Some notes on Transnational Feminism
Based on the assigned readings,
Grewal and Kaplan, Introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies*
Mani, “Multiple Mediations”

“Transnational Feminism” is a response to “global” and “international” feminisms that have tended to view the world from a Eurocentric, colonialist perspective. Under the rubric of transnational feminism theorists look at interrelationships between and among players situated in different contexts across the globe. Global feminism tries to fit the whole world into one feminist mold, or studies discrete areas of the globe; transnational feminism articulates issues as they take place through multiple related contexts, often with different meanings in different places. Transnational focuses on relationships and movements – of people, capital, ideas.

A transnational critique of “global feminism” asks “how to link diverse feminisms without requiring either equivalence or a master theory.” Grewal and Kaplan call for Western feminists to examine academic work and everyday life in terms of understanding that privilege in a world system means someone else’s exploitation/oppression (19). Thus, not all feminists will have the same agendas, or the same approaches to particular problems.

“Transnational” as defined by Grewal and Kaplan is used “to problematize a purely locational politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of … the lines cutting across them. As feminists who note the absence of gender issues in all of these world-system theories, we have no choice but to challenge what we see as inadequate and inaccurate binary divisions.” (13)

Grewal and Kaplan talk about the necessity of engaging with *postmodernity*, the current historical and political context which is marked by the decentralization of power, subjectivity, meanings, and narratives. In a postmodern world, it is no longer meaningful to talk about “the subject,” or “woman,” or to tell one unified narrative of history or power.

Postmodernity historically comes after *modernity*, which was characterized by the rise of industrialization and the primacy of the nation state. People and institutions may still see the world through the unifying lens of modernity, however, which is a hallmark of colonialist thinking. In Lata Mani’s terms, modernity is marked by “the fictions of unified subjects and disinterested knowledges” (25).

The hegemony of white, western (including feminist) theory is part of modernity. One major problem of modernist thinking is its reliance on binarisms (us/them, male/female, first-world/third-world) and they way they homogenize and overgeneralize.
For example, a recent news story referred to events in “the remote nation of Kyrgyzstan.” On the one hand, the attention to Kyrgyzstan is an improvement; on the other hand, we have to ask from whose perspective Kyrgyzstan is “remote,” and whose interests are centered when it is depicted that way.

From Grewal and Kaplan’s transnational feminist perspective:
“Our critiques of certain forms of feminism emerge from their willing participation in modernity with all its colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women” (2)
Thus, “postmodernity is an immensely powerful and useful conception that gives us an opportunity to analyze the way that a culture of modernity is produced in diverse locations and how these cultural productions are circulated, distributed, received, and even commodified” (5).

(Note that “locations” is an expansive term in this context. Mani cites Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s sense of “location” as a “‘temporality of struggle’… characterized by multiple locations and nonsynchronous processes of movement ‘between cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power’” (Mani, 26).

Postmodernism is not in itself the solution, however, since “postmodern articulations of difference and global connections can be used to reify dominant social relations, or they can be used to oppose the hegemony of Western imperial culture...” (Grewal/Kaplan, 7)

From this perspective, the term “postcolonial” can reinforce the status quo by assuming that colonialism and its effects are in the past; especially as used in the humanities, the term doesn’t necessarily include a critique of colonialism (Grewal/Kaplan, 15)

An important transnational question:
“Does the new global matrix engender liberatory spaces that deconstruct the old regimes of the nation-state or does this phenomenon continue the process of uneven development that marked earlier colonial and neocolonial social formations?” (Grewal/Kaplan, 9)
IOW, is it the case that the more things change, the more they remain the same?

In articulating the main point of their essay on p.17, Grewal and Kaplan clearly argue for the importance of a transnational perspective in feminist theory and politics:

“If feminist political practices do not acknowledge transnational cultural flows, feminist movements will fail to understand the material conditions that structure women’s lives in diverse locations. If feminist movements cannot understand the dynamics of these material conditions, they ill be unable to construct an effective opposition to current economic and cultural hegemonies that are taking new global forms. Without an analysis of transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations, feminist movements will remain isolated and prone to reproducing the universalizing gestures of dominant Western cultures.”
Feminism must be attentive to nationalism because it serves “various patriarchies in multiple locations . . . When modernity takes shape as feminism, therefore, it collaborates with nationalism” (Grewal/Kaplan 24). This has serious implications in discussions of various types of fundamentalisms (plural), as fundamentalisms serve nationalisms (24-6).

Grewal and Kaplan conclude that there are “roles for women everywhere to play in the politics of solidarity in transnational feminist practices . . . [to] acknowledge differences in women’s lives as well as links between transnational power structures” (26-7).

Lati Mani’s essay explains the practice of feminist theory in a transnational world, in which the same term or argument has different meanings in different global contexts. Her essay illustrates her point through a variety examples related to the Hindu practice of sati, seen from various global, historical, and political perspectives.

Mani’s argument is summarized well at the end of the essay:

“The example of women’s agency [i.e., ability to make independent choices] is a particularly good instance of the dilemmas confronted in simultaneously attempting to speak within different historical moments and to discrepant audiences. What might be a valuable pushing of the limits of current rethinking of agency in Anglo American feminism, may, if not done with extreme care, be an unhelpful, if not disastrous move in the Indian context. If criticism is to be ‘worldly’ (Said, 1983: 1-30) or ‘situated’ (Haraway, 1988), or engaged, it must take account of the worlds in which it speaks. Perhaps to Bruce Robbins’ suggestion that theory is a ‘when’ not a ‘what,’ (Robbins, 1987/8: 5) we should also add the notion of a ‘where’” (Mani, 38).