

Dissertation Abstract

The Affective Circulation of Digital Rhetoric: The Viability of Transnational Feminist Action on the Web

In recent years, rhetoric and composition scholars have suggested that considering the “transnational” involves attending to how rhetorics are inextricably involved in processes of globalization: transnational flows of people, ideas, technology, and communication across national boundaries (Hesford; Schell; Dingo; Queen). The explosion of user-generated content with Web 2.0 has led to new political platforms for transnational organizing, protest, and action and to new ways of encountering transnational circuits of knowledge formation. Despite these factors, there remains a dearth of rhetorical scholarship addressing these relationships within digital spaces. To fill this gap, I offer a transnational feminist rhetorical study of digital circulation, which includes an analysis of the political and economic investments undergirding that circulation. I argue that turning to these moments of transnational engagement will help scholars in rhetoric and composition and feminist studies better understand both the possibilities and limitations for feminist rhetorical action.

This dissertation investigates a series of events that arose from activist Amina Tyler’s decision to post a nude photo with controversial, provocative language sprawled across her chest. As the image circulated throughout social media platforms, blogs, and mainstream news sites (by groups such as FEMEN, Muslim Women Against FEMEN, and the mass media), it encountered other kinds of rhetorics involving discourses and perspectives on feminism, national and transnational concerns, human rights, and the “war on terror.” These instances of rhetorical contact allowed for changes and shifts in meaning, prompting the circulation of new texts and thus new kinds of arguments that, oftentimes, came into conflict with the rhetorical purpose of Amina’s original text.

While many of these circulatory movements can be discussed in terms of discursive practices and deliberative, participatory acts, I argue that there is an affective element undergirding digital circulation that is central to the action textual circulation might catalyze. In chapter one (“Affective Rhetorics”), I define affective circulation as a process comprised of intertextual social and historical linkages that arise from the amalgamation of rhetorics and the mixing of the emotional and embodied charges undergirding those rhetorics. These rhetorical encounters—and the fusion of the various histories, contexts, and emotive elements that make up these rhetorics—(re)produce both connections and disjunctures that ultimately negotiate and change the rhetorical purpose of a text, making such affective circulation a form of action that can go beyond the intent of any individual rhetor (as seen with Amina’s image).

To illustrate this process, using a transnational feminist methodology, I examine over 300 texts that circulated throughout this series of events. In chapter two (“Interarticulating Rhetorics”), I explain my methodology, defining the parameters of circulation within this case to highlight the ways circulation can be analyzed across time and space. In looking at three different stages of circulation on the web (categorized by three different timeframes: (1) the initial four weeks surrounding Amina’s post; (2) two months following Amina’s post; (3) two years after Amina’s post), I show how texts, in their digital movements, become the basis for further representations. More specifically, I use transnational feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal’s method of interarticulation—a term that describes the ways in which discourses permeate rhetorics and change their meaning—to show how, on the web, events and arguments get repurposed through cyclical modes of affect. These moments of “repurposing,” I illustrate, operate as forms of rhetorical action in their

reinforcements of and/or resistances to discourses of globalization.

In chapter 3 (“Embodied Rhetorics”), I begin with an examination of how circulation moves from individual rhetorical acts to collective expressions of affect. I demonstrate how Amina’s individual text (a nude photo with the statements “Fuck your morals” and “My body belongs to me” written across her chest) represents a moment of rhetorical action that then prompts the production and circulation of other kinds of texts. In analyzing themes that emerge from these texts, I illustrate how affect plays a role in (re)producing a narrative about the body in relation to arguments and claims about feminism, human rights, and nationhood.

In “(Dis)Embodied Rhetorics” (chapter 4), I show how circulation becomes amplified beyond specific rhetorical contexts. Through an examination of FEMEN’s circulation of Amina’s text, which prompts a response from Muslim Women Against Femen (MWAFF), I trace how, within a two-month timeframe, the themes that surfaced in the previous chapter morph into new meanings, moving the conversation into different contexts. I highlight how in these moments of circulation, rhetorics of the body, as they relate to the themes of feminism, human rights, and nationhood, become tied to racial anxieties, particularly in relation to discourses on war and religion.

Finally, in chapter 5 (“Enduring Rhetorics”), I suggest that the rhetorics most amplified “stick” in their reinforcement of neoliberal ideologies. In exploring the case of FEMEN and MWAFF two years after Amina’s original post, I illustrate how certain rhetorics from earlier periods of circulation retain powerful and pervasive movement. I demonstrate how, in the texts that continued to circulate, certain visual strategies and rhetorical appeals remain present and cogent. I also highlight how these same strategies and appeals produce other kinds of narratives about women’s rights and women’s bodies, particularly in relation to capitalism and geopolitics.

I conclude the dissertation by pointing to the ways in which rhetorical theory needs to account for how digital circulation involves an affective element that necessarily determines the boundaries of rhetorical action—what is possible and what is foreclosed. I also consider the ways in which this affective element is always already immersed in a global information economy, and thus ever caught up in the uneven relations of power that shape public life. For these reasons, I argue that scholars in rhetorical studies need to look at digital circulation from a transnational feminist perspective so that we might better understand how feminist rhetorical action, or any kind of rhetorical action for that matter, works within a global economic system such as the web.