

# Introduction

## Mapping Disjunctures and Dissonance: Transnationalism as Transgeography in *Ummah*

It is a paradox that a feminism that has insisted on a politics of a historicized self has rendered that self so secularized, that it has paid very little attention to the ways in which spiritual labor and spiritual knowing is primarily a project of self-knowing and transformation that constantly invokes community simply because it requires it.

—M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*

When the term *ummah* appears in the Qur'an, it usually refers to human community in a religious sense.

—Frederick Matthewson Denny,  
“The Meaning of ‘Ummah’ in the Qur’an”

A recent article in the online edition of *Voice of America News* boldly documents the legality of interfaith marriages in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. With a population of 220 million, of which roughly 90 percent is Muslim, Indonesia legally permits couples of different faiths to marry.<sup>1</sup> However, as the article reports, the legally backed provision is “culturally discouraged.” As a result, private religious groups and organizations such as the International Conference on Religion and Peace, led by Mohammad Monib, help interfaith couples realize their dream of romance and nuptial union. This example is but one instance of the disjuncture between legally permissible but culturally discouraged and disapproved practices. As scholarship on Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic

world unremittingly asserts this faith's storied diversity and rich variety to thwart claims of monolithic Muslim uniformity, rarely is the Islamic world's own stance on diversity—its relation to others, including other faiths and cultures within and across it—examined with a sharp eye. Seldom do we ask what Muslims have to say about interactions with other faiths, cultures, and non-Muslims. How do the religion and its practitioners deal with disjunctures in their midst? *The Space of the Transnational* embraces these questions to engage with the dissonance between formally accepted knowledge practices and the unnoticed energies and activism of informal and aleatory habits and actions. It argues that women's studies in the US academy—as a field of inquiry and knowledge production, as activism in support of women's causes, and as an academic discipline—registers a related disjuncture with respect to transnational feminism. In its conceptualization of transnational feminism, women's studies in the United States aims to forge connections across national borders yet continues to presuppose and reinforce those borders. Although transnationalism nominally enables solidarity in the face of such globally common feminist and socially just causes as gendered subordination, violence, discrimination, poverty, and inequity, the steady accrual of its critical value as a theme in feminist inquiry springs from its impressive ability to span global spaces. Feminists consider uniting across such great gulfs as transnationalism's hard-won reward. But they should know better than to uncritically celebrate such relationships as the nation space itself is fraught with gulfs that multiply inequities and disproportionately affect women and sexual minorities. Such relationships—cross-national coalitions, affiliations, and affinities—are bound to die a death by a thousand disjunctures. Thus, transnationalism's triumphalist claim of breaching national walls remains aspirational at best.

To respond to the discursive disjunctures within women's studies in the North American context, this book spotlights the ability of gendered agencies within marriage, family, and other fundamental social relationships and interfaith interactions to redefine transnationalism (relationships across national boundaries) as transgeography (relationships across geographies of identities). In the creative resistance of mixed marriages, families and communities, aleatory, interreligious dialogues, and encounters, women release unnoticed and, more precisely given my focus on space, *unmapped* energies to fight injustice. Such transgeographic gendered agencies shift the space of (or respatialize) the nation-state and, by extension, the space of the transnational. These agencies trouble the nation-state's presumed

status as a monolingual, monoreligious, monoethnic, and heteronormative entity, modifying its internal and external boundaries to make it more inclusive and equitable and remediate gendered citizenship and feminist community. In looking at a selection of fiction and nonfiction by African and Southeast Asian writers, this book considers the literary aesthetics and poetics of the Islamic construct of *ummah* (or community) as a strategy manifestly deployed by Muslim women to solve such widespread gendered problems as domestic and communal violence, polygynous abuse, destitution, and sterility. In literary examples of *ummah*-building strategies, I read a respatialization or shifting of the boundaries of transnational feminist communities from cross-national borders to transgeographic boundaries. Spanning the gulfs between classes, religions, languages, and other such expansive spaces of habits, practices, customs, and rituals within the space of a nation-state is in itself a transnational enterprise. As a claim, it is not self-evident since a number of well-known feminist theorizations that predicate gender and nation on a relationship of subordination, mediated primarily through the patriarchal structures of marriage and family, take the border of the nation-state as the boundary in transnational interactions. In so doing, they concentrate on predominantly monoreligious (monoethnic, monolingualistic, and so on) gendered voices. But transnationalism as simply a coalition of national narratives is insufficiently equitable and inclusive. The untranslated and consequently unmapped agencies present just one such obstacle to transnationalism as cross-nationalism. Thus it is my contention that religiously, linguistically, and ethnically pluralizing the expanding relationships of marital, familial, communal, and national spaces across the geographies of classes, religions, sexualities, ethnicities, and languages even within the boundaries of the nation-state reshapes the space of the national, and consequently the transnational as a more equitable and inclusive sphere of feminist praxis. *Ummah*-building strategies foreground those unmapped agencies—aleatory, informal, and everyday interfaith relationships—that respatialize (modify or shift the space of) the nation as a plural, mixed, equitable, and inclusive space, enabling relationships to unfold transgeographically between classes, religions, languages, ethnicities, and other such “geographies of identities,” to borrow Susan Stanford Friedman’s term (1998, 35). This enables me to show that national boundaries are not the ones that determine the national and consequently the transnational. The relationships fostered across borders that are not necessarily national is where I suggest we must look to redefine transnationalism equitably and inclusively as transgeography.

At the same time, I read against the assumption of sameness of religious affiliation as homogeneity. I offer examples that delineate the disjunctive bent of the *ummah* as a human community, not unaware of racial, ethnic, linguistic, class-based, and other divisions and disparities. *The Space of the Transnational* thus attempts a retheorization of transnationalism as transgeography via the concept of *ummah* or community.

My literary reading of transnationalism and *ummah* in African and Southeast Asian fiction goes against the assumption that the borders of the nation-state are the only limitations in performing a truly equitable solidarity in feminist causes. Even transnationalism, as feminist theorists have shown (and as I will elaborate), reproduces and extends many of the same “unequal relations of power” and the “inequality of resources around the world” of its predecessors—international and global feminisms (Chowdhury 2011, 1; Nagar and Swarr, 2010, 5; Ferree 2016, 34).<sup>2</sup> The main contention of this book is that transnational feminism in its current and widely accepted definition as cross-national solidarity is fundamentally flawed and in need of urgent revision. Rooted in and disseminated by the North American academy, transnational feminism fails to theorize Muslim women as agents with a particular kind of political self-determination. Moreover, as has been widely stated by Islamic feminist theorists, it focuses its attention on only a fraction of the population of the global Islamic world. Thus when Chandra Mohanty and Linda Carty conceptualize transnational feminism as “ethical and just solidarity across borders based on attentiveness to power and historical specificities and differences,” I ask whether these borders are nationally drawn. I then probe further into how a just and ethical solidarity across national borders is conceivable when relationships between national entities are markedly unequal, amplified by numerous differences in access to resources between women in the Global North and Global South. Furthermore, relationships within national borders—across geographies of class, religion, race, ethnicities, and languages—remain fraught with inequities (2015, 9, 10). As a result, certain instantiations of gendered agency, those that are expressed in less dominant and globally circulated philologies, venues, and forms of knowledge production in effect fall through the gaps. They remain unmapped and unknown within a transnational feminist framework because of the conceptualization of transnationalism as cross-nationalism. In failing to account for these creative and unnoticed agencies, transnational feminism also fails to confront solutions to such long-standing gendered problems as discrimination, inequality, and abuse in the form of Islamophobia,

domestic and communal violence, and sterility. My study of *ummah* therefore looks at Muslim women's use of Islamic concepts as a way of solving many persistent gendered problems.

This study is organized around the following questions: how can transnational feminist agency work itself out of the impasse of inequalities and exclusions produced by cross-national organizing? What strategies can be crafted to address the direction of the flow of information or "theory" and ideas that maintain unequal relationships between such categories as First World and Third World; Global North and Global South; center and periphery? What kinds of conceptual tools help think through community to disrupt inequalities and reverse the flow of ideas and "theory" from historically dominant centers to the peripheries? Do Muslim women view *ummah* as spaced across other boundaries? What spaces or platforms enable Muslim women to articulate an equitable and inclusive transnational agency? How do Muslim women situate themselves in the national and transnational feminist imaginary as citizens of an *ummah*? What kinds of transnational feminisms or solidarities can be theorized about selves when knowledge about them is enabled only through translation? How can feminists commensurate such experiences that await translation across geographies? If premised on uniting against injustices across or despite national borders, how can constituents representing "national" interests ensure equity and inclusiveness amidst myriad identity lines—languages, ethnicities, religions, and races? In other words, who or what performs the work of transnationalism? Or what can be termed as *national* to claim the right to be in a transnational relationship? Who represents the national culture here? Which class, religion, language, or ethnicity gets to transact cross-nationally? In an age of rising fundamentalism where we are at risk of one racial, religious, or linguistic category becoming dominant, can we content ourselves with transnational to mean *transnational* simply because it defies the limits of national borders? If enabled only through translation, what can Muslim women's solutions to violence, injustice, and discrimination outside of the more popular discursive conceptualizations as subjects of capitalism and patriarchal neoliberalism tell us?<sup>3</sup> More particularly, what will become of such selves in feminist movements that uphold the heterosexual, masculinist, capitalist norm? To reformulate the question: what will become of feminist epistemologies until such feminist praxis is known in other languages?

A number of reasons compel a reimagination of transnationalism as performed by and seen in literary writing. First, the theme of transnationalism is often tangentially critiqued in the works under analysis here.

Even in feted novels such as Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, transnational feminism may not be the preferred topic of critical discussion. Yet Ba remains one of the most prominent voices (as I discuss in chapter 2) to engage the difficulties underlying racial sameness that she optimistically assumed would facilitate unity around common causes, and in particular, cross-national solidarity in Africa in the frenzy of the first years of independence. Most of the fiction studied in the present project consists of short stories, a genre that is also tangential in the literary and critical canon, unable to dislodge the position held by the novel in the literary universe. With the exception of Mariama Ba, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and Leila Aboulela, the writers I study in this book—Anna Dao, E. E. Sule, Pearlsha Abubakar, Abidah el-Khalieqy, Abubakar Gimba, and Arifa Macaqua Jamil—remain insufficiently critiqued and mostly unmapped by audiences beyond their linguistic or national regions. Their inclusion refocuses attention on the question of cross-national dissemination of the production of and solidarity with such creative expressions in shaping transnational feminist ideas. Finally, the field of women and gender studies in the American academic context trains the spotlight more heavily on socioscientific disciplines, eclipsing thus literary (nonmeasurable, non-scientific, and nonquantifiable) theorizations of feminist experience.

It is for the above reasons that I choose the literature under consideration in this book: *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba; "A Private Experience" by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie; "Majed" by Leila Aboulela; Anna Dao's "A Perfect Wife"; E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*; Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*; Pearlsha Abubakar's short stories "Ayeshah's Pretty Hate Machine," "Maghrib," and her short essay "'Naunu Na Kaun Yan?'" (What's Happening to You?); Abidah El-Khalieqy's story "Road to Heaven" (translated from Bahasa Indonesia by John H. McGlynn); Arifa Macaqua Jamil's short story "Sakeenah"; and Jemila Abdulai's "#Yennenga." All posit the everyday and assertive politics of a disjunctured relationship of gender to the nation and transnation than has been theorized so far. In tropes of informal, aleatory, and everyday encounters, exchanges and relationships, the writers I have chosen stage Muslim women's rearticulation of the *umma* as a trans-geographic site of relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims, posing fateful challenges to the overinvestment in solidarity as a feminist goal in cross-national relationships that risk excluding or ignoring materially and historically weaker constituents. The literature under consideration in this book thus underscores examples of women who are disconnected

from each other in the tenor of their gendered experiences, ranging from sterility to domestic and communal violence. And yet, all recast the relationship of gender to the nation and transnation through an inherently split, mixed, and plural domestic genealogy.

Pertinent to any study on gender is the question posed by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan on women's writing, its location, and on its definition itself. Sunder Rajan asks if "women's writing [is] to be located within the work/the act of writing or in the critical reading that disengages it for us?" (1993, 4). I would say it is lodged in both. The writers I examine and their writing function as counterpublics—a subordinate category of religious, sexual, and gendered minorities who destabilize the epistemic authority of revered knowledge practices and heteronormative sexualities. However, my choice in selecting the case studies under analysis here has more to do with my investment in tracking an unmistakable shift in the way the writers under analysis illustrate the space of relationships in their writing to place on the map of feminist knowledge production and practices a reimagination of transnationalism. As I discuss in later chapters, the motivations for writing vary from one writer to another. At best, we can assess a writer's motives based on their own accounts—interviews and firsthand reports of their writing experience or through interpretive techniques. By citing Coeli Barry, in chapter 3 I will point out that Southeast Asian writers—Muslim Filipino writers in particular—write in diverse venues, forms, and genres, making it nearly impossible to compile their work, let alone guess the motives behind their craft. Precisely then, it is in this difficulty of collecting, comprehending, and evaluating feminist expression, the transnational unmappability of feminist expression, that I locate the impetus to question the current dispensation of transnational feminist theories that seem confident of the sites of knowledge production and sources of feminist knowledge and lay claim to transnational feminist activity. In the rest of this introduction, I elaborate on the main definitional and theoretical excursions underpinning the conception of transgeographic feminisms. I begin with unmappability.

### Disjunctures and Dissonance

Unmappability, as in the case of interfaith marriages in Indonesia (in the opening example), indexes the discouragement, deterrence, and tacit social

disapproval of a legally permissible practice—unnoticed and unexpressed attitudes, avid habits, and practices that may not readily map onto legal, formal, or official records and observations of communal relationships. Likewise, for practices and methodologies of feminist knowledge production, unmappability instantiates the inaccessibility or inscrutability of feminist agencies in at least two ways. First, unmappability raises questions about informal acts of community. Second, unmappability raises questions about the expression of knowledge in philologies other than the globally dominant and imperially resonant mediums of English and French. Despite being assertive sites of anti-imperial and decolonial knowledge production and practices, literature and literary expression face progressive marginalization and obscurity in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies in the United States. The privileging of certain methodologies over others is primarily responsible for the marginalization of literature as a site of feminist knowledge production. With the bulk of the field resolutely moving toward and insisting on "factual," tangible, and verifiable data as pursued by the methodologies of a few select disciplines—anthropology, political science, sociology, and even history—women's studies in North American institutions of higher education undervalue literary knowledge production as mostly "fictional," with little or no bearing on policy changes and legal reforms for gender-related causes.<sup>4</sup> This preference for quantifiable proof in academic disciplines echoes the broader debate in higher education on employment-driven diplomas or degrees. Humanities subjects broadly (and literary studies within these), as is well-known in academia, are perceived to be poorly correlated with job acquisition in higher education. Nor are they considered as critical to the future as STEM fields. Literature itself reveals disjunctures in transnationalization or cross-national relationships in the unmappability of knowledge practices in modes other than the dominant philologies of English or French. Thus, on every level of construction of self and identity, particularly with regard to gendered citizenship, the mappability of feminist experiences in unofficial expressions—in unnoticed sites of knowledge production such as literary expression, particularly in languages other than the dominant philologies—remains hindered, disjunctured, by hierarchies of relationships between geographies. It is precisely such disjunctures, between the epistemic authority of academic disciplines, methodologies, venues of knowledge production, experiences, and practices outside formal and official categories, as I will argue throughout this book, that chafe at the most widely held iteration of transnational feminism.



Thus, the first disjuncture appears in the current and widely accepted definition and understanding of transnational feminism as cross-national feminism, revealing the ignorance of conceptual tools emanating from the materially and historically weaker constituents in transnational relationships: Global South diasporas. Chandra Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander qualify this inequality in the persistence of “hierarchical relationships” among “geographies” that complicate not just constructions of self and identity but concomitantly women’s relationship to transnationalization (1996, xvii). The second disjuncture emerges in methodologies and sites of feminist knowledge production. Women’s studies focuses increasingly on the social justice methodologies of such sites of activism and knowledge production that redound to policy-driven and legally tangible benefits. They omit thus the unnoticed energies of informal and aleatory activisms that may not directly lead to legal and politically actionable gains and policy benefits. As a result, when expressed as cross-national feminism, feminist expressions fail to be mapped because of hierarchies and inequalities that persist within nation-state borders, impeding thus the equitable mapping of expressions and activisms across national boundaries onto a transnational landscape. Thus, Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr underline the imperative in transnational feminism to “a continuous commitment to produce self-reflexive and dialogic critiques of its [transnational feminism’s] own practices rather than a search for resolutions or closures” so it may remain alert “to overlapping hegemonic power structures at multiple temporal and geographic scales” (2010, 9). As such, disjuncture or dissonance between the methodologies of legally tangible spaces and those of informal knowledge practices in unnoticed and aleatory sites of knowledge production become particularly discernible in the case of gendered citizenship. In such structures of gendered relationships as family, community, and nation-state, women’s citizenship is mediated by their gendered identities of wife, mother, or daughter—as wards of a patriarchal order. National genealogies are domestic genealogies, argues Anne McClintock, to underscore gendered membership in society as hierarchical and mediated by subordination to male privilege. “Nations are symbolically figured as domestic genealogies” and “masculine family drama,” writes McClintock (1997, 91). Using both these disjunctures—definitional and methodological—this book suggests that the subordination of gendered citizenship, as a site of knowledge production and practices, redefines and reshapes the space of the nation-state and consequently the space of the transnational. Unmapped agencies in everyday relationships—interfaith

dialogues, conversations, marriages, family structures, and aleatory exchanges—actively contest the space of the nation as monocultural, and by extension they question the formation and site of the transnational.

### *Ummah* as Transgeography

I find the literary aesthetic of *ummaḥ* or community pointedly useful in disrupting transnationalism as cross-nationalism because the Islamic construct of community is neither wholly cross-national—bonding fundamentally over faith, or “faith community” as Lamin Sanneh terms it—across a variety of such geographies as races, classes, ethnicities, and most important, as intended here, across religions (2016, 11). Nor is it locally rooted as its most central connotation—community—is premised on relationships, connections, and networks. Indeed, to be a Muslim, as Sylviane Diouf succinctly states, entails an observance of a panoply of rules concerning habits and behavior, including interacting appropriately with coreligionists and non-Muslims (2013, 99). It is in this feature of the *ummaḥ* as a framework of the everyday and assertive politics of interactions, aleatory exchanges, dialogues, and relationships that I locate an alternative energy and agency to transnational feminism, conceived perforce as cross-national feminism, sited mostly in formal and policy-oriented activisms. The ethics and centrality of *ummaḥ* for Muslim women occasion a redefinition of transnational feminism as community to serve as a fundamental space of daily interactions from the smallest of social spaces (family units) to the broadest (transnational socioscapes). More recently, the *ummaḥ* has come under increased academic scrutiny because of the global stereotypes attached to Muslims, namely as a transnational breeding ground for global terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Overemphasis of its meaning as *global* community has meant that its fundamental sense of community—even between two people—is woefully overlooked. Even “inter-Islamic” and “trans-communal” relationships that Margot Badran identifies in the “co-mingling of Muslims and those of other religious backgrounds, and . . . [where] family space (marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims are continually increasing),” tend to be understudied about the *ummaḥ* (2010, xvi).<sup>6</sup>

One idea about the *ummaḥ* poses more frequent critical challenges than any other to the variety of its meanings: implying homogeneity as Muslims bond over a common faith. Can there be an *ummaḥ* despite such diversity? I argue that these common critical debates stem from an

overemphasis on sameness about *ummah* as Muslim community. In her pragmatic rumination on the *ummah* and its cross-national possibilities, noted African American Islamic scholar Jamillah Karim uses a much-cited *hadith* (Muhammad's teachings on ideal speech and behavior) that unequivocally underlines the bonds of religious brotherhood: "A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He neither oppresses him nor humiliates him nor looks down upon him" (2008, 7). Just treatment that Karim evokes as a basis for community in the cited *hadith*, and as I discuss in greater detail later in this introduction and in chapter 1, is directed not only toward other Muslims but in general toward all humans. Nevertheless, Karim's focus rests on just treatment in the Muslim *ummah* in America today: "As challenged by racial injustice, negotiating Islamic sisterhood and brotherhood thus means negotiating race and class inequalities" (7). If the *ummah* is impaired by such divisions as race, ethnicity, and other identity lines, it is also repaired by a recuperation of *ummah*-building relationships, underemphasized in knowledge and practices. Mixed marriages, interfaith connections, dialogues, and encounters are some such ways of re-membering the *ummah*. As I discuss in chapter 2, Mariama Ba's treatment of the *ummah* in the interfaith relationship of her minor Christian character Jacqueline from the Ivory Coast raises the crucial question on the unity of the *ummah* that remains disjunctured, if not by race (as Karim focuses on this particular category of identity) but by class, ethnicity, and even language within the same nation-state. Ba then asks whether as a black woman Jacqueline's interfaith marriage to a black Senegalese Muslim would not be as anomalous as her own failed and tumultuous marriage to a Black Senegalese Muslim. To reiterate the premise of this study, *ummah* then is not just a transnationally articulated relationship. It is also and equally a transgeographically sustained effort toward community.

Reemphasizing *ummah* as a transgeographic community shifts the boundaries of transnationalism to borders other than national ones. It also shifts the boundaries of the *ummah* as more than simply a community of Muslims. In the literature I analyze, this shifting or respatializing of the *ummah* is visible in Muslim women's redefinitions of gender relations to the nation-state. As a result, the nation, too, is redefined through a shifting of its borders. These borders, I show, are transgeographic—located across classes, genders, religions, ethnicities, races, and other geographic spaces within the nation-state. Notwithstanding much debate around inclusions and exclusions, the *ummah* remained cognizant and accepting of other

faiths and systems of belief. As Abdullah al-Ahsan (2007) posits, even in its narrowest sense, as the “*ummah* of Muhammad” consolidated under Muhammad during the Medinan period with the promulgation of the “Constitution of Madinah,” the *ummah* retained a topological quality.<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* defines *ummah* as

Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Quran, *ummah* designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation.

It is not my intention here to present the *ummah* as a homogenous, unified collective. Even a casual glance at the Qur’an affirms the variety of connotations of the word *ummah* across verses from the Meccan and Medinan periods, from its narrowest meaning as an individual embodying virtues of a community to its broadest implications as a community of species interspersed with a range of adjunct meanings.<sup>8</sup> I aim to show that literary attempts at defamiliarizing this range of adjunct meanings of *ummah* in its sixty-four occurrences in the Qur’an have since long functionalized the concept of *ummah* to recast women’s relationships to family, community, nation, and transnation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, I am interested in extracting how Muslim women defamiliarize community or *ummah* in everyday and informal interactions as such everyday activist agencies may not always be plotted onto the more formalized canvas of feminist activity or religious meanings.

### Transnationalism and Transgeography

Inevitably, transnationalism evinces interest in an entire critical and theoretical corpus of concepts that explains global relationships today. Arjun Appadurai’s well-known model of the global cultural economy immediately comes to mind. Deterritorialization, as Appadurai terms it, reenvisions the world on differing scales, of “alternative fears,” and “disjunctures” rather than on the tradition of bipolarity, center-periphery models, or the linear movement of globalization as a homogenizing force (1996, 39).<sup>10</sup> Similar such concepts, “translocality,” rootedness, and rootlessness, local or universal, are predicated on geography as place or physical territory,

scaled as local, national, or international.<sup>11</sup> Translocalism then pertains to the traversal of distinct places or territories. When rejecting the idea of rootedness and rootlessness to broaden the imaginary of the local and the universal, theorists are also relying on the geography of place or territory. Appadurai also bases his model of global cultural flow or deterritorialization on the predictable distinction between national and transnational using the boundaries of the nation-state to determine transnational scales. The transnational in this case is located manifestly beyond the borders of the nation-state, distancing but never quite canceling the cognizance of the dominant center, priding itself thus for being unfettered by the national boundary.

Similarly, Peter Mandaville's study on transnational Islamic politics suggests translocal Islam. Mandaville highlights "the Muslim world's experiences with globalization," where translocal politics appends experiences of Muslims within the boundaries of the nation-states to Muslims in the broader world in an effort to capture the changing patterns of lived experiences of Muslims (2002, 2). Translocalism, as Mandaville uses the term, is interested in globalized patterns of change produced by such processes as diasporas and migrations across national borders that influence lived experiences. As I will elaborate in the section on definitions of transnationalism later in the introduction, the various conceptualizations of transnationalism—translocalism, transterritorialism—all spring from an avowed engagement with the borders of the nation-state. The kind of respatialization I am proposing differs also from the transnationalism that Paul Gilroy conjures as planetary consciousness with political and moral dimensions in anticolonial struggles and that ended the French and British empires (2005, 290). "[T]hink, for example, of Nelson Mandela's travel to Algeria for military training. What network of solidarity and cross-cultural connectedness made that association possible?" urges Gilroy as a cross-national (South Africa and Algeria) stimulus for "multi-culture and a support for anti-racist solidarity" (290). But anticolonial struggles also registered across many diverse forms—methods, actors, and means—and geographies (rural, urban, linguistic, ethnic, gendered, religious). They resulted in, as Gilroy reminds us, an unequal world: "That world became not a limitless globe, but a small, fragile, and finite place, one planet among others with strictly limited resources that are unequally allocated" (290). Edouard Glissant (1989) among numerous other cultural theorists, has written much in the context of decolonization in Africa and particularly on asymmetries between "lived experience" and the imposition of a

“single History or an *official* way of thinking through which it passively consents in the ideology “represented” by its elite (93, emphasis added). Cross-fertilizations of histories, Glissant reminds us, is one such strategy of repossessing both “a true sense of one’s time and identity” to re-evaluate asymmetrical and imposed power (93).<sup>12</sup> Respatializing transnational relationships as transgeographic connections aims to address these exclusions, inequalities, and asymmetries that emerge when connecting the world only across national borders that miss genealogies of identities that can be repossessed by shifting the boundaries of transnationalism.

The literature I examine in this book supports my contention of shifting the space or respatializing transnationalism as transgeography, as more than a cross-national accomplishment. In my reading, I modify the idea of local or universal as a physical, geographic space—a place inside or beyond a physical territorial boundary. I treat geography as a human category of identities, quite simply to observe the gulfs between two or more races, religions, ethnicities, genders, or languages even within the same nation space. In their definition of transnationalism, Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way question its reliance on the framework of the nation “in place of a long and deeply embedded modernist tradition of taking the nation as the framework within which one can study things (literatures, histories and so forth), the nation itself has to be a question” (2008, 628). I envisage transgeography and consequently the transnational as relationships across boundaries of class, religion, sexuality, language, ethnicity, and other spaces of identity formations, and not perforce as relationships within or across the boundaries of the nation-state. In one sense, crossing the geographic divide between rural and urban landscapes within a nation-state can be termed “transnational.” The most recognizable example of such an idea is undoubtedly subalterneity, which deconstructs the fraught relationships of marginalized communities to the center or the nation-state. However, by delving deeper, subalterneity revealed that the painful struggles for social justice by lower-caste peasant groups and laborers were yet further disjunctured by the discrepant hierarchies of genders, languages, castes, and religions to problematize the definition of the transnational as simply cross-national. I argue, then, that “geographies of identities,” as defined by Susan Stanford Friedman—as a broad analytical panorama of gynocriticism and gynesis—connotes more suitably the relationship I aim to uncover in my redefinition of transnationalism, where two or more such geographies of identity as religions, classes, ethnicities,

sexualities, languages even within the same nation-state can lay claim to transnationalism (1998, 35).

Transgeography refocuses attention on the concept of *ummah* as more than a global connection of similar religious beliefs, thus enabling a redefinition of the relationships of gender to the nation through the idea of *ummah*. It also corrects three of the most salient problems within transnational feminist theorizations (see Nagar and Swarr, 2010).<sup>13</sup> First, transgeographic feminism tackles the persistence of exclusions and nonrecognitions between historically and materially unequal sites both nationally and transnationally by capturing relationships engaged in common feminist causes that have come to animate the anti-imperial and decolonial spirit of transnational feminist activity “around a common agenda such as women’s human rights, reproductive health and rights, violence against women, peace and antimilitarism, or feminist economies,” as Valentine Moghadam deftly lists the most prominent causes that animate transnational feminist activity (2005, 4). Secondly, a transgeographic feminism rethinks the overinvestment in solidarity as a goal of transnational feminist politics that Third World feminists have identified as characteristic of misrecognitions and exclusions of their agendas in such transnational frameworks as global and international feminisms that tended to privilege the agendas of women in the Global North (Boehmer 2005, 187).<sup>14</sup> And third, transgeographic feminisms address the long-standing problem of the flow of influences, ideas, and “theory” from dominant centers to historically and materially less powerful sites by rendering the former what I would term a “distant presence,” where issues are worked out without basing their authority in dominant centers of the Global North (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2).

### Unmappable Translations: Literary Transnationalisms

Literary expression as a site of feminist knowledge production enables the reimagination that I foreground in this book. Thus I connect literary expression as a site of knowledge production with the discipline of women’s studies in the American academic context, primarily positioned in the social sciences, to map the parallels between these two theoretical and academic orientations on feminist knowledge production. One elliptical example for now should sufficiently accentuate my aim in what sociologist Elora Chowdhury calls the “dependency chain,” which requires local

feminist organizations to learn English, and what Aamir Mufti and other literary theorists have identified as a subsumption of “writing traditions of the world into the European cultural system” in postcolonial literatures in their continued efforts to decode and recode such terms as “world literatures,” “Global English,” “world library,” or “universal libraries” as signs of the unremitting dominance of English and other European colonial systems (2011, 5; 2016, 149, 156).<sup>15</sup> The parallelism in these challenges posed by dependency and subsumption signpost for me the need to work out a theorization of the transnational that addresses issues of commonly recognized discrepant power structures more equitably and inclusively as literary expression remains poorly analyzed in current theorizations of transnational feminisms. More particularly, this book is concerned with the field of women’s studies in the North American context that has largely focused on such methodologies as ethnographic inquiries to legitimize women’s experiences. It is thus useful to remind ourselves of the dangers of what Mufti and James Clifford term “ethnographic authority” and “ethnographic philanthropy,” a cultural mode drawing heavily from methodologies that came in the wake of postcolonial transitions as a “reaggregation” of “imperial power,” to evoke Mufti again, foregrounding the paradox of “global solidarity” out of empathy for victims of racial and imperial violence while producing a telos of political desires aimed at circling the wagons of common feminist causes (2013, 14, 16).<sup>16</sup>

Or perhaps these discrepancies pertain more to material truths. The United States and Great Britain account for the largest number of institutions of higher education and the most prestigious centers of learning in the world. Arguably, some of the most influential schools of contemporary thought and cultural studies, especially postcolonial studies, had their origins here. As B. Venkat Mani points out in his study of the rather felicitous migration of books or “bibliomigrancy,” as he terms it, “55 to 60 per cent of translated works are originally written in English. However, only 2 to 4 per cent of books published in the United States and United Kingdom are translated from other languages” (2017, 6). How truly transnational, equitable, and representative is the scholarship on world literature in the United States and United Kingdom when only a fraction of these works are translations from other languages? Like Mani, Aarthi Vadde spotlights a chimeric pattern in aesthetic tools and methods in the quest for a communicative internationalism through such strategies as autotranslations to mediate and negotiate “uncommonness” and “illegibility” while showing awareness of the rootedness of literary



and artistic expressions in cultural conventions. To this end, Vadde (2016) reads Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel Prize-winning *Gitanjali* as a chimeric model of literary and cultural conjunctures "to disclose the entanglement of translatability and illegibility in cross-cultural discourse and to affirm the particularity of national languages and literatures while challenging the myth of their purity and self-sufficiency" (40–41).

Despite such robust phenomena as bibliomigrancy, recoding, and aesthetic shifting, which facilitate the travel of literary expressions, I want to question how writers such as the ones I study in the present project—Abidah el-Khalieqy, Pearlsha Abubakar, and Balaraba Ramat Yakubu—are all widely read within their immediate regional domains and even translated into English but remain relatively unknown in the United States and United Kingdom. What implications then do such illegibility and unknowability have for transnational feminism? As I discuss in a later section, not all women take the nation-state, capitalism (class-based), or globalization as overarching and universalizing frameworks for organizing their lives despite the fact that these forces ineluctably regulate gender. Compounding this disengagement is the persistent problem of translation or communication in transnational feminist organizing. However, the problem of translation, commonly identified as a setback in the circulation and transaction of literary expressions in languages other than English, forces questions on the knowledge and mapping of experiences on transnational feminist landscapes. These chasms, as I discuss throughout this book, trouble the imperative of solidarity that underpins transnational feminist organizing. In the remaining part of this introduction, I elaborate on literature as a site of knowledge production that enables the redefinition I undertake in this book. I also explain the theoretical terms and concepts—"contact zones," "Muslim cosmopolitanism," and "dissident relationality"—that clarify the topologies of the theorization of community that I propose in this study. In the introduction, I also address my choice of Africa and Southeast Asia—two predominantly Muslim but geographically distant regions—as totemic sites of transgeographic communities.

### Feminist Bonds of Faith: African and Southeast Asian Islams

I focus on Islam in Africa and Southeast Asia because it is the most widely practiced religion in these regions. While South Asia is home to the largest

number of Muslims; Southeast Asia is metonymically called the “Muslim archipelago,” accounting for the world’s three hundred million Muslims, and Africa constitutes the second-largest agglomeration of Muslims in the world, ranging between four hundred to five hundred million. With Sunni majority communities, Islam is also practiced by sections of society that make up Shia, Ahmadi, and other sects. In sub-Saharan Africa, Islam is distributed among Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi, Tijane, Mouride, and numerous other denominations. This fact alone, that Muslims are called to bond over faith but remain disjunctured in their approaches to the faith, evokes Mohanty and Alexander’s question, “How do we understand the production and reception of diverse feminisms within a framework of transnational . . . movements?” (1994, 2–3). Thus I probe the ways in which writers in the two largest and most diverse pockets of Muslim societies in the world engage with such concepts as community, solidarity, and citizenship and map more broadly the production and reception of such connections transnationally. In the literature that I analyze from these diverse and distant regions, numerous overlapping themes of gendered struggle and injustice emerge. Despite incommensurate disparities in the practices and forms of Islam across the globe, the treatment and perceptions of gender register remarkable parallels across diverse geographies. First, I will address the treatment of gender. In both Southeast Asia and Africa, broadly considered, the practice of dowry (or bride price), euphemistically termed “gift giving” in Nigeria, disproportionately burdens women in society. As my comparative studies make explicit, expectations of fulfilling biological roles—motherhood—determine women’s value in society. Sterility is thus a ponderous burden for women in Africa and Southeast Asia to bear in self-definitions. Women also suffer domestic violence, negligence, and destitution. These topoi—male guardianship (*wali*), dowry (*mahr*), sterility, denial of marriage, maintainence (*nafaqah*), lack of reproductive rights, and destitution—are studied through the lens of multireligious relationships in the literature analyzed here from these two regions.<sup>17</sup> Poverty in both Africa and Southeast Asia particularly exacerbates Muslim women’s conditions as they face more acutely the side effects of religious discrimination, as well as the minoritization and phobic treatment of Muslims. The wide gulfs in religious differences on account of class differences (or producing class differences) and concomitant linguistic gaps between communities, as I will discuss in the literature from Africa and Southeast Asia, create a relationship that spans divides no less deep than national boundaries.

More important to my study of transgeographic feminisms is the changing nature of the meaning and character of *ummah* as seen in Muslim interactions with peoples of other faiths and systems of belief in the region than the density of Muslim populations in Africa. Thus, as the statistics below explain, topologies shape identities more significantly than the presence of the religions in predominantly homogenous societies. Africa is the region where both Christianity and Islam will proliferate and spread at steady rates, owing to internal migrations, higher birth rates, and overall population growth. Robert Dowd notes, “Christians and Muslims are coming into contact with each other in sub-Saharan Africa like in few other regions of the world” (2015, 16). Dowd statistically maps the percentages of Muslim and Christian Africans to state that even though the number of Christian-majority countries in Africa is double that of Muslim-majority countries (seventeen Christian majority countries to eight Muslim majority countries), “the number of Muslims, even in many predominantly Christian countries of the region, is considerable” (16). Despite the predominance of these two religions in the African region, the largest Muslim country in Africa, Nigeria, is also considered one of the most “religiously diverse and vibrant societies in the world” (17). Such figures and observations are therefore immediately put to the test in Dowd’s considered statement on the diversity of even a Muslim-majority country. The idea of *ummah* and definitions of transnational, then, are also called into question in light of such disjunctures.

But it is certainly not only Islam’s density in the region that makes it unique. Islam accounts for the region’s ability to serve as a “contact zone”—a social space—according to Pratt (1991), “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power” (34). In Malaysia, Malay identity is of a piece with Islam: “To be Malay is to be Muslim,” declares Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2009, 129). Islam dates back to the ninth century in Southeast Asia to the presence of trade networks with the Middle East, China, and South Asia. Maritime transmission of the religion meant that it also settled in these parts of Southeast Asia most extensively but retained its cosmopolitan character owing to the fluidity of trade routes. But the religion began to spread steadily among the inhabitants of Southeast Asia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the establishment of kingdoms and sultanates along these maritime trading routes by local leaders and princes who commonly converted to Islam. Islam reached the Philippines as early as the fourteenth century. As reported in *Global Security*:

Other important sultanates in Southeast Asia around the time of Melaka's ascendancy included Aceh in northern Sumatra; Johor on the Malay peninsula; the port cities of Demak and Banten on the north coast of Java; Ternate and Tidore in what is now Maluku; and the kingdom of Mataram . . . a trading kingdom in central Java.<sup>18</sup>

On religion in the Philippines, Jack Miller notes, "beginning in 1350, Islam had been spreading northward from Indonesia into the Philippine archipelago. By the time the Spanish arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was firmly established on Mindanao and Sulu and had outposts on Cebu and Luzon." Islam's ability to coexist and interact with other faiths is the product of tropes of contacts—dialogues, encounters, interreligious marriages, immigration, exchanges, and interactions—within more immediate boundaries rather than broader national ones that stage cross-national engagements. Such interactions, as analyzed in this book, redefine transnationalism by shifting its space from cross-national exchanges to transgeographic ones. Such a respatialization can therefore prompt us to rethink and reimagine transnational feminisms.

### Reconstellating Spaces: Local, National, Transnational, International, Global

Yet somehow, it would seem impossible, contradictory, and semantically illogical to imagine the transnational as something not *across the national*, as the term suggests, but transgeographically even within national borders. What would such transnational feminism look like in light of some of the most salient definitions of the transnational that place it de rigueur beyond the national level? In such disciplines as women's studies in the American academic context, for instance, "cross-border feminist praxis" (as Elora Chowdhury terms it), it seems, has the valence of "cross-national" (2011, 7). Notably, Chandra Mohanty and Jacqui Alexander argue for the need to "understand the local in relation to larger cross-national processes" (1996, xix).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Valentine Moghadam defines the transnational as a cross-national network beyond two or more nation-states "organized above the national level that unite women from three or more countries . . . in a 'transnational public sphere'" (2005, 4). Recent formulations of transnationalism as cross-nationalism have not changed much. Notably,