CHAPTER 11

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 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

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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 knowledge of past critiques (from scholars and activists), and an inten-

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).