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Feminists and the Forum: Is It Worth the Effort?¹

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In January of 2004 I attended my first World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, and my experience there was transformative in ways that I never could have predicted. I traveled to the Forum seeking insight into the direction of transnational feminist activism, and upon my return felt inspired both intellectually and emotionally by the critical analysis and the vibrant energy I encountered there. Since that time I have been listening and learning, observing the questions, visions, and challenges of women's and feminist activism in transnational spaces, all the while seeking ways that academic research might strengthen women's movements for social justice.

In this paper, I engage in critical methodological reflection and empirical analysis as equally but differently important endeavors that I hope will be useful for movement activists situated in a variety of settings, including the academy. In the first section, I attempt to make visible the ways in which my commitment to feminist research influences my scholarly practice, including the development of my question, the gathering of my data, and the interpretation of my findings. I reflect explicitly on the methodological challenges of scholar-activism, and highlight several tenets of feminist methodology that bear particular importance for scholar-activists participating in and researching the social forum process. I then discuss my methodological approach and articulate the importance of the central

¹⁾ Generous funding from the Center for Ethics at Vanderbilt University has supported this research. Thanks also to Brooke Ackerly, Marina Karides, and Sonalini Sapra for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of the paper.

research question I seek to address: What is the Forum able to achieve for women? In the second portion of the paper, I lay out my analysis of this question. I consider the benefits and drawbacks of the social forum as a political space for women's and feminist movements. I propose that there are reasons to be both skeptical of and optimistic about the Forum's utility for advancing the agendas of feminists working transnationally, and ultimately I argue that activists for women's rights should recognize the particular limits and advantages of the social forum process and space in order to elicit the greatest benefit from their participation in it. I conclude by sharing suggestions with the intention of enhancing the work of our community of scholar-activists researching and participating in the social forum process.

Methodological Reflections on Scholar-Activism

I am acutely aware of my limited vision and of the perils of engaging in an analysis of transnational feminist activism from my position as a white, western, middle-class woman situated in the academy.² This tension and discomfort leads me to ponder explicitly the crucial importance of ethical research practices as I study the social forum process and the activists who participate in it. Therefore, I feel compelled to highlight a particular methodological concern that may resonate with other scholar-activists.

The space, process, and people of the Forum have increasingly become subjects of scholarly inquiry as more and more academics have been made aware of its existence. As this global space reaches scholar-saturation, we must be especially careful of *where* we are looking, of *what* we are able to see from our particular social locations, and of *how* we interpret what we see. Even multiple accounts or perspectives will fall short of telling a "whole" story. Critical and feminist methodologists continually remind us of this point,³ and as a feminist scholar committed to ethical and politically fruitful research, I take their cautions seriously.

Feminist methodology can guide us in seeking such goals, particularly because it requires of its practitioners a vehement commitment to self-critique. One's own commitment to reflexivity must be augmented by a

²) Maiguashca 2006 voices similar reservations about her research on feminist anti-globalization activism. Like her, I take seriously the epistemological and methodological critiques of postcolonial feminists (e.g., Mohanty 1988).

³) Haraway 1988; Harding 1987; Mohanty 2003; Sprague 2005; Tuhiwai Smith 1999.

knowledge of past critiques (from scholars and activists), and an intentional searching out of new critiques. An incorporation of those criticisms necessarily improves the quality of the work, and in so doing the possibility that it can contribute to positive social change. Activist scholarship must be dynamic; it must be produced in community with other scholars and activists to promote deliberative inquiry and reflexivity. DeVault offers a particularly appropriate characterization of the uniqueness of feminist methodology that touches on this point:

I mean to suggest that it [feminist methodology] must always have an open and ‘provisional’ character, (Mohanty 1991: 15), but that it is nonetheless a ‘strikingly cumulative’ (Reinharz 1992: 246) discourse, held together by core commitments to addressing particular problems in the standard practice of social research and by a common history of *learning through activism* that provides much of its energy and insight.⁴

Some scholar-activists have provided specific models of research that are helpful in promoting reflexivity and successful activist scholarship. One example is Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). Tuhiwai Smith is critical of the imperialist character of much of the western research on indigenous peoples. She shares Maori “guidelines” for researchers, which include principles such as: a respect for people, face to face representation, being generous and cautious, and not flaunting knowledge.⁵ Ackerly has also suggested multiple strategies for scholar-activists.⁶ She emphasizes the recognition of valuable theoretical insights of activists, and consistently gives activists authorial credit for the theories she distills from their insights. She also offers a number of concrete suggestions for researchers interested in forming partnerships with activists, including the development of research agendas and questions in concert with activists, and making the product(s) of the research more accessible to activists (possibly via listservs or other media).⁷ These types of collaborative relationships among researchers and activists, though certainly more difficult to achieve, tend to prove more beneficial in tangible ways, and go even further toward preventing the sorts of exploitative practices critical scholar-activists strive to avoid.

⁴ DeVault 1996, p. 34, italics mine.

⁵ Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p. 120.

⁶ Ackerly 2000.

⁷ Ackerly 2007.

Such principles of critical and feminist methodology are never far from my mind as I engage in research, but there is nothing quite as powerful as a personal experience to drive home the point. A few months ago, I participated in the US Social Forum in Atlanta. I was there in multiple capacities – student/learner, researcher, and organizer. I co-organized a session there and, for a few short hours, I removed my “researcher” hat completely and went into participant mode. The group that I work with at my university, the Global Feminisms Collaborative, had planned our workshop on the theme of community-university partnerships.⁸ Not surprisingly, we were not the only participant-observers at the US Social Forum, and as it happened there was a researcher from another institution in the room for our session. I speculated that this researcher’s questions and comments in our workshop were shaped not just by her personal interest, but by her goals as a researcher. Some of our community partners had joined us for the workshop, and in that moment our purpose was not about research, but about sharing what we were doing and what we had learned. I found that I began feeling a little protective of our project, and even somewhat suspicious, even resentful, of the researcher’s “agenda” and her interpretation of us. My feelings were at least partially validated when a colleague of mine later stumbled upon the researcher’s notes online, and I saw in those notes what I viewed to be an at-best incomplete, and at-worst inaccurate account of our group’s session at the social forum.

In the days that followed I reflected more critically, and I recognized myself in this researcher. In all the activist meetings, workshops and protests in which I participate, I uncomfortably straddle the fence between scholar and activist. In a given meeting, I might shift perspectives multiple times; part of the time I will be listening, questioning, and commenting with my own research goals in mind, while at other points I engage the discussion solely with movement goals in mind. That brief moment of inhabiting the role of research subject illuminated for me a perspective to which I would not otherwise be privy. It gave me the occasion to reflect on the risk of interpretation, and on the importance of ethical research practice. If I felt “vulnerable” in this situation, how much more vulnerable might an activist feel who risks a job or organizational funding in cooperating with or being misrepresented by a researcher?⁹

⁸⁾ <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/gfc/USSE>.

⁹⁾ In cooperating with researchers, some activists may risk their credibility in their own communities, their economic livelihood, or even their political security.

Methodological Approach

Equipped with the tools of feminist methodology, and newly influenced by the lessons of this salient personal experience, I seek to construct an analysis of the utility of the social forum for transnational feminist activism. Questions about the utility of the Forum have emerged not simply from my own intellectual curiosity, but rather from a political commitment to seeking ways that my research might address issues that are strategically important for women's movements. I have never considered the topic of my research to be the World Social Forum, but rather women's movements, and the WSF only insofar as it serves as a hub of feminist activism. Analyses of the costs and benefits of women's participation in the Forum are largely absent from the landscape of activist scholarship, making such an endeavor timely, both intellectually and politically.

In both developing and addressing these questions, I rely on multiple forms of evidence, primarily participant-observation at two World Social Forums (Mumbai 2004 and Nairobi 2007), the US Social Forum (Atlanta 2007), and one Feminist Dialogues meeting (Nairobi 2007). My experiences at activist gatherings have not only provided valuable insights toward answering my research questions, but in fact have motivated me to ask the research questions in the first place. This is a crucial point that I wish to emphasize, largely because researchers only rarely make transparent their motivations for asking particular questions.

Each time I have participated in a social forum, I traveled with colleagues who were also engaging in feminist research. I have benefited enormously from the observations and insights they have shared with me, and I want to acknowledge explicitly their invaluable contributions to my thinking as I have developed my analysis. In addition to participant-observation at social forum events, I draw insights from semi-structured interviews and informal conversations¹⁰ with women's rights activists, many of them organizational leaders; finally, I also incorporate existing research and writing on transnational women's movements and the social forum. Through considering different kinds of data and their relevance to my questions, a broader range of perspectives influences my analysis. And although my reliance on multiple sources of data may still illuminate only a partial understanding, it may also help paint a more complex picture than would otherwise be possible.

¹⁰ Some of these conversations have taken place at a Forum, while others have taken place at organizational offices or in other personal settings.

Emergence of a Feminist Research Question: What Does the Forum Do for Women?

A number of feminist scholars and activists have written extensively on men's domination of the World Social Forum, women's disappointments in working to change the Forum, and more recently their successes in influencing it.¹¹ Frequently, this work is produced by, or focuses on the efforts of, prominent feminist leaders and well-organized transnational networks such as *Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur (AFM)* and the *World March of Women (WMW)*.¹² Often implied in these feminist critiques of the WSF is that the social forum, and other global justice movements more generally, are themselves primary targets of women's activism. Such accounts reflect the fact that feminists have devoted enormous energy not only to advancing women's rights around the world, but also to influencing the structures of the Forum itself. If women's movements had not begun to participate actively in organizing the Forum and demand that their voices be taken seriously, the Forum might have continued to neglect women's concerns and struggles. Feminist international relations scholar Catherine Eschle notes that "... a feminist analysis was strongly evident in the official panels of the 2003 Forum *only* in those thematic areas organized by feminist groups. In short, the integration of feminist concerns into antiglobalization discourses remained dependent on the concrete presence of self-declared feminists."¹³

Furthermore, many feminist activists accord great importance to the task of building alliances with other global justice movements in an attempt to ensure that they incorporate a gender perspective. This is evident both from my own experiences at the Forum and from feminist accounts of activism at the Forum. For instance, Fatma Aloo, board member of the *African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEM-NET)*, argued that the African feminist voice was stronger than ever at the 2007 WSF, but also noted that "we did not talk to the converted – we engaged with other groups that did not traditionally have a gender component in their work."¹⁴ However, many activists also identify coalition-building as one of the greatest challenges, often because of prejudices they

¹¹) Conway 2007; Eschle 2005; Vargas 2005.

¹²) Conway forthcoming; Vargas 2003.

¹³) Eschle 2005, p. 1759.

¹⁴) Geloo 2007.

encounter in other movements,¹⁵ and because of a history of being exploited by other movements who are not explicitly feminist. A number of feminist leaders have expressed frustration at having provided support to other movements (e.g., trade unions) only to have their voices ignored when attempting to transform the patriarchal cultures of those movements, or when seeking reciprocal support for their own feminist campaigns.¹⁶

Since the first WSF in 2001, and in particular since Mumbai in 2004, women have devoted substantial energies to and made great strides in pushing a feminist agenda at the Forum.¹⁷ And while this continues to be a critical issue as feminists attempt to forge alliances with other global justice movements, it is not the only facet of the social forum that is worthy of feminist concern.

In spite of the plethora of rich discussion and analysis of feminist influence on the social forum, the Forum's role *within* women's and feminist movements is understudied and discussed rather infrequently. The World Social Forum is commonly characterized as an "indispensable" space for transnational feminist activism,¹⁸ but the claim is rarely interrogated critically. In my conversations and interviews with feminist activists over the last few years, I have observed that feelings about the utility of the social forum actually range from staunchly supportive, to ambivalent, to downright dismissive. Thus, I argue that we must treat this issue as a serious research question. Instead of asking whether or not the Forum is "feminist-friendly," or documenting women's efforts to change it, I take up a related but different set of questions. I ask whether the social forum is a productive space for feminist activism. Are women's groups able to come together to network, share strategies and visions, expand consciousness, etc.? Do they come away from the Forum with tangible results? Putting aside for a moment the goal of infusing global justice movements and the Forum with a feminist perspective, what are the benefits to feminists' continued participation in the Forum? *In short, is it worth the effort?*

Feminist movement organizations are asking themselves these same questions. In fact, Janet Conway reports that the World March of Women has had an ongoing debate about "whether to continue struggling over the

¹⁵ At the 2007 WSF in Nairobi, I noticed that LBT feminists, in particular, expressed this concern.

¹⁶ Mangalubnan-Zabala 2004.

¹⁷ Conway 2007; Wilson 2007.

¹⁸ Alvarez et al. 2004; Conway 2007.

organizational structures of the WSF or to simply exploit the spaces of the WSF as fully as possible.”¹⁹ Moreover, some organizations and activists appear to be leaving the Forum space altogether. Several of my colleagues and I have noticed that a number of feminists who were present at WSFs before and including Mumbai in 2004 chose not to attend subsequent social forums. This may be because, as some activists have suggested to us during informal conversations, they no longer deem the World Social Forum an effective use of their time and resources. In any case, it is vitally important that scholars and activists in women’s movements carefully consider whether participation in the social forum is, in fact, worth the enormous energy that it requires.

Skepticism of the Social Forum

There are a number of convincing reasons to doubt the utility of the social forum for women’s and feminist movements. First, the Forum is, to a large degree, an elite and privileged transnational space.²⁰ The resources required to travel to the Forum automatically exclude many under-resourced organizations and women who are poor, uneducated, or who must remain at home to care for family or land; thus, the issues most pressing to those women may never get to the table. Furthermore, even when smaller organizations are able to procure funding to send representatives to the WSF, it can be an enormous drain on organizational resources like money, time, and leadership. As anyone who has represented an organization at the Forum can tell you, the costs are truly multi-faceted. The preparation required is surprisingly time-consuming, especially for first-time participants, and the funds necessary for transportation, lodging, food, and workshop publicity are substantial. In committing to WSF participation, activists often must divert resources away from local efforts, thus risking their own organizational livelihood and success.

Another criticism of the social forum process is that it emphasizes discourse over action. Although I have talked with a number of women who found the feminist events at the 2007 WSF stimulating and energizing, I

¹⁹ Conway 2007, p. 63.

²⁰ Desai 2005. At a 2007 WSF workshop entitled “Sponsorship, Scholarship, and Women’s Human Rights Activism: Building Bridges and Fostering New Leadership,” organized by the Global Feminisms Collaborative, Desai also argued that the Forum is a privileged transnational space.

have also observed and talked with at least as many women who found the events disappointing in terms of conversations around concrete strategy. One South African activist struggled with the challenge of making feminism and its discourses accessible, relatable, and practical for the women with whom she works; she expressed great frustration with the amount of jargon used in the sessions, and was very skeptical that she would be able to return home with anything truly useful.²¹ Another South African activist in the LGBT community noted that she heard lots of talk that “Another World is Possible,” but was left feeling disenchanting with the lack of discussion of concrete tools and practical strategies to build that world.²²

Another point to consider is that the feminist presence at the WSF is heavily shaped by well-networked leaders with substantial transnational organizing experience. These individuals and organizations deploy sharp, sophisticated critiques of global capital, fundamentalisms, and other sources of gender oppression, and they advocate tirelessly for women’s rights and the inclusion of a feminist perspective at the WSF. They tend to have wide communication networks, and are thus able to disseminate feminist discourses and information about their workshops more effectively than other groups. In many ways, these women are the faces of feminism at the WSF.

An unintended consequence of this is that some women, especially grassroots activists, feel left out of the process. I observed a few women who commented that their issues were ignored in the mainstream feminist events at the Forum in Nairobi. Although issues such as democracy, fundamentalisms, and militarization received substantial attention, discussions of social and economic class, as well as environmental issues, were few and far between. Some women claimed that they felt more comfortable in events not organized by feminists because they talked about issues that resonated with them, and they did so without overusing academic language. The experiences of these women remind us that a concentration of feminist leadership at the WSF, even with rigorous critical analysis and efficient organizing, carries with it the risk of silencing voices and excluding activists with whom the “familiar” feminist discourses and issues do not necessarily resonate.

²¹ Anonymous interview conducted on 23 January 2007.

²² This comment was shared at a workshop on sexual diversity sponsored by the LGBT South-South Dialogue on 24 January 2007.

Finally, the social forum also tends to be an extremely lively and even chaotic space. No fewer than three organizational leaders have told me that they now choose not to attend the WSF because it just “too crazy” to get anything done.²³ Similarly, some have criticized the WSF for its inability to be an “outcomes-oriented” space for women’s groups; because of the diverse set of experiences and perspectives, and because of the huge number of people and the short time period, the WSF is not conducive to hammering out consensus, resolutions, policy briefs, or campaign plans. Clearly, for some activists, this feature is problematic.²⁴

Reasons for Hope

Although the points I have articulated above are serious concerns, there are also compelling reasons indicating that the WSF has been and can continue to be a useful space and process for transnational feminist activism. In the wake of shrinking space for transnational dialogues, activists must exploit the opportunities available, and right now WSF is one of the only games in town. While the UN World Conferences and parallel NGO forums once provided consistent opportunities for face-to-face interaction, especially in the early 1990s, the UN is no longer hosting such conferences (and many women have become disillusioned with the UN structures anyway). The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) hosts a triennial forum that is widely recognized as an energizing and productive international gathering of feminist activists, but it only happens every three years, and cannot serve as the lone site of feminist collaboration.²⁵ Therefore, the social forum is all the more important as a venue of transnational feminist organizing.

Although I mentioned above the somewhat elite and exclusive nature of the Forum, it need not always be this way. Feminist organizers can learn from moments of success (e.g., vast local participation in Mumbai, the rich diversity at USSF), and do the work necessary to get more underrepresented voices in the space, thus enriching the conversations. Another way of addressing this issue would be to further develop the social forum process (outside of the actual meeting), rather than just the space. In the

²³) Anonymous interviews conducted on 16 February and 7 June, 2007.

²⁴) This parallels recent concerns raised about the future of the WSF (see Bello 2007).

²⁵) The next AWID International Forum is scheduled to be held in Capetown, South Africa in late 2008.

months leading up to the 2007 WSF, the WSF process website²⁶ was launched, and by many accounts was wildly successful. The common web space allowed groups with similar issues and goals to “meet” one another, discuss plans and possible collaborations for WSF, and generally build their networks. Even organizations that were unable to send representatives to the Forum could participate, removing a key barrier to transnational organizing around the Forum process.

The social forum can also be an ideal space for strategy-sharing. Instead of diverting *so* many resources to influencing the Forum itself and building alliances with other movements, feminists might look toward using the space more fully to share experiences and strategies and build solidarity among women.²⁷ At a USSF workshop on the social forum process, several panelists and audience members argued that their experiences at the social forums have a profound influence on their strategic practice. One activist with Interfaith Worker Justice relayed how much he had learned in just a few days in Atlanta. He articulated the utility of the Forum as a place to share ideas and strategies of resistance, and he insisted that the things he had learned would influence his practice when he returned home. These arguments underscore the point that strategies are one of the most valuable, tangible resources that activists take away from the Forum.

We know that the challenges of global capital, militarization, and fundamentalisms manifest differently in different places. As Virginia Vargas writes,

It is enriching to know that the common causes of justice and liberty do not necessarily imply the same strategies, nor the same results, and that, therefore, there is no one answer, nor set recipe with which to confront the same kinds of exclusion and discrimination affecting women. All of this permanently challenges the idea of universal solutions and unitary mindsets, and in turn enriches the horizon and complicates feminist strategies of transformation in the global-local arena.²⁸

This is all the more reason to be discussing what has worked (and not worked) in particular contexts so that, through shared learning, women’s resistance can gain momentum and make progress. Below, I share a few examples.

²⁶ www.wsfprocess.net.

²⁷ I am not suggesting that building alliances with other movements bears no importance, but rather that it is not the only important task.

²⁸ Vargas 2005, p. 110.

While at the Forum in Nairobi, I learned about the use of street theater in Zimbabwe; some women's organizations have begun to use theater and performance as a means to level critiques against government. This tactic has proven to be an especially effective mode of activism and resistance because of its accessibility and, more importantly, because women can engage in protest without fear of prosecution. In using non-traditional forms of protest, women are subverting patriarchal authority.

I also learned in Nairobi about a movement to create alternative rites of passage to female genital cutting. The organization, Rescue Women, is attempting to retain the cultural value of ritual for young girls, while removing the physical and emotional violence, and they are having considerable success. Their community has become increasingly supportive, and over five hundred young girls had gone through their program. Another activist from The Gambia pointed out that some women have effectively used the Women's Protocol²⁹ (as opposed to an international document like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) in Africa to combat not only female genital cutting, but also patriarchal marriage and inheritance laws. Governments have been more responsive to such a strategy in part because they could not claim that the norms were imposed from the outside.

Although the particulars of these strategies of resistance may not be applicable or effective in all social and cultural contexts, women can learn from and adapt such strategies to fit their localized issues and circumstances. But in order to maximize this kind of sharing, there must be more intentional efforts to create such opportunities. Activists may find that by collaborating more with other groups in organizing events, and by emphasizing strategy-sharing as a primary goal of such events, they are able to acquire more tangible tools from their participation in the social forum.³⁰

Finally, I would argue that the social forum *is* an outcomes-oriented space, but that understanding it as such requires us to expand our definition of "outcomes" to encompass celebration and the cultivation of collective identity. Just because no new policy is made does not preclude the possibility

²⁹) The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which went into effect in November 2005, is widely considered a groundbreaking international legal document that calls for the protection of a wide range of women's human rights.

³⁰) At the 2007 WSF, for the first time, one day was set aside to promote events that were co-sponsored by multiple organizations.

of important emotional and cultural outcomes. For example, we should not underestimate the importance of being in solidarity, renewing women's energies, and celebrating cultures. Many discussions I took part in at the 2007 Feminist Dialogues³¹ meetings and at the WSF revolved around the emotional dimensions of activism. One Algerian activist argued that churches are so successful at organizing women because they help them have fun and feel good; she went on to say that churches bring people joy through singing and dancing, and provide an escape from miserable family circumstances where their husbands are beating them, where “patriarchy rules.”³² Similarly, a South African activist argued that feminist groups should make space for celebration and fun (music, dancing, performance) in order to build connections with women, especially those who may not identify as feminist. Given the wonderful music, dancing, chanting, and parades that pervade the WSF space, it is particularly well-suited to this task.

Is It Worth the Effort?

I suggest that women and feminists should not abandon the World Social Forum process and space, but that they could approach the social forum critically with a couple of cautions in mind. First, activists should recognize the Forum for what it is and exploit its most productive features (e.g., strategy-sharing), rather than expecting it to serve purposes that it is not well-suited to serve (e.g., creating consensus documents). Second, feminists must continue working to transform the social forum – not just the male-dominated organizational structures, but also the ways in which different kinds of women and women's groups are able to use the Forum. We must work harder at inclusivity, particularly along dimensions of class, and also at building collective identity and solidarity in spite of differences. Only if a range of voices and concerns are well-represented at the forum can it truly be a productive space for transnational feminisms. I hope that future research will examine more closely the organizations that are less visible at the WSF, and in what ways the Forum is and is not useful for

³¹⁾ The Feminist Dialogues first took place immediately prior to the 2004 WSF in Mumbai as an effort to create an explicitly feminist space for dialogue among activists involved in the WSF, and have continued at each subsequent WSF since then.

³²⁾ Small group session on Day 2 of the 2007 Feminist Dialogues.

these groups, so that we can better assess effective strategies for addressing this existing shortcoming.

Further, I argue, as others such as Thomas Ponniah³³ have, that scholars can provide valuable analysis as participants in, and not simply observers of, global justice movements at the WSF. However, we must pay adequate attention to our own motivations and methods as we strive to advance the cause of global justice. Doing so is an essential component of engaging in ethical and politically productive research on/with/for activists working within the Forum.

Suggestions for Scholar-Activists Engaging the Social Forum

In this final section, I offer a few suggestions for strategies to address the challenges of scholar-activism in the social forum. I assume that most, if not all, researchers at the social forum arrive not simply out of intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to envisioning another world and effecting political and social change. Maria Mies tells us that while academics are not well situated to launch social movements, they can certainly join them and potentially play useful roles.³⁴ However, if we go about our research in unreflective ways, we undermine that potential and exploit people in the process.

We need to be talking more explicitly about our epistemologies and methodologies, and we need to be doing this in public spaces. We should make our research as transparent and accessible as possible, both to social forum activists and to other scholars studying the social forum process. We should make efforts to provide one another support and accountability, and to promote the collaborative production of knowledge that is both interesting to scholars in the academy and useful to movements as they do their work.

There is already a wealth of interesting, useful, and ethical research happening in and around the social forums. In fact, many researchers working in this field enact principles that are consistent with the goals of critical and feminist methodology, even if they do not claim the specific label. However, there are still many untapped opportunities to share and compare data, methods and unpublished work, thus promoting transparency and

³³) Ponniah 2007.

³⁴) Mies 1991.

accountability in all phases of our research processes. Below, I suggest a couple of specific ways we might think about exercising such opportunities.

First, those of us engaging in research on the social forums should consider sharing our field notes, research protocols, survey instruments, and working papers online, at smaller meetings and conferences, as well as at the social forums.³⁵ Although disseminating more polished versions of our work is not a bad practice, the academic timeline for publishing does not lend itself to sharing information quickly. In making our research tools, our raw data, and our analyses (even unpublished work) easily accessible, we may be able to solicit valuable feedback from activists, and also ensure that movement organizations need not waste valuable resources in seeking out research.³⁶ Moreover, we may be better able to see patterns in what kinds of questions are important to movements, and thus take such insights into account as we develop our research agendas.

One of the comments I have heard repeatedly in my conversations with activists is that they would value opportunities to talk with researchers about the issues that are important to them, but that there simply is never enough time or money to facilitate such discussions. Thus, we should be seeking out funding from our universities and from external sources to support workshops³⁷ in which scholars and activists working in similar areas could de-brief with one another, discuss questions, and share observations and experiences in person.³⁸ On some level, this type of strategy could be useful for communities of researchers in any field; however, the importance of collaboration, transparency and accountability are heightened when dealing with populations for whom the stakes are so high.

³⁵ The North American Working Group on the World Social Forum Process (<http://www.nd.edu/~wsfgroup/>) and the Institute for Research on World Systems at the University of California-Riverside (<http://www.irows.ucr.edu/>) are both dynamic examples of information-sharing “hubs” on the social forums.

³⁶ Verta Taylor (1998) notes that participatory, collaborative methods enabled her to use feedback from her research participants to clarify and strengthen her analysis of post-partum depression self-help movements.

³⁷ Jackie Smith organized and hosted one such workshop at Notre Dame in November 2006. The workshop resulted in a collaboratively authored book, *Global Democracy and the World Social Forums* (Paradigm, 2007).

³⁸ Such opportunities would also serve the purpose of including activist voices that may otherwise be left out due to lack of access to internet communication technologies or resources necessary to travel to large global gatherings.

In closing, I would like to add that in promoting the practice and visibility of activist research that is both rigorous and ethical, we also further legitimize this form of scholarship and contribute to a transformation of our fields and of the academy. As Jackie Smith has argued, resistance within the academy is another important facet of our activism, and we must take it seriously.³⁹ Moreover, Manguashca points out that our promotion of activist scholarship not only transforms our universities, but also enables us to build healthier, more trusting relationships with activists. She notes that we must be "... much braver about and more adept at presenting our 'politicized' research as 'real' scholarship in academia."⁴⁰ With these thoughts in mind, I hope that our community of scholar-activists will continue to seek new ways of networking, sharing insights, and learning from one another as we strive to create research that matters for social movements locally and globally.

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³⁹) Smith 2007.

⁴⁰) Manguashca 2006, p. 135.

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