

Transnational What? Encounters and Reflections on Questions of Methodology

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There are some constructs and conjectural spaces that keep recurring in one's life – sometimes making their appearance metaphorically, at other moments materializing more physically, and still at others they remain a promise, a hope and a dream. Two in specific have seeped into my life from different corners, sometimes unexpectedly and accidentally, at other junctures being part of a premeditated plan. Many a time their appearance was not necessarily marked or registered as a node in a matrix, yet in retrospect and from particular positions of articulation (or rather re-articulation) they do acquire special signification and parlance. One is the infamous “from Cape to Cairo” and the other is the “transnational”. A spatial axis underpins both, invoking the nation and the state as pertinent in their thinking and making, yet both are indeed about crossing the boundaries of the nation and the state, in pursuit of other connections and possibilities.

Moreover, both are constructs and signifiers for multiple histories, relations, positions, and projects, variously articulated by the different groups¹ that hailed and keep on hailing them as possibilities of what Fabian (2000: 281) once called “remembering the present”. Their meanings and deployments varied tremendously: “from Cape to Cairo” was once a node in an imperial design, later re-appropriated as a powerful idiom for reconfiguring connections in revolutionary and liberatory projects and imaginings of/for Africa, and yet at other moments deployed to ridicule the very possibility or tangible nature of that project. Transnational has many biographies and meanings, some celebrating the possibilities offered by the concept that promises methodological rigour and theoretical advance achieved by multiple crossings of boundaries, the national being only one among many². Other usages add the “ism” and turn transnational into a meta-narrative and system-like formation or explanation, thus challenging unwittingly the potentials of “crossings and connections”, while as an adjective transnational

is appended to such a multitude of nouns, that its efficacy gets lost in the myriad phenomena, experiences and relations it presumes to describe, let alone analyze³. Transnational was also wrapped up in capitalist and imperial designs, signaling the corporate body that metamorphoses with the historically different configurations of capitalist relations.

In the subsequent sections of the article, I will use both constructs as entry points to reflect on questions of methodology, particularly feminist methodologies. My notes – tentative, unfinished, incomplete, and raising more questions than answers – embody thoughts, experiences and encounters that were part of a personal and intellectual journey while traversing diverse places, literally Cape and Cairo, but also Tanzania, the UK and the US, as well as other spaces that were encountered by proxy through the institutions, libraries, texts and interlocutors engaged along these paths. They also aspire to a beginning of conversations and dialogues, again literally between Cape and Cairo, and beyond.

Rather than a linear temporal narrative that has a moment and place of a beginning (and what would these “beginnings” be, since they cannot and did not start with the “fact” of being born in Cairo, receiving my primary through high school education at a German missionary school at a time when Nasser’s nationalist project reached its heights only to crumble a few years later), I will start with the recent past and navigate my way through to the past(s) that made the present possible. Attempting to isolate a moment of beginning in a personal journey assumes that a trajectory starts with the “fact” of birth; rather the latter intercepts structures of meaning and conditions of existence that shape, facilitate and contribute to certain conjunctures, whose comprehension is necessary in unpacking the making of the subject and the multiple positions from which she speaks/acts/imagines.

Re-Turns and Different Positions of Engagements

In August 2006 I accepted a position teaching anthropology at the American University in Cairo, after 20 years of studying and teaching in the US. Many – myself included – talked about this movement in unidirectional manner, i.e. a “return”. Was Cairo a place that I “came back” to, to which I re-turned? But what did this re-turn actually mean, given all the “transnational talk” about the dense social fields within which our lives and works are wrapped, and which insisted on challenging the unitary nodal points of departure and return, and along with that the compartmentalization of knowledges, experiences and histories? Was mine yet another narrative similar to all the accounts that,

particularly since the 1990s, proliferated in bookstores, journal articles, policy documents and newspaper reports about “transnational” connections, lives and experiences that crossed the boundaries of nation-states, among a multitude of other boundaries ranging from race, to gender, to ethnicity, to disciplines, eras and spaces. In fact, from a rather hasty online search on *Academic Search Complete*, I would fall right there with the 43,233 citations for articles that included transnational in their subject index, the 21,734 entries that *Jstor*’s results produced, as well as the 4464 texts generated from an *Amazon* listing for transnationalism⁴. Indeed, my pace and directionality of crossings did not alter much since my “return”. While residing in the US I traveled regularly to Africa to visit friends and family in Egypt and attend conferences. I went to Tanzania for research, to South Africa and Mozambique for collaborative teaching and research engagements, or to Europe for research and more workshops. From Egypt, I equally crossed to the US to visit friends and family, to attend conferences, and to the other parts of the African Continent for teaching, conferences and research. However, moving between nation-states was only one crossing and not the most salient either, though at each immigration station or embassy post the power of states and capital in marking and regulating the movement of bodies was rendered very “real” and visible, especially for certain geopolitics (like the Middle East). Hence, what does transnational actually mean? A recent encounter is a case in point.

During the last two months, I participated in two *international* conferences, one in Johannesburg about labour crossings and the other in St. Paul, US organized under the rubric of an area studies’ annual meeting. Both events were *interdisciplinary* and at both transnational talk abounded in rooms where panels were held and more pertinent at keynote speeches and plenary closing sessions. At both transnational was marked off from other prefixes like “cross-”, the “multi-”, the “inter-”, and the “post-” and was placed on the pedestal of critical categories to “challenge”, “go beyond”, “question”, “subvert”, “change”, and “revitalize” debates, paradigms, and theorizing practices⁵. But what did the participants actually mean when they engaged transnational as part of their conversations and their praxis? And equally pertinent: what do our students mean (particularly US-based graduates and undergraduates) whose theses and papers are saturated with references and usage of transnational this and that, in an attempt to situate themselves in an economy of knowledge and manner of articulating experience that has packaged transnational as the discursive form of value? How different then is

the biography of the concept transnational from other categories, like gender and identity⁶, whose efficacy of critical analysis and political engagement has been subject to recent debates and skepticisms? Has transnational then – like the category gender – “become such a taken-for-granted buzzword”, deployed as a “catch-all term for a plethora of competing meanings and agendas, shorthand for which the longhand has either been forgotten or was never really that clear in the first place” (Cornwall, 2007: 2)? I would argue that indeed transnational – like its predecessor concepts – has become a buzzword, circulating with such ease and facility that it naturalizes its critical analytical potentials. And indeed like gender, “it may not have lost its utility. Rather, what might be needed is, as Wittgenstein puts it, a bit of cleaning before it can be put back into circulation” (Cornwall, 2007: 10).

What follows are some thoughts on possible cleansing practices that are the outcome of encounters and conversations that took shape from particular locations and positions, while simultaneously attempting to traverse compartmentalized and already packaged forms of knowledge. Several of these thoughts are also products of the shifting locations from which we practice and produce knowledge, particularly in this case the re-turn to Cairo, and the different meanings it posed to engagements with students (and which students doing what), to collaborative endeavors, to the world of development and its practitioners, and to the value of social sciences and humanities as political projects. They are also a product of what Mignolo entailed by “conversation as research method”. He elaborated, “By conversations I do not mean statements that can be recorded, transcribed and used as documents. Most of the time the most influential conversations were people’s comments, in passing, about an event, a book, an idea, a person. These are documents that cannot be transcribed, knowledge that comes and goes, but remains with you and introduces changes in a given argument” (Mignolo, 2000: xi).

Locations in Packaged Fields

Knowledges that we gain in the classroom in encounters with students and reading and re-reading of texts fall squarely within those conversations that “remain with you”. During my year at the American University in Cairo, a question re-appeared in two of the graduate seminars: why are we reading these texts, and the reference was to a collection of diverse ethnographic texts that dealt with transnationalism and migration in one and history production and memory in the other. At the heart of the query was a sense of distance

to texts that concerned “regional” contexts in China, South Africa, Columbia and Haiti, and which rendered the engagement with ideas, experiences and analyses unfamiliar and foreign. A proximity to texts about West Africa was articulated in terms of Islam and to the US in relation to the hegemonic role it plays in the global imaginary and consciousness, while those referencing Algeria, the Gulf, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt were “home”, “here” and “near”. This sense of distance and proximity was further magnified by questions of relevance and congruence, which marked a substantial part of student queries and concerns. Despite all the “talk” about crossings and connections and the references to transnational possibilities, the boundaries were “real”, bespeaking the effect of regional imaginings and carvings that had the power to defy both historical and contemporary connections and crossings as well as histories of intricate relations that simultaneously were delineating “the Middle East” as separate and distinct from “sub-Saharan Africa”, “Latin America” and “Asia”⁷. Ironically, what has been labeled “methodological nationalism”⁸ – namely the reproduction of specific national histories and traditions as ahistorical, naturalized and essentialized constructs, with only lip service paid to transnational parameters in introductions or prefaces – remains powerful enough a tool to lock and confine not only the imagination of the nation but also by extension the regional orbit within which the nation implants itself. The invocation of a “Global South” – itself imagined and constructed as a product of transnational connections with aspirations for radical change in epistemology and practice – has yet to challenge the resilience and lasting effect of area studies, as well as the homogenizing tendencies that come under the rubric of measures and scales for success in international discourse and practice, particularly by governmental, non-governmental organizations and international institutions⁹. Indeed as Mama (2006: 153) argued, “many less-than-radical gender interventions in which gender is applied as depoliticized technical device, generating log frames and statistics, do little to challenge unjust gender relations”.

Students in a seminar were not the only ones articulating sensibilities about the familiar and the distant, neutralizing and naturalizing the critical potential of categories and constructs. At the launching of an international report on Gender Equality and Justice (Cairo 2007), one of the criticisms about the report was its heavy reliance on case studies from Africa, Latin America and South Asia as documentary evidence for the complexity of the constructs of gender, equality and justice, as well as the experiences of unequal relations

that marked the lives of thousands if not millions of men, women and children of diverse yet overlapping languages, races, ethnicities, castes and religions. A call for a substantial inclusion of the more familiar terrain of the “Middle East” (but how the latter was to be bound remained ambiguous) cut through many of the discussions and deliberations of participating scholars and activists, NGO representatives and spokespersons of women’s, feminist and human rights organizations, donors, and policy-makers. Bye-bye Global South!

Similarly in an interview with members of local women’s rights organizations in Cairo, where debate on where and how to locate Egypt in relationship to diverse orbits of engagement, arose, it was primarily around the question of FGM that situating Egypt in the Middle East was questioned. Rather than the Middle East the point of reference became the equally ambiguously bound construct of Africa. Indeed it is gendered bodies that become a terrain on which the geographic imagination of places and their linkages are mapped out. Here, a brief and short detour from Egypt to Tanzania and South Africa helps to further clarify the mutual mapping of regions and gendered subjects. My research in Tanzania concerned the making (and unmaking) of labouring subjects on sisal plantations whose birth on the East African shores occasioned the institution of the German and later British colonial projects. Central to the constitution of the category of labouring subject was an imagination of the plantation worker as an inherently and essentially single migrant male figure. Particular ethnic and regional repertoires compounded the gender and age axis along which labor was constructed. An elaborate knowledge production machinery codified what was to comprise plantation workers, with an equally sophisticated apparatus and technology geared towards regulating, molding, and managing labour, i.e. rendering labouring subjects into breathing, eating, working and reproducing bodies on the plantation. Complex institutional entities were established and thrived on the production of extensive statistics, qualitative studies, codes of behavior, legal decrees, plans of operation, maps of travel routes and of camps along the roads and on the plantations, layouts and plans of fields and social spaces for work and sociality, calendars for work operations and for entertainment minutely organizing times for work, food, and sexual encounters. All procedures and processes of what Fabian (2000) classified as cognition and recognition were made to see, hear and deal with single migrant men, to the exclusion of any other possibility of difference that in fact prevailed on the plantations. The power of experiences

on South African mines, which fueled the imagination of the single migrant male, shaped the Tanzanian plantation trajectory, making their presence visible through commentary and comparison. And the power of the imaginary not only molded the vision and ideas of planters and state officials, but also equally pertinent was the effect on the scholarly productions¹⁰ that ensued for years to come, reproducing the narrative that was handed down and passed on as the “common sense” about plantation workers.

However, plantation workers were as differentiated, diverse and complex as the messy social life that surrounded the plantations and from which plantations were carved out and parceled as distinctive and singular entities, the likes of which did not and could not exist. And the differences were not only in terms of sex, age and ethnicity, but also migration, locality and mobility. Men, women, and children, old and young, strong and feeble, local and alien, populated the plantations fields and camps, day and night, working, living and socializing. Yet, apart from the single migrant male, the “others” were rendered invisible – or rather almost invisible – by virtue of the power of an apparatus that built a category that was premised on a refusal of recognition. Indeed, it was precisely around and through the cracks of that which was “absent” that plantation workers constituted their lives in ways never imagined nor desired by colonial (and post-colonial) planters and state agents.

Back to Egypt via Tanzania and the politics of the local and the refusal to recognize. And in a similar vein, how the politics of the “local” shape processes of knowledge production, circulation, and consumption, which areas, domains and targets to tackle and which to silence, adds to the work that gendered bodies have to perform as well as the disciplinary authorities that come to speak about them, with what values and resonances. As Sholkamy (1999: 121) argued in relation to Egypt, “while qualitative data collection is recognized as a relatively cheap and efficient way of gaining insight into human behavior, the concepts and theories from which these methods derive are still underemployed and viewed with some suspicion. The battle is over representation and meaning”. Moreover, not only do scholars and academics of the social sciences and humanities have very little space from which to speak in debates about restructuring Family Law and Family Courts, equivalent to legal and religious authorities and experts (despite the fact that kinship and gender consumed a substantial part of anthropological and sociological engagements for years), but equally pertinent are areas, which are wrapped in silences and “processes of maintaining deafness” (Bennett, 2000: 8),

and there are questions to be asked about how, when and by whom do these areas eventually erupt as domains of intervention. Of particular interest in Egypt are those pertaining to sexual desires, incest, and sexual violence, which have recently received international funding to become “areas for research and intervention”. Yet the question remains: whose agenda and intellectual project frames the tackling of these “off-limit” and “scandalous”¹¹ arenas? What gets to be said by whom, and according to which points of reference, crossing and challenging which boundaries? What is left out, what is included and how, using which resources, which languages and invoking the interlocution of which libraries and paradigms, for what effects, are all questions that remain unsettled.

Attempts at Different Possibilities: From Cairo to Cape

Through a number of conversations that crossed many boundaries, intellectual and personal, spatial and temporal¹², the Cynthia Nelson Institute of Gender and Women’s Studies at the American University in Cairo initiated a two-year long program/project to interrogate the intersection of the constructs of region and gender¹³. It was also an attempt to rethink in practice the meaning of dialogue and collaboration within the context of what came to be construed as the “Global South”. As we moved along with the project in a quest to challenge the compartmentalization of knowledge production processes and products, our conversations with colleagues from four already-given and disciplinarily recognized regions – namely Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Latin America – spilled over into rethinking the nature of travels of constructs and paradigms, the limits and possibilities of gender category, and the location and binding of the Global South.

How are regions bound and imagined, what key gate-keeping constructs are developed without which regions cannot be imagined (both in the social science and humanities knowledge production processes and in policy interventions) formulated the first set of questions, that were placed in relation to how gender as a category intersects with the imagination and binding of regions. Histories mattered in such analyses, particularly in terms of what moments shaped the marking of regions and gender categories and how such histories layer the production of knowledge at present.

“From Cape to Cairo” and “from Cairo to Cape” effectively became a “reality of engagement”. The first workshop was held in Cairo, and was followed a few months later by a second workshop in Cape Town. What

became clear in these mobilities and crossings, particularly in the debates that ensued, was the need to emphasize the flux in binding and mapping out what constitutes region, thus challenging the self-evident and naturalized manner in which regions came to be deployed, re-imagined, or rendered subject to parceling, to certain linkages with other regions, or wherein some parts of a region (e.g. nations, states, or sub-regions) come to stand metonymically for the whole, or from the other end of the pole treated as exceptional. Hence, methodologically, a comparative framework that historicizes the very making of regions in relationship to each other is paramount, not only to unpack linkages and connections, but also to explore what questions have been raised in one region regarding a specific domain, but refuse to be the subject of engagement in another. Similarly, this opens the possibility for answering why some regions have been indeed in conversation, acting as faces of the same coin for each other when it comes to certain debates, and which others have been imagined as off-limits with no potential productive value arising from such a nexus. Which themes and domains served as linking axes in inter- and intra-regional debates and interventions, and which remained the purview of one region or one place within a region, held in suspension but always revisited? Are there some regions or parts thereof that act as “exporting zones” of knowledge and concepts, while others remain as consumers of such knowledge? How are international agendas framed with certain regional tropes at the heart of their making?

These last two points relate directly to the circulation of paradigms, frameworks, and theories between and within regions, and how – and if – theories are indigenized, by whom and with what agenda? How are travelling constructs constrained by a particular topography of languages, libraries and resources? And who controls the ease and facility with which the ethnographic, the particular and the historical get to be the ground on which theorizing proceeds geopolitically in particular locations and not others, and from particular spaces and not others? Of special significance are moments of crises of the social sciences and humanities, the value of their statement and methodologies in specific settings, and the efficacy of not only the production, but also the consumption of their paradigms both locally, nationally, regionally and transnationally. This is particularly pertinent in historicizing the present with all the contradictory trajectories and trends that are arising from aggressive moves to corporatize institutions of higher learning and universities, render research centers nodes in a development or

human rights machinery and industry, or de-politicize critical engagement with the re-ordering of society. Neoliberal and religious fundamentalism tactics are but two of the most serious contingents that are at present shaping the making (and re-making) of regions, the linkages or de-linking of regions or parts thereof, and the setting of agendas and definitions pertaining to the constitution of difference of which gender is one of the most salient. Certain phenomena are at the heart of the everyday lives of peoples molding and remolding experiences, connections, and subjectivities in the process – such as migration and mobility, violence, policing of boundaries, the burgeoning of types of suspect bodies marked and regulated through elaborate yet simplistic and reductionist inventions of schemes of classification, HIV/AIDS, sub-contracting, feminization of labor, the unholy alliances between patriarchy and globalization, the proliferation of identity politics as markers of a political process, the unrelenting power of consumerism, the mushrooming of NGOs, the intensity of democratization talk and rights talk, the power and efficacy of religiously fundamental ideas and practices and their normalizing projects, to enumerate only a few.

Given some of the currents outlined above and the skepticism that has already engulfed the category of gender, has the impasse in gender studies been reached? Binaries and essentialisms, with all sorts of deeply disturbing naturalizing tendencies are rebounding with ferocity. The question remains how to refuse being incorporated, co-opted or rendered superfluous and non-threatening. Is one possible way out to re-examine from the vantage point of other spaces (region being one among them) and times, that which has been left out, that which is not fitting, that which has not yet been packaged, that which has been absent through its awkward presence from the normal imagining of fields of practice, and which retains the potential for disturbing the “order of things”?

As I mentioned at the onset of these notes, they are tentative, unfinished and incomplete, raising more questions than answers, yet hoping to think through possibilities for a different kind. Penning them to paper gives them a certain materiality that also aspires for connections and conversations between Cape and Cairo.

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Endnotes

1. What Shohat and Stam delineate for the construct of multiculturalism as "protean, plural, conjunctural, existing in shifting relation to various institutions, discourses, disciplines, communities and nation-states" (2003: 6) operates in parallel lines to the transnational and the paradoxical invocation of "from Cape to Cairo".
2. The list is long, and for a selective reading see Basch *et al.* (1994), Schiller *et al.* (1992), Kearney (1995), Appadurai (1991), Vertovec (1999), Stoller (1997). While recognizing the value of the construct and the approach, others voiced cautionary notes on questions of methodology (Portes *et al.*, 1999), the long history of connections and flows that preceded the era of late capitalism (Mintz, 1998), particularly taking the instance of the Caribbean as a region constituted by long histories of transnational flows (Mintz, 1996; Trouillot, 2003), and the salience of meaning of the construct in everyday experiences of peoples (Fitzgerald, 2004).
3. Again the list is rather long and includes transnational being appended to families (Lima, 2001; Garcia, 2006; Levitt, 2001; Bryceson and Vulero, 2002), to childhood (Orellana, 2001), to communities (Georges, 1991; Kearney 1989), to connections (Al-Rasheed 2005), to identity (Gorashi 2004; Gupta 1992; Miller 1998), politics (Smith, 2008), to commodities (Hansen, 1995), cultures (Kennedy, 2002), times (Berezin, 2003) and of course corporations (e.g. Bennett, 1985; Gereffi, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1981). The coining of transnational and feminist practices and politics; as well as gender studies also had its fair share of the literature (e.g. Mohanty, 2003; Tripp and Ferree, 2006; Moallem *et al.*, 1999; Hesford and Kozol, 2005; Grewal, 1994; Shohat, 2001; Salih, 2003).
4. Amazon listings have a more elaborate classification. Beside the 4464 entries for transnationalism, there are 646 under transnational feminism, 894 texts for transnational families, 1897 for transnational crime, while transnational management has 2206 publications. Only 39 texts were classified under transnational blackness, and 4 entries for transnational tortillas.
5. These ranged from essentialized analyses and readings of nation-states, histories, contexts, communities, gender, race, labor, class, politics, fields of power, theoretical paradigms like Marxism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, as well as methodological tools like comparative approaches.
6. Cooper and Brubaker (2000) provide a provocative analysis of the concept identity and its uses and misuses. For gender see for instance Cornwall (2007), Mama (2006, 2004), Kandiyoti (2005), Butler (1990), Benhabib (1999).
7. See Mignolo (2000).
8. This construction was part of a discussion at the closing session of the Labour Crossing Conference in Johannesburg, September 2008.

9. In the case of gender in Global South the measures and scales pertain to the assessment of performance of various nation-states and regions in relation to the Gender and Development Index (GDI), the Gender and Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG), among others (see Moghadam, 2007).
10. See Sunseri (1996).
11. Indeed scandalous was the terminology used by different participants at the aforementioned conference launching the gender equality report.
12. For instance, national, disciplinary, location in the field as researcher or practitioners, regional encounters through networks and initiatives in the so-called global south, personal histories and institutional affiliations
13. This project is coordinated by Martina Rieker, Director of Institute of Gender and Women's Studies at the American University in Cairo and myself. Funding for the project is provided by the Ford Foundation. The reflections in this paper are my readings, re-interpretation and re-articulation of the debates and conversations that shaped the first two workshops of the project, one held in Cairo and the second in Cape Town.

