

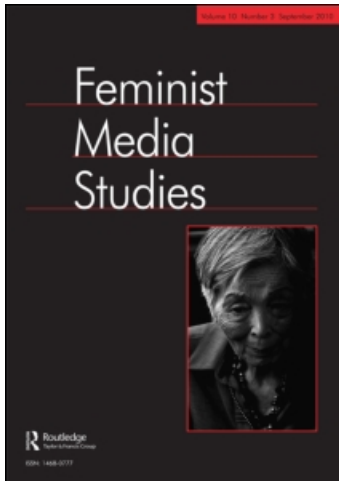
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Publisher Routledge

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## Feminist Media Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713700978>

### Introduction

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Online publication date: 18 March 2011

**To cite this Article** Silva, Kumarini , Mendes, Kaitlynn , Escosteguy, Ana Carolina and Gurumurthy, Anita(2011) 'Introduction', Feminist Media Studies, 11: 1, 139 – 149

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2011.538962

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.538962>

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# COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

## INTRODUCTION

### Negotiating the Local/Global in Feminist Media Studies: Conversations with Ana Carolina Escosteguy and Anita Gurumurthy

**Kumarini Silva and Kaitlynn Mendes**

As feminist academics, working and living outside the geographies we were born and grew up in, we continue to be interested in understanding how feminist media studies impacts spaces outside North America and Europe. As such, for the tenth anniversary issue of *Feminist Media Studies*, we chose to engage in conversations with two feminist academics/activists located, respectively, in Brazil and India. We were especially interested in finding out the degree of impact that feminism and feminist media studies has had, can have, and should have, in the global "South." What became apparent from these conversations are the possibilities and challenges of feminist research, where the projects of feminism(s) and its corollaries are complicated and diverse because of an increasingly globalised world. Certainly, a global information society is emerging, and in its wake we are forced to rethink our approaches to understanding how our notions of self and Other change in new and complicated ways. At the same time, it is cogent to remember the continuing challenges facing women and to find a connection between our own locations and the broader theoretical forms of knowledge production that circulate in the academy.

Together, Ana Carolina Escosteguy and Anita Gurumurthy show us the importance of investigating the local, while simultaneously acknowledging global shifts in knowledge production and distribution. As we mark a decade of publishing an academic journal devoted to feminist media studies, these two interviews raise important questions and provide meaningful answers for furthering the reach, analysis, and growth of feminist media studies.

## FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANA CAROLINA ESCOSTEGUY AND KUMARINI SILVA

**Dr Ana Carolina Escosteguy** teaches Communication and Media Studies at the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) and also is a researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). Currently, she is a Postdoctoral Visiting Scholar at Westminster University (UK). Her research and publications are in the areas of Latin American cultural studies, media and cultural identities.

*KS:* It's been ten years since the journal *Feminist Media Studies* was launched. What impact do you think feminist media studies, as an area of study, has had in South America? And what impact can a journal like *FMS* have within the region? Is there a space for it?

*ACE:* First, it seems important to say that the beginning of women and gender studies within Brazil happened only at the end of the 1960s, so they still have a short history if one compares it with other places. Also, along with the feminist movement of the 1970s, it was connected with other social movements against the dictatorship (Miriam Grossi 2004). These differences—historical and political—certainly have an impact because within other geographical contexts one may find that feminism began at least twenty years earlier. Secondly, until recently there was no consensus, in the Brazilian context, about the use of terms like “gender,” “women,” or “feminist studies.” Not all the people who are working with themes and subjects connected with these areas feel comfortable with these terminologies, especially feminism. The reasons for this may be that, on the one hand, feminism may be understood as a social movement so demands a political commitment and, on the other hand, it may be also understood as theory or a field of studies that configures a scholarship. Currently, many young researchers who are recently associated with a gender perspective don't think they are political activists or adequately committed to a feminist cause. Others seem to understand that the research dedicated to gender issues has broader consequences and surpasses the feminist framework. It's important to stress that those researchers who we are talking about are mainly women. A recent paper written by my students calls our attention [to the fact] that the majority of authorship of the articles published between 2001 to 2009 in the two main feminist Brazilian journals—*Revista Estudos Feministas* and *Cadernos Pagu*—is female (Lirian Sifuentes, Bruna Rocha Silveria & Janaina Cruz Oliveria 2010). Similar data was found in another work which analyses the previous ten years of the journal *Revista Estudos Feministas*, concluding that 95 percent of the articles published between 1992 and 2002 had been written by women (Debora Diniz & Paula Foltran 2010).

Finally, it was only in the 1990s that a specific gender/women and feminist research tradition was strengthened in Brazil. At that epoch, the two main feminist journals were launched. In 1992, *Revista Estudos Feministas* was launched and in 1993, *Cadernos Pagu*. Regarding the presence of disciplines and theories, those feminist journals have been

publishing a varied intellectual production. In spite of this dispersion, one can observe the relative absence of issues connected to media studies (Ana Carolina Escosteguy 2004: see also Luzinete Simões Minella 2004). As a consequence, at least in Brazil, one can claim that feminist media studies is at a disadvantage. The reasons are: research in feminist media studies is still low and, at the same time, it needs to compete with more “traditional” disciplines—sociology, anthropology, literature, and so on—for space in a very small number of feminist journals because it doesn’t have an appropriate journal published within the region. However, it also means that this kind of scholarship is not as consolidated as the traditional areas. Because of this, I would say that there is a niche for journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, but it needs to broaden its circulation and presence within Brazil.

KS: Certainly Latina/o culture and Latinidad, along with Chicana/o culture, have become important components within feminist media studies. But what about Latin American feminism and feminist media studies? Is it still a one-way flow (North to South), or has there been a significant shift?

ACE: From my point of view, we should not get rid of the North’s accounts, whether they are from North America or Europe, because these paradigms were raised in those places. If they are convincing, powerful, and efficacious in their commitments, we need to take account of them. On the other hand, we should not think that Latin American thought is better for understanding Latin American problems because it has flourished there or because its Latin American authorship. So it doesn’t matter the thought’s origin or source. I would say that we do need to update the international intellectual production and try to use it to understand strategic questions of our reality. After all, the key issue here is our ability to address, reframe, and build fundamental questions grounded in our local reality.

At the same time, if one stands in the North, what counts is to acknowledge that, in other places, there are also inquiries and theories, even if they are at times beyond reach because they are written in a different language—basically, not in English—and circulated through different channels of communication. Furthermore, that knowledge takes as its starting point historic singularities of different contexts. As a result, the North’s or South’s knowledge is different, because it is founded in different historical settings. In spite of this, it may have points of contact or ties.

For example, I have already written about the affinities between Latin American cultural studies and this field of studies within Britain (Escosteguy 2001). In spite of the features of Latin American cultural studies that are unique to that region, it is also important to acknowledge that there are also affinities between those features and those in Britain. Indeed, I don’t see any problem in this kind of issue as long as one realises the political significance of the Other. In the name of diversity, this Other should have place and voice to be heard. Clearly, it doesn’t mean that the borders are completely blurred between “us”—the Latin American version of cultural studies or the South—and “them”—British cultural studies or the North; rather, certain lines of differentiation are still in evidence.

At this point, I think another dilemma challenges us. Mainly, with globalisation, there are many bonds between North and South as well as South and North, so this flow cannot operate in binary opposition. But, at the same time, both sides retain their differences. The key question here is that this Other account is not written in English, so rarely circulates from South to North. We, from the South, always make a strong effort to cross this language and political barrier, but the opposite almost never happens.

Concerning feminist media studies within Brazil, I think the issue is different. We haven't yet had a completely consolidated tradition so we are trying to keep up with the North's inquires and accounts, while trying to work on and research areas grounded in the South.

*KS:* What are some of the emerging research trends/areas in South America that will be useful for non-South American academics to know and engage with?

*ACE:* I can't speak for the whole of South America and Brazil. It would be too pretentious because there is much diversity among the Southern countries, as well as Brazilian regions. Also, there are many disciplines that are interested in doing gender or women studies, and even feminist studies. But I do think that it is possible to assume a very specific point of view, which tries to connect gender or women studies with media studies and sketches some concerns that, in my opinion, are important nowadays. As a media studies scholar who understands that the main feature of the field is its entanglements with the process of power, I would suggest at least three opening tracks: from the point of view of media texts, I would suggest the study of women's representations that appear in media culture and what kind of ties these representations connect with women in social reality; within reception/audiences studies, gender should be understood as social and historical, so researchers might question the uses of these women's representations among distinct types of audiences (i.e., male and female informants); these two different points of view—media texts and reception studies—are connected with inquiries of identity issues. Concerning media political economy, we should pay attention to the increasing rate of female labour in cultural industries, which may be changing certain practices of production. For example, in Brazil, many women are nowadays working in radio or press sports sections, places which are traditionally male clusters. So the question is, what is the female presence in this kind of position producing?

On the whole, for the South, I believe it is also very important to think and keep in mind that, in spite of current media discourses of social equality—those trends/shifts that, some scholars have noticed, facilitate media access to diverse class positions—economic and cultural inequalities endure and are even sharper today so we can not erase class as a system of inequality. Therefore we cannot work with gender as a category without addressing the complexity of social classes.

*KS:* It is interesting to note that the areas you have pointed out above as important shifts in South American feminist media studies are questions that were asked in Europe and North American media studies some years ago. I think that scholars in the North tend to forget that these questions are still vitally important, and cogent, especially in southern geographies. Do you agree? And perhaps this link maybe too abstract to make, but I was wondering whether this fracture in the timing of research questions/areas accounts—along with the issue of language that you raised earlier—for the lack of South American feminist media scholarship in North American academic journals?

*ACE:* Yes, perhaps you are right. Although I don't feel completely comfortable evaluating what is going on about North's accounts, I would say that some of those questions that I have mentioned—for example, the relation between social class and gender or the role of women and the new technologies or cultural industries—are still open questions to be researched in the North. Perhaps they need deeper handling than they received in the recent past. Of course, I'm not saying that we—in the South—have the same questions about those broad subjects.

KS: You have written extensively on globalisation, homogenisation, and the challenges of research within global cultural shifts. Can you speak about this in terms of doing gender studies within media?

ACE: Within the broad lines sketched earlier, I would add that we need to focus on the construction of identities through media consumption, without forgetting structure and action. At least, in Brazil, I think it is very important to engage with the tension among class, culture, and identity. In terms of class, I think we need to explore the media visibility or invisibility of the destitute—or disadvantaged—classes and how those representations are building female identities. That's why, for example, I have been supervising research on the use of radio among female prisoners, the representations of Black working-class women in television programming, and the reception of telenovela among poor girls, among other related issues. This kind of work can be viewed online (Escosteguy 2008).

KS: What more can be done to involve non-US/European feminist media scholars and create collaborations? What are some of the challenges and opportunities?

ACE: We need to build projects together to strengthen collaborations, such as this one with *Feminist Media Studies*. We also need to fund and encourage translations of the South's accounts, with the precise purpose of having a more balanced flow between North and South.

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## ICT AND FEMINISM IN INDIA: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANITA GURUMURTHY AND KAITLYNN MENDES

**Anita Gurumurthy** is a founding member and Executive Director of IT for Change (ITfC), an India-based NGO engaged in policy research and advocacy on information and communication technologies and development (ICTD). Gurumurthy has written extensively on gender and ICTD from a Southern perspective, interrogating the construction of the mainstream discourse on social justice and equity. At IT for Change, Gurumurthy currently coordinates a policy research project titled "Information Society for the South."

*KM:* If thinking specifically about the work you do, in what ways has a feminist analysis impacted on the study of ICT and its potential for empowering women?

*AG:* Feminist analysis offers the fundamental epistemological tools necessary to understanding ICTs, as it does to all fields of enquiry—the pervasiveness of power and the multiplicity of positionalities. The global digital technological architecture and advanced capitalism are the warp and weft of the social fabric through which our subject positions are shaped; yet it is in the new spatiality and mobility of the digital realm that the possibility of egalitarian change lies. The study of the Information Society is essentially the study of the power structures shaping the emerging social relationship infrastructure of current conjuncture as well as the ruptures in social hierarchies that the emerging techno-social paradigm is affecting. How the dialectic between digital technologies and the ecologies of power in the overlapping spaces of the global-local plays out is critical to grasp.

For me, the older political economy debates on power between nations and the feminist critiques of corporate globalisation are at the heart of any analysis of ICTs. The global governance institutions of the Information Society reinforce the hegemony of powerful nations. Take, for instance, the fact that the UN Broadband Commission is co-chaired by a person whose companies own 80 percent of landline infrastructure and close to 90 percent of the wireless infrastructure of a country. The Commission's report quite prominently calls for reduced taxation on broadband provision, and is almost entirely focused on market-based frameworks.

The issue of network neutrality, little discussed in feminist circles, is the triumph of hyper-neo-liberalism. A non-neutral Internet will be the death of all our dreams for transformative change. Non-neutral traffic exchanges at global gateways as well as within developing countries, where global capital in any case dominates, will make the position of developing countries weak and make invisible marginal populations who thrive in and through virtual spaces. Control over knowledge and communication platforms, the digital means of their transmission, comprises the new strategy of continued domination of the North. Continued hegemony of the North requires the colonisation of the Internet as the squelching out of counterflows of knowledge and counter-publics in the digital space that the Internet as an equalising force has so far meant for many.

The global politics of the Information Society is mirrored at national levels in the South—although one could argue that many countries in Latin America are a reassuring exception. In India for instance, media and telecom policy debates are steered by the middle class, whose new citizenship in the global “knowledge” economy and access to its enticements and privileges requires that unfashionable rhetoric around social justice and the structures of exclusion be emphatically buried. Meanwhile, regulators and policymakers, if they are not hobnobbing with the corporates, are caught in deep apathy. And the new developments vis-à-vis Internet services on mobiles in India are setting the scene for corporate rent-seeking in the spectrum-scarce mobile telephony market in a manner that completely distorts the basic structure and the basic principles of the Internet.

From a feminist standpoint, the corporatisation of media, its oligopolistic/monopolistic structures (also cross-media ownership), and the fact that in India we are now witnessing new trends of media investments in big business, frame the very analysis of the communicative arena, the evolution of democracy, and the strategies for justice. With the economy becoming the *raison d'être* of mainstream media, the notion of the deliberative public sphere, however imperfect the notion, is indeed a fallacy in more ways than one. The logic of the capitalist economy in which the media are embedded drives the trajectories of public discourse—inasmuch as what is projected as worthy, or what may be made invisible for being unworthy, and thus undermining of market interests. Commentators in India have pointed out how news media, especially print, have stopped covering labour, agriculture, and school education—the social domains within which capitalist politics have been traditionally contested.

It must also be understood that the digital ecologies have transformed social relationships in unpredictable ways. On the one hand, the “sexualisation of culture” within capitalist consumption, as Rosalind Gill (2007) says, complicates feminist analysis, but, on the other, the narratives of countercultures, in the emergence of local language public spheres, “globalisation from below,” and public and collaborative initiatives to shape digital societies and communities reveal that there is in the new media context not just the sole trajectory of capitalist aggrandisement.

Thanks to feminist analysis, one can clearly see the ambiguities of the digital space: the fact that identity is not fixed and action does not proceed only from vertical, masculinist visions of organising. Transnational feminism cannot ignore the social theories of the Information Society.

*KM:* You are clearly heavily involved in feminist activism through organisations such as IT for Change. To what extent is feminism still closely associated with activism in the global South, especially in India, and (why) is it still important?

*AG:* I think feminism in the global South in general is embedded in action, but I also feel that it needs new pathways and is in some ways at crossroads. Partly, the challenge is in the fact that a global economy does not have a commensurate global polity, and at national levels, the concept of social contract has crumbled. It must also be remembered that the state is reinventing itself in a never-before manner in the digital age. I did speak about capitalism, but equally, the threat of the neo-liberal, informational state is very real. Within the wider context of the privatisation of health, education, water, etc., reinventing the public is an imperative for feminist activism. This means getting institutions to work and renegotiating the state–citizen relationship. However, feminist activism is equally about looking at civil



society solidarities, and addressing the need for pluralism, peace, and environmental sustainability.

There is also a need for new theoretical frameworks that can inform action in the context of a highly fluid, post-national and transnational reality. The imperative is for alliances between women's movements, feminist thinker-activists, and other movements, and collective action for global justice. While at the global transnational level, the governance of trade and financial markets have seen feminist engagement, the governance of the Internet is still virgin territory for feminist action.

In India, feminist activism is not monolithic by any stretch of imagination. While neo-liberal state policies have led to a de-radicalisation of feminist action in the rise of the female beneficiary of state-sponsored feminism, it has also had indeterminate effects. On the one hand, feminist thinkers have strongly critiqued the de-politicisation of development through policies for inclusion—especially through micro-credit programmes that target women while leaving untouched the basic questions around agrarian reform, environmental destruction, livelihoods, and the burdens of social reproduction on women. In fact, mainstream media, given its cosy relationship with micro-finance companies and a penchant for over-valourising its version of “empowerment,” have consistently ignored these issues and their structural, political moorings. Paradoxically, however, development financing for gender equality has also had the effect of democratising feminist thinking. Many women who are development subjects are equally agents of social change, giving participatory democracy its specific, substantive meanings. From opposing Coke in Kerala, to forming associations as domestic workers, and collectives as sex workers, the vantages of activism have been diverse. India has also seen the slow but sure queering of public space in the opening up of the discussions around sexuality. I am most excited about this democratising trend, which also brings in younger feminists and infuses into popular imagination multiple critiques of patriarchy. In fact, what is happening in Kerala, for instance, thanks to female literacy, women's writing, and presence in the public sphere is fascinating from the perspective of feminist self-reflexivity around theory and practice and the pushing of boundaries about the meanings of feminist and feminism.

*KM:* Tell me a bit about your thoughts regarding the flow of feminist discourse in an international setting. Certainly India is well known for its feminist activism, but is there still a dominant Western narrative of feminism that limits its efficacy? Feel free to also comment on ways feminist perspectives in the South might have challenged dominant paradigms and ways of thinking.

*AG:* I believe that there is a healthy scepticism of Western feminist narratives in Indian feminism despite the templates around gender mainstreaming and such. Yes, we have seen imports, but the feminist knowledge project is also independent and I see this not just in the ivory towers of theoretical musings, but in the rigorous practice of everyday feminisms across the country. The Right to Information Act (2005) took birth in India because of the work of activists committed to gender equality who were able to show what rights and citizenship meant to the poorest women. Similarly, even though the HIV money may have been instrumental, it is also undeniable that the discourse of sexuality is no longer a dark secret because of activism.

I do however think that the processes of knowledge validation, in a globalising world, are still determined by Northern systems. For instance, most journals are in English and published from the North. The discourse in the present transnational order must flow from

dialogues that encourage Northern and Southern feminists to debate together on frameworks for action. Southern feminists in Northern locations have influenced feminist thinking quite a bit, but I feel that the current crisis is as much in the theoretical gap as it is in the limits of transnational mobilisation. We need feminist theoretical work that comes from feminists located in the South. For the feminist perspectives to truly influence dominant paradigms and ways of thinking, the democratisation of the Internet is a non-negotiable. This obviously is not just about connectivity, but about an altogether new and radical way to think about institutional methods. We need institutions to be able to accommodate a diversity and plurality of voices at national, global, and sub-national levels, not in tokenistic ways through faceless email IDs, but in real, substantive ways. Additionally, I think there is so much to be learnt from the unique digital cultures of different communities, and the vision and resources to nurture such cultures through capability building is badly needed at local institutional levels.

*KM:* Looking back over the past ten years, in what ways have women's relationship with ICTs changed, and to what extent has this been facilitated by feminist activism/research?

*AG:* Quite frankly, feminist research has not really done much for shaping women's relationship with ICTs. Feminist activism has undertaken the task of enabling women to get a sense of, and understand how to use, these technologies, but only in small measure. The focus of these few feminist or women's organisations doing work with ICTs has been really on training to use and produce content. This is indeed an important first step, but the problem is still that there is a big distance between feminist media organisations and feminists working on other agenda. Media as a feminist agenda has somehow frozen in the minds of the generation of activists who took it to Beijing as an issue of images and representation; whereas when one talks about digital technologies, one is really grappling with the changing contours of something huge and fundamental. The shift is actually in the conceptual tools to get to the heart of feminist ways of making sense—the public–private; production–social reproduction; local–global; individual–collective; identity–subjectivity; etc. Feminists in media have not really been able to keep pace with the metamorphosis of the past decade and so have not been able to articulate convincingly and forcefully the nature of techno-social transformation ushered in by ICTs, and the gendered implications of this for development and women's rights. In the meanwhile, the technology juggernaut has proceeded with stunning rapidity. It would not be an exaggeration, though, to say that more and more women are now also creators and producers of media as much as they are consumers. More urban and younger women are increasingly using the internet and mobile phones. Obviously, there is a quiet revolution in the brewing in the various subversive tactics being born in digital spaces that challenge traditional gender orders. Much of this is delinked from the spaces where traditional feminist activism is engaged. Feminist activism and feminist research need to work closely—we need to take rapid strides in building the conceptual tools that inform our training to make use of ICTs, which are rooted in the theoretical connections between gender, digital spaces, and feminist visions of development, as well as a feminist ethics around the practice of technology. This effort can neither ignore the reality of the subjective nor escape the more macro structural issues from Internet governance to corporate and state gatekeeping of the digital realm.

*KM:* What role do you think feminist activism/research will continue to play in the future of ICT?

AG: Well, at the most basic level, there is no other discipline and field that can politicise the Information Society discourse as much as feminism can. Beyond the mechanistic call for “women’s access to ICTs,” the self-indulgent pursuits of pure theory or corporatist invocations of empowerment through mobiles, and into the heart of real people and their embodied and embedded experiences, it is feminism that can lead the way. The queering of the Information Society arena is a necessary step to get closer to questions about identity, difference, marginality, and exclusion. Feminism also needs to play a lead role in bringing cross-disciplinarity to the area. This would need us to go into the political and economic dimensions—rejecting both the rigidities of economic models and the mythical goodness of an “anything goes” cultural lens.

The fundamental question for me is about how digital technologies and the information society shape participatory democracy and citizenship. The diverse contexts of women’s life experiences in relation to ICTs interact with and are shaped by the particular relationship constellations between state, market, and civil society and, of course, the gender norms mediating these. The question of how women’s citizenship and democracy evolves in different Information Society contexts through public policy and social process innovations needs to be studied and must inform the future of technology governance.

KM: In what ways do you feel that the journal could do more to promote feminist theory/activism/dialogue in the South?

AG: An important development in India is the way the media industry has impacted media education. The proliferation of media is incredible. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) estimated earlier this year that in another five years media and entertainment in India will be worth around \$22 billion. One estimate, using TAM (television audience measurement) figures, puts the number of TV channels today on which advertisers buy time at 324. Ironically, this seems to be a no-win situation, with stagnating viewership (in fact the share of the top five channels in the viewership pie has come down from 40 percent to 30 percent), and a war between broadcasters and advertisers, neither of whom wants to pay for the rising costs of programming. It is clearly a dog-eat-dog situation and reeks of every trick in the book of evil tricks, from pinching staff to unethical news-making. As Sevanti Ninan (2007), a very well-respected journalist says, knowledge of a subject is not essential when all you have to do is to stick a mike in somebody’s face and toss off an opinionated sentence to round off a piece to the camera. Journalism is the casualty, but who cares? Noted social thinker and senior journalist P. Sainath (2010) recently remarked in an interview that while some journalism colleges have tried to help students get into serious reporting, the nature of media itself has distorted the curriculum design in the universities. Grounding in political science or social sciences is not seen as important. As Sainath says, like the media itself, media education is now big business, a huge media-baron fiefdom.

The truth is that India’s current experience is a microcosm of the politics of the globalised knowledge industry. There is a fringe no doubt—which signals the triumph of collaboration and sharing over the blatant individualism and competition promoted by the dominant approaches. These do thrive in the margins. However, it is hard to swim against the tide, and journals are equally caught in the macro-economic logic that seems self-perpetuating. Dialogue is possible only when spaces are open and egalitarian. A feminist journal needs to look at different ways to bring in and connect with feminist actors. Translations and special issues in different languages is not a fantasy anymore. It is more than plausible. I have learnt most when I have had access to the writings of Latin American

feminists. I feel a sense of delight in their formulations, which touch a chord instantly in the way we see reality in its everyday complexity in India. Theoretical readings by local feminists are critical for students and younger generation researchers, who can then reflect upon the historicity of their contexts. Can the journal reach out to these young people and penetrate the classroom? Another equally important question would be how can the journal privilege ways of knowing and articulating that may defy Northern standards? These are not easy questions, but perhaps they do push the boundary a little.

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