

For Western girls only? Postfeminism as transnational culture

Article (Accepted Version)

Dosekun, Simidele (2015) For Western girls only? Postfeminism as transnational culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15 (6). pp. 960-975. ISSN 1468-0777

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/63369/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Title: For Western girls only? Post-feminism as transnational culture

Journal: Feminist Media Studies

Abstract

Much of the literature on post-feminism concerns the “Western” world and variously conceptualizes post-feminism as “Western culture.” This article argues that, as a result, feminist cultural scholars have not sufficiently imagined, theorized or empirically researched the possibility of post-feminism in non-Western cultural contexts. By briefly reviewing what has been said in the literature about post-feminism and the non-West, and by putting this in dialogue with transnational feminist cultural scholarship, this article makes a case for a transnational analytic and methodological approach to the critical study of post-feminism. It argues that such an approach provides an understanding of post-feminism as a transnationally circulating culture, and thus can better account for the fact that the culture interpellates not only women in the West but also others elsewhere. The article concludes by outlining what it means and could afford feminist cultural scholars to work with a new conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture.

Keywords: post-feminism / transnational / culture / Western /class /

Introduction

A growing body of feminist cultural and media scholarship is concerned with “post-feminism,” understood as a contemporary cultural sensibility proclaiming that women are “now empowered,” and celebrating and encouraging their consequent

“freedom” to return to normatively feminine pursuits and to disavow feminism as no longer needed or desirable (e.g. Gill 2007, 2008; Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011; Butler 2013). Rosalind Gill (2007, 2008) conceptualizes post-feminism as a contradictory sensibility marked by elements such as an emphasis on femininity as a bodily property; the growing imperative for women to (hetero)sexually self-objectify; women’s disciplinary consumption of fashion and beauty; and an insistent casting of women’s actions as freely chosen, knowing and self-pleasing. For instance, in post-feminist discourse “the maintenance of the feminine body is steeped in the rhetoric of choice as an endless series of supposedly positive and empowering, autonomous consumer decisions for women and girls” (Blue 2012, 6). With its individualizing logics that downplay and depoliticize the fact that women continue to face gendered inequality, and with its constitutive imbrication with consumerist notions of “choice,” post-feminism is also understood as a fundamentally neoliberal sensibility (Gill 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011; Butler 2013).

The existing feminist scholarship on post-feminism overwhelmingly concerns the “Western” world. Indeed the tendency has been to understand post-feminism itself as Western: as culturally so; as historically located in or having emerged from the West; and as “post-” the mostly liberal gains of Western second-wave feminist activism (e.g. Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2009). It is widely noted within the literature that post-feminism does not address or concern just any Western women, however. Rather the sensibility has been deemed “white and middle class by default, [because] anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2). It has also been noted that as most represented and most evidently interpellated by post-feminism, its normative subject is also young, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin and conventionally attractive

(McRobbie 2009; Butler 2013). Yet posing the question “for white girls only?” Jess Butler critiques feminist scholars of post-feminism for their tendency to assume that the culture excludes Western women of color constitutively and/or representationally. She insists that this assumption is “both overly simplistic and empirically unfounded” (2013, 48) and, highlighting post-feminist media figurations of non-white Western women, makes a case for a more intersectional approach to post-feminism, to more fully account for the ways in which it incorporates racial difference.

The present article borrows its title from Butler (2013) to argue that a transnational approach to post-feminism is also needed, to recognise that the culture reaches and hails not only women in the West but also others elsewhere. Indeed my central case in this article is for both the possibility and value of reconceptualizing post-feminism as transnational culture. To make this case I use and interchange the terms West/global North/first or developed world and non-West/global South/third or developing world. These terms refer not to essential geographies but to spaces that are dialectically constituted and differentiated by historicized discourses, imaginaries and material inequalities, including imperialist ones (Grewal 2005). Inderpal Grewal writes that divisions of “the West” and “the non-West” were “produced through European colonialism [and] rearticulated continually to inform the inequalities that demarcated the wealthy nations from the “developing” countries, or wealthy cosmopolitans from subalterns” (2005, 25). I use the terms heuristically, moreover, seeking to call into question the neat divisions and binaries that they hegemonically constitute and represent. I use transnational, as I later elaborate, to designate that which exceeds and traverses such boundaries, as well as the analytic mode of thinking across them (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2001). Thus far the tendency in the literature on post-feminism has not been to think transnationally. I further demonstrate this in

the first of three sections of the article where I briefly review what has been said about post-feminism and its logics in or relative to the global South. I argue that because the literature has been mostly animated by the view that post-feminism is Western culture, the possibilities of its emergence elsewhere have not been sufficiently imagined, theorized or researched.

To suggest how we may begin to address this gap I turn my attention in the rest of the article to transnational feminist cultural scholarship. In the second section I outline a theoretical understanding of transnational cultural formations so as to conceptualize post-feminism as such. My argument is that post-feminism is readily transnationalized, that is rendered transnational culture, because it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and set of material practices. It is broadcast and sold across borders, to put it quite simply, and in ways that are neither simply linear nor inevitably from North to South. Building on this theoretical point, in the final section of the article I outline the analytic implications and value of working with a new conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture, for which I briefly provide as an illustrative example my research on spectacular new femininities in Lagos, Nigeria. I propose that thinking of post-feminism transnationally and as transnational culture can help feminist cultural scholars to recognize, open and link new terrains of enquiry, and to better keep up with and critique the deeply political and contradictory cultural logics of globalization.

Post-feminism and/in the non-Western world

The West has long represented itself as the site of “progress” and “modernity” for women, casting diverse Western actors as saviors of “other” women (e.g. Mohanty

1988). Chandra Mohanty rightly notes that such discourses, in which Western feminists may be implicated, rely on the figuration of the “‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject” (1988: 61). A number of feminist scholars have begun to consider how such old tropes and figurations are being reworked in neoliberal, post-feminist times (e.g. Gonick et al. 2009; Sensoy and Marshall 2010; Wilson 2011, 2012; Koffman and Gill 2013; Switzer 2013). They variously find and problematize the fact that with, through, indeed buttressing the contention that the work of feminism is achieved in the West is the discursive displacement of its continued need to the non-West. The post-feminist “‘turn to girls’ in policy and popular discourses... [constructs and contrasts] girls in the Global North or South as, respectively, empowered, postfeminist subjects and downtrodden victims of patriarchal values” (Koffman and Gill 2013: 85). Kalpana Wilson (2012) and Heather Switzer (2013) suggest that for putatively post-feminist Western girls, feminism becomes popularly endorsable only in reference to or on behalf of girls in the global South. Özlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall (2010) call this a “missionary girl power.”

In short, the view in the literature is that the post-feminist rhetorics of “girl power” popularly broadcast in the global North are being variously translated with reference to the global South to rhetorics of “girls to be empowered.” Via a new positioning of girls and women of the global South as ideal beneficiaries of development programming and intervention, such rhetorics are being operationalized by states, the neoliberal development industry and global corporate agendas (Gonick et al. 2009; Sensoy and Marshall 2010; Wilson 2011, 2012; Koffman and Gill 2013; Switzer 2013). Switzer characterizes this as a “(post)feminist development fable” about “young female exceptionalism” that takes gender equality and women’s empowerment as normative values yet sheds them of transformative feminist visions

to recuperate them in service of the market (2013: 350). Yet, however new or reconfigured, such representations of Third World women as “still in need of feminism” continue to function by ignoring and obscuring their plurality. Also still ignored and obscured are the possibilities that women in the global South may be feminist in their own right or have local feminist histories (Sensoy and Marshall 2010; Wilson 2011).

Within such hegemonic discursive terms, the possibility that such women may be post-feminist is incoherent. This possibility has been little considered by critical feminist cultural scholars of post-feminism, too. McRobbie (2007, 2009) offers one of few theoretical accounts of how post-feminism may hail women in the global South. She posits the emergence there of a new feminine figure or type that she terms “the global girl.” The global girl is the non-Western woman increasingly incorporated as worker and wage-earner into the grossly uneven circuits of global capital—hence McRobbie (2007) also briefly calls her “global girl factory worker.” “The global girl like her western counterpart the career girl, is independent, hard working, motivated, ambitious, and able to enjoy at least some of the rewards of the feminine consumer culture which in turn becomes a defining feature of her citizenship and identity” (2007, 733-734). According to McRobbie, we may see this figure pictured in international editions of women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and in their local equivalents, if lacking “the ironic inhabiting of femininity of her [Western] post-feminist masquerading counterparts” (2009, 88-89). From Western state and global corporate perspectives, the global girl is the “ideal” third world subject who, placated by minimal wages and attendant minimal access to global feminine consumer culture, does not aspire to migrate to the West but will “stay put and yearn for the fashion and beauty products associated with Western femininity and sexuality” (2009, 89).

Thus effectively McRobbie's (2007, 2009) theoretical proposition is that in the non-Western world, post-feminism manifests via consumer culture as a tame, derivative copy of its putative Western original. It constitutes not putatively powerful, independent, glamorous and sexy girls, as in the West, but quite naive ones content to play dress up with ultimately little. While I appreciate that McRobbie offers the global girl typologically, as a highly condensed and schematic representation of hegemonic cultural representations, I still find it a problematic figuration of difference. I would problematize it on many of the grounds well-established in Mohanty's (1988) critique of earlier Western feminist representations of the non-Western woman. Most importantly for my present argument, the typology of the global girl does not allow or account for difference between non-Western women. It especially fails to see that there is immense socio-economic inequality in the global South—for instance in Nigeria, the site of my research, 2010 World Bank data reports that the wealthiest and poorest 10% of the population hold 32.9% and 2.2% of the national income respectively.¹ Such inequality means that even for heuristic or metaphoric purposes, the glamourized girl on the third world magazine cover cannot be conflated with the exploited factory worker, nor the underpaid translocal or “maid” with her middle-class employer (e.g. see Ong 2006; Sun 2011). I would further contend that by not accounting for class difference in the global South, McRobbie (2007, 2009) does not see the extent to which post-feminist culture may be available to class privileged women there, and available, moreover, in ways that are neither merely watered down nor tantamount to “yearning” for the West.

A few feminist scholars have begun to consider how class prosperity and the various lifestyles, mobilities and imaginaries it affords may engender post-feminist

¹ See http://data.worldbank.org/country/nigeria#cp_wdi

possibilities for women in the non-Western world. Eva Chen (2012) explores the phenomenon of “chick-lit” in China. Characterizing the genre as a global capitalist commodity that in China has a distinctly elite consumption, Chen argues that it imagines its characters and readers as belonging to “a global sisterhood of chic, empowered, consumerist and individualistically minded women who find freedom through consumption” (2012, 215). However, Chen further characterizes Chinese chick-lit as doing so via the promotion of “Western brand-name commodities and Western-defined and locally endorsed values of beauty and femininity,” and thus recenters post-feminism in the West. Thinking in relation to neoliberal Japan, Joel Gwynne takes a different view. He asserts that it is “a mistake to conceptualise postfeminist culture as an exclusively Western phenomenon, especially if we follow Rosalind Gill’s (2007: 148) foundational argument that postfeminism ‘should be conceived of as a sensibility’ and not a culturally specific historical moment” (2013: 326). I fully agree with this assertion and indeed seek to develop it in this article. However, as I explain further below, I diverge from Gwynne’s (2013) alternative proposal to delimit post-feminism to prosperous, democratic and relatively socially egalitarian societies.

Given the foregoing kinds of delimitations in the literature of the possible spaces and places of post-feminism, Michelle Lazar (2006, 2009, 2011) is notable for her characterization of the cultural sensibility as “global.” Lazar locates the historical origins of post-feminism in Western media and popular culture. But she contends that post-feminism has been since globalized via “circulation by international media corporations” (2006, 506), and by being actively packaged and sold globally—that is, across ethnic, racial, geographic and geopolitical difference. For example, analyzing post-feminist print adverts circulated in Singapore by local, regional and global

beauty brands, Lazar (2006) contends that they hail women as “cosmopolitan” consumers of the same products and sensibilities. “Cosmopolitan” is not simply reducible to “Western” in her analysis. While she finds that some of the adverts use white (Western) models, Lazar argues that Singaporean women are being invited to identify with these women. Other visual strategies in the beauty adverts to create the effect of a global post-feminist identity are the use of iconic black celebrities such as Beyoncé, as well as pan-Asian models. Thus Lazar (2006) shows that a globalized post-feminism accommodates and indeed commodifies global difference. But, critically, she also sees that it remains premised on myriad exclusions: although racially varied, the putatively cosmopolitan post-feminist subject represented in the adverts is otherwise conventionally attractive, able-bodied and normatively heterosexual. “Membership in the global sisterhood of power femininity, therefore, is premised upon certain criteria for inclusion (Lazar 2006, 515).

In my opinion, Lazar (2006) overlooks the extent to which class is a central criteria for inclusion in the putative post-feminist global sisterhood. Class is at the crux of what I propose in the rest of this article as a theoretical elaboration of the more descriptive and empirical assertions of Lazar and a few other scholars’ (e.g. Chen 2012; Gwynne 2013; Bradfield 2014; Salmenniemi and Adamson 2014) that post-feminism is not in fact limited to the West, not consumed and performed by Western girls only. My argument concerns how post-feminism as a culture and sensibility travels, and thus how post-feminism as an analytic concept may be relevant and useful to feminist cultural scholars across borders, too. For this I propose a transnational analytic and methodological approach. This entails de-centering post-feminism from the West, that is not thinking of it as uniquely or authentically Western culture such that we already see it as impossible or imitative elsewhere. This is not an

imperializing move to universalize post-feminism, nor does it deny the Western historical and cultural context with reference to which the concept has been developed. Rather it is a move to theorize post-feminism with globalization, an urgent and necessary move then, and one for which transnational feminist cultural scholarship offers critical tools.

Thinking transnationally about post-feminist culture

Following transnational feminist cultural scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994, 2001) and Radha Hegde (2011), I understand the “transnational” to designate the multiple and uneven cultures, practices, subjectivities and so on that exceed and cross but do not thereby negate boundaries of nation-state and region. Hegde defines the transnational both descriptively and heuristically as “the layering of social, political, economic and mediated processes that exceed conventional boundaries” (2011, 8). The transnational is constituted by heterogeneous and historicized “connectivities” through which meanings, practices, capital, commodities and people travel (Grewal 2005). These include media networks, commodity circuits, migratory and diasporic movements, and activist, institutional and state linkages. While largely driven by the imperatives of capital and geopolitics, transnational connectivities are not structured by “centers” versus “peripheries” but rather by nodes of power both old and new (Grewal 2005, 22-24). Conceptualized as such, the transnational serves as a critical heuristic to contrast and to problematize reified or unitary notions of “the global,” and rigid binaries of “global versus local.” Relative to an all-encompassing notion of the global, the transnational implies asymmetries and incompleteness, flows not fixity, cross-cutting rather than uni-directional linkages.

The term also serves to usefully distinguish “globalization” and indeed “the will to be global” as political-economic and corporate processes (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2001).

As in the literature, I also use the term transnational to refer to a critical mode of thinking across borders and thus thinking across multiple intersections, forms and sites of difference at once. To think transnationally is to think of what Grewal and Kaplan (1994) call “scattered hegemonies”: the lines and clusters of power that do not respect local, national or regional borders but traverse them and thereby come to constitute other kinds of boundaries and belongings. Therefore, to think transnationally about post-feminism is to consider how, as an entanglement of meanings, representations, sensibilities, practices and commodities, post-feminism may discursively and materially cross borders, including those within our feminist scholarly imaginaries. Methodologically, this mode of thinking entails tracing the connectivities through which post-feminist culture may travel, wherever this may lead. It requires consideration of how these connectivities are structured, what institutions and knowledges they rely upon, and which kinds of subjects they therefore include or exclude. It also entails thinking about what does or can not necessarily travel, or perhaps need not. All this is avowedly not to think about post-feminism relative to a putative center, authentic source or subject, even if these are problematized.

Thinking transnationally, my contention is that as a thoroughly mediated, commodified and consumerist discourse, post-feminism is readily transnationalized via the media, commodity and consumer connectivities that today crisscross more borders more densely and more rapidly than ever before. Both the very same and similar kinds of media and consumer discourses, goods and practices that feminist

scholars have identified as vehicles for post-feminism in the West are vehicles for it elsewhere. This is an effect of globalization. “Media technologies, systems of representation, and information networks constitute the circuitry that transport modalities of power” transnationally (Hegde 2011, 1). They provide disparate, geographically distant subjects with tools and resources for the imagination and construction of new selves (Appadurai 1996; Mankekar 2008; Hegde 2011). They enable the production and circulation of affect and desire among such subjects, constituting and placing them in imagined “webs of relationality” and “interpretive communities” (Mankekar 2008, 149). The increasingly inevitable consumption of other transnationalized commodities functions likewise. Whether limited to learning and perhaps fantasizing about new goods, services and signs, or whether it extends to their material acquisition and use, consumption is deeply constitutive of new transnational subjectivities. As in the earlier cited example of post-feminist beauty adverts in Singapore (Lazar 2006), consumption of the transnational enables located subjects to fashion themselves as cosmopolitan (also Appadurai 1996; Grewal 2005; Hegde 2011).

Yet just as I emphasized in reference to these adverts, the transnationalization of post-feminism via media and consumer connectivities is highly structured and exclusionary. Consumption is structured most centrally by material means. Mere access to various kinds of transnational media and technologies, and thus to mediated interpellations and sensibilities, is also structured. Likewise the “imaginative travel engendered by media is... inflected by relations of power. Our capacity to imagine, even to fantasise, is shaped by our structural locations in social fields” (Mankekar 2008, 153). Also vastly unequal are the transnational flows and availability of different media and other consumer content. The hegemony of Western-originated

content is well-established in cultural studies of globalization. However, it is also established that this dominance amounts to neither Western cultural imperialism nor the erosion of supposedly pure and oppositional local cultures. Rather it engenders contextual and contradictory, localised and hybrid interpretations, as well as new cultural formations and subject positions (Appadurai 1996; Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Kraidy 2002).

Thus by proposing to understand post-feminism as transnationalized via media and consumer circuits especially, I certainly do not mean to suggest that it is a culture everywhere, or one with fixed or predetermined meanings wherever it emerges. I am not suggesting that any feminine subject anywhere on the globe can perform a post-feminist identity. Rather my contention is that post-feminism is potentially and variously available to globally “scattered” feminine subjects who have the material, discursive and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it. Conversely put, my contention is that post-feminism sells transnationally—from “Beyoncé” to “boob jobs” to “Brazilian waxes,” from Shanghai to Mexico City to London to Lagos where my ethnographic research on new femininities is located. It is with this analytic perspective that I differ with Gwynne’s position that:

While it would be a mistake to assert that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility may operate in any society across the globe, it is perhaps accurate to suggest that it more commonly operates in economically prosperous neoliberal nations, regardless of their geographical location. Postfeminism is, after all, strongly implicated in neoliberal governance and citizenship... and should be understood as imbricated with global neoliberal ideologies that serve not only to affirm the individualistic values of late-capitalist culture, but

also function to position feminism as redundant within democratic and ostensibly egalitarian societies (2013, 327).

I would draw Gwynne's (2013) logic to the contrary conclusion: that, precisely because post-feminism is a neoliberal, individualistic and consumerist discourse, we may find its sensibilities not only in developed or even rapidly developing national contexts. Neoliberalism is increasingly hegemonic across the globe (Grewal 2005; Ong 2006). As I previously noted, there is immense wealth in the global South, in private pockets, and hence "postcolonial elites" able to partake of the kinds of lifestyles and sensibilities post-feminism proposes. "Globalization has shrunk the distance between elites," as Arjun Appadurai succinctly puts it (1996, 9). Thus while the dominance of post-feminism in any given society may require the kinds of political, economic and cultural conditions that Gwynne (2013) outlines, the absence of these conditions does not necessarily mean the absence of the cultural sensibility. It may yet be found in elite locations.

I would also dispute Gwynne's (2013) related suggestion in the quote above that post-feminism requires the positioning of feminism as no longer locally relevant, such that it can only be meaningful in "ostensibly egalitarian societies"—in Japan versus India, say. The positioning of feminism as redundant for some women can include its presumed continued relevance or need for local others, as distinguished by class and other discursive and material lines of difference. In highly inegalitarian local contexts, post-feminism for putatively "empowered" women can meaningfully co-exist alongside feminism for putatively "still disempowered" others. Indeed this is all the more possible given the manner in which notions of women's empowerment have been appropriated and operationalized in the global South by the neoliberal

development industry. The ‘gender and development’ paradigm promoted by institutions like the World Bank, for instance, is concerned with gendered resource-poverty and with issues such as girls’ access to schooling and women’s access to microcredit (Wilson 2011; Switzer 2013). These are important issues, certainly, even if feminists may problematize the ways in which they are hegemonically constructed. But the point that I want to make here is that they are deeply classed issues. They do not include or concern all women in the global South. Rather they construct classed subjects in the global South as still in need of putative empowerment and, however implicitly or explicitly, this positions their class-privileged counterparts as post- or past empowerment. If an increasingly dominant neoliberal definition of women’s empowerment means and is measured by their access to material resources and consumer goods, women already enjoying education, careers, disposable incomes and measures of consumer choice and cosmopolitan lifestyle are in the position of “already empowered.”

Vanita Reddy (2006) reads in the middle-class Indian women’s magazine, *Femina*, the kind of classed bifurcation that I am contending here between a certain local feminism and what I am calling a transnational post-feminist sensibility. She writes that *Femina’s* attention to grassroots feminist activism for social change in India is “constantly interrupted by its simultaneous commitment to the ‘female empowerment’ generated by middle-class consumerism” (2006, 67). Grewal notes similarly that:

the current phase of capitalism in India is producing a new kind of popular, cosmopolitan feminism that seems to operate differently than the feminism that many have come to associate with women’s movements in India. This

feminism constructs women as working professionals at the same time as it commodifies feminism through beauty and fashion culture (2005, 31).

Notably neither Reddy (2006) nor Grewal (2005) use the term post-feminism, a question of analytic framing that I return to in the next section of the article. Also referring to a global Southern context such as India, Chen argues that because “feminist work to improve women’s political and legal rights has been conducted mostly at the grassroots level,” this seems to enable urban class-privileged women “to bypass feminism altogether,” to take up the commodified emancipations of post-feminism (2012, 223). Chen’s notion of “feminism bypassed” is very useful for my present argument if it may be shed of any Eurocentric and teleological suggestion that particular localized feminisms should ordinarily proceed post-feminism in the non-West, as in the Western historical example. Globalization “plays havoc with the hegemony of Eurochronology” (Appadurai 1996, 30). It produces “new spatialities and temporalities” and disproves any assumption that the nation is “a unified spatiotemporality” (Sassen 2000, 215). Thus it is the contradictions and disjunctures of globalization itself that account for what may seem the contradictions of my argument here, namely that for some kinds of women in the global South there may now be a certain post-feminism before a certain feminism.

I agree with Western feminist scholars of post-feminism who contend that the culture and sensibility emerged historically in the West and in direct response to a second-wave feminist time. Yet because post-feminism is a commodification and hollowing out of this feminist history, I am arguing that under conditions of globalization, post-feminism is sold and consumed transnationally without this history. In fact, the literature on post-feminism in the West supports my contention

that the culture sells without an explicit consciousness of feminism, with findings that young women take for granted celebratory and now commonsensical rhetorics of “choice,” “having it all,” “empowerment,” yet cannot articulate their national or local feminist histories or make sense of their personal experiences of pervasive sexism in critical feminist terms (e.g. Pomerantz, Raby and Stefanik 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011). This is precisely the post-feminist “undoing of feminism” (McRobbie 2009). What I am arguing is that it occurs transnationally too. Via its popular mediation and commodification, via global neoliberal institutions and connectivities, and via its internal logic to depoliticize and do away with feminism, post-feminism is readily put into transnational circulation and rendered transnational culture.

Transnational post-feminism: Analytic implications and empirical examples

Having proposed a theoretical account of how post-feminist culture may travel across borders, in this section of the article I consider the implications for “post-feminism” as a critical feminist concept. I make a case for the analytic value of a revised conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture. I do so by outlining what it means and could afford feminist cultural scholars to work with this new concept, for which I also briefly present as an illustrative example my empirical research on new femininities in Lagos, Nigeria. Reconceptualizing post-feminism as transnational culture in the manner and for the reasons that I have proposed above provides a rigorous theoretical framework to broach a cultural phenomenon that, with and through globalization, is already empirically unfolding. Raka Shome and Radha Hegde warn that critical cultural scholars must keep up with globalization or “be left

wandering in situations of theoretical stasis,” relying on long-established maps of culture, identity and difference that look quite distinct from those that are “emerging through and in the global and that are exploding and imploding in unexpected ways” (2002, 178-179). In my view, McRobbie’s (2009) figuration of the “global girl” illustrates Shome and Hegde’s (2002) point. Ultimately resting on an epistemologically and empirically insufficient binary of “affluent West” versus “poor rest,” it cannot offer an adequate theoretical account of new feminine cultures and subjects in the global South that have evident similarities and continuities with those deemed post-feminist in the West.

A conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture can serve this complex and urgent purpose. In the first place it allows us to at all see and so begin to direct our critical attention to the fact that post-feminist sensibilities, representations, commodities and practices cross borders and histories, and interpellate subjects across these; and, do so in places and with effects that cannot be neatly predicted. As I have argued, an understanding of post-feminism as a culture put into transnational circulation includes the understanding that the culture does not travel or arrive in a unitary or prototypical Western form. Enabled by our new conceptual view to see the possibility of post-feminism in non-Western contexts, we are thereby also enabled to see and account for the fact that in these contexts post-feminism is not simply “Western culture” or simply engendering “Westernizing” effects, however construed. As such, a conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture opens up while also better nuancing critical feminist cultural enquiry. It allows us to ask questions such as if and how and where post-feminist culture is emergent outside the West; with what meanings and effects; addressed to which kinds of subjects; via which transnational connectivities and/or local sites; with, through and/or contrary to which

other transnational and local cultural formations, and so on. This is instead of foreclosing such questions as impossible or incoherent, or alternatively prefiguring or delimiting their answers.

To broach such questions, a necessary analytic and methodological task becomes to specify how post-feminism as both culture and concept is meaningful in our various local contexts of research. In other words, working with a conceptual view of post-feminism as transnational culture demands that we attend to how the culture is localized. This entails attention to the closely contextual: the histories, politics, structures and cultural logics with which post-feminism may variously articulate on the ground. For instance, I have proposed class as a key structural category that positions subjects in the global South with differential access to transnational post-feminist culture, much less material capacity to enact its consumerist subject positions and sensibilities. Looking at class in our particular research contexts is likely to point us to other axes of historicized local differentiation that it structures or coincides with, that contribute to constituting quite divergent local femininities: divides such as rural/urban, religious/secular, putatively ‘traditional/modern’, ‘parochial/cosmopolitan’ and so on.² According to national context such differences may coincide with ethnicity, too. As such the conceptual reframing of post-feminism that I am proposing by no means ignores the nation. Rather, in line with what I have proffered as a feminist transnational analytic perspective, it eschews any view of the nation as internally homogenous and/or neatly boundaried. It invites us to instead take into consideration how the nation is constituted, and likely contested, by internal difference as well as by its connections to its myriad “elsewheres” or “outsides.”

² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for helping me to articulate this point.

Radhika Parameswaran (2004) offers an example of the kind of analysis I am outlining here. Albeit not framed in the conceptual language of “post-feminism,” her analysis demonstrates the “complex and contradictory ways in which hegemonic constructions of class, nation, and gender structure the politics of feminine empowerment” (2004, 348). Parameswaran’s (2004) concern is with Indian media representations of local winners of global beauty pageants such as “Miss World.” She sees the beauty queens figured as “role models” or exemplars of a new, neoliberal, consumer and putatively empowered Indian femininity. She argues that their deeply classed brand of femininity is used to represent the nation, to its middle-class citizens especially, as well as in certain nationalist assertions of India’s belonging in the global and modern. A new and transnational style of femininity serves to imagine a “new” nation, in short. Yet it is a style materially impossible for the vast majority of Indian women—in a nation in which almost a quarter of the population subsist on less than \$1.25 a day.³

Of course to posit transnational post-feminism as constituting new femininities in the global South begs the question of what comprised the old or now-shifted or reconstituted. The work of understanding how post-feminism is localized necessarily includes consideration of how the culture articulates with prior salient local constructs and norms concerning women’s status as well as “women’s empowerment” or, indeed, “feminism.” An example of such analysis is the earlier-cited observation that, in India, new consumerist and individualized notions of feminine empowerment co-exist and to some extent conflict with a prior, more activist and grassroots feminism (Grewal 2005; Reddy 2006; Chen 2012). Lazar (2011) provides a contrary and equally instructive example from Singapore of how transnational post-feminism

³ See <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND>

necessarily meets local historicized gendered conditions. She notes briefly that the Singaporean state has long promoted economic goals of gender equality, in fact prior to second-wave feminism in the West, of which one effect has been the undermining of feminism as a local politics. She proposes that this discursive and material history of “government-given rights and opportunities [for women] makes mainstream Singapore fertile ground for the postfeminist distancing of feminism to take root so well” (Lazar 2011, 39).

But even where there are neither meaningful state positions on women’s rights nor a particularly explicit or recognized “feminism” to distance, this kind of contextualizing and localizing analysis remains possible and crucial. This relates to my earlier theoretical arguments that post-feminism can come to make local sense without a certain or marked local feminism, past or present. In such contexts, as in Nigeria where my research focuses, we can ask after traditional or at least prior cultural notions, sites and practices of women’s empowerment to better understand post-feminist logics and shifts in relation. Doing so we may find shifts from more communal to more individualized constructs of empowerment, for example, or shifts from the maternal as a putative source and signification of feminine power to other kinds of femininities. Or, as earlier theorized, we may find or be precisely concerned to show that the positioning of certain kinds of local feminine subjects as “already empowered” does and need not occur with reference to feminism as oppositional politics or struggle because, in itself, “women’s empowerment” is becoming a neoliberal and postfeminist commonsense and value. In contexts where “feminism” may have no clear or agreed local referent, thinking in terms of post-feminism is still possible and valuable, including to draw our critical attention to the contradiction of

“post-feminism before feminism” and to consider whether and how post-feminism may contribute to undermining the emergence or consolidation of local feminisms.

“Already empowered” is the short and contradictory answer to the question of how the young Nigerian women in my research see themselves. I will outline this research very briefly and schematically to give further empirical illustration of my proposed conceptualization of post-feminism and its analytic implications and usefulness. My research concerns class-privileged and educated young women in Lagos, Nigeria who dress in what I call a hyper-feminine style characterized by the spectacular use of elements such as cascading hair extensions, long and manicured acrylic nails, heavy and immaculate make-up, false eyelashes and towering high heels. On the surface of it, these women look like the luminous figure of the “post-feminist masquerade” that McRobbie theorizes, “triumphantly re-instating the spectacle of excessive femininity” (2009, 66). My research does not assume that such stylized Lagos women are, or more precisely, see and fashion themselves as post-feminist subjects, but nor does it presume that they could not due to their location in the global South. It asks what kinds of feminine subjectivities such women are performatively constituting in and through their particular style; and it does so conceptually and analytically open to the possibility that “post-feminism” may be among the answers, and methodologically attentive to the various transnational connectivities within which the women may locate themselves.

On the basis of semi-structured interviews with 18 Lagos women aged between 18 and 35 who tend to dress in the style in question, I argue that they do see themselves as post-feminist subjects and, in this, privileged global consumer citizens. For instance, the women represent themselves as freely choosing what their accounts reveal to be a highly normative, disciplined, laborious and sometimes physically

painful style of dress. They insist that they dress for and to please themselves, certainly not men, and subject their appearance to intense self-scrutiny because positing and experiencing beauty as power. They insist, too, that being or becoming career women, they do or will fund their expensive style by themselves. To give an indication of the sheer cost of this style, and its marked elitism and exclusivity in the local context (and elsewhere, I would argue), it includes “human hair” extensions as expensive as \$1,500; multiple trips per week or month to the hair salon, which the women deemed “cheap”; Chanel handbags, Christian Louboutin shoes, and so on.

That the women in my research position themselves as independently affording their spectacular style further encourages their view that they are entitled to it. In fact, they very closely cite the post-feminist consumerist logic that adult women are now entitled “to unapologetically embrace feminine practices and stereotypes, and... to become ‘girls’ once more” (Lazar 2009, 372). Many explicitly name their style as “girly” and themselves as “girly-girls” but emphasize that these positions signify neither feminine frivolity nor traditional domesticity but rather stylized freedom. Connected to family and friends in the Nigerian diaspora and well-travelled themselves, in half of the cases having pursued further education in the West or South Africa, they take it utterly for granted that they share cosmopolitan consumer sensibilities, practices and reference points with demographically similar women elsewhere. They show themselves to be thoroughly plugged in to post-feminist popular media produced in the West and distributed transnationally. For instance, they casually and knowingly reference iconic post-feminist mediated figures—almost exclusively non-white ones—such as Beyoncé, Rihanna and Kim Kardashian (Butler 2013).

In all this, as I have said, my research participants position themselves as already empowered—unlike other local women, let me add. The particular work and value of the concept of post-feminism in my research is to make sense of the simultaneous or entangled logics of distinction, displacement and return that I heard from these women: their sense of being beyond some other state or kind of femininity, indeed beyond power, from and thanks to which they are both empowered and entitled to a celebratory reclamation of femininity. But while I centre the concept of post-feminism in my analysis, it is not all there is to it. With regard to participants’ assertion that they independently finance their spectacular consumption, for instance, I argue that this may sound “obviously” post-feminist but is not *per se*. In the first place I situate the participants in long histories of women working outside the home in West Africa, histories that predate second-wave feminism in the West (e.g. Dogbe 2003; George 2014). I also show that the women were oriented to locally dominant and hyper-moralized imaginations of young Nigerian women funding consumerist lifestyles via transactional heterosexual relationships (e.g. Odejide 2007; Bakare-Yusuf, 2011). One participant described this as: “the *worst thing* I think that I could be known for.” Therefore I argue that even as the women’s assertion of normative financial independence further enabled and bolstered their taking up of post-feminist positions, in itself it was not a performance of post-feminist empowerment and “can-do” but sexual respectability.

Given that the hyper-sexualization of femininity has been deemed central to post-feminist culture (in the West), the contrary example in my research is particularly useful to illustrate that the new view of post-feminism being proposed in this article is not an imperializing or all-encompassing one that would flatten out considerations of difference, of the contextual, of the contradictory. To borrow Aihwa Ong’s analogous

point about understanding neoliberalism as a transnationally migrating rationality, understanding post-feminism as a transnationally migrating culture does not engender a reductive analysis of “a uniform global condition of “[Post-feminism]” writ large” (2006, 14). Quite the contrary, what it does is offer feminist cultural scholars a critical framework and language to see, trace and try to make sense of the lines of complex connection and disjuncture between new and quite particular logics of femininity across transnational contexts. It offers explicitly theorized grounds to think in terms of “post-feminism” in local contexts where the very notion and language may seem ahistorical and paradoxical, such as where a particular history of feminism may not apply or where the notion of feminism itself may be contentious or deemed an illegitimate Western cultural import. An understanding of post-feminism as transnational means that the scholar thinking and working in terms of post-feminism in the global South—as a growing number are already doing—is not importing a foreign concept and language uncritically, but rather making a deliberate and theoretically grounded assertion about globalization, neoliberalism and their cultural contradictions.

Thus far it is not “post-feminism” but closely related concepts and terms such as “neoliberal feminism,” “consumer feminism” and “cosmopolitan feminism” that have tended to be deployed in transnational feminist cultural scholarship on new femininities (e.g. Parameswaran 2004; Grewal 2005; Butler and Desai 2008). I want to propose not that the concept of “post-feminism” is superior or more apt for transnational feminist purposes but that, doing particular work, it offers a particular analytic value or purchase. In the global South as in the global North in reference to which it has been elaborated, the concept of “post-feminism” works—analytically but also rhetorically and politically—to frame and thereby help us better broach, and

problematize, certain aspects of the new gendered cultural phenomena with which we may be concerned: phenomena such as the resurgence of normative practices of femininity; the intensification of fashion and beauty norms and practices, including an intensified surveillance of women's embodied appearances; the "girlification" of adult femininity; the (hetero)sexualization of femininity; and the certain popular entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist values. Critically, too, the concept of post-feminism is particularly suitable to encapsulate and represent the deeply political and insidious logic that I have called "already empowered": the discursive doing away with the need for feminism that is variously happening in both the global South and North, that works by distancing the need for feminism whether locating it in some other time or in some other place.

Yet in making a case here for both the applicability and value of the concept of post-feminism for transnational feminist cultural scholarship and for understanding certain kinds of new femininities in the global South, let me be clear that I am not proposing a one-way flow of theory, from "West to rest." The starting point of this article is a critique of the existing literature on post-feminism for its tendency to not see beyond its own borders: for its Eurocentricism; for ignoring or inadequately accounting for globalization and the transnational; for working with too-simple binaries and dialectics of global difference; for concluding, implicitly but sometimes also explicitly, that post-feminism is "for Western girls only" or "for Western girls really." I have sought in this article to bring theoretical, methodological and empirical insights from transnational feminist cultural studies to bear on this literature. My aim has been to argue and show that there are conceptual and analytic gains from closer dialogue between these bodies of scholarship. If post-feminism as culture has "gone

global,” as it were, our critical feminist conceptualizations and analyses of it must, too.

References

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2011. “Nudity and morality: legislating women’s bodies and dress in Nigeria.” In *African Sexualities: A Reader*, edited by Sylvia Tamale, 116-129. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.

Blue, Morgan. 2012. “The Best of Both Worlds? Youth, Gender and a Post-feminist Sensibility in Disney’s Hannah Montana.” *Feminist Media Studies* (ahead of print): 1-16.

Bradfield, Shelley-Jean. 2014. "Society's Emerging Femininities: Neoliberal, Postfeminist and Hybrid Identities on Television in South Africa." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, edited by Carter, Cynthia, Steiner, Linda and McLaughlin, Lisa, 280-289. London and New York: Routledge, 280-289.

Butler, Jess. 2013. "For White Girls Only? Post-feminism and the Politics of Inclusion." *Feminist Formations* 25 (1): 35-58.

Butler, Pamela, and Jigna Desai. 2008. "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8 (2): 1-31.

Chen, Eva. 2012. "Shanghai(ed) Babies." *Feminist Media Studies* 12 (2): 214-228.

Dogbe, Esi. 2003. "Unraveled Yarns: Dress, Consumption, and Women's Bodies in Ghanaian culture." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 7(3/4): 377-396.

George, Abosede. 2014. *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development In Colonial Lagos*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Gill, Rosalind. 2007. "Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2): 147-166.

Gill, Rosalind. 2008. "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Post-feminist Times." *Subjectivity*. 25: 432-445.

Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff. 2011. "Introduction." In *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 1-17. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Gonick, Marnina, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose and Lisa Weems. 2009. "Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What Comes after Girl Power?" *Girlhood Studies* 2 (2): 1-9.

Grewal, Inderpal. 2005. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. 1994. "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity." In *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, edited by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 1-33. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. 2001. "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality." *GLQ* 7 (4): 663-679.

Gwynne, Joel. 2013. "Japan, Postfeminism and the Consumption of Sexual(ised) Schoolgirls in Male-authored Contemporary Manga." *Feminist Theory* 14 (3): 325-343.

Hegde, Radha. 2011. "Introduction." In *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*, edited by Radha Hegde, 1-21. New York: New York University Press.

Koffman, Ofra and Rosalind Gill. 2013. "'The Revolution Will Be Led by a 12-Year-Old Girl': Girl Power and Global Biopolitics." *Feminist Review* 105: 83-102.

Kraidy, Marwan. 2002. "Hybridity in Cultural Globalization." *Communication Theory* 12 (3): 316–339.

Lazar, Michelle. 2006. "'Discover the Power of Femininity!': Analyzing Global Power Femininity in Local Advertising." *Feminist Media Studies*. 6 (4): 505-517.

Lazar, Michelle. 2009. "Entitled to Consume: Post-feminist Femininity and a Culture of Post-critique." 3 (4): 371-400.

Lazar, Michelle. 2011. "The Right to Be Beautiful: Post-feminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising." In *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 37-51. Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan.

Mankekar, Purnima. 2008. "Media and Mobility in a Transnational World." In *The Media and Social Theory*, edited by Desmond Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynebee, 145-158. Oxon: Routledge.

McRobbie, Angela. 2007. "Top Girls?" *Cultural Studies* 21 (4): 718-737.

McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Mohanty, Chandra. 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn): 61-88.

Odejide, Abiola. 2007. "'What Can a Woman do?'" Being Women in a Nigerian University." *Feminist Africa* 8: 42-59.

Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Parameswaran, Radhika. 2004. "Global Queens, National Celebrities: Tales of Feminine Triumph in Post-liberalization India." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 (4): 346-370.

Pomerantz, Shauna, Rebecca Raby and Andrea Stefanik. 2013. "Girls Run the World? Caught between Sexism and Post-feminism in School." *Gender & Society* 27 (2): 185-207.

Reddy, Vanita. 2006. "The Nationalization of the Global Indian Woman." *South Asian Popular Culture* 4 (1): 61-85.

Renold, Emma, and Jessica Ringrose. 2011. "Schizoid Subjectivities? Re-theorizing Teen Girls' Sexual Cultures in an Era of 'Sexualization.'" *Journal of Sociology* 47 (4): 389-409.

Salmenniemi, Suvi, and Adamson, Maria. 2014. "New heroines of labour: Domesticating post-feminism and neoliberal capitalism in Russia." *Sociology* (online first): 1-18.

Sassen, Saskia. 2000. "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization." *Public Culture* 12(1) : 215–232

Sensoy, Ozlem, and Elizabeth Marshall. 2010. "Missionary Girl Power: Saving the 'Third World' One Girl at a Time." *Gender and Education* 22 (3): 295-311.

Shome, Raka, and Radha Hegde. 2002. "Culture, Communication, and the Challenge of Globalization." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2): 172-189.

Sun, Wanning. 2011. "Maid as Metaphor: Dagongmei and a New Pathway to Chinese Transnational Capital." In *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*, edited by Radha Hegde, 196-211. New York: New York University Press.

Switzer, Heather. 2013. "(Post) Feminist Development Fables: *The Girl Effect* and the Production of Sexual Subjects." *Feminist Theory* 14 (3): 345-360.

Simidele Dosekun
Final draft – April 2015

Tasker, Yvonne and Diane Negra, eds. 2007. *Interrogating Post-feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wilson, Kalpana. 2011. “Race, Gender and Neoliberalism: Changing Visual Representations in Development.” *Third World Quarterly* 32 (2): 315-331.

Wilson, Kalpana. 2012. *Race, Racism and Development: Interrogating History, Discourse and Practice*. London: Zed Books.

Biography: Simidele Dosekun is a PhD candidate in Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King’s College London. Her research is on new and spectacular femininities in Lagos, Nigeria.