

Deconstructing the Feminist Metanarrative:
Women over Woman; The Many over The Few

We currently exist in a time of apathy: one in which we have been taught to accept the “easy” and commercial route. We are consumers first in America’s eye. Travel is no longer synonymous with the exploration of a new place; vacation is hardly a time of relaxation. Instead, we have been marketed all-inclusive stays at theme parks and resorts, finding ourselves cursing the fine-print asterisk we had gleefully ignored when booking; horseback riding not included; lunch not included. All-inclusive *hardly* ever means just that, and claims of such grandiose scale must *always* be questioned.

There is little to no difference between the vacation analogy above and the concept of the metanarrative: both claim states of “all-encompassing” while remaining dependent on the fine-print beneath their words; the loop-holes if you will. It is simpler, cleaner, and easier, to market an idea to the masses, to find and develop an over-arching description which will garner the most-possible guttural reactions: “that fits me; I want/need that.” But as always, with the creation of such wide-scale “truths” there will be those demographic audiences that just did not make the cut. The asterisk is always present. Single-mothers not included. Indigenous women not included. Metanarratives, monolithic, digestible, representations of complexity, will *always* need to sacrifice “the few” in the name of simplicity and the continued application to “the many”. And therefore, they

automatically birth binaries having been formed on racist, heteronormative, classist, and ableist ideals.

In its simplest of definitions, a “feminist” could be claimed as one who advocates for, and/or supports, the rights of women: someone working for goals of equality among the lines of gender in our world. What a wonderful concept. What a bastardized definition.

Just as any, the *feminist* metanarrative exists only by the exclusion of the “other”. A global-wide movement, simplified into one or two sentences, will always require such ostracization. The fault does not truly lie in the act of generality per se, but rather in the claim that this “majority” *is* the movement in its *entirety*. A feminist is... Cisgender. Able-bodied. Middle-class. Majoritaly heterosexual and white: although the movement has garnered allowances in these categories over time. A feminist is fighting for equal rights for women. They stand for freedom-of-choice in terms of the abortion debate, and equal pay in the workforce. A feminist protests rape-culture, looks to rid the world of oppressive patriarchal demands, and empowers young women and girls to claim their bodies, and look beyond the mirror for their worth. A “feminist” in the broad, global-sense of the word, has been defined through the Western lens, creating a widely “accepted” definition which rejects, ignores, and oppresses much of the world’s female population.

The implications brought about by the feminist metanarrative stem from the irrefutable idea that a “feminist” can *be* defined. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her piece *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, discusses the concept of the definable “woman”, “a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses,” in relation to the reality of “women”, “real, material subjects of their collective histories,” in terms of the creation of the feminist metanarrative (19). Here Mohanty brings concepts of subjectivity into play. Women, individual subjects, with varying factors, histories, and cultures, verses woman, the combined, monolithic, and over-simplified collective “one”. It is the latter which fuels the metanarrative in question. As Mohanty discusses; the metanarrative’s existence functions on:

the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location, or contradictions, [which] implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy that can be applied universally and cross-culturally (21).

In one sweeping action, women, become woman, to further the “feminist goals”. But even more crucially, women become the “woman” of the Westerner’s definition.

Susannah B. Mintz’ work in chapter one of *Unruly Bodies: Life Writings by Women with Disabilities*, focuses mainly on themes of embodiment and the

binary constructed through ableist ideals. She begins her chapter speaking to the “standards of normalcy” and how that in setting them we, “marginalize some bodies as deviant” (2). While this statement helps support her main thesis on ableism and the out-casted disabled in the feminist community, it serves, on a macro-level as well, in terms of the entire feminist metanarrative. At its zenith, the metanarrative itself is a “standard of normalcy”, constructed through the Western feminist lens. As Mohanty speaks to the collective “woman”, so too does Mintz in her sense of “normalcy” and its creation of the deviant. As a binary, in order for the “normal” to exist, so too must the “abnormal”, and therefore, if the Western definition of feminism has come to be the accepted, *normal* delineation, one can conclude that all other feminisms are deviant, the words beyond the asterisk. The ultimate implication of the homogenous feminist metanarrative is that there is no room for non-Western ideas in feminism. And by simplifying the entire movement to a case of identity politics, where some are the “it”, feminists, while the rest are the “other”, the metanarrative also glosses over *years* of historical atrocities which have allowed for the Western power to be as great as it is.

While the normal/abnormal binary is clearly acting upon the global feminist community, it is far from the sole dualistic force. The feminist metanarrative is composed of a multitude of binaries, all of which create the overarching sense of “us versus them” and thus the white savior complex. As we are engaging the Western feminist lens for the creation of this over-arching definition of the feminist movement, we will call on the earlier “definition” of feminism provided

through such eyes: a feminist is cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class and most commonly heterosexual and white. Ultimately, this is the “norm” spoken to by Mintz, as well as the image of the collective “woman” brought about in Mohanty’s work, but within this larger binary lies a multitude of sub-binaries: gender, ability, class, sexuality, and race.

Gender within the feminist movement is a seemingly awkward topic. Aren’t we fighting for equality between the *two* genders? While one of the major goals of feminism is to achieve such equality, the metanarrative acts under the assumption that the gender binary is held as a “fact” by all. “Normalcy” exists as the cisgender individual, one whose biological sex matches their gender identity, and thus, the trans* community is automatically othered. Any individual identifying as transgender, genderqueer, or as one of the myriad of other gender identities exists as the “them” to the cisgendered “us”. And what we are left with is an ostracized group of individuals, trans women, agendered, and two-spirit persons among them, who are no longer welcomed by the forces of the binary.

Ability is another area in which an “us and them” is created. While some disabilities have become “accepted” in Western society, and would allow for the individual identifying with them to remain in the “us” portion of the dualistic policies, Mintz speaks to the majority of the disabled community, who are quickly “othered” through the Western lens. Mintz focuses on embodiment in order to determine the, “distinction between physical impairment as the material condition

of the body and disability as a set of attitudes and practices imposed upon that body to discipline its divergence from accepted norms” (2). The diction within the feminist community reiterates the macro-binary of normalcy, the prefix of dis-insinuating that the subject is *not* able, therefore reflecting the ableistic nature of our society as a whole. It is the physical *body* which has the disabling condition, and yet, such individuals are unable to separate themselves from the “disability” that effects their form as it exists. They are forced to embody the dis-. However, if we follow Mintz’ theory of embodiment, we discover, “how artificial the line is that we draw between the biological and the social” (8). One cannot separate from their form, and so physical impairment and “disability” become seen as one through the eyes of the metanarrative, leading to the disregard and exclusion of yet another feminist population.

Class, sexuality, and race all function as their own binaries among the Western feminist standards of normalcy; however, they are uniquely related in that they are the more muddled areas within the “us versus them” determination. While the metanarrative depicts a middle-class, white, heterosexual woman as the “face of feminism”, in more recent years it has become *more* acceptable to alter said image. However, it seems as though there are still strict stipulations for “feminist membership” in that these deviants are only accepted if, they too, identify as a *Western* feminist. Audre Lorde, a Caribbean-American queer woman has been a prevalent voice in Western feminism, regardless of the deviation(s) from the norm which she embodies. Outside of the Western camp, however,

queer, non-white, and/or lower-class individuals are hardly included within the feminist metanarrative as they are deemed “othered” and thus unworthy.

The ultimate consequence of defining feminism through a metanarrative of binaries is that the movement begins to reinstate the patriarchal paradigm it claims to fight against. The Western feminist claims themselves as the “us”, hierarchically looking down upon the “them”: the non-white, disabled, queer, gender-nonconforming, and lower class individual. “The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals” (Mohanty 22). And thus, the savior-complex is created, where those deemed superior look down with pity and a need to “help” or “save” those who are subordinate. An act of “mercy” formed through narcissism. The “third-world woman”, and all other variant feminists become a figure to “save”, just as “females” are in need of “saving’ by the male population.” Defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into “objects-who-defend-themselves,” men into “subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,” and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people” (Mohanty 24). This system of “us versus them” which pervades the metanarrative is developed from misogynistic ideals of the comparison between the sexes. Not only does the duality exclude multiple populations of feminists worldwide through its creation of a “norm”, but it also helps to reinforce the male/female binary overall.

Mohanty, and Lila Abu-Lughod, in her piece, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” both discuss the concept of discursive colonization through the feminist metanarrative and its current scholarship. “Colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (Mohanty 18). Within the creation of the dualistic metanarrative, Western feminists have come to colonize those deemed “other”, forcing their own ideals and goals onto groups of women in the name of progress. By existing under the creation of the dominant-subordinate paradigm, us versus them, the feminist metanarrative has proven itself to be no better than the patriarchal values it claims to fight against. Abu-Lughod calls upon the feminist community to question these under layers, posing the statement, “we may want justice for women, but can we accept that there may be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best?” (788). She asks the metanarrative to examine its own practices and reliance on binaries, and ultimately, the true reasoning behind the activist work. Do they truly want equality for all? Or only equality how they see it should be?

Due to the power dynamics in place, Western feminism defines that which is considered “feminist scholarship”, thus, allowing for the propulsion of *only* their ideals through “accredited” sources. Representation within feminist scholarship by those women deemed “deviant” is a rare occurrence at best. Renya Ramirez

speaks to the failures of the feminist metanarrative from a scholarly perspective in her essay on race, tribal nation, and gender. “The feminism I had studied was just *too white, too American*” (26). Identifying as an indigenous woman, Ramirez describes her personal ostracization from feminism in this essay, but also goes on, speaking to the metanarrative as a whole and how its existence creates this exclusion through scholarly colonization:

Feminism is ultimately derived from white culture. They follow dominant notions of acculturation that presume that the culture of the dominant group will overpower the culture of the subordinated and that any mixing of the two will ultimately mean the subordinate group’s assimilation and loss of identity (25).

As Mohanty and Aub-Lughod would agree, the Western feminist seeks only to place their definition of feminism onto others, appropriating cultures and denying complex cultural histories along the path of doing so. And it is this crucial “lack” of feminist scholars identifying outside of the accepted definition of feminism, which continues to propel the metanarrative within the scholarly world. As Ramirez writes, it is imperative that, “rather than viewing a Native feminist consciousness as a force that could cause internal conflict or as a white construct,” we must instead view it as an entity outside of binaries and constructs overall, and in the scholarly world, this opportunity is readily available (26).

Ramirez speaks at length to the concept of scholarship and its definition formed under Western domination. That by allowing the Western feminist to delineate that which is considered “scholarship”, many important works, let alone crucial, intelligent, and innovative individuals are disregarded. Constructing a definition of “educated” creates nothing but a failed attempt at “education” as it “others” those who fail to meet the criteria regardless of their potential. Ramirez’ writing refers to rape and domestic violence crisis centers, that when taken over by the American government, “were required to hire people with proper credentials... Thus, many women, especially poor women and women of color, were no longer able to participate” (27). In this instance, the failure of the metanarrative through scholarship is blatant and unforgivingly detrimental. A movement which claims to stand for the rights of the female population, has harmed its own supporters by functioning on such a narrow definition; had the feminist movement worked *with* and learned *from* the women Ramirez speaks of, instead of attempting to mold their system into that of the Western-approved entity, actual progress and a collective effort for positive change could have occurred. She later brings in Lakota philosophy to stress the potential in a collective:

Lakota philosophy encompassed in the phrase ‘all my relations’ offers an alternative approach to tribal sovereignty that considers how people are related and embedded within social relationships with one another. Using this

approach, all people are interconnected and valued and at the same time they are expected to listen to and respect those around them (30).

By engaging this indigenous philosophy, Ramirez makes the crucial leap away from the oversimplification of identity politics. It is not enough for all feminists to listen *to* and respect one another, we must also be diligent in understanding how we are, “related and embedded”. While the metanarrative exists as a system of binaries creating an “us and them,” it also exists as a cloaking mechanism for Westerners wishing to avoid the darker sides of history. Any over-generalization is created to be both so simple that anyone can understand, and simultaneously, riddled with underlying complexity in so that it only *appears* uncomplicated.

In its reality, the colonization of other feminisms and identities through the Western feminist metanarrative parallels, directly, the colonization and imperialism that the “West” has historically spearheaded. Linda Tuhiwai Smith draws upon the concepts of imperialism and colonization in her work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. She states that imperialism can manifest itself in four different ways, including, “as a discursive field of knowledge” (21). While the metanarrative obviously depicts itself as a series of binaries, this being one of its most frequent critiques, it is less evident that such binaries are a direct result of a vast history of imperialism and genocide. The feminist metanarrative, especially in its scholarly textual manifestations, is a historic result of slavery, and

indigenous atrocities, among many other foundational events. It could not, and would not exist without such predated historical consequences.

“Imperialism provided the means through which concepts of what counts as human could be applied systematically as forms of classification, for example through hierarchies of race and typologies of different societies” (Smith 25).

The Western history directly allowed for the creation of a Western-defined master feminism, and when this feminism claims an “other” as deviant, they are doing so not just as an identifier, but as a means to continually suppress all those they’ve historically assaulted.

With so many cultural histories, and populations of “feminists” historically subjected to horrors from the Western accumulation of power, there is a natural inclination of hopelessness when faced with the problem of metanarrative. How could we ever please everyone? How can feminism’s definition ever be “all-inclusive”? It can’t. No singular classification could ever justly house such a myriad of variations, and so, numerous “deviant” feminist scholars have begun to pose “solutions” to the metanarrative in the form of abolishment of such a concept overall. The feminist movement does not need a solution, as such diction continues to engage the existing paradigm. Instead, scholars have posed an entire new way of feminism, where history is faced and factored, cultures are respected and included, and the compilation of differentiation holds the power.

Christina Beltran, in her piece, "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of the Mestizaje," offers one concept through her creation of the "borderlands". In her work, the "borderland" is described as a place which, "attempts to provide a theoretical space, a discursive 'home,' for an identity recognized as multiple, fluid, and contradictory" (597). Beltran does not deconstruct the feminist metanarrative, but rather obliterates it, calling to arms a complete lack of a story in lieu of the prior propagandized Western version. She ultimately seeks a, "space for plurality," where the collective history of all feminists can come together without abolishing self-representation and individualized identity politics (599). Her proposal allows for the necessary inclusivity demanded by feminism's variations, managing to, "legitimize and include marginalized subjects and their claims without essentializing them" (Beltran 595). The borders bolstering each side of her theory represent the "defined", a concept that Beltran believes unachievable by humanity. Instead, she proposes the space between as the home of feminism, allowing for the hybrids of identity, and the fluidity necessary for inclusivity.

Ramirez too speaks to a new theory of feminism in abolishment of the metanarrative. However, her approach is not to disregard definity in its entirety as Beltran has proposed, but instead to create a multiplicity of definitions:

No one term could possibly encompass the complexity and diversity of Native Women's experience. Because of this diversity, I, however, argue for the need to articulate many Native feminisms rather than a singular feminism. (33)

Rather than fit the needs of feminists *into* a definition, classification should be created through the compilation of multiple defined *feminisms*. A multitude of definitions is crucial in order to accomplish inclusivity without essentialization, and these definitions are formed through the individual, feminist story. As, *This Bridge Called My Back*, a compilation of personal prose and poetry edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa proves, our personal stories and individual narratives become our strongest source when attempting such a grand-scale depiction such as feminism. By bringing the grandiose down to the scale of the individual, these, "writings by radical women of color," allow us to connect on simple, humanistic levels, making the complex (feminism) digestible. However, unlike the over-simplification that the metanarrative provides, the personal narrative model of feminism does not disregard history and individual cultural needs in pursuit of understanding the involved movement overall. Instead it gives voice to the individuals involved, forcing the "woman" to be created *by* the "women".

"Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together... This Bridge can get us there. Can

coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other's ways of seeing and being. Of hearing each other" (Moraga vi).

Instead of one overarching definition into which women are forced to fit *their* needs, the metanarrative must be replaced by a multitude of stories, and definitions, which all come together to create the feminist movement. "It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundlessness, determines the center" (Mohany 42). The power of the feminist movement does *not* lie in the homogeneous force of females worldwide, but rather in the heterogeneous characteristics of the community overall and the strength these differences provide. It is crucial that we discard the binaries and the over-arching metanarrative overall, in lieu of a multiplicity of feminisms where all are represented, working together, for a collection of goals, as a collective force of change.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* v. 104 no. 3 (2002): 783-790.
- Beltran, Christina. "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of the Mestizaje." *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 57. No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 595-607.
- Mintz, Susannah B. "Introduction and Chapter 1." *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007. Chapter 1, p. 1-91.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Under Western Eyed: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. *Feminist Review*, No. 30 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 61-88.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldua, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Second ed. N.p.: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1984. 1-261. Print.
- Ramirez, Renya K. "Race, Tribal Nation, and Gender: A Native Feminist Approach to Belonging." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, Vol. 7. No. 2. 2007. Pp. 22- 40.
- Smith, Linda T. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1999. Pp. 19-38.