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Navigating Socio-Spatial Difference, Constructing Counter-Space: Insights from Transnational Feminist Praxis

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Abstract

In recent years, feminist activists have increasingly transnationalized their struggle against local forms of oppression. Our study explores the contentious nature of feminist transnationalism, asking how transnational feminist networks (TFNs) navigate socio-spatial inequalities within their own practices and as a wider social movement. We argue that: (1) TFNs make socio-spatial differences meaningful in part through their constructions of regional, international, and trans-local imaginaries; and (2) TFNs construct resistant feminist counter-spaces through dialogue and strategies aimed at destabilizing dominant structures. Our findings highlight the central role of spatial praxis within transnational feminism.

Keywords: transnational feminism, spatial praxis, critical spatial theory, difference, resistance

Feminist activists increasingly turn to the transnational scale to counteract local forms of oppression. Transnational feminist networks (TFNs) describe loosely coupled networks of women engaging in collaboration, direct action, and advocacy around problems of poverty, development, health, and discrimination (Moghadam, 2005). TFNs pursue these goals across regional, state, and international scales of action. They bridge scales by generating resources, support, and publicity for local and regional oppressions and bringing them into a transnational discourse. Here, engaging place-based differences is a primary, prob-

lematic goal. The history of transnational feminist praxis is characterized by ongoing tensions related to the conception and materialization of socio-spatial differences. In some cases, the rejection of essentializing conceptions of women and their needs leads to militant particularisms, or localized, insular movements tied to a particular place or region (Harvey, 1996). In this way, TFNs navigate a nebulous divide between universalizing visions of global sisterhood, and a retreat to place-based, particularist politics.

In this essay, we trace how TFNs draw upon spatial practices to negotiate the contestations, struggles, and politics of transnational organizing. We begin by situating TFNs within women's historical exclusion from international policymaking. As we chart the growth of feminist transnationalisms, we highlight the ongoing contestation over the treatment and status of difference. Incorporating insights from theories of intersectionality and critical spatial theories, we build the case for the importance of spatial praxis to TFN efforts. Our case study argues that (1) TFN discourses make socio-spatial differences meaningful in part through their constructions of regional, international, and trans-local imaginaries, and that (2) TFNs construct resistant feminist counter-spaces through dialogue and strategies aimed at destabilizing dominant structures.

Rise of Transnational Feminisms and the Problem of Difference

Contemporary transnational women's and feminist networking have developed in response to the exclusionary, patriarchal systems of international governance growing out of the post-World War II development context. In this way, transnational feminisms evolved out of the spatial problem of power concentrating at particular scales of decision-making. Historically, development projects designed, funded, and monitored by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United States Agency for International Development have ignored or downplayed women's economic activities (Escobar, 1995). Development institutions have also routinely excluded women's contributions and expertise from planning and implementation processes. The refusal to substantively engage women's roles and expertise has had disproportionately negative impacts on women and children's lives (Barker & Feiner, 2004; Ferber & Nelson, 1993). During the 1960s and 1970s, female activists, development practitioners, and critical scholars began critiquing the exclusionary practices of international development institutions based on the analysis and understanding of women's lives. Ester Boserup's (1970) *Women's Role in Economic Development* helped usher in the Women in Development (WID) movement, devoted to crafting women-friendly development policies and gaining greater access to decision-making processes and project implementation (Young, 2002). Guided by Western liberal feminist arguments, the WID movement focused on increasing women's equity without questioning the underlying assumptions of mainstream development, such as capitalist modernization.

By the mid-1970s, the burgeoning Gender and Development (GAD) movement incorporated a socialist feminist analysis of inequality within systems of capitalism (Young, 2002). GAD critiqued the liberal feminist assumption that modernization brought greater equality and prosperity for women. GAD also criticized the tendency to treat women as a homogenous group with similar needs, and argued for the inclusion of differences such as

class, age, marital status, and religion. Rejecting homogenizing discourses of global sisterhood, many groups pursued place-based identity politics. In what has been called the Women and Development (WAD) movement, activists, practitioners, academics and dependency theorists from developing countries questioned the very foundations of the modernist development project, including the way liberal, Western feminisms have assisted that project. They argued that development institutions not only excluded women, but lacked input and expertise from developing countries. Networks of researchers such as the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) created alternative analyses of development that guided feminist activism (Antrobus, 2004; Young, 2002). DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), a network composed of researchers and activists identifying with the Third World, developed a critique of the negative impacts of development interventions in poor countries as well as essentializing conceptions within liberal feminist discourses and practices.

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) and its associated conferences and meetings provided a catalyst for debate and alliance-building among these different approaches (Jain, 2005). According to Peggy Antrobus (2004), founding member of DAWN, diverse women who “might not easily have met and worked together in their own countries came to understand each other” (p. 61). Through face-to-face meetings, diverse women began developing collective analyses of oppression and power, while also identifying key differences across women’s various experiences. Representatives of women’s groups and feminist networks continued to forge alliances between women from the South, North, and East during the UN conferences of the 1990s and 2000s, the meetings of the World Social Forum, and through internationally coordinated protests organized against neoliberalism, militarization, and capitalist globalization. During this time, women’s organizations began sponsoring their own meetings dedicated to knowledge sharing and alliance-building across different regions. Today, TFNs provide a pragmatically and theoretically interesting example of contemporary efforts to carve out transformative, resistant feminist spaces.

TFNs and Socio-Spatial Difference in the Contemporary Context

Contemporary transnational feminisms are characterized by the struggle to forge a common identity and politics across multiple forms of difference, thereby avoiding universalizing women’s experiences (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Pettman, 2004). Women from diverse backgrounds, including women of color, women identifying with the Global South, as lesbians, and as working-class, have strongly challenged liberal, cosmopolitan discourses for ignoring the racial and class power of white feminists (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 2003; Zinn, 1996). This power is often concentrated in Western, urban places, and at the international, policymaking scale. In some cases, contestation around the role and understanding of difference has prompted place-based identity politics. Contemporary transnational feminism is characterized by conflicts between universalizing and particularist approaches. The designation of women-centered networks as “feminist” by scholars such as Moghadam (2005) is itself illustrative of the broader struggle to forge a collective feminist identity. While many TFNs explicitly claim feminist goals and aims, not every network labeled as such identifies with the term. The contestation over the political efficacy and

relevancy of feminism points to just one of the many differences characterizing TFN efforts.

A central feature of women's transnational activism includes intersectional analyses of multiple forms of differences. Intersectional analyses have emerged in response to the problematic ways difference has been taken up in feminist praxis, and the concomitant need to theorize coalitional politics. An intersectional approach highlights the dangers of adopting a universal conception of "woman" to address complex systems of discrimination and privilege (hooks, 1984). Here, categories of difference like class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion produce interlocking systems of control, domination, and resistance (Collins, 1990). Intersectional analyses see cultural differences as relational, providing a vantage point to see the ways women's experiences of inequality differ from place to place. Carrillo Rowe (2009) argues that a relational approach involves a movement away from an individual feminist subjectivity (a "politics of location") to the subject as constituted through multiple belongings (a "politics of relation") (p. 26). A politics of relation highlights that women's economic empowerment is often derived at the relative expense of other women's (Ong, 2006). As TFNs engage in their explicitly political and value-laden work, they confront issues of oppression and the myriad ways diverse women understand and experience this oppression. TFNs must also contend with the problematic history of a liberal cosmopolitan feminism that positions Western women as saviors. Our study responds to the need to better understand the contentious processes involved in the forging of alliances across complex, differentiated power lines (Carrillo Rowe, 2008; Mohanty, 2003) by incorporating insights from critical spatial theories of difference.

Spatial Praxis and the Making of Counter-Spaces

Emerging from a long line of Marxist and poststructuralist critiques of global capitalism, critical spatial perspectives converge around the rejection of abstract, Cartesian, neo-Kantian, and Newtonian conceptions of space and place in favor of social constructionist and relational approaches (i.e., Castree, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994). Rejecting the understanding of space as pre-given and directly observable, critical perspectives see space as a terrain of social and political practice. Control over the spatial organization of society is a crucial means for the reproduction of power relations, and a resource for social change. Henri Lefebvre's (1991) work reveals the ideological dimensions of space, including how the appropriation and domination of space functions in resistance. Building on Marx's theories of capitalist relations, Lefebvre (1991) criticized both the empiricist understanding of space as an empty container or backdrop against which social action occurs, and the idealist view of space as a purely symbolic construct. Lefebvre instead theorized space as an interrelated triad of perceived space, the physical space of economic production, conceived space, the mental constructs of space, such as those used in city planning, and representational or lived space, describing space as used and symbolically understood by its inhabitants (pp. 33, 38–39).

Lefebvre's triad delineates the wide ensemble of social practices and discourses through which groups produce, reproduce, and transform space. The concept of *counter-space* derives from Lefebvre's analysis of the use of space as a tool for capitalist accumulation and

political domination by elites, which he argues provokes opposition. Counter-space describes a process whereby groups create temporary and partial milieus to communicate and enact oppositional politics (Hershkovitz, 1993). In this way, spatial practices are essential to both domination, as well as the assertion of resistant views and oppositional political projects.

Spatial praxis describes the use of space to achieve ideological ends. Within the geopolitical context, feminist transnationalism is a particularly innovative site of spatial praxis, or “political relations” instantiated by feminist networkers “between different places and scales of activism” (Conway, 2008, p. 208). TFNs are characterized by alliance-building across multiple, place-based differences and scales. However, participants’ ability to engage in spatial praxis is profoundly structured by the interplay of social and economic inequalities (Massey, 1994). The politics of place give rise to both opportunities and constraints, shaping the terrain of feminist transnationalism. Overlapping systems of colonialism, racism, classism and economic exploitation create different political opportunities within and across particular locales. Ongoing digital divides, political repression, and language barriers limit many women’s abilities to organize at the transnational scale (McLaughlin, 2007). Depending on their particular political context, “going public” can jeopardize members’ safety. In addition, large, highly professionalized feminist networks such as Women in Development Europe (WIDE) receive foundation support, and may even include paid staff members at a central office. Smaller, less professionalized networks such as World March for Women (WMW) have much less access to material resources. In these ways, organizing across multiple scales is more problematic for some women than it is for others. As Doreen Massey (1994) argues, there exists the need to better understand the complexities of *power geometries*, or the distinctively different ways in which women are placed relative to global flows and processes. The interplay of these multiple aspects of socio-spatial differences introduces significant tensions related to power. Integrating theories of intersectionality with critical spatial theories of difference, our study explores the resistant potential of spatial praxis within TFN efforts.

Multiple Case Study of Transnational Feminist Networking

Our multiple case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003) draws from a combination of data sources, including textual analysis of organizational documents and close reading of autobiographical narratives of TFN founders. We began by surveying the burgeoning literatures addressing transnational feminist advocacy. Based on our survey of this research, we identified 25 networks adopting feminist goals and participatory, decentralized forms of organizing spanning multiple nation-state borders (Moghadam, 2005). We then narrowed our list to allow for in depth analysis of fewer cases through archival research. We selected groups: (1) operating for at least five years, (2) possessing a publicly documented identity and history in English, and (3) involving participants from at least three countries. After reviewing publicly available documents produced by the 25 TFNs, such as mission statements and published interviews and histories, we chose seven TFN cases fitting our criteria: Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Association for Women’s Rights

in Development (AWID), Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Women in Development Europe (WIDE), Association of Women of the Mediterranean Region (AWMR), Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), and World March for Women (WMW). As a result, our analysis included a subset of fairly professionalized, Western-oriented, English-speaking TFNs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Transnational Feminist Networks

Network	Website	Purpose
Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)	http://www.awid.org/	Strengthens the voice of advocates, organizations, and movements internationally to advance women's human rights
Association of Women of the Mediterranean Region (AWMR)	http://www.mediterraneas.org/	Works for social and environmental and social justice, equality, and peace in the Mediterranean region and beyond
Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)	http://www.dawnnet.org/	Advocates on global issues affecting the livelihoods, living standards, and rights of women especially in the global South
Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)	http://www.wedo.org/	Builds local and regional allies and conducts research to advocate global policies supporting women's rights
Women in Development in Europe (WIDE)	http://www.wide-network.org/	Monitors and influences international economic and development policy and practice from a feminist perspective
Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)	http://www.wluml.org/	Provides information and support for demystifying diverse sources of control over women's lives
World March of Women (WMW)	http://www.worldmarchofwomen.org/	Connects grass-roots groups and organizations working to eliminate the causes of poverty and violence against women

Through cross-case comparisons of the seven TFNs, we identified salient concepts related to transnationalism and the treatment of multiple differences. During this phase, we generated comparisons and applied diverse lenses to the data (Stake, 2005). Data included documents produced by the networks, which consisted of mission statements, newsletters, platform documents, reports, meeting summaries and minutes, and organizational histories. During this initial stage, we identified a set of organizing tensions or dilemmas. What appeared particularly noteworthy were the ways in which TFNs drew upon spatial praxis, or their use of spatial strategies for political ends. We deepened our analysis by grounding it within the personal experiences of participants (Jones, 2001). After contacting six founding members of TFNs, we were able to conduct two open-ended, autobiographical interviews. We employed close reading of our interviews (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008) with "Petra" and "Rae," influential participants in two TFNs included in our analysis. We supplemented our interviews with three previously published interviews with TFN founders. Through close reading of the interviews, we refined key constructs related

to spatial praxis and the treatment of difference. Taking a constructivist approach, we further refined our categories and relationships between categories within and across the narratives and additional organizational texts. Through this process of iterative data collection and analysis, we identified two reoccurring themes: a spatially informed analysis of difference, and the making of feminist counter-spaces.

Articulating Socio-Spatial Differences

Based on our analysis of their published mission statements, reports, and working papers, we found that TFN discourses reflect an awareness of the dangers of downplaying the many differences constituting women globally. Rather than taking a “global sisterhood” approach, TFN discourses emphasize the role of socio-spatial differences among women. The following examples illustrate the prominence of a socio-spatial analysis emphasizing the need to account for multiple differences within the practices of organizing.

In her reflections on WIDE’s annual conference, Chair Wendy Harcourt (2005) argues for increased attention to the differences in the lived realities of participating women from the North, South, and East. Her comments highlight the implications of socio-spatial differences for network practices such as conferences and meetings. She states:

The expressions of different feminisms lie in different cultural, financial and social positions as well as in the different generational, individual and collective analyses of the roots of oppression. It seems important in WIDE that while many of us embrace feminism, we recognize that those differences may lead to diverse strategic positions, which need to be listened to and debated. (p. 1)

An AWID publication (Symington, 2004) explicitly centered on interpreting and theorizing the concept of intersectionality also emphasizes the need to understand:

... the experiences and views of women of the full diversity of identities, including women in the global South and also women of colour and immigrant women in the global North. The “subjects” of development work should be at the table (not the foreign “experts”) and involved in developing analysis and the interventions. Similarly, the voices of theorists and analysts from the global South need to be amplified and respected. (p. 6)

Such discourses emphasize the need to bring traditionally immobile, spatially and socially isolated women into the practices of organizing. In this way, producing intersectional analyses of difference is a prominent feature of TFN discourse.

Another example taken from one of our interviews highlights a commitment to understanding how socio-political differences create uneven experiences across places. According to Rae, the network she participates in:

. . . stated from the beginning that we will have differences in strategies due to the fact that we lived in different contexts, had different views regarding religion, etc. From the start we recognized that there are different ways to improve the lot of women, and that the choice is not always ours . . . it is obvious that living in Afghanistan under Taliban, in Iran under Khomeini or in Sudan does not give you the same space for maneuver than living in Tunisia, Senegal or India: this fact will determine difference in strategies.

Her comment emphasizes the need to account for the role of these multiple, overlapping differences when designing social change strategies. Together, such statements reflect the prominence of a socio-spatial analysis devoted to understanding how multiple categories of identity are linked to place and region.

TFNs make socio-spatial differences meaningful in part through their construction of spatial imaginaries. We found three primary spatial imaginaries, or representations of socio-spatial difference within the networks: regional, international, and translocal. Each imaginary reflects a particular understanding of, and approach to, the role of difference within feminist networking. Importantly, each privileges a different, primary scale of action. Rather than being fixed, or pre-given, geographic scales such as the local and the international are socially and discursively constructed, with material effects (Massey, 1994; Swyngedouw, 1997). In the following examples, we show how TFNs engage in scale-making practices as they navigate socio-spatial differences.

Regional Imaginaries

While each TFN emphasizes their practices and connections between and among multiple scales, we found that some networks actively cultivate a regional imaginary within their discourses. Published accounts of AMWR's founding reveal their use of a Mediterranean imaginary to facilitate political action among diverse women. Founding member Ada Donno (n.d.) uses the metaphor of sailing to describe a process whereby women working for change in different places converged around a Mediterranean identity. Here, the idea of "being Mediterranean" describes a:

Political place of women who, moving from different experiences and belonging and weaving thoughts and actions, become the creators of a common political project: to sail in the Mediterranean Souths trying to recognize each other and build strong relations, overtaking prohibitions as old as our stories; also to find a definition of our antagonism, moving from what our exchange of experiences can produce, as regards the powers that discriminate, exclude, wipe off, oppress us. (pp. 3-4)

The construction of a regional imaginary is also central to DAWN's identity. Founding members created DAWN as a response to the exclusion of Southern voices within international decision-making and Western versions of feminism. DAWN's official history (DAWN, 2009) highlights how a politicized regional framework provides a temporary bridge across socio-spatial differences:

. . . a nucleus of committed women from a number of different countries came together to share their experiences with development strategies, policies, theories, and research . . . [feeling] a sense of urgency about communicating alternatives . . . Recognizing the commonality and power of global economic and political processes that constrain the possibilities for alternative strategies and actions, the group brainstormed what factors were hurting women and arrived at identification of regional crises as the peg from which to hang the analysis of women's situations: Africa's food crises, Latin America's debt, South Asia's poverty, and the militarization of the Pacific Islands. With the emergence of a new framework, DAWN was born. (DAWN, 2009, para. 1)

DAWN's regional configurations include Africa, Asia, Latin America, Caribbean, and the Pacific. The premise that Third World women are unified by common historical and political experiences potentially minimizes the many differences that exist among these women. However, DAWN's discourses reflect a commitment to understanding the variations of women's experiences within and across these regions. Thus, while regionally focused networks privilege a particular scale of action, they emphasize the need to maintain ties across scales. For example, although AMWR's founding story stresses the importance of a common Mediterranean identity, the story simultaneously destabilizes any notions that participants have the same experiences and realities.

International Imaginaries

The older and more professionalized networks, WEDO, WIDE, and AWID, adopt a primary focus on international policymaking within the global arena. Targeting the United Nations and other international organizations, they attempt to make the decision-making and policymaking of these organizations more responsive to the realities of women's lives. These networks work within and across dominant institutional spaces, often working in partnership with one another as they do so. These networks also function as strategists and consultants for community-based women's groups and NGOs. Importantly, these networks are more likely to take on an advocacy role, in which they speak on behalf of women's interests broadly.

WEDO is one example of a TFN taking on an advocacy role. Founded by Congresswomen and U.S. feminist leaders, WEDO's coordination and decision-making are centralized within their professionalized New York office. Their self-description emphasizes their focus on international policymaking, stating: "working in key global forums such as the UN, WEDO advocates for and seeks to empower women as decision-makers to achieve economic, social and gender justice, a healthy, peaceful planet and human rights for all" (WEDO, 2009a). While largely focused on this broader scale, WEDO also incorporates an understanding of how women's lives differ locally. Co-founder Mim Kelber describes an initial meeting in New York, bringing together representatives from around the world. Here, "members discussed the environmental issues in their respective countries and agreed on an action campaign centered on women's needs and concerns" (Kelber, 1994, p. 43). In a recent newsletter (WEDO, 2009b), Executive Director Xuan Nguyen highlights the need to continue building alliances with "partners in the North and the South," stating:

We will reach out to women and environmental groups at the grassroots level to join our global movement. We will strive to amplify women's voices—from low-income neighborhoods in the U.S. to rural villages in Africa—to create better living conditions for women of the world and planet Earth. (Letter from the Executive Director, para. 3)

While these examples suggest an emphasis on understanding how women's experiences differ across locales, they also indicate an understanding of the network's practices and strategies as emanating from the international scale. In the case of WEDO, the construction of an international imaginary is accompanied by the problematic practice of speaking on behalf of others.

WIDE provides an illuminating example of how TFNs take measures to defend against the potentially universalizing effects of an international imaginary. WIDE sponsors international conferences, seminars, and consultations and participates in national, European, and international social movement events. WIDE conferences also reveal a commitment to engaging multiple perspectives, such as by programming sessions devoted to incorporating analyses from the South and the North. Similarly, Toronto-based AWID functions as a clearing-house of sorts, participating in international meetings, and publishing studies, occasional papers, advocacy guides, and pamphlets. Like the other internationally focused networks, AWID illustrates an awareness of the many drawbacks of taking a one-size-fits-all global sisterhood approach. AWID actively cultivates ties across regions, for example, taking care to note in their description that half of their members are located in the global South and Eastern Europe (Alpizar & Wilson, 2005). In this way, AWID's spatial imaginary conceptualizes the international as a place of convergence.

Networks cultivating an international imaginary reveal a greater potential for conflicts over the role of socio-spatial differences. An example from AWID's reflection on their 2008 Forum (AWID, 2010) indicates tensions related to voice. A section entitled "Where Can We Improve? Critical Lessons and Insights" identifies the need to learn from their recent Cape Town conference. There:

. . . some activists and organizations mobilized against the Forum, feeling that the process of session selection was not transparent and the registration fees too high—we came to see that an event of this magnitude requires much more proactive outreach on the part of AWID, particularly to address the kind of miscommunication and misinformation that can generate unnecessary tensions. (p. 12)

Typically, AWID designates a number of sessions led by local groups, providing a number of free registrations. The document acknowledges that, in this case, such efforts were insufficient, noting the need for "more proactive local ambassadors; more focused local communication efforts with women's movements, as well as regular open interaction with an array of relevant actors in the host country" (AWID, 2010, p. 12). Furthermore, the document promises to review "the role and visibility of organizations in the host country in the Forum program (while still maintaining the forum as an International—not regional or country-focused—event)" (p. 12). Such language reinforces an international scale of action.

As suggested by this example, networks cultivating an international imaginary walk a tension-filled path to maintain their legitimacy with local groups.

Internationally focused networks navigate their discursively dangerous positions by developing strategic relationships with groups tied to the regional and local scales. For example, in 2005, WEDO joined with the Center for Women's Global Leadership and DAWN to establish the Gender Monitoring Group (GMG) aimed at pressuring the World Summit, a meeting of mostly male world leaders. The GMG (2005) developed a jointly produced position paper, *What's at Stake for Women*, which outlined a critical gender perspective and offered proposals for the World Summit. The partnership illustrates how networks primarily operating at the international, policy-making scale cultivate ties with regional and local scales. By building these temporary bridges, these networks incorporate a richer understanding of socio-spatial differences, including how international policies might be experienced and shaped by women in different places.

Trans-local Imaginaries

The discourses and practices of another set of networks reflect the construction of a trans-local imaginary to negotiate socio-spatial differences. These networks emphasize the local scale of action. However, their spatial imaginaries provide a stark contrast to the regressive tendencies of militant particularism, or an insular retreat to place-based identities. While privileging the local scale of action, these networks construct this scale as inextricably bound to regional and global scales. A trans-local imaginary reflects a hybrid strategy that shifts between the particular and the universal. In this way, these networks construct a progressive sense of place, in which the local is linked to multiple scales of action (Massey, 1994).

Throughout their documents, WMW emphasizes the importance of the local scale of action. This emphasis on the local is reflected in their structures and practices. WMW consists of national coordinating bodies spanning more than 70 countries, and includes hundreds of community-based organizations. The newest network in our analysis, WMW's history reveals a commitment to making evident socio-spatial differences. Begun as a Quebec-based network focused on the international policymaking scale of action, WMW now takes the form of a highly decentralized network centered on the local scale. Official documents (WMW, 2008) credit their renewed interest in alliance-building to lessons learned in their previous attempts to influence international institutions. After their unsuccessful efforts to target key development actors such as the World Bank, WMW began cultivating trans-local ties and developing their own counter-spaces.

WMW's use of symbols plays an important role in articulating a trans-local imaginary. Their theme song functions as a metaphor for their approach to socio-spatial difference. To compose the song, members created their own unique verses to a common melody. The final song combines 40 sets of lyrics from 23 countries and 20 languages. The chorus line "'Capire' mosamam mam capire El ham mosamam el ham" incorporates Italian, Persian, and Arabic, and means "understanding, determination and inspiration" (WMW, 2008, p. 33). The very development of the song reflects a trans-local orientation, in which the network draws upon diverse local experiences to shape a broader unifying framework of action and interpretation.

An early Plan of Action (WLUMML, 1999) created by members of WLUMML provides an example of a trans-local imaginary emphasizing the need to understand how enduring oppressions such as militarization and armed conflict play out within different spaces. Drafted in 1997 in Dhaka by 35 participants from 18 countries, the Plan of Action analyzes shared struggles and outlines goals and strategies. A section detailing the impacts of militarization and conflict states:

We believe that fundamentalist movements thrive by encouraging people to link their identity exclusively to membership of a collectivity defined by supposedly immutable characteristics of religion, ethnicity or nationality; then by erecting the barriers beyond such collectivities; and finally by intensifying the threat deemed to be posed by the "other." The resulting ethnic or religious confrontations underlie some of the most brutal conflicts of our time. Thus our struggle against fundamentalisms flows directly into our work on militarization and armed conflict. (p. 5)

This is a prime example of discourse that directly engages the complexities of spatial praxis. The network's organizing efforts are focused on regionally empowering women through their sense of place. At the same time, WLUMML actively resists the threats of militant particularisms that can emerge in regionally based networking. In fact, this example reveals how WLUMML reconstructs militant particularisms as an oppressive force to their efforts to forge a common bond from which to act.

The founding story of WLUMML provides a compelling illustration of how the construction of a trans-local imaginary can be deployed to political effect. According to Rae, the origins of WLUMML lie in an initial successful attempt to mobilize diverse women. Rae helped organize a campaign to pressure the Algerian government into freeing three feminists imprisoned for initiating debates among women's groups over changes in Algerian family law. These changes would have deprived women of rights they had previously enjoyed, including the right to initiate marriage and divorce. From a distant place, she organized diverse students from a women's studies department to write to their home organizations and various countries asking for assistance. The President of Algeria received telegrams and faxes from unexpected places such as Papua New Guinea, Peru, and India. Algerian consulates across the world received delegations demanding the release of the three arrested women. They were freed after a month-and-a-half campaign, an unprecedented success. Several months later, Rae received a letter from a representative of an Indian women's group asking for their help with a case involving a restrictive application of Muslim law. She recounts:

Of course we campaigned for her and also started weaving ties and links with many women's organizations, especially but not exclusively in the Muslim world. I realized that getting support from "The West" (to make it simplistic) was not as efficient as getting support from diverse sources; and notably that support coming from Muslim countries or communities had a special weight in these battles.

Indeed, cultivating a regional imaginary to mobilize a plurality of non-Western voices is a central feature of WLUML's founding story.

As we have shown, TFNs construct particular spatial imaginaries as they pursue transformative change across diverse groups of women. Each spatial imaginary reflects a particular response to the socio-spatial differences found within each of the networks. These regional, international, and trans-local imaginaries provide insight into how TFNs navigate socio-spatial differences, including their efforts to articulate points of convergence among women.

Constructing Feminist Counter-spaces

TFN discourses also suggest the creation of resistant counter-spaces devoted to understanding how religious, cultural, political, and social differences inform social action within various parts of the world. Two practices are central to the articulation of counter-space: the designing of participative spaces, and the destabilizing of dominant structures internally. Together, these efforts further illustrate the centrality of spatial praxis within feminist transnationalism.

Designing Participative Spaces

While TFNs do advocate on behalf of women by targeting dominant institutions such as the World Bank or the United Nations, our analysis also suggests that TFNs actively construct counter-spaces within which to articulate resistant politics and practices. For example, Annie Imbens-Fransen, a feminist theologian and Dutch participant in WMW, writes of her experience attending the 2004 Assembly of the Parliament of the World's Religions (S.A.F. Net, 2005). During a break in the meeting, she witnessed a small group of young women in tears over the patriarchal tone set by "male religious leaders of hierarchical and male dominated institutions." She further noted, ". . . both female and male participants expressed their disappointment and anger about the invisibility of women and the male dominance during the assembly, and the lack of respect for the minority of women who participated in the panels" (S.A.F. Net, 2005, p. 7). She organized an alternative meeting, called "Listening to the Voices of Women in the Parliament of the World's Religions." About 200 women and some men participated and "the majority of the participants clearly expressed the necessity of the elimination of male dominance in religions; solidarity; respect for women's human rights; listening to the voices of women" (S.A.F. Net, 2005, p. 7). In this case, the creation of a feminist counter-space is an intentional response to the recognition that simply gaining access to dominated space often fails to expand the participation of groups who routinely operate on the margins of those spaces. From this feminist counter-space, a smaller committee of 12 volunteers prepared a set of Recommendations to the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions petitioning for such changes as a greater focus on gender inequality in the world's religious and spiritual traditions, equal numbers of women and men present on all programs, and the practice of embedding gender issues in every topic. Such an example reveals how TFNs create feminist counter-spaces in opposition to dominant socio-spatial structures. Within these counter-spaces, socio-spatial differences can be more openly expressed, negotiated, and strategically acted upon.

Throughout our analysis, we found multiple examples of such purposive attempts to animate and engage socio-spatial differences through dialogue, sharing narratives, and other communicative means. TFNs use workshops, conferences, exchange programs, and communication technologies to facilitate knowledge sharing, debate, and consciousness-raising across particular standpoints. These initiatives occur across regional, international, and trans-local scales of action. For example, WLUMML designs workshops and conferences to promote dialogue about the various interpretations of Islam found across national contexts. WLUMML also sponsors exchange programs designed to promote cross-regional relationships among women. Here, exchange programs reflect “the conscious promotion of face to face interaction between women from the Muslim world who would normally not have a chance to travel and meet with women from other, culturally diverse, Muslim societies” (Shaheed, 1994, p. 9). A founding member credits the early success of WLUMML in part to meeting physically during their “Plan of Action” meetings or around special projects. According to our interviewee:

We experienced many times how important seeing people face to face can be, and hearing their stories first hand. Visiting other’s countries and organizations is also very important, especially because it allows for women to *live* a different “Muslim” life, rather than hear or read about it. Experiencing emotions and feelings touches a very different level in oneself than intellectual knowledge; the consequences of such experiences in terms of personal changes are deep and durable.

For WLUMML in particular, meeting face-to-face and in a variety of locales expands participants’ understanding, and cultivates a sense that change is possible. When shared face-to-face, personal histories illuminate how Islam is experienced across space and scale. In this way, feminist counter-spaces make possible a more nuanced understanding of potentially polarizing differences. Rae describes how her network functions as a “school of tolerance” regarding the different strategic choices available to different women:

For many women raised in a traditional way, the mere fact of sitting with agnostics or atheists from Muslim countries, collaborating with them, fighting the same battles, was quite an experience; the mere fact of fighting hand in hand with women who, for example, drink alcohol, or do not observe fast during Ramadan, or demand sexual freedom, or state their lesbianism, was a way to grow; similarly having to accept that some strong believers, even veiled women, could be hard core feminists was enlightening for those who could not conceive of fighting for emancipation in the straight jacket of religion.

Such comments suggest a commitment to actively learning about and particularizing similarities and differences through direct collaboration with highly diverse members. In this way, feminist counter-spaces assist in the identification of common roots of oppression, thereby strengthening members’ capacity for political action across socio-spatial differences.

For TFNs, the creation of these intentional spaces to “engage difference” informs network participants of the multiple forms of oppression that women are facing within a broader transnational context. For example, at their 1985 World Conference, members of DAWN ensured that women from different regions in the South were invited to a meeting.

[Women were] invited to reflect on their experience of development over the course of the Decade for Women—from the perspective of poor women living in the economic South. In this way the final document reflected regional differences, even as it reached for a framework that revealed the linkages between these experiences. This process—which starts with testifying to local regional or even individual experiences (telling our stories, speaking our truths), leading to the negotiation of differences and finally to the articulation of a position that attempts to generalize, synthesize or globalize the diversity of experience. (Antrobus, 2004, p. 19)

Identifying patterns of similarities and differences in members’ experiences of oppression and resistance strengthens solidarity, and informs the development of a more sophisticated social change strategy. Within these spaces, TFNs define how to move forward on issues while allowing for the inclusion of diverse experiences.

Spatial imaginaries also have implications for the construction of counter-space. A regionally focused network such as AWMR constructs spaces to speak as a provisionally unified region. An internationally focused TFN such as WIDE sees difference as primarily tied to local regions, and will create spaces to ensure different material experiences get vocalized and can influence advocacy efforts on behalf of larger groups of women. Trans-local TFNs such as WMW see difference as emerging from a collective sense of oppressions that play out differently, thereby designing spaces devoted to bringing women together to see their connections and better understand their differences. For trans-local networks, advocacy involves deploying a plurality of spatially distributed voices on behalf of a highly contextualized, yet unifying goal.

Destabilizing Dominant Structures Internally

TFNs also draw upon an understanding of the socio-spatial dynamics of power to destabilize dominant structures within their own organizing efforts. Here, participants expand the space in which difference can be articulated, understood, and acted upon. Our analysis suggests that the articulation of counter-space can blunt the impacts of structural inequalities inherent in the broader systems within which TFNs work. Here, TFNs attempt to destabilize their own internal power imbalances.

Several of the TFNs explicitly acknowledge their own role in reproducing socio-spatial dynamics of power. For example, WMW weaves statements such as the following throughout their printed materials:

Positions of class, race, and ethnicity are at the root of inequalities in our societies and are reproduced among us women. This can manifest itself in our organization, as we know more educated women who speak various languages find it easier to travel and participate in an international movement. (WMW, 2008, p. 13)

Many of the networks in our sample suggest a readiness to destabilize elements of their own internal structures that may lead to the sedimentation of such power relations. They do so through spatial means. For example, both DAWN and WMW have moved their secretariats from one locale to another in an attempt to prevent the concentration of power within one region. Networks also choose to intentionally dissolve their working groups after a set period of time, rotating in new members to increase diversity. When discussing her work with several TFNs, one interviewee discussed how she and several others had formed an alliance between two historically contentious feminist groups. The alliance grew to include 12 groups, with the goal of eventually dissolving the previous groups and moving forward around the emerging alliance. In discussing her work with another network she participates in, Petra emphasizes how affinity groups are "self-formed around issues that people want to work on," but that they include intentional measures to ensure that new voices are being incorporated, and that the membership is balanced across regions. She works to increase diversity by taking what she deems a "circle approach." Rather than adhering to what she sees as a more bureaucratized and hierarchical set of practices, she draws upon concentric circles of personal ties to accomplish her goals. Importantly, it was this more fluid "circle approach" that aided her in shifting a key annual meeting to a new location, a move that enabled a more meaningful engagement with difference. She explains:

When we put together the meeting we made sure that we [women from the Western, Eastern, and Northern European regions] were working very much as partners . . . and in bringing in Southern people I relied on my own networks of people that I knew that had been involved with me in other conversations, and so they knew they were coming in, not to be either objects of the discussion but as people who had their own histories.

These comments describe a tension between adhering to a rigid structure "to get things done" versus pursuing an emerging structure that would allow for better understanding of difference in the network. In this example, the commitment to difference served as a decision rule. Taken together, these practices reveal a tendency to destabilize practices that may reproduce socio-spatial differences within the network. They also point to an understanding of how power can become embedded in place. However, such tactics risk introducing new imbalances. Although movement from one location to another can assist in the destabilizing of sedimented relations, women within and across regions have unequal access to this mobility (Ong, 2006).

Our analysis also points to other difficulties involved with articulating a spatially responsive analysis of difference. Referring to a set of working groups in her network, Rae lamented, "Unfortunately, in my view, some of these temporary structures turned into

more permanent ones, beyond the duration of the project they were supposed to serve." While recognizing the importance of destabilizing conventional structures to engage women from different regions, Rae also noted a pull towards formalizing structures.

Discussion

We have argued for the need to examine transnational feminist praxis for insight into the contentious process of alliance-building across multiple axes of socio-spatial difference. In particular, we have highlighted the need to better understand the negotiation and enactment of socio-spatial differences within feminist transnationalism. A critical spatial perspective incorporates an understanding of the production of space as inevitably involving power and social control. From this realization emerges a second, key insight regarding the resistant potential of spatial praxis. Lefebvre's (1991) conception of counter-space describes a process by which groups reclaim spaces within dominant structures to exert greater self-determination within those structures. The case of TFNs provides a glimpse into the production of counter-spaces across lines of difference. Through their construction of spatial imaginaries, as well as within their organizing practices, TFNs create provisional spaces devoted to articulating forms of alterity. Our study suggests that the viability of these counter-spaces is highly contextual and often temporary. As noted in the analysis, constructing these spaces is not easy or problem-free. Thus, while the concept of counter-space contributes to theorizations of the transformative potential of spatial praxis (Shome, 2003), there exists the danger of unrealistically high expectations. One of the risks we have faced throughout our study includes romanticizing resistant forms of praxis (Ashcraft, 2006). While we develop the case of transnational feminist networking as an illuminating account of alliance-building across power lines, our study points to the need to better understand the potentially disempowering aspects of these practices (Carrillo Rowe, 2009). Thus, insights gained from a focus on counter-space should be carefully measured against the acknowledgment of how spatial praxis can further exacerbate existing relations of inequality. Importantly, the case of TFNs illustrates the need to grapple with the many ways in which the politicized histories of nation-state relationships and post/coloniality continue to organize the experience and expression of alliance-building (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Hegde, 1998; Prasad, 2003).

With this important caveat in mind, transnational feminist praxis provides a compelling example of the ethical value of openness to interruptions by otherness (Pinchevski, 2005). As such feminist transnationalism can inform theoretical developments in communication ethics more generally. TFNs not only encounter ethical dilemmas as they seek to build alliances across socio-spatial differences, but they also actively adopt a set of spatial practices designed to engage these differences. For example, TFNs seek to minimize northern hemisphere voices at various stages of projects. This not only reflects the attempt to manage the tendency for members of more powerful groups to speak for historically marginalized groups, but also highlights the value of an approach to difference that is informed by a critical, spatial analysis. Further investigation of the ethical consciousness of TFNs and other forms of transnational social movements has the potential to make significant contributions to ongoing concerns about communication ethics. More provocatively, the

case of TFNs challenges an extreme version of postmodern critique, which holds that cultural relativism reduces the ability for ethical collective action within the wider transnational context. In demonstrating a profound sensitivity and responsiveness to multiple and intersecting forms of socio-spatial difference, the case of TFNs creates hope for the development of ethical models of alliance-building appropriate to our time and place.

In this study, we have focused on an emergent, transnational form of organizing in which there is a purposeful attempt to organize for transformative change across diverse perspectives, peoples, goals, and geographies. While responding to recent calls to explore transnational and feminist forms of organizing and collective action (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005), our analysis is limited by a focus on seven TFNs, as well as by its focus on TFN-produced public discourses. Like much of the previous research on transnational feminist praxis, we too have privileged the practices of professionalized, English-speaking, Western-oriented TFNs. Thus, our analysis does not address the experiences of non-English-speaking, as well as less formalized and professionalized networks. In addition, our understanding of feminist transnationalism would benefit from future ethnographic analyses, including a focus on daily practice. While our findings have significant limitations, we hope they challenge researchers to consider the extent to which current theories account for the intersections of socio-spatial differences within transformative forms of organizing. While cultural diversity is a central lens through which scholars have tried to understand transnationalism, the tension-filled process of organizing across socio-spatial differences remains undertheorized and unexplained as a transformative practice.

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