inappropriate(d) difference: notes on transnational feminist encounters

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How to foster feminist coalitions across various borders, without flattening out crucial differences that matter? The problem of difference has exercised much critical attention in the field of transnational feminist studies. On the one hand, transnational feminism foregrounds differences and multiplicities, and challenges the exclusion and marginalisation of the other. On the other hand, the investments in certain difference sometimes run the risk of fixing its location and meaning, and producing a seeming impasse for transnational feminist collaboration. As M.J. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2010, p. 27) ask, 'can transnational feminist lenses push us to ask questions that are location specific but not necessarily location bound?'.

In this Open Space piece, I provide an account of how the question of difference shapes practices such as note-taking, critiquing and debating at two transnational feminist encounters, and raises questions about what decolonising knowledge production and critical translation entail. I suggest rethinking difference as inappropriate(d)ness (Trinh, ed., 1986–1987) that is constitutive of the field of feminist studies, which, as Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr (2010, p. 12) note, 'must contest its very definition in order to be useful'. I argue that at stake is not the inclusion of all or the prioritising of certain differences, conceived of as discrete and autonomous entities/identities. What is needed is a critical and generous mode of relating that is felt as touching and being touched.

encounter one

In February 2018, I participated in the symposium ‘Decolonize! Theorize! Practice!’ in Finland. The setup of the room in which the symposium was held caught my attention. Instead of rows of chairs, each facing the podium, there were chairs positioned around tables that were placed in different parts of the room. Each table was covered by a big sheet of paper. Participants were invited to sit around the tables and to write down notes during the symposium on the shared piece of paper. I found this an interesting
arrangement that was meant to contest the logic of knowledge production, which typically posits knowledge as the property of an individual author or individual authors.

The practice of writing down notes on the shared sheet of paper in a symposium setting can be said to be different from the typical mode of writing/note-taking from the following perspectives. First, instead of writing line by line, from left to right, from top to bottom, there are various styles of handwriting in different parts of the paper. Second, there might be more repetitions and incoherence in the shared notes. Third, the shared note-taking means that one’s thoughts will most likely be read by others too, which informs what is written and how. Last but not least, the shared space—the large sheet of paper—materialises a bodily felt collective mode of knowledge production that complicates the ownership/authorship of writing and knowledge.

For example, instead of facing the podium or looking at the screen of my laptop or at my notebook, I needed to turn towards the table to write on the paper. I felt the pressure on the paper from other scribbling hands. I heard the unsynchronised sound of writing—the fissure between the tip of the pen and the surface of the paper. I heard the conversations between participants. While some participants chose to write notes in their own notebooks or on their laptops, others participated in the collective note-taking. Still, this arrangement of the symposium invited the participants to consider the following questions: Who writes and reads? And for whom? It challenged the figure of the sovereign ‘I’ as the author, authority and proper owner of knowledge. Moreover, the messy and collaborative note-taking presented an alternative modality of knowledge production that sharply contrasts the requirements of fast knowledge in increasingly neoliberalised universities.

Interestingly, this call for alternative modes of knowledge production, which follows a feminist transnational and decolonial ethos of multiplicity and solidarity, was contradicted by another practice that also aimed at decolonising knowledge which took place during the Q&A session after my talk. My presentation was about the problem of air pollution in the Chinese context. I took up Gayatri Spivak’s (1993) theorisation of value to challenge the Malthusian narrative of ecological scarcity, which continues to inform and justify the elision of socio-economic inequalities in discussions of environmental crisis. After my presentation, I received the following question: ‘Why don’t you cite any decolonial thinkers who work on questions of ecology?’.

I took up Spivak’s theorisation for the presentation at the symposium, because I found it helpful for the argument that I was making. I understand that the critique I received concerns the politics of citation and the importance of remapping knowledge. I absolutely agree with the emphasis on citation, which as Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 15) writes ‘is feminist memory’ and ‘how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before’. Ahmed suggests that feminists should create crisis, hesitations and wonderings around citation. It is in the hope of producing productive hesitations and wonderings that I raise the following questions.

Given my analysis of the phenomenon of air pollution in the Chinese context, why is it that no one asked why I did not draw on or engage with theorisations of ecology by Chinese scholars? What constitutes an attempt to decolonise knowledge production? Is it about making reference to the work of scholars who are identified as decolonial thinkers? How are these identifications made? Is it based on the geopolitical
location of the writer? Does the reference to a decolonial thinker stand for and as decolonial practice? Can decolonising practices also be about critical translations that aim at challenging the linguistic, methodological and theoretical borders more generally? Interestingly, both aforementioned scenarios can be considered as practices of decolonising knowledge production. Whereas the practice of shared note-taking reconfigures knowledge production as multiple, cacophonous and collective, the emphasis on citing certain decolonial thinkers underscores the necessity of recognition, authority, property and the individual identity of authors. While both practices are important and timely, the question that still needs to be asked is: how can they work together?

**encounter two**

In March this year, I participated in a workshop in China that aimed to bring together Nordic and Chinese scholars to discuss questions of welfare crisis in both Nordic and Chinese contexts. Participants were divided into three working groups; each was instructed to provide a set of policy recommendations on welfare solutions from feminist perspectives that would then be submitted to the Nordic Council of Ministers. Many of the participants, especially the ones from the Nordic countries, found this setup of the workshop troubling. Some of the participants raised questions such as: why Sino-Nordic dialogues, why now? And how might the framework of the workshop reproduce the figure of the exceptional Nordic 'We' who teach the others about the 'best' practices of gender equality and welfare policies?

These concerns were also raised in relation to the practice of translating feminisms. In a session of the working group discussion that I coordinated, a Chinese scholar gave a brief presentation on the different waves of feminist translations in China, including, as an example, translations and adaptions of *The Vagina Monologues* (Ensler, 1998) that had been performed in different Chinese universities (for example, see C.D. Chen’s translation of Ensler, 2000 [1998]). After her presentation, a Nordic participant voiced concerns about the presenter’s emphasis on translation, which she understood as a form of importation of North American and European feminist work; for the participant, this seemed to imply that there was no feminist work in China before these translations.

Two sets of responses followed this initial critique. One was from the presenter, who rejected the participant’s reading that an emphasis on translation suggests that Chinese feminism was originally lacking and only on the receiving end of knowledge from the West. The presenter explained that her engagement with feminist translations in China was about understanding the relations of power at work in the translation process—for example about how and why feminism is translated variously as ‘feminist right-ism’ and ‘women-ism’—and how the ongoing debates about these terms could shed light on the specificities of feminist knowledge production in the Chinese context. As I see it, the presenter’s emphasis was on the negotiation between and strategies of Chinese feminisms rather than the relation between an assumed origin and its copy. The other response came from another Nordic participant who felt that the presenter’s argument ran the risk of putting all the responsibility of decolonising and challenging the hegemonic status of white, Anglo-American and West European feminist theory on Chinese feminists.

Interestingly, despite their differences, the critique and its responses all aimed at decentring Anglo-American and West European feminist theory. How might it be possible to talk about translation and learning, without reinstalling the hierarchy of origin and copy? As another Chinese participant told me:
I understand that they are critical about the format of the workshop, and that they are worried that they are imposing on us a universalised notion of gender equality, but I don’t find it problematic to say that we wish to learn from them. This does not mean that we think that there is no problem in welfare policies in the Nordic countries, but it is undeniable that some of their practices for promoting gender equality would benefit the Chinese too.

**inappropriate(d) differences**

In these two transnational feminist encounters, different understandings of difference informed how the shared aims—decolonialising knowledge production and translational feminist collaborations—were understood and critiques produced. For example, difference was understood variously as: multiplicities of voices and writings that confound the implicit notion of the proper, property, authority, coherence and the figure of the individual author of knowledge; recognition and inclusion of the work of decolonial thinkers that has often been silenced, marginalised and elided; the difference between hegemonic Western feminist theory, the problematic universality that it claims and the specificities of feminisms; different strategies that aim to improve gender equality and welfare systems; and the uneven distribution of responsibility of decolonising feminist knowledge production.

How to critically engage with these differences with a sense of curiosity, generosity and care, especially in transnational encounters, so that it is possible to discuss and understand assumptions of and investments in different configurations of difference, as well as making possible alliances and collaborations? I suggest that rather than considering these different positions in terms of incommensurability, or simply assimilating differences into a more universal, inclusive account, it is more productive to reconsider the question of difference. Here I turn to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (2005) theorisation of inappropriate(d)ness. As Trinh makes clear in her following response to the question of where and how to locate difference:

One strategical definition of ‘the inappropriate/d other’ I gave in my book, in the context of gender and ethnicity, is that you always fare with at least four simultaneous gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in one’s difference; and that of insisting ‘I am different’ while unsettling all definitions and practices of otherness arrived at. This is where ‘inappropriate(d)ness’ takes form. Because when you talk about difference, there are many ways to take it in; if you simply understand it as a division between cultures, between people, between entities, you can’t go very far with it. But when that difference between entities is being worked out as a difference also within, things start opening up. Inside and outside are both expanded. Within each entity, there is a vast field and within each self is a multiplicity. (ibid., p. 129)

Importantly, instead of a grid-like configuration of difference, located in and as the distance between inside and outside, self and other, Trinh’s theorisation of inappropriate(d)ness points to the involved complicity of identity and difference. On this account, difference is not simply an in-between one thing and another but is an ongoing process of differentiation that inhabits what is identified as a meaning, a location, a position, a thing. I suggest that this involved complicity entails a form of relating that is important for transnational feminist practices.

At the workshop in China, we watched a Danish documentary film about the Red Stocking Movement in Denmark. Sitting next to me was a Chinese feminist activist, whom I encountered for the first time at the
workshop. At the end of the documentary, she turned to me and said, ‘I like this song’, a song written and sung by Danish women during the Red Stocking Movement. I nodded, ‘Yeah it makes me want to sing along, even though I don’t know the language. Why don’t we make a Chinese version of it?’ ‘Oh, that would be nice’, she smiled. Our brief communication, the music in the Danish documentary, her smile, touched me in a way that reminded me of the sound and the pressure from the marker pens touching the surface of the paper at the symposium ‘Decolonize! Theorize! Practice!’. It is the relating through inappropriate(d) difference that makes possible feminist collaborations felt as touching and being touched.

**author biography**

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