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Jessica Ouellette
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Blogging Borders: Transnational Feminist Rhetorics and Global Voices

Jessica Ouellette

As more and more digital publics emerge as generative sites for cross-cultural communication and social action, it becomes imperative for us to critically question the ways in which these spaces operate not only as platforms from which to speak, but also as platforms from which to silence. By looking at digital publics through the lens of genre and critical discourse theory, I argue that the dis/empowering and (de)linking of speakers is an intrinsic part of public discourse and one that deserves further scrutiny. Through an analysis of the global feminist blog, [Gender Across Borders](#), this project questions the ways in which the fostering and foreclosing of public discourse relies on the rhetorical practices communities use to respond to a shared exigence. In using this site as a case study, I suggest that the rhetorical approaches to and within digital publics necessitate critical examinations of the ideological social relations undergirding those approaches.

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Introduction

[Gender Across Borders](#) (GAB) defines itself as “an international feminist blog community.” Since its inception in 2009, GAB, through the publication of news stories and commentary about social and political issues, has made the effort to “foster a global community of feminists where everyone should feel free to express their opinions” (GAB Mission Page). The site’s overarching agenda, as stated on their [Mission Page](#), is to critically examine and discuss issues of gender, race, sexuality, and class. “We embrace people of all backgrounds,” the mission reads, “to come together to voice and progress positive gender relations worldwide” (GAB Mission Page).

GENDER ACROSS BORDERS

a global voice for gender justice

At first glance, GAB represents an ideal site for many digital activists; the chance to engage in cross-cultural communication about social and political issues, as many of us know, poses both exciting opportunities and challenges that seem worth the time and investment. And yet as I will discuss in the following pages, despite GAB's explicit call for an engaged, deliberative feminist community, and despite their insistent goal in fostering an open dialogue for feminists across various nation-states, such participation appears absent on the site. Although extremely participatory in circulation (the site offers monthly electronic newsletters, links to social networking sites, and a blogroll with links to similar sites), the desired dialogue and discussion remain merely exercises of laudatory and affirmative comments, such as "Great post," or "Thanks for this." Given such a disconnect, this essay explores the various reasons underlying GAB's inability to achieve an interactive global feminist community.

What does it mean to "provide ways to engage issues"? And for whom do we provide this engagement? Who is the "we"? How does a blog invoke a "participatory community"? And who is part of that community? Who remains outside of it?

Digital sites, like GAB, provide interesting and provocative data for considering the various opportunities for and limits of digital activism. Over the last decade, digital activists and scholars working within the fields of rhetoric and composition, communications, and feminist studies, to name a few, have begun to consider the viability of the digital as a site for social activism and cross-cultural communication. Given these considerations, and particularly the recent move to link digital spaces with transnational feminist engagement, I argue that as digital activists, we need to be critical of our positions and the genres and discourses in which we locate those positions. To that end, this piece looks at the limits of the online blog GAB through the lenses of genre and discourse theory in order to question further the potentialities for and limitations of transnational feminist communication and activism within digital spaces.

Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd, two scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition, have offered a wealth of scholarship on the nature of social action and digital genres. In their most recent work, "Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere," Miller and Shepherd revisit their original claim—that the weblog characterizes a genre through "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" ("Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog")—arguing, now, that blogs actually represent a medium for communication and genre formation. They conclude that it is instead the purpose and discourse of a blog that constitutes the

genre(s). As an example, they argue that the “public affairs blog” represents a kind of internet genre as it reproduces “remediated versions of other print genres,” such as news writing and civic journalism (Miller and Shepherd 275). The public affairs blog, they add, enacts social action in a more clearly defined way, as it mediates between private intentions and social exigencies through “participatory journalism,” “micro-news,” and “citizen journalism” (Miller and Shepherd 276).

For Miller and Shepherd, one of the most important rhetorical impetuses for engaging in the public affairs blog is the overwhelming “dissatisfaction with mainstream media.” Put differently, many writers and digital activists turn to the public affairs blog to express discontent with mainstream media’s voiceless and impersonal (dis)connections with its readers, and to offer an “alternative voice.” This turn is symptomatic, Miller and Shepherd note, of public discourse’s failure in realizing effective forms of democracy:

For an exigence characterized by the corporate commodification of news, perceived loss of authentic public engagement, and a shared sense of political impotence, blogs provided ways to engage issues, to participate in discussion, to undercut corporate media homogeneity, and to turn audiences into participatory communities. These effects addressed directly the growing unease with public discourse. The interactive capabilities, the immediacy of response, and the ease of access all contributed to the hope that blogging could support what Benjamin Barber has called ‘strong democracy,’ which he characterizes in rhetorical terms as ‘a democracy that reflects the careful and prudent judgment of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities’.

(Miller and Shepherd 278-279)

While in many ways I agree with Miller and Shepherd’s claim that blogs, and specifically public affairs blogs, have addressed some of the growing issues within public discourse, I question the various ideological implications within those arguments. For example, what does it mean to “provide ways to engage issues”? And for whom do we provide this engagement? Who is the “we”? How does a blog invoke a “participatory community”? And who is part of that community? Who remains outside of it?

In his article, “Genre Identity: Individuals, Institutions, and Ideology,” Anthony Pare suggests that while genres do function as forms of social action, they operate within certain power dynamics that enable ideology to remain concealed. For Pare, the idea that a genre represents a “conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action” (Miller 163) is dangerously prescriptive in that ideologies of a discourse almost always remain transparent, and thus unquestioned and unchallenged. In other words, because genres appear as “normative” frameworks—“habits or rituals that work”—ideologies within those genres are reproduced and “naturalized” through the discursive practices of the texts themselves, making it difficult to realize and call attention to those ideologies. Perhaps we can think of this “naturalization” of ideology as a process by which assumptions, beliefs, roles, and ways of acting and relating to one another become accepted as conventions, as the “norm.” In a public affairs blog, the assumption and belief is that there are certain societal problems—issues within public discourse—that need to be

addressed. Because public affairs blogs rely on journalistic genres, certain “rules” for responding to such issues apply (speaking positions, subject-object relationship, “reporting” about others, etc.).

Similar to Pare, critical discourse theorist Norman Fairclough points to the ways in which ideology undergirds, and perhaps undermines, generic and discursive practices. In *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, he argues that genres are recurrently constituted through discursive conventions and representations of various ideological “aspects of the world—the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world” (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* 124). Discourses, according to Fairclough, are always ideological in that they provide specific conventions, beliefs, ways of being—“resources which people deploy in relating to one another—keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating—and seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another” (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* 124).

I see this piece as part of a larger conversation about digital activism, a conversation that seeks to encourage critical dialogue and promote what feminist scholar Alison Jaggar has argued are the "reassessments of our own commitments and refinements of our own views."

For both Fairclough and Pare, then, genres and discourses operate interdependently and must be thought of as inextricably linked. By examining the ways in which ideology undergirds the generic conventions and discourses operating on a digital site like GAB, we can begin to understand how such interactions might construct social relations and subject positions that, at times, contribute to imbalanced power dynamics. Pare gets at this kind of analysis by asserting, “Their [genres’] existence raises a series of questions that lead inexorably to ideology: For whom do they ‘work’? To what end? Do they ‘work’ equally for all who participate in or are affected by them?” (Pare 60).

These are the questions that drive this piece. As mentioned earlier, GAB’s goal in fostering a global feminist community did not come to fruition, and as I will demonstrate in the next section, this failure can be located in the fact that the actual addressed audience assumes a predominantly western feminist audience—not a “global” one. More specifically, this disconnect functions as a result of how the generic conventions of civic journalism (speaking positions, objective perspectives, informative purposes) and the larger beliefs associated with the discourse of western academic feminism (ways of acting and being) interact in ways that produce, interpellate, and negate specific subject positions, privileging particular experiences and representations of women. Such representations, I will argue, necessarily obscure difference, ultimately undermining the goals of GAB.

Before delving into my analysis, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge my own speaking position as coming from a place of privilege and situated in a specific, western academic discourse. In an effort to be more transparent about my position, I see this piece as part of a larger conversation about digital activism, a conversation that seeks to encourage critical dialogue and promote what feminist scholar Alison Jaggar has argued are the “reassessments of our own commitments and refinements of our own views” (Jaggar 11). With this in mind, I view this project as an attempt to engage and participate in the act of questioning and “reassessing” the viability of the digital as a site for transnational feminist rhetoric, communication, and social action.

Analysis: Blog Profiles

One of GAB’s most prominent generic features is the writing itself—remediated forms of print journalism and news writing. Fairclough, in his discussion of news writing, cautions us to be critically aware of the generic conventions of such writing: “News,” he argues, “is making stories out of series of logically and chronologically related events. One way of seeing news is as a form of social regulation...news reduces complex series of events whose relationship may not be terribly clear to stories, imposing narrative order upon them” (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* 84). In considering Fairclough’s argument, how might we read the following objective on GAB’s [About page](#): “The GAB team works hard to deliver global feminist news and commentary to you every day” (GAB About Page)? Like many public affairs blogs, this statement makes clear the goal of civic journalism; but how might we understand the relational dichotomy in their statement—the relation between the GAB Team and the “you”? Who is the “you”? Who is the “GAB Team?” In other words, who is named? Who is not named? Who is doing the naming?



Welcome!

Welcome to Gender Across Borders [GAB], a global feminist community and blog. The GAB team works hard to deliver global feminist news and commentary to you every day (and note that we’re always looking for more writers). [Click here to read about our mission](#) and read about our [copyright policy here](#).

For starters, we learn that the [GAB team](#) is comprised of twenty “named” writers, each with a generic profile offering a photo and a detailed description of the writer’s life (who they are, where they live, what they do). Most, if not all, of the authors are academics studying and/or teaching at a college or university, or working for an organization directly connected to an academic institution (e.g.

grassroots programs). Nineteen of the writers are located in the United States, Canada, Europe, or Australia, and one is located in Tunisia, Africa. And lastly, almost all of the writers state in some way or another their commitment to the global human rights movement, as well as their advocacy for the formation of a “global sisterhood.”

In many ways, the profiles’ markers of education, hobbies, professional experiences, and location lead me to question how the ideologies of both journalism and western academic feminism encode and naturalize problematic notions of difference. For example, the majority of the blog posts are written about women in the Global South (Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and certain parts of Asia). Considering this fact alone, how might we render the “global” perspective on this site, since most of the posts are written by women located in the Global North? In other words, how does one grapple with the fact that almost all of the writers (all but one) locate themselves in western geographic locations, as well as academic institutions? In addition to this inquiry, it is worth noting that fifteen out of twenty profile photos visually represent white women and one white male. Might we question how such photos invoke certain ideologies about race? I ask such questions in order to gesture toward the kinds of visual and rhetorical undermining that seem to be occurring in the profiles alone, particularly the ways in which the “global” perspective gets co-opted for authorial purposes, rather than the site’s intended “community-building” purposes.

The notion of disembodied texts on a site that advocates for the connections between the personal and social, the private and public, seems somewhat contradictory.

When looking at the profiles more closely, we can also see this kind of undermining taking place in the writers’ use of the distant third person voice. It is worth noting that this stylistic choice is a generic characteristic of journalism—the neutral, objective stance of the writer (Fairclough, *Media Discourse* 84). The following [profile description](#) serves as an example: “Amy Littlefield is an Editor for Gender Across Borders and a reporter who lives in Providence, Rhode Island. She [...] has traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico to learn about revolutionary women’s movements. A Massachusetts native, she graduated from Brown University in 2009 [...] She is a folk musician who likes critically analyzing pop music while dancing to it” (GAB Profile Page, Littlefield). Within this passage, not only does the distant third person perspective completely remove the subject’s voice, it also allows the profile to function as a disembodied text. The notion of disembodied texts on a site that advocates for the connections between the personal and social, the private and public, seems somewhat contradictory. Issues related to gender, sexuality, race, class, etc. are always already subjective, and thus always active and personal; therefore the passive impersonal structure of the profiles undercuts GAB’s earlier invocation for a participatory, engaged community.



Amy Littlefield is an Editor for Gender Across Borders and a reporter who lives in Providence, Rhode Island. She has written for the Los Angeles Times, Women's eNews, New Politics magazine and the Providence Phoenix, and has traveled to [Oaxaca, Mexico](#) to learn about revolutionary women's movements. A Massachusetts native, she graduated from Brown University in 2009 with degrees in Comparative Literature and Latin American Studies. She is the founder of [The Provider Project](#), a collection of stories from the abortion-providing community.

Amy works as a [gynecological teaching assistant](#) and a counselor at an abortion clinic. She is a folk musician who likes critically analyzing pop music while dancing to it.

You can contact Amy via email [amy \[at\] genderacrossborders \[dot\] com](mailto:amy[at]genderacrossborders[dot]com).

Furthermore, this removal of voice not only separates the self from the social, it also conceals the writers' agency, masking imbalanced social relations of power between the writers, readers, and the subjects within the texts. It can be assumed that the singular omniscient author is really the writer herself. And while the writer may be unaware of these imbalanced social relations, or at least unaware of how her text obscures them, it is important to recognize how the ideologies undergirding this generic convention contribute to a kind of problematic positioning. If we consider the reference to Oaxaca, Mexico as a place Amy had to travel to "to learn about revolutionary women's movements" we might see how such a statement, which on the surface appears to be very "progressive," actually masks larger ideologies about difference. The statement suggests an exoticism of the "other," in that women from Mexico (as a whole) serve as an object of study due to their "distinct" experiences. This notion of "learning" about other women, and more specifically, "traveling" to another country to learn about other women's experiences, suggests an imperialistic relationship between the individual Amy and the collective, revolutionary group of women from Mexico, as it implies a kind of physical imposition of space and subject. The fact that Amy had to travel to a specific place to "learn" about women's revolutionary movements undermines GAB's mission in fostering a global feminist online community; for such a community would seemingly find the "learning" component to be synonymous with interactive, engaged dialogue and discussion.

Pare reminds us that the social practices of discourse within specific genres “locate or position individuals within the power relations of institutional activity” (Pare 59). We see this positioning occur in multiple ways on GAB’s profiles, particularly in terms of how the writers are positioned within institutionalized notions of what it means to deliver news and what it means to deliver “feminist news.” In other words, the objective, neutral stance of the writer (a generic characteristic of civic journalism) conflated with beliefs about human rights and a “global sisterhood” (a characteristic of western academic feminist discourse) at times overlap and subvert one another in ways that ultimately construct certain social relations and subject positions that undermine the larger goals of critical awareness, engagement and community.

Analysis: Blog Posts

As we saw with the blog profiles, the blog posts on GAB operate in ways that warrant a critical examination of ideology and social relations as well. How, for example, does the generic act of news writing and representation (what/who is named, what/who is not named) construct and produce social relations of power between subject positions? With this inquiry in mind, I have chosen to discuss three blog posts. Such examples not only demonstrate the prescriptive narratives of news stories, they also call into question the ways in which news stories construct social relations through the use of generic speaking positions and universalized meanings. In particular, the generic conventions of civic journalism (the neutral, omniscient, investigative speaking positions, and the subject-object relationship construed in news stories), as well as the discursive beliefs of western academic feminism (the universalized representations of agency, victimization, history, and liberation) encode and naturalize ideological social relations between various subjects and participants. While I see both operating simultaneously, and at times in conflicting and undermining ways, for the sake of analysis, I have chosen to discuss first the conventions of civic journalism and second the beliefs associated with western academic feminism.



JANUARY 13, 2012 10:00 AM

Challenging ‘cultural’ excuses for gender-based violence in India

In considering the first blog post example, [“Challenging Cultural Excuses for Gender-based Violence in India,”](#) we learn early on in the post that the writer, Anamaria Vargas, is not originally from India, but rather working for the UN in New Delhi. In attempting to establish her knowledge of women’s experiences in India, she aligns herself with these experiences, noting that, “Never in my life have I been so constantly reminded that I am a woman.” A few sentences later, Vargas then moves to distance herself from women in India, commenting on her observations of the “burden *they* carry.” Here we see how the use of pronouns in depicting specific speaking positions constructs an imbalanced relation of power between those who speak and those who do not speak. The identification of the speaker as “I” (as a single individual) and the identification of women in India as “them” (as a collective), sets up a problematic relation: the “I” represents the speaker as the subject and the “them” represents all women from India as the object of study. As Fairclough suggests, such linguistic moves, which operate as generic conventions of journalism, function as distancing mechanisms; they work (consciously or not) to “divide voices” (Fairclough, *Media Discourse* 82). In addition, Vargas’s vacillation from aligning herself with women in India to then distancing herself from “them,” as well as her lack of critical attention to her own freedom of movement, suggests an attempt to know and speak for another’s experience without actually being a part of that experience. In other words, the “I” – “them” construction enables the writer to assume an authoritative, all-knowable position and to speak for a group of women who presumably cannot speak.



APRIL 17, 2012 7:00 AM

Targeted Sterilization: Women’s Reality in Uzbekistan

A similar division occurs in the post, [“Targeted Sterilization: Women’s Reality in Uzbekistan,”](#) although, here, the pronoun use works to interpellate a second-person subject. In the first sentence, the author, Nadia Smiecinska, projects the lived experience of female sterilization onto the reader—onto the “you”—asking the reader to imagine finding out that “you no longer have a uterus.” The narrative continues to claim that, “It would be an immense shock to any woman. Unfortunately, in Uzbekistan right now, women are sterilized.” Several moves occur in these sentences. First, the second-person projection implies that such an experience requires an imagined scenario by the readers, by the “you,” because presumably such an experience is not the “you’s” experience. Smiecinska’s use of the words “would” and “if”—it “would” be shocking *if* sterilization were to occur—presumes a direct alignment between the speaker (Smiecinska) and the “you.”

These sentence constructions point to an underlying and problematic assumption about audience. If the speaker (unconsciously or not) aligns herself with the reader and assumes that both the speaker and the reader require an imagined scenario in which sterilization is a reality, how do we render this kind of representation as part of a larger, global discussion, inclusive of women transnationally? In other words, it appears that women from Uzbekistan are not presumed audience members. Rather, “their” lived experiences are used and described in order to frame a human rights violation to readers outside of that experience; thus readers must “imagine” the experience. This kind of ordering of voices represents what Fairclough believes to be the ideological conventions and mechanisms inherent in media genres like civic journalism, “mechanisms for ordering voices, and subjecting those voices to social control” (Fairclough, *Media Discourse* 84).



APRIL 18, 2012 1:00 PM

Not so Different from You or Me: Trafficked Women in Spain

The “I,” “you,” “them” construction is evident in the third example, entitled [“Not So Different from You or Me: Trafficked Women in Spain,”](#) written by Samantha Smith. We see this construction in the title itself. The “you” and “me” function as an alignment between the speaker and the reader, and the “trafficked women” function as the objects of study. Throughout the post, the phrase “trafficked women” appears to constitute a homogenized collective, where difference becomes only a matter related to gender and sexuality; “they” are all women and “they” are all involved in sex trafficking. The narrative reads, “Many come from Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Back in their countries of origin, organized crime networks deceived them with promises of lucrative jobs, a top-notch education, or simply ‘a better life’, but the reality of what awaits them in Spain is far different.” The phrases “them” and “their countries,” juxtaposed against the “you and me” referenced in the title and throughout the rest of the post points to my earlier remark concerning assumptions about audience and agency. These “trafficked women” are not perceived readers, for as the very end of the article suggests, “*they* are not so different, *those* women, they are just like you and me.” The use of “those women,” implies, too, an extreme detachment and distance between the speaker/reader and the “trafficked women.” This kind of representation, both literal and spatial, suggests once again the idea that the “them,” trafficked women, cannot speak, and thus need to be spoken for.

Instances like these are where the intersections between the generic conventions of civic journalism and the discursive practices of western feminism are most apparent. While the speaking conventions of civic journalism position subjects and participants within

problematic power relations, certain western feminist beliefs about agency perpetuate and reinforce these problematic power relations. Gayatri Spivak, in her piece, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” claims that the representations of “Third World” women by “First World” women obscure the subjectivities and lived experiences of “Third World” women, as such representations typically seek to support and advance the interests of the authors (Spivak 278). Perhaps this kind of representation, both in civic journalism and western academic feminism, arises from the ways in which genres and discourses function as “projective imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions” (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* 124). As I will show, much of the discourse of western academic feminism is tied to western notions of human rights, liberation, and individuality, and these notions are all represented as universalized desires across global contexts.

As Fairclough claims, discourses are always ideological, and at times, they constitute falsified, misconstrued representations of the world. In thinking about the generic feature of the I-you-them construction within a western feminist discourse, we might think about how the “them” as a singular collective represents what Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to as a monolithic, homogenized, composite “Third World Woman.” In her article, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Mohanty articulates this claim further, arguing that “This discursive colonialism is a mode of appropriation and codification of ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world.” Such appropriation enables an implicit self-(re)presentation of the “First World Woman” as secular, liberated, and in control as opposed to the “Third World Woman,” who is always represented as conservative, inferior, and a victim lacking control (Mohanty 336-337).

In the first example, [“Challenging Culture,”](#) Vargas explicitly refers to women from India as “victims” and “females with little capacity to participate in decision-making.” And in [“Not So Different from You or Me,”](#) Smith asks the following questions of trafficked women: “Will they ever be able to achieve their dreams? Will they ever feel whole again?” The reference to victimization and “wholeness” as a universal value not only positions certain women as powerless, but also as mute, as unable to speak and “participate.” Furthermore, these references suggest that women experiencing oppression in the Global South do not see themselves as agentive individuals.

And yet by attempting to create a global sisterhood, differences become both strategically obscured and emphasized, and experiences, agencies, and histories become something singular and universal.

In “Globalizing Feminist Ethics,” an essay on global feminist discourse, Alison Jaggar speaks to the disconnections between the universalized meanings of agency and truth within dominant discourses and the actual lived experiences of women outside of those dominant discourses. The obscurities of subjectivity, she suggests, arise out of the tendency of western feminist discourse to project a global sisterhood, where all experiences of women can be known and understood (Jaggar 10). The effort to promote a global

sisterhood is evident on GAB in statements like “*they* are not so different, *those* women, they are just like you and me” (emphasis mine). And yet by attempting to create a global sisterhood, differences become both strategically obscured and emphasized, and experiences, agencies, and histories become something singular and universal.

We see this ideological representation of singularity in “[Challenging Culture](#),” particularly in Vargas’s discussion of history and nationhood. In the third and fourth sentences of the passage Vargas suggests that there is a lack, or even an absence, in the nation of India: the idea being that India, a “traditional culture,” is “less integrated into globalization” because it is behind in modernization. Presumably, this “lack” is also the reason India remains subjugated to a patriarchal society. By positioning India as lacking modern development, the post suggests that modernization is anti-patriarchal and that its “presence” could perhaps bring about gender resolutions. Such a distinction, I would argue, is a falsified discursive projection, as the oppressive histories of colonialism and patriarchy constitute the histories of modernity/ization.

In the second example, “[Targeted Sterilization](#),” we see a similar narrative of singularity, particularly in discussions of agency and liberation. Throughout much of the post, Smiecinska portrays women from Uzbekistan as powerless and in need of outside (read: western) aid: “There is no doubt that empowering Uzbek women, providing them with adequate pre and post-natal care and making contraception easily available would help to advance the nation’s human development index rankings, while improving the quality of life for all its people.” The belief that western intervention would “empower” Uzbek women, “advance” the nation, and “improve their quality of life” suggests several implicit assumptions about the singularity and universality of western academic feminist discourse. First, the claim that Uzbek women require empowerment, and that such “power” is assumed to come from western resources, perpetuates a discourse of imperialism—the belief that the “West” is the center of power, knowledge and development. Second, the reference to “advancing the nation’s human development” speaks to my earlier discussion about modernization, and western academic feminist tendencies to assume a singular, all knowable history of modernity. Third, the reference to improving Uzbek women’s “quality of life” suggests yet another tendency in western academic feminist discourse to assume that westernized notions of liberation, freedom, and agency apply to and are desired by all women across all cultural and historical contexts.

Pare and Fairclough remind us, once again, that discourses, like that of western academic feminism “embody certain ideologies, knowledges and beliefs, and particular ‘positions’ for the types of social subjects that participate in that practice” (Fairclough qtd. in Pare 58). Mohanty argues, too, that the efforts to perform “particular knowledges and beliefs” about the Global South, as seen on GAB, actually produce the “Third World Difference”: “that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most of if not all the women in these countries” (Mohanty 335). What becomes clear on GAB is that the attempt to know and represent the experiences of others within dominant discourses of privilege and power actually silences women from outside those discourses.

That silencing, then, perpetuates falsified narratives about their lived experiences, as those experiences can never be fully represented within such privileged, institutionalized discourses.



Conclusion

As I have tried to show throughout this piece, the break between GAB's stated purpose and social action is not only located in the generic practices that produce problematic social relations, but also in the attempt to apply western ideas and beliefs universally and laterally to all experiences without ever acknowledging the impact and significance of this attempt. Such an attempt arguably conflicts with the overarching goals of writing *with* women from various geographic locations, as certain genres and discourses do not offer spaces for all women to participate.

If we value social action, critical dialogue, and cross-cultural communication, and if we do so through generic and discursive practices, how do we confront the fact that some discourses and genres necessarily exclude others? Clearly the answer to this question goes beyond the scope of this piece, but I ask it rhetorically because I believe it is an inquiry that many digital activists might want to consider further.

It may be that the notion of an online global community is in many ways a paradox.

Interestingly enough, in the spring of 2012, GAB decided to cease its function as a blog for reasons unbeknownst. However, they decided to keep their site visually available and have encouraged those involved to "start improving the world" in other ways. In their ["Goodbye"](#) piece, they note, "We will not vanish from global feminism—we are here and plan to continue our global feminist fight through other forms." In many ways, I wonder if their reasons for shutting down the blog had to do with the failed enactment of their desired global feminist community. While I am still uncertain about the kinds of "criteria" that might "work" in the digital

sphere for transnational feminists and activists, I am beginning to think that we may need to revise our understanding of what it means to participate in global, transnational online communities. It may be that the notion of an online global community is in many ways a paradox. Community implies shared understandings and knowledges, a localized sense of intimacy. Global moves away from these localized connections, and assumes something more universal and unbounded. As GAB reveals in their title, “Gender Across Borders: A Voice for Global Justice,” such a community premised on western ideas and beliefs does not allow for multiple voices in a transnational context to exist; instead it functions as a singular community—one “*voice* for global justice.”

In considering this paradox, I want to ask the following question: how might the proliferation of online sites addressing locally-, historically- and context-specific issues be more productive for digital activists? Perhaps the effort to form connections and transnational coalitions could be found in the circulation and linkages between various sites (the use of blog rolls, in-text citations, links) rather than in the attempt to represent “all voices” and “all experiences” in one space. The site [Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan](#) (RAWA) is one such example. RAWA activists specifically state on their [About page](#) that “freedom and democracy can’t be donated; it is the duty of the people of a country to fight and achieve these values” (RAWA About page). For RAWA, national solidarity is important and significant to their notions of activism. For this very reason, their work is situated as a locally- and context-specific project. They provide overviews of local issues in Afghanistan, as well as local projects that they initiate in response to those issues. In an effort to connect outwardly, to form transnational coalitions and connections, they include a page on their site entitled “[Links](#),” where they link to other activists’ sites located in various parts of the world.



Sites like RAWA, I believe, exemplify the ways in which transnational feminist activism can indeed exist online. As transnational feminist scholars Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest, engaging in transnational feminist practices requires us to “rearticulate the histories of how people in different locations and circumstances are linked” (Grewal and Kaplan 5). Perhaps we can think of this kind of rearticulation in terms of how people are (and can be) linked within digital spaces. Pare reminds us that “learning to participate...means learning one’s professional [social] location in the power relations of institutional life.” Thus, if we are to

continue thinking about digital activism and transnational practices, we need to be more critical of how genres and discourses interpellate and negate certain positions. We must, Pare claims, “help create the critical consciousness required to undermine that process, but we ourselves will have to work to escape the identities our own discourse compels” (Pare 69). While I am not so certain we can ever really escape “the identities our own discourse compels,” we can become more critically conscious of the various positions we take on in social situations, and how those positions invoke, construct, and/or silence other positions. As writers, scholars and activists interested in the digital as a site for transnational engagement, it is imperative for us to continuously consider what is at stake when we engage in those practices, and how we might begin to question, push against, and revise those practices.

Jessica Ouellette is a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests include transnational feminist methodologies, feminist rhetorical practices, and digital media studies. She currently teaches undergraduate courses on digital rhetorics, gender and sexuality studies, and professional and technical writing.

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