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"It's a Hard Job Being an Indian Feminist". Mapping Girls' Feminist Identities and "Close Encounters" on the Feminist Blogosphere

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Introduction: Finding Feminism Online

You won't find anyone writing, "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." on the *FBomb* (http://thefbomb.org) website. In fact, the online community is a meeting ground for teen feminists who embrace the "f bomb" – or feminist – identity. While we are often told that today's girls are not interested in "their mother's movement," websites like *FBomb* prove otherwise.

The *FBomb* represents one of the most active spaces for feminist activism over the past five years: the internet. The feminist blogosphere, a loose affiliation of blogs dedicated to discussing feminism and gender inequality, has become an important space for women to connect with likeminded women, speak their thoughts on feminism, and organize feminist events. While girls can access these blogs, the target demographic is usually adult women, and consequently, girls may feel marginalized by their age and educational status. Blogs like *FBomb* serve to shift power instead to teen feminists, providing a forum for them to discuss gender issues relevant to their lives as adolescent girls.

While the feminist blogosphere is globally accessible to anyone with a computer and an internet connection (as well as a working knowledge of English, the primary language used), many of the websites are based in Europe and North America, often resulting in conversations focusing on Western-centric feminist issues. While there are many women reading these blogs, little research has examined how non-Western women navigate their identities, both as feminists and as non-Westerners, within a feminist blogosphere often dominated by Western feminist discourses. This chapter then will make two important interventions into this topic: first, by focusing on *girls'* participation in the feminist blogosphere, and second, by addressing the specific issues facing *non-Western* girls' in these spaces.

I will focus my analysis on the *FBomb* website, drawing on theoretical discussions of third wave feminism, postcolonial feminism, and critical Internet studies, and using a discursive textual analysis of fifteen blog posts to determine how feminism as a transnational movement is talked about through

postings by non-Western[1] girls and the conversations that these postings produce. Additionally, I will draw on the comments of two non-Western *FBomb* bloggers from India and Jordan in order to better contextualize my textual analysis. These comments are taken from qualitative, open-ended interviews, which I conducted with each blogger via email in April 2011.

Reimagining a Transnational Third Wave: Intersectionality, Close Encounters, and the Internet

I am positioning the contemporary feminist blogosphere as part of the third wave of feminism, which developed in the early 1990s out of young women's desire to articulate feminism according to their own lives.[2] The third wave is typically understood as racially and sexually inclusive, global and ecological in perspective, influenced by poststructural notions of identity and subjectivity, an interest in popular culture as a site of resistance, and a focus on sexuality and pleasure (Karlyn 2003). The third wave's privileging of a multiplicity of issues and, as Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (2003) note, an understanding that "identity is multifaceted and layered", means that the monolithic category of "woman" is problematized, making the third wave a rich site for thinking about diversity and difference within feminism (10).

This approach is based upon an intersectional understanding of identity, a perspective that views race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, ethnicity and other identities as mutually constructing systems of power (Collins 2005). Thus, intersectional paradigms do not attempt to privilege one identity over another, but grapple with the ways that multiple identities intersect to position individuals in varying relationships to social power. Coined by U. S. Third World feminists who critiqued the women's liberation movement for their assumption of an unproblematic "global sisterhood," intersectionality has since become a significant concept for both feminist scholars and activists and a foundational concept for the third wave's "politics of hybridity and coalition" (Heywood and Drake 1997: 9).

Despite the third wave's emphasis on intersectionality and diversity, several scholars have critiqued third wave practices as reinforcing the dominance of white, Western middle-class feminists and equating the First World with the *whole world* (Woodhull 2004). Denise deCaires Narain (2004) argues that the third wave must do more to build coalitions with Third World women, arguing that the third wave's emphasis on individ-

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1 The term non-Western is not entirely unproblematic. I employ it as an analytic and political category, representing those outside of the white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, Western feminist movement, similar to Mohanty's (2003) use of "Third World." I do not mean to enforce a Western/non-Western binary here and I utilize these terms while recognizing them as being potentially problematic.
2 While I agree that the wave metaphor does not capture the rich complexity of feminist movements, I utilize third wave feminism as demarcating a cultural context, rather than a narrowly defined generational marker in opposition to the second wave.

ualism and pleasure risks difference "being articulated entirely in terms of a consumable, chic, metropolitan hybridity, rather than an engagement with 'other' contexts and representations" (243). Her critique exists as part of a lengthy history of feminist postcolonial theory, which has made important interventions into the ways in which Western feminists think and write about women in non-Western nations since the mid 1980s.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) argues that some Western feminist writers have promoted a "third world difference," a universalist discourse that positions non-Western women as traditional, oppressed, uneducated, devoutly religious, and possessing little control over their bodies. Mohanty notes that this image of the "oppressed woman" simultaneously constructs Western women as modern, free, educated, secular, agential, and thus able to "save" their non-Western "sisters." Thus, instead of employing the universalizing "woman" as a category of analysis, Mohanty advocates for a contextual analysis that understands women as located within specific local, historical, and social conditions as a way to find productive spaces for a coalitional politics that do not rob women in non-Western nations of their agency.

Mohanty's critiques remain significant, particularly in the context of the "war on terror" and the mainstream attention given to Muslim women over the past decade. Thus, we must ask: how might contemporary feminists build transnational coalitions that avoid universalizing, simplifying, and commodifying the experiences of non-Western women? Sara Ahmed (2000) suggests that transnational collective politics be formed through what she calls "close encounters." She describes these close encounters as a "politics that is premised on closer encounters, on encounters with those who are other than 'the other' or 'the stranger' . . . The differences between us necessitate the dialogue, rather than disallow it – a dialogue must take place, precisely because we don't speak the same language" (180).

According to Ahmed (2000), close encounters avoid common universalist approaches whereby Western feminism assumes the ability "to get inside the skin of the other," adopting the position of speaking for her (166). But stepping back in the name of cultural relativism, assuming that the best way to avoid speaking for others is to avoid speaking at all, is also problematic as it confirms the very privilege that it seeks to disavow. *Not* encountering then becomes an active choice that can stall the development of a transnational feminist network, while ignoring the necessity of this network within a globalized world (Ahmed, 2000). I want to suggest that the internet may offer new potential for global networks where close encounters as articulated by Ahmed can take place, and I will now turn to a discussion of this possibility.

Technological advances such as the internet have provided new spaces for feminist activism within popular culture. Ednie Kaeh Garrison (2010) argues, "Technology is a major discursive repertoire in the cultural geography of third wave feminism, [as] 'democratized technologies' have played a significant role in the feminist political consciousness of many young women today" (396). While feminism has always relied on networks of people to

sustain it as a movement, networking within the context of third wave internet culture takes on new meanings and opportunities. Garrison describes third wave networks as being "technologic", signaling a particular practice of communicating information over space and time, the creation of temporary unified political groups made up of unlikely collectivities, the combining of diverse technologies to construct oppositional cultural expressions, and the construction of feminist politics of location that "weav[es] between and among the spaces of race, class, sexuality, gender, that we all inhabit" (187). Third wave networks imply a kind of "messiness" that complicates the notion of a unified social movement with a clear agenda and boundaries and in this sense, may serve as a useful way to think about intersectional identities and transnational feminist coalitions online.

However, Stacy Gillis (2004) argues that while the Internet has been promoted as a "global consciousness-raising tool" for third wave feminists, "the myth of cyberfeminism – that women are using cyberspace in powerful and transgressive ways – far exceeds what is actually taking place online" (185). Gillis maintains that this is primarily because feminism's transgressive potential in an online space is limited by the specificities of embodied identities, including those of race, ethnicity, and class, within online experiences. Likewise, Winifred Woodhull (2004) argues that the third wave's use of new media technologies often reproduces divisions by prescribing Western models of feminism for women worldwide. According to these scholars, third wave feminists must conscientiously work to build coalitions online that can recognize and challenge inherent power relations, rather than reinforce them.

Performing Feminist Identities In Flux

Much of the existing research on girls and internet use focuses on the use of social media by girls for identity exploration and navigation (Mazzarella 2005). danah boyd (2007) notes that without the physical body to guide others' perceptions of us, "people must learn to *write themselves into being*" (12). This articulation of a virtual presence can present an opportunity for girls perform and experiment with identities, including *feminist identities*. While blogging is viewed as a "new" form of media production, finding one's feminist identity through the craft of writing has a lengthy history amongst women from all over the world (Muaddi Darraj 2003). This is especially true for non-Western *Fbomb* bloggers who seem to often specifically state their identity upfront, and in several cases, describe how their geographic location, informed by their national, ethnic, religious, or racial identity, shapes their feminist identity.

In a post dated 28 April 2010, Mumbai, India native Jasmin,[3] grapples with her own feminist identity, which is situated within the tensions between India and the West. She writes,

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3 All names are pseudonyms.

> I am an Indian and I live in India. How convenient. At the same time, I'm not really sure what an Indian feminist is . . .. Most Indian teenagers have to negotiate their Indian identity into either blending in with Western values and immediately being liberal or retaining their Indian-ness and try to re-negotiate what norms they accept, for what purpose etc. To add to this existential burden, if the teenager is also (unfortunately) a feminist, then said teenager has to again see what norms of Western feminism to pick and which ones to leave out . . .. it's a hard job being an Indian feminist.

This post gestures to the complexity of identity issues, where being a feminist is only part of one's identity, and must often be navigated with other aspects, which can include national, ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual identity. This intersectional approach is indicative of the influence of third wave feminism that informs many of the blog posts and discussions on the site, and forms the standpoint from which many bloggers "write themselves into being" (boyd 2007).

boyd's description of writing oneself into being is particularly useful here, as the authors of many of the blog posts I analyzed use the space of their post and the practice of writing to work through their own hesitations about their feminist identity. In the same April 28, 2010 post, Jasmin writes,

> So just because I talk of Nora Ephron instead of Gurinder Chadha . . . Margaret Atwood instead of Arundhati Roy, harp praises about P. J. Harvey instead of Kavita Krishamurthy, bring up Gilmore Girls instead of Ladies Special – the list never ends – *my Indian-ness* doesn't fade away in the Western hoo-ha. If I talk using 'Indian' terminology (case in point: rotis, chai and dhobis) I'm not being any more Indian than I am now.

Here, Jasmin articulates her feminist identity using her own framework through writing, calling out the fallacy of the West/rest binary that often structures talk about global feminisms. In doing so, she carves a space within the *FBomb* to talk about feminist identities as being more than just about gender, but about the different power structures that operate on the lives of girls around the world, while also recognizing that these identities do not fit into neatly established binary of Western/non-Western feminism. This arguably globalized perspective also points to the influence of the third wave and globalization itself on this younger generation of girls.

It is often this tension over identity that spurs girls to participate within the feminist blogosphere. Nyssa, a seventeen-year-old blogger from Amman, Jordan tells me that being a *Middle Eastern feminist* was an important reason as to why she wanted to contribute to the *FBomb*. She explains that, "I've been on the feminist blogosphere as a reader for awhile now, but I thought that I had a different perspective because most of what I've read is from the U. S. or other Western countries. I've seen very little coverage on feminism in the Middle East and the perspective of a young person in the Middle East – and so I wanted to write from my own perspective."

Like all identities, the feminist identities of the *FBomb* bloggers are far from static, and instead are constantly shifting through blogging, dialogue,

and new experiences. Jasmin tells me that many of her opinions have changed since she posted and that I shouldn't regard her posts as her take on feminism right now. She explains,

> I find that I've become more nuanced in my understanding of feminism – if you see my earliest posts they're still a part of Oh Yay We Are All Fighting Sexism/ Misogyny Together And Everything Is So Freaking Perfect to now where I am no longer appalled when white feminists ask me to prioritise my race and body over gender . . . so my feminist identity is fissured today. . . . I need a feminism that goes from the local to the global, so to speak – writing these thoughts out week after week has build me up to what I am today.

While Jasmin acknowledges that her views have changed dramatically through her blogging experience, this doesn't make her previous posts invalid or no longer important. Instead, they can be read as documenting a feminist identity *in flux*, a position that many other girls (and women) can relate to and a position that really exemplifies what sites like the *FBomb* are all about.

Similarly, Nyssa describes herself as "indecisive" about many feminist issues, and that the *FBomb* comments section serve as a productive space to hear about other's perspectives, which sometimes shift her own. "The comments section is a testament to how layered feminist issues are, it's definitely made me more aware of how feminism is in the West and challenged some of the perspectives I've developed about feminism from living in the Middle East, reading blogs has definitely helped fill in the layers in between." In this sense, the process of blogging is a practice that helps girls make sense of their thoughts, try out different perspectives, and to shift their feminist identities as they grow. Thus, the *FBomb* must be read as a space that is in constant motion, recording identities in flux rather than documenting static "truths" about contemporary feminisms or how teen feminists *really* are.

Renegotiating Space: Close Encounters and Closed Borders

I am labeling the *FBomb* as "in-between space" based upon Nyssa's comments that, "reading [feminist] blogs has definitely helped fill in the layers *in between*." This comment speaks to the ways that online spaces like the *FBomb* can be thought of as physical space occupying a *location in-between geographies*, and thus, has the potential to serve as an "in-between space" where close encounters can occur (Ahmed 2000). An 11 October 2010 post by Iraqi citizen Sheena serves as a useful example of what I'm calling a close encounter on the *FBomb*:

> Before we go about judging those women who dress in loose, black clothing and click their tongues at our skinny jeans, we have to remember that they can't help their beliefs, in that this is how they were brought up. The people who are performing [female genital mutilation] don't do so to hurt the girls, they just want

to protect them. The procedure, although backwards, is thought to ensure marriageabilty and cleanliness. The only way to stop this is through education.

When there are things like this going on, who really cares if Hannah Montana isn't completely coherent with feminist standards? We're so wrapped up in the issues that directly involve us that we forget to consider the bigger things.

Sheena's posting generated seventeen comments, expressing a variety of thoughts, including readers who identify as an Orthodox Jewish feminist, an Indian American girl, a Muslim American currently living in Saudi Arabia, and a British Muslim girl.

For example, Courtney writes in the comments section,

As an Indian-American girl, I often find myself flabbergasted at some of the things that white feminists find SO important . . . I mean, yeah, it is necessary to scrutinize pop culture. But don't do it so much that it overshadows other issues. I barely see international women's rights issues or issues explicitly pertaining to American women of color on fbomb, and it really upsets me. Women of color and their stories are hardly represented here.

Another poster, Kirsten, responds writing,

I totally agree that transnational and global feminist issues are important, but it's also important not to trivialize more local issues. It's not just about whether or not Hannah Montana is a feminist. The fact is, young women are being brought up on this media and therefore, it is shaping a new generation. The problem of patriarchy and the sexualization of young girls is systemic and it is communicated through media, i. e. television, music, movies . . .

I'm glad that you showed that this issue [FGM] is extremely important, but it doesn't need to be done at the expense of other issues.

I'll refrain from discussing the potential problems with the arguments being put forward and instead focus on the discursive in-between space that they produce, a site for potential close encounters.

Ahmed (2000) writes that, "Close encounters work with what is *missing from or in the formation of collectives* . . . Alliances are not guaranteed by the pre-existing form of a social group or community, where that form is understood as commonality or uncommonality. The collective then is not simply about what 'we' have in common – or what 'we' do not have in common. Collectivities are formed through the *very work that we need to do* in order to get closer to others, without simply repeating the appropriation of 'them' as labour, or as a sign of difference" (179–180). Sheena's post and the resulting discussion does not provide solutions or simple agreements. However, this rich example makes visible the *work to be done*, complicating notions of differences and commonalities and working through these issues within the space of the blog, what I would characterize as productive close encounter.

Despite the ways in which sites like the *FBomb* have the potential to function as an in-between space, they do not always do so. Jasmin was the most outspoken about the ways in which borders function to homogenize the feminist blogosphere. She says,

> Most – if not all – discussions in the feminist blogosphere end with western bor-
> ders. I'm not asking people to write about things they don't know . . . I'd just like
> to see borders in their writing, acknowledging that everything they write about
> exist within specific borders . . .

This comment confirms some of the critiques made by scholars such as
Woodhull (2004), and reveals the ways that the geographic borders that get
inscribed within the online world often go unacknowledged, perhaps be-
cause of the incorrect assumption that the internet is borderless.

This logic also affirms Mohanty's critiques, such as the notion of the
white, Western feminist as the unmarked norm, the assumed center of fem-
inism. *FBomb* bloggers are often assumed as white and Western – unless
they overtly identify themselves as "other". Jasmin argues that because of
this assumed white, Western norm, girls who do not fit this identity are
legitimated only through talking about their *difference from* Western femi-
nists. She tells me that Western feminists often,

> Don't see my body as beyond brown, where my location in India is an "interest"
> for them because of how "different" the cultures are – so I notice people 'listen-
> ing' to me, or re-blogging whenever I rant – but in day-to-day interactions, there
> is still an invisible, unequal dichotomy . . . when I'm not directly addressing
> them or pointing out their fails, very few have any interest in what I have to
> say.

Jasmin's comments point to the complexity of dialogue within an online
space, and reveal the ongoing tension between creating open space for
close encounters and closed borders that limit these close encounters from
occurring.

Conclusions: Creating Transnational Feminisms?

The *FBomb's* diverse community hints at the formation of a transnational
feminism, fostered by online global coalitions. For example, Nyssa is op-
timistic that the feminist blogosphere is an avenue for the development of
a transnational feminism. She says that, "The Internet has definitely really
opened up the scope, allowing people from virtually everywhere to chip
in. I think it's opening eyes everywhere – you can read poems by a Saudi
Arabian feminist or a Jamaican LGBT activist or the thoughts of an Ameri-
can woman in Afghanistan and a bunch of other scenarios . . . and while it
might not be perfect, it's definitely great to have that access."

Nyssa's comment points to the ability of sites like the *FBomb* to facilitate
dialogue where everyone is encouraged to have a voice and participate by
both speaking and listening to others. This is especially significant for girls,
whose voices are rarely present within mainstream media and public institu-
tions, unless incorporated into an adult-directed initiative (Harris 2004). The
ability for girls around the world to exercise agency online through identity
exploration and connections with other girls, may suggest as to why girls are
increasingly active online, especially as bloggers (Lenhart et al. 2008).

But Jasmin's comments remind us that borders, geographies, and bodies still exist in this space, privileging a normative white, Western feminist lens with which to view issues both within Western borders – and outside them. While having girls from different countries write their own posts is a good first step, it does not necessarily negate the power dynamics present within the feminist blogosphere or dismantle the West/rest binary that has long marked transnational feminisms. Thus, Jasmin often says she feels like the "token brown" on many Western-based feminist sites. It is telling when Jasmin confides that, "I've experienced more racism online than I have in my non-online life."

The feminist blogosphere, and the *FBomb* in particular, cannot then be regarded as indicative of an unproblematic transnational feminism. However, based on my analysis and interviews, I argue that it *can* be seen as an *activist space that both makes visible the work that needs to be done, while working towards making more close encounters possible*. This is not an easy task, and leads to a space that at times appears messy, contradictory, and fraught with tensions – a position that aligns it with the feminist activism of the third wave.

Girls' blogging on the *FBomb* can be viewed as a form of feminist activism in progress, with the practice of writing constituting a way to develop, perform, and explore one's shifting feminist identity and make space for close encounters with girls from around the world. This does not always happen, as borders, bodies, and nations often get reaffirmed through the blogging process, however, as the *FBomb* and other feminist sites continually shift and change, we can hope that these shifts continue to make more space for future transnational feminisms.

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