

Rethinking Cultural Studies: From the Role of the Intellectual to Transnational Feminism

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I Broadening Perspectives

In his essay “On ‘Cultural Studies’” (1993), Fredric Jameson calls for “a cultural studies analysis of Cultural Studies itself.”¹ While Jameson is highly critical of the cultural studies *en vogue* in the late twentieth-century North American academy (his essay is a takedown of the 1992 omnibus volume *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler), in his attempt at singling out those features of the field which distinguish it from other social sciences, he does stress the potential of cultural studies to promote intellectual and political discussion in a space of reciprocity and exchange between various social groups and movements. According to Jameson, cultural studies rejects the notion of one group affiliation in favour of a more diversified conception of identity. He thus asserts that the discipline is concerned with working out the tension that arises from dealing with a multitude of different identities at once and several distinct attitudes which arise from these identities. This assertion fits the course environment that I encountered while writing this essay. Rather than recreating a United Nations plenary session, “in which each of the groups said its piece [...] and was given respectful (and ‘politically correct’) hearing by all the others,”² the colloquium opened up a virtual room of discussion much closer to Jameson’s ideal, in which participants from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds could actively engage and react instead of just politely listening and nodding to different perspectives.

The overall course design guided the students towards such a climate of engagement and exchange. It enabled the taking in of insights from other international students – insights that reflected different interests and different degree programmes. Each session, we were tasked with revisiting canonical essays that have shaped cultural studies, attempting to illuminate the texts’ blind spots as well as enriching them with new, modern meanings in light of the field’s trend towards more transnational perspectives. The all-access online approach was especially helpful in that, in contrast to the usual framework of seminars in which we could only get glimpses into the minds of the other participants through their answers in discussion, in the

¹ Fredric Jameson, “On ‘Cultural Studies,’” *Social Text* 34 (1993): 17–52.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

colloquium we could get to know each student's point of view also through their writing. The diverse reading responses also illuminated how the assigned readings could be reread and reinterpreted from the most varied and unusual perspectives. Moreover, the professors did not assume the role of explainers and ultimate judges of the texts, but rather moderated a free exchange of ideas. Being left completely alone with the essays as well as not being given some sort of explanatory summary of the text at the beginning of each session, but going straight into the discussion instead, showed great confidence on the part of the professors in the independence and quality of the students' own intellectual work. Apart from learning many new things concerning cultural studies and international approaches, this course has hence strengthened my confidence in myself and in my own academic performance.

Since each student and/or scholar in the course had a different academic as well as cultural background, many new points of view came to light that I would have never encountered otherwise. For instance, I still distinctly remember the work of one participant in particular who looked at both Raymond Williams's essay "Culture is Ordinary" (1958) and an excerpt from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) from the point of view of her educational degree. Consequently, the focus of the discussion shifted to the question of how learning processes – cultural learning mechanisms applied to our specific case – can be understood and to what extent education can integrate people into cultural processes as well as exclude them from participation. Moreover, adding more international perspectives through the contribution of our Indian colleagues has proven valuable to unveil more of my own biases. I was incredibly impressed – and at times a little intimidated – by their knowledge and ability to connect works they had previously encountered with essays from this colloquium. What impressed me most, however, was the warm atmosphere of the seminar despite the pandemic, which had hit India in a particularly hard way.

The following essay can be understood as a reflection of my experiences as a student in cultural studies, literature, the humanities, and my study focus on feminist studies as well as a confrontation with my own intellectual biases, which have been illuminated through the discussions with students from different backgrounds. Some issues that came up in our discussions left me thinking long after the seminar had ended and have therefore had a lasting impact on me. Especially striking was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Michele Wallace's assertion of the voicelessness of subalterns and of the intellectual's inability to speak for or represent these groups. This prompted me to ask myself if there could be a unique approach to confronting this issue in cultural studies through an increased self-reflection of the intellectual in terms of their own positionality as well as through rethinking the role and the potential of cultural studies in the intellectual and public spheres.

Examining the role of the intellectual has also caused me to reflect more on my own positionality regarding feminism. Maitrayee Chaudhuri's and Inderpal Grewal's deep reflections on feminism in India and transnationally have caused me to rethink my definition of feminism, which had previously been shaped by an understanding of the movement as a unified effort of women all around the world to fight the inequality between the sexes. However, I came to realise the inadequacy of this

internationalization of feminism for highlighting distinctive national and local challenges and for reflecting attitudes of women differing from Western feminist perspectives. While I came to the conclusion that the challenges of feminisms around the world must be approached from a more regional or national level, I still want to shed light on the merits of transnational perspectives in cultural studies, to which I will dedicate the last section of this essay.

II

The Vagueness of the Social Sciences: Why the Humanities Should Dare to be Different

From the beginning of this course, the issue of subalternity emerged again and again. The first time we talked about the intellectual's positionality was brief, regarding only Williams's "Culture is Ordinary," but this was quickly followed by much deeper discussions of Jameson's reflections on cultural studies and Spivak's essay concerning the subaltern's voicelessness.

Both Wallace and Spivak throw light on subalternity's relationship with cultural studies when they point out the inability of the intellectual to truthfully speak for subaltern groups. While Spivak is primarily concerned with shedding light on the marginalization of subaltern groups in India's colonial past and present, Wallace, with her focus on feminist studies in combination with intersectionality, extends the concept of subalternity to Black women whose voices have been historically and systematically silenced. Spivak's stance on this problem is rather pessimistic. She concludes her lengthy and well-known observations on the complex nature of subalternity and the issues linked to representation by stating that the subaltern woman is doubly objectified: by her own culture, defining her as the property of her husband, and by the British colonists, who imagine her as an immobile object in need of rescue from her own people. Hence, "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernisation."³ Spivak's final verdict is clear: The female subaltern does not have a voice. She can never speak for herself nor be realistically represented by intellectuals.

In "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism" (1992), Michele Wallace draws on Spivak's notion of subalternity. Wallace is an African-American literary scholar and feminist writer who concerns herself with the (under-/mis-)representation of Black American culture in the media, intersectional feminism, and Black masculinity. Her essay, which addresses issues of Black feminism and

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 306.

media silencing, is included in the 1992 collection *Cultural Studies* alongside other prominent Black studies scholars such as Cornel West, bell hooks, and Paul Gilroy. Moreover, the essay is referenced in Jameson's "On 'Cultural Studies,'" as he reflects on the positionality of the intellectual.⁴ In her text, Wallace voices concerns similar to those originating in Spivak's work when she asks herself whether the Black feminist movement is able "to speak for black women, most of whom are poor and 'silenced' by inadequate education, health care, housing, and lack of public access."⁵ However, Wallace seems decidedly less pessimistic about the issue, as she also presents a possible solution to the problem. In her view, the main problem of any intellectual is not actually their incapability of realistic representation itself, but that they do not always address and reflect this incapability within intellectual discussion. Reflecting on one's own positionality in this way, as a scholar, is far from a universal practice in any school of cultural studies, even today. As Jameson points out, many scholars still seem to understand their role as intellectuals as outside observers of social phenomena and issues, actively ignoring the blind spots of their own viewpoint. He especially singles out traditional sociologists whose "glacial disengagement from social phenomena" and whose exclusion from "any activist participation in the social" results in "losing the very insights, the very power of demystification, paid for by just this epistemological separation from the human."⁶

This issue of the intellectual's positionality emphasized by Wallace, Jameson, and other scholars raises questions concerning the value and usefulness of cultural studies and the humanities in general. I feel like social and cultural studies are commonly looked down upon by other disciplines and the public alike precisely because of this issue. I often feel belittled for my own choice of studies, especially for my focus on feminist theory. Again and again, people are told that the reason for their failure to find a job is not the current market situation, but their own decision of choosing to pursue a degree in the humanities. I have also had many experiences with strangers, friends, and family asking me the dreaded question: "And then what can you do with your degree?" And I am not referring to the politely delivered, genuinely interested version of this question, but to the version that is asked with a slightly cocky grin and in a patronizing tone. There have been family gatherings where I had to explain that no, I do not hate men, and that my opinions were not just drummed into me by my university professors. Why does one find such reactions concentrated especially in discussions about the humanities, even more so when it comes to literary and cultural studies? An understandably limited public imagination regarding the possibilities of these degree programmes is certainly part of the problem. While everyone can roughly say what a lawyer or a medical doctor

⁴ Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 42.

⁵ Michele Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 654–671; quotations are taken from the summarizing discussion in Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 42. For further reading, see Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 2015) and *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 2008).

⁶ Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" 39–40.

does for a living, the answer is less obvious for graduates and scholars in the humanities or social sciences.

However, this does not fully explain the sometimes fiercely negative reactions towards social and cultural studies, as opposed to the much more esteemed fields of the natural sciences, legal studies, or medical training. In my opinion, these negative reactions have a lot to do with both the self-perception and outward appearance of the scholars and students of the field themselves. The social sciences often seemingly try to gain recognition from other academic fields by imitating them as closely as possible, which can indeed produce positive outcomes. I am especially thinking of my time as a student of sociology when I was reading texts written by scholars like Max Weber, which often felt like studying law papers. Surely, this style of writing can be useful in that it produces lines of thought that are incredibly well-structured. Nonetheless, this *modus operandi* does not magically turn the humanities into sciences, which are understood to be strictly guided by data and verifiable facts. Yes, we also analyse facts (cultural practices, social structures, and so on), but we often have far a greater scope of interpretation – which is actually necessary to truly grasp the vast area that is to be captured in an interdisciplinary field like cultural studies that draws on tools of literary analysis, historical approaches, and a range of theoretical paradigms. We do not look at closed, regulated systems like they are typically found in mathematics, in which the same rules always apply regardless of time and space, but at cultural systems that are by definition open and thus constantly changing. To claim that our work delivers similarly incontestable and unchangeable results and facts as the natural sciences is not only false, but rightfully comes across as arrogant to outsiders. Even if most scholars do not hold this view uncritically and do not openly communicate holding it either, they will still seem untrustworthy as long as they do not come to terms with their own biases and their own positionality as intellectuals. Being more open about their own possible shortcomings in being able to represent certain groups of people as well as practising self-reflection about their own positionality could hence positively impact the public image of the humanities.

So, what can the humanities actually do to improve their public standing? In my view, they must start by recognising their own strengths and communicating them openly. How can the studies of culture truly be acknowledged for what they are able to contribute if they are always trying to veil their most special features? What distinguishes them from the natural sciences, the inability to prove all of their claims through objective evidence, should not necessarily be regarded as a negative thing, but as a possibility to think the role and responsibility of the intellectual in a different way. If intellectuals are not bound by a hard, number-supported, seemingly objective way to the one ultimate truth, they can build their diverse and differentiated claims by drawing on personal experience and reflexion. This type of approach, which is partly based on emotional and subjective arguments, can open new intellectual spaces for more empathetic discussions. Thus, while feminist studies are rooted in deep research and draw on hard facts as well, I think there is major potential in having a unique approach to intellectual discussions that stands out from

usual academic writing styles. Enrichening one's work with personal experience and clearly questioning one's own social status and privileges could have a huge positive impact on political discussion outside of academia, as especially feminist studies have had and continue to have a strong impact on political and societal processes. Recognising that political programmes gain voter approval not just because of the facts and figures presented, but because the socially important issues are also highly emotionally charged, could therefore be a chance for cultural studies and the humanities to generate a more empathetic intellectual discourse leading towards progressive societal changes and a wider consciousness of cultural issues among the public.

Radically rethinking one's positionality could therefore solve the issue of intellectualism's outside perception of being inherently elitist. Some scholars even like to regard themselves as the mouthpiece of the people, calling themselves "organic intellectuals." Organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense are intellectuals who are "in charge of elaborating and spreading organic ideologies," i.e., those ideologies which are "the expression of the 'communal life of a social bloc.'"⁷ These might be articulations of "higher philosophies," but they are communicated in a vernacular, simple manner.⁸ However, this ideal of the organic intellectual is ultimately a utopian concept that positions the scholar as "one of them." As long as scholars of society and culture claim to be able to speak for a certain group as a whole, almost all attempts of proving their works' merits, especially to non-intellectuals, will fall flat. Intellectuals must disillusion themselves from the concept of the organic intellectual, realise that this ideal will always remain unreachable and redirect their saviour complex toward more attainable goals.

To further illustrate what I mean by possible unique approaches to this issue of the intellectual, I must return to Williams's essay "Culture is Ordinary." Williams describes journeying by bus across a landscape at once pastoral with its "rivers out of paradise," mountains, and farming valleys, and simultaneously modern with its streets and cinemas.⁹ After this personal, almost narrative anecdote, he reveals that he "was born and grew up halfway along that bus journey."¹⁰ Williams also shares that he was born into a working-class family, his grandfather having worked as a farmer and roadman and his father as a porter and signalman. He ends his personal account by saying that he himself, after a non-prestigious education at the village school, began studying at Cambridge. Then, he immediately jumps to his bold claim that "culture is ordinary."¹¹ Opposed to what most intellectuals tended to claim at the time, culture to him was not something that is produced only in higher-class circles. This becomes apparent in his section on his experience in the

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci" in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 187 and 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹ Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

Oxford teashop where people sported the “visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people.”¹² For Williams, however, this was more appearance than substance: These people “were not, the great majority of them, particularly learned; they practised few arts; but they had it, and they showed you they had it.”¹³ For Williams, culture is rather a concept that must be understood as consisting of already established meanings and new meanings which are still being tested and debated in society.

These learning processes of adopting certain cultural meanings subconsciously or contesting them consciously are, according to Williams, experiences everybody shares: They “are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds,” hence culture being ordinary.¹⁴ Much of our discussion during the semester was centred around the issues negotiated in Williams’s text, especially concerning the inclusivity of his understanding of culture and cultural production. This raised some individual questions: Does everybody have the mental capabilities to understand and participate in cultural learning processes? Also, how can Williams be so confident in declaring himself the interpreter of how contemporary working-class citizens of his time are thinking and feeling? It is certainly true that what Williams lacks is a certain type of “modesty” in his approach to the intellectual’s positionality, as Jameson would phrase it.¹⁵ Williams clearly regards himself as the mouthpiece of a yet underestimated group, the lower classes. The issue here is not that Williams is striving for a more nuanced representation of the underrepresented, but that he does not undertake a critical evaluation of his ability to truthfully represent them.

I would nevertheless like to redirect the focus to the merits of Williams’s essay. Interestingly, the beginning of our discussion on Williams very much centred on his use of language and personal experience. Everybody seemed to agree that his essay is as compelling as it is beautifully written and that his anecdotal style enriches the text. Williams hereby undoes – albeit only partly – the illusion of being an objective outside observer of cultural phenomena. Hence, Williams’s “Culture is Ordinary” is a suitable example for what I am promoting: an approach to cultural studies which does not shy away from giving its author a face and voice and which evokes an affective response to the text supplementing critical intellectual reactions.

III International Feminisms

The cultural studies approach modelled by Williams and especially Wallace has led me to rethink my own role as a young scholar. Identifying as a feminist and having a focus in feminist studies, it was only natural for me to start my own journey of self-reflection in this specific academic context. My own biases regarding feminism

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Jameson, “On ‘Cultural Studies,’” 42.

came to light especially clearly while we discussed Chaudhuri's 2004 introduction to a volume devoted to Indian feminism and Grewal's 2005 examination of the appropriation of feminist ideas during the adjustment of the Western Barbie doll to an Indian market.¹⁶ What I immediately noticed and was surprised by in our discussion of these essays, was the Indian students' striking perception of colonialism (to me as a Western woman), both in this discussion and in prior sessions. I had expected them to be decidedly critical of the impact that colonialism has had on today's India, as all postcolonial essays I had dealt with before in my studies – mainly the Black and “oriental” colonial experiences analysed in Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin – had focused almost solely on negative aspects, mainly on how Eurocentric perspectives still dominate the discourse on cultures outside the Western world, overwriting their language, literature, cultural practices and products with Western meanings. Hence, it came as a surprise to me that, while postcolonialism's harsh stance on the influence of Western imperialism was oftentimes criticized by the students, they simultaneously stressed the positive consequences colonialism has had on Indian society and culture.

Feminism could have been one of those positive Western influences, but apparently has had a difficult time establishing itself in India: a point which Chaudhuri strongly makes in her introduction.¹⁷ The utilization of feminism by Indian nationalist movements for their own political gain as well as the issue that feminism has yet to address “historical circumstances and values that render the women's issue different in India” still remain challenges that have to be overcome in order to create a feminist movement which addresses the problems of Indian women specifically.¹⁸ But which concrete problems do they actually face? To be completely honest, my direct knowledge of women's issues in India is limited to what I have gleaned from general media coverage and documentaries. Interestingly, although the access to actual issues of women in India is strongly limited in Western media, one can find a vast array of features about sexual violence and physical endangerment in the country. Prominent examples include documentaries like *The Holy Wives* (2010),¹⁹ which portrays the lives of three Indian women who have been sexually exploited in the name of religion, or multiple features on the issue of gang rape in India.²⁰ Surely, the common Indian woman faces many other issues, such as economic inequality or access to childcare, as well, but this is not being reported on specifically.

¹⁶ Maitrayee Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi–xlvi; Inderpal Grewal, “Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationalities and the Global Consumer,” *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 80–120.

¹⁷ It is still interesting to note that, despite the comparatively weak institutional as well as public recognition of feminism in India, the Indian students in the colloquium stressed that Chaudhuri, who currently teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, is nevertheless regarded as a prominent figure in Indian feminism.

¹⁸ Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” xxii.

¹⁹ *The Holy Wives*, directed by Ritesh Sharma (Andhra Pradesh: Ahwaan, 2010).

²⁰ “The Truth about Rape in India,” *BBC News on YouTube*, 26 November 2020, web.

Rather, the media choose to flood viewers with images of women who have been brutally raped or murdered. These viewing experiences left me with a pronounced feeling of rage at the fact that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes often seem to go unpunished, with lawyers and lawmakers being either indifferent to women's issues or agreeing with the world view of the rapists. I am thinking specifically of a documentary titled *India's Daughter* (2015), which features the tragic story of 23-year-old Indian student Jyoti Singh who in 2012 was brutally gang raped and murdered by six men on a bus in New Delhi.²¹ Her male friend was also injured, but survived. The main blame was placed on Singh herself: by the perpetrators, police, and lawyers alike. She was accused of not having been a decent enough girl because she had been hanging around on the streets. The perpetrators claimed that it had merely been their civic duty to make an example of Singh to show Indian women their supposedly rightful place at home. Some of the men who were interviewed for the documentary – politicians, lawyers, and police officers – agreed with the perpetrators' stance or even praised their crime. Yet the documentary also depicted a different reaction to the rape and murder of Singh. It showed thousands of people – women and men – protesting on the street in favour of a reform of the legislative and judicial system in rape cases. Hence, these images also left me with the hopeful impression that a sizeable part of the population is finally standing up against these injustices and is starting to demand equal rights.

Nevertheless, I had not been able to infer the actual societal progression towards a less patriarchal Indian culture from these representations of women's issues in the popular media alone. What I therefore wanted to know, as I entered into discussion with Indian students, was if and how India's stance on feminist issues might have progressed over the last decade, especially considering the increasing outside influence of Western cultures, norms, and ideals. Almost ten years after the rape of Jyoti Singh, what had changed for women in India? What shocked me was that India's academic world apparently shares the same unease with Western feminism that the general public in Germany and the United States still seems to have. Some of the Indian students in the colloquium reported little exposure to feminist studies at their university to begin with. At one point in the discussion, it was stated that male professors and students have made comments denoting feminism as a kind of Western souvenir with little to no relevance to Indian realities. Moreover, accounts explaining that more and more feminist organizations and academic departments are being shut down in India were downright depressing to me. What I had expected, or perhaps rather hoped for, was a steadily growing openness, especially among engaged studies and intellectuals, towards what I would identify as the "progressive" idea of feminism and see as a part of an increased willingness to engage with the issues of the younger Indians and Indian women in particular. Were these expectations wrong? Or did I have the wrong ideas about how critical engagement regarding feminism should be handled on a transnational level?

²¹ *India's Daughter: The Story of Jyoti Singh*, directed by Leslee Udwin (London: Assassin Films, 2015).

Through the personal accounts of Indian students, I was able to gain insights that would otherwise have eluded me. Although our discussions on feminism were focused more on India and the Indian diaspora, these type of exchanges about specific cultures were by no means one-sided. The Indian students repeatedly expressed interest in how Germans specifically view and experience issues of social and gender justice. When asked about the current state of feminism in Germany, I realized that I seldom think about feminism from a national perspective, but rather tend to perceive all types of Western feminist perspectives as one. In general, I perceived feminism in the West as a fight for equality, which inevitably triggers animosity between men and women, as some men realise that their economic and social advantages are now being contested. For me, the distinction between Western and non-Western feminism was only made on the basis of differences in the actual expression and severity of the inequality between men and women. I had never differentiated feminism according to national criteria before entering this kind of transnational discussion.

Ironically, narrowing the scope of feminism to national peculiarities has made me reflect more on the internationalization of Western feminism. While the attempt to universalise feminism as a concept, promoting equality between all sexes and genders, can be read as a well-intentioned attempt at unifying people from all around the world and spreading progressive ideas, it also disregards existing national differences. These differences are not to be understood as mere minor variations. Returning to Chaudhuri's observation that feminism in India does not express the same type of anger as Western feminisms, as it is, according to her, not based on an adversarial male-female dichotomy, Indian feminism would not even agree on the basic definition of Western feminism as a movement trying to compensate the inequalities between the sexes. Chaudhuri sees in this viewpoint of feminism a reflection of India's apprehension towards Western influences in general. Considering the modernist changes brought about by colonialism and Western authority in India, she points out that "for Western feminists whether or not to engage with non-Western feminism is an option they may choose to exercise, no such clear choice is available to non-Western feminists or anti-feminists."²² Hence, nationalist feminist discourses have sought to annihilate all Western influence from Indian feminism. Intertwining concepts of culture and nationalism with notions of the Indian woman as the representative of Indian culture and morality untainted by Western influence, as well as effacing all internal differences between the sexes, were strategies deployed by the nationalist movement to construct the image of a united India.²³ Therefore the "women's movement in India had none of the man-woman antagonism characteristic of women's movements in the West."²⁴

²² Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, xx–xxi.

²⁴ Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom," in *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity*, edited by B. R. Nanda (Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1976), 40, as quoted in Chaudhuri, xxi.

Even within the Western framework, feminism in Germany also differs from feminism in the United States. Political and social changes accompanying the election of Donald Trump have had drastic consequences on women's reproductive rights specifically. His three conservative appointees have given the Supreme Court an entirely new, decidedly reactionary identity: one which resulted in the shocking decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a decision that allows pro-life-leaning states like Texas to further limit access to procedures and criminalise abortions, thus stripping women of a long-established right to bodily autonomy.²⁵ This threat to women's rights in the US produces a different understanding of the practices and challenges of feminism than those perceived by feminists in Germany. For while the abortion process is challenging for women in Germany as well, a complete reversal of reproductive rights is more than unlikely at present. Thus, discussions are more concerned with issues of equal pay, quotas, and – unfortunately, in my opinion – the usefulness of feminism in our modern times. One also must consider the multiplicity of definitions of feminism circulating within one culture alone. Many different movements exist under that umbrella term, approaching it with a diverse set of motivations while weighing today's problems differently. The more I think about it, the less it makes sense to think of feminism from an international or transnational perspective, or even as a singular block at all. The specific national and regional challenges for women are just too extensive to be subsumed into one broad concept of feminism.

Ultimately, it continues to be surprising to me how much even my most basic definition of feminism had changed by the end of the course. Feminism in my mind – that is, feminism in the Western sense – had previously been a kind of unchanging concept, one that could be applied to any nation and culture with only some small and localized cultural challenges depending on the country. This seems no longer fitting to me. I am now inclined to use the plural form *feminisms* more often. Hence, I also had to first learn of my own positionality as a Western woman regarding this issue, before I could truly grasp the depth of it. Even though I identify as a woman I certainly cannot fully understand the challenges other women in other cultures face every day. I am not able to produce a truthful representation of every feminist struggle on the planet, nor can I speak for all women around the world.

IV The Merits of Transnationalism

The lively discussions we had in the colloquium and the detailed examination of canonical texts in cultural studies have taken me on a journey towards making more balanced and careful reflections. As one of the key goals of the colloquium was to generate discussions about the problems and merits of nationally specific

²⁵ Eleanor Klibanoff and Maria Méndez, "What the End of *Roe v. Wade* Would Mean for Texas' Past, Current and Future Abortion Laws," *Governing.com*, 4 May 2022, web.

perspectives and to evaluate the possibilities of a more transnational or global approach in cultural studies, I have also attempted to outline my personal line of thought regarding one of the research topics we have discussed, coming to the conclusion that a transnational approach might not always be the best solution for tackling specific issues.

What I have not done so far is talk of the merits a transnational approach to cultural studies can generally have. This is a pity, because such a discussion is sorely needed. Examining the transnational turn in modern literary studies, Gül Bilge Han observes that “[a]n increasing number of scholars have come to challenge spatial and temporal boundaries that previously confined modernism to the early twentieth-century Euro-American realm of cultural production.”²⁶ One of the goals of these new approaches is “to trace literature’s border-traversing capacities, and the cross-cultural affiliations that may be found not only *between* but also *within* literary works.”²⁷ Cultural studies’ shift towards a more international and transnational perspective also allows for the same type of critical reflection on the limitations of the nation state and sheds light on the variety of “cross-cultural” attitudes and identities. Analysing cultural modes and practices outside the restraint of national borders and the Western framework hence opens the possibility of completely new interpretations and spaces of discussion, which are much more open and diverse. Therefore, I would like to end this essay with a humble suggestion: Let us extend the reach of cultural studies more – not just in the sense of expanding our interdisciplinary affiliations, but also our intercultural relationships.

²⁶ Gül Bilge Han, “Transnationalism,” in *The New Wallace Stevens Studies*, edited by Bart Eeckhout and Gül Bilge Han (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Emphases in the original.