

## CHAPTER 14.

# THE VIABILITY OF DIGITAL SPACES AS SITES FOR TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST ACTION AND ENGAGEMENT: WHY WE NEED TO LOOK AT DIGITAL CIRCULATION

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*In the early spring of 2013, through the use of social media, the global feminist protest group FEMEN staged a “topless jihad” day in support of Tunisian member, Amina Tyler, who was threatened with physical punishment for posting to Facebook and Twitter images of her naked body, covered in written messages such as “Fuck your morals” and “My body is mine.” Because new media systems have vastly changed communication and information-sharing processes, they have also altered the ways we engage rhetorically in feminist activism. Ouellette argues that in order to engage effectively in feminist activism and foster transnational connections within digital spaces, we need to look at the ways in which texts move and circulate, and how, in and through those movements, textual meanings and rhetorical purposes shift and change. To achieve such goals, Ouellette provides a case study of the events and protests surrounding Tyler and FEMEN’s protests—specifically the texts that circulated, and the political and economic investments undergirding that circulation.*

In early March 2013, the circulation of two particular images sparked a series of debates, deliberations, and discussions in the digital sphere. Images of a topless woman, Amina Tyler, holding a cigarette in one hand, and a book in the other, moved throughout social media sites at rapid speed. Across Tyler’s chest were messages written in English and Arabic, messages that read, “Fuck your morals” and “My body is mine, not somebody else’s honor.”



*Figure 14.1. Amina Tyler, Arabic.*

Tyler, a citizen of Tunisia and an outspoken member of FEMEN, a Ukrainian-born international feminist group, decided to post these images on her Facebook as a response to her nation's policies regarding women's rights. At the time of her posting, the government of Tunisia was in the process of drafting a new constitution, one that would allegedly alter, and perhaps take away, some of the rights already in place for Tunisian women. Following Tyler's response to this specific political moment, and following the rapid circulation of her images by Tyler's Facebook and Twitter friends (and thus other friends of friends), Tyler was threatened with physical punishment and death threats from national officials of Tunisia for posting "nude portraits." As a result of these threats, Tyler deleted her social media accounts and fled Tunisia. Despite her withdrawal, her texts took on lives of their own, becoming the subjects of many news articles, blog posts, and social media posts across the globe. As Tyler's images circulated, they encountered various kinds

of rhetorics involving feminism, human rights, and nationalism. These instances of rhetorical contact led to changes and shifts in meaning, prompting the circulation of new texts and thus new kinds of arguments that, oftentimes, conflicted with the original rhetorical purpose of Tyler's texts.



*Figure 14. 2. Amina Tyler, English.*

For rhetoricians, this event is particularly compelling. Not only does it highlight a moment in which feminist action and intervention prompts transnational conversations, it illustrates the scope and global reach afforded by digital circulation, and further illuminates the often unexpected consequences of such circulation. Tyler's case is not unique, however. Over the last decade, protests

involving women's rights have been very much present in the media. Since 9/11, we have seen a wave of feminist movements addressing various political issues—reproductive rights, acts of violence, the need for economic support, wage inequities, and rights regarding women's bodies, among others. These various global upheavals have not surfaced without external influences. The “war on terror,” the perceived increased need for national security alongside the push for open trade markets, and the continuous move from national governance to supranational governance have caused many disjunctures between the state and peoples' actual needs. Because of these pressures and their effects on lived experiences, social activist groups from all around the world have looked to the digital web as a productive place for protest and a powerful site for demanding change.

For these reasons, this piece, which is part of a larger research project, emerges out of an interest in and exploration of the possible efficacy of digital spaces as sites for transnational feminist engagement and intervention. These questions, for me, are inextricably linked to my interests in the intersections between writing, gender, and technology. Although the digital is the site of my inquiry, at its core is a concern for transnational feminist discourse and activism: the digital came into the project as one of the most viable places for such action to occur. The crux of this research, then, is an effort to understand both the possibilities and limitations of transnational feminist engagement within digital spaces. As a result, I examine and expose how the circulations of discourses on women's issues oftentimes serve as exigencies for national and global agendas within these spaces. In doing so, I argue for a new theory of rhetorical production—a theory that acknowledges the ways in which circulation operates as an affective movement and co-constitutive process that necessarily structures and shapes public life. Looking at digital circulation, I believe, can help us identify how the practices of writing and rhetoric within a transnational context reproduce and resist current ideologies so that we might write for social change more effectively in these spaces.

In recent years, scholars such as Rebecca Dingo and Wendy Hesford, among others, have begun attending to the transnational, looking at how rhetorics are inextricably linked to processes of globalization and the transnational flows of people, ideas, technology, and communication across national boundaries (Hesford, 2005, 2006, 2008; Hesford & Schell, 2008; Dingo, 2012; Queen, 2008). In her essay entitled, “Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition Studies” (2006), Wendy Hesford calls 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” (p. 796). While Hesford's article was published over a decade ago, much of it still remains relevant for our field today. Hesford's

deliberate reference to a “changing world” speaks to the ways in which the intersections between culture, power, politics, and economics have been changing significantly due to the uneven processes of globalization. The increased production and advancement of information and media systems, and the ways in which these systems have vastly changed the processes of communication and information sharing, has undoubtedly altered the ways we engage in writing and rhetorical practices. And yet, rhetorical scholars have rarely examined digital writing’s role in transnational exchange and processes of globalization with the exception of a few (Queen, 2008; Blair, Tulley, & Gajjala, 2009; Royster & Kirsch, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on the “digital” has, for the most part, been focused on the implications for digital literacies within transnational contexts (Berry, Hawisher, & Selfe, 2012; Warriner, 2007; Lam, 2004) and questions related to web genres and digital writing (Miller & Shepherd, 2009; McKee & DeVoss, 2007; Porter, 2009; Giltrow & Stein, 2009).

Because Web 2.0 is a site of user-generated content, the “writeable” phase of the web, it not only facilitates and encourages participation, collaboration, and information sharing, it is driven and run by such content. This phase of the web has demanded new ways of thinking about rhetorical strategies. One of the most important concepts for understanding rhetorical action on the web may be “rhetorical velocity,” a term coined by Jim Ridolfo and Danielle DeVoss (2009) to talk about rhetorical delivery within the context of user-generated content. Rhetorical velocity, they argue, is both a “strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery” and a term that describes “the understanding and rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, distributed, recomposed, redelivered, redistributed, etc., across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (p. 1). The speed of information, the nature of remixing and citation, and the ability to instantaneously respond, modify, and copy are just a few of the changes intrinsic to the reimagining of rhetorical action within Web 2.0. Given these changes, the potential effects of circulation within a digital space are not just between a writer and a reader; rather those effects are caught up in larger networks of interaction or, to use Jenny Edbauer-Rice’s term, “rhetorical ecologies” of meaning that are quite different from print or Web 1.0 (Edbauer, 2005). The time-space compression of digital communication is, in fact, one reason why we might view the web as a space where our everyday interactions and conversations happen transnationally and where those interactions and conversations, as they circulate, have transnational effects.

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1 See Mary Queen, “Transnational Feminist Rhetorics in a Digital World” (2008); see Kristine Blair, Christine Tulley, and Radhika Gajjala’s edited collection, *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action* (2009); and see Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch’s *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* (2012).

This study, then, speaks to the digital more broadly, emphasizing rhetorical analyses of digital circulation in order to understand how to productively and affectively engage in these digital mediums. While many scholars in rhetoric and composition have theorized digital circulation as part of an intentional mode of rhetorical delivery, and thus rhetorical deliberation (Porter, 2009; Warnick & Heineman, 2012; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009), I argue that circulation is a process through which various, and oftentimes conflicting, intentions and goals come into contact with each other, creating new meanings and new kinds of knowledge. Moving beyond the notion that rhetorics are individual speech acts, or occasion-bound events, I consider rhetoric as a larger, circulating, affective network of arguments, and thus propose that we rethink our understanding of social action on the web, and see it in terms of circulation and affect. Royster and Kirsch's definition of "social circulation," one of the four terms of engagement they put forth as part of their theoretical paradigm for feminists interested in engaging in rhetorical work, is helpful for thinking about the productive lens circulation can provide digital feminist activists. Social circulation, they argue, centers on "connections among past, present, and futures in the sense that the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified [generationally] and can lead to changed rhetorical practices" (Royster and Kirsch, 2012, p. 23). This piece attempts to hone in on such "overlapping circles"—the various connections made (or forestalled)—by looking at the process of digital circulation and the web's ability to provide texts with heightened amplification and velocity such that certain rhetorics become privileged over others. In other words, deliberation is not always the end goal, or the end result. Circulation does not work only (or even primarily) in favor of discursive interactions with others; it is as often prompted by emotions, feelings, and lived experiences.

In looking at the case of Tyler, I use transnational feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal's method of interarticulation (2005), which describes the ways in which discourses permeate rhetorics and change their meaning. Methodologically, this research project involves an examination of over 300 texts within three different timeframes: (1) the initial two weeks surrounding Tyler's post; (2) two months following Tyler's post; and (3) two years after Tyler's post). In focusing on four themes that emerged from the data (two of which I examine in this particular piece), all in relation to the rhetorical trope of the body—body as protest, body as object, body as madness, and body as nation—I show how texts, in their digital movements, become the basis for further representations, and how events and arguments get coopted and repurposed. In analyzing this data, I developed a three-part concept of circulation involving the following components: amplification, velocity, and endurance.



To be more specific, I define amplification as the process through which a certain aspect of a text gets highlighted over the rest of the text. A specific ideology embedded in a text, for example, becomes magnified in such a way that it becomes detached from its original purpose, context, and history, thus changing its meaning and overall message. In other words, the volume is figuratively ‘amplified’ as some messages get louder and others move to the background. Velocity follows amplification, referring to the speed and scale of circulation a text can achieve and the various social alliances that form as a result.<sup>2</sup> Endurance corresponds to the ways in which certain texts retain such high levels of circulation over time that they become normalized, connecting and revising other ideologies, such that they stick and re-solidify as “reality.”



*Figure 14.3. FEMEN Topless Jihad.*

2 While Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) argue that rhetorical velocity involves a “rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time,” particularly in relation to the ways in which writers “strategically” compose texts for third parties, this definition implies that the writer has a certain level of agency over the recomposition and appropriation of their text by third parties: and this is where my use of velocity differs. Instead of focusing on the writer, I examine velocity with an attention to the circulation process.

Emotion and the need to identify and align one's self with others plays a large role in determining the movement of texts—how they get picked up and amplified, where they go, what gains velocity and visibility and what doesn't, which voices are heard and taken seriously, and which ones are silenced. In other words, the emotional reactions and the circulation that results from those reactions determines, in large part, which amplified messages gain velocity and the kinds of social relations that emerge. Such *affective circulation* further determines what messages/rhetorics endure.

In this chapter, I illustrate the concept of affective circulation as it relates to my data, particularly the themes of body as protest and body as object. I begin with amplification: the figurative act of turning up the volume on a specific aspect of a text and thus, moving the rest of it to the background. In FEMEN's instance of circulation (the group of which Tyler was a part), the theme of the body as protest becomes foregrounded and amplified as the main message of Tyler's text. This happens in two ways. First, FEMEN uses Tyler's text as a catalyst for organizing a "topless jihad day." In social media posts, as well as an open letter published on *The Huffington Post*, FEMEN calls on women across the globe to support Tyler's cause by using their bodies "as poster[s] for the slogans of freedom," by "baring their breasts against Islam" and circulating the hashtag "#freemina" (FEMEN Homepage, 2013).



Figure 14.4. FEMEN Protest.



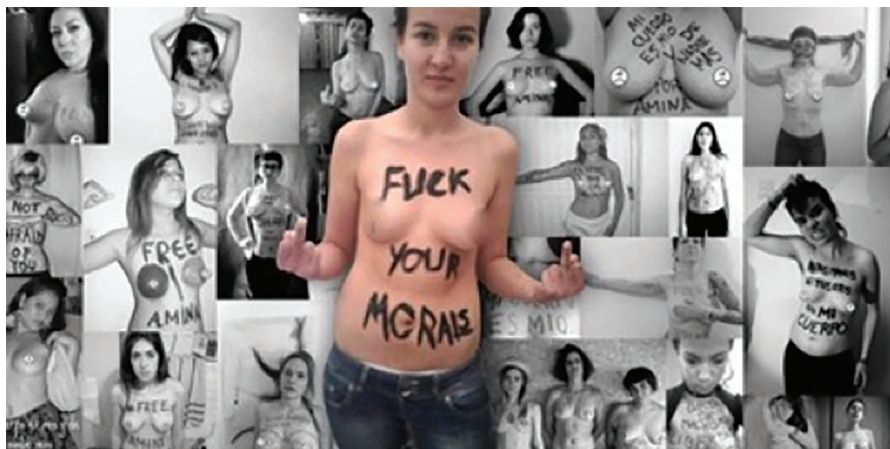


Figure 14.5. Amina Tyler on FEMEN's Facebook Page.

On FEMEN's Facebook page, we see Tyler's image against a backdrop of her supporters with the following statements written on their bodies: "Our tits are deadlier than your stones" (FEMEN Facebook, 2013). In these messages, what gets amplified is the call for a topless protest, and for two reasons: to oppose the religion of Islam and to help liberate a woman from an Arab nation. It is in these changing meanings that I locate the social action of circulation.

Inna Shevchenko, leader of FEMEN, in an article published by *The Guardian*, explains why she believes naked protest is necessary. She claims, "A woman's naked body has always been the instrument of the patriarchy . . . They use it in the sex industry, the fashion industry, advertising, always in men's hands. We realized the key was to give the naked body back to its rightful owner, to women, and give a new interpretation of nudity . . . I'm proud of the fact that today naked women are not just posing on the cover of Playboy, but it can be an action, angry, and can irritate people" (Shevchenko as cited in Cochrane, 2013). Once again, Shevchenko's references to the naked body as an "instrument" and as a kind of "action"—an action that gets people angry and irritated—speaks to the ways in which affect is always already caught up in the act of amplification, that the move to amplify something is indeed emotionally driven. Such references also call to mind what Zimmann (Chapter 16, this collection) argues in her piece, "A Peek Inside the Master's House": the belief that feminist rhetorical action and intervention always already brings with it an inherent link between the personal and political—in this case, the body as a personal representation of one's self becomes a political platform for feminist work (Zimmann, 2018).

In continuing with the amplification of the body as a kind of protest, other web users responded similarly, calling on others to join in the "fight for Amina."

One blogger, in particular, posed the following question: “You joining in this fight for women’s rights or are you staying covered up? I’m currently writing this with no top on, just to do my part . . . Every little bit helps!” (Byrne, n.d.). Again, we can see how quickly Tyler’s text becomes re-positioned as a global symbol of bodily protest regarding women’s rights and the rights to owning their bodies. Amplified in these moments of circulation is the belief that *the act of naked protest is analogous to the “fight for women’s rights,”* the belief that the physical female body should be used as a canvas for protest and a tool to unite women on a global scale, to create solidarity—a “body” of feminists. Byrne’s reference to “doing one’s part” points to the way in which amplification functions as a kind of world-making, to use queer theorist Michael Warner’s term (2002)—the ways in which texts become the basis for further representations, creating and foreclosing certain subject positions in order to create a world in which one wants to live.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, we can see how the rhetoric of FEMEN and FEMEN supporters is being used as a means to propose and put forth solutions to shared matters of concern—gender inequities, for example. Many of these activists and feminists participate in amplifying Tyler’s text because they feel they are furthering the cause for women’s rights. On the other hand, amplifying the body as protest also moves Tyler’s goal to the background, making the local case of Tunisia only a side note. Allying with Tyler, then, becomes a way of allying with her means of protest rather than with its goal (or more accurately, allying with Tyler, and by extension FEMEN, makes the means more important than the cause for which she is protesting).

As feminists and other activists, including FEMEN, circulate Tyler’s text as an amplified narrative about the body and women’s rights, they reposition Tyler as a silent victim in need of saving. This kind of western feminist ideology not only elides the local and specific context from which Tyler’s text emerged, it also perpetuates a problematic perspective of Muslim women as an essentialized group of oppressed women, thus perpetuating certain essentializing beliefs about Islam and the Middle East.

While the body as protest theme continues to be amplified in multiple venues, other writers/responders also focus on the body, but amplify its rhetorical functions quite differently. In the mainstream media’s portrayal of Tyler’s story and the #freeamina campaign, certain news outlets focus solely on the “entertainment” factor of Tyler’s and FEMEN’s nudity. As journalist Matt Gurney of the *National Post* claims, nudity always garners attention: “When presented with nude protesters, enjoy the show, and say so,” he wrote (Gurney, 2013). What we can take away from this statement is the belief that women’s naked bodies alone, regardless of the images’ purposes or contexts, will inevitably lead to more

3 See Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002).

readers, and thus generate more capital. This demeaning sentiment becomes amplified as other social media users and bloggers post similar statements. For example, one blogger writes, “My opinion of feminists has gone right up . . . this is a jihad I could live with. Titslamism, is the future” (Kafir Crusaders, n.d.). Other statements include, “Feminist babes getting their boobs out against militant Islam” and “Not a body hair in sight on these sexy feminist nude protesters breaking the mental image of your excessively hairy razor-shy traditional feminist” (Kafir Crusaders, n.d.).

In these moments of amplification, we can see how the original message and rhetorical purpose of Tyler’s text becomes completely erased. The amplification of both Tyler’s and FEMEN’s texts as objectifications of the female body illustrate the ways in which one component of a text—the naked body itself, pulled from its relationship to protest, to politics, to the messages literally written on those bodies—can be reconstructed as its own narrative, producing new, and oftentimes conflicting meanings. Amplified in these moments is the problematic correlation between feminism and what the body of a feminist should look like. And once again, amplified in these texts is also a western ideology of the liberated naked body versus the presumed conservative practices of Islam.

The variety of amplifications that emerged, particularly the two examples that I have described thus far, when traced to the next level of circulation in this study, highlight how such amplified meanings become the basis for further circulation, interanimating ideologies far from the original post. As the first layer of texts continued to circulate, certain texts gained a higher level of velocity due to the affective charges underlying the ideologies amplified in their circulation. Thus, the narratives around the body as a form of protest and the body as object took on lives of their own. The velocity of these particular texts not only sped up the circulation of certain messages, ensuring they continue to be heard, but that velocity also performed a kind of rhetorical action, creating alliances and oppositions and establishing and structuring certain social relations in sometimes surprising ways.

The mainstream media’s focus on objectifying women’s naked bodies, for example, prompted various reactions to and disagreements with FEMEN and Tyler’s mode of protest. In an ironic move, Tyler and FEMEN are criticized for not being feminist enough because their mode of protest—the body—can only be understood as an object. As a result, “feminists” who might have aligned with FEMEN come to distance themselves from the protest. As writer for *The Daily Beast* Janine Giovanni states, “Any protester knows that the only way activism works is to get the people on your side. Femen is not exactly endearing themselves to anyone, except perhaps to hormonal teenage boys” (Giovanni, 2013). She ends the article with the following quote: “Amina’s heart might be in the right place, but I wish she would cover it up with a T-shirt and protest quietly,

but effectively, rather than getting her kit off". The reference here to "getting people on your side" depicts a clear understanding of how users reacted to these texts, and how the velocity of texts can enact a kind of allying mechanism, initiating and changing social relations.

Both the use of body as protest *and* the body as object also beg a question not amplified at all in the initial response, but rather one that emerges in the texts' increased circulation and velocity: that is, whose body? As protest becomes connected to (and almost collapsed into) the body as object theme, another group that might have allied with the national context of Tyler's protest comes to *protest her* based on the previously amplified messages of the body, specifically a raced body that purportedly speaks for all women.

The Facebook group, Muslim Women Against FEMEN, for example (a group that formed in response to FEMEN's call for a topless jihad day), points out in an open letter to FEMEN (published on their Facebook wall) that the "bodies" protesting are not the bodies of brown women, nor the bodies of Muslim women.

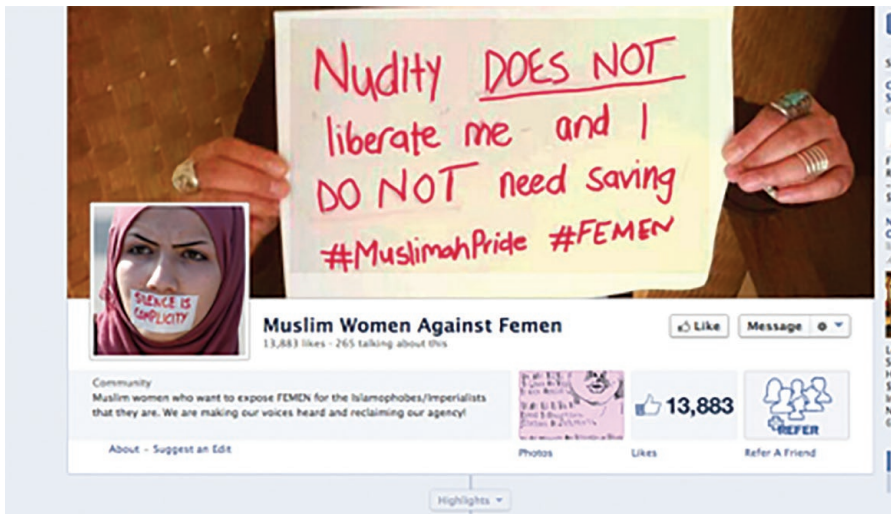


Figure 14.6. MWAFF Facebook Page.

Because of this, they resist FEMEN's idea of a "global sisterhood" and critique FEMEN's attempt to operate as a "collective mouth piece." Through the mediums of Twitter and Facebook, MWAFF re-appropriates FEMEN's protest with a "counterprotest" and FEMEN's "topless jihad day" with a "Muslimah Pride Day," reshaping and recontextualizing the discourse of the body as protest within a more localized, context-specific framework. In other words, what gets highlighted here is the way in which solidarity needs to be and must be tied to

issues of race and religion, not *only* gender. This same message becomes more apparent in the embodied texts produced by MWAF. As another form of “counterprotest,” Muslim and non-Muslim women circulated photos of themselves to Facebook and Twitter as a response to FEMEN’s topless images. Some women took photos of themselves wearing hijabs, others with signs reading: “Nudity does not liberate me and I do not need saving,” “Do I look oppressed to you?!,” “Shame on you FEMEN. Hijab is my right!,” and “I am a Muslim and a Feminist.” In a similar way, we can think of this kind of activism alongside Barbara George’s (this collection) analysis of counter-literacies, as MWAF’s acts serve as a kind of feminist intervention that “challenge[s] traditional notions of agency” and “interrupt[s] dominant policy and practices” (George, 2017, p. 2)



Figure 14.7. MWAF (1).





Figure 14.8. *MWAF* (2).

The re-appropriation of FEMEN's rhetorical mediums (the open letter and the use of images and bodily messages on Twitter and Facebook), as well as the re-appropriation of the language and words used by FEMEN (words such as "fem-

inist,” “liberation,” and “oppression”) increases the velocity of these texts. But this velocity is not merely an act of resistance; this circulation is also an act of feminist intervention and revision, an act that challenges, changes, and destabilizes previous rhetorical meanings. Rather than “universal solidarity” among all women, MWAF implores FEMEN and the larger public to acknowledge difference, to take on a critical consciousness by recognizing that the universalizing rhetorics of Western feminism do not speak to/for *all* women. Furthermore, MWAF’s redistribution and revision of FEMEN’s rhetoric operates as a mode of resistance to the dominant discourses of globalization interarticulated in FEMEN’s rhetoric. In re-characterizing FEMEN’s essentializing rhetoric—FEMEN’s idealistic notion of a “global sisterhood”—MWAF, in their open letter to FEMEN, take on FEMEN’s constant use of the third person plural to signify a different “we,” alluding to a solidarity among “Muslim women and women of colour from the Global South” (Open Letter to FEMEN, 2013). In other words, the “we” for MWAF encompasses not just gender, but also race, religion, geographic location, and class. This kind of affective circulation showcases both FEMEN and MWAF’s efforts to redistribute *and* revise ideologies related to “liberation,” “freedom,” and “oppression.” These ideologies are premised on emotional and personal attachments, attachments that then help to construct connections and disconnections—“awayness” and “towardness”—between FEMEN, MWAF, and others. As was the case with FEMEN’s reaction to and circulation of Tyler’s image, MWAF’s circulation of their counter-texts demonstrates an affect with roots in different material and historical contexts and differing evaluations of collectivity and solidarity. In other words, MWAF’s moments of affective circulation—the fomenting anger regarding FEMEN’s silencing, universalizing moves—represent instances of critical confrontation regarding women’s lived experiences and differences. As Jacqueline Schiappa (Chapter 15, this collection) reminds us in her piece on intersectional activism, “Difference itself has become one of the most valuable truth-tools feminism has skilled . . . Pursuing freedom from oppression involves recognizing the ways in which systematized exclusions are distinctive and yet also emerge and are sustained by intersecting dominant cultural logics” (p. 299). In considering these texts, we can see how contesting and restructuring meaning facilitates the creation of alliances and social relations in these instances of circulation.

In these same moments, though, MWAF is responding to the “body as protest” and “body as object” themes as more generalizable to women across the globe than to the specificity of the Tunisian context of Tyler’s original post. Although I cannot know for sure, MWAF’s posts suggest that they may be in line with Tyler’s goals if not the means by which she executed her protest. But due to the velocity of the amplified themes I discussed earlier, this original context gets lost and instead becomes re-contextualized by MWAF as a response to white, Western feminism.



*Figure 14.9. MWAF (3).*

To further highlight how velocity, undergirded by affective charges, works to construct social relations, let us return to FEMEN. FEMEN ultimately accepts MWAF's reframing of the conversation, altering the social relations among feminists to form groups "for" and "against" that did not exist in the first layer of circulation. For example, in an open letter to MWAF (published by the *Huffington Post UK*, 2013), Shevchenko writes, "So sisters . . . You say to us that you are against FEMEN, but we are here for you and for all of us, as women are the modern slaves and it's never a question of skin color" (Shevchenko as cited in Nelson, 2013). It is important to note how the sentiment and meaning of solidarity differs here. Whereas in MWAF's texts, they attempt to point out

the intersections between race and gender (among other markers of identity), FEMEN employs a rhetoric that distinguishes gender and race as separate experiences. In other words, FEMEN suggests that gender can and should be conceived of universally, regardless of other differences. Further down in the letter, Shevchenko attempts to characterize this idealistic, universal world, writing:

And do you know what I see? I see a world without Serbs, Croats and Muslims being massacred, without 9/11, without witch-hunts, a world without suicide bombers and without the Taliban, without Israeli-Palestinian wars, without persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’, without Northern Ireland troubles, without Crusades, a world where there are no, “public beheadings and no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. See you on the battle lines!” (Shevchenko qtd. in Nelson, 2013).

In this excerpt, several moves take place. First, we can argue that this letter represents an attempt to affectively circulate and characterize a rhetorical imaginary—a “world” in which people are no longer subjected to violence. And yet in this projection, we see slippages between rhetorics of solidarity and rhetorics of geopolitics, particularly in Shevchenko’s own rhetorical incitement of violence (e.g., her references to war and “battles” in describing FEMEN and their activist pursuits). Within her assertions about violence, other rhetorics emerge that produce other kinds of affect, and thus other kinds of knowledge. By resituating, and in many ways dismissing, MWAF’s rhetoric around race and difference, Shevchenko’s response uses the concept of a unified collectivity to suggest that the focus on difference comes from the problematic responses of those in power (men, religion, nationhood). This affective collision becomes one that suggests geopolitical solutions, something the mass media then runs with as their circulation of this particular text morphs into fear-mongering rhetorics around terrorism and 9/11.

Through amplification, then, we see the swift circulation and conflation of body as object and protest that allows the body to become a symbol, undifferentiated in how both MWAF and FEMEN see it. It is this meaning that gains significant velocity as we see in the back and forth between the two groups as well as multiple posts commenting on the two groups. But what also happens as a result of such emotionally motivated velocity is the conflation of women’s bodies with questions of the nation due to how race and religion are positioned by FEMEN. This meaning is the one that, unfortunately, endures past this second layer of response.

We can see its beginning in mass media responses within the same time period as the MWAF/FEMEN debate. *A New Yorker* headline (Greenhouse, 2013), for example, reads: “How to Provoke National Unrest with a Facebook Photo.”

APRIL 8, 2013

## HOW TO PROVOKE NATIONAL UNREST WITH A FACEBOOK PHOTO

BY EMILY GREENHOUSE



In the middle of March, a nineteen-year-old Tunisian woman named Amina Tyler posted two topless photos of herself on Facebook. In one, she looks straight at the camera, her middle fingers up, with the words “Fuck Your Morals” painted across her bare chest, the black “O” of “morals” not quite closing over her navel. In the other, she is wearing eyeliner, or maybe kohl, and bright lipstick, her mouth compressed into a tight frown. Between a book in her right hand and a cigarette in her



*Figure 14.10. The New Yorker Article.*

In the article, writer Emily Greenhouse not only positions the nation of Tunisia as “ill-equipped to deal with the possibilities of public broadcasting afforded by the World Wide Web,” she goes on to strategically argue that Tunisia is no longer a “progressive Arab country that respects women’s rights.” The article then ends with a citation and re-characterization of FEMEN’s call for a topless jihad day (and I should note that there is no mention of MWAF’s counterprotest in the article). Greenhouse writes, “Femen has issued a call for a new Arab Spring in a strongly worded statement against the ‘lethal hatred of Islamists, for whom killing a woman is more natural than recognizing her right to do as she pleases with her own body.’ It pleads, ‘Long live the topless jihad!’”

Here, we can see how the media’s use of FEMEN’s texts—particularly FEMEN’s affect of righteous anger in favor of women’s rights—serves as an incentive to construct an “us-them” relationship in which the powerhouses of the west (the US and the UK) are seen in opposition to the Middle East. This change in meaning—the move from an effort to invoke a narrative on universal freedoms and rights (FEMEN) to a fear-mongering narrative about 9/11, terrorism, and national progression (mainstream media) can be located in the disjuncture between textual content and emotion. FEMEN’s affective use of warfare language to talk about the need for universal women’s rights actually undermines FEMEN’s call for universal rights, thus enabling the media to discount that call as



well. What gets re-circulated by the media, then, is the affect—the fear and “ethical” kind of anger that undergirds the content of FEMEN’s message. That affect alongside the content of the media’s messages—discussions about terrorism and national backwardness/progression—produces a fear-mongering narrative of blame, purporting, further, racial anxieties about Muslims and Islam.

Such fear-mongering becomes what endures out of the “body” rhetorics; we can trace meanings from the body as protest and object, to the body as anti-protest and raced, to the body as nation-state, indicating the insurmountable differences of the West and the Middle East, resulting finally in Islamophobic rhetoric. What begins as a feminist protest ends up solidifying and reinforcing a firmly held ideology of fear directly at odds with the original protest.

This kind of rhetorical endurance indeed poses many more questions and concerns regarding the nature of the digital as a site for feminist activism. However, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the kind of feminist interventionist work at play here. As Angela Crow points out in her piece on embodied literacies and activism, such activist “labor,” regardless of the outcome—and I am referring to both FEMEN and MWAF’s protests—are “example[s] of embodied literacies reshaping local possibilities not only for themselves but in their work to address infrastructure, the build for the larger community as well” (Crow, 2018, p. 49). These cycles of amplification, velocity, and endurance point to a new form of rhetorical action in digital spaces that allows for the reshaping of possibility: circulation powered by affect. For those of us interested in the transnational effects of rhetoric, it behooves us to pay attention to digital circulation in order to understand how rhetorics and the affect undergirding their movements lead to co-options of meaning and thus the production of knowledge and social relations. It is this movement that I term affective circulation. For the web, affective circulation speaks to an unstable process where words and images (memes, tweets, citations, for example) operate as metonymic moments, bringing about certain associations and disassociations, forming social alliances while also producing exclusions by “othering” certain bodies. A text detached from its original history and context via the speed of circulation *and* the emotional weight of repetition allows the political weight of a message to both be obfuscated and coopted. And it also allows the message to become an agent for mobilization. As Sarah Ahmed (2014) suggests, “Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’” (p. 8). These kinds of movements—the changing and shifting of rhetorics depending on the contexts of their encounters—allows us to see how circulation represents a co-constitutive process, an assemblage of events and knowledges that necessarily affect the “lived encounters of public life” (Edbauer, 2005, p. 21). The kind of rhetorical repurposing that takes place within digital spaces is unique in that those processes are always already immediate, rapid, pervasive, and widespread.

What we can take away from looking at this kind of circulation is the way in which rhetorics necessarily become tied to discourses of globalization for various purposes. Tyler's image, once taken up by sponsors with vastly different economic and political goals, became the basis for purporting neoliberal logics about women's rights and propagating Islamophobic claims and beliefs. In many ways, the mainstream media's circulation of these particular events allows us to see how women's bodies get defined and repurposed for national and supranational projects. As rhetorical scholar Catherine Chaput (2010) reminds us, theorizing circulation within spaces dominated by neoliberalism "demands a structural reorganization in the way we think about political-economic and cultural practices within capitalism from situation to transsituation" and it demands "a new understanding of rhetoric as continuously moving through and connecting different instantiations within this complex structure" (p. 6). In addition, viewing circulation as an affective process—and even more so, as a rhetorical tool for feminist intervention—can help us understand circulation not only as an intricate process within the digital, but also an intricate and vastly material process within a global information economy. Thus, in using a transnational feminist lens for looking at circulation, we can question the ways in which texts engage in and/or dispute discourses of globalization so that we might better understand the limitations of and possibilities for feminist rhetorical action to occur on the web. More importantly, though, attending to circulation in this way can also help us think more critically about how we as rhetoricians and feminist activists can intervene and leverage affective circulation towards a more productive kind of social change and rhetorical efficacy.

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