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## Using Millie Thayer's Making Transnational Feminism to Connect Transnational Feminist Theories to Transnational Feminist Practices

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## Using Millie Thayer's Making Transnational Feminism to Connect Transnational Feminist Theories to Transnational Feminist Practices

### Abstract

I review Millie Thayer's 2010 book, *Making Transnational Feminism*, from a methodological standpoint to discuss its ability to effectively connect transnational feminist theories with transnational activist practices. Transnational feminism is at once a theoretical and practical model, consisting of an intricate, yet complex, web of small entities that work with and for one another to address related concerns. Thayer illuminates the processes that are involved in creating and sustaining these transnational feminist networks in the attempt to deconstruct the complex social relations and power dynamics that operate within the current structures of globalization. I purport that *Making Transnational Feminism* is an appropriate and useful text for academics, students, practitioners, feminists, and any individual who is interested in transnational social movements.

### Keywords

Transnational, Feminism, Ethnography, Cross-Cultural Research, and Methodology

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## Using Millie Thayer's Making Transnational Feminism to Connect Transnational Feminist Theories to Transnational Feminist Practices

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*I review Millie Thayer's 2010 book, Making Transnational Feminism, from a methodological standpoint to discuss its ability to effectively connect transnational feminist theories with transnational activist practices. Transnational feminism is at once a theoretical and practical model, consisting of an intricate, yet complex, web of small entities that work with and for one another to address related concerns. Thayer illuminates the processes that are involved in creating and sustaining these transnational feminist networks in the attempt to deconstruct the complex social relations and power dynamics that operate within the current structures of globalization. I purport that Making Transnational Feminism is an appropriate and useful text for academics, students, practitioners, feminists, and any individual who is interested in transnational social movements. Key Words: Transnational, Feminism, Ethnography, Cross-Cultural Research, and Methodology*

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I have recently gained interest in transnational feminism due to its explicit foregrounding of the junctures at which identities intersect, overlap, and diverge (Mohanty, 2003). Analyzing power relations from these points of collision situates gender in a tightly interconnected web that also includes sexism, racism, and heterosexism (Moallem, 1999). Drawing upon post-colonialist ideologies, transnational feminists attempt to gain contextualized understandings of the power dynamics that are embedded in the interplay of gender, economic, racial, class, and historical conditions (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).

I have been reading texts and articles from the seminal theorists to deepen my understanding of the main theoretical bases of transnational feminism, yet there still was a gap in my understanding of the practical implementation of strategies in transnational feminist advocacy movements. Transnational feminism is at once a theory and a practice. In addition to theorizing about how gender relations are situated within other forms of political and social relations, transnational feminists also proclaim a commitment to activism. They attempt to create "new sites for action at the local, national, transnational levels in which to enact new political, economic, and cultural practices" (Desai, 2002, p. 16). Transnational feminist activism is comprised of many smaller social movements that are culturally, historical, and geographically grounded, rather than being a single mass movement. In this way, transnational feminism incorporates place-based political activism (Osterweil, 2005) as well as transnational political practices.

As a doctoral candidate with a strong interest in methodology, I was seeking a text that illustrated the decisions, negotiations, and activities at the individual and organizational level to show how the theory is enacted in practice. I found what I was

looking for in Millie Thayer's 2010 book, *Making Transnational Feminism*. This text, which was born out of Thayer's dissertation research, does a wonderful job of showcasing the interwoven fabric that is created with threads of both theory and practice.

In *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil* Millie Thayer (2010) offers a poignant behind-the-scenes look at transnational feminist organizing and social movements. She uses ethnographic techniques to observe the processes that occur within and among several feminist organizations in North East Brazil. Through her participant observation, she highlights the ways in which they work cooperatively in their struggles to achieve common goals. She does not present the transnational networks as a utopia, but rather, exposes some of the tensions that arise from linking and forming partnerships between various feminist organizations.

Thayer (2010) problematizes the analyses of transnational feminist activism in academic literature. She asserts that it foregoes analyses of the processes of organizing in favor of a perspective in which "movements appear as pre-constituted. The focus is on how already existing entities respond to opportunities and obstacles in a globalizing context, rather than on the processes by which movements come into being and sustain alliances" (p. 5). Thayer justifies using an ethnographic approach to examine culture as a way to understand the "fluid sets of meanings that tacitly shape movement practices and discourses" (p. 5).

Thayer (2010) has structured her book in a very reader-friendly manner. She outlines the structure of her book in the preface, preparing the reader for each chapter. The introductory chapter presents a brief overview of feminism in Brazil, her theoretical position, and the methodology that she uses to conduct this study. In chapter two, Thayer traces the development of feminism and, more specifically, transnational feminism in Latin America beginning in the 19th century. She uses examples of Latin American feminists advocating for social and economic issues to show that they had feminist movements that were different and independent from the movements that occurred in the United States and Europe at the same times, which primarily focused on political rights.

Chapters three through six is where the making of transnational feminism happens in Millie Thayer's book. She focuses on three aspects of transnational feminist networks to illuminate the processes that work to make these types of social movements possible. She first discusses cultural politics in chapter three, followed by organizational relations in chapters four and five, and lastly she speaks about the economic negotiations between local organizations and larger international donor agencies. Through detailing her observations and providing multiple examples to illustrate her points, Thayer allows her readers to be privy to the background processes that are involved in transnational feminist movements, which are often overshadowed in the literature by discussions of the outcomes of large events and/or conferences. In the concluding chapter, Thayer discusses the potential threats that neoliberal capitalism brings to the counterpublics that characterize transnational feminism. Counterpublics in this discursive space are "where participants share a commitment to negotiate their differences, transforming those differences from acrimonious divisions into sources of collective power" (p. 164). The practices of globalized economic structures undermine the cooperative and collective processes that the success of transnational movements relies upon, instead encouraging pursuits that satisfy self-interests. She asserts that the most effective way to resist the

potentially detrimental effects of neoliberal capitalism is for feminists and organizations to actively resist it by upholding the communal values of the counterpublic.

Thayer (2010) includes a methodological appendix that addresses some of the issues that arise when researchers engage in cross-cultural and cross-geographical studies. Thayer, a researcher from the global North, speaks of the power dynamics that were embedded in her study with participants who are from the global South. She had access to a greater amount of material resources, and had social liberties that the women with whom she studied in her research did not. This imbalance of economic and social resources created a complex relationship between her and them that, regardless of the culturally relevant pedagogy and immersion techniques that she instituted, made the power differentials visible.

As a potentially time-saving, practical guide for academics who seek to use this text in their course, Thayer (2010) has outlined the sections of the book which are relevant to specific topics. For example, she suggests that professors who use this text to discuss ethnography could focus on chapters one and three, while others who use it as a learning guide for rural social movements can focus on chapters four and five, and methodology is spread throughout the book, but is most discussed in chapters one, the conclusion, and the appendix. Interested readers can peruse Chapter One by visiting the book's website located at <http://www.routledge-ny.com/books/Making-Transnational-Feminism-ISBN9780415962124>.

Overall, *Making Transnational Feminism* (Thayer, 2010) is a great illustration of the processes that lead to organizational movements, and it is a book that is appropriate for students, educators, feminists, nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, and others who are generally interested in transnational social movements. It is most useful for people like me who are new to this field, and who want to gain a deeper understanding of how the theoretical bases of transnational feminism are implemented in activist movements.

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