The books reviewed in this section explore feminist politics in a global frame. These will include writings in feminist international relations, but will also feature multi-disciplinary scholarship pertaining to global gender relations. The reviews section comprises three distinct elements: a think-piece, review essays and book reviews. The think-piece, entitled ‘Rethinking the Canon’, gives space for an individual to reflect on one text that they feel ought to be essential reading, but which is likely to be marginalized by existing disciplinary boundaries: they are invited to bring the text to our attention and explain why it is essential reading. The review essays will survey several texts on a single theme, aiming either to explore a recent debate which has generated a range of new publications or to survey the best of the literature covering a more established area of research. The book reviews will provide brief introductions to and evaluations of as broad a range of new publications as space allows. Anyone with suggestions for texts to be reviewed, or requests to contribute to the section, are encouraged to contact the Reviews Editor, Catherine Eschle, on catherine.eschle@strath.ac.uk.

Rethinking the Canon

REFLECTIONS ON A TEXT THAT OUGHT TO BE ESSENTIAL READING

Susan Stanford Friedman. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. ISBN 0–691–05804–0.

As globalization transforms political, economic, technological, and interpersonal terrains, an intelligible guide to the labyrinth of the present can be a treasure. A guide that excavates the past, situates on-going developments within a rich history of feminist theoretical and metatheoretical debates, and illuminates possibilities for the creative deployment of emerging global concepts will be a rare treasure indeed. In Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Mappings: Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, I found just such a treasure.

Susan Stanford Friedman draws upon insights from cultural studies, feminist ethnography, feminist historiography, feminist literary theory, African American and Latina feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and poststructuralist theory to make a case for a ‘locational’ feminism keenly attuned to the
complexity of ‘glocalization.’ Arguing that globalization entails the simultaneity and interpenetration of the local and global, Stanford Friedman advocates a form of geopolitical feminism that avoids reductionism and ethnocentrism. Weaving her way through painful debates within feminist theory over the past two decades, she identifies routes through apparently intractable impasses, routes that respect and valorize historic feminist landmarks while recognizing the need for new by-passes and analytic vehicles.

Feminists of color and postcolonial feminists have argued forcefully that privileging gender as an analytical category too easily occludes other categories of difference such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. Taking this insight to heart, Stanford Friedman explores a variety of analytic strategies that can enable feminists to avoid binary constructions that continue to privilege White, Western, Northern women. Deploying the metaphor of the borderlands, she invites feminists to consider the permeability and liminality of identities that are structured by cultural hybridity, travel, and diaspora. Rather than construing situatedness as fixed, stable, and organic, she analyzes the fluidity characteristic of selves that grow, change, migrate, mix, and inhabit ‘places of betweeness.’ As the recurrent dislocations associated with contemporary globalization make clear, movement and migration are not metaphors alone. Stanford Friedman suggests that attention to the ‘geopolitical axes’ of identity can attune feminists to the complex interplay of power in and across local, regional, national, and transnational terrains. Approaching identity through such complex matrices would allow feminists to track the multidirectional flows of power in a global context and gain more sophisticated understandings of interlocking dimensions of global cultures, as well as the resisting subjects they engender.

Stanford Friedman also devotes considerable attention to ‘hybridity theory’ as a means to move beyond ‘difference debates’ (version 1: women are different from men; version 2: women are different from one another) within feminism. Drawing upon extensive literature in cultural studies and postcolonial studies, she maps three models of hybridity and traces their spatial, functional, and political implications. By juxtaposing an ‘oppression model,’ a ‘locational model,’ and a ‘transgression model’ of hybridity, Stanford Friedman illustrates the powerful range of analytic possibilities that hybridity theory opens for feminist analyses of structures, agency, resistance, and destabilization of cultural formations.

Stanford Friedman’s Mappings makes it clear that to rise to the manifold analytic challenges posed by globalization will require a great deal of work. Feminists must cultivate geopolitical literacy, learning to trace the structures and effects of spatialized power relations. We must study localities other than our ‘home’ base. We must learn to make visible how the global is woven in to the local and the local embedded in the global. We must cultivate sensitivity to the various means by which culture ‘travels,’ acquiring new forms and meanings in the process of transplantation and transculturation. We must also develop considerable sophistication about the political implications of competing theoretical tools.
One of the great virtues of *Mappings* is that Stanford Friedman provides powerful evidence of the benefits that flow from such hard intellectual work. In several chapters of the book, she demonstrates how recognition that our analytical tools are culturally freighted can enable us to develop innovative methodologies to counteract tacit biases that would otherwise permeate our analyses. She provides wonderful insights into the cultural moorings of particular narrative conventions. She explores the lessons of recent debates in feminist ethnography for feminist literary criticism and for feminist methodology more generally. She explicates the rich interpretive possibilities that flow from her geopolitical and hybrid conceptions of identity. She provides a superb analysis of the stakes involved in debates among feminist historians over the comparative merits of poststructuralist approaches to the study of women’s lives, contrasting the modes of critique that poststructuralism makes possible against the forms of investigation that it precludes.

As she works through debates internal to literary studies, anthropology, geography, history, psychoanalysis, social theory, ethnic studies, African American studies, postcolonial studies, global studies, and women’s studies, Stanford Friedman is remarkably measured and fair. She characterizes her work as a ‘negotiation of borders,’ and like a skilled diplomat she understands that far more can be accomplished by recognizing the strengths of competing parties than can be gained by caricature or underestimation. As a consequence, her book is enormously helpful as a guide to formative debates within feminist scholarship, as well as to critical debates that can help shape forms of feminist inquiry well suited to the enormous challenges that globalization poses. For feminist scholars who seek analytical practices that can contribute to a more egalitarian world, *Mappings* is a guide and an exemplar.

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**Book Reviews**

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicholas Faraclas and Claudia von Werhof (eds). *There Is an Alternative: Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2001. ISBN 1–84277–006–3.

‘Radical hope is the essence of popular movements’ (Esteva, p. 165). This compelling volume exudes just such radical hope. It sets out to challenge the discourse and practices of corporate globalization and to take on the seemingly hopeless task of demonstrating that this neo-liberal dream – or nightmare – is not in fact inevitable. It succeeds quite remarkably.

The contributors to this thought-provoking volume come from diverse backgrounds: many are academics, many are activists, many are both. All are intensely engaged in seeking alternatives to the destructive system of corporate
globalization currently rampaging across the globe. Each of the diverse analyses and arguments offered in this volume is inspired by the path-breaking work of Maria Mies (and her collaborators) on the ‘subsistence economy’. By ‘subsistence economics’ the contributors emphatically do not mean ‘hopelessly outdated production or a backward lifestyle’ (p. 174). Instead, this perhaps provocative phrase is used to designate ‘a way of life based on everyday life and its necessities, and the willingness to limit one’s own needs in the interests of other human beings and the environment’ (p. 214). The goal of such a fundamentally rethought economics is ‘the re-establishment of our sense of individual and collective power over our bodies, beliefs, communities, land, food, markets, and so on’ (p. x).

To use different language, subsistence economics offers a radically different social imaginary (Castoriadis 1987) than does neo-liberal corporate capitalism. Just as Castoriadis (1985) has argued that the social imaginary of modernity, defined in terms of ‘growth’, ‘progress’ and ‘development’, is devoid of substantive content, of meaning or cultural purpose, so this volume charges that corporate capitalism offers a mode of existence devoid of human meaning and preoccupied with the production of ‘exchange value, scarcity, violence and death’. The perspective of subsistence economics championed here explicitly seeks to reorient our social imaginary, to re-infuse it with meaning, to replace ‘exchange value, scarcity, violence and death’ with the production of ‘use value, abundance, fertility, and life’ (p. x).

This volume, then, is about the abundance, creativity, diversity, individualism and non-alienated production made possible by subsistence economics. It contrasts subsistence economics – this radical source of hope for a genuinely sustainable future – with the scarcity, destructiveness, monotony, uniformity, alienation and radical un-sustainability of neo-liberal practices. In so doing, the volume challenges the verities of the corporate globalization discourse, and of its underlying and sustaining academic disciplines.

As Gustavo Esteva notes, the dogma of ‘economic growth’ maintains that it alone will ‘bring justice, peace, sovereignty, independence, liberty, democracy, and well-being for all’ (p. 158). Each chapter challenges this assumption in some way, and each is interesting in its own right. A few examples must suffice. Vandana Shiva argues, as persuasively as usual, that ‘biodiversity-based small farm systems are more productive than’ the ‘industrial monocultures’ imposed around the world by the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO (p. 58). Moreover, focusing on such systems could actually alleviate the global hunger produced by export-oriented industrial agriculture. Helena Norberg-Hodge shows not only that ‘local small-scale diversified food production’ is more efficient than ‘large-scale monocropping’, but also that the lower prices offered by the latter are only sustained by massive, ongoing subsidies from the public purse (pp. 179–88). Silvia Federici tackles head-on the rampant myth of the ‘liberal peace’ – that the spread of liberal capitalist democracy entails the spread of peace – arguing instead that ‘war is on the global agenda precisely because the new phase of capitalist expansionism requires the destruction of any economic
activity [i.e. subsistence economics] not subordinated to the logic of accumulation, and this is necessarily a violent process (p. 133). Indeed, she explains, 'structural adjustment generates war, and war, in turn, completes the work of structural adjustment, as it makes the countries affected dependent on international capital and the powers that represent it' (p. 133). Saral Sarkar’s chapter criticizes ‘sustainable development’ – i.e. the belief that continued economic growth based on capitalist economics is possible through, for example, technological fixes, recycling and renewable resource use – as a dangerous delusion, arguing that environmental sustainability requires a planned retreat from the capitalist growth economy (pp. 41–54). The volume challenges as well the benevolence of food aid (Federici, p. 137) and of BINGOs (Big International Non-Governmental Organizations) (Farclas, p. 67); it refutes as a ‘dangerous lie’ the ‘great hope, that technological progress would liberate us’ (Akhter, p. 170); and it disputes the fundamental liberal assumption of scarcity, arguing instead that the apparently indisputable ‘fact’ of scarcity is the artificial product of the growth and commodification logics of capital (pp. 32, 180).

Taken as a whole, this fascinating volume challenges the perversities of the neo-liberal discourse of globalization. It is a discourse in which ‘People are being perceived as parasites, to be exterminated for the “health” of the global economy’ (Shiva, p. 62). It is a discourse in which, through liberal intellectual property rights, ‘theft’ (from indigenous populations in the Majority World) ‘is creation’ (and can thus be patented by corporations in the Minority World) while ‘saving and sharing seed are defined as theft of intellectual property’ (p. 63). In this ‘commodified political economy’, Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill note (p. 107), quoting Bennholdt-Thomasen and Mies (1999: 20–1), ‘life is, so to speak, only a coincidental side-effect’.

In short, this passionate and intriguing volume, motivated both by outrage at the extinction of life perpetrated by corporate globalization and by an inspiring optimism of the will to struggle against it, disputes directly the inevitability of globalization and its catastrophic consequences for the Majority World. I recommend it enthusiastically to anyone wanting to challenge themselves or their students to rethink the increasingly deafening refrain that ‘there is no alternative’ to globalization.

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**References**

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Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1985. ‘Reflections on “Rationality” and “Development”’, *Thesis Eleven* 10/11: 18–36.
Many of us have been calling for innovative research into the complex and diverse manifestations of what otherwise appears to be a relatively abstract if omni-present analytical and political tangle: ‘globalization’. *Women Working the NAFTA Food Chain: Women, Food and Globalization* responds directly and effectively to this call. The book emerges from an extensive research project in which Canadian, Mexican and a few American researchers and activists came together to explore how the political economy of food both shapes women’s lives and creates linkages among women, in their roles as both producers and consumers. The choice of food as a focus is symbolically, politically and analytically rich. As described in the book’s introduction, not only is food what sustains us physically, it is a crucial aspect of many of our cultural practices, shaping our daily lives in intimate and far-reaching ways. It is also the aspect of our lives perhaps most directly impacted by trade agreements such as NAFTA. As opposed to more traditional focuses on an industry, a spatial entity (such as the state) or political process, this focus enables an analysis which not only links women’s public and private lives, but also links women across vast geographical distances both in terms of resonances among experiences and in direct political–economic relationships. Framing the analysis through how NAFTA is reshaping these relationships reveals intimate and far-reaching elements of how NAFTA works, while simultaneously providing a potentially explosive site for political engagement. The success of this focus is revealed throughout the book, as each essay unearths yet another layer of meaning and political impact embedded in our relationships with food, and in our relationships with each other created through food. The approach taken by the project is thus important both politically and analytically, and the book provides an excellent resource for those of us seeking to understand and effectively respond – in our teaching, research and everyday lives – to some of the large-scale changes affecting our lives.

Following an introduction that describes the research project from which the book emerges, the book is divided into three parts. The first section provides the context for the rest of the book. It contains three essays which explore in turn the historical forces that have shaped and reshaped the political economy of food in North America leading up to and including NAFTA; the diverse meanings and experiences of the ‘flexibilization’ of work as revealed through the life of a tomato; and the cultural character and effects of the ‘fast food’ approach to both the production and consumption of food. Together they provide an effective frame for the material that follows, enabling the reader
to locate NAFTA within a broader context of political, social and economic processes.

The second section contains a series of essays exploring the actual experiences of women as both producers and consumers of food, and how these are changing as a result of NAFTA. The essays primarily focus on experiences of Canadian and Mexican women (as this was the research focus of the larger project), although one essay explores how these processes have affected women in rural Tennessee. The resonances and discontinuities among women’s experiences described in the essays are striking and important, revealing complex and nuanced terrains of political possibility. Particularly striking are the linkages explored between practices of consumption in Canada (and the USA) and their effects on shaping the working conditions of women in Mexico, in turn forcing Mexican women towards patterns of consumption resembling those of Canada. Simultaneously, the ‘flexibilization’ of work increasingly shapes both Canadian and Mexican women’s work experiences in similar ways, and in ways that render resistance increasingly difficult.

The final section, however, turns to an exploration of several different projects through which women are seeking to respond to the changes affecting their lives. Essays in this context describe particular ‘grassroots’ projects involving the creation of alternative political economies of food in both Canada and Mexico, detailing how they arose and their successes and failures at providing women with more control over their own lives.

Taken as a whole, the book provides a richly textured snapshot of how NAFTA not only builds upon and reinforces historical relationships of inequality, oppression and exploitation, but also is reshaping these relationships in ways that are profoundly – and asymmetrically – affecting women’s lives, family structures and relationships, and the physical and cultural health of whole communities.

Some readers will wish for more from the book: perhaps more sustained exploration of the structure and substance of NAFTA specifically and/or clearer analytical distinctions between its effects and other forces shaping women’s lives; a more robust articulation of the theoretical implications of the research, or more engagement with potentials for transnational political responses to these situations (the final section remains resolutely ‘local’). All are areas where more sustained engagement is surely needed. An important strength of the book, however, is that it not only provides a rich groundwork from which to launch such projects, it also inspires and provokes them. The provocation to such much-needed research is a valuable contribution in itself.

Crucially, the book is very accessible. It could be used for undergraduate teaching at any level, and would be especially rich in combination with any of a range of other debates: most obviously on the political economy of processes of globalization, but no less effectively in relation to political dangers and possibilities residing in changing local/global relations; the contemporary politics, meaning and practices of gender; critiques of ‘development’ paradigms; the changing sociology of the family and work and so on. Although focused
on North America, it could also productively be read to provoke debates and research into the effects of similar processes at other sites, not least the European Union. Its accessibility and the political salience of its focus also mean that its readership should extend far beyond academia.

In short, I think this book provides us with an excellent teaching tool and a rich and provocative soil to help us ground our research and political practice and to open new terrain. More of the same is necessary to build the depth of understanding we need of the micro politics of contemporary ‘global’ processes, and to develop innovative, effective and enabling political analyses of and responses to these processes.

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