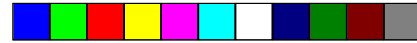


Networking the Macro and Micro: Toward Transnational Literacy Practices

Rebecca Dingo

In late summer 2009 Knof Press released the book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning and humanitarian journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky* tells atrocious stories about individual women from across the developing world. The book has had a favorable and uncritical reception in the U.S. For example, a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* accompanied the book's release. The editor of this special issue, ignoring the history of feminist organizing for women's rights globally as well as the rise of the Women and Development paradigm in the 1980s and 90s, suggests that Kristof and WuDunn have begun a new crusade for women's rights in the developing world (Kristof and WuDunn, "Women's"). Likewise, popular media outlets ranging from the *New York Times* to *Reuters* and even feminist media organizations such as the blog *Feministing* and the magazine and website *Bitch* have praised the book for exposing the gendered violence—or "gendercide" as Kristof and Wudunn call it in their book—that women continue to face in the two-thirds world countries in the twenty-first century. The *New York Times* book review notes that the book offers a "poignant portrait... of [third-world woman] survivors [to] humanize the issues, divulging facts that moral outrage might otherwise eclipse" (Manji). Although critical of the book's lack of attention to neo- and colonial power and history, the feminist organization "Elevate Difference" (formerly *Feminist Review*) suggests that the book "lay[s] out a powerful argument about the importance of development work paying heed to gender" (Forman).

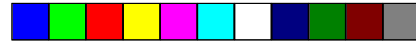
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These reviews thoughtfully draw attention to the fact that *Half the Sky*, through snippets of individual women's stories told through the voice of Kristof and WuDunn, exposes heinous problems of violence against women and girls, ranging from sexual slavery, trafficking for prostitution, dowry murders, rape, and acid attacks to name only a few. These stories, as the *New York Times* points out, do put a human face on the struggles that women from lower-income or two-thirds nations, terms I prefer over "developing" or "third world," face through close-up and intimate details of individual women's lives.¹ And, through these micro-stories, Kristof and WuDunn certainly offer a sort of pro-information literacy campaign about how, in some lower-income countries, women face gendered oppressions and gendered violence both in the private and public sphere. In doing so, they make a valuable case for the fact that much of the violence that women cope with goes unreported, especially in mainstream media outlets, or, if reported, such events do not register as *gendered* violence. Perhaps as a consequence, these reviews, following the call of feminists and those who support human rights, celebrate *Half the Sky* for exposing this gendered violence. They commend the book for offering information about women's struggles in places that are often discounted in common, everyday reporting. And ultimately, they exalt these stories because they are affective, at once predictable and spectacular.

As a result, the book has easily captured a sympathetic audience's attention. This has been made clear not only because the book has received such positive reviews across a range of media outlets, but also because *Half the Sky* has been chosen by a variety of colleges (such as the prestigious women's college, Smith College) and universities (such as George Washington University) for their freshmen "one read" programs. Likewise, the College of Wooster and the University of Missouri's Women's and Gender Studies Department and School of Journalism have invited Kristof and/or WuDunn to talk about their encounters with women in the developing world and about how students might best support these women. In short, *Half the Sky* has become a literacy apparatus for teaching students (and faculty, for that matter) about the plight of women who reside in lower-income nations.

Yet, I find this book's praise, its easy and uncritical reception, and its pedagogical circulation among media venues and universities quite



troubling. As a rhetoric and composition scholar who engages transnational feminist work, I suggest that the book promotes a sort of limited literacy about the so-called “two-thirds world women”; it promotes a literacy always already schooled by our emotions and bodily affects. Likewise, I think that the book’s popularity is due not just to what the stories tell (affective and emotional stories about *other* women’s oppression), but also to what is *absent* from these narratives.

If literacy includes reading and writing practices that are used to interpret and evaluate knowledge (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 3),² then the literacy that *Half the Sky* promotes, with its focus on heinous crimes experienced in “other” nations and by “other” women and atrocities that are seemingly unconnected to the book’s readers, reaffirms what many transnational feminists argue should be blurred and complicated: the dichotomy between center and periphery and the notion that brutal violence happens “over there,” disconnected from our comfortable home and seemingly enlightened nation (see, for example, Grewal; Kaplan; Mohanty; Nagar). *Half the Sky* promotes a limited form of global literacy distancing the women it represents from broader historical, material, and political conditions. As a result, the book unwittingly separates “those other women” from “our” own circumstances. The only connection *Half the Sky* asks its audience to have with the women in the stories is to feel bad for them and then to offer support in the form of monetary donation—indeed, the final section of the book lists a wide variety of organizations where one might donate money. In other words, *Half the Sky* offers the audience who reads the book no *connectivity* beyond pathetic, localized, and individual stories—not to the political structures and processes, global economic systems, or colonial histories that imbricate systematic gendered violence against women and girls.

Yet, with the right reading tools, as Deborah Brandt points out, literacy can be an “economic, political, intellectual, [and] spiritual resource” that offers new ways of understanding our world (Brandt, qtd. in Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 3) and, as such, as Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell point out, literacy practices then must promote thinking and writing about the economic, social, political, cultural systems that frame issues such as those present in *Half the Sky*. For transnational feminist and cultural studies scholars, literacy addition-

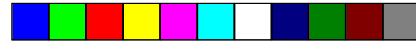


ally means considering how cultural systems have also schooled how we receive, react to, process, and then understand information.

The familiar narratives that *Half the Sky* tells remind me of the sorts of colonial narratives that have been critiqued in literary studies for decades. Because of their repeatability, colonial narratives offer affective moments of recognition and dis-identification. As postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha noted decades ago in *The Location of Culture*, colonial narratives repeat over and over because they are familiar; indeed, particular and repetitive *pathetic* colonial narratives about women and children are affective and emotional—they stimulate the body, then the mind, and then move us toward action. However, economic, political, and cultural contexts often limit the possibilities for effective action.

A transnational literacy must break this familiar cycle by re-schooling our understandings of these narratives and pedagogically connecting individual lives, stories, and sufferings to wider systems of historical, cultural, and material local- and geo-politics. Affect scholars such as Brian Massumi have suggested that affect is not emotion. Rather, affect is bodily sensation and emotion follows from that sensation. Thus, an affective moment, when the body is shifted or jarred, can provide an opening for re-thinking or re-considering preconceived notions; affect can offer possibility. However, if affect is only coupled with preconceived information, that possibility may be closed. *Half the Sky* draws on our pre-conceived colonial lenses (see Bhabha) as it reifies a nineteenth-century colonial rescue narrative.

I see the celebration of *Half the Sky* for making the world aware of the violence that women face (a celebration that does not explore the connection between the women's stories and these material structures) as symptomatic of our present cultural milieu of neoliberalism where choice and investment are conflated with agency and where an exorbitant amount of information is at once readily available via the far reaches of the Internet but also constrained by our own personal choices in that access (see Duggan). Within *Half the Sky* there is an absence of a structural critique so that we are unable to *see* or understand how transglobal (Dingo and Scott) power relationships are literally transferred onto women's bodies and lives. Women become subjects of neoliberal discourse rather than people who are part of a local and global community.



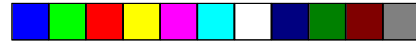
Whereas neoliberal policies extend capitalist market logic—that is, competition, free trade, and business—to all institutions, including social welfare, Wendy Brown illustrates that neoliberalism has turned into a sort of governmentality, a form of “political rationality” that extends beyond market economics to the management and then self-management of people. Neoliberal governmentality, which embraces rational choice economics, works at the level of the individual and thus produces neoliberal actors. We can see neoliberal governmentality enacted through rhetorics of choice (consumer, personal, behavior, and so forth) and personal investment—a rhetoric that *Half the Sky* promotes both for first-world readers and the two-thirds world women. As Brown also clearly explains, neoliberal governmentality imbues our social and ethical obligations so that the onus for fighting this sort of gendered violence falls on the shoulders of individuals and not on the state or another governing body and certainly not on the shoulders of multinational corporations whose economies often exceed those of lower income nations. Twisting Gayatri Spivak’s observation, individual (read: Western) investors are responsible for teaching brown women how to save *themselves* from brown men and historically “backward” cultural practices. This neoliberal rhetoric, then, obfuscates the wider contextual problems that constrain people’s choices and their investments. Additionally, this neoliberal rhetoric allows people with money, presumably from wealthy countries, to separate themselves from those in whom they are investing.

Thus, I believe that *Half the Sky*’s stories offer readers a dangerously neoliberal literacy and pedagogy—an incomplete pedagogy that does not teach its readers how tangible global systems of power impact individual women’s lives; a pedagogy that precariously situates its readers (and in the case of universities, student and faculty readers) as empathetic neoliberal agents for change without educating them in the *contexts* that connect women’s oppression with wider transglobal powers and histories. Recognizing these contexts ought to be part of a transnational feminist pedagogy and literacy. In contrast to a transnational feminist pedagogy and literacy, Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney suggest that a neoliberal pedagogy interpellates subjects into social relations that support the circulation and realization of capital in daily lives while producing subjects whose lives are fully subsumed within the logic of the



global market (20). While certainly part of the goal of a university education is to produce agents who can have a positive and productive impact on the world, the problem is that *Half the Sky* positions readers (that is, student-consumers who most likely come from powerful and first-world nations) as agents only insofar as they place an imperialist, modernizing, and westernizing gaze on low-income/two-thirds world women as objects of rescue—and in the context of the book, rescue takes place through individual gifts of charity. The “so what” (so to speak) of the book is for readers, much like the sorts of citizen-students we often assume need to be reproduced through our rhetoric and composition pedagogies (see Schilb), to become agents—limited agents who invest financially, emotionally, and pedagogically in these women’s lives without querying how atrocities came to be, how they connect to geopolitical power structures. Through affective connections and their financial investments in charities and microlending, readers are called upon to *teach* downtrodden women how “to turn oppression into opportunity” and in exchange readers become interpellated into a neoliberal subjectivity and as a result might *feel* emotionally and intellectually fulfilled.

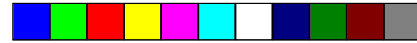
John Schilb recently observed, in his position as editor of *College English*, that rhetoric and composition scholarship and pedagogy has overwhelmingly translated traditional Foucauldian analyses of power into an uncritical celebration (and obsession with) agency in our field. Reflecting neoliberal subjectivity, agency often becomes the gift you can give—buy a book, volunteer, participate in service learning, write a letter, go to college, become an expert, get a job, make money, donate money—and these gifts make everybody *feel* better. Offering agency through investing and donation, for example, merely distracts the reader from the wider contexts that impact gendered oppressions. The powerful energy and message of the book gets deflected onto the reader’s limited action, not onto the individual woman’s material conditions—her local-global situation. Schilb ultimately calls for rhetoric and composition scholars to examine sovereignty, especially as agency can be decontextualized and limited. His essay makes clear that in rhetoric and composition we need new reading, writing, and teaching practices that extend the sorts of texts we examine and *how* we examine those texts. He suggests we ought not only to look at texts for their structures of power, but also to take note of



the “public lives” (5) of written texts; and, I might add, to take note of what these texts’ public lives say about us and our culture, a move advocated by transnational feminists as well.

This essay demonstrates the ways that we can pedagogically take note of the public lives of texts like *Half the Sky*. Despite my critiques and troubles with the book, I do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I suggest we might look productively and critically at popular books about women’s oppression such as *Half the Sky* to find its fissures so that we can formulate a new literacy and pedagogical practice that embraces the transnational feminist method of linking what appear, for example, to be an individual’s story to its wider contexts.³ I propose that we might first reflect upon the sorts of analyses we tend to privilege in the field; second, we ought to develop transnational literacy practices; and, third, we need to rethink the sorts of writing practices we engage in ourselves and then also teach our students. I wish to extend Schilb’s observation about moving scholarship beyond ungrounded analyses of power and suggest that we use texts like *Half the Sky* to develop a transnational feminist literacy and pedagogy of writing that does not focus only on individual agency but that instead productively turns a critical lens on our own reading and writing practices and pedagogies. We might develop such literacy by teaching students to make connections between gendered and seemingly micro-level atrocious acts (such as those acts that *Half the Sky* describes) and the wider macro-level geopolitical and economic contexts of such acts. The compositional structure and rhetorical micro-narratives such as those in books like *Half the Sky* mask these sorts of macro-level power relationships and then ultimately hide the material/structural causes of women’s oppressions.⁴ Ultimately, a transnational feminist literacy practice could push readers to unveil these macro-level power structures and better understand the multiple scales that cause women’s oppression.

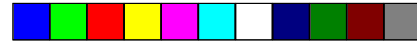
In what follows, I draw upon transnational feminist theory to create a pedagogical response to neoliberal and Western “savior” discourses and the literacies they (and *Half the Sky*) promote about “other” women. In so doing, I critically examine parts of *Half the Sky* in order to consider the sorts of limited arguments the text makes and then to gauge what it is that we find attractive about its arguments and why they move us toward



limited and decontextualized action—politically, scholarly, and pedagogically. I suggest that in addition to repeating a familiar colonial savior narrative, the book offers stories imbued with a sense of urgency and thereby impel audiences to act impulsively, without making cogent analyses, and then channel action through consumption; this urgency allows audiences to celebrate the fact that gendered atrocities are brought to light but not to understand *why* such atrocities occur and *how* to perhaps offer systematic responses to atrocities.

I next argue, however, that this uncritical circulation of *Half the Sky*, especially as a text that teaches students and faculty about the two-thirds world women, provides an opportunity for rhetoricians to think about their own writing practices and to consider how their own scholarship and pedagogy may be complicit with broader global, social, historical, and economic practices. Ultimately, I show how *Half the Sky's* model of literacy and writing—the delinking of powerful stories from their local-global connections—demonstrates the need for rhetoric and composition scholars to examine critically our own literacy, writing practices, and pedagogies making sure that we connect localized and individual micro-stories to global macro-conditions, and also that we carefully consider the notion of agency in the classroom. We might look at *Half the Sky* as an opening to formulate a new composition pedagogy of networking arguments, a pedagogy that embraces the transnational feminist rhetorical practice of linking what appear, for example, to be micro-stories to their wider contexts (see Dingo, *Networking*).⁵

In the next section, I examine *Half the Sky* in order to demonstrate why we need a transnational feminist literacy practice of networking individualized stories to their wider global contexts. This practice enables students and scholars alike to move away from neoliberal forms of agency and colonial Western rescue narratives by tracing the economic, social, and political conditions of contemporary neoliberalism, neo-colonialism, and neo-imperialism across nations and asking how these sorts of practices link diverse nations and people and shape them in similar and different ways.



Telling Half the Story: *Half the Sky* as a Pedagogical Moment

Half the Sky is certainly interesting and good at drawing an audience's attention to the atrocities that women face, but it does so through individual stories that are divorced from the wider local-global contexts that impact these women's lived experiences. Although the stories in *Half the Sky* might seem dynamic, they are actually flat and acontextualized. These sorts of acontextualized stories ultimately position readers as neoliberal saviors of women, who through their monetary donations can help be responsible for teaching seemingly dis-empowered and disenfranchised two-thirds world women how to become responsible and productive economic actors in an increasingly globalized economy.

Half the Sky skims the surface of women's oppression and in a large part attributes women's oppression in the two-thirds world as being due to traditional patriarchal cultures and, as such, does not invite readers to critically consider the other forms of tangible power that allow violence against women to continue throughout the world (and at home, for that matter). Because the book obfuscates these macro-contexts, we need to learn ways to read for them without these macro-contexts being there.

The book makes one singular argument about all women from low-income nations: that their oppression can be an opportunity for us to invest money or support charities. As a result, *Half the Sky* makes readers feel good about themselves—they are aware of atrocities and by using their wealth they can make a difference.

Early in the book, for example, to put a human face on women's oppression and to elicit attention to gendered violence, the audience is introduced to Srey Neth, a teenager who was trafficked by her cousin from Cambodia and forced to serve in a Thai brothel. Kristof and WuDunn explain that because Neth was attractive, young, and a virgin, she brought a significant amount of money to the brothel and was thus forced to sleep with many men. Undeniably, Neth experiences first-hand sexual and physical violence and exploitation. As a result, Neth is understandably fearful and traumatized, and her suffering has not only visceral effects but also emotional and material effects.

Neth is able to escape her situation, nevertheless, when Kristof and WuDunn purchase her (and another young woman) from the brothel and



then set them “free.” At Neth’s request, they return her to her family in Cambodia and provide her money to open a small village grocery store and from there Neth goes on to be trained as a beautician. Kristof and WuDunn also tell the story of Srey Rath, another young woman who was trafficked into prostitution. They describe Rath as “self confident,” “small boned, pretty, vibrant, and bubbly” (xi) and claim Rath’s “attractiveness and winning personality,” “her trusting nature and optimistic self-assuredness,” can be “perilous bounties” (xi) or life savers. As the story goes, Rath’s character, her good looks, and the confidence she gains from escaping prostitution and running a business save her life. Rath opens a small shop next to her mother’s with the support of the American Association for Cambodia.

Both Rath’s and Neth’s stories end happily: Neth gains employment as a beautician, and Rath is married, HIV-negative (amazing, since she had been forced to have unprotected sex with an HIV positive client), and has given birth to a healthy son. Through these descriptive first-hand accounts provided by Kristof and WuDunn, the book indeed places a human face on women’s oppression.⁶ However, we are not privy to either Neth’s or Rath’s backgrounds or how they actually became involved in prostitution. Likewise, we hear nothing about the political relationship between Thailand and Cambodia that may make it easy for pimps to traffic women across borders. And, we are not told why brothels thrive in Thailand.

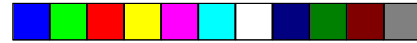
What we do hear about, as exemplified above, is how Neth and Rath had personalities and then came across opportunities (not to mention the fact that Kristof himself presented an opportunity to them to escape) to better their situation. As a result, *Half the Sky* bolsters neoliberal ideologies of personal tenacity and free will—even at the moment of rescue, Neth and Rath *choose* to go with Kristof and then make good choices about their future employment. These sorts of neoliberal stories attract an audience schooled in neoliberal governmentality. While Neth’s and Rath’s stories appear as narratives of personal freedom, tenacity, and empowerment, their stories also obfuscate other unhappy stories—where women are *not* purchased by wealthy journalists who set them “free” and offer them monetary and social support due to their “winning personalities.”



Readers do not learn that solutions to human trafficking must confront a wide variety of political, legal, and material factors. Readers do not learn how most women do not come across loans and support from NGOs, nor do they learn about what sorts of strings maybe attached to such loans or supports. These stories ask readers to become neo-colonizers who merely offer a gaze of recognition without being cognizant of the wider vectors of power that impact these individual women's lived experiences. The emotionally gripping stories that position the reader as a hero enables high-income nations' audiences to avoid thinking through power relationships, and they allow these audiences to be complicit with larger political, economic, and representative systems.

Moreover, neither Rath's nor Neth's stories offer more complex views of sex work as a result of several networked and intertwining factors (see, for example, Hesford; Dingo, "Linking" and *Networking*). I do not doubt that both Rath's and Neth's lives were saved by Kristof and WuDunn's efforts, but their stories have many holes. The authors explain, for example, that Neth was kidnapped and sold by her cousin, but what we do not know is *why* she was kidnapped. Surely it is not simply because this cousin (or all Cambodians, as a reader might assume) does not respect women. Likewise, we know that Rath left her hometown to sell vegetables in the city, but we don't know *why* she needed to do so; were there not economic opportunities in her hometown?

If we looked closer at the history of the region, we would find that there is plenty of literature about how political and military instability and violence have contributed to the economic conditions that created large markets for sex work in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand (see, for example, Enloe; Bishop and Robinson). In fact, if we look deeper at the history of Cambodia, we would find that for three generations most Cambodians grew up orphaned. Prior to and after the Vietnam War, many Cambodians lived in work camps where familial relationships were discouraged or impossible. Additionally, within these camps, women were systematically raped. Then, due to mass killings by the Khmer Rouge, followed by decades of social and political instability, many in the next two generations grew up as orphans or near orphans. How has this history fueled and continue to fuel the trafficking of Cambodian women?



And how has this history affected Cambodian women's view of sex and sexuality?⁷

As Cynthia Enloe has made clear, sex work tends to proliferate around military bases run by nations seeking to watch or be part of another nation's governmental organization. How did the Khmer Rouge (along with the U.S.'s, Thailand's, and Great Britain's support of it) impact the nation's economy and, as a result, the sorts of economic opportunities present for women? Likewise, how has the Khmer Rouge and its ties to wealthy high-income nations influenced Cambodian gender expectations, its policies, its local ethnic struggles? What is Cambodia's education system like? Has Cambodia taken loans from the IMF? If so, what sort of unintended ramifications have those loans caused?

What if we think about how Cambodian women tend to be represented (and to whom they are the represented)? How are women in Cambodia marketed as exotic, erotic, and submissive? Do they reflect broader Westernized ideologies of Asian womanhood and therefore create a market for young (read: passive) women? Thailand, where Neth and Rath were trafficked, has become a sex tourism destination; how do these sorts of images of women attract tourists to visit and take part in illicit sexual activities? How are tourists, and the nations from where the tourists come, complicit with human trafficking? Why are local citizens complicit with trafficking and prostitution?

The above questions are the sort that one might ask in order to network Rath's and Neth's stories to wider cultural, political, historical, and economic issues. While *Half the Sky* may make the general public more aware of the gender-based violence many women across the world face, the only solution it offers its audience is for that audience to engage in humanitarian work through donating to one of the charity organizations listed at the end of the book. In doing so, the book does not ask its readers to shift or complicate the framework through which they read the text. In other words, individualized micro-stories do not offer any systematic or plausible solutions to the problem of women's oppression, nor do they offer a cogent analysis that would guide audiences toward *holistically* understanding the problems that these women face.

Transnational feminist literacy practices encourage readers to ground their analysis of power within real histories and relationships so that



knowledge can lead to civic participation (see Berlin). Networking, then, is a useful practice for thinking beyond *Half the Sky* because it not only demonstrates power as grounded in links between women's diverse experiences, aspirations, identities and geopolitical contexts but also because by using this transnational feminist literacy practice of networking readers learn that agency (their own and then that of the individual woman from the story) is complex. Agency is more than monetary exchange; to act as an agent of change requires a reader to first understand intricate geopolitical relationships and histories and second to consider the ways that they are complicit with these uneven structures of power. Agency then becomes about challenging power on a number of scales, the representative, the personal, the local, the national, and the international.

Because *Half the Sky* often resorts to old colonialist stereotypes of third-world women as passive and meek victims who do not possess self-esteem, resources, resourcefulness, or voice, it teaches its readers that if women were to change epistemologically, then they would not be oppressed—especially if they were taught to be entrepreneurs. Through the micro-stories, audiences meet a woman from a different region of the world, and her story is used to reflect the gendered practices of that locale. However, through statistics and references to policies throughout the globe, each woman becomes a metonymic representation of all women who reside in low-income nations, and so the complex networks of power that affect individual women are erased. Through this easy slippage of one woman's story to the rest of the two-thirds world, each woman becomes an argument for neoliberal policies that promote empowerment through personal economic gain, and each woman loses her agency as she merely becomes an affective and pathetic story. In these micro-stories, it is the women who overcome these “traditional” gender roles who become successful entrepreneurs or political actors. Likewise, the book often relies on a colonial rescue narrative that suggests that third-world women need to be saved by wealthy and educated Western citizens from savage and backward “traditional” practices. This is a dangerous pedagogy—one that ultimately situates the first-world reader as the person who must teach the two-thirds world how to behave differently, how to save money, how to be an entrepreneur, how to survive in a capitalist economy.



Networks of macro-conditions exist that make human trafficking possible, and the book does not unpack or connect these macro-conditions (such as ideologies of race and gender and economic and political power) to the micro-conditions that work on a local level. Like all the examples in *Half the Sky*, Rath's and Neth's stories draw upon the audience's emotional responses and neoliberal belief systems and thus allow readers to forget or not even notice the macro in this micro-story. Micro-stories do not draw attention to *why* Neth or Rath were trafficked in the first place or *why* the other women that the book presents face continued discrimination despite over sixty years of human rights organizing.

For this reason we need a literacy practice of “networking” arguments so that we can begin to read for that which is not told in the story (see Dingo, *Networking*). Searching for the networks of contexts that shape the stories presented in *Half the Sky* will enable students and scholars alike to move away from neoliberal forms of agency and colonial Western rescue narratives by tracing the economic, social, and political conditions of each story. By developing this sort of literacy, readers can become agents who respond on multiple levels—the personal, the political, the economic, and the historical. To me, one of the goals of the university in the twenty-first century is to push students and scholars alike to understand that issues and solutions that seem obvious or simplistic are actually complicated and, as such, deserve multifaceted, thoughtful, and nuanced responses. But how should we do this? As I demonstrate in the next section, the practice of networking arguments makes connections between *persuasion* and state and supranational power, history, and class relations, and it also considers the role sexual, gendered, raced, and ethnic expectations play in the making and unmaking of citizens, nations, and nation-states.

Networking: A Transnational Feminist Literacy Practice

Networking is a useful metaphor employed by transnational feminists because it draws attention to the links between women's diverse experiences, aspirations, and identities. Transnational feminist scholars seek to



examine “linkages among political actors [broadly defined] across borders” (Moghadam 81); political actors are not just individual people, but also institutions, governing bodies, and NGOs within specific histories and places. The metaphors of network and connectivity can help to illuminate uneven transnational power relationships and their uneven impact on women and thus emphasize that to understand women’s oppression feminists must consider not only a woman’s local circumstance (such as an individual woman’s story), but also how her circumstances *relate to* and are *informed by* supranational policies, colonial history, global economic structures, and even our practices here in the West (Grewal 24).

For instance, a transnational feminist lens sees the economic, political, classed, and gendered connections between Mexican maquiladora workers (female factory workers along the Mexican-U.S. border) and U.S. megastore workers. Due to trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1995 (NAFTA), maquiladora workers may now be making the very same products that U.S. middle-class workers were making over a decade ago but for significantly reduced wages. U.S. workers may face unemployment and growing debts due to a lack of the job security that factory jobs may have formerly provided. While these same U.S. workers also might be able to sustain some portion of their pre-NAFTA lifestyle because the low wages maquiladora workers make enable U.S. companies to keep the cost of products down, these same U.S. workers may now also work in low-paying blue collar jobs that do not provide benefits, childcare, or vacation. Thus, like their maquiladora working counterparts, U.S. workers may struggle to make ends meet. Both the maquiladora and U.S. workers’ economic situations are linked by an international trade agreement, by the products one produces and the other sells (and/or can or cannot purchase), and the fact that both are not thriving within a neoliberal and transnational economy. Simply comparing these two groups of people’s economic status does not elucidate the *complex* ways in which they are linked by a transnational economy.

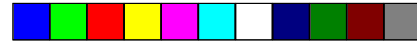
A transnational feminist literacy, then, does not simply study atrocities and repeat a common colonial narrative, nor does it ask who suffers more or how two (or more) groups are different or similar. Instead, a transnational feminist literacy begins to imagine the complex matrix of



connections between people, nations, economies, and the textual practices present by questioning, for example, what other information is missing from the story that might help us understand *how* and *why* people become disenfranchised. In other words, a transnational feminist literacy practice acknowledges that women's personal lives are structured by global processes that are largely beyond their control making it necessary to politically engage multiple scales of exploitation, especially our own complicity.

This sort of transnational feminist literacy helps us as a field to move beyond the tendency to recognize and celebrate diverse women's voices or experiences and more toward a cogent analysis of rhetoric and writing by and/or about women in relationship to the political, social, and transglobal structures that configure women's abilities to speak, be heard, and understood (see Dingo, *Networking*). Transnational feminists "situate language practices within far-reaching political and economic systems" (Stone-Mediatore 129), including global to local relations, as well as state-to-state and supranational transactions. Following transnational feminism, we can learn to think, read, and write critically and dynamically about the stories that we are told about women's subjectivity and disenfranchisement in places that seem far away. Transnational feminist scholars and activists have rallied against an acontextual celebration of women and have worked against literacies that position *the* two-thirds world women as speaking for all two-thirds world women (see, for example, Spivak; Narayan; Kaplan and Grewal; Mohanty, and Mogdaham, to name a few) and instead seek to situate individual voices and their lived experiences within their wider material structures so that one voice does not metonymically represent all voices. In doing so, they have complicated how issues such as sex work, female genital surgeries, and slavery are often represented in the West as static two-thirds world women's issues and not issues related to local-global economics, policies, histories, or that similar forms of violence and oppression indeed happen within high-income nations.

Transnational feminist scholarship does not deny that women are often disenfranchised and face gendered violence; however, it understands that violence and disenfranchisement look different in different locales. For example, Uma Narayan notes that the numbers of *sati* (bride



burning) in India correspond to the numbers of domestic violence murders in the U.S., as does the numbers of so-called “honor killings” in places like Pakistan and Iraq. In *Half the Sky* for example, a whole chapter is devoted to honor killings claiming that “The paradox of honor killings is that societies with the most rigid moral codes end up sanctioning behavior that is supremely immoral: murder” (82). Likewise, the book claims that “In India, ‘bride burning’—to punish a woman for an inadequate dowry or to eliminate her so a man can remarry—takes place once every two hours, but these rarely constitute news” (xiv). Within common U.S. media, *sati* and honor killings are represented as backward and historically common cultural practices. Yet, in the U.S. domestic violence (in the U.S. intimate partners commit approximately 14% of all homicides in the U.S. The total estimated number of intimate partner homicide victims in 2007 was 2,340, including 1,640 females and 700 males [Catalano et al. 2]) tends to be represented as a result of a perpetrator’s or victim/survivor’s individual mental state or upbringing, or due to a perpetrator who has issues with power and control.

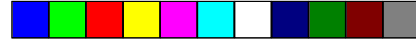
However, each of these acts of violence has a different gendered history and politic but both, nonetheless, predominantly happen to women. For this reason, we should not read or write about “the two-thirds world women” without considering these vectors of power, nor should we read or write about women from our own culture without addressing these tangible vectors of power. As an example, studies from the U.S. suggest that incidents of domestic violence against women rise during economic hardships. What happens if we read domestic violence at home and abroad through the lens of globalization and economic shifts? We might note, then, how power is tangible and how the economic is a form of power that structures women’s everyday lived experiences. Women in high and low income nations are linked by a global economy and thus may similarly experience violence in the home as basic resources become constrained or scarce and levels of stress rise due to these conditions. In other words, although patriarchal beliefs may imbue a culture (whether it is on our own or in another part of the world), it is not enough to suggest (as *Half the Sky* tends to do) that violence against women is merely cultural, because the cultural is not static. It shifts with history, economics, and politics, generally, and incidences such as war,



famine, industrialization or deindustrialization, structural adjustment, specifically.

In fact, a study by Amber Ault and Eve Sandberg demonstrates clearly how structural adjustment and the expansion of formal labor to women in Zambia ended up significantly shifting gender relationships and Zambian culture, which ultimately influenced the rates of violence against women. In the 1980s and 1990s the IMF structurally adjusted Zambia's economy. As part of the parameters of the IMF loan, Zambia was forced to devalue its currency and cut its heavily subsidized health care, food, and education programs. Consequently, to make ends meet, many women entered the formal labor market. Although these modifications certainly affected all Zambians because these changes left many citizens with scarce resources and money, they had drastic indirect consequences for relations between men and women. For example, as a result of these financial constraints, many families chose to send boys to school over girls, and many women also took on triple workdays, often selling goods in the market or working formal jobs to survive while maintaining households and farms. Likewise, women experienced more violence in their homes, as men turned to patriarchal social structures as an outlet for stress, and outside their homes, as women became desperate targets of robbery when they went between work, home, and garden (Ault and Sandberg 471). As this example demonstrates, cultures are not static; they shift and react to economic and political changes. Such economic and political shifts have material ramifications for citizens and cultures. Reading for and considering these seemingly disconnected contexts are at the core of a transnational feminist literacy model.

Exploring and naming transnational power provides an alternative model to what Schilb critiques as careless Foucauldian analyses of power that happen within rhetoric and composition. Schilb points to the tendency within rhetoric and composition scholarship and practices of teaching and writing to think about power as though it is ungrounded and unspecified. His concerns echo transnational feminists' critique of how high-income nations tend to represent "the two-thirds world women's" oppression as static and therefore due to backward cultural practices, patriarchy, or gender roles (for example, women being meek or not resourceful). For this reason, Schilb ultimately calls for rhetoric and



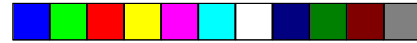
composition scholars to ground their work so that we can “confront” the materiality of power through new reading, writing, and teaching practices that extend both the sorts of texts we examine and *how* we examine those texts.⁸

Feminist scholars have suggested that globalization has had uneven material consequences throughout and within different regions of the world, making it necessary to consider not only how power is unevenly grounded in geo-economic-politics, but also how tangible power structures impact and ultimately are reflected in representations of women, in general, and violence against women, specifically (see Grewal; Kaplan; Naples and Desai; Mohanty; Moghadam). In fact, Chandra Mohanty’s recent call, in her revision of her groundbreaking essay “Under Western Eyes,” is for feminists to teach the practice of linking micro-stories to their macro and material contexts; she advocates for pedagogies that do not push audiences to act as saviors of disenfranchised women in low-income nations, but that instead offer audiences a better understanding of the transnational global politics of gender inequality by teaching how to connect what appear to be micro-stories or happenings to powerful geopolitical and economic relationships.

Networking is thus a useful practice for rhetoric and composition scholars (indeed, one that has emerged recently, albeit in a different way, in rhetoric and composition scholarship) because it draws attention to the links between women’s diverse experiences, aspirations, identities, and geopolitical contexts.⁹ I suggest that in rhetoric and composition we ought to follow transnational feminist theory and adopt the practice of “networking” arguments by identifying, in our writing, networks of tangible power and contexts to help explain and counteract the cultural work of texts that we teach and critique that appear to be about disenfranchised people in other locations.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that rhetoric and composition scholars ought to develop new literacy and pedagogical practices that link the micro and the macro—looking at how micro-stories relate to larger global economic, political, and cultural movements. A transnational feminist lit-



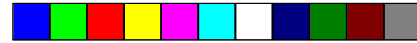
eracy practice means connecting the micro and the macro by situating writing and textual practices within far-reaching economic and political systems and by drawing connections between vectors of power: state and supranational power, rhetorical representations, history, class relations, and sexual, gendered, raced, and ethnic identity. I also suggested that because stories such as those presented in *Half the Sky* position readers as limited agents who appear separate from the very women the book represents, we need to enact transnational feminist literacy practices to better understand and then to better formulate responses to gendered violence.

Networking arguments might be seen a literacy practice and then, ultimately, as a composing process that makes connections between entities, places, practices, and histories that might at first appear to not relate to each other. Linking the micro to the macro is not just an analytic but also a material practice that offers a new sort of productive agency that asks readers to address scales of oppression that include how they themselves may be complicit with transglobal power relationships. Ultimately, books like *Half the Sky* will not stop the *systemic* oppression of women and girls because they do not get to the root of the problem of gendered violence, since they do not address the network of macro-conditions that make this violence continue, and they do not unpack or connect these macro-conditions to the micro-conditions (such as the ideologies of race and gender) that work on a local level. If we seek to make students active “agents” who can valuably act in their world, then we need to carefully consider how to shift our own pedagogical and scholarly work to best acknowledge and understand the complexity of inequality.

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Notes

1. Calling a country “developing” suggests a particular colonial-like teleology: that if nations were to follow particular steps forward they would be on par with “developed” nations. I also do not like the term “third world” because it obfuscates transnational power relationships, suggesting that poverty and disen-



franchisement do not happen in our own (U.S.) backyards. Terms such as “low-income” or “two-thirds world” draw attention to the economic and political structures that inform citizens’ place in a nation.

2. Following Lynn Worsham’s definition of pedagogy, part of what we must do is analyze how these narratives and encounters work together in “teaching” people how to be in the world now—in the case of *Half the Sky*, this text is teaching readers how to be sympathetic actors, or “givers,” in neoliberal capital.

3. Also see Rachel Riedner’s work in progress on labor at George Washington University and women’s gardening practices (*Reading Value*, in progress).

4. When I say “power relationships,” I am not just thinking about Foucauldian notions of power but actual tangible and material power relations made possible through international agreements, supranational organizations, and local politics.

5. The notion of “networking arguments” has been discussed by scholars such as Jeff Rice and Richard Miller who suggest that we should ask students to make connections between seemingly disparate texts and use them to follow information and how it is dispersed and linked. My notion of networking certainly furthers Rice and Miller’s work, but it does so in the context of globalization and through transnational feminists who have talked about the concept of networking women’s uneven experiences (see Dingo, *Networking* and “Linking”). As I will demonstrate further below, I bring together these two theories of networking in order to put forth a pedagogy of writing practices that draw together contexts.

6. I am choosing not to go into detail about the heinous events of Neth’s and Rath’s lives because I do not want to draw attention to their spectacular stories that garner emotional attachment; rather, I seek to shift attention to what is missing from the story.

7. In the video essay *Remote Sensing* by Ursula Biemann, she traces the routes and reasons that women travel or are trafficked for sex work. One of the core arguments that Biemann makes in her film is regarding the fine line between coerced sex work and sex work by choice. In one scene a sex worker from Thailand is asked if she has never had sex for pleasure; her reply is no, only for money. The woman appears quite disturbed by the question, as though sex for pleasure is out of the question. This scene demonstrates how one’s relationship to sex, sexuality, and labor may look quite different from another’s views on sex, sexuality, and labor and how historical happenings are dialectic and impact our present culture and indeed our relationship to our bodies.

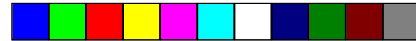
8. He says, “We must think about sovereign power if we’re to think about—and confront—the rhetoric that was recently used [for example] by the Federal Government to justify and promulgate torture as a policy measure. And these verbal maneuvers abound, in all sorts of documents we might study” (4–5). Although here Schilb speaks specifically of recent tortures at places like Abu Graib and policies such as the racial profiling/immigration policy passed in

Arizona, his essay makes clear that in rhetoric and composition we need new reading, writing, and teaching practices that extend the sorts of texts we examine and *how* we examine those texts.

9. Although rhetorical scholars such as Jeff Rice (“Networks”) and Colin Brooke (*Lingua*) have begun to talk about how rhetoric scholars should consider how rhetorics are networked to and associated with less obvious texts, my theorizing of the network starts with transnational feminists’ theorizing on gender and networked power relationships.

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