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9. Ethos Righted

Transnational Feminist Analytics

Wendy S. Hesford

In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch ask us to consider contemporary feminist configurations of the “ethical self” and the terms of our engagement with both the texts we study and produce. They call to feminist scholars to “engender an ethos of humility, respect, and care,” and, in so doing, they prompt us to think of ethos in relational terms (21). Although the qualities of “humility, respect, and care” suggest a nonagonistic feminist stance, the *means* to this *end* are far less demure. Among the reflexive practices that have gained traction in contemporary feminist rhetorical studies and that Royster and Kirsch endorse, are those that involve the “critique [of] our analytical assumptions and frames” (14), demonstrate multidirectional thinking (86), and extend “the boundaries of locally defined assumptions” (112). Royster and Kirsch do not frame ethos as a mode of inquiry per se; but the terms of critical engagement that they espouse provide a set of tactics that feminist scholars might ostensibly adopt in pursuit of the enviable “ethical self” (14).

Transnational feminist studies exhibit qualities of critical engagement similar to those that Royster and Kirsch reference; yet transnational feminists also foreground methodological challenges that the authors do not explicitly

address that are vital to a relational understanding of ethos. Assuredly, ethos is a “component of rhetorical argument” (Hyde xvi). But instead of defining ethos in modernist terms as an attribute of the speaker prerequisite to persuasion, I aim to reinvigorate classical notions of “*ethos* as a social act” and argue for an understanding of ethos as an analytical orientation to thought and action (Holiday 389). Specifically, I turn to transnational feminist studies for a more robust theory of ethos as both a mode of inquiry (epistemology) and as a site of struggle (political action). Transnational approaches to feminist scholarship developed as a critical response to the universalizing tendencies of global feminism, namely the sisterhood-is-global model (Morgan) that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, criticized for privileging gender as a category of analysis and for its near exclusive focus on women’s sexual victimization and reliance on a Western liberal legal framework.

Transnational feminist scholarship cannot be reduced to a single methodology; but generally transnational feminist methods aim to illuminate cultural, political, and economic processes of globalization and the inequalities that shape geopolitical alignments. Although transnational feminists question the sanctity of the nation-state as an analytical category, they do not abandon analyses of the global force of the world’s most powerful nations.¹ Attuned to the contingencies that generate seemingly incommensurable differences among women across contexts, transnational feminist analytics dislodge ethos from its moorings in liberal notions of the polis (inattentive to cultural stratification and inequalities) in order to attend to the asymmetrical terrain of feminist politics and political economies. This includes attention to how political economies differently shape the domestic oppression of racial and ethnic minorities (see Chowdhury, “Locating”). In offsetting uncritical cosmopolitan feminisms, transnational feminisms return us to the classical sense of ethos as “a habitual gathering place” (Holiday 389), with renewed questions about the ideological frameworks that underwrite the formation of political alliances. Specifically, feminist studies that examine the multiple layers of power operating in transnational movements for gender justice and local feminist responses to these movements call forth a relational ethos that is neither lodged in complicity (determinism) nor in the ideals of ethical purity (idealism). In focusing on women’s navigation of contesting material-discursive fields, recent transnational feminist studies of social movements summon postmodern notions of ethos as an “element of the discourse itself, not simply its origin” (Holiday 389). Transnational feminist analytics animate ethos as a struggle with norms, including the regulatory structures of liberal

internationalism and its moral paradigm of rescue and repudiation of “third world” women and children and construal of certain populations as objects of recognition onto whom rights must be conferred.

In *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*, Elora Halim Chowdhury skillfully charts the movement of narratives of multiple actors involved with local and transnational campaigns against acid violence and demonstrates how privilege is consolidated through multiple axes of power and unevenly distributed across these campaigns. I turn to *Transnationalism Reversed* because its methodological and ethical imprint can usefully inform our discussions about ethos in feminist rhetorical studies. In her analysis of Naripokkho (translated “For Women”), a women’s advocacy group founded in 1983 in Bangladesh, and the conceptual groundwork that the organization provided for the internationalization of campaigns against acid violence (namely, the construal of acid violence as a gendered human rights violation), Chowdhury brings a much needed rhetorical approach, primarily narrative interpretation, to the transnational study of feminist advocacy. She does not explicitly engage the concept of ethos, but her focus on survivor-activists’ struggles for justice, the strategic deployment of women’s narratives of violence in international politics and popular media, and the consequences of transnationalism to local women’s advocacy campaigns deepens our understanding of how globalization has reset the parameters of feminist praxis and ethical deliberation. I use the phrase “ethos righted” in my title as both a descriptor and an analytic to characterize the genealogy of modern notions of the “ethical self” in liberal humanism, a formulation of ethos that contrasts with the transnational feminist movement of rights arguments toward a more critical humanism. Three variations of feminist ethos emerge in *Transnationalism Reversed*: the ethos of the compassionate cosmopolitan whose privileged mobility enables recognition of the rights of the disempowered; the survivor of acid violence and activist, who must repeatedly assert her rights, lest they be denied; and the transnational feminist ethnographer, who strives to document these recognitions and denials while mindful of her inescapable influence on the representational process.

Transnational Rights Narratives and Visibilities

I had heard about barbaric acts of violence against women in the third world, but I had no idea that hundreds of young women in Bangladesh were being attacked with sulfuric acid simply because they dared to say

no to men. . . . I saw a portrait of one victim that was truly extraordinary. It showed a woman's head completely covered by a veil, except for one eye staring out. . . . The woman behind the veil was a 17-year-old named Bina and the more I learned about her, the more I realized that we had to tell this story through her eyes. . . . Ironically, Bina was one of the first acid survivors to take off her veil. Most of the victims are too ashamed to show their faces. . . . But Bina was different. . . . For the first time in Bangladesh, a girl burned by acid was demanding justice. (Connie Chung)

Television journalist Connie Chung's report "Faces of Hope," which aired on ABC's *20/20* on November 1, 1999, and is the focus of Chowdhury's media analysis, features the stories of two teenage acid-violence survivors—Bina Akhter and Jharna Akhter (no relation)—and their trip to the United States for medical treatment. Chung and her camera crew follow the girls from Bangladesh to the United States and introduce them to their host family in Cincinnati. Bina was fourteen years old when a gang broke into her home to abduct her older cousin, Makti. The men brought acid with them to use if they encountered resistance. During a struggle, Bina was severely burned. The attack had left her blind in her left eye (Chowdhury 93). Neither "Faces of Hope" nor *Transnationalism Reversed* offers details about the circumstances of Jharna's attack; readers of *Transnationalism Reversed* only access Jharna's story through Bina's recollections. (Given the common surname, I will refer to Bina Akhter as Bina from here on.)

In "Faces of Hope," Chung presents acid violence as a "little-known crime" and assumes that with greater international visibility the problem will diminish (ABC News 1999). Chung reports that she

had heard about barbaric acts of violence against women in the third world, but [she] had no idea that hundreds of young women in Bangladesh were being attacked with sulfuric acid simply because they dared to say no to men. (ABC News 1999)

Underlying Chung's compassionate cosmopolitan ethos as a reporter is an epistemology of saving third world women; a strategy of representing the suffering "other" that transnational feminists have long argued against. In response to Chung's newfound knowledge of the extent of the problem in Bangladesh, Chowdhury asks a key question: "Little known to whom?" (xviii). Chowdhury explains, "Acid violence was certainly not 'little known' in the context of Bangladesh" (xviii). Bangladeshi activists had documented hundreds

of cases of acid violence and played a key role in supporting victims and mobilizing medical, legal, state, and media professionals to intervene (xviii). In its absence of coverage of local activists, Chowdhury argues “Faces of Hope” “essentialize[d] rescuers and victims on either side of the North-South divide” (xix). The report made acid attacks against women and girls in Bangladesh intelligible to U.S. audiences through the highly gendered and racialized rescue narrative of liberal internationalism, wherein, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak legendarily put it in 1994, “white men . . . sav[e] brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern” 93). Ethical discussions based on essentialist identities and geographies are clear oversights of ethos as a mode of inquiry alert to contextual variables, contingencies, and particularities.

The close-up photograph of Bina’s scarred face that accompanies ABC’s *20/20* online report sets the parameters for the audience’s ethical engagement in terms of a visual rhetoric that attributes to spectators the privilege of incorporating the victimized foreign “other” as a subject within the liberal international imaginary, wherein human rights subjectivity is established on the basis of its violation. The unsettling photograph establishes the scene of rights recognition in dialectical (self-other) terms, while maintaining the fantasy of transnational intimacy for distant audiences. That international recognition of “third world” women’s human rights is founded on subjection partly explains the prominence of spectacular images of women’s scarred bodies in campaigns against acid violence. But the high profile acid-attack cases reported in US popular media are also driven by international development narratives that depict women of the global South not only as victims of gendered violence but as victims of cultures and political systems perceived as hindering their emancipation. Here international human rights meets its sister discourse—neoliberal development.

The rhetoric of recognition that underlies these discourses, as I discuss elsewhere (*Spectacular Rhetorics*), is one in which our “seeing” Bina’s scarred face becomes a mandatory element of her projected progress and promise of liberation. But, as Arabella Lyon persuasively argues in *Deliberative Acts: Democracy, Rhetoric, and Rights*, “Recognition, a self-willed engagement with another, is more than the condition of seeing and being seen” (49). Lyon usefully broadens “the concept of recognition from one of making people politically visible to one of enacting the human” (49). “Performative deliberation,” she argues, “would have us understand recognition as a matter of being and becoming rather than one of seeing and representing or witnessing” (49). To reorient the concept of recognition from the “*condition of possibility* (to

have rights)” to “its *actual performance* . . . (the right of engagement)” may unsettle human rights’ ocular epistemology, but this shift does not retire the rhetorical critic of the task of investigating the link between visibility and structures of subjection (49). Indeed, as “Faces of Hope” illustrates, the ethos of US internationalism is deeply entrenched in hierarchical scenes of recognition and the visual production of violated and righted subjects.

The cultural weight attributed to the face as a conveyer of meaning (Omizo) becomes evident in Chung’s emphasis on Bina’s removal of her veil. Unveiling is read as a highly charged act in the post 9/11 context, where images of unveiled “liberated” Afghan women circulated as justification for US military interventions in the region (some of these images were reportedly staged by Western journalists). “Faces of Hope” partakes in the Western Orientalist fantasy of imagining what is behind the veil as a project of reimagining Muslim women as subjects with rights and dignity. However, the Orientalist fantasy of seeing behind the veil is complicated in this instance because the face revealed is scarred by gendered violence. The photograph of Bina’s scarred face that accompanies the article serves as the “before” image (not the typical afterimage of Western liberation) and points toward the sought “after” image of the reconstructed and “liberated” face. The medical promise of liberation overwrites acid-violence survivors’ subversion of cultural norms and risk in public unveiling within the context of their own communities, where removing the veil works against the shame of disfigurement. Women’s advocacy groups, such as Naripokkho, encourage acid victims to show their faces in public and to partake in public forums to share their stories (Chowdhury, *Transnationalism* 36). Indeed, the “visibility of the survivors became a key strategy in the efforts to make public the anti-acid violence campaign” (35). In its stress on the afterimage, ABC’s 20/20 “Faces of Hope” deflects attention from acid survivors’ ethos as political agents engaged in the disruption of cultural norms and shaming tactics.

Sensational depictions of gendered violence prevail in international human rights campaigns and popular media. Amirita Basu rightly notes that the most visible and apparently successful transnational campaigns for women’s rights have been those that prioritize sexual victimization, especially when the focus is on “women from the south who experience genital mutilation, stoning, or public humiliation” (82). Predictably, Chung characterizes Bina as a victim of “barbaric acts of violence in the third world,” invoking the savage-victim-savior metaphor (Mutua). But in depicting Bina as an “extraordinary” survivor who demands justice, Chung extends the savage-victim-savior

trope. The victim turned survivor-activist narrative facilitates Bina's incorporation into the liberal international imaginary as a transformed (righted) subject. Metonymically, victims of acid violence are "righted" (redirected, remedied, rehabilitated) by the global North, who confer rights onto women of the global South and presumably place them on the correct path. Here the "liberal apparatus of the human rights identity machine" sets up dualistic oppositions that permit the narratability of only certain identities and social relations (Chowdhury, *Transnationalism* 141).

In *Trafficking Women's Human Rights*, Julietta Hua investigates the protocols that circumscribe legal personhood and liberal subjectivity and thus advances our understanding of the genealogy of the ethical self—ethos—as a righted subject. She asks: "What are the terms through which subjects can become legible as victims of trafficking? What do these terms tell us about the ways gender, sexuality, and race are working to help shape notions of national and global belonging" (xxi–xxii). Although "becoming legible is necessary to garnering aid like legal status, food, and shelter," as Hua rightly notes, and as we see in popular media depictions of acid-violence survivors, the normative frameworks of legibility often reiterate troubling configurations of the "third world." Within the context of international and domestic US trafficking legislation, women who are trafficked are (inadvertently) required to produce themselves as victims without agency in order for their experience to be categorized as a human rights violation. Hua therefore asks: "How useful is human rights as a site through which to address global gender violence, given the fact that human rights talk threatens to resurrect these colonial configurations of power?" (xxiii).

At various points in the history of human rights, certain groups have been cut off from the category of the "human," namely women, children, slaves, the "insane," and the disabled. One common response to the dialectical (self-other) philosophical framework of human rights law and its history of exclusion has been the call for a more inclusive history. Yet, as Hua remarks, countering the colonial hierarchies of human rights past and future is not simply a matter of the inclusion of heretofore excluded voices and perspectives. Hence transnational feminist scholars and activists consider the conditions of legibility that render certain populations visible and audible and others invisible and inaudible. In tackling these multifaceted conceptual issues, *Trafficking Women's Rights* reveals the limits of the commonplace liberal feminist paradigm of inclusion as a political solution to the problem of human trafficking. For Hua, and for transnational feminist

scholars more broadly, the challenge of difference for rights advocacy is not just one of “accurate representation” (Lyon 3) or inclusion, but about how difference shapes recognition—that is, as Lyon puts it, “the moment of the conferring of subjectivity and humanity” (2).

Transnationalism Reversed illustrates how women’s advocacy groups skillfully navigate the international moral economy of human rights and how individual acid-violence survivor-activists, such as Bina Akhter, unsettle moral dichotomies (victim/agent) as they take on shifting identities and positions in narrating their struggle for power within their multifaceted particularities. In contrast to the savage-victim-savior narrative told by elite popular media, Bina’s story, as conveyed to Chowdhury, is much more fragmented and contested. Bina discloses that while she was grateful for the generosity of her host family, for example, there were serious cultural and religious tensions in the home. The host family required Bina and Jharka—both are Bengali Muslims—to attend church and pressured them to convert to Christianity. Chowdhury also reveals Bina’s shifting relationship with and eventual estrangement from Naripokkho, the advocacy group for which she once played a leadership role. Chowdhury’s explication of contesting cultural and institutional expectations enables her to make visible Bina’s struggle for representation without reproducing the static spectacle of the suffering “other” (16). Through comparative ethnographic, oral history, and media analysis, Chowdhury elucidates how the internationalization of the campaign against acid violence confounded the rescue and rehabilitation narrative customary to global feminist and neoliberal development discourses and how Bina and other Naripokkho activists negotiated competing antiviolence discourses and agendas.

In contradistinction to the sisterhood-is-global model of community ethos, Bina’s ethos as survivor-activist and her shifting relationship to Naripokkho unsettle universalized notions of women’s experience and feminist resistance. Chowdhury puts it well, “the feminism of Bina and alternative ways she crafted her own narrative of victimization, empowerment, and choice could not be given voice within the larger script of global feminism” (*Transnationalism* 183). Bina first met Naripokkho activists at the burn unit in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. After attending an acid workshop organized by Naripokkho in 1997, Bina was named coordinator for the nationwide acid survivors’ network (85). Bina’s relationship to Naripokkho, however, changed after she left Bangladesh to obtain medical treatment in the United States, a trip made possible by Naripokkho, and US-based organization Healing the Children, UNICEF, Shriner’s Hospital in Cincinnati, and a host family.

Prior to coming to the United States, Bina played a prominent role in Naripokkho's acid campaign. But when she began to pursue options for staying in the United States, Naripokkho activists felt betrayed. If Bina were to stay in the United States beyond two years, she would defy the contractual understanding that she had with her sponsoring organizations and further compromise Naripokkho's legal case against the men who had attacked her. However, by the end of the two-year period, Bina's medical treatment was not yet complete. Moreover, Bina thought that she and her family were at risk in Bangladesh from her attacker and his associates (97). In 2000, she applied for political asylum in the United States (98). As Bina started the political asylum process and after Healing the Children relinquished sponsorship of both girls, she moved in with a Bangladeshi expatriate family in Cincinnati. Shriners' hospital continued to care for both Bina and Jharna. Two years later, Bina moved into her own apartment and began to tour the country to share her experiences. At a speech she delivered at Boston University's Take Back the Night rally in 2002, Bina again drew the attention of the international community. Chowdhury observes, "She had the ability to draw crowds, to stir emotions, and to question people about their own assumptions and beliefs" (100)—transnational feminist ethos extraordinaire.

Initially, Bina found herself the star of Naripokkho's acid campaign, but once she transgressed the conduct of a "good victim," she was blamed for the campaign's loss of local and international support (114). Bristi Chowdhury, who worked closely with Bina at Naripokkho, criticizes the organization's decision to place Bina in such a prominent role.

I believe it was a mistake to choose Bina as the Naripokkho intern. We should have groomed someone else. We knew from the onset that she was a star. But, she was also a child. We should have known better. (B. Chowdhury qtd. in Chowdhury *Transnationalism* 117)

In other words, Bina was shunned for acting "as the ungrateful and wayward child of the campaign: the very campaign that had brought her into the limelight" (118). The infantilization of Bina points to the class-based tensions within Naripokkho. Moreover, Bina's ethos and agency are tied to class-based expectations. While the middle-class women of the organization construe Bina as unprofessional, Bina's decision to stay in the United States is based partly on her desire for economic security.

During the course of her extended ethnographic study, Chowdhury learns that Naripokkho's organizational hierarchy was also driven by the dictates of

international funding agencies. Additionally, the more the campaign internationalized, the more tensions between “funders” and “recipients” and among individuals within the organization grew (*Transnationalism* 118). Naripokkho began to systematically campaign to bring public attention to the problem of acid attacks in the mid-1990s. As a result of its success in conceptualizing acid violence as a gendered human rights violation, the campaign attracted a diverse set of international actors, which by 2003 had set in motion the creation of the Acid Survivors Network in Bangladesh. The network eventually took over the service role of the campaign by assisting acid-violence survivors. In short, Chowdhury’s attention to the rise and fall of Naripokkho’s involvement in the international campaign against acid reveals the unintended and lesser-known consequences of transnational movements at the local level, a process that Elizabeth Friedman refers to as “transnationalism reversed,” from which the title of Chowdhury’s study is derived (109).

Chowdhury’s invocation of the concept “transnationalism reversed” points to her important complication of feminist critiques of neoliberalism that either construe development as a deterministic megadiscourse or uncritically espouse neoliberal development visions in women’s empowerment projects. Chowdhury suggests that the Acid Survivor’s Foundation (ASF) falls into the latter category in that it “strives to ‘empower’ individual survivors by channeling them into service activities without an attendant deeper focus on social transformation” (*Transnationalism* 57). Although Chowdhury acknowledges the important services that ASF provides, she points out that it is limited “by its structural location as a local NGO funded by international development organizations that subscribe to a mission that replicates a neo-colonial vision of women’s empowerment” (57). *Transnationalism Reversed* defines development as the practice of negotiating normative structures and expectations. Of course, Chowdhury also has a stake in these negotiations; her research depends on her access to development organizations. She does not explicitly engage questions of narrative distance or reliability; rather she foregrounds Bina’s self-narration as a mechanism through which readers might see its potential offering of “decolonizing” and “oppositional knowledges” (88). Yet Chowdhury is well aware that “experiences are mediated by active narrative construction[s]” (88), her study’s analytical frameworks among them. To point out that experiences are discursively mediated is far from a new revelation. *Transnationalism Reversed*, however, is distinct in the precision with which Chowdhury explicates the mediation of experience and the insights that her multisited narrative ethnography yields for understanding

the intricacies of acid violence and the survivor-activist ethos as a struggle for representation, subjectivity, and agency.

In a 2004 interview with Chowdhury in Boston, Bina recollected events that she thought were particularly important to document (88). Chowdhury frames Bina's willingness to retell her story as a strategy to reach out to Naripokkho activists from whom she had become estranged (89). Eight years after the attack, Bina narrates her experience.

I saw the men with a bucket and jar advancing towards Mutkti. I shook her awake. At that moment the contents of the jar splashed on my outstretched hands, and the bucket on my feet. I screamed. . . . Then, Dano poured the entire contents of the bucket on my face. I felt my ears burning and touched it. The skin was peeling off in to my hands, and the acid was dripping in to my mouth—I could taste it. It was like the room was alight with fire. I cannot describe, and you cannot imagine what it was like. I tried to grab the man, and in the struggle, Dano's mask fell off. . . . I think he also got burnt by the acid on my hands. At that point, he took out a pistol and aimed it at me. "If anyone tried to stop me, I will shoot you. Just look outside," he threatened. There were at least 10 more men outside the house in addition to the four inside the room. I let go of him. I thought, if I lived I would be able to get him later. But, if he shot me and I died, my family died, nobody would be able to do anything about the crime that had just taken place. (qtd. in Chowdhury 90)

Bina's ethos as narrator lies in her construal of herself as an agent, as a subject with rights who fought her attacker and made prudent decisions in the midst of the attack.

I let go of him. I thought, if I lived I would be able to get him later. But, if he shot me and I died, my family died, nobody would be able to do anything about the crime that had just taken place.

Bina's ethos is also located in the *act* of self-narration and in the *narratability* of her story. Bina's narrative is encumbered by the difficulty in describing her pain and suffering to another, but her narrative agency is not. She explicitly cordons off the listener from either knowing or identifying with her pain and suffering: "You cannot imagine what it was like," as if to say, "You are not me. I am I." Authorial distance is minimized, however, in her acquiescence to a community-based ethos of justice—crime and punishment—with which her audience presumably identifies. Bina's assertion of

difference within identification raises a larger question about what's at stake in upholding identification as a precondition for ethical deliberation. That Bina cordons off the listener from sharing her pain might also be read metaethically as procuring a collective response to human suffering directed at systemic solutions.

Linking ethos to method brings ethics to the foreground—a connection that is not new to feminist ethnographers, especially those working in the field of rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies (Royster and Kirsch), who call for increased self-reflexivity on location and power imbalances between researchers and their subjects. Chowdhury attends to similar concerns. But transnational feminists also point to the limits of self-reflexivity and its risks. In *Transnational Feminism in the United States*, Leela Fernandes observes that “self-reflexivity too often becomes reduced to static conceptions of social locations or unduly elaborate representations of the researcher/writer’s own self in relation to the subjects of study” (128). As an alternative to mechanistic acts of self-reflexivity, Fernandes turns to Donna Haraway’s notion of the “feminist writer as a ‘modest witness’ who observes, participates in, and shapes the world she writes about” (128). According to Haraway, “Critical reflexivity, or strong objectivity, does not dodge the world-making practices of forging knowledges with different chances of life and death built into them” (qtd. in Fernandes 129).

In the “Faces of the Hope” report, Chung’s ethos as a compassionate cosmopolitan emerges as a response to her construal of Bina as a victim turned humanitarian subject. In other words, Chung’s ethos emerges as a byproduct of the incorporation of Bina’s struggle into the normative structures of liberal-humanist internationalism. In contrast to Naripokkho’s construal of Bina as the ungrateful and disloyal global sister, Bina’s ethos as a survivor-activist within the context of Chowdhury’s study resides in her pragmatic response to and contextual negotiation of shifting material realities and personal desires. Indeed, Bina’s diverse encounters with development structures serve as a counterpoint to scholarly critiques of development as an all-encompassing megarhetoric. Bina’s ethos emerges as an analytic, as praxis, as she strategically negotiates social norms and institutional expectations. Finally, Chowdhury claims an ethos similar to that of the “modest witness” that Haraway describes. Chowdhury attempts to establish narrative reliability through reflexive commentary, yet she is also clearly invested in women’s struggle for justice and sees her research as a form of transnational feminist advocacy. In the next section, I expand on the concept of transnational feminist ethos

as a mode of inquiry committed to the formation of transnational publics primed for both ethical deliberation and political action.

Transnational Feminist Ethos

Just before we headed for Bangladesh, we learned that Bina was coming to America. An organization called Healing the Children had arranged for Shriners' Hospital in Cincinnati to donate surgery for two acid survivors. We timed our trip to arrive in Dhaka a few days before she flew to Cincinnati—and then we flew back with her to America. As we got on the plane to come to America, she was grinning ear-to-ear. She knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance—her only hope for a normal life. She would be treated by the best surgeons in America. Could they give her back what she had lost? (Connie Chung)

Chung's reflection on her "discovery" of the extent of the problem of acid violence in Bangladesh might seem a qualifying instance of an "ethical self." But Chung is not engaged in a critique of normative frameworks; rather Chung repeats the dominant rescue narrative in her description of normalcy as a gift bestowed by American medicine. There is a reflexive moment later in the report, however, which is triggered by one of the few plastic surgeons in Bangladesh. In response to Chung's enthusiasm for increased philanthropy to support the movement of burned victims from Bangladesh to Europe and America for medical treatment, the surgeon Dr. Samanta Lal Sen replies:

We cannot send all the girls to Spain, America, Australia or Italy. We must do the treatment here in Bangladesh. . . . And we have got the skill. If we get the facilities, we will be able to do this surgery here. We must stand on our own feet.

That Chung includes this "correction" in her report is perhaps an indication of critical reflexivity, a process that Royster and Kirsch argue can mitigate the risks of "overidentification and romanticization" (78). Yet "Faces of Hope" illustrates that practicing certain modes of inquiry will not guarantee the comprehensive mitigation of *what is not known*. Nancy Tuana argues, and I concur, "far from being a simple lack of knowledge that good science aims to banish, [ignorance] is better understood as a practice with supporting social causes as complex as those involved in knowledge practices" (195). Chung precisely does not question the supporting social causes that enable

“not-yet-knowing” (Holiday 403), nor does she interrogate the oppressive practices that work “through and [are] shadowed by ignorance” (Tuana 195).

To posit ethos in epistemological terms as a mode of inquiry is not to forestall ethical deliberation about “what is” and “what should be.” Transnational feminist methods are not limited to the analysis of representational practices but can involve direct action and collaboration between researchers and activists (i.e., Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, *Playing with Fire*). In *Transnationalism Reversed*, however, Chowdhury presents transnational feminist praxis largely in methodological terms. She engages the ethical in terms of the “politics of fieldwork” (Fernandes 127). She is explicit about the need for transnational feminist ethnographers to be accountable to the communities with which they are engaged. Chowdhury’s ethos as an ethnographer emerges as dynamic and relational. Chowdhury discloses her multifaceted relationship to Bina Akhter, for example, as well as how certain stakeholders capitalized on her long-term relationship to Bina to advance their own narratives. She explains,

I was at once an insider to Bina’s circle of friends from Bangladesh, and therefore a witness to the trajectory of her arrival in the United States, and at the same time an outsider to her newer circle of American patrons, to whom I was a “native informant” from which to seek affirmation for their progress narrative. (11)

In her attention to how she and her subjects navigate the “script[s] of global feminism and local contingencies” (17), Chowdhury illustrates how women activists and researchers together “shape the dynamic terrain of transnationalism” (4).

Like Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s award-winning study *Activist beyond Borders*, Chowdhury’s attention to the communication infrastructure of transnational advocacy unsettles commonplace assumptions about collective rhetorical action by explicating advocacy’s multidirectionality. Chowdhury elucidates the “paradoxical moments” that define transnational feminist praxis (14) and “contradictory consequence[s] of global women’s organizing efforts, whereby new kinds of hierarchies emerge” (176). The NGO boom in Bangladesh, for instance, has largely benefited middle-class women, because NGOs create jobs for development professionals (130); consequently, poor women are further marginalized (174). *Transnationalism Reversed* demonstrates how NGOs reproduce local power structures and how transnational nongovernmental advocacy groups’ reliance on donor-driven

mechanisms engenders codependent relations and competition among groups (142). In Bangladesh, these “contradictory consequences” are symptomatic of increasing socioeconomic disenfranchisement and part of a larger phenomenon known as the “silent revolution,” namely the disruption of existing social structures and male-dominated public spheres as more women become integrated into the economy and labor force (25).

Transnationalism Reversed illustrates the “unexpected even unlikely alliances and trajectories that transnational feminist projects may engender” (21) and the contradictory and shifting ways in which collaborations take shape, and, in this way, inadvertently responds to Royster and Kirsch’s call to “renegotiat[e] . . . the paradigms by which we account for rhetoric as a dynamic phenomenon” (132). Similarly, transnational feminist media scholars have argued for the potential of moments of “transnational incommensurability” as a “potent critical nexus” from which feminism may reconstitute itself (Imre, Marciniak, and O’Healy 386–7). These incommensurabilities push beyond the Hegelian (self-other) dialectic of recognition that haunts human rights politics and representations of gendered violence. *Transnationalism Reversed* teaches us that transnational feminist methods and practices “cannot be assumed a priori but [are] always contingent” and “shaped by . . . specific historical and institutional realities” (9). The same might be said about ethos as a mode of inquiry. It too is contingent. Chowdhury animates these contingencies in her resistance of “analytical closure” (10) and through her deliberate “multi-axial analysis of diverse women’s positionalities and realities” (178).

Transnational feminist perspectives challenge narrow configurations of ethos as an individual attribute (moral character) or audience-conferred recognition (credibility). Such attributes and recognitions certainly have an effect on diverse rhetorical situations, but the ethos of transnational feminist praxis and research, as *Transnationalism Reversed* illustrates, is not rooted in an individual’s moral development or in the promise of consensus. The ethos of transnational feminist methods, which includes recognition of the historical and cultural production of ethical principles, sets the stage for more informed ethical deliberations. Fernandes puts it well: “Ethical action is not a self-evident or innocent realm” (130). Instead of deference to individualist liberal notions of ethos as an acquisition or universalized model of community ethos (“global sisterhood”), transnational feminist analytics (relational, comparative, and historical) engender ethos, like rights, as a site of struggle.

Note

1. For an excellent overview of transnational feminist methods see Fernandes. Among the most prominent scholars working in the area of transnational feminist studies (including those who navigate intersections among postcolonial and transnational feminisms) are: Alexander; Alvarez; Basu; Chowdhury; Dutt; Grewal; Grewal and Kaplan; Hesford and Kozol; Hua; Keck and Sikkink; Marciniak, Imre, and O’Healey; Merry; Mohanty; Naples; Ong; Shohat; Spivak; Swarr and Nagar. Scholars in rhetorical studies engaged in transnational feminist projects include Dingo; Hesford; Lyon; Queen; Schell; Wingard; among others.

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