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A discrepant conjuncture: feminist theorizing across media cultures

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A scene in Sandra Schäfer and Elfe Brandenburg's *Passing the Rainbow* (2008) exposes a compelling predicament in transnational feminist media studies: the search for connections, comparisons or adjacencies between feminist media objects in disparate locations around the globe. Schäfer and Brandenburger's experimental documentary and art project reflects on and theorizes the media landscape of post-Taliban Afghanistan and the scene in question reveals an interview with an activist from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) about the media activism the group undertakes. In it, the interviewer asks whether RAWA works with other feminist media organizations, referring obliquely to the work of the Self-Employed Women's Association's *Video SEWA* program in India. The question was rooted in an understandable desire to see the connections between the activist use of video for self-empowerment across national and cultural spheres. The RAWA representative, however, responds as follows:

We have no direct organizational contacts with them in the sense that they can force their views on us and we have to conform to them. Unquestionably, a person's thoughts and mentality depend on his or her social environment. In less developed countries, of which Afghanistan is one, women have been told for years that they should only perform certain activities. In Europe, women already engage in all these activities. [...] They say: "Women can neither do agricultural work nor work as an engineer!" But that is simply not true! What a European woman can do, an Afghan woman can do, as well. There are no mental or anatomical differences between us. A European woman, for example, has very different expectations and ideas. Maybe her notion of equality is different. A European woman who works in a factory demands the same wages as a man. But the Afghan woman doesn't even think about such demands. And why not? Because in Afghanistan there aren't even the factories in which women could work. Even if some women in Afghanistan do not yet have the self-confidence, for some the main issue is finding work!

The RAWA activist's response not only reverses the interviewer's question (shifting registers from cooperation to cooptation), but also used the opportunity presented by a question about transnational cooperation to discuss the failures of equality-based models of feminist politics.ⁱ Her statement thus poses a challenge both to the presumption of solidarity among feminist media activists around the world, but also to the search for affinities or resemblances between media works and media activism in the global system.

The caution about cooptation is to a great extent grounded in RAWA's experience working with Western feminist partners, particularly the Feminist Majority Foundation. In the spring 2002 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, under the new ownership of the Feminist Majority, an article entitled "A Coalition of Hope: How the International Feminist Community Mobilized around the Plight of Afghan Women" proposed that the Feminist Majority itself was the primary force behind the shift of U.S. policy toward the Taliban. The Feminist Majority Foundation Board

Chair Peg Yorkin stated, “If we had not prevented the U.S. from recognizing the Taliban, think of how much worse this all would be.”ⁱⁱⁱ In an open letter to the magazine, RAWA accused it of being a “mere mouthpiece of hegemonic, US-centric, ego driven corporate feminism,” and emphasized RAWA’s role in providing education, relief, medical assistance, and political organization for over two decades in Afghanistan.ⁱⁱⁱ

The RAWA activist’s statement serves to highlight the fact that feminist groups around the world are not equal -- the terms of their exchange may be unequal, as may be their access to resources, and their political weight at the national and transnational levels. Likewise, demands for equality may be articulated along different axes (of class, for example, rather than gender), or equality may not serve the interests of feminist struggles at all. Feminist media activists frequently work parallel to one another, within distinctly different economic, political and social frameworks, and through media whose conditions of production, distribution and reception are incommensurable. Intersections or sites of cooperation occur through the difficult work of political alliance, the circulation of media objects in transnational circuits or through new media platforms, and through the very labor of feminist scholarship that attempts to understand the global dimensions of feminist media production, circulation and spectatorship.

As feminist scholars of global media, we are driven to identify the considerable gaps in our knowledge and practices at the scale of the global, the transnational or the cross-cultural. This very scale demands an imaginative leap across specific instances in the interest of a critical scholarship that understands and engages the effects of an expansive global capitalism, in the interest of forging sites of solidarity and resistance, and in the service of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty terms a “feminism without borders.” Such scales of analysis (in media, activism and academics) focus on questions of production and reception in cultures of exchange, attending specifically to the differential relationships in the global system and the uneven terms of cooperation, even as the aim of scholarship and cultural production remain to discover possibilities for alliances, alternative histories or new identity positions. Mohanty argues that feminist analyses that cross national, racial or ethnic boundaries produce and reproduce difference through the naturalization of analytic categories, categories that presumed cross-cultural validity, arguing instead that unity needs to be struggled towards by “uncovering alternative, non-identical histories that challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history.”^{iv}

For the transnational feminist media scholar (and indeed for a filmmaker in political solidarity with RAWA), the connections, for example, between RAWA and SEWA are generative for a “feminism without borders,” just as the conflict between RAWA and Feminist Majority Foundation serves a critical warning, an example of an expansive and reductive transnational feminism searching not for instances in a cultural-historical conjuncture so much as family resemblances.^v A rejection of familial, analogical, or (worse) presumptive associations between media activists and video works around the globe raises the very question of how scholars might find productive intersections in feminist activism within the global system. To focus merely on local cultural production obscures the manner in which, in Stuart Hall’s terms, “historical processes with different time-scales and trajectories [...] may be convened in the same conjuncture.”^{vi} The current context of globalization, neoliberal politics and late

capitalism focuses our theoretical attention on both the very real and immediate effects of a globalizing political economy, as well as the relational geographies of power at the local, national and transnational scale. In theorizing the contemporary conjuncture, however, we must be attentive to discrepancy, to multiplicity of the contexts of globalization as, in Lawrence Grossberg's terms, "overlapping and competing geographies of locations, places, and diagrams, with their different logics of boundaries (coding), connectivities (territorializing), and stratifications."^{vii} A "discrepant conjuncture" signals also the limits of a conjuncture to account for all historical processes, and specifically those (subaltern) processes that operate outside the logics of globalization, capitalism and liberal democratic forces.

The RAWA activist's caution provides an important guideline for transnational feminist scholarship: the incommensurability of different feminist struggles, and thus the specificity of the aesthetic and representational strategies mobilized in media work, are themselves generative of feminist theorizing in the globalized present. Rather than attempting to fill the gaps in our knowledge and practice, then, these gaps themselves might shed light on the differential positions of women in the global system, and the uneven character of cross-cultural exchange. Such an approach entails a complex understanding of the material, cultural, and political conditions of global contact *and* of the discrepancies that continue to make contact impossible. The work of feminist scholars of new media, therefore, might be to make manifest these discrepancies as theoretical, cultural and political objects.

The necessity of such a practice is evidenced by the compelling desire to examine RAWA and SEWA together, to work at elucidating in theory the discrepant conjuncture between these two associations. The drive behind such an endeavor is not a taken for granted universalism, but an articulation of what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls "universal aspirations."^{viii} Rather than hastily dismiss universals in favor of culturally specific analyses, Tsing argues that universals allow scholars, activists, and cultural producers to conceptualize the global, even as a fiction, imaginative act or aspiration. Drawing from Gayatri Spivak's compelling statement that 'we cannot not want the universal, even as it so often excludes us,' Tsing argues for a scholarship of global connection through "generalization" from small details, a generalization that involves, first, a unification of the field of inquiry through "spiritual, aesthetic, mathematical, logical or moral principles," and second, collaboration among different knowledge seekers to turn disparate forms of knowledge into compatible ones.^{ix} Such collaboration involves patient, provisional work of *bridging* and *negotiating across* incompatible differences. Tsing observes, however, that both features of generalization mask one another: "The specificity of collaborations is erased by pre-established unity; the a priori status of unity is denied by turning to its instantiation in collaborations."^x The interplay of these two forms of generalization, according to Tsing, define the global scale.

Rather than resolve the tension between universalization and negotiation, Tsing uses the term *friction* to describe the unstable, unequal and creative forms of interconnection across difference. She notes, "Friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power."^{xi} Her method: ground the work of universalizing in specific historical contexts, through the unstable and shifting arrangements of power/knowledge in the global system; likewise, frame the work of negotiation and collaboration in the aspirational and unfulfilled imaginary of a (perpetually unachieved)

universalism. The work of encounters across difference in the world thus becomes a model for critical and cultural production, the careful theorization of discrepant conjunctions rather than a single-minded cultural explanation.

Tsing's concept of friction becomes a powerful metaphor for transnational feminist media production, circulation and criticism, for the entangled technologies, politics, geographical locations, semiotic codes, and subjective processes involved in visualizing sites of struggle across local contexts. Friction challenges the models of proximity, instantaneity, speed and flow, networks and webs that govern the more utopic visions of communications technologies. These latter metaphors ally new media with the discourses of freedom, self-actualization and transparency that governed (capitalist) models of globalization from the 1990s onward. The term 'friction' is both material and metaphorical: it highlights the difficult work of transnational translation across media cultures, the specific encounters of cameras and web applications, technical training, technology transfer, censorship, incommensurable platforms and exhibition spaces in which media objects emerge. Metaphorically also, friction points to the generative and repressive aspects of global connection through new media channels. Tsing stresses that friction is not a metaphor for resistance: "Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction."^{xii} Friction is productive of global connection but also importantly impedes the smooth operation of global power.

The focus here on a "discrepant conjuncture" of media activists, cultural objects, and political processes functions as an invitation to conceptualize the gap in our knowledge and practices as precisely the space of friction in and across transnational spheres. On what grounds—through what generalizable categories—might RAWA and SEWA may be compared? Through the lens of video as a mediating voice in women's political activism? Through their common social justice work? The search for a common lens provides a generalized model for approaching the two organizations, even as the concepts vital to this scholarship necessarily shift from one context to the next, are fleshed out in frictional, paradoxical or competing terms in different contexts. The critical ground of such a feminist media analysis lies not in exposing a common underlying structure in each case—and thus identifying a form of mimesis in aesthetic strategies or political actions—but in examining a generalized category across incommensurable social, cultural and political spaces. It also involves a careful parsing of the material connections and discrepancies to illuminate the historical and cultural differences between media activism, even as one might envision and enact common political and cultural projects across these differences. Questions emerge not only about the vastly different political reality of contemporary Afghanistan and India, but also about the position of women in public life, including within the international division of labor.

RAWA was founded in 1977 by a number of Afghan women intellectuals as a political and social organization fighting for human rights and social justice in Afghanistan. It aimed to involve Afghan women in social and political activities, and fought for the establishment of a democratic and secular government in Afghanistan.^{xiii} After the coup and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, RAWA became involved in the resistance movement, and separated itself from the Islamic fundamentalists who were fighting against the Soviet occupation. They played an active role in providing basic services for women and children—many of whom were refugees in camps in Pakistan—under the repressive regime of the Taliban. Their work

providing schools and hostels for Afghan children and a hospital for refugee women and children in Quetta was largely framed by the resistance to the brutal conditions of women brought upon by occupation and political repression.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), by contrast, is a trade union, started in 1972 out of the Textile Labour Association, India's oldest and largest union of textile workers founded in 1920 by a woman, Anasuya Sarabhai. The textile labor movement drew from Mahatma Gandhi's successful strike of textile workers in 1917, and formed a Women's Wing in 1954 to assist women in mill workers' households. By 1968, the Association offered classes in sewing, knitting, embroidery, spinning, typing and stenography. Finding the exploitation of women workers still rampant, and the rights of self-employed women largely unprotected, the leaders of the TLA and the Women's Wing, on an appeal from women who worked as used garment dealers, formed the Self-Employed Women's Association in 1971. Its initial aims were to represent poor and self-employed women workers. Their main goals are to mobilize women to demand work security, income security, food and social security, meeting basic needs such as health care, childcare, and shelter. They aim to organize women to be self-reliant, both economically and politically (in their decision-making ability).^{xiv}

While both organizations emerge—led by women—in the 1970s, the extension of the labor movement in post-colonial India to the informal sector (a labor movement that had its roots in decolonization) meant that the video activism undertaken by SEWA served to build unity among self-employed women and voice explicit demands for social justice and economic rights. The members of Video SEWA included women working in the informal sector (head loaders, vegetable vendors, home-based workers), many of whom produced documentaries representing their living conditions and political struggles. They formed a cooperative in 2002 to produce educational and informational video programs to shed light on the social and economic conditions of self-employed women, to provide information about the services provided by SEWA (including healthcare and childcare), and to bring awareness to women in an effort to create solidarity and mobilize women workers. Their videos include documentary accounts of the conditions of self-employed women (as vendors and hawkers, home-based garment workers, or agricultural workers), alongside informational videos about the work of SEWA in organizing self-employed women into a worker's movement. They include information about unions and cooperatives, about microfinance, or housing projects. Ultimately, Video SEWA aims to provide a tool for communication between groups of self-employed women, and between them and policy planners and government officials.

RAWA's use of video, by contrast, is constituted by the persistent and chronic state of emergency in Afghanistan, under Soviet occupation and through the multiple human rights violations perpetrated by the Taliban regime. The use of video activism served to provide evidence of human rights violations perpetrated by the Taliban, and resisted both the ban on image making and on women's participation in public life. The graphic images of beatings, executions and stonings served largely to bring international pressure to bear against the Taliban regime, as well as to solicit material support for their social work. The video work is thus largely aimed at an external audience, international human rights organizations and the international media. The videos and reports are largely distributed through RAWA's website, although they are also included in some of RAWA's publications.

Yet SEWA and RAWA both work with women largely cast out from the structures of democratic citizenship and wage labor. The work of visualizing their experiences, of mobilizing collective experience stems from their location in an impossible space, both within the structures of global capitalism (as the last instance in a chain of super-exploitation) and illegible and unrecognizable as political or economic subjects (either through the political ban on public life or through the economic exclusions in the informal economy). The generalizable category—the speculative universal described by Tsing above—turns out to be not the media activism that makes both groups appear to transnational audiences, but rather the gendered nature of economic exclusion at the heart of their social justice work.

Interestingly, this fact was laid bare in the very statement by the RAWA activist with which I began, and in its invocation of the work involved in transnational feminist media scholarship. Her emphasis on the impossibility of demanding income equality in Afghanistan (“the main issue is finding work!”) signals the importance of examining how women are differently situated in and by global processes. The media activism each group undertakes serves as an important site of generative friction, rather than as the generalizable lens through which the feminist media scholar might undertake cross-cultural comparison. For RAWA’s framing of human rights abuses conforms more readily to the documentary function of investigative journalism, while SEWA’s documentary projects are modeled more fully on participatory models of community video. The RAWA activist’s statement served to unseat the notion of the commonality of oppression as well as of the specificity of discourses of empowerment. Her warning to the interviewer serves to remind the scholar that the use of media in activist work engages the specificity of the political struggle undertaken. And further, that common strategies or aesthetics may obscure the differences between the same term across contexts. The frictions between media activists and media objects in the global sphere invite scholars to write (rather than paper over) the discrepancies between the social, political, aesthetic and cultural worlds in which media emerge in meaningful imaging processes. The important gaps—the incommensurable ways in which imaging practices function in specific contexts—rather than disabling transnational feminist media work, become rather the generative site of feminist critical engagement and an important predicament for thinking through the multiple contradictions and multiplicities of feminist politics in a globalized present.

ⁱ For further discussion of the critical challenge the RAWA activist poses to a “feminism without borders,” and to an extended consideration of the circulation of RAWA’s videos in transnational media circuits, see my discussion in the fourth chapter of *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Amy Farrell and Patrice McDermott, “Claiming Afghan Women: The Challenge of Human Rights Discourse for Transnational Feminism” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, eds. (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 107-116.

^v The special issue of *Ms. Magazine* which discussed the work of the international feminist community in addressing the “plight of Afghani women” also included a “Tree of Feminist Life: A Listing of National Organizations and Networks” from 1858 to 2002. Obscured by *Ms. Magazine*’s family tree was clearly the “family dramas” between organizations, but also the exclusivity of the very organizational schema employed, a genealogical model focused on the metaphor of the family. See <http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/treetable.asp>.

^{vi} Stuart Hall, “The Meaning of New Times” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, Eds. (London: Routledge, 1996), 230.

^{vii} Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 60.

^{viii} Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 88-9.

^x *Ibid*, 89.

^{xi} *Ibid*, 5.

^{xii} *Ibid*, 6.

^{xiii} See <http://www.rawa.org/goals.htm>.

^{xiv} See http://www.sewa.org/About_Us.asp.