



Regular article

Meeting at the edge of fear: Theory on a world scale

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Abstract

Rich and sophisticated analyses of gender have been produced around the postcolonial world. But the theory in this work gets little recognition in the current global economy of knowledge. Feminist theory needs an understanding of the coloniality of gender, seeing the gender dynamic in imperialism and the significance of global processes for the meaning of gender itself. The agendas of feminist theory are being re-shaped on issues that include violence, power and the state, identity, methodology, and the land. An alternative structure of knowledge is emerging that can re-shape the global terrain of feminist theory and its connections with practice.

Keywords

Feminism, gender, global South, postcolonial, theory, violence

*The evening will be under my disposal
and the meeting at the edge of fear is mine
I am another Buthayna
perfume springs from me
as well as love and diaspora*

(Saleha Obeid Ghabesh, 'Who Will Secure a Safe Haven for Buthayn?')

'A significant error in feminist scholarship': The problem

A quarter of a century ago, in a powerful paper called 'Feminism and Difference', Marnia Lazreg wrote of the treatment of women in colonised societies as

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‘a significant error in feminist scholarship’ (1988: 100). A split vision of the world, derived from colonialism and preoccupied with cultural difference, meant that women in Arab countries not only had to contest oppressive gender relations. They also had to break with the prevailing paradigm of feminist knowledge.

In an essay much better known to Anglophone feminists, ‘Under Western Eyes’ (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty also called attention to the colonial gaze in Northern gender scholarship. A decade after Lazreg’s paper, the Australian sociologist Chilla Bulbeck published *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms* (1998), tracing the vast diversity of women’s experience and political struggles across the postcolonial world, and arguing for a ‘braiding’ of multiple feminisms on a world scale.

Another decade on, reflecting on the importation of US feminist ideas into China in translations bankrolled by the Ford Foundation, Min Dongchao argued that ‘the power relation behind this global flow of feminist ideas, publications and activism should be revealed’ (2007: n.p.). Mara Viveros in Colombia argued for a de-colonising perspective on race, and South–South links, as essential for feminist theory (2007). Shailaja Fennell and Madeleine Arnot in Britain criticised the way global research on gender and education was dominated by Anglo-American concepts, and offered examples of Southern feminist challenges to ‘hegemonic gender theory’ (2008: 525). Reviewing scholarship on African women and gender relations, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Josephine Beoku-Betts and Mary Johnson Osirim cautioned about the importation of both postmodernist and Marxist theory, since both ‘produce biased and borrowed knowledge that mask existing gender subordination’ (2008: 334). Sondra Hale, examining the ‘migrating concept of gender’ in the Arab world, questioned North/South hierarchy in gender studies and especially the idea that gender studies in the South should be all about practical matters, not theory (2009).

Why this continuing unease? Feminist scholarship is often interested in the majority world. There is now a large research literature on globalisation and gender, and a whole library about gender and development. We have collections of global gender research (e.g. Bose and Kim, 2009). Northern feminist journals regularly publish issues about Latin American feminism, Arab feminism, etc., and seek out contributions from the global South. Thanks to scholars like Mohanty and Spivak (1988), and the rise of Black and Latina feminism, postcolonial feminism has become a fixture in North American curricula, and is now debated in Europe too (Reuter and Villa, 2009). Prominent feminist thinkers often now formulate their ideas taking global issues and postcolonial perspectives into account: a notable example is Sandra Harding’s reformulation of feminist epistemology in *Sciences from Below* (2008).

There is, nevertheless, a striking imbalance in this large literature. The great bulk of feminist writing that circulates internationally and discusses the global South is empirical, descriptive, or policy writing. If there is theory in it – conceptualisation, methodology, or explanatory frameworks – the theory almost always comes from the global North.

There is a good sociological reason for this. Feminist scholarship, whether in universities, state agencies or non-governmental agencies (NGOs), is produced by a workforce embedded in a global economy. The Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1997, 2002), who has provided the best analysis of this issue, identifies a global division of labour in the production of knowledge, with its roots in imperialism. The colonial world served as a rich source of data as well as material goods. Information and specimens were shipped back to the metropole (the French term for the imperial centre, the colonisers' homeland), which became the site of the *theoretical* moment in science. In the era of neoliberal globalisation, the metropole continues to be the main site of theoretical processing, now including corporate research institutes and databanks.

Intellectual workers in the periphery are pushed towards a stance that Hountondji calls 'extraversion'. To function successfully as a scientist one *must* read the leading journals published in the metropole, learn the research techniques taught there and gain recognition there. Career paths include advanced training in the metropole, attending conferences in the metropole, and, for the more successful, getting jobs in the metropole. The theoretical hegemony of the North is simply the normal functioning of this economy of knowledge.

This global economy of knowledge is startlingly at odds with the political history of gender relations. In fact the intellectuals of colonised societies and settler populations have a rich history of thought and debate about gender inequality, going as far back as Sor Juana in seventeenth-century Mexico. Contemporary with first wave feminism in the metropole were women like Aisha Taymour in Egypt, author of *The Mirror of Contemplating Affairs* (1892) which examined Qur'anic texts concerning women (Elbendary, 2002); and Raden Adjeng Kartini, author of the classic *Letters of a Javanese Princess* (Kartini, 2005), who despite her early death became the inspiration for generations of Indonesian feminists (Robinson, 2009). A close contemporary of Kartini, He-Yin Zhen, wrote remarkable analyses of men's power, women's labour, and feminist politics, in the radical intellectual ferment of late Qing China (Liu, Karl and Ko, 2013).

The women of the Fourth of May movement in China launched new writing projects on women's experience in the 1920s that represented a major cultural breakthrough (Ng and Wickeri, 1996). Huda Sharawi and other Arab women launched the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 (Badran, 1988). There were also men in the colonised and semi-colonial world thinking about gender reform. They included Qasim Amin in Egypt, author of *The Emancipation of Women* (1899), Jin Tianhe in China, author of *The Women's Bell* (1903), and Bankimchandra Chatterjee, famous as a novelist but also an advocate of gender equality and one of a number of nineteenth-century Bengali intellectual men who took up this cause.

Gender analysis of originality and power has continued to come from the global South. One example is Heleieth Saffioti's great pioneering work *A Mulher na Sociedade de Classes* (*Woman in Class Society*), published in São Paulo in 1969, before the famous texts of the Northern women's liberation movement. Another is the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (1975), a notable

statement of a social-relations view of gender (contemporary with Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' [1975] but more historically sensitive) and a path-breaking feminist analysis of the situation of men and patterns of masculinity. A third is Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own* (1994), which in depth of empirical knowledge, combined with integrative and imaginative power, is one of the greatest achievements of feminist scholarship in our time.

A striking proof of the fecundity of thought in the periphery has recently been provided by Francesca Gargallo Celentani in *Feminismos desde Abya Yala* (2012). Subtitled *Ideas y Proposiciones de las Mujeres de 607 Pueblos en Nuestra América*, this book documents discussions with the women of indigenous communities from Mexico to Chile, exploring local feminist ideas about coloniality, patriarchy, violence, religion, racism, internal colonialism, identity, environment, and more.

Saffioti's work is very well known in Brazil, and known in other parts of Latin America. It is little known elsewhere, and is very rarely mentioned in discussions of gender theory in the metropole. Mernissi's work is regarded in Anglophone gender studies as an exotic ethnography, and is never cited as theory. Agarwal's work is well known in development economics and increasingly in environmental debates but I have never seen it discussed in a Northern text of feminist theory. Little of the output from movements or NGOs, or official reports, gets read in the global metropole. Even the output of universities has limited presence in metropolitan forums.¹

The problem is not a deficit of ideas from the global periphery – it is a deficit of recognition and circulation. This is a structural problem in feminist thought on a world scale. If the only versions of theory that circulate globally and hold authority are those that arise from the social experience of a regional minority, there is a drastic impoverishment of gender studies as a form of knowledge.

Some scholars who recognise these patterns picture a stark dichotomy of South vs. North, indigenous knowledge vs. 'Western' knowledge. While the de-colonising anger driving these images is understandable, the empirical picture of gender studies is more complicated. Migration to the North may lead to critique as well as assimilation; hence the expatriate feminism subtly analysed by Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimū Ngarūiya Njambi (2005). Some expatriates travel back and forth, sponsor others in intellectual chain migrations, and organise joint projects and publications. Some intellectuals from the North spend time in the colonial world and are influenced by it. Maria Mies' pioneering *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) came out of this experience, as she notes in her autobiography.

And there is no question that Northern ideas can be used in new ways by Southern thinkers. Heleieth Saffioti made highly creative use of Marxist structuralism, and Bina Agarwal has made highly creative use of bargaining models. Kathy Davis's history of the circulation of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* notes the changes in themes and political assumptions made in the Latin American edition *Nuestras Corpos, Nuestras Vidas* (2007: 175–183). Across the Pacific, the Northern categories of political economy were re-worked for Philippine history in Elizabeth Uy Eviota's *The Political Economy of Gender* (1992: 172), emphasising the 'structural

coercion' that defines women's collective situation in the neocolonial economy. A recent example is the critique of the Northern canon and the re-working of concepts of difference by Colombian feminists in *El Género: Una Categoría útil para las Ciencias Sociales* (Arango and Viveros, 2011).

Yet with all these qualifications, metropolitan thought still provides the dominant theoretical framing for gender knowledge globally, and intellectual dependence is still the usual situation around the periphery. This is not good enough. The social experience of the colonised world is historically different, and the practical work of feminism, in the settings where the majority of the world's people live, requires theory that responds to this history. We need to conceive gender theory itself in new and globally inclusive ways.

This is a huge and complex task. What follows is a reconnaissance of three issues that immediately arise. First, recognising the global patterning of knowledge raises questions about the concept that underlies the whole field of knowledge – the idea of gender itself. Second, giving priority to the South requires us to think about the tasks undertaken by feminist intellectual workers, potentially rewriting the agenda of feminist theory. Third, we need to reconsider the epistemological and practical character of the knowledge project launched by feminism, and find a relevant *shape* for knowledge formation on a world scale.

The discussion that follows moves rapidly across a large terrain, and I apologise if it is sometimes rather breathless. I have grouped examples and citations by problem, not by place or period (which would be more usual). In doing this, I emphasise points of contact between the experience of different parts of the world, and encourage readers to think about the issues on a world, not just a regional, scale.

'At the imperial source': The coloniality of gender

In a powerful argument, Amina Mama shows that to understand violence against women in postcolonial Africa we must understand the violence of colonialism; and to understand that, we must start with 'gender relations and gender violence at the imperial source' (1997: 48). The Christian societies of Europe that launched the global conquest of the last five hundred years were already patriarchal and warlike. What Sarah Radcliffe, Nina Laurie and Robert Andolina (2004) have called 'the transnationalization of gender' has a very long history, and it is more illuminating to speak of the coloniality of gender. This term has been introduced by the philosopher María Lugones (2007, 2010). Though her account is very abstract, it provides a useful point of entry to the problem.

Lugones' argument draws on two schools of thought. One is the Latin American school of decolonial thought which has developed a powerful critique of Eurocentrism in the culture of the region. Lugones draws particularly on the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's account of the coloniality of power (2000), which has continued to structure South American realities in the centuries since direct colonial rule was replaced by new forms of global power. The other is a

long-running African discussion of indigenous knowledge and African philosophy (Hountondji, 2002). Some scholars, especially in the African diaspora, have argued that pre-colonial societies were not patriarchal or were not structured by gender, that feminism involves cultural colonisation, and that a distinctive African perspective on women is required (for example, Oyèwùmí, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2005). Lugones, making a sharp contrast between the colonial and the indigenous, speaks of gender as 'a colonial imposition' (2010: 748).

Such formulations are refreshing. They contest the mental habits that see the non-European world as the home of primitive gender dichotomy and unreconstructed patriarchy. However the empirical grounds are debatable. The benign view of indigenous society has attracted strong criticism within Africa, with other feminists challenging the factual claims, the cultural essentialism, and the implicit conservatism of the politics (Hendricks and Lewis, 1994; Bakare-Yusuf, 2004). It is difficult to deny the presence of gender and the existence of gender inequalities in most of the world's regions at the time when Western colonisation began, East Asia, India, North Africa, Australia, and the Pacific among them. We have to recognise the vigour of pre-colonial gender orders, the complex structures of gender relations as theorised by Agarwal, Mernissi, Saffioti and others, and the turbulent gendered history of colonisation.

Lugones' picture, then, is too stark; but the dynamic she has named is of great importance. It leads towards a profoundly historical concept of gender. Concrete evidence of gender divisions of labour and the cultural recognition of gender goes back to about 40,000 years ago (Balme and Bowdler, 2006). Human reproductive distinctions became enmeshed with social structure as anatomically modern humans spread around the planet. Plainly, gender relations have gone through many transformations in different environments in the millennia since. The idea of the coloniality of gender concerns the most recent global upheaval of power and populations, the five hundred years of European empire and the global capitalist economy.

As Valentine Mudimbe observes in *The Idea of Africa*, '[t]o establish itself, the new power was obliged to construct a new society' (1994: 140). A crucial part of this was the *dis*-ordering of gender relations. The widespread rape of indigenous women by the men of colonising forces both was an immediate violation of bodies, and broke down existing structures of sexuality, family and inheritance. Populations that survived conquest might be relocated in forced migrations, and families torn apart (the taking of indigenous children continued far into the twentieth century). Structures of gender authority were always re-built, often by missionaries. Workforces for colonial industries were sometimes taken over as they stood, but often were assembled by force, expropriation of land, or economic pressure. Rulers and settlers created systems of inheritance and tried to project their power through time. As soon as plunder turned into colonisation, then, reproductive bodies and gender relations were at the heart of the imperial project.

Mara Viveros in Colombia notes how colonialism wove together gender and racial hierarchies with peculiar intensity (2007). In colonial situations, gender and

race can hardly be regarded as separate variables. The meaning of race was constituted in gender dynamics – for instance, the rules against intermarriage between colonisers and colonised that hardened in most European empires in the second half of the nineteenth century. Conversely, meanings of gender were defined by beliefs about race, such as the hierarchies of masculinity that the British colonists defined among their Indian subjects (Sinha, 1995).

The creation of a colonial gender order was never a simple transplantation. Ashis Nandy points out in his classic study of the psychology of British rule in India that colonial conquest *created* new patterns of masculinity, both for the colonised and for the coloniser (Nandy, 1983). Robert Morrell's remarkable history of settler masculinity in colonial Natal traces the institution-building, the harsh and insistent definitions of gender, and the continuing violence against indigenous people, that was required (Morrell, 2001).

In the contemporary world, direct imperial rule has been replaced by financial power, corporate investment, differential trade relations, frequent but dispersed military interventions, development aid programmes and the multilateral state structure of the United Nations. Gender relations are embedded in, and constituted by, all of these structures. This is documented in many ways, including the extensive literatures on gender in development (Harcourt, 2009), and on gender in the globalised economy (Gottfried, 2013). For instance, gender hierarchies have underpinned exploitation in the factories of the 'south China miracle' and among the 'baomu', migrant domestic workers, of neoliberal Chinese cities (Kwan, 1998; Hairong, 2008). The changes may also be highly contradictory: as Sonia Montecino observes in neoliberal Chile, the modernisation of gender relations in privileged classes may be achieved by demanding archaic feminised labour from the popular classes (2001).

The transition to a postcolonial world involved gender dynamics as intimately as the creation of colonialism did. De-colonisation is often presented as a combat between groups of men, but women's presence in anti-colonial struggles has been shown by persistent feminist research (Mies, 1986; Ghousoub, 1987; Mama, 1997; Robinson, 2009). Sexism and violence within independence movements was a frequent part of the women's experience (Bennett, 2010), and most postcolonial regimes reneged fairly soon on the promise of equality. Some, like General Suharto's New Order in Indonesia, constructed very regressive places for women (Robinson, 2009). Nevertheless Marnia Lazreg, whose analysis of this process in Algeria is classic, notes that 'the very fact that women entered the war willingly was in and of itself a radical break in gender relations' (1990: 768). Shahnaz Rouse makes a similar argument about Pakistan, where women had been active in de-colonisation struggles, and where a repressive patriarchy was not given at the start (2004).

In these analyses, violence does not appear as a consequence of pre-existing gender arrangements, i.e. a 'dependent variable' as in most Northern research on gender-based violence (European Commission, 2010). Rather, violence is treated as an important part of the historical process that makes the gender order; violence is

in that sense *constitutive*. In a recent issue of *Feminist Africa*, Jane Bennett discusses homophobic and transphobic violence and muses that in such cases the connection between gender and violence changes shape: ‘gender, as practiced conventionally despite diversity of contexts, *is* violence’ (2010: 35; emphasis in original). Recognising constitutive violence as a general feature of the coloniality of gender may give us some grip on situations of extreme gender violence today.

In a long historical perspective, then, feminism in the colonial and postcolonial world signifies far more than ethnographic diversity to be added to Northern gender studies. It documents a great historical transformation in the social processes through which gender is constituted. It offers a path to rethinking gender itself, on a scale commensurate with the world we live in. If one side of the coloniality of gender is the gender dynamic within imperialism and contemporary globalisation, the other side is the significance of imperialism and neoliberal globalisation, and the world they have brought into being, for the constitution of gender.

‘Like bamboo shoots after a spring rain’: Changing the agenda

In an eloquent article about ‘awakening again’, the resurgence of feminism in 1980s China, Min Dongchao observes that despite the importance of activists’ contact with US feminists, there was a gulf between the historical experiences from which the two groups were working (2005). The coloniality of gender implies a changed problematic for gender theory, an expansion and re-shaping of intellectual agendas.

This is not easy to specify, for a “‘new and heterogeneous’” field of knowledge marked by multiple tensions, as Magdalena León puts it (2007: 23). However, thematic surveys of regional literatures, such as León’s in Latin America, Arnfred’s (2003) in Africa or Agnihotri and Mazumdar’s (1995) in India, provide starting-points. The issue of indigenous knowledge and its relation to Northern knowledge systems, mentioned in the previous section, is one direction where the agenda has to be expanded. Four others are easy to see in gender literatures from the South.

The first is **power and the state**. Under the influence of poststructuralism, recent Northern feminist thought has de-emphasised the concept of the state – to the point where, in one textbook of gender theory, the state does not even appear in the index. It is now much more common across the postcolonial world than in the metropole to meet definitions of gender as ‘a specific form of domination’, to quote the prospectus of the gender studies school at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (n.d. [c.2010]). The attention to large-scale violence in the picture of power has already been mentioned.

Debates about the state and its role in gender relations are vigorous in postcolonial contexts, and it is not hard to see why: state power was the central issue in de-colonising struggles, and postcolonial states have had their own gender

trajectories. Peripheral industrialisation created new privileged sites of men's employment, such as the oil-funded industries of Algeria (Lazreg, 1990) or the fragile motor industry in Australia. Dictatorships in Southern countries such as the Indonesian New Order created new configurations of masculinised power. Yet development strategies in the same countries might invest in girls' education on a large scale (Lazreg, 1990). Mernissi noted this, and ironically suggested that the state, as sponsor of economic development, had become the main threat to men's supremacy in Morocco (Mernissi, [1975] 1985).

The second issue concerns the concept of 'identity', so important in metropolitan feminism in the last generation. There are critics in the South who argue that identity questions matter little compared with poverty, power and violence (El Saadawi, 1997: 117–133). To others, identity does matter, but in a different way. Both Sonia Montecino (2001) in Chile and Elisa Nascimento (2007) in Brazil place *collective* identities at the centre. This concept is the core of a modern classic of feminism, Julieta Kirkwood's *Ser Política en Chile* (1986), which treats the problem of identity as the problem of transforming the group into a historical subject capable of contesting the specific oppression produced by patriarchy. This radically historicises the issue of identity rather than treating it as a philosophical or psychological problem.

This approach has been criticised. Nelly Richard argues that Kirkwood missed the diversity of sexuality and the importance of cultural contestation (Richard, [1993] 2004). Feminist discussions of identity and subjectivity in Latin America have changed under the influence of Northern poststructuralism (de Lima Costa, 2002, 2006). Yet the issue Kirkwood explored is widely relevant. Transforming collective consciousness and forming collective agency was beautifully described by Lu Yin in the Fourth of May movement in China, when new ideas sprouted up 'like bamboo shoots after a spring rain' (Ng and Wickeri, 1996: 112).

A third issue is **methodology**, a field impacted by postcolonial debates outside gender studies, notably Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). Feminist research too offers new departures in methodology. A notable example is the work by Chilean feminists to create a method for measuring progress (or lack of it) towards gender equality, the ICC – *Índice de Compromiso Cumplido* (index of achieved commitments). This index escapes the top-down logic of international league tables, and is explicitly tied to a politics of citizen control (Valdés, 2001). Another is the use of international online discussions sponsored by UNIFEM, with hundreds of participants from both North and South, as a methodology of theory. This approach to theorising grows out of activist experience, and addresses exclusion and coercion as well as cultural differences (Ackerly, 2001).

Perhaps the most striking methodological model has come from Islamic feminists. In *Le Harem Politique* (1991), Fatima Mernissi attempted a full-scale reinterpretation of the religious position of women. She looked critically at the way the tradition of 'Hadith' (attested statements of the Prophet) had been constructed by male scholars, and at their selective interpretations of the Qur'an. Islamic scholarship has long worked by critical scrutiny of canonical texts. Islamic feminism

argues that Qur'anic principles include gender justice, and that patriarchal customs in Muslim communities are non-Islamic intrusions. Engaging in *ijtihad*, interpretation, is not a scholastic irrelevance. It is a form of theorising central to Islamic intellectual life, and therefore a significant part of the global picture of gender theory.

The fourth issue is the **land**: a topic almost completely absent from Northern gender theory. Taking land is a central process in colonisation, with enormous consequences for the colonised. For instance, a sharp loss of women's authority accompanied the 'Great Mahele', the division of communal lands in Hawai'i in 1846–55 (Stauffer, 2004). Australian indigenous societies too were profoundly structured through their relations with the land, and that structuring included gender relations. Kinship and descent, gender divisions of labour, women's and men's ritual and art, all involved – and still involve – relations with the land, such as rights of use, environmental knowledge, routes of travel, and symbolic meanings of the landscape. An important collection of Aboriginal writing on land rights is named *Our Land is Our Life* (1997). Marcia Langton, one of the authors, argues in a paper on 'Grandmothers' Law' that women's system of law and ties to place were crucial, under the pressure of colonising violence (Langton, 1997).

The connection between gender and land is central to the work of Bina Agarwal. In her famous book, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (1994), and in a research agenda stretching over four decades (Agarwal, 2000, 2010), Agarwal provides a multi-stranded but remarkably clear account of how gender relations work in agricultural society – where nearly half the world's people, and a majority of the world's poor people, live. Her synthesis embraces gender divisions of labour, poverty, household bargaining, local political processes, patriarchal norms and their contestation, women's networks and activism, state strategies, and changing technologies in agriculture and forestry. It is, perhaps, the fullest contemporary demonstration of the multidimensional and dynamic character of gender relations.

Though based on close-focus research in South Asian communities, Agarwal's approach is easily adapted to other sites. Her work provides a powerful demonstration of the importance of land rights for change in gender relations, and has led to important contributions to environmental thinking. It shows – as dramatically as the rise of deconstructionist feminism in the global North – how a change of agenda can have far-reaching consequences for gender theory and feminist strategy.

The *combination* of these themes – and others emerging from postcolonial transformations – makes the case for a comprehensive rethinking of theory. This is important for the metropole too. Analyses from the South are already valuable for understanding gender dynamics in the North. The historical experience of massive disruption of gender orders helps in understanding the twenty-first-century impact of economic crisis and neoliberal politics within the metropole. Enriched feminist repertoires of methods and ideas help in understanding increasingly mobile and plural populations. The main thing metropolitan feminism stands to

gain, however, is the same that feminism around the global South does. It is the vision of a wider world, the dramatic expansion in what gender analysis can be.

Towards a feminist democracy of theory

To realise this possibility, we need both an idea of the shape that feminist knowledge on a world scale could take, and practices capable of moving towards it. Here my argument draws on current debates about the coloniality of knowledge, Southern theory and indigenous knowledge (Odora Hoppers, 2002; Connell, 2007). Three main images of the shape of global knowledge are revealed in these discussions.

The first is the **pyramidal model** implicit in the mainstream economy of knowledge. Theory is universal; it is mostly generated at the apex of the global system, sometimes with data input from the rest. Once formed, it trickles down to the rest. Scholars in the global South, and in marginal institutions of the global North, can participate in theory-making if they migrate to the apex, or learn its language and contribute from a distance. The difficulties in this model have already been mentioned in this article. It discards much of the actual wealth of knowledge formation, it forces Southern experience into Northern moulds, and it legitimises stark inequalities within the world's intellectual workforce.

The second might be called **mosaic epistemology**. Separate knowledge systems sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture or historical experience, and each having its own claims to validity. Mosaic epistemology offers a clear alternative to Northern hegemony and global inequality, replacing the priority of one knowledge system with respectful relations among many.

However, a mosaic approach also faces major difficulties, pointed out by Bibi Bakare-Yusuf in her careful critique of a well-known Afrocentric text. Cultures and societies are dynamic, not fixed in one posture (Bakare-Yusuf, 2004). Pre-colonial societies were not silos, but interacted with each other over long periods of time, absorbed outside influences, and had internal diversity. Uma Narayan (1998) similarly reflects on the problem of essentialist treatments of culture that use iconic gender practices such as *sati* and assume uniformity within a culture. These arguments are reinforced when we recognise the massive disruption of existing gender orders. As Jane Bennett in South Africa points out, much feminist research is done in conditions where 'relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise' are the *norm* not the exception (2008: 7).

Theory adequate to what Teresa Valdés (2007) calls the emancipatory interest in knowledge *on a world scale* requires a more interactive epistemology. Such an approach has to recognise both the diversity of local gender orders, and the coloniality of gender.

The third image of knowledge emphasises horizontal interactions, and might be called a **solidarity-based epistemology**. The picture is one of mutual learning on a world scale, in which different formations of knowledge are respected but enter into educational relations with each other. These relations include critique, since

education always requires active engagement and evaluation. Solidarity, like education, implies a concern with social justice – the principle that prioritises the interests of the least advantaged. While unequal gender orders dominate the world, while new forms of gender exploitation and gender violence are still coming into existence, that principle alone will provide energy for solidarity-based knowledge projects.

Such a view of knowledge is implicit in many current discussions, including Bulbeck's idea of 'braiding' feminisms, and Bennett's observations on methodology for feminist research in Africa (Bulbeck, 1998; Bennett, 2008). In this perspective the continuing unpredictable interweaving of ideas and experience around the majority world is an asset, not a difficulty. This is not to say that building solidarity is ever easy, given the history of colonisation, constitutive violence and the huge inequalities of the contemporary world. Aileen Moreton-Robinson shows some of the reasons in her critique of white feminism in Australia from an Aboriginal viewpoint: institutional orthodoxies, entrenched racisms and social distance (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Making a solidarity-based epistemology work requires a practice of seeing gender *fundamentally* in the perspective of coloniality. Within Northern knowledge institutions this means far-reaching changes in curricula. How many gender studies programmes now get by with just one course, or even one lecture, on 'postcolonial feminisms'? It means changes in the definition of scholarly competence, towards a model of world competence. In the periphery, it means displacing ingrained habits of deference to the metropole. It means new projects of building South–South links – never easy, though attempts are under way (e.g. Wieringa and Sívori, 2013). It is not enough to have work from India, South Africa, the Maghreb, Brazil, Mexico and Australasia separately. It is by seeing this work *together* that we become conscious of a body of knowledge with a scope and sophistication comparable to the output of the metropole.

Much of the knowledge about gender arising in the majority world is activist knowledge (Conway, 2011), rather than the product of academic reflection. To give one example: in the early 1990s a retired accountant, Esther Chávez, was dismayed at the number of women whose dead and often mutilated bodies were being found in the desert around Ciudad Juárez, near the Mexico–US border. She launched a personal research project to document the murders and demand action. In the face of growing violence and official indifference this became a movement, eventually an international campaign, to stop the femicide (Chávez, 2010). Such change projects demand more than the categorical formulas and statistics that pass for a 'gender perspective' in official development programmes, the 'technification of knowledges of gender' identified by Teresa Valdés (2007).

The relation between academic and activist knowledge is an old issue in feminist politics, which takes a more hopeful shape when imagined globally. Regional and global networks have some capacity to hold different arenas together, and have attracted increasing interest from feminist thinkers. Valentine Moghadam, Millie Thayer and others have documented counterpublics and networks that address

issues ranging from structural adjustment and trade to lesbian and gay rights, the position of women in Muslim-majority countries, and men's involvement in gender equity (Moghadam, 2005; Tambe and Trotz, 2010; Thayer, 2010; www.menengage.org). Mara Viveros (2007) suggests the growing importance of South–South links for feminist theory; Ashwini Tambe (2010) offers a model of transnational feminist studies and notes that even locally-based feminisms may have distant links.

The workforce of gender research in the majority world, plus South–South linkages across this workforce, plus the heterogeneous counterpublics that need and use this knowledge, represent an alternative to the global economy of knowledge dominated by the metropole. This alternative is still developing. It is not yet strongly institutionalised, and its resources are far less than the mainstream's. Many parts are vulnerable to violence and dispersal. But it is important to say that this alternative exists, even in limited forms.

To dramatise the issue a little, I suggest that we are moving from a Northern-centred global economy of knowledge with a pyramidal epistemology to a Southern-centred global democracy of knowledge with a solidarity-based epistemology, where theory is produced and recognised at many sites, and thus brought closer to popular struggles and everyday life.

As this structure develops, it will certainly produce multiple types of feminist theory. Brazilian universities with journals like *Estudos Feministas* and *Cadernos Pagu* will produce one kind of theory; Muslim feminisms engaged in the contestation of *ijtihad* will produce another; Indian engagements with land and environment yet another. There cannot be a uniform 'Southern theory of gender'. What is possible is a differently-structured world process of producing and circulating knowledge. To make this happen does not need a shared doctrine. It needs overlapping visions of gender justice, arenas of connection and mutual learning, and enough sense of solidarity to make these arenas work.

Which brings me to the poem with which this article began. In 2002 Saleha Obeid Ghabesh, a poet from the Gulf states, published 'Who Will Secure a Safe Haven for Buthayn?' based on the story of a medieval poet. The princess Buthayna bint al-Mutamed was enslaved during the collapse of the Muslim kingdom of Andalusia; she then negotiated with her suitor and her father a new path in life. The modern poet, in a complex act of solidarity, reaches across thousands of kilometres and centuries of time to find parallels with the subjugation of women and the position of Arab societies now. She uses the rich resources of the Arabic poetic tradition to suggest both the need for new departures, and the fear and hesitation involved (Gohar, 2008). The symbolism has wide relevance. The meeting at the edge of fear is ours, as well.

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Note

1. To take just one example, see the last five years of *Feminist Theory*: the majority of papers are from institutions in North America and Europe.

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