Ruth Williams

Moving Beyond *Necessary Targets*: The Role of the American Feminist in Transnational Activism

In a heated exchange between J.S. and Melissa--the main characters of Eve Ensler's 2001 play *Necessary Targets*--the women discuss group therapy sessions they have been conducting with women refugees from the Bosnian War (1992-1995). J.S. confesses: "I can't help these women. They need homes, a country and care" (Ensler 17). Her doubt is a result of the resistance many of the women show to therapy. While J.S. assumes that the women respond unfavorably because they feel "patronized" by the therapists, Melissa blithely concludes that their resistance is simply a therapeutic stage: "These women need an outlet for their rage and despair. We are necessary targets. I've been in other wars. It always begins like this" (17). Melissa clearly feels that her proper role with these women is to be a "necessary target," absorbing blows and pressing onward until the women forcefully break through their trauma. Implicit within her statement is the notion that playing the "necessary target" gets good results in such situations. What goes unanswered, however, is telling: are these results good for the patients or simply good for the therapist?

Ensler's play asks whether being a "necessary target," as Melissa suggests, is the most productive role for the American feminist working with women in transnational settings. Ensler is keenly aware of the discomfort a privileged American feminist encounters when travelling from her home country to work with women whose suffering is compounded by having little in the way of material resources. *Necessary Targets* might be seen as an artistic extension of Ensler's humanitarian activism; in fact, the play

grew directly from her aid work in Bosnia[1]: "*Necessary Targets* is based on the stories of the women I met in Bosnia. It was their community, their holding on to love, their insane humanity in the face of catastrophe, their staggering refusal to have or seek revenge that fueled me and ultimately moved me to write this play" (Ensler *Random House*).

Unlike Ensler, J.S. and Melissa have been sent as part of a presidential commission; specifically, their task is to help Bosnian women who seem to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder related to their experience of war trauma and mass rape. From the outset of the play, it is clear that J.S. and Melissa are on a crash course. In their first conversation, J.S. confesses her ignorance of the region and conflict: "I read the news, but until about a week ago, the Balkans was not exactly next on my vacation map" (8). Prior to travelling to Bosnia, J.S. has been comfortably living in Manhattan, practicing psychotherapy with upper-class clients. J.S. concludes that she has been asked to join the commission primarily because of what was "at one time [her] field of work," the "trauma" of eating disorders (9). She concludes she's skilled to head to Bosnia not because of her specific knowledge of the region or war, but because "Trauma is trauma" (9).

Conversely, Melissa is, as J.S. dubs her, "a war specialist"; Melissa says she is a "trauma counselor" who "only work[s] with seriously traumatized populations" (8-9). She explains to J.S. that she is writing a book "investigating the effect of war in the creation and development of trauma, focusing primarily on communities of women, on those specific atrocities that traumatize women" (9-10). For her, this trip is "work"; as she says simply, "It's what I do" (9).

Since the narrative of *Necessary Targets* appears to be born from Ensler's interrogation of the work she herself has done with women across the globe, it is instructive to examine the trajectory she sets out for J.S. and Melissa as an expression of how she situates herself as a transnational

---

[1] *CurtainUp* review claims that Necessary Targets was written based on work Ensler did in Bosnia during 1995 at the tail end of the Bosnian War.

feminist activist. In this paper, I will identify and critique Ensler's construction of the "proper" role of the American transnational feminist activist as it emerges from the pages of *Necessary Targets*. Ultimately, while Ensler's representation of the conflict of transnational feminist activism is admirable given that the topic does not get much play outside of academic circles, I propose that the play fails to present its ultimate heroine—J.S.—as possessing a productive transnational feminism. In the end, Ensler presents an Oprahfied version of activism that emphasizes personal suffering and triumphant survival for the Bosnian women as well as its feminist heroine, J.S.

Despite its problematic end, *Necessary Targets* provides a jumping off point from which to discuss the future of transnational feminism from an American feminist perspective. As recent global events illustrate, the welfare of countries' economies as well as their people, are inextricably linked; consequently, American feminists must think not only of the good work we can do domestically, but how such work may effect change internationally. If we are to be engaged in successful work across our national borders, we must be self-reflexive in our approach; in other words, we must temper our well-intentioned desire to do good. Without such reflexivity, as *Necessary Targets* illustrates, American feminists will fail to collaborate in ways that bring about effective change. Thus, alongside my critical reading of the play's characters and plot, I will examine how an American feminist who desires to work successfully with women, feminists, and organizations in other countries can construct a role that moves beyond a "necessary target."

I. The Feminist-as-Rescuer

In reading *Necessary Targets* as an expression of Ensler's approach to transnational feminism, we can begin by identifying the various activist approaches embodied by J.S. and Melissa. In the narrative of the play, Ensler employs a third character, Zlata, to serve as a voice of dissent, constantly challenging J.S. and Melissa. As J.S. and Melissa attempt to start the first group therapy session, Zlata demands "What do you want with us?":

> J.S. I have come here … well, (*Looking at Melissa.*) we have come here … to help you. (*Everyone stares.*)
>
> Zlata. And how to you plan to do that?
>
> J.S. I … well … we … I am a clinical therapist and you have … […]
>
> Melissa. We are here to help you, well … talk. […]
>
> J.S. We are here to help you talk about the war, about that … (The women laugh.)
>
> Zlata. You flew all the way here for that? Two American doctors to "help" a group of poor Bosnian refugees talk about the war? What did you think we were talking about before you came? (15).

While the other women respond to J.S. and Melissa as exotic outsiders who look "so pretty and so modern," Zlata contests the idea that there is some special skill these two women posses which qualifies them to be care-givers to this group (14). Pointedly, Zlata names the therapists' Americaness as tied up with their assumption of the helper role, suggesting that she is all too aware of the tendency of American outsiders to present themselves as saviors to disadvantaged "others." Later, Zlata identifies J.S.'s expression of wanting to "help" as resulting from a perspective which casts the Bosnian women through a patronizing lens: "Help?," she says, "Why do you assume I want your help? You Americans don't know how to stop helping. You move so fast, cleaning things up. Fixing" (25). Here, Zlata's sarcasm is pointed as she asserts that the help these women offer has less to do with the Bosnian women and more to do with their American desire to "fix" the world.

In "Challenges in Transnational Feminist Mobilization," Aili Mari Tripp identifies this feminist-as-rescuer approach to transnational work as one which uses a "rescue paradigm . . . that seems to legitimate ignoring local actors altogether by stressing their neediness and backwardness" (302). She states that this paradigm leads "not only to fantasies of rescue that exaggerate Northern women's power and freedom but often also to an inability to see local feminists as active, intelligent, competent partners

for their efforts" (303). The extreme outcome of this view is that feminists of the global North convince themselves that they are "helping" women of the global South when in fact they are simply making themselves feel good. Clearly, Ensler means to use Zlata to critique the American feminist-as-rescuer narrative which Tripp describes.

While Ensler paints J.S. as a hesitant interloper simply trying to do "good," she casts Melissa as a feminist whose career aspirations blind her to the negative consequences of her behavior. In the first group therapy scene, Melissa explains to the group why she's recording the sessions on tape: "It's important that people know your stories the way you want to tell them" (15). While this sounds to be a legitimate feminist endeavor—expose the "outside" world to stories of oppression and suffering that have been deliberately obscured by those in power—it is clear that Ensler means for her audience to condemn Melissa's approach.

When Melissa urges the women, "Tell us your stories," Zlata fires back: "You and everybody else" (15). Zlata accuses Melissa of "Recording refugee tears," an act she calls a "sexy business," designed only to interest people in the titillating details of these women's victimization (21). When J.S. attempts to suggest to Melissa that her obsessive recording of the women is "invasive," Melissa responds: "This recorder has helped women everywhere I've been. It is a device which legitimizes their experience, documents it, heals it..." (26). Melissa explains her approach: "We're here to trigger, provoke, release. Move in, move out" (26). Melissa treats the women's stories as a product which she must ferret out of Bosnia to present to audiences in the U.S.; her rationalization of such invasion is that these stories will be "helping so many people" (15). In fact, we know from the first scene of the play that Melissa feels "It is essential that [she] complete the book this year"; consequently, it is difficult to see her actions as fully altruistic (10). Furthermore, her approach seems to disregard the psychotherapeutic norm of patient confidentiality in favor of treating these women as research specimens. While it is possible that Melissa has obtained permission to record and share these stories publicly, Ensler suggests that her behavior stems more from a self-centered goal for career advance-

ment rather than any therapeutic model. Such a suggestion makes it easy to assume that Melissa has never thought to stop to ask if these women want their trauma shared with the world. Melissa, as Ensler portrays her, is solely interested in getting the Bosnian women to "tell their stories" so that she can move on to the next "seriously traumatized population" (9).

While Ensler's characterization of Melissa feels a tad hyperbolic, it does allow for a critique of the feminist who works with disenfranchised populations out of a vague sense of "doing good" that is, in reality, informed mostly by her desire to do good to her career. In their essay "Solidarity Work in Transnational Feminism," Linda Carty and Monisha Das Gupta indict what they see as an "industry of 'studying poor women' that generates a somewhat steady source of funding for middle-class women globally in the name of feminism" (108). They suggest that this "gravy train" reinforces class differences which are at odds with a transnational feminism whose goal is to allow Third World women to be presented and theorized as agents of their own destiny (108). Obviously, such motivations run counter to the purpose of the sort of transnational feminist work which enacts what Chandra Mohanty calls a "feminism without borders" (2). Such cross-border work "acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders present...[and] envisions change and social justice working across these lines of demarcation and division" (2). Melissa's use of the women's suffering is enabled by the border she creates between herself and the Bosnian women—they are victims, she is whole; they need her help, she has the skills to help. These divisions allow Melissa to objectify the women's suffering and use it for her own gain while still sustaining a benevolent feminist-as-rescuer guise. Ensler is clear that such a commodification of the suffering of women is deplorable; thus, it is hardly surprising that Ensler, through Zlata, condemns Melissa as nothing more than a "story vulture" (Ensler 27).

II. The Spectacle of the "Othered" Woman

While Ensler clearly deplores Melissa's approach, it is worth looking more closely at how a transnational American feminist might avoid becoming

an unwitting "story vulture" in work with less-advantaged populations. Given the penchant for traumatized populations to be fetishized by global audiences, specifically those in the West, it is important to interrogate not only our self-narrative of American feminist-as-rescuer, but also how we represent those we help to the world-at-large. In a scene mid-way through the play, Melissa and J.S. argue about Melissa's "pushing" on the women for details of their trauma. J.S. chastises Melissa, pointing out: "Seada [the most disturbed woman in the group] didn't have her terrible experience in order to serve your book" (36). Melissa defends herself: "I may want recognition but only so my work will be seen and these women, their pain will be heard" (36). Once again, it is Zlata who realizes how exploitive such telling can become despite the author's good intentions (17). She explains to J.S. why she's resistant to spill the details of her own particular trauma:

> You only care about the story, the gory details of the story [...] you want us to be different than you are so you can convince yourselves it wouldn't happen there where you are—that's why you turn us into stories, into beasts, communists, people who live in a strange country and speak a strange language—then you can feel safe, superior. Then afterwards we become freaks, the stories of freaks—fax please—get us one raped Bosnian woman, preferably gang-raped, preferably English-speaking (24-25).

Zlata is well-aware that the American media tends to feed on tragedies that happen outside national borders, fetishizing the victimization of "others." Ensler's inclusion of Zlata's speech on this subject indicates that she understands how such representations can exacerbate the problem of the "Third World difference" in which the "othered" woman cannot function as an empowered individual, only as a helpless victim. Zlata's list of the differences that make her "strange"—nation, language, victim status—suggest how our representations of those we seek to help can enforce an otherness that in turn creates a crippling imbalance of perceived power.

In her essay "Violence in the Other Country," Rey Chow explains how the "strange"-ing of the "other" woman works: "This is the cross-cultural

syndrome in which the "Third World,' as a site of the 'raw' material that is 'monstrosity,' is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle, entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the 'First World'" (348). Like Zlata, Chow specifically invokes media representations as problematic: "Locked behind the bars of our television screens, we become repelled by what is happening 'over there,' in a way that confirms the customary view, in the U.S. at least, that ideology exists only in the 'other' (anti-U.S.) country" (348). As Chow says of China so might Ensler say of Bosnia: the depictions of the violence in the country allow us to treat "the 'Other'"—the other woman and the other country—as a screen upon "which the unthinkable, that which breaks the limits of civilized imagination, is projected" (351). Problematically, in making this suffering "unthinkable" we fail to see how similar suffering happens within our own borders nor are we compelled to ask how our nation has contributed to the suffering happening "over there."

Turning the suffering of Third World women into a fetishized spectacle is obviously reprehensible—an action many feminists would seek to avoid; however, in representing the "strange"-ness of the "othered" women, American feminists can inadvertently create a narrative in which they cannot avoid becoming the feminist-as-rescuer. When representations of the "othered" women emphasize their absolute difference from "us," it becomes too easy to view ourselves as empowered. Mohanty suggests that such representations of the absolute difference of Third World women are "predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives" (42). Through the spectacle of the othered, victimized Third World woman the Western feminist gains a sense of control and power that she may not actually have in her home country. Thus, we can see how the narrative of the "other" woman as "freak," as Zlata puts it, becomes essential to feeding the feminist-as-rescuer narrative. As Mohanty notes, "one enables and sustains the other" (42). In *Necessary Targets*, Ensler uses Zlata as a voice of critique, calling Melissa and J.S. to accept that neither the "rescuing" nor the "strange"-ing approach really results in "help."

III. A Ruthlessly Local Global Approach

While Ensler critiques the feminist-as-rescuer position and the "othered" woman as spectacle, the main stage of action in the play takes place within an isolated container. By container, I mean to suggest that there is a lack of local context in the play that is troubling when viewed as an indicator of Ensler's feminist transnational approach. While it is easy to assume that J.S. and Melissa have been given access to the women through some local Bosnian organization or governmental body, Ensler chooses not to include such details in the play. Of course, it must be admitted that this lack of detail does simplify the play's narrative, it does not reflect the local perspective necessary for a productive transnational work.

On a basic level, when non-local (or "global") feminists fail to work closely with their local counterparts, they can often make the situation worse. In her essay, Tripp describes a productive transnational activism as one that works closely with local partners: "Taking action that affects another society requires consulting local organizations regarding the advisability of a strategy, its timing, and the way in which the issues are framed in the international arena." (306). Obviously, a productive transnational feminist activist will invest time and energy into the local context via research as well as dialogue with local actors. While Ensler critiques J.S. and Melissa's ignorance of the local context through their interactions with Zlata, I would suggest that she could have included in the play the presence of those local actors who were undoubtedly working with the women prior to the arrival of the American therapists[2].

---

[2] Perhaps, one such local organization that could have been included is the Center for Women War Victims which has worked extensively with women refugees. Interestingly, just as J.S. and Melissa do in NT, the Center ran group therapy sessions for women in refugee camps in which they were encouraged to discuss their experiences and work through their trauma. Initially, the Center intended to focus their work only with women who had been raped; however, after working in the camps, they "changed the project and put a stress on working within the women's communities in the camps to help women regain control over their lives. We planned to form self-help groups in the camps led by our help-givers and to help women financially with regular small amounts of money to help them feel more secure and in control" (Belic and Kesic). While Ensler never mentions whether she herself knew of or worked with CWWV, the Center's methodology is in direct contrast to Melissa's approach: "activists

The effect of such an inclusion would be two-fold: first, it would indicate that the therapeutic set-up which J.S. and Melissa enter has not been spontaneously created by them. Rather, their work is made possible because of the work of local organizations who have instituted a structure of care prior to the therapists' arrival. While their work has the capacity to positively contribute—perhaps even expand—these structures of care, they are not the sole organizers or authors of the "good" being done with these Bosnian women. Secondly, in the case of the Bosnian conflict, Ensler's failure to include local activists means that real-life local women who were active in caring for "their own" are left out of the pages of this account of history. Ultimately though, in eliding the work of local agencies who are attempting to help local women, Ensler feeds back into the narrative of Western/American feminist-as-rescuer who arrives on the scene to transform the local culture on her own.

To prevent such pitfalls, a ruthlessly local contextualization of transnational work is necessary. In other words, we cannot let our global sense overcome our common sense; we need to bring both to the table. Even in situations in which formalized structures of care do not exist locally, our contributions should not be framed as impositions; instead, they should be conceived of as facilitations, additions, and expansions which respond directly to the needs of those in the local scene. From informal partnerships with local organizations or individuals to full-blown formal partnerships, to simple conversations with locals—such contextualizations of our activism are necessary for the creation of effective transnational collaboration. Ultimately, transnational work has the possibility to enact powerful change both globally and locally precisely because it requires the creation of partnerships in which boundaries and borders are transgressed.

---

didn't... insist on getting 'the truth' from [the women]. Our principle is to support the women to overcome the trauma in the way they need and feel according to their particular situation" (Belic and Kesic). The possibility that Ensler worked with or knew of CWWV raises further questions as to why she never mentions the existence of such organizations in the play or in her discussions of how the play came to be written.

IV. Turning the Eye on Home

As suggested by Zlata's choice comments about the penchant for Americans to blithely "help" without considering local voices or concerns, it is especially vital for American feminists to interrogate how they fit or depart from U.S. foreign policy and global relations. While Ensler does portray J.S. as interrogating her position of power over the Bosnian women, the national consciousness so vital for a transnational feminist activist is missing from the play. Neither Melissa nor J.S. seem to be aware of themselves as Americans; indeed, only Zlata names the women's nationality as influencing the way they see themselves. Developing national consciousness is crucial for any global activist; however, it is especially important for American transnational feminists to question how locating one's "home" in the global North superpower of the United States affects not only how one views the world but also how one is viewed by the world.

Most troubling in terms of this lack of American national consciousness, as it is portrayed in *Necessary Targets*, is the fact that Melissa and J.S. never interrogate their participation in the U.S. presidential commission which has sent them to Bosnia. By specifically identifying the therapists as part of a U.S. government team, Ensler places them within the system Breny Mendoza has called a "new supernational jurisdiction" that operates "a form of sovereignty that functions not by force, but by the capacity to present itself as representative of right and order and of superior ethical principles that can be applied to all societies" (298). She notes: "others refer to this process as a form of recolonization or neocolonialism" (298). It is not terribly difficult to see how this narrative of bringing "right and order" creates a space within itself for the American feminist-as-rescuer. Furthermore, Mendoza notes that the "destabilization of the nation state" creates a disparity between the local and global: "Locations and places evaporate as inessential contexts of political struggle and economic surplus production. In this sense, only territorial points that are saturated by global forces [...] acquire a real social, political and economic significance" (299). Obviously, during the Bosnian War, the nation of Bosnia was literally "saturated by [the] global forces" of the U.N., U.S. troops, and N.A.T.O;

yet, Ensler does not require J.S. and Melissa to ask how their work perpetuates these forces.

In their discussion of productive solitary work, Carty and Das Gupta state: "In our mind, transnational feminism, to be effective, has to foster a political consciousness about the alliance of borders to understand and respond to the interpenetrations that confound the boundedness of national spaces and the political markers of a nation-state" (101). Rather than ignoring where we come from, we must ask how where we come from connects with where we are going. Margo Okazawa-Rey locates the connecting of the local and global at the heart of transnational feminist work: "Doing solidarity work requires making the connections between domestic policy and foreign policy and showing the inextricable links between 'here' and 'there,' 'us' and 'them'...It recognizes and affirms our common destiny" (221, 206). Thus, transnational feminism calls for us to interrogate our national identities in both local and global spheres—even as we work outside or across the borders of our national "home"—so that we might develop a productive national consciousness.

Unfortunately, the final scene of *Necessary Targets* depicts not a taking up of a national consciousness, but the total divestment of it. J.S. sits alone, a tape recorder in hand, speaking to Melissa (who is presumably in another "traumatized" country) about the aftereffects of her experience with the Bosnian women. After discussing how she's rejected the American narrative of "ambition," she says: "I am without a country. I am without a profession or pursuit. I am without a reason or even a direction."[3] (Ensler 41). These disavowals sound wonderful on the surface; yet, problematically, J.S. is not without nation, she is not without profession, she is not without reason. While it is true that Ensler depicts J.S. critiquing herself and her

[3] It is hard not to hear in J.S.'s monologue the echo of VirginiaWoolf's famous statement in Three Guineas: "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (Wikiquote). Again, this divestment of nation is thrilling in its suggestion of a possible supranational unity of women, but is troubling in that it encourages a lack of national consciousness.

former life in this final scene, the interrogation lacks a consciousness of not only nation, but class and race. As Carty and Das Gupta suggest, "we must tackle the question of class- and nationality-based privilege not through crippling guilt but through addressing those structures of inequality that have differential yet connected impacts on those with whom we yearn to build solidarity, whether they are located in the North or the South" (108). Part of the benefit of engaging in transnational feminist activism is precisely how being out of your "home" can allow you to come back with a new vision of these "differential" yet "connected" impacts. Okazawa-Rey discusses this effect: "National privilege [...] is invisible within much of the feminist theorizing in the United States...Only by stepping outside the comfort zones of U.S. borders does this 'invisible knapsack' of national status become evident" (211). Transnational activism most certainly allows us to "help" those outside our borders, yet it also creates opportunities for us to engage with our borders, interrogating our various privileges in terms of race, class, and nation. Thus, as American feminists we must develop a national consciousness not only of how we, as Americans, interact globally but also how our various national positions within the U.S. may create a privilege that greatly facilitates our ability to act globally.

Finally, Okazawa-Rey concludes that her work outside of national borders has resulted in her reinvestment with work inside U.S. borders: "Understanding the significance of nation, I have come to conclude that, regardless of how much work U.S.-based activists/scholars do outside, over 'there,' our primary work is 'here' in the United States" (221). In other words, transnational feminist activism must be engaged in a "two-way" direction in which both "homes" are in dialogue, transformed and transforming one another, rather than a "one-way" direction in which those from one "home" help those in another. Certainly, such a "two-way" or transversal approach would facilitate what Nira Yuval-Davis in "Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversalism" calls "a radical political group as a collective subject in which there is a constant flow of communication both horizontally and vertically [...] without the processes of reification taking place" (281). Obviously, in such a transversal transnationalist approach, there could be no "othered" woman as spectacle nor American feminist-as rescuer.

While *Necessary Targets* allows for J.S., its Western heroine, to be changed by the Bosnian women, I would venture that this change happens on a purely ahistorical, personal/psychological level; thus, the change stays attached only to the characters rather than having political resonance outside the play.

V. Whose Change?

In *Necessary Targets*, we might connect the lack of national consciousness to the fact that play is not interested in a historicized, contextualized portrait; rather, Ensler is more concerned with depicting the personal transformation of characters. While the play demonstrates an attention to the pitfalls of the feminist-as-rescuer narrative and the spectacle of the "othered" woman, it slips back in its final scenes to a more traditional and reductive vision of the fruits of transnational activism.

If Melissa is the clear anti-feminist feminist in *Necessary Targets*, then it seems logical to look at J.S. as Ensler's model for transnational work. As the play progresses, J.S. undergoes a personal transformation in which she discards her therapeutic remove and emotionally engages with the Bosnian women. This slow dissolve of boundaries is signified by Ensler when J.S., rather than attempting to complete group therapy, goes off with the women for a rousing night of drinking and dancing. J.S. is changed by this experience, awed by "The honesty, the rawness" and the freedom she felt being with the women (Ensler 29). After this triumphant moment of collective happiness, she confesses to Zlata the details of her own trauma: a repressive childhood and a deep sense of unhappiness with her current life. In this scene, Ensler reverses the normal feminist-as-rescuer narrative, as the "victimized" Zlata comforts the empowered feminist. It is Zlata who encourages J.S. to let go of her inhibitions and "sing" as a way of moving beyond unhappiness and trauma (29).

Yet, if we take the play as a whole, it seems Ensler ultimately suggests it is J.S., not Zlata, who saves the day. At the end of the play, despite J.S.'s rejection of the standardized script of therapist, she has managed to bring

about a breakthrough for Slata who, in the course of an unsuccessful attempt to escape gang rape, dropped her infant. Since the child died, Slata has carried around a bundle of rags which she treats as a baby. In the play's climactic scene, J.S. heals Slata by holding her close and singing a lullaby which silences the "wailing in [Slata's] head" (38). Even Slata, in an earlier scene, foreshadows her "healing" in J.S.'s actions: "(*Seada gets up and crosses over to near Melissa. Says into the recorder.*) Please, I want you to record that Seada feels safety on her face. (*Seada goes to J.S. and stares into her eyes.*) It is because you came. Finally, you came" (22). While Ensler makes it clear that Slata is suffering from transference, it is telling that these sentiments literally become true when J.S. "heals" Slata later on in the play.

Surprisingly, it is not only Slata who expresses such sentiments, by the play's end, hardened Zlata does as well. Over the course of the play, she too has been healed, finally describing the brutal beheading of her parents to J.S. As J.S. prepares to leave, Zlata tells her: "For refugees, things do not change. You were our change" (39). While it is clear that J.S. has been radically changed by her encounters with the Bosnian women, I would suggest that this final scene with Zlata and the narrative arc with Slata unfortunately re-rights the stereotypical relationship of American-feminist-as-rescuer which Ensler sought to reverse.

Furthermore, the final scene of *Necessary Targets* illustrates a transcendence which skews toward what Mohanty critiques as a "notion of universal sisterhood [that] seems predicated on the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism" (110). Mohanty notes that this notion leads to the idea "that transcendence rather than engagement is the model for future social change" (111). This move from engagement to transcendence is evidenced in the final monologue of J.S. Back in New York, as J.S. records herself speaking to Melissa about their trip, on the other side of the stage, the Bosnian women gather. J.S. says: "What if I told you that Zlata stopped my life, made my luxurious, advantaged, safe, protected, well-kept, organized, professional life impossible. What if she entered me, and I could

not move. Back. Could not return to anything, anyone I've ever been" (Ensler 41). She identifies her "ambition," her "need to achieve" as "the thing that made me unhappy. Always unhappy, always longing for more. Longing to be someone, to count, to matter, to make it" (41).

J.S.'s final statements indicate that she has undergone a profound personal change; however, this change has resulted not in an attitude of engaged challenge, but in disengagement from the American ideals which have caused her unhappiness. Tellingly, she disavows her location in the series of "I am without" statements discussed above. After listing how she is without nation, profession, and reason, J.S. speaks the final lines of the play:

> I am there in that refugee camp in the middle of nowhere. I am with Zlata, and Jelena, and Seada, and Nuna, and Azra, some time very early in the morning. We are sitting, we are trying, we are really trying to trust one another, and in between the tears we take little sips of made, thick coffee. (*J.S. looks to the women. Lights fade.*) (41).

While this is a rosy vision of communion between J.S. and the Bosnian women, it is problematic in two respects. First, there is a notion that the Bosnian women, despite being listed by name, have come to represent in J.S.'s mind everything that America is not—real, open, unconcerned with social location. Is this not simply another, perhaps less problematic, "othering" of the women which reduces them, not to spectacle, but to icons of survival? As icons, these women lack the complexity which is characteristic of real-world human beings; instead, they become stock characters in an Oprahfied tale of triumph over adversity which problematically tends to preclude future expressions of weakness. Such depictions, while inspiring, are especially problematic when associated with "others" since they tend towards an idealization that transforms real human beings into a romanticized objects. Real engagement with others cannot happen whether they are viewed as weak, victimized spectacles or rosy visions of survival.

Secondly, the unity J.S. envisions does not account for the differences between herself and the women in terms of nation and class. Mohanty indicates this vision of "universal sisterhood" is problematic because it is "defined as the transcendence of the 'male' world [and] thus ends up being a middle-class, psychologized notion that effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third World women (and, paradoxically, removes us all as actors from history and politics)" (116). Certainly, by placing this vision of sisterhood between J.S. and the Bosnian women "in the middle of nowhere," Ensler suggests that it exists outside of historical time and space in the realm of transcendence. Mohanty urges: "experience must be historically interpreted and theorized if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial" (122). Without the awareness of how our location influences and creates our experience working across and through borders, we will slide back into the weak and rosy narrative of global sisterhood. Instead, we must treat transnational feminist work as "networking across local specificities towards universal objectives, not assumptions of universal sisterhood or experiential 'unity' among women across cultures" (120). As might be expected, this networking will not be easy; rather it will be "something that has to be worked for, struggled toward—in history" (116). Ultimately, the final scene of *Necessary Targets* moves its characters—and by extension its audience—further away from history, and thus, further away from social engagement.

While this failure is problematic in terms of transnational feminist work, *Necessary Targets* serves an important purpose. It is one of the few, if only, dramatic representations of the struggle middle/upper-class American feminists undergo when attempting to "do good" in contexts in which their privilege sets them uncomfortably apart from those they seek to "help." Furthermore, in depicting this struggle in a piece of theater, Ensler not only gives feminists the opportunity to ask such questions but also creates the possibility for the audience to consider their position vis-à-vis the Bosnian women. Will they be like Melissa—using these stories to make themselves feel better—or will they allow themselves to be changed like J.S.?

Though there exists in the play's narrative the possibility for a feel-good kind of change to occur in the audience, I would suggest that the greater (and more realized) merit of this play is located in the critique it allows us to do of the role of an American transnational feminist. Certainly, based on the historic penchant for well-meaning feminists to exclude local and national contexts from their transnational work, to fall into the feminist-as-rescuer narrative, and to seek transcendent ahistorical "universal sisterhood," it behooves us to use *Necessary Targets* in this way. In this context, while the play may have failed to capture its audience or to present a productive vision of transnational activism, it does provide an important platform from which to explore these crucial issues so that we might build a better model for future transnational feminist work. Such work must critically assess the connections between both "here" and "there," requiring American feminists to view themselves not as rescuers, but as partners with local actors. Furthermore, this work demands that we develop a national consciousness in which we are self-reflexive about both our local and global identities and privileges as Americans. Ultimately, productive transnational activism requires us to develop the capacity for transnational reciprocity: to be both an agent of change as well as one of the changed.

Works Cited

Belic, Martina and Vesna Kesic. "Center for Women War Victims Disregards Nationality." *off our backs* 24.1 (1994). Print.

Brantley, Ben. "Exploring the Pain of Bosnian Women." *New York Times*. New York Times, 1 March 2002. Web. 1 December 2009.

Carty, Linda and Monisha Das Gupta. "Solidarity Work in Transnational Feminism: The Question of Class and Location." *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change*. Eds. Julia Sadbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey. Boulder: Paradigm, 2009. 95-110. Print.

Chow, Rey. "Violence in the Other Country: China as Crisis, Spectacle, and Woman." *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* 1991. Rpt. in *Theorizing Feminism*, 2nd ed. Ed. Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart. Boulder: Westview, 2001. 345-364. Print.

Ensler, Eve. *Necessary Targets*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2003. Print.

_______. "From the Author." *The Necessary Targets*. Random House. Web. 22 November 2009.

Lazreg, Marnia. "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria." *Feminist Studies*. Spring 1988. Rpt. in *Theorizing Feminism*, 2nd ed. Ed. Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart. Boulder: Westview, 2001. 321-344. Print.

Mendoza, Breny. "Transnational Feminisms in Question." *Feminist Theory*. 3.3 (2002): 295-314. Print.

Mohanty, Chandra Talapade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke U Press, 2003. Print.

Murray, Matthew. "Necessary Targets." *Off Broadway*. TalkingBroadway.Org, Inc. Web 22 November 2009.

Staudt, Kathleen. "Transcending Nations: Cross-Border Organizing." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 4.2 (2002): 197-215. Print.

Okazawa-Rey, Margo. "Solidarity with Palestinian Women: Notes from a Japanese Black U.S. Feminist." *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change.* Eds. Julia Sadbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey. Boulder: Paradigm, 2009. 205-223. Print.

Sommer, Eylse. "Necessary Targets." *CurtainUp.* CurtainUp, 22 February 2002. Web. 22 November 2009.

Tripp, Aili Mari. "Challenges in Transnational Feminist Mobilization." *Global Feminism.* Ed. Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp. New York: New York University Press, 2006. 296-312. Print.

United Nations. "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict: A Framework for Prevention and Response." United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OSHA). Web. 6 December 2009.

V-Day. Vday.org. Web. 26 November 2009.

Wikiquote. "Virginia Woolf." *Wikiquote.* Web. 6 December 2009.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. "Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics." *Global Feminism.* Ed. Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp. New York: New York University Press, 2006. 275-295. Print.

Copyright of Michigan Feminist Studies is the property of University of Michigan, Women's Studies Department and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.