

Research Statement

A decade ago, feminist rhetorical scholar Wendy Hesford called on the field of rhetoric and composition to turn its focus to global matters—matters that necessitate “a reexamination of existing protocols and divisions, and the formation of new critical frameworks in light of a changing world” (796).¹ My research answers this call by pointing to the need for a critical investigation of the connections and disconnections between rhetoric, gender, and transnational technologies of power. These interests arise out of my deep concern for and commitment to women’s issues and the gender politics surrounding the various inequities that pervade women’s experiences on a global scale. Rhetorics concerning women and gender issues have been most prevalent in larger discussions on (and justifications for) globalization. In recent years, many feminist and activist groups have responded to these discussions by organizing and engaging in transnational feminist movements on the web (e.g. PussyRiots; SlutWalk; #FemFuture; FEMEN; Muslim Women Against FEMEN). In attending to these moments of feminist engagement, my research takes on an interdisciplinary approach, combining rhetorical and digital studies with transnational feminist theories and methodologies. By questioning the system of production on the web, and the ways in which we play a role in that production, we can better understand the potentialities for the web to function as a space for social action.

To this end, my dissertation, *The Affective Circulation of Digital Rhetoric: The Viability for Transnational Feminist Action on the Web*, investigates instances of transnational rhetorical contact on the web through an analysis of feminist groups’ and mainstream media’s participation in debates and conversations about feminism, the body, and women’s rights. I demonstrate how these instances of rhetorical encounter allow for changes and shifts in textual meaning, prompting the circulation of new texts and thus new kinds of arguments. While many of these circulatory movements can be discussed in terms of discursive practices and deliberative, participatory acts, my qualitative analysis shows that there is an affective element—emotional and embodied charges—undergirding digital circulation that is central to the action textual circulation might catalyze. In other words, when rhetorics come into contact with one another, 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.

This work is important for the fields of rhetoric and composition and feminist studies for two reasons: (1) it exposes and critiques the ways in which digital technologies and digital rhetorics are always already implicated in relations of power—a global information economy—that necessarily affect the lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups, and (2) it emphasizes the importance of attending to rhetorical analyses of digital circulation in order to understand how to productively and affectively engage in these digital mediums. In addition to the two articles circulating based on my dissertation research (“Affecting Transnational Connectivities: A Study of Circulation and Feminist Rhetorical Action in the Digital Sphere” and “The Viability of Digital Spaces as Sites for Transnational Feminist Engagement”), I plan on turning my dissertation into a monograph, putting forth the argument that 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. This monograph will also address the importance of bringing a transnational feminist perspective to digital rhetorical studies, so that we can 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.

Central to my goals as a researcher is an effort to connect my scholarship to my teaching. I find value in

¹ Hesford, Wendy S. “Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition Studies.” *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006): 787-801. Print.

utilizing the studies I conduct on public discourse, feminist action, and digital rhetorics for pedagogical purposes. For example, building on my *Harlot Journal* article, “Blogging Borders: Transnational Feminist Rhetorics and Global Voices,” which looks at digital genres as sites of inquiry and possibility for civic discourse, I plan to conduct a classroom study, exploring how students’ engagement with digital genres in the writing classroom can facilitate a better understanding of rhetorical production, action, and awareness. In *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede ask the question: “What are consequences for civic discourse in a world where those interested in a specific topic or audience can, if they have Internet access, easily find sites where they can communicate with like-minded individuals?” (253).² With this question in mind, I want to examine how students’ participation in blogs, social media platforms, and news sites can inform and heighten their understanding of how rhetoric works in the world—how it circulates, reshapes meaning, and affects change. What drives this work is the belief that once writers are aware of how genres can enhance *and* limit who can participate within spaces such as the web, they are then able to see more clearly their potential role in fostering community action and engaged digital publics.

In addition to projects that look at digital media directly, I am also interested in examining the circulation of ideas *about* digital literacy, particularly as those ideas relate to women and gender. Underlying this interest is the belief that in order to address literacy practices that take place within the digital sphere—such as the effects of feminist action and public discourse online—we need to understand the ideologies attached to digital technologies and digital literacies. In addressing this need, I plan to look at the United Nations’ digital literacy campaigns targeting women’s (il)literacy in the Global South. In 2011, the UN put forth the following campaign slogan: “Illiteracy has a woman’s face.” Following this claim was a correlation between illiteracy and women’s increased fertility rates and susceptibility to HIV and AIDS. In looking at the most recent literacy campaign—*Intel® She Will Connect*, which targets women and girls in Africa—I plan to examine how human rights rhetoric mobilizes certain beliefs about women and gender (e.g. beliefs about women’s bodies), as well as certain modes of governance for controlling gendered bodies (e.g. policies on reproductive health). Building on the work of transnational feminist scholars Wendy Brown, Gayatri Spivak, and Inderpal Grewal, I plan to illustrate how these campaigns, in their aim to provide an educational foundation for marginalized groups in “underdeveloped countries,” actually construct a neoliberal subject in need of rights (and in need of a certain kind of literacy and technological proficiency). This neoliberal subject is not only gendered, but also racialized, classed, and geographically marked. Understanding the effects of these rhetorical productions makes it possible to see how power gets exercised through the means of literacies and technologies, and how such power is used to shape and reshape social and geopolitical relations.

In sum, at the core of my work is an effort to investigate how the increased production and advancement of information and media systems have vastly changed the processes of communication and information sharing and altered the ways we engage in writing and rhetorical practices aimed at global change. By interrogating these processes, we can begin to understand further how social relations are formed, reshaped, controlled, and maintained through systems of production like that of the web. If feminist scholar Rosemary Hennessy is right in claiming that “subjectivity is constructed out of the available knowledges in a culture as they circulate in discourses and institutional practices” (37),³ then questioning the ways in which rhetoric, knowledge, and ideas circulate is imperative, as such circulatory processes—the processes in which we participate—affect actual bodies and lived experiences. This kind of work, I believe, can provide scholars with a more nuanced lens for understanding both the tensions and possibilities posed by the digital.

² Lunsford, Andrea A., and Lisa S. Ede. *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice, a Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2012. Print.

³ Hennessy, Rosemary. *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.