



TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST ITINERARIES

Ashwini Tambe and
Millie Thayer, EDITORS

Situating Theory
and Activist Practice

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST ITINERARIES

BUY

NEXT WAVE NEW DIRECTIONS IN WOMEN'S STUDIES *A series edited by*
Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, *and* Robyn Wiegman

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TRANSNATIONAL

Situating Theory **FEMINIST**

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and Activist Practice

Edited by ASHWINI TAMBE and MILLIE THAYER

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TO CLAIRE MOSES, who brought us together
and whose work has built lasting solidarities across feminist fields

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EDITED VOLUMES are an underappreciated form of scholarship. They are enormously time-consuming and require tact, patience, and stamina, but they also spark deeply meaningful intellectual collaboration. Mysteriously, they don't get the credit they deserve in current academic hierarchies. Some of the most influential texts shaping our feminist academic formation have been edited volumes, and we are humbled and delighted to be in a position to continue the genre.

Many people helped us in bringing out this volume. First, we offer profound thanks to all the participants in the "Whither Transnational Feminisms?" panels at the 2017 Women's Worlds Conference in Florianópolis for their contributions to our enormously generative conversations, as well as for the hard work and creativity of the conference organizers who brought together so many feminist scholars and activists from around the world.

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Editors' Acknowledgments

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Introduction

ASHWINI TAMBE & MILLIE THAYER

WE PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES on this book during a moment of remarkable civil protest against anti-Black violence. The unprecedented scale of multiracial public demonstrations across large cities and rural areas in the United States revealed a swell in support for dismantling systemic racism. Quite rapidly, it became clear that this was not solely a national-level reckoning; around the globe, across six continents, hundreds of thousands gathered in public rallies against racism.¹ Many of the solidarity practices reminded us of a mode of cross-border connection that transnational feminists have long upheld: one that forges alliances based on common analytic goals rather than similarity of identities. These protests beyond the United States were not a simple mimicry of the US cause, even though many protesters held up “Black Lives Matter” signs. They were self-reflexive in nature, turning the spotlight on very local problems: in Auckland, New Zealand, protesters focused on the brutal policing of Maori and Pacific islanders (Perrigo 2020); protesters in Jalisco, Mexico, focused on the police killing of bricklayer Giovanni Lopez Ramirez (McDonnell and Linthicum 2020); French protesters in Paris focused on the 2016 death of Malian immigrant Adama Traore in police custody (Godin and Douah 2020); and a statement by FeministsIndia (2020), a 750-strong online collective, highlighted the Indian state’s violence against Dalits and Muslims. They exemplified for us a transnational solidarity that presumes differences between varied locations rather than claiming sameness.

These protests also took place amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, an experience that has underscored a sense of connectedness across hierarchies of geopolitics: no part of the world is immune to this virus. Indeed, the health and economic ravages of the pandemic have exposed cracks in the myth of US invincibility. Analyzing this moment calls for understanding asymmetric linkages across disparate social locations as well as a commitment to unsettling US dominance and global inequalities—both signature features of transnational feminist approaches. Transnational feminist understandings of race, gender, and sexuality as mutually constitutive categories also align with the way protesters have framed their agendas. Although the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked a wave of demonstrations in many cities, Black cis and trans women victims such as Breonna Taylor in Louisville and Dominique Fells in Philadelphia were also the focus of attention in numerous locations; compared to previous demonstrations against US police brutality, protesters were more engaged with the specific articulation of racism, gender, and sexuality.² This historic moment, in other words, underscored for us the analytic and political fruitfulness of an approach we have held dear.

What came to be known in US academic circles as *transnational feminism* emerged during another period of worldwide social upheaval in the 1990s: a period of restructuring of industrial production, globalization of financial capital, and liberalization of markets and media. The human costs of these massive shifts were borne disproportionately by women and marginalized, often racialized, populations. Movements soon emerged in the Global South to challenge the commodification, impoverishment, and violence they wrought. At the same time, UN initiatives brought feminists from flourishing movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America face to face with their northern counterparts, now populating government agencies, development institutions, academic circles, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The often-uneasy alliances that emerged built on decades of earlier efforts by activists and researchers to forge connections across national boundaries to address problems affecting women.

The scholarship in US settings that came to define transnational feminist approaches engaged insightfully with these changing historical conditions shaping cross-border feminist practice. In 1994 Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's landmark work *Scattered Hegemonies* turned an evaluative lens on such North-South (or East-West) collaborations, criticizing a hegemonic feminism that presumed universalist understandings of womanhood; they presented it as complicit with modernist national agendas and oblivious

to the “multiple, overlapping and discrete oppressions” among women in distinctive locations (17). At the same time, it challenged a culturalist and masculinist postmodernism inattentive to the economic forces further entrenching inequality around the world. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997), appearing a few years later, built on their own important earlier work decentering the implicit subject of Western feminism. They articulated how solidarity between feminists critical of racial capitalism could look across geographic locations and they also merged important currents of US women-of-color feminism with critical development studies. Such books broke new ground by seeking out the voices of those outside Euro-American centers of power and advocating a transnational feminist politics of coalition among differently situated subjects. At the same time, like all harbingers of the new, their work was suggestive rather than exhaustive. It was left to those who followed to flesh out the contours of a new conceptualization of feminist practice.

Over the past two decades, the work of others, such as Richa Nagar, Valentine Moghadam, Wendy Harcourt, and Janet Conway, has been richly generative on topics such as ethical collaboration, solidarity, movement building across borders, and epistemic hierarchies; it has shaped multiple cohorts of feminist scholars. But transnational feminism has also met with criticism from some quarters and has been portrayed in the United States as exclusively focused on “elsewhere” and unconcerned with domestic questions, in spite of its early theoretical commitments. Some critics have cast it as an artifact of the past. We believe otherwise. Amid the increasingly unregulated voracity of capital for global consumer markets, labor, land, and other resources, and the ascension to power of right-wing nationalist leaders and movements intent on racist exclusion, it is important to foster feminisms that hold capacious collective visions for sustainable futures. The premise of this volume is that in our current era, a transnational feminist lens is needed more urgently than ever.

With that in mind, we pursue a simple question: What can two decades of transnational feminism offer to contemporary analysis and activism around the globe? We gathered scholarship set in five continents—North and South America, Africa, Australia, and Asia—to explore how transnational approaches are being taken up within and outside the academy. In particular, we were curious about the salience of the nation as a unit of theoretical analysis and activism: How are scholars currently examining the power of nations in ordering economies, cultures, and forms of social justice activism? How

are transnational political relationships configured in relation to the changing power of nations? In what way do feminist and other social movements traverse the spaces within and between nations? And how do powerful economic actors work with/in nations to shape the terrain of transnational political action? The chapters in this volume are written by a dynamic group of scholars from universities in Brazil, Mexico, Mozambique, South Africa, and the United States who convened at the triennial Women's Worlds Conference in Brazil in August 2017 for a symposium titled "Whither Transnational Feminisms?" The material presented at this symposium has been revised over a two-year conversation since the conference and, along with some commissioned work, offers new directions for thinking about transnational feminism's pasts and futures.

Connections across borders figure centrally in each chapter. Rather than only describing feminisms in discrete nations—an international approach—our authors stress the power-laden networks, material linkages, and discursive flows that characterize our contemporary world, which a transnational approach typically connotes. The term *transnational* both acknowledges and questions the nation as a source of constraint and a locus of identity and possibility. As we note in the first chapter, transnational feminism not only marks connections that cross national borders but also places those articulations under critical scrutiny to diagnose how power operates within them in asymmetric and multidirectional ways.

We view transnational feminism as a flexible and evolving framework rather than a rigid set of prescriptions frozen in time. It is an analytic lens that, we insist, has been constructed through mutual engagement between scholars and activists in many parts of the world, and our book draws on the insights of those within the academy as well as their counterparts in non-university-based activist settings. The primary interventions of *Transnational Feminist Itineraries* are both conceptual and empirical, based on engagement with theory as well as observation of feminist activism on the ground. First, we claim that the grim contemporary global political and economic scenario that confronts those who struggle for racial, ethnic, geopolitical, economic, environmental, and gender justice calls for the very tools that transnational feminism offers. Most important, these tools include (1) a specific mode of thinking across national and digital boundaries attuned to the politics of scale, (2) critiques of nationalism and novel forms of transnational capital with an eye to their gendered and racialized causes and effects, (3) a processual and historical approach to thinking about identity categories,

and (4) an expansive imagining of solidarity that presumes differences rather than similarities.

Our coauthored first chapter elaborates these four features of transnational feminism. Chapters by Srila Roy, Carmen L. Díaz Alba, and Rafael de la Dehesa each reflect on scale, while Inderpal Grewal, Cara K. Snyder, and Isabel Maria Cortesão Casimiro and Catarina Casimiro Trindade address nationalism and forms of fundamentalism. Laura L. Lovett, Kathryn Moeller, Nancy A. Naples and Mary Bernstein, and Amrita Pande each discuss the role of transnational capital, while Jennifer C. Nash and Cricket Keating and Amy Lind consider how solidarity can be expressed in ways that creatively engage differences.

Second, our collective theoretical framing of transnational feminism refuses to place it in opposition to other approaches. We carefully explore the relationship between transnational feminism and parallel perspectives—especially intersectional feminisms and postcolonial and decolonial feminisms—and seek to illuminate overlaps and disjunctures. We argue that these perspectives are complementary rather than antagonistic and that their disjunctures, rather than signaling deep divides, provide fertile ground for mutual learning and new elaborations. In this spirit we also call for greater clarity about transnational feminist work on racialization, colonialism, and identity. The chapters in the first section, by Tambe and Thayer, Nash, and Grewal, each reflecting on the relationship between intersectional and transnational feminist theory, carry out such clarificatory work.

Third, we situate transnational feminism in the changing history of cross-border feminist activism that precedes and accompanies it. In relation to the activism of recent decades, we find that the rise of the political right has largely forced feminists to retreat from the global stage they occupied in the late 1990s and has partially displaced the institutionalized actors that dominated it. While we claim that transnational activism has largely shifted from an “embodied” to a “spectral” form—a trend that the pandemic has for now intensified—our book illustrates continued commitment among activists to cross-border solidarities and transnational analytic perspectives. In our view, what may have begun as a pragmatic and defensive move away from venues such as the United Nations has generated opportunities for creative new forms of transnational politics. In this regard, de la Dehesa discusses “embodied” forms of activism, while Díaz Alba and Lovett focus on cross-border digital campaigns—the “spectral.” Tambe and Thayer also address the challenges of forming solidarity in digital contexts.

Fourth, noting that social media platforms drive political polarization and empower the right, even as they also enable progressive mobilizations, we argue that the current scenario calls for “scaling out” across social and ideological boundaries, as well as “scaling up” across geographic ones. As feminists increasingly renew their attention to domestic politics, we find this kind of lateral movement beginning to occur, although not always in predictable ways, as Roy’s chapter illustrates.

Finally, we address the critiques of transnational feminism in the academy, finding that some of the valid concerns about US-centrism, elitism, and the inaccessible style of some written work are common to many fields, though more visible in the feminist field, given its diversity of actors. In any case, these obstacles have not deterred marginalized activists from forging and actively participating in transnational feminist alliances, as Casimiro and Trindade, Díaz Alba, and Lovett show in their chapters.

This volume is structured along thematic lines. Part I offers provocations about the current state of transnational feminism. Tambe and Thayer provide an overview of the arguments reflected in the book, place transnational feminist activism in historical perspective, and argue for new approaches to theorizing scale. Nash delves into the troubled relationship between intersectional and transnational feminism, also exploring how women’s studies job advertisements participate in cleaving these two approaches apart. Grewal, coeditor of *Scattered Hegemonies* and an early participant in conversations on transnational feminism, provides a historical perspective on the field and offers a transnational analysis of corruption and patriarchy under the Trump presidency.

The next two parts of the book represent new takes on debates within transnational analysis. Part II features work that recasts the concept of scale in analyses of social movements. The chapters featured in this section are each about forms of women’s social mobilization in distinct locations: Roy on new forms of mobilization “in the name of women” in India, Díaz Alba on the shifting fortunes of the World March of Women in Mexico, and de la Dehesa on the history of reproductive politics around mass sterilization in Brazil. Each chapter shows how national movement building articulates in complex ways with transnational discourses: Roy shows how a “protest assemblage” in India was shaped by a mediatized environment shaming the country, while de la Dehesa explores how circulating condemnations of mass sterilization in Brazil shaped national laws regulating sterilization in what he describes as “network ecologies.” National-level organizing within a transnational network can reproduce hierarchies and elitism, as Díaz Alba’s

chapter reveals in describing the consequences of shifting the local coordination of the World March of Women from the capital, Mexico City, to San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas.

Part III showcases nuanced transnational critiques of what J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) called the “rape script” of inexorable global capitalist penetration. Moeller, who writes about Nike’s “Girl Effect” campaign on the ground in Brazil, and Lovett, who discusses patterns of international consumption and feminist resistance to gendered scripts in children’s toys, each recount and critique examples of corporate attempts to construct gendered subjectivities. They note that forms of standardization—whether of children’s toys or of targets of development intervention—meet a far-from-certain fate: transnational activists undercut the messages toys convey, and the ideal adolescent girl can prove an elusive target for Brazilian NGOs contracted by Nike to implement its program.

We then turn in part IV to a paired set of case studies of a thorny issue debated among feminists: commercial surrogacy. The chapters by Pande (on caste, religion, and race in the practice of transnational surrogacy in India) and Naples and Bernstein (studying the unequal relations shaping cross-border commercial surrogacy exchanges from the perspective of Australia) show how and why there are no easy answers or ways to resolve the moral and political dilemmas that this practice throws up. Naples and Bernstein apply a reproductive justice lens to studying the practice of gay couples in Australia seeking commercial surrogate mothers from the Global South, noting how the impulse of fighting heteronormativity grates against the principle of contesting racialized/economic reproductive coercion. Pande takes up, from a transnational feminist angle, the principle of “epistemic honesty” in conveying the voices and perspectives of surrogate mothers.

Our part V includes chapters by Keating and Lind (on plurinationalism in Ecuador), Snyder (on the transnational migrations and imaginations of women soccer players from Brazil), and Casimiro and Trindade (on the struggles of Mozambican feminists against the control of women’s bodies by a patriarchal state). This part of the book offers an array of critical engagements with how states and nationalisms shape feminist politics, how the discursive power of nations is actually being entrenched through the process of transnational migration, and how transnational networks serve as resources in domestic struggles. Snyder explores how both Brazilian media and women soccer players participate in constructing the United States as a sanctuary and how such constructions obscure the workings of global capital and homonationalism. Casimiro and Trindade offer a detailed account of a

2016 crackdown on feminist protest in Mozambique, pointing to the specific mix of Christian and authoritarian Marxist influences that vilify feminism as a foreign intrusion. We close the volume with Keating and Lind's account of the innovations underway in theorizing the Ecuadorian nation and the family in new diverse and pluralistic ways that dismantle colonial legacies.

OVER THE TWO-YEAR PERIOD when we wrote this book it became increasingly clear that our globe was experiencing a rightward political tilt. A number of events underscored the electoral resurgence of nationalism: Britain formalized its economic-nationalist exit from the European Union in a messy referendum in 2019; in that same year, the reelected Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India formally revoked the autonomy of Muslim-majority Kashmir and redrafted criteria for citizenship to deepen the exclusion of Muslims; in Brazil elected president Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer, openly endorsed antidemocracy protests and favored a return to dictatorship; the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who imposed vicious censorship on the press, social media, and intellectuals, was reelected in 2018; hard-liner Benjamin Netanyahu's victory in elections in 2020 made him the longest-serving Israeli prime minister; and Vladimir Putin proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow him to stay in power in Russia until 2036. Authoritarian strongmen like Trump seemed to act with impunity, emboldened by massive electoral boosts—and they were shameless in seeking to bend unfavorable election results to their will. The global pandemic bolstered xenophobic turns inward, with foreigners viewed as vectors of disease in multiple parts of the globe, and the fortressing of nations, cities, and homes occurred with renewed fervor. At the same time, the inadequate responses of autocratic leaders to the spread of the virus, deploying exclusionary rhetoric rather than public health guidelines, actually threatened to undermine their own power. It was precisely a moment that called for robust feminist understandings of nationalism—and an analysis of how solidarity can and must work.

The genuinely transnational collaboration we fostered—even before the onset of the pandemic—thus emerged out of a sense of political urgency. It has been important for us to feature the expertise of specialists from varied locations, including some whose work is not easily available in English. The outcome, we believe, is a set of geographically diverse voices engaged in theoretically rigorous conversations. Our process, which has been a mix of interpersonal meetings and presentations, email exchanges, phone calls, and detailed commenting on files, has exemplified the joys of feminist intellectual

collaboration. For the coeditors—situated in two different institutions and on two different continents over 2018 and 2019—the tasks of coordinating a conference in a third country and coauthoring a chapter together has been a reminder of how a deliberate effort to maintain fragile connections yields not only intellectual rewards but also personal and political resilience in tough times.

NOTES

- 1 For details on events outside the United States, see Gregory (2020).
- 2 Widespread protests over the killing of Breonna Taylor present a striking example of such public attentiveness to violence against women; see Wood (2020) and Patil (2020).