

preface

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, feminist scholars have examined the terms “comparative” and “global” in innovative ways. Transnational and postcolonial feminist approaches have troubled the premise underlying comparative work that nation-states serve as adequate units of analysis. Transnational feminists have also contested the universalizing gestures characteristic of many phenomena traveling under the sign of the “global.” Notwithstanding this critical precedent, several of the works featured in this issue revisit the analytical resonance of comparative and global scholarship. We begin with a cluster of articles that emerged from the Global Feminisms Project (GFP) at the University of Michigan. Jayati Lal, Kristin McGuire, Abigail J. Stewart, Magdalena Zaborowska, and Justine M. Pas, in “Recasting Global Feminisms: Toward a Comparative Historical Approach to Women’s Activism and Feminist Scholarship,” present the significance of the GFP as destabilizing many received understandings of the terms “comparative,” “global,” and “transnational.” Although their project compares feminisms in four national locations—India, Poland, China, and the United States—they refuse the common comparative goal of being representative of these four locations, instead pointing to the uneven and multiple locations of feminists in each country. The authors also refute the assumption that there is a unidirectional flow of influences from Western European and US locations to the rest of the world, instead pointing to examples of how lesser-known organizations in India and Poland, for instance, direct the agendas of more prominent metropolitan scholars and institutions. Insisting on the multiplicity of feminist movements and stressing the exchange of ideas between locations, they describe a mode of global scholarship that displaces questions of scale and highlights flows of influences. In this sense, they absorb many of the insights

offered by transnational feminist scholarship while remaining attentive to the contextual specificity of national politics and the feminist formations shaped by them.

Participants in the GFP, Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang, in their article “Global Concepts, Local Practices: Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women,” exemplify the complexity suggested by Lal et al. Wang and Zhang focus on the seeming contestation between two different approaches to feminism and women’s rights—“gender equality,” linked with post-Maoist feminism, and “equality between men and women,” characteristic of the Maoist or state feminist stance. The authors begin with the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and argue that this was a “watershed” for Chinese feminism. They speak in particular of how Chinese feminists drew from the UN conference experience to appropriate and deploy transnational feminist concepts to their local situations, using the “transnational opportunity structures” to which they were introduced to create domestic changes. These transnational opportunity structures, especially nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), enabled Chinese feminists to “pry open social spaces for Chinese citizens’ spontaneous activism.” Participation in the UN conference at the moment when Chinese leaders were trying to “re-enter” the “global economic” frame enabled Chinese feminists to “pitch” women’s NGOs as one means to accomplish this re-entry. The authors also contend that the UN conference provided Chinese feminists with new analytical tools that allowed them to “break away from the constraints of a Marxist understanding of ‘women’s problems.’” In their interviews of Chinese feminists (both post-Maoist and Maoist), the authors find that in the decade following the UN conference the major paradigm shift that occurred in Chinese feminism was not always explicitly articulated. Chinese feminists, including state feminists, challenged the official discourse of “equality between men and women” by introducing the new concept of “gender equality” but did so through gender training and other mechanisms that retained the state’s preferred language of “equality between men and women.” In other words, Chinese feminists used the “old term” because it was “more readily understood and acted upon,” but used the analytic concept of gender to shape the ways in which “old” approaches were articulated in

policy. The authors note that this shift from “equality between men and women” to “gender equality” among Chinese feminists, in their practice even if not always in their public speech, has been overlooked by non-Chinese speakers. In the end they contend that this sea change in Chinese feminism marks both a “challenge to the continuing power of the party-state and a feminist demand for a new notion of citizenship that acknowledges women’s agency and autonomy.”

Another of the goals of the GFP is to de-emphasize the prominence of US feminism in renditions of the global history of feminisms. The participants do so through illuminating the fault lines within US feminism in order to dispel the common identification of US feminism with only its best-known Second Wave proponents. Elizabeth R. Cole and Zakiya T. Luna, in “Making Coalitions Work: Solidarity across Difference within US Feminism,” reflect on a fascinating lineup of US interviewees: activists who have worked for justice on various fronts such as maquiladora workers’ rights, Native American sovereignty, queer subcultures, and diasporic Palestinian politics. Cole and Luna push us to note how identities are constituted through, rather than prior to, political action. In various ways, the feminists whose interviews they analyze reject the notion that identities are fixed and stable even as they mobilize for resources and justice around identity formations. In carefully tracing how activists negotiate divisions within women’s movements, Cole and Luna demonstrate that all movements are, in a sense, coalitions. Their analysis reminds readers that studying movements can advance our theorization of identity.

In their study, “Becoming Feminist Activists: Comparing Narratives,” Kristin McGuire, Abigail J. Stewart, and Nicola Curtin focus on four interviews of feminist activists from the GFP to discover the source of their political activism. Although the activists they analyze are from distinct locations and contexts, the authors investigate the ways in which each woman came to “resist social structures” in which she was “deeply embedded,” thus seeking to read across these subjects’ differences to find commonalities in their “political socialization.” The four women on whom the essay focuses grew up during the 1950s and 1960s—a period of cultural upheaval in their respective locations—India, Poland, China, and the United States. The authors argue that cultural upheavals, when joined

with personal experiences, especially the disjuncture between family (or societal) articulations of gender equality and their lived experiences with discrimination, created for each woman “the capacity to respond critically to normative expectations.” This broadly comparative essay reminds us of the continuing power of the “personal as political” for understanding women’s lives and their route to feminist politics and activism.

Maura Reilly’s art essay, “Curating Transnational Feminisms,” highlights the challenges and opportunities involved in creating an exhibit on “transnational” or “global” feminist art. Invoking Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s work, Reilly characterizes the exhibit as a “careful exploration” of “common differences.” Organized into four sections—Life Cycles, Identity, Politics, and Emotions—and composed of multiple and sometimes competing voices, the exhibit, as is evident in some of the images you see in this issue, is not linear but cyclical and overlapping like the conversations (and debates) one might imagine women having over coffee or at political meetings. Engaged with oppression but decidedly not focused on and even rejecting victimization models, the exhibit focuses on relations—between women and between the art and its subjects. As Reilly notes of the exhibit, it “places diverse, transnational works by women in dialogic relation with careful attention to complicated histories” and “seeks to produce new insights into feminist art today.” Perhaps the most powerful of these insights retains a trace from the 1970s—that “difference” does not have to mean disunity—and it is through understanding our common differences and the varied meanings we give them that solidarity is achieved.

The flow of ideas between urban and rural movements is the focus of Millie Thayer’s article, “Translations and Refusals: Resignifying Meanings as Feminist Political Practice.” Reviewing the cross-class coalition between SOS Corpo, an urban, middle-class Brazilian women’s organization, and Movement of Rural Women Workers (MMTR), a rural northeast Brazilian organization, Thayer traces their translations of (and refusals to translate) US feminist discourses of the body and sexuality. By examining the structural differences between actors at the headquarters level (whether in field offices in Brazilian cities or in European cities), Thayer offers a sensitive critique of NGO-ization, the politics of funding, and the flow of knowledge. She also offers examples of shifts in power relations, with lines

of accountability flowing downward (rather than upward, as they often are), noting how SOS Corpo revised its role and activities in dialogue with rural interlocutors MMTR and how SOS Corpo in turn exerted pressure on a Dutch NGO, the Network among Women, to more explicitly enact goals of gender justice in its own structure.

The woman worker is a central figure in feminist scholarship on globalization. Nancy Plankey Videla's review of recent scholarship on garment workers in Thailand, Mexico, and Sri Lanka, as well as high-tech workers in the Philippines and Indonesia, reflects on central features running through such scholarship: the intersection of materialist and discursive analysis, as well as contrapuntal theories of agency and victimhood. In her essay, "Engendering Global Studies of Women and Work," Plankey Videla focuses on texts addressing women's development and globalization and draws our attention to the similar directions each of these fields has taken. She delineates these parallels by highlighting the increased concerns with agency as a critical concept and the importance of the local in defining meanings and as a site for power. Noting the emerging approach to globalization that this body of work exemplifies through its attention to the continuing relevance of the state as well as the ways in which globalization is always already rooted in the local, Plankey Videla situates the four books as in conversation with and critiquing the concept of globalization. All four authors argue that female laborers were agents, not victims; and, as a participant in the process of global production, each navigates the difficult terrain inherent in defining agency in relation to employers and the state quite distinctly. Thus globalization is always a contested process with multiple axes of agency. Although many of the consequences of global economic and social dynamics are premised on oppression of subjects, "they also open spaces for resistance and new meanings."

The possibilities for agency even in the most challenging situation is the subject of Rachida Madani's offering, "Tales of a Severed Head" (*Contes d'une tête tranchée*). As explained by the translator, Marilyn Hacker, the poem is a "modern reworking" of the challenges to women in society articulated in the collection of stories "One Thousand and One Nights" written one thousand years ago. In her reconceptualization of these tales, the heroine Sheherazade's seeming entrapment in gilded cages is broken

by words, “I is gagged, / To fall silent / . . . but have you ever seen a woman stop speaking?” In her revised stories Madani offers images from creation stories, an apple “tumble[s] down from the sky,” and the woman “always goes toward the same tree” but she would be “satisfied with a pomegranate.” As Hacker notes, Madani’s poem brings us into the twenty-first century where “the threat comes as much from poverty as from the power still wielded so cruelly by individual men,” and “once again language provides the weapon” to resist. As Madani notes, “You are the master / . . . but what becomes of a master / when the slaves rebel . . . I am no one . . . / I am nothing / . . . But I have words.”

The remaining creative pieces in this issue reflect on the importance of memory. Davi Walders offers three poems on remembering the pain, despair, and unimaginable loss created by the Nazi exploitation, torture, and murder of Jews during World War II. Yet these poems are also interspersed with moments of joy—a child taking a summer walk with her grandfather; of triumph—the flames from the Lustgarten exhibit; and of resistance to the end, thus remembering three women now named and recognized. In turn, Gina Athena Ulysse gives us “Little Gina’s Rememory #2: *An Soudin* (In Secret),” a reflection on a Haitian childhood spent in part eavesdropping and learning of secrets exchanged in gossip among adults. These secrets spoke of shame but also of transcripts better kept hidden because there are already “stereotypes too entrenched to dismantle.” Ulysse writes of learning as a child that family difficulties should be kept private and not recounted except in whispered conversations. But she also remembers her maternal grandmother Mgran who “defied convention and made [her way] in the world.” Channeling Mgran’s spirit and energies, Ulysse “began to write my book of rememories,” calling her mother to say she was “telling . . . and no one can stop me from telling this tale.” As Ulysse writes in her concluding note, these “rememories” are an attempt to “collect, document, and disseminate that which we hold with disdain for all sorts of reasons, yet needs to be salvaged for future safekeeping.”

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