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Reviews: Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity and Race, ethnicity, and sexuality: intimate intersections, forbidden frontiers

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Chandra Talpade Mohanty. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. Vii-viii+300pp.

Joane Nagel. 2003. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. Vii-xii+308pp.

Reviewed by Mechthild Nagel

Chandra Mohanty and Joane Nagel (no relation to the reviewer) share biographic histories and scholarly interests. Both now work in the United States and have lived and worked in Africa; and their latest works show their commitment to a transnational feminist agenda. Nagel, a sociologist, has published articles in ethnic studies and most recently authored *American Indian Ethnic Revival: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (1996), while Mohanty, a women's studies professor, has written extensively in the field of transnational feminism and co-edited the important anthologies *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991) and *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997).

Mohanty's opus basically could be dubbed "The Mohanty Reader," since almost all articles have been previously published. *Feminism without Borders* is divided into three sections: 1) *Decolonizing Feminism*; 2) *Demystifying Capitalism*; and 3) *Reorienting Feminism*. I wish to turn first to the last section which contains just one article. The final chapter, "Under Western Eyes' Revisited," was specifically written for this collection. It responds to critics of her classic article "Under Western Eyes" (1987)—the first article in this book—and gives us insights in what ways Mohanty is rethinking debates within feminist theory and her own political and philosophical commitments. For instance, critics have argued that "Under Western Eyes" is beholden to an epistemological position of championing the experiences of the oppressed (Third World women) which cannot be understood by western feminists who could not really speak about Third World women without assuming a cultural imperialist stance. Mohanty counters that her criticism of Eurocentric feminist analyses does not mean that no cross-cultural analysis is ever possible and that North/South solidarity is futile. Rather, as postmodern feminists have also argued, one should worry about ahistorical universalist theories and one's positionality when "studying down" —i.e. when western, white feminist scholars study "African women," "women of color" or other oppressed peoples.

Mohanty notes that in the United States, women's studies has made important adjustments in the recent decade, in particular with respect to incorporating race/racism into the curriculum. However, the challenges remain with respect to globalizing the curriculum—and I might add, the National Women's Studies Association conferences of the late 1990s still betrayed parochialism and an unwillingness to understand how the global has an impact on the local (and vice versa).

Mohanty offers three models for “doing feminist theory”: 1) Feminist-as-Tourist; 2) Feminist-as-Explorer; and 3) The Feminist Solidarity or Comparative Feminist Studies Model (239-242). The first two models are fraught with problems and are the typical ones chosen in a U.S. women’s studies course. They are the old additive approach (“add-and-stir”—model) and the cultural relativist approach (“separate-but-equal”—model). Very few feminist teachers seem able to incorporate the third, relational approach, of linking global and local issues in a systematic way, which betrays an activist stance of solidarity rather than the convenient stance of the “white women’s burden.”

Her theoretical and activist approach, which includes a personal commitment to a relational, transformative feminism, is clearly outlined in this chapter. This approach has influenced many second and third wave feminists in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. I myself have used her anthologies in graduate courses devoted to Global Feminisms. *Feminism without Borders* weaves together several important themes which illustrate aspects of effective feminist praxis philosophy. In this review I will focus on five thematic approaches.

First, Mohanty foregrounds the importance of experience and also notes the difficulty of theorizing experience appropriately. Discussing Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical essay (“Identity: Skin Blood Heart” 1988), Mohanty approvingly notes that Pratt’s honest narrative, coming to terms with the meaning of home, white supremacy and homophobia, avoids the typical script of a “linear progress toward a visible end” (100). Instead, Pratt is ‘tarrying with the negative’ by acknowledging her prejudices, her fear of losing a sense of home and community; and by forging new commitments by turning her experiences into “positive forms of struggle” (103).

Secondly, Mohanty points to the commonality of struggle for women and the necessity of their renegotiating the politics of identity. Making sense of her own identity within a framework of a politics of location, Mohanty recounts:

Growing up in India , I was Indian; teaching high school in Nigeria, I was a foreigner. . . .Doing research in London, I was black. As a professor at an American university, I am an Asian woman.... In North America I was also a “resident alien” with an Indian passport—I am now a U.S. citizen whose racialization has shifted dramatically (and negatively) since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 (190).

Mohanty writes about passing as Mexican while staying in San Diego, California, or as Native American while visiting New Mexico; in addition, she feels invisible as a South Asian, when Asian Americans are always already mapped as having East Asian ancestry (134-135). She holds that given these experiences with shifting labels, she is most comfortable with identifying herself as a woman of color or Third World woman and explains: “Geographies have never coincided with the politics of race. And claiming racial identities based on history, social

location, and experience is always a matter of collective analysis and politics” (135). Given one’s misidentifications in a white supremacist context and given complex histories of slavery, imperialism and the presence of neocolonial configurations and heterosexist patriarchy, how does one forge a common feminist antiracist agenda? Here is Mohanty’s definite answer:

What seems to constitute “women of color” or “Third World women” as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is Third World women’s oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality. Thus it is the common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems that determines our potential political alliances (49).

Now, what would this alliance building mean for feminist sisterhood in general? Mohanty’s third point is a scathing critique of Robin Morgan’s analytic approach of global sisterhood in chapter four, “Sisterhood, Coalition, and the Politics of Experience.” She contrasts Morgan’s “sisterhood” with Bernice Johnson Reagon’s notion of “coalition,” and holds that coalitional efforts are more honest approaches to bridge various experiences. In contrasting the two approaches, Mohanty settles with the tactics of feminist “solidarity” in order to decolonize knowledge and critique capitalism (7). Her discussion of the exploitative nature of home work illustrates this political commitment (see chapter six).

In order to develop a politics of solidarity, border crossings become necessary. This fourth theme is alluded to in all of Mohanty’s writings and establishes her as an authoritative voice in the transnational feminist discourse. Mohanty again begins with the personal: she reflects on her own painful experience visiting her hometown Mumbai, India, which has been marred by religious warring. Her own Hindu family dismisses her feminist critique of Hindu fundamentalism as being irrelevant, given her outsider status—as “nonresident Indian”—which makes her unable to possibly understand the “Muslim problem” (130-134). Her analysis highlights the need to understand the import of international capital and how it is intertwined with a religious, moral, and gendered nationalist agenda. Border crossings also loom large in the era of globalization and the anti-globalization strategies that have been developed in the recent decades. Mohanty laments that much of the anti-globalization discourse is devoid of a feminist analysis; it is high time to note how poor women have resisted in the global South (250). Even ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva fails to use a feminist angle when she discusses Indian women’s resistance struggles (233).

A final theme in the book which I wish to highlight is Mohanty’s skillful weaving together of narratives that have little in common, or so it seems. Chapter 6 brings into relief economists’ case studies from immigrant female workers in Silicon Valley, California (based on Hossfeld’s work) and compares their work attitudes with those of the women lace workers in Narsapur, India (based on Maria Mies’s work). Mohanty adds a third narrative, based on immigrant women’s home work experiences in Britain. In a final part of this densely argued chapter, women’s organizing campaigns in South Korea, Britain, India and the export processing zones in

the Philippines, Malaysia and other countries are evaluated. Using materialist feminist analysis, Mohanty shows that women's homework is rendered invisible in a patriarchal discourse, conveniently utilized by capitalists and husbands. What is less clear to me is Mies' and Mohanty's claim that among the lace workers' caste positions are renegotiated (149).

My favorite article in the book is "Race, Multiculturalism, and Pedagogies of Dissent," (chapter 8) which also joins uncommon themes in educational policy. I think this chapter is a 'must read' for American administrators interested in diversifying their campuses while avoiding the corporate traps of "managing diversity and race." It also gives important insights to faculty on multicultural pedagogy and on coalitional building between women's studies, Black, and ethnic studies programs.

Feminist theory and practice is clearly shaped by one's own experiences and level of political education, e.g. vis-à-vis the enduring reality of colonialism, imperialism, and hetero-patriarchy, what Mohanty dubs as "military/prison/cyber/corporate complex" (172). Mohanty gives us important tools on how to understand and ultimately dismantle this complex.

Border crossings are also an important feature in *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality*, Joane Nagel's book-length discussion of sexual transgressions which shows us how much the discipline of sociology in the United States has developed in recent decades. Nagel looks at the discourses of racialized sexuality, sexed racial formations, homophobia and nationalism. Her opening chapters clearly define ethnicity, social construction, gender, and race. Like Mohanty, Nagel uses a telling biographical narrative to highlight her own journey through the miscegenation discourse. Nagel explores the meaning of her parents' 'white flight' to the suburbs when their daughter was about to enter junior high school in a racially mixed urban setting (in Cleveland, Ohio during the 1950s). Nagel suggests that it had everything to do with "a sexual passage into a world that my parents wanted to be white like me" (3).

This textbook is designed for the undergraduate reader, and I have explored it with my women's studies students in fall, 2003. The book includes many images and colored plates, historical and contemporary. It makes for engaged class discussions, a favorite topic being the efficacy of interracial dating. Some white students reported severe ostracism from parents and friends because of it and were ultimately forced to end their relationships. Inevitably, the discussion revolved around the mystique of the black male body. A companion article read along with Nagel's book was Angela Davis's "Race, Rape and the Myth of the Black Rapist"; it was challenging to move the students to a comprehension of the deep seated anti-Black racism in the United States.

Nagel's book cover features the classic William Blake image, "Europe Supported by Africa and America," so it is fitting that her historical chapters cover the European encounter and discovery myths in the 'new world.' Nagel notes that Columbus' and Vespucci's diary entries of their encounter with indigenous peoples differ substantially. While Columbus describes the natives as

childlike and beautiful, Vespucci comments on their barbarian appearance and practices (including incest and promiscuity) (65). The chapter on black and white miscegenation covers the court case *State of Missouri v. Celia* (1855). Celia was an enslaved woman who killed her master in self defense, when he tried to rape her. Her case and those of other women who resisted sexual enslavement produced a discourse of white male anxiety and impotence and its focus was the containment and control of a powerful Black female sexuality (100-106).

Nagel's discussion of various, contradictory anti-miscegenation statutes during chattel slavery also help to illustrate the slaveholders' need to discipline white female 'race traitors,' i.e. women who had voluntary relationships with Black men, in the United States. What is the legacy of such policing? Nagel notes that "there remains in U.S. society today no ethnic boundary more sexualized or scrutinized than the color line dividing blacks and whites" (117). Surely, the recent discovery of sexual sojourning in the lives of Thomas Jefferson and hardened racist Senator Strom Thurmond are testimonies to this national obsession. It makes the biographers' task more challenging and exciting given that a wholesale historical revisionism is in order.

Nagel covers 20th century border crossings in the milieu of sex tourism, the globalization of desire, and the United States military's sexual excursions overseas. She recounts the familiar mail-order bride rhetoric in western magazines and internet websites, replete with racialized gender stereotypes of docile women. What is missing from this chapter is a discussion of how women in Asia and Russia are 'sold onto the American ideal man.' Russian women, in particular, are being told that western American men are courteous, helpful and all around emancipatory. Nagel's book makes little mention of the personal struggles involved in cross-ethnic, national, racial border crossings for the women and men involved, e.g. testimonials of 'mail-order' women who escape from their abusive husbands.

In her discussion of male sex workers in Costa Rica and Morocco, Nagel reports that the men tend to self-identify as heterosexual even if it contradicts their behaviors. In the United States and western countries in general, sexual epistemologies function differently (205). However, prison testimonials from U.S. male prisoners tell another story; here too, heteronormativity rules even if it does not coincide with sexual practices (cf. *American Me*, a film about the Mexican mafia). Nagel could benefit from Mohanty's feminist analysis in carefully noting oppressed people's agency and a commonality of struggles.

Nagel's final remark is hopeful, echoing perhaps Foucault's dictum 'where there is power, there is resistance':

Despite the ethnosexual regimes to keep us in our proper places and to dictate the ethnic conditions of our intimate relations, there will always be those who challenge the rules and reach across racial and ethnic boundaries to form families and create community. These are the ethnosexual resisters, innovators, and revolutionaries (261).