Prologue

Cynthia Nelson and Shahnaz Rouse

One of the key dimensions of this volume concerns the issue of borders and boundaries. These are both real and imaginary (i.e. symbolic and metaphoric), hegemonic and counter hegemonic. Among those real borders are spatial ones that determine individuals' and communities' everyday location and place in the world – these include borders/boundaries of class, gender, territory, and language(s). Each of these separations in turn has embedded in it, and rests on constructions of 'imaginary' borders and boundaries – for instance the roles ascribed to women, the permissions and opportunities that stem from class and spatial/territorial location. In other words the real and imaginary do not exist as two disparate entities but are inextricably linked to each other in a dialectical move that simultaneously enables and disables movement and action. And it is this circular yet not tautological relation that defines the dilemmas and the promise of globalization.

Until recently, three elements dominated thinking and writing on globalization: first, the *newness* of the phenomenon. Globalization was thus represented as a radical departure from the colonial and early post-colonial period. Second and in relation to the first, globalization was envisioned as *a homogenizing process*, one which threatened to engulf the local and overcome it. Implicit in such thinking is the notion that movement emanates from the north to the south; and furthermore, that the south is helpless in the face of the overwhelming power that still accrues and rests in the advanced capitalist world. The turning point in the view of many progressives and conservatives alike, was the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a 'new' world order. Finally, the global was *represented as 'foreign'*, external

(to the local). The struggle therefore was posited as consisting of a dialectic encounter between hegemonic forces of globalization and 'indigenous' forces of resistance.

Current re-visioning of globalization challenges all these suppositions. For those of us born in the 'South', globalization is nothing new. It is a new form of an on-going process that took inception during the heyday of colonialism. It might serve as a descriptive term to articulate the current historical period, but it remains theoretically problematic and imprecise. While theoretically globalization is often explained in terms of time-space compression, we feel bound to reiterate, borrowing from Doreen Massey's *Space, Place and Gender* (1994: 147), the extent to which such a conceptualization represents the coming home of capital's outward spread on localities in the core. She states:

> The sense of dislocation which some might feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports … must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonization, maybe British …, later U.S., as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.
>
> Moreover, as well as querying the enthnocentricity of the idea of time-space compression and its current acceleration, we also need to ask about its causes: what is it that determines our degrees of mobility, that influences the sense we have of space and place? Time-space compression refers to movement and communication across space, to the geographical stretching out of social relations, and to our experience of all of this. The usual interpretation is that it results overwhelmingly from the action of capital, and from its currently increasing internationalization … . But surely this is insufficient. Among the many other things which clearly influence that experience, there are, for instance, 'race' and gender … . In other words, and most broadly, time-space compression needs differentiating socially. This is not just a moral or political point about inequality; it is also a conceptual point.

The close of this quotation slides into our second point: globalization is *not* a homogenous process, nor is it straightforwardly homogenizing. It affects different localities and peoples within them differentially. The very term 'people' conceals as much as it reveals: are we talking

about men, women, the educated or those without education, the rich or the poor, those culturally dominant in a particular context or those culturally marginalized? Should we not re-think globalization as a struggle between dominant groups in different arenas – the economic, the cultural, and/or in terms of gender and/or race, ethnicity, as opposed to those marginalized? Reconsidered in these ways, maybe it might be more useful to think of globalization as a multiplicity of flows in a variety of terrains, bearing witness to the emergence of new political realities and accompanying shifts in power, as well as struggles around these transformations.

Our volume picks up on these problematics of power and its dispersal and concentration. Thus both Philip Marfleet's and Mona Abaza's papers point to the manner in which cultural idioms travel across borders; and these borders are not the traditionally antagonistic ones of 'east' and 'west' but constituted by means of a flow from south to (other parts of) the south. However, the bearers of these cultural flows seek legitimacy from their potential constituency by positing their language – cultural and religious – as local and therefore inherently in opposition to the hegemonic cultural knowledge that has seeped in from 'outside' and led to disempowerment of local 'peoples' and 'knowledges'. No mention is made by bearers to this Islamist knowledge, of the 'foreignness' of this idiom to many *within* the societies in question. Any attempt to contest their positioning and bearers of the indigenous results in charges of either betrayal or brain washing. This mode of articulation, in other words, which masks its own attempts at hegemony and control over all other local languages, represents itself instead as egalitarian – a furthering of democracy, albeit democracy in a new form. Regardless of the self-representation by its proponents, such a positioning disregards multiple cultural languages, knowledges and experiences that are 'authentic' to individuals who live them on a daily basis.

The majority of the papers in this volume address this multiplicity: Heba El-Kholy's article speaks of the manner in which working class women use customary practices as a means of empowering themselves within a marital arrangement and the obliviousness of secular, middle class feminists to such arrangements; Mohammed Tabishat's article shows that both health professionals and men and women of the popular classes rely on a mixture of modern and alternative medical

and spiritual remedies in the treatment of *al-daght* i.e. hypertension. Rather than invoke a clear distinction of medical and other languages between professionals and 'the people', this work demonstrates the interpenetration at all levels of various languages and remedies.

But this interpenetration of language can also lead to the dominance of certain discourses over others. For example, in their papers Kamran Asdar Ali and Petra Kuppinger focus on the hegemonic role that the discourse of development and public health play in constructing what constitutes 'healthy behaviors' defined basically as those that affect the economy. Asdar Ali specifically emphasizes how women-sensitive development agendas in Egypt are linked to the larger historical debates on how to control women's bodies in particular and create responsible citizens in general. Kuppinger on the other hand shows how the loss of midwifery skills and eventual control of female bodies by state medicine is part of larger developments in both colonial and post-colonial Egypt. By moving back and forth between the lives and work of midwives within a local community and the larger state policies of order, control and domination we come to understand the hegemonic power of medical/development discourse.

In their piece *Gendering Globalization: Alternative Languages of Modernity* Nelson and Rouse point out how the period of modernity can be seen as transitional, during which individuals are cast into particular identities by their particular location in time and place.

The instance of Doria Shafik speaks to the multiplicity of languages not across peoples but in the same person. Her persona exemplifies the manner in which these are not contradictory impulses but integrated practices consequent to a person's particular existence at a given historical moment. Nonetheless, Doria Shafik suffered at the hands of her peers, both secular and religious, in being denied both as a woman (the Dean of Cairo University refused to give her a job on these grounds) and as a supposedly 'westernized' woman (by the mufti of al-Azhar for her feminist stances). Her ultimate flight from active politics, ironically, resulted not from her religious adversaries but from the left, some among whom condemned her for her critique of Nasser's regime and its denial of women's and human rights to Egyptian women.

Doria Shafik's example speaks volumes for the manner in which identities are thrust upon people, what some Indian writers have referred to as 'forced identities'. In other words, identities that one does

not assume but that are imposed on a person by others. There are numerous examples of such 'forcing' in the contemporary world: in Sarajevo, in Cyprus, in many parts of contemporary Africa. For our purposes, the need to distinguish between identities one assumes and dons deliberately, and the identities which one is forced to assume is paramount. In the latter case, the most obvious instance is that of people caught in historical crisis points: during the burning of Babri Masjid in India in the nineties, at India's partition in 1947, and following the 1967 Israel conflict in various parts of the Middle East.

Here the issue of the identities one 'chooses' and the identities into which one is 'forced' become complex and knotted. Conventionally, the resolution to this crisis in identities has been sought in placing people caught between worlds – the old and the emergent – as either modern or traditional; and each of these two terms is either valorized or denigrated depending on those doing the labelling. The articles in this volume suggest – and the instance of Jahanara Shahnawaz and Hamida Akhtar Hussein highlights this – that the languages we speak are as often the consequence of our own life histories and experiences as they are deliberate choices we make. And by extension, to take them out of this experiential context, is to render them meaningless and simply the target of ideological accusation and subterfuge.

The articles by Didier Monciaud, Anita Häusermann Fábos and Nadje Al-Ali particularly illustrate this point. Monciaud for example reconstructs the trajectory of a particular historical actor by locating him in the context of the communist movement in Egypt. Through a biographical approach he unveils and reconstructs the underlying meaning of a life as well as the self-representation of this historical actor. As a result of his experience and the place he occupied in this movement, Moubarak Abdu Fadl figures as a living legend, representing in the present the human continuity and political memory of Egypt.

Häusermann Fábos and Al-Ali, on the other hand, choose to situate themselves in the very process of knowledge construction. In her article *Problematizing Marriage: Minding my Manners in my Husband's Community* Häusermann Fábos considers the dialectical projects of negotiating the roles of spouse and researcher in relation to changing gender ideology for a northern Sudanese immigrant community in Cairo. Her personal understanding of Sudanese norms of propriety, developed through marriage to a man from her research community,

led her along an epistemological path towards a hypothesis on the role of manners for Sudanese in marking ethnic boundaries in relation to Egyptian society. Through this process of negotiation, Häusermann Fabos came face to face with the challenge of authenticity and the ethical implications of the research process itself.

Al-Ali appropriately concludes our series of essays by challenging assumptions about western as opposed to indigenous scholarship within the context of the author's research among secular oriented women activists in Egypt. The author's own positionality vis-à-vis the women she interviewed is explored in order to reveal the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the research enterprise. The experience of shifting boundaries between self and other, between the researcher's identity and those of her informants became central to this inquiry. While occasionally presenting a source of self-knowledge, mediation and bridging, the experience of 'being here and there' may pose great dilemmas and conflicts for the researcher who cannot be clearly positioned inside or outside her research community.

This brings us to a final point: might not a better way to approach treatment of globalization be through a more thorough going empirical investigation into the multiple dimensions of the process and its related social relations through the lens of experience and life histories? While recognizing that experience itself does not exist outside representation, can we not simultaneously interrogate people's lives even as we probe the languages in which these lives are explained and made sense of? What we are suggesting is a return to a feminist framework. Not as a way to study women's histories alone, but as *a perspective* that permits us to better understand the lives of the marginalized and their desire for a genuinely egalitarian social order rather than one that posits its egalitarianism in discursive terms alone.

Bibliography

Massey, Doreen (1994) *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis/MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Mignolo, Walter D. (1997) *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press.

Oncu, Ayse/Weyland, Petra (1994) *Space, Culture and Power*, London: Zed Books.