



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

September 1, 2010

ISSN 1094-5296

Swarr, Amanda L. & Nagar, Richa. (2010). *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. NY: State University of New York Press.

Pp. ix + 232

ISBN 13- 978-1438429380

Reviewed by Jennifer de Saxe
University of Washington, Seattle

Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis, edited by Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar, is an insightful, critically engaging anthology that offers educators an opportunity to truly delve into and analyze the foundational and theoretical challenges that often plague our discipline, classrooms, and institutions. Although this text was introduced to me in a Feminist Methods Course, it was extremely accessible in my roles as both a graduate student and educator.

This unorthodox book brings together many diverse activists and scholars who work collaboratively to reflect and find meaning in three distinct dichotomies as they relate to transnational feminist praxis: individually/collaboratively produced knowledges, academia/activism, and theory/method. Although not an educators “practitioner book” in a traditional sense, *Critical Transnational Feminist*

Citation: de Saxe, Jennifer. (2010 September 1) Review of *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* by Amanda L. Swarr & Richa Nagar (Eds.). *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev967.pdf>

Praxis serves as a template for digging into the systematic and widespread inequalities found in our educational institutions; simply, the existing practices of colonization, the complexities of power and knowledge production, as well as the roles of educators as sources of knowledge while simultaneously working as activists. In addition to reading this text as a better way to understand transnational feminist praxis (the juncture of theory and practice), we must also read it through lenses that help us challenge the difficult realities of our educational institutions and schools. Furthermore, the anthology's lucid insight and honesty show us that there is no better time to bring in a non-traditional text as we work to drastically improve the educational experiences for all of our teachers and students.

The introduction to the text, written by Swarr and Nagar, offers a detailed and "user-friendly" working definition to help us better understand the meaning of transnational feminist praxis:

"transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re) structure colonial and neocolonial relations to domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time" (p.5).

In other words, learning to work collaboratively with one another in our institutions and schools, we can begin to critically challenge many of the aforementioned questions and concerns, while also scrutinizing their connections and relationships to our current pedagogical practices and epistemologies. Although collaboration is an important theme throughout the book, Swarr and Nagar do not shy

away from recognizing that there is often a misperception of relying too heavily on collaboration as the tool to “fix” all that may be “broken”. Rather, they insist on understanding collaboration as something that “must be subjected to continuous critical scrutiny so that it can oppose the paralyzing effects emanating from the institutionalization of both academic and activism” (p. 14). Although collaboration is a necessary part of praxis, it must be reevaluated in multiple settings, times, and spaces.

Critical Transnational Feminist Practice is broken up into three main sections that focus on specific themes: *Decolonizing Transnational Feminisms*, *Dialogical Journeys*, and *Representations and Reclamations*.

Part one, *Decolonizing Transnational Feminisms*, explores the debates surrounding knowledge construction and power, and builds on the argument that knowledge is in the hands of the knower, traditionally White males. This argument is drawn out further in that it asks us to examine traditional malestream, US/Eurocentric curricula and pedagogy. Critically engaging in ways to break down these barriers is what Nagar suggests “what we are in a position to do in producing knowledge, namely, constitute ourselves as political actors in institutions and processes both near and far” (as cited in Nagar, 2006, p. 154). This begs us to rework our current systems and actively challenge the hegemonic nature of our educational institutions.

The second major theme discussed in part one, *Decolonizing Transnational Feminisms*, is the examination surrounding the central debates within/about transnational feminism. The authors of this chapter argue that there are specific key or “buzzwords” associated with transnationalism: “collaboration”, “praxis”, “theory”, and the “university.” They argue that this can become problematic in that these words only help reinforce the perceived finality or unchangeable nature that often define the term transnational. Further, the authors assert that praxis and collaboration are many times exclusively linked to methodologies within women’s studies, and that they are seen as the remedy to the “crisis” within the field. To help

combat this, the authors suggest that those involved within these discussions should question and critically analyze the binary between theory and praxis.

The second part of the anthology is titled, *Dialogical Journeys*, and focuses specifically on the authors' and participants' fieldwork, research, and their diverse collaborative experiences, both individually and through their partnerships.

A central question or concern in this section relates to the relationship between academia and activism. In the education community, I don't see enough space or time given to engaging in conversations regarding the dual roles of teachers as both educators and activists. Specifically, it seems that the activist part of our profession is pushed to the side or ignored all together. This text helps us to see how the two are inextricably linked. Nagar and Swarr recognize this known paradox by noting "the status of the academic researcher as the "true intellectual thinker" remains undisturbed, along with the hierarchies that elevate theory, research, and academic knowledge production to a higher plane than method, outreach, community-based conversations, and nonconventional academic writing" (p.8).

In regards to our own roles as educators, pedagogies, methods, and dissemination of knowledges seem to take priority over our "activist" work. A better way to think about our own activism in schools, is to see ourselves teaching our children to be better citizens, engaging in efforts for social change, or community and global outreach. Additionally, the difficult nature of connecting the two; academia and action, is altogether dismissed as a prerequisite to teaching and learning. Again, reading the text through lenses that draw from our own discipline, we can have more critical discussions on issues that may not be common -place in our own professional settings or institutions.

The four chapters included in section two do a remarkable job discussing the reality of such concerns and challenges. Through intimate stories that focus on research and activism in the field, the scholars and activists discuss their personal

experiences that include exploring “the feminist production of knowledge; the links between activism, social change and research...” (p.16) The other contributors in this section also reflect on their experiences with collaboration, while also looking at the relationships between theory and practice. This section is intimate in its candor, and passionate in its honesty and self-reflection.

The third part, *Representations and Reclamations*, is the final section of the text, and continues to provide personal stories and reflections from the many experiences of the authors. Stories and intimate anecdotes are brought in from time spent with a dance production, a community arts organization, and a film screening. This section continues to draw on the themes from the first two parts, but also brings in perspectives regarding intersectionality, representation, embodiment and funding. Additionally, the “known” definitions of feminist pedagogy, research and outreach are explored and reconsidered.

Section three provides a rich dialogue regarding privilege and positionality; challenges that many educators work through and grapple with in many of our classrooms and schools. In Deborah Barndt’s essay, focusing on her experience in VIVA!, a community arts project, she recognizes that “self reflexivity, subjectivity, and power are central concerns of a feminist poststructural methodology, yet, while we are challenging hegemonic power relations in the content and process of the VIVA! Project, we also reproduce them in ways that we must constantly confront” (p. 176). Barndt, a White female university researcher, understands her role as researcher and activist, and discusses the many structural inequalities that are persistent in her work. She understands her position, and comments that there are times when her “privilege slaps [us] in the face” (p.177). This honest and provocative conversation is an important step for us, as educators, to consider as we look to the methods, methodologies, and practices in our academic institutions.

The conclusion to *Critical Transnational Feminist Practice* continues to be unorthodox in its unique delivery and

presentation. The final chapter, or section, is titled *Continuing Conversations*, and provides its readers with exactly this; a continuation of the conversations that played out in the book. Many of the anthology's contributors "speak" to one another in the epilogue, and continue to ask the difficult questions that are woven throughout the text. Its purpose is not to summarize the book's aims or goals, but rather to demonstrate what true collaboration or praxis might look like; "the point here is not to encourage a codification or institutionalization of collaboration in the same ways that both intersectionality and the notion of transnational are being codified and disciplined. For collaboration to remain dynamic and generative concept, it is critical to retain the incoherent, contingent, and contextual nature of such praxis" (p. 18). This final point helps clarify the numerous discussions, examples, and stories we find throughout the book. Specifically, as educators, we need to read this book as an example of ways we can continue to challenge the master narratives we find in our academic institutions and schools. We can understand the importance of collaboration and praxis, but also work to break down the boundaries that surround our initial understandings of the term.

Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis is a must have in every educational library. It is rare to find such an engaging, pertinent and important book outside of the usual genre assigned for educators. We often rely too heavily on text designed for the education community, when there are many others that speak to our discipline. This anthology serves this very purpose. *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* is provocative, educational, and truly engaging for all who are fortunate to have read, discussed, and soaked up all it has to offer.

Reference

- Barndt, D. (2010). Remapping the America's: A transnational engagement with creative tensions of community arts. In Nagar, R., & Swarr, A.L., *Critical transnational feminist praxis* (pp. 166-191). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

About the Reviewer

Jennifer de Saxe is currently a doctoral student at the University of Washington. Prior to returning to graduate school, she was an elementary teacher for seven years. Her current research interests include exploring anti-oppressive educational programs, as well as the presence of both feminist and queer pedagogy in our classrooms and schools.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
<http://edrev.asu.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
