Chapter 96

Ethos Construction, Identification, and Authenticity in the Discourses of AWSA:
The Arab Women's Solidarity Association International

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the complex emergent feminist ethos in two virtual spaces created by the San Francisco chapter of AWSA—the Arab Women's Solidarity Association International, an Arab women's activist group. First, the chapter discusses ethos and identity construction in cyberspace. Second, the chapter analyzes AWSA's cyber discourses to uncover the characteristics of its feminist ethos and the opportunities allowed or lost for authenticity and the role of anonymity in constructing its feminist ethos. Third, the chapter questions whether anonymity allows for the critical examination of the discourses and ideologies of the powerful in addition to the creation of a sustainable counter-hegemonic discourse or whether it heightens the threat of homogeneity and streamlining in cyberspace. The chapter, in its conclusion, calls for a critical investigation of the potential of the digital domain to challenge the concentration of power in virtual spaces and uncover frameworks through which revolutionary discourses can be sustained and disseminated.

INTRODUCTION

In both virtual or real communities and the rhetorical situations that transpire within and outside these discursive spaces, the construction of ethos emerges as a central component. Whether we view ethos as one's credibility displayed by one's good or moral character (Plato, 2001; Aristotle, 2001), an element of style (Quintilian, 2001), a "dwelling place" in which we should consider the situation and context within

which rhetoric is applied (Hyde, 2004), a group quality (Gurak, 1999), or a network of communal discursive practices that is ideally "multi-voiced and authentic," negotiated with social institutions (Brooke, 1991), or situated in "one's locatedness in various social and cultural 'spaces'" (Reynolds, 1993, p. 326), ethos in online discourses becomes key to the realization of identification with one's digital audience.

In online spaces, identity is formed and constituted through language interaction, making identity an "emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices" (Bucholtz & Hall as cited in Grabill & Pigg, 2012,p. 102). In digital interactions, the term identity-in-use emerges to elucidate how identity is formulated not only by broad categories like race, class, and gender, but also by discursive negotiations and interactions whereever digital identity is distributed and enmeshed in complex dialogical activity for the purpose of building social relationships, as Carolyn Miller (2001) suggested. In this light, online communication becomes "a complex negotiation between various versions of our online and our real selves, between our many representations of our selves and our listeners and readers, and, not least, between our many selves and the computer structure and operations through which we represent these selves to others" (Zappen, 2005,p. 323)—creating a complex discourse on identity that accounts for the multiplicity of selves constructed through online discursive interactions in "relation to embodiment and materiality" (Grabill & Pigg, 2012, p. 103). The complex discourse on identity elucidates the challenges associated with ethos construction and deployment in cyber spaces, making the term ethos-in-use equally relevant because the emergent digital ethos is formulated by online discursive negotiations and interactions and is, thus, non-static and ever-changing across time, across texts, and across spaces. In the discourses of the marginalized, ethos construction becomes, in itself, an act of struggle through language—a "struggle in language to recover…, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew" (hooks,1989, pp. 146-147). Though ethos in these discourses is created in the margins, that locale "offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks, 1989, p. 207) and allows for the potentiality of transformation and the creation of radical inclusive spaces from which to recover those in the margins, create solidarity, and erase the categories of colonized and colonizer (hooks, 1989, p. 209).

The rich discourses on ethos stem from the central role feminism plays/ed in challenging and redefining the traditional conception of ethos, conventionally seen as emphasizing the conventional and the public rather than the private and the idiosyncratic. Undeniably, the traditional male-female divide in Muslim and Arab communities has found its replication in the real and virtual spaces Arab and Muslim women traverse, as Arab women activists' efforts have often been discredited for defying the male-constructed normative code of women's ethos of silence and invisibility. In the context of Arab culture, Arab women's voices become acts of dissidence and encroachments upon masculine spaces because these women defy the rigid separation between the public sphere of visibility of masculinity and the private sphere of silence and domesticity of femininity (Guéye, 2010, p. 162)—challenging a dichotomy that perpetuates the primacy of men in Arab societies. However, for these women, ethos is constructed from the margins of society (Rich, 1986; hooks, 1989; Haraway, 1988) and in the social space between "personal and public life" (Ronald,1990, p. 37) and between writer and reader and speaker and listener (LeFevre, 1987,p. 45-46), and between the self and its locality within and outside the boundaries of social institutions and hierarchies. In their deconstruction and redefinition of the traditionalist constructions of women's ethos in their virtual and real communities, Arab women activists "displace the structures" from which they emerged and try to "create empty spaces, and new places, from which others may speak" (Schmertz, 1999, p.89). However, the success with which these women activists are able to traverse the conditions of their disempowerment in their communities and extend that liberation to other women in

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