

## MUSING

# Contested Terrains of *Women of Color* and *Third World Women*

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OPENING A DIALOGUE  
Saba Fatima

This particular Musing emerged from some uncomfortable and constructive conversations that took place at the 2015 FEAST conference as it explored the contested terrains of identifiers such as *women of color*, *Third World women*, *transnational*, and *global South*.

FEAST (Feminist Ethics and Social Theory) is a longstanding US-based organization of feminist philosophers that holds biennial conferences. At each conference, FEAST encourages its participants to submit in response to a similarly titled call for papers for a special issue of a feminist-friendly journal, such as *Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. The 2015 FEAST conference call for papers was titled “Contested Terrains: Women of Color, Feminisms, and Geopolitics.” However, in the corresponding CFP for *Hypatia*, “Women of Color” had been replaced with “Third World Women.” Concerned debate ensued at the FEAST meeting and then continued through electronic correspondence. After much deliberation and communication, the title changed to its present iteration: “Women of Color and Third World Women.” I note this change both to record institutional memory and to mark the unresolved and misunderstood tensions that exist in feminist philosophy, a subfield explicitly committed to issues of women’s lives, social justice, and intersectionality. Although these ideals have been embraced theoretically, they are much harder to put into practice.

Whereas the other contributors to this conversation focus specifically on the terminology of *women of color* and *Third World women*, I use this introduction to consider some of the concerns about the import of identifiers that these *changes* in title brought up for feminist philosophers. For simplicity, I default to the use of the term *women of color* to refer to nonwhite feminists within a US context. However, the term itself is not without problems, as it loses “the specificity of antiblackness and

presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy" (Sexton 2010, 48), and as Ranjoo Seodu Herr notes below, the term also has an "exclusionary connotation in the global context" (this issue, 736).

Several concerns came up about the switch in title from *women of color* to *Third World women* during FEAST, and as expected, views were not homogeneous among white feminists or within women of color feminists. The conference CFP had (rightly) given the impression that as a feminist organization, FEAST was/is committed to promoting a diversity of voices and methodologies (in fact, with the exception of one member, the entire Program Committee for that year's conference was comprised of women of color). However, the *change* in title from *women of color* to *Third World women* possibly undercut that commitment in two direct ways.

First, it gave the impression that the two terms, *women of color* and *Third World women*, are interchangeable or at least close enough in content that one term could be replaced by the other and still target the philosophers who had presented at FEAST under the "women of color" CFP. As Ranjoo Seodu Herr indicates here, the term *Third World* connotes within it specifically a "common history of profound injustice of ... eurocentrism and cultural imperialism imposed on non-European subjects" (this issue, 736). Even the target authors that the *Hypatia* CFP seemed to be aiming for was problematic for some, since it became apparent in conversations at FEAST that a number of philosophers who were perhaps pegged as Third World feminists among the conference presenters did not identify as such. The term itself has waned in recent years, as Serene Khader suggests below.

This leads into the second way that the title change signified a lack of awareness of what it meant to be committed to inclusion. Many African American, Latina, mestiza, and Native American women present at the conference felt that their voices had been erased from the corresponding publication CFP. African American women present, for example, pointed out that they did not self-identify nor are they identified as Third World women, and that they were not theorizing about "Third World" subjects. Consequently, many of the women who had presented at the 2015 FEAST conference were essentially excluded from the *Hypatia* CFP. In fact, as Sandra Soto highlights, an emphasis on interconnectivity *across* borders and the contradistinction between US women of color and transnationalism has yet again led to the "disappearance" of US-based feminists of color from critical inquiry, just as they were gaining a foothold in scholarship (Soto 2005).

The issues indicated above did not have to do with the terms themselves, as each term is problematic in its own way; rather the concerns had to do with the *switch* from *women of color* to *Third World women*. It signified the longstanding and often uneasy racial dynamics among feminists. Many women of color present at the conference felt that these issues served as yet another instance of the white apparatus congratulating itself on the success on issues of diversity, without a genuine sense of its own relationality with, or access to, the lives of women of color, all the while exercising its power as gatekeeper over whose work and which work is worthy.

Of course, 2015 FEAST was not the first (or the last) time that conferences aimed toward inclusion have been exclusionary to women of color (see Lorde 1983). Also

in 2015, there were some contestations at a different major feminist conference where plenty of uptake was given to white women philosophers' emotions and aspirations, *but* by some accounts, at the expense of dismissing philosophers of color's objections to the exclusionary literature and methodologies being deployed to do "inclusive" philosophy. And at a feminist conference after 2015 FEAST, there was yet another instance where Black women's voices were dismissed by a particular prestigious philosopher in the Q&A session; and if that wasn't enough, the incident later became fodder for an online discussion where philosophers (mostly white, and mostly men) insisted on being privy to the specific content of the incident so that they could "impartially" judge whether the conference session in question was indeed objectionable to the Black women present at the conference.

In many of these cases, there is very little credibility given to the testimony of women of color, and it is often insinuated that either women of color have not properly understood the philosophical points at hand or that we are being overly sensitive.

Furthermore, our place in the discipline becomes one where we constantly have to educate others about the relationality between women of color and the white apparatus, and the corresponding status of the discipline. We must take heed of Lorde's chiding with regard to tasking "women of Color to educate white women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought" (Lorde 1983, 101).

For some women of color present at 2015 FEAST, these sorts of iterations of harms expressed above begin to feel like an orchestrated play about diversity and inclusion, one that is always scripted and produced within the white apparatus, and where diversity matters only "in the casting of the film, not in the casting of the [entirety of the] show" (Smith 2015), where women of color become superficial placeholders for "diversity" on conference programs, where our tones are policed, where our wariness is seen as a sign of disengagement from philosophy itself, and events and/or special issues that focus on women of color result in reassuring pats on the back that progress is being made. Attempts at "diversity," as Sara Ahmed notes, become an issue of optics, with painstaking measures to make sure it *appears* that issues of "diversity" have been taken into account, rather than actually undoing the white supremacy within academia (Ahmed 2012). The Musings below hopefully delve beyond optics, as a dialogue among liminal feminists about the contested terrains of identifiers and identity.

Of course, many feminists recognize how these issues cannot be explored, crossed over, or beautified by a few journal issues, which simply reinscribe tokenism (Minh-ha 1987). In that spirit, this Musing is part of a long line of engagements among certain liminal subjects who occupy these terrains.

I am thankful to Kristie Dotson, Ranjoo Seodu Herr, Serene Khader, and Stella Nyanzi, who agreed to put in the intellectual labor to continue the contested conversations that liminals before us have undertaken. The first three contributors were present at the 2015 FEAST, and Nyanzi was invited to present a perspective of a

feminist who does not reside in the US. Her voice adds a further layer of complexity, illustrating how the terrain of discussion shifts when we move outside of the US and how both terms, *women of color* and *Third World women*, may be alienating to feminists residing elsewhere. However, as Rey Chow warns, do not take our voices as the authentic native voices offering neat digestible parameters of the discourse (Chow 2003). Rather, as Dotson notes here, identifiers have to be contextualized within sociohistorical legacies. FEAST proposed this Musing conversation in an effort to make sense of the hurt generated by the switch in title in the hope we can all do better, and our contributors responded to the request. Nevertheless, there are inescapable gaps in a conversation such as this. For example, the fact that we have only one non-US-based academic in a dialogue that is in part about the term *Third World women* is emblematic of American solipsism. Furthermore, there are gaps not simply in representations (First Nation, Latina, Afro-Caribbean, and so on), but there is also partiality in the contestations presented in this conversation, as it is “shaped and limited by what comes into focus and what remains obscured” (Dotson 2014). It is our hope that we, as philosophers, do not further fragment our sisters through our caricatures of identifiers of women of color, Third World women, or white women. Rather, we self-identify and respect one another’s situated testimony in order to occupy and navigate these contested terrains in solidarity with one another.

“OH, THE IRONY!”: THINKING ABOUT THE TERM *WOMEN OF COLOR*  
Kristie Dotson

The term *woman of color* at once ironically “captures” populations, while gesturing to the historical, social, and terraineal circumstances that are anything but ironic.

The term *woman of color* invokes at least two, not unrelated, levels of irony. First, it is ironic that the *intended meaning* of the term picks out particular groups of women by using words that literally denote all women. That is, all women have some color, but the term is meant to signal only some groups of women (and some of those women are themselves not “colored” in socially significant ways). So the term’s literal meaning, that is, women with color, is at odds with its intended meaning, that is, only some groups of women as have been determined by social and historically developed differences. This first level of irony is what the novice notices first.

Folks often ask, if the term *women of color* rests on an initial irony that, as Spivak points out, falls out of an uncritical chromatism (Spivak 1999, 164–65), why do we still use the term? This is simple enough to answer. Any affirmation or denial of the term invokes a second irony that is informed by the first irony.

People who are conscious of the first irony but *miss its significance* may choose to deny that they are, themselves, women of color in a manner that is itself ironic. The second irony, then, emerges when the very denial of “woman of color” status invokes the reality that they are marked as women of color by *social and historical developments* in spite of the first irony, that is, that *women of color* fails to literally signify anything but women themselves (except, apparently, the people who feel the need to deny even that).

This cacophony of ironies can spiral out of control, causing us to end up back in discussions of the “who” of women of color over and over again. And here we are, at yet another iteration of this conversation. We keep having this conversation, it seems. (If you don’t believe me, check out *This Bridge Called My Back* [Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Cade Bambara 1983]. This conversation is an ongoing one.)

It strikes me that what is important about *women of color* is not its ironies, but the fact of what it signifies *in spite of its ironies*. It speaks beyond irony because the conditions it tracks are social and historical and, in being such, are terrain-based. That is to say, underwriting the persistence of the term *women of color* beyond its easily observed incoherence are the historical, social, and place-based developments it brings into focus, whether we agree to (or are comfortable with) those developments or not. That means that whatever *women of color* connotes probably is not, at this point, a subjective formation (if it ever becomes such). Rather it may refer to a set of social, historical, and terrain-based legacies that makes sense of a political identification that, to be frank, makes no sense at all. The term *women of color* does not make literal sense, but it does make historical and place-based sense.<sup>1</sup>

If something like what I am saying sounds about right, then the term *women of color* will disappear only when the histories and place-based conditions that animate it disappear. Any other protestations aid in signifying, beyond the irony, the positionality of women of color, whether one likes it or not. The work here, then, is figuring out how one gets caught in its ironies, which would take one beyond personal identification to historical and terrain-based structures. That kind of analysis, however, might take one beyond being “identified” as a woman of color to the state of actually becoming one (see, for example, The Santa Cruz Feminist of Color Collective 2014).

#### WHY I IDENTIFY MYSELF AS A THIRD WORLD WOMAN Ranjoo Seodu Herr

The subtitle of this special issue of *Hypatia* on “Contested Terrains” is “Women of Color and Third World Women, Feminisms, and Geopolitics.” The juxtaposition of “Women of Color” and “Third World Women” may seem tautologous to some. Yet this reflects a genuine disagreement among feminist philosophers of color regarding whom this issue is about. *Third World women* and *women of color* are commonplace identifiers adopted by women of color in the Western context and they may overlap considerably in their extensions. Yet these are not exchangeable terms. In this Musings contribution, I wish to examine the respective connotation/intension of the identifiers *Third World women* and *women of color* and argue that *Third World women* captures something important for feminist purposes that the other does not.

*Women of color* is co-extensive with *nonwhite women*, and both terms are principally used in multiethnic states in the liberal West. The former, however, differs from the latter in its political connotation. Unlike the latter, which is politically neutral, the former implies political oppositionality and resistance to the negative stereotypes associated with one’s particular “race.” In this sense, *women of color* is preferable to

*nonwhite women* for feminist theorists. However, it is limited by the fact that it refers primarily to racial-ethnic women in the liberal Western context. As Nyanzi aptly points out, it is “very North American” and potentially “eras[es] and mut[es]” the realities of nonwhite women outside of the Western context—the “Third World” (this issue, 739). In this sense, it has a peculiarly exclusionary connotation in the global context, and the insistence to use *women of color* exclusively in promoting a diversity of voices in feminism seems to imply a certain obliviousness to matters that affect Third World women outside of the liberal Western context.

More important, *women of color* fails to connote the complex dimensions of women’s oppression across the globe due to the history of European imperialism, colonialism, and globalization in the last five hundred years. The term *Third World* is meant to capture a common history of profound injustice of not only military, political, and economic subjugation, but also Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism imposed on non-European subjects. To some, this term may seem to lump “unique countries from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and Latin America” into a homogenized, “big dark amorphous place of stereotypical plight and lack” (this issue, 740). I agree that the blurring of different nation-states under the *Third World* is a potential risk against which we must guard. Yet I disagree that *Third World* necessarily implies the stereotype—pervasive in the West—to which Nyanzi refers.

Historically, the term *Third World*—invented by a Frenchman (Prashad 2008, 6)—gained wide circulation following the signing of a common communique<sup>2</sup> in the Bandung Conference (1955) by twenty-nine newly independent nation-states from Africa and Asia, which launched the “nonalignment movement” during the Cold War. Although the term *Third World* was not included in the communique itself, it has come to be associated with the movement and has since symbolized a common struggle against Western domination and solidarity among formerly and currently colonized nations (Shohat 1992; Dirlik 1994). In keeping with this history, I propose that we use *Third World* as a term reappropriated by members of previously or currently colonized and imperialized nations to signify their oppositionality and resistance to not only military-politico-economic but also cultural dimensions of Western domination (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991, ix–x). When a woman of color identifies herself as a “Third World woman,” therefore, she can indicate her resolve to oppose, resist, and overcome disadvantages she and others have sustained due not only to their perceived race, but also to their affiliation with formerly or currently colonized, underdeveloped nations whose non-liberal cultures have been perceived as “backward,” “uncivilized,” or “barbaric” by those in the West.

The term *Third World* may seem anachronistic to some, however, given the collapse of the “Second World” and global socio-politico-economic changes in the wake of neoliberal economic globalization since then. Hence, Khader claims that “the political demands of the world have changed” due to neoliberal globalization and that we ought to speak of “transnational” feminism now (this issue, 738). By this claim, Khader seems to imply that *Third World women* is not an appropriate identifier for transnational feminism.

If this is so, then I have two comments about Khader's move: First, as fashionable as it may be, I believe that this call to join the "transnational feminism" bandwagon is problematic. Due to its popularity since the early 1990s, the term *transnational* has been overstretched to refer to varied phenomena, resulting in "much conceptual muddling" (Vertovec 2009, 4). Even "canonical" (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 9) transnational feminists Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan admit that the term *transnational* has become "so ubiquitous" that "much of its political valence seems to have become evacuated" (Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 664). Under these circumstances, some conceptual clarity regarding *transnational* is desperately needed to determine the precise implications of transnational feminism for feminist praxis. Currently, at least two different conceptions of transnational feminism point in contradictory directions. For instance, whereas Chandra Mohanty's version of transnational feminism focuses on the "critique of global capitalism" (Mohanty 2002, 509), Kaplan and Grewal's site of engagement is "transnational feminist cultural studies" (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, 67). As I have argued elsewhere, these two approaches are ultimately inconsistent with each other (Herr 2014; Herr forthcoming).

Let us, however, be charitable to transnational feminism and interpret it as focused on feminist praxis against neoliberal global capitalism, as Khader suggests. Even so, and this is my second comment, it is unclear why transnational feminism is compatible with *women of color* but not with *Third World women*. As previously mentioned, I propose to use *Third World women* to underscore their oppositionality and resistance to both military-politico-economic and cultural dimensions of Western domination. Resisting neoliberal global capitalism as a goal of transnational feminism is consistent with this connotation of *Third World women*.

Furthermore, I believe that *Third World women*, understood in this way, would be a better fit for transnational feminism than *women of color*, contrary to Khader's suggestion. As pointed out earlier, *women of color* is most relevant in multiethnic states of the liberal West. *Third World women*, however, implies specific geographical locations, Third World nation-states, in which women are disadvantaged by the global forces of neoliberal capitalism. Recall Mohanty's incisive critique of white feminism's ahistorical conceptions of gender and patriarchy that have entailed "the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism" on Third World women (Mohanty 1991, 34). It is of utmost importance, therefore, that Third World women's intersectional and complex oppression be addressed through careful examinations of their local/national conditions in historical specificity (2–3). Transnational feminism then must recognize the local/national as an important arena worthy of transnational feminist investigations, as only by taking into account Third World women's particular experiences in their nation-states can transnational feminists "demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism and envision anticapitalist resistance" (Mohanty 2002, 514). In fact, the feminist linkage with "larger, even global, economic and political frameworks" is necessary precisely because of the importance of "grounded, particularized analyses" of Third World women's oppression (501).



## WOMEN OF COLOR, TRANSNATIONAL, AND THIRD-WORLD FEMINISMS

Serene J. Khader

*This Bridge Called My Back* was published before I was born. I have asked myself why I, and so many women of color, continue to turn to it. The answer is its depiction of political longing. Moraga begins, "I have dreamed of a bridge." It is not between white women and women of color; it is among "women who have no line, women who contradict each other . . . [a] life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom. . . . In the dream, I am always met at the river" (Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Cade Bambara 1983, xix).

The vision at the center of *This Bridge* is of a community that enmeshes political and theoretical praxis and that does so from the viewpoint of the margins. Though the term *Third World women* has become less common in the last twenty years, and is no longer synonymous with *women of color* in the literature, we should take these changes in usage as expressing, rather than undermining, core commitments of women of color feminism. These include commitments to resistance, internal contestation, and theorizing from the demands of politics.

The terms *Third World* and *Third World feminist* have always denoted resistance to hegemonic understandings of global politics. *Third World* evoked the revolutionary cry of the third estate, a historical majority living under brutal despotism. Self-identified Third World feminists in the 1980s and 1990s saw the term as capturing realities obscured by colonialism, such as the *relational* character of global wealth distribution and the activity of movements centered in the global South (such as decolonial movements and the nonaligned "third way" movement). *Third World feminist* highlighted the agency of women who were otherwise seen as passive victims or reactors to Western feminism (Mohanty and Alexander 1997). *Third World* undoubtedly continues to aid epistemological projects that treat "others" only as dark mirrors of the West, but *Third World* analyses also belong(ed) to resistant politics.

The use of *Third World women* narrowed within feminist scholarship, but the reasons for this have to do not only with the perspectives of the marginalized, but with the women of color feminist commitment to developing theories from praxis. We now speak of *transnational feminisms* because, arguably, the political demands of the world have changed. Neoliberal globalization has reduced the power of the nation-state and constituted poor women—in and outside the global South—as a new disposable working class (Mohanty 2008). Where *Third World* echoes the idiom of the Cold War, *transnational feminisms* highlights the mobility of global capital and the gendered effects and opportunities it creates. *Third World women* retains usefulness for denoting women seen as marginalized by "backward cultures" (Khader 2011).

The writers of *This Bridge* used the terms *women of color* and *Third World women* interchangeably. Other contributors to this exchange rightly note that, in the present moment, the terms have differences in meaning. Herr and Nyanzi are right that the term *women of color* foregrounds race, but it is worth remembering that race is not only relevant to power relations within the North/West. Imperialism in both its contemporary and historical forms is undergirded by racist ideology and produced new



forms of racial (and gendered) domination. Much recent scholarship considers phenomena that are both transnational and racialized: the “anchor baby” as constituting new racialized citizenships (Cisneros 2013), transnational surrogacy as constituting women of color as inferior mothers (Khader 2013), stereotypes of nimble-fingered Asian women as constituting the best sweatshop laborers (Ong 1987). Of course, some struggles, especially local ones, may require more particular analysis, and speaking of “women of color” or “transnational feminisms” should not preclude this.

The gendered effects of empire have taken new forms, but naming them, while acknowledging their tension and coexistence with old ones, is part of praxis-oriented theory. Multiplying and identifying intersections among frameworks that enable resistance was always part of dreaming the bridge.

### I AIN'T NO THIRD WORLD WOMAN OF COLOR

Stella Nyanzi

I do not self-identify as a *woman of color*, or even as a *Third world woman*. When pushed hard to label myself racially or geopolitically, I am a Black African Muganda woman of the Buffalo clan from Uganda. I find *woman of color* very North American and colonizing. Is this label *woman of color* one that minorities willingly choose for themselves in order to ally with other oppressed nonwhite women? Is it a regulatory mechanism deployed by repressive regimes of governmentality akin to apartheid South Africa's racial classification of human beings as Colored, Black, White, Indian, or Other? If *Colored* was the apartheid label for people of mixed race, would *woman of color* mean that I am similarly of mixed race? Color here is ambiguous because it has diverse possible political and historical renditions. In America, color empowers solidarity among minorities, whereas in South Africa it was a divisive identity marker used by an oppressive racist regime to shame the products of miscegenation (Wicomb 1998).

The paradox of the label *woman of color* is that while nonwhite American women appropriate it to resist homogenization by white feminists, the same label suffocates non-American nonwhite women by erasing and muting our realities. In contemporary Uganda, I never have to come up against the historical legacies of the slave trade and slavery, racial segregation, discrimination, and suffragist struggles in ways similar to African Americans living in the US. I resist the label *woman of color* because it is rooted within dissent against structural inequalities and ideological violations rife among minority nonwhite people living with the effects of racial discrimination in raced America. Universalizing the “woman of color” to represent all nonwhite women is as colonizing and constricting as hegemonic, white, Western feminist frames of thought and praxis. In my part of the world, whiteness is not the problem. Black Africans are (and have always been) the majority who claim to be indigenous to the land. Thus, oppression through white supremacy or white privilege carries no immediate contextual currency. The fracture lines of society are class, sexuality, rural–urban location, ethnicity, and religion, rather than race.

The deprivation, exploitation, and disruptions created through shared histories of colonialism and neocolonialisms lumped several unique countries from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and Latin America into one "Third World." This Third World is a big dark amorphous place of stereotypical plight and lack. What homogenizing commonalities bind women from countries as disparate as Bolivia, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Djibouti, Nicaragua, and Burundi? Our historical trajectories into the Third World category are as diverse as our sociocultural, political, economic, and ideological contexts. Thus, our experiences as women from these different Third World contexts cannot be one and the same. Mohanty rebukes Western feminists for "the production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty 1984, 333). To be placed into the "Third World" is to be violated—both discursively and structurally. In comparison to others in the first world, one living in the Third World is perpetually judged and found inferior, underdeveloped, and still in the formative stages of becoming.

Stereotypes of the poor, broken, victimized woman of color hailing from the rather vague undeveloped Third World and waiting for white and/or male saviors do nothing for me. I recognize neither myself nor my issues in these stereotypes. Alas, I would never think of myself as a Third World Woman of Color. It is only the taxonomical othering by first world experts that would define me in these terms.

## NOTES

1. I cannot predict a priori all the places where a term like *women of color* makes sense. Such an estimation would require place-based investigations that attend to historically developed markers of salience for how we understand our social landscapes and analyses of the material impact of these schedules of salience.

2. The communique subscribed to the principles of self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, noninterference, and equality among the recently independent nations.

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