

## **Response to Peitho Special Issue on Transnational Feminist Rhetorics Spring 2025**

# **Transdisciplinary Contiguities and Disjunctures: The Present and Future of Transnational Feminist Rhetorics**

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**Abstract:** This collaborative response foregrounds key questions that challenge the field to remember its theoretical histories and reassert its political commitments. We raise key questions about Transnational Feminist Rhetoric's (TFR's) disjunctures and contiguities with other critical frameworks, including intersectional, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms that seek similar ends, by asking several questions: For what or for whom are we disciplining, and to whom do these disciplinary boundaries matter? How does TFR contend with the disjuncture between expectation and experience, for example in the ways in which scholars replicate or produce notions of US academia as something that exists only outside of itself? Drawing from the essays in this special issue, we highlight TFR as a framework for fostering transnational solidarities and epistemological justice in the face of colonial, imperial, and neoliberal legacies. We caution against the risk of TFR becoming a hollow signifier and instead advocate for an approach that remembers the field's critical roots. Ultimately, this multivocal response invites deeper dialogue and renewed commitment to the transformative impact of TFR on everyday lives.

**Tags:** [transnational feminist rhetorics](#), [transdisciplinarity](#), [critical contextual ontology](#), [ubuntu/abantu](#), [hybrid listening](#).

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In the context of arguing for a transnational feminist cultural politics, Inderpal Grewal notes that “[w]hat we now call a transnational approach in feminist research emerged to make connections across feminisms and national boundaries by theorizing how feminist scholarship and feminist formations needed to contend with a history of colonialism, culture, and empire that spanned continents and nations” (“Rethinking Patriarchy” 56). We take up Grewal’s call for this ongoing need to further critique the *transnational*; in fact, *need* is principal in driving the following work. The contributors to this special issue on Transnational Feminist Rhetorics (TFR) have collectively demonstrated the need for a roadmap that can develop and nurture connections and solidarities across cultures, economies, injustices, and epistemologies. In their own ways, they challenge readers to either question or understand various personal and political underpinnings of what Tambe and Thayer call a “disjuncture” that is shaped by the relationships and tensions between intersectional feminism and postcolonial and decolonial feminisms (5). They put localized personal and political experiences into global conversation in order to make space for feminist ways of knowledge-making.

In turn, when the editors of *Peitho* first approached a group of us to provide a response to these essays in this special issue, our immediate reaction was to draft the response through a reciprocal, collaborative, feminist method. After reading the essays, we generated several thematic questions that emerged not only from these essays, but also from the need for a larger reading of the field. The following response should be read as a multivocal call-to-action for scholars and practitioners in TFR. It is less an endorsement or response that presumes definitive answers to the questions that emerged from our reading of the essays gathered in this issue, and more an *opening* to future conversation, questions, and deeper dialogue around the need for TFR.

In particular, the questions that arose in our discussions of the future of TFR have to do with the transdisciplinarity and critical border-crossing that TFR encourages, even as we have observed the conversation moving away from its critical history and theoretical origins. For its attention to politics of gender, political economies, advocacy, and mobility, TFR scholarship—if not approached consciously, critically, and with care—can risk becoming an empty signifier, a nullity, an umbrella for projects loosely interested in cultural or international study and the effects of such study on feminist or gendered subjects. We ask, then: Have we arrived at a disciplinary stage in which TFR has come to mean everything and nothing, a critical frame that is simultaneously depoliticized even as it is used to critique everything?

Following from this is the question of how TFR is adjacent or contiguous to other current critical frames (e.g., Critical Race Theory, decolonialism, antiracism, queer studies, cultural studies, etc.) that may seek to achieve similar goals but which may or may not also be transnational. What do these other frames

enable or foreclose for TFR? And what do we gain and lose when these lines blur or when TFR slips away from its theoretical origins? Forty years after Chandra Mohanty's 1984 essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," if we have, indeed, arrived at a critical place in which the goals or outcomes of TFR have become blurred, what is gained or lost in holding on to or letting go of this critical space? Do we double down on the history of TFR, leaning heavily on the shoulders of the postcolonial critics that defined the terms of the field in its emergence decades ago, acknowledging the continuing relevance of their critiques, or do we embrace the slippery nature of the conversation as it merges and blends with these other critical frames?

This line of thought led us to the larger question of the stakes of this kind of disciplinary work: For what or (for) whom are we disciplining and to whom do these disciplinary boundaries matter? How can TFR scholarship move beyond stasis around its definitions and re-definitions, away from perpetual questions of "what *is* this?" and toward questions of "what does this *do*, and for *whom*?" Knowing that transnational feminist rhetorical theory both relies on and questions the politics of scale, and yet knowing that these politics themselves rely on a disruption or discomfiting of nationalist perspectives and ideologies, what other motives can or should guide TFR's comparative agendas and methodologies (Jiminez, "Speculative Linking")?

In thinking through the stakes of disciplinary integrity for TFR and its contiguities with other critical interventions, we turn to rhetorical philosopher Omedi Ochieng, who implores us to think about intellectual practices through their *critical contextual ontology*, or "a systematic, comprehensive account of knowledge as emergent in actually existing contexts as opposed to idealized scenarios" (*Intellectual Imagination* 4). In other words, we must recognize the ways in which intellectual thought is bounded temporally and socially, networked through operations of power so that outcomes and products of knowledge are "interanimated" with the structural and the material (*Intellectual Imagination* 2). This should ring true to TFR scholars as much of its foundational critical lens is to recognize and counter the problematically centralized world view of "Western" feminism (Al-Khateeb et al.). We think we should pay special attention to this critique given the mutually enabling relationships between the (historically often problematic) production of knowledge sponsored by US universities and our contemporary political moment in which institutions of higher education in the US are under grave threat.

For example, how does TFR uphold and break down the binaries of In/Out as identified in Anand's poem and as discussed by Dhar and Mizan, and the expectations that are generated through such binaries? Rather than reifying these idealized scenarios for knowledge production and thus the binary fixity of that which is being compared, Ochieng seeks to de-dichotomize comparative work in North Atlantic higher education. He argues instead that foundational constructs like "North America" or "Africa" are not "pure" or authentic, but rather mutually constituted by infinite influences in symbiotic ways (*Groundwork* 4). For the sake of the thought experiment, let's draw a parallel between the disciplinary conversation of TFR and ideological constructs like "North America." Although this is a bit of a false comparison, it helps us think through the larger point regarding how all critical thought is compromised by ideology. In other words, we must

think about our critical engagement in TFR as emergent habitus, “responsive to embeddedness, embodiedness, enablement, encounter, and engenderment” and it must be attuned to “intertwined, generative, and emergent practices” (*Groundwork* 3). Responsive to our precarity, vulnerability, and our distributed agency and subjectivity, this “ontology of knowledge as embodied habitus” can produce “solidarity and participatory world making” (*Groundwork* 4). Thus, through this lens of what Ochieng calls *critical contextual ontology*, we can reinvigorate the ethical intellectual work of TFR to become more attuned to “fugitive forms of knowledge pulsing below the frequencies of supremacist discourses” (*Intellectual Imagination* 4).

Beyond recognizing disciplinary integrity as something that is both constitutive and emergent, we also consider what it could mean for TFR to both highlight *and* question decolonizing agendas or other critical frameworks. For example, we think of how Zimbabwean-born writer and scholar Panashe Chigumadzi necessarily complicates indigenous terms of identification in pan-African and African diasporic discourse, such as *ubuntu*. Chigumadzi argues that, contrary to popular belief, *ubuntu* did not only come of interest during South Africa’s late 20th-century democratic transitions, reminding us that, in the long nineteenth century, *ubuntu* had historically provided isiXhosa-speaking intellectuals with “an indigenous ethics of ‘conquest and incorporation.’ The idea of *umuntu ebantwini* (a person amongst people) is a more accurate way of understanding this concept that is simultaneously central to pan-African identity and yet so variant across and within cultural and linguistic regions in Africa” (“Can”; *Nineteenth*). For Chigumadzi, appropriating *ubuntu* without understanding *abantu*—the isiXhosa term that differentiates between people of the land and generations of colonists, oppressors, settlers, and their dependents—constitutes its own form of dispossession of heritage, or its own re-settling of colonized thinking (*Nineteenth*). Chigumadzi may or may not self-identify as a transnational feminist rhetorical theorist, but in her careful articulation of latent perspectives about togetherness, we see TFR’s persistence in questioning how particular ideologies become privileged in the cross-national borrowing and co-optation of key terms associated with or as markers of decoloniality. Additionally, we think of the problem of the transnational archive (Graban; Lowe), about the interstitial realities of TFR archival work, and the necessity of approaching “archives” in and within transnational spaces with expectations other than re-positioning, reclamation, restoration, or sovereignty. Their instability and dispersal requires a different kind of curatorial knowledge, and potentially muddies questions of ownership and appropriation. Put another way, we recognize in TFR agendas a commitment to breaking the status quo around decolonizing arguments, even when that status quo is informed by culturally corrective ways of thinking.

Broadly speaking, then, transnational *feminism* has its greatest potential in limning neoliberal agendas and diffusing the liberalization of markets and media (Tambe and Thayer 2), whereas transnational *feminist rhetorics* has even greater potential to extend this limning toward discomfiting contemporary methods of feminist analysis and activism. Part of this limning involves recognizing critical narratives that emerge from multi-, cross-, and hybrid cultural spaces and how those narratives raise timely questions about allyship, solidarity, and coalitioning together (Al-Khateeb et al.). For example, in Dhar and Mizan’s essay in this special issue, the main ethnographic subject represents a “triple positioning”: they are Bangladeshi, female, and a graduate student. In the U.S., as the authors argue, even among linguistically, culturally, and spiritually

diverse South Asian communities, Bangladeshis stand out, partly due to the number of borders they share with other republics, and partly due to their expansive US immigration pipeline. The added epistemological challenge of being a *female* Bangladeshi graduate in the US who seeks to ally with global minorities makes for a rich transversal of perspectives, experiences, and struggles. But part of this limning also lies beyond the recognition of multicultural, cross-cultural, and hybrid identifications, and even beyond discomfiting racial, cultural, ethnic, national, or linguistic claims to positionality. Just as Lu Ming Mao (and Ed Schiappa before him) articulated a critical turning point in comparative rhetorical studies—by directing rhetorical philosophies away from “facts of essence” (questions of “what this is”) toward “facts of usage” (questions of “how this comes to be known”)—we see a critical turning point in TFR in that it does not content itself with the validation of experience. Instead, it looks critically at what occurs in the interstices of/across/between national and colonial contexts.

Finally, as we consider future directions in and for transnational feminist rhetorical theory, in what ways do TFR writers and scholars contend with this very disjuncture between expectation and experience, for example in the ways in which we respond to and sometimes produce a notion of US academia as a myth that exists only outside of itself, such as configuring/imagining the US (higher education) as a “safe” or productive space for critical thought? How does our scholarship perpetuate or get supported by this myth? Just as Ochieng encourages us to attend to the broader histories of encounter (e.g., between “East” and “West” or “Africa” and “North Atlantic”), how can we invent new spaces for TFR that don’t co-produce this myth? These questions seem especially relevant given the current radical dissolution of this myth in a moment when higher education and TFR in particular are under siege.

Most obvious, for example, is the recognition that, as transnational feminist rhetorical scholars, we are not currently in equally precarious positions—some academics are experiencing more threat and precarity than others. This has always been the case, but it is especially visible now. In our discourses of coping and critique, are we moving toward new agencies and belongings, or are we repeating older patterns—for example, by constructing some US states as “safe” and others as “unsafe” (a pattern that has been intensifying even prior to 2025) (Hijazi, “Syrian Refugee Women”)? Less obvious is that inasmuch as these expectations can become disrupted by experiences with broader educational and national policies, cultural assumptions, or jurisprudence (Anand, “My Queer”; Dhar and Mizan, “Transnational Counterstories”), how do we approach academic work without the promise of intellectual and material safety (Dweik and Varas, “To Gather”; Dhar and Mizan, “Transnational Counterstories”)?

In fact, the practical, material realities of transnational encounters are often disconnected from these theoretical and ideological promises. In her research on branch campuses of American universities in the Gulf Arab States, Neha Vora cautions against the pervasive myths about the American university that recur in conversations about the globalization of higher education and “easy dismissals or celebrations of the practice of global higher education” (“Is the University Universal?” 20). Instead, she encourages nuanced attention to the ways that the travel of higher education, exemplified in international branch campuses of US

institutions, involves complex and multidirectional exchange and knowledge production informed by diverse configurations of people, ideas, cultures, institutions, and geopolitical relationships. Vora calls these branch campuses of US academia “sites of new agencies and belongings” (*Teach* 29), in contrast to critics’ objections to these branch campuses that “ironically rely upon facile and Orientalist understandings of Gulf governments, people, and politics in order to argue against American neocolonialism in the region...[and] venture dangerously close to moral judgments and civilizational discourse about which places in the world are ready for democratic government, Western education, or civil society” (21).

Vora’s observations match many of ours as we find our respective scholarly backgrounds in transnational feminist rhetorical studies sometimes clash with the other ways we have been trained as faculty or with the demands of being writing program administrators and/or program directors. In fact, still relatively few scholars in transnational feminist rhetoric engage with the practical and material ways that TFR might inform writing program administration and/or composition instruction, within or outside the US. For example, a material problem faced by a group of instructors at American University of Beirut (where one of our co-authors administered the writing program) involved creating a custom textbook that did not merely reproduce a North American orientation to the field. As they co-edited a custom reader, they recognized an ideological challenge: most of the readings they could find about core aspects of writing instruction (e.g., texts about the writing process or the rhetorical situation) were written by US authors and assumed an audience of US students. While AUB’s identity as an “American-style” university provided an easy dismissal of this problem, such an approach would completely miss the opportunities for rich cultural, political, and knowledge production and exchange that institutions like AUB (and the branch campuses Vora describes, despite their different context) make possible. Our interest in the globalization of higher education stems from our experiences grappling with the US-centrism of rhetoric and composition, which became especially evident as our colleague at AUB realized that the history of composition and writing studies she learned as a graduate student narrated a trajectory from Harvard in the 1800s through various key developments in 20th century US universities without referencing locations beyond the US. Even scholarship that engages with questions of identity and difference tends to focus on North American contexts. This orientation creates a disjuncture between practical experience and the material needs of students, instructors, and the discipline around which their work is oriented. It is these nested complexities that inspire us to push the limits of TFR beyond obvious comparisons of difference, pat identifications, and comfortable answers to uncomfortable questions as it scales outward in transnational contexts.

Perhaps one of TFR’s greatest potentials moving forward, then, is in coming up with ways of *listening actively* to complexity and hybridity. In this way, TFR’s disciplinary strengths lie also in its constraints: it requires antistasis and it both demonstrates and troubles the politics of scale—where scaling up attends to how the local informs the global, and scaling out attends to how a particular event becomes a mobilizing tool for other events. To “trouble” the politics of scale is to question enactments of decolonizing and other inclusive agendas so as to avoid falling into one’s own representational traps whereby TFR becomes too much associated with only certain kinds of identity projects or becomes too much opposed to global or comparative work.

Instead, TFR is attuned to how and when experiences of hybridity require new ways of listening actively. The value of listening practices is not new to feminist rhetorical studies. From Jacqueline Jones Royster's multipart action for understanding voice as a code for cross-cultural conduct (38), to Krista Ratcliffe's negotiation of cultural identifications for interpretive invention (17, 25), *listening* has been theorized as equal parts engagement and inquiry. Yet listening as *cultural identification* and listening as *action* are not synonymous. The latter requires more than a unilateral understanding of culture—of what it is, whose it is, who “owns” it or claims its sovereignty—and requires more than the exchange of Eurocentric practices for more global ones (Kock and Villadsen). Listening actively to hybridity—or *hybrid* listening—requires the ability to think creatively about how to interrogate each interlocutor's own cultural trusts along various axes of epistemology, and further, how to use that creative, interrogative energy to recognize the deeply ingrained cultural biases that shut down conversation before it can even begin.

Thus, we argue that perhaps it is more productive to consider the dialectical relationship in which the discourses and experiences being compared are mutually constituted and are only “disciplined” by their metatextual comparison. Rather than thinking about what is gained or lost in the potential depoliticizing of TFR through its disciplinary muddying, we suggest that a better question for these times is the following: What is gained or lost in policing these discursive categories when there is a much more urgent demand to speak truth to power in more mutually care-*ful* ways that are attuned not to our institutional demands, but to our communities and relationships? To ask the needful question of whom the conversation serves is to embrace the critical contextual ontology thrumming through the discipline even as we seek to preserve the deeply political and critical nature of the question and the field.

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