Introduction: Gender, Power and Transcultural Relations

Nancy Cook[1]

Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada
ncook@brocku.ca

This thematic issue of *ACME* began as an attempt to create academic community about four years ago. I was certain that other feminist scholars shared my preoccupation with thinking through the implications of Northern women's global travel and various types of transcultural interactions in the contemporary era. But my literature searches yielded only a few published pieces. A call for papers unearthed several other scholars from a range of disciplines whose research tackled this question from a number of angles. This collection, as an outcome of that community-building project, features the work of Gulzar Raisa Charania, Gada Mahrouse, Megan Rivers-Moore, Kate Zavitz, and David Butz.

The impetus for each of the analyses in this collection is an interest in examining how Northern women are implicated in contemporary global power relations as they actively search out transcultural encounters through opportunities to live, study, work, volunteer, and travel abroad. This search is often an enactment of privilege and a particular subjectivity that requires a global stage and transnational point of contact.

Much feminist historical, literary, and geographical scholarship has engaged this question with regard to European women who traveled and wrote in the colonial era (see Cook, 2006). However, far less work focuses on contemporary global migrants from Northern metropoles, who constitute an important facet of cultural globalization. Some writing discusses the dynamics of metropolitan women's lives abroad (Boyle, 2000; Hebard, 1996; Yeoh et al., 2000; Yeoh and

Khoo, 1998), rather than their complicity in transnational power arrangements. But some scattered pieces have examined nurses (Parfitt, 1998), educators (Boyle, 2000; Kealey, 1990), professionals (Cole and Fechter, 2007; Hebard, 1996), activists (Peake and De Souza, 2010), sex tourists (Frohlich, 2007), and students on overseas study placements (Heron 2005a, 2005b; Zemach-Bersin, 2007), analyzing their transcultural experiences and impacts. Barbara Heron (2007) and I (2007) have done ethnographic research with women development workers in sub-Saharan Africa and Pakistan, respectively, and we argue that imperial regimes of power continue to accompany global flows of metropolitan people and culture through international development activity (see also Fechter and Hindman, 2011; Goudge, 2003; Heron, 2004; Mawdsley et al., 2002; Townsend et al., 2004). This diffuse body of scholarship emphasizes that Northern women's transcultural encounters are often implicated in historically variable and contingent acts of imperialism in the global present. These activities often unfold in a historical context of conquest, and even though that context may have been modified over time through assorted anti-colonial influences, imperial histories remain salient to analyses of contemporary global operations such as transcultural engagements.

Because so few scholars have turned their attention to the relationship between globally mobile Northern women and transcultural power relations, this collection serves two purposes: to consolidate the research that has been done on this topic (mainly through our reference lists), and to explicitly mark out a parameter of transcultural power relations that has been largely neglected in feminist, globalization, and postcolonial literatures. Much non-feminist literature assumes that the operations of transnationalism and globalization foregrounded here are gender neutral. In contrast, this collection supports feminist scholarship that explores the systematically gendered – as well as sexualized, racialized, and imperial - nature of material practices, spaces, discourses, and consequences of globalization by providing empirically grounded, contextual understandings of heterogeneous processes of transnational encounter.

By addressing these processes, the collection contributes to feminist scholarship in geography more broadly in a number of ways. First, the growing literature on gender and transnationalism tends to emphasize movements of women from the global South to the North (e.g., as domestic servants, migrant workers, refugees), richly describing their experiences of migration and identity formation (Dannecker, 2005; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004; Momsen, 1999; Pratt and Yeoh, 2003; Preston et al., 2006; Ryan, 2002; Salih, 2003; Silvey, 2004). But we know very little about Northern women's impulse to abroad or their experiences of cross-cultural contact. We need this empirical detail, out of which we can develop understandings of the impacts of their global mobility. Second, in theorizing how contemporary transcultural power relations are constituted as these women travel the globe, the papers link the imperial present with the colonial past. The collection, therefore, expands the concerns and field of postcolonial and

globalization studies, while drawing postcolonial theory more fully into the social sciences.

Third, in terms of feminist praxis, our studies' pragmatic concerns challenge the predominant approaches used by development institutions, work study programs, transnational activist networks, and tourism programs and agencies to deploy overseas workers, students, and visitors by showing how, despite the best of intentions, these global migrants are largely unaware of the power relations inherent in their situations. These power relations reinforce global inequalities and social hierarchies, foster resentments, and undercut many of the main aims of these activist projects and the purported reasons activists undertake them in the first place.

Fourth, the papers respond to calls for a transnational feminist praxis that is committed to combating inequalities among women (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty et al., 1991). They do so by generating North-South conversations that identify how Northern women's practices affect lives in the South and how global flows of power colonize Southern women's lives. By this means, they document and challenge new forms of imperialism, which often take the guise of rescue or benevolence. This body of transnational feminist scholarship lays the groundwork for struggling against these global enactments of power, and for envisioning change and social justice work across lines of division to develop dense networks of feminist collaboration and alliance (Naples and Desai 2002). The ethical culture that results may be capable of intervening in exploitative global forces and practices of global culture.

Finally, the collection foregrounds diverse modes of global movement that are frequently neglected in the literature. For example, Arjun Appadurai's (1996) concept of 'ethnoscape' and Ulf Hannerz's (1996) categories of transnational flow specify five groups of people that have become principal features of our globalized world, affecting flows of identity, culture, and power. They include the transnational business class, tourists, refugees, immigrants and migrant workers, and artists. Northern development workers, voluntourists, researchers, and global activists need to be considered as additionally significant, if not large, groups of transnationals who profoundly affect global politics. They do so by enabling the transnational - mainly unilateral - flow of ideas, values, identities, and expertise and by mobilizing discourses of benevolence to mollify unease in the global North about its privilege without addressing global inequalities themselves.

This issue begins with a focus on Northern women's global activist impulses that are inspired in the context of global education in undergraduate university classrooms. Her experience teaching a curriculum that exposes students to global structural inequalities leads *Gulzar Raisa Charania* to examine how white women students frame global injustice as a set of forces that cannot be righted or even identified without the direct intervention of Northerners. This framing frequently compels them to leave for the global South at once, to travel abroad to help counter

these injustices, even when course content does not highlight such types of activist engagement. Rather than debating the issue of whether or not students should be engaged in such global activism, Charania focuses her attention on the conditions of that engagement, and suggests alternative activist practices that do not deny or obfuscate the power relations intrinsic to those conditions.

Charania's students are influenced by dominant constructions of global engagement as a process of cross-cultural understanding that is undertaken by open-minded, resourceful Northerners who have a feminized moral duty to alleviate Southern suffering. This gendered construction has several important implications. First, it obscures power relations at work in North-South histories and contemporary interactions. Second, questions of whiteness as a system of domination are circumvented so as to mask the ways in which Northern women activists are implicated in structures of underdevelopment in the South. Third, altruistic narratives disincline activists from acknowledging how their engagements generate material benefits for themselves. These occlusions render Southern subjects as passive victims in need of rescue, rather than as activists in themselves who have their own nuanced critiques of global injustice and histories of resistant struggle.

What is the historical context for this gendered process of intervention in the lives of Southerners? Charania links the imperial present with white women's civilizing mission in the context of Empire. Contemporary rescue work resonates with memsahibs' attempts to save colonized women, who were constructed as perennially oppressed by ahistorical gender and religious regimes. White women's sense of themselves as 'liberated' subjects served as the basis for their politics of saving. Charania cautions that this self-representation may also structure racialized Northern women's contemporary global activist efforts.

What can be done to alter these conditions of global activism? Rather than laying out any particular course of action, Charania suggests that by revising the dominant construct of global activism new avenues for action become available. A justice (versus charity) based framing could be achieved through a pedagogy of suspicion that prompts activists to interrogate their investments in, desires for, and practices of global engagement. A sustained suspicion of these investments may illuminate what is eclipsed in particular forms of global encounter. It may also show that redressing global inequality by installing Northern women in Southern contexts is a strategy that often obfuscates relations of power. Building political projects with Southern people based on an understanding of how relations of power structure both global inequality and Northern activists' location within struggles against it is a more promising practice of global engagement.

Gada Mahrouse focuses on 'feel good' tourism as another site of transcultural interactions for Northern women. She argues that the power-laden dynamics of mainstream tourism are reproduced in 'socially conscious' tours to the global South, even when those tours foreground oppressive local realities, local

resilience, and travelers' ethical responsibility to these communities in the context of an inequitable global order. Her ethnographic research focuses on the experiences and self-understandings of women who traveled to South America with Reality Tours to understand how racialized power relations are reproduced in 'socially responsible' tourism and why this type of tourism is an inadequate means of achieving global social justice.

Mahrouse demonstrates that racialized power relations are reproduced in ethical tourism in four main ways. First, her participants were motivated to travel by the promise of a stimulating experience that would materially benefit poor Southern communities. While they share this motivation with mainstream Northern tourists, these women represent themselves as different from the norm, disclaiming a privileged touristic status. This mechanism of denial is a rhetorical strategy that renders their travel innocent and morally superior by disavowing racialized processes of commodification and consumption. Second, while Northern privilege was highlighted in pre-trip tour discourse, once women were actually in South America their sense of privilege devolved from a concern about global inequality and their position within networks of power to a concern that inequalities were not flaunted before Southerners in the form of conspicuous consumption. As women struggled to adapt to less comfortable circumstances of everyday life, they reconciled their white privilege, equating critical awareness with actions that actually undermine privilege. Third, Mahrouse's participants represented their relationship with Southerners as reciprocal in that both groups live with burdens, lacks, and particular kinds of wealth. This representation obscures racial inequalities in the context of a touristic experience that purportedly highlights them, once again constituting the traveler as comfortably innocent. Fourth, as the tour was paid for in advance of travel, little money exchanged between Northerners and Southerners on the trip. This veiling of touristic consumption combined with strategies of enchantment on the part of tour operators to promote tourist satisfaction with an 'authentic' experience. Participants' high levels of tour satisfaction eliminate residual guilt and embarrassment, which leaves asymmetrical power relations intact.

Mahrouse concludes her piece by arguing that these four mechanisms together produce a strong sense of innocence in 'socially conscious' tourists. The women in her study reconciled their privilege by minimizing and managing power imbalances to create a comfortable touristic experience. Consequently, racialized understandings of Self and Other are sustained in 'ethical' tourist practices, which demonstrates that 'feel good' tourism can reproduce the global inequalities it purportedly seeks to challenge.

Megan Rivers-Moore shifts our attention from socially conscious tourism to sex tourism, while also reflecting on her own implication in a global field of power as a Northern woman researcher in Costa Rica. Her ethnography in San José demonstrates how images of Northern women play an important role alongside those of Costa Rican men in the dynamics of the transnational heterosexual sex

trade in that city. Male North American sex tourists and female Latin American sex workers represent these imagined others, who are not literally present in the sex trade scene, in ways that justify and facilitate sexual contact. Rivers-Moore claims that a sophisticated understanding of sex tourism that does not reproduce the binary of 'oppressed Southern sex worker' and 'exploitative Northern sex tourist' "necessitates looking at the relationships among various social groups rather than only between sex tourists and sex workers, in order to better understand the intense complexities of the encounters of transnational, transactional sex" (in this issue). These imagined others, who are consistently invoked in transcultural sexual encounters in this context, have so far been invisible in the scholarship on sex tourism.

Although sex tourists have few interpersonal interactions with Costa Rican men due to language barriers, they regularly represent them as violent, domineering, and irresponsible according to racialized notions of aggressive Latino masculinity. Sex workers promote this discourse because it offers a rationale other than the ostensibly crass 'ability to pay for sex' as the basis for their choice of clients. As Costa Rican men are framed as backward and domineering, Northern men see themselves as enlightened by contrast, even though these constructions reproduce oppressive gender relations. A similar binary is produced through sex tourists' and sex workers' representations of Northern women as materialistic, demanding, unattractive, and unfeminine products of feminist politics who compare negatively with more civilized Latino sex workers who know their place in the 'correct' gender order. Rivers-Moore argues that this attention to Costa Rican men's violence and North American women's lack of appropriate femininity operates to obscure the economic exchange for sex in an unequal field of power.

Rivers-Moore connects the imperial present to the colonial past when she reflects on the discomfort she felt about being associated with and asked to answer for 'failed' Northern women during fieldwork. In order to cope with the thorny experience of listening to sex tourists bash shifting gender relations in North America, she clung to a sense of feminist independence that sex tourists critique in favor of supposedly compliant, traditional Costa Rican femininity. In this way she is inculcated in colonial tropes that juxtapose liberated white women with dependent racialized women who can be rescued through their enlightened example. Reflecting on the role of white womanhood in structuring fieldwork relations demonstrates how thoroughly Northern women are implicated in global power inequalities in transcultural research, as well as in the Costa Rican sex industry.

The fourth paper in the collection, written by *Kate Zavitz and David Butz*, foregrounds yet another type of transcultural touristic encounter called volunteer tourism (or 'voluntourism') that is commonly understood as a more globally equitable alternative to mass tourism. Their ethnographic research focuses on a group of young Canadian women who traveled to Costa Rica for a couple of weeks to volunteer at an organic farming project. They examine how these women

characterized volunteering abroad and their reasons for participating, as well as their actual experiences on the farm, to develop a critique of the social justice framing of short-term volunteer tourism. Dominant discourses exercised by the voluntourism industry, many volunteer tourism scholars, and voluntourists themselves construct an 'ideal type' of volunteer tourism that has three transformative potentials: to contribute to social development and environmental sustainability in Southern communities, to generate transcultural understanding between Southerners and Northern volunteers, and to produce reflexive self-transformation among volunteers. However, Zavitz and Butz's analysis demonstrates that this ideal type is not realized in the actual volunteer experience. Rather, volunteering in this context became subordinated to tourism as a logic that framed women's understandings and behaviors during their stay in Costa Rica.

The paper's first objective is to outline five dimensions of the voluntourism process that prevent it from achieving its idealized form. First, discourses of international volunteering are easily assimilated into tourism discourses and practices as they both rely on similar essentialized hierarchies between North and South (wealthy/poor, independent/dependent, subject/object) and on images of capable, benevolent Northerners exercising their agency to enable oppressed, needy Southerners. Furthermore, volunteers' desire for self-development opportunities and touristic distinction through an 'authentic' experience are additional codified aspects of voluntourism that are no different in their logical foundation than mass tourism in that they produce hierarchical distinctions between agential Northern volunteers and Southern beneficiaries. Second, the structure of short-term volunteering relies on tourism infrastructure and exchange relations in that volunteers seek out and pay for additional touristic opportunities alongside their volunteer experience. Work and play get intermixed to create the "touristification of volunteering" (Zavitz and Butz, this issue). Third, the farm had difficulty attracting enough volunteers with applicable skills to do the necessary agricultural work and sustaining itself through the sale of its agricultural produce. In this context the $15/day that volunteers paid to stay at the farm became more important to the farm's survival than their volunteer labor because it enabled the owners to employ capable local farmers. Consequently, the farm was organized by touristic exchange relations rather than by volunteering. Fourth, because volunteers stayed for such a short time, their focus shifted from helping to learning, from usefully employing skills to watching as superficial, paying participants, which incorporated them into a touristic financial exchange. Finally, volunteers became disillusioned over the course of their trip as their expectations of helping and transcultural understanding went unrealized, doing was sacrificed to learning (self-development), and stark financial exchange organized their interactions. This disillusionment led them to question volunteering and reconcile themselves to tourism.

The second half of the paper relates these effects of voluntourism to the three transformative potentials touted by voluntourism companies, travelers, and scholars, showing how they are not achieved. This instance of voluntourism had no positive effect on local socio-ecological development or transcultural understanding. The limited instrumental self-development and self-awareness that did occur did not transform volunteer selves, North-South relations, or tourism in that volunteers were not motivated to reflect deeply on the contradictions they experienced. They more comfortably acquiesced to touristic sensibilities and behaviors.

Our purposes in bringing together these few contributions in a themed issue are to expand critical thinking about contemporary processes of globalization and imperialism that (re)produce global inequalities, and to draw links between the past and present in tracing the trajectories of global inequality, with a particular eye on Northern women's continued role in those processes through their transnational encounters. In so doing, the papers expand the fields of postcolonial, feminist, and globalization inquiry. While authors take different paths to meet these objectives, they all challenge us to pay closer attention to the largely overlooked implications of Northern women's global travel and various types of transcultural interactions in the 21st century. Contributors demonstrate that these women, through diverse modes of global mobility, enact various forms of privilege and a specifically gendered, racialized, classed, and imperial subjectivity that requires a global stage of cross-cultural contact. These preoccupations appropriately situate this set of papers in *ACME*, a journal that highlights geographical research that marks out new parameters of critical scholarship.

Our hope is that these pieces as a grouping help to consolidate an emerging, yet dispersed field of feminist scholarship and to motivate further research that explores Northern women's inculcation in practices of power in contemporary transcultural social contexts in order to imagine alternatives to current global power arrangements. In Rivers-Moore's words, "Questioning the role of Northern women in various kinds of transcultural encounters…demonstrates the impossibility of presuming that Northern women are anything less than completely entangled in global relationships of power and inequality" (in this issue).

References

Alexander, M. J. and C. T. Mohanty. 1997. *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. New York: Routledge.

Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Arat-Koc, S. 2002. Imperial wars or benevolent interventions? Reflection on global feminism post September 11. *Atlantis,* 26(2): 53-65.

Boyle, J. 2000. Education for teachers of English in China. *Journal of Education for Teaching,* 26(2): 147-155.

Coles, A. and A. Fechter (eds.). 2007. *Gender and family among transnational professionals*. London: Routledge.

Cook, N. 2007. *Gender, identity and imperialism: Western women development workers in Pakistan*. New York: Macmillan.

Cook, N. 2006. Bazaar stories of gender, sexuality and imperial spaces in Gilgit, northern Pakistan. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies,* 5(2): 230-257.

Dannecker, P. 2005. Transnational migration and the transformation of gender relations: The case of Bangladeshi labor migrants. *Current Sociology*, 53(4): 655-674.

Desai, M. 2005. Transnationalism: The face of feminist politics Post-Beijing. *International Social Science Journal,* 57(2): 319–330.

Ehrenreich, B. and A. Hochschild. 2004. *Global women: Nannies, maids and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Fechter, A. and H. Hindman (eds.). 2011. *Inside the everyday lives of development workers: The challenges and futures of Aidland*. Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.

Frohlick, S. 2007. Fluid exchanges: The negotiation of intimacy between tourist women and local men in a transnational town in Caribbean Costa Rica. *City & Society,* 19 (1): 139-168.

Goudge, P. 2003. *The whiteness of power: Racism in third world development and aid*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Grewal, I. and C. Kaplan. 1994. *Scattered hegemonies: Postmodernity and transnational feminist practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hannerz, U. 1996. *Transnational connections: Culture, people, places*. London: Routledge.

Hebard, C. 1996. Managing effectively in Asia. *Training and Development,* 50(4): 36-39.

Heron, B. 2007. *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender and the helping imperative*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Heron, B. 2005a. Self-reflection in critical social work practice: Subjectivity and the possibilities of resistance. *Journal of Reflective Practice,* 6(3): 341-351.

Heron, B. 2005b. Changes and challenges: Preparing social work students for practica in today's Sub-Saharan Africa context. *Journal of International Social Work,* 48(6): 782-793.

Heron, B. 2004. Gender and exceptionality in North-South interventions: Reflections on relations. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 13(2): 117-127.

Heitlinger, A. (ed.) 1999. *Émigré feminism: Transnational perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kealy, D. 1990. *Cross-cultural effectiveness: A study of Canadian technical advisors*. Centre for Intercultural Learning: Canadian Foreign Service Institute.

Mawdsley, E., J. Townsend, G. Porter, and P. Oakley. 2002. *Knowledge, power and development agendas: NGOs North and South*. Oxford: INTRAC.

Moghadam, V. 2000. Transnational feminist networks: Collective action in an era of globalization. *International Sociology,* 15(1): 57–85.

Mohanty, C. T. 2003. *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Mohanty, C.T., A. Russo, and L. Torres (eds.). 1991. *Third world women and the politics of feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Momsen, J. (ed.) 1999. *Gender, migration and domestic service*. New York: Routledge.

Naples, N. and M. Desai. 2002. *Women's activism and globalization: Linking local struggles and transnational politics*. London: Routledge.

Parfitt, B. 1998. *Working across cultures: A study of expatriate nurses in developing countries in primary health care*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

Peake, L. and K. De Souza. 2010. Feminist academic and activist praxis in service of the transnational. In, Nagar, R. and A. Lock Swarr (eds.), *Critical transnational feminist praxis*, Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 105-123.

Pratt, G. and B. Yeoh. 2003. Transnational (counter) typographies. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 10(2): 159-166.

Preston, V., A. Kobayashi, and G. Man. 2006. Transnationalism, gender and civic participation: Canadian case studies of Hong Kong immigrants. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(9): 1633-1651.

Ryan, J. 2002. Chinese women as transnational migrants: Gender and class in global migration narratives. *International Migration*, 49(2): 93-116.

Salih, R. 2003. *Gender in transnationalism: Home, longing and belonging among Moroccan migrant women*. New York: Routledge.

Silvey, R. 2004. Transnational migration and the gender politics of scale: Indonesia domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 25(2): 141-155.

Townsend, J., R.E. Porter, and E. Mawdsley. 2004. Creating spaces of resistance: Development NGOs and their clients in Ghana, India and Mexico. *Antipode,* 36(5): 871-99.

Yeoh, B. and L. Khoo. 1998. Home, work, and community: Skilled international migration and expatriate women in Singapore. *International Migration,* 36(2): 159-86.

Yeoh, B., S. Huang, and K. Willis. 2000. Global cities, transnational flows and gender dimensions: The view from Singapore. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie,* 91(2): 147-158.

Zemach-Bersin, T. 2007. Global citizenship and study abroad: It's all about U.S. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices,* 1(2): 16-28.