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## Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice

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## Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice

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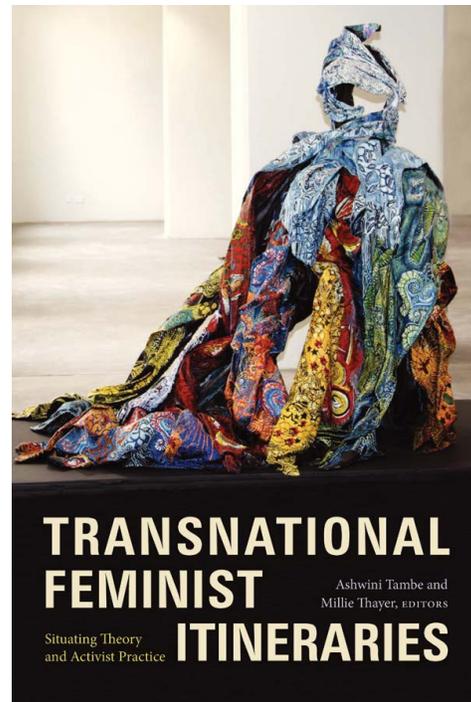
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Amidst an increasingly globalized world, abetted by COVID-19 pandemic and its necessitation of on-line interaction, feminist scholars, activists, and community organizers alike have faced increasing pressures to return their collective focus to more localized struggles. We see this forced movement to the local occur within issues such as reproductive rights in Texas, United States in 2021. Despite this and parallel movements throughout the world, digitally cultivated spaces, as seen in social media platforms, have deepened the possibility for transnational collaboration across borders and boundaries. This collaboration is particularly visible within social justice efforts such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which has become a central cry amongst anti-racist movements across the globe. This paradoxical contemporary context created the exigence for *Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice*. Composed for a predominantly academic audience, *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* offers extensive discussions of our contemporary context and how collaborative, feminist practices are being taken up not only within, but across nations.

*Transnational Feminist Itineraries* is a collaborative collection of essays which aims to contribute to the development of feminist theory and practice through a five-part approach: (1) positing that the global socio-political context requires the tools and methods of transnational feminism; (2) positioning transnational feminism as running parallel, and not in opposition, to other feminist approaches; (3) exploring a historical context rich with cross-border activism; (4) arguing for both the “scaling out” in addition to the “scaling up” of feminist methods; (5) offering critiques of transnational feminism to further complicate the conversation surrounding its place amongst alternative feminisms.

*Transnational Feminist Itineraries* consists predominantly of case studies. Each chapter takes a unique approach to discussing the affordances of transnational fem-



inism, as well as some of the difficulties engendered within various nations and their relationships across borders. Many of these texts draw on scholars such as the prominent feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal (author of chapter 3); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, known for working across borders and within decolonial frameworks; and Kimberlé Crenshaw, perhaps best known for coining the term intersectionality. While invoking the use of these and other scholars, the authors demonstrate the various contexts within which transnational feminisms offer valuable frames for critiquing and understanding the relationships between and within nations.

Part 1 of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries*, a collection of self-identified provocations, begins with a chapter contributed by the co-editors, Ashwini Tambe and Millie Thayer. Their chapter, “The Many Destinations of Transnational Feminism,” situates transnational feminism historically, and illuminates its connections with intersectional and decolonial feminisms. In the chapter, they examine the multiplicity of oppression and question relationships of power—as well as points of divergence, such as transnational feminism’s pointed critique of conceptions of nation(alism), intersectional feminism’s focus on the intersection of race and gender, and decolonial feminism’s critique of the categories and language of scholarship. Tambe and Thayer additionally discuss the importance of “scaling out,” creating discussion across ideological boundaries, and critiques such as how transnational feminism is steeped in academic, at times inaccessible language when considering the readers it is crafted for; nonetheless, tangible examples of what conversations might look like outside of academic contexts do not appear within the chapter.

The second chapter of Part 1, “Beyond Antagonism: ReThinking Intersectionality, Transnationalism, and the Women’s Studies Academic Job Market” by Jennifer C. Nash, explores how the tailoring of academic job advertisements further separate, and at times confuse, the concepts of intersectionality and transnationalism. Nash focuses on the perception of intersectionality as “a gesture toward complexity” and transnationalism as an ethic of solidarity across difference (43). Within this conceptualization, Nash argues that perceptions of intersectionality range between “an area of focus [...] a method or approach [...] a cross-cutting theory, method, and practice that supersedes feminist practice” while the term transnational “is treated as a place-based marker and indicates a desire for scholarship that centers non-US locations” (47–49). While Nash’s work gives rise to questions about Women’s Studies programs’ understanding of the relationship between the terms, readers will not find discussions of how job postings connected to the work conducted by the faculty ultimately hired; and whether their dissertations or other scholarly work shared a similar disposition or if the terms were used more as indicators of what was valued in the department than requirements for how the terms needed to be understood by potential candidates. However, Nash clearly articulates a critique of how those within positions of power can determine the discourse’s framework.

The concluding chapter of Part 1, “Rethinking Patriarchy and Corruption: Itineraries of US Academic Feminism and Transnational Analysis” by Inderpal Grewal, focuses on the creation of political subjects and how they are constructed in relation to transnational, postcolonial, and intersectional feminisms. While elaborating on

the distinctions and similarities between the three positions previously established in the book, Grewal posits transnational feminism as a response to theories of mobility with an intent to “fracture notions of national tradition or culture, or global capitalism and its institutions, as well as hegemonic forms of power” (60). Grewal conducts a case study focusing on the Trump presidency to explore how transnational feminism can be used to understand the construction of empires and “the maintenance of racial patriarchies through privatized accumulation” (62). Grewal’s work effectively demonstrates how transnational feminism, while being conceptualized as a theory of elsewhere, can be valuable within US contexts as well.

The initial chapter of Part 2, a triplet addressing issues of scale, begins with “Transnational Feminism and the Politics of Scale: The 2012 Antirape Protests in Delhi” contributed by Srila Roy. Roy’s chapter draws upon theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari when discussing the construction of a protest assemblage emerging from the aftermath of the rape and murder of twenty-three-year-old Jyoti Singh Pandey in 2012 Delhi, India (77). The term assemblage captures the unpredictable and multifaceted interactions of both public and private entities engaged with an issue, such as the Delhi events. Roy notes that responses were not uniform, whether demographically or ideologically. Roy provides clarification for readers on the differences between “scaling up” and “scaling out,” as these terms are applied to geographically or ideologically diverse constituents. Roy illustrates how movement across boundaries is possible, and thus transnational approaches necessary, even within national borders; furthermore, she offer a discussion of the ever-growing importance of transnational feminism within increasingly divisive political regimes.

Chapter 5, the intermediate section of Part 2, “Transnational Shifts: The World March of Women in Mexico” by Carmen L. Díaz Alba analyzes the World March of Women (WMW) to demonstrate the difficulty of engaging with transnationalism while acknowledging the affordances made on a national level to various organizations. Díaz Alba successfully navigates a standing critique of transnational feminism, the inaccessibility of academically coded language. Without abandoning rigor, Díaz Alba addresses issues of scale and the transitions of responsibilities within organizations as well as other activist concerns such as burnout and the possible disconnect between transnational and local pressures. While the chapter discusses the difficulties of transnational movements, how cross-boundary work is most attainable during moments of international urgency, Díaz Alba also notes how transnational movements such as WMW create spaces for organizations to promote their work who may otherwise not have the necessary resources. Transnational feminism is thus presented as complex, shifting, and always already in a state of development, a state which requires different actions from collaborators at different moments.

In “Network Ecologies and Feminist Politics of ‘Mass Sterilization’ in Brazil,” Rafael de la Dehesa, explores the concept of network ecologies within transnational feminism and describes it as an evolving constellation of public and private entities, circulating resources and knowledge. de la Dehesa argues that transnational network ecologies can cultivate solidarity while also being sites of confusion and misunderstanding, using the discourse around mass sterilization in Brazil as a case study. The

work found here posits that interpretations of the Brazilian context misunderstood the situation and assumed governmental coercion into sterilization instead of inquiring about how women's agency was being demonstrated within a context with limited choices. Perhaps most beneficial for activist readers, is how de la Dehesa's extensive historical account demonstrates that network ecologies can develop in ways that create allies out of seemingly oppositional groups.

The midway point of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries*, chronologically but not ideologically, occurs in Part 3, "Interrogating Corporate Power," and begins with "Transnational Childhoods: Linking Global Production, Local Consumption, and Feminist Resistance" by Laura L. Lovett. "Transnational Childhoods" adds to conversations from anthropology which focus on childhood migration by acknowledging the power held by corporations and how their ability to determine available choices of children's products inherently limits demonstrations of agency on the part of children and parents alike. Due to an increasingly globalized market, engendered in part by legislation such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), corporations possess transnational influence over conceptions of gender roles and supposed norms. Lovett strategically argues that the global market, then, becomes a key site of interest for transnational feminism when considering the construction of the next generation's understanding of gender identity.

Concluding Part 3, Kathryn Moeller's "Nike's Search for Third World Potential: The Tensions between Corporate Funding and Feminist Futures" continues to interrogate ideas of who can just do transnational feminism. Moeller employs an ethnographic method to recount the experience of working on a transnational project. She explores how the educational program, which consisted of professional training for young women in poverty to enter sport-oriented workplaces, began with pre-imagined participants prior to entering local sites. The characteristics of participants then fit into a westernized, US-centric understanding of what the potential to end poverty meant. Moeller's account provides an accessible entry point for thinking through some of the difficulties involved with corporate sponsorship: the benefits of additional funding, recognition, and a proverbial seat at the table as well as some detriments such as the legitimization of corporate power, programs being structured to fit ever-changing corporate goals, and the framing of participants as resources or a means to an end, instead of being valuable in and of themselves.

The fourth section of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries*, "Intractable Dilemmas," opens with "Reproductive Justice and the Contradictions of International Surrogacy Claims by Gay Men in Australia" by Nancy A. Naples and Mary Bernstein. Chapter 9 focuses on the developing discourse around surrogacy, specifically in relation to Australia. Naples and Bernstein incorporate three sources of primary data within their NVivo coding: fifty-two interviews from legislators, activists, and people self-identifying as gay or lesbian, public statements from LGBTQ+ rights organizations, as well as articles published in various Australian newspapers (157–158). Curiously, Naples and Bernstein find that advocates of surrogacy outwardly supported transnational rather than domestic surrogacy. The co-authors prompt readers to consider the continuing line of colonialism within the outsourcing of surrogacy, citing Jyotsna A. Gupta who

writes “that one’s privileges in the world-system are always linked to another woman’s oppression or exploitation” (169).

Part 4 closes with “Wombs in India: Revisiting Commercial Surrogacy” by Amrita Pande which seamlessly flows from the work of Naples and Bernstein who discuss at length the Australian use of surrogates from India. Pande, too, elaborates on the colonial nature of surrogacy, especially when clients frame their payment for services within a savior narrative, citing the assumed life change associated with the additional income. This narrative positions Indian women “not only as desperately poor but also as worthy poor” (185). The ability to label others as (not) deserving of a savior is enabled from the clients’ position of power, in part engendered by the power associated with their respective nations, as well as issues of class, race, and religion as Pande discusses. Pande posits the need to not only acknowledge the agency of women opting to participate within commercial surrogacy, but to provide spaces for their voices to be heard and to make meaning *with* this community instead of having conversations *about* them.

*Transnational Feminist Itineraries* concludes with Part 5, Nationalisms and Plurinationalisms. This portion of the book begins with “Sporting Transnational Feminisms: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Athletic Migrations between Brazil and the United States” by Cara K. Snyder, which focuses on how athletic teams and players participate in both the construction and critique of the imagined identities of nations. Snyder outlines how the movement of players between Brazil and the United States, predominantly to the US, created a space to discuss the ideological differences between the nations: an elevation of the importance of perceived femininity within a male-dominated soccer history and the centering of economic gain, respectively. Snyder does not include the voices of US-based players or coaches; however, the incorporation of (formerly) Brazilian athletes effectively demonstrates how “the unevenness of the global financial infrastructure” has positioned the US in a place of power, where its moves for capital gain have created a transnational perspective of the country as a sanctuary, as other discussions subordinate the financial one (199).

The penultimate chapter, of both the text and Part 5, “Mozambican Feminisms: Between the Local and the Global,” by Isabel Maria Cortesão Casimiro and Catarina Casimiro Trindade demonstrate how the positioning of feminism as a “foreign intrusion” is used in places such as Mozambique to alienate the movement, disassociating it from the national identity (207). Chapter 12 discusses how individuals in power within the country have used tactics ranging from threats to kidnappings to the prohibition of feminist protests and public activities to maintain control and avoid critique. Feminism within Mozambique thus runs parallel to the US war on terror, creating a fear of outsiders while strengthening a particular communal identity and perception of sovereignty. “Mozambican Feminisms” challenges readers to engage in the necessary work of transnational feminism, while rendering the dangers inescapably palpable: as with accounts such as Jaime Macuane’s, a political science professor, who was shot four times in the knees as a warning for his public critique of Mozambique’s governance.

The closing chapter of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries*, “Plural Sovereignty and *la Familia Diversa* in Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution” is a co-contributed piece written by Christine “Cricket” Keating and Amy Lind. Keating and Lind discuss the shifting language used within Ecuador’s various constitutions and extensively map the contingent development of local feminist movements. Central to Chapter 13 is the dual exploration of the terms plurination and *la familia diversa*, or the diverse forms of families. Plurination is a term adopted within Ecuador’s 2008 constitution that acknowledges the sovereignty of Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian groups as well as, as outlined by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador and presented by the authors, “denotes the process by which different autonomous groups can interact and coexist with respect and equality” (224). *La familia diversa* is a concept that recognizes and destigmatizes nonnormative family units and champions equal protections and affordances to them. The concluding chapter underlines that the value stemming from language changes within and across institutions originates in their use, a testing of what is permissible.

The introduction of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* put forth the goal of furthering the development of feminist theories via a five-pronged approach, which I have delineated above. Varying success can be found in each of these areas. (1) The contributions create a compelling claim for the necessity of transnational feminist tools and methods within the current global context. (2) The parallels between intersectional and transnational feminisms are extensively illustrated; however, direct engagement with decolonial and post-colonial theories are limited, leaving the reader to parse out the relationship between the two. (3) Chapters within the text develop highly nuanced understandings of cross-border activism that map out transnational feminism’s historical context. (4) Sections such as the introduction and Part 3 effectively demonstrate the value of both “scaling up” and “scaling out”. (5) Two main critiques of transnational feminisms are briefly incorporated—the paradoxical focus on the US and the perceived elitism of language use. *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* effectively decenters the US within its discussion, however, the issue of language use largely goes unaddressed, perhaps due to the intended audience of the text. While written in a predominantly formal and academic register, various audiences would still find the discussions taking place within *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* both useful and approachable. The contributors successfully navigate the nuances between different feminisms, referring to relevant readings that provide established scholars, graduate students, and ambitious undergraduate students alike the ability to pursue further reading without requiring all readers to engage with the text in a formal academic way. The language within this text, while not being overtly theoretical, does build on styles of writing more common within academic spheres. The chapters are formatted via a combination of short subsections which allows readers to peruse the text quickly or in brief installments. Additionally, digestible explanations of theories—such as how post-colonial does not mean the impact of colonialism is no longer felt—do provide entry points for those who have not conducted extensive readings on each theory discussed (19). Whereas the language itself may be challenging at times, these compositional choices do welcome busy community organizers and activists to read the text

at their own pace, between meetings, or wherever they can afford the time to spare, without feeling the need to devote hours at a time to engage with the text. That being said, this text may prove most useful to individuals and organizations who are either firmly established with self-sustaining networks, or those positioned near and actively working across the erected borders of nations. This is due in part to the continuous efforts and material resources that transnational feminist work requires.

Although the subtitle of the text, *Situating Theory and Activist Practice*, puts emphasis on activism, *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* does not focus on what much of this conversation means for activists today. The focus centers around the connection between activism and theory, situating it, but is not structured to serve as a “how-to” guide for readers. The text prioritizes and illustrates the historical context of transnational feminist activism via an assortment of case studies instead of generating tangible examples of what activism could look like, or providing suggestions for how to approach transnational work, beyond providing historical examples of what has been done. This may be in part due to the complexity of transnational feminist work. Offering potential suggestions or step-by-step guides is counterintuitive to a theory that recognizes the need for researchers and activists alike to situate themselves, to understand the investments of various stakeholders, and to recognize how these investments evolve over time within each individual context. Offering a checklist of how to conduct transnational feminist work risks flattening the identities of academics, activists, and communities alike. It would assume sameness instead of cultivating solidarity.

Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* may find this text useful even if they do not currently engage in transnational work. While each chapter offers insight into methods for collaboration, the introduction and sections on scale may be points of particular interest as they directly address how collaboration is possible amongst dissenting constituencies. Working with communities necessarily entails working with individuals who hold varying viewpoints and thinking about how to bridge those differences to create solidarity. This edited collection may also be useful for those working within larger cities, which generally host diverse populations. Those within towns with agriculturally based economic systems may also find this text helpful in considering the transnational flow of labor and capital in connection with food production, as many workers traverse national borders in the pursuit of work. Community literacy workers within the US will recognize the increasingly divisive socio-political context, as well as the increasing diversity of the communities within which we work. In sum, *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* provides in-depth analyses of how borders, whether geographical or ideological, do not need to be barriers to collaborative action.