The Politics of Border Crossings

Black, Postcolonial, and Transnational Feminist Perspectives

Hyun Sook Kim

Feminist scholarship in the past three decades has continued to theorize about the politics of various borders, or about how divisions and inequalities across race, culture, sexuality, class, and nationality create tensions and fragmentation. Theoretically and politically, feminist researchers and activists working across various sociocultural divides have critiqued the notions of universal patriarchy and global sisterhood (womanhood) and have analyzed how multiple forms of hegemonies are configured unevenly in “scattered,” fragmented, conflicting, and contradictory ways (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 2005). These tensions, however, appear to have deepened with the increasing inequalities and polarizations caused by globalization—namely, of capitalist free trade and corporate market economy, or economic liberalism. Given this backdrop, how do feminist researchers produce critical knowledge about domination and subordination, power and privilege, and geopolitical and institutional rule that is historically salient today? What are the ways in which feminist scholars contribute to knowledge production without reinforcing or legitimating their interests and agendas, or those of privileged groups and places? How is feminist production of knowledge made more explicitly tied to material and cultural politics, so that the less privileged groups, communities, and places are made visible and integrated into analysis?

Some strands of feminist scholarship have been more explicit than others in grappling with these questions about epistemology and praxis—about how feminists speak about, frame, and engage across multiple divides and putative borders without privileging the interests of dominant groups. I consider these questions, which have been similarly raised elsewhere by feminist geographers Staeheli and Nagar (2002), to examine epistemological and methodological issues facing feminist scholarship. This chapter focuses, in particular, on black feminist thought, postcolonial feminist theory and, transnational feminist perspectives. These feminist trajectories have developed in parallel movements, and while they may reflect uneasy relations with...
each other, their mutual concerns deal with issues of voice, authority, and subjectivity of groups (or women) in subjugation.

My working premise is that in the current context of globalization, it is necessary to draw important lessons about feminist epistemology and methodology that will enable making connections and linkages across variously polarized communities and places. Such analytical and political linkages are necessary for several reasons. One is that the issues of race, empire, imperialism, colonialism, and nations/states are particularly salient today in light of globalization, but they remain overlooked and undertheorized in feminist scholarship. When these questions are probed, more often feminist analyses tend not to study them in relation to gender, sexuality, class, patriarchy, and feminist epistemology. Partially, this is due to the blind spots that exist in our feminist approaches to studying these questions, and partially also because the different strands of feminist scholarship (of black and “Third World” feminist approaches, postcolonial feminist studies, and transnational feminist analyses) remain separated from each other and on the “margins” of academic disciplines. In this chapter, I not only examine such conceptual limits but also review the important contributions offered by them. Although different in their epistemic positions, black, Third World, postcolonial, and transnational feminists have been attentive to the problems of racism, imperialism, and neocolonialism found in knowledge production and have offered critiques and insights on the complex matrix of power and representation. They have articulated the complexities and specificities of material and cultural practices across historical and cultural contexts, as well as exposing the intricate workings of power dynamics in knowledge production. These particular feminist trajectories offer necessary insights on how we can unravel these matrixes of power.

Furthermore, given the realignments of nation-states and the reconfiguration of empires today, feminist scholars and activists now face new challenges and opportunities. Concerns of (neo)colonialism and imperialism, with the United States extending its military, political, and economic power globally, are as relevant today to feminist scholars working in metropolitan centers in the global North as they are for those residing in the Third World or the global South. Decolonization, or a resistance against forces of imperial domination, is a political and theoretical project not only pertinent to the Third World communities and peoples, but also equally, if not more, urgent for feminist scholars working in Anglo-American academia. This is the case because neocolonial structures fostered through the latest political and economic liberalization—otherwise referred to as globalization—continue to impose (and extend) cultural, social, economic, and political practices of the Anglo-European powers elsewhere. We need to be aware that feminist knowledge production is not innocent or value-free in this context; rather, as in other forms of knowledge construction, feminist knowledge is produced within the matrix of power. In this age of global and multinational capital, feminist scholarship is embedded in the patterns of unequal exchange and transfer of hegemonic notions and ideas (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Kim-Puri, 2005; Mani, 1990; Mohanty, 2005; Ong, 1988, 1999; Radcliffe, 1994). Feminist theories, concepts, and methods continue to travel in one direction, typically from the Anglo-European academy to its “peripheral” sites and places (Bulbeck, 1997; Collins, 1990, 1998; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Massey, 1994; Narayan, 1997; Sandoval, 1991, 2000; Spivak, 1988, 1990). In other words, presumptions made about the boundaries and borders between the First World and Third World (women) in the Anglo-American feminist scholarship is not innocent, and decentering its hegemony in knowledge construction is necessary. This means, as so aptly described by Sarah Radcliffe (1994), that in process of knowledge production and communication, “Western feminists are engaged in fissiparous and highly complex gendered and racialized relations of power at global and regional levels” (p. 31).

Similarly, concerning the process of knowledge production on Africa, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome (2001) problematizes the politics of appropriation of “Western” concepts and issues in/to African studies in the contemporary context of globalization. Okome argues that it has now become fashionable for African scholars to write about the issues of hybridity and cosmopolitanism. The engagements with these
ideas have suddenly become the new and dominant—though not the only—ideologies shaping the field of African studies. In Okome’s view, the knowledge produced about hybridity and cosmopolitanism is defined by and within the Anglo-European academy, and African scholars now appropriate these notions because they are fashionable. When “Western” and African scholars apply such categories and concepts to Africa, they “explain not very much.” Okome laments that with the circulation of such discourses of hybridity and cosmopolitanism, Africa is seen as “even more of an enigma” to the West and African cultural philosophies are made effectively irrelevant or erased from the “cosmopolitan” imagination.

In a different context, recent feminist research has documented the gendering of globalization and its pernicious effects on women in various places (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Marchand & Runyan, 2000; Ong, 1999). Feminist scholars point out that local socioeconomic and cultural production (and consumption) cannot be adequately understood without looking at how globalization discourses and practices also inject power in various sites via the circulation of finance, capital, labor, and information technology. The globalization processes and practices pose new challenges for feminist scholars and activists.

Given this political terrain, some key questions—theoretical, epistemological, and methodological—need to be reexamined and are hence explored in this chapter:

- Against the backdrop of global capitalism, how do feminists theorize about differences and borders that are central to feminist research and praxes?
- How do feminist scholars conceptualize political, material, and geographical borders (and communities) without reifying the world through binaries and dualisms? (i.e., self/other, center/margin, First World/Third World, Western/non-Western, West/East, North/South, global/local, modern/traditional, black/white, religious/secular).
- As cultures and groups become multiply fragmented, oppositional, and heterogeneous (and homogenized in other ways as well) under global capitalism, what feminist knowledge helps to make analytic and political linkages across disparately marginalized and unequal places, groups, and relations?
- How do feminist researchers produce knowledge that is tied explicitly to the cultural and material politics of social change that challenge the matrix of domination and subordination without reinforcing the interests, agendas, and priorities of privileged groups and places?

This chapter examines these questions from black, postcolonial, and transnational feminist perspectives. It seeks to identify the distinct methodologies that have been conceived in feminist scholarship that aim to destabilize a series of naturalized categories: to question the boundaries presumed in our imaginaries about borders, to decolonize our conceptions of self and other, and to cross multiple boundaries (i.e., conceptual, cultural, geographical, and political) by forging transnational linkages. As critical methodologies, these feminist approaches can be viewed as “analytic weapons” applied to unravel the fracturing dualisms and binaries that have been drawn around the notions of “self” and “other” (Collins, 1990, 1998; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Narayan, 1997; Sandoval, 2000; Spivak, 1990).3

**BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: TRIPLE OPPRESSION, AFROCENTRIC STANDPOINT THEORY, AND THE U.S. HEGEMONY**

At the heart of black feminist theory in the United States are concepts that speak to African American women’s historical and collective experiences: of triple oppression; of subjugated knowledge; of black feminist standpoint; of Afrocentric epistemology; of voice, authority, and authenticity. The notion of triple oppression captures the critical and reflexive thinking about the cumulative experiences of black women and people of color who are subjugated and discriminated against on the basis of race, class, and gender (Carby, 1985; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1991; James & Busia, 1993; King, 1988; Lorde, 1984; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). For black women, history is embedded in experience, one that creates a specialized knowledge about their collective struggle, pain, and marginalization, which
are direct outcomes of the cumulative effects of slavery, colonialism, and ongoing discrimination they face in the global labor market as cheap and reserve labor. The historical evolution of black feminist thought in the United States emerges not only out of black women’s antagonistic and dialectical engagement with Euro-American women but more significantly out of this recognition of the need for self and group empowerment. Black feminism can be viewed as “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (Collins, 1989).

As Naples (1996) and Collins (1990) highlight, black women have mobilized against the myriad practices of discrimination and subjugation in their everyday working lives. Black women’s resistance and social movements in the United States and elsewhere reflect struggles to collectively voice and organize themselves against the forces of discrimination based on race, class, and gender. This recognition has led feminist scholars to articulate a concept of intersectionality, which describes the co-dependence and co-constitution of race, class, gender, and sexuality as axes of power. The axes of this interlocking system of oppression and domination cannot be analytically or politically separated (Crenshaw, 1991; King, 1988).

While these notions center on the common experience rooted in racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, Amos and Parmar (1984) and Mama (1995) contest that the difference and diversity between black women cannot be ignored. They argue that it is problematic to valorize a global discourse on triple oppression that somehow binds black women together in a collective identity and struggle. They argue that it is problematic to valorize a global discourse on triple oppression that somehow binds black women together in a collective identity and struggle. Similarly, Mirza (1997) suggests that the framework of triple oppression is an outmoded way of understanding the diverse and different histories of black women’s lives. Implicated in this concept of oppression is the assumption of the common notion of universal black womanhood, which masks heterogeneity of women’s voices and forms of authority. While struggles against the interlocking forms of domination and marginalization are still central to black women, Mirza suggests a need for more inclusive and nuanced modes of analysis that capture the different voices among black women across cultural contexts.

Her study of black women in Britain shows, for example, that they challenge the discourses of black womanhood that are specific to and dominant in local sites—such as about motherhood, family, education, employment, and community activism—rather than against a global discourse.

In contrast to the British black feminist call for specificity and diversity, Collins (1989, 1990) developed an Afrocentric black feminist standpoint theory that theorized the commonness of black women’s experiences. Collins’s articulation of black feminist epistemology emphasizes four essential points. First, she argues that black women empower themselves by creating self-definitions and self-valuations that help them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of black womanhood. Second, black women confront and dismantle the “overarching” and “interlocking” structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression. Third, black women do not disconnect but combine intellectual thought and political activism. Fourth, in Collins’s view, the black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination. In this sense, Collins describes a “subjugated knowledge” that runs counter to the dominant ideology (that privileges heteronormative male, middle-class, and Euro-American feminist), which she argues has not been accepted as a valid form of knowledge by the dominant groups in the United States.

Black feminist standpoint theory traces its roots to the distinct Afrocentric philosophical episteme, and it not only enables the possibility of black women’s “ways of knowing the world” but also “measure[s] knowledge against concrete experience, test[s] [it] through dialogue, and judge[s] it in relation to an ethic of personal accountability” (DeVault, 1996, p. 42). The black feminist standpoint is, therefore, an important political and analytical tool for articulating black women’s voices, struggles, and histories. Parallel to the emergence of Third World feminist critiques offered in the United States and elsewhere, black feminist perspectives rose out of the matrix of the very discourses that have denied, suppressed, and produced differences. As a subjugated knowledge determined by the
“other” or marginal structural location of black women, this feminist standpoint theory creates a discursive space within which a “new politics of resistance and critique” may be possible (Hall, 1992). In the past two decades, however, black feminist standpoint theory and Afrocentric epistemology have been critiqued for overhomogenizing black women as a group and for erasing their heterogeneity. The criticisms raise the following concerns: The first point, as already mentioned, is that diversity and differences among black women are effectively ruled out in black feminist Afrocentric standpoint theory in order to insist on black women’s communality and common interests. Critics argued that the black feminist Afrocentric standpoint mirrors, in this sense, all standpoint theories (e.g., Dorothy Smith, who developed early the standpoint that all women constitute a “group”). It uncritically assumes a particular (African American) women’s experience as being representative of all black women, not unlike the way Euro-American middle-class Western women assumed theirs to be universally shared by all women. Hence, the critiques of black feminist standpoint theory correctly point to the fissures, fragmentations, and differences between women who differ by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, culture, and so on. The criticisms resonate with similar challenges directed at Western, Euro-American feminists who have been criticized too often for falsely generalizing and universalizing a particular group of women’s lives across history and cultures.

The second point centers on the limitations of black feminist standpoint theory in its constraining and essentialist deployment of the notion of black womanhood and black women’s voice and authority. By privileging “experience” and promoting images of authentic and essential black women, the Afro- or black-centric epistemology assumes the idea that their experience is primordial. This “authenticized” and “valorized” view of black women’s experience, as Reynolds (2002) tells us, is based on the recognition of their suffering, dysfunction, and marginalization, but black women are fixed into particular positions of oppression (and subjugation) where they are victims without agency. This perspective has been criticized for its presumptions of universalization and essentialization of black womanhood, which masks differences in black women’s lives while also ignoring the complexity in cultural, social, economic, and political variations in black communities throughout history. For these reasons, some feminists have concluded that the conceptual framework of black feminist standpoint theory is reductionist (Reynolds, 2002; Sylvester, 1995).

The third point concerns the issue of U.S.-centrism. Some British black and African feminist writers have argued that Afrocentric black feminist standpoint theory is, in fact, “Americocentric”; it represents the application of a particular U.S. black feminist knowledge and worldview to interpret the diverse histories and lives of black women everywhere, and in the process cultural and political differences are erased (Nzegwu, 2001; Oyewumi, 1997, 2002; Reynolds, 2002; Sylvester, 1995). Even more problematic, according to Reynolds (2002), who writes from a British context, is that black women’s experiences that do not fit with this particular U.S.-based worldview are effectively silenced. In spite of the differences and diversity among black women, the U.S. black feminists valorize a discourse of global similarity based on notions of a black women’s collective history presumably involving a common racial struggle, common suffering, and common experience of marginalization (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Mama, 1995; Mirza, 1997).

Fourth, these U.S.-centric black feminist theories that ironically emerged from marginality produce hegemonic concepts and impose U.S. dominance in knowledge production. As mentioned, the recent criticisms and challenges offered by African, British black, and Third World feminists are worthy of reflection. Writing about the perspectives of Third World women inside and outside of the United States (or of Western nations), feminist thinkers such as Amos and Parmar (1984), Chandra Mohanty (2005), Oyeronke Oyewumi (2001, 2002), and Uma Narayan (1997) have commented that black feminists within the First World (and in the United States in particular) have ignored the specific geographical, cultural, and historical context that underpins black women’s experiences. Raising the problem of cultural imperialism in knowledge production, Oyewumi (2001) asks, “On what basis are feminist concepts, developed from
Western social categories, transferable or exportable to other cultures that display a different social organization and cultural logic?" (p. 7). The concepts of “gender” and “sisterhood,” Oyewumi (2001) argues, are grounded in Anglo-European feminist somatocentric interpretations of their particular histories and are based on the model of Anglo-American nuclear family structures; they are, nonetheless, uncritically applied to Africa, whose dynamic cultures and histories and varying forms of households, family relations, and social organizations are made invisible. Such misconstrued rendering of Africa and African cultures is, however, also reflected in Afro-American imagination. Oyewumi (2001) argues that the quest of Africa is articulated as a theme of “paradise demonized” for some black feminists. For example, Alice Walker represents Africa as “the ultimate fountainhead of misogyny” and villagizes it as a culture where lesbianism is presumably not accepted and female genital mutilation is widely practiced.

Similarly, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome (2001) also notes these problems inherent in the assumptions made by First World black women when they speak on behalf of black women globally and when African scholars mimic or appropriate theories and concepts produced by U.S. scholars. The U.S.-dominated feminist knowledge, for example, can mask black women’s voices from elsewhere in the world that receive limited theoretical consideration in the production of a black feminist standpoint. These practices hinder an understanding of the differing cultural and social contexts in which other black women live and the way their cultural and gendered identities are situated within specific historical and geographical locations (Hall, 1992). This U.S.-centered black feminist standpoint differs from its counterpart in Britain where the distinctive struggles and patterns of black women from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent are openly acknowledged in feminist engagements (Mirza, 1997).

In sum, the politics and negotiation of black Afrocentric feminist standpoints reveal ongoing epistemological dilemmas. They suggest that power is connected to the process of knowledge production. As Harding and Haraway rightly suggest, all knowledge (including the claim of a black feminist knowledge) is socially constructed and is representative of a partial perspective. Postcolonial feminists have similarly noted that interpretations and applications of concepts need to be situated in specific historical and cultural contexts. In other words, all knowledge production is context and time bound.

Taking these criticisms seriously, black feminist theories that are produced in a U.S. hegemonic context need to consider a more contextual, more reflexive, and more fluid, approach to understanding black women’s lives. Such decentering is necessary so that the scope, complexities, and diversity of black women’s lives in the transnational world can be successfully captured. A theoretical and political decentering, however, requires a different methodology. Which methodologies enable flexible and mobile border crossings and capture differences across histories and cultures? The postcolonial and transnational feminist theories address precisely these questions, which are discussed below.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEORIES: THE INESSENTIAL WOMEN AND DECOLONIZATION

Sunder Rajan and Park (2000) have stated that, in their view, a postcolonial feminism that addresses the concerns of “the most ‘backward’ parts of the world” may be a theoretical paradigm that offers “the most advanced understanding of the contemporary ‘reality’” (p. 66). Postcolonial feminism examines issues of subjectivities (often subaltern) and “scattered hegemonies” composed in and through patriarchies, nations, states, empires, political economy, and (neo)colonialism. Postcolonial feminists typically rely on “a rigorously historical and dialectical approach” to understand the imbrication of gender, nation, class, caste, race, culture, and sexualities in the different but historically specific contexts of women’s lives (p. 66).

Moreover, “Western” feminist notions of the family, patriarchy, and the state have been critically decentered and sufficiently analyzed in the contexts of racism and colonialism. Postcolonial and Third World feminist studies have been guided by twin goals: to situate feminist theory in the politics of racial relations and to offer gendered conceptualization of colonialism and postcolonialism.
Bulbeck, 1997; Hurtado, 1989; Lewis & Mills, 2003; Mohanty, 2005; Okome, 2001; Suleri, 1992; Sylvester, 1995). While the aim here is not one of offering an extensive summary of postcoloniality and postcolonial feminism, this section discusses some of the key insights found in postcolonial feminist theory that deal with questions of difference and decolonization.

Drawing on the insights of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohammed, and Gayatri Spivak, among others, postcolonial feminists aim to heal the discursive and “epistemic violence” (in Spivak’s words) of imperialism and posit that “politics at this moment of history are [still] about decolonization” (Emberley, 1993, p. 5; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2005; Schutte, 1998; Spivak, 1988). In this sense, postcolonial feminism is not simply a subset of postcolonial studies, or another variant of feminism, as explained by Sunder Rajan and Park (2000), but rather a political and theoretical intervention that aims to reconfigure both postcolonial and feminist studies.

First and foremost, postcolonial feminist theories analyze the limits of modernist paradigms and deconstruct the naturalized boundaries that are presumed to be normative (De Lauretis, 1988; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Narayan, 1997; Sandoval, 2000). Parallel to postmodern and poststructuralist feminist engagements, postcolonial feminists directly challenge and unravel the modernist frames, essentialist categories, and androcentric politics; this includes representations of women and cultures in binary terms and attributions of Western notions of enlightenment, rationalism, and individualism applied to all peoples and cultures (Bulbeck, 1997; Nash, 2002).

From a poststructuralist critique, the category of “women” is not reduced to an effect of discourse because its referent is, as it should be, constantly shifting. Similarly, as in poststructuralist and postmodern feminisms, postcolonial feminists have pointed to the problems of ahistorical universalist frames of reference and the essentialist fixing of subject’s positionality when the privileged individuals and groups study the “other”—that is, when Western Euro-American middle-class feminist scholars study “Third World women,” or when U.S. black feminists speak for African women, or when “women of color” or nationalist feminists speak for the “oppressed” peoples. Instead, what is highlighted is the need to shift our attention (and analysis) to the fragmented and situated forms of knowledge, not generalizing about the uniformity and homogeneity as a group (of women, sexuality, race, nationality, culture, religion, etc.).

In this regard, postcolonial feminist delineations also echo those provided by black feminists regarding the falsely universalized Western/feminist frames of reference about world cultures and people/women of color, as was discussed in the previous section. But postcolonial feminism offers a distinct alternative to feminist standpoint theories and goes beyond other “post” theories to consider the continuing legacy of gendered colonialisms.

Second, the questions of agency, subjectivity, and representations (of Third World women in Western feminism and of women in nationalist and colonialist discourses, for example) are central in postcolonial feminist theories. Similar to black and Third World feminist writers, postcolonial feminist critics focus on the ways racism, sexism, and colonialism shape representations. As Sarah Radcliffe aptly describes, “white women” have depicted “Third World women as static loci of eternal suffering, a privileged recipient of First World concern” (1994, p. 26). This point has been well analyzed by Mohanty (2005), Trinh (1989), and Ong (1988). As these feminist writers have shown, these condescending depictions lock Third World women in a distinct temporal, spatial, and historical frame as people who are assumed to have little agency or differentiation and who are cast as being “special” others (Radcliffe, 1994, p. 27; Trinh, 1989).

Mohanty’s (1988) “Under Western Eyes,” published almost 2 decades ago, asserted a thesis of discursive colonialism; that is, Mohanty examined and analyzed the institutionalization of Western feminist discourses that produce a reductive and homogeneous notion of Third World women and deny their agency. She showed that such discursive practices are akin to colonialism within which the complexities that characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes are effectively erased. Mohanty challenged Western feminists to situate themselves and their discourses in global economic, political, and historical contexts and to address the complex interconnections between First and Third World
nations. Although influential, Mohanty’s own way of framing and identifying “Western feminists” in the status of “true subjects” and Third World women as objects has invited legitimate criticism. Suleri (1992), for example, argues that Mohanty’s own position is not free of binarism (that she herself problematizes), and that her analysis treats gender as history and gender as culture as being irreconcilable. According to Suleri, the recuperation of the “ethnic” voice of womanhood (in oppositional terms of West vs. Third World) cannot replace or counteract the cultural articulation found in the exegesis of Western feminism.

Third, the contentious issue concerning epistemology is, hence, also central to postcolonial feminist theory. As related to Suleri’s points above, others have charged that Mohanty is beholden to an epistemological position of championing the experiences of the oppressed (Third World women) that purportedly cannot be understood by Western feminists because the latter could not really speak about Third World women without assuming a cultural imperialist stance (Nagel, 2004). Mohanty counters and clarifies that her criticism of Eurocentric feminist analyses does not mean that cross-cultural analysis is impossible or that North/South solidarity is futile. But she insists that feminists need to take seriously the limits of ahistorical universalist theories and about their own positionality in knowledge production.

Fourth, if the issue of epistemology is crucial in feminist theorizing, so is the related question of voice and authority. As Spivak, Mohanty, Grewal, Narayan, and other postcolonial feminist scholars have shown, Third World women are perceived and represented as victims or members of a minority, both authoritatively and politically, and are allowed to speak only to give evidence of the “Third World difference.” In discursive representations, subaltern women (Western/feminist, nationalist/feminist, and colonialist) are excluded from having their voice and subjectivity.

But can the “objectification” of Third World women be countered by allowing the “authentic” subaltern to speak? Spivak (1988, 1990) answered this question in her seminal articles, including “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak (1990) rejects the alternatives of letting “subalterns” speak for themselves and at the same time also discounts the strategy of having the “radical critic” speaking for them. Instead, she advocates for necessary changes in the process of academic knowledge production so that “the postcolonial critic” learns to speak in a form that is, and can be, taken seriously by disenfranchised subaltern women. She theorizes about the possibilities of border crossings and addresses the tensions and contradictions across the academic-nonacademic divide. Spivak pushes for the unlearning of “our privileges” as academics and theorists in the North and the recognition that feminist representations of the “gendered subaltern” do not produce necessary communication with Third World women. Spivak’s and other postcolonial feminist theorists’ strategies of intervention are enabling, and they advocate for an analytical shift away from the “difference” impasse and a move beyond the binary hierarchy and across various borders to forge a dialogue among women.

Fifth, the issue of border crossings (analytical and political), therefore, raises important questions about differences and possibilities of how to decolonize self and other. The postcolonial theorist JanMohammed (1986) had already stated that “a Manichean opposition between colonizer and colonized is based on absolute moral and metaphysical differences, rather than relative and qualitative differences” (p. 89). He convincingly argued that such a binary framing of self and other (the colonizer and the colonized) reinforces “an empty gulf” between reductionist oppositions. Similarly, feminist scholars pointed to such problematic binary categories that do not foster imageries of decolonization: of self and other, mind and body, reason and emotion, First World/Third World, West/Orient, male/female, white/black, modernity/traditional, West/East, active/passive, civilized/primitive, secular/religious, universal/local, culture/nature, intellect/instinct, and so on (Bulbeck, 1997, p. 45; duCille, 1994).

Postcolonial feminist scholars are grappling with this question of how Third World and First World women can work together in ways that are authorized by dialogue with Third World subjects, as advocated by Spivak, rather than engaging solely with the First World academy and audiences (Nagar, 2003; Peake &
Trotz, 1999). Radcliffe (1994) explains, for example, that “the processes of producing representations of women (whether Third World, Western, or both) could be relocated, mapped out across the patriarchal priorities, rather than as appropriations” (p. 31). She further suggests,

Rather than representing Third World women in political and authorial ways, “we” [feminists] would self-consciously contribute to jointly-produced authorial representations of relations of local and global patriarchies, racisms, and (post)colonialisms, and only claim to politically represent the coalition that is (provisionally) “ourselves.” (p. 31)

These postcolonial feminist thinkers advocate for and foreground the many and different ways in which subjectivity and identity are constructed in any given historical moment. They also underscore the charge Sangari (1987) offered already two decades ago: “The history of the West and the history of the non-West are by now irrevocably different and irrevocably shared. . . . The cultural projects of both the West and the non-West are implicated in a larger history” (cited in Chanda, 2000, p. 486). Echoing Sangari, postcolonial feminists have pushed for “a genuinely dialogic and dialectical history that can account for the formation of different selves and the construction of different epistemologies” (Chanda, 2000, p. 486).

**Transnational Feminist Perspectives: Forging Analytical and Political Linkages**

What feminist methodologies are then needed if we are to forge analytical and political spaces of collaborative engagements? To chart new possibilities for crossing cultural borders and epistemological divides, various feminist “trans-” studies have emerged recently in a number of disciplines, including geography, sociology, and women’s studies (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Kaplan, Alarcón, & Moallem, 1999; Katz, 2001; Kim-Puri, 2005; Mohanty, 2005; Nagar, 2003; Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Radcliffe, 1994; Tambe, 2005). Seeking to develop new theoretical frameworks and languages, some feminist research from “trans-” perspectives focuses on making linkages across social relations and places on multiple scales—such as neighborhood, community, city, region, nation. They shift the analytical focus away from issues of representation, reflexivity, and positionality embedded in texts and move toward comparing localized places and relations that are simultaneously affected by the same global processes.

**Geographies of Power**

Feminist geographers have offered insights on the direction of the kind of theories and methodologies that might be considered for transnational feminist praxis (Katz, 2001; Massey, 1994; Mitchell, 1997; Nagar, 2002, 2003; Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Raju, 2002; Rose, 1997). Pointing to the limits of postcolonial feminist analyses that tend to center on issues of representation and discourse, they emphasize the need to connect issues of subjectivity and identity with institutional, geopolitical, material, and cultural practices of power and privilege. Nagar (2002) states, for example, that “in the last decade, reflexivity, positionality and identity have become keywords in feminist fieldwork in much of anglophone academia,” which has led to “an impasse” (pp. 179–180, 182). The challenge is, as Nagar reminds us, “the epistemological dilemma” of whether and how women’s struggles in “Third World contexts” can be represented “accurately” and through which theoretical frameworks. She further notes that feminist scholarship in the United States has contributed to this “in/ability to talk across worlds” by avoiding these vexing questions (p. 179).

Drawing her fieldwork on marginalized, poor, rural women in Tanzania and North India, Nagar (2000, 2002) examines the sociospatial strategies that they develop to curb caste- and class-based inequalities and gendered violence facing local communities. Her ethnographic study of “local feminism” facing the Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh highlights the concrete ways in which local women theorize both empowerment and disempowerment in their everyday lives, and how they develop strategic sociopolitical acts that are “inherently geographic” practices
The women situate their struggles and subjectivities in “the geographical spaces from and within which they derive their resources, meanings, visions, and limitations” (Nagar, 2000, p. 344). The socially and politically “peripheralized women” successfully organize campaigns to address domestic and patriarchal violence and to forge self and collective identities through street plays and theater. The two women’s organizations—Mehila Samakkhya (Education for Women’s Equality) and Vanangana (Daughter of the Forest)—resort to street campaigns to challenge spatial demarcations between home, body, and community, or about marriage, gender violence, and caste and class oppression.

Theoretically and methodologically, such analysis enables “discursive geographies” of women’s resistance—in other words, it situates “local” women’s activism in “place-specific” contexts and identifies the strategies such subjects develop to critique and transform “the hegemonic views of empowerment and violence, masculinity and femininity, crime and justice” (Nagar, 2000, p. 360). This type of feminist empirical research and methodology emphasizes a grounded, collaborative study, one that incorporates perspectives of the global South and the global North and sheds light on the importance of place, space, and the local in global processes (Nagar, Lawson, McDowell, & Hanson, 2002). This methodology of feminist geography also maps social relations and inequalities that are found across multiple geographic scales, such as household, community, body, and nation-state, as well as paying attention to the intersecting hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. Pratt (1999), for example, analyzes “geographies of power” that operate in local and transnational scales; she does this by looking at the global labor market segmentation and transnational migration circuits that shape Filipinas’ discourses of survival and resistance in Vancouver. The analytical focus here centers on women’s political responses to power at various geographic scales and places.

Similarly, to further the study of gender in transnational social spaces, Mahler and Pessar (2001) have developed a conceptual model called “gendered geographies of power” (p. 445). With this, they delineate the term geographies to understand how “gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains” (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, p. 445). By “transnational,” they refer to processes that occur in particular places and histories, while “connecting collectivities located in more than one national territory” (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, p. 444). Hence, their model is applied to examine how power and privilege are differentiated on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and other identities in conjunction with gender. Examples include Guatemalan women’s struggle for citizenship claims beyond the nation for human and women’s rights, while they are displaced to Mexican refugee camps, and rural Salvadoran and Haitian migrant women in the United States working to send transnational remittances despite the fact that the intertwining of gender, class, race, and ethnicity conspires to make them vulnerable.

Place Making

Recent scholarship by feminist geographers on space and place making illustrates the nuanced ways in which neocolonial relations of power and political economic structures of domination and subordination combine to shape gender politics of inequality, difference, and resistance in specific communities (Nagar, 2000). In line with this, transnational feminist studies have recast their analyses on the lives and voices of marginalized subjects situated in particular places rather than on the general processes of economic globalization.

For example, Cindi Katz (2001) uses a methodology of critical topography to show the material effects of globalization “on particular grounds” or to examine in detail “some part of the material world” in a particular place (p. 1214). By considering topography as a distinct research method, Katz aims to reveal “a local that is constitutively global,” within which knowledge is situated (p. 1214). She examines how the socioeconomic, demographic, and personal information that is compiled and fed to global databases, such as geographical information systems (GIS), actually facilitate resource extraction, surveillance, and domination. Topographical knowledge, she argues, is used to foster globalization and is
“integrally important to capitalists and other agents of domination” to maintain uneven global development (p. 1215).

Her analysis of the effects of capitalism, imperialism, and state power on the local population of Howa, Sudan, looks at both the global capitalist relations of production and reproduction and their intersections with the history of volatile political circumstances and racialized religious and ethnic conflicts shaping particular locales. By applying topography as a research method, Katz (2001) reexamines the historical and material transformation of central eastern Sudan where the Howa pastoralists and their rural economies become commoditized as cash relations through structural adjustment policies and state-sponsored and international agricultural development projects. She shows that displacement and de-skilling of children in Howa, as well as conscriptions of young boys into militias in Sudan, have to do with both local and international political economies—of structural adjustment policies, the international embargo, and the enduring civil war.

This method of topography enables us to understand globalization as both a script and process of differentiation and fragmentation of the world, which is much like scattered hegemonies described by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994). According to Katz (2001), we need to better understand the specific and concrete ways that globalization processes play out on “particular grounds” and to “work out a situated, but at the same time scale-jumping and geography-crossing, political response to it” (p. 1216). By scrutinizing local details and analyzing larger politics shaping particular locales, Katz sheds light on the intertwined structural consequences of globalizing capitalist production. She further compares the impact of divestments in social reproduction in Harlem, a section of New York City, and Howa, Sudan, and argues that in both places young people are affected by a common set of political and economic processes. While a different kind of politics is necessary for each particular place, a detailed topographical analysis reveals that the young generation in these disparate geographical settings is similarly deprived of formal education and “warehoused” in prisons or armies instead of being empowered.

Beyond National Borders

A similar analysis of geographical border crossings is offered in Ashwini Tambe’s analysis of international trafficking in women. In keeping with a transnational feminist understanding of subject formation, Tambe (2005) explains that racial and sexual categories do not have fixed, pregiven meanings, but rather, they are produced in contextually specific ways. She employs a transnational feminist lens to illustrate that emphasis on national borders can mask the ways power and coercion are reproduced in local and regional places. Tambe (2005) does this by criticizing the discourse of antitrafficking that unduly located the problem of prostitution on European women’s crossing of national borders while ignoring regional and local trafficking in the sex trade. She uses transnational analytical frameworks that typically problematize nationalist and state-bound definitions of social problems and offers instead a historically grounded empirical analysis of colonial state power. When international antitrafficking campaigns emerged in the 1910s and 1920s that regulated national/international borders, Tambe shows that the colonial state in Bombay (now called Mumbai) protected and fostered trafficking in European women while also marking them as sexually potent, foreign outsiders. Through a detailed historical analysis, Tambe demonstrates that the global discourse on the international sex trade in the Anglo-European colonial metropoles was connected to the ways colonial state agents promoted and coercively regulated sex trafficking locally in Bombay. As Tambe (2005) shows, the enclave of European brothels in Kamathipura, Bombay, became “the site of pervasive relations of coercive protection between police and prostitutes” (p. 175) and entirely bypassed the antitrafficking conventions that emphasized international movements.

Bringing Nations/States Back In

From a transnational feminist sociological approach, there is a renewed interest in bringing the nations/states back into analysis. This methodology involves probing and questioning the naturalization of nations/states (as well as empires and imperialism) as the fixed and stable
order of social/material life. Related to this, a number of feminist scholars have recently called into question the popular view of social relations as taking place inside the boundaries of contemporary nations/states, or as being defined by nationalized societies or cultures (Kim-Puri, 2005; Mitchell, 1997). As Mitchell (1997) explains, geopolitical research typically defines states as “containers” of the nation and are also conceived of as completely circumscribed entities (p. 105). By foregrounding “transnational spatial geographies,” critical scholars instead conceive of nation-state borders as being differentially porous—that is, borders varying not just by nation or by political regime, but depending on “historical relations of unequal exchange” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 111).

In this vein, feminist sociologists Kim-Puri (2005) offer a new methodology to reframe issues of gender and sexuality in direct relation to states and nations. The concerns of nations/states are, in their view, salient to the sociological analyses, especially given contemporary trajectories of global capitalism, and they need to be brought back into feminist sociology. They consider the analytical categories of gender, sexuality, states, and nations to be co-constituted in particular historical and social contexts. Drawing on the work of feminist social scientists who have studied nationalisms as profoundly gendered phenomena, the analyses of the fault lines of nationhood, they argue, need to be deepened and extended.

Writing against the dominant approach in social science that implicitly and explicitly treats the national and international as a dichotomy, they emphasize that such binaries are not only limiting but also misleading with the national falsely homogenized as the “local” and the international distanced as the “foreign.” Like feminist geographers, Kim-Puri (2005) call for a methodology that better illuminates the cultural, material, and political interconnections across geographical borders without relying on the nation-to-nation comparisons. This methodology of “transnational feminist sociology” focuses on understanding social processes that shape various spatial settings in a contradictory and unequal manner. Extending transnational feminist cultural studies to materialist analysis, this methodology of transnational feminist sociology emphasizes four dimensions:

1. An approach that bridges discursive and material analyses to understand how unequal economic, political, and social relations are mediated and (re)produced through cultural representations and discourses. Sociological analyses of power, structures, relations, processes, organizations, identities, subjectivity, and movements need to attend to material/cultural meanings and conditions that jointly produce inequalities and exclusions.

2. An approach that highlights the importance of social structures and the state. This emphasis on social structures and especially the attention to state institutions and relations is necessary to contend with empires, imperialisms, colonialism, and nationalisms that are shaped through gendered, sexualized, and racialized imageries.

3. An approach that shifts analyses to linkages refers to various forms of border crossings, including conceptual, temporal, bureaucratic, geopolitical, geographical, economic, cultural, and so on. This focus on linkages eschews nation-to-nation comparisons and treats scale or geographic unit of analysis as historically and culturally contingent.

4. An approach that stresses the role of empirical research for shedding light on cultural, material, structural, and historical forces, which in turn shape social relations, hierarchies, identities, and conflicts in distinct ways. (Kim-Puri, 2005, p. 143)

Through such a methodology and approaches, transnational feminist sociology seeks to avoid binary reductionism and generalizations about power/resistance, dominance/subordination, modernity/tradition, East/West, national/international, and feminism/patriarchy. The key focus is to recognize the possibilities of building transnational feminist alliances that link fragmented groups and places and to understand how material and cultural inequalities affect places unevenly. This methodology also emphasizes the study of the material and the cultural within a transnational feminist framework. This means that in contrast to the transnational feminist cultural studies such as those offered by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994), the materiality of social structures and historical
analysis of institutions such as nations and states are also examined in relation to cultural representations of gender and sexuality.

Kim-Puri also point out that U.S. feminist sociology has not sufficiently engaged with transnational methodologies or with feminist research on gender and sexuality that is produced outside of the Anglo-European contexts. Aside from the obvious problems of not taking seriously other cultural and geographical contexts into consideration, Kim-Puri (2005) argue that this neglect reveals a theoretical and methodological oversight in Euro-American feminist research on gender, sexuality, and nation-states. Through transnational feminist methodology, they emphasize the value in connecting locales and places across transversal borders and suggest that the United States not be considered the sole site of feminist knowledge production. This theoretical framework and methodology are spelled out in the April 2005 special issue of Gender & Society, which provides critical feminist analysis of global and transnational discourses and processes.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined distinctive feminist epistemologies and methodologies that deal with the questions of political and social difference. How do (and must) feminist researchers and activists address and respond to the uneven and competing flows of ideas and practices? It is this question concerning power relations in knowledge production (and politics) that has motivated feminist scholars to look for new theoretical directions in (and methods for) research and praxis. But with the contemporary force of global capitalism and (neo)imperial impulses shaping realigning communities, feminist scholars need to keep constant vigilance on power and develop research and praxis that meaningfully engage with marginalized subjects. Such meaningful feminist research and praxis would also involve more than the application of the most current theories or concepts. Instead, feminist scholars and activists must constantly ask whether the questions and concepts we frame capture the fluid, situated, and varied contexts, and whether our analysis adequately attends to the voices and consciousness of marginalized groups.

The feminist theories and methodologies discussed in this chapter grapple with these questions, albeit in different ways. In particular, postcolonial and transnational feminist approaches invite us to question what is an adequate way of theorizing various borders and boundaries, and through which methodologies. Transnational feminist methodologies discussed in the chapter further point to the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of issues that are often separated analytically and politically, such as gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, nations/states, imperialism, and so on. Instead of simplifying or obfuscating these linkages, transnational feminist methodologies attend to the diverse ways in which women and men in particular places and spaces produce and transmit knowledge (and local forms of feminist thought). Our feminist analyses need to reflect on the heterogeneous locations, relations, and identities that not only affect the processes of knowledge production but also shape the form and content of feminist research. Feminists working in their specific locations need to reflect on how feminist theories and methodologies travel transversely across cultural and geographical borders and reconsider what happens when and as they do so.

NOTES

1. Recently, feminist geographers have engaged with these questions and offered new insights. Particularly noteworthy are the works of Geraldine Pratt (1999), Katharyne Mitchell (1997), Richa Nagar (2000, 2002, 2003), Cindi Katz (2001), and Doreen Massey (1994). Some theoretical and methodological questions about border crossings raised in the 2002 special issue of Gender, Place and Culture are very similar to the ones I raise in this chapter.


production, see African feminist scholars’ perspectives in the online journal *Jenda*.

4. Following Sandra Harding (1987) and Liz Stanley (1990), I distinguish “methodology” to mean theorizing about research practice and “epistemology” to mean the study of how we create knowledge and of what can be known.

5. The chapter does not, however, aim to offer a comprehensive survey of these feminist paradigms.

6. This is similar to the discussion about the term *feminisms* that emerged in the late 1980s as a politically strategic term.

It is intended to deny the claiming of feminism by any one group of feminists and to signify the multiplicity of ways in which those who share a feminist critique may come together to address issues. Feminism acknowledges that specific historical and cultural experiences will differently construct understandings of gender at different times and places. Feminism is meant to create discursive space in a fraught arena. It is quintessentially historical, resisting homogenization, generalization, nostalgia. (Miller, 1998, p. 569)

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