

## How can we make networks of solidarity that work across different kinds of regimes of oppression?

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The question of how to make networks of solidarity that work across different kinds of regimes of oppression has been discussed by feminist scholars around the world (cf. Mohanty 2003; 2013; Dufour, Masson & Caouette 2010, Stone Mediatore 2003; Kaplan, Alarcon & Moallem 1999). Efforts to make feminist unity in the name of gender studies across different sets of borders also inevitably unveils the cracks and differences dividing feminist communities. How do we account for this while doing solidarity that can cut across regimes of oppression? We had the opportunity to discuss the conditions of possibility for doing border- crossing scholarly cooperation at the conference *Girlhood in the Turbulent Times: Gender Equality as a Cultural Norm and Social Practices* in Moscow on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2017. We raised questions regarding the ways in which we can challenge the different kinds of brick walls that we experience in institutional, national and other contexts, and that we need to get up against for doing transnational cooperation in the field of gender- and girlhood studies. In earlier work, we have written about the internal activism and strategies of ambivalence we need to adopt in order to navigate the changing academic landscape in order to make gender studies part of our university at all (Fahlgren, Giritli-Nygren & Sjöstedt Landén 2015; Sjöstedt Landén & Giritli-Nygren 2016). International networking practices are idealized in Swedish academia through the promotion of ‘internationalisation’ for excellence (Mählck 2013), but there is a strong need to critically assess the conditions and possibilities for feminist scholarship that arise in the landscape of internationalisation across different regimes of oppression.

The examples brought up at the conference with attempts to do border-crossing work spanned between cooperation with scholars acing in northern and southern hemispheres as well the north and northernmost north constituting a community of ‘northern circumpolar’ relations of feminist scholarly cooperation. We have experiences of working in a variety of international networks of feminist scholars and activists that aims to transgress boundaries of academic and national regimes through efforts of setting up northern circumpolar connections as well as connections and communities of feminist scholars crossing the equator. It is therefore not to say that this is something we are doing ‘elsewhere’. Philomena Essed (2013) points out that social justice work is a kind of leadership and we align with this thought, but how do we actually do it? In this paper we would like to stress the need to examine our own positionality and conditions of possibility for going forward with such work discussing strategies, challenges and the openings.

## Feminist alliances across boundaries

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013) has stated that it has never been so difficult, yet so necessary, to create feminist alliances across geographic, cultural, social and religious boundaries. A feminism, and therefore a political work for social justice, should recognize and take place across these borders. Mohanty draws on theoretical concepts borrowed from Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theory and by criticizing, combining and developing them she builds what she calls a 'feminism without borders' or 'politics of solidarity' – this particular feminism or solidarity aims to decolonize knowledge (especially the knowledge produced by white middleclass western feminists) and to criticize capitalism. In order to develop a politics of solidarity border crossings are necessary.

Solidarity has been a key concept in the history of feminism, and appears even to be one of the few concepts that have not yet been appropriated and redefined by and for neo-liberal philosophy. In the Forum for Gender Studies at Mid Sweden University we have tried to work with the concept of solidarity by including questions such as: Are there other ways to see? Other communities? We have wanted to listen to other stories, but also asked others: do you want to hear my story? We have wanted to explore what it means to walk beside/alongside (Söderberg & Nyhlén 2015). Conversation and an open and active listening is an alternative social relationship to the 'leaderisms' of neoliberal times (Fahlgren, Giritli-Nygren & Johansson 2016). This is central for solidarities cross different inequality regimes. The feminist solidarity must give feminisms across borders equal opportunities to fight for and defend not only one's own right but also in and through this right of others. As feminists, we have the responsibility to promote a society beyond ourselves, but we also have the responsibility to act in the present, a responsibility to be a voice against the extreme individualism and competition, against sexism and racism and fascism and for disturbing and resist the communities such regimes of oppression creates.

We want to believe that feminism still has the power to build alliances that can constitute a counterforce. It does not mean that we must strive for unity. When Mohanty (2013) explores how her own writing has been picked up or translated across borders it is possible to see the differences through the inequality regimes at work at the three sites, Sweden, Mexico and Palestine. In all of the three sites, her writings are picked up to identify analyses of domination and resistance from the standpoint of immigrant, indigenous and/or women of color as key to radical feminist praxis, but in different formations – racism and anti-capitalism/labor movements in Sweden, colonialism and racism/indigenous agency in Mexico and in Palestine colonialism/militant indigenous feminism (Mohanty 2013:986). The task is to recognize and undo the ways in which we colonize and objectify our different histories and cultures, and thus collude with hegemonic processes of domination and rule (Ibid:125).

Mohanty (2013) writes that the 'systemic analyses of domination and resistance' that has been 'key to radical feminist praxis' in Sweden has been about racism and anticapitalism/labor movements. A lot of the (hegemonic) feminist efforts have been directed towards the concept of gender equality and especially in terms of labour market relations. In

our own research we have tried to productively rethink the Swedish gender equality norm and address the importance of not turning it into a “thing” and instead see it as an arena of political contestations (Giritli Nygren, Fahlgren & Johansson 2016, Sjöstedt Landén & Olofsdotter 2016).

Furthermore, Sweden is often held up as an example of successful ‘state feminism’. However, anti-racist feminist scholars such as Diana Mulinari, Irene Molina and Paulina de los Reyes have done extremely important work to criticize the articulations of the ‘women friendly state’ that has mostly been ‘friendly’ to white middle class women and noted that the social democratic welfare state has not distributed its graces evenly among women. However, neither the women friendly state nor the anti-racist feminist movements has commonly incorporated indigeneity and Saami feminism and activism. Mohanty (2013) compares Sweden to Mexico and Palestine where indigenous feminist movements have played an important role in the feminist ‘landscape’. The tendencies of not wanting to know or just ignore the conditions for living in Saami communities, or even acknowledging Saami identity as an important part of society, needs to be resisted by contemporary feminism by insisting, as Knobbloch & Kuokkanen (2015:277) argue; ‘on incorporating a critical examination of racism and colonialism as an inseparable part of all feminist theory and practice’. In our own work we have participated in different projects attempting to deconstruct the hegemonic Swedish feminism and gender equality as way to put solidarity at work as a kind of academic activism. Essed stresses that committing to social justice in our scholarly work is making clear choices (Essed 2013). It does not ‘just happen’, since it goes against the grain of mainstream communities. This could also hold for indigeneity in the Swedish context. Essed also notes that there is a greater sense of being ‘pushed’ into doing anti-racist work for black women scholars.

Being self-reflexive, the Forum for Gender Studies at Mid Sweden University which we often call a room of our own, is a very ambivalent place (Fahlgren et al., 2015). It is a separatist room where we want feminist scholars to be able to feel at ease, but also where normalization of gender studies and (academic) feminism takes place. It can be a very convenient room to be taken for granted at the same time as it can be frightening that so much is taken for granted. Sometimes we describe ourselves as an ‘inclusive environment’, but perhaps it is that we are inclusive in a fairly homogeneous manner. The construction of such rooms in universities has been based on arrivals of particular (female) bodies that can pass as acceptable in malestream academic practices (Stanley & Wise, 2000), and this continues to play into the reification of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) and the middle-class contours of the ‘proper’ feminist academic. Indeed, the ways in which stories of feminist achievements in academia and other rooms are told have become invested in particular writings of feminist history that it is most important to challenge (Hemmings, 2011). We have in previous studies argued for the need to keep our analysis open to the entanglement of processes that construct privileged positions and simultaneously marginalize our everyday doings as gender studies scholars in complex ways (Fahlgren et al., 2015). Many of our everyday doings presuppose that we abide by a series of explicit as well as unspoken rules.

The deconstruction of dominant intellectual traditions and practices, particularly by feminists, has proven useful in exposing hegemonic spatial imaginations and in analyzing the construction of gendered regimes of power vis-à-vis cultural norms, the state, and colonial power relations. Attempting to do gender studies over different regimes of oppression and across national borders help us to reflect over what becomes taken for granted and to move the positions of feminist scholarship forward at the university. When we realize that our seemingly open feminist academic gatherings can also be limiting, we can be aware of how these limitations are either kept beyond sight also of ourselves, or defended if they come into view. We must, as Ahmed (2012: 191) puts it, make visible the blockages and restrictions that occur in our institutional life, and remind ourselves that just because we have come to occupy a privileged position in the academia does not mean that we can ignore what it takes to create and sustain it. It is important that we as gender scholars does not ignore to acknowledge such limitations as well as the possibilities that an institutionalized feminist platform has. We therefore need to explore further the ways in which we can share this feminist space beyond the borders of the university as well as beyond national contexts.

## Sharing institutional space to explore and counteract nationalism from feminist standpoints

The current situation of neoliberal capitalism, nationalism, anti-feminism and racism poses similar (but not identical) threats to different parts of the world, which in turn structures parallel but locally performed resistance. At this very moment, the one thing that is of our major concern is the growing forces of nationalism all around the world. The present expansion of right wing populism and social conservatism which we observe in Europe, Russia, the US and elsewhere feeds on fears concerning migration and economic instability, but also on anxieties around gender relations and changes in the sphere of sexuality and family. In some cases, e.g. in Hungary such arguments became an important part of ruling party's rhetoric and policy making (see e.g. Barat 2011). While opposition to feminism and gender equality policies is not a new phenomenon, recent developments mark a distinctly new phase of "culture wars", strengthening or in some cases establishing new "regimes of oppression" that gender scholars and feminist activists need to respond to. These regimes of oppression include personal attacks on scholar, cutting funding for research on gender and attempts to de-legitimize gender studies as "ideology", a danger to society's well-being and harmonious development. We can also see how the struggles women have gone through to achieve (gender)equality have become co-opted: even though nationalist movements usually propose solutions and policies which are against women's interest, they often make use of a gender equality rhetoric (see e.g. Mulinari 2016 for the case of Sweden). We therefore argue that it is necessary to challenge and deconstruct the merging of the notion of nation and gender, we need ways to understand these struggles as challenges that transcend nationalities and national identities.

Our standpoint is that one of the core tasks of gender studies is to put forward fantasies, visions and ideas about alternative economic and social futures that go across nationalism and

other regimes of oppression, especially in the era of segregation and deepening class inequalities (Martinsson et al. 2016, Kaplan et al. 1999). Gender studies have contributed greatly to deconstructing how nationalist discourses becomes bearers of such regimes of oppression and how they intersect (Yuval Davies 1997). Again, Mohanty helps us to formulate the meaning of this standpoint:

What would it mean to be attentive to the politics of activist feminist communities in different sites in the global south and north as they imagine and create cross-border feminist solidarities anchored in struggles on the ground? (Mohanty 2013:987)

We regard the feminist standpoint epistemology put forth by Mohanty and others as a project aiming to focus on the perspectives and knowledge's of feminist and other extra parliamentary groups (including academics) in order to achieve a "liberatory knowledge" (see also Harding 1991, Mulinari & Sandell 1999, Hill Collins 2004). An important issue in order to achieve "liberatory knowledge" has also to do with "how to find" areas where liberation takes place – to achieve multiple standpoints and struggles that occur simultaneously in different spaces. Therefore, working or operating under standpoint epistemology, we need to cross boundaries to build understanding from multiple and contrasting standpoints in order to create knowledge. However, attempts to decolonize theory and concepts that might not always work out as expected; attempts to cross common divides of knowledge on feminist issues that could be considered global like the violence against women; crossing national borders from "within" by exploring the borders of what has been understood as mainstream feminism in Sweden; and experiences of travelling between doing gender studies in different national contexts in South Africa and Sweden. These examples show the variety (although only a selected part) of networks and attempts of crossing borders through feminist action that are presently being enacted under the umbrella of Forum for Gender Studies at Mid Sweden University.

When working with colleagues from for example Russia, Hungary, and Turkey we have also become aware of the fact that in the ongoing struggle for discursive-material power we also have to acknowledge and use our institutionalized position to create space across regimes of oppression. We believe that one of the ways to build solidarity across different regimes of oppression and decolonize the hegemonic feminism is about identifying, acknowledging and sharing our different spaces for action, for example our institutionalized positions and resources. This means that we believe that networks should not only be based on cooperation and exchange between established research centers with institutionalized resources, such cooperation is in many ways also reproduce the institutionalized hegemonic feminism.

Locally based struggles developed in response to specific oppressive regimes are important sites but they may be limited when it comes to challenge the extra-local processes that shape them (see Kaplan & Grewal 2002; Mackie 2001). We therefore also think that it is necessary to unsettle binary conceptions of politics as either global or local, central or peripheral and instead try to work to identify how to create chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) among various feminist struggles. Different boundaries can, for example, serve to naturalize

difference, refuse political alliances, and obscure commonalities between separate spaces and linked forms of oppression (Kaplan and Grewal 2002). We believe that solidarity across ‘often conflictual locations and histories’ derives from ‘the political links we choose to make among and between struggles’ (Mohanty 1991:5). To deepen our understanding of the complexities, challenges, and possibilities of grounded struggles against different regimes of oppression we want to call for more comparative conversations (and analysis) exploring not only the links between different forms of oppression but also between our diverse forms of resistance and struggles.

In conclusion, we want to take further two interconnected tasks of academic activism 1) decolonizing feminist scholarship and theory by resisting relativism and continuously question our own assumptions. 2) exploiting our own resources such as time, freedom of speech, money for publishing and meeting in a way that serves a decolonization of feminism.

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