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CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 131-149 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/ncr.2004.0009

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Problematics of Transnational Feminism for Asian American Women

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Witnessing the trajectory of international relations these days confirms my belief in the necessity of psychic transformation, especially after the U.S. declaration of a “war on terrorism” in response to 9/11. The intensification of U.S. imperialist efforts to eliminate any geopolitical influence that would get in the way of its campaign to achieve global dominance demonstrates the failure of military force to attain world peace. If we are to create international relations based on mutual cooperation, then Americans need to move beyond jingoism and self-serving protectionism and embrace a consciousness about global interconnections, between nations, within nations, and between people and the natural environment. The shock of “9/11” represented for so many Americans the bursting of their “national security” bubble, supported by a general ignorance of U.S. foreign policy, as well as providing a rationale for throwing uncritical support behind U.S. military aggression abroad in order to punish those foreign “evil-doers.” Moreover, many patriotic Americans turned a blind eye to the way the U.S. government eventually bullied its way into Iraq, in spite of a lack of United Nations (UN) support, in order to further its oil and other economic and
geopolitical interests in that part of the world (Mathis 2003), all justified in the name of an “international coalition” to more easily hide their government’s rogue tactics. The fact that most Americans did not respond to this wake-up call by demanding instead that the U.S. government change how it relates to other nations means that we first need to have honest dialogues about the issues within this nation’s own backyard that lead to such different visions of international community, if we are ever to bring about true transformation of global consciousness.

My essay attempts to contribute to a dialogue about the meaning of international community by examining efforts to create solidarities based on gender across national boundaries, particularly postmodernist trends in transnational feminism, from the critical perspectives of Asian American women, whose dual experiences of racialization and gendering necessarily problematize easy unions. I would like to begin by explaining my own positioning within this dialogue as an Asian American woman scholar of critical race theory and gender, whose formal education in women’s studies allowed me to experience first-hand what Audre Lorde (1983) called “racist feminism” (100). But reading texts like This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1983) reinforced my faith in the affinities among women of color and Third-World women outside those legitimized by Anglo feminism, as well as our ability to think beyond any paradigm that attempts to limit our visions by invalidating our experiences.1 During the 1980s, remarkable statements like Chrystos’s (1983), “I no longer believe that feminism is a tool which can eliminate racism—or even promote better understanding between different races and kinds of women” (69), encouraged me to look beyond conventional gender frameworks by drawing from the experiences and perspectives of Third-World women.2 Now, I write as one who understands the value of mobilizing solidarities aimed at transforming, at once, sexual, racial, socioeconomic, and colonial hierarchies, and as one who has also witnessed the conflicts and huge perspectival diversity within U.S. women’s and feminist studies. I learned that women of all backgrounds and affiliations may do “feminist” work, but we do not all agree about issues of gender. I assume those ruptures cannot (nor should they) be easily transcended for the sake of “sisterhood.” Consequently, I am somewhat surprised
at how a certain postmodernist trend in academic feminist discourse called “transnational feminism” seems so quickly to have replaced critiques of feminism by women of color, which argued for an intellectual and political incorporation of racial-gender diversity and its significance in shaping our respective communities. In other words, I learned that even as the labor and subjectivities of women of color continue to cross national boundaries, our experiences of racism, coloniality, and culture require us to prioritize “feminist nationalist” movements—that is, work “concerned with our sex, and also our race” (Davenport 1983, 90).

The emergence of my skepticism about postmodernist feminist trends in transnationalist discourse coincides precisely with moments when they fail to account for, in a nonreductive way, the theoretical and material significance of race and coloniality in processes of transnationalism. I believe that one of the most irresponsible postmodernist interpretations of transnationalism is the idea that the social constructedness of race and culture means that they are also superficial, and therefore knowable as a “play” of “difference”—particularly within the context of globalization, wherein cultural and national differences are supposedly made obsolete. However, significant aspects of transnational processes arise from imperial relations of power, which continue to delineate nationalist interests and racialized geographies (as we are reminded these days by the U.S. treatment of the Middle East). Similar to postmodernist interpretations of transnationalism, postmodern feminism also tends to “transcend” race and culture, but strangely leaves the status of gender unquestioned. For example, Teresa de Lauretis’s (1987) idea of “differences among women” (136) or “differences within women” (137) attempts to problematize gender essentialism by acknowledging gender pluralism, but manages to privilege gender over other identities by reinstating the category of “women” as a container of other differences. Elucidating their postmodern transnational feminist project, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) state their commitment to feminism and their goal of acknowledging “the different forms that feminisms take and the different practices that can be seen as feminist movements” (20). While they explicitly reject a universal notion of womanhood, Grewal and Kaplan’s commitment to diverse feminisms seems to be accompanied
by the underlying assumption that there is a shared field of women’s oppression and resistance that exists a priori, “across cultural divides” (2). The singular logic of a basically gender-based framework reduces or minimizes other axes of difference, and therefore cannot move beyond portrayals of difference as merely additive or cumulative—as if “gender,” “race,” “sexuality,” and “class” could be understood as mutually discreet, equivalent, and sometimes interlocking experiences, rather than as operating simultaneously in constituting subjectivity at a fundamental level.

While Asian American women and other women of color in neocolonial situations have been critically aware of the impact of transnational flows of multinational corporations, cultural imperialism, and supranational geopolitics since the modern age of European (and later American) imperialist expansion, modernist feminisms are still coming to terms with the effects of transnationalism on women in European and American contexts. Sau-ling Wong (1995) points out that before postmodernist and poststructuralist theories gained popular currency in Asian American studies, the field was, from its beginnings, concerned with international connections (3). Marxist and liberal feminists can no longer sufficiently criticize patriarchy from within developmentalist, modernist models of world-system theory or core-periphery frameworks, or from within the narrow focus of nationalist paradigms, as the security of the geopolitical “centers” are increasingly becoming more “peripheralized,” and new “cores” are springing up in formerly Third-World “frontiers.” I am pointing primarily to a perspective of Anglo feminism, since, historically, the colonial situations of Third-World women and women of color have never made it possible to challenge patriarchy without confronting imperial nationalism and modernity at the same time. Put another way, the colonial contexts of women of color have always been violently complicated by transnationality, whereas the world of white liberal feminism opened up precisely when the domestic comfort of white colonial elite women began to fall apart: when the balance of power between the empires and the colonies became destabilized through anticolonial revolutions.

One of the problems with the notion of transnational feminism has to do with different interpretations of transnationalism itself. Transnationalism is used variously by academics and theorists to refer to new global networks,
flows, encounters, and connections across national boundaries, as a result of capitalist restructuring and increasing cultural contacts and political alliances, which often supersede the purposes or powers of nation-states. The discourse of transnationalism distinguishes itself from other types of internationalism or border-crossings of the past, marking a new era of globalization, through its notion of transcending national boundaries. I take issue with this definition, as transnationalism is often celebrated as an opportunity to create a utopic “global community” of “world citizens,” without paying attention to relationships of power, as under imperialism, that continue to be nationally determined, except now on a larger scale. Thus, transnationalism is neither new nor truly “trans-national.”

In their edited work on postmodernity and transnational feminist practice, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) describe what I consider to be a postmodernist perspective of transnationality. They state that postmodernism “can be read as part of the operations of transnational culture; as the cultural expression of . . . ‘scattered hegemonies,’ which are the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject” (7; my emphasis). Thus, Grewal and Kaplan’s view of transnationalism is founded on an economic and cultural definition, retheorizing the binarist framework of Marxist world-system theory by accounting for capital’s flexible mobility and dispersed identities. Instead of the unified world-system groupings of core-periphery, First World–Third World, and by extension, colonizer-colonized and dominator-dominated, postmodernism identifies multiply constituted categories, hence “multiple centers” and “multiple peripheries” (10). However, the postmodernist view of transnationality relies on a dubious flattening out of racialized geopolitical and economic hierarchies through its rejection of significant differences between First and Third Worlds, between empires and colonies—ultimately disabling a complex theory of decolonization. For instance, a feminist scholar at a conference once argued with me that U.S. women of color who identify as Third-World women were obsessed with race, since the Third World in reality does not exist. When I rejected the paradigm of imperial feminism in a separate encounter, another feminist scholar defensively queried, “What isn’t imperial?”—which I understood to be a way of relativizing and, therefore, trivializing the reality of colo-
nial hierarchies. I wonder how the idea of “scattered hegemonies” of “global capital” can explain what many people are calling “debt slavery” by the G8 countries (the world’s wealthiest nations), which are still disproportionately Western powers. Acknowledgment of imperialism is lost, while the “greedy grab for empire” (Cade Bambara 1983, vii) continues in the form of international diplomacy and structural adjustment policies.

Postmodernism, which recognizes the proliferation of differences, critiques anti-imperialist stances for overemphasizing dualistic relationships between the colonial and the colonized, and ignoring multiplicity within groups. I believe this critique confuses resistance against imperialism with imperialism itself, which attempts to maintain bifurcated realities; that is, it assumes that Third-World identity in opposition to First-World dominance implicitly perpetuates imperialist, dichotomous thinking. A simplified, binarist view of anti-imperialism is the result of an intellectual conflation of world-system theory with critiques of imperialism and coloniality. World-system theory describes primarily economic relationships between “core” and “periphery” countries, which supposedly make up the basis of imperialist relations between First World and Third World. While I agree that world-system theory insufficiently describes global power relations through its economist core-periphery formation, I do not think anti-imperialist critiques can be reduced to a purely economic view of colonialism. “First World” and “Third World” mark not only hierarchized economic systems, but also cultural and political power, beyond the economic, which build imperial empires. Furthermore, the view of anti-imperialist critiques as comprising monolithic, binarist analyses of the “pure” colonized subject vs. the “pure” colonizer inaccurately represents the range of anti-imperialist discourse; for it fails to take into account diverse aspects of coloniality that have long concerned studies of imperialism, such as “imitation of the colonizer, horizontal violence, self-deprecation due to internalized oppression, self-distrust, psychic and material dependency, desire to assimilate” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxvii), as well as cultural reception and appropriation (Fanon 1967), colonial complicity (Fanon 1963), and even “multiple peripheries” qua the “internal colonialism model” theorized by Third-World activists in the United States (Wong 1995, 3).
Just as Marxist and modernist frameworks clearly were never sufficient to account for the colonial predicament outside of their own worldviews, postmodernist trends in transnational discourse also tend to spring from specifically Eurocentric perspectives. Some postmodernist theorists claim that it would be inaccurate to suggest that postmodernism is a Western intellectual import due to the phenomena of multi-directional cultural flows (Richard 1987/88, quoted in Grewal and Kaplan, 12). While it is obviously true that revolutionary, anticolonial intervention into Western domination forced postmodernists to acknowledge “hybridity,” one cannot ignore the unevenness of global cultural flows and the intellectual hegemony of certain liberal-pluralist postmodernist theories within the U.S. academy that support Euro-American hegemony (Alexander and Mohanty, xviii). I would argue that while postmodernism offers critiques of modernity and capitalism, they also recuperate these phenomena as they perpetually refer to (and virtually embrace) a totalizing view of global or “transnational culture” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 7). This perspective of the triumph of capitalist modernization through mass communication and commodification is fundamentally Eurocentric in terms of describing not only the present, but future possibilities as well. Furthermore, the appearance of a shrinking, technocratic “global community” through expanding information technologies and telecommunications must be placed into a perspective of power that shows the “nerve center” of the world internet system to be located in the United States, with links to the federal government (Mazrui 1999).

The adoption of the “post-” and “trans-” by feminism may represent an attempt not only to separate imperial feminism of old from a supposedly new and improved, more globally sensitive feminism, but to create artificially a break between the modern days of empires and the days of consolidating neo-empires. The prefixes “trans-” and “post-” are semantic smoke screens, erasing, as if by magic, the contemporary pervasiveness of coloniality from discourses on modernity and nationalism, all the while colonial projects rigorously persevere and expand in astonishingly flexible ways. As the economic and political histories of the “superpowers” demonstrate, transnationalism exists simultaneously with thriving colonialisms and imperial nationalisms, in a sometimes contradictory but ultimately mutu-
ally enabling relationship. Contrary to the postmodernist perspective of transnationalism, which suggests that global economic and cultural flows render obsolete state sovereignties and distinctions, an anti-imperialist critique of transnationalism acknowledges the power of state practices to collude with and determine capitalist relations, consolidating what Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) call “advanced capitalist/colonial states” (xxi), and what Masao Miyoshi (1993) calls a contemporary “re-colonization process” (730). State sovereignty is “still far from dead,” as governments find at their disposal “national budgets . . . , bureaucracies corresponding to a large array of social spheres, interests and activities, capacities for coercion and surveillance, and the most destructive military machines in history” (Bamyeh 1993, 67, 69).

The postmodernist notion of capitalist interests superseding national boundaries or concerns demonstrates more myth than reality, as corporate operations continue to vary along national lines in terms of their core governance, financing, innovation, investment, and multinational behavior (Doremus et al. 1998). Moreover, the transnational tendency toward regional and global integration, through economic unions and treaties, as well as international organizations and institutions—such as the UN, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Court—does not necessarily reflect increasing geopolitical equality or integration between nations (Bamyeh 1993, 71), but rather a continuation of an imperial legacy through which European and North American nation-states attempt to maintain global power. Therefore, critical links must be made between propagandistic languages of international benevolence (as in “UN peacekeeping missions”) and deployments of “hypernationalist intervention into the economies of the Third World” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxiv).

Today, after the end of the Cold War, studies of imperialism are more important than ever, “as governmental imperialism is becoming more aggressive, blatant and unchallenged on a global scale” (Bamyeh 1993, 75). Yet certain aspects of transnational feminism suggest that the erosion of national distinctions (as well as of old colonial relationships) through globalizing forces means, by logical extension, that an alliance based on nation
is less viable and less progressive than one based on sex/gender or socioe-
conomic class—as Grewal and Kaplan explicitly urge when they state, “In
its nationalist guise, [feminism] cannot be oppositional. The need to free
feminism from nationalist discourses is clear” (22). I thus approach this sub-
ject of transnational feminism with caution: Is this not yet another instance
of the unmarked, international Woman of imperial feminism? Does the fem-
inist rejection of nationalism come precisely from the movement’s uneasy
dealings with race and culture, and is it subsequently a way of escaping the
threat of Third-World solidarity to an unquestioned, racist white national-
ism? While I recognize a problematic ideological-structural link between
certain machoisms and nationalisms that support nation-state projects
(including the “post”-colonial kind), I am concerned that a generalized
approach to patriarchy and nationalism disguises the politics of white fem-
inity in relation to nonwhite gender definitions, and the role that white
women play not only as national symbols for white men, but also as agents
of these very colonial sexual orders.

Moreover, such an approach ignores the uses of feminist nationalism by
women-of-color revolutionaries, which suggests that an uncritical dis-
missal of nationalism derives from a unitary conception of nationhood from
a Eurocentric, modernist perspective. In fact, the language of revolution,
which is foundational to Third-World feminism (“women of color who want
nothing short of a revolution in the hands of women”), seems to be com-
pletely absent in postmodernist feminism. The editors of This Bridge envi-
sion not a revolution like those deployed by state nationalisms, resulting in
failed decolonization, but a “radical” revolution connected with Third-
World women’s own definitions of cultural struggle: “We use the term [“rad-
ical”] in its original form—stemming from the word ‘root’—for our feminist
politic emerges from the roots of both our cultural oppression and heritage”
(Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, xxiv).

A critique of nationalism must take into account the unequal relations
between nations, particularly those that arise from colonial domination
(Alexander and Mohanty, xxiv). Algerian feminist Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas
(1988) reminds international feminists:
Probably most [women] take for granted that they belong to a country, a nation, which does not have to prove its existence; it allows for transcending the concept of nation, of criticizing it. It has not been allowed for us . . . it is not for so many people in still colonized countries, or countries facing imperialism at war . . . [Under these conditions it is] much more difficult to come to criticize the nation, and even the State which pretends it represents the Nation. (quoted in Enloe 1989, 45).

Third-World feminists and feminists of color who are critical of nationalist discourses are aware of state apparatuses, which create oppressive, obligatory constructions of the citizen-subject, and their collusion with gendered relations, racialization, and labor exploitation to differentiate Third-World women and women of color as a “casual” workforce. The “racialized feminization of labor” (Lowe 1996, 158) demonstrates the unique position of super-exploitability and the contention that women of color and Third-World women have against state nationalisms. As Lisa Lowe observes, Asian American women’s necessary critiques of official nationalisms do not preclude the utility of nationalisms or the possibility of their reinvention for women’s needs in doing oppositional work:

Insofar as this notion of culture as an institution of the modern state remains in force, even today in its complex imbrication with “postmodern” global extensions and distortions, Asian American cultural nationalism as an oppositional mode continues to have significance in relation to both residual and recast modes of the “modern.” . . . Yet at the same time, the current global restructuring . . . constitutes a shift in the mode of production that now necessitates alternative forms of cultural practice that integrate yet move beyond those of cultural nationalism. (171)

While a critique of nationalism must speak to the violence executed by masculinist state policies, a wholesale rejection of culture-based struggles14 precludes alliances combating imperialist-nationalist domination. Hence, an overall condemnation of nationalism reduces broad definitions of nationhood, or peoplehood, to a monolithic understanding of how and why they originate and function at certain historical moments.
Transnational feminism carries its own set of politics that acknowledges the importance of specifying diverse, “local” voices; but these specificities of gender eventually become incorporated by feminism under a universal rubric of “sexual domination.” Although transnational feminism is careful to reject unitary notions of womanhood, at one level, one of the reasons for an underlying universalization of sex within transnational feminism has to do with an uncritical reductionism inherent within the very idea of “sexual oppression” (in postmodern terms, by multiple, collaborationist patriarchies). I was reminded of this gender-reductionist, universalizing tendency at a conference by the same individual who wanted to do away with “Third World” as a term of solidarity among women, but praised transnational feminism for describing diverse practices of “women’s resistance” around the world and throughout history. It seemed hypocritical to criticize the oppositional usage of “Third World,” a historically specific usage that arose in response to a specific historical situation, and at the same time construct a timeless, universalist portrayal of “women’s resistance,” appropriating them all as examples of feminism.

Pluralizing “women’s oppression” cannot get around the fact that there exist “various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share [with white women], and some of which we do not” (Lorde 1983b, 97). The experiences of Asian American women show that sexual domination cannot be separated from other oppressions, unless one takes a narrow view of gendered experience within our “traditional” cultures. In his important work, “The Sexual Demon of White Power . . . in ‘America’ and Beyond” (1999), Greg Thomas thoroughly elaborates processes of sexualization via racialization and coloniality that challenge the notion of universal sex. Within this framework, the inadequacy of feminism to account for multiple, simultaneous oppressions, in particular the centrality of experiences of racialization and coloniality to sexualization, is precisely why different gender identities, such as “womanist,” become necessary. This is also why the Combahee River Collective (1983) uses the term “racial-sexual oppression”—“which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression” (213). In the classes where I have worked with Asian American women and other women of color, I often hear it stated that they cannot imagine identifying first with
white women on the basis of gender or sex over their cultural communities on the basis of ethnicity or race. I think that this does not necessarily reflect a naïve ranking of race over gender, but the predominant experiential reality of *racialized sex* for nonwhite women.

The implications of transnational feminism for Asian/American women create artificial solidarities with white women where there may not be a common ground, whether subjectively or sociopolitically. Even if a contingent similarity exists between women—where Asian-based, patriarchal sex/gender systems claim Asian American women just as European-based patriarchies claim white, Anglo women—it is important to look at the specificities of these relationships within their own contexts. The different racial and gender experiences of Asian women may separate, on the basis of race *and* sex, Asian feminine subjects as far apart from white femininity as they may be from Asian masculine subjects. In other words, we need to reconceptualize radically both cultural and biological notions of sex into a perspective of multiple genders and sexes beyond male vs. female binarisms.

In concluding my observations about the limits of transnational feminism for theorizing the radical multiplicity of sex as racial and cultural difference, I would like to investigate briefly the desire fueling transnational feminism’s attempt to create alliances across boundaries, by looking at the ramifications of travel as elaborated in transnational feminist theories. In an era of cyberspace and jet travel, defining one’s location can demystify notions of difference and similarity associated with postmodernist accounts of border-crossing (Kaplan 1994, 138). But when I think of what a feminist colleague said to me about the apparent academic anachronism of “1980s women-of-color feminist identity politics,” after the arrival of postmodern feminist “identity deconstructionism,” I glimpse the backlash against Third-World women’s organizing and the limits of simply questioning one’s location as one travels without addressing the continuing material and subjective barriers that differentiate at least a vast half of the world’s population. If identity politics represent “essentialist,” and therefore politically “unsophisticated” tools for making interpersonal connections, compared to the mechanisms of self-critique implicit in fluid, postmodern identities, what happens after deconstruction? Does historicizing location make travel...
easier while subjective and material barriers remain? I was reminded of this
distance, if not rupture, in subjectivity and experience by the reactions of
white feminists at an international women’s studies conference where I first
presented this paper. I watched their facial expressions change from amuse-
ment to disdain as they realized I was propounding the importance of Asian
feminist nationalism as a critique of “transnational” feminist erasures.
While the few Asian women in the room expressed agreement with my
ideas, I was not surprised that in this instance, like many others, some white
women “just didn’t get it.” We must deconstruct and historicize the reasons
for our divergences, but it seems that crossing lines would necessitate over-
coming, in actuality, those histories of subjective and material barriers. This
remains an incredibly difficult task, since people are so entrenched in their
material and subjective (conscious and unconscious) investments in rela-
tions of power. In my opinion, oppositional identity politics continue to be
necessary insofar as intersubjectivity operates purely as an intellectual exer-
cise, and not as an active commitment to destroying the hegemony of cer-
tain cultural egos. As Moraga (1983) states, we must decide to “make faith a
reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality” (xix).

Making international connections and mobilizations is important to
Asian American women concerned with progressive theory and practice
because our lives are already linked with other national contexts through
imperialism, migration, labor, race, and culture. Therefore, feminist nation-
alist consciousness cannot afford to take a myopic approach to issues that
seem to affect us only within the national, domestic sphere. Neither can
Asian American cultural struggle take a transcendental view of internation-
alism, for often official state nationalisms collude, serving state interests in
the name of internationalism or transnationalism. A similar warning can be
made about transnational feminist projects, which must be grounded
through tracking histories of cultural difference and rupture. Without a crit-
ical eye honed from collective cultural experiences of material conditions,
the commitment to a different practice of feminism cannot seem to move
beyond a superficial level of emotional investment. So I must question the
possibility of a transnational “feminist alliance” (Kaplan 1994, 144) based on
the model of “coalition” or “affiliations” (139) between women. In my view,
affiliations mean conscious, voluntary memberships, constructed through an unquestioned desire for “empathy” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 5), which in turn connotes a presumed sameness. By contrast, I find that Elaine Kim’s notion of “affinities”²¹ can be used to describe the aspect of identification or recognition that is not only consciously constructed, but also unconscious and “visceral” (Moraga, xvii), an intersubjectivity collected beyond individual will. Affinities are subjective, even cosmic attractions or kinships constructed through a shared, albeit embattled, political and cultural history. As Moraga explains, “It is about intimacy.” Clearly, a degree of emotion and desire is involved in the notion of affinity, “a desire for life between all of us.” Moraga also envisions that “We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams. . . . It is about physical and psychic struggle. [It is] not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives” (xix). Unlike romanticized emotional attachment, “kindred” intimacy created through material and psychic labor marks the most deeply and closely hidden and, therefore, the most revolutionary site of struggle. I think “transnational feminism” and “feminism” in general must be rehistoricized to focus on how Third-World women and women of color have always been concerned with cross-national issues of labor exploitation, imperialism, migration, and racialized gender—which includes their radical departures from both modern and postmodern Eurocentric definitions of gendered communities or subjectivities. In a “transnational age,” historicization of location, identity, and experience would reveal the productive possibilities of our cultural affinities, or, conversely, that some should have just stayed home.

NOTES

1. In their introduction, the editors Moraga and Anzaldúa envisioned the anthology to be used as a required women’s studies text (xxvi), but I think its appropriation by academic feminists, as well as the tokenized presence of students of color in the classroom, reflects a general experience of women of color with white feminism and women’s studies in the 1980s. The token marginality of women of color within women’s studies pro-
grams continues to legitimize the field today, as Rachel Lee (2000) observes: "women of color remain eminently useful to the progress narrative women's studies wishes to create for itself, where the fullness of women of color's arrival within women's studies is always "about to be" (91).

2. See, for example, Yamada (1983).

3. For an explanation of postmodernism, see Harvey (1990), especially the chart on page 43.

4. Davenport appropriately points to the importance of addressing race, but my view of feminist nationalism addresses not only race relations in the United States but also anticolonial struggles, which include movements for national sovereignty.

5. I am aware that women of color both in the United States and elsewhere participate in or use diverse definitions and approaches that they may call "transnational feminism," or simply "feminism." In this essay, I draw attention to the strategic limits of feminism for women of color, particularly in terms of how the dominant position of postmodernist perspectives overshadows the significance of imperial nationalism in discussions of "transnational" phenomena, and how culture and race become minimized in discourses of feminism. In this sense, it is not my intention to do away with transnational feminism or feminism in general, but to point to the necessity of cultivating a critical consciousness of race, coloniality, and culture as women-centered practices, which may also be considered alternatives to "feminism."

6. As Wong suggests, one does not need to travel in theory or practice to appreciate the international ramifications of domestic concerns.

7. By "Third-World women" and "women of color," I mean to draw attention to gender identities created by colonial and racialized relationships, whether resulting from extraterritorial rule, settler colonialism, internal colonialism, or neocolonialism. There is no unified experience or perspective among women within national boundaries, which is why, for instance, indigenous women use terms such as "Fourth-World" to distinguish their experiences of coloniality from those of Third-World and immigrant women of color. However, I think these identities are not simply mutually exclusive due to overlapping relationships of power. In this sense, identities may be shared in spite of other material differences across class or national boundaries.

8. I refer to Grewal and Kaplan's *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994) because it seems to have coined "transnational feminism," at least in academic discussions. I do not presume that all the essays in this collection necessarily exemplify postmodernist, transnationalist feminist ideas, nor do I see transnational feminism as comprising a monolithic discourse or practice. In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997), an understanding of the centrality of coloniality to the experiences of Third-World women and women of color frames Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty's vision of a transnational feminist democracy, emphasizing strategies of decolonization absent from Grewal and Kaplan's formulation. Alexander and Mohanty view the fail-
ures of anti-imperial nationalisms “at this stage” (xiii; my emphasis) as a consequence of their imaginative limitations (xxxix) in envisioning women as legitimate national heirs and in transforming colonial education (xiv).

9. See Grewal and Kaplan (9–10, 14–15), where they discuss the binarism of world-system theory and its ideas of core-periphery and First World–Third World, citing Ulf Hannerz as well as editors of Public Culture (1988, 14), who call for the erasure of First World–Third World distinctions to reveal global interconnections. Grewal and Kaplan state, “Many binary terms such as dominator-dominated, center-periphery, and colonizer-colonized are open to the same charge” (10). The implication is that anti-imperialist critique remains caught within these oppositions.

10. Speaking of British transnationalism, Stuart Hall (1991) acknowledges that regional organizations represent projects of national self-preservation, of continuing British imperial “rule alongside and in partnership with other economic and political elites” (29; my emphases).

11. I am thinking in particular of the work by Saskia Sassen, Cities in a World Economy (1994), in which she suggests an answer to global economic trends lies in forging a new transnational alliance based on class or gender.

12. I refer to white nationalism instead of simply white supremacy because national identities of Western countries are constructed racially as “white.” White nationalism needs to be placed into relief within the racialized geography of national identities because cultural nationalisms are often automatically assumed to be racially or ethnically chauvinistic, while (white) nationalism is not readily equated with white supremacy.

13. See, for example, Elaine Kim’s “Dangerous Affinities: Korean American Feminisms (En)counter Gendered Korean and Racialized U.S. Nationalist Narratives” (1999), in which she describes “Korean American feminist nationalism that creates space for rearticulations of Korean and Korean American female subjectivity and community” (5).

14. By culture-based struggles, I suggest forms of nationalism based on shared political histories of racialization, culture, and coloniality, not a depoliticized view of cultural struggle usually associated with some United States–based cultural nationalisms of the 1970s, although I also do not mean to convey that the assessment of past cultural nationalisms as wholly apolitical and narrow is a fair one.

15. I use the construction Asian/American to connote the already transnationalized space of the United States for Asians, including those born here, as well as to acknowledge the particular U.S.-specificity of Asian American experience, which is not simply an Asian experience transplanted to an American context.

16. One of feminist theory’s contributions is the deconstruction of social and biological notions of “sex,” such as Anne Fausto-Sterling’s Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men (1985). Thomas takes the deconstruction of sex further by tracing nonwhite and/or transgender definitions of “sex,” demonstrating that dualism
instead of multiplicity still seems to be the dominant way of thinking about sexual identity.

17. See Thomas’s work for an explicit analysis of “sexual multiplicity.”

18. Kaplan critiques a politics of location that romanticizes and reinforces essentialist notions of difference and similarity in both liberal and poststructural feminist theories. However, I am unable to gather what critiques of location would produce in the way of transnational feminist organizing when differences, once demythologized, appear to be insurmountable.

19. As stated by the Combahee River Collective, the assault on radical identity politics is nothing if not politically motivated: “In the case of Black women [identity politics] is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves” (212).

20. Davenport describes an aversion of Black women to narrow, white femininity in terms of de-fetishizing white aesthetics, culture, and sociopolitics: “Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. . . . Culturally, we see them as limited and bigoted. . . . Socially, white people seem rather juvenile and tasteless. Politically they are, especially the feminists, naïve and myopic” (87).

21. I prefer Kim’s use of “dangerous affinities” to describe Korean American women’s subjectivities and communities, because it validates the existence of a feminist nationalist genealogy, cultivated in spite of racist and sexist nationalist narratives.

REFERENCES


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