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Terrae Incognitae: Global Feminism, Canons, and the Case of Brazil

sonita sarker, Macalester College

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TERRAE INCOGNITAE:
Canons, Global Feminism,
and the Case of Brazil

Sonita Sarker

I. Setting the Compass

On the cover of volume 1 (1993) of the Brazilian academic journal Cadernos Pagú is a figure under a tree, seated before emblems that evoke Indian (South Asian) miniature paintings. A notation informs us that this illustration is inspired by the UNESCO series entitled “Dialogue between the Peoples of the World.” A scene from a specific culture symbolizing an activity spanning the entire world as a frontispiece to a journal on women’s issues seems a perfect example of globalization, here manifested in the cross-fertilization of cultural iconography over the boundaries of nation-states. Yet, my first journey to Brazil, which I had known only from a distance, primarily through its music, revealed some of the “unknown territories” of my title—curious disjunctures as well as intriguing possibilities in the links, present and potential, between globalization, feminist/gender studies, and pedagogical practice. Since the connotations of its realities are more than partially representative of other areas of the world, and this essay explicitly addresses locales beyond Brazil, I emphasize the function of Brazil as a case in point, as one letter in a larger lexicon.

Immanuel Wallerstein’s idea that societies exist in this kind of relational sense rather than in comparison to the absoluteness of Western centers of political power thrusts the definitions of globalization in a new direction. Although the center-periphery model prevails in many discussions of inter-national relations,
the contextual idea of cultural production and nationhood was the preparatory ground for the 1995 International Women’s Conference in Beijing. The focus of the conference was largely on social, political, and economic situations, reflecting the emphases that the discourse on globalization places upon technology (media, mass communications, information flow) and economy (multinationals, modernization, capitalist finance) as the main agents.

In cultural contexts, the concept of change as both catalyst and consequence has gained its primary forum in academe; the debate that correlates to the bases of the Beijing conference rages around the connotations of “universalism.” The general consensus is that Anglo-American feminisms have exerted a hegemonic power in the guise of this word, and that attention must be paid to the particularities of women’s situations. This “politics of location,” as Adrienne Rich calls it, resides in dialectical tension with the resurrection of universalism in Ronald Robertson’s definition of globalization as “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”

My research in comparative international feminist literature, and more specifically in the question whether a global feminism that acknowledges “the politics of location” is possible, propelled my journey to Brazil. The simultaneity of sameness and difference embedded in this question provided the conceptual ground for the conversations I had with colleagues at the women’s/gender studies programs on four campuses: Pagú at UNICAMP (Campinas); Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Estudos da Mulher na Literatura (NIELM) at Universidade Federal in Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ); Núcleo de Estudos Sobre a Mulher at Pontífica Universidade Católica (Rio de Janeiro); and Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinar da Mulher (NEIM) at Universidade Federal in Salvador (Bahia). The practical aspects of our dialogues were the following: the present condition, methods, content, and intent of academic instruction in our respective women’s/gender studies programs, and the ways in which our canons addressed globalization (and if not, why not). Most important, my larger goal was to explore the potential for our academic programs to be part of a global exchange on/about gender studies, and the forms and means by which this plan would be implemented. In this essay, I will be referring primarily to litera-
ture written by women, but my interest lies in the development of feminist studies based in “gender” as it relates to both men and women.

The exchanges with colleagues exposed even more lines of pursuit than I had anticipated, about the implications of current practices, academically and otherwise. Thus emerge the questions that intertwine in the following sections:

- What does globalization mean in the context of such phenomena as the Beijing conference and “the politics of location”?
- What role does feminism, based in the disestablishment of hierarchies and epistemological boundaries, play in defining globalization?
- Could the conditions of canons, in this case especially the ones in feminist studies, be said to reflect the ideologies of the nation, i.e., if we assume that globalization is predicated fundamentally upon the issue of nations?
- Then the definition of globalization itself. An issue of its shape and form resides in the question, What would enable me to say globalization is “working”? If it were not working in ways that I could recognize, would it be said to be “working” at all? In what different ways might it be working that I would fail to recognize? The discoveries resulting from these questions are addressed sequentially in the sections below, though they impinge upon one another.

II. Uneven Terrain

Ah, que belo país é o nosso Brazil,
onde um escritor de língua neo-latina
pode fazer um romance inteirinho cheio
de personagens com nomes anglo-saxões.¹

Ah, what a beautiful land is our Brazil,
where an author who writes
in a neo-Latin tongue can compose an entire novel
filled with Anglo-Saxon names.

The definition of globalization as “the production and circulation of symbolic forms”²³ leads one to believe easily that, aided by the speed and flow of technological communication, most
countries of the world are involved in a mutual and free exchange; refer again to the description at the beginning of this essay. Instead, eco-political relations between nations create inherent inequalities in the dissemination of symbolic forms. In other words, inequality becomes a precondition for, and an uncomfortable cohabitant with, the anxiety of homogenization, to the degree that often makes globalization seem like a disguise for Neo-Enlightenment imperialism.

The phenomenon of globalization and George Bush’s call for a new world order after the end of the Cold War, said to be watersheds for change in the international system, rest upon two illusions: that nations have reached a consensus about the shape of the new world order and that most aspects of each nation are equally accessible to others. The half-ironic quote in the epigraph could indeed be seen as a celebration of the syncretism that is one aspect of globalization. Referring to this merging of heterogeneous forces, José Luiz dos Santos, one of the speakers at our seminar in Brazil, contends that Brazil has always been global in its mixture of races and peoples. Here, the illusion of equality in the word *global* is evident, since it does not convey inherent disparities of racial status or acknowledge the diaspora of the slave, the migrant, and the refugee.

This combination of hybridity and inequity becomes the breeding ground of homogeneity and is contiguous with certain anxieties. The epigraph thus also signals an inescapability from past history, from older patterns of cultural and political dominance by certain nations. The apprehension in the quote is further complicated by the coexistence of a certain desire for homogeneity. This ambivalence was apparent in the voice of an official at the University of São Paulo—he apologized for the fact that globalization was lagging because their students were unable to communicate in English.

In the processes of globalization, the nation-state simultaneously struggles to consolidate as well as align itself with predominate powers. My contention is that the state of a canon, by definition also an effort at consolidation, reflects this twin priority. Globalization is mentioned often in the journals such as *Cadernos Pagú*. In my conversations at UNICAMP and UFRJ, my interlocutors expressed a strong awareness of writers such as Salman Rushdie and bell hooks, so what basis does my obser-
vation have? My consistent discovery from the broad sample of Brazilian feminist academic journals that I read was the preponderance of references to Euro-American theorists. A representative example is the end of Margareth Rago’s “Adeus ao Feminismo? Feminismo e (Pós)modernidade no Brasil,” which limits its references to the names of Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Simone Weil, even Jane Fonda!7

This is not uneven but selective globalization—the result is a certain degree of homogenization of ideas. Although Brazilian contexts have absorbed and modified certain voices to their own unique use, the latter dominate to the degree that the analytical perspective is affected only by a certain range of ideas within view. Global sisterhood, debated and desired as the actuality is, does not consist simply in validating the so-called center; there is also a qualitative difference in utilizing acknowledged authorities occasionally to place in juxtaposition to other voices.

Marianne H. Marchand raises questions about the degree to which “neocolonial discourses” exist in studies of Latin American women’s movements and whether these have accommodated the voices of the participants in these movements.8 It is not clear to whom she is addressing the queries, but could the questions not be redirected toward Latin American feminist critics themselves, Brazilian ones in this instance? Once asked, the questions would need to be followed by constructive suggestions.

III. Strangely Familiar

“Me ajude Padre Nando”—disse Levindo—
“O que eu quero dizer ao Leslie é que precisamos criar dentro do brasileiro a ajuda ao Brasil.
Temos de fabricar os mitos.”

“Help me, Father Nando,” Levindo said.
“What I’m trying to tell Leslie is that help for Brazil ought to come from Brazilians.
We need to invent some new myths.”

The antidote could lie in two kinds of myths: those generated by historical realities and those created through new connections. In fact, a combination of the two supports the resistance of
South American feminisms to being seen as an indistinct “Other” in relation to Western European and Anglo-American feminisms. The “selective globalization” described above can thus only reinforce an already present identity, since the range of references remains bound within its epistemological foundations, unless counteracted by local agency. Just as local subjects may reproduce culture, they may also initiate the creation of contexts beyond their specific habitats. Besides loyalty to European and U.S. partnerships, what about polygamous relationships in other neighborhoods that evoke commonalities of historical experience as well as engender new communities? Intellectual hegemony can be broken not by disacknowledging accepted authorities, but by combining them with those that would define the matrices within which we live in other ways.

Where would these other neighborhoods be? Not surprisingly, the locales and their inhabitants are found often in regions already traversed—Gayatri Spivak, Aihwa Ong, Leslie Marmon Silko, Chandra Mohanty, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Alice Walker reside in the same areas of the world as Betty Friedan and Jane Fonda. Looking at the U.S.A. and elsewhere, couldn’t the work of anarcho-feminists like Matilda Magrassi and pioneers such as Bertha Lutz (founder of the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino) be compared fruitfully with studies of White women and their colonized counterparts by Kumari Jayawardene, or of Middle Eastern women’s resistances to oppressions by Lila Abu-Lughod? One example of this kind of perspective is Andrée McLaughlin’s work on the global phenomenon of the intercontinental Black women’s consciousness movement; this provides an actualized example of the potential historical and intellectual links.10

These create “transnational cultures”that form gateways to other territories and allow both mobility and the opportunity to incorporate various knowledges into one’s local experiences. In fact, the word transnational preserves the nation while allowing canons to expand. In the types of juxtapositions illustrated above, there is the possibility that comparisons of definitions and redefinitions will also arise, e.g., why apparently universal words such as feminism, race, gender, and class have such different connotations, across and within regions.
My recommendations seem to imply that all-inclusiveness “completes” the processes of globalization. But because globalization is made up of processes, it is not a question of including everyone. The more meaningful part of an increasingly diverse set of references is to discover and acknowledge the histories that link struggles over race, gender, class, and sexuality. Given Brazil’s colonial past and its histories of slavery and modernization, there is great potential in making connections to the critical knowledge of such writers as Toni Morrison (United States) and Bessie Head (South Africa/Botswana). To illuminate the changing landscapes of Brazil’s culture and economic status, Chandra Mohanty’s idea that the Third World is not confined to a geographical region would serve to address the arbitrariness of geography itself, since Brazil is in the West from one perspective, but in the Third World as well as in the South from another! The brochure of the Núcleo de Estudos Sobre a Mulher (NEM) at Pontifícia Universidade Católica in Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RIO) states that one of its intentions is to assemble Brazilian as well as international publications so as to enhance teaching and research. Again, the parameters of the word international have to be clarified through practice based in a wider arena than “selective globalization” indicates.

The desire for new myths that the epigraph to this section expresses is echoed in the words of Gloria Anzaldúa in her introduction to Haciendo Caras:

_Necesitamos teorías_ [We need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries — new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods…. And we need to find practical application for those theories.

Globalization is one of those theories that seems to promise the crossing of borders, but only actual implementations reveal its efficacy. The blurring of boundaries characterizes certain modes in globalization, yet this exists in tension with the struggle of nations to maintain a degree of sovereignty, the European Union being an example of this. The section below addresses the paradox of national self-projection in the era of globalization.
IV. Regarding the Nation

The debate over the coexistence of sovereignty with the super-session of national boundaries that globalization enables is captured in the views of Arjun Appadurai and Stuart Hall. Appadurai posits that nation-states will not be able to maintain their hegemonies—migration and mass media being key factors in this breakdown; in *Modernity at Large*, he talks about an “emergent postnational order,” while Hall considers it unlikely that globalization will result in gradual dissolution of the nation-state and simply remove national identities.\(^{14}\) The implication of postnationality is that the superior force of the global framework creates images that challenge the nation-state.

What Appadurai’s thesis ignores is that the transfer of cultural imaginaries in the global order often recycles images that are stereotypes or mutations of them that can be contested. Does globalization simply mean a network with other places and issues? Does it not also mean an assertion of one’s own cultural/social/political significance to other countries, especially in the context of the unequal power relations discussed above? If so, what may emerge is a new way to write antitymology after the traditions of Márcio Souza, Roberto Drummond, Flávio Moreira da Costa, and Rubem Fonseca.\(^{15}\)

Another aspect of the resistance to a diffusion of identities often celebrated by globalization is expressed in *Becoming True to Ourselves* (1987). Author Maria Luisa Nunes comments that

Brazilians are yet in the process of genuine self-knowledge and self-recognition, to say nothing of self-acceptance, in the face of a history made of the interaction of Indians, Africans, Portuguese, and later immigrants. . . . Like the citizens of most New World societies, the Brazilians have the task of uncovering their true nature from the origin of a diverse grouping of elements. Up until the present, the dominant grouping has been European and North American. In order to pass from nature to an autonomous culture, first having rejected the culture of the Other, some reconciliation with the culture of the Other is inevitable and necessary.\(^{16}\) [italics mine]
I would add that there is no “true nature” but at least a self-defined one, that autonomy cannot be absolute, and that neither rejection nor reconciliation would be the mode in this era; nevertheless, Nunes’s vision encapsulates the problem inherent in an easy dismissal of the “nation.” The self-discovery that Nunes describes is also concomitant with a greater dissemination of information to viewers or audiences to whom this process might be unknown. Would academic canons not be one medium of transmission to acquaint readers other than expert researchers in the fields of Brazilian culture with the facts that Gilberto Freyre’s *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933) extols the contribution of Africans to the melting pot of Brazil, that Maria Firmina dos Reis, the nineteenth-century author of “Ursula,” was an outspoken abolitionist, that Nísia Floresta translated Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in 1833, that, in this century, Lya Luft, Edla van Steen, and Hilda Hilst are preeminent in the post-Clarice Lispectorian attack on the traditionalism of women’s social positions?

Mitu Hirshman sounds a necessary note of caution in asking whether feminists should “borrow concepts without considering the cultural and historical limits of these concepts.” There are some historical and cultural similarities yet unacknowledged that might warrant the borrowing through careful use.

V. Critical Canons

Difference... does not necessarily give rise to separatism. There are differences as well as similarities within the concept of difference.

At the beginning of this essay, I placed a strong emphasis on the fact that Brazil is a synecdoche for similar conditions elsewhere, a part symbolizing a whole. The new potential for feminist canons to cross-fertilize could serve as a similar function for other areas of study. The reaction to the hegemonic undertones in the idea of “universal feminisms” is “the politics of location,” in which uniquenesses have been emphasized, occasionally to the point where the specific has become parochial, petrified into the primacy of the most immediate reference, leading to a kind of relativism of particular differences.
What is the path that avoids the Scylla of the totalizing vision of global fundamentals and the Charybdis of extreme relativization? One would be to transcend boundaries created by historical events—both Marx and Engels look forward to the ultimate disappearance of the nation-state and “the internationalization of literary cultures” while Hegel talks of “history-less peoples.”

There is a range of prescriptions that, on the other hand, cannot eliminate history from the reckoning—James Rosenau’s call to become “multicentric,” María Lugones’s similar idea of “a pluralistic feminism,” Anthony Giddens’s notion of “distanciation” (connecting absence and presence) and “disembedding” (lifting out of local context). There is also much promise in Susan Quinlan’s theory of syncretic criticism, which allows one to “draw from each methodology whatever serves to illustrate one’s chosen premise,” though the examples she proffers maintain the center-periphery model. In her view, lesbians and Black women, which she calls “splinter groups,” are to be blended with the mainstream.

Here, the attribute of reflexivity, as embodied in Jodi Dean’s notion of “reflective solidarity,” might serve various feminisms well, among which U.S. feminism would be one. The alertness to the continuous play of similarities and differences, and the awareness of their simultaneity, might create the basis for a more critically conscious global feminism. To provide a couple of examples in the area of theory not produced but practiced: Couldn’t Haraway’s idea of the cyborg be seen in the context of technological and industrial output and consequences in Brazil or Korea? Couldn’t Hilda Hilst’s sexual fantasies as a measure of a woman’s identity be compared to the expression of sexuality in the works of Kamala Das and Anaïs Nin?

These might be instances of “emerging sets of ‘third cultures’ which themselves are conduits for all sorts of diverse cultural flows which cannot be merely understood as the product of bilateral exchanges between nation-states,” triumphant bearers of transnationalism. Yet another cautionary note against tokenism must be sounded: an inclusion that effects no considerable influence will only result in a kind of “uneven” or “selective” globalization without depth or complexity.
VI. Local First, Global First

As inviting as the call for “reflective solidarity” and pluralistic feminism might sound, the tension between the local and the global needs to be revisited. The local should not be seen as a subset of the global, nor should it be considered its dichotomous opposite. There are circumstances in which one predominates, but, again, that is not to the exclusion of the Other. The significance of my findings in Brazil illustrates this. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai assumes that the imagination of the horizons of a cultural landscape is necessarily, or is forced to be, globalizing “where lives are being imagined partly in and through realisms that must be in one way or another official or large-scale in their inspiration.” In many realities, this is subject to the availability of resources.

A priority of the local, born of the necessity to (re)build or consolidate, was the most common circumstance I discovered in Brazil’s feminist institutions; this was further complicated by a severe dearth of resources and support. Pagú’s members requested book donations. The new director of the women’s studies program at PUCI-RIO described the approximately five years of inactivity before her incumbency: the most immediate imperative, therefore, was to reactivate the program and consolidate organization so that the community (academic and otherwise) would gain from its yet-unrecorded stacks of material on the shelves. Apart from an absence of participation, sheer survival seemed at stake. One of the coordinators of the women’s studies program at UFRJ, also in Rio de Janeiro, commented that the library was being neglected. From these situations, it was clear that what often seems like an absence of activity should not connote a lack of willingness or ability.

The observation that the researchers make in their study of Tooting (a suburb of London) is applicable to the situation of the women’s studies programs in Brazil: “the locality can sustain as much globalist sentiment as there are sources of information for and partners in making sense of worldwide events.” The latter resource is being employed by NEIM at the University in Salvador, which is currently collaborating with European sponsorship for local research. Theories of globalization assume the self-sufficiency of the local, which then stands in opposition to
the global; the role of the latter is, instead, to feed the local with necessary resources. Thus locality becomes generated from, and is generative of, the global.

VII. Fieldwork

It is not the record of my experiences in Brazil that should be described as “fieldwork” (as some sociologists or anthropologists might expect) but the reflection upon the activities I am performing here in the familiar territory of the Macalester College classroom. The actual work goes beyond the experiencing and the recording; what is left is the review, the incorporation and the implementation in explicit and implicit ways.

One of the primary elements of the trip that is relevant to my teaching is that which affects, to the greatest degree, my representation of material to the class; it is also the one element that has been consistently threaded into this discussion: the status of canons. Courses such as my “International Perspectives on Gender, Race, and Class” and “Exile in Literature and Film” demand a constant attention to the local-global nexus. Given the nature of these courses (some of which may be evident in their titles), boundaries swing constantly between affirmation, dissolution, and reconstitution. Cyana Leahy-Dios, one of the speakers to address our seminar group in Brazil, remarked on the reinforcement of traditional sources of information and placed an urgent call to review, critique, and bring reform to syllabi across the Brazilian educational system (see her essay in this volume). The journey to Brazil has reinforced one of my intentions in creating new territories out of existing canons — to encourage students to think about the implications of canons themselves. Their relation to globalization, which I have articulated in this essay, is a new aspect I will soon have the opportunity to utilize in the classroom.

After journeys like the one to Brazil, it would be easier for my students and me to rest content in the knowledge that the global flow of information to which some of us happen to have access makes of us “cosmopolitans”—people who conceive of life itself as an engagement with the Other, who search eagerly for contrasts, who are willing and able to listen and reflect upon the unknown, and who, therefore, become skilled in handling
diversity. This version of what Ulf Hannerz means by the word\textsuperscript{25} (which the author also warns us can fall into dilettantism) is translatable in feminism into the uncritical exercise of privilege and exoticism of the Other. The venture is rather to breed a responsiveness to the fact that a global culture that can be grasped whole does not exist, and that we build locality simultaneously as we build globality. It is also crucial to come to the understanding of globalization as a conglomeration of processes, since the strategies, tools, means, effects, and resistances or subscriptions are quite varied; they cannot be said to have happened or ended. The title of Clarice Lispector’s work \textit{Laços de família} (1960, translated as \textit{Family Ties}) evokes our search — to explore our genealogies and find where our diverse routes/roots lie.

\textbf{Notes}

1. The Gender Studies Program (Centro de Estudos de Gênero) at the University of Campinas (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, or UNICAMP) is named after one of the most prominent feminists of the 1920s, Patrícia Galvão, a.k.a Pagú. The illustration is taken from UNESCO’s \textit{Revista Cultures} 8, no. 4 (1982). It is repeated as a cover of \textit{Cadernos Pagú} 4 (1995).


4. In Márcio Souza’s \textit{Mad Maria} (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização, 1983), the final authorial intrusion directly “burlesques the concept of cultural domination” (341).


19. Anthony Smith, “Towards a Global Culture?” in Global Culture, 171–91. In the same essay, he contends that earlier imperialisms extended national and ethnic sentiments and ideologies while apparently today’s imperialisms are “non-national” — capitalism, socialism. Earlier ones were more tied to place
while “today’s emerging global culture is tied to no place or period. It is context-less, a true melange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, borne upon the modern chariots of global telecommunications systems” (177).


22. *Global Culture*, 1. Also, in *Haciendo Caras*, Lynet Uttal, in “Inclusion without Influence: The Continuing Tokenism of Women of Color,” says: “Being better informed about different groups and their critiques not only will make the process of inclusion more fruitful, but the personal work of each recruiter will benefit and may even be radically modified” (44).

