

More Than Empathy: Transnational Feminist Mentoring Practices for Solidarity Building

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Abstract: Drawing on existing research on feminist mentoring in academia, this paper uses personal reflections on our mentoring relationships with one another to explore the challenges and possibilities of transnational feminist mentoring as a solidarity-building praxis. Through these reflections, we conclude that in order to develop a transnational feminist solidarity, we need more than empathy. Instead, transnational feminist relationship-building needs to start with respect and humility built on self-critique, recognition of changing intersectionalities, and consequential vulnerability. As mentors and mentees engage the processes of learning and unlearning, they also must be in solidarity to challenge gatekeepers, even as they become them.

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Elizabethada Wright does work on the rhetoric of memorial place as well as on nineteenth-century women's rhetoric. With all her work focusing on how marginalized people find voice in societies that try to silence them, most recently she has been examining the influence of French Catholic women religious (commonly known as nuns) on writing pedagogy in the United States. Dr. Wright's work outside the academy has similar goals: she has been an activist in many areas of social justice, co-hosted and co-produced a radio show on not-for-profit companies, and owned a fair trade company, Fa La Lo.

We are the victims of our history and our present. They place too many obstacles in the Way of Love. And we cannot enjoy even our differences in peace.

–Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*

Introduction

Transnational feminist scholars like Uma Narayana, Chandra Mohanty, and M. Jacqui Alexander show the importance of building transnational coalitions via scholarship, research, and relationships. In addition, these scholars are alert to the colonizing potential of academic research, in which scholars are compelled to search for an area to research, which they then pin down and theorize. When that chosen “area” includes sets of knowledge and experiences outside of those of the privileged scholars, the effects, these feminist scholars argue, are too often colonization rather than collaboration.

While we might imagine scholars from different positionalities as equivalent, the ideal of equal exchange of scholarship has long been troubled by the realities of power and inequity across national borders. For example, just as Black feminist scholars in the US like bell hooks have said that they are “made” black, so do transnational scholars like M. Jacqui Alexander come to “know” that they are brown after coming to the US. This experience of racialization, as much as any other research product, is part of what is produced and exchanged in transnational work. And the effects are compounded in the context of other interlocking power differentials, such as those of gender, sexuality, religion and dis/ability. These effects, then, have consequences for transnational feminist scholarship and for the possibilities of feminist solidarity and coalition-building across differences.

Drawing on existing feminist mentoring research (Eble & Gaillet; Ribero & Arellano; Mullings & Mukherjee; Tassoni), this article emerges from our own experiences of the coalition in mentoring—instances in which we shared several eureka moments of learning and unlearning that illuminated the following questions:

1. How can mentors and mentees bring their intersectional selves into their relationships?
2. How can we understand mentor and mentee relationships as relational sites of solidarity?
3. How can intersectional differences between mentors and mentees be negotiated for social justice purposes?

To explore these questions, the three of us—Asmi, Amy and Liz—first provide definitional

clarity regarding transnational mentorship, before we meditate on our roles as mentor, mentee, collaborator, student, and scholar, as they have transformed in different mentoring moments. Through these meditations, we conclude that in order to develop a transnational feminist solidarity, we need more than empathy. While relationship-building is crucial to our feminist praxis, we center on the insight that feminists in majority positions may need to unlearn the idea that they could ever truly empathize with women of marginalized positionalities, because they fight very different battles with the patriarchy.

Instead, all parties might instead benefit from focusing on their own reflective practices as a resource for solidarity building. For us, transnational mentorship is a relationship developed/fostered between and amongst differing, transnational scholars (for us, mentor and mentee). Like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, we define transnational in wider terms by going beyond the locational connotation and referring to the geopolitical and cultural positionality—all of which are important for production of knowledge (Erikson; Mohanty).

The meditation on intersectional complexities produced by our locational experiences that also emphasize geopolitical and cultural positionality remind us that power is not always derived from location of origin—though often that location of origin is implicated in power dynamics. Therefore, such mentoring involves recognition of the fluidity of power dynamics. The impetus for reflective unlearning in relation to mentorship is in recognition of the existing power differentials and the possibilities for violence and discrimination that mentoring may enable. Given the histories of various forms of transnational violence, we urge that differences are not to be “ironed out.” They must be discussed, so that trust may be built. Our conversations have led us towards a revised notion of rhetorical empathy, similar to that articulated by Lisa Blankenship, as a potential opening for transnational feminist mentoring praxis.

Blankenship’s concept of rhetorical empathy responds to critiques of empathy, such as our own, that have been leveraged in the wake of postmodernism. In particular, Blankenship responds to postmodernism’s critiques of the ways power can be seen to complicate (and even confound) the possibilities of empathy across differences. In lieu of empathy as traditionally conceived in Western thought, Blankenship defines four characteristics of *rhetorical empathy*, which we consider here in the context of transnational feminist mentoring praxis:

- Yielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories
- Considering motives behind speech acts and actions
- Engaging in reflection and self-critique
- Addressing difference, power, and embodiment (20)

In contrast to Aristotelian conceptions of empathy in relation to persuasion, which assume the rhetor's ability to understand and influence another, rhetorical empathy is not about accessing the experience of an Other for persuasion but about changing the *speaker* through listening, invoking a response in ourselves that may then be reciprocally invoked in our interlocutor. It is a relational interaction that is grounded in vulnerability.

While we think of rhetorical empathy as a resource for both mentors and mentees, it comes through most forcefully for us in the practices of those in positions of relative power, whether by virtue of professional position (of mentor), geographical origins that are related to global influence, and/or other vectors of relative power and privilege. In a transnational feminist mentoring practice, those with relative power are particularly called to practice rhetorical empathy—yielding, considering motives, engaging in reflection and self-critique, and addressing the salience of difference, power and embodiment in their relations—in order to build solidarity and coalition. For example, mentors in and from power positions in the US might begin by recognizing the cultural specificity of their own location and experiences, disrupting their ostensive normativity in the context of “internationalizing” rhetoric and composition research (Donahue).

In the following, we provide examples of such reflection and self-critique that have enabled us to build a community of shared interests, examples of how explorations of our biases have resulted in collaborative projects that investigate the situations that perpetuate bias. In so doing, we reflect on our relationships with one another and respond to each other's reflections. These ruminations work to surface shared insights, points of tension, and other learnings in the context of our own transnational feminist mentoring experiences.

Ultimately, our narratives allow us to respond to our initial three questions by observing that we must *be aware* of our intersectional selves as well as the ways in which they change in and through our relationships. With such a recognition, we must be in solidarity even as our intersectionalities change. Such solidarity and recognition allow us to work better toward social justice, even as we ourselves take on the role of gatekeepers in the hierarchically structured academic system (Corrigan and Vatz). We must use the recognitions of our positionalities to contest the structural inequity of academia and work toward that social justice.

Our specific context was one in which the mentee experienced a power differential as a brown graduate student from Nepal relative to white faculty mentors in the US. By providing examples of the “messiness” in mentorships, we provide some praxis to make it possible that mentorships developed between scholars sharing different intersectional identities can be leveraged for building solidarity. Mentors and mentees can learn from and be changed by each other when they engage in reflection and honest dialogue, humility, and support.

Reflections: Storying Transnational Feminist Mentorship

The three authors of this text have come together through their shared relationships. At the center of this network of relationships is Asmita, a graduate student of Nepali origin who has worked for the past three years in mentoring relationships with both Liz and Amy, white women faculty in or from the upper midwest. Asmita invited the three of us to come together to reflect on our experiences of feminist mentorship across transnational differences to discover what might be learned from our experiences. Asmita wanted to build on the work of Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano who explore how Latinx mentors and mentees are able to utilize culturally specific mentoring approaches. She wanted to explore how the three of us from different backgrounds find means to mentor—particularly following on Beverley Mullings and Sanjukta Mukherjee, how we can do so within academia’s racist and xenophobic environments.

To begin this process, each author individually wrote a reflection on their mentoring relationships with one another. Reading through the reflections of the other authors, we each then composed a second reflection in response. Together, this set of reflections and responses allows us to explore some of the intersections and differences in our experiences.

Asmi: My encounter with Liz and Amy is ushered and shaped by my desire for what I want to term as multiple mentorships (Rockquemore). For me, multiple mentorships is the networking and relationship I earned and developed to fight institutional racism I encountered after my arrival in the US as an international student and to excel in an academic market where excellence is determined by academic labor.

Liz welcomed me as an international student at the University of Minnesota Duluth, an institution that was already fraught by and struggling to get rid of racialized hierarchy in diverse ways. For example, getting to hear remarks such as, “You must be very proud to be here,” as I introduced myself to my colleagues, classmates and professors was quotidian for almost the first semester, until I stopped responding to it with a simple, “Oh yes, my parents are really proud of me.” Nonetheless being placed in classes to get rid of my accent and to perform everyday English, stripping away from my right to be graduate instructor, and having professors ask me to visit the writing center every time I stumble with grammatical errors were some of my everyday experiences, which (as I reflect now) represent the neoliberal ethos of the institution that I arrived on. In the first week of my arrival, during the time when I was still making sense of what I now come to know as everyday racism, I got an email saying that I cannot be a TA because I failed the English Test. I did not respond to the email; Liz did. Liz replied that Asmita will work as RA for me. Her intervention as a white woman working as a WPA at that time was a powerful and much needed intervention. Reflecting after almost four years, I am wondering if that intervention is to be interpreted as a “rescue effort”—an action of a person from a powerful positionality assuming their benevolence was necessary for the success of another person from a less powerful positionality. Perhaps so!

However, if we want to define such an intervention as a “rescue,” how can we foresee the possibility of solidarity devoid of such interventions? The dual meaning of “intervention” which I illustrated before is important throughout our mentor and mentee relationship. Drawing from this experience, as one of these instances, in this article we are intentionally trying to answer how transnational mentorship—the idea of building solidarity amongst scholars sharing diverse intersectional identities (Mullings & Mukherjee)—is shaped by “messiness” (Pihlaja & Durá) of breaking down the hierarchy, as we are struggling to dismantle the institutional hierarchy that we already behold and represent.

The Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition (CFSHRC) mentor and mentee program introduced me to Amy. I do not remember our first meeting in detail, rather I have vivid memories of how she responded to my first draft of the project on Yogmaya, an important feminist figure in Nepali history. The first draft I shared with Amy was not the draft, but the sharing of my vulnerability secretly asking for support to make it possible that a Nepali feminist be known in academia in the US. In this draft, I really did not know Yogmaya; I did not describe her well because I did not know her well at that time. However, I had a secret belief that “If Ida B. Wells can be a rhetorician, so does Yogmaya but I do not know how to say that...” Amy caught me in the paragraph where I described my mother’s sister’s story of being a widow, and said she valued my experience: “Asmi, this is a great project. I really believe that you have valuable knowledge and experience to talk about it.” She did not look at the details of Yogmaya; rather, she asked me to look inside me, going beyond my discomfort. She pushed me for self-reflection before asking me to research more about Yogmaya, even though I still thought Yogmaya’s story was more important than my own. In the case of recovering the rhetorical history of Yogmaya, my positionality was an asset—the asset that was developed by my academic knowledge of non-western rhetoric, my upbringing in rural Nepal, my family background and my emerging feminist resistance.

More than being a Nepali citizen, what is crucial is my positionality that goes beyond my nationality. In other words, in the case of Yogmaya, her stories of child marriage, being widowed, and fighting for freedom resonate with the story of my mother’s sister. While in the first draft, I mentioned my mother’s sister in a passage. Amy caught this powerful narrative and suggested I focus on amplifying this living data to revive the actual story of Yogmaya whose story was available only through the secondary data like a novel written on her and a dissertation written on her where all the sources are either the novel or the imaginative narratives. As suggested by Amy, by going back to my own memories of my mother’s sister and revisiting my conversations with her, I was able to compose Yogmaya as a rhetorician. While doing this, I feel like empathy is not situated in bodies in hierarchical ways, rather it gets (ex)changed between mentor and mentee; in my case, I did not have to persuade Amy if Yogmaya was a rhetorician; she wants to see if I see/feel/think as a rhetorician based on my cultural and political history. Amy clearly mentioned that she does not know who Yogmaya is and how she is a rhetorician; but she also tells me that she wanted to know

through me how she is. For me, at that time, I was experimenting with ideas and knowledge. Having lived a more privileged history than Yogmaya did and understanding her from the oral tradition only, I had to give voice to Yogmaya by interpreting her actions as rhetorical. And while doing so, I constantly felt that I am distant from her rhetorical practice as Amy is distant from my understanding of the rhetorical practice.

Amy: Asmi and I met through the CFSHRC mentoring program in November 2020. Still in the early months of the pandemic and not yet accustomed to the isolation that would become our new normal, I really enjoyed the opportunity to connect with Asmi as a scholar, but also just as a person.

From our first conversation, personal sharing and relationship building were a major part of how we connected, from my perspective. We talked often about Asmi's sister, who was expecting her first child. Asmi was moving to New York for the summer to help out with the new baby, and I had just had my first child as well, so we had much to share with one another on this front. We also related to one another in our deep connection to our sisters. We were particularly surprised to discover our shared connections to Duluth, Minnesota, where my whole family is from and where Asmi had done her Master's degree, having finished the year before. Now in California myself, with Asmi in Texas at the time, we waxed on about our appreciation of the cold and snow from our sunny desks in the South and West. Asmi doesn't remember these early meetings, suggesting they resonated differently for her. But I wonder how they might have nonetheless staged a relationship of trust for our work together supporting Asmi's research, particularly her project on Yogmaya, the early twentieth-century Nepali feminist activist and rhetorician.

I learned everything I know about Yogmaya from Asmi's passionate descriptions in these meetings. She talked often about her own personal connections to this woman and this story—connections that included national, gendered, and caste-based experiences and identities, among others. As a feminist rhetorician who studies historical women, I offered a set of readerly eyes and disciplinary resources to help draw those ideas out and contextualize them within the field. She brought her own scholarly texts to the interpretive work as well, trying out frameworks, combining them, and transforming them as she cast about for the right approach to do justice to Yogmaya and her contributions.

As we continued to work together to refine Asmi's argument about Yogmaya as a feminist rhetorician, we came to realize the *process* of researching and analyzing this woman was worth thinking about on its own, and we began to develop a version of Asmi's research for submission to *Peitho's* Recoveries and Reconsiderations section. That piece honored the specificity of Asmi's own lived experiences and research process as part of the work and allowed that to be a contribution in and of itself. This is part of what a feminist rhetorical praxis looks like to me broadly: to explore the ways we are implicated in and connected to the women's histories we research and

narrate. That piece made me more fully realize the importance of the positionality, experiences, and stories of globally diverse feminist scholars. As much as Yogmaya's lived experiences of patriarchy are outside of my own experience, so are the specific resonances of this historical figure within the context of Nepal, where Asmi encountered them. These are important perspectives that add complexity and depth to our discipline's collective understanding of women's rhetorics. Working in solidarity with the keepers of these stories, transnational feminist mentoring is a means by which I can not only learn from but also articulate my own experiences in relation to diverse histories and experiences from global contexts, understanding my own research subjects more deeply from this broadened perspective.

While she awaited word on that piece, Asmi pivoted and began work on another project that provided a different inflection point for these questions, as this next project focused on Afghan beauty parlors as sites of feminist rhetorical engagement, focusing on how these sites have been (mis)represented by Western stakeholders. This project revealed other layers of complex transnational feminist mentoring praxis, as we thought together about how to study and represent a community and experience of which neither of us were a part. While Asmi shared much with the subjects of her research in terms of her positionality as a non-Western feminist, there were other aspects of this culture and experience that were far afield from her own. Was this a project she was equipped to research, given her difference from her research subjects? How might she approach it ethically and reflectively? This additional layer of messiness and difference is part of what we can now explore together in this next research process. Transnational feminist mentoring does not offer a solution to these methodological questions, but instead illuminates and values their complexity as a resource.

Liz: I have little transnational experience. When I met Asmita in 2019, I was a professor in Minnesota who greeted the impressive young woman from Nepal. I was horrified when my university denied her the position she had already been awarded as a GTA because of their assessment of her English-speaking ability. With a background in literacy, I seriously doubted that Asmita, who already had an MA in English and Rhetoric from Tribuwan University in Nepal, was any less capable than other GTAs. Fortunately, the university did not revoke its offer of funding, and Asmita began assisting me in teaching an Advanced Writing section, since she was not allowed to be the instructor of record. As we worked together in a graduate class on teaching writing, I was continually impressed by Asmita's perspectives on rhetoric; I learned as much from her as she did from me, especially as she began research in the graduate class. Asmita's lived experience as a scholar in Nepal taught me how professional texts differ in Nepal from the US, and her extensive research on Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNEST) introduced me to an area of our field I knew little of previously.

As a white, straight, North American woman, I am in a remarkable seat of privilege which I have recognized for a number of decades. I also recognize my parochiality: most of my life ex-

periences and education occurred in the northeastern US. Though I yearned to see more of the world, my financial abilities limited the worlds I could experience.

Perhaps because of my background in feminist and African-American theories, I clearly know how little I know. In fact, one of my mantras—one I often relay to students—is that a true sign of intelligence is an awareness of your ignorance. In working with Asmita, as well as with many other young scholars, I remind them that though I might know more than they do about certain academic subjects—because of my age and experience—they may well have far greater critical capacity, and they have enormous experience in all kinds of areas in which I do not—and I can learn from them.

This attitude is perhaps what drew Asmita and me together as writers and scholars who thoroughly enjoy collaborating, because we appreciate each other's differing experiences as we continually learn from each other. Asmita and I both would not acknowledge the power of authority for authority's sake, as we constantly discussed gatekeeping. My attitude partially results from my experiences traveling to Spanish speaking countries. While my Spanish was sufficient to allow me to get by, people always told me that I "needed to work on my Spanish." Bringing my memories of struggling in Spanish speaking countries to the multilingual classroom, I admire the courage, intelligence, and persistence of multilingual students studying in the US, especially at Predominantly White Institutions where a US/British English is considered the norm.

Our differing backgrounds, and a common love of learning, also bring us to an important element of mentoring: trust. I trust Asmita. I may sometimes disagree with her, as she may disagree with me. However, we believe that the other is working to advance critical thinking—about whatever subject we are investigating. For our strong mentorship relationship, there needed to be trust built out of a common love of knowledge, a love that stems from the vulnerability and recognition of how much we don't know, of how limited our experiences are. I want to learn, not just teach. I believe Asmita wants to learn and be given credit for what she knows or has experienced. She knows so much that I don't or haven't experienced.

Asmi: It took resistance and a sort of revolution for Liz and me to trust each other. Liz is a white woman who possessed power that could influence my experiences in American graduate school. I felt I had been betrayed by the American graduate school system that offered me admission and an assistantship, only to inform me after my move across the globe that my abilities were insufficient. I was not sure why I should trust Liz, a cog in this American system. At first I trusted her because I had to; my other options were to leave the system or to trust someone else who I had no more reason to trust. As time passed, we performed forms of trust a lot of times, and there were movements where we would push each other—I challenged her as she challenged me. Our honesty with each other introduced me to the recognition that in the US, people are regarded by color. In other words, I learned that I am a "person of color" only after coming to the

US. After nearly eight months of me being in Minnesota, the relevance of “color” in the US became enormously evident. George Floyd was killed, and his death resonated with my experiences of learning how dangerous it is to be a “person of color” in the US. People have to die for the color of their bodies; let alone be judged, discriminated against, relegated, degraded, and disrespected for the human they are. As I recognized these issues, one of the questions that Liz and I wrestled with is how does Liz’s positionality empower me? How does my positionality empower her? Does she need to be empowered by my position? Or do I need her support to be empowered?

Oftentimes, I have seen, heard and learned how difficult it is for international students to work with privileged white professors in the university. Oftentimes, white professors want to capitalize on the labor, knowledge, and intellect of students—this often happens in most of the STEM fields too, where most of the academic publications are expected to be collaborative. Understanding one’s privileged positionality and leveraging the positionality is very important in mentor-mentee relationships. Liz always prefers to be the second author in the publications that we have done. This is very important for graduate students, especially in collaborative work. The authorial position is power. Empowering the co-author mentee can be done by providing them with an authorial position, especially when the mentor is in a powerful position. But the language of this offer does not have to happen in a gesture of grants or something like a kindness gesture. Giving an adequate and optimum amount of credibility to students and mentees is very important in mentor and mentee relationships.

Amy: It is interesting to me that Asmi recalls my own influence in bringing out the personal connections between her and Yogmaya, as I saw them as an existing strength in her work from early on. As she wrote these stories up gradually, theorizing them as she went, I merely provided a reader’s perspective on where she might elaborate or draw connections for Western audiences, based on my own curiosities and excitement.

This is where rhetorical empathy comes in for me—in yielding to Asmi’s expertise and listening to her experiences as a foundation for our work together, carefully considering my own motives in providing feedback and advice, and recognizing that her motives and experiences will differ from mine based on differences in power and embodiment. One thing that our relationship brought out about the nature of rhetorical empathy in the context of transnational feminist mentoring practices was the particular role of power and privilege in shaping who is most called to practice rhetorical empathy, and the complexity of accomplishing this in the context of career mentorship, where the task is simultaneously to listen and to guide. This was always a delicate balance for me, as I sought to mentor Asmi into new and potentially unfamiliar discourse communities and disciplinary literatures, without suggesting that her own frameworks should change as a result. I was keenly aware of Asmi’s depth of experience and the valuable situated knowledge that she brought to bear, which were key assets in this work of hers. How could I help harness those perspectives and contributions for Western audiences without inadvertently pushing her towards assimilation?

How could we accomplish this work of translation, both within the text and also within our own mentoring moments?

Still, reading Asmi's account of microaggressions and unproductive writing feedback related to English grammar, I admit to pangs of fear: how might I have perpetrated similar violences in my relations with Asmi? How did my responses to her language or experiences in my own comments on her drafts unknowingly contribute to any of these same experiences of deauthorization? As I read her account, I found myself trying to read through the lines to see where my own approaches might be reflected and revealed as inadvertently damaging, in spite of Asmi's assertion to the contrary. All of this is about me and my white fragility, not about Asmi. But it is also part of something more productive, too, at the center of our transnational feminist mentoring praxis: a seeking out of areas for improvement in our interactions, an assumption of growth and change, a desire to face the limitations of our own frameworks and interactions head-on. This drive towards self-reflection and self-critique in recognition of power /differences is rhetorical empathy at work in feminist transnational mentoring.

In writing this piece, we have tacitly committed to examining honestly the ways we have interacted across difference, for better *and* worse. As I'm reading more in the area of cultural rhetorics recently, I see many resonances between that term and what we are here calling rhetorical empathy as a transnational feminist mentoring practice. In particular, what conversations in cultural rhetorics have helped to reveal for me is the utility and necessity of fluidity, change, and contact as resources informing cultural (and transnational feminist) rhetorics (Jackson). That is, it is not the isolation of practices, positionalities, or experiences that animates these discourses as sites of liberatory potential, but the purposeful interaction between and among them—the transrhetorical practices in our mentoring practice, as Rachel Jackson theorizes. I am beginning to see more and more in both Liz's and Asmi's accounts, as well as my own, a common desire to share and learn from stories that are different from our own. To constellate our experiences and perspectives as part of our discrete research projects and scholarly identities (Powell et al.). To be changed. I wonder what thinking of our transnational feminist mentoring praxis of rhetorical empathy in relation to these cultural rhetorics frameworks might afford or enable?

Liz: Reading Amy's introduction, I am struck by the familiarity between Asmita and Amy, an initial familiarity Asmita and I did not have. For example, I never before called Asmita, Asmi, and I feel a bit uncomfortable doing so. As I wonder about my discomfort, I consider whether it's my upbringing that forces the totally professional stance. When Asmita and I first met, before the disaster of the University imposing its not-so-subtle racism, Asmita offered me a gift. A present from Nepal. I told her that I couldn't accept it. There must be rules about accepting gifts from students, I thought, but didn't know. I didn't want to break rules. Am I such a gatekeeper, assimilating Asmita into the rules of North American academic traditions? Perhaps it results from our mutual recognition of my role as mother to children around the same age as her, and as she joins us for dinner,

she is another member of the family, and I treat her as such.

I'm also struck by Asmita's observation that my involvement with her after the University disaster could be perceived as a "rescue" effort. Indeed, it could. As a white, female, full professor, I was in a position of power as Asmita came to the University. My "helping" her could be something for me to cite on merit forms and among my colleagues of what a wonderful person I am. I could assuage any discomfort I might feel about any of my own racial biases. Though I am horrified that I might have such selfish motives, I can't quite dismiss that perspective. How can I avoid such self-serving rescuing as a white woman, I continually ask.

As I contemplate this concept, I also note that discussions of "mothering" are parts of Asmi's and Amy's initial narratives while not part of my own, yet mothering is something that is comfortable to me—and enters all my teaching whether I want it there or not. I have two adult sons, but I still mother. My mothering is now more like mentoring, structuring our relationship in terms of trust and dedication to one another. For those of us comfortable with mothering (regardless of any actual parental roles), we can use those skills to nurture all students, as we simultaneously model that academic success and motherhood can be achieved together. It's messy, for sure, but it can be done.

While recognizing that "the metaphor of the (cis-hetero) family has historically been used to produce whiteness and augment white power as well as paper over deep and irreparable structural trauma," it is also possible, following Lisa M. Corrigan and Anjali Vatz, to imagine an ethic of care "where collaboration is prioritized and where growth is modeled and nurtured through intimate networks of collective solidarity and mutuality" (224, 226). For radical women of color feminists, as well as for myself, "mothering" in these ways may provide a model for this kind of care (Gumbs, Martens, and Williams). It may also take one of the hegemonic roles assigned to women and put it to work contesting hegemonic norms, which is messy business.

While there are no easy answers here, we need to recognize the multidirectional nature of knowledge and empathy, including its relationality to other positionalities we might hold, to better understand each other and learn from each other. Power is complex, and while mentors may sometimes have more privilege than do many of their mentees, the mentees have vast amounts of knowledge that can benefit the mentor.

More than Empathy: Rhetorical Empathy in Practice

An implicit commonality within our discussion is the need for empathy. However, empathy in itself can be dangerous if the vicarious experience that promotes the empathetic reaction appears to substitute for the actual experiences that are empathized. As Ann Jurecic states, empathy can

be complicit with “oppressive practices” (17).

In our work together, understanding the other has been essential, but this understanding has been multidirectional. The “rescue” mission that Liz engaged in with Asmita rescued Liz as much as it did Asmita; as Amy “helped” Asmita with her text on Yogmaya, Asmita helped her just as much. Empathy is not about power, and it is about power. We need to continually stretch our understanding of others, and ourselves, as we work to help each other and our field advances in the direction of social justice.

After writing and reading these narratives, the three of us met to see what we could cull from our experiences and reflections about this work. To this end, we close by returning here to our original three questions and briefly discuss how our narratives collectively respond to them to illuminate our learnings about empathy and solidarity in our transnational feminist mentoring practices.

1. How can mentors and mentees bring their intersectional selves into their relationships?

As numerous mentors and mentees before us have observed (e.g., Okawa; Rowe, “What Actually Works”; Rowe, “Building Mentorship Frameworks”; Rheineck and Rowland), we recognize that both mentor and mentee must know and understand each other’s positionality both in and out of academia. Being self-reflective about one’s positionality will help to understand one’s privileges and challenges.

Mentorship is already a hierarchical relationship. Amy and Liz recognized that in order to produce productive intellectual works and learning out of mentorships, they had to be willing to share the power that comes with their positionality. Power sharing here means willingness to be uncomfortable when it comes to empowering mentees. We must recognize that vulnerability can enhance rhetorical thinking (Marback).

In each of our narratives, we cannot help but to be our intersectional selves: a brown graduate student and two white tenured professors, one at the beginning of her career, the other well into it. But we are also much more than the color of our skin or our roles in the university, and who we are continually evolves. As Asmita’s scholarship becomes more established, she will gain power; as Liz’s gray hairs turn white, she will lose it. While everyone’s positionality changes over time with reversals of wealth and health, with the passing of time in a patriarchal world, women are particularly likely to find their power differentials in a deficit. As women marry, have children, age, and lose ability, they are less likely to maintain power than are men (e.g., Carmel, Miller). If we are serious about positive transnational mentoring relationships, we need to recognize their ongoing and intergenerational natures, as we continue to work and learn together. Amy’s listening to Asmi allows her to learn; Liz’s collaborations with Asmi teach her to challenge her assumptions;

Asmi is able to negotiate gatekeepers.

2. How can we understand mentor and mentee relationships as relational sites of solidarity?

Throughout these narratives, each of us recognized the value of what the other offered. Such recognition is essential. As in our case, when Asmi had been made to feel that her experiences did not count, Amy and Liz helped Asmi recognize the value of her previous experiences. This does not mean, as Juan Guerra points out, that Liz and Amy told Asmi to only use discourses associated with Standard White English (SWE) and its power to communicate those experiences and insights, but instead that they recognized and encouraged Asmi's "rhetorical sensibilities" developed within her translingual practice as part of what she has to offer to her scholarly work. It also meant that Liz and Amy recognized that Asmi's prior knowledge created thresholds for the development of their new knowledge, as their mentoring created thresholds for Asmi's new knowledge.

The three of us also continually asked each other what role they wanted to be in, as Gesa E. Kirsch recommends feminist collaborators must. They had clear communication about authorship: Liz was explicit about that in their work, Asmi should be the first author. Asmi and Liz also discussed the demands of academic publication in the US and how to work accordingly—without losing confidence. Amy made clear she was not going to offer solutions to Asmi's ponderings about Yogmaya—she wanted Asmi to figure out the answers. Amy told Asmi that Asmi was the sole producer of the knowledge she was creating and that she had the authority to carve the knowledge in the way she wanted. In our relationships, the focus has been less on the teaching and more on learning what role Asmi's expertise had in the material.

3. How can intersectional differences between mentors and mentees be negotiated for social justice purposes?

Recognizing our solidarity and the changing dynamics of our intersectionality, we have continually been challenging gatekeepers, trying to make our field more expansive. As mentors, we have encountered the paradoxes of being both gatekeepers and gate-breakers. However, part of the solidarity found in our fluid intersectionalities requires that, while we may have common goals in challenging the gatekeepers, many mentees from countries outside the US fear challenging gatekeepers because of visa policies and their documents. They do not want to speak against the system to which they are foreign. In such cases, we need to illustrate means of challenging the status quo. For example, after Liz knew that Asmi was not allowed to teach, Liz went to talk with several of the administrators working on the behalf of international students and the school. She asked the exact reason Asmi was not allowed to teach. Liz was told that some decision makers wanted to give a good impression of the school. As a tenured professor, Liz made clear Asmi was

an asset to the university. Such modeling illustrates we can recognize our intersectional selves to create solidarity to take on tasks that work for social justice.

We also have to recognize when we are gatekeepers. As Amy and Liz have worked with Asmi, they have tried to handle differences in language and culture with care, recognizing such differences as resources, and not simply assumed as errors (Lu; Horner et al.). Our own work in this piece recognizes the discomfort with assimilation as well as with “error, ” a discomfort Suresh Canagarajah has discussed at length. We want this piece to be published, to be shared; however, we know the syntax here is not always conventional English. We struggle with how much to “correct” and how much to allow to create change and resist assimilation. After all, editors and publishing houses are gatekeepers, too (Corrigan and Vatz). Challenging the gatekeepers means a critical recognition and rejection of policies and practices that have prevented various peoples from moving forward.

Challenging gatekeeping, like each aspect of transnational feminist solidarity we have explored, is a self-reflective practice of asking if our positions, roles, and practices are hampering others from moving forward. These moments do not present easy answers for any of us. However, as mentee and mentor in solidarity with one another, we struggle together.

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