

OF POWERFUL PARTICULARS AND CONTINGENT UNIVERSALS: FREEDOM, FEMINISM AND ENGAGED UNIVERSALISM

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Introduction

What is a universal? What is the place of particular categories in a theory of universalism? Does the particular have the power to shape history? How does this debate play out for narratives of freedom like transnational feminism? I get to some of these provocations in this essay.

Using Anna Tsing's much acclaimed monograph *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), I try and sketch out a framework of "engaged universalism." I argue that a theory of engaged universalism must simultaneously view the particular as powerful and the universal as contingent. In so doing, I draw on the questions of "area" studies, cultural relativism and world-historical progress. I use, particularly, the debate around transnational feminism to ask questions of the universal category of "Freedom"—understood in its liberal, emancipatory, Western formulation. What does it mean to be "free" in different parts of the world? Does "freedom" have one universal meaning—an interpretation which is superior to others, or are there simply different kinds of equally valid freedoms etched in their particular contexts?

My main argument is to assert that any universal, including that of freedom, is in the ultimate analysis, a particular. It is simply a matter of historical chance (or of deliberate politics) that any one particular category gains the ability to *travel* across geographies and position itself as a universal. In that positioning, it aspires to transcend other particulars by undermining their agency and securing for itself an unquestioned superiority.

I ask in this essay—what is the role of the particular in a theory of engaged universalism? Or more importantly, is there a fundamental difference between a universal and a particular that makes the former necessarily superior or transcendental? I believe not. It is here I argue that to move from an account of transcendental universalism to one of engaged universalism is to admit the contingency of the universal and the agency of the particular.

Freedom That Travels

Anna Tsing's *Friction* traces the environmental movement against the mass destruction of Indonesia's rainforests in the late 1980s and 90s to produce an ethnography of global connection. Tsing contests the homogenizing narrative of the obliteration of all cultural difference at the feet of globalization and argues that we live at the confluence of the universal and the particular—in those awkward links where ideologies like capitalism are acted upon by people living in culturally specific locations. She uses the metaphor of friction to describe this encounter—where the “unimpeded” motion of globalizing universals meets the particular and, in this “sticky engagement,” produces new meanings.¹

Some believe that universals are specific to the cultural systems they come from. Tsing argues, contrarily, that the universal can be understood only by stepping outside the boundaries of locality. An anthropology of global connection must look more closely at the “bridges, roads and channels of circulation” that the universal weaves as it travels across geographies.²

Of particular interest to me are Tsing's chapters on freedom where she explores how activists in Indonesia used the universalizing rhetoric of rights and freedom to organize local coalitions and make possible new politics.³ She views the movement of transnational political liberalism as being both mobile—assuming specific forms within cultural systems and yielding contextual results—and mobilizing—bringing together people to create historical change.⁴ Responding to the universals of freedom, rights and civil society, the movement in Indonesia produced its own modality of how a coalition works by bringing together different people (Tsing names three groups—Meratus villagers, provincial nature lovers, and national activists) to each of whom freedom meant different things.⁵ In turn, by engaging with transnational organisations such as Ford, the Indonesian movement gave its own model of community-based resource management to the world. This possibility of *unexpected transformations* of the universal is, according to Tsing, what keeps hope alive.⁶

I read Tsing to be making two distinct arguments. First, she is interested in asserting that the “practice of universalism”⁷ must be understood to mean a process of *engagement*—between the universal and the particular. This engagement is made possible through the act of translation across difference. In the forests of Indonesia, the universal of freedom had to be translated into local equivalents while local

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-5.

² Tsing, *Friction*, 7.

³ Tsing, *Friction*, 205-268.

⁴ Tsing, *Friction*, 214.

⁵ Tsing, *Friction*, 245-246.

⁶ Tsing, *Friction*, 267.

⁷ I borrow the phrase “practice of universalism” from Darryl Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 12.

demands had to be translated into English to catch global attention.⁸ Her second argument is about the character of the universal itself. Even as she argues that universalism is characterized by engagements with particular contexts, Tsing's main interest seems to be recognizing the ability of the universal to travel, to be both "mobile" and "mobilizing" and to forge global connections.

In this essay, I focus on the first argument—one which instead of hailing the universal, accords importance to the potentiality of the particular. It recognizes a place of agency and actor-hood for the particular which is otherwise seen as a passive recipient of universalist claims. With Tsing, I want to argue that even if a universal assumes certain characteristics such as the ability to travel and cross contexts, there is nothing inherently superior about a universal. An overemphasis on the "universal" obfuscates its inherent contingency and undermines the agency of the "particular." The rest of my discussion, therefore, is an attempt to offer a corrective to the story of powerful universals and contingent particulars by inverting that relationship and bringing into sharp focus the contingency of the universal and the agency of the particular.

"Historical Effectivity" of "Universal Areas"

In recent years, the universal-particular dyad has come to be investigated in the context of the imperialist undertones of modern "area" studies.⁹ In his 2001 paper provocatively entitled *Universal Areas*, scholar Pheng Cheah argues that the "area" in area studies is framed as the opposite of the universal—it is that "which is not *capable* of universality."¹⁰ Area studies is believed to be "intellectually subordinate" to other disciplines which specify the epistemological framework for the scholar of area studies to apply. Universality thus represents a form of discursive knowledge that transcends particularity.¹¹

In making this argument, Cheah refers to Hegel who argues that in any era, the spirit of a dominant nation (*Volksgeist*) manifests the world spirit (*Weltgeist*) and advancement of world history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom. He suggests that Asian nations, bounded by their particularity, are bereft of this consciousness and thus play a limited role in world history. This Hegelian understanding of world historical progress views the particular, synonymous here with "Asian nations" or "area," as inert and deprived of agency.¹² It is only the particulars of the West—although never regarded as such but always positioned as universals—

⁸ Tsing, *Friction*, 212.

⁹ See, for example, Gavin Walker, and Naoki Sakai, "The End of Area," *Positions: Asia Critique* 27, no. 1 (2019): 1–31; Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Pheng Cheah, "Universal Areas: Asian Studies in a World in Motion." In *The Postcolonial and the Global*, edited by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 54.

¹¹ Cheah, "Universal Areas," 56.

¹² Cheah, "Universal Areas," 59–60. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001) 430–477.

that carry within themselves the power to shape history, or what Cheah calls “historical effectivity.”¹³

My reading of Tsing, on the other hand, shows that for a theory of engaged universalism to be internally lucid, it is necessary to view the particular as possessing agency and the “historical effectivity” which is usually the reserve of the universal. Tsing underlines how the “particular” Indonesian movement was involved in the making of history. She argues that the universal is not the exclusive domain of the West; claims of rights and freedom have played an instrumental role of empowerment in the post-colonial world.¹⁴ Conversely, I argue, the post-colonial world has played and continues to play an instrumental role in transforming the meaning of rights and freedom by engaging with the “universal” discourse.

Indeed, Cheah asserts that the solution to rescue area studies from the dichotomy of “dogmatic universalism” and “cultural relativism” is to regard the non-West not as an extension or obstacle but as an active participant in universalism.¹⁵ For him, universality *is* the incessant movement and “sharing” of ideas, allowing the particular to alter and shape it in specific contexts—an idea quite similar to Tsing’s understanding of engaged universalism.¹⁶ However, Cheah goes on to write:

The idea of universality that I think is able to accommodate a non-privative universalizing of Asia is one that is marked not by the transcendence of finitude but, instead, by a radical openness to finitude, which is to say, also a radical openness to *contamination by alterity*.¹⁷

This is where I take slight exception to Cheah’s (and Tsing’s) understanding of universalism. While they correctly identify the problem with a theory of transcendental universalism and propose to replace it with a theory of engaged universalism, they end up deeply investing in the premise of something like an unblemished universal to begin with—one which can be “contaminated” by alternate particulars. I, on the other hand, am keen to argue that there is no such thing as an “unblemished universal.” To demonstrate this point, I return to the question of “Freedom,” particularly in its universalizing expression in the form of transnational feminism. Is freedom—including feminist freedom—a clean, universal category which travels across geographies, both “mobile and mobilizing”? Or is there a way to think of freedom, and in turn universalism, differently?

¹³ Cheah, “Universal Areas,” 65.

¹⁴ Tsing, *Friction*, 9.

¹⁵ Cheah, “Universal Areas,” 62.

¹⁶ Cheah, “Universal Areas,” 64.

¹⁷ Cheah, “Universal Areas,” 63 (emphasis mine).

The Universal-Particular Debate Through the Prism of Transnational Feminism

In this backdrop, I find it generative to think with Julie MacKenzie's article titled "Refiguring Universalism" where she engages with the opposing views of celebrated feminist scholars Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler on the universal quality of feminism.¹⁸

Nussbaum's capabilities approach entails the universal acceptance of basic human rights such as dignity and freedom. She leaves open scope for revision, but within the general framework of liberal feminist humanism. She argues that the only alternative to universalism is parochial cultural relativism.¹⁹ Butler, on the other hand, calls the very idea of "human capabilities" essentialist and antithetical to the appreciation of difference. She argues that while appeal to foundations such as a universal claim is a legitimate political act, these foundations are contingent. A "transcendental" universal is simply the imperial imposition of one cultural idea, and to keep possibilities of true democratic engagement truly alive, a universal must be thought of as "permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent". While critics of "contingent universals" argue that this diminishes their political effectiveness, Butler responds by saying that it is in the questioning, contestation and engagement that a universal finds its true strength.²⁰

MacKenzie notes that Nussbaum's international feminism assumes a hegemonic character in failing to adequately negotiate with the "local"—the very site of real action.²¹ Per contra, Butler's idea of cultural translation allows the universal to be "informed and enabled" by the particular.²² To use Tsing's framing, the relevance of universal rights to the local crisis is not a foregone conclusion—it has to be established one step at a time.²³

Nonetheless, Mackenzie regards Nussbaum's capabilities approach as a meaningful "rearticulation of the universal." Within the larger human rights framework, it allows for historically and culturally located human beings to embody these capacities in negotiating their social world.²⁴ I would argue that this "rearticulation," or for that matter Tsing's "unexpected transformation" of the universal, is made possible only by acknowledging the contingency of the universal claim itself—human rights in this case. For instance, Aihwa Ong—in the context of

¹⁸ Julie MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism: Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler—An Uneasy Alliance?" *Australian Feminist Studies* 24, no. 61 (2009): 343-358.

¹⁹ MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism," 344-46. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁰ MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism," 348-350. See Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism?'" In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, edited by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²¹ MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism," 350.

²² MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism," 352.

²³ Tsing, *Friction*, 206.

²⁴ MacKenzie, "Refiguring Universalism," 352-353.

stateless people who occupy an “exception to neoliberalism”—explores alternative “universalizing moral discourses” such as those of religion and non-state solidarities that provide normative claims to ethics without invoking the human rights discourse.²⁵ Thus, Nussbaum’s insistence on considering certain facts as “universally acceptable” is not only hegemonic but also does not sit well with the origins of her own theory. It is only when the “universal” is treated as a “placeholder” of culturally located engagements of ideas²⁶ that a “rearticulation” is possible.

Nussbaum’s staging of cultural relativism as the only alternative to universalism, then, is also questionable. My reading of Tsing and Cheah suggests that the global and the local are not opposing poles; rather, they are constantly engaged in global connection. It is no more “culturally relativistic” to view particulars as differently and specifically situated than to view a specific particular positioned as a universal.

Which Freedom is the Universal Freedom?

Indeed, one might ask—what do charges of cultural relativism even mean in a debate around universalism? In her seminal piece *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2002), published in the face of the American rhetoric of liberating Afghan women using “universal” freedom, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the transnational feminism and cultural relativism debates get it all wrong by creating artificial silos like the “empowered” women of the West and the “burqa clad” women of the Middle East.²⁷

Abu-Lughod notes how the Western pioneer of “freedom” is astounded when a “freed” Afghan woman refuses to discard the burqa. He fails to appreciate the social, cultural, religious or personal importance the piece of clothing may have for the woman. It is only the liberal assumption that the American woman wearing what “the tyranny of fashion” dictates is freer than the Afghan woman who dons the veil. Hence, she argues, it is imperative to understand what freedom means to different people before calling them victims.²⁸

This simple argument shakes the pre-suppositions of the entire universal-particular debate. What Abu-Lughod is advocating is not the kind of cultural relativism which accepts every culture as it is without imposing any value judgement discarding any place for universals. In fact, Abu-Lughod finds Western feminist movements meaningful, but she posits that they must look within to investigate what it is they are supporting.

²⁵ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 22-24.

²⁶ For the framing of “the universal as a placeholder,” see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 675-676.

²⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 784.

²⁸ Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” 784-786.

Is freedom just about a piece of clothing? Does freedom not entail freedom from war and global inequality? There are people living in the non-West who might want to use the narrative of feminism without, however, becoming Westernized. More fundamentally, she asks, “Are emancipation, equality, and rights part of a universal language we *must* use?” Is their validity not open to be reconsidered in the face of differing cultures?²⁹ What does it mean to be “free,” as I asked at the beginning of this essay, in different ways? And who is to say which one of those ways is the “universal” way of freedom?

While Tsing asks us to move beyond the confines of locality by recognizing the power of travelling universals, I am keen to assert that what moves is not a superior, clean force. The universal of freedom we take for granted, carries within it the Western, Enlightenment-induced idea of what it means to be a free individual. Its universality is contingent on its originary particularity—which it can never be rid of.

Cheah’s use of the word “contamination,” as I pointed out earlier, presupposes that there is such a thing as a pure set of ideas—a universal theory of rights for example—which is altered when it engages with specific contexts. I wish the reader to pause here and ask—can ideas even exist without practice? Are *logos* and *praxis* separable? Is “bare” freedom not simply “Western” freedom? As a logical corollary, therefore, would it be right to term the Afghan woman’s version of freedom a “contamination” of the overarching, “correct” version of the universal idea of freedom?

My endeavour in this essay has been to argue that it is just another, equally valid, embodiment of freedom. It does not “contaminate” the idea of freedom but embodies it in a different iteration keeping alive the possibility of both a movement of the idea and its translation into political action. Therefore, while the question of the universal cannot be reduced to its site of origin, neither can we, in acknowledging its ability to travel, engage, and sometime transcend, place too much reliance on an anchorless idea floating somewhere out there ready to be contaminated by variegated particulars. Instead, universalism has to be seen *as* the movement of ideas; and a universal as any idea that has the aspirational ambition to engage with other particulars in a gesture of “friction” as Tsing would have it.³⁰

Situating Engaged Universalism: Finding the Particular in the Universal

Where does this leave us? On the one hand, I acknowledge the aspirational and mobile character of the universal and its ability to become trans-contextual. On the other hand, my primary concern in this essay has been to bring out the contingent foundations of the universal and the fact that every universal is, after all, a particular

²⁹ Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” 787-788.

³⁰ For universalism as a “structure of aspirations” which seeks to “process” difference, see Li, *The Universal Enemy*, 11-15.

which has been “forcibly globalized.”³¹ In other words, the narrative of “freedom” and transnational feminism does have value for its capacity to bring meaningful change as Abu-Lughod herself agrees. Yet, it is “western freedom” regardless. How does one solve this apparent paradox? And more importantly, why is it important to stress on the contingency of an idea which has already become trans-contextual for whatever reasons?

I am of the view that this paradox resolves itself when we bring into the picture the hitherto neglected agency of the “particular”—which is what this essay has attempted to do. While the origins of a universal lie in one locality, it means little without being contextualized, through the act of translation across difference, in another cultural location. I argue that this contextualization necessarily involves viewing the “particular” as a powerful actor that engages with the universal on its own terms and expresses its political and historical effectiveness. The use of the word “translation” signifies the equal terms on which the universal and the particular converse—the universal is not simplified or watered down as it were; rather, it is transformed into a particular context just as one would translate one language into another.

The particular is where the universal plays itself out. By contesting the contingent foundations of a seemingly transcendental idea, the particular engages in a process of democratization of the universal. The “correctness” or “validity” of the universal is constantly tested by “friction” which characterizes this engagement. Whether it is Indonesia’s environmental movement or the Afghan woman’s stance on freedom, the relevance of universal claims is put to challenge by both time and space. Global interconnection thus forms the basis of this account. To understand universals in this way is to go beyond cultural relativism – the particular is not opposed to the universal, nor is it a bounded and dormant entity. It is relentlessly engaged in a complex meaning-making exercise.

Lastly—and this is where the contingency of the universal and the agency of the particular meet each other—in each iteration of the practice of the universal, there takes place what Tsing calls “unexpected transformation” and MacKenzie terms as a “rearticulation.” It is only when we acknowledge the contingency of the universal that there arises a possibility of its perpetual reappraisal. Concurrently, it is only when we recognize the agency of the particular that we leave out the hope for it to become the universal in the next draw of lots. That is to say, the “rearticulation” may itself be treated as a universal for subsequent contexts.

Thus, in this account, the Afghan woman’s practice of freedom is not a contamination of the true American freedom, nor is it a particularized context which has been transcended by an unblemished universal. It is a version of freedom that

³¹ Chakrabarty, "Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital," 675-676.

engages on equal terms with the American version of freedom which currently claims to “speak in the name of the universal”³² but is always already contingent.

This is perhaps the starting point for the newer theory of universalism that Tsing calls for. While acknowledging the power imbalance in the extant universalism of truth claims, it regards the particular as having enormous strength. Indeed, under this new theory, it is the universal which is dependent on the particular and not the other way round. Such a theory promises not only to shake off our comfortable set of assumptions regarding the universal-particular debate but also gives us space to understand and explore important political consequences of universals such as those of rights, freedom, feminism, and what have you.

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³² Li, *The Universal Enemy*, 13-15.

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