Introduction

While sifting through the mass of e-mails that accumulate at the beginning of a new academic year, I was struck by the subject heading of one message. The message line exclaimed, “Saudi Women Drive! NEW at Ms. in the Classroom.” Upon opening the message, I found a generic informational advertisement recommending the use of a digital version of Ms. magazine for my courses. Buried at the bottom was a note that said, “P.S. The NEW Summer 2011 issue is available at Ms. in the Classroom, which includes Saudi Women Drive! Get the whole story on the fight for gender equality, including women’s right to vote, in Saudi Arabia.” I was immediately struck by some of the contradictory implications of this small piece of feminist advertising. The use of an internationally oriented marker for a generic teaching-oriented advertisement seems to imply a widespread public interest and a presumed marketability of a sign of the “global” fight for women’s rights. Yet this presumption is rooted in a mainstream national cultural symbol in the United States—the ability or right to drive. Driving and sociocultural identification with the car one drives are deep-rooted cultural symbols in the United States that circulate widely in public discourses and popular culture. The deployment of the global or international in this instance was thus firmly cast through a national framing of the feminist imagination. This kind of vision is particularly striking given the fact that academic feminists (to whom the e-mail ad was clearly addressed) writing about global issues have placed significant emphasis on the dangers of casting global or international gender issues through the subtle historical legacies of colonial images of inferior others. The message thus also underlines the disjuncture between advances in feminist theorizing within the academy and the more public, mainstream rhetoric of U.S. feminists. In this case, the symbol of Saudi women driving is presented in a message devoid of any description, reference, or context of the campaign, the country, or even the region. Saudi Arabia is presented as a site that has been vacated of any empirical, historical, or contextual depth. The idea of
Saudi women driving is thus emblematic of a U.S. national imagination. The geographic imagination at play here is defined by the borders of the nation-state rather than by a transnational perspective.

The complex issues and disjunctures that leak out of this example point to larger challenges that continually arise for feminists who write and teach about women, gender, and sexuality in locations that want to move outside of a national American narrative. Feminist scholars have increasingly sought to develop transnational perspectives in order to break from national narratives and decenter U.S.-oriented approaches. Yet, as this anecdote suggests, feminist efforts to invoke global or transnational perspectives are continually challenged by nation-centered narratives and visions of the world. In this book, I examine such challenges that arise in the creation of knowledge about the world. In particular, I examine the possibilities and the limits of the paradigm of transnational feminism that has arisen in interdisciplinary fields of study that have specifically been committed to breaking from nation-centric visions of the world. While I focus on the paradigm of transnational feminism, the issues I address speak to broader challenges of how to write and teach about the world in the current historical moment in the U.S. academy.

The anecdote that I have begun with captures some of the larger issues that continue to trouble the creation and dissemination of knowledge about the world within and outside the academy in the United States. In recent years, American universities and colleges have increasingly sought to expand the global dimensions of their curricula and academic programs. Institutions of higher education in the United States have long had programs focused on international studies, many of which evolved out of area-based programs that were developed during the Cold War period in the 1950s. What is distinctive about the current emphasis on a global perspective is the attempt of new programs and avenues of intellectual inquiry to grapple with and move beyond the traditional borders of nation-states, regional areas, and disciplinary territories. The acceleration of economic globalization and the rapid global flows of people, capital, and cultural goods and information have intensified this search for global frames of analysis. The growing emphasis on global perspectives in academic institutions in the United States is in this sense partly an effect of globalization. Academics have sought to create programs of study that can make sense of the border-crossing flows that have been produced by or have intensified with globalization. Meanwhile, the emergence and expansion of interdisciplinary fields of study within the academy (such as postcolonial studies,
women’s studies, and cultural studies) have produced a move away from older approaches to international studies that used the nation-state as a foundational analytical and political lens. Scholars writing in these fields have persistently called attention to processes of migration and diasporic identification that have unsettled the nation-state and produced new forms of cultural and political identities and practices. The result has been a wide range of research and scholarship on various transnational political and sociocultural formations.

As such formulations become institutionalized within the academy, the question that arises and that frames this book is one that asks how these paradigms shape the ways in which we produce, consume, and disseminate knowledge about the world within the United States. Such a question immediately becomes a fraught one given the contemporary historical and political context in which we pose it. The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by an intense confluence of intersecting local, national, regional, and international conflict, crisis, and change. Consider the key events that frame both public and intellectual understandings of the world within the United States. One of the overarching sets of events marking this period has, of course, been the post-9/11 U.S. “war on terror” and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hypernationalism in the post-9/11 United States has already unsettled romanticized beliefs in a deterritorialized postnational world that had begun to gain currency among some interdisciplinary academic avenues. U.S. national interests have become further enmeshed with long-standing regional conflicts, including those between Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan, among others. The twenty-first century has also been marked by the continued and intensified contradictions of economic globalization. On the one hand, states and international institutions continue to promote economic policies of liberalization. On the other hand, global economic crisis has served to reveal the continued significance of the state in structuring national and global economic activity. In both the United States and Europe, states have had to intervene to manage financial and political conflicts that have emerged over the nature of state intervention in the economy. Meanwhile, the concurrent rise of China and India as growing global economic forces that has accompanied economic decline in the United States has produced new often fear-driven desires to know about these nations. The creation of “global” forms of knowledge that emerge on American campuses are thus often shaped by motives and affinities that are complex configurations of the instrumental (the need to know about regions and processes that affect
Introduction

individual, local, and national self-interest), affective (the emotional fears and desires that conflicts, crisis, and real or perceived threats create and that direct the will to know and understand), and the ethical (the desire to find responsible and accountable ways of engaging with the world).

Through this sketch of recent global events, I want to foreground the ways in which the framing of this global context is already a nationalized process. Thus, while large-scale events and processes are certainly transnational, they are perceived, framed, experienced, and negotiated in ways that are shaped by distinctive local and national contexts. The academy is one institutional site where such nationalized framings and negotiations are produced, disseminated, and consumed in important ways in the United States. Any interdisciplinary project that seeks to study questions that are comparative, global, transnational, or simply non-U.S.-centric emerges within a set of historically situated national discussions that have already been taking place both within and outside the academy in the United States.

The Rise of the Paradigm of Transnationalism

Consider some of the ways in which such national conversations and contexts have shaped the emerging paradigms of global and transnational studies in the United States. At one level, institutional resources and student interests have been shaped by the broad contours of these events. This is illustrated, for instance, by an increased interest in China and a continued and intensified interest in regions such as the Middle East that represent visible areas of conflict that are inextricably linked to U.S. governmental policies and state interests (particularly, of course, in relation to national security and economic interests). As students feel the impact of globalization on their own lives through their perceived threat of outsourcing of white-collar jobs and uncertain employment prospects, their interest in economic globalization and its effects has also grown. Intellectual paradigms have also been shaped by such events. Scholarly research agendas have been affected by the responses of both supporters of U.S. foreign and economic policy and critics of these policies (particularly in relation to war and economic globalization).

Meanwhile, processes of migration and the emergence of varied immigrant communities and forms of cultural identification have meant that students and faculty have also focused on both the countries of origins in
regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia and the transnational ties between these regions and the United States. This has also intersected with the cultural dimensions of globalization as cultural goods such as film and media now routinely cross borders. Such cultural products are simultaneously local and transnational as they are consumed by multiple audiences in multiple locations. As scholars of cultural globalization have noted, this has led to new forms of cultural identification and new ways in which people and communities imagine their identities that no longer directly correspond to the territorial borders of the nation-state. Some social theorists, for instance, have focused on the idea of cosmopolitanism as a way to break from nation-centric modes of identification. These scholars have sought to identify ethical bases for identification and action that break both from territorialized nation-centric conceptions of the world and from state-centered ideas of citizenship. Meanwhile, the growth of studies focused on diasporic communities has produced a rich interdisciplinary body of scholarship on the intersecting identities of sexuality, race, ethnicity, and gender.

Such approaches have consciously sought to dislodge nation-centric approaches to the world. However, the fields of knowledge that are produced through such paradigms often struggle to break from narratives that do not reproduce analytical frames or narratives that are implicitly associated with the U.S. nation-state. Ella Shohat, for instance, has cautioned against a kind of “submerged American nationalism” that permeates “a number of ethnic studies/women’s studies/gender studies/queer studies curricula.” Meanwhile, writing about the field of Asian American studies, Kandice Chuh has provided an important discussion of such struggles to break from nation-centric frames of analysis. Writing about the field, Chuh argues for a continual interrogation of “Asian American’ as the subject/object of Asian Americanist discourse and of U.S. nationalist ideology, and Asian American studies as the subject/object of dominant paradigms of the U.S. university” in order to ensure that the field does not reproduce the exclusionary dynamics of U.S. nationalism. While Chuh is discussing the field of Asian American studies, she touches on a broader risk that also permeates fields of study that have explicitly sought to use transnational perspectives that seek to move outside of a U.S. frame. For instance, when transnational perspectives take liminal transnational identities of diasporic communities as unquestioned subjects, the generation and consumption of knowledge may inadvertently be located within particular kinds of U.S.-centered interests and concerns by centering transnational flows through the territorial space of the United States.
The emergence of the study of global and transnational processes in this context presses us to think of “the global” and “the transnational” not merely as a neutral geographic level of analysis but as conceptual categories that have emerged from specific political, economic, and historical circumstances. The kind of “global” or “transnational” perspective that has emerged is in many ways a national conception—it is shaped by the specific context of the U.S. academy. A central argument that will unfold in this book is that interdisciplinary research on global and “non-U.S.” locations is itself inadvertently nationalized. Such an argument may appear provocative to scholars who identify with such interdisciplinary paradigms, since much of the impetus of such theory and research (in cross-cutting fields such as women’s studies, postcolonial studies, and diasporic studies) is driven by an intellectual and political imperative of moving beyond the nation-state. In fact, interdisciplinary research (both feminist and nonfeminist) on transnationalism has identified itself with an ideological position that has been critical of nationalism and usually depicts the idea of the nation-state as an outdated or regressive political formation. Within the terrain of academic institutional practices, transnational interdisciplinary scholarship has also defined itself against older models of “area studies” scholarship whose origins lay within the specific geopolitical context of U.S. state interests during the Cold War. Certainly, the very “areas” that were carved out and institutionalized within the U.S. academy were derived from U.S. state conceptions of specific regional spheres of influence in which the U.S. state was competing with Soviet state power and influence. Transnational approaches have thus often explicitly attempted to dislodge such artificial boundaries that frequently created rigid institutionalized barriers to cross-regional, comparative, or transnational intellectual engagements. Within such interdisciplinary sites, scholarship that takes the nation-state as the primary or foundational unit of analysis is now often viewed as an antiquated approach that has not kept up with newer understandings of the transnational nature of culture, politics, and economics. Yet, as I argue in this book, discarding the nation-state as a unit of analysis does not automatically dislodge a U.S.-centric epistemic project. My argument is not, of course, that contemporary transnational and global intellectual or academic activities are explicitly shaped by nationalist interests in a self-evident or deterministic way or that such knowledge necessarily serves the interests of the American state or of U.S. foreign policy in any simplistic fashion—nor that individual writers and texts cannot or have not broken from nation-oriented visions of the world. Intellectual
production is situated within and shaped by the historical compulsions of time and place but is never determined in a simplistic way by historical and structural conditions. Rather, the nationalization of interdisciplinary research and theory unfolds in more nuanced and indiscernible ways precisely because this research often normatively seeks to move beyond nation-centric perspectives. For instance, an overdetermined analytical and political compulsion to move beyond the nation-state often inadvertently transforms the “transnational” or “global” into a territorialized concept. Global and transnational research and theory are driven by the search for spaces and processes (whether they are cultural, political, or economic) that are not contained within the nation-state. The result, as I will illustrate in chapter 4, is that the space of the transnational becomes territorialized through the search for border-crossing activities and phenomena. The realm of the transnational in effect becomes a kind of derivative discourse that ironically mirrors the ways in which, as postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee has argued, postcolonial nationalisms became trapped by the discursive colonial models of thought they sought to oppose and replace. Chatterjee has argued in his reading of Indian nationalism that core elements of the nationalist movement mirrored and reproduced the very categories of colonial rule they sought to displace. It is this kind of oppositional mirroring that is increasingly becoming codified within transnational/global research. Locked in opposition to the nation-state, transnational research often mirrors the borders of the sovereign, bounded form of the nation it seeks to move beyond.

The seductive danger of this nationalization of global and transnational research is intensified when we consider the ways in which the global and the transnational are not transcendent categories that simply empirically describe the broadest geographic or sociocultural scale of being and action but are categories that are constructed and operate within a specific historical and political context. In the case of U.S. transnationalism, the postnational imperative must be contextualized within and in relation to the ways in which U.S. national interests have been expressed through global claims of justice, democracy, and freedom. The postnational, in other words, is itself an American national concept in which (as I illustrate in chapter 2) the U.S. state has actively promoted its economic and foreign policy goals through challenges to conceptions of national and state sovereignty.

Consider, for instance, globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai’s formulation of the postnational thesis of transnational processes. Appadurai’s groundbreaking work represented one of the first sustained theoretical
arguments that contemporary forms of identity, imagination, and practice in a rapidly globalizing world are literally “trans” national—that is, they represent deterritorialized, border-crossing formations that exceed the nation. As he put it, “It is in the fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world, that the mediascapes and the ideoscapes of the modern world find their fractured and fragmented counterpart.” Appadurai’s arguments about deterritorialization and postnational globalization have been a foundational text in shaping emerging conceptions of transnationalism in a range of interdisciplinary fields, including cultural, postcolonial, and globalization studies. Indeed, Appadurai provides a rich analysis that seeks to disrupt static categories of the “West” and the “Third World” and explicitly addresses examples of global flows that are not defined by U.S.-centric definitions of migration. Thus, he discusses the complexities of postnational imaginations and identities of migrants from India to the Persian Gulf states—a migration flow within the so-called non-Western world.” Yet, tellingly, when Appadurai identifies an ideal-typical site for the emergence of postnationalism, he turns to a discussion of the United States. Thus he argues:

We might recognize that diasporic diversity actually puts loyalty to a non-territorial transnation first, while recognizing that there is a special American way to connect to these global diasporas. America, as a cultural space, will not need to compete with a host of global identities and diasporic identities and diasporic loyalties. It might come to be seen as a model of how to arrange one territorial locus (among others) for a cross-hatching of diasporic communities.

As he further argues, “But America may be alone in having organized itself around a modern political ideology in which pluralism is central to the conduct of democratic life.” This identification of the United States as an exceptional postnational space (rather than a typical nation-state) is not unique to Appadurai’s work. The discipline of political science, for instance, has had a long-standing set of intellectual practices rooted in a logic of American exceptionalism. In this tradition, the United States (and American politics) has been analyzed as an ideal-typical site that is defined by democratic institutions, practices, and cultural norms. However, Appadurai’s arguments are significant because they represent a set of discursive narratives that have shaped interdisciplinary fields that have claimed
to represent new and innovative conceptions, in contrast to more conventional disciplines that have produced narratives of exceptionalism.

The U.S. national narrative implicit in Appadurai’s conception of a postnational United States is thus not simply an inaccurate or dated understanding of transnationalism. Rather, it is a discursive marker of the nationalized narratives of transnationalism that permeate and increasingly discipline interdisciplinary fields of knowledge. What has emerged in this process is a new set of disciplinary practices underlying such interdisciplinary conceptions of the global and the transnational. These normative practices have emerged at a historically specific moment that has been shaped as much by the national specificities of the United States as by the transnational and global processes that do indeed shape the world. In this process, there is a slippage between transnationalism as an ontological category (a real and complex material set of processes) and transnationalism as a normative paradigm that has increasingly become a disciplinary device within interdisciplinary research and theory. It is this slippage that is rooted in the historically specific discursive and material national context of the U.S. academy. Despite the extensive interest in the links between power and knowledge in interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies and the strong influence of Foucauldian analyses of knowledge production, less attention has been paid to such national framings of interdisciplinary knowledge and the ways in which these framings produce “the world” within the United States. More significantly, this framing is a marker of a deeper trend toward the disciplining of interdisciplinary work.

Thus, the essays in this book have two interrelated objectives. The first is to unsettle the nationalization of the paradigm of transnationalism. The second purpose of this book is to use this discussion of transnationalism to open up questions about interdisciplinarity and to find ways to unsettle the disciplinary mechanisms that sediment interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies. My intention is to specifically initiate a discussion about both the possibilities and the limitations of interdisciplinary knowledge on international, global, and transnational issues. The power of interdisciplinary fields of knowledge such as women’s and gender studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies has rested on their ability to unsettle the complacency and rigidity of the traditional disciplines. In doing so, such fields have called attention to epistemological silences within the disciplines and produced new theories, methodological innovations, and political challenges that have simultaneously transformed and moved beyond
the disciplines. Feminist scholarship began by pointing to the erasure of women from conventional analyses of historical, economic, and political life and soon moved toward transforming categories of analysis within all the major disciplines. Such scholarship, for example, transformed traditional conceptions of work by focusing on domestic labor and informal sector work, and challenged understandings of politics by focusing on the power in the private sphere. Meanwhile, interdisciplinary research on culture also produced methodological innovations by focusing on new sites of analysis such as film and the media that make up what Appadurai and Breckenridge have termed “public cultures.”

As the impact of such vast and important contributions has spread, interdisciplinary scholarship increasingly falls into familiar patterns of research and analysis. The unsettling power of such forceful interdisciplinary challenges has begun to give way to interdisciplinary norms that increasingly discipline the forms of knowledge that emerge from these fields.

The paradigm of transnationalism is one case of this disciplinary impec- tus of interdisciplinary knowledge. It has, for example, become common- place to use transnationalism as a framing device in many interdisciplinary fields. At a surface level, “transnational” has simply replaced “international” or “global” as a descriptive term meant to designate a move outside the territorial boundaries of the United States. At a deeper level, however, transnationalism represents a paradigm that explicitly seeks to move beyond the presumed parochialism of the territorial boundaries of the United States. Some scholars have already noted that the circulation of the term “transnationalism” itself can be problematic. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan examine some of the uses of “transnational” and caution against the loss of the “political valiance” of the term. In line with a significant body of research on transnationalism, they call attention to inequalities and relationships of power that undergird the term and to the complex linkages between local, national, and regional processes that interact with transnational phenomena.

Transnationalism is, in effect, both a category that captures particular kinds of processes and a perspective on the world that is embedded within relationships of power. Transnational knowledge thus functions in complex and multilayered ways. On the one hand, as I have noted, transnational knowledge in the U.S. academy arises in a specific location and historical moment within the national imagination of the United States. The political implications of transnational knowledge are contingent on the ways in which various American publics both within and
outside the academy shape and respond to transnational processes. On the other hand, knowledge that is produced is itself a transnational product within a globalized intellectual marketplace. Transnational knowledge produced within a particular location thus circulates across national borders and may have different political implications in different local, regional, and national contexts. For instance, research that calls attention to poor working conditions that undergird China’s economic boom may play a politically subversive role by challenging state power in China or India but may provide political comfort for American audiences increasingly threatened by outsourcing and capital flight to these rising economies.

Interdisciplinary paradigms such as transnationalism are located within and shaped by national imaginations in nuanced ways in U.S. interdisciplinary scholarship. Such dynamics have often been left unexamined because such interdisciplinary approaches are often located on the margins of national public discourses. Furthermore, scholars working in interdisciplinary fields are often located on the margins of intellectual sites in the academy as they critically respond to or disengage from the traditional disciplines and have often been at the forefront of calling attention to the relationship between power and knowledge. This has often prevented a closer examination of the ways in which interdisciplinary fields may themselves be shaped by national agendas and ways of imagining the world even though their intentions may be to disrupt these very agendas. To pose this question that asks whether and how interdisciplinary fields are implicated in such national narratives is not to dismiss the significance of these fields but simply to interrogate the assumption that any set of knowledge practices can transcend the specificities of location and context. It is with this intention that an analysis of transnationalism must ask, in what ways is the dominance of this paradigm shaped by a national imaginary? In what ways is transnationalism an idea that is shaped by national publics in the United States as much as it is a concept that is grasping historical processes that have in fact unsettled the nation-state? In what ways has the idea of transnationalism begun to discipline research and writing in interdisciplinary fields of knowledge? These are the questions that shape the essays in this book. I seek to explore these questions through a specific focus on the paradigm of transnational feminism.

Transnational feminism has become one of the central paradigms in interdisciplinary women’s and gender studies programs and curricula. The case of transnational feminism is a particularly fruitful case for analysis on
a number of levels. Scholarship on transnational feminism has engaged with the major cultural, political, and economic trends associated with recent processes of globalization and has intersected with all the major disciplines and interdisciplinary fields that have focused on such processes. A theoretical focus on transnational feminism thus also provides an avenue for a critical engagement with crosscutting debates that span fields such as area studies, postcolonial studies, and the challenges of developing humanistic social science research agendas. Scholarship on transnational feminism has also paid close attention to relationships of power that shape knowledge production. Such work has engaged in self-reflexive knowledge practices in which feminist scholars themselves have examined the political implications and limits of categories of thought that have been used within this field. Transnational feminist thought thus comprises a rich and varied set of research and writings—both empirical and theoretical—that do not represent an easy target for critical analysis. On the contrary, the analytical tools for rethinking the concept of transnational feminism arise from within this set of scholarly writings. This set of essays thus represents an approach that both works within and builds on this body of writing on transnational feminism even as it simultaneously presents a critical engagement that interrogates the analytical terrain that increasingly structures this body of knowledge within a disciplinary field. Thus, in this endeavor I hope to engage in a theoretical project that is both deconstructive and constructive. In a deconstructive mode, I interrogate the limits of the paradigm of transnational feminism and use this case study to illustrate the disciplining of interdisciplinary research. In a constructive vein, I address the transnational as an ontological material and discursive formation and discuss ways to approach, analyze, and capture processes that do indeed exceed the nation-state (even if the nation-state has not withered away). This focus on transnational feminism thus provides both a set of theoretical debates that allow for this discussion and an empirical case study with which to analyze the links between power and knowledge that bind interdisciplinary theory and research.

The Case of Transnational Feminism

Transnational approaches to the study of feminism emerged in the 1980s through critical engagements with existing ways of addressing global feminism. These emerging approaches sought to move away from
understandings of global feminism that ignored inequalities and differences between women.\textsuperscript{29} Chandra Mohanty, for instance, specifically argued against models of global feminism that were based on apolitical understandings of universal sisterhood.\textsuperscript{30} Writing about the then dominant version of international feminism that was rooted in a “sisterhood-is-global” model,\textsuperscript{31} Mohanty argued that such a conception of sisterhood neglected the ways in which women’s locations, identities, and political practices were embedded within transnational inequalities—particularly those linked to colonial relationships of power and structures of global capitalism.\textsuperscript{32} The shift away from a singular “global” feminism to a more complex set of transnational processes pointed, for instance, to the ways in which women not simply were victims of their own particular systems of patriarchy but also were placed in complex historical and material relationships with both men and women in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{33} Scholars such as María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, Aihwa Ong, and Maria Mies analyzed the emergence of a new gendered division of labor where women in poorer Third World countries increasingly were tracked into manufacturing industries, often in “export processing zones” designated for multinational corporations.\textsuperscript{34} As these groundbreaking works showed, the middle classes in “Western” countries (including middle-class women) were increasingly the consumers of products created by these women workers.

While a central dimension of this work was a focus on colonial and neocolonial relations of power between the Western (European and U.S.) and non-Western world, this work did not treat the West or the Third World as homogenizing or monolithic categories. Rather, such research sought to call attention to the colonial historical processes that have shaped contemporary transnational processes. Thus, for instance, Jacqui Alexander’s seminal analysis of sexuality and the state provided a complex analysis of the layered intersections between colonial histories, contemporary global capitalism, nationalism, and the state. Writing about the nature of the postcolonial state in Trinidad, Tobago, and the Bahamas, Alexander showed that legislation designed to protect women from domestic violence in effect consolidated heteronormative marriage while criminalizing gay relationships.\textsuperscript{35} Alexander’s analysis of such heteronormative constructions of citizenship located these constructions of gender in relation to both historical and contemporary tensions between national identity and transnational processes. From a historical perspective, normative middle-class conceptions of black respectability emerged as a nationalist response to colonial rule and a slave plantation economy. In the contemporary context, the
integration of the nation-state within a liberalized global economy through structural adjustment policies and the growth of the tourism industry have also fed into these tensions as they have destabilized the nation-state and produced new forms of nationalist, anti-Western sentiment. Sexual bodies provide a site for internal struggles of legitimation for the postcolonial state. The result, as Alexander notes, is that “as the state moves to reconfigure the nation, it simultaneously resuscitates the nation as heterosexual.”

Alexander’s essay served as an exemplary text that marks the emergence of a transnational feminist approach. In contrast to more singular models of global feminism, the analysis pointed to the complex layers of local, national, and state practices that interact with and are shaped by transnational processes. The construction of gender from this perspective is shaped by complex processes of sexuality, race, and class. As Chandra Mohanty argued, a transnational conception of a feminism “without borders” was one that was located within these intersecting structures of inequality even as it emphasized women’s agencies, responses, and resistances to these relationships of power. This normative interest in transnational perspectives was heightened by a growing body of scholarship that called attention to the gendered politics of nationalism and the modern nation-state. Such work illustrated the ways in which nationalist movements invoked and reproduced gendered conceptions and sought to restrict or manage women’s political participation. These studies thus pointed to the limits of nation-centric approaches to feminist struggles for equality.

Since the emergence of these approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, there has been an explosion of work on transnational feminism in the interdisciplinary field of women’s and gender studies. This work has produced a rich and varied scholarship ranging from studies of socioeconomic and political processes such as globalization and migration to more theoretically oriented discussions of culture, power, and knowledge to discussions of feminist practice and activism. Such work has marked a critical break from earlier understandings of a “global feminism.” For instance, in lieu of a global feminist approach to women’s movements as a unified movement against patriarchy, new transnational feminist approaches to women’s movements have drawn on the intersectional analysis of local and global inequalities and substantially contributed to debates on how research, theory, and activism constitute the subject of feminism.

Yet the diversity and nuance of such scholarship have also been accompanied by a set of contradictory processes. This scholarship has had a significant intellectual impact within interdisciplinary knowledge.
proliferation of transnational approaches has meant that transnationalism has now become a framing term for feminist knowledge of places (or people linked to places) outside of the United States. The result is that this framing device has been disciplined in troubling ways, and transnational perspectives are now disseminated and consumed in ways that reproduce the kind of U.S. national imagination I have been discussing. At the most basic level, the term “transnational” now often operates as a descriptive colloquialism that refers to research or theoretical work that is not focused on the United States.40 Used as a descriptive signifier, “transnationalism” does not differentiate between work that seeks to make sense of processes that have crossed or transcended national boundaries and questions, processes, and histories that are not necessarily primarily linked to transnational processes in significant ways. The consequence for knowledge production is the risk of reproducing the common ahistorical assumptions that all research must begin with or connect to a transnational frame.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that the origins of this paradigm were located in work that specifically called attention both to relationships of power and to the power dynamics of knowledge, transnational feminist knowledge is still distorted by a desire to consume issues linked to particular representations of non-Western women such as veiling, female genital mutilation, and other cultural issues. This is particularly true in public spheres within the United States such as the media, some activist sites, and classroom discussions within the academy.41 These preoccupations are in fact markers of the national feminist imagination within the United States. Public representations of such issues in the media are perhaps to be expected. Furthermore, given the driven ideological investment of the media in representing non-Western, particularly Middle Eastern and Islamic, women as victims of cultural oppression, it should also not be surprising that undergraduate students in the United States also bring these imaginations with them to the classroom.42 There is often a sizable gap between the breakthroughs of transnational feminist theory and research and the trans-/post-/interdisciplinary innovations that seek to push beyond borders and boundaries, on the one hand, and students who are grappling with coming to terms with a world that they access through their own complex public spheres, often with very little factual knowledge, on the other hand. In many instances, this means that students latch on to visible issues that they gain access to within the confines of the public spheres that shape their imaginations. In other cases, students are often pressed into a purely deconstructive mode where they learn to express their inability to
judge other cultures and remain mired in their own bounded and paralyzing self-reflection of their own power and privilege.

The limits of such framings of the transnational, of course, seem more readily apparent in ideologically charged spheres such as media-driven public spheres or in the case of younger students who simply have not had access to systematic or in-depth understanding of world histories through the secondary school system in the United States. Yet the incorporation of the “transnational” within interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies is also bounded by particular national understandings albeit in different and nuanced ways. Consider, for instance, a recent text that speaks to the cutting edge of interdisciplinary work and women’s studies in particular, Women’s Studies on the Edge, constructed by leading interdisciplinary feminist theorist Joan Scott. The purpose of the book, as Scott puts it, is “to restore feminism’s critical edge, even to sharpen it.” Thus, she notes,

This impulse to self-critique has been present from the inception of feminism as a social-political movement. The critique I refer to is not the same as factional fights or different identity or strategic positions (difference versus equality, liberal versus socialist, straight versus queer, white versus women of color, first world versus third). Instead it is an examination of the very terms that organize our actions: What does it mean to make “women” the object of our studies? What are the exclusions performed by insisting on a homogeneous category of “women”? When inclusion is the aim, are there alternatives to the endless proliferation of specific (racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, national, sexual, class) identities? Is there such a thing as feminist theory or feminist methodology? What counts as emancipation and for whom?

In the spirit of Scott’s call for a continual process of self-critique, let us examine this text as an instance of the ways in which the project of interdisciplinarity becomes nationalized in subtle ways. Women’s Studies on the Edge provides a useful example both because it is explicitly concerned with the risks of disciplining and institutionalizing interdisciplinary work (and its essays allude to or analyze a range of fields, including cultural studies, postcolonial studies, critical race studies, and transgender/sexuality studies) and because the text explicitly seeks to move beyond what Scott lists as the proliferation of specific identities including the national and geographic.

The text encodes the national and transnational through discursive practices that frame or attempt to disrupt the analytical lens of the
nation-state—what Scott calls the process of “edging in” and “edging out.”

There are three central discursive patterns through which Scott’s framework of edging in/edging out delineates the national and transnational. First, the text makes an unstated analytical assumption that the theories and framings of feminism being discussed are those located within the U.S. academy. Second, the book makes an explicit attempt to speak to and to unsettle knowledge about spaces outside of the territorial United States. Finally, the text explicitly engages in a critical discussion of the limits of U.S. framings of interdisciplinary issues. While the individual essays that deal with these questions provide rich and complex analyses, taken together what we have is a subtle renationalization of the terrain of interdisciplinary and women’s studies scholarship, despite the intentions of both individual essays and the volume as a whole.

Consider how this renationalization unfolds through the text. At a basic level, the discussions of the institutionalization of women’s studies and the dilemmas this poses for the project of interdisciplinary knowledge focus on the U.S. academy. This should not of course be surprising given that the text is addressing problems of institutionalization within the United States. However, this nationalization of debates on institutionalization becomes significant because the text claims to move beyond specificities such as nation and geography. The national space of the U.S. academy is rendered invisible even as it is foregrounded as the framing narrative for interdisciplinary work (including work that addresses contexts that are either outside the United States or transnational in nature). The U.S. nation-state in this narrative becomes the unmarked universal site, in contrast to the “endless proliferation of specific (racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, national, sexual, class) identities.”

In contrast to this unmarking of the U.S. nation-state, the second set of discursive practices seeks to explicitly address both the ways in which transnational identities and questions are addressed and the ways in which such representations are limited by U.S. conceptions of the world. The book contains two essays that address questions that explicitly unsettle the U.S.-based construction of women’s studies. Afsaneh Najmabadi provides an important critique of the ways in which the “postcolonial” becomes a distorted signifier for all non-Western contexts. She addresses the enforced unspeakability of her position as an Iranian feminist scholar as she is mistakenly characterized as a postcolonial scholar (when Iran did not undergo colonization) and as she is compelled to negotiate between rigid and bounded hegemonic identities of Islamic and secular feminism.
second essay, Saba Mahmood presents a powerful critique of the ways in which the deployment of autobiographical accounts of diasporic Muslim writers has become a central ideological component of the U.S.-led “war on terror” that has been targeting the Middle East. Mahmood illustrates that the representation of Muslim women as victims of cultural misogyny serves as a justification for the current U.S.-led wars in the Middle East. At a deeper level, as Mahmood notes, this ideological agenda is linked to both (neo)conservative political agendas and the secular norms and prejudices of liberal movements such as feminism.

The essays by Najmabadi and Mahmood provide powerful criticisms of the very U.S.-centered conceptions of feminism and interdisciplinarity that I have been analyzing. In different ways, both essays allude to the dangers of producing U.S. conceptions of the transnational. Najmabadi’s analysis reveals the danger of reducing world history to U.S.-based understandings of postcoloniality. Meanwhile, Mahmood’s analysis illustrates both how diasporic writers consciously address U.S. national audiences and how diasporic writings can be deployed and appropriated by both liberal/feminist and neoconservative American ideological agendas. However, while taken individually these essays highlight the national narratives embedded in interdisciplinary feminist knowledge practices, within the discursive frame of the volume in which they are located, they are disciplined by the reproduction of a nationalized conception of women’s studies and interdisciplinarity that shapes the construction of the text. Thus the only representation of the transnational or of any context outside of the national borders of the United States takes place through the eye of U.S. institutional practices (whether those practices are of academic institutions or neoconservative think tanks). There is in effect no ontological existence—no reality or being—outside of this framing of interdisciplinarity and women’s studies. Given the overdetermined attention to Muslim women and Islamic societies in the current U.S. political context, the fact that the only references to the world outside of the U.S. nation-state are indeed these very overdetermined signifiers only serves to accentuate this process of nationalization.

I have turned to this discussion of Women’s Studies on the Edge precisely because it is a more nuanced and complex instance of the nationalization of interdisciplinarity and transnationalism within the U.S. academy. This instance of critical interdisciplinarity illustrates three central issues that I seek to highlight and address at various points in this book. First, the question at hand is not simply one of including or developing either critical perspectives on transnationalism or complex and rich knowledge about
the world (whether in particular local, national, or transnational contexts). These perspectives thrive within the academy. Rather, the problem for interdisciplinary research and theory is how such knowledge is institutionalized, framed, and subsequently disciplined. This is not to engage in yet another sterile debate on the pros and cons of institutionalization. The institutionalization of interdisciplinary knowledge has happened—the task at hand is not to bemoan or try to rationalize it but to address the concrete problems, responses, and negotiations that must be made in an ongoing and context-contingent process in order to allow interdisciplinary work to maintain a sense of dynamism. Thus, with the example of the Scott volume, the problem at hand is not the lack of inclusion of perspectives critical of U.S. nationalism but the ways in which these perspectives are disciplined when placed within a nation-driven narrative of interdisciplinarity, knowledge, and feminism.

The second issue that a text such as Women’s Studies on the Edge foregrounds for us is the risk of rejecting ontology in the pursuit of purely epistemological projects—that is, the risk of rejecting discussions of historical, empirical, geographic reality as at best mundane “specificity” and at worst retrograde positivism. For instance, Scott dismisses nation, geographic location, religion, and race as specific identities that proliferate (presumably in contrast to epistemological generality). Geography and national identity are coded as specific, particular, and empirical factors (elements of ontology), in contrast to the deeper project of critical theoretical analysis (epistemological concerns with knowledge production). Yet the epistemological limits of Scott’s discursive framings are precisely marked because of the ontology with which she marks interdisciplinarity and women’s studies. Scott, in other words, makes specific empirical choices (that is, she engages in a method of selection) when she selects U.S.-centered debates on both U.S. and transnational questions. Scott’s ontological grounding of interdisciplinary conversation is the United States even as she dismisses raising questions of location, nation, and geography as a set of subsidiary specificities. There is a double theoretical move in this nationalist framing. Such a dismissal renders invisible the marking of this U.S.-centered discursive approach even as it centers it. In this model of interdisciplinarity, the marked national geographic locations of other nation-states are simply particularistic identities that are checked off in a simplistic liberal model of multiculturalism, while the unmarked, overdetermined site of the U.S. nation-state serves as the ontological ground for conversations about knowledge, interdisciplinarity and feminism.
The third issue that my discussion of Women’s Studies on the Edge seeks to foreground is an exploration of the tension between academic scholarship and the worlds outside of the academy. This tension is often mistakenly coded as a divide between theory and practice. Yet the problem of how to engage with the transnational that emerges within women’s studies and feminist sites in the United States does not conform to a simple theory/practice dichotomy. At one level, both academic feminism and feminist sites outside of academic institutions have grappled with a similar dynamic in relation to engagements with women outside of the United States. This dynamic has produced a kind of Janus-faced feminist engagement with the world that oscillates between a missionary impulse, on the one hand, and a desire for transcendence, on the other. Consider, for instance, the conventional paradigms of global feminism that I have discussed. While postcolonial feminists and historians have analyzed the missionary impulse in the context of colonial histories of European feminism, this missionary impulse also resurfaces in more recent discussions of women’s human rights and in transnational women’s movements and activist agendas.\(^5\) Thus, in a comparative discussion of transnational activism focused on Nigeria, states within the former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan, Aili Mari Tripp argues that “outsider advocacy movements” (movements in which activists focus on women living in other contexts and states) are often characterized by what she calls “a ‘rescue’ mentality.”\(^5\) For instance, Tripp points to the highly publicized case of Amine Laval Kumara, who was sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria in 2002 after being convicted of adultery. Nigerian activists and feminists involved in (eventually successfully) overturning the conviction repeatedly requested international advocacy groups to refrain from sending petitions (that Nigerian activists viewed as strengthening the political hand of Islamic extremists). Many international activists, especially those involved in Internet-based advocacy, ignored these requests and, as Tripp notes, circulated inaccurate and often racialized depictions. More recently, a similar international dynamic unfolded around the conviction and sentencing to death by stoning of the Iranian woman Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. While, in this instance, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani’s children and lawyer initiated an international campaign for petitions and called for pressure on the Iranian government, the images and rhetoric of rescue circulated in a similar fashion—migrating through various blogs in the United States and popping up as an advertisement on social networking sites such as Facebook in rows with other commodities and websites being marketed. As one transnational activist organization’s blog put it:
Last week a massive global outcry stopped an Iranian woman, Sakineh Momammadi Ashtiani, from being stoned to death. But Sakineh still faces hanging, and today, fifteen more people await execution by stoning—people are buried up to their necks and large rocks are hurled at their heads. Sakineh’s brave children’s international campaign shows that worldwide condemnation works. Let’s turn this family’s desperate appeal into a movement that ends stoning for good—sign the petition and send to everyone.

As with other such examples, Ashtiani and her family appear as lone victims being saved by international activists. Indeed, the post-9/11 period in the United States has highlighted the persistence of colonial discourses on the need to save women through the resurgence of colonial stereotypes that academic feminist scholarship has long since deconstructed.

If this missionary impulse is one side of and indeed the more familiar face of transnational feminist advocacy (and one that has been well criticized by feminist critics), the other face is what I have termed the desire for transcendence within the academy. At the most basic level, this need for transcendence is expressed through an impulse of moving beyond—whether it is beyond the borders of nation-states or the confines of old concepts. For instance, in one trend scholars argue for a move away from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity. In other cases, concepts such as race and nation are identified (as seen both in Scott’s framing and also more broadly in the culture of interdisciplinarity that is increasingly practiced and reproduced on an everyday basis) as particularistic or regressive identity-based concepts. In the everyday cultures (both written and lived through daily institutional and cultural practices) of “cutting-edge” interdisciplinarity, theories and research on race are critical only if they move us beyond the old-fashioned claims associated with identity politics. In this framing, questions regarding the politics of inclusion and exclusion and the structural, systemic reproduction of inequality are viewed as outdated normative questions. The nation, for example, is a central analytical and political category only when it is the site of critique (a space that should be moved beyond) rather than a valid analytical lens. In this mode, interdisciplinarity becomes contingent on a teleological sense of movement and of moving beyond.

My argument here is not of course that all feminist perspectives can be reduced to these two faces of the transnational. Rather, my point is that these are two of the dominant trends that shape transnational feminist
work within and outside the academy. For instance, one of the needless tensions between “theory” and “practice” that permeates many women’s studies programs and departments is in fact in large part about this opposition between the missionary impulse and the growing addiction to transcendence of feminist work within the academy. Thus, activist-oriented students often view “theory” as an elitist project and are resistant to any interrogation of the theoretical assumptions and political limits of feminist activist projects. Activism in this context becomes a missionary project in which feminists must go forth and act in the world on behalf of oppressed women without interrogating the theoretical and political assumptions (and limits) of their agendas. Meanwhile, theory increasingly becomes coded as a particular mode of deconstruction in which students must move beyond old paradigms and ways of thinking—often without pausing to consider how this addiction to transcendence itself is in need of interrogation. In the midst of these false binaries (between “theory” and “practice,” between the missionary and transcendent faces of feminism) lies the world that feminism struggles to come to terms with.

The theory/practice debate and the anguish that often accompanies it are in many ways products of some of the specificities of public intellectual and political life in the United States. Intellectual and academic work tends to be stigmatized by a broader national public culture that valorizes anti-intellectualism. This has been accentuated by conservative political rhetoric that has effectively constructed colleges and universities as threatening sites that spread “liberal” values and effectively equated intellectual work with elites that are at best out of touch with real life and at worst representative of un-American values. Meanwhile, the corporatization and professionalism of intellectual work has intensified this apparent separation between academic sites and activist-related work. While the project of connecting academic knowledge production to grassroots activism is an important one, the construction of an opposition between academic knowledge and activist or practice-related work often reproduces the misplaced assumption that academic sites are in some sense set apart from the real world. Such an opposition misses the ways in which academic sites are central to the production, negotiation, and subversion of various relationships of power. For instance, as I will argue, academic sites are in many ways part of an institutional network that serves as a bridge between the state and civil society. Much as Antonio Gramsci argued, universities, colleges, and other academic sites serve as the trenches within civil society that enable the exercise of state power and that may be transformed as sites of struggle for counterhegemonic political projects.
This conception of the academy as a network of institutional sites and practices that are fundamentally intertwined with state power holds important implications for interdisciplinary feminist research and theory—particularly in relation to international and transnational work. Given that interdisciplinary fields are located within such institutional webs, an adequate understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge must systematically address the relationship between interdisciplinary work, on the one hand, and state agendas, practices, and ideologies, on the other. At the most basic level, this institutional perspective cautions us against easy assumptions that interdisciplinary work (and a specific paradigm such as transnational feminism) has moved us past the nationalist imperatives of the state.

The primary assumption of this book is that knowledge matters and that discursive practices that circulate within the academy have real implications and effects. This book is thus not concerned with the question of dualistic discussions of bridging theory and practice. Such discussions miss the ways in which institutions of higher education in the United States are central institutional sites within broader networks of power (linked to both the state and capital). Knowledge produced in the U.S. academy circulates in complex ways both nationally and across national borders. The assumption that academic knowledge is simply limited to private inaccessible debates within an ivory tower at best misses this complex relationship and at worst reflects anti-intellectual trends that permeate U.S. public culture.

Framework of the Book

My intention in this book is thus to unsettle this opposition between theory and practice and to take seriously the now well-accepted insight that knowledge itself represents a form of practice. My focus is thus broadly on the question of knowledge production and the complex apparatus of theoretical, practical, political, and cultural processes that make up this site. One of my primary goals is to unsettle the beliefs that often circulate among transnational and postcolonial academic feminists that a transnational feminist perspective marks a break from older regressive approaches that take the nation-state as their primary unit of analysis. In the current dominant culture of interdisciplinary feminist work, scholarship that locates itself within national historical frames of other countries is viewed
at best as archaic or at worst as politically suspect. Yet the transnational frame that undergirds and polices such interdisciplinary judgments is itself a product of the national specificities of the American academy. This is one of the central ironies of the transnational imperative of feminist scholarship.

Such contradictions necessitate that we ask, what does it mean to locate feminist research and theory within a transnational frame in the specific location and historical location that we live in? At one level, this series of essays seeks to unravel some of these contradictions and to interrogate the limits of a hegemonic form of transnational feminism that erases competing understandings of international and comparative perspectives on women’s and gender issues. However, and perhaps more important, this book seeks to be constructive as well as deconstructive. I thus wish to go beyond simply observing the limits of various approaches and point to ways in which “transnational feminism” can and has served as a productive approach to feminist thought. I engage in this analysis through a focus on three major themes: (1) the growing significance of visual knowledge and its implications for comparative and transnational approaches, (2) the emergence of new forms of disciplinary regimes that shape interdisciplinary knowledge production within the academy, and (3) the relationship and contradictions between power, knowledge, and ethics.

Visual Knowledge: Representation and Public Spheres

One of the distinctive dimensions of transnationalism, and transnational feminism in particular, is a growing emphasis on the visual realm. New technologies have led to the proliferation of various forms of visual representation. Such technologies, in an era of rapid globalization, have led to the rapid movement of media, film, television, and advertising images across national boundaries. This has led to changes in both cultural and political life. Thus, in her foundational work in interdisciplinary feminist cultural studies, Ella Shohat argued, “The global nature of the colonizing process, the global flow of transnational capital, and the global reach of contemporary communications technologies virtually oblige the multicultural feminist critic to move beyond the restrictive framework of the nation-state as a unit of analysis.” The spread of satellite technology has meant visual images of political events and conflicts circulate rapidly across borders. This has had destabilizing effects for states as dissidents have been able to use technology to publicize their struggles and agendas. However, it has also allowed states to both use and control these technologies.
Meanwhile, cultural products such as film and television have also circulated through transnational circuits. As theorists of globalization have long argued, this has not led to simplistic forms of a homogeneous global culture or Westernization. Rather, the Westernization of elites and expanding middle classes has been challenged by both secular and religious nationalist cultural representations, as well as by the persistence of local cultural practices and resistances and the creation of hybrid cultural identities and forms.

Such processes have led to a growing literature on visual practices and the politics of representation. These new cultural products are often distinctively gendered. For instance, television series in comparative contexts often use particular models of family life and representations of women’s roles to depict idealized cultural images that can provide a nationalist response to external cultural forces of globalization and Westernization. Writing about Egyptian television series, Lila Abu-Lughod has illustrated the ways in which particular images of family relations seek to produce a national identity that is distinctive from both Western and Islamist cultural forces. In India, media and advertising firms have often constructed images of a “new Indian woman” with a hybrid modern-national identity to present the changes associated with India’s globalizing economy through a nonthreatening image.

The significance of such visual practices is not limited to a response to globalization. A growing feminist literature has also focused on the significance of gendered images in constructing narratives of war and conflict. In an insightful analysis of the Kosovo conflict, for instance, Wendy Kozol illustrates the ways in which racialized and gendered media images of the conflict in the United States produced support for U.S. military action. Kozol’s analysis is representative of a broader set of feminist writings that have debated the implications of visual representations of women as victims of war, violence, and human rights violations. Such writings have debated whether these visual depictions of women have been useful in promoting rights and justice or whether they have in effect transformed women into a spectacle to be consumed by various viewing publics and produced racialized and gendered nationalist narratives. More recently, the focus on the politics of emotions, or what Sara Ahmed has called the “affective economy,” has further enriched such analyses of representational practices.

The significance of the visual realm means that feminists must grapple with the implications of gendered visual practices and representations. This is particularly the case given the ways in which inequalities of race,
class, and nation have constituted such gendered images. A transnational feminist approach is thus presented with the critical task of examining the ways in which the cross-national circulation of such images produces and is shaped by such inequalities. Such visual practices, as cultural theorists have argued, are not simply reflections of such power relations. Rather, they are productive practices that help to create and reproduce these relationships of power. I thus begin these essays with a discussion of the significance and limits of a focus on visual representation. Given that this book seeks to foreground the locatedness of the paradigm of transnationalism within the United States, I begin with an analysis of the contemporary moment of the post-9/11 politics of the U.S. “war on terror.” Feminists have paid much attention to the gendered, racialized representations in the post-9/11 period. I examine one of the central debates within transnational feminist scholarship—the uses and limits of languages of human rights in the post-9/11 period. Drawing on this case, I argue for an approach to representational practices that complements the lens of the visual with an analysis of the covert scripts that constitute the state’s representational practices. In chapter 3, I extend this focus on representational practices by moving to a discussion of the power dynamics of the national and transnational production and circulation of cultural products such as film.

While these essays point to the importance of such representational practices, the visual turn of transnational feminist thought has had double-edged implications for feminist thought. An emphasis on the visual has often been collapsed into a preoccupation with issues that are readily visible. In other words, the visual has been transformed from a set of particular practices and sites of analysis to a realm of readily accessible border-crossing issues that are visible to academic audiences in the United States. The visible sites of analysis are in a sense those that such audiences can readily visualize in their imaginations. Chapter 4 thus looks at the challenges that this affinity for the visible has posed for interdisciplinary feminist research.

The Paradox of Visibility: Regimes of Interdisciplinary Knowledge

A discussion of transnational feminist approaches provides a useful case study for an analysis of the current trends in interdisciplinary theories and methods. The slippage between feminist preoccupations with the visual and the visible enables us to think through some of the discursive regimes that have come to shape interdisciplinary knowledge. In the case of women’s and gender studies, the transnational feminist focus on visible border-crossing issues points to deeper issues and problems that arise with
regard to the study of countries and regions outside of the United States. Much feminist scholarship has pointed to the epistemological problems that arise when we attempt to produce knowledge of “other” women, particularly those from marginalized locations. Recent trends in transnational feminist scholarship have specifically responded to these criticisms, particularly by attempting to link local and global processes and by paying attention to the intersecting identities that shape women’s subjectivities.

Despite the richness of such scholarship, there have been subtle disciplining trends within women’s studies scholarship. At one level, such scholarship has centered around specific kinds of visible issues such as women working in export-processing zones, transnational migration, tourism, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and cultural practices (such as veiling and female genital mutilation), among others. This is the case even when such scholarship is paying attention to the complex power relations that constitute such issues. In other words, the critical discussions of Western feminist representations also inadvertently reinforce these trends because they preserve a focus oriented toward the West. At a deeper level, the focus on the transnational and the desire to address epistemological questions of power and knowledge have in fact not led to systematic discussions of how best to produce fields of interdisciplinary knowledge that enable students to systematically locate women’s and gender issues within their own cultural, historical, and political contexts—contexts that are not reducible and sometimes not even primarily linked to transnational issues. These trends have produced a dominant model of interdisciplinary scholarship that rests on an excessively linear approach to the production of knowledge—an emphasis on new transnational processes and the use of new forms of language to represent such questions have become markers of an advanced interdisciplinary approach. Yet in reality most students (both undergraduate and graduate) come to interdisciplinary fields like women’s studies with little basic empirical knowledge about specific places and contexts. The term “empirical” itself has become a marker of an outdated positivist approach. Yet students are often most in need of specific and systematic empirical knowledge. Without this knowledge, they turn in their research to visible issues that they can readily grasp. Meanwhile, self-reflexive discussions of knowledge production often stop at a familiar epistemological paralysis about the perils of writing and representing “other” women.

I analyze some of these kinds of pitfalls that have arisen with the institutionalization and expansion of interdisciplinary approaches in chapters 4
However, the essays in this book seek to move beyond criticism and deconstruction of such dominant trends and explore alternative possibilities and responses to interdisciplinary work. Karen Barad, for instance has argued for a theoretical understanding of knowledge that includes three realms: the epistemological, the ontological, and the ethical. Barad’s approach specifically urges us to consider the materiality of our knowledge practices. Working in the field of science studies, she conceptualizes a form of materiality that is ontological even as it is constituted by discursive processes, agency, and practice. Such an approach provides a useful path for moving beyond existing epistemological discussions of the power dynamics of transnational knowledge production. Further developing such an approach, I argue, requires that we consider more systematic discussions of the methods and practices that are used to produce transnational feminist knowledge. Taking the ontological dimension seriously, for instance, means that interdisciplinary knowledge must reconsider resistances to a systematic consideration of how we approach empirical research and teaching within interdisciplinary sites such as women’s studies.

Underlying these challenges is a need to disrupt teleological approaches to the question of knowledge production. This teleological approach assumes that successive new paradigms that emerge must move beyond and break sharply from preceding approaches and conceptions. There is no better example of this than the “wave model” that has become a canonical historical formulation of feminist thought. The kind of rethinking of transnational feminism that I am arguing for requires a critical rethinking of this formulation. The paradigm of “third wave” feminism, for example, which has included both U.S.-based research on race and postcolonial/transnational feminism, has been misrepresented through this linear form of temporality. Writings on “third wave” feminism, as I argue, provide us with an example of conceptions of border-crossing and difference in ways that move us beyond the disciplinary impetus of interdisciplinary research that produces binary oppositions between new and old paradigms and between epistemological knowledge and empirical reality.

Power/Knowledge and the Question of Ethics

Finally, the book addresses the question of knowledge production as ethical practice. The question of ethics is of course always embedded within feminism. The feminist concern with addressing questions of inequality, power, and justice is itself an ethical project. Feminist debates on power relationships that characterize research practices are also implicitly questions
about ethics. However, ethical questions, while linked to questions of power, are not reducible to such questions. A discussion of ethics enables us to move beyond the limits of a conception of power and knowledge that operates solely within the discursive-epistemological realm. A theme running through many of the chapters in the book is the way in which a focus on ethics can move us beyond the current impasse on what some adaptations of Foucauldian approach view as a circular and unyielding relationship knowledge and power. This move requires a shift to an understanding of knowledge as a set of practices rather than a set of circulating texts or predetermined power relations. Taken in this way, the question at hand for scholars of feminist or other interdisciplinary fields becomes: What is the relationship between our knowledge practices and our ethical practices?

Ethics is itself of course not a neutral zone of activity. Much harm has been done through political projects that claim an ethical imperative. Historically, many forms of military intervention—ranging from the European colonial project of civilization to conflicts as recent as the Bush administration’s wars designed to spread democracy—have claimed an ethical imperative. The question of ethics also raises debates over the question of whether (and which) ethical principles are universal or may be products of specific historical and cultural contexts. Simply reverting to the realm of the ethical does not provide easy answers that can escape the power-laden nature of knowledge production. As I argue, ethical formations and belief systems are not zones of exception that automatically move us beyond the problems inherent in knowledge production. In fact, ethical realms are themselves shaped by particular cultural, historical, and national circumstances. A focus on ethical practices thus does not provide a shortcut that can circumvent U.S.-centered philosophical assumptions or the power relations that stem from the state.

Yet a discussion of ethics brings with it two key issues that are of relevance both to feminist thought in general and to any transnational feminist approach committed to justice. The first is a practice-oriented approach to knowledge and an agency-centered understanding of responsibility. The second is a shift from the preoccupation with visibility that I have noted to a consideration of the often invisible practices, attitudes, and behaviors that constitute ethical action. The power-knowledge dyad, for instance, has led to intensive debates on strategies of representation, particularly in the case of texts and representations of marginalized women. These have ranged from Spivak’s early argument against representation in her classic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to a range of experimental strategies on
how to present one’s texts to various audiences. The focus on representation is of course one that is concerned with the visible presentation of one’s research and writing. A discussion of ethics allows us to build on these insights and also to include a range of practices that do not fit the domain of visibility. In other words, these ethical practices may be witnessed by small numbers of people but are not commercially visible on a mass scale through the public performative practices we use to display our knowledge products. This move toward the ethical also points us to a reconsideration of how we define and think of knowledge.

Outline of the Chapters

This introductory essay has laid out the central themes and structure of the book. I begin with a discussion of the ways in which visual practices are a central element in understanding transnational feminist knowledge. I engage in this analysis through essays that engage the circulation of knowledge in public spheres that include but are not limited to formal academic sites. In chapter 2, I examine how the U.S. “war on terror” has reworked the question of transnational human rights. Such processes, I argue, are not reducible to visual images. State practices draw on ideologies of race, gender, and nation in order to redefine (and narrow) the boundaries of civilian life. Chapter 3 moves from the realm of state practice to that of public culture. The chapter examines the ways in which different forms of knowledge (such as film and biography) circulate across national borders and have varying power effects in varying national contexts. Taken together, these essays examine the centrality of representational practices (both visual and nonvisual) in understanding the politics of knowledge production. Chapter 4 disrupts the conflation of the visual with visible border-crossing issues, presenting a critical discussion of some of the dominant trends in transnational feminism knowledge and the “regime of visibility” that increasingly disciplines transnational research and theory. The chapter then examines an alternative approach that incorporates the epistemological, ontological, and ethical dimensions of knowledge production. Chapter 5 continues this discussion through an examination of the ways in which the paradigm of transnational feminism has become institutionalized within the academy. Chapter 6 continues this discussion of dominant trends and alternative approaches through an analysis of the ways in which dominant U.S. models of multiculturalism such as the wave model of feminism have
disciplined and distorted the insights of “third wave” feminism. The chapter then turns to alternative ways of thinking about the relationship between race and transnationalism. Finally, chapter 7 reflects on the stakes of transnational feminist scholarship for how we understand and engage with the world in which we live.

My concern throughout these essays is with knowledge as practice. While my focus is on women’s studies and transnational feminism, the implications of my discussions are not limited to this field. Women’s studies is simply a case study for analysis, and many of the discussions are pertinent to other fields. I draw out such connections whenever possible, particularly in relation to interdisciplinary approaches such as area studies and postcolonial studies. As with any series of theoretical essays, this book is a work of interpretation that draws on my own intellectual background and engagements. I thus draw on examples and empirical work from my own academic research and teaching on feminism, globalization, South Asian studies, and postcolonial theory in the United States. Taken together, these essays are thus an attempt not to reflect every trend or debate on transnational feminism but to provoke debates and reflections in ways that continue to unsettle the disciplining of minds that sets in even within the most productive interdisciplinary fields.