# Review of *Transnational Assemblages: Social Justice and Crisis Communication during Disaster.*

Carina Jiaxing Shi (she/her) and Jessica Enoch (she/her)

At first glance, it might not seem as if *Peitho* readers would find deep interest in a book focused on rhetorical approaches to disaster relief. But upon our reading of Sweta Baniya's 2024 monograph *Transnational Assemblages: Social Justice and Communication during Disaster*, we believe there is much for feminist readers to learn and find value in. Throughout her book, Baniya foregrounds feminist rhetorical values and stances as she pays special attention to intersectional experience; local, national, and international acts of coalition building; and her own positionality while taking up her book's purpose: to explore how people around the globe formed transnational assemblages to provide disaster relief in response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake and 2017's Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Manuel DeLanda, Baniya defines transnational assemblages as "collectives of people, organizations, or entities who are connected transnationally via online and offline mediums and who gather to respond to a certain situation of natural or political crisis by challenging the dominant narratives and practices" (13). Using a mixed-methods approach of narrative inquiry and social network analysis, Baniya gathers both micro-level, qualitative and macro-level, quantitative data to uncover the localized stories, formation, and mobilization of transnational assemblages created during the two disasters. Baniya prioritizes social justice concerns throughout her analysis, focusing on marginalized communities' crisis response efforts and inequity in disaster relief. Feminist scholars, of course, will be drawn to this focus, especially given the exigency of our current global moment, as we face a new reality marked by diminished U.S. federal support for institutions like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In her introduction, Baniya defines "disasters" as "events that have extreme, large-scale impacts that affect a great number of lives" (4). Disasters, Baniya clarifies, "can have a multidimensional effect that requires the involvement of national, local and international entities to address the aftermath" (4). Baniya goes on to assert the rationale for using assemblage theory to understand disaster relief, citing the variety of local and global collectives involved in responding to disasters. She contends that the transnational assemblages she studies reveal how such assemblages "can take countless multimodal forms, and members of the assemblage can perform such communication both formally and informally," within and without digital contexts as well (15). Baniya continues, "transnational assemblages help in identifying the gaps in communication that may

be created by the official disaster response system, and they may also encourage actors to stand up for the community" (15). Baniya also uses this introductory chapter to underscore the necessity for technical communication specialists to engage these discussions about disaster relief, highlighting especially those scholars in technical communication who have developed social justice-oriented frameworks to approach technical communication. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Natasha Jones, Michelle Eble, and Angela Haas, Baniya claims that studies like hers offer insight into how to "incorporate social justice-oriented communication and disaster response that will help us in understanding how current disaster relief models strengthen systemic oppressions, creating newer forms of injustice in post-disaster situations" (9).

In both of her two case-study chapters, Baniya is highly reflective of her own positionality, explaining how she offers an insider and outsider account of the two research sites. In chapter one, she explores her positionality as a local Nepali journalist, communications practitioner, and active social media user who experienced the 2015 Nepal earthquake firsthand. Baniya's focus is to turn attention from large-scale federally funded relief efforts to explore instead how local Nepali communities worked within transnational assemblages to respond to the disaster. Using the Nepali term *swa-byabasthapan*, which Baniya translates as self-management," Baniya explores the alternative, grassroots-level disaster response performed by individuals within transnational assemblages who did not wait for the government or any official organizations" (54). These self-management efforts indicate the communities' investments in sovereignty and control as they assess the "collaborative actions necessary to address the injustices these individual communities . . . face [and . . .] understand the community and its needs" (54).

As an outsider investigating the devastating effects of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, Baniya works in chapter two to acknowledge her limited perspective while still uncovering how transnational assemblages informed relief efforts in response to this disaster. Similar to her work in chapter one, Baniya investigates how Puerto Rican communities addressed governmental shortcomings through their own efforts. Drawing on the expertise of feminist scholars like Karrieann Soto Vega, Baniya highlights how local assemblages enacted *autogestion*, which, like chapter one's *swa-byabasthapan,* is also "loosely translated as 'self-management'" (91). Here, Baniya considers how actors leveraged digital media platforms to "prioritize[e] the voices and needs of the people and creat[e] flexible protocols that continued to evolve as the crisis unfolded" (92). Focusing on examples like the disaster relief app Connect Relief, Baniya explores how this "application helped collect data, identify community needs, and match donors and volunteers with needy communities" (94) in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

Through the two chapters on the two case studies, Baniya engages two research sites of different geopolitical contexts and delineates non-Western, decolonial modes of disaster relief . In her concluding chapter of the book, Baniya considers what readers might learn from these case studies, which seems critically important to current local and transnational exigencies and circumstances. In both chapters' studies, Baniya's research data indicates that transnational assemblages not only facilitate crisis communication and action as disaster response, but they also have the potential to challenge and highlight inequalities: social injustices created by unequal distribution of aid or information through the official narrative of authorities. Building on these findings, Baniya thus redefines decolonial and social justice approaches to crisis communication as

"alternative crisis communication performed by individuals unrelated to any official or international organizations to curate, share, and validate information for the larger public by using varied publicly accessible digital technologies and platforms" (119). Baniya also turns her attention to the pedagogical in this final chapter, explicating how faculty in technical communication might engage the possibility and promise of transnational assemblages as they explore new social justice-oriented response and communication strategies.

It's essential to dwell on the positionality and the stance Baniya cultivates and calls for in her monograph. As readers and reviewers of *Transnational Assemblages*, we especially appreciated Baniya's focus on positionality as a way to meditate and make sense of disaster-related experiential realities (or not) and as a lens through which to analyze disaster relief efforts. While Jess appreciated the outsider perspective Baniya cultivates in chapter two, Carina found that reading this book brought back memories of the Sichuan earthquake in China, a collective grief shared by every Chinese citizen who lived through May 12, 2008.

At a time when access to globally available social media was not available, and living far away from Sichuan, Carina's only memories of the disaster came through official TV channels. Baniya's book prompted questions about the stories silenced or untold with the absence of social media, and the enormous relief people would receive had it been present. Carina knew, however, that countless efforts of "*autogestion*" and "*swa-byabasthapan*" were made locally and transnationally, despite the very limited digital network resources back then. Even though Baniya's transnational assemblages are a proximate product of digital tools, Carina firmly believes that their spirit of self-management existed before digital spaces. People have been able to conjure up local, individual efforts of disaster relief long before the access of digital tools. Transnational assemblages, therefore, remain as a non-Western, temporal, and spatial reality whenever disaster strikes in less privileged areas.

As Baniya's book prompts this kind of reflection, it also pronounces the power of crisis communication made possible through transnational assemblages to reach the marginalized, the ignored, and the unseen in disasters in a timely manner timely manners. As decolonial and social-justice research is currently at the forefront of technical and professional communication, Baniya's book serves as a fine example of a mixed-methods, multi-sited, and multimodal study that is mediated by the "self-reflexivity" of the researcher (39). Feminist scholars should pay close attention to how this book contributes to crisis communication and disaster studies by introducing non-Western methods of disaster relief sensitive to local communities and marginalized populations, which are made possible through transnational assemblages. *Transnational Assemblages* ultimately offers a redefinition of crisis communication with social-justice orientations that future researchers, educators, and practitioners can adopt in the study , teaching, and management of disaster relief.

## Biographies

**Carina Jiaxing Shi** is an English PhD candidate studying rhetoric and composition at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research centers on translingual artisanship and translingual/transmodal fluency within academic and professional writing literacies. She also invests her time in the politics of U.S.-trans-

national identities, comparative rhetoric, and transnational literacy autobiography. She endeavors to find scholarly values in lived experiences. She teaches upper-level professional writing courses and first-year academic writing courses at UMD, where she also served as writing program administrator. Carina believes that art and music are ladders to the soul, and the making of art is no different from prayer.

**Jessica Enoch** is professor of English and director of the academic writing program at the University of Maryland. Her recent book publications include *Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetorics and Women's Work*; *Mestiza Rhetorics: An Anthology of Mexicana Activism in the Spanish-Language Press, 1887-1922* (co-edited with Cristina Ramírez), and *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor* (co-edited with David Gold). Enoch currently serves as the immediate past president of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition.