

Fernandes *Transnational Feminism in the United States*



Transnational Feminism in the United States

Knowledge, Ethics, and Power

Leela Fernandes



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London
www.nyupress.org

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Fernandes, Leela.

Transnational feminism in the United States : knowledge, ethics, and power / Leela Fernandes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8147-6096-3 (cl : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8147-7033-7 (pb : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8147-6299-8 (e-book)

ISBN 978-0-8147-6052-9 (e-book)

1. Feminism. 2. Feminism--United States. 3. Transnationalism. 4. Women's rights. 5. Women's studies--United States. I. Title.

HQ1155.F47 2013

305.420973--dc23 2012038381

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transnational Feminism in the United States

In memory of Clara Fernandes

Acknowledgments

THE IDEAS THAT have shaped this book have germinated over a long period of time and through the course of interacting with many students and colleagues. Many of the issues that I grapple with here are ones I have wrestled with as I have developed interdisciplinary courses and curricula at both the undergraduate and the graduate level at the various institutions I have worked at, as well as worked on designing the women's studies PhD at Rutgers. The process of working with students in the classroom and guiding them in their various interests, resistances, and commitments has enriched my own intellectual work on international perspectives on women and gender. In this process a number of colleagues and former students have helped sustain me and provoked me to think through the challenges of teaching about the world in the U.S. academy.

I have benefited at various points from intellectual engagements with a number of people, including Nikol Alexander-Floyd, Karen Barad, Drucilla Cornell, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Wendy Hesford, Nancy Hewitt, Dorothy Ko, Wendy Kozol, David Ludden, and Asha Sarangi. Amrita Basu, David Ludden, Susanne Rudolph, and Linda Zerilli provided invaluable support over many years, which has helped me to move forward in productive ways. While at Rutgers, I was lucky to have met a number of people whose intellectual and personal friendships have far outlasted institutional location and affiliation. I am grateful to Jane Junn for her steadfast friendship and for being an example of how to live feminism. Prema Kurien has been a loyal friend and a neighbor I miss. Nikol Alexander-Floyd has been a dear friend who especially made my last year at Rutgers meaningful, fun, and survivable. Ruthie Gilmore has always been life-affirming and I am particularly grateful to her and Craig Gilmore for the blissful vacations in Lisbon. Caridad Souza gave me spiritual companionship and friendship at critical moments. My time at Rutgers has also been made meaningful by a wonderful group of students who are all now pursuing their own new and exciting research and activist agendas; my thanks go to Kate Bedford,

Melissa Brown, Carolyn Craig, Priti Darooka, Denise Horn, Stacey Hunt, Anil Jacob, Miduk Kim, Valsala Kumari, Karey Leung, Laura Liu, Simantini Mukherjee, Michele Ruiters, Yustina Saleh, and Undarya Tumursukh.

The University of Michigan has provided a congenial environment, and I appreciate the many new colleagues with whom I have an opportunity to engage and co-teach. I am grateful to the College of Literature, Science and Arts for providing me with a research leave that has allowed me to finish this book. I am also thankful to my research assistant Dashini Jeyathurai for her reliable help in tracking down citations and bibliographic materials. Ann Arbor has been a blissful place to finish this book, with fun visits and time spent with Ellie, Dave, Rosey, Natalie, Ian, and Dylan.

Over the years, I have learned from interactions at conferences, from responses to talks, and from conversations and workshops with many people both inside and outside of the academy and in a range of countries. These interactions have challenged and deepened my understandings of how knowledge matters. Finally, I am grateful to my editor, Ilene Kalish, and to NYU Press for their support of this project. Some portions of individual chapters have appeared in prior publications. Portions of chapter 2 appeared in "The Boundaries of Terror: Feminism, Human Rights, and the Politics of Global Crisis," in *Just Advocacy? Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005). I first began thinking about *Bandit Queen* for an article published as "Reading 'India's Bandit Queen': A Trans/National Feminist Perspective on the Discrepancies of Representation," *Signs: A Journal of Women, Culture and Society* 25, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 123–152. Some portions of chapter 3 appeared in this article. Finally, parts of chapter 6 appeared in "Unsettling 'Third Wave Feminism': Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect," in *No Permanent Waves: U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

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Introduction

WHILE SIFTING THROUGH the mass of e-mails that accumulate at the beginning of a new academic year, I was struck by the subject heading of one message. The message line exclaimed, "Saudi Women Drive! NEW at Ms. in the Classroom." Upon opening the message, I found a generic informational advertisement recommending the use of a digital version of Ms. magazine for my courses. Buried at the bottom was a note that said, "P.S. The NEW Summer 2011 issue is available at Ms. in the Classroom, which includes Saudi Women Drive! Get the whole story on the fight for gender equality, including women's right to vote, in Saudi Arabia."¹ I was immediately struck by some of the contradictory implications of this small piece of feminist advertising. The use of an internationally oriented marker for a generic teaching-oriented advertisement seems to imply a widespread public interest and a presumed marketability of a sign of the "global" fight for women's rights. Yet this presumption is rooted in a mainstream national cultural symbol in the United States—the ability or right to drive. Driving and sociocultural identification with the car one drives are deep-rooted cultural symbols in the United States that circulate widely in public discourses and popular culture.² The deployment of the global or international in this instance was thus firmly cast through a national framing of the feminist imagination. This kind of vision is particularly striking given the fact that academic feminists (to whom the e-mail ad was clearly addressed) writing about global issues have placed significant emphasis on the dangers of casting global or international gender issues through the subtle historical legacies of colonial images of inferior others. The message thus also underlines the disjuncture between advances in feminist theorizing within the academy and the more public, mainstream rhetoric of U.S. feminists. In this case, the symbol of Saudi women driving is presented in a message devoid of any description, reference, or context of the campaign, the country, or even the region. Saudi Arabia is presented as a site that has been vacated of any empirical, historical, or contextual depth. The idea of

Saudi women driving is thus emblematic of a U.S. national imagination. The geographic imagination at play here is defined by the borders of the nation-state rather than by a transnational perspective.

The complex issues and disjunctures that leak out of this example point to larger challenges that continually arise for feminists who write and teach about women, gender, and sexuality in locations that want to move outside of a national American narrative. Feminist scholars have increasingly sought to develop transnational perspectives in order to break from national narratives and decenter U.S.-oriented approaches. Yet, as this anecdote suggests, feminist efforts to invoke global or transnational perspectives are continually challenged by nation-centered narratives and visions of the world. In this book, I examine such challenges that arise in the creation of knowledge about the world. In particular, I examine the possibilities and the limits of the paradigm of transnational feminism that has arisen in interdisciplinary fields of study that have specifically been committed to breaking from nation-centric visions of the world. While I focus on the paradigm of transnational feminism, the issues I address speak to broader challenges of how to write and teach about the world in the current historical moment in the U.S. academy.

The anecdote that I have begun with captures some of the larger issues that continue to trouble the creation and dissemination of knowledge about the world within and outside the academy in the United States. In recent years, American universities and colleges have increasingly sought to expand the global dimensions of their curricula and academic programs. Institutions of higher education in the United States have long had programs focused on international studies, many of which evolved out of area-based programs that were developed during the Cold War period in the 1950s.³ What is distinctive about the current emphasis on a global perspective is the attempt of new programs and avenues of intellectual inquiry to grapple with and move beyond the traditional borders of nation-states, regional areas, and disciplinary territories. The acceleration of economic globalization and the rapid global flows of people, capital, and cultural goods and information have intensified this search for global frames of analysis. The growing emphasis on global perspectives in academic institutions in the United States is in this sense partly an effect of globalization. Academics have sought to create programs of study that can make sense of the border-crossing flows that have been produced by or have intensified with globalization.⁴ Meanwhile, the emergence and expansion of interdisciplinary fields of study within the academy (such as postcolonial studies,

women's studies, and cultural studies) have produced a move away from older approaches to international studies that used the nation-state as a foundational analytical and political lens. Scholars writing in these fields have persistently called attention to processes of migration and diasporic identification that have unsettled the nation-state and produced new forms of cultural and political identities and practices.⁵ The result has been a wide range of research and scholarship on various transnational political and sociocultural formations.⁶

As such formulations become institutionalized within the academy, the question that arises and that frames this book is one that asks how these paradigms shape the ways in which we produce, consume, and disseminate knowledge about the world within the United States. Such a question immediately becomes a fraught one given the contemporary historical and political context in which we pose it. The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by an intense confluence of intersecting local, national, regional, and international conflict, crisis, and change. Consider the key events that frame both public and intellectual understandings of the world within the United States. One of the overarching sets of events marking this period has, of course, been the post-9/11 U.S. "war on terror" and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hypernationalism in the post-9/11 United States has already unsettled romanticized beliefs in a de-territorialized postnational world that had begun to gain currency among some interdisciplinary academic avenues.⁷ U.S. national interests have become further enmeshed with long-standing regional conflicts, including those between Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan, among others. The twenty-first century has also been marked by the continued and intensified contradictions of economic globalization. On the one hand, states and international institutions continue to promote economic policies of liberalization. On the other hand, global economic crisis has served to reveal the continued significance of the state in structuring national and global economic activity. In both the United States and Europe, states have had to intervene to manage financial and political conflicts that have emerged over the nature of state intervention in the economy.⁸ Meanwhile, the concurrent rise of China and India as growing global economic forces that has accompanied economic decline in the United States has produced new often fear-driven desires to know about these nations. The creation of "global" forms of knowledge that emerge on American campuses are thus often shaped by motives and affinities that are complex configurations of the instrumental (the need to know about regions and processes that affect

individual, local, and national self-interest), affective (the emotional fears and desires that conflicts, crisis, and real or perceived threats create and that direct the will to know and understand), and the ethical (the desire to find responsible and accountable ways of engaging with the world).

Through this sketch of recent global events, I want to foreground the ways in which the framing of this global context is already a nationalized process. Thus, while large-scale events and processes are certainly transnational, they are perceived, framed, experienced, and negotiated in ways that are shaped by distinctive local and national contexts. The academy is one institutional site where such nationalized framings and negotiations are produced, disseminated, and consumed in important ways in the United States. Any interdisciplinary project that seeks to study questions that are comparative, global, transnational, or simply non-U.S.-centric emerges within a set of historically situated national discussions that have already been taking place both within and outside the academy in the United States.

The Rise of the Paradigm of Transnationalism

Consider some of the ways in which such national conversations and contexts have shaped the emerging paradigms of global and transnational studies in the United States. At one level, institutional resources and student interests have been shaped by the broad contours of these events. This is illustrated, for instance, by an increased interest in China and a continued and intensified interest in regions such as the Middle East that represent visible areas of conflict that are inextricably linked to U.S. governmental policies and state interests (particularly, of course, in relation to national security and economic interests). As students feel the impact of globalization on their own lives through their perceived threat of outsourcing of white-collar jobs and uncertain employment prospects, their interest in economic globalization and its effects has also grown. Intellectual paradigms have also been shaped by such events. Scholarly research agendas have been affected by the responses of both supporters of U.S. foreign and economic policy and critics of these policies (particularly in relation to war and economic globalization).

Meanwhile, processes of migration and the emergence of varied immigrant communities and forms of cultural identification have meant that students and faculty have also focused on both the countries of origins in

regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia and the transnational ties between these regions and the United States. This has also intersected with the cultural dimensions of globalization as cultural goods such as film and media now routinely cross borders. Such cultural products are simultaneously local and transnational as they are consumed by multiple audiences in multiple locations. As scholars of cultural globalization have noted, this has led to new forms of cultural identification and new ways in which people and communities imagine their identities that no longer directly correspond to the territorial borders of the nation-state.⁹ Some social theorists, for instance, have focused on the idea of cosmopolitanism as a way to break from nation-centric modes of identification.¹⁰ These scholars have sought to identify ethical bases for identification and action that break both from territorialized nation-centric conceptions of the world and from state-centered ideas of citizenship. Meanwhile, the growth of studies focused on diasporic communities has produced a rich interdisciplinary body of scholarship on the intersecting identities of sexuality, race, ethnicity, and gender.¹¹

Such approaches have consciously sought to dislodge nation-centric approaches to the world. However, the fields of knowledge that are produced through such paradigms often struggle to break from narratives that do not reproduce analytical frames or narratives that are implicitly associated with the U.S. nation-state. Ella Shohat, for instance, has cautioned against a kind of “submerged American nationalism” that permeates “a number of ethnic studies/women’s studies/gender studies/queer studies curricula.”¹² Meanwhile, writing about the field of Asian American studies, Kandice Chuh has provided an important discussion of such struggles to break from nation-centric frames of analysis.¹³ Writing about the field, Chuh argues for a continual interrogation of “‘Asian American’ as the subject/object of Asian Americanist discourse and of U.S. nationalist ideology, and Asian American studies as the subject/object of dominant paradigms of the U.S. university” in order to ensure that the field does not reproduce the exclusionary dynamics of U.S. nationalism.¹⁴ While Chuh is discussing the field of Asian American studies, she touches on a broader risk that also permeates fields of study that have explicitly sought to use transnational perspectives that seek to move outside of a U.S. frame. For instance, when transnational perspectives take liminal transnational identities of diasporic communities as unquestioned subjects, the generation and consumption of knowledge may inadvertently be located within particular kinds of U.S.-centered interests and concerns by centering transnational flows through the territorial space of the United States.

The emergence of the study of global and transnational processes in this context presses us to think of “the global” and “the transnational” not merely as a neutral geographic level of analysis but as conceptual categories that have emerged from specific political, economic, and historical circumstances. The kind of “global” or “transnational” perspective that has emerged is in many ways a national conception—it is shaped by the specific context of the U.S. academy.¹⁵ A central argument that will unfold in this book is that interdisciplinary research on global and “non-U.S.” locations is itself inadvertently nationalized. Such an argument may appear provocative to scholars who identify with such interdisciplinary paradigms, since much of the impetus of such theory and research (in cross-cutting fields such as women’s studies, postcolonial studies, and diasporic studies) is driven by an intellectual and political imperative of moving beyond the nation-state. In fact, interdisciplinary research (both feminist and nonfeminist) on transnationalism has identified itself with an ideological position that has been critical of nationalism and usually depicts the idea of the nation-state as an outdated or regressive political formation. Within the terrain of academic institutional practices, transnational interdisciplinary scholarship has also defined itself against older models of “area studies” scholarship whose origins lay within the specific geopolitical context of U.S. state interests during the Cold War. Certainly, the very “areas” that were carved out and institutionalized within the U.S. academy were derived from U.S. state conceptions of specific regional spheres of influence in which the U.S. state was competing with Soviet state power and influence. Transnational approaches have thus often explicitly attempted to dislodge such artificial boundaries that frequently created rigid institutionalized barriers to cross-regional, comparative, or transnational intellectual engagements.¹⁶ Within such interdisciplinary sites, scholarship that takes the nation-state as the primary or foundational unit of analysis is now often viewed as an antiquated approach that has not kept up with newer understandings of the transnational nature of culture, politics, and economics. Yet, as I argue in this book, discarding the nation-state as a unit of analysis does not automatically dislodge a U.S.-centric epistemic project.

My argument is not, of course, that contemporary transnational and global intellectual or academic activities are explicitly shaped by nationalist interests in a self-evident or deterministic way or that such knowledge necessarily serves the interests of the American state or of U.S. foreign policy in any simplistic fashion—nor that individual writers and texts cannot or have not broken from nation-oriented visions of the world. Intellectual

production is situated within and shaped by the historical compulsions of time and place but is never determined in a simplistic way by historical and structural conditions. Rather, the nationalization of interdisciplinary research and theory unfolds in more nuanced and indiscernible ways precisely because this research often normatively seeks to move beyond nation-centric perspectives. For instance, an overdetermined analytical and political compulsion to move beyond the nation-state often inadvertently transforms the “transnational” or “global” into a territorialized concept. Global and transnational research and theory are driven by the search for spaces and processes (whether they are cultural, political, or economic) that are not contained within the nation-state. The result, as I will illustrate in chapter 4, is that the space of the transnational becomes territorialized through the search for border-crossing activities and phenomena. The realm of the transnational in effect becomes a kind of derivative discourse that ironically mirrors the ways in which, as postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee has argued, postcolonial nationalisms became trapped by the discursive colonial models of thought they sought to oppose and replace.¹⁷ Chatterjee has argued in his reading of Indian nationalism that core elements of the nationalist movement mirrored and reproduced the very categories of colonial rule they sought to displace. It is this kind of oppositional mirroring that is increasingly becoming codified within transnational/global research. Locked in opposition to the nation-state, transnational research often mirrors the borders of the sovereign, bounded form of the nation it seeks to move beyond.

The seductive danger of this nationalization of global and transnational research is intensified when we consider the ways in which the global and the transnational are not transcendent categories that simply empirically describe the broadest geographic or sociocultural scale of being and action but are categories that are constructed and operate within a specific historical and political context. In the case of U.S. transnationalism, the postnational imperative must be contextualized within and in relation to the ways in which U.S. national interests have been expressed through global claims of justice, democracy, and freedom. The postnational, in other words, is itself an American national concept in which (as I illustrate in chapter 2) the U.S. state has actively promoted its economic and foreign policy goals through challenges to conceptions of national and state sovereignty.

Consider, for instance, globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai's formulation of the postnational thesis of transnational processes.¹⁸ Appadurai's groundbreaking work represented one of the first sustained theoretical

arguments that contemporary forms of identity, imagination, and practice in a rapidly globalizing world are literally “trans” national—that is, they represent deterritorialized, border-crossing formations that exceed the nation. As he put it, “It is in the fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world, that the mediascapes and the ideoscapes of the modern world find their fractured and fragmented counterpart.”¹⁹ Appadurai’s arguments about deterritorialization and postnational globalization have been a foundational text in shaping emerging conceptions of transnationalism in a range of interdisciplinary fields, including cultural, postcolonial, and globalization studies. Indeed, Appadurai provides a rich analysis that seeks to disrupt static categories of the “West” and the “Third World” and explicitly addresses examples of global flows that are not defined by U.S.-centric definitions of migration. Thus, he discusses the complexities of postnational imaginations and identities of migrants from India to the Persian Gulf states—a migration flow within the so-called non-Western world.” Yet, tellingly, when Appadurai identifies an ideal-typical site for the emergence of postnationalism, he turns to a discussion of the United States.²⁰ Thus he argues:

We might recognize that diasporic diversity actually puts loyalty to a non-territorial transnation first, while recognizing that there is a special American way to connect to these global diasporas. America, as a cultural space, will not need to compete with a host of global identities and diasporic identities and diasporic loyalties. It might come to be seen as a model of how to arrange one territorial locus (among others) for a cross-hatching of diasporic communities.²¹

As he further argues, “But America may be alone in having organized itself around a modern political ideology in which pluralism is central to the conduct of democratic life.”²² This identification of the United States as an exceptional postnational space (rather than a typical nation-state) is not unique to Appadurai’s work. The discipline of political science, for instance, has had a long-standing set of intellectual practices rooted in a logic of American exceptionalism. In this tradition, the United States (and American politics) has been analyzed as an ideal-typical site that is defined by democratic institutions, practices, and cultural norms.²³ However, Appadurai’s arguments are significant because they represent a set of discursive narratives that have shaped interdisciplinary fields that have claimed

to represent new and innovative conceptions, in contrast to more conventional disciplines that have produced narratives of exceptionalism.

The U.S. national narrative implicit in Appadurai's conception of a postnational United States is thus not simply an inaccurate or dated understanding of transnationalism. Rather, it is a discursive marker of the nationalized narratives of transnationalism that permeate and increasingly discipline interdisciplinary fields of knowledge. What has emerged in this process is a new set of disciplinary practices underlying such interdisciplinary conceptions of the global and the transnational. These normative practices have emerged at a historically specific moment that has been shaped as much by the national specificities of the United States as by the transnational and global processes that do indeed shape the world. In this process, there is a slippage between transnationalism as an ontological category (a real and complex material set of processes) and transnationalism as a normative paradigm that has increasingly become a disciplinary device within interdisciplinary research and theory. It is this slippage that is rooted in the historically specific discursive and material national context of the U.S. academy. Despite the extensive interest in the links between power and knowledge in interdisciplinary fields such as women's studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies and the strong influence of Foucauldian analyses of knowledge production, less attention has been paid to such national framings of interdisciplinary knowledge and the ways in which these framings produce "the world" within the United States. More significantly, this framing is a marker of a deeper trend toward the disciplining of interdisciplinary work.²⁴

Thus, the essays in this book have two interrelated objectives. The first is to unsettle the nationalization of the paradigm of transnationalism. The second purpose of this book is to use this discussion of transnationalism to open up questions about interdisciplinarity and to find ways to unsettle the disciplinary mechanisms that sediment interdisciplinary fields such as women's studies. My intention is to specifically initiate a discussion about both the possibilities and the limitations of interdisciplinary knowledge on international, global, and transnational issues. The power of interdisciplinary fields of knowledge such as women's and gender studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies has rested on their ability to unsettle the complacency and rigidity of the traditional disciplines. In doing so, such fields have called attention to epistemological silences within the disciplines and produced new theories, methodological innovations, and political challenges that have simultaneously transformed and moved beyond