

The Ethics of Transnational Feminist Research and Activism: An Argument for a More Comprehensive View

The ethics of feminist research and activism undertaken by global Northerners operating in the global South has been a topic of ongoing debate for a number of years.¹ Research or commentary undertaken by individuals from or based in the global North into issues such as rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, honor killings, the seclusion or veiling of women, or female genital cutting occurring in the global South is fraught with ethical questions around the misunderstanding of local viewpoints and the ethnocentric imposition of alien norms.²

Scholars have noted that the notion of individual rights does not necessarily accord with the cultural values of a number of societies, in which conceptions of the individual do not rest on ideas of deep autonomy and relative detachment from one's community (Kalev 2004; Abu-Lhugod 2013). Others argue that fighting for women's rights or gender equality is not necessarily what their communities need.³ However, as Alison Jaggar notes, outsiders' desire to refrain from criticizing specific practices in the name of cultural relativism may reveal "misplaced concern for 'the community' as a whole at the expense of some women within it." In the end, "ignoring the plight of such women [may be] racist or ethnocentric, insofar as it suggests a moral double standard according to which high levels of abuse and exploitation are regarded as 'culturally acceptable' for some women but not for others" (Jaggar 1998, 10).

Much has been written about these dilemmas and about how to ethically engage in transnational feminist research and practice. In this article, I describe and interrogate the various arguments that have been proposed. I then propose an alternative argument, drawing on the most promising positions of other scholars and adding to these to arrive at a more comprehensive proposal.

Categories such as "global North" and "global South" themselves warrant problematization, as such conceptions do not always reflect the reality

¹ See, e.g., Jaggar (1998), Staeheli and Nagar (2002), Hesford and Kozol (2005), Sultana (2007), and Nagar (2013).

² See Kalev (2004), Hesford and Kozol (2005), Phillips (2010), and Abu-Lhugod (2013).

³ See Hall (2009), Bastian Duarte (2012), and St. Denis (2013).

of transnational interactions. Many of the arguments below, however, are relevant to any cross-cultural or transnational activity, including South–South and intrastate interactions.

The problem

Activism undertaken by individuals from the global North, popular opinion in Northern countries, and even Northern governments' immigration and international relations policies have often rested on notions of saving Southern women from oppressive traditional practices. These notions have often included a heavy dose of ethnocentric and neocolonial bias. This bias positions Northern societies as enlightened and advanced, as opposed to backward societies of the global South, which are seen as particularly prone to restricting women's freedom, independence, and happiness.⁴ As many analysts have noted, such bias is condescending and illegitimate.⁵ Shari Stone-Mediatore, for example, notes that "many educated women [in indigenous and religious communities] have found rich and empowering values in religious sources and . . . western feminists who assume that those women can only be liberated by joining secular western culture exercise a condescending paternalism similar to patriarchy" (2009, 65). Such racist or ethnocentric biases can have serious negative repercussions, such as irrationally designed, ineffective, or even harmful interventions by international non-governmental organizations (Stone-Mediatore 2009; Smith 2011), or policies by which asylum seekers are only granted asylum if their personal histories help to further the Northern state's narrative of itself as superior to the global South (Ticktin 2011). Concern for women's rights, moreover, was used as a justification for war in Afghanistan and Iraq, effectively placing a positive face on a destructive enterprise for the sake of public relations (Stone-Mediatore 2009; Abu-Lhugod 2013).

Within the realm of scholarly research, analysts have voiced concerns about power inequalities in research interactions, the question of whether researchers have the right to represent the voice of the researched, and the specter of neocolonialist stereotyping or Western-centric bias that does not adequately allow for the voice of the researched to come through.⁶ Some researchers, however, have pointed out that the divide between Western researcher and non-Western research participant is not so clear or simple to

⁴ See Smith (2011), Ticktin (2011), Abu-Lhugod (2013), Patil (2013), and Gangoli (2014).

⁵ See Sultana (2007), Stone-Mediatore (2009), Smith (2011), and Abu-Lhugod (2013).

⁶ See Jaggard (1998), Fonow and Cook (2005), Phillips (2010), and Abu-Lhugod (2013).

delineate, as many researchers can be said to be both insiders and outsiders of the communities they are researching, or can be defined as researchers from the global South investigating communities of the global South (Miraftab 2004; Sultana 2007). However, Southern feminist activists can be accused of having been Westernized by others within their communities, seen as no longer authentic community members (Jaggar 1998). Southern feminists may also enact very similar patterns of privilege or imposition of alien norms vis-à-vis the communities they work with (Abu-Lhugod 2013). As Farhana Sultana states, “the ‘native’ can be the ‘other’ through class privilege” (2007, 377).

Analysts have argued that external intervention, especially when undertaken without sufficient understanding of local context, often causes more problems than it solves (Stone-Mediatore 2009; Abu-Lhugod 2013). It has been argued that external intervention to end practices deemed oppressive to women can actually cause the entrenchment and solidification of harmful local practices and norms (Stone-Mediatore 2009; Smith 2011). As Colleen Fisher states, “traditional notions of masculinity are rigorously defended when cultures feel under threat from external pressures. . . . The result can be an increase in rigidity of cultural practices and increased gender inequality” (2013, 839) As stated by Stone-Mediatore:

In some cases, attempts by foreigners to champion the cause of other women thwart productive discussion within those women’s communities, sometimes by silencing the women on whose behalf they attempt to speak and sometimes by compelling women who have been working for change within their communities to defend problematic cultural practices, when outsiders have intervened without understanding the social significance of the practices they condemned. In other cases, international women’s-rights campaigns have created a local backlash against indigenous women, who have been working through their own channels to address abuse but whose efforts have been endangered by international campaigns that link the women with foreign powers. (2009, 61)

External intervention or commentary on issues of women’s rights are therefore often unfairly patronizing, or alternatively are ill-advised and characterized by a lack of sufficient knowledge of local context and concerns. Indeed, Northern discussion of Southern women’s rights is sometimes critiqued for inaccurately essentializing culture, homogenizing groups that include disparate individuals, and ignoring voices of dissent that exist within Southern communities against some of those communities’ own practices (Hesford and Kozol 2005; Phillips 2010; Patil 2013).

Responses to the problem

Focusing on cross-border relationships and on history

In order to counteract a paternalistic gaze in which global South societies are considered inferior to the global North, one point that many scholars emphasize is that gender constructs and relations, as they occur in contemporary postcolonial regions, are in many ways a product of colonial-era impositions. European colonization, it is argued, has imposed a Western style of patriarchy (Shoemaker 1995; Oyěwùmí 1997; Patil 2013). Others argue that colonial-era racism and its legacies have catalyzed a stark turn for the worse in the treatment of women (Kandirikirira 2002; Makley 2002; Poupart 2003). This leads to the contention that relationships and impacts crossing national borders should receive greater attention in feminist analyses, as should historical legacies (Patil 2013).

Recognizing the fluidity of “culture”

As a number of scholars argue, culture is not monolithic. Mores are contested, and any ideology or moral code that appears dominant or prevalent will have numerous detractors and dissidents who themselves belong to the society in question (Sen 1999; Stone-Mediatore 2009; Hutchings 2013). This leads to the argument that moral values are not always incommensurate across cultures (Sen 1999; Hutchings 2013). Stone-Mediatore, for example, states that every culture “offers insights that can contribute to the continuing development of women’s rights” (2009, 66).

Interrogating societies equally

Numerous scholars also emphasize the importance of recognizing that practices and cultural environments in both the global South and the global North are often deeply harmful to women.⁷ Andrea Cornwall contends that researchers should focus more on the harms to women caused by practices in Western societies. Reminding us that women’s eagerness to alter their bodies to align with “ideals of the ‘proper’ or ‘real’ woman” (2012, 358) is by no means restricted to countries that practice female genital cutting, Cornwall indicates that the ethical imperative of anthropology is to direct our gaze to the similarities between Western practices and non-Western ones. She reminds us, for example, that “amongst the most common plastic surgery procedures in the United Kingdom are breast augmentation for women and breast reduction for men” (2012, 358–59). These, like female genital cutting, are procedures to alter the body in order to “conform more closely to cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity” (359). Lila Abu-Lughod, fur-

⁷ See Stone-Mediatore (2009), Smith (2011), Cornwall (2012), and Abu-Lughod (2013).

thermore, points out the double standard by which Northern commentators decry oppression of women in distant lands. Within popular publications recounting oppression of Southern women, states Abu-Lughod:

No quotes appear from reports like that of the U.S. Justice Department, whose national survey indicated that one in every six American women has been raped in her lifetime, usually by an intimate or someone else she knows. They do not mention Peggy Sunday's research on the white, middle-class culture of college fraternities, where getting women drunk so that guys can "score," even gang-raping their guests and boasting about it the next day, is acceptable. Nothing is said about the alarming rates of domestic violence and murder of spouses that shadow returning veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Abu-Lughod 2013, 63)

While the scholars cited above argue for a recognition of the fact that the oppressions faced by women in Northern contexts are often as harmful as the circumstances encountered by Southern women, Courtney Smith takes this argument even further. Smith argues for a method by which a roughly equivalent phenomenon is found in one's own culture, then deliberately placed in front of women in the scrutinized culture. Her aim is for members of both societies to learn by looking beyond their own context and to expand their awareness by hearing about the reactions of others to their own context. She uses breast implantation surgery in the United States and female genital cutting in parts of Africa as her example. She therefore interviewed African respondents on their views and understandings of female genital cutting, then explained the practice of breast implantation surgery to the same respondents in order to get their reactions and feelings regarding this phenomenon. Smith undertook a similar pattern of questioning in the United States, asking her US respondents for their views on both breast implants and female genital cutting. In this way, Smith aims to expose both Northern and Southern societies to scrutiny. By sharing her research findings, she hopes that both Northern and Southern individuals will learn from new perspectives on their own home settings, thereby perhaps igniting a feminist consciousness among both groups. Smith advocates this type of practice as a deliberate method, a means of counteracting ethnocentrism in transnational feminist practice (Smith 2011; see also Baum 2004).

Dialogue and support for Southern women's priorities

A number of commentators argue for dialogue, listening to Southern women, and ensuring that Southern women's voices are heard. Analysts have noted the importance of remaining wary of the dangers of othering, of stereotyping, of making assumptions rather than listening to the voices of the women we

research with full openness to their lived experiences and views, regardless of how different those views may be from our own.⁸ Thus, feminist academics have interrogated the power to represent others, and the potential harms that this entails, particularly with regard to stigmatizing and silencing Southern women.

These scholars have proposed a number of methods to undermine the researcher's undue power to "speak for" and represent those she has researched, including participatory research, in which research participants take an active role in research design, data collection, and analysis (Ramazanoğlu 2002; Skinner, Hester, and Malos 2005); taking active steps to reduce the power inequalities between differently positioned researchers on a research team or between researchers and participants (Skinner, Hester, and Malos 2005; Johnson 2008); and collaborative authorship of research products (Nagar 2002, 2013).

Supporting Southern women or Southern feminists in their own struggles is likewise emphasized. In this way, feminist scholars argue that the desires and wishes of Southern women or Southern feminists should be given priority, and attempts to impose Western ideals with insufficient understanding of local culture, meanings, and values should be prevented (Stone-Mediatore 2009; Smith 2011).

As Kimberly Hutchings states, issues of "transnational distributive justice, the ethics of war or other kinds of cross-border intervention" cannot be addressed without considering how to arrive at a code of just and ethical action that is acceptable cross-culturally (2013, 81). Seyla Benhabib (1992) makes a proposition for arriving at such a code of ethics, one that is applicable across the divides of culture and power. Benhabib contends that feminists from different places must commit to dialogue under principles of "universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity" (1992, 30). As Hutchings explains, for Benhabib, "it is only on the basis of this 'universal respect' and 'egalitarian reciprocity' that the plurality of different women can be guaranteed participation in moral discourse in the first place" (2013, 93).

Benhabib's push for egalitarian, respectful, and reciprocal dialogue has been criticized, however, since those without any commonality of purpose do not, in practice, converse about moral values. As Hutchings states, "principles of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity rule out certain kinds of identities/groups and certain kinds of arguments in advance" (2013, 95). Moreover, Benhabib's proposal inevitably directs dialogue toward biased outcomes. Hutchings notes, "in practice, it becomes clear that the condi-

⁸ See Jaggar (1998), Ramazanoğlu (2002), Kalev (2004), Skinner, Hester, and Malos (2005), and Abu-Lhugod (2013).

tions underpinning the discourses needed to agree on global moral norms are stringently liberal. They therefore require a high degree of coincidence of moral starting points in the first place, which cannot in fact be taken for granted" (97). The result, then, is dialogue that is not actually inclusive. If the goal is to work respectfully across great divides in outlook and worldview, a dialogue that is not inclusive of various voices is surely inadequate.

Iris Marion Young also criticizes Benhabib. Hutchings describes Young's argument, which states that Benhabib's call for cross-cultural dialogue under principles of egalitarianism, reciprocity, and respect involves "a tendency to assimilate difference to sameness, by always assuming the other's point of view will be intelligible in the self's own terms" (Hutchings 2013, 93–94). Young argues this is problematic, since the point is not to look for how another's views fit with one's own paradigm but to "suspend [one's] assumptions in order to [truly] listen" (1997, 53). In addition there is the practical question of how to bring people with vastly different amounts of power and resources to the same table of dialogue without minimizing or silencing certain voices (Baum 2004).

Calls for dialogue with Southern women and for the importance of making Southern women's priorities central, moreover, often assume a common feminist cause. Richa Nagar, for example, has written about utilizing research to create knowledge that is both considered useful by the communities with which the researcher has worked and accessible to critique by those communities (Nagar 2002, 2013). Nagar herself works with a community that engages in political activism around economic rights for Dalit women and men in India, including empowerment initiatives for poor women. This activist community is intent on promoting nonhierarchical relations among its members, a practice that Nagar describes as being in line with a feminist ethic (2013). Nagar has additionally studied women's street theater activism on domestic violence, a project she undertook at the request of the women involved (2002).

In Nagar's case, not only is a politically active movement already under way such that she is able to collaborate with its members, there is also a strong set of shared values, since both Nagar and the community members are actively promoting an ethic of nonhierarchical relationships. Yet feminist researchers and activists may not always work with communities that hold to values that are so close to a feminist ethos. In these contexts, how are we to operate ethically when shared values are rare or nonexistent? Other scholars also tend to assume common feminist cause between community insiders and outsiders when they call for outsiders to support movements spearheaded by Southern women. Thus, in her description of Benhabib's work, Hutchings refers to egalitarian and respectful dialogue between "*feminist* actors in dif-

ferent places and radically different cultures” (2013, 93; emphasis added). Stone-Mediatore (2009) calls for Northern feminists to listen to and support Southern women in their struggles, but her argument assumes that the Southern women in question are already working toward their own empowerment. Likewise, Smith (2011) makes a point of listening to Southern women’s own feelings regarding female genital cutting. In so doing, however, she appears to assume that Southern women are themselves interested in dialogue about this issue, when in fact an interest in female genital cutting is a focus spearheaded by Smith herself. Even Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose argument is more nuanced than those of other scholars, in that it decries Northerners’ tendency to “[domesticate] women-of-color epistemology in ways that either erase or assimilate it into a Eurocentric feminist globality,” describes ethical feminist efforts as those that work closely with the priorities of *feminists* in other societies (2013, 981). When she argues for the importance of “according epistemic privilege to the most marginalized communities of women,” she is assuming that those women are members of activist and feminist groups (985; see also Mohanty 2003). Such assumptions of common feminist cause completely sidestep the issue of how to engage in transnational feminist practice with communities with whom we encounter more fundamental disagreement.

It is worth noting here that local notions of women’s rights may include deeply problematic values, or a combination of an emancipatory ethos with principles that reinforce oppression. In my work on the Tibetan Plateau, for example, I have found notions in line with liberal feminist philosophy coupled with gendered beliefs that are at times highly judgmental of women.⁹ One Tibetan nun, for example, complains about nuns’ lack of opportunities for religious education vis-à-vis monks and emphasizes that women and nuns are capable of doing anything they put their minds to. She aims to enhance both nuns’ and laywomen’s sense of their own ability to achieve success in studies and other endeavors. At the same time, however, she supports prevalent stereotypes of women as jealous, closed-minded, and too easily offended (DethongWangmo [བདེ་སྟོང་དབང་མོ།] 2011). Another Tibetan woman, who is widely considered to be a feminist, who has published on women’s rights, and who promotes discussion of the daily difficulties faced by women,

⁹ These findings derive from fieldwork conducted in 2012 and 2013 on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai Province, China. While my fieldwork was primarily aimed at understanding domestic violence dynamics within Tibetan households, the findings listed here derive from a subset of interviews with community leaders, government officers, authors, and academics. This subset of interviews was aimed at understanding the state of local policy responses to domestic violence and existing private, nonprofit community mobilization initiatives to empower women.

told me in our interview that some women are beaten a lot by their husbands. If such beatings stop, she told me, women victims can “go astray,” as they are not accustomed to their newfound freedom. She also indicated that beatings in Tibetan marriages are likely but that Tibetan women should bear these beatings rather than marry men of other ethnic groups, as the latter shows these women to be shortsighted and closed-minded.¹⁰ Another woman who is also often considered to be a feminist and who has worked with women on empowerment initiatives told me in our interview that Tibetan women’s historical low status has resulted from women’s own innate inferiority (Rajan 2015).

I believe, therefore, that calls to support Southern women in their own perspectives and aims are naive in assuming that an unproblematically non-hierarchical or emancipatory ethos will always be found when collaborating transnationally. I doubt, for example, that a Northern feminist would advocate supporting a group of women who are clearly pushing for the entrenchment of patriarchy—for example, if a group of Southern women were to advocate for men to beat their wives *more*.

How, then, should feminist activism be undertaken when collaborating with an ongoing activist movement is not an option, because such a movement does not exist, or when community members who openly oppose oppressive structures are not easily found? What of situations in which a majority of community members find that relating to each other in a nonhierarchical spirit is an alien concept that does not accord with their conception of their own needs? How is feminist activism to be undertaken when common convictions are not readily apparent? In such a case, is any feminist activism undertaken by community outsiders ethically acceptable, and if so, what form should this activism take? We might note that, when working in contexts within which local values do not primarily adhere to many feminist principles, conducting feminist research or activism may cause harm, since women’s feminist consciousness may be raised within an environment in which their newfound views are unwelcome and cause isolation. As Mary Maynard states, “feminists have raised questions about the ethics of research which, having generated all sorts of issues in respondents’ minds, then abandons them to come to terms with these on their own” (1994, 17).

Moreover, what are the ethical implications and potential consequences of providing funding or other types of support to groups of women’s activists who, in their feminist and political beliefs, may be a minority within their communities, may work to upset the existing power balance in society,

¹⁰ This woman believes that Tibetan men are more likely to beat their wives than Han men, an assertion that is itself, of course, suspect.

and may be disliked by various segments of their communities? What are the ethics of placing external money or power or support behind individuals working toward women's empowerment when such individuals are opposed by others in the same community? Calls for dialogue, listening, and supporting women's priorities do not adequately address this issue.

Limitations of universal visions of morality

Judith Butler offers a salient response to the question of how collaboration or dialogue should be undertaken when values fundamentally diverge and when great differences in power, privilege, and circumstance exist. Hutchings interprets and describes the contention found in Butler's works (Butler 1987, 2000a, 2000b, 2004a, 2004b) that transnational dialogue about moral values or about human rights should be based on a concept of "cultural translation" (Hutchings 2013, 102).¹¹ As Hutchings explains, for Butler, "genuine translation" is a matter of "forging common ground" in such a way that the parties to dialogue "[recognize] the limits of mutual intelligibility" (102–3). That is, one cannot assume that concepts and paradigms can be translated across cultural divides. Some amount of mutual *un*intelligibility is inevitable, as our capacity to comprehend one another is limited. In addition, a moral code that is truly universal—a code that articulates principles that are true for all humans, across divides of culture—is essentially unknowable. As a fully and completely universal code is impossible to decipher, we must recognize that any given moral stance is limited. In turn, we should surrender our sense of steadfast moral certainty, as "there is no . . . fixed, authoritative ground for moral judgement" (102). This may be difficult, however, as it requires a fundamental shift in the way we think about ethics. While steadfast moral conviction is set aside, parties to cross-cultural dialogue may transform each others' views (Butler 2004b; see also Baum 2004; Hutchings 2013). Thus, the endeavor is not to convince others of one's own moral code or even to ensure that the other fully understands one's views. The endeavor is one of dialogue and interaction, within which mutual transformation of both parties may be part and parcel of the process (Butler 2004b; Hutchings 2013).

Butler's approach may not answer all the questions raised above, but it offers a means of ethically engaging in dialogue without falling into the trap of ignoring profound differences in values, privilege, and circumstance. Rather than erasing the great differences between people and groups, as Benhabib does, Butler's approach accepts the existence of immense divides and at-

¹¹ The following works refer to the concept of cultural translation: Butler (2000b, 2004a, 2004b).

tempts to find an approach to dialogue that is humble and respectful in spite of them.

Class, gender, and transnational economic inequalities

Instead of paternalistically directing our gaze toward gender-oppressive practices in the global South, argue some scholars, transnational feminist activism should focus on the role played by Northern governments, Northern multinational corporations, and Northern individuals in the economic marginalization of Southern women and men. While some of these arguments are convincing, others risk erasing gendered concerns from the activist arena, with class and economics considered the only basis of individuals' oppression or subordination. Stone-Mediatore, for example, calls for opposition to "labor exploitation by transnational corporations" and for buying from a women weavers' collective in Mexico so that workers need not "sell [their products] at desperate prices" (2009, 63). In terms of supporting the needs of Afghan women, Stone-Mediatore calls on Northern feminists to advocate for "implementing greater community control of donor aid, holding foreign military forces accountable for violence against civilians, and demanding greater sensitivity to local authorities on the part of occupying personnel, whose insensitivity has fuelled support for the Taliban" (68).

Such issues are disturbing, important, and require an activist response. However, Stone-Mediatore's approach can easily lead to a situation in which opposition to poverty or wartime atrocities is based on an analysis of these situations absent a gendered lens. "The point of cross-border feminist coalitions," states Stone-Mediatore, "is not to unite against an abstract patriarchy but to coordinate strategies and resources in confronting the abusive practices of specific transnational institutions" (2009, 62). By dismissing any focus on this "abstract patriarchy," however, she appears to set aside issues specific to gender for a focus on class and economics alone.

Such an approach can easily lead to a situation in which problems such as domestic violence and rape retreat into the realm of the private, personal, apolitical, and most important, forgotten. Feminist activism around the world, spearheaded by both Northern and Southern women in a range of contexts, has worked long and hard to bring issues such as domestic violence out of the private realm and into the public, so that not only laws but also norms and practices by which violence against women remains hidden and forgotten may change.¹² Removing a focus on such matters altogether is surely unwise.

Moreover, numerous historical examples from settings such as the United States (Pleck 1987), China (Hershatter 2004), and South Korea (Heo 2010)

¹² See Pleck (1987), Walker (1990), Muehlenhard and Kimes (1999), Yoshihama (2002), Hester (2005), Zhang (2009), Heo (2010), and Maktabi (2010).

reveal a tendency within leftist activist communities to subordinate or dismiss feminist concerns as unimportant or less central than other leftist causes (see also Seguí 2015). The argument for focusing on transnational economic inequalities, in short, is an argument that risks shifting the focus to economics entirely while abandoning a gendered analytical lens. This would be a serious loss to the cause indeed.

Not all calls to focus on transnational economic inequalities result in this effect, however. Some argue for working with Southern women to advocate for *both* economic emancipation and women's emancipation. As noted above, for example, Nagar has worked with Dalit activists pushing for "fair access to work and wages" and to infrastructure such as irrigation (2013, 6). Practices aimed at ensuring that no one voice dominates within the movement have become established in the community's activities. This is an ethic, therefore, that may allow for the full and equal participation of women. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (2005) likewise speak of combining a focus on issues like pay equity and domestic violence with activism around armed conflict and neoliberal trade agreements (see also Mohanty 2013). Some additionally argue that struggles against economic and other bases of oppression must be deeply intertwined with "earlier feminist policy concerns" such as "domestic violence, . . . employment discrimination . . . and political representation" (Fonow and Cook 2005, 2226; see also Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Mohanty, for example, pushes for "a materialist analysis that link[s] everyday life and local gendered contexts and ideologies to the larger, transnational political and economic structures and ideologies of capitalism" (2003, 504). Thus, some feminist scholars argue for a combination of struggles against economic and gender-based oppressions in a way that does not privilege one form of struggle over the other (Mohanty 2003; Baum 2004). Nancy Fraser believes that "male domination cannot be overcome short of abolishing capitalism's deep-seated preference for economic production over social reproduction" (Gutting and Fraser 2015; see also Fraser 1995). Lesbian feminists in Latin America likewise argue that "the commercialization of the human body and sexuality is part of economic globalization and thus . . . lesbian resistance is fundamental in the struggle against neoliberalism" (Bastian Duarte 2012, 170). Some calls to focus on economic inequalities are thus less likely than others to lead to the sidestepping of women's gender-based oppression.

Theories arising from the global South

Southern women's feminist theorizing often reflects the political and economic realities of marginalized women's positionality, reminding us that

we cannot assume that Euro-American theories are directly applicable to other parts of the world. This section looks at theories arising from feminist activist spaces of the global South or from subaltern feminist theorists in order to understand how subaltern feminists have navigated marginalization and interaction with more privileged groups. The ways in which subaltern women have grappled with these issues can provide insights into questions of transnational or cross-cultural feminist ethics.

Addressing the questioning of loyalties

Women belonging to racial minority and underprivileged groups have faced pressure from their communities to reject feminism, as feminist ideology is often seen as an external cultural imposition, derived from a society with more power and privilege than the community's own. In some contexts, for example, North American indigenous women are told "that one's first loyalty is to one's nation, race or culture, above gender, and that to challenge oppression by one's own community is to betray it." They further "risk being dismissed as 'assimilated' [by mainstream society] if they identify with feminist politics" (St. Denis 2013, 25; see also Hall 2009). Similar sensitivities have been faced by Tibetan women (Rajan 2015), women in Algeria (St. Denis 2013), and women in India (Mani 1990). In one case, an article was coauthored by a white Australian woman and an Aboriginal woman. As Jaggar explains, "this article exposed astronomical rates of violence and rape, including frequent gang-rape, committed by Aboriginal men against Aboriginal women. The truth of the allegations was undisputed, but some Aboriginal women objected that it was inappropriate for this topic to be broached by a white woman, even in collaboration with an Aborigine" (1998, 9). In this case, revealing community problems to outsiders was "experienced as a form of betrayal" because those outsiders belonged to a more powerful group "claim[ing] cultural superiority" (20).

Thus, power relations with the authorities or with mainstream society clearly impact sensitivities around discord or lack of unity within underprivileged communities. Such sensitivities may arise from the need to maintain community resilience in the face of colonialism or oppression (Rajan 2015), as well as from more immediate logistical concerns. As Verna St. Denis notes, "disagreements within our communities can not only discourage critical debate among ourselves but can be used as a justification by dominant institutions to ignore Aboriginal claims for social justice" (2013, 26).

In response to such sensitivities, indigenous, subaltern, and minority feminists have argued that they are not being divisive but realistic, that their feminism enriches rather than detracts from the wider movements for emancipa-

tion undertaken by their communities, and that women's emancipation is part and parcel of the nation's or community's emancipation at large.¹³

Gender violence as deriving from colonialism

One line of argument specifically related to violence against women posits that the legacy of colonialism and discrimination has led members of marginalized communities to internalize dominant racist stereotypes, thereby reducing their self-esteem.¹⁴ It also asserts that men tend to "transfer" the rage they feel toward the dominant society by directing that rage at lower-status individuals within their communities and families, namely women and children. Rape, domestic abuse, and harassment of women and children are among the results (Kandirikirira 2002; Makley 2002; Poupart 2003). Some, however, contend that this line of argument sidesteps the ways in which communities disregard the needs of victims and avoid bringing perpetrators to justice. Diverting responsibility for male violence from perpetrators to a broader history of colonization, states Rauna Kuokkanen, "position[s] indigenous men as greater victims of colonization [than indigenous women]." This not only silences the experiences and oppressions of women; it can also have the effect of "[denying] agency and condon[ing] perpetrators' behavior" (2015, 273).

Feminism as a front for alternative priorities

In her descriptions of Indian responses to the practice of sati both historically and currently, Lata Mani argues that reactions among Indians and British alike have run along similar lines both in colonial times and in the present. These reactions, she argues, tend to be couched in a rhetoric of women's empowerment, with feminism used as a front for alternative priorities. "Women," writes Mani, "provided ground for the development of other agendas" (1990, 35; see also Mani 1987; Rao 1999). These alternative agendas have included valorizing Indian religion, colonial interests in intervening in civil society more generally, or broader societal reform irrespective of women's welfare (Mani 1990). Similarly, I have found that Tibetans active in private initiatives to empower women were more focused on community-wide concerns than on reducing violence or dismissiveness toward women. "Empowering women" was in reality a means to promote an alternative agenda (Rajan 2015).

¹³ See La Rue (1995), Ebunoluwa (2009), Bastian Duarte (2012), and St. Denis (2013).

¹⁴ See Franklin (1984), Poupart (2003), Snider (2007), and Johnson (2010).

Marginalization in feminist spaces

Analysts have also addressed the gaps and problems existing within feminist thought and in feminist activist spaces. Numerous women of color have expressed dissatisfaction with feminist theories “that [elevate] gender at the expense of race or class identity” (St. Denis 2013, 24; see also Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). These authors argue that white or mainstream versions of feminism have ignored the experiences of minority women or those who are particularly underprivileged, in effect reinforcing marginalization and discrimination. In legal cases in the United States, for example, scholars have shown that “although Black male and white female narratives of discrimination were understood to be fully inclusive and universal, Black female narratives were rendered partial, unrecognizable, something apart from standard claims of race discrimination or gender discrimination” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 790–91). At times, women of color or women from marginalized groups have faced dismissiveness when collaborating with mainstream or liberal feminists, revealing that problems lie not only in wider society but in activist spaces as well. As Ángela Ixxic Bastian Duarte notes, in Latin America “erasing lesbians from the feminist agenda in the name of ‘greater feminist victories’ remains one of the fundamental challenges for the . . . lesbian movement” (2012, 166). The adoption of an intersectional lens of analysis, in which attention is paid to the ways in which race, gender, class, and other bases of oppression interact in individual lives, has been proposed to overcome the silencing of minority women’s experience (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Latin American lesbian groups in particular have attempted to counteract the sidelining of lesbian issues by arguing that compulsory heterosexuality, as an institutionalized cultural construct, is fundamental to women’s overall oppression and thus cannot be disentangled from the struggle for women’s rights more generally (Bastian Duarte 2012).

While various writers have criticized white or mainstream versions of feminism, Lisa Kahaleole Hall (2009) argues that some of these writers reveal patterns similar to those of the feminists they critique. Hall finds value in the works of African American theorists and draws upon them to enhance her own feminism, but she also criticizes black or women-of-color feminism for its lack of relevance to indigenous women’s experiences, particularly indigenous Hawaiian women. States Hall, “The insights of U.S. black feminist thought . . . often displayed the same kinds of omissions and erasures (in this case, directed toward non-black women of color in general and indigenous women in particular) that they brilliantly critiqued within the work of white scholars” (2009, 17).

As a result of perceptions that many versions of feminism do not respond to the problems faced by indigenous women and indigenous communities, some Canadian and Latin American indigenous women have argued that colonialism, loss of land, and racism “are more pressing concerns than achieving gender equality” (St. Denis 2013, 20; see also Bastian Duarte 2012). Some argue that indigenous cultures historically gave women a very high status, and therefore a return to indigenous traditions is more necessary than gender equality as it is currently conceived (Bastian Duarte 2012; St. Denis 2013). Others argue that the focus on individuals and individual rights often found in feminist thought is short-sighted. “Complementarity and reciprocity” have been proposed as more important than the concept of equality (Bastian Duarte 2012, 161).

However, indigenous critiques do not always equate to a wholesale rejection of feminist thought. Thus, some have argued for a concept of collective emancipation rather than rights and equality for individuals, a move that would allow for the preservation of indigenous culture, natural resources, and territory (Hall 2009; Bastian Duarte 2012). Concepts of collective action in which individuals are deeply intertwined, in which “there is no easy division between speaker and audience, meaning and context,” have also been proposed (Hall 2009, 32; see also Bastian Duarte 2012). It is also argued that, despite the historically high status that indigenous societies may have provided to women, indigenous communities have been heavily influenced by Euro-American patriarchy, and feminism is therefore relevant to these communities (Hall 2009; St. Denis 2013). Some also point out that feminisms are not all the same, many versions of feminism adequately address issues of cultural hegemony and marginalization, and therefore not all versions of feminism are irrelevant to indigenous groups (Hall 2009; St. Denis 2013).

Moreover, while some thinkers have seen reason to critique feminism because of its perceived individuality, Nagar speaks of a true feminist ethic as one that is deeply collectivist. Nagar (2014) implies that it is necessary for the transnational activist to live with local individuals, experience life the way locals live it, and most important, become part of a collective social experience. She implies that feminist activism means spending a lot of time with the groups one is working with, such that group members become deeply and personally enmeshed in each others’ lives. Nagar’s work shows that not all forms of feminism are necessarily individualistic in nature.

As with indigenous women in North and South America, other groups of women have also argued that Western feminism does not always accord with their needs. In China, for example, at a time when the study of gender and feminism was on the rise in the 1980s, women turned to landmark West-

ern feminist texts but found that these offered conceptual tools irrelevant to Chinese women's experience. Instead of operating with these relatively irrelevant tools, feminists in China have felt the need to assert their identity as women, and as different from men. This need resulted from the historically "orthodox Marxist position of treating the women's question entirely under the heading of class" (Dongchao 2005, 283). Some Chinese feminists therefore felt that women's oppression was not founded in the fact that women were "made to symbolise the body," as was the case in some Western settings, but in the fact that "political or ideological discourse had rendered women invisible" (284). It was felt that "the important task at hand was to awaken an awareness of gender identity among women, through claiming bodily differences and the physiological and psychological experiences that are particular to women" (284).¹⁵

It seems clear, then, that in many communities, various feminist ideas, including those often considered foundational to feminist thought, are felt to be irrelevant or inapplicable to local contexts. Those attempting to work toward the emancipation of oppressed groups, however, have offered a number of suggestions and alternatives, ensuring the development of versions of feminism that are not always monolithic or dismissive of minority needs.

Questioning a focus on consent and choice

In this section, I explore the works of two prominent scholars—Lila Abu-Lughod and Lata Mani—for the ways in which they critique notions of consent and freedom. Both scholars grapple with issues of intersectionality, postcolonial experience, and paternalist tendencies by privileged groups toward the underprivileged. As such, their arguments delve into the heart of questions of ethics in transnational feminist interactions, and it is worth addressing their arguments at some length.

Lila Abu-Lughod: Abandoning the principles of rights and freedom

In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Abu-Lughod decries the condescending nature of Westerners' gaze, in which they assume that societies of the global South are inherently worse for women than those of the North. Abu-Lughod argues against a singular focus on whether or not Southern women "have rights," as this view neither captures nor addresses the complexity of women's lives. The framework of rights, she maintains, is untenable.

¹⁵ For a discussion of somewhat similar discourses around class and gender in Central and Eastern Europe, see Havelkova (2016).

ble and of limited utility: "It is not easy in people's lives to distinguish freedom and duty, consent and bondage" (2013, 216). Rather than thinking of freedom and rights as the common entitlement of all human beings, Abu-Lughod suggests, we should ground a concept of human beings' common humanity in the notion that circumstances always have the capacity to make us vulnerable, we are all deeply social beings, and we each have strong emotional needs for connection that tie us to other human beings. She argues that not all individuals value a life of freedom and states, "Might other desires [besides the desire for freedom] be as meaningful for people? Might living in close families be more valued? Living in a godly way? Living without war?" (2013, 45).

Abu-Lughod further argues that choice itself is a flawed concept, since choice inevitably brings with it uncertainty around the outcomes of our choices. Moreover, she contends, our very identity and desires are largely a product of family and circumstance, factors entirely outside of our choosing. Therefore, drawing on Butler's work, Abu-Lughod argues that the notion of individual autonomy is a bit of a fantasy, one that many Westerners hold but that is premised on a conceptualization of individual possibility that is excessive.

As a result, Abu-Lughod calls for understanding, listening, and a focus on the complexity of real lives. In the process, however, she delves into descriptions of Egyptian women's lives in which she portrays awareness of complexity as anathema to a feminist consciousness. That is, she implies that feminism and nuanced understanding are antithetical to each other and cannot be combined. Her emphasis on complexity, moreover, leads her to posit choice and freedom as inadequate moral principles. Her reasoning is simply to claim that individuals sometimes make choices that they later regret or that the constraints of real life often make a truly free choice untenable.

Abu-Lughod's argument here is both inadequate and dissatisfying, as a focus on freedom or rights is not equivalent to assuming that individuals always make choices that leave them better off than before. A focus on the principle of freedom does not therefore deny that individuals may make choices that, due to ignorance, misfortune, or circumstances, leave them worse off than before or worse off than they could have been. It is rather the case that freedom and rights are proposed as a means by which to prevent undue control, manipulation, or coercion among individuals. Even in the event that some individuals make choices they later regret, the principle that individuals usually do not have the right to control or coerce others, nor should circumstances remain so constraining that they cause this eventuality, remains a valuable one.

Earlier, we saw indigenous critiques of feminism for its perceived lack of concern for collective solidarity and collective rights. I do not see Abu-Lughod's critique of feminist principles as falling within this line of thought. Instead of finding fault with feminism's lack of communal ethos, in my interpretation Abu-Lughod perceives feminism and feminists to think simplistically, to lack intellectual rigor, and to engage in excessive generalization about social phenomena. It is on this basis that Abu-Lughod finds fault with the principles of freedom and rights.

In her book, Abu-Lughod describes the experience of a woman who faces periodic beatings at the hands of her husband but who is constrained from divorce because of both the complicated nature of her extended family social ties and her economic dependence on her husband. Abu-Lughod lists the constraints against divorce that this woman faces as if these constraints prove her argument that Western feminism, or a discourse of rights, is not relevant to this woman. She further argues that, to end the suffering of this and many other women in similar situations, focusing on opposing patriarchy is inadequate, since the factors trapping these women in difficult situations include transnational economic relations; individual circumstances; and, principally, poverty.

Here, however, Abu-Lughod exposes her serious misunderstanding of the outlook of many Western feminist researchers and activists, as many of these individuals are well aware of the complex nature of domestic violence and the complex constraints facing survivors.¹⁶ Such feminists acknowledge and even explain the complex nature of women's lives when they promote feminist values. They are therefore unlike the feminists of Abu-Lughod's imagination, who can only think simplistically. The policy of Refuge, a nationwide domestic violence helpline in the United Kingdom, for example, is to support women victims in *their* wishes and decisions. Callers are not pressured to leave their abusive partners. Rather, women callers are treated as if they are in the best position to make decisions about their own lives.¹⁷ In this way, the organization aims to treat women in a manner that is not condescending while also remaining aware of the complex nature of women's family circumstances. Only survivors of domestic violence know what is the best course of action within their own situation, including whether or not to stay with their partners.

¹⁶ See Kabeer (1994), Agarwal (1997), Koenig et al. (2003), Michalski (2004), Stark (2007), and Cane, Terbish, and Bymbasuren (2014).

¹⁷ This information was obtained through my personal relationship with the organization, where I worked as a helpline volunteer for several months.

Moreover, in her attempts to focus on complexity, Abu-Lughod reveals herself to be deeply culturally relativistic, to the point that she does not decry clear examples of victim-blaming when such blaming is directed at a survivor of domestic violence. As Abu-Lughod states, villagers reacted to the periodic beatings that a woman named Khadija faced at the hands of her husband in the following ways:

When I would ask [the women of Khadija's village] why [Khadija] didn't leave her husband when he was violent with her, some would explain that she didn't want to end up like her mother, divorced and raising two kids on her own, or that she didn't want her children to grow up as she had, without the love of a father. Others mentioned that she had wanted to marry this particular man, knowing full well his situation and his drinking problem. It was her choice and therefore she had some responsibility to make the marriage work. Some women blamed her for being too touchy and hypersensitive. They contrasted Khadija's flighty mother, who had provoked her ex-husband's violence, to Khadija's father's calm second wife who had managed just fine for eighteen years to get along with her husband. (Abu-Lughod 2013, 197–98)

Rather than voice any concerns with these victim-blaming attitudes, Abu-Lughod calls the villagers' reactions simply "local ways of understanding the many sorts of difficult situations in which women find themselves" (197–98). When a survivor of intimate partner violence is characterized as an individual who has "brought the beatings upon herself," it seems, Abu-Lughod feels no need to decry such depictions. In short, Abu-Lughod appears to believe that if we are to understand the complex nature of women's lives, we can do little more than simply accept local responses to them, even when these effectively justify abuse. Yet awareness of complexity need not necessitate the abandonment of a feminist consciousness. In fact, there is no necessary or consistent link between the two.

Lata Mani: Moving beyond an excessively singular focus on choice

Lata Mani, like Abu-Lughod, also expresses an ambivalence toward singular attention to women's choices. She describes how reactions to the practice of sati in India have at times resulted in an excessive focus on whether or not the woman in question chose to enter her husband's funeral pyre or was coerced into doing so. Solely questioning "whether or not the widow went willingly," Mani states, "makes it difficult to engage simultaneously women's systematic subordination *and* the ways in which they negotiate oppressive, even determining, social conditions" (1990, 37). For Mani, then, a sin-

gular focus on agency and consent, absent a comprehensive account of the oppressive circumstances women face, is inadequate.

However, Mani is a proponent of complex depictions of agency in which speakers attempt to avoid playing into neocolonial and racist tropes. We should not, she states, be left with “reductive representations of women as primarily beings who are passive and acted upon,” as this would leave us “with that common figure of Eurocentric feminist discourse: the Third World woman as ‘always, already victim.’” What is necessary, then, “is the notion of women’s oppression as a multifaceted and contradictory social process” (1990, 37).

Here, Mani concludes that women’s oppression is real, that it exists. Abu-Lughod, on the other hand, appears interested in decrying a singular focus on consent and choice, without opposing the broader set of constrained circumstances women face because of their gendered position. Abu-Lughod appears to believe that a consideration of nuance and a feminist consciousness are mutually exclusive, assuming that an individual cannot be both feminist and aware of complexity at the same time. Mani, on the other hand, describes the local feminist response to sati in India, promoting this type of response herself. This version of feminism is skeptical of enhancing state powers to ban or curb gender-oppressive practices due to fears that “the state would merely abuse the greater powers that would accrue to it” (1990, 35). This feminism also sees individual practices such as sati not as reflective of either tradition or modernity but as one of a host of conditions oppressing women. Such practices are seen as historically embedded such that assigning labels of “traditional” or “modern” is often untenable. Unlike Abu-Lughod, Mani describes and supports one variant of local feminist responses to gender-oppressive practices, a variant that is based on a nuanced, in-depth, and historically embedded understanding of women’s condition.

A more comprehensive view on transnational feminist ethics

We have seen some of the proposals put forward by Northern scholars and activists and by those operating within activist spaces of the global South. We have also viewed the many pitfalls that may occur in transnational feminist interactions and have taken a look at the sensitivities and social pressures faced by subaltern women raising issues of women’s rights. Below, I aim to draw upon these works to arrive at a more comprehensive proposal for how to ethically engage in transnational feminist research and activism. My proposal for ethical transnational work involves five points, each of which is elaborated upon below.

Distancing oneself from problematic values and from feminism used as a cover for ulterior motives

As I describe above, some scholars argue that transnational feminist activism can be ethical if local women's movements and priorities are supported, as this prevents the imposition of external priorities. Here, I wish to disagree with these scholars. My disagreement does not rest on any notion that women's own desires and wishes should not be supported. On the contrary, I am fully in support of the view that women's own choices, freedom, and wishes should be supported and heard. However, the scholars making these arguments assume a level of commonality in position and viewpoint that I am not ready to assume. As a result, I am not ready to subscribe to a principle by which I might end up supporting women who may promote further extending patriarchal values or practices. We have seen, for example, how those who are active in raising awareness of women's rights may also support norms, beliefs, or practices that are deeply oppressive to women at the same time. In addition, seemingly feminist priorities are sometimes a front for alternative agendas (Mani 1990; Rajan 2015). It is necessary for feminists, whether working in their home setting or transnationally, to remain aware of these possibilities and to carefully frame their arguments so that problematic values are not supported.

Mani (1990), for example, describes feminists in India who propose a particular vision in response to the practice of sati, as noted above. This vision is wary of playing into the agendas of those who are not especially focused on women's welfare but who claim feminist values nonetheless.¹⁸ In order to avoid playing into these alternative agendas, the feminists Mani describes make sure to remain historically nuanced in their understanding of sati and emphasize the comprehensive nature of women's oppression. They refuse, therefore, to "treat [sati] in isolation from women's subordination in general," as other commentators do, and "[challenge] attempts to frame the issue as one of tradition or religion." Moreover, they place concern for women's welfare and lives at the center of their analysis (Mani 1990, 33–34). Mani's descriptions can act as a guide to feminists working in other regions of the world on similar topics.

Discovering common viewpoints and building upon them

Second, I want to adopt the argument of those scholars who emphasize the contested and fluid nature of culture and its norms, who argue that societies always have detractors who oppose prevalent practices or codes of normative

¹⁸ Sadly, however, Mani indicates that other groups dominate the popular discourse in India, rather than these feminist thinkers (1990).

behavior, and who argue that many cultures offer insights that can be used to carry women's rights forward. Here, however, I further develop these scholars' arguments by contending that even when values around the acceptable treatment of women are fundamentally incommensurate, Northern feminists can still build upon commonalities to encourage or advocate for feminist outcomes. For example, in my own research with Tibetan survivors of domestic violence, I discovered that in many instances Tibetan survivors did not feel that their husbands' beatings were deeply hurtful, traumatic, or problematic. More severe instances of beating, psychological abuse, and material abuse, however, were described as problematic and traumatic (Rajan 2016). As a Northern feminist, I can focus on mitigation and prevention of more severe cases, since these are considered abusive and unacceptable by both Tibetan women survivors and myself. The fact that both more and less severe cases are underpinned by norms that men are, under normal circumstances, the heads and disciplinarians of their households, may allow a Northern feminist such as myself to argue for altering men's role within the household. That is, by focusing on the more severe cases, which we all can agree are abusive, I may still be able to encourage an alteration in men's household role.

In my work, I have identified and interviewed a number of individuals spearheading private initiatives to empower Tibetan women. Most of these individuals, however, did not identify with the term "feminist." Some even expressed contempt for those they believed to belong to this category. I could conclude that a feminist consciousness is extremely rare in the parts of the Tibetan Plateau where I have conducted my research. A closer look, however, finds the most vivid local forms of feminist consciousness within art, as some Tibetan women authors have created poignant depictions of domestic abuse or women's lack of freedom in their poems (Chime [འཆི་མེད།] 2011; DekyilDroma [དཀྱིལ་དྲོམ་] 2011; Schneider 2016). A tendency toward artistic depictions could result from the sensitive nature of feminist issues and from fears of social backlash in the event of openly and directly arguing for feminism. Alternatively, those who portray feminist issues in art may not entirely feel the need to vocally oppose gender-oppressive patterns. These depictions, however, are indicative of potential starting points from which joint transnational dialogue or collective action may be built.

Counteracting stigma

Third, when advocating for women's rights in underprivileged communities that have suffered discrimination and marginalization, it is important to counteract the reinforcement of stigmatizing labels. In the Tibetan communities with which I am familiar, for example, many individuals are sensitive

about the image of their society, as Tibetans in the People's Republic of China have long been characterized as backward and superstitious (Postiglione, Zhu, and Jiao 2004; Yi 2005; Hillman and Henfry 2006). We have seen, moreover, how some feminist theories and feminist spaces have dismissed marginalized women's priorities or have made marginalized women's experiences and voices invisible. We have also seen how women from underprivileged groups may face pressure to refrain from adhering to feminist values and may be told they are not authentic members of their communities when they advocate for women's rights. These sensitivities can derive from underprivileged groups' power relations with authorities or the colonizing power or from a sense that unity is required to withstand the oppressions faced by the community at large. The transnational researcher or activist should recognize that her dialogue partners may be bracing themselves for condescending and ethnocentric onslaughts, as they may frequently face these dynamics when interacting with outsiders more generally.

An awareness of these difficulties can help the transnational researcher or activist to think carefully about her message and build sensitivity into her communication. Toward this aim, I wish to draw on the work of those scholars who speak about the importance of focusing on practices within Northern societies that are harmful to women. These scholars point to the value of showing Northern audiences that there is a lot of misogyny in Northern societies and that practices similar to female genital cutting or other Southern practices have been occurring for a long time in Northern settings. I wish to develop this point further by arguing for the importance of drawing such North-South parallels when working within Southern societies as well. It is necessary, I believe, to present oneself humbly to Southerners, by describing oneself as an individual from a Northern context where misogynistic practices are alive and well. In so doing, the hope is to counteract further stigmatization of the society in question, in the minds of Southern audiences as well as Northern ones. Any criticisms or calls for change in Southern practices should be couched within a narrative in which Northern customs are presented as equally harmful. This is one way in which the transnational activist may navigate the sensitivities and pressures faced by the underprivileged or marginalized communities with which she works.

Advocacy absent coercion

As I note above, feminist research or activism may cause harm, by isolating women with newfound feminist views from their communities, by leading to ineffective or ethnocentric interventions, or by instigating an entrenchment of patriarchal values because community members feel threatened by external pressure. I argue, however, that Northern feminists can ethically encour-

age a change in local practices provided that dialogue around differences in values, including advocacy for a change in values, occurs within a context in which value or behavioral change is in no way felt to be tied to the provision of scarce material goods or opportunities. Community members should feel little or no constraint against dismissing and ridiculing novel views. One way to ensure this may be to actively encourage criticism.

Encouraging a move toward more gender-egalitarian attitudes could be enacted while engaging in charity work, such as providing food to the starving, delivering water to those in need, or providing scholarships and education to impoverished communities with few opportunities. However, encouraging a change in values within this context would be unethical, as the power inequality engendered by the provision of goods, opportunities, and services may result in a pressurized imposition of values within a context in which value change might alienate an individual from her community. For example, if I were to become involved in financing or providing shelter for Tibetan victims of domestic violence, it would be unethical to use my interactions with shelter clients as an opportunity to propagate a feminist value system in line with my own beliefs. We might additionally raise the issue of perceptions, even if erroneous, that one is tied to a military or colonizing power. That is, feminist dialogue or activism should not be undertaken by outsiders if those outsiders are perceived to be capable of providing goods or opportunities via links to a powerful government, military, or colonizing regime.

What, one might ask, of a community member who outwardly acquiesces with alien views, who presents a facade created for the purpose of acquiring needed resources, a facade that is summarily discarded once it is no longer necessary? This type of imposed deception is itself a form of alienation and silencing—and therefore undesirable. Let us take the example of deception undertaken at times by victims of domestic violence in order to obtain needed services and protection. As Michele Bograd writes, “victims [of domestic violence] may sometimes employ . . . social stereotypes to buy freedom. . . . Incarcerated, black, battered women are tutored not to mention their children in court to avoid confirming stereotypes of the welfare mother, while incarcerated, white, battered women are taught to weep about their children to capitalize on images of conventional white motherhood. In the service of safety, the conscious manipulation of images fundamentally estranges the battered individual from the truths and integrity of his or her life, a poignant repetition of dynamics often experienced with the batterer” (1999, 281). Engaging in deception on pain of losing opportunities, services, or goods can be an alienating and marginalizing experience. While the above example refers to victims of domestic violence in particular, this type of enforced de-

ception may be isolating for many types of individuals and should therefore be avoided.

Accepting the limits of both morality and cross-cultural understanding

I seek to adopt Butler's argument that moral values cannot be entirely hard and fast, that a moral code that is genuinely applicable universally is unknowable, that we must accept the possibility of being transformed ourselves through the process of dialogue, and that cultural translation can involve incomplete communication in which each party may never entirely comprehend the concepts of the other (Butler 2000a, 2004b; Hutchings 2013). However, I take Butler's argument further by emphasizing that this type of dialogue can occur not only in settings where groups take the initiative to come together for discussion but also within the context of Northerners advocating for a change in Southern practices or values. Indeed, the latter context may be one of the best arenas in which transnational dialogue should take place, because this type of context removes the problems inherent in Benhabib's argument. We might recall that Benhabib has been criticized because her call for cross-cultural dialogue between individuals who have committed to conversing under principles of universal respect and reciprocity effectively excludes certain types of individuals and certain types of arguments from the dialogue table *a priori*. Calls for transnational dialogue, moreover, are often naive because they implicitly assume that groups of Northern and Southern women are interested in exploring and discussing the same topics. However, in the case of Northern activists working to encourage a change in Southern values, Southern individuals who were not originally interested in the topic at hand may be drawn into dialogue. This expands the inclusiveness of dialogue and encourages more diverse voices to take part in discussion.

Conclusion

This article has explored various feminist viewpoints regarding how to ethically engage in transnational feminist research and activism. The problem of ethnocentric bias, usually on the part of Northern analysts or activists viewing societies of the global South, has been described by numerous feminist scholars. To counteract such problems, various methods of transnational feminist practice have been proposed. Subaltern feminist activists have also undertaken particular measures to respond to the marginalization, sensitivities, and social pressures they face. Here, I argue that in order to ethically engage in transnational feminist research and activism, the Northern activist should adhere to five principles—namely, distancing oneself

from problematic values and from feminism used as a cover for ulterior motives, discovering common viewpoints and then building upon them, engaging in advocacy that is fully absent of coercion, counteracting discourses that could further stigmatize underprivileged communities, and operating in a spirit of acceptance that both oneself and the other will be transformed by transnational dialogue—a dialogue that is itself a matter in which no one party is completely right or wrong.

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