introduction

95 | theorizing the 'first wave' globally

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The contributors to this special section on 'Theorizing the "First Wave" Globally' initially presented versions of these essays at the 2006 Modern Language Association Convention (MLA) on a panel organized by myself and Kanika Batra. In proposing this panel, we understood that the Western periodization of the feminist movement into first, second, and third waves is not directly applicable to postcolonial locations, yet as scholars and teachers of women's studies, we wondered if the wave model might be a convenient (albeit schematic and necessarily provisional) means of analysing the shift in concerns articulated by women in non-Western nations. The articles that follow historicize feminisms in a global framework, interrogating the applicability of Western periodization to women's movements in specific regional contexts within Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Since this examination of non-Western feminisms takes the wave model as a point of departure, I begin by clarifying what we mean by 'first'- and 'second'-wave feminism, drawing on Nancy Cott's and Nancy Fraser's useful summaries of these movements in the West.

The first phase of the women's movement in non-Western contexts is roughly coterminous with the Western understanding of the first wave and often connected to women's participation in the anti-colonial nationalist movement from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. During this period women modelled their plans for gender equity on Western feminists' demands for electoral, educational, and employment rights adapted to an indigenous programme of social reform in the public sphere as well as a re-assessment of gender and sexual mores in the private sphere. In a 1936 article in *The Listener*, the journal of the BBC, for example, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau dates the women's movement in India to 1917 with the formation of the first 'all-India organization – the Women's Indian Association, formed in Madras' (1936: 637). The franchise for women was among its first concerns. By 1925 an annual All-India Women's Conference had been established that addressed the social and legal status of women, including labour problems and women's education. By the time of Rau's article, women's organizations were working to widen the franchise, obtain the right of divorce, and establish more

equitable inheritance laws. In short, they were engaged in the work Western feminists have identified with the first wave.

According to Nancy Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (1987), the term 'Feminism' (initially capitalized) emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Designating a binding ideology rather than a notion of woman's sphere that prevailed in the women's movement of the nineteenth century, feminism, Cott says, was part of a broader rebellious spirit of the early twentieth century that included, for example, the birth control movement and internationalism, as represented by the League of Nations and the International Workers of the World (Cott, 1987). Fighting for 'the elimination of all structural and psychological handicaps to women's economic independence' and for 'the end of the double standard of sexual morality', feminism was both a continuation of the women's movement of the nineteenth century and its fight for full citizenship for women, and an expansion of that movement to include the recognition of women's sexual desires and freedom (Cott, 1987: 15).

Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* (1949) that the problem for feminist politics is that 'women do not say "we" as workers or blacks do' (quoted in Cott, 1987: 5). Yet that position, the need for group identification, has always been a paradoxical one for feminism, giving rise, especially in the second wave, to a tension between group identity on the one hand, and acknowledgement of diversity on the other. The 'paradox of feminism', as Cott terms it, is rooted not in theoretical differences but 'in the actual situation of women' (1987: 5), an insight significant to the critique of Western feminism from non-Western locations. As William Spurlin writes in his article included here, 'The term "feminism" itself is already full of contradictions and sites of contestation which become even more heightened as feminist thinking travels across borders' (2010: 13).

The paradox that Cott identifies as integral to feminism erupted in second-wave feminism, a history Nancy Fraser details in *Justice Interruptus* (1997). Second-wave feminism traverses three 'phases', according to Fraser: a first phase focused on *gender difference* preoccupied feminists from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, marked by debates between *equality feminism* and *difference feminism*; a second phase, which lasted until the early 1990s, focused on *differences among women*; and a third phase, which lasted through that decade, focused on '*multiple intersecting differences*' (1997: 175, emphasis added).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Fraser says, differences between men and women were either seen as destructive because produced by male dominance ('equality feminism') or valued as women's unique cultural identity ('difference feminism') (1997). In the second phase of the 1980s, which coincided with (and helped give rise to) identity politics, feminists argued that both of these positions privileged gender difference to the exclusion of other 'axes of difference', including race, sexuality, class, and ethnicity (1997: 178). 'Now the political scene was

crowded', writes Fraser, 'with "new social movements," each politicizing a different "difference"' (1997: 179). That proliferation of differences in turn made feminists aware of the need for a 'reorientation'. As Fraser puts it, only by abandoning an 'exclusive focus on gender difference' could feminists respond to differences among women as other than 'threats to the unity of women' (1997: 180). Such a reorientation enabled feminists to theorize feminism's relation to other political struggles (1997: 180).

This awareness led to what Fraser defines as the third phase of the second wave, though it might also be designated as the emergence of a third wave, divided by two competing positions: antiessentialism and multiculturalism. Antiessentialism, Fraser writes, with its theory of performativity, rejects any notion of a shared, ontological identity as always necessarily exclusionary (1997: 182). In contrast, multiculturalism, which, Fraser says, 'has become the rallying cry for a potential alliance of new social movements', promotes a cultural pluralism that recognizes all identities as equally valuable in their particularity (1997: 184). Whereas 'difference' was seen as a threat in first-wave feminism, in the 'pluralist version' of multiculturalism, Fraser says, 'difference' is 'intrinsically positive and inherently cultural' (1997: 185). The multiculturalist valorizes the very group identity the antiessentialist deligitimizes.

It was in the context of these debates that Chandra Mohanty published her powerfully influential essay, 'Under Western Eyes', which Spurlin discusses in more detail in the essay that follows. In a recent article revisiting that 1984 essay, Mohanty writes:

I wrote 'Under Western Eyes' ... to expose the power-knowledge nexus of feminist cross-cultural scholarship expressed through Eurocentric, falsely universalizing methodologies that serve the narrow self-interest of Western feminism I also wanted to chart the location of feminist scholarship within a global political and economic framework dominated by the 'First World.' ... I argued for grounded, particularized analyses linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks. (Mohanty, 1984: 501–502)

Mohanty says her goal was 'feminist solidarity across borders' but that position was missed by many because her essay was read in the context of the second-wave debates Fraser outlines, which led readers to focus on difference over commonality. 'Now', Mohanty writes in 2003, 'I find myself wanting to reemphasize the connections between local and universal' (2003: 504–505). With that shift from difference to 'the universal', feminism seems to have come full circle, back to the claims, and aims, of the first wave. As Kanika Batra pointed out in her MLA paper: 'If one accepts the idea of phases or stages as applicable to the Indian context, it also needs to be acknowledged that the women's movement has been forced to revisit some of the very same problems that it faced in its early stages'.

Yet Mohanty's work shifts the emphasis of first-wave feminism, whether in Western or non-Western contexts. Whereas in the 1930s Rau emphasized commonality among Indian women and their shared concerns, Mohanty shows how attention to indigenous movements provides a critique from below – or rather, a critique from the *side*, to borrow Susan Stanford Friedman's useful formulation (Friedman, 1997) – that enables new ways of relating. In her 2003 essay, Mohanty uses the environmental and indigenous movements of contemporary India to provide a model for a new kind of feminist practice, 'an anticapitalist transnational feminist practice ... located in the context of the critique of global capitalism' (2003: 509). Indigenous knowledges, she writes, 'are often communally generated and shared among tribal and peasant women for domestic, local, and public use'; they oppose to a Western notion of private property and ownership 'the idea of an intellectual commons where knowledge is collectively gathered and passed on for the benefit of all' (2003: 509).

The kind of localizing model Mohanty proposes is taken up by the essays here as they engage with the contours of feminism in specific non-Western national and regional contexts and in different historical eras, roughly coinciding with the three waves of feminism: the 1920s and 1930s (Rosenberg), the 1960s (Batra), and the 1990s (Spurlin). Spurlin's article, 'Resisting Heteronormativity/Resisting Recolonisation', offers a sustained theoretical reflection on the objectives of this themed submission and thus serves as an appropriate opening piece. He also provides a localized example of the Basotho women of southern Africa that offers an important intervention in Western models of historicizing. Far from abandoning all such models completely, Spurlin calls for using them *strategically* to theorize new sites of 'conjunctures and discontinuities' rather than *paradigmatically*, where 'generalities of periodization' have elided 'particularities of women's lived experiences' (2010: 23).

In 'The Home, the Veil and the World', Kanika Batra finds in the writings of Ismat Chughtai, especially her 1966 novella 'The Heart Breaks Free', a model for a *genealogical* rather than *teleological* approach to the history of feminism. Histories organized by 'waves' or 'phases', she argues, tend to suggest a progression, as if succeeding stages were an advancement on what came before. Like Spurlin, Batra focuses on sexuality, and like Rosenberg, on class – the Muslim middle class in particular – thereby shifting the focus (as Chughtai's novella does) from a history focused on the 'public activist dimensions' of feminism to the 'private worlds of Muslim women' (Batra, 2010: 35).

Leah Rosenberg's contribution, 'The Imperial Formation of Jamaican Feminism', focuses on the feminist movement in Jamaica in the 1920s and 1930s and its connection to first-wave British feminism. Paying particular attention to the middle class women's movement overlooked by many historians, Rosenberg analyses the relation between Jamaican nationalism and feminism. Rosenberg seeks to extend the feminist and nationalist historiographies to reveal the prominent roles played by women and feminism in the development of Jamaican nationalism.

Together these essays demonstrate, through specific local examples, ways of approaching feminist historiography that attend to what Mary John's calls the 'entangled clusters' of problems specific to a particular culture or region at a particular time. What results is a reconceptualizing of (Western) feminism that appreciates, in Mohanty's words, 'the thorough embeddedness of the local and particular with the global and universal' (Mohanty, 2003: 513). In doing so, these articles provide useful models for feminist work not so much *in* as beyond the third wave.

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