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Is Simply Saying “We” Enough? Feminism, Transgression, and the Challenge of the Transnational Turn

Ironically, even though Women’s Studies is an interdisciplinary field that has continued to stretch the parameters of other disciplines, its own boundaries can constrain its production of feminist knowledge.

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I

Has Poland had a feminist movement? This is an inevitable question that comes up in a women’s and gender studies classroom at a North American university. Keenly aware that what has emerged from the Solidarity revolution of 1989 is a culture rich in patriarchal values and beliefs, feminist students in North America are understandably puzzled.² To be sure, the 2016 election of an unabashedly patriarchal man as U.S. President was a shock for them. At the same time, however, many of them persist in their view of the world as divided into

¹ Laura E. Donaldson, Anne Donadey, and Jael Silliman, “Subversive Couplings: On Antiracism and Postcolonialism in Graduate Women’s Studies,” in *Women’s Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 445.

² The tenaciousness of a patriarchal value system in postcommunist Poland is epitomized by an anti-abortion law that was passed by the male-dominated Parliament in 1993, four years after the fall of the communist system. Predictably enough, the strongest support for the delegalization of abortion came from the Catholic Church that acquired a great deal of political capital in Poland in the past. See Renata Siemieńska, “Women’s Political Participation in Central and Eastern Europe: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Women in Post-Communism*, ed. Barbara Wejnert and Metta Spencer (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996), p. 88.

modern and traditional halves, and in their perception of Western nations as progressive and more distant nations as peculiarly prone to restricting women's freedom, independence, and happiness.³

The enduring resonance of such perceptions makes the students' question all the more pressing. While remaining judiciously uncensorious, some instructors respond by arguing, somewhat indirectly, that recent feminist scholarship has questioned the accuracy and usefulness of a distinction between a feminist movement and a women's movement. As Myra Marx Ferree and Carol McClurg Mueller point out, restricting feminism to fighting for women's rights or gender equality results in policing the boundaries of "legitimate" feminism to exclude women's mobilizations that focus on, for example, anti-colonial resistance or human rights, but that may incubate feminist ideas and practices.⁴ Accordingly, it is worth bearing in mind that large numbers of Polish women who proclaim "But I'm not a feminist!" in fact share many struggles – for economic justice in particular – with self-identified feminists. But because they refuse the

³ For a study of such perceptions (and their broader resonance) in Western Europe, see Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). It is devoted specifically to examining how the concept of women's rights has been used by Western European feminists and non-feminists alike to support xenophobic, nationalistic, and racist agendas. Farris's findings remind readers that Eastern Europe continues to be framed according to orientalist categories. As a result, East European men and women are treated like "like other non-western subjects in the western European imagery": "Not only are eastern European men therefore portrayed as oppressors and women as victims, but also sexism is considered as a problem that troubles eastern European communities more than it does western European ones" (p. 189, note 25).

⁴ See Myra Marx Ferree and Carol McClurg Mueller, "Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 577–578. For evidence directly relevant to this argument, see, e.g., Lyudmyla Smolyar, "The Ukrainian Experiment: Between Feminism and Nationalism or the Main Features of Pragmatic Feminism," in *Women's Movements: Networks and Debates in Post-Communist Countries in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Edith Saurer, Margareth Lanzinger, and Elisabeth Frysak (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2006), pp. 397–411. Her research on the women's movement in Ukraine leads her to conclude: "The more women became involved in public life and in the national liberation movement, the more they realized that they were discriminated against. Accordingly, they became interested in feminist ideas and started to implement them in practice" (p. 410).

label *feminist*, these women are often typecast as pawns of Poland's right-wing political establishment that reviles "gender ideology" and "genderism" as dangerous imports from the West, while pressing for legal and public policy changes to promote further extension of patriarchal norms.

By now, it is evident that I eschew rigid notions of who is or is not a "real" feminist, as well as any final definition of the term *feminism*. Beginning with the recognition that the history of feminism is in fact a history of diverse feminisms, I propose to work with concepts of feminism that are open and contingent rather than monolithic, static, and prescriptive. More exploratory than conclusive, the discussion to follow takes the present volume's query about feminist transgression as an apt occasion to grapple with the problem of the First World–Second World discursive binarism that has proved resistant to feminist attempts to overcome "the limitations of the three-worlds metageography of the Cold War," despite increased interaction and communication across regional and national borders since the breakup of the so-called Soviet bloc.⁵

What makes resistance of this discursive binarism to feminist transgression especially puzzling is that over the past three decades Western feminist scholarship has undergone a "critical shift in language and epistemology from the international to the transnational."⁶ The transnational turn in feminist discourse has been seen as "an effective way to launch a strong (and long overdue) departure from U.S.-centric scholarship in its many forms" and "a much-needed, self-reflexive interrogation of the epistemological traditions

⁵ Jennifer Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2011), p. 838

⁶ Ibid. For seminal texts in transnational feminist studies, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, "Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/Feminism Divides," *positions: east asia cultures critiques* 2, no. 2 (Fall, 1994), pp. 430–445. Kaplan and Grewal's article has been reprinted in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 349–63.

in women's studies and related areas of study."⁷ In U.S. feminist academic work in particular, the concept of the transnational has emerged as "a corrective to the ethnocentrism of the global-sisterhood approach to internationalizing women's studies and promoting global women's rights."⁸ In addition to decentering the West as the authority regarding research on women around the world, transnational approaches have been used "to address the essentialism of the politics of location," given that, "in some cases, the global turn to the politics of location relies on romanticized and rigid understandings of the local and the global."⁹ However, as Jennifer Suchland points out in her incisive account of the transnational turn, arguments generated under the rubric of transnational feminist studies are "primarily focused on the first/third world tension."¹⁰ Or, to put it more bluntly, "the current parameters of what the transnational means have excluded the second world."¹¹

⁷ Sandra K. Soto, "Where in the Transnational World Are U.S. Women of Color?," in *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 112, 114.

⁸ Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?," p. 848. Used by First-World women in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of global sisterhood served to smooth over the differences among women and the specificities of their experience by subordinating all forms of social stratification, including race, to gender. As Vera Mackie points out, this concept "was rightly criticized by women who identified as 'third-world women' or 'women of colour.'" Mackie, "The Language of Globalization, Transnationality, and Feminism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 3, no. 2 (August 2001), p. 198.

⁹ Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?," p. 849. Suchland cites an article by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan who explain that "in our collaborative work we decided to use the term transnational instead of international in order to reflect our need to destabilize rather than maintain boundaries of nation, race, and gender." Grewal and Kaplan, "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices," *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2000), p. 2.

¹⁰ Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?," p. 849.

¹¹ Ibid. On this issue, see also, e.g., Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, "The Decolonial Challenge: Framing Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe within Transnational Feminist Studies," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (November 2014), pp. 330–343; Katarzyna Marciniak, "Immigrant Rage: Alienhood, 'Hygienic' Identities, and the Second World," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 33–63; Denise Roman, "Missing in Action: On Eastern European Women and Transnational Feminism," *CSW Update Newsletter*, 1 November 2006, pp. 5–8, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/485681pr>.

In taking up this problem, I am well aware that a number of activists and researchers have invested heavily in efforts to build connections across borders and divides and to overcome the "vexing 'misunderstandings' and 'prejudices'" that have hampered Western feminists' interactions with East European women.¹² By and large, however, the region known during the Cold War as the Second World remains outside the purview of transnational feminist circuits of knowledge production and dissemination. In transnational feminist studies, experiences and voices from Eastern Europe are rarely taken into account, and Croatian, Czech, Polish, or Ukrainian women are, at best, assigned walk-on parts. On the other side of "the long-demolished, yet mentally still-standing Wall," the inclination to engage in selective historicizing and theorizing is exemplified by widespread consensus in Polish feminist discourse that the national struggles for Poland's independence disrupted the logic of the separate spheres with their respective duties for men and women, and therefore Polish women emerged into gender equality far ahead of their benighted sisters in the West.¹³

I wish to avoid the risk of situating this article within the didactics of postcolonial polemics with their inevitable resort to a triad of center, periphery, and semi-periphery. Such a framing, I suggest, is

¹² Susan Gal, "Movements of Feminism: The Circulation of Discourses about Women," in *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency, and Power*, ed. Barbara Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 117. Gal's quotation marks around the words *misunderstandings* and *prejudices* suggest some skepticism on her part about whether any real misunderstandings and prejudices were involved. For dissenting views, see, e.g., Hana Havelková, "Transitory and Persistent Differences: Feminism East and West," in *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 56–62; and Kornelia Slavova, "Looking at Western Feminisms through the Double Lens of Eastern Europe and the Third World," in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Jasmina Lukić, Joanna Regulska, and Darja Zaviršek (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 246–263. Havelková and Slavova suggest that the approach of Western feminist scholars to gender research in Eastern Europe has tended to perpetuate a colonial gaze.

¹³ The phrase "the long-demolished, yet mentally still-standing Wall" comes from Martina Pachmanová, "In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory," in *Gender Check: A Reader; Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić et al., trans. Greg Bond et al. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), p. 49.