumed that all women will eventually marry and be financially supported by their husbands. The tax system, the pension system, and the health insurance system, are all designed to support the married housewife who does not earn too much money. Now this model of 'welfare through marriage' is crumbling as well.

This means that it has become harder for young women in Japan to either obtain economic independence through work – because as irregular workers they earn barely enough to make ends meet, and their salary does not rise commensurate with experience – and also harder for them to attain economic security through marriage. And because it is becoming harder, it is also perhaps becoming more aspirational. In a survey of 3000 young women in their teens to thirties conducted in 2013, one-third of unmarried women expressed the wish to become full-time housewives.[25] This high figure needs to be understood as a dream of economic security, one that is increasingly out of reach for many. For more and more women, the future holds struggling with low-paying and insecure jobs, as well as unpredictable family relationships, often with partners who themselves are in low-paying and insecure jobs.

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[22] Miura (2016b) points out that the terminologies and categories for irregular work are often divided by gender and age: *pāto* (part-time) is used for middle-age and older women; *arubaito* (from the German Arbeit) for younger men and women especially side-jobs for students. The term *haken* (dispatch workers) used to apply mostly to women in specialist positions such as computer programming and translating, but a series of revisions of the Dispatch Labour Law in the 1990s expanded the category to include manufacturing. This led to the great increase in irregular labour, especially among men. The workplace hierarchy that used to be defined along gender lines is now less gendered, but only in the sense that many more men are also in irregular and insecure forms of labour. It does not mean that men in regular positions have been replaced by women.

[23] Quoted by Konno Hisako in http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/sangiin/189/0058/18908060058019a.html (accessed August 27, 2017)

[24] See Miura (2016). Miura contrasts the Japanese model with others, such as 'welfare without work' (Western Europe), 'welfare with work' (Scandinavia) 'work instead of welfare' (Anglo-American).

[25] Cited in Ogawa (2017).

What about role-models for women who want to move up to leadership positions? What has happened to the generation of women who entered the workforce as 'equal to men' in career tracks (*sōgōshoku*) under the EEOL? The picture is discouraging. A survey revealed that 80% of the more than 1000 women who had joined career tracks in 1986 had quit work by 2015.[26] The career tracks tend to require long work days and relocation at the will of the employer. Thus many women decide it is not possible to combine that kind of employment with having children.[27] The difficulty of juggling career and family has led to women racing to exit from both, rather than staying in order to have a voice in changing both, to borrow Leonard Schoppa's formulation (Schoppa, 2006). This results in the low number of women in leadership positions thirty years later, as well as the low marriage and birth rate for society.

Consequently, '30 by 20' – 30% of leadership positions held by women by 2020 – seems ever distant as a goal. Reflecting this reality, the government downgraded the numbers in the Fourth Basic Plan of Gender Equal Society announced in 2015: Now the target is women in 7% of leadership positions in government, and 5% in the private sector. This is not a very ambitious figure. The number of women in the cabinet has also declined. After the August 2017 cabinet reshuffle, there were only two women.

What about the idea of involving more men in childcare, which had been another major focus of the Third Basic Plan? Not surprisingly, under the Abe administration this has received much less attention, even as 'work-life balance' has become a buzzword. Promoting awareness on the need for such balance is fine, but has little real effect without concrete measures to make it possible. Attempts to curtail long work hours – traditionally expected of male employees – have so far not been successful.

It is thus also not surprising that boosting the birth rate seems to have receded somewhat as well, compared to the initial few years of the Abe regime. Japan may have moved beyond the tipping point for reversing the population decline. There are few concrete and optimistic plans to push the birth rate back past the point where the population will hold steady. Increasing immigration is frequently mentioned as a solution, but not seriously discussed as a policy.[28]

Many constraints remain around the 'ideal' family shape. Thus infertility treatment is in the news often – one in six couples seek treatment according to recent reports – but this is restricted to married heterosexual partners. Single women are not encouraged to give birth; adoption and foster parenting is also very marginal.[29] The ideal family continues to be having biological children (preferably two or three) born to married heterosexual couples where the man is in a stable occupation as breadwinner and the mother is primarily responsible for childcare for the first several years. Established in the post-World War II decades as the foundation for Japanese economic growth, this continues to be the outdated ideal image of the family in the minds of many lawmakers. So far, neither the birth rate nor the female leadership goal is being served by clinging to this image.

## THE LARGER VIEW: POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR FEMINISM IN JAPAN

As we have seen, Womenomics has a complex history, and the results are ambiguous. Where would feminists in Japan go from here? If all women could have three children and hold jobs that make them shine, that would seem to be a success by Abe's standards. But how do feminists in Japan feel about this picture? Of course the definition of feminism has been problematic, and it has become impossible to blithely espouse any notion of sisterhood, or women's common experience or interests. Can we at least articulate what the commonalities of interests might be for women in Japan? Or is that category also disintegrating?

For example, Ueno Chizuko has been one of the most prominent feminist scholars in Japan since the 1980s and her stance can be interpreted as a kind of snapshot of the current paradox of feminism in a reactionary age. Many feminist scholars have come to take for granted the divisions within the category of women, and would point out the serious differences, as well as potential conflicts in the relationship between first- and third-world women, or between majority and minority women (Grewal and Kaplan, 2006; Shigematsu, 2018).[30] Ueno, however, insists that the experience of womanhood has a universal component. Moreover, she insists on such universality that arises from the experience of weakness and vulnerability (Ueno, 2006). Her stance sets her potentially at odds with

[26] Josei sōgōshoku ikki sei hachiwari taishoku: Kintōhō shikō sanjū nen [80% of First Generation of Women on Career Track Retired: 30 Years after EEOL]. *Tokyo Shinbun*, January 24, 2016. http://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/economics/list/201601/CK2016012402000111.html?ref=rank

[27] See Strober and Chan (1999) for a comparison tracking female graduates of elite institutions in Japan and the U.S.A.

[28] Meanwhile, so-called 'trainees' (*kenshūsei*) is an ambiguous category that allows a large number of foreign workers to be employed temporarily in Japan, often with minimal benefits and sometimes in exploitative conditions.

[29] Same-sex marriage is not recognised; domestic partnership is partly recognised in two municipalities (Shibuya and Setagaya Wards in Tokyo) but with few legal rights. Support for reproductive and childrearing costs are low by OECD standards.

[30] See also Eisenstein 2016: x-xi who disagrees with the postmodern transnational feminism.

 

two dominant trends in feminism: with the kind of neoliberal feminism exemplified by Womenomics (let strong women become stronger and 'shine') and the kind of postmodern feminism that renounces the idea of common interest for all women (Ueno and Miyaji, 2011). If one rejects the 'trickle-down feminism' that is Womenomics as well as the 'always already divided' postmodern take on feminism, what remains logically is a position of universal vulnerability.[31]

Recently, Ueno has come under fire for her comments about the present and future of Japan (Ueno, 2017). In an interview she reflected with striking pessimism about Japan's future, stating bluntly that it is impossible to reverse the population decline by boosting the birth rate, but also rejecting the possibility of population and economic growth through increased immigration. She claimed that because of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, Japan would never accept immigrants – especially in an era of global anti-immigrant sentiment – and that the only remaining option for Japan is to accept a shrinking and declining nation. This rejection of immigration was greeted with a great deal of consternation as an expression parallel to 'America First' and 'Brexit.' Ueno has acknowledged that her view of immigration as an all-or-nothing proposition was too simplistic.[32] But just as important was her urging that a shrinking Japan should stress equality – "we should equally and slowly grow poorer together". This call for accepting decline was not received favourably, but it can be understood as a call akin to the notion of degrowth. It seems diametrically opposed to the type of neoliberal feminism that Hester Eisenstein critiques as complicit with globalising capitalism, and that is being pushed by the Japanese government under the name of Womenomics and women's promotion.

What will a marriage of neoliberalism and feminism look like in Japan? The neoliberal game produces winners and losers, it is said: the strong entrepreneurial independent person who can plan and work for and invest in the future on the one hand, versus the weak disposable fatalistic underclass who is unable to live in the mode of hoping for the future, on the other hand (Shibuya, 2003; Berlant, 2011). They are often depicted as different groups of people, different classes.[33] There is a definite possibility of increasing disparity among women in Japan that makes the feminism of a previous generation – which was premised on the idea that all women share a common experience of discrimination in a masculinist world – seem old-fashioned, even impossible. Not all women are sisters, they are rivals, or even live in separate worlds, it is said.[34]

Will Japan have an elite group of women for whom neoliberal feminism makes sense, and a non-elite group who are actually disadvantaged by it, rather than being equally helped by it? (Eisenstein, 2009/2016; Fraser, 2009). It is hard to claim that this has already happened in Japan. There are few signs of a group of elite women reaching the top. Misogyny and sexism at all levels of government and the private sector remain pervasive and entrenched. So for now, feminism as a thought and practice that speaks to women as a categorically disadvantaged group, unfortunately still has some meaning. Of course this is not unique to Japan, as gendered inequality persists in most nations in the world. And of course it is also the case that inequalities among women have always existed in Japan, and that multiple overlapping structures of discrimination are confronted by ethnic minority women, lesbian, bisexual, and trans women, women living with various disabilities, and so forth.

What then, are the plausible alternatives for Japanese feminism in this reactionary era, both theoretically and practically speaking?

A purist would insist on opposing capitalism and would argue for a revolution. Of course, one must also question the premise that feminism in Japan should, by definition, seek the improvement of the lives of women *in Japan*. A purist position would ask women in Japan to work in the best interest, not of themselves, but of 'all women' in the world. This will likely mean renouncing the various privileges of living in a highly developed and industrialised society and working for the good of women in less developed parts of the globe.[35] On the other hand, the postmodern position would start with the premise that such a universal 'women's interest' is impossible to articulate. This is a point on which thoughtful and committed feminists can disagree.

Another path would be to create separate spheres in which alternatives to capitalism can be carried out. These can include anything from sustainable food production, alternative local currency, workers' cooperatives, and

[31] I thank Chelsea Szendi Schieder for pointing me to the term 'trickle-down feminism.' See Schieder (2014).

[32] See the website of Women's Action Network (https://wan.or.jp) for a record of critiques of Ueno's initial position by members of the Solidarity Network with Migrants in Japan, and by feminist scholars Okano Yayo, Shimizu Akiko, and others.

[33] Critic Minashita Kiryū describes both kinds of women as 'going rogue' (*buraika*) against the gendered norm of women relying on men and becoming good wives and mothers. 'Burai' combines the characters of 'no' and 'dependence, ' but the word's connotation is more negative than 'independent. ' See also her tongue-in-cheek critique of current corporate structures as a 'shitty game' with too many bugs for female players to make progress (Minashita 2009).

[34] For further detail on the increasing disparity among women, see Tachibanaki (2008/2010). For an example of disagreement between those who advocate and oppose neoliberal feminism, see Katsuma and Kayama (2010). For an unusually clear statement in favor of a kind of neoliberal feminism, see Hayashi (2013).

[35] For an analysis of postwar Japanese social movements and the dream of revolution, see Oguma (2013, 2017), Ōsawa Masachi (2016). On the question of capitalism and feminism, see Cudd (2011).

 

various co-living arrangements.[36] A further variant of this model would call for decommodification at various levels in society, such as public housing, public healthcare, public childcare and eldercare, and public education. This is not unrealistic, and perhaps close to what Hester Eisenstein advocates under the name of socialist feminism. Nancy Fraser calls for a Universal Caregiving regime, which would be another variant. Strengthening the welfare state (often called the Scandinavian model of welfare) is preferred by many feminists.

Another option is presented by Ueno in her call to 'grow poor together.' This degrowth strategy is consonant with her advocacy of 'feminism for the weak'. While it is based on the premise of universal vulnerability and care ethics, it is in diametrical opposition to the current government's policies.[37]

At the other extreme, feminism could dictate going along with Womenomics, and moving towards the Anglo-American neoliberal model of minimising welfare. This would be a 'feminism for the strong.' It would accept that some women would become elite leaders, a few even on a par with men, while others would likely struggle with a weakened social safety net. One could imagine that safety nets could be improved for the majority of women, with some feminist strategising, to alleviate the problems of poverty. One could also imagine that having women in 30% of leadership positions, if that were to happen, might change something fundamental about the structures of organisations and of society. But this seems rather unlikely to happen soon.

The current Japanese policies are torn between shoring up the traditional male breadwinner model and moving to a universal breadwinner model. It is thus a strange amalgamation of conservative and neoliberal ideologies. Conservatives want to see children raised at home by mothers rather than in day care. Marketisation is thus moving unevenly, with tight regulation on day care and limited outsourcing of housework. The conservative norms about strict gender roles are still so robust that certain aspects of neoliberalism seem to be encountering continued resistance.[38]

But if the neoliberal aspect of Womenomics were to succeed, and if the gap between the elite and non-elite women were to grow, is that a step forward or backward? Rather than *all* women being treated as second-class citizens because of their gender, if *some* women would be treated as first class, along with some men, and the majority of women and men were to be treated as second class – would this be a step forward or back?

When neoliberal reforms arrived in Japan, they interacted with the existing labour structures, and the result has been an exacerbation of existing inequalities between regular and irregular workers. And because the resistance to neoliberalism has come from those holding conservative gender ideology, feminists have been put in a tricky triangulating position. So far, most feminists in Japan have refused to jump into a liaison with neoliberalism – especially as it has been promoted by the Abe administration. Precisely because the coalition of conservatism and neoliberalism is tenuous, and feminists are not quite ready to jump into bed with neoliberalism, we are at a moment of possible alternative futures for feminism in Japan

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[36] See Ueno (2011) for some examples of such collectives.

[37] For Ueno's response to neoliberalism, see Ueno (2013). On feminism and care ethics, see also Kanai (2011), Okano (2012).

[38] There is a larger question here about why this amalgamation is not often recognized as a contradiction, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. One may note that this amalgamation is also found elsewhere in advanced industrialised countries. In the United States, for example, conservative rhetoric about the importance of women upholding 'family values' coexists with neoliberal valorisation of women as workers and entrepreneurs. Often hidden in media representations of 'superwomen' who manage to fulfil conservative ideals of motherhood as well as neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship, are the nannies and domestic workers who make the juggling act possible.

 

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# Feminist Culture and Politics in Iranian Women's Post-Revolutionary Poetry (1979-2017)

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## ABSTRACT

This article shows how Iranian female poets in the post-revolutionary period, through their poetry, transgress several socio-cultural boundaries. The strategy of these women poets is the same: to become more visible, to raise their voice, to resist and to create a new identity not far off from their self. The article shows how the Iranian women poets in question attempt to promote ethical relations between human subjects through using their feminine writing. Their poems highly criticise an Iranian historical tradition that does not sufficiently recognise the presence of two different subjects—masculine and feminine— and which is not concerned enough with the ethics of relations between subjects. These poems can be analysed in terms of an Irigarayian framework that argues for a woman's ability to establish herself as an independent subject. The Iranian authors/poets started to reform and rethink gender, and their poetry opens doors to Bakhtinian dialogism and eventually Iranian feminism. The article argues, using Irigaray, that it is essential for Iranian women to create a "house of language", a place in which they can practice living and articulating, so that they can achieve self-enunciation.

**Keywords:** phallogocentric, self-enunciation, dialogical, deconstructionist, feminine syntax

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-related themes began to be highlighted in women's literary discourse in Iran during the post-revolutionary movement, after 1979. Women's poetry enacted a shift in discourse, from traditional Islamic themes of mothers, wives, guards of the revolution, warriors, and martyrs, to more directly gender-related themes in the past three decades after the revolution.

Gender identity in Iran cannot be detached from the concept of *sharm*[1] (self-erasure). Self-control in behaviour and appearance, and confinement of physical mobility and sexuality, are all features of the gender politics in Persian classical poems. These restrictions often function through the concept of self-erasure, or the Persian equivalent, *sharm*, which is a patriarchal measure of a woman's attraction and beauty (Milani, 1992: 52). It can be argued that the question of *sharm* was the focus of poets' critical inquiry during this period. Classical poems were created as love poems for and about women, who were at the centre of the poetry, an aesthetic object, there to be gazed at (ibid). In other words, these poems predominantly had a monologic voice and were produced from the perspective of the masculine lover only. However, the women poets in post-revolutionary period gradually attempted to challenge the question of *sharm* and remove the position of woman as beloved, and transferred this position or direction of the poem into men to be gazed at.

The present study proposes a fresh evaluation of contemporary Iranian women's poetry. It adopts a feminist theoretical context in order to observe the shift in women's poetry from the concept of *sharm* (self-erasure) to more recognisably feminist themes. It looks at the nuances of the relationship between femininity and masculinity, and offers a 'self-enunciation' of the female other in the context of Iranian culture.

[1] The concept of *sharm* in Iranian culture applies typically to women and it is recognised as a modesty aspiration for women. According to Rouhi Shafii in Scent of Saffron (1997), the concept involves both an internal state and an external behaviour. It is associated with feelings of embarrassment, shyness or self-restraint and a women's public self-erasure. In this research, I will focus on the self-erasure aspect as a denotation of captivity within a phallogocentric order.

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This paper will analyse post-revolutionary women's poetry in Iran in order to reveal how the poems express sexual desire regarding notions of visibility and invisibility, and how they modify male mythologies into ones from a female point of view. Moreover, the study will identify how, despite the state's censorship practices, female authors have found ways to escape the restrictive rules in recent years by targeting their readership via digital media. The paper focuses on the poetry of Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936-2008) and Granaz Moussavi (1974- ), published in the three decades after the revolution, and documents a shift in their discourse from traditional Islamic themes as mothers, wives, protectors of the revolution, warriors and martyrs, to more gender equality themes. These two poets could offer a range of ways in which Iranian female poets voice critiques of existing gender norms during these three decades. Tahereh is from an older generation of female poets whose writing belongs both to the pre-revolution and post-revolution period. Granaz is from the younger generation that did not experience the period before the revolution, but her upbringing overlapped with the constitution of Islamic Revolution and its upheavals.

In this search for the cultural meanings of contemporary Iranian women's poetry, the French feminist Luce Irigaray's transcendental theories of the duality of subjectivity, the masculine and feminine, and the culture of dialogic exchange between different subjects, will inform the reading of the selected poems. Using such Irigarayian modes of resistance, I will explore how the two poets transformed traditional poetry in order to represent certain female experiences in their culture. I will demonstrate that women poets of this period oppose masculine authority over language and reverse the negative image of women, through literary strategies that can be understood in terms of Irigaray's resistant praxis and her three phase division of oeuvre (Olson, 1995: 145). In other words, I will show how Irigaray's division of work to three phases can be used to open up and explore the poetry: the first phase is to criticise the auto-monocentrism of the symbolic subject, the second is to define a second subject, and the third is to define a relationship or an ethic between the two different subjects. My analysis of post-revolutionary women's poetry will attempt to establish whether the female poets of this period seek to cultivate and embody the female subject and simultaneously return to the reality of existence of two subjects.

Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) is considered to be the pioneer of the female poets who initiated writing about the erotic elements of the female body in Iran. But after the revolution, other female young poets such as Granaz, continued to insert these erotic elements into their poetry. They provide reflections on the first, second and third phases of Irigaray's work, show how two sexually different subjects can survive by creating a third space, and explore the possibility of *parler femme* by embodying a 'house of language' in their feminine syntax. It can be argued that the project of writing about the body in feminist poets' work, such as the poetry of Granaz Moussavi, to borrow Irigaray's words, 'upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarisation toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse' (Irigaray, 1985: 30). In doing so, they resist typical arrangements of male sexual desire. Their work does not follow the traditional Iranian narrative pattern of experiencing pleasure: arousal, tension, climax and resolution (ibid: 133). Instead, these poets appropriate language to represent a female sexual pleasure that opposes and reverses the linearity of male pleasure. Female desire in their work contradicts traditional logic and disorders syntax. These feminist poets adopt an associational eroticism that forms their poetic diction and expression, to articulate a female desire, a desire with multiple endings and beginnings, multiple orgasms, multiple voices, multiple patterns of female sexual pleasure.

## METHODOLOGY

There is still a persistent need for a systematic and comprehensive theoretical approach to women's poetry in dialogical[2] terms, and a consideration of the ethical[3] questions in literature that relate to women in Iran. Feminism in Iran is a term used to describe Iranian women's struggle for gender equalities and their resistance to patriarchal system. However, the term might be misinterpreted with Western connotations by both the secular and Islamic feminists. Much of the misunderstanding takes place simply because the term feminism does not have a Farsi

[2] Irigaray refers to two epistemological models in conceptualising ethics: 'monological' versus 'dialogical' consciousness. Irigaray stresses the dialogical model of the 'two' rather than the monological mode of the one (one is man, and the other is woman who is an autonomous and different subject [I] (1993:48). The monological model of subjectivity according to Irigaray is historically masculine and the one does not take the other seriously since he views the other as 'things' to be exploited. Irigaray endorses the paradigmatic model of two autonomous and different subjectivities, masculine and feminine, in order to ensure and promote dialogue and intersubjectivity to facilitate their coexistence.

[3] For Irigaray, the psychoanalytic gesture is the start of an ethical relation to the other and not the conventional meanings of ethics. Irigaray's text *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is devoted to this theme. She believes that it is unethical that women have not had access to subjectivity, and that the universals of our culture have been dominated by a male imaginary. She says that ethics requires that men and women understand themselves as embodied subjects. She argues in her text that men and women must work together to learn to respect the irreducible difference between them.

 

equivalent and is extensively exercised as a Western meaning in Farsi that is understood as sexism, a discrimination or devaluation based on a person's sex. The nature of relation between Islam, Human Rights and Feminism is one of the most important contemporary issues in Muslim cultures.

Many Muslim, Islamic and secular feminist groups in Iran experienced a problematic relationship despite similarities in their procedures. Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that women in Iran who adopted principles and ties to feminism have experienced a constant struggle as Muslim women since secular feminism argues that women's emancipation is impossible under such a theocratic government as observed in Iran. The Muslim aspect of their identity is sometimes simplistically described by secular scholars as oppressed, whilst their feminist identification is perceived as 'progressive and emancipated,' (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:14). The same question is central to debates surrounding Islam and feminism or more recently, within Islamic Feminism. Western Feminism is seen by some Muslims as 'one of the many instruments of colonialism. They despise the kind of freedom offered to women in the West' (Afshar, 1996: 200). I believe an approach by scholars analysing literary works concerning a woman's ability to establish herself as an independent subject can be more effective in overcoming such problems in a state where openly feminist movements are not acknowledged and the activists' measures are foreclosed.

Along with feminist activists in Iran, women who were active in the literary fields also showed a great inclination towards feminism, e.g. some poets as feminists engaged in activism through their poetry. Literature became women's central medium of self-expression and an important means for them to illustrate their suppressed voices.

I mainly borrow my approach from the work of Irigaray and will survey the poets' use of techniques for shifting the situation of women in Iranian culture. Mimesis, strategic essentialism, utopian ideals, and employing novel language are some of the techniques central to this poetry and its attempts to change contemporary culture and highlight ethical relations. There are not enough studies that use Irigaray in connection with any theoretical, linguistic, spiritual and artistic practices in Persian literature, specifically in relation to women's work, however Irigaray draws heavily upon writers such as Bakhtin, who is very popular in Iranian intellectual tradition. In hoping to develop a gender-neutral point of view studies in Iran, I believe Luce Iriagary's resistance theories could offer more contribution to current politically controlled feminist movements in Iran firstly to stress the definition of a meaning for an articulating gendered subject, and secondly to recreate those elements of the feminine syntax that are excluded in the traditional discourse of Persian poetry.

I argue that resisting or deconstructing patriarchal discourse is essentially the goal of the selected poets. My argument connects Iranian women poets' literary politics and Irigaray's philosophical (ethical) position in the sense that they mutually involve literary and ethical approaches to work in the concealed space of the other in a phallogocentric world. It is suggested in this paper that Iranian women poets' style forms a parallel relation with the three phases of Luce Irigaray's oeuvre: 'the first a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the western subject; the second, how to define a second subject; and the third phase, how to define a relationship, a philosophy, an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects' (Olson, 1995: 145). These divisions are a very useful guide to understand the persistent development of thought in Iranian women's poetry. These phases or continual shifts will show how the poets stress the importance of the need to replace the duality of subjects in sexual difference, with the singular masculine one.

During the last few decades Luce Irigaray's work has been studied from several standpoints. Her writings have been analysed both by those feminists agreeing with her work and by those who are more critical of her understanding of philosophy and psychoanalysis. The diversity of perceptions of Irigaray's work results in the classification of her work according to four common attitudes: Irigaray as a biological essentialist, Irigaray as anti-feminist, Irigaray as deconstructionist, and Irigaray as heterosexist. I acknowledge Irigaray's methodology of revealing the repressive mechanisms present in the socio-symbolic order, mechanisms that deny the female subject. A key element in her theory contends that written language confines the feminine into a phallogocentric logic. Although I am fully aware of the possible essentialist, anti-feminist and other charges against Irigaray's work, in this paper I want to stress the aspect of Irigaray as a deconstructionist, rather than focus on the other charges against her thought.

This article does not suggest that Irigaray is a truly inclusive theorist nor does it attempt to read all aspects of the poems using her ideas. However, since deconstructing stereotypes from within is the aim of Irigaray's work, her thoughts can be linked to Persian women's poetry as an approach aimed at uncovering masculine phallogocentric practices and their method for the elimination of the female subject in the patriarchal culture.

Moreover, Irigaray does not argue for a writing of the female body; she argues for the need to speak the feminine, to articulate it and to give it room for enunciation. To speak the feminine is more influential for Irigaray because according to Irigaray feminine language is derived from the patriarchal pre-oedipal period of fusion between mother and child (Irigaray, 1989:132). Poetry arguably provides a cultural arena in which to begin to explore these ideas and to put them into practice. Irigaray believes the language of poetry is a form of dialogue that is more suitable than a 'speculative' way of speaking. She writes that, in speculative language, 'I talk the other's language, using his grammatical and lexical norms' (Irigaray, 2004: 47). The selected poets' work in this study could

 

offer such a platform to challenge masculine grammar, and the possibility of another syntax which allows for the articulation of female sexual desire within its diffusive language.

## TAHEREH SAFFARZADEH (1936-2008)

### Early Work

Tahereh Saffarzadeh is one of the most prominent Iranian female poets; her work falls into both the Pahlavi (her first collection was published in 1960s) and post-revolutionary periods. It can be argued that Tahereh's pre-revolution poetry encompasses all three elements of Irigaray's schema, but her post-revolution poetry doesn't follow that representation so much. In her early work before the revolution, Tahereh challenges existing gender norms such as women's oppression and seclusion. Tahereh's poetry is a good example of literary reflection upon the socio-political changes in Iran. She expresses the impact of socio-political transformations on women's identity and creativity. Solitude, alienation, the search for autonomy, anger and confrontation with patriarchal social structures can be considered the common themes of the first period of her work. In her early poems Tahereh seeks to liberate herself from restrictive social codes and conventions. In her first collections, she undertakes a process of self-discovery; this ends with her trip to England (1967) and later to America (1969). The poems of her first collection, *Moonlight Passer-by*, composed from 1956 to 1962, are mainly in the form of love lyrics focusing on the poet's experience of alienation and solitude.

The image that Tahereh is sharing through her poems in the first period is of the poetic persona's dilemma and dissatisfaction, to the point that she finds comfort and freedom only in companionship with God and poetry. In her later works, this connection becomes more evident, and Tahereh began to write poems on topics such as birth, death, love and injustice. In her early work Tahereh is openly present in the poems, and there is not much distance between her and the personas in the poems. She is not proscribing her inner feelings and where she feels the necessity, she expresses them. Milani[4] suggests that 'the author seeks freedom that slips through her [Tahereh's] cupped fingers. Alienation, fragmentation, and a search for autonomy are by far more forcefully realised here than is the ideal that the poet longs to compass' (Milani, 1992: 161). In her early collections, Tahereh challenges social codes and norms. According to Milani none of the female characters of the poems in the first collection feels the 'solace of conformity or domesticity; instead they experience a dilemma in its crudest form' (ibid).

The second period of Tahereh's work began when she left her job, loses her child and leaves Iran to continue her education in the USA at the University of Iowa. Her fifteen English[5] poems in the collection *Red Umbrella* (1969), published by Windhover Press, give the impression of her new style. The poems challenge the masculine culture of her period. She shows her dislikes and expresses her seclusion from norms, anger and distinctiveness. The poems here are feminine, sensual and erotic, while directly questioning of Iranian patriarchal values. According to Tahereh's own words, her experience of living in America, getting to know foreign poets and her interaction with other artists had a great influence on her thinking (Saffarzadeh, 1979: 131). The content of Tahereh's poems in this collection expresses the persona's eccentric experiences and desire for more. This open, spontaneous space enabled the poet to expose her emotions and inner self without the need for conformity to social standards or moral codes. She challenges the concept of *sharm* (self-erasure) in her collection, and expressions of sensual and erotic themes are not concealed.

However, this did not last long and her language and content changed after her return to Iran. It can be argued that the poet's being away from home, having a different type of audience and readers, as well as writing poems in English, detached her from the intolerance of the source language and its implicit restrictions that she adopted in her previous collections. She left the sense of captivity in her early poems and decided to attack society's injustice towards women. Her poem 'My Birthplace' (*Zadgah*), from her collection, *Tanin Dar Delta* (*Echo in Delta*) (1971), expresses the poet's anger toward cultural discrimination in Iran. She illustrates the moment of a girl's birth and the relation between mother and daughter. Tahereh condemns the mother's silence and immobility and her failure to confront tradition:

> my mother's look of shame
> at my father,
> at my grandfather,
> after a muffled voice announced,
> "It's a girl!"
> The midwife cringed, fearing no tip

[4] Farzaneh Milani is an Iranian-American scholar and author. Milani teaches Persian literature and Women's Studies at the University of Virginia.

[5] Tahereh was the first Iranian female poet to have a collection of her poems originally published in English.

for cutting the umbilical cord,
knowing there'd be none
for circumcision.
On my first pilgrimage to my birthplace
I will wash from the walls
My mother's look of shame[.]
(Milani, 1992: 164)

Tahereh presents the mother and the newly born girl as victims of patriarchal practices and values. She refers to the relationship between mother and daughter that is damaged by patriarchal society. The need to modify the mother-daughter relationship is also a constant theme in Irigaray's work. In this poem whereas the mother's role is shown as passive and immobile, her persona's voice is loud and critical. To show her resistance and opposing belief, the persona refuses and discards masculine supremacy and looks for a new identity distinct from her mother's:/ I will wash from the walls/ My mother's look of shame/. Traditionally and for a long time, families in Iran regarded having boys as more desirable. Some documents from the Achaemenid period (550–330 BC) show that mothers with baby boys were adored more compared to ones with girls. Midwives and medical practitioners were given more payment for delivering baby boys (Hamidpour, 2010: 48). Tahereh's poem illustrates these moments of suffering, the whispered and muffled voices, the depressed and shameful feelings of the mother and the midwife won't be paid: / The midwife cringed, fearing no tip/ for cutting the umbilical cord/. Its tone echoes the overpowering masculine culture.

The persona in the poem does not merely express her grief at the injustice in her culture. She also has a critical and mimetic voice that confronts discrimination. The figurative passage into the tradition here is not to authorise the past, but to invert the condition that makes women feel shame and suffering at the birth of a baby girl. Tahereh presents a female poetic persona who refuses to be of a similar status as her mother and who seeks her own equal importance and value. She challenges the relationship between mother and daughter in her poem and, similar to Irigaray, she is looking for a 'rehabilitation' of the relationship between mother and daughter, in order to recuperate her/self. By reconstructing the normative practices of motherhood, Tahereh's poem provides awareness that helps re-imagine female consciousness and thereby begin intervention, aiding women in becoming subjects of resistance who can confront the dominant authorities.

In other words, the poet's strategic use of the relationship between the mother and daughter (mother-daughter relationship) is a form of deconstruction of normative models of women's compliance to men's desire, and simultaneously a reforming attempt at establishing a new, liberated place for women in society. In *Je, tu, nous* (1993) Irigaray proposes techniques to deploy for improving the relationship between mother and daughter. For instance, exposing images of the mother and daughter together, or deliberately stressing the subjectivity of each of them. The poet here portrays the daughter's position relative to her mother. Displaying images of mother and girl together in this poem illustrates the need to alter the mother/daughter relationship that is a persistent theme in Irigaray's work.

Irigaray stresses the need for mothers to symbolise themselves differently to their daughters, and to emphasise their daughter's separate subjectivity. Tahereh, by embodying the picture of mother and daughter, reminds women of their lack of subject identity, since the female identity is 'imposed upon her as pure exteriority' (1996: 47). To challenge the relationship between the mother and daughter in this poem, the poet refers to a free and active woman who has the ability to choose her own path and future. This new meaning for the relationship is in opposition to the masculine characterisation of the undifferentiated relationship between mother and daughter. Tahereh's representation of this relationship grants autonomy to women and encourages them to take action and to reconstruct their own identity.

Similar to Irigaray's technique of mimetic resistance, Tahereh first illustrates the traditional and normative Iranian culture that shows the most desirable child for a woman is a boy, into whom, according to Irigaray, she shifts 'all the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself' (Irigaray, 1985: 14). Women's value according to this normative culture depends on successfully giving birth to a male child. The poet shows how this masculine culture provides detailed descriptions of the mother-son relationship, but ignores the mother-daughter relationship. Irigaray argues that, unlike the son, the daughter is not recognised and privileged in her society and is 'kept as a natural body good only for procreation' (Irigaray, 1993: 46).

For Irigaray, for a girl to recognise her individuality and self-enunciation is for her to have a possibility to escape from the patriarchal order and attain her own separate subject position. Therefore, the mother should resolve their relationship and assist her daughter in becoming a separate, individuated subject. Irigaray states that: "When I speak of the relation to the mother, I mean that in our patriarchal culture the daughter is absolutely unable to control her relation to her mother. Nor can the woman control her relation to her maternity, unless she reduces to that role alone" (Irigaray, 1985: 143). The mother-daughter relationship in Tahereh's poem is an attempt to

 

create a new discourse and replace the normative pattern. Tahereh removes the boundaries and restrictions between the mother and daughter figures, in order to give voice to women in Iran and mobilise their potency.

The second period of Tahereh's writing is infused with Western values absorbed in England and the USA. She was criticised in this period for using too many foreign words and too much Western ideology in her poems (Milani, 1992: 158). However, Tahereh's stance shifts once again in the second part of her collection, *Tanin Dar Delta* (*Echo in Delta*), and themes of spirituality and Islamic topics, as well as views opposing Western influence in the social and political domains, start to appear more frequently. When she deploys Islamic topics in her poems she has a new interpretation of them, however.

Milani states that Tahereh 'finds an invigorating ideology of freedom and equality' in Islam and prescribes it as a 'revolutionary banner to mobilise people' (Milani, 1992: 167). It can be argued that the impact of feminist consciousness is exposed in Tahereh's poem, and that it shows the beginning of new activities or a discursive shift in women's poetry, especially for Islamic poets after the revolution, which female poets of the past did not reflect in their discourse. Although these Islamic authors did not apply gender-related statements in their work, they did occasionally add to the body of women's discourse by reinterpreting Islamic norms.

In other words, Tahereh's poetry in the years just before the revolution takes swift steps to connect with Islamic themes. For Tahereh, Islam becomes the ideology of resistance to the West, and of seclusion from society, monarchy and autocracy of the Pahlavi dynasty. As Milani states, Tahereh found the religion 'as the sole viable cure for all the ills and affliction of her society and voluntarily veils herself' (Milani, 1992: 167). Whereas in Tahereh's early poetry, religion had a personalised impact, in her subsequent poetry it became an effective tool in building her ideal society.

**Post-Revolutionary Work**

Tahereh's third period of post-revolutionary work makes a transition from her early work toward her full compliance with religious themes and the literature concerning the Islamic revolution (*Adabiyat-e Engelab-e Farhangi*). Throughout this period, her style did not obey *Nimaic* rhythms or any traditionally structured rhythmic design, she used a more controlled tone. While she expressed her inner feelings more openly in her earlier poems, here she demonstrated more restraint by using a measured, metaphorical and ironic language.

The practice of veiling after the revolution became mandatory in Iran. The veil was mainly advocated as a political campaign to resist the Westernisation, which was considered one of the reasons for the supposed moral corruption in Iran. By the late 1970s, for many women, such as Tahereh, the veil represented what the Pahlavis had rejected: from a symbol of oppression and a badge of backwardness, it was transformed into a marker of protest and of a new Islamic identity (Mir-hosseini, 2007: 7). As Tahereh began to practice veiling willingly, her poetic persona also started to veil her outraged feminist voice. It was as if she blocked her poetic personas' sense of the search for self-enunciation and Western style of personality that had marked her poetry in the Pahlavi period, and instead replaced it with a new sense of cultural identity. This new shift in Tahereh's poetry seems distant from the ideas and practice of individualism and women's rights. It is more about religious obligations. In these poems, she indicates her support for the elimination of Western elements and intervention. In contrast to her earlier collections, her poems after the revolution do not resist the patriarchal system in society. For example, in the collection *Beiáat ba Bidari* (*Allegiance to Wakefulness*), published during the Iran-Iraq war in 1987, Tahereh praises Ayatollah Khomeini as a hero among the prophets and as the soul of God spreading justice:

> you are the ancestor of all heroes
> the hero among prophets [.]
> Milani, 1992: 169)

According to Milani, in Tahereh's poetry after the revolution, her women no longer has the desire to rebel against the state's imposed gender restrictions. Milani continues:

Her [Tahereh's] feminist voice is submerged in a neutered persona, if not discounting, then at least hiding her sex behind an asexual facade. In these gender-indistinguishable poems, the peculiarities of the self are transformed, harnessed into the revolutionary social system, where there is no space for personal, especially feminist, demands. One no longer finds any concern over the fate of women, let alone any protest over her condition. (Milani, 1992:171)

**Breaking Codes of *Sharm* (Self-Erasure)**

Although Tahereh's early poems to some extent broke the code of *sharm*, her post-revolutionary work became neutral and gender-less, composed in the context of *sharm*. Tahereh's attention to the self and lyrical images of love disappeared and they were replaced by a collective self of religious desire. Tahereh's later work carefully detaches her inner self from her readers. She disguises her gender and has a neutral approach to gender-related subjects. Her critical voice disappears and there is no confrontation with masculine or patriarchally controlled society. Her

 

feminist voice, seeking equality for the sexes, is almost non-existent in her later collections. Her enunciation of self has vanished amongst the more dominant voices of the revolutionary society. Tahereh's conformity to the collective voice of society and the gender politics of the period after the revolution could depict the poet's conscious choice of changing her direction of writing under the hegemony of Islamic politics.

Tahereh's work after the revolution, unlike her early work, cannot be read in terms of Irigaray's three phase division. The female personas in Tahereh's later work remain in an 'economy of the same'. But their presence in phallocratic logic does nothing to deconstruct that logic. In such a symbolic order, the female personas have no right to claim their own unique genealogy, beliefs or becoming, and as such cannot enunciate their inner self as a locus for changes to the symbolic order.

For Tahereh, religion was a personal issue before the Islamic Revolution, but after the revolution Sharia laws informed the state's policies and 'it was no longer enough to be just a believer; one had to wear one's beliefs in the form of hijab' (Mir-Hosseini, 2005:1). Tahereh's later poetry stresses religious and political themes and she does not show any resentment toward the reconstituted Iranian state. As advocator of Islamic themes after the revolution, Tahereh is not critical of patriarchal society and she does not excavate the monosubjective (masculine) character and tradition of Iranian culture in this period. Moreover, she does not seek in her poetry to express the conditions necessary to develop a culture of the feminine. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that one cannot really connect Islamic poets such as Tahereh to Irigaray's three phases: to criticise the auto-monocentrism of the symbolic subject, to define a second subject, and to define a relationship or an ethic between the two different subjects.

## A VOICE IN EXILE: GRANAZ MOUSSAVI

Granaz Moussavi (born in 1974) is representative of female poets in Iranian diasporic literature. She is considered to be a member of the young generation of poets after the revolution, often referred to as the 'children of the revolution' or sometimes the 'scorched generation', who experienced the Iran-Iraq war in their upbringing and did not experience a peaceful childhood. Educated in the revolutionised schools, they faced many unanswered political and religious questions and became unconvinced by the authorities' justifications for sociocultural conditions at the time. Granaz is from a well-educated family and she emigrated with her parents to Australia in 1997.

Using a distinctive female voice, she echoes her repressed feelings and seeks other possibilities of political and social articulation, resisting the perceived ignorance of the male-oriented authorities. Granaz's imaginative language and creativity, with strong polemics and a fearless voice, are an example of the range of expressions that exists within women's poetry at present. Although being outside of Iran doesn't necessarily mean free from censorship and cultural normative perceptions or sensitivities, Granaz, unlike poets in Iran, has no limitations on the narration of her poetry to express her uncensored voice. Her distinctive voice can be defined as the spontaneous reaction to her oppressed self with no conscious language restrictions, since she does not need to adhere to the state's political (and repressive) requirements.

Iran's young, post-revolutionary female poets have always struggled with finding a balance between commitment to the modern poetry of poets such as Simin Behbahani and Forough Farrokhzad and developing their own individual style. Granaz is a contemporary Iranian-Australian poet, film director and screenwriter who has developed an original voice in her poetry. Her language is packed with metaphors and erotic images.

Erotic images in a poem do not always involve explicit aspects of sex. Sometimes the poet uses elements related to the description of the sensual aspects of the human body, most typically the female body, to give voice to oppressed women. Granaz signifies feminine *jouissance* (feminine imagination and eroticism) in her poetry as an implicit strategy. For Irigaray, jouissance refers to the countless forms of pleasure a woman's sensual responsive body can experience. It is not confined to a genital/sexual organ, for example. In other words, Irigaray does not restrict the meaning to acts of genital sexual pleasure. Irigaray argues that "the whole of my body is sexuate. My sexuality isn't restricted to my sex [sexual organs] and to the sexual act in the narrow sens" (Irigaray, 1993: 53). Granaz seeks to challenge the dominance of masculine discourse by writing feminine difference into culture. With the specificity of a feminine *jouissance* indicated through her poetry, Granaz questions the domination of phallic *jouissance,* or single pleasure which is explicitly associated with sexual anatomy of a heteronormative masculine subject.

Like Irigaray, Granaz's feminist assessment is focused on the 'sexual indifference' that she finds at the heart of the social order. Granaz's work seeks to deconstruct phallic patterns of imaginary and instead to focus on diffuse female sexuality. By inserting feminine poetic dictions and elements into her poetry Granaz criticises the masculine sexual imaginary for taking feminine pleasure away from discourse. The goal for Granaz, like Irigaray, is to form a place for feminine *jouissance*, embedded in the erotic and sensual experience of the body. The following poems will demonstrate how Granaz alters the poetic line to enact certain female experiences.

 

Irigaray offers a detailed picture of women's pleasure in language. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she argues that woman's desire cannot 'be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks' (Irigaray, 1985: 25). A woman has often been classified by lack, the lack of a penis, the lack of reason and the lack of power. Irigaray, however, argues that woman lacks no/thing. She states that "[woman] she finds pleasure almost anywhere. (…) [T]he geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness" (ibid: 28). Irigaray stresses that women's language can offer them multiple sources of desire:

[In her language,] 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers' are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. (…) She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished (…) When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, concealed in them. (ibid: 29)

Female sexual desire in language, then, according to Irigaray, can happen as multiple beginnings, brief poetic dictions, split sentences, nonsensical reasoning and not following consequential, linear patterns (beginning, middle, and end), as well as challenging fixed definitions and views. Female desire in Granaz's poetry collections disrupts the linear narrative model that is prevalent in the conventions of male sexual response.

Granaz's poem, '*Man* (I)', from her *Sketching On Night* collection (1996), is a direct exposure of women's subjectivity and identity crisis:

> I
> Am not a human neither a sparrow
> I am a tiny occasion
> Every time I fall
> Split into two pieces
> One half goes with the wind
> The other half is taken by a man.
> (Hosseini, 2017: 208)

The poem shows how women are not adequately represented by the existing symbolic system in Iranian culture. Borrowing from Irigaray, the poem also illustrates how in the patriarchal world, female subjectivity is based on a lack. The poetic persona explains that women are not given a proper place in this patriarchal world, and that she is in fact not existing either as a human or even as a tiny sparrow. The wind might refer to the norms and standards of society which undermine a woman's identity to form. Finally, we see her as blaming 'a man' for having power over her. Like Irigaray, the poetic persona challenges the fixed definitions related to women's subject position in a masculine society. It states that she has no subject position and is only considered as a tiny occasion: / I /Am not a human neither a sparrow

/I am a tiny occasion/. Irigaray argues that in a patriarchal society 'woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself' (1985: 193). The preference for succinct diction (such as /I/) and fragmented sentences that lack subject or not grammatically ordered (such as: / Am not a human neither a sparrow/ or / Every time I fall/ Split into two pieces/) by the poet represents an enunciation of the female desire to expose the domination of phallic *jouissance*.

**Breaking Codes of *Sharm* (Self-Erasure)**

In another poem, *Aseman Ra Beband* ('Close the Sky'), from the same collection, Granaz illustrates a bitter but realistic view about love:

> Barbed wire was my mother's dowry
> On the border of the road that was reaching the bitter moon
> I sleep with you without love
> But I get up with more love
> Here the bare footed whores
> For one pair of shoes and one set of floral china,
> Run Mosaddegh to the end of Vali-asr Avenue

 

Yes! The air is filled with sick children
Our bed will be recognised
Close the sky[.]
(Hosseini, 2017: 210)

In this example, the poetic persona leaves behind the historical shyness and moral standards that are defined for women, in order to express her loveless life with her male partner. She embodies the conventional sexual relationship that she has to comply with because of the marriage contract. The words 'Mosaddegh' (democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 until 1953 when he was overthrown in an Anglo-American coup) and 'Vali-asr' (the title and a synonym for the Twelfth Imam of Shia and the meaning directly attached to the last Saviour; also a name of street in Tehran) are used to indicate the history of women's suffering in a satirical way, as being continuous from the Pahlavi period to the current Islamic period. The female persona gladly announces her freedom from the conventional paths of morality but she pays the price for having done so. Instead of expressing self-restraint and instead of suffering from sexual repression, she gives voice to her fear in the form of physical desire and passion and fearlessly asks to close the window so their bed would not be visible to the opponents.

The poetic persona in the last line gladly makes a public revelation of a sin for which the sentence was death: having sexual relations and children outside marriage. Having children outside of wedlock is forbidden by the authorities and by Islamic laws but the persona inverts this perspective by confirming exclamation expression: 'yes!' Moreover, she attempts to expose the issues related to prostitution and the political subjugation of prostitutes by inverting the commodity value in this phallocratic system. Similar to Irigaray's perception in 'Women on the Market', Granaz reveals the position of use value and exchange value of women in the patriarchal society, in which women are treated in the same way as any other commodity. In the Irigaryian sense Granaz shows that the whore is seen as 'used up' in masculine culture, which makes her a suitable object of exchange for men's desire, without consideration of women's own desire (Irigaray, 1985: 808). The whore in the poem is fully aware of her commodity value in this phallocratic system, and she suffers the pain of being empty. She should run the entire street for her basic needs. The sexual desire of the female persona and a relationship with a man outside the marriage contract, as well as the fear of revelation by the authorities, are reflected several times in different collections of Granaz's poetry. For example, in her poems *Rabeteh* ('Relationship), *Gonah* ('Sin') and *Baz Ham Gonah* ('Sin Again') she similarly expresses her oppressed feelings of desire:

Do you think if
I embrace you in this way
And we hide in the sunniest day
Will they find us on Friday evening [weekend evening]?
(Hosseini, 2017: 211)

In her second collection, *Barefoot Till Morning* (*Pa Berahneh Ta Sobh*) (2000), Granaz continues to transgress the dominant ways in which men and women imagine themselves and each other sexually, and their social space. In her poem *Kutah* ('Short'), the persona is annoyed at all the oppression and she shows her anger:

Send me a new mirror
My mirror was loaded with my broken images
So it broke.
(ibid)

The female agony and anger in this poem offer an example of what Irigaray might suggest by liberation from forms of masculine artistic dependency and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture. The poem is short but steady in movement, full of fluidity and flux. The title of the poem, 'Short', sets up an alternative sequence and initiates a straightforward message. The rhythmical stress on 'mirror', the pronoun 'my' and the word 'broken' sets the poem in motion. The persona's need for a new mirror in the first line establishes a movement from her past identity that was imposed on her by the symbolic masculine order. The broken images of her and the mirror signify a rejection or refusal of the phallogocentric order. There are also multiple presences in the poem by repeating the first subject pronoun. Hence we have a sustained representation of Irigaray's model of female subjectivity: 'within herself she is already two – but not divisible into ones' (Irigaray, 1985: 24). The poem evokes a moment of strong *jouissance* to describe sheer unrepressed pleasure. As the poem opens up, the symbolic order of language is subsumed within the semiotic: 'new mirror / my mirror / broken images / broken mirror'.

Granaz, like Irigaray, uses masculine models against themselves. If the 'feminine' is an indication of the uncountable figure in the phallic order, then the 'imaginary body', or the reflection, must be masculine. According to Irigaray, since men keep the reflective side of the mirror, then women are the suppressed back part of the mirror,

 

holding up the mirror for men. They are not visible in the mirror and have no accurate reflection of themselves. Therefore the poetic persona needs a new mirror to reflect her image and the old mirror must break.

**A Novel Feminine Syntax**

Granaz takes the feminine poetic experience further, however, by displaying her writing as an act of embodied *jouissance*. She expresses a new sensitivity in Iranian women's poetry. This original and different awareness is characterised by selecting simple poetic diction and style to reflect the subjects which are more familiar to the younger generation's experience of life in Iran.

Granaz, similar to Tahereh's poetry written in the USA, finds new opportunities in her exile to Australia in 1997, and her struggle with traditions and norms continues with the articulation of unrepressed feelings of desire and belonging. She starts her collection published in 2000 with the poem 'The Sale', which is a long poem showing the poet's rediscovery of her inner self and the generation she has grown up with in exile. Many works in exile are written concerning themes of being in limbo. The expression and language of these works in exile can depend on the poet's integration into the new country they live in and the diasporic opportunities available to them. However, this sensation of being in limbo in Granaz's poetry creates a new space and language for the poet that is representative of women's contemporary discourse in Iran, and it also displays women's diasporic discourse.

This new language or 'feminine syntax' illustrates Luce Irigaray's definitions of *parler femme*:

What a feminine syntax might be is not simple nor easy to state, because in that 'syntax' there would no longer be either subject or object, 'oneness' would no longer be privileged, there would be no longer be proper meanings, proper names, 'proper' attributes (…) instead, that 'syntax' would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation. (Irigaray, 1985: 134)

This 'feminine syntax' appears in contrast to the masculine perspective in Granaz's poetry. In other words, *parler femme*, in her poetry, involves exploring the shape of women's imagination and eroticism, in such a way as to give way to a new poetic discourse in Iranian women's poetry. This feminine syntax is characterised by dislocation of poetic diction, disruptive syntax, apparent disorder, fluidity, repetition and fragmentation. In these poems she offers new meaning to this feminine syntax and offers original perspectives on it by suggesting it as a way to realise the connection between her inner self and her belonging and the fixed, essentialist feminine nature defined by the authorities. The friction between her longing and belonging can be seen in her poems 'Denunciation' and 'Bell', from her collection *Barefoot Till Morning*. In one poetic persona she refuses to return to Iran and in the other she wants to go back. This theme is repeated in her new collection *Red Memories*, in the poem 'I want to go back'. These images of longing and belonging are located in much of Granaz's poetry, and they show the poet to be in a discomforting state of limbo. This space of in-betweenness brought a new realisation of the self to the poet. Robert Young suggests that the limbo state 'is the site of enunciation, the instance of every utterance' (Ikas & Wagner, 2008: 84). In her poem, 'The Sale', Granaz applies the elements of this feminine syntax:

> I've wrapped the moon's head in a scarf,
> slipped the bracelets of the world on her wrists,
> rested my head on the gypsy sky's shoulder
> and goodbye…
> (Talebi, 2008: 161)

Granaz uses a gypsy as the symbol of desire, fluidity, mobility and hope. Here the gypsy also confronts the social boundaries and limitations instituted for women. The gypsy has the potential to shield the persona of the poet and appropriate her with the new possibilities that are open to her gender. Moreover, the poet has changed the subject/object image of the classical lover and the beloved who exists to be gazed at. She also transforms the metaphoric meaning of natural elements, such as a rose with a geranium to convey spring coming:

> Go to my house
> That day and water the geraniums
> Spring might come[.]
> (ibid)

Watering of the flowers is a necessary precondition for the arrival of spring, and it has a direct relation to the reawakening and renewal of the persona. The classical metaphoric meaning of other elements, such as the moon, has also shifted from the symbol of the attractiveness of the beloved, to virginity and pureness. Whereas she leaves the country on the shoulders of a gypsy, she pictures a return to her country and meeting her lover under the escort of the moon:

 

And one day if someone
backtracks in the night
looking for trinkets from the past,
one day if a girl
appears whistling distractedly
to herself and the moon,
that would be me,
returning to pick up my tattered tomorrow
to piece back together before morning's prayer.
(ibid)

In other words, Granaz utilises the natural elements to give voice to the persona's self-enunciation in classical metaphoric discourse, and she explores these creative feminine syntaxes to help her to find a way to *parler femme*.

In addition, the poem is written in a non-linear temporal structure, and the tenses (past, present, future and a future that could have been) are non-sequential because of the conditional tense ('if') in the poem. This is to show the status of the persona and perhaps the poet in her exile. However, only by being next to the moon can her return become possible.

On the whole, the creation of a feminine syntax is one of the characteristics of Granaz's poetry. Her first four collections of poetry are expressive of a younger generation after the revolution in Iran, whom she has grown up with and experienced the war with, and shared political and religious reinforcement with. However, in her latest work, 'Red Memories', Granaz shifts her approach of writing about the sufferings of her generation and uses a more personal poetic diction to further develop a feminine syntax, by using natural elements to transgress the masculine culture (Hosseini, 2017: 214). The concept of *parler femme* in her poetry provides a fresh discourse which allows for the possibility of the continuity of the female persona's existence and self-enunciation. Granaz announces her belonging to nature to give a voice to her invisibility, immobility and non-existence. By employing a novel language, particularly in her latest collection, similar to Irigaray, Granaz uncovers the absence of a female subject position in Iranian culture. Granaz seeks to revalue Iranian female identity and, similar to Irigaray, challenge the existing images with which women were traditionally classified. She challenges the validity of the conceptual hierarchy which favours a metaphorically masculine culture over a metaphorically female nature.

## CONCLUSION

The poetry of Tahereh Saffarzadeh and Granaz Moussavi show a shift in their discourse from traditional Islamic themes as mothers, wives, protectors of the revolution, warriors and martyrs, to those associated more with gender equality during the three decades after the revolution. Female sexual desire appears in the language of their poetry as multiple beginnings, succinct diction, fragmented sentences, and illogical reasoning, as well as a refusal to follow sequential patterns, and defiance of fixed definitions and positions.

These two poets as feminists engaged in activism through their poetry but the degree of their stress on this issue is different. Feminist poets' work inside the country such as in Tahereh's early period poems challenged gender roles, criticised questions of gender inequality, particularly, and they changed their forms and thematic concerns. But the intensity and impact of their work is very different from the younger generation's voice, which is more directly furious and outraged by gender oppression. Moreover, the younger generation's ease of access to online social media made their stance more visible than the previous poets.

Young poets in diaspora, such as Granaz, escaped from the frequent censorship in Iran and became more successful in representing this shift in women's discourse. These exiled poets could concentrate on the elements required to share the culture of two and cultivate the hospitality between the two more explicitly when compared to the female poets inside the country, or the female poets of previous generations. Self-publishing poets such as Granaz, have in recent years used the digital world to distribute their poetry collections, and due to censorship in Iran this has become a trend amongst many feminist poets who want to unveil their voice.

Therefore, it can be argued that power structures, conventional religious beliefs and social values in each period had a direct relationship upon the production of women's poetry in Iran. Finally, the significance of the role of diasporic poets in developing the body of diverse voices in Iranian women's literary map should be more carefully studied. In a sense, diasporic women's poetry can be considered to be providing an impetus to the process of deconstructing the masculine patterns and conventional paths of morality in Iranian culture.

 

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# Talk Shows in Pakistan TV Culture: Engaging Women as Cultural Citizens

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## ABSTRACT

Gendered content that travels through popular TV in Pakistan highlights gender-based crimes and allows women access to the mediated public sphere. This is an unprecedented form of access in a society that defines public/private through Shariah. The boundaries between the two spheres have thus far been immutable. Recent changes in the media landscape have made these boundaries porous. Drawing on theoretical debates on popular culture, cultural citizenship and counter public sphere, the study argues that these popular cultural spaces can be read in terms of an emerging feminist public sphere where women can engage as members of the public and as cultural citizens. To determine engagement patterns of young viewers, focus groups turned out to be effective method. In the sample of university students, there were 42 participants in 10 groups with 4 to 6 members in each group. The study finds that gendered content allows women to act in pro-civic ways. Their engagement with this content allows viewers to revisit their intersecting identities as Muslims, women and Pakistanis.

**Keywords:** cultural citizenship, shariah, Pakistan, talk show, women audiences

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the Pakistani media landscape has significantly changed. Up until 2002, Pakistani audiences were largely (if not entirely) relying on state TV (PTV) for news and entertainment (c.f. Ali, 1986). In 2002, the Pakistani government liberalised the media by issuing licences to private broadcasters. These broadcasters not only introduced new genres (interactive TV) but also started experimenting with topics that were not welcomed on state TV (controversial topics such as religion and gender). I identify that the new wave of gendered content highlights controversial issues such as honour killings, rape, child abuse, rights of transgender, the violation of women's divorce rights, *halala*, marriage with the Holy Quran, stoning, adultery, prostitution, domestic violence and the subjugation of women in the extended family system (c.f. Cheema, 2016)[1]. Following Felski (1989), Fraser (1990), Benhabib (1992), McLaughlin (1993) and Landes (1998), I identify this content in television as an emerging feminist public sphere. As a feminist media researcher, I read popular culture as an alternative or counter public sphere. I argue that talk shows should be read in terms of counter public spheres that have started to be heard in the mainstream public sphere on gender issues (child abuse, rights of transpersons, rape, honour killings). Moreover, it is not only on the production side (in studio), but in viewing contexts that one can locate counter publics/public sphering. I will argue viewers' reflection on gendered content can be read in terms of cultural citizenship. Drawing on viewers' discourse, I argue that gendered content can be used effectively for feminist agendas.[2]

[1] The term 'halala' is when a man has irrevocably divorced his wife, and they (or some people) intentionally plan and arrange for another person to temporarily marry the (divorced) wife, so that the wife can again become legal again for the first husband. This intentional plotting and planning for arranging the temporary marriage of the divorced wife with another person to intentionally circumvent the Laws of Allah and make her legal for her first husband is what is known as 'halala'. This definition is cited on Islamhelpline.net, Available at http://www.islamhelpline.net/node/4722 (accessed 20 September 2014).

[2] This article emerges from a wider project that looks at the production and reception of gender-based content in Pakistani TV cultures (c.f. Cheema, 2015).

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The post-liberalisation period is notably defined by a 'change' in content. Although change can be seen across television programming, I am mainly interested in gendered content.[3] There are two attributes to this change: firstly, it breaks the silence on gender-based issues in Pakistani society and secondly, it gives women improved access to the mediated public sphere.

While acknowledging change in gendered content, this study aims to share findings of how young women, specifically university students, engage with interactive genres in Pakistani TV culture that highlight new forms of gendered content. By interactive genres, I refer to shows that allow women access to the mediated public sphere through letter-writing, in person, phone, email and social media. Categories in interactive TV can include religion-based talk shows, social issues-based talk shows, breakfast and crime shows. These are panel-based shows where host takes questions from the public (mostly women) that are discussed among the panel of experts. Experts include, clergymen, social activists, lawyers and celebrities. With slight variations in format, all categories highlight gender-based issues. This article will demonstrate how viewers' engagement with 3 categories of talk shows allows them to reflect on gendered realities in Pakistani society.

To determine the engagement patterns of young adult viewers, focus groups turned out to be an effective method. In the sample of university students, there were 42 participants in 10 groups with 4 to 6 members in each. Given that an ethnographic approach towards reading audiences emphasises the importance of the context and 'insists that being an audience (or "doing audiencing" or "consuming technologies") should not be abstracted from its social context' (Kitzinger, 2004: 178), I conducted all focus groups in the Arts Lobby, a popular social space at Karachi University. Students use this space for socialising and usually sit with friends in groups of 4 to 10. Groups who watched these shows on a regular basis volunteered to become part of these discussions. Members of the groups knew each other well, in most cases they belonged to the same department. Using a template for semi-structured interviews, most discussions started off with recalling the 'glorious' days of PTV and how content has changed after privatisation. Prompts were used to discuss gendered content across genres. Students mostly discussed among themselves and I only intervened when participants were either talking simultaneously or went off-topic.[4]

The data used in this study emerges from different groups that have reflected on gendered content in interactive TV. I traced viewers' engagement with gendered content across 6 shows. These are: *Alim aur Alam* (Scholar and the Global Society)*, Hawa Ki Baiti* (Daughter of Eve), *Geo Hina Kay Sath* (Live with Hina)*, Utho Jago Pakistan* (Wake Up Pakistan)*, Subh Saveray Maya Kay Sath* (Early Morning with Maya)*,* and *Good Morning Pakistan*. In addition, two case studies from crime shows, *Shabbir Toh Dekhay Ga* (Shabbir Will Watch) and *Jurm Bolta Hae* (Crime Speaks) were selected that fall into the category of narrative form as well as interactive genres.

**Access to the Mediated Public Sphere:**

The essence of this study lies in exploring women's access to the mediated public sphere in a society that is becoming increasingly conservative. Women's access to the public sphere is heavily influenced by hegemonic Islamic discourse as the state religion, which depicts 'home' as women's natural sphere of activity, and their participation in the public sphere as regulated by male guardians *(mahram)*. I do not mean to generalise this scenario by stating that all women have limited access to the public sphere, or that there are hardly any women who are free to struggle against the religious and cultural practices that bar women's access to the public sphere (c.f. Cheema, 2018). Of course, it is clear that Pakistani women do not form a homogenous whole with the same aspirations for identical social behaviour, and are intersectional subjects.

Significant for this project is how interactive genres give women access to the mediated public sphere, with gendered content directly challenging the public/private distinction of Pakistani society laid under *Shariah*. This distinction is defined by the contemporary Muslim scholars inclined toward the Hanafi school of thought. For a long time, scholars (such as Abul Ala Maududi, Israr Ahmed and Amin Ahsan Islahi) who campaigned for political Islam opposed women's participation not only in politics, but also, in any other activity 'outside the home'. In justifying his stance on women's sphere of activity, Maududi (2010) relies on the *hadith* that 'the woman is not allowed to go on a journey except in company of a *mahram'* (a male member of the family with whom sexual relationship is forbidden) (2010: 148). In the light of the *hadith* from Abu Da'ud (third of the canonical hadith

[3] I have chosen to call it `gendered content' because themes mainly address women issues but also touch other gender-based issues such as homosexuality and rights of transgender people.

[4] In the first stage of transcribing, most of the data was transcribed in the form of notes taken during recording and conducting the interviews and the focus groups. The second stage of transcribing was the stage of 'data reduction' (McLellan, MacQueen, Neidig, 2003: 66). The data reduced was that which did not fall into the scope of this study or where participants had completely diverted from the topic, but I did not discard the written notes about visual cues, body language and gestures that were equally important to reinforce any ideas about identity construction and social meanings. In the third stage of transcribing the data, the thorough examination of the fieldwork was undertaken to identify the common themes in discussions.

 

collections), Maududi further notes that 'the most appropriate place for her according to the Islamic law is her home' (148). Amidst rising conservatism in Pakistan, this belief is garnering appeal across different classes in the society. While Muslim scholars with a more liberal outlook (Wudud (1999), Asma Barlas (2002), Asghar Ali Engineer (1997) and Javed Ahmed Ghamidi (2010)) have attempted to rearticulate this distinction and the role/place of women in society, they struggle to get 'air time' on screen because broadcasters are fearful of giving them space (c.f. Cheema, 2016, 2018).

This study notes that interactive shows, however, give women access to media without displacing them from home. This is a unique and unprecedented form of access that transcends physical boundaries laid by *Shariah*. Interestingly, it does not essentially need accompanying a *mahram* to access the public sphere. In this sense, the liberalisation of media has opened up many areas for debate. I am fundamentally interested in how the public/private distinction has become negotiable by giving access to women (without *mahram*) to the mediated public sphere.

## THEORETICAL PREMISE: POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

Gendered content travels across different genres in popular culture and offers spaces for the intersection of the social, private, public and the political. Popular culture plays an important role in nurturing an environment in which dominant ideologies can be challenged. More importantly, it can also allow its consumers to perform like responsible citizens. In other words, the production and consumption of popular content can be organized around civic concerns. For instance, the issue of gendered crime and state law is a common theme in popular genres in Pakistani TV culture. Such content enables audiences to reflect on these issues and react as concerned citizens. This practice of performing as citizens in relation to cultural products is referred to as cultural citizenship.

Scholars define cultural citizenship as a concept that initiates and celebrates symbolic representation and discussion on otherness and tolerance. (c.f. Isin and Wood, 1999; Pakulski, 1997). Stevenson argues that 'questions of cultural citizenship therefore seek to rework images, assumptions and representations that are seen to be exclusive as well as marginalizing' (2001: 4). I argue that gendered content facilitates the access of 'left out' members of society to the public sphere in two ways. Firstly, by giving a platform to victims of gender-based crimes to narrate their stories, and secondly, by giving access to female viewers (to perform as cultural citizens) who may otherwise not participate in the public sphere. Hermes (1998), Dahlgren (1995) and Wieten (1998) directly link the concept of cultural citizenship to popular culture. Hermes (2005: 10) defines cultural citizenship as 'the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture'. In case of this study, I argue that such popular culture invites women across class and age to reflect on the public/private distinction in Pakistani society (and thus on a defining aspect of women's role in society).

In academic literature, there is a tendency towards belittling the popular genres that offer sites for practising cultural citizenship. I argue, as researchers looking for possibilities of public sphering on gendered issues, our focus should turn towards locating spaces where gendered publics are invested. In most cases, gender-based issues are featured in serialized dramas and interactive TV. Audiences who behave as publics in the symbolic and imagined spaces of such programmes, may use these spaces for personal reasons as well as for the pro-social reasons.

I choose to use follow Dahlgren (2009), Hartley (1996), Hermes and Muller (2010) and Klein (2013), Lunt and Stenner (2005), McGuigan (2005) in tracing Habermasian public spheres within popular culture. While exploring how popular culture addresses issues of immigration and disability Klein (2013) argues that entertainment driven genres 'serve the goals of a public sphere' by providing additional material for generating discussion (Klein, 2013: 53). Sanli (2011) also stresses the importance of women-oriented talk shows (in a Turkish context) as a space to revisit the honour code. Taking it forward, I argue, in Muslim societies that nurture a culture of silence on gendered issues, popular culture offers the opportunity to initiate discussions on issues that matter to a large population of society.

Specifically, in Muslim societies that define public/private distinction through religion, boundaries between the public and the private have thus far been immutable. In many households that follow *Shariah*, women are neither allowed to step out of their homes without *mahram*, nor are they allowed to interact with issues of socio-political nature (which makes it an immutable aspect of life). I stress that popular culture plays a crucial role in negotiating that boundary. Hermes (2005) also identifies this potential by calling popular culture truly democratic and inclusive. The element of interactivity and an extraordinary interest in cultural products can produce newer identities and can also challenge existing understandings on rights of people. More importantly, entertainment provokes a kind of engagement with the public that 'lacks the cultural capital or competence to engage with democratic practice at a more political and abstract level' (Hermes, 1998: 160). In case of my project, I explore how women who may otherwise *not* engage in official political discourse on gender rights get the opportunity through such popular culture to voice their opinion. The entertaining aspect of popular culture bestows it with an unusual privilege

 

(especially in conservative contexts) to challenge official narratives on citizenship and rights. Similarly, the rhetoric on talk shows may appear emotional, but it renders unique occasions to address issues that have thus far been excluded from the mainstream public sphere (c.f. Lunt and Stenner 2005 and Lunt and Pantti, 2009). At the same time, I stress that our understanding of the 'reflective spaces of the public sphere' should be more open and inclusive toward issues that prioritise emotions over reason. This does not in any way downplay the importance of the issue under consideration, or make it in any way less political.

Following Fraser (1990), Benhabib (1992), McLaughlin (1993) and Landes (1998), I read interactive TV as an emerging feminist public sphere. Thematically and methodologically, this study is also informed by other feminist media studies and formative research by Tania Modleski (1982), Ien Ang (1985), Hobson (1982) and Andrea Press (1991). While looking at soap operas, Modleski (1982) notes that soaps do highlight social issues such as rape, but popular feminine texts do not question women's obsession with 'the primacy of male-female relationships' (113). Hobson (1994) discusses soap opera with a group of six women and argues that viewers are not passive (1994: 166). She notes how viewing television and soap operas goes beyond the moment of reception: '[i]t indicates that a further stage of communication takes place when they talk about television programs and often the relating of those programs to the everyday life of the viewers' (167). Press (1991) reads how women of different economic backgrounds read the content of soaps in the US television culture. Most crucially, she suggests that how her research respondents 'interact with television culturally is more a function of their social class membership than their membership in a particular gender group' (177). This article also examines how audiences relate content to their everyday life and subjectivities.

In regional literature, the study has overlaps with Suleman (1999), Kothari (2005), Talib and Idrees (2012), Hashmi (2012) and Naqvi (2011). While analysing the *Late Night Show* (aired on private TV), Hashmi (2012) notes how content pushes the boundaries of mediated discourse on sexuality and gender. Suleman (1999), looks at drama serials as a site for challenging dominant ideologies. Likewise, Kothari's (2005) also studies drama serial as a crucial genre that is targeted towards women as audiences. She notes that dramas emphasise on 'home' as an essential sphere for Pakistani women.

Methodologically, my work is closer to both Mankekar's (1999) and Butcher (2003) who use interviews and focus groups to understand audiences' engagement with TV content. Mankekar (1999) studies Doordarshan's role in the portrayal and reconstruction of gendered realities during the 1980s and 1990s, combining interviews and observation. While she explores women's engagement with TV content on state television, this study focuses on private TV content. Butcher's study (2003) on transnational television and cultural change also uses focus groups across class to measure 'cultural change by looking at changing perceptions of Indianness, and the role of transnational television in the process of defining, creating and maintaining that identity'.

## RELIGION-BASED TALK SHOWS: CALLING WITHOUT CONSENT, PROTECTING IDENTITY

For the religion-based talk shows, my two case studies were *Alim Aur Alam*[5] and *Hawa ki Baiti*.

Speaking firstly of *Alim Aur Alam*. This is a 30-minute shows that runs three times a week in which the host takes live calls from the viewers who either want to seek *Shariah*-based advice on issues of any nature or give voice to their opinion on a given topic. Though this show is open to all kinds of topics related to religion, female viewers (who seek advice on issues of personal nature) make a considerable number of the calls. In the studio, the host is accompanied by a panel of three male clerics from different Islamic sects who give advice on the issue at hand.

Going through the archives of the show, I identified recurrent issues for which women make live calls on these shows. I was not interested in quantifying the number of calls made by women but summarising the issues they brought to the mediated public sphere, focussing not only on the pattern of recurrence of (gender-related) dominant issues, but also on what is absent from the content. Most importantly, it was necessary to notice any deliberate or intentional silence on certain gender-based issues (transgender issues and homosexuality). This show offered spaces for producing/reinforcing socially constructed knowledge, and identifying such discourses laid the foundation of semi-structured interviews for the focus groups. I closely followed all the episodes of *Alim Aur Alam* (from 2010 to 2012), in particular I analysed 25 episodes of *Alim Aur Alam* (*Scholar and Society*) that were strictly

[5] *Alim aur Alim* is one of the most popular religion-based talk shows in Pakistan. The host of the show started his show under the name of *Alim Online* from the Geo TV. At the time of the fieldwork, he joined ARY Digital where he started his show (same format) under the title of *Alim Aur Alam*. In the year 2013, he joined back in the Geo TV as a Vice-President, but following the scandal of blasphemy in one of the other shows of the channel in April 2014, he has now joined Express TV as the President. He has also served as a Minister for Religious Affairs. Although he changes channels, his show continues under one title or the other.

 

covering gender-based issues. From these episodes, I have extracted *four* major themes based on their recurrence in each episode watched. These include:

a) women calling in this show to know about their rights for a separate nuclear home (a home apart from in-laws);
b) women calling in to the live show to complain about their husbands' behaviour or that of in-laws;
c) women complaining about domestic violence faced at home, in most cases involving sexual harassment by the male members of the family;
d) families of the victims of gender-based crimes appearing on this show to give voice to their experience.[6]

In exactly, the same way, I analysed another religion-based talk show called *Hawa Ki Baiti* (Daughter of Eve)[7]. The format of *Hawa ki Baiti* varies from that of *Alim aur Alam*, in that it has a female-only panel for discussion, a two-member panel with a female cleric and a legal advisor. Such shows offer *Shariah*-compliant advice on issues; any issue that falls out of the scope of *Shariah* does not feature in these spaces. These types of shows deal with gender-based issues in a serious manner and I could not identify any implied intention to create a spectacle out of any victim's misery. What is significant here is that these shows provide a safe space for women to discuss issues of concern. It is important to note how young women (respondents in focus groups) make sense of this access to the mediated public sphere:

> Rehma: Obviously, if a woman is suppressed at home (by in-laws), she cannot leave her house to approach anyone for help, then such shows offer the right sort of avenue for her. It is a limited sort of assistance but isn't bad at all, and it is safer for they don't have to reveal their identity. But women calling in such shows, should be careful about asking questions of very intimate nature (periods/sex) for they have a male panel, you know what I am trying to say.
>
> Sobia: I don't think it is going to have any effect because their families wouldn't let them follow the advice they seek through calling. Maybe, they just call for their satisfaction, and for catharsis, but it wouldn't really change their lives in any way.

While Rehma acknowledges 'calling on shows' to be somewhat beneficial, Sobia does not see any good coming out it. While discussing this aspect, both refer to women living in joint household with in-laws. In Pakistan, the joint family system is prevalent in rural areas, cities and educated households, a household usually spanning three generations. Under Shariah, sons are responsible for providing maintenance to the parents but also a separate household for a wife. With rising costs of living, managing two households is not easy. Hence, in most cases, it is economically viable to stay in parental home and provide financial care to parents.

Most of the callers are daughters-in-law living in joint households who complain about their lack of privacy and how they are treated by mothers-in-law. Rehma and Sobia are referring to how daughters-in-law can use the show for voicing their concerns without revealing their identities, as the honour of the family resides in their concealment. Here, concealing their identities can also serve as a protective shield for women who choose not to reveal identity to protect their own safety at home. They are fully aware of the consequences of revealing their identities on television.

Most of the women I interviewed at Karachi University seemed confident, opinionated, yet religiously-inclined. A majority of these students wore hijab, and often quoted Islamic rulings on gender rights. Modest clothing can be read in terms of the practice that facilitates Muslims women's entry into public spaces (c.f. Ahmed, 2011). However, my intention is not to draw parallels between their dress and their religious inclination. With their presence in a public university, one can safely assume that these students do not associate themselves with the radical Islamic school of thought that prohibits women's participation in the public sphere at all. Yet, students referred to religion as their principal frame of reference for making day to day choices. Fabeha and Romaisa, students of General History Department, differed in their responses to 'live calling':

> Fabeha: I don't think one should call, if you have an issue at home, it should be addressed within home. Besides, what are these women calling for, is it not to seek guidance through the *Quran*; do we not have the Book at home? Haven't we read it? And what if their families would come to know about their calling on such platforms, it can make the lives of these callers even worse.

[6] See for example: Alim aur Aalam, Episode 234 aired on ARY Digital uploaded by: sabakarachi00 (2012) Aamir Liaquat Part 2 Aalim aur Alam rape in Karachi 3 choti buchiya Episode 234 with Amir liaquar mp4. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCT1z5eXRYg (Accessed 4 July 2014)

[7] Lately, the channel has changed its title.

> Romaisa: I think it is empowering for women to call on *Alim aur Alam* for issues of personal nature. At least, one step forward.

It is in a way understood that viewers who are calling have not sought permission from their husbands/in-laws, and this lack of approval can land them into trouble within the home. Except for Romaisa, no one considered the experience/practice of calling as 'liberating/empowering', rather as an act of naivety. There is another dimension to this response. These young girls are all too familiar with cultural norms, and in a way they are implying that those who are calling to address their home-based issues, will be unable to stand up against their 'exploiters'.

While most of the viewers seem eager to watch this show, they do not imagine participating in such shows without the permission of male heads of family, which raises the question: how limited is the autonomy of these female viewers? In another related study on housewives' engagement with gendered content, I find that married women (focus group respondents) get permission not usually from their *mahram* (husband or father-in-law), but rather their mother-in-law who takes decisions on their behalf. This has nothing to do with *Shariah*, it is a cultural practice that empowers mothers-in-law and makes her sovereign in the private sphere (c.f. Cheema, 2018). In such instances, women are not essentially struggling against *mahram* (male members) of the household, but rather their main adversary is another woman who exercises patriarchal power on behalf of male guardians (*mahram*).

## BREAKFAST SHOWS: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF GENDERED DISCOURSE

In the case of breakfast shows, gender-based issues were highlighted once or twice a week. In Maya Khan's morning show, these cases were highlighted daily with specific campaigns run by this show to highlight issues of domestic politics. However, for other breakfast shows, I had to identify episodes where specific cases of abuse were highlighted. For this purpose, I analysed at least five episodes per show to understand their treatment of the gender-based issues. The shows in this category included: *Subah Saveray Maya Kay Sath, Good Morning Pakistan* and *Utho Jago Pakistan.*

In the case of *Subh Saveray Maya Kay Sath*, the approach towards the gender-based issues appears to be highly emotional and sensationalised, with everyone in the studio including the victim and the host seen in tears. This happens in the first 15 minutes of the shows where victims (usually rape victims or acid victims) or those accompanying the victims share their ordeals. The discussion takes a serious turn in the second half when law enforcement authorities, NGOs, legal advisors and the politicians are included. During these shows, live-callers (mostly women) call in to express their concern over such issues or express solidarity with victims. The discussion around the plight of women is wrapped up after assurances from the social activists, politicians and the host to follow up the case in future. However, what is worth noting is that the hosts of *Subh Suveray Maya Kay Sath* and *Good Morning Pakistan* are conservative in their approach towards such issues. The discussion often focuses on how perpetrators commit heinous crimes against the *weaker gender* (*sinf-e-nazuk*) who otherwise needs *protection*, against she who is *naïve*, and who should be *cared* for. The hosts do not talk about gender equality because of perceived editorial control over controversial subjects (c.f. Cheema, 2016, 2018).

In the case of *Utho Jago Pakistan*, the host is somewhat liberal in her approach towards gender-based issues. She is much more authoritative in tone. She inspires confidence in the victims of domestic violence, leading them to divorce. She has also taken up themes of 'gender identity crisis' and 'sexual ambivalence' in her show. Interestingly, in such episodes, she has usually avoided inviting religious scholars as discussants. The panellists on her shows include social activists, doctors, politicians and even celebrities. The discussions here tend to be less emotionally-laden, calmer and more analytical. There is clear evidence of using the show to make such issues socially and politically relevant.[8] When I pursued this aspect with respondents, students of English Literature, they commented in this manner:

> Sania: Speaking on just any issue on television is concerned, we [referring to her friends] don't think everything should really be discussed on a public medium. There should be some limits to this freedom. For instance, we should not be very open about issues of homosexuality. Our channels are giving extraordinary coverage to homosexuality and transgenders, that it will soon be a norm. Five years ago, it was unusual for us to know that someone is a homosexual or homosexuals are even part of this society, but now it is as if we have accepted them now.
>
> Bushra: It is true that as students of literature we read anything that is otherwise restricted in our society, but there is a limit to what we can watch on a public medium (TV), see, we have some religious norms

[8] See for example: Topic 'gender identity crisis' on Utho Jago Pakistan. Utho Jago Pakistan published on April 30, 2012. Uploaded by pakmorning (2012) Utho Jago Pakistan 1st May 2012 Part 3/7 High Quality. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IJwyHjEULc (Accessed 23 July 2014)

> as well. And religion gets involved in our life at all levels, so we can't really be open about everything, we simply can't do away with our religion. As far as acceptance is concerned, we can accept only if that falls under our limits; that is, to stress that we can accept a transsexual for his/her sexual orientation because it was given at birth by God but cannot accept any sexuality that is socially constructed (referring to homosexuals).
>
> Rabeeya: Our limits should be clearly defined. If you look at the Westerners, it is no wonder that they have lost their limits and even their homes, because their kids are too informed about their rights, they just leave their homes and do whatever they want to. It is frightening to see how their family structure has collapsed.
>
> Hina: But in a way, it is even good to know about certain issues and your rights as a citizen, because we can handle ourselves better in a crisis.

In Pakistan, religion is the central reference point for almost everything in life; from identity to daily activities, religion enforces silence on some issues while explicitly condemning certain acts. Homosexuality is depicted as an offence in Islam, hence on screen, homosexuality is represented as either an ailment or a sexual deviation. Mostly, such representations are used for comic relief or to reinforce stigma. There is a fear of normalizing homosexuality that directly challenges *Shariah* while there is also anxiety about losing conventional family structure. Both *Shariah* and family essentially define the social fabric of Pakistani society.

In this way, religion becomes involved with viewers' engagements with gendered content on TV in Pakistani culture, though it does not seem to affect their engagement with the literature they study in the same way. Bushra draws attention to how they perceive the nature of the medium, pointing out that as students of English literature, they are ready to read anything about other societies because it does not come in the way of their personal commitment to religion. It is difficult to identify how these women perceived the nature of my study, as public or private, but in most cases, they seem to be comfortable talking about these issues among friends.

Reporting gendered crime is not restricted to a single genre; in fact, all interactive shows feature such cases. Recently, it has become more common for breakfast shows to invite victims of gendered crimes (essentially acid cases and rape victims) to discuss their ordeal. Young women in the study who follow these shows shared how they feel about how everyday discussions on rape can trivialise the issue:

> Bina: Our shows have a habit of making news or a programme out of gender issues, what we in fact need, are the solutions to our problems. We have emergency situation, every other day in our country (referring to rape cases), but we are hardly told anything about protecting ourselves.
>
> Amira: Rape is a done to death theme on TV, and now we need solutions for it, we need to know what to do, whom to contact if we are in any sort of trouble.
>
> Hira: I agree, these issues (rape) are very serious and too much reporting or discussing them on every show can even trivialise the actual nature of the issue itself.
>
> Zainab: Our mothers have been living in the same society, and they have dealt with many issues on their own or have suffered. I don't mean that we should suffer in silence, but every individual has his or her own strengths, we just need to realize our strengths to fight for our place or rights in society, rather than just call in shows and get instant gratification. And there is one more angle to it, as female viewers, the gendered content fails to tell us about laws that protect us. It is something that has to be improved, we should bring the laws that deal with women to the fore. Is it not something that has to be the centre of this debate?

Since the genre is essentially ratings-driven, covering rape can be tricky and often seems to sensationalise crime. Bina, Amira and Zainab express worries that viewers cannot see beyond the case. Such gendered content does not meet their expectations. As educated women, they are aware of gendered realities of the society and their interest comes in knowing more about laws that protect victims. Bina, Amira, Hira and Zainab perform as cultural citizens, their eagerness to know about the laws that protect them also demonstrates how they think TV can be used effectively as a public good. Interestingly, this desire to know about women's legal rights has been consistent across the sample at Karachi University.

Amira and Hira raise concerns regarding 'too much reporting'. In Pakistan, there is a significant rise in gendered crime that is mostly unreported. Reporting across genres is a new trend for Pakistani viewers, but it is also the one that attracts viewers. From drama serials to interactive genres, all have started experimenting with gendered crimes (specifically rape) for ratings but also in part for demonstrating corporate social responsibility (c.f. Cheema, 2018).

 

It is in this regard, that Amira and Hira raise their concern about desensitisation, but they are by no means showing their aversion to the representation of rape onscreen. While stressing the importance of covering gendered crime as a serious issue, Humaira (from the Psychology Department) in another group, appreciates how Hina Bayat (host of social issues-based talk show) used her show to inform viewers about their rights:

> Humaira: I used to watch Geo Hina Kay Sath, we badly need programmes of that sort. It was really an initiative to make us more aware as female citizens. It not only engaged us with the women-based issues, but also informed us about the law that caters to our needs. So, there was a situation of bailout in the end, through which you could know about whom to contact and where to go in a situation like this.
>
> Sohema: Instead of these shows, we need shows like *Geo Hina Kay Sath* and *Aurat Kahani.* (Stories of Women). We can still recall these two programmes which were committed to social awareness. These programmes were crucial in facilitating the cases enough to draw government's attention towards it or the legal process itself, but what happened thereafter is altogether another matter.

Bayat's show has been an exception being more objective about gender-based issues. The show would begin by introducing a case study and treating it as an issue of socio-political relevance. The emphasis has always been on the 'situation for bail out' and exploring avenues for psychological and legal counselling. In our conservation, Bayat shared how she wants to address men in the family and initiate discussion on gender rights in viewing contexts of the home (c.f. Cheema, 2016, 2018). I argue that hers was the only show that could be seen as similar to the concept of the public sphere in mediated contexts. Hence, Humaira aptly recalls Bayat's show as the only show that informed women about their rights and informing them of whom to contact when in trouble.

It is heartening to notice that gendered content facilitates such practices of cultural citizenship among these women. Even while acknowledging the inadequacies in breakfast shows, women respondents reflect on possibilities of tailoring televisual content to cater to their needs as citizens. In this way, content enables them to critically reflect on the status of women in society, and triggers their aspirations for taking charge of their life. The question of individual rights is also related to their socioeconomic class. At the same time, educated middle class (including both elderly and young women, c.f. Cheema, 2018) expressed distrust in the system, and that could be one of the reasons for not participating themselves directly in the shows. This kind of audience engagement and participation occurs somewhat between the civic and political, where the desire is to know about laws and to 'influence governmental action' (Dahlgren, 2009: 58).

## CRIME SHOWS: REPORTING RAPE IN AN UNRESPONSIVE SYSTEM

The category of crime shows, as opposed to talk shows, is somewhat complicated. Hosts interview aggrieved parties, then get in touch with local politicians and law enforcing agencies to determine the status of the case. Initially, I did not choose crime shows because this genre is available for viewing on the news channels and I had initially selected genres on the entertainment channels. However, during the fieldwork in Karachi, my findings revealed that there is a growing enthusiasm among women respondents for these shows. In most cases, gender-based crimes (especially that of rape, incest and honour killings) are first reported on these shows and then later taken up by other interactive formats or genres for discussion. In another study, I have found that crime shows have a strong audience engagement amongst housewives in the Pakistani lower middle class. These women shared with me that they find such crime shows closer to the realities in their neighbourhood (Korangi and New Karachi). Moreover, they stressed the necessity of crime shows as their only window to the outside world - it also alerts us to their reliance on television producers for versions of reality. Most of these housewives had children attending school or working in low-paid jobs. Such shows informed them about the risks of moving about in a society apparently full of gendered crimes, and this further may reinforce segregation in society (c.f. Cheema, 2018). Interestingly, when I discussed the utility of crime shows with university students, they were more vocal about the negative consequences of watching crime. One of them reminded me of such a story which speaks volumes regarding 'the security of women' in Pakistan:

> Sana: Reporting in news is altogether a different thing but bringing these issues up in talk shows or re-enactment is something else, at least I disapprove of it. Do you think it would make a difference to victim's life? In fact, the trauma it leaves with the viewers is immense. After watching the case of a man who raped more than 50 female dead bodies, I and my mother remained disturbed for at least a week.
>
> Hadia: There is so much wrong in this society, what can we do about it, perhaps just report it. We should keep our problems to ourselves and solve it internally, rather than taking it to Oscars, and letting the

 

> entire world know about it. We are a crises-ridden country; there is one crisis after the other, so we should fix our problems without bringing them on to the channels that are watched abroad.

Sana and Hadia exchanged thought-provoking opinions on reporting crime. Sana refers to the case of necrophilia reported in 2011 whereby a man who used to work in a graveyard raped 48 female dead bodies[9]. Both seem concerned about the paranoia and stress such viewing might provoke in viewers. Their responses also suggest that viewers are fully aware that reporting crime would not change gendered realities on the ground for the victims.

These crime stories seem to resonate with their life experiences, and this content has even sparked 'a sense of concern' in relation to the nation's image.[10] I argue that thinking about the nation's image disengages Sana and Hadia from global women issues, and instead makes them dwell on their identity as Pakistanis. As a researcher looking for counter publics, I argue that such readings are crucial in identifying intra-public divisions. For example, the counter public for gendered content identified by this study, may at times not respond to the gendered aspect of content as much as they would perhaps react to their religious obligations and duties as citizens. The content, therefore, facilitates a practice of reflecting on their intersecting identities. In this case, they chose to prioritise their identity as Pakistanis rather than as women.

Almost all the students showed some distrust in the system. While some were in favour of reporting gender based violence to the authorities, others opined that reporting has no value in a corrupt system. Students of International Relations commented on how reporting rape is a case in point:

> Madiha: We feel we are more vulnerable to such crime; we felt safer in the same environment when there was limited reporting on gender-based crime. I don't think rape should neither be reported nor be spoken about, because reporting cannot do anything to facilitate the trial or bring the perpetrator before the court of law.
>
> Zunaira: But I think it should at least be reported, for we have the right to know what is happening in our society.
>
> Saima: These shows cannot help female victims in any way, in fact, it can tarnish the reputation of the family. In such cases, police as party to these crimes make matters worse for the victims' families, does that leave any point for discussion on TV, when we cannot seek justice through reporting.

Despite unprecedented trends in reporting, Madiha and Saima question the value of it. Their concern is not entirely unsubstantiated, in the past, there have been cases where victims' families have faced significant consequences after reporting. In 2010, Kainat Soomro, a rape victim's brother was killed after he went to the police.[11] The system is not ready and equipped to protect such victims, and the role of police is frequently under question in such cases.[12] While the media has started giving greater representation to sexual and gender based crimes, the judiciary and police remain largely unresponsive to such cases. Hence, one effect of this media coverage has made viewers more aware of their vulnerability in what is felt to be a corrupt system. At the same time, I argue that recent coverage of rape issues have triggered a #metoo moment in Pakistan. Celebrities have started raising their voice for rape victims on screen and also take to the streets to protest the failing justice system. Recently, celebrities and citizens have come out with their personal stories of abuse on breakfast shows, Twitter and Facebook. The popular pressure to do something is building across media (all genres and social media) and in public domain (via protests). I see greater television coverage of gendered crime as empowering women in some ways. Recent trends of greater media reporting gives the opportunity to victims to publicly denounce their victimhood and defy traditional understanding of honour (that traditionally silences victims). I wish to argue that reporting is one step forward in Pakistani women's struggle for emancipation.

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[9] Tonight with Jasmeen, Samaa TV (2011) available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chxsKhXOu60 (Accessed 14 January 2018)

[10] Sharmeen Obaid is a filmmaker who has received an Oscar for her film on acid victims. Conservative segments in society criticise her for showcasing her film in the West.

[11] Kainat says her brother was killed by rape accused, (2018), *Dawn* [Online] Available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/544166 (Accessed 28 January 2018)

[12] A very recent example is that of Zainab Amin Case, a 7-year old abducted, raped and killed by the preceptor who lived nearby home in Kasur. After five days, her body was found in a nearby garbage dump. The family tirelessly looked for the child for 5 days, even provided supporting evidence (CCTV footage) to law enforcing agencies. In a recent interview, Zainab's father claimed how his family 'seized the culprit and handed him over to the police', while police seemed uninterested in the case. In other words, victims' families have limited trust in law enforcing agencies and judiciary (c.f. Ansari, 2018).

 

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I looked at how young women respond to gendered content in interactive TV shows. The aim was to find out how women make sense of this new wave of more directly gendered content within Pakistani TV culture. This article presented findings across genres. In case of religion-based talk shows, young viewers reflect on the issue of access to the mediated public sphere in a de-personalised way (since it did not affect them so directly). Discussions on religious shows highlighted issues of living in a joint household and the tensions that inevitably evolve. In contrast, reflecting on breakfast shows, viewers expressed their reservations on covering homosexuality as a topic, here, highlighting their identity as Muslims and religion as the principal frame of reference for approaching social, gendered realities, whilst also suggesting that 'unconstrained discourse' on gender can have negative consequences on existing family structures. Crime shows made them wonder about the utility of reporting in a system that does not sufficiently protect women.

However, it is worthwhile to note that gendered content has certainly pushed the boundaries of discourse on gender and violence in Pakistani culture, and this has engaged viewers in pro-civic way. As cultural citizens, viewers returned to the content to think about their status in society and thus reflect upon their vulnerability. Viewers also want a way forward in knowing more about their rights under State Law. I read this trend as a hugely positive step in a traditional religious culture that nurtures silence on gender-based issues. If cultural citizenship is about 'the right to know and speak' (Miller, 2007: 35), then gendered content in Pakistani television has certainly pushed women to speak for their right to know about the laws that might protect them. Recently, as part of corporate social responsibility, broadcasters have started intentionally airing drama serials and breakfast shows to raise awareness on women's rights (c.f. Cheema, 2018). Non-governmental organisations that are run by feminists have also expressed interest in collaborating with broadcasters on projects of women empowerment For example, Kashf Foundation, a specialized micro-finance institution, has produced three drama serials which focus on developing awareness on women rights. Given such initiatives, I argue that current television has reduced the gap between feminists and female citizens. Given that viewers also seem to be ready to learn more about their rights, such initiatives can be empowering in the long run. Yet one needs to bear in mind that all women are not alike, their ideals for emancipation vary with religious inclination, social class, age and other intersectional factors (c.f. Shaheed, 2010). Hence, in a commercially driven media, feminist agendas on screen are subjected to the parameters of viewers choice and editorial policy (c.f. Cheema, 2018). Yet, a way forward could be finding areas of mutual concern (such as child abuse, or rape) for both Islamic and liberal feminism in Pakistan.

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Book Review

# Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China

Hongwei Bao [1]*

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Min Dongchao's new book *Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China* offers a fascinating account of the history of feminist theory and practice in the People's Republic of China in the past three decades. Using the metaphor of 'travelling theory', Min traces the process of how feminist ideas have been introduced into the Mainland Chinese context via translation, academic discussions and social movements, and how they have been received, debated and contested by different stakeholders within China to empower Chinese women and to develop feminist theories and activisms that speak to the Chinese context. Such a process, as Min convincingly demonstrates, is fraught with tensions, contestations and even pitfalls; it nonetheless shapes feminism in China as it is today and makes feminism a highly politically pertinent project in a world of global neoliberalism. Weaving together rich historical data and astute critical analysis, Min's book marks one of the best scholarships on feminism in China to date. The work is an interdisciplinary project that is at once theoretical, historical, and empirical, and it makes a significant contribution to the intersecting fields of gender studies, cultural studies and translation studies.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework of the book, i.e. an 'alternative travelling theory'. Building on Edward Said's notion of 'travelling theory', which Min sees as not only Euro-American-centric but downplaying unequal power relations between the West and the non-Western world as well, Min's book aims to establish an 'alternative travelling theory'. This theory takes into account the reception and adaptation of Western theories in different geographical and cultural contexts; it also pays meticulous attention to the links between discursive and material conditions, as well as the complex power relations that shape the trajectory of travels. I find Min's emphasis on the materiality and the political economy of travelling theories most insightful. Diverging from the over-emphasis of the linguistic and discursive dimensions of theoretical production in much of the previous scholarship on translation and feminist theories, Min's book insightfully shows how the material conditions and the funding models of feminist scholarship have shaped feminist theories in China in specific ways. For example, The Ford Foundation played a critical role in developing women and gender studies in China in the 1990s, with its generous support of various women and gender studies programmes, non-governmental organisations, conferences and seminars in China. The support was both financial and ideological, as a particular version of US-centric women and gender studies was introduced to China, and the development of women and gender studies in China became a part of neoliberal capitalism's expansion in the Global South. What is more, the 'doing projects' model of feminist scholarship funded by international foundations in the late 1990s and the 2000s led feminist scholars away from asking significant and fundamental theoretical questions, such as the relationship between gender and social development. Min interrogates: 'what role the terms "gender",

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"development" and "NGO" play in the neoliberal development agenda, and how this discourse has ensured that gender has achieved a place within international social movements?' (6). By laying bare the political and ideological underpinnings of transnational feminism, Min urges readers to consider feminism as a political project aimed not only to challenge a patriarchal social order but neoliberal capitalism as well.

'Translation' is seen as a vehicle for knowledge and theories to travel. Drawing on the notion of 'cultural translation' as well as feminist and postcolonial approaches to translation studies, Min sees translation not as a direct rendition from a 'source language' to a 'target language'; instead, translation is seen as a constant process of negotiation shaped by different power configurations and underpinned by individual translators' agency. In the book, Min painstakingly delineates the material and discursive conditions of translation, as well as the strategic and contingent decisions made by translators. The academic discussions about how to translate feminism and 'gender' in the 1980s and the 1990s serve as good examples. In the 1980s, despite the lack of access to Western feminist works and the general lack of foreign language competence, Chinese women studies scholars managed to translate Western second-wave feminist ideas of 'asserting gender justice into state-organised capitalism' into Chinese ideas of 'asserting gender justice and gender difference within state-organised socialism' (37). In the 1990s, with more opportunities for transitional exchange of ideas, the critical attention paid to the legacy of socialist feminism in China was unfortunately lost and subsequently a reworking of the Western concept of sexual difference as the Sinicised *nüxing* took its place in the national and transnational craze of 'connecting to the international track'. The proliferation of translated works in Chinese was accompanied by the loss of opportunities for Chinese scholars to reflect on China's own historical conditions and theoretical legacies in order to develop feminist theories that speak to these cultural specificities. The 'gains' and 'losses' in translation are thus equally important issues to ponder upon. Chapter 2 to 6 trace the development of feminism in China from the 1980s to 2010s to chart the fascinating trajectory of how feminism travels to and takes root in China. Min takes time and great care with primary sources to demonstrate show different stakeholders, including feminist scholars and activists, the Chinese state, international foundations, and various non-governmental organisations interpreted feminism in their own ways. The process of 'travelling theory' is full of contingency and coincidence, but nonetheless following the flow of capital in a postsocialist market economy. For example, The All China Women's Federation, in its compliance with the state and complicity with neoliberal capitalism, effectively depoliticises and deradicalises feminism.

Min uses some indigenous terms and concepts, including 'awakening', 'dialogue' (*duihua*) and 'connecting to the international track' *(jiegui*), to account for the contexts and the imperatives of how feminism travels in China in different historical eras. These terms and concepts are part of a powerful rhetoric which not only offers historical contexts and discursive conditions of 'travelling theory', but also conditions whether and how theories travel. For example, the *jiegui* discourse in the 1990s not only connects Chinese economy to transnational capitalism; it also forces Chinese feminists to connect Chinese feminism to global feminism, especially liberal feminism from America. And this has significant implications: liberal feminism becomes a benchmark for Chinese feminism and is intertwined with the official ideology of state-led market liberalisation. In the process, the discourse of gender differences becomes a tool for social stratification and serves to mark middle-class distinction in a neoliberalising China.

One major insight of Min's book is that China has missed an opportunity to develop an indigenous version of feminism, based on China's historical conditions of socialism and the scholarship of socialist feminism. This is primarily because the 'bias' of how theories travel: while liberal feminism travels easily to China in the 1990s because of China's official endorsement of market liberalism, Chinese scholars' obsession with the Euro-American liberal feminist experience and rigid methodological empiricism has made socialist feminism a missed opportunity. Observing emergent interest in socialist feminism and younger generations' feminist activism in China today, Min seems cautiously optimistic about the future of feminism in China.

Min's book should be read not only as a critical analysis of the development of feminist theory and praxis in China; it should also be read as a personal account of a Chinese feminist scholar and activist. Having actively participated in the development of feminism in China, Cao offers a first-person insider's account of the history and status quo of feminism in China. Her transnational perspective also allows her to examine and assess the issues critically and free from the limitations of China-exceptionalism or self-orientalism. Her first-person narrative, as part of her feminist methodology, allows her to clearly acknowledge her own subject position and effectively articulate her feminist politics. This book can be read both as a fine piece of theoretical work on transnational and Chinese feminisms, and a source book with precious historical data, original interviews, first-hand experiences and accounts of Chinese feminists.

Min's focus on academic and activist feminism is methodologically understandable; however, this also means that her account of feminist history is bound to be incomplete and at times even seem elitist. Other forms of feminism in China, including popular, vernacular and even folk interpretations and experiences of feminism also require critical attention and they also constitute diverse ways of how theories travel. Ordinary women may not be familiar with the works of feminist scholars and activists, but this does not prevent them from developing their

 

own understandings of feminism, often by mixing different theoretical and empirical trajectories of knowledge. The effort of delineating a clear, linear and progressive narrative of feminism in China is commendable; what such a history may omit or conceal is also an important question to ask: how does an 'alternative travelling theory' travel?

Considering that transnational feminism is a keyword for the book, the author's definition of transnational feminism could have been more clearly articulated. 'Transnational feminism', in the book, is seen, on the one hand, as the global dominance of a Euro-American centric feminism, what some scholars call 'global feminism', pushed by the United Nations and various international foundations through political and economic means in order to 'liberalise' the global south as part of the neoliberal hegemony. On the other, it is seen as a diverse range of informal and grassroots exchange of ideas, people and movements across borders, represented by the Chinese Society of Women's Studies, a transnational feminist organisation which was sympathetic to the development of feminist theories that speak to the Chinese context and which gradually adopted a participatory and dialogic approach to feminist knowledge production. The two forms of transnationalism need to be distinguished in order to account for the theoretical complexities of transnational feminism.

Overall, this is a fascinating piece of work that combines historical and theoretical scholarship, and interrogates fundamental questions about transnational feminism and Chinese feminism. Written in clear language and employing a lucid style, this book will become an indispensable reference for anyone interested in feminism, China and translation.

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Book Review

# Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia

Daniel Cardoso [1*]

**Published:** March 19, 2018

**Book's Author:** Pereira, M. do M.

**Publication Date:** 2017

**Publisher:** Oxon: Routledge

**Price:** £90 (hardback), £35.99 (e-book)

**ISBN:** 978-1-317-43367-5

Maria do Mar Pereira's book can be seen as several different books all very cogently rolled into one. It manages to be, at once, a book about the role of feminism in academia, about the dynamics of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) as an academic activity, about feminist critiques of scientific epistemology, about the situatedness (geographical and temporal) of knowledge production within a very anglo-centric academic ecosystem, about the neoliberalisation of academia, about the embodied experience (and harm) of academic work, and about the self-reflexiveness of writing an academic book about people who write academic books. At no point are all these layers confused or confusing, and they flow consistently and methodically, demonstrating a superb command of the literature involved, both in depth and in breadth – as many references are from outside the anglosphere of most-cited authors.

From here, it follows that this book has several target audiences – people focusing on WGFS, on mental health, on academic praxis, on epistemology, on postcolonial studies, on guides for self-reflexive writing, on cultural studies, on ethnography, on neoliberalism and precarious work, among others, will find here plenty of interesting material, and an absolutely impressive literature review from which to draw. The author is quite aware that this, too, is a way for her to perform academic status – that she is not outside of the dynamics that she is studying – and it shows how familiar she is with the field of sociology and WGFS.

The main idea behind the book is that, in order to understand the processes of power and knowledge at work in academia, an ethnographic analysis is necessary – one that combines structural aspects (funding, politics, marketing) with situated events, even those that are often seen as unremarkable, such as 'corridor talk', or back-and-forth conversations in classes. To do this, Maria do Mar Pereira creates a new conceptual tool - a feminist theory of epistemic status:

> the degree to which, and the terms in which, a knowledge claim, or entire field, is recognized as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge, however those criteria are defined in specific spaces, communities and moments (p. 1).

This concept was created through the interweaving of three perspectives on the relationship between power and knowledge: Foucault, Code and Gieryn.

From Foucault, the idea of the "*production* of *effects* of scientificity requires examining the *episteme*" (p. 48) of that context, which means considering which discourses are validated and productive in that context; from Code, Maria do Mar Pereira focuses on the everyday life of academia, the spaces and territories where discourses are uttered,

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and who can enter them with credibility; from Gieryn, the author mobilises several cartographical and geographical metaphors which allow insight into the "*processual* character of demarcations of scientificity" (p. 53), rendering the discourses, the interlocutors and the locutory spaces mobile, flexible, and highly contextual. The articulation of these three references allows Maria do Mar Pereira to talk about maps, climates and negotiations when analysing how, when, by whom and with what goals WGFS establishes itself or, as Maria do Mar Pereira puts it, "the *maps* and *boundary-work* produced in *negotiations* of the *epistemic status* of WGFS within changing *epistemic climates*" (p. 62).

Having laid the foundations for her work, Maria do Mar Pereira presents her findings from her fieldwork, based mostly in Portugal. The main source of material is a set of 36 interviews during 2008/2009, with 12 follow-up interviews in 2015/2016. The interviewees had various positions and relations to and towards WGFS, as well as varying degrees of seniority (including students). All of this was complemented by a decade of *ad hoc* ethnographic observation in the UK and Portugal, Sweden (one year), and multiple academic conferences, PhD viva presentations, and many other events related to academic life. This allowed Maria do Mar Pereira to draw from very rich and diverse material and to provide an integrated look into many different layers and modes of producing epistemic status.

The longitudinal aspect of her work also allowed her to track the changes created by the developing climate of international neoliberalisation within all quarters of academia. Rather than take this as an outside process that is imposed on academia, Maria do Mar Pereira picks up on Judith Butler's concept of performativity and looks at the "rise of the performative university" (p. 70), one based on a connection between productivity and profitability, and a subsequent structure of audits and rankings. The performative university is not simply an economic phenomenon – it is the *epistemic* facet of this process that interests Maria do Mar Pereira:

> It becomes necessary to do and re-do epistemic status every day, to continuously constitute oneself as a proper scholar by recurrently and incessantly producing the products seen to count as appropriate displays of scholarly competence, authority and achievement. (p. 73)

Ambiguity and paradoxes are an integral part of Maria do Mar Pereira's analysis, and the performative university's relation to WGFS is an especially poignant example of this. The author concluded that, during the 2008/09 fieldwork, the epistemic climate that surrounded WGFS was changing, and so too was WGFS's epistemic status: the institutions' need to expand and show themselves as more productive made them conditionally embrace the productivity that came from WGFS. She writes that, "WGFS is recognized as proper knowledge *if* it leads to publications, and *as long as* scholars «*produce and keep producing*»" (p. 79, emphasis in original). The institutional constitutes one space, and the corridors where informal talks and remarks between colleagues happen is another, and there the othering of WGFS scholars continues, keeping the field in ambiguity ("not generally considered a *fundamental* and *indispensable* component of education and research in the SSH [Social Sciences and Humanities]" – p. 82), and dependent on "*individualized institutionalization*", where "WGFS' presence is attached to, and contingent on, the presence and work of those [senior, productive] individuals" (p. 82).

The fact that processes of institutionalisation happened through specific people meshes particularly well with the current performative, neoliberal, climate of academia. The dynamics this created are not linear – it served as "a basis for demarcating epistemic status, and doing exclusionary boundary-work, *within* WGFS" (p. 85), and, as ten years passed, "openings and closures for WGFS not only coexist, but are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive" (p. 183), and individual gains often do not translate into gains for WGFS as a field. On top of that, Maria do Mar Pereira delves into the biopolitical impact of the precarisation of academic work: "This «*state of exhaustion*» and «*alienation*» is […] a «*sick climate*» that «*makes us all ill*», and determines the collective atmosphere", which is marked by "physical exhaustion, intellectual depletion and emotional despondency" (p. 186). As before, this is important for economic and ethical reasons, but especially, in the context of Pereira's work, for epistemic reasons. WGFS is performed and negotiated when there is no time to read, think or organise (pp. 190-2), and thus the logic of productivity is turned against itself, making it harder to produce knowledge, or even to "have the working (and living) conditions to be able, individually and collectively, to do 'significant, creative or critical work' in the first place" (p. 192). The resistive anger of the end of the noughties is turned into depressive despondency in the mid-2010s, and the fundamental value of community-building in a feminist framework becomes increasingly harder to do, while simultaneously some noted scholars in Portugal make significant institutional strides in WGFS.

Another main contribution of Pereira's book – one which directly connects to this toxic climate within the ossification of the performative university – is the typification of five different maps that WGFS and non-WGFS scholars draw (i.e., perform) when negotiating the epistemic status of WGFS vis-à-vis itself, other scientific areas, and the area of the non-scientific. These five maps do not intend to constitute a full categorisation of how this demarcation is made in institutional and everyday interactions, but rather make clear the most often used strategies observed in Pereira's fieldwork.

The maps are: "WGFS is closer to proper science", where mainstream science is given specific traits, and it is argued that WGFS is already very close to those traits; "Proper science should be like WGFS", where the place of

 

proper science is put into question and through which it is argued that it is proper science that should move closer to the space occupied by WGFS; "Mainstream science is just like WGFS", whereby its users argue that "mainstream science is just as (if not more) subjective, political or partial than WGFS" (p. 125), thus invalidating those arguments as ways of dismissing WGFS; "WGFS is just like mainstream science", which performs its claim by also not contesting the hegemonic meaning of scientificity, and by arguing something similar to the previous map, but with its direction reversed; "WGFS can help mainstream science get closer to proper science", this map more clearly separates proper science from mainstream science, and portrays WGFS as having instrumental value to mainstream science, since the latter needs to learn from WGFS how to uphold and expand the reach of science.

As Pereira makes explicit, these aren't maps that are internal or intrinsic to specific people, they aren't ontological positionings, but rather strategic games of pushing and pulling on the borders of certain epistemic terrains. Thus, their deployment is contextual in several different ways: it depends on the audience, and the objectives the map-maker intends to perform on or with the audience; elements of one map can be combined with other maps; mapping efforts "are structured on the basis of what is intelligible in particular climates, persuasive for specific audiences and hence more likely to produce the desired effects" (p. 131). Depending on the kind of person or academic doing the mapping, these maps might also simply not work:

> Epistemic (micro)climates are contextual and diverse; academic negotiations are not only epistemic, but also professional, financial and personal; structural and fortuitous influences interact in often unpredictable ways. (p. 144)

The map-performing – the constant work of bringing WGFS into being, and bringing its epistemic status into being – might happen in very formal and very informal settings, but it is also contingent on historical, geographical, political and economic constraints. This is where the situatedness of Maria do Mar Pereira's work really shines through – not because of how uniquely 'Portuguese' her results are, but because of how she manages to anchor her results in a dynamic and comparative analysis of how the Portuguese results are co-created by realities that extend far beyond Portugal.

On the one hand, Pereira does an excellent analysis of situating WGFS within the broader field of academia, showing that WGFS has been

> gradually, though not linearly, institutionalized in two distinct but related senses […] [since] a more or less large and stable space for it has been, and is being, created or extended […] [and] WGFS has become also an academic institution in itself. (p. 28)

The non-linearity of this process means that the epistemic status associated with this double institutionalisation is not a given, but a performance, and that there is also no direct causal link between institutionalisation and epistemic status; furthermore, "negotiations of epistemic status […] are also internal contestations that play a central and generative role in the life of the field" (p. 36), serving sometimes to create boundaries between 'proper' and 'improper' WGFS, as Pereira demonstrates so vividly, and setting up a climate of "*dismissive recognition* of feminist scholarship" (p. 114) by mainstream scholars. So even though there is a constant question mark about the validity, existence or epistemic status of WGFS within the field of academia as a whole, this question mark is not and cannot be, according to Pereira, uniform or universal.

On the other hand, Pereira argues that the epistemic status of WGFS must also be considered geopolitically. The history of WGFS in academia is linked to the history of Western colonialism, since "the academic hegemony of particular countries constrains the growth, diversity and local relevance of WGFS" (p. 149). Yet, even this narrative is complicated by Pereira's analysis of the figure of the 'modern foreign' in Portugal, framed as a semi-peripheric country. The 'foreign', according to Pereira, can be used to increase the legitimacy of WGFS as it is done 'out there', to draw attention to funding from international institutions, to legitimise the national work of a given scholar by aligning it with foreigners' work, to bemoan the state of WGFS in Portugal as compared to other countries, and so on. Like in other aspects of her analysis, Pereira brings to the fore the fundamental role of ambiguity:

> we must consider both what gets silenced because of these hegemonies, *and* what becomes possible and speakable for WGFS scholars in (semi-)peripheral contexts through the invocation of a hegemonic modern foreign […] [;] those asymmetries produce both losses *and* gains for WGFS, and that the two interact with each other. (p. 168)

The book is built around a praxis of challenging dichotomies, as I hope to have made clear by this review, and so there are no easy stances of for/against WGFS, or of WGFS being more/less than. Maria do Mar Pereira's analysis is not focused on finding the best strategy to increase the epistemic status of WGFS – because her entire work renders that line of thinking moot and unintelligible (if framed as a grand unitary plan). More so, epistemic

 

work around WGFS is also done through the pushing away and out of certain perspectives, seen as 'too much' or 'not enough' – an epistemic, rather than theoretical, disavowal of feminist work, that Pereira rightly criticises for its redeployment of toxic hegemonic strategies. But the book is also a powerful reminder of the toll that academic work – epistemic or otherwise – takes on all of us, and how it impacts WGFS scholars specifically, and it tries to offer some strategies on how to deal with that.

Pereira is keenly aware of the irony involved in her research and her work, as she writes "I am checking the final proofs for this page in absolute silence at 4.56 am on a dark night in November, desperate to go to bed" (p. 218), and that is perhaps why she closes with a few pointed questions, the first being: "As for you… why are you still reading?" (p. 218).

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Book Review

# Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia

Hoching Jiang [1]*

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As the book title, *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, suggests, this edited volume provides not only a guide to gender and sexuality studies in Asia but also arguments that centre sexuality in Asian cultural politics. The book presents a collective effort to ethnographically examine recent changes within the political economy in Asia through the lenses of gender and sexuality. Moreover, across the twelve chapters, the authors address various methodological and theoretical issues that extend beyond Asia as a regional case and sex/gender as a sole analytical dimension. Such a volume would benefit not only students and scholars who are already interested in Asia, political economy, and sex and gender studies, but also those who primarily study social changes in first-world countries.

Like other excellent ethnographic studies, the essays in this book constantly ask readers to be mindful of specific cultural and historical contexts that may be different from and yet connected to other parts of the world. This volume manifests a critical theoretical position between strong cultural relativism and universalism in anthropology. In other words, the authors simultaneously present their studies as unique in specific contexts and claim broader implications of the cases in relation to studies done elsewhere. For instance, Ahmed Afzal (chapter 11) argues against a universal assumption of premodern or Western gay identity in understanding male-male sexual relationships in Pakistan. Instead, he says that the selfhood and 'homosociality' of these relationships should be understood in the context of localised adulthood, gender roles, familial expectations, and religious beliefs. Danning Wang (chapter 5) stresses the historical situation as an important aspect within discourses of the family planning campaign in China as it simultaneously 'desexualiz[ed] working-class women's family life' (94) and reoriented the notion of family to state interests. Afzal, Wang, and many other chapter authors highlight the importance of specific social and historical conditions in ethnographical analyses, but at the same time, their cases speak to various theoretical and methodological issues beyond particular regions and populations.

While essays in this book focus on cultural politics in Asia, the human subjects in the studies are in the process of migration, and so are materials and ideologies. The authors demonstrate that Asia is never in a closed, homogeneous, or stable state. Rather, it is highly diversified with movements of people, wealth, and ideas in both global and local scales. Furthermore, by focusing on humans experiencing relocation or displacement, the authors identify the constant changes of political economy that shape migrations from rural to urban areas and international movement. In these cases, humans are not confined to a region, and their migrations suggest layers of social changes. In Heidi Hoefinger's (chapter 10) research of Cambodian women engaging in transactional sex with Western foreigners as a means of class mobility, she identifies a series of contradictions and negotiations regarding

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gender expectations, individualisation, and White-centered modernisation mobility among the women migrating from rural areas for class mobility. Like Cambodian women migrating for better life conditions, rural Chinese men also come to major cities to work as 'money boys' (chapter 1) and professional porters or carriers, which are termed locally as *bangbang* men (chapter 7). Tiantian Zheng argues that in postsocialist China, rural male migrants become money boys as a route to approach the 'normal' citizen subject position in which they 'contest social inequality and cultural stigma by valourizing state ideology' (34). Paradoxically, money boys move upward in the class ladder to sanitise the stigma as migrant sex workers. Xia Zhang's study of *bangbang* men also indicates that the *bangbang* men phenomenon arises from the changing political economy and that their redefinitions of masculinity work against class and migrant status. More importantly, she maintains that the ideal masculinity in China 'involves many diverse and conflicting meanings in relation to class, work, and the rural-urban division' and that 'inconsistency in the meaning of masculinity in contemporary China reflects changes in dominant masculinity ideals over the course of Chinese history' (127). Hsunhui Tseng's (chapter 12) study of the transnational marriage markets between Taiwan and other countries presents another kind of human migration in which racial, gender, and class logics are the key mechanisms. Comparing the ways in which matchmaking agents filter Taiwanese male clients and present women from Vietnam and Ukraine, Tseng indicates the differentiated, racialised presentations and expectations for foreign women. Yet, Tseng (212) points out that both the supposedly traditional Vietnamese women from rural areas and the urbane, romanticised Ukrainian ladies underline a 'gender crisis' for men and their 'nostalgia for the traditional gender relations in pre-industrial Taiwan'.

Another important theme running through many of the chapters is 'doing gender'. The authors collectively depict how individuals meet or negotiate social expectations for assumed gender roles. In the Ladies' Academy in urban China (chapter 2), the male instructors find contemporary Chinese society chaotic because men and women do not live up to their 'proper place' (47). While they think both men and women are problematic in the present-day, they consider female behaviours to be the root of the problem. Moreover, the all-male instructors hold a neo-traditionalist view of an imagined 'real China' to lament the loss of social order and justify their conservative brand of education for women at the Ladies' Academy. In the cultural activities of the *mandal* in Pune, Western India, Madhura Lohokare (chapter 8) observes 'moral masculinities' that emphasise selflessness and helping others among low-caste male youth in urban India. Such masculinities come with a sense of community belonging that instils confidence in these marginalised young men. Just like *bangbang* men (chapter 7) in China, the masculinities in India are articulated along with local cultural forces, such as religion and class. While there are assumed gender roles and social expectations associated with gender, there are always individuals who do not fit the normative assumptions or intentionally reject their logic. For example, Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo and Tracy Royce's (chapter 3) ethnography of Thai gay nightclubs show queer subjects challenging the sex and gender hegemony in various spaces and moments. Lynne Nakano (chapter 9) compares single women in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo as they all confront social pressure to marry, though the sources of their stress may vary. While some question their ability to meet the requirements of marriage, others question the institution itself and its underlying assumptions. These studies of 'failures' or cases outside normativity precisely reveal the ordinary cultural logics of gender and sexuality. A few of the book chapters address heterosexual male homosociality as constructed by reference to the women in their lives. For example, Nana Okura Gagné's (chapter 4) argues that the male-centred Japanese hostess clubs function as 'a space *suspended from* masculine expectations stemming from the professionalization of men's roles as husbands, fathers, and workers' (89). Similarly, John Osburg (chapter 6) describes a 'gendered social formation' among rich men in the Chinese state-business network as they pursue what the author calls the 'boss' ideal of masculinity and participate in a ritualised leisure of masculinity (109). In both cases, the making of male space and homosociality requires women as symbolic references or labour power.

This book also contributes to the scholarship of intersectionality. Echoing feminism of colour, all scholars in this edited volume address intersectionality in their analysis of cultural politics. While it is certainly not new to advocate for intersectionality, I find that the authors are particularly attentive to localised social factors and that the analyses also accentuate the interplay of social forces. While in North American and European societies, scholars often focus on race and ethnicity as these are the primary social categories when talking about intersectionality, studies in Asia such as those in this volume book present a different view of intersectionality in which race and ethnicity are no longer the master categories. In recent years, some scholars question whether the notion of intersectionality has been overused to become a buzzword or at times is confined in a narrow sense of identity framework. This book provides us with studies of intersectionality in Asia that focus on the multiplicity of social inequalities.

More precisely, the studies in this volume collectively show multiple, localised, social forces at work in shaping the practices of individuals as well as their ethos. The authors also demonstrate that the research subjects' lives are not passively determined by social structures, but that these women and men actively challenge or participate in the social formations. These studies contextualise intersections of social oppressions while being attentive to agency.

 

Throughout the book, the authors identify various social forces coming together to create particular cultural phenomena and to shape human experiences. At the same time, these studies also show that humans are social actors pursuing their material and ideological interests. However, some discussions or use of theories in this volume are puzzling. For example, in some chapters, the term 'neoliberalism' is repeatedly raised as a critique without further explanations of how it is connected to the problems being discussed. The application 'sexual field' theory to gay nightclubs and the contesting of sexual and gender norms (chapter 3) could also go further.

Finally, on reading this edited volume, questions arose in my mind as to why we need a book about cultural politics of gender and sexuality that particularly focus on Asia. In what specific sense does Asia matter (and matter to whom)? Alternatively, how should we read such a book and locate it in the mapping of knowledge-production? It seems to me that some scholars contributing to this book share similar concerns as they simultaneously challenge Western epistemology and bridge theoretical connections across continents. Therefore, I would encourage people to read the chapters in this book more as critiques of rather than supplements to social theories built in Western academia.

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Book Review

# Living A Feminist Life

Chin-Ju Lin [1]*, Benny C. Lu [2]

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A feminist and queer of colour, Sarah Ahmed lectured in Women's Studies at Lancaster University and was later appointed by Goldsmiths College, University of London. During 2016, however, Ahmed would resign from her post at Goldsmiths—in protest against institutional discrimination against sexual harassment. Coming from an interdisciplinary background, Ahmed has studied philosophy, women's studies, and cultural studies. Within all of these fields, she finds women of colour's writing most empowering and sees it as her genealogy (p. 15). This is the approach that she adopts in this book. *Living a Feminist Life* is her most recent work that has developed out of her previous series of books (*Willful Subjects* (2014) *On Being Included (2012)*, *The Promise of Happiness (2010)*, *Queer Phenomenology (2006*). But what distinguishes *Living A Feminist Life* from her previous work?

Firstly, Ahmed ardently pursues the feminist 'citation policy' (p. 15-16); citing only feminists—and women of colour in particular—to build up this book. She claims that citation is also a political standpoint for feminist writing and she aimed to focus upon those who are excluded by white-centric authorship - hence the title 'Feminist Life'. This book of everyday feminism is composed of three parts. The first part 'Becoming Feminist' describes Ahmed's experiences of growing up by adopting a feminist lens. In the first chapter, Ahmed describes her positioning as a brown girl growing up in Australia and Britain. She felt different; struggling to conform to the right names, right bodies, and the right gender. Ahmed also felt alienated by other's expectations of her; she would not feel like herself, to become as others expected. But when she started describing those problems, within the autobiographical logic of the book, she became the problem. Ahmed studied those problems, identified sources of injustice, and described how they shaped her feminist politics and practices in daily life. Chapter Two focuses on power and directions. 'How power works as a mode of directionality (p. 43)'. Power shapes norms, and norms shape direction: people expect girls and boys to follow norms that are heteronormative. As a girl who refused to be 'girly', Ahmed refrained from smiling and singing at parties and demonstrated unhappiness with those gendered norms. To others, the young Ahmed was showing her potential as a feminist killjoy, seeking solace in the sadness of feminist pedagogy, in the tradition of feminist writing pioneers such as *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. Chapter Three raises the subject of wilfulness and feminist subjectivity through the lens of Steven Erikson's *The Willful Child* who did not do as her mother wished, so that when she became ill and was on her death-bed and then lowered into her grave, her arms always came out of the earth again. The wilful child never gave up, even after death. Wilfulness, as Ahmed frames it, is an explanation of disobedience, a feminist spirit, it describes women who never give up their will, never recede, always oppose. A wilful subject often causes violence. Violence is not only gendered: there is

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also the violence of enslavement, of colonisation, of empire, thus, women of colour continuously and consciously raise their arms to show their strength, to protest, and to support each other.

Part II on 'Diversity Work' provides an account of how sexism and racism at institutional levels estranges women of colour and explores feminist lives within university settings. The Amendment to the Race Relations Act in Britain in 2000 required all public organisations in the United Kingdom to have and to disseminate race equality policies. Some institutional appointments were then created to meet the legislation, often of women of colour who were expected to transform the institution, and work to promote diversity. Such diversity work is a wilful feminist work for Ahmed, however she described it as being like 'banging your head against a brick wall' (p. 138). The metaphor of 'walls' is a theme in this chapter and then throughout to the end of the book. For Ahmed, 'wall' is a metaphor of the hardness of the institution that is difficult to transform. Some examples of sexual harassment and citation cultures are also used to explain how white male privilege remains powerful in the academic system.

Part III is on 'Living the consequences'. How do feminist killjoys live? How do they come up against the walls that are built up by sexism, heterosexism and racism? In chapter 7, 'Fragile Connections', Ahmed looks into black queer feminists' fragile connections with the world. When Ahmed, as a queer, a brown feminist, and an immigrant daughter, comes up against the system, she is often thrown, shattered, fragmented, in pieces, broken. Broken stories are also a history of secrets; wilful subjects are often regarded as shameful. Ahmed is looking for a way in her book, to relate to this breaking without aiming for restoration. Chapter 8 is 'feminist snap': a snap is a sudden break. It occurs when feminists encounter the breaking point that she cannot accept. She snaps. She speaks up, she takes action, and she refuses to accept those unacceptable interactions. A snap might seem a break but it actually brings up new 'hap', argues the author. When feminists snap, snap and snap, we make collective snaps to form arms that support each other. Feminism is thus collective snaps.

Chapter 9 is about lesbian feminism. It is liberating for women as it points out the possibility of women's solidarity without men, following lesbian feminism of the 1970s. Heterosexuality comes up as a wall that bars and frustrates women's connections with each other. Lesbian women are wilful subjects who come up against heterosexism in their ordinary everyday lives. They are regarded as dangerous and threatening. Their wayward arms challenge the system, providing a space where women build shelters to support each other.

In conclusion, the *killjoy survival kit* and manifesto, as presented in Ahmed's book, provides practical tools for how to live a feminist life. The survival kit includes books, tools, time, life, permission notes, other killjoys, humour, feelings, bodies. Within the ten principles of the *killjoy survival kit*, Ahmed's main point is to encourage the feminist to stay critical to the world, and to be against conventional happiness as the world defines it, against institutions and jokes that are unjust, violent and unequal. Instead, killjoys are willing to break the bonds that are damaging to themselves, and to take 'hap', to craft a new life, new happiness.

Clearly, 'wilfulness' represents the most vital politics that Ahmed postulates in this book and this provides a theory of the everyday tactics for feminists and activists to fight the racist heterosexual normality in/outside the academy. Readers who are familiar with Ahmed's work thus can easily glean the ethos of wilfulness that went through her previous writing. It is passionate writing of 'becoming a wilful woman' (of colour or queer), on the one hand. On the other, it also resounds with the topical #metoo movement as we witness many wilful women standing up to question and collapse the "wall" that was built to harass women as well as shut off and quieten women's voices of pain and anger. This is perhaps particularly pertinent to younger girls, and resonates with Ahmed's study of a young girl's arm from the grave, vividly symbolising young girls' wilful subjectivity that insists on being heard. Her wilful power can even break the ground of the grave after death. Interestingly this may also remind readers about Judith Butler's (2000) noted reading of Antigone, also a wilful girl from Sophocles's Oedipus, who insisted upon her own will to decide life and death, confronting the patriarchy that aimed to silence her. What differs between Butler and Ahmed is the 'affect' that the latter brings to light, which is more centred on anger and uncompromised emotions rather than on the power of mourning that Butler is presenting.

In short, this book is about how 'becoming a wilful woman' and why we might want to. It is not simply a book of theory, but a kind of manifesto, however, it is still not a book that can be digested easily by the general public in our view – given its highly performative writing style, complex ideas and argument. But this is a book dedicated to the feminists and activists that are looking for reflexive shared experiences, as bell hooks claims "everyone should read it." Some Western connotations for us are still revealed here, when reflecting upon our experiences in Taiwan. We perform the power of queer wilfulness perhaps from the perspective of being wilful when negotiating with power, rather than directly picking up weapons to bang the walls; we learned how to collapse walls from numerous strategic negotiations and co-operation in our many daily practices with patriarchal structures.

Lastly, Ahmed's 'no-white-male-authors' citational politics and her prioritisation of women of colour invites more debates. For instance, it reminds us of the activist Sunili Govinnage (2015) who started to question white authorship in the literature field, when she asked why only 3 out of 124 bestseller from the New York Times 2012 were written by non-white authors.

For us, this book also actually brings to mind the great solidarity that western radical feminists have developed from the 1970s on, and the postcolonial critique of 'women' that Black feminists drove so assiduously. This reminds of us of the vitalities of feminism in which different standpoints of women can be communicated and debated, and the book animates the hope that women might break the walls between us and transcend our different standpoints.

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Book Review

# Slutwalk, Feminism, Activism and Media

Rui Vieira Cruz [1*]

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"Women should avoid dressing like sluts". This sentence, spoken by a Canadian security officer during a speech at York University in 2011, introduced the motto for the online discussion about rape myths perpetuation. The constant emphasis on women who dress in a provocative way, consume alcohol or show interest in sex usually results in blaming them for the sexual crimes which they are victims of. This notion, coupled with the (false) social imagery that rape occurs in dark alleys and is perpetrated by some 'bad apples' unable to control their libido, has opened space for discussing sexual violence leading to SlutWalk (SW) protest marches around the world, under the slogan 'Because We've Had Enough'. But how does getting out on the streets with the word 'slut' written on their own bodies, and/or in posters alerts to rape culture? How does it avoid victim-blaming and slut-shaming? How were these groups created, and what was the media coverage in several countries throughout the world? These are the topics that, framed by media and communication studies, Mendes analyses throughout this book.

Structured into eight chapters, the book addresses i) introduction to SlutWalk; ii) contextualising this social movement; iii) its implementation in different geographic and temporal spaces; iv) how it has challenged rape culture; v) controversies and oppositions it suffered; vi) hierarchies and roles of participating organisations; (vii) linking SlutWalk communities to cyberactivism; and viii) final systematisation.

In chapter 1 (*Introduction*) Mendes questions and rejects the premise that sexual violence is a genetic/biological act, presenting sets of data that reveal the global discrepancy regarding the numbers of reported rape cases. These variations, alongside the various ways they occur, makes this practice a social phenomenon and validate SlutWalk's emergence as a movement to end rape culture, aimed at women's (self) determination about their own bodies and their free participation in public space.

Mendes dedicated Chapter 2 (*Contextualizing the issues*) to literature review and conceptual frameworks, where we are presented with an analysis centred on a triad of (post) feminism(s), representations, and social media. Here, Mendes focuses upon the pervasive methodological aspects that guide the book's research: qualitative complementary techniques (i.e. content analysis, framing analysis and critical discourse analysis), including international press clippings, and semi-structured interviews. However, the book's innovative nature consists of netnography (i.e. ethnography on the internet) made possible by following the many debates generated within SlutWalk's groups in social network sites, complemented by traditional ethnography participation in protest marches which were later reported in an ethnographic record format.

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In Chapter 3 (*Situating SlutWalk*) Mendes locates SlutWalk territorially, spatially and ideologically, and explores several regional, national, and international differences in news coverage follow-up published by both mainstream media and feminist media on SlutWalk from 7th February 2011 to 31st December 2013. With a strong media presence in 2011, SlutWalk's following two years of coverage registered a drastic reduction, revealing a thematic fatigue and the end of its spectacle/novelty effect, which did not, however, prevent the movement's global expansion and consequent regional adaptations. However, other feminist organisations have argued that SlutWalk represents a setback in the advances made by feminist movements in recent decades and a mere adaptation of Canada's and USA social realities worldwide. In countries such as Australia, New Zealand and mainly India, the SlutWalk movement has been accused of appeasing the West and of not taking into account differentiated feminism paths in these contexts. Also, SlutWalk was accused of relegating these countries' specificities, in which sexual violence is a systemic problem and is connected to class/caste system. In Singapore, due to state and police control alongside the public protests ban, a traditional SlutWalk march did not take place, and other diffusion strategies arose, namely workshops and slutscreens. In Canada and USA, another pertinent question focused on 'reclaiming', or not, the word 'slut'. Several black movements criticised its use, accusing it of being a word used only against white women. These discourses sparked a broad discussion within the SlutWalk and feminist movements and in black women groups (who did not reject the word slut, preferring the expression ho), requiring re-branding and re-labelling. The SlutWalk-organised platforms of Toronto and Winnipeg rejected this proposal; SlutWalk Vancouver hosted an open online meeting to discuss this subject matter and decided to keep the name; in other groups, such as SlutWalk Chicago and Philadelphia, the expression 'SlutWalk' eventually fell. In Johannesburg, which maintained the slut expression, it was decided that individuals did not need to identify with the word to be part of the movement.

Did the media take into account these emerging concerns in internal discussions? Chapter 4 (*SlutWalk challenges rape culture*), explores the frameworks imposed upon SlutWalk's actions both by mainstream and feminist media. The main focus highlighted by both types of media was on how SlutWalk challenged and alerted to sexual violence practices. However, not only do we find differences in the messages, but also in the contents that various SW groups intended to see transmitted. This recurrent lag/discrepancy between what is intended to be transmitted and what is effectively transmitted has allowed for Mendes' theoretical critique of both types of media. First, the book explores the discourses for blaming the rapist, and then the discursive strategies used to blame the victim, especially by mainstream media, are also analysed. The book even ironies with discursive strategies that focus on such provocative pieces of clothing that make people rape victims. The hegemonic discourse on rape in both popular and political culture understands it as a crime of passion and sex, carried out by 'deviant' strangers, rather than by the average father/brother/friend/husband/boyfriend/acquaintance. In this understanding of rape, men become so overcome by their sexual urges that they (often unwittingly) commit rape as a result. By deconstructing and withdrawing discursive values of these types of records, anchored by an approach that rejects the victim's 'personalization', and by rejecting individualised characteristics (i.e. what she wears, if she drinks alcohol, goes out at night), Mendes focuses on the structural aspects of this problem: rape as a form of violence, power and control that occurs in periods of war (regardless of victim's clothing); as a form of punishment and revenge (revenge rape); and as a form of sexual gratification in which the rapist's desires and fantasies surpass the victim's body autonomy and self-determination (date rape).

Despite chiming with the public's concerns about sexual violence public concerns, SlutWalk was not exempt from criticism and opposition. Chapter 5 (*SlutWalk is misguided or opposed*) captures controversies and objections directed at SlutWalk's tactics and goals, namely those that address body uses. It would be wrong to think that criticism came solely from conservative sectors of these societies or from corporative media. Feminist criticisms focused on supporting the issue, without supporting its implementation. Incorporating into SlutWalk's protests contents such as images of young, slim and sensual women has given the movement an appealing lens to the male gaze, transforming a sexual violence awareness-raising action in spectacularisation act, transforming the body into commodity fetishism, hence the interest of mainstream media. This focus on the body, shock and spectacularisation that the mainstream media attributed to the protest raised widespread criticism from organisations involved in SlutWalk, accusing them of misrepresenting the protest marches. Mendes departs from the duality between good and evil and does not consider that SlutWalk has been misrepresented by mainstream media, since they only presented an interpretive framework based on a neoliberal ideological framework. Even feminist movements addressed criticisms to Slutwalks postfeminist approach, namely not giving enough emphasis to the structural aspects of rape culture:

> It is worrying that we live in an age in which women are told equality and liberation have been already achieved and that empowerment is best achieved through the sexualized displays of one's body rather than collective political action. It is worrying that under neoliberalism and postfeminism, structural inequalities are reframed as individual problems, which can be overcome if individuals simply try harder. (p.119)

The emphasis given to spectacularisation via images/photos/videos attempted, from the perspective of organisations and participants, to distort the sex-positive banner of the movement. This redirected feminist movements to a more creative performance and to another set of narratives that did not imply neoliberal ideology. Feminists' focus was not merely on grievances or complaints against mainstream media, but rather on intervening directly by providing another interpretive framework to understand, represent and remember the movement. These collectives therefore attempted to generate counter-memories through videos, photos and text that could counteract hegemonic mainstream media voices. However, SlutWalk presented a set of internal inconsistencies: it appeared linked to neoliberal principles through the defence of individualisation in the control of the body; and promoted an apolitical and non-structural stand. Feminist criticisms of the movement itself, focused on spectacularism and *raunch culture*, has led to a greater media visibility of the movement yet the lack of a central argument, a clear opponent, and a motto, differentiates it from new *grassroot* movements such as *Indignados* or *Occupy*.

Knowing the themes addressed by mainstream and feminist media, it was still necessary to question how these SlutWalk groups had been created. Chapter 6 (*SlutWalk hierarchies and organizer's roles*) reveals the importance of recruiting leaders and individuals with a desire to support and diffuse the core idea through social media. A distinctive feature ('horizontalism') appeared within groups focused on a pluralistic strategy with no central or hierarchical leadership, and with room for debate among members. Nonetheless, not all SW groups opted for collective and shared management strategies, as others chose to establish hierarchies and delegate specialised tasks to specific members. In addition, the content promotion strategy revealed different levels of (in)experience, in models as different as 'learning by doing' heuristic or by using each member's specialised knowledge. Also, who were they talking to?

> While some satellite groups made a concerted effort to target national or local media, others were more interested in community outreach. (…) I do not wish to argue that the mainstream media does not matter, it is clear that organizers are divided in their opinions, and that many would be happy to bypass the mainstream media completely. (p.158)

These very different strategies result in one of two outcomes: i) by rejecting mainstream media, SW tries to strengthen the impact of its message; ii) however, it risks something similar to having a talk amongst its members with no real outreach.

What distinguishes these online mobilisations from more traditional ones? How do they leave the online sphere and reach the streets? How do different collectives cooperate? And do common individuals participate in established networks? In Chapter 7 (*SlutWalk, Community and Cyberactivism*), Mendes addresses the innovations that mobilisations have registered during the twenty-first century, and the novelty of cyberactivisms and counter-publics networks. Fostering the creation of new SlutWalk groups around the central Toronto group has resulted in the formation of satellite groups which use Slutwalk's symbols, logos, colours, flags, posts and hashtags - a general branding action that conferred an overall identification and coherence to the movement. This protest counter-sphere allowed for various SlutWalk groups to promote other initiatives and to incorporate different cyberactivism strategies that reinforced the links between groups, by disseminating posts, hashtags, images and videos, and marches in other cities and even articulation intensification with other feminist organisations/collectives: "While not all groups contributed to this 'enhancement' of posts, it was a common practice among some Facebook pages" (p.166).

Regrettably, new strategies convey new problems, and this discussion openness has generated new consequences made possible by online social networks, such as cybersexism and trolling. Public arenas allow the entry of dissonant voices and some of those only aim to destabilise, to provoke and to discredit these new online communities. Different organisations dealt with these problems quite differently: while some erased troll comments, others elucidated them, or even allowed for the community as a whole to answer such topics.

SlutWalk was an innovative idea regarding equality and social justice. However, like most technological innovations it was not without flaws. As a final observation, covering eight different territorial spaces allowed the reader to note the differences in the ways SlutWalks organised themselves and to empirically demonstrate the slogan 'think global and act local'. This oscillation between how SlutWalk has become global and how it has adapted to local realities in a glocal strategy was reflected in a plural set of organisations, meanings, and mediations. Nonetheless, globalisation and glocalisation are neoliberal strategies. The use of bodies and connections to the word 'slut' contributed to capitalist media usage through image transmission, fostering a desired soft shock. On the other hand, it allowed these movements a broad media coverage, visibility and notoriety. The information reached the general public, with another of SlutWalk's latent effects being that it was left out of hard news space and relegated to soft news. Feminist media largely protested against these dominant views by adding information to journalistic *raunch culture* of visual and dramatic effect that removed the protest essence, which also appealed to the male gaze. Although feminist media addressed numerous criticisms to SW, they have provided a generic

 

supportive position, discussing political investments in feminism, their priorities, tactics and strategies in order to achieve the desired social change. They did so by using the same formats as corporate media (text, images and video) to demonstrate the diversity of protest agents, thus creating their counter-memories and to (re)signify the movement. Even in the face of global mainstream media's support for SlutWalk protests (which Mendes found surprising), countries such as India, South Africa and Australia have demonstrated more critical positions by questioning the real need and function of this movement, and the ways it acted, while in Singapore they redefined SlutWalk's street actions. Therefore, hegemony does not cease to be hegemonic, even in social protests. By just adapting to local realities, glocalisms are not, in themselves, forms of social protest.

The theoretical diversity presented demonstrates that this is not an apology book, but a critical argument about SlutWalk, which addresses and sustains its relevance. Yet, one of the book's many strengths, its methodology, has also been one of its weaknesses. Combining systems of complementary and integrated methodologies has sometimes generated epistemological noise: mentioning several examples, coming from different variables, obtained through different techniques did not result in a complete clarification of the elements. Also, the constant focus on *social media* (are there media that are not social?) deserved a greater discussion considering its plurality. After all, SlutWalk organised its online coverage in a way very similar to any company or organisation: it used its network of followers/participants to promote its idea.

In short, SlutWalk was not always consistent. If it was global, it was also glocal. If it emancipated groups of women, it appealed to male gaze. If it was innovative, it was also static. If it criticised neoliberal positions, it was also ideologically connoted to this stance. If it helped revitalise feminism, it also watered it down. If it existed online, it also marked its presence on the streets. If it was horizontal, it was also hierarchical. Still, SlutWalk made a difference by alerting to sexual violence, capturing one individual at a time, in different parts of the globe, simply: 'Because We've Had Enough'.

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