

**Transnational Feminist Pedagogy: An Interview with
Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan**

Q: *Your influential textbook **An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World** represents a major intervention in Women's Studies pedagogy. What was the inspiration for this remarkable work and how was it received by the academic community?*

IG & CK: In the mid to late 1980s, as feminists working in postcolonial studies in the US, we saw gaps in both fields. In postcolonial studies, the gaps came from a very territorially circumscribed approach to the nation-state stemming from the United States' Cold War articulation of "area studies" as a project to extend knowledge of other nation-states and expand spheres of influence and power. There was little about diasporas, global movements, mobile populations and nations. In addition, the "development feminism" approach also was contained in such a bounded state and did not engage with the histories of colonialism through which geopolitical asymmetries constructed the "third world" or the "developing world." In feminist studies, the gaps came from American exceptionalist nationalism in relation to the subject of woman as well as any other forms of social difference. This notion of exceptionalism saw feminism as an American project and saw international issues in relation to US and European feminism expanding from the "West to the Rest." It was a moment in which neoliberalism as a new "western" imperial project was being constructed and we wanted to ensure that Women's Studies students in the US were able to think through what it might mean to live in this new empire as well as its rearticulating relations to a changing world.

The reception to the textbook was initially quite mixed and we think it remains so. First of all, much of the teaching in Women's Studies begins with what is called "Second Wave" feminism and continues on to trace social and political movements for the most part, culminating with an emphasis on activism. We thought that the field had evolved to create a rich body of scholarship that was not simply about social movements but rather about a theory of culture and society, and so we began the book

with thinking about social and sexual difference. Many do not accept this approach. Reception was also mixed because there is a huge unexamined attachment to nation that exists even within Women's Studies, and we think this is very difficult to understand especially since nation itself and nationalisms are always changing — morphing, perhaps. There remains a huge emphasis in popular and academic culture — its collaboration actually — which produces the individual woman as a universal figure whose histories are unexamined. Many see our approach as insufficiently “resistant” since it does not construct a revolutionary gendered subject. Those who have been inspired by our approach want to critique both “Area” and “American” studies in relation to their Cold War formations, and want to explore a feminist critique of empire and an ahistorical approach to globalization. We wanted to show that gender is an historical and geographical project that creates difference through interconnections. Empires are one sort of interconnection.

Another objection to our book is from those who think it is too “American” and these are the people who want to think about how to teach transnational feminist approaches from other regions. We did plan the book with our particularly located classrooms in the US in mind, but we do think that our approach can be useful to design a Women's Studies course that might be located in other places — and we know this has been the case for many who use the book.

All of the responses to the textbook illuminate the many uneven circulations and connections of the world we live in and how difficult it is to address power in these circumstances.

Q: *In the introduction to your textbook, you state that “transnational feminist studies is not a luxury that is added to the end of a syllabus or that can be relegated to one week out of the semester or quarter.” What are some pedagogic techniques and approaches that you have taken to actuate this epistemology?*

IG & CK: The point is that our approach is integrative and methodological/theoretical and so it has to be integrated into understanding the world. It is an analytical critique of how to think about the world, rather than how to carve up the world into thematic units. We don't start with a social movement in a particular region (e.g., Second Wave feminism in the US) but with deconstructing the fundamental unit of our field, which is sex

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and sex difference. We also think about how this exists in connection with race, nationalism, religion, and colonialisms.

Q: *What would you suggest (in terms of texts, audio/visual materials, etc.) for someone creating a Transnational Feminism course from scratch? What has worked/not worked for you in the past?*

IG & CK: Starting a course from scratch might begin with thinking about what the animating critique of nationalism, internationalism, and gender might be in a particular context. Other questions: Is this to be done in a large scale or a more pointed seminar? What are some of the urgent challenges facing the students that might make this material relevant to their everyday and working lives? What are some of the key issues that make Women's Studies relevant to the location of the classroom? In our context of the Women's Studies classroom in the US, in the midst of major sexuality and transgender social movements, the students love this book because it opens up these issues, but they also request more recent materials on this topic.

The most difficult section to teach is the political theory unit, which many students seem to find very boring, but which we believe is key to the project. Understanding how liberal notions of selfhood have become hard-wired into all democratic projects globally, and how public-private divides are being created in related but different ways, is critically important. Another major intervention made by the book which students have to struggle to learn is the nature of modernity and how modernities globally are different but connected.

Q: *How has the Women's Studies classroom changed over the past decade?*

IG & CK: It is difficult to separate the Women's Studies classroom from the push to privatize public education that is now a terrain of struggle for many students and faculty in the US. While in the past, many middle-class students were able to attend college full time, now many are part-time students or working jobs while attending college. This affects how much time they put into their studies and their preparation for college. Increasingly, lower income students are losing opportunities to go to college at all, or their education is becoming virtual, without much contact with

faculty, discussion, or engagement with classmates. Much of this change is also connected to the devastating impact of global finance capital and new regimes of empire and war. This also means that education is now geared towards getting a job, rather than gaining knowledge and competencies that would enable students to develop skills of community and democratic participation. Women's Studies students are seen to be working either towards a professional degree or towards becoming members of NGOs. These two types of goals are both contradictory to the political work that we hoped Women's Studies would achieve. But we do hope that the book allows students to critique the changing nature of economic, social and political projects everywhere — to be alert to the politics and power of all their workplaces, communities and nations.

Q: *In addition to **Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World**, you have also collaborated on a number of other important works in the field of Transnational Feminism. Can you please comment on these texts?*

IG & CK: We have collaboratively and separately worked on articulating projects that brought postcolonial studies into conversation with race, diaspora and American Women's Studies. We believe that the dialogical process of collaboration is the best way to do transnational research. Our theorization of "transnationalism" has allowed us to understand the legacies of colonialisms that underlie so many feminist and other social movements. See, for instance, Inderpal's critique of human rights discourses, or of security regimes, and Caren's work on militarized visual cultures.

Q: *What is some of the innovative work that is currently being done in the field of transnational feminist pedagogy? What are some of the most challenging aspects of this work?*

IG & CK: What is going on in Turkey and in your classrooms is difficult for us to know since neither of us is familiar with teaching in that context. In our contexts, students are diverse, in specific US-ways, in terms of religion, class, race, and ethnicity, which means that there are challenges to using our textbook. We deliberately work against some assumptions

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about gender and feminism that come from popular culture and other knowledges in the US. This means that we are always trying to question knowledges about “other” cultures as well as knowledges that seem to be taken for granted. We seek to examine how mediated our knowledges about gender and women are and we ask students to see gendered subjects as coming from distinct histories.

Works Cited

Grewal, Inderpal and Caren Kaplan. *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Print.