

# Feminism in the Space of the World Social Forum<sup>1</sup>

By Ara Wilson<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Despite clear affinities, the integration of feminism into the World Social Forum remains uneven, in ways reminiscent of well-known histories of women's movements with various lefts. This essay draws on observations of the 2005 WSF at Porto Alegre, Brazil and the 2006 African Social Forum in Bamako, Mali, as well as secondary literature, to explore the articulation of transnational feminism and the World Social Forum. Using concrete practices, texts, and spaces, I discuss different dimensions of the interaction of feminism with the WSF, including political norms, political geography, and historical trajectories. The relation between feminism and the WSF hinges not only on how "feminist" the WSF is but also on what feminists are doing and trying to do at the Forum.

*Keywords:* transnational feminism, World Social Forum, anti-globalization

## The Space of Arrival

My arrival in Brazil to attend the fifth World Social Forum in January 2005 was as delineated an experience as any I had at the surfeit of the Forum itself.<sup>3</sup> Delayed by an impressive snowstorm in the northeastern U.S., I obtained the last seat on a flight from Buenos Aires to Porto Alegre, agreeably sandwiched between a scruffy white American man and a Filipina, Mavic Cabrera Balleza. It turned out that they knew each other through activist radio work; Mavic and I knew people and projects in common from

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<sup>3</sup> The WSF developed as an alternative to the World Economic Summit, a privately run retreat for corporate and government elites. It aims to provide a hub for a network of global resistance, particularly foregrounding south-south relations and struggles, but welcoming activists from the global north. For information about the Forum, see the WSF "Charter of Principles" (about the forum itself), the "Manifesto of Porto Alegre," and Waterman.

international feminist organizing; and the wife of the lanky community radio advocate, he told me, taught Women's Studies, as do I. We found our commonalities in the back row of a plane full of pilgrims to the "movement of movements", the World Social Forum.

In the Porto Alegre airport, U.S. citizens were gently escorted to a small office for digital fingerprinting, a tit-for-tat response to U.S. treatment of Brazilian visitors and a concrete reminder that the world does not share a commitment to American exceptionalism. While waiting for my finger scan, I talked to a bright young compatriot who corrected my efforts at Portuguese (*obrigado, desculpe*). She had majored in Women's Studies, she said, but after college wanted to partake of different – larger – issues, and was working for an environmental organization. My thumb scanned, I shared a taxi with my seatmate Mavic to a feminist meeting called the Feminist Dialogue.

My entree into the World Social Forum highlighted a number of elements relevant to the Forum, and feminists' engagement with it: the obvious—though at times problematic—role of participants from the global north, universities, and NGOs; the place of human relations that constitute politics, a feature resonant with the critical humanism of Forum and feminist values; the pervasiveness of feminism at the Forum, with both integration into and also distinction from other "larger" movements; and the weight of post-9/11 global contexts, all themes that unfolded in my experiences at the Fórum Social Mundial.

The cacophony of progressive agendas, the disparate spatiality, and the open-ended politics of the Forum make it impossible to analyze feminist participation there in a simple, straightforward way. Even Michael Hardt, the coauthor of *Empire* and *Multitude*, was overwhelmed by the "unknowable, chaotic, dispersive" quality of an earlier Forum that was half the size of the 2005 event I attended (Hardt, 112). The pluralist diversity of the Forum raises two points for this analysis. On one hand, the event that is the World Social Forum can best be described from a particular vantage point, a recognition of partiality that accords with both feminist theory and with the Forum's embrace of multiple epistemologies and with its emphasis on providing an "open space" for a plurality of progressive and radical commitments. On the other hand, accounts of the Forum generally attempt to identify some core principles and meanings, as I note below. In this essay, I recast this effort by centering my account on feminism at the Forum and on the relationship between Forum politics and feminist presence. My focus is on radical efforts of transnational feminists that either focus on, or are engaged with, the politics of North-South relations, anti-racist and anti-nationalist commitments, and a critique of global capitalism and U.S. hegemonic powers, with a particular emphasis on feminist projects located in the Global South.

Is the Forum feminist? The question recognizes proximity and distance. Transnational feminist projects and alter-globalization movements share horizons, agendas, values, and methods – but this mutuality is incomplete.<sup>4</sup> Feminists participate in the Forum at virtually every level and transnational feminist projects – the radical, critical formulations – share fundamental orientations with the overarching themes of the World

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<sup>4</sup> On feminism's relation to anti-globalization, see Eschle; Staudt, Rai and Parpart; and Alvarez, "Another (Also Feminist) World Is Possible." The latter essay is based on the introduction to a dossier on "Feminisms and the World Social Forum," edited by Sonia E. Alvarez, Nalu Faria and Miram Nobre, in a special issue of the Brazilian journal, *Revista Estudos Feministas* 11(2) 2003.

Social Forum and with the alter-globalization or transnational social justice movements it gathers together. Yet how thoroughly feminism is incorporated into the core framing of WSF politics remains less than clear. The integration of feminism into the World Social Forum remains uneven, in ways perhaps reminiscent of well-known histories of women's movements with various left movements but also undeniably registering the transformative effects of years of feminist and allied projects. Moreover, the relation between feminism and the WSF is not only a matter of how "feminist" the WSF is (although participants reflect on that question) but also what feminists are doing at, with, and through the Forum.<sup>5</sup> Lurking beneath the question of what the WSF means for feminists, is a deeper puzzle: what does feminism mean for the WSF? That is, what are the feminist alternatives to globalization?

Addressing the articulations of feminist, Forum, and alter-globalization politics, my essay draws on the growing body of transnational feminist analysis from the critical edges of political science and sociology as well as from the advocacy worlds. My approach differs from much of this political analysis in its reliance on the methods and frameworks of ethnography and geography and attention to tacit, routine, or everyday dimensions of participation at the Forum. In addition to discussing overtly political discourse, I use ethnographic approaches to convey how politics are realized and constituted through the practices, relations, and texts of the Forum. My opening anecdote, for example, flags the methods of feminist ethnography, which uses situated and delimited observations of the practices, spaces, relations to ground discussion of political theory. Such an ethnographic perspective gives significance to the practices and discourses of participants, underscoring how the informal and habitual dimensions of women's participation also constitute feminist politics. This essay draws on my observations of the 2005 WSF held in Porto Alegre, and of one of the regional meetings that constituted the Forum in 2006, the African Social Forum in Bamako, Mali, focusing mostly on the Brazilian gathering.<sup>6</sup>

### **Uneven Political Developments**

Emerging from a particular political culture in Brazil, the WSF did not set out to be a feminist space. The World Social Forum began in Brazil in 2001 as an oppositional alternative to the hegemonic World Economic Forum held each winter in Davos, Switzerland. As is often noted, the Forum has grown into multitudes of political and social claims more or less allied against the new world order that includes feminist

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<sup>5</sup> The participants at the WSF are of course reflexive actors and incorporate thought about their methods, frameworks, and address these not only during meta-level discussions but also throughout the range of activities and discussions that constitute their participation in the Forum. The question of feminism's place at the Forum was an explicit thread in feminist discussions about the 2004 Mumbai and 2005 Porto Alegre Forums. At the 2006 African Social Forum, it was more implicit, conveyed in the tacit framing of women's issues.

<sup>6</sup> The African Social Forum was a regional meeting, not imagined to replicate the scale of the World Social Forum. In 2007, the WSF will be held in Nairobi, Kenya. Because I lack in-depth experience with African feminist networks, my observations of women's organizing at the Bamako meeting are far more limited and provisional than those of the 2005 WSF. The research for this essay is part of long-term projects studying feminist organizing and sexual rights at transnational venues. See, e.g., Wilson.

concerns among its plurality. But with this inclusion, the Forum remains uneven in its recognition of feminist ideas and voices. Leaders of the WSF have been predominantly, though not completely, male, as are its best known figureheads and theorists.<sup>7</sup> The 2005 (unofficial) Manifesto of Porto Alegre, for example, was signed by eighteen men and one woman, an African politician, who, while by no means anti-feminist, was not primarily associated with feminist worlds.<sup>8</sup> When the WSF is depicted as a whole by progressive commentators, the description of its core politics does not prominently feature feminism.

One way to consider feminism at the WSF is the textual level: WSF generates an enormous amount of texts, ranging from conference ephemera to Internet postings and print publications. Here I give a cursory look at a small sample of its English-language texts. In its main public documents, the WSF does not convey a deep engagement with feminist politics. Representations of feminist politics in commentary of and about the Forum range widely, at times appearing to be a late-stage and haphazard addition. Forum texts – which are themselves contested and often unofficial – incorporate gender, women, or sexuality as an itemized subset of a larger issue.<sup>9</sup> The “Manifesto” of the 2005 Porto Alegre Forum nods to feminism in the eighth proposed measure, which reads: “First of all, combating all forms of discrimination, sexism, hostility against foreigners, racism and anti-Semitism through different political measures.” The English term “sexism” (which appears elsewhere) is a puzzling choice, an atypical reliance on liberal frameworks, perhaps a vestigial artifact of particular archives that inform textual production at the Forum. Terminology varies across documents. The “general objectives” for the World Social Forum 2007 in Kenya, published in advance of the event on the WSF website, includes “guaranteeing gender equality” halfway down its list as part of an entry on discrimination. This phrasing itself hails from UN-NGO and Gender-and-Development language (WSF, “See the General Objectives”). The phrases “sexism” and “guaranteeing gender equality” can be found in the discourse of transnational (or domestic) feminist networks. However, much feminist discourse adopts more radical and wide-ranging analytic terms. Vocabulary aside, discourses emerging through the WSF are not generally *framed* by feminism. The main exception is the hard-won modifier in the phrase “patriarchal capitalism,” which acknowledges that gendered forces shape the new world order (although what the phrase signifies has rarely been explicated in either the two fora I attended or the pages of Forum-related texts I have perused). An American participant

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<sup>7</sup> The World March of Women, a worldwide radical project originating in Montreal, is on the WSF Organizing Committee. Latin American feminist groups, like the *Articulación Feminista Marcosur*, participated in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002 and 2003, where they were key to organizing two of the five axes organizing that edition of the Forum. And domestic and regional feminist networks have been active in struggles connected to the World Social Forum -- against free-trade agreements, third-world debt, militarism, US imperialism, and so forth. For example, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) is a network of women in the global south who focus on economic justice, feminism, and democracy. But the feminist presence in alter-globalization events remained limited until recently.

<sup>8</sup> See “Manifesto.” The woman signatory was Animata Traore, a former government official from Mali.

<sup>9</sup> From Number 4 of the “Manifesto”: “The right of every inhabitant of this earth to work, social security and pension following the equality between man and woman as a founding element of all internal and international policy.”

at Porto Alegre, who was engaged in projects concerning women and unions, wrote that “the mostly men behind the WSF act like we need a room of our own rather than that they need to be in the room with us. I feel like we are in parallel universes” (Fonow).

The political culture of the Forum is open to, but not markedly, feminist. As a condensed site of cultural practice and social relations, the Forum represents and constitutes political subjects in certain images that involve gender (as well as sexuality). In the Latin American Forum, the cultural image of the radical remains masculine. To judge from t-shirts and memorabilia, the icons of the 2005 Forum in Porto Alegre were Bob Marley and Ché. At the African regional forum, however, the figuration of radicalism appeared less marked by gender. (Although, in Bamako I attended a reggae concert, reinforcing the sense that the Caribbean form has become a leading genre of the subaltern.) Different forums are too diverse to consolidate into one figure comparable to “the Davos Man” of the World Economic Forum, yet such political iconography has its effects on the interpretations of the politics and representatives of the movement of movements. Some women criticize a persistent masculinist character of the political culture. There have also been charges of sexual assault at the gatherings.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, feminism has not been scarce at the Forum. References to “patriarchal capitalism” reveal backstage feminist organizing at the Forum. Feminists, particularly from Latin America, were involved as organizers and participants in early editions of the Forum.<sup>11</sup> According to participants, feminism became an unmistakably visible presence particularly at the 2004 gathering in Mumbai as a result of organizing efforts in Latin America and South Asia.<sup>12</sup> An activist from Sweden, America Vera-Zavala, writes, for example, that “[n]ever before at the World Social Forum have women been so visible, nor has the issue of gender played such a central role.” Others confirmed this assessment of the unprecedented prominence and integration of feminists and women’s issues at the Mumbai Forum.

What the Forum does well is allocate space to a plurality of progressive agendas, including feminist or gender politics. The specific spatiality of feminist presence takes different forms at different gatherings. The 2006 African Social Forum, for example, converted the grand Palais de la Culture into the “Women’s Universe,” a site for women’s issues for the duration of the regional meeting. With an air of grandeur fallen on hard times, this compound allowed large meetings in the capacious main hall – like the African Feminist Dialogue – and informal conversations in the courtyard. Organizers of the African Social Forum identified this dedicated women’s space as one of the Bamako gathering’s major contributions to the unfolding experiment of the Forum. Centralizing women’s issues also saved on cab fare for those concentrating on them, since taxis were the only real means of transport from one site to another.

The 2004 edition of the WSF in Mumbai had a different spatial approach, and was noted for the presence of feminists and women presenters spread across the Forum. There, demands for *parité* (50 percent representation of women on panels) were taken

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<sup>10</sup> For one hard-hitting critique of the WSF, see Obando.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Virginia Vargas and Lilian Celiberti of the Articulación Feminista Marcosur were active in organizing earlier editions of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

<sup>12</sup> Women’s voices were prominent in the Indian gathering, including at the radical anti-WSF protest staged across from the Forum.

with some seriousness resulting in an abundance of feminist or female voices. Back in Brazil, in 2005, feminist panels peppered the thematic areas of *Diversidades*, Communications, *Lutas Sociais*, Peace and Demilitarization, *Ordem democrática*, and Human Rights and Dignity. An evening panel on “Feminism and Anti-globalization Movements” was packed, with volunteers scrambling to provide enough of the transistors for the audience to hear the translation. In the harbor, a small ferry was the “women’s boat” hosting daytime meetings and two parties. Underneath the rack of life preservers, politicians drank *caipirinhas*, danced salsa (and *samba* and *merengue*), and engaged in multilingual conversation. I do not know of a comparative evaluation of these different approaches to spatializing diverse and inclusive politics for feminist activism at the Forum, but their variation represents the Forum’s effort to avoid uniformity and top-down organizing agendas, and confirms that the World Social Forum provides a welcome space for progressive feminists to meet and articulate their concerns with other critical projects.

How feminism is integrated at the WSF varies, then, by the particular edition and location of the Forum, and by domain or scales. At the textual level, the incorporation of feminist politics is uneven to the point of arbitrariness. At the level of practice, the feminist presence exemplifies the open-space and inclusive politics of the Forum. In the domain of norms and values, feminist and WSF discourses resonate with each other. A consideration of how feminist the WSF may be also invites the question of what feminists themselves want from the Forum, and what they are doing there. I turn now to examine how the relation between feminism and the Forum plays out in the concrete discourses and practices in the variegated spaces of the Forums I observed.

### **The Feminist Dialogues**

What are feminists doing at the World Social Forum? I answer this literally, by describing what feminists did at the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre and to a lesser extent at the African Social Forum in Mali. To begin, I turn to an extended illustration of the 2005 Feminist Dialogue at Porto Alegre.

The event that Mavic and I rushed to from the airport was the major feminist event in Porto Alegre, the Feminist Dialogues, which took place before the Forum officially began.<sup>13</sup> Launched the year before at the Forum in Mumbai, the FD’s were organized by feminist networks in the global south, and heavily influenced (some said) by a South Asian processual political style. Arriving at the Feminist Dialogues, both Mavic and I immediately saw women we knew from transnational feminist networks fostered over more than a decade of international organizing in the distinct (and in the alter-globalization context, dubious) political milieu of non-governmental organizations

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<sup>13</sup> The Feminist Dialogues for India and Brazil were organized by a Coordinating Group constituted by seven international feminist networks and organizations: Isis International (Manila); DAWN - Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era; INFORM (Sri Lanka); WICEJ - Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice; AFM – Articulación Feminista Marcosur, FEMNET – African Women’s Development and Communication Network; INNAWG – India National Network of Autonomous Women’s Groups. On the Dialogues, see “International: WSF Contradictions - Feminist Dialogues” and the World Social Forum’s press release, “Global feminism”.

(NGOs) and the United Nations' orbit.

The Dialogues offer an autonomous place for feminist organizing, an attempt to balance integration into and autonomy from the World Social Forum. This negotiation replays long-standing feminist navigations between autonomy and affiliation with left, popular, or national struggles, an effort that continues to be feminism's "double challenge" with the global justice movement (Alvarez, Faria, and Nobre, 204). The Dialogues are organized by groups in the global south and attempted to enact values of diversity, anti-racism, and participatory democracy. This is manifest in a deliberate effort at inclusion. In Brazil, the Feminist Dialogues included proportionally more Asian participants than did the Forum at large, which was heavily weighted to Latin America and Europe. Though few in number, a couple of transgendered people joined the event, including an Argentinean transman who was a consistent, if reluctant, participant in feminist events across the Forum. There were a dozen or so academic participant-observers, myself among them.

The Feminist Dialogues were divided into time dedicated to discussion groups based on language (English, French, Portuguese) and time for formal plenaries. This structure reflected feminist principles of inclusive representation as well as feminist epistemologies. They were designed to include multiple voices in ways that did not reproduce global or racial hierarchies and as an effort to build from concrete particulars to more abstract generalities in ways that valued the diverse knowledges of participants. During the first day (which I missed), discussion groups talked about local, grounded, and personal issues; these discussions were meant to form an organic basis for subsequent explorations of "how to move the issues forward" and "what are effective new strategies." I joined day two of the English 5 group, which included women from India, Africa, Uruguay, Scotland, Canada, and Malaysia. Our assignment was to come up with three strategies for feminist activism in this new world order.

A matter-of-fact development worker from Zambia suggested one strategy: to gain acceptance for feminist principles, relate them to local claims and contexts. The lesbian feminist from Uruguay continually argued for sexual diversity, noting for example that reproductive rights should include lesbians' right to have children. Others asserted that feminists should forge "strategic relations" with non-feminist women's groups and new social movements, and towards that end, calls to use the space of the WSF "creatively" were heard more than once. Returning to the often heard query, "where are the young women?" participants proposed popularizing feminism (using top-ten countdowns was one method suggested) and incorporating younger women into feminist spaces and networks. A 30-something activist from Malaysia noted a reluctance to assume leadership in her generation that followed the trail-blazing feminist activists in the region. She also remarked that her group had fantasized about a feminist takeover of the government—but when one of them asked, "so, which ministry do you want?" each woman was at a loss. While the contours of participants' critiques of the new world order were more or less clear, the Malaysian organizer's dilemma was symptomatic of the difficulty of enunciating specific agendas for new modes of government or economics.

Our group discussion raised more questions than it answered. Some feminists have been concerned that the World Social Forum might allow the participation of religious groups that were anti-globalization but also anti-women's rights and anti-sexual rights. Feminist critiques of fundamentalism stress the gender politics of politicized

theology, and our group debated whether or not feminist groups should work with (non-feminist) religious women? The World Social Forum has not explicitly called for an end to capitalism, and we asked ourselves if we were seeking alternatives or are we resigned to working within it? The vibrant throngs of young women in the alter-globalization movements evoked an anxiety more specific to feminists: Why aren't those young women more involved in feminism?

The challenges facing transnational feminism were apparent at the WSF. It was difficult for our disparate English 5 cohort to arrive at specific, let alone new or effective, strategies based on our "concrete" experiences – a difficulty that was hardly unique in the World Social Forum. It was not clear which were strategies, which were aims, and which were issues. The large and lively Spanish-language groups may have had more success, to judge from their energetic exchanges. However, as Sonia Alvarez later pointed out in a conversation among the academics present, they were also more homogenous, given the geography of Spanish speakers. Their group restaged the Latin American feminist *encuentros* that had been taking place for years. Still, we English speakers were with the event in spirit, and as instructed, cobbled together a few strategies and questions to pass along to the general body. (The political scientist Catherine Eschle and I were assigned this rapporteur's role.<sup>14</sup>)

At the plenaries of the Feminist Dialogues, speakers enunciated the major themes: militarization and war, fundamentalism, and neo-liberal globalization, with sharp critiques of U.S. imperialism. These critical discussions fit seamlessly with the major currents in the World Social Forum, demonstrating the mutuality of critical transnational feminism and global justice movements associated with the World Social Forum. Clearly there is a far-reaching transnational feminist network with politics that engage and overlap with those of the Forum. Yet this overlap also raises the question, what is distinctly *feminist* about feminists' anti-global critiques? Feminists continue to navigate relations with the global justice movement through varying modes of autonomy, integration, dialogue, affinity, with a desire for representation and impact. The desires to impact the Forum and have feminism registered at the level of the "larger" social movements are recurring themes among the Latin American feminists and European feminist advocates in particular.



*The Feminist Dialogues at Bamako, Mali, WSF VI, 2006*



--Photos by author

### **Feminism Beyond Feminists**

The day after the Feminist Dialogues at the Porto Alegre Forum, the question of feminists' relation to the Forum was taken up at a feminist orientation in a stifflingly hot tent in the *Lutas Sociais* space, where twenty or so feminists sat in a circle fluttering the handy fans provided by a savvy anti-fundamentalist project from Uruguay. The discussion arrived at the question of how feminists could engage the Forum strategically:

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<sup>14</sup> See Eschle.



*Anti-fundamentalist fan used at WSF V*  
 --photo supplied by author

How could the Forum be used as a venue for feminist organizing? How should feminists articulate with other movements? And how might feminism shape the agenda of the Forum itself?

The coalition that produced the Feminist Dialogues addressed the call to articulate feminism with other political projects by hosting an ambitious panel called “A Dialogue Between Movements,” or intermovement dialogue.<sup>15</sup> The panel juxtaposed representatives of four movements: labor; race/ethnicity (in this case, the Dalit); GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and

transgendered, also associated with the term queer); and feminist. Their task was to identify both convergence with and criticism of other movements. The representative for GLBT politics conceded that first-world GLBT movements had not addressed racial diversity or class issues. A women’s movement representative challenged the representative from the Dalit movement to acknowledge that ethnically based struggles had not recognized sexuality as a political domain. Unfortunately, logistics matter: the audio was terrible. The event next door consisted of impassioned exhortations that drowned out the soft-spoken activist voices and their tired translators. Still, as a premise—as an example of one of the strategies that the groups in the Feminist Dialogue were striving to name—this intermovement dialogue offered an alternative to the choice between autonomy or integration for feminism in the spaces of the Forum by locating feminism as the hub for broader political coalitions.

This panel was also noteworthy for positioning GLBT politics as a major social justice movement. A full discussion of sexual politics at the Forum would require its own essay. Here, I will offer brief observations about the different modes of public address of sexuality at the World Social Forum in Brazil and the African Social Forum. In Porto Alegre, one of the “diversity” tents was dedicated to sexuality, which the Forum recognized to be a salient axis of difference and oppression. Gay, lesbian, or queer groups from Brazil, the Philippines, the Gay Games, and international networks had their panels, stalls, fliers, and a night at a local bar. The prominence of sexuality in Brazil was due in no small measure to Latin American feminist networks, which have engaged the issue of sexual diversity, as well as the emergence of politicized gay, queer, and transgendered publics.

At the African Social Forum, the political recognition of sexuality was different. There was no visible non-heterosexual, queer, or transgender presence. A South African colleague and I scoured two conference compounds trying to locate the one panel listed in the program that addressed sexual diversity (organized by a group from Uruguay):

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<sup>15</sup> “A Dialogue Between Movements,” moderated by Sunila Abeyasekara, and organized by the National Network of Autonomous Women’s Organization (India), Articulacion Feminista Marcosur, Development Alternative for Women in New Era, Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice, FEMNET-Africa, INFORM-Sri Lanka, and ISIS International.

after three taxi rides, we found a locked door with no sign of the event and never found any trace that it had happened. Sexuality was implicit in discussions of such subjects as HIV/AIDS, what was widely referred to as female genital mutilation, or the rights of the girl child (for example, to decline marriage at a young age). I heard sexual orientation or sexual diversity mentioned only once outside of private conversations, when a South African Afrikaans woman included sexual orientation in a list of issues at a large and long event called the World Court of Women. The difference clearly lies with the specific realities governing African organizing and the different histories of women's organizing on the continent. The collective politics of the regional Forum prioritized critiques of the effects of the global inequalities on health, livelihood, and sovereignty. At the same time, given that organizing around sexual rights, including self-styled gay and lesbian advocacy, exists in Africa, and is particularly strong in South Africa, this absence points to different formations of progressive networks associated with social justice. It suggests that the many advocates working on sexual and gender diversity in Africa did not identify the African Social Forum as a relevant venue for their political projects.<sup>16</sup> The varying ways that the World Social Forum engages sexuality, and the ways that sexual rights or queer activists articulate (or not) with the global justice movement, is worthy of more consideration than I can give it here. The place of sexual politics in global social justice movements resonates with the relationship between feminism and alter-globalization movements.

### **The Geography of Politics**

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has grown into a plurality of political and social claims, more or less allied against the new world order. Any reportage on the Forum is obligated to produce signs of this wide array of projects and subjects – the Youth Camp, the Sexual Diversity tent (at Porto Alegre), the colorful range of allegiances and affiliations. Given this polyvocality, it is interesting to consider how the Forum is mapped in commentary and analysis. Much discussion identifies core meanings of the Forum, particularly emphasizing the Forum as a process or as an inclusive “movement of movements.” This more meta-level discussion defines the Forum in relation not only to guiding principles but also through the figures of key thinkers (mostly male) and representative movements, most commonly associated with struggles against global capitalism (ATTAC, peasant movements) or national struggles against imperialism (notably the Palestinian cause). As I suggested in regard to the political culture at Porto Alegre, attempts at capturing the meaning of the Forum rely on a gendered figuration of politics. In these general portraits, the presence of feminism might substantiate the diverse pluralism of the Forum, but feminism is not represented as part of its essential core.

The Forum is also mapped according to a political cartography, given meaning by

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16 Mama, Pereira, and Manuh provide a salient declaration about sexuality and Africa in their editorial for the online journal, *Feminist Africa*: “Instead of the silences and silencing surrounding sexualities, which allow patriarchal, abusive and heteronormative relationships and power structures to have hegemonic sway, it is important that scholars and activists foreground the embeddedness of sexuality in the lives, emotions, desires, health and fears of women and men across Africa.”



*Feminist academics debrief after Feminist Dialogues at WSF V* --photo by author

reference to particular placed events. The WSF was conceived as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, referenced through the shorthand of its location in Davos, Switzerland. Michael Hardt proposes placing the WSF into the historical trajectory of a the non-aligned movement, as a “distant offspring” of the Bandung Conference, the meeting of post-colonial African and Asian government representatives held in Indonesia in 1955 (Hardt, 112). The WSF has been linked to a series of geographic metropolises: Seattle 1999, Bandung 1955, Paris 1968.

There has also been much reflection about the relation of the WSF to its original host city, Porto Alegre, known for socialist politics. These geographic histories chart lineages for the progressive left.

The diversity of the World Social Forum suggests that there will be other geographic coordinates tracing the particular histories of different constituencies. For feminists, the WSF is not its first venue for transnational organizing. Feminists arrived at the World Social Forum after several decades of heightened international organizing (and of course to a longer history, if one looks to anti-slavery, anti-imperialist, socialist, and peace movements). Many, if not most of the women at feminist events in Bamako and Porto Alegre were seasoned through domestic activism, regional networks, such as the dynamic Latin American *encuentros*, and advocacy in the worlds of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Alvarez, Faria and Nobre, 200).

Transnational feminist advocacy parallels other contemporary movements by tacking between domestic, regional, and international scales. During the 1990s, feminist organizing reached feverish intensity at the otherwise banal venues associated with the UN and other multi-lateral agencies, above all at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995. To participate in these spaces, feminist activism took the institutional form of the non-governmental organization, or NGO, drawing on established domestic or regional political trajectories. Through this work at the transnational scale, advocates learned politicking, lobbying, and UN prose style, honed their eye for power structures and advanced their fluency in the language of funders and agencies.

In critical evaluations of the World Social Forum, the presence of NGOs (like those of radical political parties) is viewed with skeptical alarm. Links with NGOs are seen as dangerous compromises to the radical values of the World Social Forum. Within feminism, particularly in South Asia and Latin America, the “NGOization of feminism” has been a subject of concern as well.<sup>17</sup> Traces of the UN-NGO experience

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<sup>17</sup> While Alvarez writes analytically, rather than simply dismissively, about the institutionalization of feminism in NGOs, by now the term “the NGOization of feminism” is usually used pejoratively. See Alvarez, “The NGOization of Feminisms”. Since the 1995 UN Conference, for a prominent example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has criticized feminists engaged in NGOs as the handmaidens of global capitalism: “In this phase of capitalism/feminism,

appear in Forum terminology, their influence crystallized in the numbing reliance on acronyms and by-committee prose. In the Porto Alegre and Bamako Forums, feminist discourse was peppered with references to B+10 (Beijing Plus 10, the meetings held at the United Nations in New York in March 2005 that marked the anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women), WTO+10 (the women's meeting and World Trade Organization shared an anniversary), MDGs (Millennial Development Goals), and ICT (information and communication technologies). Feminist agendas became "women's rights," "gender issues," or the much criticized call for "gender mainstreaming" (Walby). The feminists at the WSF, being the reflexive actors that they are, are aware of the constraints and powers of the UN orbit.

Without directly answering the problems posed by NGO complicity with the UN, states, multilateral agencies, or neoliberal programs – problems that are the subject of much critique and debate in academic scholarship and within NGO and social justice circles -- I want to suggest that NGO participation for feminists might have specific gendered and regional dimensions that complicates wholesale critiques of NGO participation in global social justice movements. As a South African advocate active in transnational feminist work said of NGOs and the Forum, "they are not mutually exclusive." The African regional Forum in particular was stamped with the effects of NGO organizing, with the names of accredited organizations painted on banners and even woven into the fabric of some women's dresses and scarves. At Bamako, the venues of the UN, NGOs, and the World Social Forum seemed to exist along a continuum. Indeed, one of the best-attended women's events was a fundraising workshop hosted by donor organizations from the North. Overall, the African Social Forum closely resembled an NGO gathering.

Many feminists participating at the Forum would map its sites in relation to the geographies and acronyms of the UN-NGO orbit: Cairo (a conference on population), Vienna (a UN conference on human rights), or Beijing. The 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, represents a return to the site of the 1985 UN Third World Conference on Women. Feminism's alternative lineage shows that the familiar coordinates of radical left discourse – Bandung, Paris, Davos – represent *particular* political geographies, however salient and powerful they may be. The geographic history of transnational feminism reveals gendered politics operating across multiple sets of sites and networks and engaging a plurality of political institutions and strategies. For many feminist participants, the WSF offers one node in a wide terrain of political projects, ranging from local organizing in Africa to the corridors of UN headquarters in Manhattan.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the increasing feminist participation at the WSF suggests a trend in transnational feminist organizing away from a concentrated focus on the UN towards other transnational and translocal progressive platforms (even as many participants continue to act in both the UN-NGO and global social justice worlds). In the 1990s, feminist organizing reformulated human rights to incorporate gender issues and generated

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it is capitalist women saving the female subaltern....This matronizing and sororizing of women in development is also a way of silencing the subaltern." The critique of NGOization seems stronger in Latin American and South Asian discourses than in African or Southeast Asian conversations, regions where radical activity has often taken NGO form.

<sup>18</sup> An example of research on women's human rights at the WSF is Ackerly and D'Costa.

significant reference points in UN texts. However, by the 2000s, efforts at the UN level became more defensive, mainly attempts to prevent the U.S. administration under President Bush and a loose alliance of conservative governments from eviscerating policies concerning gender, reproductive rights, or sexuality. Feminists no longer look to the UN as a stage for progressive achievements on most issues. Moreover, many NGO feminists, themselves the products of radical movements, criticize the compromises and complicity of work in the UN arena. A panel at the 2002 meeting of the Association of Women in Development Conference in Mexico, “The Big Debate: Have the UN Conferences Benefited Women?”, exemplifies such internal, reflexive critique. Anti-globalization movements offer a vital arena for an alternative, more radical domain of feminist politics.

The “open space” of the Fórum Social Mundial allows feminist projects to extend into this alternative transnational milieu. One virtue of the WSF for feminists is its social justice orientation, which allows feminists more latitude to express the critical politics that had informed prior women’s movements. Feminists at the Forum voiced energetic critiques of U.S. policy, global capitalism, the World Bank, and so forth. The feminist themes at Mumbai or Porto Alegre diverged from those that prevailed at, for example, the B+10 meetings. At the NGO gathering across the street from the United Nations, the heated debate concerned the trafficking in women while other panels were dedicated to gender mainstreaming. These issues were not in the foreground at the World Social Forum. The Fórum Social Mundial allowed feminists to let their radical hair down and their leftist slips show.

Feminist participation at the WSF invites questions not only about the relation of feminism to the alter-globalization movements but also about transnational feminism’s own trajectories after a decade of activism in the orbit of the UN. While feminist engagement with the World Social Forum rejuvenates its articulation with radical left movements, this engagement is not despite, but in important ways because of, its history in the UN-NGO orbit as well as autonomous and affiliated women’s movements in the global south.

### **Space, Process, and Norms**

The World Social Forum attempts to materialize a set of radical principles, such as inclusion, diversity, and alternative culture, and makes a self-conscious effort to avoid the ends-orientation and commodity logic of neo-liberalism and global capitalism. At the level of norms and values, feminist discourse overlaps considerably with the political vocabulary common to the Forum. In particular, feminism and the Forum share emphases on space and process.

One of the aims of the World Social Forum is the creation of social, cultural, and political space. The term space was ubiquitous at the 2005 WSF and was concretized in the self-conscious design of thematic areas. (A Spanish-born architect and housing activist and long-time resident of Nicaragua, Ana Sugranyes, is one of the women on the WSF coordinating body.) “Space” represents one of the shared values of the alter-globalization and transnational feminist movements. It is difficult to find writing about feminism at the WSF (or the WSF in general) that does not refer to space. As one website explains, “Feminists are seeking spaces to move from fragmentation towards common grounds for action” (Björk). Three essays in a special issue of *Revista Estudos Feministas*, a Brazilian feminist journal describe the World Social Forum as: “a space of

confluence of the struggles and proposals of movements”; “international spaces of encounter and articulation”; “a space where feminisms find a productive *locus* to weave their alliances and ideas with other subjects”.<sup>19</sup> In discussions at the Porto Alegre Forum, Feminists called for “seeing the WSF as a strategic space,” “using the space of the WSF creatively,” “creating inclusive spaces,” “incorporating young women in spaces,” and “creating spaces to move the dialogue further.” The women’s events at the African Social Forum also invoked space. Space -- literal, symbolic, and rhetorical space and feminist space within the spaces of alter-globalization -- was an end in itself. The emphasis on the significance of space for inclusive process was coextensive with the anti-privatization, pro-democracy discourse about space by the Forum at large. The feminist emphasis on space also draws on a critical evaluation of the public/private division in the gendered hierarchies of modernity, although the gendered significance of space was rarely articulated explicitly.

The norms, politics, and discourses of feminism and the World Social Forum overlap to the point of convergence. Radical transnational feminism and the World Social Forum share political critiques of the new world order and globalization in its hegemonic capitalist, imperialist form. The themes of feminist panels at the WSF, like speakers at the Feminist Dialogues, echoed the prevailing themes of the Fórum Social Mundial: critiques of fundamentalism, militarism, neoliberalism, and U.S. hegemony.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the WSF might also be seen as echoing feminist discourse. The Forum departs from other expressions of anti-globalization protests by integrating more attention to diversity of people and cultures (or at least trying to). Its lexicon includes marginalization, inclusive spaces, diversity of voices, and open dialogue. In Latin America and India, its design was predicated on an allowance for (or celebration of) different modes of knowledge, politics, and expression (meaning in particular non-Enlightenment epistemologies) that echoed feminist principles. Many feminists consider this resonance to be the result of feminist influence on “larger” left movements, although such influence was not acknowledged by the Forum at large.

A particularly striking convergence between feminism and the Forum is in their understandings of the relation of means to ends. The Brazilian Forum’s processual politics bore a remarkable resemblance to familiar feminist principles. Its organization manifests enormous labor reflecting on epistemology, methodology, and politics of infrastructure, attendance, communication, cultural production, and labor itself. The Forum guide at Porto Alegre explained the principles behind these decisions and commitments in multiple European languages. Even the 2005 Fórum Social Mundial tote bag included a tag that explained the labor arrangements behind its production. Clearly, the Forum has been predicated on a philosophy in which the means must attempt to manifest, rather than be justified by, the ends. Process is as political for the World Social Forum as it is for feminist political ideals.

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<sup>19</sup> The translated quotations appear in Alvarez, “Another (Also Feminist) World Is Possible.”

<sup>20</sup> The key themes at the African Social Forum differed from those at Porto Alegre. They were: the ecosystem, war and peace, cooperation, debt, neoliberalism. Women’s events in Bamako overlapped with much of the discourse of the Forum, which was characterized overall by a regional focus on African issues, but as noted, were also marked by the use of NGO and UN terminology as well.

So is the World Social Forum feminist? Does the recognition of patriarchal capitalism and the similar emphasis on space and process make for a happier collaboration than the “unhappy marriage” between feminism and Marxism diagnosed by socialist feminists? Probably. But however *simpatico*, feminists—at least at the 2005 Brazilian meeting—did not feel that the Fórum Social Mundial was a feminist event *per se*. Feminists continue to navigate between autonomous spaces—such as the Women’s Universe in Bamako, the Feminist Dialogues in Mumbai, and the women’s boat in Porto Alegre—and integration across Forum events.

Feminists still choose autonomous projects affiliated with progressive venues like the World Social Forum at least in part because of enduring limits to “gender mainstreaming” of those larger movements that are reflected in the uneven representation of feminism in Forum texts, among other things. But I have suggested in this essay that feminism’s relation to planetary progressive politics does not hinge only on a lingering masculinist culture of the left.

The political history of global women’s organizing is relevant for the question of feminism’s impact on Forum political norms. Feminists asserted that they wanted feminists’ voices audible at the larger Forum. But in day-to-day discussion, it was less clear what it was that feminists wanted heard. What are the feminist agendas at the World Social Forum? What is specifically *feminist* about the visions of alter-globalization? Transnational feminist analysis abounds in critiques of global capitalism, militarism, imperialism and the new world order. The framing of the Feminist Dialogues highlighted the gendered effects of these processes, for example, particularly on racialized and female bodies. Feminism certainly has more to say than submerged calls to eliminate “sexism” and guarantee “gender equality.” But in my admittedly partial and situated observations, these questions were not the center of gravity in feminist discourse or practice at the Forum. Discussions of what feminists might contribute to the specific content of Forum political discourse was relatively rare, at least at these public events. As is true for the Forum as a whole, there was more clarity about critique than there was about norms for alternative social orders and strategies to achieve them. The group conversations at the 2005 Dialogues and the cross-language, cross-border debates in the hall of the Palais de la Culture in Bamako pointed to a need for propagating but also cultivating alternative feminist visions of governance and political economy. Those young Malaysian women, who, when divvying up the government ministries they had not yet taken over, found that they were unsure of their vision for state governance and are hardly unique in their lack of an applicable feminist theory of governance.

The relative lack of concrete radical visions expressed in feminist practice at the Forum may reflect the impact of the UN-NGO world, which has enabled, but also profoundly constrained, critical transnational feminist projects. It may also have something to do with the mutual norms of the World Social Forum and feminist organizers, such as the common belief that the means are inseparable from the ends. At the 2005 World Social Forum, the process itself -- providing spaces, staging dialogues, ensuring a diversity of voices -- was a major political aim and achievement for feminism’s version of alter-globalization. The feminist emphasis on space and process as ends in themselves -- *how can we use the WSF space creatively? how can our processes match our politics?* -- defers the question of content. *What* feminist logic should be absorbed as alter-globalization commonsense? Feminists could edit and revise various

Forum texts, providing new language for “sexism” or “gender equality.” But given the significant integration of feminists into WSF practice, and the shared sets of political norms, it has been harder to identify a distinctly feminist analysis that could rewrite the prevailing political frames of the Forum, at least in the commonplace discourse surrounding the Forum itself. By partaking of the inclusive spaces of the Forum, can feminist political norms shape the alter-globalization and global social justice visions – and if they can, will these be understood as a distinctly feminist innovation? Will feminist gestures towards another possible world be any different?

The ways that feminists navigate the World Social Forum – their autonomy or integration, the feminist claims on the Forum and the feminist claims for social justice – revolve not only around the gendered cultures of progressive movements but also around feminist movements’ internal dynamics and historical trajectories. Bringing feminist histories to the understanding of the World Social Forum can pluralize the political geography of the global social justice movement. These feminist trajectories – particularly the years of strategic complicity with the UN – have both enabled, and constrained, feminists’ engagement with the radical visions of the World Social Forum.

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