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**Feminist Cyberdialogics:  
speech-action and online community.**

**A case study.**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in Sociology**

**University of Warwick**

**Department of Sociology**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the contents of this thesis, which is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, are my own work. This material has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

During the course of this PhD project the following related presentations have been made or submitted for publication:

### **Presented Papers:**

'Authoritative "I" and "We" in an online feminist community' *Identities: Negotiations in Contemporary Space(s)*, An Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference, University of Warwick, December 2006

'Only words? Constituting feminist action online', *Communication Technologies of Empowerment*, ICS Postgraduate Conference, University of Leeds, May 2007

### **Papers submitted for publication:**

'Only Words? Constituting feminist action online', paper published in the conference proceedings of Technologies of Empowerment Conference 2007, University of Leeds. Online. Available at <http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~icsfsp/papers.htm>



## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores online sociability practices in a discussion website for feminist activists in Central and Eastern Europe. It examines the constitution of identity, community and social action focusing on interactive, generic, technological, and discursive context of online communication. The project draws its methods from action research framework and virtual ethnography, and investigates key themes of the thesis through designing an online discussion forum and participating in its collective discussions. Its analytical strategy is informed by socio-linguistic approaches which perceive language as relational, dialogic and encompassing action. Drawing on a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Bakhtin's philosophy of language, speech act theory, contemporary approaches to genre studies, feminist theory and *praxis* debates, cyberfeminism and actor network theory, I analyze identity, community, and feminist action as sites of social action shaped by interactive exchanges, generic forms of communication, technology, and feminist discourse. On the one hand, I interrogate how commonsense/popular feminism constructs online feminist action and agency, and on the other how the textual/discursive/virtual context of the Internet challenges and has the potential to shift the understanding of these terms. I argue that on the new terrain of the Internet, speech and action have been reconfigured and that the modernist understanding of embodied action and self-determined subjectivity that informs traditional action research as well as activist strategies has to shift. This thesis further argues that certain strands of radical feminism constitute a common rhetorical place through which the participants negotiate their identity, authority, the terms of membership and articulate action in an international and virtual speech community. It describes these 'common places' as idiomatic feminism and implies that they function as a meta-narrative/meta-political commonsense that crosses international borders. This thesis points toward the need to rethink questions of action and agency on the Internet and become more attuned to the rhetorical-material-discursive context of their production.

## ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention for Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CEE	Central Eastern Europe
CIS	Common Wealth of Independent States
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
EGG	Enlargement, Gender and Governance
ENAWA	European North American Women's Action
ICT	Information Communication Technology
G8 countries	Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
MP	Member of Parliament
MUD	Multi-User Dimension
NEWW	Network of East-West Women
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
NOW	National Organisation for Women
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
WITT	Women's Information Technology Transfer
WUNRN	The Women's UN Report Program and Network

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

28 February 2001

*I remember my first meeting with women activists in Kosovo. It was chaired by a male election officer who opened the meeting welcoming his female audience 'dear ladies'. He was immediately cut off by an Albanian woman's correction - 'We are not ladies, we are activists' - said in English and translated in Albanian, Serbian, and Turkish. Was it a cultural misunderstanding? Or was it male arrogance? Or simply the wrong choice of address? The 'dear ladies' could have gone unnoticed and even been welcomed in other settings, however, here it was a mismatch with the speech etiquette of a mostly feminist activist audience and came across as patronizing when uttered by a male officer. I understood a full meaning of this adverse reaction weeks later. It stood for activists not being heard and being fed up with the patronizing attitudes of the international community. It meant frustration that civil society representatives were not taken seriously. It was indicative of the growing dissatisfaction with the UN protectorate in Kosovo which frequently failed to facilitate inclusion, especially the inclusion of women.*

30 June 2003

*Another meeting... More than two years have passed since I began working in Kosovo. I had learnt that dialogue with local activists and politicians was crucial for my work. However, it seems that I got something 'wrong' this time. Now disappointed looks and complaints are directed at me because I am the only 'international' in the room. I had invited a group of women MPs to discuss a report on women in Kosovo and to get their feedback on the issues raised. This study, among other things, described rural Kosovo as 'patriarchal' and pointed*

*out worrying statistics which showed a significant difference in the ratio of male and female births in Prishtina's hospital, suggesting the possibility of sex-selective abortions. I expected a reaction but not such a hostile one. I heard in my headphones a verbal translation: 'they rejected the report'; 'there was no female foeticide in Kosovo'; 'they were not "savages" and Kosovo is not "patriarchal"'; 'the internationals concocted this statistics to get money from donor governments to fund their huge salaries'; 'they are going to complain to the SRSG<sup>1</sup>'; 'MPs are calling a press conference'...*

As with any doctoral thesis, my project has arisen out of a particular set of personal as well as academic motivations. I came to this project from the background of an activist and a gender advisor at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>2</sup>. My encounters with Kosovar activists, governmental and international officials cited in the meetings above are illustrative of a number of challenges that I address and revisit in this thesis.

As an activist and a gender professional I have always been concerned with questions of political action, social change, and efficiency. I observed that women's groups were not sufficiently heard in various national and international forums, and the question of how to make them heard on the issues of governance, economy, and social politics became central for my work in Kosovo. My decision to design a discussion website for research and activism could be seen as an extension of my ongoing interest in the facilitation of activists' voices and grass-root politics. In response to the issues of silencing and exclusion of women's groups

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<sup>1</sup> Special Representative of the Secretary General, a head of the UN Mission in Kosovo.

<sup>2</sup> The OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization with 56 participating States. I worked for the Department of Democratization in the OSCE's Mission in Kosovo from 2001-2003. Under the umbrella of the United Nations, the OSCE was responsible for institution building in post-conflict Kosovo.

from various forums, I created the Online Women's Forum as a platform for a dialogue on gender issues in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

As a Lithuanian, I have been interested in women's movements in CEE on professional as well as personal basis. My own struggle to discover and construct my feminist identity, along with my engagement in international women's rights advocacy, made me particularly aware of power dynamics in the East-West feminist dialogue. The encounters cited above with local women's groups and international officials indicate that dialogue in international contexts is complex and shaped through various competing geopolitical, grass-root, and institutional discourses. These experiences left me with a number of questions. What happens when local activists are given or take up authority to speak? What are the conditions of speech and hearing in international context? Who is 'insider' and who is 'outsider' in a feminist activist community and how are these terms negotiated? In the context of my work with women's groups in Kosovo, I very much thought about myself as an 'insider' because I was Eastern European; I was not 'Western'- a Western European or American. Furthermore, I felt united with local women's community in my feminist identity and joint efforts to lobby international organizations and governmental structures for the inclusion of women's concerns. However, the cited experience with MPs, where I was assigned the status of a rather distrustful 'outsider', indicates how bluntly and crudely these terms were established in certain contexts.

In this project I pursue my interest in transnational activism, the place of speech and action in feminist politics, and the complex terms of 'insider' and 'outsider' status, but now, in the new context of the Internet. As an activist, I set out to create online women's community in CEE; while, as a researcher, I was challenged to think how cyberspace transforms political

organising. The Internet is chiefly a medium of words, it allows us interact without our bodily presences; it is immediate and crosses geographical boundaries. These characteristics of the Internet promise new opportunities for international feminist politics as well as invite us to revisit a number of foundational terms such as collective identity, community, locality and social action. The Internet also raises new questions for researchers, indicating the need to rethink the traditional notions of researcher and participant, the concept of research community, and the politics of location, including the terms of 'insider' and 'outsider'. My simultaneous focus on 'doing' activism and researching it on the Internet opened for me a critical space from where to reconsider these vexed and contested questions.

This project is a cyberfeminist inquiry into questions of social action and agency on the Internet. It draws on an action research framework and virtual ethnography. The focal point of analysis is participant observation of the activities of an online community which I designed and hosted during the period of April-June, 2005. The project's analytical methods are discursive, focusing on repertoires of textual participation and performance. It draws together key perspectives from second and current wave feminist standpoint debates, emergent perspectives in cyberfeminism and socio-linguistic frameworks, in particular those of Bakhtin, contemporary approaches to the study of genre and speech act theory to consider terms and textures (generic, idiomatic and narrational) through which feminist identities and politics are internationalised through a virtual medium.

Having briefly addressed some of the personal motivations driving this project, the first section of this Introduction provides the context and rationale of my study. I then go on to

explain key themes relating to the contribution of the thesis and introduce the project and research questions. This introduction concludes by describing the structure of the thesis.

### **The context: Central Eastern Europe**

The global expansion of the Internet and participation on it has been of growing academic and activist interest in the contemporary social sciences. In Central Eastern Europe<sup>3</sup> the Internet is increasingly recognised as a powerful instrument for communication, economy, and politics (Mihalec and Sudar 2004; Simerska, Fialova and Alborough 2004). However, research on women's engagement with the Internet in CEE is scarce and usually does not go beyond an evaluation of the statistical distribution of access to and use of the Internet by gender.

Central Eastern Europe has both homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics. While CEE countries share a legacy of communism that shapes both gender relations and ICTs, they are also very diverse in terms of economic development, culture, life-style, standards of living, degree of political stability, and EU membership. Therefore, one has to be careful drawing generalisations about feminism as well as the Internet in this diverse region. However, the common trends, reported by UNDP, indicate the under-representation of women at all levels of ICT initiatives, their low involvement in developing online content, lack of information about the use of ICTs for gender equality activism, and the absence of the region from global and gendered ICT forums (Simerska, Fialova and Alborough 2004: 15).

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<sup>3</sup> There are various geographical and socio-political definitions as to what countries constitute Central Eastern Europe. In this thesis I use the term to refer to former communist countries in Europe, excluding the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Mihalec argues that silences about gender and technology in the CEE and CIS countries are connected to a geopolitical dichotomy of 'South/North' digital divide that establishes terms of the debate and donor politics worldwide (2004: 9). Although geographically this region can be referred to as the 'North', economically and socially it is not. CEE countries are frequently omitted from discussions of the North/South digital divide, including activist forums and research agendas, because 'it is not clear what and who is being discussed' (2004: 10). Moreover, there is very little evidence that feminist investigations of cyberspace include the CEE region in their analysis. Most of the few studies of women's engagement with the Internet in CEE are written by regional ICT activists. These studies report low women's engagement in online activism and a general lack of data on the Internet (Mihalec and Sudar 2004; Simerska, Fialova and Alborough 2004). Thus this thesis contributes to filling the gap in digital discourse and especially cyberfeminism by offering an investigation of women's activist community focused on Central and Eastern Europe.

Despite the infrastructural barriers, discursive exclusions, and a general lack of feminist engagement with regional politics, women in the region do create web pages and develop networks and mailing lists through the Internet. For instance, the Network of East-West Women<sup>4</sup> (NEWW) is one of the oldest and best known transnational women's networks. It aims to strengthen activism and women's NGOs in CEE and CIS countries by raising awareness of women's issues in the region and influencing political decisions that affect women. The NEWW updates its web-site regularly, publishes a monthly digital newsletter and has an active mailing list. However, what struck me, as an ordinary member of this network nearly four years ago, was the lack of interactivity and joint online discussion. I also observed

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<sup>4</sup> [www.neww.org](http://www.neww.org)



that other regional websites, such as Karat Coalition<sup>5</sup>, and European and North American Women's Action<sup>6</sup>, had low levels of interactivity and online forums. I needed more interactive environment to explore questions of authority, identity, and knowledge claims. Therefore, I decided to design my own research website for CEE women that aimed to go beyond the usual exchange of information about projects, conferences, and workshops and focus on discussions and joint online action. Since the conception of my project some of these regional websites have developed, while others have ceased their activities due to limited funding. Nonetheless, women's regional online activities in CEE are still strikingly scarce and under-researched.

Although feminist studies of cyberspace in CEE are barely existent, there is a growing field of literature on gender and feminism in CEE. This literature theorises gender, feminism, and women's movements in offline environments and explores them in the context of transformation from a socialist system to a democracy and market economy. The early gendered investigations of the post-communist transformation reported weak women's organizations and the 'absence' of a women's movement in the CEE region (Einhorn 1993). Recent analysis has changed focus from the presence or absence of a women's movement to analysing how ideological discourses produce and create political movements and collective identities according to dominant and resistant political and social currents (Duffy 2000; Watson 2000; Einhorn 2003). One of the growing strands of these literatures focuses on the transnational dynamic of East-West feminist dialogue. The dominance of Western feminism and a yearning for authentic Central Eastern European voices, actions and feminist analysis

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<sup>5</sup> [www.karat.org](http://www.karat.org)

<sup>6</sup> [www.enawa.org](http://www.enawa.org)

are at the centre of these debates. This raises the question of whether the Internet can shift the terms of East-West feminist dialogue and regional feminist politics?

### **The Internet: online activism and cyberfeminism**

Contemporary economic, cultural and political life is increasingly dependent on the Internet. The Internet's design and operation allows ever-growing numbers of people to be involved in new forms of online human interaction, such as virtual communities, the digital economy, online publishing, and various forms of political activism. Social movements have embraced the Internet with particular enthusiasm. Small and large groups of activists create public awareness websites that link to traditional political organisations, create online petitions, develop sites to support real life political protests, and share information about environmental issues. Activists not only incorporate the Internet in their traditional repertoire of political actions but also generate new modes of activism specific to a virtual context, such as creating online organisations, maintaining individual and group weblogs, creating spoof websites that make political points for the activist cause as well as engaging in 'hacktivism' (McCaughey and Ayers 2003).

Feminism has also gone online and embraced the new possibilities as well as problematics raised by the Internet. Cyberfeminism as theory and practice could be considered as the most significant feminist response to the woman-machine interface. Working with notions of hybridity and the mutual shaping of the technological and human, cyberfeminism aims to recontextualise feminism in new circumstances. It opens up the space for new imaginings about women's agency, subjectivity and politics. Haraway uses a metaphor of the cyborg to

mark the postmodernist and political play of agency as well as the lived reality of new technology: 'I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings' (2004a: 8). Plant implies through her emphasis on interconnections and intersections that woman's histories, cultures, technologies, and sexualities make them quintessential 'wired posthumans' (1997). However, some cyberfeminists are wary of such celebratory claims and argue that new technologies reproduce problematic issues within culture, including familiar power dynamics of sexism, racism and traditional gender identities<sup>7</sup>. Cyberfeminism cannot be defined as unified theory and practice; but its shared characteristic is a cyberfeminist mode of thinking that focuses on the connection between technology and the interpersonal and social relations that ICTs represent, gesturing towards the fusion of human and machine (Youngs 2007: 7-8). This project is based on the cyberfeminist mode of thinking; however, it also significantly draws on poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity and explores how interactivity of social exchanges, speech genres, rhetorical situations and historical feminism are involved in shaping online identities and communities.

A more recent development, feminist blogs<sup>8</sup>, has opened up a new debate about the rise of third wave feminism on the Internet. Feminist blogs as sites of self expression, sharing stories, as well as interaction and dialogue, are reminiscent of the early second wave feminism practice of consciousness-raising. According to Kennedy, these feminist presences online constitute a new and valuable site for virtual consciousness-raising, networking, and feminist

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<sup>7</sup> This more critical stance toward cyberspace is frequently deployed in recent cyberfeminist work (See Fernandez, Wilding and Wright 2002; Gillis 2004; Reiche and Kuni 2004).

<sup>8</sup> A recent estimate put the number of feminist blogs at 240 000 out of 4 million 'active' worldwide blogs but reported figures could be much higher (Cochrane 2006). The blog numbers are constantly growing, for instance Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com/about/>), a website which tracks blogs, reported the estimate of around 97.9 million blogs on 15 August 2007.

community building that contests considerable feminist-backlash, antifeminist sentiments and talk about feminism being dead (2007: 7). Although the Internet potentially enables anyone with Internet access to participate in these new forms of activism, it is evident that a feminist 'blogosphere' are still subject to the critique of being exclusive. It cannot be ignored that the G8 countries are home to just 15% of the world's population - but almost 50% of the world's total Internet users<sup>9</sup>. Some blogs try to redress the balance by highlighting global stories and reaching out to women from all over the world<sup>10</sup>. However, feminist bloggers as well as their critics are concerned about how blogging feeds into traditional grass-root activism and policy making. It seems that feminist blogs are useful tools in raising consciousness, building activist networks and providing alternatives to women's journals, but the question about the political effects of individual blogs is more difficult to answer, particularly, if we understand activism as embodied and deliberate activity that has to result in a policy change.

The Internet is immediate, interactive, trans-spatial, multilateral, drawing in many participants and connecting different groups. It allows disembodied interaction and the traversing of spatial and temporal boundaries. These characteristics raise a number of questions about how political organising works on the Internet. The issues of locality, temporality and embodiment in these spaces are reconfigured in different ways. For instance, most would agree that the traditional notion of activist identity incorporates a willingness to put your body on the line. In contrast, the Internet lacks embodiment and is based only on the activist's textual presence. How might we compare the textual acts of participation in an anti-war online forum with embodied anti-war demonstrations? Does participating in a feminist forum constitute a bid for activism?

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<sup>9</sup> Statistics cited from the World Summit on Information Society web page (<http://www.itu.int/wsis/tunis/newsroom/stats/>).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Carnival of Feminists (<http://feministcarnival.blogspot.com/>).

Does women's transnational networking impose a Western feminist agenda on local women's organizations or, in contrast, strengthen local voices and put into motion a 'place based' women's movement? Do these textual and symbolic strategies lead to individual or structural change? These questions challenge the traditional theoretical frameworks on social movements and feminist activism by raising questions about what social action and social agency are in the textually, discursively and technologically mediated environment of the Internet.

### **Rethinking feminist movements**

The Internet offers multiple opportunities for breaking silences around women's lived experiences through new collective networks as well as political, cultural and economic endeavours by individual women (Youngs 2007). It is especially significant for women in transcending the public-private divide, enabling new modes of feminist awareness raising and offering radical potential for transnational communication and activism (Harcourt 1999a; Kennedy 2007). However, the Internet also creates new problematics, including digital inequalities and power issues in transnational encounters; the significance of popular forms of feminist activism such as blogs and online discussions; and reconfiguration of terms of locality, community, and feminist agency on the Internet. This thesis aims to contribute to these points of contestation in a number of ways.

I noted earlier that gendered analyses of the Internet in Central Eastern European societies usually do not go beyond evaluation of the statistical distribution of internet users by gender. A few pieces of research have specifically addressed the mutual shaping of activism and the

Internet, but these were mainly conducted by nongovernmental and international organisations and took the format of needs assessment of women's groups. There is urgent need for an analysis of the mutual shaping of feminist activism and the Internet that goes beyond the computer as a support for social action and poses questions about the innovative effects of the intersection between the Internet and activism in CEE region. This thesis endeavours to include CEE women's activism in the 'broader picture' of the global discourse on women and the Internet, and in particular cyberfeminism.

Cyberfeminism has been criticized for failing to recognize differences between women (Fernandez and Wilding 2002). There is growing interest but little empirical investigation within cyberfeminist discourses of the crucially different cultural, ethnic, economic and political conditions under which women worldwide engage in online feminist politics. This research, building on a case study of the CEE online women's forum, also endeavours to address the gap in cyberfeminism, which has predominantly developed in the West. In particular, this project aims to contribute to the cyberfeminist debates on the question of 'feminism' in cyberfeminism, exploring how feminism gets articulated in online environment invoked as a 'CEE community'.

This project also contributes to the theorisation of feminist agency and social action on the Internet. Feminism has always been concerned with issues of location, the social and political positioning of the speaking subject. This thesis contributes to a rethinking about how these issues are reconfigured/recuperated in the new context of the Internet. It contributes to existing cyberfeminist investigations of online subjectivities (Fernandez, Wilding and Wright 2002;

Reiche and Kuni 2004) by highlighting the significance of the textual, interactive and dialogic context of the Internet communication.

The methodological contribution of this project is connected to a reconsideration of action research on the Internet. As I indicated earlier, I created my own activist-research website which aimed not only to generate data for research but also to contribute to women's activism in the CEE region. Whilst some online research has also focused on the creation and observation of online communities, this study is novel in its approach, in that its epistemological focus on feminist agency and action intersects with the methodological approach. The question of action arises at three levels in this project: forum discussions, where participants talk about feminist action; the forum as a site of activism; and, finally, as a site of research, where I act and reflect as a researcher. These multiple locations of action put me in a position to do a piece of reflexive research and open up debate about the meaning of 'action' on the Internet.

Overall, this thesis makes three major contributions: an empirical contribution to cyberfeminism and Central Eastern European Internet studies, a contribution to the theorisation of feminist agency and action on the Internet, and a methodological contribution in terms of the originality of the research design.

### **The project**

This thesis began as an attempt to 'fill in' the gap in knowledge about women's online sociability practices, including identity, community and online activism/feminism in Central

and Eastern Europe. Because of strikingly limited literature on the intersection of activism and the Internet in CEE, I sought to locate it within different research fields that dovetail with key themes and questions of this thesis. These contextual literatures include: cyberfeminism, approaches to online community studies, online activism and feminist epistemology/politics, including East-West feminist debates.

As my research progressed, the geographical CEE focus of my study was troubled by the fact that the majority of participants to the online forum I created were from other countries; and they partly renegotiated the forum as international space. That threw open questions about the locality and situatedness of speaking subjects, as well as one's authority to speak and be heard in a forum invoked as a 'CEE space'. It also raised questions about how ad-hoc online communities are achieved and sustained. The textual, discursive and interactive context of my research directed my attention to language related approaches to understand my online sociability practices. I found a Bakhtinian understanding of utterance and dialogism, approaches to genre, and speech act theory particularly useful in considering the coherence and dissonances of an online activist community.

Another theme that emerged in my field work was connected to my research methodology. I started this project with the assumption that the online forum constitutes an 'action' and is a site of activism, however there were moments in my research when my participants as well as I, myself, questioned whether the online discussions constituted 'action' as such, given that they lacked traditional forms of embodied performance, orientation to 'results' and direct links to grass-roots associations. This yearning for action, and our recurrent doubts in our own



activities, raised questions about the dichotomy of speech and action and what happens to the notion of action in an online community of words.

All of these emerging themes have been explored through analysis of my field notes and the participants' postings on the Online Women's Forum and they can be formulated into the following broad research questions:

- How do the participants construct their identities and claim authority and knowledge in the forum's discussions? What feminist identities are privileged in the online feminist forum invoked as a 'CEE space'?
- What conceptual tools allow us to identify and assess the question of 'coherence' and formation of community? Given that the Internet is chiefly a medium of speech, are notions of genre and speech act theory illuminating? Can we identify a speech genre in the Bakhtinian sense - as a set of idiomatic practices and 'rules' through which a speech community is articulated?
- How is feminist 'action' constituted on the Internet? What does it mean to act and enable change in the textual/discursive/virtual environment of the Internet?
- How can we assess the reciprocal effects of feminism and the Internet? What is transformed and/or recuperated in a virtual feminist space?

In responding to these questions, this thesis employs inter-disciplinary approach. The project draws on a long tradition of interdisciplinarity in academic feminism, which generates its own methodologies and analytical frameworks at the intersection of different disciplines. Focusing on the questions of social agency and action, it draws upon a variety of theoretical frameworks

including feminism, cyberfeminism, actor network theory, cyberculture and Internet research, a Bakhtinian approach to language, speech act theory, and genre theory.

## **Chapter outline**

Chapter 2 is a literature review chapter that sets out the key points of four debates relevant to this thesis. First, cyberfeminism as a site of theoretical contestation about the encounters and epistemic character of feminism and cyber-technology; second, the question of communities and the character and politics of online participation; third, the theme of activism and shifts in understandings of social movements in the wake of Internet; and fourth, feminist epistemology/politics and East-West debates. Throughout consideration of these themes, I engage with them in terms of their significance to my thesis, noting omissions and highlighting the areas where this project aims to make a contribution. The chapter argues for the need to reconsider and reassess questions of identity, community, activism and feminist politics in the light of new forms of sociability on the Internet. It also suggests a confluence between cyberculture studies and feminist theory, including the research on women in CEE, to understand the constitution of feminist agency and action in the CEE online community.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological aspects of the project. I provide a critical description of my online action inquiry, locating it within debates on action research, virtual ethnography and online participant observation. I also discuss the main methodological themes and dilemmas arising and outline the analytical concepts deployed in my data analysis. The chapter picks up the theme of the need for rethinking of the traditional concepts of identity, community, and social action from Chapter 2 and reflects on the question of what happens to

action research when it is conducted online. Exploring three inter-related epistemological-methodological issues; what counts as 'action' and progressive agency, standpoint issues, and community, I argue that the modernist understanding of action research in online environments has to shift. Finally, the chapter sets out key concepts of utterance, genre and speech acts through which to consider the coherence and dissonance of online activist communities and concludes by suggesting that action and speech on the Internet cannot be easily disentangled.

The next four chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7) have an analytical focus, where I turn to the analysis of 'primary' data from my empirical inquiry into the questions of social agency and action on the Internet. Chapter 4 sets out a number of foundational concepts (genre, dialogism, paratext, Butler's concept of performativity, feminist mode of address, and footing) as they are articulated in my primary research field and on which I build the overarching arguments of the thesis. The chapter makes a set of claims concerning the interrelationship of these key concepts in the framing of the website as a feminist cyberdialogic field. It empirically focuses on the mode of address/summons articulated in the structure of the website. The chapter explores how I established a web-space through two commonsense rule-governed speech etiquettes: those that constitute feminist speech communities - specifically those inflected towards activist and academic communalities/identities - and those that constitute internet speech communities. Then it turns to the analysis of my participants' engagement with and response to the established structure of the forum. The chapter finishes by considering the wider contextual and cultural factors that might be salient for participants' engagement in the forum.

Chapter 5 considers how the issues of identity and authoritative claiming are negotiated in a feminist cyberdialogic field. It explores these questions by empirically focusing on the repertoires of authoritative 'I' claiming, and how 'I' acquires the meaning of 'We'; together with how the 'We' as a feminist communality is dialogically constituted through conversations among participants, including myself. The chapter defines the analytical categories of 'standing', 'authority' and 'repertoire' and deploys these to investigate micro-issues of identity work. Then it moves to consider the repertoires of 'I' and 'We' exploring their grounding in experiential/standpoint feminist traditions, and interactivity. The chapter also investigates the role of generic tools such as feminist autobiographical practices, electronic message, and dialogue/conversation in the constitution of feminist 'I' and 'We'. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the participants negotiated their identity, standing and claimed knowledge within the range of possibilities supported by the community, which represented commonsense/idiomatic feminist values and norms grounded in versions of experiential/'radical' feminism.

Chapter 6, drawing on a Bakhtinian notion of speech genre, aims to build a picture of feminism as a speech community. It pursues arguments concerning key generic aspects of feminism through the close examination of the postings on women and war. The chapter begins by considering the terms of sisterhood and patriarchy and suggests their idiomatic status in feminist discourse. It then turns to the analysis of the postings and considers how the feminist analytic repertoires interact with a human rights discourse and bid for a feminist speech community. The chapter suggests that the emergent speech etiquette is grounded in the repertoires of 'radical' feminism and human rights, and constitutes a feminist moral community which is premised on particular understandings of violence and victimhood and

demands orientation to ‘justice’ and necessary ‘action’. It closes with the discussion of the ethical consequences of the deployment of victimisation narratives for the represented.

Chapter 7 extends the questions of authoritative claiming and feminism speech genre into one ongoing point of tension running across the discussion threads of the Online Women’s Forum: the place of speech and action in the articulation of feminist politics, community, and identity. This chapter is organised into two parts. The first explores the speech-action tension in feminist debates, including pornography, pointing out the relevance of these debates to my project in their understanding of speech as not radically different from action. The second part focuses on empirical analysis of the material and explores the constitution of feminist action in the forum. I suggest that the emerging definition of ‘action’ dovetails with ‘internetness’, and also idiomatic feminism and intersubjective recognition through conversation. Then I turn to the discursive analysis of the participant’s yearning for action, arguing that there is a masculinised mode in thinking about what counts as action. I conclude the chapter by considering whether cyberspace can yield material results for feminist activists/activism.

The concluding chapter draws together the central arguments of the thesis and explores their implications for the field of action research and cyberfeminism, offering directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: CYBERCULTURES, FEMINISM AND EAST-WEST DIALOGUE**

### **Introduction**

This literature review is organised in two parts; the first explores and critically evaluates debates on online identities, virtual communities and cyberactivism, while the second deals with questions of feminism drawing on feminist epistemology and feminist debates in Central and Eastern Europe. I have a number of reasons for my choice of focus. First, there is a strikingly limited literature on women's online activism in Central and Eastern Europe (Simerska, Fialova and Alborough 2004). Thus in order to situate my research questions I had to draw on collateral sets of literatures that engage with questions of feminist agency and social action in online and offline environments and apply them to the arena of my interest. Second, as we shall see, feminist standpoint debates prominently featured in the forum's discussions, therefore, an examination of epistemology debates and setting out of their key concepts are useful for my further analysis of the articulations of feminisms in the forum.

The first section begins by locating my thesis within cyberculture studies, focusing on cyberfeminist investigations of women's engagement with the Internet and questions of identity and politics. I then turn to the 'virtual community' studies and literatures that argue that not all forms of online sociability could be described as 'virtual communities' recognisable by nature and degree of membership (Erickson 1997). Drawing on these claims I suggest that a genre/speech community approach could be more suitable to analyse online exchanges such as in the Online Women's Forum. This section also explores key literatures on cyberactivism, proposing that the Internet has not only changed substantially what counts as

activism, collective identity, and political action but also has challenged the traditional theoretical frameworks of social agency and political action. Could the Internet as a global platform for communication also shift the terms of debates in feminist theory and practice?

The second section critically evaluates feminist epistemology, focusing on feminist standpoint and postmodernist/poststructuralist debates, arguing for the need to reassess these feminist projects in the light of new forms of sociability on the Internet. Finally, I turn to the literature on gender research in Central Eastern Europe, focusing on the main tensions in transnational debates between Eastern and Western feminists. With regard to the latter, Muharska's (2006) analysis of East-West dialogue provides a compelling account of Eastern feminists' identity formation through exclusion from and silencing within dominant Western feminist discourse, as well as their local societies.

The chapter thus suggests a confluence between cyberculture studies and feminist theory, including the research on women in CEE to understand the constitution of feminist agency and action in online environments.

### **Cyberculture: new sociabilities**

The emergence of the Internet as a new communication medium has been associated with a rise of new patterns of social interaction such as cyber identities, virtual communities, and online social movements (Turkle 1996; Rheingold 2000[1993]; Castells 2001). These new forms of sociability raise contested and pervasive questions in cyberculture studies. The debates here range from the postmodernist condition of fractured, plural and decentred

subjectivities to the alternative identities, networks and movements which challenge traditional power hierarchies and offer the prospects of empowerment for previously marginalized social groups (Haraway 1991; Plant 1997; Youngs 1999).

In this new techno-reality identities and subjectivities have no fixity and are perceived as fluid, transgressive and a matter of choice and freedom. The early studies of online subjectivities and role playing in chat rooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dimension) reported exciting liberatory activities of gender swapping and reconstructed identities (Turkle 1996). Although role playing provides new ways of thinking about human identity in an Internet Age, recent studies of online communication report that online selves are very much connected with our real selves (Baym 1998). For example, Castells in his analysis of the Internet argues that role playing, chat rooms, news groups and multi-purpose conferencing were meaningful for early Internet users but that their importance dwindled with the spread of the Internet (2001). According to the author, 'social interaction on the Internet does not seem to have a direct effect on the patterning of every day life, generally speaking, except for adding online interaction to existing social relationships' (2001: 119). My thesis argues quite opposite that online interaction not only changes thinking about feminism but also significantly transforms the practice of feminist activism.

A critical and oppositional approach to cyberspace, virtual subjectivities, and activism has been developed to great effect within the cyberfeminist perspective and agenda. In the following section I will explore in more detail cyberfeminist debates on cyborg identities, their political potentials and limitations.



### *Cyberfeminism: approaches to identity and politics*

Identified within the context of post-feminist debates cyberfeminism could be understood as a constellation of postmodern and poststructuralist epistemologies that seek to rethink feminist voices of the 1980s and 1990s, present situational ethics and go beyond established notions of gendered identity and subjectivity (Kennedy 2000: 283). Within this strand of feminism, concepts of identity and subjectivity are perceived across complex cultural, social, molecular and technological webs. Technology, according to Kennedy, is fundamental to cyberfeminist epistemologies, which raises essential concerns about women in technology, women's connection to machine, 'her cyborg ontologies' (2000: 284).

Cyberfeminist engagement with ICTs, reproductive technologies, as well as science and technology more broadly provides the basis to the 'cyberfeminist mode' of thinking which recognises 'the new intimacy between machines and interpersonal and social processes that ICTs and their expansion in daily life represent' (Youngs 2007: 3). What is significant here is that this new mode of thinking claims a fusion of machine and human processes. The recognition of hybridity, interdependence, blurring of boundaries and oppositions constitutes a significant shift in feminism both philosophically and practically. Youngs argues that cyberfeminism remains concerned with established feminist questions of freedom and oppression, liberation and equality, imagining, creativity and community building, but it addresses these in the context of women's relations to technology (2007).

Fernandez and Wilding in *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (2002) suggest that the question of feminism in cyberfeminism is highly vexed and contested. According to them, as an 'heir to both postfeminism and poststructuralism, cyberfeminism has neither welcomed a

definition nor a clear political positioning within feminism' (2002: 18). According to Fernandez and Wilding, some cyberfeminist projects tend to prioritise a rhetoric of critical engagement with art, culture, theory, politics and communication on the terrain of the Internet and technology, rather than feminism (2002: 18). They do that for tactical reasons to attract more women who do not identify themselves with feminism. A tension between feminism and cyberfeminism without specified politics emerges in virtually every discussion of cyberfeminism, indicating a clear necessity to negotiate between tactics of engagement and devising radical political strategies to challenge patriarchal structures (2002: 19).

Cyberfeminists almost unilaterally agree that cyberspace can make feminism more accessible to new audiences of women (Harcourt 1999a; Fernandez and Wilding 2002; Youngs 2007) but strategies to do this are still to be invented and tested. It seems that the identification of 'a woman' is no longer effective as a connecting link in the context of the bewildering variety of feminisms which have fragmented the women's movement, and thus new strategies for political action have to be found. My project aims to contribute to the exploration of these tensions in cyberfeminism by investigating the articulation of feminisms and considering how the strategies of action and speech are constituted in a transnational technologically mediated context of the Online Women's Forum.

A distinction can be made between two overlapping waves of cyberfemism. An initial wave, celebrating the innate affinities between women and machines and their subversive potentials, was strongly forced by Haraway (1991) and Plant (1997) and subsequently inspired a number of cyberfeminist interventions and projects. The second, more critical orientation of cyberfeminism, critiqued the apolitical stance of these theorists and advocated an embodied

and politically engaged cyberfeminism. Here I am going to consider these debates, focusing on the tension between the early liberational accounts of women and technology and the arguments of critical cyberfeminists who call for material/practical analysis of women's engagement with technology.

Cyberfeminism was initiated by Donna Haraway and inspired a number of feminists to explore the complex relationship between gender and technology. Haraway in her essay 'A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s' is optimistic and even utopian about the potential of the machine/human combination, the cyborg (2004a). The cyborg figure here questions the Enlightenment epistemologies that foreground binary thinking and definitions of 'organism' and 'machine'. She sees the cyborg as a symptom for the new conditions within a technological world, as well as an 'ironic political myth' for female emancipation and a world without gender (2004a: 8-9). Her text is 'an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries' incorporated by the cyborg (2004a: 8). This emphasis on generating pleasure from diffusion of boundaries between human and machine makes cyberfeminism different from other feminisms where technology was perceived as instruments for women's liberation, separated from the body. In cyberfeminism the technological body is both the medium and pleasure of liberation, and not the technological tool itself.

Sadie Plant in her book *Zeros and Ones* goes even further, implying that cyborg identities are women's identities (1997). She argues through an emphasis on interconnections and intersections that woman's histories, cultures, technologies, and sexualities make them quintessential 'wired posthumans'. Beginning with Ada Lovelace and her experience with

Charles Babbage's 'difference engine'<sup>11</sup>, she states that women are unsung heroines of the digital revolution. This debate exemplifies the tensions within cyberfeminism, which aims to rethink the pairing of women with nature; but while critiquing old stereotypes it risks creating a new kind of essentialism, that is an essentialism that posits women as 'naturally' akin to multitasking, fluidity and networks. For example, Nina Wakeford in her study of women's networking and Grrrls group online criticises Plant's argument of women as veiled presences, mediators and interface and calls for more radical reconfiguration of the relationship between women and machine (2000). She suggests that women's web presences provide a way for constructing oppositional identities such as geekgirl<sup>12</sup> and other feminist websites which display the active integration of women in computing culture as well as building electronic social networks (2000: 357).

Gillis in her article 'Neither Cyborg Nor Goddess: The (Im) Possibilities of Cyberfeminism' argues that dissent from the two models - the post-gendered cyborg and the cybergoddess<sup>13</sup> - has not been readily forthcoming because Haraway and Plant validated any and all activity by women online (2004: 188). According to the author, 'This is Internet as metaphor, not a materialist examination of the Internet (2004: 188). Gillis acknowledges that these metaphors generated some fruitful debates about the gendered nature of information technology but admonishes us that an authentication of 'all' women-centred online activity places cyberfeminism outside history and politics.

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<sup>11</sup> The difference engine is frequently considered as the first prototype of a modern computer.

<sup>12</sup> [www.geekgirl.com.au/geekgirl](http://www.geekgirl.com.au/geekgirl)

<sup>13</sup> The metaphors of 'post-gendered cyborg' and 'cybergoddess' stand here for the two sets of ideas about women's relation to technology developed by Haraway and Plant, as summarised in the previous discussion.

Other feminists, wary of liberatory claims for the Internet, argue that new technologies reproduce problematic issues within culture, including familiar power dynamics of sexism, racism and traditional gender identities (Braidotti and Lykke 1996; Nakamura 2000). For Fernandez and Wilding, 'New media exist within a social framework that is already established in its practices and embedded in economic, political and cultural environments which are still deeply sexist and racist' (2002: 24). A number of cyberfeminist writers express ambivalence about the powerful myths of the Internet as a space free from identity, class and cultural hierarchies. Internet studies report that, along with tales of women's empowerment and success on the Internet, there are accounts of inequality of access and use, as well as documented online sexism and harassment (Herring 2002). Many observers and participants suspect that cyberculture simply duplicates the social and gendered hierarchies of material culture.

These internal contestations are embedded in cyberfeminism, which cannot be described as a focused and unified theoretical or political position but is comprised of tactical dialogues, competing theories, debates, and practices. If the Internet offers an opportunity for transparency and dialogue, the conditions for this transparency and dialogue should be the primary concern in research on women and technology (Gillis 2004: 191). It seems that critically oriented cyberfeminists seek to retain some features of material feminism and progressive agency. This is evidenced particularly in the critical assessment of poststructuralist and postmodernist epistemologies that shape early cyberfeminist accounts as lacking social and political engagement. I suggest that the tension between the apolitical, mainly theoretical cyberfeminism and the yearning for material analysis and embodied action of critical cyberfeminists could be partly understood as an articulation of the tensions between theory

and *praxis* embedded in feminism. I will consider this question in more detail in Chapter 7, where I discuss how the theory/action binary played out in the *praxis* debates of the 1980s and 1990s as well as in the Online Women's Forum.

This thesis engages with these contested cyberfeminist questions of subjectivity and politics in a number of ways. First it draws on the 'cyberfeminist mode of thinking', that is, a recognition of a fusion between technological and human. Second, although it explores the idea of the Internet as a site of new identities, dialogue, and social action, it aims to critically investigate the situational, material, discursive and technological conditions under which these new forms of sociability take place. The thesis also engages with the question of 'feminism' in cyberfeminism by empirically focusing on how feminism is articulated in the case study of online community in Central and Eastern Europe.

### *Approaches to the study of virtual community*

The study of virtual community certainly overlaps with themes and concerns raised in cyberfeminism, however, because of their distinct foci they also could be distinguished as interlinked but separate fields of inquiry of online sociabilities. An early wave of virtual community studies began to appear in the early 1990s, heralding the rise of communities of shared interest rather than geographical proximity. The concept of 'virtual community' was first articulated by Rheingold (2000[1993]) and has become increasingly popular in Internet research. According to Rheingold, 'Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (2000: xx).

This definition of virtual community has also been criticised. Fernback argues for a more critical application of the term 'community' to various forms of online communication (1999). According to her, the analysis of online community is shaped by popular as well as intellectual imagination of what the 'community' means. Thus, various approaches to community as place (Tioness), as symbolic (Cohen) and as virtual (Anderson) can be traced in online community studies (1999: 206-212). Although virtual community might share some characteristics of the various community ideals that marked this area of studies, Costigan argues that some issues in virtual community are inherently unique to them:

The medium has changed and so has the community. The medium has such an effect on the community as to define it. Community relations formed on-line allow an access and intimacy not transferred to other situations. On-line messages can be sent at any time and to anyone and can be responded to when time is available. This level of access does not transfer to face-to-face situations where different social, personal, and community rules exist.

(1999: xxii)

So what is suggested here is that the asynchronous mode of computer mediated communication is not time-sensitive. If one believes that the community exists as long as people are 'reading and participating with and through these messages', then the community may emerge and disappear as people discover the messages (1999: xxii). Indeed, online communities are usually characterised as fluid, processual, and as communities of meaning rather than place or structures.

Another criticism of virtual community studies is related to the overextension of the term to all virtual gatherings and philosophical scepticism that 'virtual community' can exist at all given the fluid membership, reduced social accountability, and lack of shared geographical space that characterise most groups online. Erickson (1997) argues that not all online communication could be described using the term 'virtual communities'. He suggests that a genre approach could be more suitable to analyse online exchanges as it 'shifts the focus from issues such as the nature and degree of relationship among "community members", to the purpose of the communication, its regularities of form and substance, and the institutional, social, and technological forces which underlie those regularities' (1997: 1). Here the traditional notion of the community with its association of close ties goes into the background and the primary emphasis is on the mechanisms which support communication.

My research is premised on the assumption that recurrent forms of communication practices can meaningfully be characterized as genres. This perspective in online communication studies was pioneered by Yates and Orlikowski (1992) in their analysis of organizational uses of email. Their work draws on traditional models of genre from rhetoric, a perspective where genre refers to typical rhetorical actions that appear in a community in response to recurring situations (Miller 1994a). At its core, genre analysis could be understood as classification of 'typified acts of communication' based on their form and substance. Similarly, Swales (1990) characterizes a genre as 'a class of communicative events' having 'a shared set of communicative purposes' and similar structures, stylistic features, content and intended audiences.



In these socio-linguistic approaches to communication the notions of genre and community are intertwined. Cherny in *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World* (1999) examined the discourse of social MUD as a speech community. According to the author, the routines, conventional vocabulary, and abbreviations, syntactic and semantic phenomena, and special turn-taking and repair strategies distinguish the MUD community's register. Cherny argues that one's ability to participate adequately in the community could be understood as one's ability to participate in social and communicative interactions by adapting what one says to the expectations of the addressee according to genre repertoire or a set of communicative practices in a specific community (1999: 15).

A genre approach was recently deployed to analyse new forms of online interactions such as weblogs (Miller and Shepherd 2004; Herring *et al.* 2005). The characteristics that make blogs a genre include common structural features such as dated entries displayed in reverse chronological sequence and sidebars containing links and calendars (Herring *et al.* 2005), a culturally recognized name, and the common purpose of sharing content with others through the Web. Generic analysis approaches weblogs as new rhetorical opportunities, made possible by technology, where

a set of cultural patterns, rhetorical conventions available in antecedent genres, and the history of the subject have combined to produce a recurrent rhetorical motive that has found a conventional mode of expression. Bloggers acknowledge that motive in each other and continue enacting it for themselves. The blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self.

(Miller and Shepherd 2004)

Discussing the content, formal features, and purpose of blogging, Miller and Shepherd suggest that blogs have 'multiple ancestors' in reality TV, memoirs, filtering and directory services of the Internet, clipping services and edited anthologies, political journalism, and diaries/personal journals. Drawing on the conceptual insight proposed by Miller herself (1994b), that genre could be understood as social action, the authors suggest that blogging is a social action of self cultivation and identity construction, which emerged as a response to a recurrent and widely shared cultural need for identity in contemporary societies. They also argue that the blogging genre could be understood as a counter postmodernist reaction to fluid subjectivity, and that bloggers tend to invest in unitary and reflexive modes of self presentation (2004).

For the purpose of this thesis it is significant to note that socio-cultural and linguistic approaches consider online communities as sites of social action constituted through words. The community here is understood as social activity evoked and constituted through mutual objects of attention, common goals of interaction, and a shared repertoire of routines, words, genres, and concepts. In fact, writing/speaking is not just a cognitive act but a social activity which cannot be considered without taking other participants of interaction into account (Miller 1994a, b).

There are just a few studies which deploy genre approach to analyze feminist online communities. Herring's analysis of gendered language in two academic lists (1996) raises some important insights about the generic features of women's communication online. In her study she identified a 'list effect' in academic discussion lists, whereby participants on female-majority lists tend to employ female stylistic features such as inclusiveness, support, acknowledgment whereas participants on male-majority lists tend to employ male stylistic

features such as opposition and assertiveness, in both cases regardless of the gender of the contributor. Other studies on the intersection of feminism and cyberspace contest these results. For instance, Fredrick (1999) has chosen for her study two feminist news groups asserting the belief that if a newsgroup claims to be feminist, it is more likely to create an inclusive ethos. However, her research results reiterated the criticism of computer mediated discourse and feminism as inherently democratic by showing that 'feminist newsgroups do not necessarily create an inclusive *ethos*' (1999: 196).

By approaching the analysis of online community from a genre perspective, my project aims to contribute to this contested discussion on the intersections of the Internet genres and feminism. However, unlike the previous analysis of emerging electronic genres, I examine this intersection of cyberspace and feminism paying particular attention to the pre-existent feminist speech community and its feminist subjects, and propose that feminist politics/epistemology themselves are also usefully understood as a convergence (and dispersal) of genres. It has to be noted that the decision to use genre approach in my case study is pragmatic since it is contestable whether the Online Women's Forum could be understood as a 'virtual community' constituted in terms of 'degree of membership' or 'sufficient human feeling'.

### *Cyberactivism and women on the Net*

The debate about online forms of activism has been developed following the line of Castells' argument that globalisation and contemporary capitalism are enacted and made by the new information and communication technologies (2000: 367). Here the relation between social movements and ICTs is considered in terms of two parallel struggles: over democratisation of the Internet and over the current restructuring of economic and social conditions fuelled by the

new technologies (Escobar 1999: 32). Contemporary researchers and activists of social movements agree that new information and communication technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for actors and identities, and production of cyber cultures that resist, transform or present alternatives to the dominant virtual and real worlds. For example, Castells argues that the Internet provides the material support for contemporary social movements to engage in the production of a new society, and in this process the Internet itself is transformed from an organisational business tool to a lever of social transformation (2001:143).

Resnick (1998: 55) distinguishes between three aspects of Internet politics: 'politics within the Net, politics which impacts the Net, and, political uses of the Net'. Regarding the political uses of the Internet, an emerging wave of literature has been devoted to the understanding of oppositional online politics, as well as global and local activism which is mediated online (Harcourt 1999a; McCaughey and Ayers 2003).

Defining online activism and evaluating its effects is as difficult as making sense of activism before the Internet (McCaughey and Ayers 2003: 14). Activism can take many forms - including direct action, such as rallies, street marches, strikes or boycotts, or less embodied and virtual activities which do not literally require you to put your body on the line, such as writing letters and petitions to newspapers or politicians, political campaigning, organising various self-help, cultural and educational groups, publishing activist newspapers, etc. Activists through their intentional actions seek to bring about social and political change.

Vegh (2003: 71) defines online activism as 'a politically motivated movement relying on the Internet'. He suggests that activists now take advantage of technologies and techniques offered

by the Internet to achieve their traditional goals; and that their strategies are either Internet-enhanced or Internet-based (2003: 71). According to the direction of the initiative – whether one sends out information or receives it, calls for action or is called upon, initiates action or reacts to it - Vegh places cyber tactics into three categories: awareness/advocacy; organisation/mobilisation; and action/reaction (2003: 72).

This typology of online activism is based on the assumption that activism is comprised of proactive actions to achieve certain goals or reactive actions against controls and the authorities imposing them. What is notable about this classification is that as well as indicating the direction of action, various activities placed within these categories, for instance, organising the transport in the category organisation/ mobilisation or defacing a website in the action/reaction category, transmit a greater sense of ‘focus’, ‘action’, and ‘visible results’ than others, for example, the distribution of information in the category of awareness raising/advocacy. According to this classification the CEE Online Women’s Forum could comfortably ‘sit’ within the category of awareness raising: the participants published and accessed information on topics of Women and War, Women’s Participation, Networking, etc. Despite the fact that information distribution networks are very important for activism, within a traditional notion of activist tactics they are perceived as preparatory stages of action, where these support networks are later called upon for mobilisation, organisation, and subsequent political action (Vegh 2003: 72-73).

Online activism not only provides an alternative mode of political action, but also raises questions about the applicability of traditional theoretical frameworks of social movements to the new environment of social action. For instance, Ayers’ findings (2003: 145-164) revolving

around concepts of collective identity, suggests that in her case study the NOW village, an online feminist organisation, at first glance can be mistaken as a full-fledged social movement group. However, in reality its members enjoyed very few shared experiences. According to Ayers, forming a 'traditional' collective identity in cyberspace, that includes the practices of working for collective gain, shared definitions, consciousness, and opposition, may be difficult because of the distance between group members (2003: 161). The online group members whom she interviewed did not seem politically or socially motivated outside the confines of the computer screen (2003: 162). This research raises a number of issues: what counts as an 'activist group'; is traditional social movement theory applicable to online activism; and is a collective identity needed for online social action?

Silver notes that 'When approached as "texts" online environments prove tricky; they are most often decentred, fluid, temporary, and subject to constant change brought about by historical, economic, political, and technological developments' (2003: 280). Thus this emerging field of study calls for interdisciplinary approaches and urges us to focus on the historical, rhetoric, ethnographic, and technological aspects of online activism (Silver 2003: 288-289). My project takes up this interdisciplinary approach by focusing on technological, interactive, and discursive aspects of the constitutions of feminist action/activism online.

Feminist engagements with women's online projects assert the empowering potentials of the Internet for women's political organising as well as feminist theory (Harcourt 1999a). Youngs in her analysis of the Women on the Net project (1999), suggests that women's online activism signifies not only new forms of networking and joint projects developed in

connection with them, but also represents exciting openings for revisiting the history of thought about women:

As feminist theory enters a new phase of critical awareness and sensitivity to discovering shared politics and conditions of difference, the Net offers a specific communication domain for bringing women together for such purposes. Through their virtual voices they can confront and challenge the ideas as well as the conditions and practices that separate and connect them in their real lives.

(1999: 68)

What the author argues is that the Internet has the potential to shift the terms of debate in dominant feminist (Western) theory and practice by providing a powerful platform of communication for women to negotiate their differences, produce collective knowledge and utilise the Internet's potential for radical change.

Youngs in her more recent article 'Making the Virtual Real: Feminist Challenges in the Twenty-First Century' (2007) suggests that there has been an explosion of the different forms of women's networks and activism (social, economic, political and cultural) on the Internet. She argues that because of the Internet, 'women are more public beings than they have ever been', and that 'is a radical development' (2007: 3). According to Youngs, the Internet brings unprecedented changes for women who have access to it by facilitating women's public presences and actions, their access to virtual politics and the digital economy. This new situation produces new forms of identities, communities and collectivities raising challenges

for feminist thinking to inhabit these new problematics and possibilities. My project seeks to contribute to the consideration of these possibilities and problems by investigating issues that confronted Women's Online Forum.

I noted in Chapter 1 that there has been very little research done on women's online activism in Central and Eastern Europe. A report on Gender and ICT in Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (Simerska, Fialova and Alborough 2004) portrays a bleak picture of women's engagement with ICTs in the region. It states that 'women are underrepresented in various ICT initiatives' and activities supporting 'specific gender/women's issues are limited'; that 'CEE/CIS is largely absent from global Gender and ICT debates and forums'; that 'gender equality advocates are uninformed about the importance and relevance of ICT to gender equality agenda' (2004:15). Mihalec's and Sudar's (2004) study of women's engagement with the Internet, including activism in Croatia, suggests various reasons for the unutilized potentials of the Internet by women's groups. 'One of the main reasons is the fact that only a small amount of women, including activists, has so far learned the skills of web page design and maintenance' (2004: 49). Other barriers include: a lack of funding 'for expensive web page design courses, as well as stereotypes about the Internet as a "male toy", which men know more about than women and have more time for' and an unfamiliarity with the possibilities that the Internet can offer for activist work (2004: 49). Both studies highlight the lack of data on women and ICT in the region and stress the need for further research. It has to be noted that academic research and literature on women's online activism is barely existent, which could be partly related to the low levels of women's engagement with cyberspace at the regional level as well as unavailability of the Internet



studies to broader audiences due to language barriers or lack of effective research dissemination strategies.

Despite these challenges, women's organisations in CEE do develop web pages for self promotion, information dissemination, as well as for empowering and mentoring other women. Within Vegh's proposed typology of online activism, the majority of these online presences could be classified as awareness raising/advocacy initiatives. Women's Information Technology Transfer (WITT) is an example of an online project which seeks to promote women's online activism in the region. WITT was initiated in 2002 by ENAWA – European North American Women Action as part of its training program and became an independent entity early in 2005, with its base in Croatia and focal points throughout the region. The mission page of the website states: 'WITT is a portal site which aims to link women's organizations and feminist advocates for the Internet in Eastern and Central Europe, providing strategic ICT information to all, and supporting Central and Eastern European women in developing the web as an instrument in their social activism' ([www.witt-project.net](http://www.witt-project.net)). The website in the last years has grown, but it mainly assumes an information dissemination role rather than facilitating interactive forums or joint online actions.

In addition to self promotion pages and dissemination of information about various forms of activist work, women's organisations use the Internet for networking in the region. Some of these organisations are: NEWW – Network of East West Women ([www.neww.org](http://www.neww.org)), a network of women from East and West founded in 1991 with the aim of strengthening activism and women's organisations in Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States; Karat Coalition ([www.karat.org](http://www.karat.org)), a regional coalition of NGOs and individuals from 20

Central and South East European countries advocating gender equality; ENAWA ([www.enawa.org](http://www.enawa.org)), European and North American Women's Action, which covers women's activism all over the world but also has a strong focus on the CEE countries. These organisations use their web pages and mailing lists to exchange information about women's position in various regions and countries, initiate actions and petitions, exchange information about trainings, workshops, and conferences. Similarly to WITT they mainly use their websites and mailing lists for information dissemination rather than interactive public forums or joint online actions.

To conclude, although there is a solid literature on cyberactivism and women's online activism, the research into these topics in the CEE region is very limited. My project aims to contribute to the bridging of this gap by investigation of the case study of women's online community focused on Central and Eastern Europe.

### **Feminist epistemology and situated knowers**

This second section of the chapter explores feminist epistemology debates focusing on the question of women's agency and social action. As I noted earlier, this thesis draws on feminist epistemology debates in a specific way: it suggests that feminist epistemology debates shape our understanding of feminism as theory and *praxis*. This section is concerned with identification of key indexical terms such as the category of 'woman', 'experience', 'difference', 'the personal as political', 'situatedness' and issues of 'transnationalism' in the context of gender research in Central and Eastern Europe. In setting out and critically evaluating these concepts, this section provides a rubric within which to locate and investigate

my research question on the constitution of feminist identity and potential feminist speech genres.

The 1980s were a period of growth in feminist methodology and theory. Discussions ranged from ethical and representational issues to the fundamental question of how and what feminist researchers claim to know. Feminist epistemologists adopted a variety of positions which sought to challenge the positivist notions of objectivity and truth. At the centre of these discussions were the claims that the process of knowledge production has to account for the social positioning of the subject. This accounting for the situatedness of the knowing subject has been used epistemologically in standpoint theory in at least three different ways by feminist empiricists, standpoint theorists and postmodernists (Harding 1987).

Feminist empiricists did not challenge or reinvent the positivist framework of the sciences but sought to improve standards, within a traditional framework. They called for differentiating the circumstances in which situatedness generates error and in which it constitutes a resource that can be used to advance knowledge (Eichler 1988). Feminist standpoint theorists suggested that knowledge must necessarily be 'socially-situated' and perspectival, and they argued that some social situatedness (which itself has been constructed in several different ways)<sup>14</sup> endowed the subject with a privileged access to the truth. In its most recent formulations,

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Hartstock (1987) and Smith (1987) suggested that women's centrality in the reproduction system (caring for children and household) put them in better position to see whose needs are better served under patriarchy. Many versions of standpoint, including that of Hartstock (1987) and Smith (1987), argued that women's cognitive style based on the ethics of care rather than the ethics of domination is epistemically superior. MacKinnon (1999) proposed that women's collective self consciousness and action as a group against their sexual objectification enables them to unmask ideological misrepresentations of women, their self knowledge and action grants epistemological privilege. Harding (1991) and Collins (1990) suggested that women's experience of oppression enables them to see aspects of social reality which cannot be seen from dominant position and endows their marginal position with epistemic privilege.

standpoint theory is viewed as the process of approximating the truth through a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differently situated (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). Meanwhile, postmodernists have rejected claims of epistemic privilege, emphasising instead the instability of social identities and representations (Haraway 1991; Flax 1997).

### *Feminist standpoints*

Feminist standpoint theory in its early formulation tended to define all 'women' as one grouping. For instance, Dorothy Smith focuses on women's standpoint and calls on sociologists to put women's life and women's experiences at the centre of their inquiries (1987). Smith aims not merely to uncover experience but to make a place for its sociological analysis that will be focused differently and serve a different purpose. In her formulation, a feminist sociologist must refuse to put aside her experience and make her bodily existence and activity a starting point for inquiry. From this perspective, the inquiry points toward an analysis of the social context of experience, the relations of ruling that organise daily life and connect all members of a society in systemic interaction (1990). Smith argues that a sociology which takes into account women's way of knowing has higher claims to truth because it resists dualisms at the heart of conventional knowledge's claims to legitimacy, such as the dichotomy constructed between reason and emotion, or mind and body, and their gendering. For Smith, it is women's simultaneous centrality to social life (as daily and generational reproducers) and marginality to it that provides them with greater insight. Some critics pointed out that analyses like Smith's risk prioritising/over-emphasising the concerns of white (Collins 1990) or heterosexual (Ingraham 1994) women.

The attention paid to women's experience was taken up by many other feminists and stimulated much of the discussion around the concepts of 'woman' and 'experience'. For instance, Stanley and Wise, argued that "'woman" is a socially and politically constructed category, the ontological basis of which lies in a set of experiences rooted in the material world' (1990: 21). For them, the common experience is oppression, which can be shared but is not the same:

'oppression' should be seen as an extraordinarily complex process in which women are only rarely *in extremis* totally powerless and in which ordinarily, women utilise a range of resources – verbal, interactional and other – in order to 'fight back'.

(Stanley and Wise 1990: 21)

These definitions indicate that gradually the idea of any singular women's standpoint and experience became fragmented. Feminists started to question the universalising understanding of gender relations, as well as criticise early feminist standpoint debates for their focus on western, white and middle class women's experiences. Recent standpoint theories see feminist standpoint not as something which arises inevitably from the experience of women, but rather as a consciously chosen political and social location.

Harding (1986) insists that the epistemically privileged nature of the feminist standpoint derives from active political engagement in the feminist cause, not just the perspective and experience of women. Thus, in order to access the feminist standpoint a certain political activity is required to appreciate women's marginalized position. According to Wylie, this sense of standpoint refers to the capacity to develop 'a critical consciousness about the nature

of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically' and builds upon, but is distinctive from, the situated knowledge thesis that recognizes the importance of social location in shaping epistemic perspective (2003: 31).

Women's consciousness raising groups as a form of activism were one of the ways to achieve critical consciousness by exchanging 'personal' experiences and feelings about oppression in the United States second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. The phrase 'the personal is political' was coined in these early feminist groups which enabled women to see how they were united in personal experience of oppression and thus shared the same political position (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 1997: 34-35). However, by the late 1970s the focus shifted from the face-to-face consciousness raising groups to personal narratives and life history writing which documented the diversity of women's experience, questioning the possibility of shared women's consciousness (1997: 35).

For Sandra Harding, the basis of feminist knowledge is to be marginal lives, which offer new understandings about the world (1991). She argues that research from the perspective of marginal lives offers 'strong objectivity' because the research of the oppressed and marginalised includes new values in research and this way avoids endorsing the views of dominant knowers. However, according to Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, the strengths of this approach in some situations could be turned into weakness:

Even prioritizing non-hierarchically the 'view from the margins' might lead to underestimating the relevance of the knowledge of the dominant centre. Although the

view from the margins produces other kinds of knowledge that are valuable (and often also more attractive to study), it is crucial for any emancipatory movement to understand the hegemonic centre and the ways people situated there think and act. After all, it is from this powerful position that most political decisions affecting the largest number of people in society come. Not surprisingly, however, access to the study of hegemonic positions of power is the most difficult to attain. Emphasis on the importance of the lives of the most marginal elements in society can sometimes collude with the attempts of hegemonic centres to remain opaque, while at the same time maintaining the surveillance of marginal elements in society.

(Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 319)

Furthermore, theorising from the margins raises the question of the single 'worst' positioning and whether such a positioning exists. Collins argues that it does not exist (1990). According to her, it could be tempting to think that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else but that may not be the case, as the various axes of social, political and economic power cross-cut black women as a grouping (1990: 74). Collins proposes a dialogue between people of different positioning to 'approximate the truth' and to avoid any mechanical construction of hierarchies of oppression. This epistemology is based on the process of knowledge creation in African-American communities, where dialogue, caring and personal accountability are central.

Feminist standpoint theory aims to empower oppressed women and change their situation. For instance Harding (1991) suggests that this pragmatic orientation itself put feminist theorising

in a superior position as it may offer truthful and more *useful* representations to women rather than just other truthful representations.

The standpoint theory debates established action and individual as well as structural transformation as the bedrocks of feminist theory and practice. The question of transformative action intersects with the question of agency. As argued by Smith (1986) and Stanley and Wise (1990) feminists start from identifying the lack of women's agency and their construction as victims of patriarchy, whereby the goal is to transform women into self-determined actors who act in the world on their own terms. However this perception of agency is based on the humanist perception of self-determined subjectivity, where the action is understood in quite simplistic terms of 'Me/I acting on the world' and producing effects. This notion of humanist agency was contested by various theories of subjectivity, including psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and Marxism, highlighting the determination of agents by various structures (Irigaray 1985; Butler 1990; Wittig 1992). On the other hand, postmodernist feminism, including cyberfeminism, attempts to go beyond a dichotomous model of agency by suggesting the possibility of situated, hybrid and localized identities and subjectivities (Haraway 1991; Plant 1997).

Feminist engagement with postmodernism and post-structuralism<sup>15</sup> produced several changes in the conceptualisation of feminist epistemologies. A postmodernist feminist approach abandoned the notions of 'objectivity' and 'truth'. Rather than studying 'reality' feminist postmodernists look at how scientific 'truth' comes to be constituted in the discourse and with

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<sup>15</sup> I use the terms postmodernism and post-structuralism to refer to perspectives that draw on a variety of French post-structuralist and postmodernist theorists, including Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, Irigaray, and Kristeva.



what effects (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 87-88). Feminists drawing on the conceptual and methodological tool of postmodernism stress locality, partiality, instability, uncertainty, ambiguity and the essential contestability of any accounts of the world, the self, and feminism itself.

Feminist appropriations of poststructuralist concepts - Foucauldian discourse, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Derrida's deconstruction - have signalled several productive moves for the theorization of gender. These include conceptualisation of identity as mutable and not fixed, and of gender norms and identities as constructed through various social, linguistic and discursive practices. Linguistic approaches aided with tools of deconstruction have enabled feminists to underscore the fluidity of identities and gender norms as well as to understand how these concepts acquire the appearance of fixity and naturalness (Butler 1990). A poststructuralist feminist informed approach has shifted the focus from the investigation of the opposition between 'man' and 'woman' into an inquiry as to how the meanings of these terms, and the dualistic logic within which they operate, comes to be established through relations of power.

Postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist approaches have also figured prominently in internal critiques of feminist theory. As I noted earlier, standpoint feminism has been criticised for its ignorance of distinct problems faced by women of colour, lesbian women, other women, Third World women, etc (see, for instance, Spivak 1987; Collins 1990; Stanley and Wise 1990; Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991). The postmodernist approaches responded to these critiques by underwriting the analytical concept of 'woman' as essentialist and advocating for the proliferation of theories produced by differently situated women.

A departure from a pre-given, fixed, biologically determined category of 'woman' and the infinite fragmentation of perspectives are controversial in feminist theory because of the implications for cohesive social action. In the beginning of this chapter, the question of 'feminism' in cyberfeminism has also suggested this unresolved tension between the apparent apolitical stance of postmodernism and the need for more political and material analysis of women's engagement with the Internet. Postmodernist and poststructuralist alternatives of fragmentation and multiplicity raise questions of agency, effective coalition building among differently situated women and the possibility of resistance and change. Nevertheless, the development of technology and the rise of new forms of sociability on the Internet poses new challenges for feminist theory and practice to inhabit the new possibilities and problematic for women's individual and collective identities and social actions. As noted by cyberfeminist authors such as Youngs (2007), the Internet has the potential to shift thinking about social agency, and thus identity and social action. My project seeks to engage with these new challenges in epistemology debates, arguing for the need to reassess these feminist projects and their understanding of women's subjectivity in the light of the textual/virtual/discursive environments of the Internet.

In the following section I will continue to explore feminist debates, focusing on women in Central and Eastern Europe and issues arising in transnational exchanges between feminists from Eastern Europe and Western feminist discourse.

### *Feminist debates: across East and West*

Western feminism and scholarship arising from women's critique of Western liberal experience have been criticized for overextending themselves to other cultural and historical

contexts (Mohanty 1997). As noted above in the discussion on feminist standpoints, women may share an experience of oppression, but it takes many forms and exhibits different characteristics. Therefore, some of the analytical and conceptual tools developed by Western European and US feminism, such as the public/private divide, gendered access to power, and notions of feminist identity and movement, often miss the point or do not reflect the perceived women's lives in Central and Eastern Europe. In this section I will critically evaluate the research on women in Central and Eastern Europe, with special attention paid to an 'East-West' dialogue.

The early gendered investigations of post-communist transformation reported weak women's organizations and the 'absence' of a women's movement in the CEE region (Einhorn 1993). According to feminist scholarship, women were losers in post-communist transformation and with the collapse of the socialist system the position of women has deteriorated (Einhorn 1993; Rueschmeyer 1994; Moghadam 1995). Studies focusing on economic transitions reported that women are over-represented among the unemployed and are likely to remain unemployed for longer periods than men (Fong and Paul 1993: 223). At the same time, a drop in women's participation in politics across Central Eastern Europe has been observed (Wolchik 1993).

These widespread assumptions about disadvantaged women in Central Eastern Europe and the documentation of the negative impact of the transformation process on the women's movement could be admonished from several aspects. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that it is not that the gendered impoverishment and insecurity reported by feminist empiricists does not exist, but rather that such work conveys and reinforces the popular impression that

post-communist social and economic transformation is a process that inevitably disadvantages women over men. Secondly, feminist empirical work and theorising about 'Eastern Europe' is conditioned by general assumptions and categories, which might lead to the analytical exclusion of the full range of aspects which may strengthen women's position in different spheres of social life. For instance, Nash provides us with a striking example of such overextension of the universal validity of Western feminist scholarship and a lack of understanding of local context. She has suggested that Western research on gender in the Czech Republic has mainly emphasised the lack of a grassroots feminist movement whilst ignoring the substantial political involvement of women in Czech society (2002). This has resulted in the application of Western models of political participation which have not been able to 'recognise' the 'difference' of context and women's involvement in Czech politics.

More recent analysis of women's movements in CEE has shifted the focus from the negative impacts of post-communist transformation and the 'absence' of a women's movement to the exploration of ideological discourses which produce and create political movements and collective identities according to dominant and resistant political and social currents. Einhorn, in her essay 'Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe', states that 'women in Central and Eastern Europe not only had a different diagnosis of the source of gender discrimination, but constructed their political identities along different axes to those in Western Europe' (2003: 173). According to the author, women's political subjectivity in CEE was formed by a system that had already granted formal equality and 'women's issues' were perceived as secondary to other political goals (Einhorn 2003). During the hardships of the transformation process in the CEE region women's groups stepped in to provide welfare and social services which were privatised or cut off by the new governments. These groups

included charity organisation, information centres, health care provision and domestic violence hotlines, but on the whole women's grass-roots initiatives did not have a strong political identity as a women's movement.

An agenda of women's activism has been promoted in the CEE region as an integral part of membership in transnational advocacy networks. Some feminist studies report positive consequences of such networking: 'By supporting women's organising as women, transnational resources help to produce a politicised identity for women and to recognize community activism, "the housework of politics", as gendered activity even when the issues raised are not directly about gender oppression' (Sperling, Ferree, and Risman 2001: 1180). However, it should be admitted that these networking discourses and the availability of financial and other resources has major implications for the capacity, shape and objectives of women's groups.

The relationship between East and West has been discussed widely by Western as well as Eastern European scholars in their writings on gender and women in Central Eastern Europe (Einhorn 1991; Bassnett 1992; Funk 1993; Olsen 1997; Nash 2002; Muharsha 2006). Both Western and regional commentators critically reflect on the risks of application of Western theory and *praxis* to different contexts as well as call for accounts which articulate a research agenda on gender in Eastern Europe in 'local' terms.

In her article 'Feminist East and West' (1993), Funk, a US feminist, reflects on complex and sometimes 'thorny' conditions of dialogue between East and West feminists as shaped by structural power and economic imbalances between Eastern and Western women. She notes

that the process of 'East being *incorporated* in to the West' results in the dislocation of power and status hierarchies as well as individual self worth, status, and social respect (1993: 319). Funk also acknowledges that the hegemony of Western scholarship risks 'the suppression and distortion of post-communist women's concerns' (1993: 319). According to her, these considerable power differences between 'Eastern' and 'Western' women result in a risk of misunderstandings which make Eastern Central European researchers uneasy in relation to Western feminism and Western feminists (1993: 321).

Havelkova suggests that the source of misunderstandings in the dialogues between the East and West is the assumption that 'a focus on women must necessarily mean the same thing in all contexts' (1997: 57). Neither the meaning of the category 'woman', nor feminist theory and practice, can be simply transplanted from a Western European and North American context to East Central Europe. Havelkova calls for local analyses of women's experiences and suggests that Western feminists have to acknowledge and grant local perspectives legitimacy:

Articulation in local terms is important, but I am afraid that women from the East will not articulate their experiences in their own terms, because Western feminist theoretical discourse has taken up the task of translation. For them, translation is a one way project from West to East. This really means that those from the East speak two languages: their own and that of Western feminism. What is needed is awareness by Western feminists that they speak in a contextually bound way, too. They must be willing to learn our language and grant it validity.

(1997: 62)

So what Havelkova highlights here is power imbalances in East-West dialogue and requests for more contextualised accounts of gender research. However, what strikes me in her observation is that Eastern feminists have to speak two languages - that of the East and that of the West. Can we make such a sharp distinction between East and West feminist languages when the terms of any discussion about feminism have already been established by dominant Western feminist discourse? Is there any authentic 'East' feminist speech to articulate local perspectives? And if there is one, how is this authentic speech structured by local context?

Recently Muharska, an Eastern European feminist, has engaged with similar questions in the analysis of Eastern European feminist identity in her essay 'Silences and parodies in the East-West feminist dialogue' (2006). Muharska suggests that the appropriation of feminist identity for some Eastern European women is problematic and is shaped through exclusions from the dominant feminist discourse from which Eastern feminists borrow their terms, and from their own societies, where their 'feminist' foreignness is distrusted (2006: 1).

According to Muharska, Eastern European feminism leaves in feminist discourse a trace of silences. These include: the silence from the First or Western World about the Second World; the silences from the Third World about the presence of Eastern European women in their dialogues with the First World<sup>16</sup>; and the silences of their own societies and political elites that have 'other priorities to talk' (2006: 4). Muharska argues that because of the virtual absence of feminist movement, and thus specific discourse, local feminists tend to talk about their

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<sup>16</sup> Muharska suggests here that Third World feminists as well as Second World (Eastern European) feminists argue their important differences and describe their own experiences usually without acknowledging each others presence. This 'pretending' about not seeing each other can be seen as a consequence of established feminist discourse on First - Third world women which shapes research topics and methodology (2006: 4).

experiences using the speech of Western feminist discourse. Furthermore, they have to 'experientialize' the discourse that has already been theorized', meaning that instead of developing from grass-roots to theory, Eastern European feminists hope to help their societies to develop gender awareness by 'translating' feminist theory (2006: 6). The articulation of one's experience in 'borrowed' terms inevitably raises the question of the authenticity of experience, representational authority, and legitimacy.

Muharska suggests that Eastern feminists have difficulties using the same voice when they are addressing their 'home' audience, non-feminist in most cases, and an outside, usually Western feminist audience (2006: 7-8). 'When they speak to their own society, they translate the borrowed discourses, while they speak to the "outside", they translate the experience: both projects are difficult, not to say impossible' (2006: 8). Thus, according to Muharska, in both cases their language is always 'reflected discourse'<sup>17</sup> or discourse which is being implanted/transplanted or imitated with varying degree of success. That complex situation puts an Eastern feminist in the ambiguous, marginal but also subversive position of a parodist<sup>18</sup>:

She is a two-faced figure straddling a double margin: that of the East (of her own society) and that of the West. From an Eastern European perspective, the West contains the "centre" of feminism somewhere in itself. So she is a double other, desired and rejected, desiring and rejecting in the two directions she is facing. Hers is a double, maybe even multiple, marginality when compared to the positions of Western

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<sup>17</sup> Here Muharska borrows the term 'reflected discourse' from Bakhtin (1979).

<sup>18</sup> The author suggests that the parody, 'much like assuming a feminist position', implies 'the appropriation of power, a gesture of marginality and a challenge to hierarchies' (2006: 2). Muharska, drawing on Hutcheon (1994) and Bakhtin (1979), understands parody as a cluster of discursive practices that rely on a detachment/doubling/two-faced nature as a means to overcome a situation, and a rising above it.



feminists in their own societies. Her ambiguity – also duality, and maybe even duplicity – is ironic (paradoxical) in its very nature, and therefore has a very interesting subversive potential.

(Muharska 2006: 8)

So what Muharska argues is that subversion/deconstruction usually occurs on the boundaries between marginality and ‘centrality’, thus, the marginality of the two-faced Eastern feminist figure may be seen as deconstructive. The Eastern feminist identity through its subversive potential serves to construct a more critically self-aware feminist community, and offers productive insights in the developments in feminisms both as social practice and theoretical discourse (2006: 8).

I found Muharska’s approach to Eastern European feminist identity particularly useful to understand the multiple opportunities for displacements (or misplacement) of voices, ironies and problematic interpretations in the East – West dialogue. As Funk (1993) and Havelkova (1997) have done, her analysis highlights the specificity of women’s experiences against an Eastern European background but also goes beyond that and looks at how Eastern European feminist identity is negotiated in the broader context of a global feminist community.

These debates indicate that there is a need for a more nuanced picture of women’s subjectivities and women’s activism in Central Eastern Europe. Women’s identities and subjectivities should be examined through the detail of current activities and political positions, placing them against the background of post-communist transformation, Western feminist theory and transnational networking contexts. My research of women’s online

activism seeks to analyse the question of emerging women's subjectivities, referring to the complex reality of transnational dialogue carried out in online environments.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has situated my thesis within cyberculture research, feminist epistemology debates and literatures on women in CEE, identifying indexical terms which I deploy in my analysis in the subsequent chapters. In doing so, it has pointed out the main points of tension and contestation with which my project seeks to engage.

In the first section I situated my research project within cyberfeminist debates, pointing out tensions related to the question of 'feminism' in cyberfeminism, which is frequently critiqued for its fragmented postmodernist and poststructuralist groundings and thus potentially apolitical nature. I indicated that my project aims to address the question of 'feminism' by analysing feminist action/speech strategies in a case study of the Online Women's Forum. I also pointed out that my project takes up the 'cyberfeminist mode of thinking' (Youngs 2007) and explores questions of subjectivity and action as mutually shaped by technology and human processes. Drawing on the critiques of the concept of virtual community, I suggested that linguistic approaches to genre/speech community could be usefully deployed to understand online exchanges. My discussion on online activism provided a definition of cyberactivism and located the Online Women's Forum as a form of activism within the awareness raising/advocacy campaigns category (Vegh 2003). It also pointed that the rise of new forms of sociability, including cyberactivism, that challenges traditional theoretical frameworks of what we mean by online movements, activism and action. Similarly cyberfeminists' investigations of women's presences (Harcourt 1999a; Youngs 2007) suggest

that the Internet as a new communication platform has the potential to shift the terms of the debate not only for activism but also feminist theory. In this section, due to the limited research on women's online activism in CEE, I also briefly located my research project within women's regional online initiatives.

The second section of this chapter, drawing on feminist epistemology debates identified the concepts of 'situatedness', 'category of woman', 'experience', 'the personal is political', 'difference' and issues of transnationalism in feminist dialogue which I will deploy in my subsequent chapters to analyse the articulations of feminisms and constitution of identity. These debates suggest that thinking about women's agency has shifted from theorising of women as one grouping to proliferation of theories by differently situated women. This move consequently raises questions about agency and effective coalition building among different women and the possibility of resistance and change. Drawing on the discussion on the rise of new forms of sociability, I argued that feminist epistemology debates and thinking about women's agency have to be revisited. Furthermore the literature on East-West feminist dialogue indicates that feminist theory and *praxis* is context specific and has been largely developed in the West, raising the issue, as noted by Muharska among others, of unequal relations between West and East feminists, and the domination of Western feminist speech.

Overall, this chapter suggests the confluence of two different areas of cyberculture studies and feminism to understand the constitution of feminist online identities, virtual communities, and social actions on the Internet. In the following chapter I consider my methods and arising methodology issues of the thesis, focusing on the research design, methodological framework and methods of analysis.

## **Chapter 3: RETHINKING ACTION RESEARCH ONLINE: METHODS, METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter has suggested that the Internet has the potential to shift the understanding of what we mean by identity, community, social agency, action and feminism. In this chapter, I seek to explore the challenges that the Internet poses to the understanding of research methods deployed in my thesis. According to Markham, the Internet and associated media permeate and alter interactions and the possible outcomes of these interactions at the dyadic, group, and cultural level, compelling scholars to re-examine traditional assumptions and taken-for-granted rubrics of social research (2005: 794). This chapter provides a critical description of my online action inquiry, locating it within debates on action research and online participant observation. It also discusses the main methodological themes and dilemmas arising and outlines the analytical concepts deployed in my data analysis.

The first section describes how I created my research site and gathered data, mapping out the progress of my research through the spiral of action, reflection, and revision (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). I begin by explaining how I designed the CEE Online Women's Forum, who the participants were, and what we discussed in the forum. I highlight that my established vision of the forum and the trajectories of action were partly shifted and renegotiated by the participants from other parts of the world and the global themes of the discussions. This section also situates my research methods within debates on action research and online qualitative methods, considers emerging ethical issues and discusses methods of data analysis.

The second part of the chapter reflects on the question of what happens to action research when it is conducted online. Exploring three inter-related epistemological-methodological issues; what counts as 'action' and progressive agency, standpoint issues, and community, this section suggests congruence between the epistemological and methodological questions of the thesis and argues that the modernist understanding of action research in online environments has to shift.

The last section of the chapter sets out the concepts of utterance, genre and speech acts through which to consider the coherence and dissonance of 'online activist communities' and the constitution of feminist action and agency online. The chapter concludes by suggesting that action and speech on the Internet cannot be easily disentangled.

### **Constructing the site for research and activism**

My methodological approach was shaped in part by my prior activist experience and by the low level of interactivity, joint online actions, and campaigns in women's online initiatives in CEE. I designed my own activist-research website which aimed not only to constitute research site but also sought to contribute to women's networking and online activism in Central and Eastern Europe. I began from the assumption that action research and online participant observation would allow me investigate the constitution of online action and agency by literally acting and carrying out a piece of feminist action on the Internet, providing me with in-depth insight about the sociability practices in the forum, including online activism as well as the practices of identity, authority and knowledge claims. Deploying these methods I sought to discover how sociability is interactively and discursively constructed in a text based

environment. I conceived my research as pitched to the debates on online women's activism and cyberfeminism (Harcourt 1999a; Youngs 2007) as well as language related approaches to online selves and virtual communities (Herring 2003, 2004; Miller and Shepherd 2004). Since the project was designed to focus on sociability practices in textual environments, I envisaged it as both a piece of action research and an analytic online ethnography, informed by linguistic approaches which perceive language as relational, dialogic and encompassing action (Austin 1962; Bakhtin 2004[1986]).

My initial visions of the project included a discussion website with various threads where women from Central and Eastern Europe could discuss topical gender/women's issues in the region. I engaged regional women activists interested in gender and ICTs to identify the topics of online discussions. This decision was prompted by the participatory and democratic principles of action research; the need to know what is 'topical' for activists involved in online activism in the region; and a more pragmatic presumption, that the inclusion of activists in consultation from the very beginning of the project would make them more likely to contribute.

I used a combination of website searches to identify online activists and to collect their email addresses. I sent emails to ten activists asking their opinion about my research and for suggestions of possible discussion topics for the forum. These activists were actively engaged in the promotion of an ICT agenda and networking in the region by hosting websites of regional networks such as NEWW, Karat Coalition, ENAWA, and WITT, and other regional activists were involved in various projects on women's reproductive rights, employment, and awareness-raising on gender discrimination.

In the email I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my research and ideas for the website. I also asked them to contribute to future online discussions and provide contacts of people who might be interested in participating. Notwithstanding the speed and immediacy of online communication, I received the first answers one or two weeks after the initial contacts. The contacted activists generally welcomed the idea of a new activist website but were also cautious about women's participation. In personal email exchanges they commented that women in Central and Eastern Europe did not have enough resources to participate in online projects. Such resources included access to computers, IT skills, English language skills, time and finance; and those who had the resources were felt to be over-worked and over-researched. One activist commented that it was incorrect for me to talk about 'online activism' and 'online feminist identities' in the region where there is so little regional feminist 'offline' activity. Others highlighted that the priorities for women were national projects and activism.

An activist in one of the personal email exchanges wrote to me:

<...> It will be difficult for you to gather information without giving something back so that there is a balance in relationship. Women are too busy or tired of helping strangers, they don't buy "but this is for your own good if you help me..." or "do this out of the kindness of your own heart..." type of approach. <...>

This comment indicates a certain expectation of an economy of exchange in research and activism, which was salient to my networking with women and the developing of the website. For instance, if I asked a women's organisation to include a link to the forum it was usually done on a reciprocal basis – I also hyperlinked their web pages and campaigns to my website.

Furthermore, through personal email exchanges with moderators I shared my experience of fund raising and gave some insights into 'job hunting' in the OSCE; commented on research reports; and connected people with other people working in the same field. In summary, I was open and willing to help activists who approached me in any way that I could.

The above cited activist suggested that I needed to provide some financial incentives to women's organisations to participate in the development of my initiative. I certainly took her remark on the economy of exchange into account but also decided to look for other ways to make the website attractive to the participants. One idea was to develop the forum as a place where women's organisations, activists and researchers could present and advertise their projects and campaigns, and moderate their own discussions. My own research agenda shifted from directly asking questions about online activism to supporting and observing the process without directly imposing the topics and political agenda on the participants.

In my email exchanges with the ICT activists I was often constructed as someone who is 'strange' and not part of the network, whose forum would not change anything:

<...> If you ask my opinion, I don't think a new website with a forum will change anything. All the initiatives you named: NEWW, Karat, ENAWA and many others run online debates, forums and lists. Perhaps you did not access them because they are internal, just for the members? I myself participate in many of such fora. <...>

These responses very early on in my project indicated that there are some established notions as to what counts as a legitimate bid for activism and what can enable change. From the above



comment we can gather that the discussion website was not perceived as something that would change the situation of activism in the region and, according to this activist, I was not doing anything new because other networks had online discussions and lists running. I myself did not have illusions that my website would change the state of affairs in online activism, however, I wanted to develop a website which was not for 'members only' but was public and where the interactivity went beyond the exchange of information about conferences, projects, and publications. During my fieldwork in 2005, I was a member of NEWW and Karat mailing lists, and I closely monitored the ENAWA website but my observations, contrary to the cited activist, were that the presence of interaction in the form of extended dialogue or conversation was very limited in these regional women's online spaces.

Nevertheless, in general, the women I contacted welcomed the idea of a new discussion forum and confirmed their willingness to participate. They suggested a range of topics to include: issues of CEE identity, donor politics, networking, ICTs, domestic violence, employment and reproductive rights. I took these consultations into account and developed a women's discussion website – the CEE Online Women's Forum - which was launched in January 2005. I created seven active discussion threads in the Forum: Introduce Yourself, Networking, Reproductive Rights, Violence, Employment, Women and War, and EU Enlargement. The website was introduced as an activist research project which aimed to encourage women's networking and activism in the region.

My final plan for the forum provided 'online space' for women – activists, researchers, students and anyone interested - to discuss their ideas on different issues, present their projects and research, network, as well as moderate discussions. The technical structure of the website

included an online publishing resource, where I published links, reports and articles related to the situation of women in the region; and Warwick Forums, an asynchronous messaging facility. I advertised the Online Women's Forum in my personal and professional networks, women's websites related to Central and Eastern Europe and their newsletters and regional mailing lists. However, two months after launching the website only six messages had been posted on the forum and the website viewer statistics from around 200 hits per week dropped to 20 and were getting lower and lower.

The various literatures on online communities describe the designing of such communities as a lengthy process. My observations of other regional online forums did not provide me with much hope that the forum would 'fill up' as time passed. Professional developers of online communities suggest that the content of the website is the most important factor in the creation of online communities (Powazek 2002). This observation led me to employ more active marketing strategies while developing the content of the forum. Firstly, I took a proactive approach in publishing links to various articles and reports about gender issues in CEE on the website. Secondly, I sent another round of invitations to regional women's networks as well as my previous contacts (women activists who advised me about the forum topics) and asked for volunteers to moderate the discussions of the forum. I advertised these invitations in regional and world wide activist mailing lists, like NEWW, Karat, ENAWA, Penelopes, and WUNRN. I also made personal contacts with regional women's organisations and invited them to participate.

Eventually, after three months of advertising and personal email exchanges, I received two positive responses. A research consortium of Central Eastern European and West European

researchers (the Enlargement, Gender and Governance Project) and a grassroots women's organisation (The Kolo: Women's Cross-cultural Collaboration) were willing to moderate two one month long discussions on Women's Civic Participation and Women and War. Both of these were held between April and June 2005. My research findings are mainly based on participant observation of these two discussions, as well as discussion threads on Introduce Yourself and Networking.

The discussion on Women's Civic Participation in CEE was moderated by two researchers (Spanish and Italian) from the Enlargement, Gender and Governance (EGG) project. Ten participants, including three women from CEE countries, took part in this online discussion. In total it received 25 messages within two weeks of the discussion, touching on a number of different themes such as CEE feminism, strategies for women's empowerment, gender issues in the United Nations, and issues of women's solidarity.

A feminist grass-roots activist moderated the discussion on Women and War. She also had three discussants (two from the United States and one from Serbia) who made active contributions to ongoing debates. The thread had 51 messages posted and 28 participants, including one man. The main theme of this forum was violence during wars and their aftermaths, including peacekeeping, the feminization of poverty, sweatshops, issues of depleted uranium, and feminism. Compared to the Women's Civic Participation, this discussion was much more politically and emotionally charged.

The Introduce Yourself thread, with 14 messages, was a place where participants posted their introductions. As a forum administrator I encouraged the participants to say a few words about

themselves before posting messages. Meanwhile, in the Networking thread (12 messages) the participants either discussed issues related to women's networking or posted requests for co-operation and support for their projects. The forum in total received 112 messages<sup>19</sup>. When I stopped advertising and inviting people to contribute, the activities in the forum ceased; and by September 2006 the forum pages were available just for reading because of spamming.

In addition to participant observation of the discussions, I also met with the members of the Enlargement, Gender and Governance Project in a conference in June 2005, and in individual informal conversations tried to find out why they did not participate in the online discussion which aimed to discuss their own research. Overall, my data is textual and comes from three sources: private email exchanges with activists, the messages posted on the Women's Online Forum website and my field notes.

As I noted earlier, in the initial phases of the forum I deliberately sought to engage more people from the CEE region. However, the majority of women and men participating (31) were from other parts of the world - Canada (1), Italy (2), India (1), Israel (1), Jamaica (1), Pakistan (2), the UK (2), the USA (12), and Uzbekistan (1). The participants from Central and Eastern Europe constituted less than one third of participants: Croatia (1), Lithuania (3), Moldova (1), Poland (1) and Serbia (2). There was a clear pattern whereby the forum participants from other countries had a particular interest in the CEE region. Several US nationals, who were the most active group on the forum, shared a cultural heritage with Balkan and other CEE countries; others were researching feminism and gender in the region; a

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<sup>19</sup> Nearly half of these messages (51) were posted on the Women and War thread, with 25 on Women's Civic Participation, 14 on Introduce Yourself and 12 on Networking. Others were dispersed among other threads which had just one or two postings.

few participants were looking for job opportunities in international organisations and universities in Central and Eastern Europe. Only two men took part in the forum discussions.

My data gathering process was led by a series of pragmatic decisions to build a feminist discussion site and conduct participant observation of the discussions. I encountered a number of practical, ethical and theoretical dilemmas, and I sought to resolve them in ways consistent with action research and online ethnography, and particularly the method of online participant observation.

### *Situating the research*

Action research and ethnography are usually conceived as two different research strategies. Action approaches collect data and generate knowledge by transformative action, while in ethnography the degree of action is less prominent and data is collected through observation rather than the active creation of a research platform. Action research originated in social management and social engineering (Dash 1999: 460), whereby participant observation and ethnographic research are associated with anthropology (Tedlock 2005). Despite these fundamental differences, action research and participant observation share some similarities such as critical reflexivity about the researcher's own participation within the ethnographic frame or action. This section attempts to locate my research within these two research strategies.

Action research approaches emphasize the acquisition of knowledge through action, focus on *praxis*, social change, and empowerment of participants through collaboration and

participation (Dick 1997; Bradbury and Reason 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Reason and Bradbury define action research as:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview. It seeks to reconnect action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. More generally it grows out of a concern for the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

(2001: 1b)

Action research presumes, as emphasised in this definition, collaboration between researchers and other participants. Some action research advocates even argue that research cannot be called 'action research' if it does not include active and explicit participation and collaboration. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that the roles of researchers and clients vary tremendously: highly competent participants are likely to play a more active role compared to others; participants may disagree about research agendas. David (2002) draws on the problematic experiences as a 'participatory researcher' in social movements and evaluation research, when co-researchers had disagreements and tried to promote their own political agendas. According to him participatory research has its limits and to 'adopt less participatory methods is not intrinsically unprincipled or unacceptable' (David 2002: 13).

It should be noted that some authors distinguish participatory action research from action research and/or action inquiry, one of the distinguishing factors being the degree of

participation. For instance, Tripp used the term action inquiry to underscore aspects of 'reflective practice' and 'researched action' (2003). Torbert, one of the key proponents of action inquiry, holds that a key part of action inquiry is an observing participant. His approach proposes the following: 'people should recognize the "four territories of experience," i.e., (i) outside world, (ii) one's own action, (iii) one's own strategy, and (iv) one's own vision, and people should seek to "enact congruent patterns across all four territories"' (Torbert 1991: 228 cited in Dash 1999: 474). At the core of action inquiry is the improvement of practice, which could be achieved through improved observation strategies of participant observer.

In the light of these debates, I call my research an 'action inquiry' because my initial research strategy did not include the active and explicit participation of co-researchers. The choice of the less participative strategy has been made because of the nature of my research (individual PhD research). Nevertheless, the principles of inclusion, participation and collaboration were inbuilt in the design and process of my project. The forum as such was open and no registration was needed – potentially anyone had the opportunity to post messages. The participants were invited to lead and moderate the discussions. Furthermore, the discussions on Women's Civic Participation and Women and War can be considered as separate pieces of action research in their own terms. In these discussions, the participants collaboratively raised awareness, exchanged knowledge and looked for solutions to improve women's civic participation and considered the strategies of stopping the war.

Tedlock describes face to face participant observation:

Participant observation was created during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as an ethnographic field method for the study of small, homogeneous cultures. Ethnographers were expected to live in the society for an extended period of time (2 years, ideally), actively participate in the daily life of its members, and carefully observe their joys and sufferings as a way of obtaining material for social scientific study. This method was widely believed to produce documentary information that not only was “true” but also reflected the native’s own point of view about reality.

(2005: 467)

The author continues by suggesting that recently ethnographers have modified participant observation by undertaking ‘the observation of participation’ by reflecting and critically engaging with their own participation within the ethnographic frame and generating a new genre known as ‘autoethnography’. What is significant in this change is that it emphasises subjectivity over objectivity, ‘relational over autonomous patterns, interconnection over independence, translucence over transparency, and dialogue and performance over monologue and reading’ (2005: 467). This move from neutrality to engagement and from objectivity to subjectivity brings the ‘observation of participation’ closer to relational, experiential, and participatory world view of contemporary action research (Reason and Bradbury: 2001b) .

What would it mean to understand a daily life of virtual community members where physical proximity is not a condition of shared membership? The early studies of online communities, as noted in Chapter 2 (Turkle 1996; Rheingold, 2000[1993]); emphasised the ethnographic status of their description of specific virtual groups by giving the perspective of those involved in online communities and observing virtual communities over extended periods of time.



Kendall suggested that 'researching the participants' sense of self and the meaning they give to online participation' requires spending time with participants and observation of their activities (1999: 62). Other perspectives developed in the field of computer mediated discourse analysis (see Herring 2004), challenge some of the assumptions about extended observation of the community by demonstrating how various characteristics of community, such as sociability, support and identity, could be observed and measured through the use of language. In her analysis of virtual community, Herring suggests that the notion of community could be broken down into components of behaviour which could be observed through choice of language, register, vocabulary and speech acts, the latter demonstrating reciprocity, support as well as conflict and means of conflict resolution (2004: 350-52).

My research is not a 'pure' form of action research as it lacks characteristics of 'participatory and collaborative practice' nor could it easily fit into a participant online observation frame because I actively create the platform of my research. I also build on linguistic approaches to community as constituted through shared speech rather than 'degree of membership' and 'sufficient human feeling' (Rheingold 2000[1993]). Nevertheless, my research design combines 'action' and 'participant observation', suggesting the intersection of these methods. An approach combining action and observation was recently deployed by Forte in exploration of the 'cultural constructedness' of websites (2005). Forte suggests that the visual stillness of the web site, static as it appears on the screen, can be a deceptive optical effect that fails to represent the depth and extent of social ties, networking and exchange that leads to its construction (2005: 93). According to him, the 'creative observation' through which an ethnographer creates and co-produces the research field with other participants and observers gives a distinctive insight into the complexity of social and cultural practices of websites

(2005: 98). Indeed, my direct engagement in the creation of the research field provides me with unique experience of the networking, patterns of exchange, dialogue, action and revision which lies behind the surface of the Women's Online Forum. Although my research strategy certainly has some similarity with Forte's 'creative observation', in my research I prioritise the 'action' frame, and call it 'online action inquiry', as my research aimed not only to explore the 'cultural constructedness' of the website but also aimed to contribute to women's online activism in the CEE region.

### *Considering ethics*

Online research raises a number of ethical issues related to the Internet as a social context: what is private and what is public in cyberspace; do we study human beings or public documents? As professional guidelines are still being negotiated, online researchers tend to address these issues employing the traditional considerations of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Mann and Stewart 2000: 48-63). However, I propose that the issues related to anonymity and confidentiality within my online action inquiry are less prominent than, for instance, ethical decisions related to research design.

I apply the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent to my informal email interviews and offline meetings with the participants because this information was shared specifically with me. This information did not in fact constitute any particularly sensitive data. Nevertheless, the interactions were conducted through a private medium or face-to-face conversation; therefore I chose to present the data anonymously.

My activist website had a specific page where I explained that the Online Women's Forum was an action research project, and it was a constitutive part of my PhD research. It became clear that the most of the participants were aware that I was conducting research as well as hosting an activist website; a few moderators were concerned if I was getting enough information, others praised the idea of combining activism and research. However, because of the transient participation in the online forum, I cannot guarantee that all the participants knew that some of their postings would be used for research.

Nonetheless, I consider the participants' postings on my website as instances of public communication. I suggest that expectations about the publicity and transparency of exchange were embedded in the purpose of communication on the website. The organisations, activists, and researchers raised awareness about feminist politics, women's rights and also promoted their own projects. In this context, the principals of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent are arguably contradictory to the logic of publicity, openness, and transparency embedded in the situation of communication. In addition, the information as such was not personally sensitive and could not harm the participants of my research.

I detect more ethical issues arising from my decisions about research design. Markham (2005: 811), for example, suggests that 'any method decision is an ethics decision.' The decisions that I make about research design, definition of field boundaries, analytical methods, inclusion and disregard of particular data influence the representation of research participants and, ultimately, can have an impact on practice and policy making. The issues of representation are particularly acute in online research because the participants' texts here are the primary and only means of producing and negotiating one's identity and culture (Markham 2005: 811).

Therefore, my decision about editing someone's language or including just particular extracts from online conversations inevitably affects the autonomy of the participants' textual selves.

Nonetheless, my project is not one of simply representing the voices of the participants. I am speaking for and with others, using my own understanding of theoretical and methodological approaches as well as experiences to help me select the participants' words to make my claims. I should point out that as much as I want to provide multiple and de-centered accounts, my understanding of the world and my ethical as well as political convictions influence my choices as the author of the project. My focus in the direction I choose comes from PhD supervisions, academic texts, my understanding of feminist activism and directly from my experience as a forum participant. Moreover, my compilation of the analysis of the participants' utterances is driven not only by a desire to present the story of women's activism in the online forum but also to conduct PhD research, which requires adherence to certain criteria of academic writing.

The presentation of cultural knowledge is a significant responsibility. Feminist researchers suggest that the best way to address some of these issues is to be transparent and reflexive about the production of knowledge (Stanley 1990). My research project strives to follow the politics and methods of feminist research. For instance, my research design includes the principle of advocacy for the participants, social change, and reflexivity. These values are embedded in the way I collect and analyse data.

### *Methods of analysis*

My data used in this thesis are extracted from the Online Women's Forum as well as emails and field-notes. I present some of the participants' messages in full, but also use extracts from individual messages as well as provide shortened dialogic exchanges between several participants. I indicate the names of the participants, the context or discussion thread, and, to facilitate the analysis, I number the lines of extracts.

I view online behaviour through the lens of language and my interpretation of the constitution of social action and agency are based on methodological paradigms which have originated in the analysis of spoken and written discourse, such as conversation and text analysis, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, genre and critical discourse analysis. A multiplicity of ways of approaching the participants' textual utterances can be illustrated by the following extract from the Women and War discussion:

1 Hello, I am Linda Malanchuk-Finnan. I am president of Thurston County NOW  
2 (National Organization for Women) in Olympia, Washington (the northwest not  
3 D.C.). Women here are interested and concerned with the horrible living and  
4 working conditions facing our sisters caught in the feminization of poverty,  
5 especially in the aftermath of war. We try to educate ourselves and our community  
6 on these issues and our accountability. We realize we may move in small steps, but  
7 better those than no steps at all. Issues of sweatshops and of trafficking are not  
8 found only outside the borders of America, and what we do about them has ripple  
9 effects beyond those borders. I look forward to hearing from my sisters around the  
10 world sharing what your daily lives are like, what actions you take, what we here

11 can learn, and in turn, tell you some of the things we do. We do what we can in our  
12 community, with our city and county government, at the state level and even with  
13 the federal government. This forum is a wonderful chance to hear and be heard  
14 globally. Please come forward with your stories, your questions, ideas and  
15 comments. In sisterhood, Linda

This message can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For instance, I can interpret this text from a speech act approach (Austin 1962), and explore the participant's intentions from the discourse evidence. In this short message Linda does a number of things with words: she establishes her own authority through an introductory sentence (lines 1-2); proposes and shapes the rules of communication based on sharing and learning (lines 9-10); validates the forum as a site for feminist communication (line 13), and literally invites participants to the forum (line 14).

I can also analyse Linda's message focusing on the identification of structural regularities within this particular message and across all texts of the forum (Herring 1996; Crystal 2001; Frow 2006). We can identify several elements of email genre in this text; the message starts with salutation, refers to the previous discourse (in this case, the Women and War topic), and ends with signature. In the wider context of the forum, the mode of address ('we' and 'sisters') used by the participants proved to be particularly interesting as an idiomatic element of feminist speech genre (see Chapters 4 and 6). 'We' in this message certainly indicates more than just the animator of action; I suggest that it summons the meanings of collegueship, solidarity, and shared feminist politics.

Focusing on the idiomatic use of 'we', leads me to another possible way of approaching my data, analysing the socio-cultural meanings indexed through interaction (Tannen 1993). In this example a repertoire of feminist discourse is deployed and invoked – 'sisters', 'we', 'hearing', 'sharing', 'learning', and 'acting'. Furthermore, I can look at this message through a critical discourse perspective (Fairclough 1992). I could argue that Linda's message is 'double voiced', dialogic and intertextual, and the emergent meanings of feminist action are negotiated between the discourses of patriarchy and feminism. For instance, the practices of listening, sharing, learning, and exchanging could be understood as feminist contestation of patriarchal forms of action and communication such as waging wars, giving orders, and not listening to the stories of the vulnerable.

In data analysis, I draw on all analytical strategies demonstrated in the above example. Depending on a specific case, some of these strategies are prioritised, used interchangeably or deployed all together. However, my analysis is primarily driven by my research question on the constitution of identity, authority, knowledge claims, feminist genre, and feminist action.

I found the Bakhtinian understanding of 'speech community', as invoked and constituted through conventions of utterance, its context, style and shared repertoires of speech genres, useful in approaching my data. Epstein and Steinberg (2003: 106), drawing on Bakhtin's *Speech Genres* in their analysis of the *Jerry Springer Show*, suggest that characteristics such as conventions of utterance, context, address and style that define a particular genre also define what may be described as a 'little cultural world' or a speech community, which is cemented by mutual competence to read and participate in the speech as well as share emotions. Deploying this perspective, I started my analysis by tracing the instances of shared

jargon, beliefs, values and norms, references to the group, reciprocity - characteristics that indicate the presence of mutual competence among contributors to participate in the speech, and thus a shared feminist identity. However, soon I realised that although contributors' utterances display significant elements of 'feminist speech' and identity, their utterances also participate in a variety of other discourses and genres.

I proceeded by coding my data into a number of broad categories and sub-categories using Nvivo computer assisted qualitative analysis software. These categories included: 1) negotiations of identity, including authority and knowledge claims; 2) recurrent feminist topics and forms of argumentation; 3) generic forms, including online message/email, testimony, and autobiographical practices; 4) instances of group's self awareness, including solidarity, reciprocity, and conflict; 5) instances of exchange of knowledge and negotiation of meanings (speech acts).

The above categories provided me with tools to capture more stable discursive topics and generic characteristics of communication as well as to focus on the 'making' of speech community through speech acts. In the coding process and in my analysis these categories frequently overlapped, enabling me to consider the participants' postings through a multiplicity of perspectives. Looking at the messages through different genres, for instance email and autobiographical generic forms, revealed a variety of communicative strategies/actions involved in the constitution of identity, authority, and feminist speech community.



While coding helped me to structure and familiarise myself with my data, I found the most beneficial approach to be reading and interpreting the participants' messages close to the context of interaction, that is, the context of ongoing discussion and emergent dialogic exchanges between the participants on a particular issue. My focus on negotiations of meaning and knowledge exchange or speech acts demanded this close observation and engagement with the context of communication.

### **Methodological dilemmas**

Chapter 2 highlighted that the Internet has the potential to challenge notions of political activism, community and feminism/standpoint. This chapter continues exploring these questions but now in the methodological context of my research. The first part of this chapter flagged up some of the issues arising in the research design, including the participants' and my own understanding of what constitutes a bid for action and activism on the Internet; what happens with the question of situatedness and the location of researcher and participants; and how the coherence of an online activist community could be considered. I identified my research primarily as online action inquiry, which also draws on participant observation techniques. This second part of the chapter explores emerging themes and points of tension related to action, situatedness, and community in the context of action research and online debates. I consider the arising methodological issues and tensions as three interrelated dilemmas of: speech/act, standpoint, and community. This part of the chapter suggests congruence between the methodological and epistemological questions of the thesis and argues that the modernist understanding of action research has to shift in online environments.

### *The speech/ act dilemma*

I started my project with the understanding that my research constitutes a social action. My project was motivated by the principles of feminist *praxis* and the notions of action research as a practice (Stanley 1990). I sought to contribute to online activism by bringing people around shared topical concerns, problems and issues, and enacting activism in the forum. As such my research strategy was grounded in the world of practice because it aimed to develop knowledge about online activism and also to contribute to the growth of online activism in Central and Eastern Europe. However the understanding of the forum as a site of activism and practice was challenged in several different ways.

I noted in the beginning of this chapter that one activist questioned the discussion forum as a useful tool for activism, suggesting that there were established notions as to what counts as activism and political action; it seems that online discussions as ‘only words’ were perceived as lacking political and transformative edge. Furthermore, the meeting with non-participants (CEE researchers) also indicated their general wariness towards online discussions.

The participants’ ideas about what is a ‘proper’ form of activism and action are indicative of methodological tensions surrounded the perception of social action in action research. Action historically was a modern presupposition of self determined and embodied subjectivity acting in the world – doing things. Action research is primarily based on a modernist understanding of subjectivity, whereby researchers and participants act together to yield practical results capable of improving a specific aspect of practice. Online inter/action, on the other hand, lacks embodiment and primarily takes place by the means of words or discourse. This tension between a modernist perception of human agency and embodied action on the one hand and

the textual, fluid and shifting environment of the Internet on the other, raises the question of what it means to act and what constitutes agency in the discursive/textual/virtual environment of my project.

The question of social action arises at three levels in my project. Firstly, the participants discuss various forms of feminist social action in the forum. Secondly, the forum itself constitutes a rehearsal of feminist social action, such as awareness raising and knowledge exchange. And thirdly, the forum is a site of action research where I as a researcher act, reflect, and make sense of my data by utilizing different methodological and analytical approaches. There is congruence between my methodological and epistemological questions which are primarily concerned with the questions of social action and, thus, social agency. The location of action at various levels of the research project challenges the notion of action as a linear cause-effect activity. These multiple locations of action put me in a position to do a piece of reflexive feminist research.

The participants mobilise various semiotic systems, texts, and genres to convey meanings and 'do things' online. Language is doing, on the Internet, in the truest performative sense (Kolko 1995). The focus on Internet communication enables us to see links between various levels of interactions (speech acts, genres, and broader discourses). These links and interconnections might otherwise not emerge by observing spoken and written communication. Potentially, the Internet environment can give more insights into how 'things can be done' online and forge more comprehensive theories of discourse and social action. I will explore this tension between action and speech further in Chapter 7, suggesting that feminist action in the forum

was constituted by discursive, generic and technological contexts of online interaction and that 'words' can also be 'deeds'.

### *The standpoint dilemma*

In feminist research the issues of outsider/ insider status, the questions of situatedness and the location of speaking subjects are key problematics usually addressed by reflexivity and openness about the choices made in qualitative empirical research (Wolf 1992; Lather and Smithies 1997). The growing complexities in feminist research destabilise the feminist researcher as an all knowing, unified, and context-free seeker of objectified knowledge whose very gender provides access to women's lives and knowledges (Olesen 2005: 248).

Discussing access issues in online participant observation, Mann and Stewart (2002: 89) suggest that online research has the potential to move beyond limitations of gender, race, age, and other physical factors that may contribute to the definition of a researcher as an outsider. I would argue that in the online context the issue of insider/outsider is not so easily resolved because of the shifting environment of the Internet. For instance, as an action researcher from the CEE, who has built the platform of research invoked as 'CEE online women's community', I could be considered as an insider and legitimate speaker for this community. However, despite my familiarity with the research setting and being from a CEE country, I suggest that my insider status was shifting and situational. Participants from different parts of the world renegotiated the forum as an international space. Could I be an insider in terms of my CEE identity where the majority of participants were from the US and other parts of the world? Second, the forum was 'invoked' as a CEE space, but it was physically located in a website of a Western University, raising issues of location and my situatedness as a researcher.

It could be suggested that insider status in an online community is established through what one writes: through participation in shared speech. This may overcome some limitations associated with traditional research but does not resolve the issue of access completely, as the choice of language does signify one's 'insider' or 'outsider' status in the community as much as the physical clues do. As I noted in the previous section, the methodological and epistemological questions of my thesis intersect, I will return to the standpoint dilemma in Chapter 5 and 6 exploring the constitution of authoritative feminist subject and considering the question of community.

From a methodological point of view, I attempt to deal with the standpoint dilemma through reflexivity. The action research framework allows incorporation of the researcher's co-presence in the construction of the field by shifting the focus from describing and observing practice to the reflective production of knowledge by changing/creating the practice. Kemmis and McTaggart suggest that reflexivity is one of the key features of participatory action research (2005: 567). Action research is a deliberate process whereby participant researchers aim to transform their practices through a spiral of critical and self-critical action and reflection and learn more about recursive relationships between individual and social practices; forms of knowledge about the practice; social structures that shape and constrain practices; and the social media/discourses in which practices are expressed (2005: 567-568). In their view, reflexivity which encompasses understanding of these recursive and dialectical relations that shape the practice is 'what theorising practice means' (2005: 568). Thus, I understand reflexivity not only as a strategy to appreciate methodological, epistemological, and political influences and account for contradictions and complexities in all stages of the research but as a way of theorising the emerging online feminist practice.

I theorise the practice of online activism drawing on recursive and dialogic relationships: I understand practice as shaped and dialogically constituted by my individual actions, participants' practices, forms of knowledge on feminism and activism, and a range of social media, including technology, speech acts, speech genres, and discourses.

I also understand my action research project as a 'multiple reality' which is perceived differently by me as an action researcher and by different participants in, and observers of, the practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 570). My own multiple locations as a researcher, a participant, a CEEer, and an observer in my project made me not only more aware of my methodological choices but also raised epistemological questions about social agency and social action, and what does action mean in the context of the multiple/textual/discursive/virtual realities of online environment.

My take on the ontological and epistemological groundings of my research could be summarised by the participative world view metaphor proposed by Reason and Bradbury:

The emergent worldview has been described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships that we co-author.

(2001b: 6)

The co-authoring and construing of social reality in my research is attributed not only to human agency but also technology, language, and cultural expression.

### *The community dilemma*

For the Internet ethnographer the process of locating and defining the boundaries of the field can be elusive and convoluted (Markham 2005; Hine 2000). By definition online ethnography describes places that are not embodied and geographically located. The Internet is geographically dispersed, and such issues as distance, proximity and location, the traditional markers of community, become almost meaningless considerations in research design. The social spaces, groups, and structures on the Internet are not clearly mapped out and are constantly reshaped by the participants' interactions. The membership of these spaces can be transient. Consequently, the research field is established as part of the ethnographic process: the ethnographer's research questions and decisions about which discursive patterns, interactions, and text she or he decides to follow or disregard (Markham 2003). This process challenges the notions of traditional and naturally given research settings, and enables us to look at the investigation of reality as interactive, relational, and situated. In this setting, an approach that prioritises discursive patterns of interaction seems to be more useful to understand the formation of online community.

In my action research I aimed to build an activist community. Have I succeeded? From the traditional understanding of community, defined by the degree of membership and human feeling, I didn't. The participants of the discussions were active for a short period of time only and I do not have any proof that they networked or kept in touch out of the confines of the forum. However, as I noted in Chapter 2, the notion of community is increasingly contested in online research and the coherence of online communication and sociability can be explored using discursive and generic approaches. Although my participants were not from the same geographical area, and their participation was limited in time (just one or two months), they

constituted a speech community through participation and self identification in relation to my website (see Chapter 4, and 6 for extended argument on idiomatic feminism and speech genre).

The speech/act, standpoint and community dilemmas which I encountered in my research raise questions about modernist understandings of action, participants' and the researcher's standpoint and location, and community as a research field. In the textual and discursive context of the Internet these terms become contested and reconfigured in different ways, and, I suggest, language related paradigms become central in considering these questions. I found concepts developed by Bakhtin, genre theory and speech act theory, to be very useful in understanding the constitution of action and agency in online environments.

### **Analytical concepts**

This third section of the chapter focuses on key concepts deployed in my data analysis to consider the coherence of online activist communities and their actions. These concepts also provide an insight into how actions can be accomplished in the communities of words.

In the section on analytical methods, I indicated that my data analysis techniques are drawn from discourse analysis and language related paradigms, adapted to address the constitution of social action and social agency in online environments. I use various language-related concepts and approaches such as utterance, dialogism and addressivity (Bakhtin), genre theory (Bakhtin, Bazerman, Frow, Miller, Swales), and speech act theory (Austin), to make sense of my data. At the same time, actor network theory (Haraway, Latour, Law) enables me to make



connections between discursive and technological aspects of online environments. I also draw on a number of other concepts derived from symbolic interactionism and poststructuralist approaches, such as footing (Goffman), standing (Steinberg), culture repertoire (Swidler), paratext (Genette), and performativity (Butler). My approach is more inductive and driven by the phenomena of interest rather than deductive, or theory driven. I do not take any of these approaches as a departure point but deploy them to provide a thick description of my data.

### *Bakhtinian approach to language*

Mikhail Bakhtin made significant contributions to several areas of thought – literary theory, socio-linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy (Holquist 1990: 14). His distinctive insight among other epistemologies that seek to understand human behaviour through language is a suggestion that all language is dialogic, social, historically and geo-politically situated, and draws upon meaning already in circulation within a given speech community.

The dialogic orientation of language is a constant theme in Bakhtin's writing. For him, the major building block of language is the 'utterance' rather than words and sentences (2004 [1986]: 95). The utterance is characterised by what he calls 'addressivity'. Distinct from other 'signifying units of a language – words and sentences – that are impersonal, belonging to nobody and addressed to nobody', the utterance has both an author and an addressee (Bakhtin 2004 [1986]: 95). The utterance itself is socially defined in terms of its relationship to other speakers' utterances and the broader cultural and social context. Therefore, utterances do more than just passively describe the situation outside language. Situated in social context, they are active, productive, encompass action and could be understood as a site of deeds, not only speech:

After all, the utterance of the person to whom I am responding (I agree, I object, I execute, I take under advisement, and so forth) is already at hand, but his response (or responsive understanding) is still forthcoming. When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance (I parry objections that I foresee, I make all kinds of provisions, and so forth). When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressee's perception of my speech: the extent to which he is familiar with the situation, whether he (*sic*) has a special knowledge of the given cultural communication, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies – because all this will determine his active responsive understanding of my utterance.

(Bakhtin 2004[1986]: 95-96)

We could observe several things in the above description of the utterance production and reception process. First, that the author and the addressee in the act of utterance share a reciprocal agency by acknowledging each other's semantic and social position. This interpersonal movement or dialogism has ethical and political overtones of openness to other positions and perspectives. Second, utterance in itself can be understood as a complex dialogic play of speech acts<sup>20</sup> through which the speakers, by attaching particular meaning to them, constitute social reality.

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<sup>20</sup> Austin (1962) defines speech acts as those utterances which bring about a state of affairs by virtue of the act of utterance, for instance, the words 'I marry you' under the appropriate social circumstances bring about marriage. In contemporary theory speech acts more generally refer to a performative capacity of language to constitute

The importance of the Bakhtinian concepts of addressivity and dialogism is that they emphasise the situatedness of dialogic exchange. The addressor is invested in the imagined audience or addressee; the speaker's language is always populated by the words of the listener; and utterance is embedded in context. Furthermore, according to Hitchcock (1993: xv), a true dialogics<sup>21</sup> 'denotes a relational capacity to selfhood (the addressor *co*authors and is *co*authored by the addressee)'. Dialogism interpreted in this way has an important implication for understanding agency and social action as co-authored, relational, and polyvocal. Subjectivity, in Bakhtinian terms, is always in the state of being and becoming: a subject becomes herself through dynamic exchange with another's discourse - that is through dialogue. It has to be noted that dialogue here does not imply a universalised model and fair and equal dialogic exchange. The notion of dialogue as power-inscribed activity in which two parties strive for dominance is a more common perception (see Bauer 1989; Bauer and McKinstry 1991).

Another key concept which I draw from Bakhtin's circle is genre. Bakhtin argues that speech genres are 'relatively stabilized utterances' tied to a particular field of 'human activity' (2004[1986]: 60). I noted earlier that 'addressivity' or quality of being directed to someone is an essential and constitutive marker of utterance. This quality applies to speech genres as 'stabilized utterances' as well. For Bakhtin, 'Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee and this defines it as a genre' (2004 [1986]: 95). Thus speech genres are conjured through the conventions of utterance,

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realities to which they refer. The Bakhtinian utterance bears some resemblance with speech acts as both are socially defined, thus, the utterance could be seen as performative.

<sup>21</sup> Some language has reduced responsiveness and Bakhtin refers to it as *monologic*, however, it is a matter of degree, as no language is completely free from its relation to other utterances (Lodge 1990: 95).

including its mode of address, thematic content, style, compositional structure and a context, that is the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication (2004 [1986]: 60).

For Bakhtin's group, genres are intersubjective tools for seeing and conceptualising reality. Medvedev suggests that the notion of genres is much more than a collection of stylistic devices or a way of combining linguistic elements. He suggests that 'human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualising reality. A given consciousness is richer or poorer in genres, depending on its ideological environment' (Medvedev<sup>22</sup> 1978: 134 cited in Morson and Emerson 1990: 275).

Bakhtin picks up a similar point in 'The problem of Speech Genres' (2004[1986]). He argues that people may know a language well but still feel inept in some contexts:

Many people who have an excellent command of a language often feel quite helpless in certain spheres of communication precisely because they do not have a practical command of the generic forms used in the given spheres.

(Bakhtin 2004[1986]: 80)

Here Bakhtin suggests that it is not a matter of an 'impoverished vocabulary or of style' but is 'entirely a matter of the inability to command a repertoire of genres', which represent a particular field of communication (2004[1986]: 80). Thus one's ability to command a wide repertoire of genres enriches one's capacity to conceptualize and participate in varying aspects of social life.

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<sup>22</sup> The text is attributed to Medvedev but probably jointly written with Bakhtin.

## *Genre theory*

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communication by which we interact. Genres are familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar.

(Bazerman 1997: 19)

As noted in previous discussion, an important part of Bakhtin's work is his discussion of genres that, he explains, are extended utterances that are embedded in and develop out of the various spheres of human activity (2004[1986]: 60). We have learnt from Bakhtin that genres are flexible models, not merely generic forms into which we slot ideas. They reflect an integration of content, form, function, and context of situation or setting, which is multidimensional and includes a range of factors from global to specific. Contemporary approaches to genre draw significantly on these Bakhtinian insights.

Traditionally, emphasis on genre has meant stressing structural regularities rather than the purpose of communication. Primarily, genres have been viewed as literary, entirely defined by textual features, form and content; fixed and immutable; and classifiable (Freedman and Medway 1994: 1). More recently, genre studies tend to concentrate on non-literary texts and 'to connect recognition of regularities in the discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use' (Freedman and Medway 1994: 1).

Genre has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, particularly through the influence of sociolinguistics. Miller (1994a), for example, has suggested we think of genres as ways of participating in the actions of a community, and Swales (1990) has proposed considering genres in terms of communicative purposes that give rise to particular features, rather than in terms of the features themselves. Bazerman (1994) has made an attempt to relate speech acts to a non-literary genre of patent<sup>23</sup>, demonstrating how long written utterances can be understood as actions. Frow (2006) has argued that genre can be perceived as a form of symbolic action which actively shapes the way we understand the world.

Recently, Swales (2004: 67) has proposed a multifaceted perspective on genre. Drawing on a variety of approaches and metaphors, he suggests that genre could be understood in a number of ways, including (1) guiding principles/ frames of social action, (2) conventional expectations/ language standards, (3) complex historicities/ biological species<sup>24</sup>, (4) variable links to the center/ families and prototypes, (5) shaping contexts; roles/ institutions, (6) directed discourses/speech acts (2004: 68).

In my analysis of the forum messages I primarily draw on the perceptions of genre as guiding frames, conventional expectations that shape context (Chapters, 4, 5 and 6), and directed discourse or speech acts (Chapter 7). This multifaceted approach enables me to approach analysis of community, identity, authority, and knowledge claims, thus social agency and action, as mediated, shaped, performed, and enacted through various generic forms.

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<sup>23</sup> 'A patent, usually a printed document, describes an invention, identifies its inventor and declares particular aspects of the invention as original' (Bazerman 1994: 80).

<sup>24</sup> Here Swales draws on a literary theorist Fishelov who in his book *Metaphors of Genre: The role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (1994) proposed a metaphor of biological species to understand 'how genres evolve, spread, and decline' (2004: 63).

### *Speech act theory and discourse as action*

Thinking about discourse in terms of 'doing things with words', and terms like 'perform', 'function', 'act', 'action', 'moves', 'strategies', and 'tactics' figure large in contemporary literary theory and language studies. The understanding of discourse as social action was influenced by two factors (Freadman 1994: 45). First, the philosophy of pragmatism and speech act theory which challenges the formal model used by logic to describe meaning. Second, the literary theorists themselves contested the formal models of textuality and traditional notions that the meaning of a text resides in its exclusively referential function (Freadman 1994: 45).

John Austin in his book entitled *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) suggested that we use words not only to say things but also to do things. For instance, the sentence, 'the window is open' is typically more than a factual statement about a state of affairs. Such a statement could warn you to be careful not to fall out, request you to close the window, complain about your lack of cooperation in the household, guess about the state of affairs or contradict the state of affairs, and so on – depending on the context, the social roles and relative power of the speaker and addressee.

This example raises two points that are important for my purposes. First, that words do things and they are a way of acting in the world. Second, that in order for words to be comprehended as actions, there has to be a shared understanding of the conventions circulating in the context between the speaker and the addressee.

Rhetoric studies suggest that a speech act approach might be too narrow to understand all the complexity entailed in the social action undertaken in many texts (Bazerman, 1994). Nevertheless, the central recognition underlying speech act theory - that discourse is usefully understood as action - has been very productive, not least in rhetorical studies but also feminism (for instance, MacKinnon 1993).

Speech acts and the Bakhtinian understanding of utterance enable us to see utterances, genres, and discourses as sites where speech and action intersect. The utterance identifies the repertoire of actions that may be taken in set circumstances. Thus, it embodies a range of social intentions towards which we may orient our energies, actions, and emotions.

Ricoeur makes a somewhat similar argument in 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text' (1991[1986]: 146-67), by suggesting that everything that holds good for interpretation of discourse holds good also for the interpretation of action. Drawing on speech act theory he argues that all actions as speech acts in the discourse are temporarily situated, addressed, and understood within the frames of circulating social conventions. It follows from the analogy that actions and discourse share much in common – they are interactive, dialogic and inherently subject to interpretation. This raises questions about the meaningfulness of the distinction made between actions and words. It seems that the Internet has the potential to challenge this distinction as it constitutes a new arena where action and speech intersect. The poststructuralist, fluid, and textual environment of my project questions traditional understanding of action and agency and signals the need to rethink action research approaches based on a modernist understanding of action.



## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a critical description of my action research project, locating it within the wider debates on action research and online qualitative methods, and identifying analytical concepts deployed in data analysis of the thesis.

The first section considered my research design, providing a description of my research site, the participants, and the topics of online discussions. This section situated my research within action research and online qualitative research methods, identifying my research strategy as an online action inquiry. It also considered ethical issues, suggesting that in my project ethical problems are more connected with research design such as inclusion or exclusion of particular data and interpretation rather than the public or private status of the Internet. Then I turned to discussing my methods of analysis, which draw on discursive and language related paradigms.

The second section considered three interrelated methodological as well as epistemological dilemmas: speech/act, standpoint and community. In doing so, I have suggested that my methodology is congruent and at the heart of what this entire thesis is about – a feminist social action and agency. I have argued that the congruence of my project at three levels (discussing action, rehearsing action, and conducting action research) has put me in a position to do a reflexive piece of feminist research. I also pointed out that the Internet as a new arena where action and speech intersect challenges the traditional ways of thinking about action, the researcher's standpoint and location and research community.

The third section identified a number of analytical concepts – utterance, genre, speech acts – on which I drew to understand the interactive and generically constituted environment of the Online Women’s Forum. I concluded the chapter by suggesting that the Internet challenges the traditional understanding of action and agency and thus action research based on the understanding of action and practice as constituted by self determined human agency.

In the next chapter I move on to the first analytical section, in which I consider the online forum as a generically shaped field.

## **Chapter 4: THE FRAME OF ACTION: MODE OF ADDRESS, GENERIC RULES AND CONTEXT**

### **Introduction**

This chapter sets out a number of foundational concepts as they are articulated in my primary research field and on which I build the overarching arguments of the thesis. The chapter focuses empirically on the mode of address/summons articulated in the structure of the website.

As stated in Chapter 3, Bakhtin defines speech genres as conjured through the conventions of utterance, including its mode of address, thematic content, style, compositional structure and a context (2004[1986]: 60). Drawing on this definition of genre and the understanding of genre as a window to perception and conceptualisation of social reality, the chapter considers the Online Women's Forum as generically constituted and thus, rule governed space.

In addition to previously discussed Bakhtinian concepts of speech community, genre and dialogism, this chapter set outs a number of new concepts such as rule governed space, paratext, Butler's concept of performativity, feminist mode of address, and footing. Building on these concepts the chapter makes a set of claims concerning the interrelationship of these key concepts in the framing of the website as a feminist cyberdialogic field. The central argument of the chapter is that I as a researcher constituted a web-space that can be usefully understood as an intersection of two commonsense rule-governed speech etiquettes: those that

constitute feminist speech communities, specifically those inflected towards activist and academic communalities/identities - and those that constitute internet speech communities.

This chapter begins with discussion of the key concepts that guides the analysis of primary material. Then, I turn to analysis of the generic rules and expectations that were embedded in the forum as I established it, imagining my audience/participants, and setting out my take up of feminist cyberdialogics in the construction of the site. This is followed by analysis of how these generic rules and expectations were read, reinforced and contested by the participants. Finally, I finish the chapter considering the wider contextual and cultural factors that might be salient for participants' engagement in the forum.

### **Genre as rule-governed field and performative structure**

According to Bakhtin, genre as a speech etiquette defines a set of expectations and projections which guide our engagement with the speech/text. This anticipatory structure is based on the cues that we receive when we first encounter a speech situation:

Speech genres organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms, when hearing other's speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length (that is, the approximate length of the speech as whole) and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end; that is, from the very beginning, which is only later differentiated during the speech process.

(Bakhtin 2004[1986]: 78 - 79)

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What is suggested here is that genres could be understood as conventions and rules that govern our speech. Some of these cues are internal to the text/speech such as a structural format, a mode of address, recurrent topics specific to a genre. Others are external and are located at the edge or margins of text, for instance an author's or a publisher's name, a logo, a title, and illustrations.

French narratologist Gérard Genette has defined these as 'paratexts' - the apparatuses of external cues which mediate a literary text to the reader/public and shape its consumption (1997). The web is an electronic, global and interactive medium and these characteristics have a significant influence on the webpage's presentation and consumption, making them different from those of a literary text or a book. However, there is no doubt that paratextual cues are still at work, playing an essential role in shaping our interpretation of online texts.

For instance, our reading of online articles, webpages, and even online messages is shaped by the value and trustworthiness allocated to the source, as mediated by the URL extension. An academic (ac., edu.), or organisational (org.) or market (com.) source will invoke particular generic expectations and with that associated forms of authority and credibility. I suggest that the paratextual elements of websites, such as the URL extensions, the form and design of websites, titles, and author names, constitute, using Genette's words, 'thresholds' or a 'vestibule that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back' (1997: 2).

The argument that genres shape our perception of the world was elaborated recently by Frow in *Genre* (2006). He suggests that 'genres create effects on reality and truth which are central

to different ways the world is understood in writing of history or philosophy or science, or in painting, or in everyday talks' (2006: 19). Frow explains, that 'the semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains – implicit realities which genres form as pre-given reference, together with effect of authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre' (2006: 19).

Consider the Home Page of the forum (Figure1), displayed to potential participants on the screen of their computers. This introductory page of the forum presupposes certain implicit knowledges such as computer skills, literacy in English and familiarity with Internet browsing. These are fundamental knowledges which enable and shape online communication. The page also contains other sets of implicit and explicit background knowledge such as familiarity with online writing; knowledge about women/feminism in Central and Eastern Europe; and other external contextual cues such as a logo of the University of Warwick and the title of the forum, which actively shape our understanding of the speech/text situation. I suggest that these different sets of knowledges are activated and brought into focus by deploying genres as tools of projecting and perceiving the world.

Here it is important to consider the relationship between background knowledges embedded in the context of situation, the text and the genre. Frow addresses this relationship by invoking the metaphor of translation:

Texts translate (activate, perform, transform) the complex meanings made available by the structure of genre, which in turn translates the information structurally embedded in the situation to which it responds.

(2006: 16)

Figure 1

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following elements:

- Browser Title Bar:** Warwick University - Sociology Department - CEE Forum - Microsoft Internet Explorer
- Address Bar:** http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/cee/forum/
- Navigation Bar:** Home | About the Forum | Discussion Resources | Research | Contacts
- Search Bar:** A search box with a "Search" button.
- Main Content Area:**
  - Section Header:** **What matters to women in Central and Eastern Europe?**
  - Text:** Welcome to the Online Women's Forum in Central and Eastern Europe where we discuss women's activism in the region. Come and talk in our forum about networking, violence, women and war, reproductive rights, gender and ICTs, and more!
  - Image:** A stylized illustration of a woman's silhouette with internal organs visible, standing on a cracked, rocky ground.
- Footer/Navigation:**
  - WARWICK Online Women's Forum
  - Links: [About the Forum](#), [Announcements](#), [Discussion Resources](#), [Research](#), [Contacts](#)
  - Additional links: [Click here for information on the Forum](#), [Online Women's Forum](#), [Forum Topics](#), [Networking Violence](#), [Reproductive rights](#), [Women and War](#), [Gender and ICT](#), [Employment](#), [Women's Civic Participation in CEE](#), [Important Announcements](#), [Moderated Discussion on Women and War on the CEE Online Women's Forum in June 2005](#)

I take up this thinking of the relations between the context, text and genre in my analysis, and perceive genre as a category which on the one hand is mobilised by the setting and contextual cues but on the other hand is also actively engaged in shaping the meanings of setting and text. Similarly to Frow, I perceive genres as 'performative structures that shape the world in the very process of putting it into speech' (2006: 18).

My understanding of the term 'performative' is comparable to Butler's notion of performativity in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), where the performative dimension of the construction of sexuality is understood as forced reiteration of norms. Genres as utterances, following the underlying premise by John Austin (1962), do more than just make statements about the nature of the world. They function as discursive actions and performative structures, which shape self presentations, as in autobiography (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 2000), and project different 'worlds' as in philosophy, religion, art, literature, and feminism (Frow 2006). However, unlike Butler's notion of forced performativity, I perceive genres in Bakhtinian terms, as flexible and relational social conventions (frames and expectations) where the context of utterance and participants play an important role in performing and transforming genres.

In fact in an interview 'Changing the Subject', Butler is also concerned with how the reiteration of norms is received (2004a). She points out both that any performance is hardly established by the intentions of an actor: 'What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation' (2004a: 345); and that 'cultural norms of reception' are also at play. These 'reception' norms which 'may or may not accord' with that of the norms of the production of the utterance can produce problems of cultural translation



and misunderstanding (Butler 2004a: 345-346). Butler sees these problems as productive sites of contestations, particularly contestations of gender performativity. Her conception of performativity as compelled by cultural norms of projection and reception invokes the dialogic aspects of performance/utterance, although in rather different ways than that of Bakhtin in *Speech Genres*. Butler makes an argument about the contestations of rules/norms, while Bakhtin is more concerned with how the conventions of utterance shape coherent cultural worlds and speech communities.

For the analysis of my primary material, it is important to note three points from this discussion. First, that our speech is governed by dialogically constituted generic expectations. Second, those generic cues can be internal as a mode of address or external to genre as the paratexts. Third, those genres are performative structures, similarly to speech acts, and they have the power to shape the perception of world, communality, and identity.

### **Feminist dialogics and feminist mode of address**

According to Pearce, 'dialogue', like 'difference', has become one of the indispensable categories with which to negotiate the complexities and contradictions of a contemporary feminism (1994:100). The category of dialogue was particularly productive in literary and cultural studies. Building on the Bakhtinian notions of 'utterance' and 'dialogue' feminists have developed a new school of thinking which seeks to 'make a case for a critical subjectivity that shows genders, classes, and races in dialogue rather than in opposition' (Bauer and McKinstry 1991).

Bauer and McKinstry, in the introduction to the volume *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (1991), point out several characteristics and meanings of feminist dialogics. According to the authors, feminist dialogics challenges a notion of 'a monolithic or universal feminism'; it provides a way of living and thinking that 'overcomes the public-private split'; it is an epistemology, that takes up the notions of 'positionality' and 'context'; and, most importantly, it forms a feminist political resistance (1991: 1-4). The objective of this resistance is 'to create a feminist dialogics that recognizes power and discourse as indivisible, monologism as a model of ideological dominance, and narrative as inherently multivocal, as a form of cultural resistance that celebrates the dialogic voice that speaks with many tongues, which incorporates multiple voices of the cultural web' (1991: 4). In their work Bauer and McKinstry chiefly conceive dialogue as a category of struggle and resistance.

However, other critics put dialogism to quite different use in an attempt to account for the specificity of women's writing. Pearce, building on Bakhtin's notion of the addressivity of utterance, offers a theory of feminist dialogics to conceptualise the relationship between speaker and addressee in contemporary women's fiction (1992, 1994). She suggests that the power of the addressee in determining the words of the speaker can be usefully deployed in understanding the gendered exclusivity of address that exist in literature by and for women, proposing that:

Women's writing is best understood not as writing *by* women but as writing for them: what genders a text is not its authorship but its potential *readership* – the way in which interlocutors *within* the text (i.e. the textual addressees and its actual readers) are positioned as female or, indeed, feminist.

(Pearce 1994: 106)

According to Pearce, we choose to read texts not only simply because they relate to our experience as women but because they address themselves to us. Furthermore, she suggests that in contemporary women's fiction the addressee is positioned as 'ally' and the dynamics between speaker and addressee invokes a sense of comradeship and 'community' (1992: 186). Although my texts are not fictional, I suggest that online feminist discourse generates quite similar dynamics between speaker and addressee.

Before I start my analysis of the constitution of the feminist cyberdialogic field, drawing on the discussed principles of feminist dialogics, I would like to introduce the concept of 'footing' which I deploy in the analysis of the participants' responses to the structure of the site.

### **Footing**

The notion of 'footing' proposed by Goffman (1981) in *Forms of Talks* can be valuable in understanding the changes in the generic rules of engagement which I deploy considering my participants 'readings' and take up of the established space. Goffman suggests that footing is related to social interactions where 'participant's alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue' (1981: 128). Although Goffman's category 'footing' is mainly embedded in a face to face interaction, I suggest that it can be usefully deployed in an online context as the cues of alignment, stance and self projections here are mediated through speech genres, cultural repertoires and discursive positions. Goffman proposes that participants' changing their footing is a persistent feature of a conversation. He suggest that the change of footing

implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way for talking about a change in our frame of events.

(1981: 128)

‘Given an utterance as a starting point of inquiry’, Goffman starts his analysis of footing by breaking up the ‘primitive notions’ of speaker and hearer into more differentiated parts, namely ‘participation framework’, ‘production format’ and the linguistic flexibility of ‘embedding’ a different speaker in our utterance (1981: 146-147). For Goffman, these categories represent different layers of analysis through which the footing is established and, most importantly, changed. The ‘participation framework’ is defined by ‘the codification of various positions and the normative specification of appropriate conduct’ in the interaction situation (1981: 3). ‘The notions of animator, author and “principal”<sup>25</sup>, taken together,’ constitute the ‘production format’ of an utterance (1981: 145). The linguistic flexibility to embed other utterances in our speech can be exemplified by reported speech, citation, hedges and a usage of the personal pronoun ‘I’. Goffman suggests that ‘I’ is ‘a figure in statement – that serves as the agent, a protagonist in a *described*<sup>26</sup> scene’ who belongs to the world of this scene, ‘not the world in which the speaking occurs’ (1981: 147).

According to Goffman, the structural differentiation of footing in subcategories of ‘participation format’, ‘production format’, and ‘embedding’ enables us to understand and

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<sup>25</sup> According to Goffman, a ‘principal’ (in the legalistic sense) is ‘someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, and someone who is committed to what the words say’ (1981: 144). He notes, that category ‘principal’ is defined ‘not by a body or mind ‘ but enactment of ‘social identity or role, some special capacity as a member of a group, office, category, relationship, association, or whatever, some socially based source of self-identification’ (1981: 145).

<sup>26</sup> Italics in original.

trace 'the general capacity to embed the fleeting enactment of one role in more extended performance of another' (1981: 156-157). Goffman's category footing as 'fleeting enactments' of role, suggests that the self performance is always fluid, situational and interactively constituted.

### **The constitution of feminist cyberdialogic field**

My analysis of primary material takes up principals of dialogics and sets out to analyse feminist dialogics in the field mediated through the Internet. I begin the analysis by testing out previously introduced concepts against the home page and other sub-pages of the forum. In my analysis I consider internal and external cues embedded in the speech situation, arguing that the forum's pages are generically constituted through two commonsense speech etiquettes/genres: online publishing and feminist, inflected with academic and activist communalities/identities.

#### ***Online speech etiquette***

The reading of the home page (Figure 1) presupposes certain generic knowledge of website publishing conventions. For instance, the reader looks at the home page expecting to find out about the goals of the website, the target audience and a quick access to other hyperlinked pages of the website. This knowledge is entirely generic and is a prerequisite for an effective navigation of the online/textual environment. Some of these expectations are tied to the logic imposed by the software design, for instance the access to the infrastructure of the website, while others are more general conventions negotiated in the online publishing and writing manuals, as the introductory function of a home page. This implicit set of knowledges on

online writing is summoned through the emerging online publishing conventions and hyper linking features of computer software (Crystal 2001).

All pages of the website are framed by the two top bars, with a logo of the University of Warwick and a title 'Online Women's Forum', a tab section on the top-right hand side as well as a left hand column with an index. This rigid layout was determined by a software programme (Warwick Forums) used for online publishing at Warwick University and could not be changed. The layout and information in these areas are not only specific to Warwick's corporate style but are also comparable to general website publishing and design conventions, where a logo of the organisation and a title for the website usually frame the main text; and the links to the infrastructure of the website are located at the top or on left hand column of the page.

The Explorer's address bar<sup>27</sup> and two other framing bars contain the paratexts which provide several cues about the authority/credibility of the website and generic indications. Firstly, the logo 'Warwick' and the URL indicate the attachment of the webpage to a higher educational institution in the UK. They invoke the authority and credibility associated with the university's prestige and its geographical location, and work towards the constitution of the website as an academic research space located in the West. In addition, the abbreviations and words 'fac/soc/sociology/research' signal a particular set of knowledge attributed to the social sciences. Secondly, the title 'Online women's forum' here performs two functions. It provides a generic indication of an online discussion genre (online forum) and identifies the 'preferred' audience (women). The question 'What matters to women in Central and Eastern Europe?'

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/ceeforum/>

serves as a subtitle and further specifies the audience of the forum as well as invested interest in this geographic positioning.

The location and content of the tabs (titles of the main pages) in the right corner and the links in the left column of the home page are also generically specific. The tabs are titled: About the Forum, Resources, Announcements, Research and Contacts and are quite conventional; the reader can easily predict the content of these pages. I suggest that these knowledges about spacing/location and expected content are invoked by the frame of a website publishing genre. The conventional format makes it easier for the readers to navigate and understand the infrastructure of the website, as long as they have seen one before.

### *A feminist semiotic aesthetic*

The page design (pictures at the centre and a left-hand column) invokes images of 'virtuality' and 'connectivity'. The iconic presentation of a cyber-woman standing on a computer chip/map of Central Eastern Europe, a computer keyboard as well as the running matrix of numbers on the face of the woman and the contrasting/fading words 'CEE, discuss, online, women, connect', summons the 'internetness' and 'technological' aspects of the exchange. These designs also advance two sets of background information about the forum: that of the exchange among women and that of location - Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the figure of a cyber-woman on a computer chip gestures towards a cyberfeminist discourse.

The home page carries a sequence of signs such as font, collar, images of connectivity (keyboard and computer chip), and an iconic cyber-woman figure, which, I suggest, generate a certain meaning of/within the forum. A process of meaning-making on the basis of

signification is called semiosis in the discipline of Semiotics<sup>28</sup>. I propose that in the Home Page of the forum we can observe a process of feminist semiosis generated through a variety of signs which are evocative of certain forms of feminist representation, aesthetics and discourse.

The usage of semiotic mediums such as font and colour was significantly affected by the publishing software and the two top bars framing all pages of the forum. However, within this frame I attempted to create an invocation of cyberfeminist exchange<sup>29</sup>, which could appeal to a technologically oriented women/feminist audience. Before, I started my own discussion forum, I had observed several feminist and cyberfeminist art websites for the design cues, rules of exchange, as well as rhetorical strategies. Thus my website design as an utterance is certainly intertextual and taken its shape from a wider repertoire of the cyberfeminist/feminist mode of address.

The images of connectivity (computer chip and keyboard), a palette of 'cold' colours (green, black and white) and the iconic figure of cyber-woman are comparable to the representation modes and general aesthetics deployed in cyberfeminist websites. A cyberfeminist mode of presentation (luminous high-tech images, contrasting colours, simple fonts) is quite different from, for instance, traditional/commercial address forms of women internet users.

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<sup>28</sup> Semiotics is a science of signs envisaged by Saussure (1983[1916]) and, in rather different terms, by Pierce (see Burks 1958). The meaning is generated through semiotic medium or any material, which carries a sequence of signs: indexes, symbols and icons. In the semiosis the meaning is shaped at one level (as in the Home Page) by the design elements, print and colour; and at another, by the overall organisation of these materials in forms such as of layout, font, syntax and composition, etc.

<sup>29</sup> I proposed the idea of the design and it was implemented by E-labs, the University of Warwick.



Paasonen (2002: 69), researching women's addresses on commercial websites, observed that these websites were constituted as 'women friendly' space through the usage of 'pastel colours'; 'soft italic fonts'; images of 'neatly attired able bodied women' from different ethnicities; and the invocation of a fundamental gender difference accompanied by a rhetoric of shared experience of womanhood. The commercial sites project a certain form of femininity through the selection semiotic medium (colours, font) and signs (figures of able bodied women). According to Paasonen, these websites promote traditional gender divisions and stereotypes representative of white, Western, middle class and heterosexual women (2002: 106). These 'women spaces', even if with an invocation of difference, clearly lacked a political edge, and the discussion topics were illustrative of this: 'Fashion', 'Health', 'Moms Online', 'Recipe Finder', 'Fighting Fat', etc (2002: 103-104).

In contrast to the example of the commercial address of women users, the political orientation of the Online Women's Forum is mediated through a set of topics in the right hand column: Networking; Violence; Reproductive Rights; Women and War; Gender and ICT; Employment; and Women's Civic participation in CEE. I chose these topics to invoke a feminist academic and activist discourse as one of the guiding frames of the reader's interpretation of the space.

Overall, the semiosis generated through the images of connectivity, colours, simple font and a cyborg-woman, an iconic representation for cyberfeminism, works towards the projection of the forum as a cyber-feminist space. In addition, through the strict layout, simple font and corporate colours (green, blue and white), the site invokes the reading of the space as corporate and professional/academic.

### *Feminist repertoires of address*

My welcoming message, posted on the home page of the forum (see Figure 1), is written in the first person using 'we' and 'our', invoking a very broad audience as well as assuming an existing community of participants:

- 1 Welcome to the Online Women's Forum in Central and Eastern Europe
- 2 where *we*<sup>30</sup> discuss women's activism in the region. Come and talk in
- 3 *our* forum about networking, violence, women and war, reproductive
- 4 rights, gender and ICTs, and more!

At the moment of posting the above message I was the only participant in this project. However, I used 'we' to align myself with my imagined audience, which I invoked as 'us' those who can discuss women's activism in CEE within the topics of networking, violence, women and war, etc. I also sought to construct a communal space ('our forum') and project the ownership of this space to potential participants and readers (line 3).

On the second introductory page (About the Forum) I deployed the pronouns 'you' and 'your' which through direct address constructs a direct interpersonal relationship as an immediate mode of utterance (lines 1-4):

- 1 Is there anything that *you* would like to discuss about gender issues in Central
- 2 Eastern Europe? Something that *you* agree with, disagree with, want to
- 3 question... generally want to have *your* say about?

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<sup>30</sup> My emphasis added in this and following extracts.

- 4 This is *your* chance to contribute. This is a space for *us* to meet each other,  
5 share ideas and encouragement, and discuss the issues that concern *us* (often,  
6 but not always with a gender theme).

My mode of address through the second person 'you' invites the reader to enter the text. It implies a positioning of the reader as someone who is capable of debating 'gender issues in Central Eastern Europe'. Furthermore, I propose that other contextual cues, such as the title of the forum and my own introduction invoking a feminist-activist identity, work toward the constitution of 'you' as a feminist reader. My subsequent deployment of the pronoun 'us' (lines 4-5), followed by the linguistic repertoire of communal practices - 'meet each other', 'share ideas and encouragement' and 'discuss the issues that concern *us*' - invokes a relationship of intimacy and involvement as an *idiom*<sup>31</sup> of friendship, comradeship and collegueship. However, here intimacy is evocative not only of a community of friends and colleagues but also of feminist ethics and politics constituted through caring, listening, and sharing<sup>32</sup>. The category 'us' here could be read as an invocation of 'women' and/or 'feminists' as a political community.

A short analysis of my own engagement in the construction of the audience of the forum indicates that the use of pronouns 'you', 'us' and 'we' looks outwards to the reader and works as devices to encourage participation and engagement. In addition, through this strategy of address, I position the addressee as my 'ally'. Here 'I' and 'you' functions as 'we' bringing the

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<sup>31</sup> Here the 'idiom' is understood as a speech form of a given language that cannot be perceived from the individual meanings of its elements; 'we' in this context signifies friendship, comradeship, collegueship, and shared identity.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance, Gilligan (1982) who argued that women's cognitive style based on the ethics of care rather than ethics of domination is epistemically superior.

sense of comradeship and community<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, I suggest that the pronouns ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘you’, ‘your’ have an idiomatic function in feminism and that there are generic expectations build up around a particular usage of these words.

### *Academic communalities*

Constructing my website through a feminist semiology and mode of address I was trying to invoke a much broader audience than academics and researchers. However, as I noted earlier, the indicative paratextual cues, the ‘Warwick’ logo and the URL, signalled the website’s connection to a field of social science – sociology, and worked towards the constitution of the CEE forum as an academic/research space.

Two pages of the website, ‘Discussion Resources’ and ‘Research’, also communicated this affiliation. For instance, in the section ‘Articles and Reports’ of the discussion resources, I advertised links to available online academic articles and reports. Following academic referencing conventions, I published and grouped these literatures under topics such as ‘Gender and EU Enlargement’, ‘Women in CEE’, ‘Women and War’, and ‘Reproductive Rights’. All these publications were focused on gender inequalities and women’s situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the section ‘Research’, I explained that the CEE Online Women’s forum was part of my PhD research strategy, which was based on action research methodology. In addition to conducting research, it sought to promote women’s online activism in Central and Eastern

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<sup>33</sup> Here I build my analysis on Pearce’s argument, that in contemporary women’s fiction the sense of comradeship and community has been achieved through ‘metafictional consciousnesses’ invoked by the speakers alliance with a feminist addressee (1992: 186).

Europe; and to 'create an online community of women activists to support networking and facilitate an exchange of ideas in an informal and friendly environment'. I suggest that the presentation of the website as a PhD research project and my status as a PhD student provided important information about how the website should be read and consumed. The hierarchy of the academic field positions the PhD researcher modestly with credentials (first degree, MA, acceptance on a PhD programme) but not yet having the qualifications that may open up an academic career.

The cues revealing the academic nature of the website certainly constituted one of the 'thresholds' which shaped participation in the forum. Not all women activists easily accepted the exchange system embedded in the research situation. As noted in Chapter 3, before starting my website, I consulted a few women activists who were involved in online activism from Lithuania, Poland, Croatia and Czech Republic about my research. At least two of them were sceptical about the forum being just 'research' as they thought that women in CEE were 'over researched' and 'over worked', and that I had to offer to women and their organisations some incentives or remuneration for participating. In the correspondence with these two activists, I explained in more detail that the website was not only about research but also activism; subsequently they approved the idea in general.

The forum attracted at least four participants who signalled their status as PhD students and a number of researchers/academics. The presentations of the PhD students indicated a dialogic relationship between their utterances and my research as well as my academic ranking. For instance, three participants reported on their own PhD research in online discussions. Others invoked their status as PhD students in their introductions. I suggest that my constitution of the

forum as a PhD research site solicited a display of academic ranks such as undergraduate student, lecturer, professor, head of a university department and, particularly, PhD student. These rankings were constitutive of the reading of the website as a forum for academic discussion. Participants who did not signal their academic ranking nonetheless displayed their academic credentials and knowledge through citation of academic articles and books.

### *Author and the text*

Genette, considering the effects of an author's name on the reading of a book, argues that the name is part of the paratext that constitutes the genre (1997: 41). Whereas a book generally has one or two authors whose name appears on the front cover and front pages only, the website has multiple authors as it develops, and the location of their names varies. My name, as 'Page Owner', appears on every posting (except the Home Page) and in other designated pages such as 'About Researcher'. Although the siting and functions of the author's name in website publishing might be different from that in 'hard' publishing, the maintenance of some conventional functions can also be observed.

Firstly, I propose that the omnipresent authorship or 'ownership' of website that is inbuilt in the design of the software has not so much to do with the authorship of texts but with a legal responsibility for what is written. This is comparable to Genette's observation that the authorship is sustained and styled by a publisher who presents the author: 'If the author is the guarantor of the text (auctor), this guarantor himself has a guarantor - the publisher - who "introduces" him (*sic*) and names him' (1997: 46).

The authorship/ownership of the website is mediated through the software 'Warwick Forums', which has an inbuilt presentation strategy whereby a logo of Warwick is part of every page design. The size and style of this logo has much more prominence than a little inscription 'Page Owner: Inga Aleksandraviciene'<sup>34</sup>. This presentation manner is shaped not only by Warwick's corporate publishing strategy but also the online publishing genre where authorship of the webpage is of marginal importance compared with that of an academic article or a book. However, I propose that my name, which indicates gender and nationality, is also of crucial relevance in invoking the generic frame of the forum. Imagine if the CEE online women's forum had been owned/ authored by a male, a non-feminist, and/or someone from a western or southern country. That would invoke a different audience, reading and meaning of the website. Here I suggest that the social positioning of the speaker/author is constitutive of the invocation of a generic frame which guides our understanding of online text. My family name reads as Eastern European, and the styling of my personal self as a PhD researcher, a feminist activist and a former worker of international organisation, is constitutive of the invocation of 'a network of genres' that includes online publishing, feminist, and academic.

Swales (2004: 21) coined the concept 'genre networks' to highlight intertextuality and the interdependence of various speech genres. According to him, genre networks are 'the totality of genres available for a particular sector (such as the research world) as seen from any chosen synchronic moment' (2004: 22). Indeed, my previous tracing of generic cues internal and also external to the text indicated that their intertextual links to different 'worlds' evoked a network frame constituted through online publishing, feminist and academic genres. Building on the

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<sup>34</sup> I changed my legal family name from Aleksandraviciene to Sniukaite in year 2006.

concept of genre network, I understand the website as cyber feminist dialogic field as invoked and constituted through various generic forms, including academic and online writing/publishing.

### **Generic rules of engagement**

Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to the preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word “response” here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.

(Bakhtin 2004[1986]: 91)

In previous section I described my own constitution of the website through a nexus of genre forms (online, feminist, academic) which guided my projection of the feminist world and invoked generically framed rules for navigating, reading, and participating in the forum. In the second part, I focus my analysis on how these generic frames/rules were supported, negotiated and contested by the participants. I bring in the key Bakhtinian notion of addressivity and the intertextuality of every utterance to deconstruct generically and intersubjectively constituted rules of engagement in the forum. I also deploy previously defined concept of footing to understand the change in the frame of inter/action and generic rules.

### ***The rules of the Forum***

As an administrator and developer of the forum I sought to construct it as an open space where registration was not needed and ‘anybody could read, post and start a new discussion thread’. The forum also had some ground rules that encouraged participants to ‘give a few words’ about themselves; to post messages that were relevant to the ongoing discussions; and not to



post any messages, links, which were ‘hateful, threatening, or otherwise violated any laws’. These rules were general in character and typical of internet discussion rules, which often requested participants to write to the point and not use offensive language. The majority of participants observed these rules, although there were a few cases of contributors who did not introduce themselves or posted their introduction as part of their message. Also there were several cases of messages advertising various accessories for women and IT goods, which I, as a forum administrator, chose to delete from the main discussion threads.

Before starting the online discussions on Women’s Civic Participation and Women and War, I encouraged the moderators of the discussions to promote inclusiveness and to facilitate participation, by asking direct questions and responding to every message to maintain the interest of participants. Certainly not all these recommendations were followed through but on the whole the moderators took them into account. I suggest that our deployment of particular rhetorical strategies of acknowledgement and inclusiveness were shaped by the electronic message, feminist mode of address as well as discussion moderation rules, and that all these three had an influence on other participants’ rhetorical and textual behaviour online.

### *Electronic message genre and feminist communalities*

Other practices that I deployed to encourage participation and to promote a ‘communal’ atmosphere included the posting of welcoming messages and responses to new participants in the discussions threads which were not moderated. My responses were mainly structured as an acknowledgement of authors’ perspectives and participation. For instance, my message to Nadine expresses appreciation of her participation, echoes her statement on ‘universal

women's empowerment', and the 'global' aspects of gender issues and supports her invocation of race in the discussion:

- 1 Dear Nadine, you are very welcome to the forum. Indeed the participation of
- 2 women from all over the world in this forum just confirms that women's
- 3 empowerment is a global issue and that we have a lot to learn from each other.
- 4 Thank you very much for bringing up race and gender issues into the forum.
- 5 I made a copy of your posting in the Women's Civic Participation thread where
- 6 we have a moderated discussion.
- 7 Inga

The main purpose of this posting was to inform Nadine and other participants that I had made a copy of the message she posted on the Introduce Yourself section and added it to the Women's Civic Participation thread (lines 5-6), as her posting contained not only her introduction but also her contribution to the ongoing discussion. If we look at this message from an electronic message genre perspective, lines 1-4, using Herring's words, can be interpreted as a move which realises 'a link to previous message' or discourse (1996: 91). It demonstrates how an electronic message genre is actively engaged in the promotion of intersubjective writing and dialogism between speakers/writers and their immediate and imagined addressees. In the above message my incorporation and affirmation of Nadine's perspectives, statements, and even words ('empowerment', 'learning', 'global') summons a joined identity of 'we' which is constituted through shared repertoires of feminist positions and values.

The incorporation and affirmation of an addressee's perspective was very common practice in the messages of participants and moderators. Suzan Herring, in her research on the basic schema of electronic messages, has proposed that a message schema can have two variants, aligned and opposed 'according to the stance taken by the message sender vis á vis the addressee' (1996: 92). She suggests that these variants are gendered, whereby women tend to choose to link to previous messages expressing 'agreement or appreciation' while men tend to disagree and express critical opinion without linking and building on previous discussion (1996: 92-95). In the CEE forum all the postings except two<sup>35</sup> had an aligned schema of message. The speakers directly or through the imagined addressee acknowledged the values and political positions expressed. Contrary to Herring's observation, male participants in the forum also deployed an aligned variant, building on the ongoing discussion and constituting the imagined addressee ('women' or 'feminist') as 'ally'. It is not my concern to contest Herring's findings of gender differences in electronic message schema, not least because of the very small sample of male participants in the forum. What I would like to highlight is that the practice of linking messages is constitutive of an intersubjective and communal 'we'. Building on previously discussed Frow's insight of genres as performative structures (2006) and Butler's notion of performativity (1993, 2004a), I consider an electronic message genre as a 'performative' structure, which through reiteration of linking move as well as idiomatic usage of 'we' invokes a meaning of community in the forum (I discuss this argument in more detail in Chapter 5).

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<sup>35</sup> To be more precise these two messages had characteristics of both alignment and opposition.

### *Re/makings of a feminist generic frame*

I constituted my imagined audience through a careful and all-embracing invocation of a feminist 'we'. My initial gesturing towards feminism was unspecific and framed just by the proposed discussion topics and location – Central and Eastern Europe. However the participants of the forum re/negotiated this frame, clearly prioritising the topics of feminist discourse (women's civic participation, women and war) over the location, CEE. I suggest that the changes in the frame of inter/action could be considered deploying previously defined categories of footing.

The footing is certainly a dialogic category invoked in the 'production and reception' of an utterance. Goffman suggests that the footing or frame of interaction is negotiated by the speaker and her/his hearer, which is similar to the Bakhtinian notion of the power of the addressee to determine the words of the speaker. In some cases the changing of the ground under one's feet could be forced by other participants, against one's will. The participant may have to perform a stance or self projection imposed by others, because of unequal power relations or social expectation about the flexibility of one's footing. For instance, Goffman gives an example of a female journalist at an official political event in the White House, who pirouetted for President Nixon after he commented on her novel fashion taste (she was wearing a pair of trousers) (1981: 124). Goffman suggests that this happened because the President changed her footing from a professional journalist to that of a woman, who according to 'contemporary social definitions', must always be ready to receive comments on her 'appearance' (1981: 125). Today, the President might be more mindful about complimenting female professionals on their appearance, or at least professional women themselves may not be so ready to change their footing and accept this form of approving

attention in a public/working space. However, here I am more interested in the signification of the changing of footing/standing – the social expectation that certain identities and positionings, in this case women, are expected to change their footing or have the ground (frame of activity) changed for them.

In this section I deploy the changing of footing in quite a different context and suggest that changes in the generic frame and imagined audience of online discussions have to be understood within a broad context of feminist discourse, particularly the norm/expectation of inclusiveness of all women's voices and positionings in a feminist activist space. The changes which I trace do not totally transform one's footing and the activity frame: participants did not start discussing fashionable accessories after seeing some postings on the best places to accessorize online. This radical change of frame was considered by me as spamming and deleted immediately.

The participants certainly recognised the CEE Women's Forum as a women's/feminist space but significantly changed the *topoi*<sup>36</sup> of my projected world as well as the moderators. These changes were more related with the dis/location<sup>37</sup> of the topic, whereby participants usually pursued the general frame but brought into discussion their own geographical, cultural and social positionings, which, I suggest, are constitutive of our footing and online projections of self.

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<sup>36</sup> Frow uses this term to define any recurrent organisation of textual content (2006: 155). For instance, the text/discourse on women and feminism in CEE is usually organised around the following topics: a weak women's movement; prevalence of gender stereotypes; impact of communism; Poland and reproductive rights; Balkan wars, nationalism and violence; East and West feminisms; various discourses on finding our own voice and perspective to project women's reality in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>37</sup> I use the word 'dis/location' with a slash to indicate an ambiguity of the contextualisation process of the topic, which is both abstract and detached from the place and at the same time easily moves and anchors in other places.

The re/making of the initial feminist generic frame is particularly interesting in the case of the Women's Civic Participation in CEE discussion. The discussion was clearly geographically situated by the following questions of Sara, a moderator and a researcher from the EGG project:

- 1 What strategies are women in CEE adopting to have their voice heard in civic and
- 2 political life?
- 3 Is the increased civic participation of women making an impact? If so, what sort
- 4 of impact is this?
- 5 What are the most significant barriers or constraints to women's participation?
- 6 How can such barriers be overcome?
- 7 What about the opportunities that women in CEE countries have to increase their
- 8 participation?
- 9 What are the main similarities and differences in relation to women's civic
- 10 participation in the different CEE countries?

This utterance invokes the addressee who is positioned as a Central Eastern European and someone who possesses an extensive knowledge about women's civic participation in the region. The imagined addressee is able to propose strategies on women's participation in political life and assess their impact (lines 1-4), identify barriers (lines 5-6) as well as compare and draw conclusions about similarities and differences of women's participation in CEE

countries (9-10). The questions are abstract and they require ample research to be addressed. Indeed, Sara's questions address the Enlargement, Gender and Governance project itself. This project consisted of 15 researchers and academics from 12 CEE countries and thus had the resources to make comparisons and assess women's civic participation on such a scale. However, the researchers from CEE countries, despite the fact that they had received specific invitations, did not participate in the discussion.

Sara projected the aims of a geographically situated academic research project through her questions. However, the messages posted on this discussion thread by participants from Pakistan, India, USA, Iran and Jamaica significantly affected Sara's established rules of exchange.

Consider the following exchange between Zubia, Haider, and Sara<sup>38</sup>:

Zubia:

- 1 Hi, I am Zubia Zubair. I am a Human Rights worker and trainer and have been
- 2 working in this area since the past seven years in Pakistan, with international and
- 3 local NGOs and organizations. I hope my views are taken into account as I do not
- 4 belong to any European country yet I think any forum regarding women is worth
- 5 taking part in as certain common problems all the women of the world face. <...>
- 6 Religion in our part of the world is often exploited and used as a pawn against

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<sup>38</sup> This exchange is significantly edited.

7 women. Civic Participation is something farfetched as women are devoid of the  
8 basic right to education and health.. <...>

Sara:

9 Dear Zubia,

10 You are very welcome to this forum. Your views and experiences are very

11 valuable for us so don't worry about not coming from a CEE country!

12 <...> I would also be interested to know whether women's forces are being joined

13 through the formation of women's networks and whether these are working

14 effectively.

Haider:

15 Hi, My name is Haider Ali. I am from Pakistan, currently working on a project to

16 strengthen Local Government System in Pakistan. I would further extend Zubia

17 Zubair's narrative of the plight of women in Pakistani society. One of the areas

18 where Zubia Zubair has not focused is women's participation in political decision

19 making in federal, provincial and local governments. <...>.

Sara:

20 Good morning from sunny Belfast!

21 Haider brought up the issue of women in decision making and the importance

22 of this in any gender equality strategy. I couldn't agree more. Indeed, it can be

23 argued that a gender mainstreaming approach (i.e., integrating a gender



24 perspective in all public policies) will not be effective unless women take full part  
25 in it, participating in the policy making process in all its phases, from agenda-  
26 setting to policy implementation and evaluation. <...>

This dialogue illustrates how participants negotiate and modify the frame of the discussion. At first glance it is possible to observe how Zubia, Sara and Haider align their discourses to each other. Firstly, Zubia indicates her difference, which according to her could impair her right to speak in a geographically positioned space (lines 3-5). Simultaneously, she projects and negotiates the reception of her utterance investing in the 'commonality' of women's problems (line 5). Consequently, Zubia provides a bleak depiction of women's rights in Pakistan focusing on religion, education and health as the major areas of concern (6-8). Using the frame of Civic Participation, she appropriates the forum to advocate Pakistani women's rights and highlights their problems as global concerns.

In her reply, Sara warmly welcomes Zubia's contribution, assuring her right to participate (lines 10-11) and expands the discussion frame by asking Zubia questions about women's networking and organising strategies in Pakistan (lines 12-14). Although Sara still attempts to control the discussion frame by referring to an earlier question on women's strategies, the frame is dis/located and the 'commonality' of the discourse is assumed. I suggest that this modification of the projected discourse by Sara signifies the expectation of inclusiveness of all women's voices and positionings in a feminist activist space. Zubia recognised the CEE women's forum as a global space, where her utterance had an authority through the universality of women's problems in Civic Participation and this expectation was approved by

a moderator. Here Sara's footing, shaped by her role as moderator and representative of the EGG project, was modified to accommodate Zubia's voice and to meet the norm of 'inclusivity' of feminist debate.

Haider's message (lines 15-19) is aligned to Zubia's utterance on Pakistani women's rights as well as the framework of Civic Participation through the theme of women's participation in decision making in Pakistan (18-19). Haider does not dwell on the negotiations of her footing in the CEE context and goes straight to the examples from Pakistan, as the confirmation of all women's voices as valuable has been achieved in the previous exchange by Zubia and Sara.

Sara responds to Haider's posting through enthusiastic agreement with the proposed strategy for gender equality in decision making: 'I couldn't agree more' (line 22) and the invocation of another abstract and 'dis/located' Civic participation/Democratisation topic – gender mainstreaming.

This dialogue indicates that the changes in the generic framework of the discussion could be understood as the participants' alignment and orientation to each other's footing, mediated through the repertoires of self projection and investments in certain discursive positions. Sara's footing in this dialogic exchange was shaped by her role as moderator, researcher and representative of the EGG project. Thus her investment in the Civic participation/democratisation debate was a way to control the discussion and bring it back to the point. However, Zubia's and Haider's projected selves as Pakistani activists were potentially problematic in a geographically set space, and their right to speak and be heard had to be negotiated by participants through the dis/location of the discourse and investment in the

commonality of women's problems. Furthermore, I consider that this 'commonality' is reminiscent of first wave and early second wave feminism, with its evocations of global sisterhood, dialogue, exchange, and sharing. I suggest that the 'commonality' of experience is a generic feature of the feminist frame and constitutive of the rules, which encouraged participation of different 'voices' in the forum. The majority of participants were not from CEE countries, crossing the borders of a generically projected and geographically situated world of the CEE women's forum, invoking sisterhood through the repertoires of universality, globality and exchange of women's knowledge and experience to negotiate their right to speak and be heard in the forum.

### *On the margins of the frame*

A message was posted to the Women and War discussion thread from Suzanne Kincaid, author of the book, *Financial Freedom On \$1 A Day*, informing the participants about the system which Suzanne developed to 'create income starting with as little as \$5 a month'. She explains that her system is used by 'thousands of people in 60 countries' that she knows of, and 'even many third world countries'. Suzanne continues:

- 1 <...> Please check out the reviews at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) on
- 2 my book. And please go to my website for more information. It is all FREE. You
- 3 can download a free copy of my book by email from my website at
- 4 [www.investworks.net](http://www.investworks.net).
- 5 My goal is to Empower People to:
- 6 Simplify life
- 7 Live honorably

8 Fulfil their personal mission  
9 Restructure a fair tax system  
10 Equalize the monetary system  
11 Eliminate corporate and government misuse of funds and to  
12 Purchase in ecological and humanitarian balance with the planet!  
13 I am very dedicated to my work. Please check it out. I would love to help every  
14 one of you and you will also be helping Danica and KOLO Cross Cultural  
15 Collaboration. All of *you* on this forum need access to funds so *you* can stand up  
16 to the fear, greed and corruption in the area of money. Men create wars for  
17 money, power and control!  
18 By using the power of community and uniting together *we* can take our power  
19 back and create a just and sustainable world for everyone!  
20 Danica is using my system to raise funds to further her work. Please consider  
21 linking up with her where TOGETHER WE CAN ALL HELP EACH OTHER.  
22 If you will send a request to [suzanne@investworks.net](mailto:suzanne@investworks.net) I will send you more  
23 information. <...>

Reading this message, I tried to understand what was going on and what kind of posting this was? According to Frow, when we are able to answer the second question (identify the genre), we can answer the first one: we know what's going on (2006: 100).

This message can be read in two ways. It may be an email soliciting the participants to join a system to help themselves and help Danica to raise funds. Or it may be an advertisement for a piece of controversial investment literature (a kind of pyramid scheme) packaged in the

rhetoric of 'ecologically friendly', humanitarian, fair, and community based economic development (lines 5-12). Since I receive rather similar messages nearly every week on my university email account; I tend to suspect that it could be latter.

In addition, Suzanne's posting breaches the fundamental rule of internet communication - the relevance of exchange. Her message does not engage directly with the discourse and the topic of the discussion. It invokes Danica's example for only one purpose - to advertise the system and acquire credibility through Danica's engagement in this enterprise. A 'shouting' capitalised font of 'It is all FREE' and 'TOGETHER WE CAN ALL HELP EACH OTHER' (which could also be read comfortably as a slogan projecting a community) further reinforces the reading of the message as an advertisement rather than as a contribution to an ongoing exchange on Women and War.

However, this interpretation could be wrong and maybe Suzanne's proposed investment system is perfectly legal, 'works' and is used by various non-profit organisations, as Suzanne claims, for humanitarian purposes. What I am trying to suggest here that the title 'Financial Freedom for \$1 a day' followed by a promise to create income from \$5 dollars a month activates background knowledge on the 'pyramid schemes', and guides my interpretation of this text. My reading of the message for the generic cues of a 'pyramid' genre very bluntly constrains the interpretation of the text to a possible deceit or internet scam. This reading is also reinforced through the advertisement rhetoric and a lack of engagement with the discourse. However, the decision about this text isn't so straightforward because it does not talk openly about personal profit but rather an opportunity to raise funds for humanitarian purpose, even if using a controversial and widely discredited investment strategy. The

invocation of Danica's name and her participation in the system makes it more difficult to read this message as an internet scam.

The participants' responses to this utterance provide some cues about how the message was received by others in the Forum; the message did not receive any comments either from participants or from Danica herself. I suggest that this discursive silence was partly determined by two reasons – the lack of relevance to the ongoing discussion and ambiguity about the message context. The context was contentious because of the invoked association of the proposed investment strategy with a 'pyramid scheme' and Danica's alleged involvement in this. My silence on this issue was governed by my triple role as administrator, participant, and researcher. As the administrator I was torn between my tasks to police the space from irrelevant messages but at the same time guarantee inclusivity. As a participant, I was not interested in a book titled *Financial Freedom for \$1 a day*. Therefore, my 'no response' was also an expression of my stance towards the projected discourse on the controversial networked investment strategies. Finally, as a researcher I did not want to intervene, speculating on the possible effects which my message might have had in shaping the forum's audience.

It seems that my stance as a participant, sceptical about networked marketing and constrained by the time to read and to find out what Suzanne proposes in her book, prevailed in this situation. Furthermore, I suggest that the incompatibility of Suzanne's message with the world projected in the Women and War discussion, in terms of its advertising tone and projected discourse, provoked this 'no response' stance. Suzanne's presentation of her book, which drew

mainly on self advertising strategies, was not convincing enough to engage me and, it seems, other participants.

Through the projection and reception of Suzanne's message I have sought to illustrate how the interpretation/reading of text is governed by generically invoked and constituted background knowledges. The example also suggested that because of the chosen rhetorical strategies and the direct invocation of the participants of the forum, the decision about whether the text belongs to one particular genre is not straightforward.

### **The context**

As previously stated, while the forum invoked a geographical location of Central and Eastern Europe, only a few women from this region participated actively in the online discussions. Has this scarcity of women's voices from the region been shaped by the genre's characteristic to constrain the production of meaning and thus incite a very specific audience? Or do we have to take into account broader contextual, cultural and technological forces which shape online participation patterns? In this concluding section of the chapter I propose that a combination of access to and efficiency in using technology, as well as knowledge of feminist discourse, is constitutive of the participation patterns on the forum.

I raised the question of women's low participation from the region in my offline meetings with ten CEE researchers (co-partners of the Enlargement, Gender and Governance project) who were invited but chose not to participate in the forum. I also discussed this issue in personal email exchanges with four participants of the Women and War discussion.

The conversations with researchers suggested several reasons for their low participation. Firstly, there were issues related to the Enlargement, Gender and Governance project. For instance, a few researchers commented that project demanded lots of their time and they found it difficult to follow all emails sent from the co-ordinators of the project. Secondly, the conversations revealed some reservation about the Internet as a new medium, particularly anxiety over control of one's own words and statements. Thirdly, there were some opinions expressed that in general online forums and chats were not serious. The majority of them gave me very polite answers commenting that the main reason why they did not participate was a lack of time. Five out of ten researchers said that they did not open the link of the forum at all and did not follow the discussion moderated by the Enlargement, Gender and Governance project, which all of them were part of.

The analysis of 'no participation' by the CEE researchers needs to consider the power dynamics between me as a PhD student and them as academicians. Most of the researchers were established academics who held high administration and teaching positions in their home universities. Therefore, the constitution of the CEE online women's forum as a postgraduate research site could affect their decision not to participate.

In contrast, some academics and activists from the US, UK, Pakistan and Italy chose to post their messages on the forum pages. Why did academics and activists from Western Europe and Asia identify the CEE online women's forum as an appropriate space for their discussions while most CEE researchers did not?



### *Digital natives and digital immigrants*

There are several contextual factors that could be constitutive of the different patterns of women's participation on the forum, related to the internet as a force which transforms political and social structures in the world. The inequalities in digital literacy have been theorised under the concept of the digital divide, which is usually understood as a multidimensional phenomena encompassing three distinct aspects: the divergence of internet access among countries, social stratification within countries, and a democratic divide concerned with the difference between those who do and do not use the digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life (Norris 2001). As a variation of digital divide theories, I found useful the analogy of digital natives and digital immigrants, developed by Mark Prensky (2001a,b), and intend to use it to describe the differences in the online participation patterns on the CEE Online Women's Forum.

In a two-part series entitled 'Digital Immigrants, Digital Natives', Prensky employs an analogy of native speakers and immigrants to describe the generation gap between today's students and their teachers in the US (2001a,b). The digital natives are born and surrounded by technology to such an extent that multitasking, hypertext and networking become their natural way of thinking and communicating (2001a: 1). In contrast, those not born in the digital world reveal their non-native status through a 'digital immigrant accent' that manifests itself in a number of ways – for instance, printing out a digital document to edit it rather than editing it online, and physically bringing people into your office to show an interesting website, instead of sending them a URL (Prensky 2001a: 4).

This analogy struck a particular chord for me. I could easily identify myself with someone who moves into a different country, studies and works in a foreign language but never loses her foreign accent and ability to fully assimilate into the local culture. I could also consider myself as a digital immigrant. My digital skills were acquired at work and university and as a child I did not spend a huge amount of time on video gaming and digital TV. I see my digital literacy as closely connected with English literacy. The analogy of the native/immigrant for me works in two ways - my digital literacy cannot be separated and considered separately from my fluency in the English language. It is obvious that digital skills combined with English language are the minimal requirements to cross the 'borders' of an online speech community. But to participate and get 'assimilated' into the world projected in the forum, the digital migrants had another barrier to cross - that of fluency in a feminist speech genre.

In Prensky's terms, some of the academics and activists who engaged in active participation in the online discussions on the CEE forum could be labelled as digital immigrants and some as digital natives. Some active representatives such as Danica, Stephanie and Nadine had their own websites, blogs, as well as electronic newsletters. They have been involved in various forms of online and offline activism. Being 'born' into a technology culture where the Internet is recognised as a powerful tool for networking, politics and self-promotion makes a significant difference in dealing with anxieties related to the use of technology and cyberspace. And also having English as a native and Internet language enhances one's own digital fluency as well. However, the patterns of activist engagement in the forum indicated that knowledge about feminism and feminist-activism also made a significant difference for online participation. For instance, Linda, a representative of an older generation, admitted that she participated in online forums for the first time. But having behind her forty years of

feminist activism in the US, she was one of the most active and eloquent participants. This example shows that digital 'borders' can be crossed and skills acquired.

I think that at a very personal level the digital native/ immigrant status, in conjunction with fluency in English, was played out in the decision of many activists and academics from the CEE to join or not to join the online forum. This assumption can be supported by the emerging research on women and ICT, which reports a very low level of women's involvement in international and regional online activism and feminist politics (Mihalec 2003). The follow up meetings with 'non-participants' and email exchanges with 'participants' of the forum also confirmed that language and a lack of culture of public participation were the key barriers to women's participation from the Central and Eastern Europe. These observations indicate that the women's online engagements depend on a variety of intertwined causes such as institutional and socio-political context, digital skills and fluency in feminist, activist and academic genres.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter set out a number of key concepts and discussed their interrelationship in the framing of the Online Women's forum as feminist cyberdialogic field. It empirically focused on mode of address/summons and identified a feminist 'genre' of address, linking it to the notions of semiotic (feminist aesthetics), idiomatic (idiomatic use of pronoun 'we') and a feminist representational-interactive field.

In the beginning of the chapter I discussed genres as rule-governed and performative structures. Then I turned to the debates of feminist dialogics and feminist mode of address,

setting out my feminist cyberdialogic take on the construction of the site. This discussion was followed by the considerations of the category of footing as one of key concepts of my thesis deployed to understand the modifications of my established feminist action frame.

The second part of the chapter suggested that my established website could be usefully understood as the two commonsense speech etiquettes/genres: feminist, inflected with activist/academic communalities and online writing/publishing generic forms. I pointed out that my established feminist cyberdialogic field was constituted through a 'network of genres' (Swales 2004) where various generic forms of online writing/publishing, feminist and academic speech intersect.

The examination of character and shape of participants' responses to my established frame of action supported the above made arguments in the third part of the chapter. The participants engaged in the forum primarily through established generic rules and expectations but there were also some modifications and changes in the frame of activity. My analysis revealed that the generic rules of the forum were negotiated through the participants' alignment and orientation to each others footing and that these negotiations and changes have to be considered within the context of feminist idiomatics of inclusiveness and its intersection with internet genres (electronic message schema).

Finally, I considered the shaping of the participation patterns by wider cultural and technological forces. I argued that women's engagement with the Internet depend on a variety of intertwined causes such as institutional and socio-political context, digital skills and fluency in feminist, activist and academic genres.

## **Chapter 5: 'I' AND 'WE': STANDING, COMMUNITY AND THE FEMINIST SUBJECT**

### **Introduction**

The question of what constitutes 'valid' knowledge and authoritative claiming arises vividly on the pages of the CEE Online Women's Forum. As pointed out in Chapter 4, the forum was invoked as geographically (CEE) and politically (women/feminist) situated. Significantly, despite my attempts and summoning of CEE participants, just seven out of 31 participants were from the CEE countries, while the majority of the most active contributors described themselves as US nationals. Furthermore, two male participants took part in the forum's discussions. This difference between my expected/imagined audience and actual participants raises questions about what could be counted as 'knowledge' and who is constituted as an authoritative 'I' and 'We' in an online forum on gender issues in Central and Eastern Europe. Or to put it differently: How are the issues of identity, authority, authenticity, and legitimacy negotiated in a feminist cyberdialogic field? This chapter aims to explore these questions by empirically focusing on the repertoires of authoritative 'I' claiming, and how 'I' acquires meaning of 'We'; and how the 'We' as a feminist communality is dialogically constituted through conversations among participants, including myself.

This chapter takes up the notion of 'footing' from Chapter 4 and advances its further consideration as 'standing', now looking at how authoritative standing is bid for and the terms through which it is established. Through the categories of 'standing', 'authority' and 'repertoire', the chapter attempts to map micro-issues of identity work and highlight generic, situational and intersubjective aspects of authoritative self presentation. It argues that one's

standing or 'the right to be heard' in the forum is constituted through authority, authenticity, and legitimacy claims; and that these claims are articulated through the repertoires of self assertion and interaction.

I begin the chapter by defining the analytical categories of standing, authority and repertoire. Then I turn to the analysis of repertoires of 'I', suggesting that a range of repertoires of self assertion found in the forum are grounded in versions of experience (the personal as political) that form not only commonsense referents for 'feminist standing' but also constitute referents to 'radical' feminist traditions of what is generically feminist in experiential/standpoint terms. The chapter explores these terms as the repertoires of mother, woman, and professional/academic as well as activist. The third section of the chapter considers how the move from 'I' to 'We' is constituted, highlighting the role of generic representational structures of autobiographical narratives, formal representational structures of CVs and shared/ idiomatic knowledge in play. Finally, the last section of the chapter considers the rules of 'I' and 'We' in feminist cyberdialogic field, suggesting that authoritative feminist 'We' is constituted through repertoires of 'I' that are grounded in experiential/standpoint feminist traditions and interactivity. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the participants negotiated an identity and claimed authority within the range of possibilities for self-hood which were supported or at least tolerated by the community; possibilities that represent the feminist community's values and norms.

### **Standing, authority and repertoire**

Standing, or 'a right to be heard', is a category taken up by Steinberg (1997: 196-197) to refer to the formal and unspoken rules that govern not only our speech but also our hearing.

Standing as a stance or a self assertion is somehow evocative of footing - Goffman's footing is shaped by both the projection and reception (or hearing rules) of an utterance. He notes that, when the 'utterances are heard they are still heard as coming from an individual who not only animates the words but is active in a particular social capacity, the words taking their authority from this capacity' (1981: 147). Therefore, standing which is articulated through a repertoire of self assertion certainly has some similarities and overlaps with footing. However, standing and footing as tools of different analytical approaches (post-structuralism and symbolic interactionism respectively) operate at discrete analytical levels. Standing deals with discursive formations – the power and authority of projected utterance, whereas, footing is a concept to understand the structural basis and dynamic of the self performance. In this chapter I prioritize the concept of standing over footing because here I am more concerned with the analysis of authoritative claiming rather than the change in the frame of activity, on which I focused in Chapter 4.

Goffman in the *Forms of Talk* considers the question of authority in a lecture situation:

I am suggesting that it is characteristics of lectures (in the sense of common to them and important for them) that animator, author, and principal are the same person. Also, it is characteristic that this three sided functionary is assumed to have 'authority' – intellectual, as opposed to institutional. By virtue of reputation or office, he [lecturer] is assumed to have knowledge and experience in textual matters, and of this considerably more than that possessed by the audience. And, as suggested, he does not have to fight for the floor – at least for a stipulated block of time – this monopoly being

his, automatically, as part of the social arrangements. The floor is his, but, of course attention may not be.

(1981: 167)

It can be argued that standing is different from authority as it *regulates conditions of hearing* whereas authority first of all is invested with power for speaking and not being questioned. However, as inferred in Goffman's illustration of a lecture situation, the right to be heard often goes hand in hand with authority, but not always. For instance, a witness in a courtroom acquires the right to be heard because of her/his standing, but not authority. In this situation the authority (a judge) grants the witness a right for speech and hearing. The witness' standing, differently from lecturer's, is summoned not so much through expertise, social or professional status but his/her connection to the issue at hand - a judicial case.

In feminist discourse the social categories of standing are negotiated through the social positioning of the subject. Some feminist epistemologies grant certain marginalised positionings more authority to speak and to be heard than others (Smith 1987; Harding 1991). Furthermore, feminist academia and feminist activists are concerned with the presentation of marginalised women's voices as within other than feminist discourses these voices have very little means of standing. This suggests that different or marginalised voices have a right to be heard in feminist discourse through the feminist epistemology which grants them this right. In addition, marginalised/different voices are represented through feminists (academics and activists) whose social categories of standing provide higher means of hearing (at least in certain discourses), complicating authority and authenticity claims as well as validity of knowledge. As I note in Chapter 2 in early epistemology debates, authority was mainly



articulated through the claims of authenticity – women’s experience of oppression. Now the debates have shifted from women’s experience to the consciously chosen political and social location of the feminist standpoint.

An emphasis on authenticity as ‘an-authority’ as opposed to ‘in-authority’, is comparable with Goffman’s observation of a lecturer’s intellectual authority. In my analysis, I use the term ‘authority’ as a multi-layered category which can be articulated through a variety of institutional authority (in-authority) and authenticity as an experiential expertise (an authority) claims. I suggest that standing is articulated through these two types of claims.

I also introduce another level of standing analysis. Goffman in the above citation observes that the lecturer might have a floor, but not the attention of the audience. Similarly, the participants of the forum might have standing, or might bid for it, but their claims may be dismissed by the audience. I suggest that having standing, bidding for it and having it accepted are different aspects of the standing category. These different forms of standing have to be taken into account in the analysis of standing constitution in the forum.

Before I start my analysis of standing I would like to define the concept of repertoire, which I use extensively in this chapter. The term ‘repertoire’ as a set of tools to act and understand the world has been suggested in various traditions of cultural analysis such as anthropology, sociology, semiotics, cultural and literary studies. For anthropologist Ann Swidler, a repertoire is a ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills and styles through which people construct strategies of action (1986: 273). In her theory of culture, Swidler contests the traditional view that cultural norms determine the strategies of action, and proposes a reverse model suggesting that people

organize their actions and values 'to take advantage of cultural competence' (1986: 275). This model prioritizes 'means' over 'ends', and implies that one values something because it was made available to him/her through accessible skills.

Swidler's definition of cultural repertoire is more concerned with how one encounters and produces a situation through actions. Cultural semiotics, on the other hand, including cultural and literary studies, focuses on a meaning making process, where available cultural and linguistic repertoires govern the production and consumption of utterance. For instance, Even-Zohar in the context of literature studies defines repertoire as 'the aggregate of rules and material which govern both making and handling, or production and consumption of any given product' (1997: 18). This definition of repertoire suggests not only 'systemicity' or dependencies between assumed items of particular repertoire, but also the idea of 'sharedness' (1997: 21). According to Even-Zohar, 'without a commonly shared repertoire, whether partly or fully, no group of people could communicate and organise their lives in acceptable and meaningful ways to the members of the group' (1997: 21).

Thus, I understand the 'repertoire' as a culturally and linguistically available shared set of operating tools (skills, styles, behaviour patterns, aggregates of expression and sets of generic forms) through which social meanings are produced and negotiated. The repertoire has some characteristics in common with genre, particularly the formative force of the construction of meanings. However 'repertoires' are different from genres as they are more fluid and less canonized forms of expression than genres in terms of mode of address, and its formal and thematic characteristics.

Drawing on the discussed concepts of standing, authority and repertoire, this chapter argues that standing is articulated through repertoires of self assertion and interaction. These repertoires have in their arsenal of tools certain generic forms. For instance, the self assertion repertoire uses autobiographical genres, personal stories, and testimonies. The interaction repertoire uses generic forms of dialogue/conversation and online message genre. In next section I undertake an analysis of standing exploring the repertoires of 'I'.

### **Repertoires of 'I'**

The 'Introduce Yourself' thread of the forum provides a good starting point for an overview of self assertion practices deployed in claiming standing and invoking an authoritative 'I'. Consider my introduction, the first message, posted on the thread.

- 1 My name is Inga Aleksandraviciene. I am an administrator of this forum.
- 2 I am from Lithuania but currently I reside in the United Kingdom with my seven-
- 3 year old daughter where I do my PhD research at the University of Warwick.
- 4 I consider myself a feminist researcher and an activist interested in women's
- 5 online activism, women's situation in post-conflict societies and generally
- 6 women's rights in Central and Eastern Europe. <...>

In this message I indicated forms of cultural and social capitals<sup>39</sup> which I perceived as the most suitable for the online forum. I established authority, stating my role as a forum administrator (line 1). I signalled my nationality (line 2) which provided me with an advantage in terms of being from CEE as well as the complexity of a temporarily displaced 'local'

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<sup>39</sup> I draw this concept from Bourdieu (1984) to refer to my educational credentials (cultural capital) and social density of my connections implied in my self presentation as a researcher and an activist (social capital).

knower (Central Eastern European) speaking from the UK. This move legitimated my standing to speak and be heard, at least in the context of my imagined audience, which I constructed as receptive to the East-West feminist debates on speaking for and about women in Central Eastern Europe (Muharska 2006). My self presentation here is governed by a repertoire of self assertion which could also be read as shorthand for an 'active, engaged, good citizen'.

My claim 'I consider myself ...' (lines 4-7) is illustrative of Goffman's notion of 'change of footing' defined in Chapter 4. The subtle change of footing here is signalled through the hedge 'I consider' which introduces some distance between the figure 'I' and its avowal. What is interesting here that is this 'distanced' self identification with a feminist researcher/activist identity can also be read as a problematic identification. This identification is certainly problematic for me. The qualifying 'I consider' is evoked here because I am still undergoing my research training and currently I am not actively connected to any feminist activist group in the CEE or elsewhere. A bid which I make here could be considered as a legitimating claim, which is different from an authoritative claim, as the former is more defensive. This legitimacy aspect of my claim signifies discursively summoned as well as my self-imposed and imagined norms about who could be called a 'feminist researcher' or an 'activist'. Thus, the hedge 'I consider' shows not only the subtle change of footing but signals the strength of self assertion, where my reflective statement ('consider') is less authoritative and assertive and is more defensive.

My invocation of motherhood was strategic in a sense that through a 'mother's identity' I sought to make my presentation less status oriented and more personal (line 3). In addition,

motherhood signifies a particular form of capital associated with nurturing responsibilities, which, depending on the social situation of the utterance, generates a number of meanings and interpretations. In my introduction these can range from ‘a brave mother studying and raising her daughter in a foreign country’ to less pretentious identities although with a powerful social resonance, such as ‘student mother’, ‘single mother’, and ‘migrant single mother’. The invocation of these identities in a feminist-activist forum implies quite different political consequences than, for instance, it would have at a school parents’ evening or in a social benefits office. My investment in motherhood and nationality works towards the legitimacy of my standing, which is based on certain notions of epistemic privilege such as authenticity (being a ‘real woman’, a ‘real CEEer’). Furthermore, the invocation of motherhood can be considered as a form of ‘strategic essentialism’<sup>40</sup> which appeals to both feminists and non-feminist audiences. Non-feminists might accept a mother’s standing because of her ‘realness’ of experience, which enacts authenticity of standing; whereas the feminist audience can support a mother’s standing not only for authenticity of experience but also for strategic - political purposes.

This short investigation of my self presentation shows a few emerging themes in the constitution of the standing, which I would like to pursue in my analysis of other participants’ postings. Firstly, that standing is articulated through ‘an-authority’ claims or the claims of the authenticity of lived experience (mother, Lithuanian) and ‘in-authority’ claims, which are invoked by professional and academic credentials. In addition, one’s standing may be evoked through legitimating claims/moves, which are usually more defensive and less assertive than

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<sup>40</sup> Here I refer to Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism, where she proposed to use the term ‘Third World women’ as strategic rather than metaphysically grounded (1987). I suggest that my invocation of motherhood is strategic as I seek here to consolidate my standing using a universal category of motherhood/women.

authoritative claims. Secondly, that the self assertion repertoire is characteristically articulated through generic forms of autobiography and curriculum vitae. This argument will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

### *'I' as mother*

The theme of motherhood was reciprocated by a similar disclosure of Lynnette, a feminist academic from the US, in the second message posted in the Introduce Yourself thread:

- 1 I am on faculty in Wisconsin where I teach leadership and service quality.
- 2 In fall of 2003 I held a Fulbright appointment with the East-Siberian State
- 3 Technological University in Ulan Ude of the Buryat Republic, Russian
- 4 Federation. I am interested in doing similar work in E Europe and moving
- 5 there with my 7-year-old Buryat daughter. Any ideas? I would welcome the
- 6 prospect of focusing on women and/or girls and leadership. See my web site
- 7 [lynnettebrouwer.com](http://lynnettebrouwer.com). <...>

Lynnete introduced herself in a similar way to me stating her relationship with the academy, pointing out her expertise in leadership and service quality; indicating a prestigious Fulbright teaching appointment in Russia; and expressing interest in moving to Eastern Europe with a Buryat<sup>41</sup> daughter (lines 4-5). Here the most interesting feature is Lynnete's reference to her adopted 'Buryat daughter'. It signifies a personal and genuine interest in Eastern Europe. This is also an investment which grounds her interest in the region and gives an implicit urgency to her and her daughter 'moving' to Eastern Europe. Her mothering of a girl from Buryatia

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<sup>41</sup> The Buryat Republic is in Siberia, Russian Federation.

evokes the discourse of cross-cultural adoption and popular concerns about whether it is right to raise an adopted child in a different cultural environment from their birth. Lynnete's personal website supports this reading by establishing a story of the adoption of a Buryat baby-girl; raising her as a single mother in the US; moving to the Buryat Republic through a Fulbright exchange; and at present returning back to Siberia just for summer visits every year to 'immerse' her daughter in her 'native culture'. The invocation of her daughter's Buryat identity not only enables Lynnete to legitimise her request for information on academic jobs in Eastern Europe but also constructs Lynnete as a Western woman speaking from the East, an identity which conjures a particular type of authority and knowledge associated with an 'insider's' capital accumulated through lived experience in Eastern Europe. I suggest that Lynnete bids for her standing in the forum by invoking her authority through two types of claims. First, she negotiates her basis for speech through 'in-authority' claims displaying her academic office. Secondly, she invokes 'an-authority' or the authenticity of her standing through reference to her mothering of the adopted child from Russia. What is interesting here is that Lynnete is not the biological mother of the child. However, I suggest that her claim of motherhood is can be understood as a strategic essentialist claim – an appeal for motherhood as a universal experience, a shared identity, and a 'common language'. Furthermore, this claim signifies something more – Lynnete's genuine interest in the CEE region and 'sharing' of the CEE identity through the parenting of her Buryat daughter. It is difficult to evaluate if her bid for standing was successful, as this exchange did not develop into a broader discussion. Nonetheless, I replied to her message and provided some information about available opportunities for teaching via the Soros foundation. That could hardly be read as an acknowledgement of her bid for authenticity, but it certainly indicates the recognition in terms

of her 'an-authority' claim, as I found her request for professional/employment information valid within the context of the forum.

I suggest that my and Lynette's self presentations, even though limited to a few sentences about academic/research interests, nationality and motherhood, are generically constituted. The presentations of the self include the repertoire of identity figures such as profession (researcher, student, activist, professor), nationality, and gender, which can also be elements of autobiographical genres. Lynette and I construct ourselves by invoking just the key identity figures, but the self presentations by other participants often contained more complex texts with generic features of a CV or an autobiography.

Feminist researchers call a self presentation genre (autobiography, CV, and various forms of self introduction) a form of self life writing/ speaking, which is embedded in the social situation of the narrator and her audience; in generic conventions, and is always intersubjective and political (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 2000). I consider 'self life writing' as one of the practices of self assertion through which a speaker negotiates her identity, standing and knowledge claims.

The identity of mother was invoked in only three out of 31 self presentation messages. However, motherhood as constituting standing and a topic of feminist analysis was frequently invoked in the discussions of the forum. For instance, Silvana, a participant from the US, raised the question of motherhood in a story describing her son's negative reaction to the word 'feminism'. She suggested that mothers have to take responsibility to raise awareness about feminism and respect for women in their family. In this particular discussion, Silvana invoked



motherhood as an authenticity claim summoned through a personal story: a story of perceived failing as mother to a son sceptical about feminism. The authentic experience, which is presented as 'I/we<sup>42</sup>' failing, shaped her standing and the constitution of authoritative 'I'. Silvana's personal story generated lively discussions on women's/feminist accountability and her standing was certainly accepted by the participants. Furthermore, it was reciprocated by very similar personal stories alongside feminist analysis of motherhood and women.

The ongoing discussion ranged from general lack of awareness about women's right in the Balkans, to mother's and/or women's complicity in wars and nationalism, to motherhood as a patriarchal institution and to violence against women. Danica summarised this section of discussion with these words: 'I often hear this as what about the men or not my husband, son, etc. Women come to the defence of men but not to the defence of their daughters or themselves'.

The practice of defending men and husbands or defending one's own life style, values and beliefs is indicated in the message posted by Corazon, a participant from the UK.

1 My name is Corazon. My husband was born in Yugoslavia. We have  
2 beautiful daughter Andjelka. I read about Yugoslav history a lot  
3 because I LOVE my husband very much and I want to know where he  
4 comes from. I am on maternity leave so I have plenty of time to browse  
5 internet (while my baby sleeps) and come by accident on this site. I was in  
6 shock. If any of you love enough your own husband you will not be

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<sup>42</sup> She referred to feminist participants.

7 feminists. Main purpose of woman is to bring up own children and protect  
8 them. Woman that wants to be in the man role does not deserve children.  
9 I speak this as a mother, devoted Catholic and educated woman. My  
10 husband is Orthodox Christian. <...>

This message arrived on the forum nearly one year after the active moderation of the discussions finished, and the author did not receive any response to it. Corazon in her message, which is not represented fully in the above extract, mounted a personal attack against Danica and disputed the question of the Bosnian state and nationality, calling it ‘artificially constructed’ and ‘superficial’. Interestingly, her message did not engage with any particular feminist argument made in the discussion on Women and War, only insisting that ‘kolo’ is a Serbian dance, not Bosnian, and that it is started by a man, not a woman <sup>43</sup>. It seems that Corazon’s posting was stirred by this alleged ‘ignorance’ about the ‘kolo’ dance and Serbian/Yugoslav history and a general refusal of feminism. The constitution of her standing has to be understood in this broader context of her message.

Corazon asserts her right to be heard through investing in her husband’s Yugoslav nationality (line 1). The invocation of her daughter’s Serbian name ‘Andjelka’ (line 2) and her statement about love for her husband as an incentive for her interest in Yugoslav history complement each other and bid for the authenticity of her standing (lines 2-4). Furthermore, the ‘LOVE’, printed in capital letters, or the version of heterosexual marital love summoned in this message, is projected as a key value, which has to govern the relationships between women

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<sup>43</sup> Kolo or ‘dance in circle’ is the name of Danica’s nongovernmental organisation. She used circle dancing in her work with women affected by trauma.

and men. This love is contrasted with the invocation of a popular notion of feminists as men haters, who, according to Corazon, are loveless destroyers of traditional women's roles and not deserving of children (lines 6-8).

Corazon crafts her identity as a mother giving attention to the detail: 'I am on maternity leave so I have plenty of time to browse internet (while my baby sleeps)'... (lines 4-5). This sentence constitutes Corazon as a 'good mother', as she is fully dedicated to her motherhood and pursues her self development interests only when her baby is asleep. But this also signifies a mother's guilt about doing something for herself. The guilt is signalled through her justification, that she browses the Internet only when her baby does not require attention.

Corazon finishes her introduction consolidating her right for speech and hearing by linking three identities: 'mother, devoted Catholic and educated woman' (line 9). In addition, she borrows from her husband's identity, as an Orthodox Christian (line 10), to strengthen her right to be heard through an authenticity claim. I read the invocation of her husband's religious identity within the discourse of a Christian marriage, where wife and husband operate as one unit. Thus, Corazon, a wife, shares her husband's Orthodox Christianity, which stands not only for a religious but also for a political identity in the Balkans. This sharing of her husband's Yugoslav identity, as well as her parenting of a child, provides her bid for standing and knowledge claims within the context of the CEE forum.

Corazon also negotiates her standing by invoking the identity of an 'educated woman' but without providing any details of professional or educational credentials. This suggests that Corazon perceives that the identities of mother/wife and devoted Catholic are adequate tools

to negotiate her standing in this speech situation. In my previous analysis, I have traced the way that some feminist participants, also, asserted themselves through motherhood. However, for Corazon, the category of woman signifies and is enacted within an anti-feminist version of Christian discourse, whereby a woman is defined by her biological role as a mother. The mother's responsibility is 'to bring up own children and protect them' (line 7). Corazon enacts this role invoking powerful signifiers of love and self sacrifice as key definers of motherhood/womanhood to contest the feminist invocation of motherhood. The latter in the forum was constituted through the projection of 'women/mothers' as a political category: conscious of discrimination against women, women's and mothers' complicity in war, violence against women and traditional family roles which disadvantage women. A feminist critique was summoned not only through the content of the discussions but also by the self presentations of the participants, where professional and academic credentials were the primary tools of self assertion, unlike Corazon's constitutive tools of standing (mother, loving wife, devoted Catholic). This suggests that the authenticity claims based on women's experience (motherhood) can signify and enact different generic worlds (Christian theology versus feminism) and result in conflicting political identities.

*'I' as woman*

But being a woman and knowing the soul of women... I also know that if a woman/women receive help, they automatically spread it around.

(Silvana, a participant of the forum)

The participants of the forum quite often invoked identifications such as: 'being a woman', 'as a woman', 'we as women' to construct their standing and claim authority. The quotation

above, where 'being a woman' and 'knowing of women's soul' authenticates Silvana's knowledge claim about women's ability to share resources with a community, is illustrative of this practice. Furthermore, it is evocative of 'radical feminism' and standpoint epistemology debates based on authenticity claims or a focus on women's ways of knowing and experience. In this section I suggest that the invocation of a category 'woman/women' within a context of feminist self assertion goes far beyond the biological features of identity. Depending on the context of utterance, it can signify a feminist political identity, as well as enact the feminist standpoints debates. I consider the standing of 'a woman' as a speaking position which is constituted through various versions of feminist discourse and, particularly, experiential standpoint debates such as 'the personal as political'. However, there were some exceptions as in the previous example, where Corazon invoked her woman/mother identity to oppose feminism.

Tara, an Iranian student from the US, finishes one of her messages criticising the US government and UN system for the lack of attention to and policies to help women in the aftermath of wars, with a statement: 'As a woman, I want more exposure of female voice'. Here Tara invokes 'woman' as a political identity and she requires the accountability of authorities to hear and to expose women's voices. The discourse of representative democracy is implicit in this statement, where the category 'woman' signifies an identity shared by half the population, which has the right to be heard within democratic societies. We can also read Tara's request for 'exposure of female voice' as shaped by the discourse of feminist epistemology, where the women's voice is valued because of specific women's experience and knowledge.

Danica's starts her message with the same programmatic statement as Tara: 'As a woman, I have so many words taken away...', I suggest that in these statements the speaking position is 'programmatic' in two ways. Firstly, the speaking position as 'a woman' follows and reproduces the early feminist debates or a 'programme' to advance women's way of knowing. Secondly, through the reiteration of this phrase in various feminist public discourses such as conferences, campaigns and rallies, it achieves idiomatic features, where as 'a woman' is a shorthand for political identity.

Danica in her further message puts forward a few theoretical ideas developed by Dale Spender (1980) on patriarchal language, which obstructs women 'to be heard into speech'. She deploys the discourse of patriarchal language to analyse a lack of women's solidarity and feminist awareness.

It is likely that Danica invokes her identification 'as a woman' whose 'words are taken away' primarily as a rhetorical tool which helps her to establish a connection between her writing and academic discourse through framing other authors' ideas as her own experience. However, the positioning claim 'as a woman' followed by the summoning of oppression ('words taken away') enables us to read this short declaration as a programmatic feminist statement. This statement signifies a speaking subject conscious of oppression and is evocative of feminist standpoint debates on a lack of women's voice.

Nadine, a Jamaican participant, invokes the category 'women' as a signifier of resistance and feminism: 'As women – individually and collectively – we are engaged in a personal war on a daily basis. Feminism is being murdered on the battlefields and symbolically within us'. The

invocation of 'we as women', a positioning statement, conjures the meaning of a shared political identity. This meaning is constituted through the mutual experience of oppression as well as resistance ('engaged in a personal war on a daily basis'). Furthermore, 'feminism' here is projected as the inner value system of an imagined audience invoked through the third person 'we' and 'us'. Here the words we/women/feminists are used interchangeably as signifiers of feminist identity.

These examples illustrate how the category 'woman' is rhetorically deployed to bid for standing and authority for feminist standing. The participants' programmatic invocation of this category can be considered as an enactment and reiteration of a particular version of 'radical' feminism, which prioritise women's experience, as opposed to, for instance, more recent gender or social-political positioning debates. The authority of the speaking subjects here is shaped through authenticity claims or claims of a universal experience of women's oppression. Some of these claims can also be considered as enactments of the discourse of representative democracy.

### *'I' as in-authority*

Despite my attempts to use informal and less status oriented language in the introductory pages of the forum and my own self presentation, the invocation of professional and academic credentials dominated the participant's strategies claiming their right for speech and hearing. Marina, the second moderator of the Civic Participation Discussion, introduced herself by capitalising on the moderator's role and her profession:

- 1 This week I'll act as a moderator of the forum on women's civic

2 participation in the CEE. Let me introduce myself: my name is Marina  
3 Calloni and I'm professor of social and political philosophy at the  
4 University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. I'm a member of the project  
5 on 'Enlargement, Gender and Governance' and I'm mainly working on  
6 topics related to political theory and gender relations in post-communist  
7 countries. <...>

Marina is bidding for her standing drawing on the moderator's role (lines 1-2) as an interaction position which legitimates her right for speech and hearing in the forum, and the invocation of high academic and professional credentials. Both these roles exude institutional forms of authority, and the standing gets articulated through 'in authority' claims. Here I use the term bidding for standing because Marina is not from a CEE country and comes on board as an expert in a 'working' capacity. She certainly consolidates a strong authoritative standing but does it get approval?

After this introduction, Marina raised several abstract and complex questions about women's political participation in Central and Eastern Europe; the participants did not pick up any of these questions. It is likely that the abstract theoretical level of the questions was one of the main reasons for non engagement. For example, a question such as 'How the CEE women contributed to rethinking theory and *praxis* of democracy?' requires extensive knowledge of political theory, the socio-political context of the region, and the women's movement, which makes it difficult to engage in the discussion without additional research. In Bakhtinian terms, this silence could be interpreted as a lack of fluency among the participants' in this specific speech genre. However, there could be other reasons that provoked the silence.



The majority of participants asserted themselves by reporting their professional and academic credentials, but their arsenal of tools also included other formal expertise invoked by identities such as peace activist, feminist activist, and human rights worker, student, wanting to work with traumatised women, etc. These characteristics of self presentation and informal style were certainly missing in Marina's introductory message. It is possible that strictly 'in-authority' claims were not the most effective strategies to get a response from the audience.

Sandra and Linda, the invited 'speakers'<sup>44</sup>, on the Women and War discussion also represented themselves as 'in-authority' but differently from Marina, they claimed experience and expertise in feminist activism. Consider two pieces from the short autobiographies submitted by Sandra and Linda:

### **Extract 1**

1 My name is Sandra Ljubinkovic. I am 28 years old. I'm a feminist activist  
2 in women's and peace movement for almost 10 years. In the past years I  
3 carried out a wide range of activities... [provides a long list of campaigns,  
4 seminars, and workshops] <...> Now I work as an executive director of  
5 the Anti Trafficking Center (ATC) in Belgrade where my work contains  
6 work on prevention and education, trainings, alternative programs for  
7 young women, counselling, initiative-men against violence against  
8 women, peer education and many more. <..>

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<sup>44</sup> The Women and War discussion was moderated by Danica and three 'other guest speakers': Sandra, Linda and Stephanie, who posted their autobiographies on the website before the discussion began.

## Extract 2

1 Linda Malanchuk-Finnan is a feminist activist since her college days of  
2 the late sixties. Her goal is to make the world better for women's lives  
3 and, by doing so, improve the lives of children and men. She has worked  
4 in the field of special education for many years. By avocation Linda keeps  
5 her community aware of and involved in the needs and strengths of  
6 women... <...> Today she lives in Olympia, Washington with her  
7 husband and son and is president of Thurston County NOW (National  
8 Organization for Women) there.

These autobiographical accounts are written in different styles, using the first and the third person pronouns, which make it easier to spot some of the rhetorical advantages and disadvantages of language use in claiming authority. Here, we can observe that both speech figures 'I' and 'She' can be followed by various self assertion repertoires. Sandra, as an animator of speech, claims her standing directly through the rhetorical figure 'I': 'I am a feminist activist'; 'I carried out a number of projects', 'I am an executive director'. Whereas we learn about Linda's experience and credentials through the point of view of an objective observer, a biographer rather than autobiographer, who writes, about Linda, who is a feminist activist, an educator, a community activist, and a president of Thurston County NOW. From a rhetorical perspective, the third person writing is less effective for self assertion and persuasion, but I suggest that here the reported speech, in contrast to the first person direct speech, generates the effects of objectivity through the figure of a biographer, who, from a distance, authenticates Linda's life history.

What is striking in Linda's and Sandra's accounts is that they both invoke a feminist activist identity in the first sentences of their self-presentations. What is also clear from their life stories is that both of them are involved in activism not only in a voluntary but also in a professional capacity, particularly Sandra. This invocation of 'feminist activist' as primary identity signals not only the hierarchy of their self identifications but also reflects the desirability and perceived authority of feminist activist identities in the speech situation.

I suggest that their authority claims must be explored within the generic framework of the forum, which summons feminist activists and, particularly, those from the CEE countries. From the perspective of the generic frame, Sandra, an activist from Serbia, has a very convincing authentic standing within the forum. She is a perfect representative of my imagined audience: Sandra is a feminist activist, Serbian, and has authentic fieldwork experience in the Balkan region. Her invocation of the time frame of her engagement in activism (Extract 1, line 2), a list of projects and her current position leading the Anti-Trafficking Centre (lines 4 -5) works towards the constitution of her standing through experience and expertise, or a mix of 'an-authority' and 'in-authority' claims.

Linda asserts herself very similarly to Sandra and draws on the claims of experience in feminist activism and profession. In the beginning of her biography she bids for standing investing in feminist politics (Extract 2, lines 2-3). Linda sees feminist activism as work to better women's lives and also 'improve the lives of children and men' (Extract 2, line 3). This 'extension' of feminist politics to children and men and the invocation of her husband and son at the end of her biography summons the authenticity of her feminist politics whereby the personal is political. Linda finishes her biography reporting her community involvement in

helping women to find their 'need' and 'strengths', her residence in the US, and family composition.

Linda is from the US and the enactment of her standing in the forum's discussions was much more complex than Sandra's. For instance, even though she had 40 years of activist experience, Linda was always very cautious about giving advice and opinions about feminism in the CEE: she was always making the point that this is a way how we, US feminists and NOW members, have done it in the US, but you might want to think if that works for you (Lithuanian or Moldovan activists). This signifies that geographical location as social positioning is constitutive of standing and, particularly, authenticity claims. Linda's caution indicates that she felt her advice for CEE participants might lack 'lived' or 'insiders' experience. It can be suggested that Linda's subtle approach is the enactment of feminist standpoint debates and the question 'who can speak and for whom', and it is manifested through awareness about one's social positioning and standing in the geographically located forum.

This comparison of self presentation through reported and direct speech indicates that standing is constituted not only through claimed identities, experiences and credentials but also generic forms such as autobiographical practices and their rhetorical tools (pronouns), which are actively involved in the shaping of our authority/authenticity claims. The claims articulated in the first person through the *assumed* immediacy of utterance may carry higher levels of authenticity but less of *assumed* objectivity, and thus less authority than reported speech. In the following section I am going to focus in more detail on the role of generic representational structures and idiomatic knowledges in the constitution of 'I' and 'We'.

## **From ‘I’ to ‘We’: autobiographical narrative genre, email and idiomatic knowledges**

Killoran, researching an emerging genre of personal webpages, has suggested that ‘any account of autobiographical display in the new medium of the Web must be, in part, an account of genres rooted in older media’ (2003:79). His research findings indicated ‘both, the authors’ struggles to deploy the genres of self-presentation they knew from past environments, but also of their resourcefulness in adapting these generic forms to the new media environment’ (2003: 71). My analysis of the constitution of standing in the introduction messages also suggests that the participants have drawn on familiar genres such as ‘introducing my-self to acquaintances’, CV, autobiography, and/or a short commentary about profession and/or research interests to represent themselves. I argue that these autobiographical genres through their meaning making function effect the constitution of standing and knowledge claims in the forum.

Let me illustrate this with two examples of self presentation messages by Ala and Nadine. Ala’s message contains a particularly detailed comment on education and profession (lines 4-6), that is similar to a CV genre:

### **Extract 1**

- 1 Dear friends,
- 2 I am glad so many women are active in this forum.
- 3 My name is Ala Mindicanu, I am from the Republic of Moldova.
- 4 Education: Journalism, master in public administration, Ph.D in economics.
- 5 Issue: women's management. Now I have the position of Chief of

6        Communication Department, Free International University, Chisinau.  
7        Gender equality is one of my favourite issues.  
8        I participated at IV World Conference on women. Beijing 1995 and since  
9        those times – at many other conferences on women. Today I am National  
10       expert in CEDAW. If you want to learn more – just google my name and you  
11       will find a lot of the information I published about Moldovan women.  
12       I am glad to participate at this forum. Now I am in business too.  
13       All the best for you all, only together we can change this world for better.

In this message, Ala combines the formal CV genre with informality and casualness in style: ‘favourite issues’, ‘google my name’, ‘I am in business too’. A detailed outline of Ala’s education, high administrative position at the University and expertise in CEDAW constitutes Ala as a professional academic. Her sentence ‘google my name and you will find the information...’ stands in contrast with the generic requirements of the CV and a precision of academic culture. It also indicates Ala’s digital literacy as well as her electronic ‘presence’ on the Internet. This slipping into a colloquial and casual style of ‘Net chat’ works towards the construction of Ala as an informal and friendly persona.

Three genres, that of CV, email and feminist genre, are the most significant in Ala’s constitution of a multiple self – professional, activist, academic, and informal ‘friend’. The rhetorical structure of the CV genre propagates self assertion based on educational and professional credentials. These self presentations are always calculated and change according to social context. It could be argued that the main rhetorical function of a CV genre is to establish one’s standing or authority and credibility in a particular knowledge area. Ala’s

detailed account of her university degrees and high ranking administrative position in the University works towards the establishment of her standing through academic and professional achievements through 'in-authority' claims. Furthermore, claims of expertise in CEDAW and the reference to her participation in international women's conferences such as Beijing (lines 8-10), signifies that Ala occupies a high position in a national hierarchy of the women's movement. Ala establishes her standing building on the generic forms of the CV, and its repertoire of educational, professional and activist identities. Her entry also demonstrates how self presentations are shaped by the discursive patrimony of the autobiographical genre.

The effects of the genre of electronic message and email<sup>45</sup>, the most popular and familiar genre of online writing, has also to be accounted for in Ala's assertion of the self. Previous research into online feminist writing has shown that Internet and email genres tend to intermix the personal and professional (Harcourt 1999b: 221; Jolly 2005: 159). Rhetorical analysis of electronic messages suggests that they carry a discursive legacy of previous epistolary genres such as the letter and promote an informal mode of address (Herring 1996; Jolly 2005). I would add that the personal style of messages posted in the forum is produced and enacted not only by the rhetorical structure of email/letter but also the generic invocation of activism and

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<sup>45</sup> Crystal in his analysis of the variety of languages on the Internet suggests that from the linguistic point of view there are significant differences between chatgroups and the email situation, in 'that the latter is typically between a pair of named individuals (or institutions), with message-exchanges often limited to a single transaction' (2001: 129). By contrast, chatgroups typically involve several people with messages exchanges often anonymous, continuing indefinitely, and dealing with unpredictable range of issues (Crystal 2001: 129-130). I agree with these observations, but my data, in contrast to the typical online message, indicates many similarities with email language such as greetings and closings; the postings are not anonymous; some of the messages are quite long. Here I suggest that some linguistic features and strategies of email genre as the most familiar online writing practice are adopted by the forum participants.

sisterhood, particularly, feminist address, where personal address to colleagues, women and friends is also constituted as political.

The informal rhetorical strategies deployed in Ala's opening and closing comments and her use of conversational language such as 'I am in business too' works towards the constitution of Ala as an informal 'friend' and 'a woman' who claims solidarity with other forum participants to 'change the world for better'. In the latter comment through invocation of the plural pronoun 'we' (line 13) and the reference to 'change the world', the summoning of feminist sisterhood and shared movement takes place. The personal style of her email/electronic message creates an impression that Ala participates in this discussion on equal terms with other participants who did not display or claim such qualities of cultural and social capital. The email genre and feminist address puts her formal 'CV inspired' introduction into a more personal context; however the personal here stands for sisterhood and a political category of women. Nonetheless, overall the CV genre dominates the constitution of authority through traditional investments in professional and academic identities.

Nadine's self introduction contains a comprehensive description of where she has lived and travelled as well as a detailed account of her academic and professional achievements:

### **Extract 2**

- 1 Hi, my name is Nadine McNeil. To tell you a bit about myself, I was born and
- 2 raised in Jamaica, where I lived until aged 13. Since that time, I have lived in
- 3 Canada, the United States, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain and am now living in
- 4 Holland for the past eight years. Additionally, I have travelled extensively



5 throughout the world: to Africa, Asia and as far away from my birthplace as  
6 New Zealand. All of my working life has been spent in the international  
7 organization arena, first with the UN engaged in peacekeeping activities, and  
8 now with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.  
9 Currently, I am also studying at the Maastricht School of Management, where  
10 I am pursuing a DBA in Organizational Behaviour, with an eventual focus on  
11 emotional intelligence and gender. While my main professional experience  
12 lies in the areas of logistics management and media and public relations, I  
13 also have a keen interest in gender relations, and have continued to pursue this  
14 academically. For my Masters of Arts in Management, my thesis examined  
15 the feminine approach to change management in large multi-national  
16 organisations in the new economy. My personal commitment and 'mantra' as it  
17 were remains, how can I make a viable contribution to civic society with a  
18 keen emphasis on the evolution of gender.

This posting is also based on the CV and 'short Bio' genres. Nadine states her Jamaican roots and then continues her biographical account of migration and travel 'throughout the world', which evokes the semiotic field associated with the knowledge and authority of migrant identities. By the 'semiotic field', I suggest that 'travelling' in a global world is not a neutral activity; it is an identity formation, which is saturated with forceful meanings ranging from tourist and vagabond<sup>46</sup>, global elite member, global citizen to economic migrant and illegal migrant. Nadine's 'adult' migration as a professional in international organizations, and a

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<sup>46</sup> Bauman (2000) provides an analysis of emerging global identities through the metaphors of tourists and vagabonds.

student in a Western country, signifies modes of travelling which are available to a few and carry a mark of privilege (lines 1-5). Nadine's migrant identity projected through her connection to international politics and academia evokes the authority of a global citizen/ elite member aware of the world's cultural differences. Then she highlights her interest in gender relations and finishes her introduction with a political statement about her work for civic society and gender.

Nadine's introduction is followed by further text where she makes the assertion of the universality of women's empowerment experiences and raises the issue of being a black woman (lines 19-30). I suggest that these assertions of sisterhood and solidarity, and invocation of the personal as political, are generic forms of a feminist speech genre.

#### **Extract 2 (continued)**

19 I am excited about the prospects offered by this forum as I am sure that I will  
20 learn a lot and exchange ideas with others whose focus is on gender issues  
21 within the CEE. Many of the gender issues that plague Jamaica are not dis-  
22 similar to the issues that women face from the CEE (and elsewhere,  
23 particularly in developing countries). And how women go about  
24 empowering ourselves remain essentially universal. <...>  
25 Another aspect of the gender discourse that I am looking forward to sharing is  
26 the impact of race on gender. Being a black woman, I am always confronted  
27 with double 'rejection,' from both my male and female peers. Therefore my  
28 recurring question is, am I black or am I female first? Repeated first person  
29 story experiences would lean towards race playing a greater issue than gender

We can observe that claims of sisterhood and personal politics are closely related with 'travelling around the world' and black identity invoked in the introduction section. The semiotic field of 'well-travelled' identity, and with it associated experiences and knowledge, enables Nadine to make a strong assertion about 'gender issues that are not dis-similar' around the world and to claim that women's strategies in empowering themselves are universal (lines 21-24). In these lines an individual agency (I am... I believe... I think...) is not attributed to the claim and so agreement between the reader and the utterer is assumed, maintaining the power of the utterer's perspective. The assertion about women's universal experience or sisterhood is also reminiscent of first and second wave feminism. Here it performs an important function in enabling Nadine to claim authority and legitimising her knowledge in a forum focused on women in Central and Eastern Europe. The invocation of 'black' versus 'female' identity stands in contrast with Nadine's previous comment about a universal women's experience. The question: 'am I black or am I female first?' (line 28) complicates the assumed universality of women's experience and introduces the topic of difference. Nadine raises this issue deploying a personal agency which is less assertive and more open for conversation than her statement on women's universal experience uttered as a broadly accepted truth. Thus her first assertion rhetorically carries more authority. However, Nadine's deployment of personal agency has particular currency within various feminist discourses such as academic and women's human rights which emphasize individual experience, first person stories, and testimonies. For instance, the invocation of the 'first person story' (lines 28-29) strengthens Nadine's affirmation of personal authority and charges it with the generic truth

telling effects of testimony<sup>47</sup>. Overall, Nadine shares her life story in feminist autobiographical way: she tells her life story in consciousness raising mode, drawing on the notions of universality and difference as idiomatic<sup>48</sup> feminist knowledges.

The composition of Nadine's message shows that there are strong links between her claimed identity and claimed knowledge. In general, the participants tended to invest in displaying identities that signify particular forms of cultural and social capital which enabled them to claim knowledge in the area of expertise and lived experience. In Nadine's case, the invocation of 'well-travelled' and academic identities allowed her on the one hand to make the assertion of the universality of women's experiences, and, on the other hand, to question the same assertion through her lived experience as a black women.

Nadine's and Ala's introductory messages illustrate that standing and knowledge claims are constituted through heterogeneous genres: autobiographical, email/online message and 'first person story'/feminist autobiography. The self presentations as discursive acts carry the legacy of former discursive actions propagated through these generic forms, creating effects on the constitution of standing, identity and knowledge claims.

My previous analysis indicated that the participants' self presentations were closely connected to authoritative claiming. With my subsequent analysis I pursue this line of inquiry focusing

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<sup>47</sup> I consider first person story as a subgenre of truth telling genres such as testimony. For instance, Beverley suggests that 'like autobiography, testimonio is an affirmation of the authority of personal experience, but, unlike autobiography, it cannot affirm self identity that is separate from the subaltern group or class situation that it narrates (2005: 548).

<sup>48</sup> Here I suggest that some widely shared concepts/debates such as 'women's experience', 'difference', 'dialogue', etc in feminism achieved commonsense/ idiomatic status.

on the move from 'I' to 'We' and suggesting that this move is constituted through the repertoires of 'I' and generic structure of email.

Examples of introductory comments below represent the most common mode of self presentation on the forum:

### **Example 1**

My name is Sarai Aharoni, and I'm a feminist-peace activist from Haifa, Israel and also a Phd student.

### **Example 2<sup>49</sup>**

Hi, I am doctoral candidate researching issues of gender, violence and memory in relation to South Asia.

### **Example 3**

Hi, My name is Haider Ali. I am from Pakistan, currently working on a project to strengthen Local Government System in Pakistan.

### **Example 4**

I'm Virginija Jureniene from Lithuania Vilniaus University. I'm interested in all new Lithuanian women movement problems.

These self presentations provide brief but rich information (name, place, academic, job, etc.) requested in an opening message posted by the Forum Administrator ('Please give a few words about yourself and where you are from'). They are particularly strategic, and the link between

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<sup>49</sup> There were no anonymous messages on the forum. Every contribution was displayed with the name of the author on the left side window of the posting. The forum software requested the inclusion of one's name in one of the heading fields before posting it on the forum.

investment in particular identities and the assertions made thereafter is clearly observable. For instance, Sarai, a feminist peace activist and a PhD student from Haifa (Example 1), makes assertions and raises questions that come from her lived experience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

**Example 1** (continued)

- 1 I'd like to share with you some thoughts from the Israeli perspective on armed
- 2 conflict and women's rights- the main question that I would like to share is:
- 3 How do we know that the war is over?
- 4 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example is seen as an 'intractable conflict'
- 5 which has deep roots and is lasting for years, with periods of violent
- 6 outbreaks. After 4 and half years of bloody violence (from both sides) and a
- 7 continuing occupation. It seems that it can take years until this conflict will be
- 8 resolved. Many of us (Israeli and Palestinian) are in despair. This 'ever-lasting'
- 9 alarm situation makes it impossible for women to create an alternative, or
- 10 even to stress the unique needs and suffering of women. What do you think
- 11 can be done in order to deal with women's needs under a 'chronic' violent
- 12 conflict, such as ours?

Sarai starts by sharing with the forum participants a rhetorical question: 'How do we know that the war is over?' (line 3). This question functions as an opening marker for her further argument on the popularly constructed 'intractability' of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also addresses a variety of audiences signified by a particularly broad subject category 'we' (line 3) into consideration of the question. 'We' here stands for the forum participants, Israelis and

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Palestinians, the CEE women, and potentially everyone. It constitutes 'knowers' as a very broad category. The question is followed by asserted knowledge claims on the conflict (lines 4-10). These claims involve acknowledgment of the injustice committed from 'both sides' (line 6) and speaking on behalf of both parties of the conflict – Israelis and Palestinians (line 8). Work across conflict lines is central in the constitution of a feminist peace activist identity. Therefore, the authority to speak for both sides of the conflict has been discursively granted in her invocation of a feminist peace activist identity in her introductory sentences (Example 1). Sarai finishes with the question 'What do you think can be done in order to deal with women's needs under a 'chronic' violent conflict, such as ours?' The subject 'you' makes her closing interpersonal and invokes the other participants in their role as addressees. This question constructs the audience as authority and a source of knowledge and assumes the shared feminist knowledge. The schema of the electronic message has to be considered in analysing the interpersonal closing of Sarai's message. I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the participants of the forum constituted standing, identity and knowledge through a mix of self assertion and interactional repertoires. Thus, an electronic message genre as a tool of interactional repertoire requires closer consideration.

Susan Herring, researching electronic messages on two academic discussion lists, has proposed that the basic electronic message schema is based on the 'preferred realisation' of three moves such as 'link to an earlier message', 'expression of views' and 'appeal to participants' (1996: 91). She considered 'appeals to other participants' to be the most prototypical electronic message closing in the discussions analysed in her study (1996: 90). My research indicates that the majority of postings on the CEE online forum also realised the 'appeal to others' move. The online forum as communication medium is designed to provoke

and accept short messages and multiple reactions, thus it is likely that the interpersonal appeal will be chosen by the participants as the closing. That implies that the generic structures of online message ('appeal to others'), as illustrated in Sarai's message, are constitutive of authority and knowledge claims. It seems that the electronic message, as a set of instructions of rhetorical behaviour, propagates the interpersonal appeal which assumes the authority of the forum participants in their role of addressees.

Similarly to Sarai's message, the introductory sentences in Examples 2-5 were followed by assertions and knowledge claims closely related to the declared expertise and cultural capital of the contributor. For instance in her posting, Srila, a doctoral student researching violence and memory (Example 2), provided some feminist theory insights and critique of ongoing discussion on women's first person stories. According to her research in South Asia, women's testimonies were 'neither inherently empowering nor did they guarantee political voice/agency'. Her message was also followed by an interpersonal appeal –'Looking forward for your responses'. Haider, working in Local Government, (Example 3), in her further text raised the issue of women's political representation in local, federal, and central government in Pakistan. Virginija's statement about her interest in the Lithuanian women's movement (Example 4) was preceded by an assessment of women's situation in Lithuania where she highlighted such challenges as women's political and entrepreneurial passivity. Lastly, Marina, a moderator of the Women's Civic Participation and a professor of social and political philosophy from Italy, provided in her subsequent message several theses on women's civic participation in CEE and raised a number of theoretical questions on women's political and social involvement in the context of transition and European integration. The close discursive relations between identity and knowledge assertions suggest that it can be useful to think of



identity claims as strategic rhetorical actions, which enable participants to claim authority and authenticity in transnational feminist discourse.

My analysis of the move from 'I' to 'We' suggests that the feminist subject in the forum was constituted through the repertoires of self assertion, generic representational structures, generic form of email and idiomatic feminist knowledges in play. Ala's and especially Nadina's sharing of oneself in the epistolary-consciousness raising mode signalled the orientation of their autobiographical narratives to feminist discourse. Furthermore, the close discursive connections between claimed identity and knowledge suggest that it can be useful to think of identity claims as strategic rhetorical actions.

#### **Against the grain: rules of 'I' and 'We' in feminist community**

An analysis of the constitution of authoritative 'I' and 'We' has shown that these categories were constituted through the interplay of repertoires of 'I' and interactivity. In this third section of the chapter, I continue the same line of inquiry but now focusing on how participants negotiated difference through the social categories of standing. In the first part of this section I look at the example of a posting from a male participant Richard, and the dialogic exchange between Danica and Linda provoked by Richard's participation, arguing that the Richard's right for speech and hearing in the forum was obstructed by his male gender. Then I turn to the analysis of feminist communality, suggesting that the authoritative feminist 'We' was constituted through the axes of the feminist positioning of the addressee, dialogic exchanges between participants of the forum, and the orientation of their utterances to feminist activist and academic discourses.

### *The case of Richard*

Richard, from the US, introduced himself as an old friend of Danica and posted very supportive messages emphasising the importance of men's responsibility for supporting feminism and women:

#### **Posting 1**

- 1 I come to this forum as an old friend of Danica's and certainly not well
- 2 informed about the subject. However, I am struck by how wars are started
- 3 by men for their own ego reasons without much thought about the impact
- 4 on the women and children. When the war is over, the men return to
- 5 whatever they were doing and the women are left to cope with the
- 6 aftermath.

This introduction is very different from that of other participants as Richard does not assert himself through the invocation of professional and educational achievement. Richard bids for his standing 'second-hand' by investing only in Danica's friendship and indicating his lack of 'information' or authority about the subject (lines 1-2). I suggest that Richard's male gender here might play a role in his self-performed 'demotion' of standing and the invocation of his difference. I do not question Richard's sincerity, most probably he does not know a lot about the subject, but propose that he takes on the position of 'not well informed' not only because of insufficient knowledge but because of his social category of standing (a male), which disqualifies/obstructs him from a right to speak and to be heard in a discourse which privileges women's/feminist knowledge. I suggest that what we see here is a bid for legitimacy in the feminist forum. Richard negotiates his right to be heard by aligning himself to ongoing

feminist discussion on the need to demand individual responsibility for committed crimes and accentuating men's selfishness and irresponsibility (lines 3-4). Danica, a moderator of the discussion, in her comment reads his utterance (Posting 1) as taking accountability for male gender: 'Thank you Richard P. Johnson for being the only male that wrote and took accountability for their gender'. What is interesting in Danica's comment is that she greets Richard as 'the only male' invoking the significance of gender difference and at the same time validating his right to speak and be heard as the right of an 'accountable' man. What we see here, in Goffman's terms, can be called a change of footing, where Danica changes Richard's stance and provides him with a standing of 'accountable' man. It seems that Richard takes up this position and in Posting 2 articulates his accountability claim very clearly: 'I believe that it is time for fathers to take responsibility for what they say to and teach their sons about women and feminism'. This exchange demonstrates how Richard's standing is summoned through dialogic relations of utterances and the power of immediate addressee (Danica) and imagined addressee (feminist community) to shape the words, speech and discourse of the utterer/speaker.

Danica's validation and Richard's acceptance of 'accountability' indicate that his bidding for standing was successful at least in this part of the dialogue. Richard further negotiated his standing giving an example of his gender sensitive son:

### **Posting 2**

- 1 <...> I am glad to say that he is part of a Peace Corps gender committee
- 2 in Thailand where they are trying to make culture changes in how women
- 3 in the community are treated. Of course he has been greatly influenced by

4 his mother and sister so he is very sensitive to these issues and is trying to  
5 positively influence them. His observations about Thailand, although  
6 generalized, are that the women do the bulk of the work while the men are  
7 in the power positions.

In this posting, Richard invests in the position of accountable man by invoking his successful fathering of a gender sensitive son. He also admits the great influence of mother and sister in the formation of his son's attitudes towards gender (lines 3-4). In his last sentence (5-7), Richard 'borrows' one more time, as in his introduction where he draws on Danica's friendship. Here Richard builds on his son's standing, and carefully deploys his son's observations in Thailand as a 'second-hand' standing to align himself to feminist discussion and enhance his right to be heard.

Although Richard's standing was validated by Danica, a subsequent dialogue indicates that Richard 'maleness' generated a few responses which contested the legitimacy of male standing in feminist discourse, and, I suggest, obstructed his right to be heard.

Linda in her message wrote that Richard's posting stirred her to ask her husband whether he may have had conversations with their son about 'women/feminism/respect'. She pointed out that his answer 'made both of them think' as there was not much discussion about this. Then Linda described how men's socialisation does not allow them to have a conversation about relations and put forward a rhetorical question: 'How can women make their needs, ideas, strengths known and addressed - when half of the population can't even talk about "inner" or

personal gender stuff among themselves!' This question was followed by her statement about feminism and men's role in women's organising:

- 1 I believe our first duty as women is to organize other women, but after
- 2 thinking about this, I feel we need to be encouraging men a lot more
- 3 strongly to talk/organize themselves on this issue
- 4 [women/feminism/respect]. Have them listen to more first person stories
- 5 of women and of other men.

What is interesting here is that Linda asserts strongly her belief that feminism is first of all about women organising other women (line 1). I suggest that through this move she sets out feminist priorities and queries male authority in feminist organising. The latter is substantiated by her analysis of men's inability to talk about gender relations. In the following sentence (lines 1-3) Linda indicates a shift in her belief and the idea that men have to be included and 'encouraged' to talk/organise themselves. However, this is not a straightforward inclusion. Linda, through a feminist 'we' who encourage 'them' or men to organise on feminist issues, establishes a discursive hierarchy of 'knowers' which summons women's authority in this relation. It could also be suggested that the final sentence, through reference to the 'first person stories of women and other men', opens up the possibility for more equal standing for men and women in feminist discourse. That is certainly the message that Linda seeks to convey, but her contrast between 'we' and 'them' and the forceful 'Have them..' summons women's authority whereby 'we', women, encourage and teach 'them', men. This invocation of women's authority contests the power dynamics and source of agency inscribed in

Richard's message where fathers take responsibility for talking and teaching their sons about women and feminism.

Linda's posting is certainly supportive of Richard's view to be accountable and responsible but in her text she establishes the feminist rules of the game, prioritising women's authority and knowledge in women's as well as men's organising for feminist issues. This indicates that although Richard's standing as an 'accountable man' was successful, because of 'maleness', he was constantly put in a discursively vulnerable position. This 'vulnerability' could be illustrated by Danica's response to Linda, where she further advances Linda's argument about men's implication in patriarchy and violence against women but also distinguishes between 'them' (men) and him (Richard):

- 1 Linda this is insightful.
- 2 It is often stated in feminist literature "why would men give up their preferred
- 3 status?" When I am in Bosnia, India or Sri Lanka the men often state to me after
- 4 my presentation of how they did not realize the stats on violence against women.
- 5 I sit back stunned at their privilege to be unconscious of such violence when it
- 6 does involve their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters?
- 7 I ask how is it you can 'not know' until I brought it up? For all these years of your
- 8 life how can this be?
- 9 It is interesting to note how we collude with the patriarchy and bury the
- 10 significant signposts of catastrophic violence towards women and children.
- 11 Having Richard the only male (*sic*) on this forum - also shows his intention
- 12 to be responsible for his life and to account for his male privilege - but it is rare. <...>

In this response Danica aligns her posting with Linda's questioning of men's authority and develops a critique of a 'common' male standing such as 'I am not well informed on the subject' or 'I did not know about violence against women'. What is interesting in this utterance is that Danica (lines 3-8) indirectly critiques Richard's standing invoked in his introductory sentences, where he was 'struck' by new information on gender relations in war and the aftermaths (Posting 1). Danica in subsequent lines distinguishes between Richard, as a 'rare' exception who shows responsibility and seeks accountability for his life, and 'them'-men who do not intend to 'give up their preferred status'. However, the difference between 'him' and 'them' is blurred by his 'maleness' and with this associated 'male privilege' (lines 11-12).

I suggest that Danica's specific assurance of Richard's standing on three occasions indicates that the standing of an accountable man is vulnerable because the 'manliness' is predominantly invested with patriarchy and negative power in the feminist discourse. Furthermore, discursively, at least in this dialogic exchange, the gender category of standing is certainly given priority in invoking, contesting, and negotiating Richard's standing rather than, for instance, the claims of accountability and responsibility, and, pushing it further, a claim of being feminist. To be accurate, Richard did not call himself 'a feminist' but he expressed support for feminist ideas and could easily be read as feminist (if his gender was not known to the participants). Through this overstatement, I want to point out how social categories of standing invoke certain discursive positions, which obstruct the hearing of his feminist political claims and prioritize his maleness over his feminism. Thus Richard as an accountable man is an exception but not exempt from his 'manliness' and stands somewhere on the

continuum between ‘them’ – patriarchal/ privileged men and ‘we’ – a feminist (female!) community.

### *Feminist Communalities*

The case of Richard has shown that the participants of the forum prioritised a version of feminist standing specifically constituted as experiential and female. In this section I continue to explore the rules of feminist communalities, considering the repertoires of ‘We’. Here I focus on the discussion on the importance of educating ‘our sons, brothers and husbands in a different manner’, started by Silvana on the Women and War thread.

In her posting Silvana retells a conversation with her 14 year old son about the forum and his negative reaction towards the word ‘feminism’. She also advocates for every woman to take responsibility for raising awareness about feminism in her ‘close to home’ environment of ‘immediate family and community’.

Silvana states a problem at the start of the message:

- 1 <...> at least it seems to me that *we*<sup>50</sup> can talk all *we* want and *we* can be in
- 2 the field and *we* can go to Bosnia and *we* can organize other women – but
- 3 as long as *we* don’t somehow change the way the men in *our* lives think
- 4 about women *we* are sure to be lost. <...>

What is interesting here is overwhelming use of ‘we’. Silvana’s opening paragraph certainly positions her reader as a female/ feminist ‘ally’ and invokes a sense of comradeship between

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<sup>50</sup> My emphasis added in this extract.



herself as a speaker and the participants of the forum. Here 'we' works as a rhetorical device to facilitate political engagement.

This utterance is particularly fascinating as Silvana in a previous message described herself as someone who 'lives a fairly typical middle class life with work, children, groceries and the small stories that accompany that kind of life rather than political activism, feminism or other wise'. However, in this posting she very clearly aligns herself with feminism, a type of feminism which is portrayed in the pages of the forum: 'And in my explanation to him I used the word 'feminist' – a word which I admit I do not use frequently but after having read all your words I was comfortable in using this description in relationship to the cause I wanted to discuss with him'. Here Silvana directly expresses her support for feminism and particularly the 'words' expressed by the feminist participants. Furthermore, this sentence indicates a shifting process in her attitudes towards feminism where she feels comfortable not only to use the word 'feminism' but also to identify herself with the feminist 'we' and with the associated values and politics. Silvana advances her argument now using pronouns 'I/we' and 'my/our' (line 3-4) to stress personal and group responsibility in raising awareness about feminism and women in the aftermath of war among men:

- 1 So what I decided is that with all the charges women have about being
- 2 invisible and how they are the ones to carry the burden of war and
- 3 destruction and have to give up their sons in the process that *I/we*<sup>51</sup> had
- 4 better find a way to educate *my/our* son(s) so that 'feminist' would not be a
- 5 confusing term. I guess I believed that 'living by example' would show my

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<sup>51</sup> Emphasis in the original.

6 son how strong, how worthy, how powerful I was as a woman – as a  
7 human being – but without training and constant confirmation and  
8 dialogue with him about what it means to be woman he can not know *our*  
9 truth.

Silvana's deployment of the pronouns 'I/we' and 'our' certainly goes beyond 'we' as just forum participants. 'We' here equals the political category 'women' who through their experience of 'being invisible' and carrying 'the burden of war and destruction' acquire authority to speak and tell 'our truth' – a story of women and feminism. Silvana's text is particularly captivating as it represents the constitution of an authoritative 'we' through the strategic/rhetorical use of language, explicit appreciation of participants and their ideas as well as the invocation of 'we' as a political category, 'women'.

This message was followed by the dialogic exchange between Silvana, Linda, Danica and Richard. Debates about the need to raise awareness among women and men dominated this exchange. The participants engaged in an analysis of why women's and feminists' experiences are devalued and advocated for personal, group and societal accountability for the injustices committed to women. The utterances below (Extract 5) are pulled out from much richer and longer messages where participants advanced and developed their own arguments about feminism, building on Silvana's posting on the 'education of men'. I seek through this significantly 'trimmed' dialogue to illustrate the dynamics of the constitution of an intersubjective communal 'we' by focusing on the linking move of the electronic message genre.

## Extract 1

Linda: 1 Silvana, Your words echo through me. The reply of your son, that  
2 feminists are man-haters, is what we also still hear all the time, even  
3 from some young women <...>

Linda: 4 <...> You are right, Silvana, when you say how important it is to talk  
5 of this in our own families. We need both example and discussion.  
6 I too thought leading by example would be enough to teach my son  
7 about feminism. <...>

Silvana: 8 <...> But as Linda says above when she talks to the young women of  
9 today she feels they agree with her and they definitely want the truth  
10 and a method – I hope – or forum to find out what they can do to  
11 change at least their immediate world and therefore hopefully the  
12 larger spectrum of downtrodden and silent. Thank you Linda for  
13 speaking about what I wrote and validating my feelings.

Danica: 14 <...> You asked how do we change this? We already have begun  
15 this with this forum. We as women becoming conscious of what is  
16 can move beyond into healing and being whole. When mothers  
17 have insight or awareness of their gender then their sons and  
18 husbands are educated. Just as you have shared with your son this  
19 forum, you have begun the change or shift into moving beyond  
20 what is. <...>

Danica: 21 <...> I often hear this as ‘what about the men?’ or ‘not my  
22 husband, son’, etc. Women come to the defence of men but NOT  
23 to the defence of their daughters or themselves.

Silvana: 24 yes – this is what we are taught from when we are infant daughters.  
25 Anything to keep the father from zoning in our otherness so therefore  
26 our mothers teach us how to keep quiet, how to fix up  
27 everything before *tata* comes home so he won’t notice it has been a  
28 mess <...>

Danica: 29 The utter wealth, depth and breadth in women's first person stories is  
30 captured by what you wrote here Silvana,  
31 ‘my Bosnian grandmother gave me a symbolic bottle of water when I  
32 married and told me to take a sip every time I felt the urge to ‘argue’  
33 with my husband in the future and not to spit it out until he had  
34 calmed down! At which point I was free to manipulate him with kind  
35 and friendly words and get my point across. I promptly threw it in the  
36 trash (but I also have to admit that I was divorced within a year...)’  
37 Feminism holds the individual responsible especially the men. With  
38 women's first person stories it holds women accountable as well.  
39 Thank you for the wisdom,  
40 Danica

Richard: 41 I believe it is time for fathers to take responsibility for what they say

42 to and teach their sons. It is more than just trying to be an  
43 example. It is also talking with my son about what feminism is  
44 and how we can be supportive of the women in our family,  
45 women we know and women in general. <...>

This dialogue demonstrates how Linda, Danica and Richard align their statements and discourses to Silvana's views and Silvana herself engages in dialogue drawing on the ideas of other participants. The 'alignment' is mediated through the 'linking move' which is often situated at the beginning of the message (Linda, line 1; Silvana, line 24; Danica, lines 29-30). It could also be located in the middle (Linda, lines 4-5) and at the end of the posting (Silvana, lines 8-13). These linking moves in the dialogic exchanges convey identification with other participants' experience, assurance of one's views, and express gratitude for acknowledgement and participation. We might argue that all we are seeing here are straightforward examples of interactive conventions, such as a link to previous discourse to introduce the purpose of one's own message or argument. However, we might additionally or alternatively recognize that linked responses could be designed to maintain coherence across messages. According to Herring (1996: 87), that is especially important in CMC, as online discussion is apt to be interwoven with different discussions and topics and the writer has to include additional information to identify which discussion her/his message is responding to. And there are still other possibilities. For instance, that support and affirmation expressed towards the addressee is one of the techniques used by moderators to encourage further participation<sup>52</sup>. Or that the appreciation, identification and gratitude expressed in aligned schema of the postings are 'genuine'. The purpose of the aligned linking is certainly multifunctional. However, I suggest

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<sup>52</sup> In my private email correspondence with moderators I suggested providing some feedback to all participants on their postings to encourage participation. Danica was the moderator in this exchange.

that the aligned structure of the messages (supportive and appreciative) facilitates the constitution of a communal and authoritative 'we' by affirmation of one's position/belonging to a discursively constituted speech community. Here my understanding of a discursively constituted community is close to the definition suggested by Swales in *Genre Analysis*: 'socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals' (1990: 8).

I propose that, for instance, Danica's invocation of the personal pronoun 'we' (lines 14-20) in her statement: '...We already have begun this with this forum. We as women becoming conscious of what is ...' was negotiated earlier in the discussion by Linda and Silvana. Her investment into 'we' as immediate community and 'we' as political category 'women' was enabled by previous agreement on certain feminist positions such as awareness raising and feminism which is inclusive of men and women. Thus, here 'we', as a group aware of their 'gender' and 'moving beyond what is', is deployed not only as a feature of action oriented speech and a rhetorical device for political engagement but also signifies a communal identity negotiated and invoked through the shared repertoires of feminist positions and values. In this case, 'we' acquires its immediate communal meaning through the category of women/mothers who are conscious of gender inequalities and seek change.

The longer sequences of dialogic exchange as shown in Extract 1 demonstrate that participants repeatedly chose rhetorical strategies of inclusion (agreement, support, assurance, acknowledgment) to convey their position on the issues discussed. From a pragmatic (as opposed to semantic) point of view, the inclusion of other forum participants as 'authors' in their texts through citation (Linda, lines 1-5; Silvana, lines 8-10), re-phrasing (Richard, lines

42-45) and quotation (Danica, lines 31-36) here perform a role of acknowledgement of ones' group membership. This orientation and inclusion of the participants' language into the utterance demonstrates how the communal 'we' was constituted through the relation of one utterance to another or dialogism. The dialogic 'we' was granted authority and legitimacy through generically mediated affirmation (the linking move of the electronic message genre) of one's position/belonging to the discursive community. However dialogism was only one aspect of the constitution of a communal authoritative 'we'. The language of participants was also responsive to a multiplicity of other languages, genres and feminist discourses. I suggest that a communal authoritative 'we' was constituted not only through dialogic but also heteroglossic characteristics of utterance<sup>53</sup>. For instance, the analysis of aligned linking could also be interpreted as participants' orientation of their utterance to the electronic message genre. Furthermore, the language deployed in the forum had features of various language varieties/genres such as informal letter and essay, spoken monologue and dialogue as well as academic and activist genres. This curious mixture of languages certainly had an effect on the constitution of authoritative 'we'.

The authoritative 'we', and with it associated knowledge, in some instances was maintained deploying academic genres, for instance referring to feminist works known world-wide to provide credibility for the claimed argument. Danica, in her summary of discussion on gender awareness, cites as follows: 'Adrienne Rich said it best - We are born of a woman - what does it look like when we honour this?'. The invocation of a classical feminist figure and her investment of authority into 'woman' in this particular instance validates the ongoing

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<sup>53</sup> Heteroglossia is Bakhtin's term for the orientation of language to the multiplicity of other languages. It refers to responsiveness of the utterance to large structures such as genres, language varieties, dialects, jargons, styles and so on (see 1984[1929]: 262-263).

discussion among the group through a feminist academic/activist discourse. This direct reference is very evident but the majority of the utterances were attuned to feminist discourse and feminist addressee through the investment of authority in the political category we as 'women'. For instance, Danica's rhetorical questions, which derived from the summary of the exchange on the Women and War discussion, summarise the issues discussed by the forum participants but also represent important feminist activist and academic concerns:

### **Extract 2**

- 1 <...> The real question is "Where do we go from here?"
- 2 Other questions are:
- 3 1. Will the violence towards women continue until we become extinct?
- 4 2. Is it possible for women to be in solidarity with each other and not in Mary
- 5 Condren's important work on horizontal violence – or Phyllis Chesler's book
- 6 "Women's Inhumanity to Women"?
- 7 3. Can we become a movement that comes from peace and be a true feminist
- 8 movement- since feminism means to include the men, never exclude the women
- 9 and remember the children?
- 10 4. Can we women demand accountability with a firmness that is intent on hearing
- 11 each and every first person story of violence from every female thus holding the
- 12 individual responsible even if that means it is overwhelming male (over 95%)
- 13 and not fear their power or covet their power?
- 14 I encourage responses—



This piece of Danica's summary is written in the form of rhetorical questions and certainly seeks to engage readers through extensive deployment of the pronoun 'we' and to invite the addressee as female and feminist to consider these issues (line 7, 10). Through a self reflective mode of writing this text invokes 'we' as women's political community which has to take responsibility for the injustice committed to women. It performs several functions. Firstly, through dramatisation (line 3) and feminist research it seeks to raise awareness about violence against women and a lack of solidarity to combat this (lines 4-5). Secondly it calls for women's mobilisation and provides for an 'all inclusive' feminist movement (7-9). Thirdly, it offers the method – to 'demand accountability' and 'hold every individual responsible' for injustice committed to women, highlighting the gendered nature of violence as well as power (10-14). These functions are constructed with reference to various feminist discourses on women's solidarity, women's movement, categories of difference and power, and women's human rights (accountability, first person stories, and individual responsibility). The meaning of 'we' changes and broadens as Danica moves through her rhetorical questions. For instance, the first 'we' constitutes women experiencing violence against them, then this transforms into a second authoritative 'we' constituted by women demanding accountability for violence against women. Although the formula 'Can we ..?' questions women's ability to organise and stand up for themselves, a shift from the desperation of 'extinction' to authoritative 'demands' clearly goes upwards in terms of women's agency and authority.

Danica's text, in Bakhtinian terms, could be considered as a form of 'double-voiced' discourse<sup>54</sup>, which allows her, through rhetorical stylisation, to include other voices within her

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<sup>54</sup> Author's strategies though stylisation, skaz, parody and hidden polemic to include other voices into the text (see Pearce 1994: 85-86).

text. Danica, engages in a polemic with 'we', which is constituted as female and feminist. What is interesting here is that she questions whether 'we' as feminist/female subjects can make changes but at the same time invokes the feminist practices of women's solidarity, oppositional movement, and political accountability as ultimate ideals. A formula 'Can we..?' gives voice to feminist discourse, which progressively summons the meanings of an authoritative and politically conscious feminist 'we'. In some sense, Danica through these questions represents the different stages of women's political awareness in development: from a devastating lack of awareness and agency (extinction) and female solidarity to feminist movement and feminist political agendas, which require individual accountability. Here 'we' is constituted through the axes of the feminist positioning of the addressee, dialogic exchanges between participants of the forum, and the orientation of utterance to feminist activist and academic discourses. In addition, the authority of a communal 'we' fluctuates according to its rhetorical and discursive context.

## **Conclusion**

In feminist standpoint epistemology the subject acquires authority to speak and to be heard through her/his social and political positioning. However, the assumption that the subject can speak only for herself ignores how speech genres, discursive systems, and the context of interaction shape the construction of subjectivity and agency. This chapter suggested that the analysis of feminist identities and authoritative claiming has to take into account not only the social and political positioning of the speaking subject but also the rhetorical-material and interactional context of utterance.

In this chapter I traced the practices that construct, enact and perform the authoritative 'I' and 'We' through the category of 'standing'. I proposed that the participants in the forum articulated and negotiated their right for speech and hearing through the repertoires of self assertion and interactivity. Both types of repertoires have certain generic characteristics such as autobiographical and online message genres and dialogue/conversation in their broad repository of tools available to construct standing, identity and claim knowledge.

The examination of the postings in established dialogic structures of the site revealed a range of repertoires constituting an authoritative 'I' which were grounded in experiential standpoints of 'radical' feminism through the referents to 'the personal as political' and emphasis on women's experience and knowledge. My analysis of authoritative 'I' (as mother, women and professional/academic/activist) suggested that these repertoires formed the basis of feminist authoritative standing. Whereby, the move from 'I' to 'We' was established through both the repertoires of 'I' and interactivity as well as shared/idiomatic feminist knowledge in play. My exploration who is the 'We' in the forum through the case of Richard revealed that his right for speech and hearing was obstructed by his male gender. This example poignantly suggested that the authoritative feminist 'We' was constituted through a version of feminist standpoint grounded in women's experience as well as interactivity.

Overall, the analysis of an authoritative 'I' and 'We' (except the case of Corazon) indicated that the participants tended to engage in self-policing by aligning values, goals, and discourse with an immediate as well as an imagined feminist speech community. Through various generic tools (feminist autobiographical practices, electronic message, dialogue/conversation) the participants constructed an identity that reflected their association with that group. The

recognition that they were welcome and invited was partly constituted by the linking move of the electronic message genre, reflecting the communal nature of online textual identity practices. The participants negotiated an identity within the range of possibilities for self-hood which were supported or at least tolerated by the community, possibilities that represent the feminist community's values and norms.

## **Chapter 6: IDIOMATICS OF FEMINISM: MODES OF MORALITY AND THE BID TO TRAUMA**

### **Introduction**

My analysis in the previous chapter suggested that participants negotiated their identity, standing, authority and claimed knowledge within the range of possibilities supported and tolerated by a community which represented commonsense/idiomatic feminist values and norms grounded in versions of experiential/‘radical’ feminism. This chapter, drawing on the notion of speech genre, aims to build a picture of idiomatic feminism<sup>55</sup> as a speech community. It pursues arguments concerning key aspects of idiomatic feminism through the close examination of the postings on women and war. The analysis primarily focuses on the Women and War discussion because of the richness of data and the quantity of postings on this thread (51). The discussion on Women’s Civic Participation also received postings related to this theme and these are included in my analysis.

The central argument of the chapter is that certain strands of second wave ‘radical’ feminism have become idiomatic and that they constitute chief commonsense repertoires of an international/virtual speech community. Exploring the postings I argue that two key foundational concepts/idioms – sisterhood and patriarchy – are at play in the constitution of the feminist speech community. I also suggest that the participants’ deployment of narratives of victimisation, a moral privileging of victimhood and an orientation to claiming universals indicates their connection to second wave radical feminism. Furthermore, I argue that an

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<sup>55</sup>The term of ‘idiomatic feminism’ as a shorthand to a commonsense/popular feminist speech genre was suggested by Dr Debora L. Steinberg. Personal communication, 2007.

emergent speech etiquette grounded in the repertoires of 'radical' feminism and human rights also constitutes a feminist moral community which is premised on particular understanding of violence and victimhood and demands orientation to 'justice' and necessary 'action'.

I begin the chapter by discussing the concepts of sisterhood and patriarchy and their idiomatic status in feminist discourse. Highlighting the rhetorical and strategic use of certain feminist repertoires in human rights discourse, I then turn to analysis of the women and war postings and consider how the feminist repertoires interact with human rights discourse and make a bid for feminist speech community. I close the chapter with the analysis of the ethical consequences of a deployment of victimisation narratives for the represented.

### **Sisterhood, patriarchy and feminism**

'...a text would not belong to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such a participation never amounts to belonging'.

(Derrida 1980: 230)

As the above citation would suggest, the discussion thread on Women and War 'participated' in a variety of generic forms, including electronic message, testimony, autobiography, advertisement, practices of academic writing, discourses of human rights and of feminism. Some of these generic forms and discourses were more prominent than others; I suggest that repertoires of second wave radical feminism and human rights were predominantly referenced in the forum.

What makes me read and interpret the text as feminist? I propose that the popular tropes of feminist critique such as sisterhood and patriarchy, as well as more recent categories of difference and dialogue, are involved in facilitating the understanding of the forum as a feminist space. Within the context of the Women and War discussion and overall in the forum it was the concepts of sisterhood and patriarchy that were chiefly at play.

The language of sisterhood is associated with 'radical' feminism and was a commonplace in 1970s feminism (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997: 202). The term was deployed by feminist groups in mobilising women, forging solidarities and building alliances against patriarchy and male domination. In the 1990s the term sisterhood in academic discourses was largely abandoned because of its universal claims of women's oppression and essentialist groundings.

Similarly to sisterhood, patriarchy is also a term central to 'radical' feminist traditions, which suggested overarching male dominance and saw women's oppression as oppression by men (Firestone 1971). Contemporary feminist discourse has moved from the mono-causal and totalising theories of patriarchy and male dominance (Barrett 1988; Walby 1990). However, a commitment to both these 'outdated' terms was very evident in the forum. On the other hand, a summoning of more multifaceted explorations of the contingencies of gender identities based on difference and dialogue was also taking place.

I propose that the prevalence of these concepts of feminist critique is related to their idiomatic status in popular feminist discourse. I define the 'idiomatic' as inherent, formulaic and commonsense/popular characteristics of a particular speech etiquette. These characteristics

include specific words, concepts, expressions, mode of address, values and worldviews. I suggest that idiomatic feminism invoked in the forum could be recognised through references to a social movement, a political position, an experiential feminist standpoint and foundational concepts such as sisterhood and patriarchy.

Sisterhood as an idiom for feminist struggles and resistance was frequently deployed by the participants in the Women and War discussion. Linda, a feminist activist from the US, invokes sisterhood to promote values of learning, dialogue and accountability:

1 <...> Women here [NOW] are interested and concerned with the horrible  
2 living and working conditions facing our sisters caught in the feminization  
3 of poverty, especially in the aftermath of war. We try to educate ourselves  
4 and our community on these issues and our accountability. We realize we  
5 may move in small steps, but better those than no steps at all. Issues of  
6 sweatshops and of trafficking are not found only outside the borders of  
7 America, and what we do about them has ripples of effect beyond those  
8 borders. I look forward to hearing from my sisters around the world  
9 sharing what your daily lives are like, what actions you take, what we here  
10 can learn, and in turn, tell you some of the things we do. <...>  
11 In sisterhood, Linda

Linda sets a tone of equality and shared experience, rhetorically placing herself and the US feminists with the women ‘caught in the feminisation of poverty’ in the aftermath of war and addressing them as ‘our sisters’ (line 2). Her message suggests that sweatshops and trafficking



are global, and they are also happening in America. Furthermore, the feminist struggle against the feminisation of poverty and trafficking are interconnected and ‘what we do about them has ripples of effect beyond those borders’ (lines 4-7). However, difference between ‘us’ and ‘our sisters’ here is also constituted through the continual use of the pronoun ‘we’, which refers to the local community of US feminists. The feminist mode of address ‘my sisters around the world’ summons here solidarity and caring as the main principles of feminist politics. Linda’s projected ‘sisterhood’ also has connotations with transnational feminism and its rhetorics of dialogue, learning and the awareness of global interconnections. I suggest that what we see here is not an ‘outdated’ invocation of early second-wave feminism with its totalising claims but rather a form of ‘strategic’ investment into re-configured sisterhood, which incorporates the notions of difference, dialogue and exchange to achieve solidarity for social action.

Sisterhood was certainly one of the major categories evoked in the constitution of feminist politics but some participants making their political claims also urged their imagined audience to look for alliances with men, discriminated racial groups, civil society organisations, and the international community. The building of alliances with men particularly dominated the rhetoric of political strategies. Frequently men were invoked as the power holders who irresponsibly start wars and who are oblivious to the gendered consequences of the aftermaths. The projected feminist peace agenda sought to educate/ transform these men, as well as women, who support wars and include them all in anti-war struggles. Some of this rhetoric was played out in Stephanie’s posting.

- 1 <...> Men cause war, but women support men's wars. We need to figure
- 2 out how to take the leadership now of getting men to realize that war just

3 doesn't work. I thought that this whole issue of depleted uranium could  
4 unify women - and men - to refuse to send our sons and daughters into  
5 battlefields where our family genetic legacy might be destroyed!

I suggest that this text is shaped and enacted through the concepts of sisterhood and patriarchy. Stephanie does not explicitly refer to sisterhood or patriarchy in this extract but it is summoned through the feminist address – ‘we’ (line 1). She invokes men as the initiators of wars and women as supporters but also the potential agents of generating an alternative agenda.

The concepts of patriarchy and sisterhood were particularly salient in the discussions which aimed to clarify the terms of feminism and feminist politics. The feminisms in the forum were invoked as oppositional but also inclusive movements. The oppositional rhetoric was frequently deployed in the Women and War discussion. For instance, Linda started her message on sweatshops and fair trade: ‘As a feminist I am opposed to sweatshops’. Nadine highlighted that ‘the personal is political’ and invoked the anti-war notion of feminism: ‘As women – individually and collectively – we are engaged in a personal war on a daily basis. Feminism is being murdered on the battlefields and symbolically within us’. The comments by Linda and Nadine portray feminist opposition to certain global policies: the discriminatory practices of global corporations and war, which benefit a few ‘power makers’ and have negative consequences for civilians, particularly women and children. I suggest that the summoning of capitalism and imperialist global policies as the sites of patriarchy and women’s oppression is going on here.

The inclusion and diversity dimension of feminism was usually enacted by the deployment of discursive repertoires of difference, dialogue, and sisterhood. Nadine persistently urged the participants to include the dimension of 'race' in the Women and War discussion. Her proposal was taken up and developed by Linda. She not only acknowledged that the 'race' factor is involved in the international community's reaction to wars in Africa, but also proposed that 'women's groups have to explore their own racism, get to the essential feminine that is in everyone' and develop alliance with race/ethnicity movements to stop war.

Here I would like to explore two examples of the definition of feminism in more detail. The topic what is 'feminism' or what is 'antifeminism' explicitly emerged on several occasions in the forum. Danica, in considering the strategies of women's participation in post-war Bosnia, proposed the following definition of feminism:

- 1 <...> Very few women know of female human rights or feminism. In fact,
- 2 feminism is an 'f\_' word to the women [Bosnian women]. It is as if they
- 3 want to avoid being targets. In feminist practices bringing in awareness of
- 4 how women collude or what Emma Jung researched as 'internalized
- 5 oppression' needs to be brought to light. Feminism includes men, never
- 6 excludes women and remembers the children. Inclusiveness is
- 7 collaborative practices non-existent in world policies and governing
- 8 entities and we know it but deny it. <...>

This definition of feminism suggests that feminism is oppositional. Therefore some Bosnian women may denounce feminism and women's rights as they are not informed about what these rights are; also women are trying to avoid being targets of public attention (lines 1-3). A first step, according to Danica, is to raise awareness about women's oppression (lines 3-5). What is interesting here is that Danica in her opening comment invokes 'female human rights and feminism', the markers of the discourse of Western liberalism, but she does not use the same 'rights' language to define her version of feminism.

For her feminism is inclusive and a collaborative practice. Danica's definition of feminism celebrates gender difference, recognises the 'otherness' of women, and 'remembers the children' (lines 5-6). She suggests that inclusiveness and collaborative practices attributed to feminism are 'non-existent in the world policies and governing entities'. On another occasion in the discussion, Danica added 'accountability' to her 'working' definition of feminism: 'and by holding those in power and in wealth accountable, feminism includes men, does not exclude the women and remembers the children'. I read this definition of feminism as an ideal, as a set of values, namely, inclusiveness, difference, and accountability, which have to guide feminist politics and practice. On the other hand, the oppositional dimension of feminism, I propose, is related to feminist commitment to material and social change. The invocation of 'children' is particularly interesting. It is likely that the rhetoric of inclusiveness and children here is deployed to address the audience of women (Bosnian and the CEE women), for whom the rhetoric of communist equality and individualistic liberal feminism does not 'speak'.

The 'work' of popular feminist idioms of sisterhood and patriarchy are salient in Danica's

definition. The 'inclusiveness' and 'collaboration' as political practice are discursive markers of feminist sisterhood, whereas, the exclusive and non-collaborative practices of governments and world policies are the sites of patriarchy.

Linda's definition of feminism in the Women and War forum explicitly summoned the discourse of Western liberal feminism. She provided the following response to the ongoing discussion of the perception of feminists as 'man-haters':

1 <...> From the start, we [feminists in the US] were concerned about childcare,  
2 about equal pay, about getting into better jobs, about our bodies, and about a  
3 better way to have family relationships. From the parties in politics to the  
4 government to the churches, they were all afraid of what those changes would  
5 mean for them in terms of loss of power, money, control. An easy way to make  
6 the average person, woman or man, not listen to our questions and cries was to  
7 close their minds ahead of time by labelling us man-haters. While there were  
8 some women who did feel the only way for women to survive was without men,  
9 that was never the overwhelming numbers of us. Yet that fear-based lie has  
10 continued today. <...>

11 When I describe to new young women the everyday inequalities you and I  
12 face, the violence toward women, the lack of a basis for building equal  
13 relationships, they agree with me. When they know what feminists really want,  
14 they will say to me with great surprise, "but that's what I want too" and it is a  
15 beginning. Linda

Linda identifies feminist political priorities deploying a liberal perspective of rights and equality (lines 1-3). She explains the 'labelling' of feminists as 'man-haters' as the consequence of a power struggle between the feminist movement and political parties, the media and the church (lines 3-7). Linda rhetorically includes 'women who did feel the only way for women to survive was without men within the category 'us''. However, this 'inclusion' of 'other' women is quite ambiguous because they are invoked as a small minority who prompted the 'fear based lie' of feminists as 'men haters'. Furthermore, the assumption that the 'majority of us' are not men haters distinguishes heterosexual liberal feminism from other feminisms such as queer and lesbian strands and risks excluding these minorities. This version of heterosexual liberal feminism, according to Linda, has the most currency among 'new young women', who agree with the 'equality' language of Western liberal feminism (lines 11-15).

Linda's and Danica's definitions of feminism are quite different but they have common features such as references to women's oppression, inequality and patriarchy as well as feminist resistance invoked through sisterhood. Exploration of the participant's posting reveals that the category of sisterhood was deployed as a moral feminist standpoint inflected with the notions of solidarity, inclusiveness, accountability and as a compact of knowledge and political persuasion. I suggest that the term patriarchy also stands here for more than just a plank of feminist analysis, and that it has to be considered as the term of membership, whereby its use is indicative of the 'insider' status in feminist community.

In Chapter 4 and 5, I demonstrated how the opening and closing moves of electronic messages, through references to the previous message, were shaping the dialogic exchanges

and the emergence of a feminist authoritative 'We'. On several occasions a version of dialogic feminism was summoned, which, I suggested, was partly prompted by the medium – an online forum which propagated dialogue. Pearce argues that 'dialogue is a concept which touches the heart of what it means to be a feminist' (1994: 100). It is evocative of sisterhood and of the perpetual negotiation of sameness and difference, of 'our dealings with men and patriarchal institutions, of our relationship to a language which simultaneously is, and is not, our own' (Pearce 1994: 100). Indeed, analysis of the invocations of feminism suggests that the categories of dialogue and sisterhood in the forum had some common characteristics. For instance, Linda wrote:

<...> This forum is a wonderful chance to hear and be heard globally. Please come forward with your stories, your questions, ideas and comments. In sisterhood, Linda

I read this citation as a comment which legitimates the forum for feminist interaction. It is enacted through the discursive repertoire of dialogue – 'to hear and be heard', 'your stories', 'questions', 'comments', etc. The summoning of the forum as a global space is evocative of transnational feminism. On the other hand, Linda explicitly refers to sisterhood in her message, and such discursive markers as 'to hear and be heard' could also signal the discourse of sisterhood of the 1960s and 1990s. Certainly, discourses of sisterhood and dialogue share some aspects of a 'dialogic' and 'sharing' vocabulary. But overall, the surfacing of references to the discursive repertoires of difference and dialogue indicates that the more 'contemporary' version of sisterhood was also enacted in the forum. Furthermore, I suggest that the participants strategically invested in the rhetoric of global sisterhood. The assumed

‘commonality’ of women’s problems and ‘comradeship’, it provided the participants with a legitimate speaking position in the geographically defined forum.

My analysis traced that two foundational concepts - sisterhood and patriarchy – were constitutive of repertoire of a feminist speech genre and how these terms formed the terms of membership in the instance of feminist community invoked in the postings on women and war. Frequently these terms went hand in hand: patriarchy was invoked as the course of war, violence against women and women’s oppressions; whereby its opposite, sisterhood stood for a moral standpoint, a signifier of feminist struggles and resistance against patriarchy as well as female solidarity. However, we have to bear in mind that patriarchy and sisterhood are not only ‘idioms’ but also complex analytical categories, which shift, evolve and acquire new political, critical and epistemological connotations. Sometimes, because of a lack of discursive markers and the compressed format of the messages, it could be difficult to identify their ‘exact’ discursive location.

Having in mind the shifting meanings of patriarchy and sisterhood, I start my analysis of discussions on violence paying a close attention to the rhetorical function and generic structure of the participants’ messages. Before I move to the exploration of the postings, I briefly discuss the relation between ‘radical’ traditions of feminism and international human rights, highlighting the importance of generic-rhetorical tools in women’s rights advocacy, especially violence against women.



## **Human rights, feminist standpoint and rhetorics**

A human rights discourse was also evident in the Women and War discussion, and elsewhere, with particular forms on violence against women. Violence against women has a prominent focus in the international women's movement. In 1985 it became an object of UN activity and in the late 1980s such groups as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch initiated programmes on women's rights. Recently, the topic of violence against women and women's rights has re-emerged in the context of armed conflicts in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq as well as anti-trafficking, and domestic violence campaigns in the Western world. According to Hesford, the topic of violence against women, through its 'rhetorical appeal of the transnational identity of women as victims of oppression', helps to counteract the historical divisions between Western feminists who emphasise gender discrimination, and 'feminists' from the developing world who underscore development and social justice (2005: 150). That suggests that international women's right advocacy draws on a version of 'radical' feminist standpoint which claims universal oppression of women in order to forge alliances and to build support.

Keck and Sikkink argue that the notion of universal violence against women not only makes a case for a united political platform but also uses specific generic-rhetorical tools, such as a dramatic portrayal or a personal testimony, to persuade the audience (1998: 205). The dramatisation and testimony are usually built on the invocation of victimisation narratives. However, the portrayal of women as victims of rape and violence has ethical connotations and risks reproducing certain political identifications and representations which may re-victimise women and support repressive cultural and political agendas.

My analysis in this chapter pays close attention to the rhetorical function and generic structure of the participant's messages. While it touches on issues of representation, it is more concerned with how my participants' deployment of victimisation narratives, their dramatic portrayal of violence, and their rhetoric of persuasion, constitute a commonsense feminist speech etiquette, at the same constituting a feminist moral community which requires 'justice' and 'action' for victims of violence.

### *'My truth'*

'Women in the aftermath of war face the reality that wars never end'. This opening comment by Danica indicates a lack of awareness about the gendered outcomes of war and accountability by the governments, funding institutions, and women themselves. Narratives of victimisation, women's human rights abuse and women's lack of solidarity, set in opposition to the rhetoric of sisterhood, empowerment, resistance and political action, characterised the Women and War discussion.

Sandra's factual account establishes both the rape as a war crime as well as shocking picture of systemic violence against women in Bosnian war:

'The black-and-white poster near the Sarajevo courtroom said it all: "Borislav Herak - War Criminal". Inside, the 22-year-old former textile worker stood charged with 32 murders and 16 rapes, including the murder of 12 of his 16 rape victims. The date was Friday, 12 March 1993 and Herak was the first Serb to be put on trial for war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina.'

Danica points out a lack of women's solidarity in tackling these human rights abuses and need for united action on behalf of women:

'Again, female solidarity is lost in splintered interest groups...It seems when we operate in the government, in corporations or helping aid agencies we become daughters of patriarchy instead of daughters of mothers... If anything, we women must look at how we collude in our silence, in our victimhood where we are constantly surviving and finally say "No More."'

Linda raises the issues of sweatshops and argues her opposition against women's exploitation in the aftermaths of war:

'As a feminist I am opposed to sweatshops. ... Women are paid as little as six cents an hour and work ten to twelve hour shifts... Sexual harassment, corporal punishment, and verbal abuse are all means used by supervisors to instil fear and keep employees in line. ... Women have been set up to have even more value wrung out of them and it makes me furiously crazy'.

Depictions of injury and injustice, figures of 'unemployed', 'poor', 'exploited', 'raped', 'trafficked' women and children (and sometimes men) were invoked to make an argument to stop the war and to demand justice and accountability for victims, who more often than not were women.

Hesford argues that, ‘within the human rights discourse victimisation narratives presume a process between speaker and audience that moves from identification to persuasion’ (2005: 148). This suggests that the invocation of victimisation narratives within human rights discourse could be considered not only as a representation of ‘evidence’ but also as a strategic investment to persuade an audience to act upon human rights violations. This rhetorical aspect of the invocation of certain identities puts in focus the rhetorical and generic context of identity production.

The Women and War discussion was certainly framed by the topics and rhetorical tools of human rights discourse. Grewal suggests that human rights constitute ‘what can be called “a regime of truth” in which conceptual apparatus has become so powerful that it seems to be the “truth” or becomes seen as “natural”’ (2005: vii). In my analysis I attempt to de-naturalise some of the ‘truth-effects’ of human rights discourse by exploring how it is generically-rhetorically constituted and how the universality and ‘truthfulness’ of women’s human rights is achieved and maintained.

Consider Tara’s posting which invokes human rights and explicitly refers to ‘truth’ telling:

1 <...> I am seeing that sometimes what happens after the war is worse than  
2 the war itself. I also know that as a resident of the United States, I rarely  
3 hear the truths of the aftermath- or the truths of any women at all. How  
4 have you bridged this in your work? Also, what can be done when you  
5 return after your work in Novi Travnik, and no one wants to hear the  
6 stories you have?

7 I feel overwhelmed with the massacre of female human rights. I feel lied  
8 to with the UN claiming to have an 'eye' on the injustices which occur. For  
9 example how much energy is being put into researching the numbers of  
10 domestic violence or sex-trafficking instead of preventing it.  
11 As a woman, I want more exposure of female voice.

Tara further develops the theme of accountability and identifies the United States and the UN as failing to tell 'the truth' and prevent the silencing of women's voices. She is particularly concerned about the 'truths of women' (line 3). Tara's political and ethical agenda here is to give voice to women to tell 'the truths' about the war. I suggest that the repertoires of human rights and the feminist experiential standpoint of 'the personal is political' are both at work here.

Tara's posting has connotations with testimonial genres summoned through the deployment of the personal pronoun 'I' and words such as 'seeing' (line 1) and 'truths' (line 3). However, 'I' in her story is not a 'survivor' testifying the event of human rights violations but a 'witness' or an 'observer'. Nonetheless, she emphatically identifies and even includes herself in the category of victims or 'silenced women'. Phrases such as 'I feel overwhelmed...' and 'I feel lied to...' (lines 7-8) signal the emotional and ethical work involved on behalf of a 'witness' in processing the accounts of human rights violations.

Tara's personalised story can also be 'read' as the enactment of the feminist standpoint 'the personal is political', which shares with testimonial genres the invocation of personal experience and also invokes a speech figure 'I' as part of a broader community - 'We'. For

instance, a survivor of war rape telling her own personal story of rape speaks for other abused women, who might not be there to tell their own stories. 'The personal is political' enables a speaker to invoke woman's individual problems as structural and therefore political.

'I' as a part of 'We', a marker of the 'personal is political', is summoned in Tara's statement that her own story and experience of work with women in Novi Travnik, as well as other women's stories, were not heard (lines 3-6). The neglect of her voice is invoked to strengthen the argument about the universal silencing of women's voices, which indicates Tara's critical awareness that 'the personal' is shaped by 'the political'. Tara, calling upon her identities as a woman and a witness, internalises and shares the injustices committed against women in wars and requires 'more exposure of female voice'.

The turn to 'the truth telling' rhetoric and universal identification of all women as a group is symptomatic of human rights advocacy discourse premised on versions of 'radical' feminism. Tara's message illustrates how feminist political platforms are enacted through the combination of the discursive repertoires of human rights and feminist standpoint. This example suggests that an axiomatic feminist standpoint 'the personal is political' is involved in shaping the claim of universal women's rights in the context of feminist political 'talk'. Furthermore, the 'truth' telling invests Tara's advocacy for 'more exposure of female voice' with credibility, urgency for action and moral connotations associated with the human rights discourse.

### *Trauma, dramatisation and morality*

Sandra, a feminist activist from Serbia, posted a long (one thousand word) message on universal violence against women. In this essay-posting, she provided documentary examples of the trauma of warfare rape in the Balkans and the phenomenon of 'comfort women' in the Japanese Imperial Army in the 1930s and World War II. Sandra started her analysis suggesting that 'a unique harm of war for women is the trauma inflicted in military brothels, rape camps, and the growing sex trafficking for prostitution and by increased domestic violence, all of which is fuelled by the culture of war, male aggression, and the social and economic ruin left in the wake of war'. This statement frames the violation events within contextual forces such as patriarchy (male aggression and a culture of war) in conjunction with economic and social deprivation. It also invokes the identity category of victim, summoning a particular moral universe where women are victims of military brothels, rape camps and trafficking, and men are those who committed these crimes. The universal identification of women as victims of patriarchy could be problematic as it ignores other identifications, for instance ethnicity and nationalism. Kesic suggests that, 'when women become victims in nationalist wars, gender becomes ethnicized, or subordinated to ethnicity, even before it appears as an "autonomous" discourse' (2002: 3).

The subordination of gender to ethnicity through reference to the infliction of humiliation on 'the whole community' is explicit in Sandra's further discussion (lines 1-4) of the Extract.

#### **Extract 1**

Sandra:

1 <...>According to a recent report by European Community investigators,  
2 rapes [in Bosnia-Herzegovina] are being committed in ‘particularly sadistic  
3 ways to inflict maximum humiliation on victims, their families, and on the  
4 whole community’. In many cases the intention is ‘deliberately to make  
5 women pregnant and to detain them until pregnancy is far enough advanced  
6 to make termination impossible’. Women and girls aged anything between 6  
7 and 70 are being held in camps throughout the country and raped repeatedly  
8 by gangs of soldiers. Often brothers or fathers of these women are forced to  
9 rape them as well. If they refuse, they are killed. <...>

This posting received a number of responses by Danica, Linda and Jan condemning violence and praising/ supporting Sandra’s work.

**Extract 1 (continued)**

Danica:

10 As I read these responses especially from Sandra, I note the pattern: women  
11 are the targets of war and women continue to be targets in the aftermath of  
12 wars and conflict. What is interesting is the owning of shame— as if it were  
13 the fault of the women themselves for being victims of violence.  
14 I think we do not understand the huge impact of war and bombs along with  
15 military might that rapes on the civilian population specifically on women.  
16 In fact, these responses seem to speak of a citizenship that women enjoin and  
17 that is not of any country but rather a citizenship that is global. The  
18 universal impact is the same regardless of whose side they were on— all were



19 collateral damage.

20 Thank you for the statistics and research Sandra. What do you suggest as

21 methods to start the healing of such wounds?

Linda:

22 <...> Sandra, I meant to say how impressed I am with the information in your

23 comments. Horrible things to be sure, but necessary to tell the world. Thank

24 you for your work. In sisterhood, Linda

Jan:

25 Seems to me that none of this will change much until men stop getting

26 promised "the spoils of war" in exchange for going to war.

27 The women (and often the children) are included as "spoils of war". Where is

28 humanity's sense of self-worth?

In the beginning of the extract Sandra provides a dramatic picture of violence against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which mainly quotes the report of investigators from the EU (lines 1-9). The invocation of EU investigators invests her utterance with objectivity and authority in mobilising a story of committed crimes. It is possible that Sandra refers to the EU report because her story about warfare rapes committed against Bosnians is complicated by her standing as Serbian. In another more reflexive message, she indicates this complexity in raising a set of questions: '...Am I a victim or accomplice? How do I transform the feeling of fear in organizing support for myself and the others? ...' The awareness of possible danger and disapproval of her anti-nationalist feminist political position in still very nationalistic local

discourses makes her account of violence against women even more dramatic. Also it indicates that Sandra prioritises her feminist identity, which is primarily based on the principal of solidarity among women and the ability to work and organise across ethnic lines of conflict. Thus, her essay-posting (Extract 1 represents just a short paragraph of her posting) is not only the presentation and analysis of violence against women but also a performance of an antiwar activist identity. By focusing on the example of the presentation of war trauma (lines 1-9) and the commentaries of other participants (lines 10 - 28), I attempt to understand what rhetorical function victimisation narratives perform.

Sandra invokes a story of 'forced incest' as a 'humiliation technique' used against Bosnians (lines 8-9) to draw the audience's attention to the crimes committed against women and men. The rape events depicted summon the idea of 'rape' as a tool of 'ethnic cleansing'. The latter argument enabled the human rights groups and feminist activists to achieve the recognition of rape as a war crime in the Hague International Criminal Tribunal. The invocation of forced incest dislocates the binary victim (female)/perpetrator (male) and constitutes men and women as victims of nationalistic military culture. These events provide evidence about how the sexual violence was 'ethnicised', whereby no distinction was made between men, women and children. The dramatic events depicted by Sandra incite the audience to empathise with the victims. They invoke empathy as the critical and ethical practice which guides the reception and interpretation of the text. The depiction of the destruction of any moral order summons the emotions of revulsion, horror, and disgust. These emotions are constitutive of the rhetorical function of persuasion and they are intersubjectively reconstituted in replies by Danica, Linda and Jan in such phrases as 'start the healing of such wounds' (line 21); 'Horrible things to be sure, but necessary to tell the world' (line 23); and 'Where is humanity's sense of self worth?'

(line 28). The utterances of Danica, Linda and Jan indicate that the ethical practice of reception and interpretation of victimisation narratives is saturated with particular feminist political and moral values such orientation to 'justice' and 'necessary' action. Thus I suggest that the practice of dramatisation and persuasion links feminist identity work with a version of feminist morality premised on particular understandings of violence and victimhood. Furthermore, the participants' postings indicate a moral privileging of victimhood as the basis of an authentic feminist standpoint necessitating action for change.

This authentic feminist standpoint as the experience of suffering on behalf of women is clearly summoned in Danica's response (lines 10-13). By drawing attention to women's experience of war and the aftermath she proposes a universal pattern of women's rights abuse. Her further argument, that women all over the world 'enjoy' the citizenship of sexual violence and abuse, or as she puts it 'collateral damage' (lines 16 -19), construes a picture of feminist despair but also calls for resistance and action, morally privileging victimhood of women. Danica's ironic invocation of women's citizenship as 'collateral damage' aims at political discourses which tend to bury women's human rights abuses as inevitable consequences for a civilian population entangled in military action. Women as 'collateral' stand here not only for injustice but also signify the scope of feminist political struggles. The invocation of trauma and injury events on behalf of women here performs not only the function of 'naming' and identification, but also persuasion. Danica's message is implicitly framed by the discursive repertoire of patriarchy (military and war practice, which inflicts 'rape on the civilian population and specifically women') and sisterhood, invoked through sharing of the universal abuse of women's rights and the rhetoric of resistance.

Linda's reply (lines 22-24) to Sandra's message is explicitly framed by the idea of sisterhood. Linda approves and confirms Sandra's politics and highlights the importance of telling the stories of violence. Even though she does not identify why the 'world' has to know 'these horrible things', the audience can make inferences that the stories of violence have to be told to achieve justice; empower victims; discipline perpetrators; and draw the public's attention to women's human rights. This indicates that the truth telling here is entangled with a human right's discourse as well as the foundational concept of sisterhood. That entanglement construes feminism as accountable and aimed at achieving justice.

Jan's response (lines 28 -25) capitalises on the disciplining function to 'stop' perpetrators (men) pursuing the inhuman practices of war. The context of violence is here portrayed as one-sided and static. Her message could be understood as men go to war just for the spoils of war – pillaging, looting and raping - which I suggest does not reflect the complexity of the arguments made by Sandra or Danica. This configuration of identifications assumes women and children as victims and men as one-sided sexual perpetrators, invoking an extreme version of 'radical' feminism, where women are perceived to be primarily oppressed by men. In this narrow moral universe, Jan appeals for humanity and self worth on behalf of men.

Extract 1 exemplifies the way in which the participants of the Women and War discussion tended to mobilise stories of injury and invoked women as victims by way of persuading the audience to remember and act to change the situation. The emerging speech etiquette was constituted here through a set of rhetorical tools such as bid to trauma, moral privileging of victimhood, orientation to claiming universals and the foundational terms of patriarchy and sisterhood. I suggest that this speech etiquette links feminist identity work with a version of

feminist morality and that it constitutes a feminist moral community, premised on moral privileging of victimhood, orientation to 'justice' and necessary 'action'. What is significant is that it is not 'action' per se that bids a moral community but deployed rhetoric and dialogic exchange between participants.

### *Victimisation narratives and ethics*

I noted in the beginning of this chapter that the deployment of victimisation narratives in international women's right advocacy could be problematic and ethically challenging for feminist activists. The question of how to avoid reproducing the spectacle of victimisation while also not erasing the materiality of violence and trauma, and recognising the interdependence of material and discursive realms lies at the heart of *Just Advocacy?* (Hesford and Kozol 2005: 13). The contributors of this collection propose that transnational feminist approaches to the study of globalisation and human rights shift the arena of analysis away from the binary construction of women and girls solely as victims or agents toward an analysis of the material and discursive fields of negotiation between these positions. They suggest that feminist critics have to be aware how testimonials and other truth telling genres function as politicized forms of cultural advocacy, raising both possibilities and dilemmas with which transnational feminists need to engage (Hesford and Kozol 2005: 28-27). In this section I reflect on these contested questions of victimisation, focusing on the meaning of these dramatic representations, their generic and contingent nature, and ethical and political consequences for the represented.

Consider the following message posted by Danica:

1 <...> report by UNICEF confirms what I have observed in Bosnia since  
2 March 1999. There are no war children — from the rape camps. The stigma  
3 alone is enough to cover up the situation. In the article [by George Jahn]- it  
4 quotes the UNICEF report to have evidence that these babies were killed at  
5 birth.

6 The Kolo: Women's Cross Cultural Collaboration annual conference  
7 "Peaceful Dimensions against Gender Violence," in Novi Travnik this year  
8 will be about the Rape Camps and remembering. This December (1–4) the  
9 conference is open to all especially to the Balkans, Eastern Europe area and  
10 with a conscious invite to all other countries. Inga Musico, author of the Cunt  
11 and soon to be released second book is the keynote speaker.

12 This issue has long been buried under shame that is not theirs whatsoever.  
13 What is startling is how information such as this is not front page news or  
14 even noticed. Being yesterday's news is a death sentence.

Danica raised the issue of missing children from the rape camps in Bosnia several times in the Women and War forum but the participants did not debate that in more detail even though the conference about the 'Rape Camps and Remembering' was widely advertised on the forum's pages. It is possible that the political and moral complexity of the issue made it difficult for the participants to engage.

I suggest that some rhetorical structures of an advertisement genre are deployed in this message. For instance, the invocation of a sensational 'baby killing' story as an urgency marker (lines 1-5) is used to draw attention to the Kolo's conference, which will 'remember'

the rape camps. Also mentioning Inga Musico, a famous feminist writer, as key note speaker here seeks to capture the audience's attention. This context of Danica's utterance has to be considered when analysing trauma narratives and the ethical and political issues of their appropriations.

Danica legitimises her claim about the rape camp 'babies killed' at birth by referring to the UNICEF report. What are the consequences of this claim for women who lived through violence in rape camps? What are the consequences for the surviving 'hate' children? Danica, by morally privileging victimhood, asserts that it is not women's 'shame whatsoever'. But the reader of this text is inevitably startled by a series of questions: Who did kill these babies? Mothers? Relatives? The community? Danica aims to secure for the abused women a position of victims of ethnic hatred, community pressure, and state indifference. The question of missing children generates a critical ambivalence about the victim/agent binary and construes the possibility of the mothers themselves being implicated in 'baby killing' or abandoning babies. If you kill a 'hate baby' at birth, or agree to him/her being killed, does it make you a victim or a criminal in the eyes of the judicial system? This shows how certain trauma narratives can spin out of control and, travelling through different discourses, obtain meanings that were not originally intended by the author. It would be premature to suggest that in putting forward this information Danica was not aware about the possible legal and ethical outcomes for the women or their families. It is more likely that by mobilising this story she prioritised raising awareness about the absence of adequate responses from international agencies and governments to support warfare rape survivors, their families, and communities.

Danica, as a feminist activist, speaks here for victimised and traumatised women. However, the question of whether Danica attempts to reflect the position of the represented, or is more interested in the audience response to her representation, is quite legitimate. I suggest that Danica in her message does both: she mobilises second and third account stories of violence for specific situational as well as long term goals. Her immediate aim is to advertise the conference, whereby an implicit long term feminist agenda is to empower victims of the rape camps, to raise the awareness of the target audience about women's human rights abuse, and to persuade the responsible institutions and agencies to take action. However, Danica speaks here from a privileged position, which raises a number of ethical and political issues. Firstly, that women survivors of violence are deprived of agency and invoked only as passive victims of their communities and patriarchal culture. Secondly, it is difficult to predict what impact the question of 'missing children' might have on the women from the rape camps. Finally, we cannot ignore how she may be strategically appropriating victimisation narratives to advance justice.

Danica's investigation of the missing children demonstrates the integrity of her feminist political agenda and commitment to the 'truth telling' discourses of human rights. However, without adequate political and judicial support this topic might have catastrophic consequences for abused women and their communities. I do not doubt Danica's ethical and political intentions, or suggest that silence is the best strategy to deal with human rights abuses. Instead through this example, I attempt to demonstrate that the invocation of certain victimisation narratives by women's rights advocates might be problematic as these second or third person accounts risk having the effects of new forms of appropriation with ambivalent political consequences for the represented. Furthermore, it is important to consider the



generic-rhetorical context of mobilised victimisation narratives and dramatic events. My analysis of Danica's message suggests that rhetorical-generic tools perform a number of functions ranging from the invocation of 'baby killing' as an 'importance' and 'urgency' marker for her conference and the incitement of the audience in the empathetic witnessing of human rights abuse, to the persuasion to remember the gendered impact of wars and to act to change the situation.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the foundational terms of sisterhood and patriarchy and explored how these concepts were interconnected in the definitions of feminisms. The deconstruction of these debates suggested that sisterhood and patriarchy constituted the key repertoires of feminist speech community as well as the terms of membership.

The chapter has also unpacked the ways in which the discussion on violence articulated a particular version of 'authentic' feminist standpoint, and in doing so, constituted the terms of 'insider' and 'outsider' that bid for this particular instance of feminist community. This 'authentic' standpoint was grounded in a version of 'radical' feminism and human rights discourse. The rhetorical tools in play, such as a bid to trauma, a moral privileging of victimhood and women's experience, as well the orientation to the claiming of women's universal oppression, signalled the link between radical feminism and the participants' postings. The orientation to 'truth' and 'justice' as well as the use of various rhetorical persuasion tools indicated that this standpoint was also shaped by human rights discourse. Overall the chapter suggested that the strands of second wave 'radical' feminism have

constituted the commonsense/ idiomatic speech repertoires of an international speech community invoked in the discussion on violence.

The exploration of participants' messages has indicated that the emergent speech etiquette, through persuasion and an identification practice of dramatisation and testimony, linked feminist identity work with a particular version of feminist morality. This suggested that the feminist speech community constituted in the forum could also be understood as a feminist moral community, which demanded 'justice' and necessary 'action' on behalf of the victims of violence. Here I highlighted that it was not the 'action' per se that bid for the community (i.e. the participants did not organise a campaign against violence) but the shared rhetoric and dialogic exchange.

Finally, reflecting on the ethical questions of representation, I proposed that claims of women's human rights advocacy, with their investment in victimisation narratives, have to be considered within the generic/rhetorical context of utterance. The analysis showed the rhetorical and strategic utilisation of the bid to trauma, raising the question of the political and ethical consequences of the representation. My reflection on the deployment of victimisation narratives by Danica suggested the ambiguous political and ethical consequences for the represented.

## Chapter 7: SPEECH/ ACTS: VIRTUALITY AND FEMINISM

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to extend the questions of authoritative claiming and authentic feminist standing/idiomatic feminism into one ongoing point of tension running across the discussion threads of the Online Women Forum: the place of speech and action in the articulation of feminist politics, community, and identity. In the previous chapter, I have suggested that an authentic feminist standpoint was constituted through the claims of women's universal oppression and victimhood, including orientation to 'necessary' action. This chapter picks up the theme of 'action' empirically, focusing not only on the modes of yearning for action but also speech acts and genres as directed discourses or speech acts (Bazerman 1994; Swales 2004). The analysis in this chapter is drawn across various discussion threads.

This chapter has two parts; the first part explores the speech-action tension in feminist debates while the second focuses on empirical analysis of the material. My earlier analysis indicated that second wave feminism is at the heart of what is idiomatically understood as 'feminist'. The speech-act tension was most prominently articulated in second wave feminist *praxis* debates and, especially, feminist pornography debates (MacKinnon 1993). Although pornography was not discussed in the forum, I draw on these debates as they are the most relevant to my project in their understanding of speech as not radically different from action. I also consider the notions of action proposed in the actor network theory and feminist technoscience (Haraway 1991, 1997; Law 1999; Latour 2005).

In the second part I move to the empirical analysis of material and make a set of interconnected arguments related to speech-action tension in second wave feminism and the constitution of feminist action in the online forum. I suggest that the yearning for action could be understood as idiomatic/generic to feminism. Building on the understanding that the performance of genre is action, I argue that the forum constitutes a rehearsal of feminist social action such as awareness raising and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, I suggest that emerging definitions of action dovetail with 'internetness', and also idiomatic feminism and intersubjective recognition through conversation. In a discursive analysis of the participant's yearning for action, I argue that there is a masculinised mode in thinking about what counts as action. I conclude the chapter by considering whether cyberspace can yield material results for feminist activists.

### **Speech-action tension and feminism**

The ambition to dispense with 'things' – and value 'words' more – has caused some general perplexity and irritation. Many feminists, in particular, have traditionally tended to see 'things' – be they low pay, rape, or female foeticide – as more significant than, for example, the discursive construction of marginality in a text or document.

(Barrett 1997: 112)

The follow up meetings with activists from CEE who were 'non-participants' in the forum indicated that one of the reasons they chose not to participate was their 'wariness' about the format of the activity; online discussions which do not necessarily result in a focussed, organised action. One activist explained that CEE women would have been much more eager

to engage in the forum if there was a concrete outcome of their participation, such as a petition, an online campaign, or a report. We can infer from this explanation that a 'proper feminist action' has to be material and tangible. Although a petition or a report is itself made from 'words', they are evoked here as 'deeds'. It is likely that the 'realness' and the 'tangibility' of a 'proper' action here is also complicated by the 'virtual' context. Wilbur suggests that the 'virtual' seems most often to refer to that which appears to be (but is not) real, authentic or proper (2000: 47). Indeed, the interpretation of online discussions as 'less real' and thus not serious was expressed by another 'non-participant', who explicitly doubted the effectiveness of the medium as well as the forum discussions to achieve any tangible results for women in Central Eastern Europe.

An emphasis on 'doing things', 'materiality' and 'results' of action is evocative of early second wave feminism, which was preoccupied with the question 'what is to be done?' (Kemp and Squires 1997: 8). I situated my feminist action research project within late second wave and post-modernist feminist approaches, more preoccupied with self reflexive and introspective questions such as 'who is the "I" and the "We"' that make knowledge claims or 'do things'? My chosen form of activity, an online forum, propagated less focused and more self reflexive action. Kemp and Squires note that the shift from 'overtly collectivist and political to the more individualistic and philosophical might be viewed negatively as a shift from insurrection to introspection, or positively as the coming of age of the feminist intellectual as an endeavour or perhaps more neutrally as simply symptomatic of the 1990s' (1997: 8). Certainly, the negative perception of online discussions as lacking political edge could be incited not only by the 'virtual' context but also by notions of early second wave feminism focused on 'things' and results. In addition, the tension between 'deeds' and 'words'

could also be entangled with binaries of knowledge/action and academy/activism widely debated in feminism (Stanley 1990; Mohanty 1997; Philips 1997). In the following section I set out the key-terms of speech act theory as they articulate with feminist standpoint debates, including pornography debates and feminist technoscience.

### *Feminist praxis debates*

The growing fragmentation of feminism, and at the same time its institutionalisation as an academic subject in the early 1980s in Western universities, raised heated debates about de-radicalisation and the exploitation of feminism and the women's movement (Evans 1997). Feminists were concerned about growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement (hooks 1997); the emergence of elite/academic feminists (Evans 1997); and with that associated issues of 'other' women's representation and the question of who speaks and for whom? (Mohanty 1997; Spivak 1997). Nevertheless, the question whether the institutionalisation of feminism and the emergence of theoretical language are 'a help or a hindrance to the pursuit of political objectives found fairly uniform resolution in favour of the theoretical during the early 1980s' (Kemp and Squires 1997: 14). The tension between theory and *praxis*, academic knowledge production and politics, ideas and social change, are central in these debates.

Evans, arguing against anti-theoreticism in feminism, suggests that a separation between production of theory and action is biased:

This dichotomy between theory and practice leads to some bizarre conclusions about the social world: that action or practice is in some way separable from thought and that theory is always a soft option and action always a role of true believer.

(1997: 20)

The author's view on the distinction between theory and action could be read as a critique of objectivity and rationality inherent to a modernist epistemological project. In Chapter 3, I noted that this critique has been put forward by the contributors to *Feminist Praxis* (Stanley 1990), who challenged traditional research methods and techniques by blending practical and theoretical and emphasising the political nature of knowledge production. According to Stanley, feminist research is political as feminist researchers are concerned with creating 'knowledge for' people and changing the world, not only in studying it (1990: 15).

Chandra Mohanty makes a somewhat similar point, although more self-critical and reflexive, discussing representations of 'other' women by emphasising the discursive power of Western feminist scholarship:

The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political *praxis* and organizing determines the significance and status of Western feminist writings on women in the third world, for feminist scholarship, like most other kind of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive *practice* in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses (for example, traditional anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, etc); it is a political

praxis which counters and resists...or even perhaps implicitly supports. ... There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship.

(1997: 92)

Here Mohanty deploys an argument about the interconnection between theory and *praxis* to highlight the fact that Western feminist scholarship not only counters and resists traditional discourses but also produces and supports unequal discursive representations of 'other' women. Although Mohanty understands discourse as political *praxis*, the discursive in her theorising does not necessarily represent the material (1997: 95). According to her, if there was a material reality of secular and liberated Western women versus veiled and chaste virgin women of the Third world there would not be any need for a women's movement in the West (1997: 95). However, these categories yield important political consequences for feminist representation where the binary of Western and Third world women enable and sustain each other. Furthermore, as it was noted in Chapter 2, the binary of West/Third world feminism in itself has become a dominant discursive position or mode of dialogue which tends to exclude Eastern feminism, which has the potential to deconstruct this binary.

It seems that early feminist *praxis* debates suggest that we can have only words (theory as discursive practice) but what we need is to make sure that we put deeds with words, that is, theory has to translate into actions, research practice and materialities. This dichotomy blends within Mohanty's deconstructive analysis of Western feminist theory as discursive action and political practice. However, what is implicit for these debates is the political orientation of feminism which requires a feminist academic not only to produce knowledge but also to have an agenda for social change. For my argument, it is important to highlight that even though



feminist *praxis* debates attempt to challenge and sometimes blend the distinction between words and doing things, knowledge production and politics, the action here is still understood in rather modernist terms - as the conscious imposition of acting subjectivity on the world.

### ***Pornography debates***

The words/deeds dilemma emerged very clearly in the second wave feminist pornography debates, particularly MacKinnon's theory on pornography whereby she critically challenged the normative view of speech as distinct from acts (1993). In her book *Only Words* (1993), MacKinnon argues that pornography is speech that does something. It silences, subordinates women and grievously misconstrues woman's nature and thus constitutes harm. According to MacKinnon, pornography is a form of harm not because it depicts harm to women and not because it causes harm to women but because it is harm (1993: 22). One may well wonder how pornography (mere pictures and words) could be harm?

In Chapter 3, I presented Austin's approach (1962) which suggests that words can constitute action: sometimes saying something constitutes doing something. For instance, uttering the words 'I promise to give you this book' constitutes the act of promising - that is, the stated promise sets up an expectation of action and as such it constitutes action through speech. If we consider pornography as speech which can constitute harmful action, the claims of silencing, subordination, and false constructions become clearer. According to MacKinnon, pornography as speech/act harms women in a very special and serious way: by violating their civil rights (1993). In particular, pornography subordinates women or violates their right to equal civil status; and it silences them or violates their civil right to freedom of speech. MacKinnon sees pornographic speech as an act of sex based discrimination that poses conflict between the

First<sup>56</sup> and Fourteenth<sup>57</sup> Amendments of the US Constitution (1993: 53). She challenges the ways in which pornographic speech is understood for the purpose of law, arguing that it constitutes a category of expression that is similar to other forms of non-protected speech legally considered as harmful actions (fighting words, libel, death threats, false advertising, and perjury). MacKinnon does not argue for prohibition of pornographic speech, but rather against the view that pornography should be axiomatically understood as 'only speech' and therefore due all protection under the First Amendment (1993: 10).

Is pornography a form of speech which can constitute an action of silencing and subordination? Not all feminists agree that pornography is an act of subordination; on the contrary, some would argue that pornography is an important form of sexual expression that does not harm women, and may even benefit them by liberating women and women's sexuality from the oppressive tradition of sexual conservatism (Segal 1997). Brown (1997: 381) completely rejects MacKinnon's theory of pornography and suggests that 'in arguing that pornography literally means what it says', MacKinnon ontologizes<sup>58</sup> the pornography as gender. According to her, by depicting male and female subject positions as dualistic, absolute, and formed only by sexuality, MacKinnon's theory of gender mirrors the straight male pornography rather than criticizes it (Brown 1997: 381).

Butler's critique of MacKinnon's argument is also directed at the absolute power and authority of pornographic texts to construct the social reality of what a woman is (2004b: 232-235). She

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<sup>56</sup>The First Amendment protects free speech.

<sup>57</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees equal civil rights.

<sup>58</sup> Brown argues that MacKinnon's reading of pornography as 'literal and essential representation of gendered heterosexuality precisely identifies the pornographic male consumer and pornographic female subject as ontologically male and female' (1997: 381).

suggests that ‘pornography neither represents nor constitutes what women are, but offers allegory of masculine willfulness and feminine submission, .... one which repeatedly and anxiously rehearses its own *unrealizability*’<sup>59</sup> (2004b: 234). According to her, pornography’s ‘authority is decidedly less divine; its power less efficacious’ and its performativity is not under sovereign control – ‘if the text acts once, it can act again, and possibly against its prior act (Butler 2004b: 234-235). She calls for a feminist reading of pornography which considers pornography as a site open for resignification and an alternative reading of performativity and of politics (2004b: 235).

These critiques indicate that pornographic texts may not always have the power to bring about all that they depict or that their power is not sovereign. Pornography can mean different things, it can act in multiple-ways and, thus its performativity is not absolute and dependent on the context.

Nonetheless, the point for this project is not the question of pornography but the contested constructions of the relationship of speech and act. MacKinnon considers pornography as a site of *praxis* where words and things cannot be disentangled and that words have power to bring about that which they depict. This approach applied to pornography understood in heterosexual terms, as noted by Brown, limits women’s political agency by ontologising gender. Although Butler differs from Brown through her theory of performativities and materialisation through iteration, her critique also points out that pornography does not have the power to construct what woman is. What is interesting here is that Butler elsewhere

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<sup>59</sup> Italics in original. Butler suggests that pornography could be understood as a ‘text of genders unreality’ – the impossible norms, compensatory ideals, hyperbolic gender norms – that sway over the social reality of gender positions but do not, strictly speaking, constitute that reality (2004b: 234).

suggests that signification cannot be separated from action as a site of embodiment and materialities (1990, 1993). However, in this critique she considers pornography as a field of 'unrealizable' gender positions, rather than imperatives and norms. These contestations illustrate the unresolved speech-act tension in feminist theorising with which my project seeks to engage, by exploring the meanings and constitution of feminist action in the forum's discussions. Similarly to MacKinnon, I suggest that words can be deeds. However, unlike her project mine has no concerns with legal arguments. My take on speech-action looks for a space in between MacKinnon's and Butler's arguments, whereby words can be deeds but their relationship cannot be entirely assumed in advance.

Building on the same premise that words and deeds cannot be understood as radically separate, Herring (2002) argues that online violence constitutes abuse and has harmful effects both on individual victims and on groups of users. Her definition of online violence includes online contact leading to off-line abuse, cyber stalking, online harassment, and degrading representations. According to Herring, cyber violence is more difficult to recognise and resist than off-line violence, because it diverges from the 'violence prototype' in several important ways. Online violence is virtual, symbolic, the harm can be untargeted, diffused and not intended. Furthermore, the perpetrator is an average person, which contrasts with the prototype of a criminal physically harming an individual in off-line environments. Nevertheless, Herring notes that online violence is not 'only words' and can do physical, psychological and emotional harm, and as such should not be tolerated (2002).

These feminist engagements with speech act theory and the understanding of discourse as action on the one hand point out the profound power of words to do things, and on the other

indicate some general ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounds speech as action. Textual<sup>60</sup> and therefore not 'prototypical' forms of action are generally considered as less 'real' and thus less harmful, and they require more effort to reveal, define and understand their effects. Can the textual yield 'real' results for online activists?

Although the speech act approach certainly gives insight into how things can be done in the textual environment of the Internet, it has little to say about the interaction between the textual discourse and the Internet. New approaches in technology and science studies such as actor network theory (Law 1999, 2003; Latour 2005) and feminist techno science (Haraway 1991; 1997), can be useful in exploring these new re-couplings of the social, textual and material.

#### *Actor network theory and feminist technoscience*

At the heart of the actor network theory lies a suggestion 'that society, organisations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials (Law 2003: 2). If actors form a network it is not only that they interact with other human beings. A network is formed because people interact with other people and endless other materials – machines, tools, texts, languages, money, architectures, etc. This approach is notable because it suggests that the 'social' is not simply human and includes non-human materials which act, perform, and interact. Consequently, social relations are never purely social; they are partly technological, partly textual, partly to do with occurring events, objects and processes.

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<sup>60</sup> I use 'textual' here in a broad way that includes any form of utterance spoken or written.

In feminist technoscience studies Donna Haraway (1991, 1997), in a similar way to actor-network theorists, assumes that the social and material recursively generate new social and material practices, technoscientific knowledges, and versions of the social and material world. Haraway attends in her work centrally to the way in which new hybrid social and material practices carry gender, ethnic, class and military agendas. She insists that there is no neutral place outside society, and that every description of the world also participates in social and material agenda-setting. According to Haraway, the cyborg, the coyote, the genetically engineered laboratory research animal OncoMouse™, the FemaleMan, the feminist, and the history of women in feminists analysis, the dogs and the non-human primates are hybrid entities that confuse the boundaries between nature and culture (2004b: 332). These entities not only require one to be confused about categories of nature and culture but also provide different readings of science and technology as well as new political potentials for connectivity, networking, and resistance.

Actor network theory and feminist technoscience share with speech act theory the notion of performativity. However, unlike post-structuralism, which delegates the performative only to discourse (texts and language), actor network theory suggests that other material entities (for instance a piece of machinery or a computer), like texts can act and perform or enact. According to Law (1999: 4) 'entities achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located...they are *performed*<sup>61</sup> in, by and through those relations'. When entities are performed, and perform themselves, into relations that are relatively stable, the actor-network is said to be durable.

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<sup>61</sup> Italics in original.

Building on the actor-network approach, I argue that the Online Women's Forum could be understood as a complex network comprised of people, texts, speech genres, speech acts, networks of computers, communication links, nodes and pathways that connect the participants into things like the World Wide Web, the Internet, and a final destination – the interface of the CEE Women's Forum. This disassembling of the actants (human and non-human)<sup>62</sup> can also provide a much more multifaceted picture of how feminist online action gets performed and performs itself into relatively stable social relations.

My take on the forum draws on the speech act theory as articulated in feminist pornography debates: I suggest that words and actions cannot be understood as radically separate. However, my argument is more subtle and also draws on a number of other debates on speech acts. In my analysis I build on Butler's understanding of performativity; the notion of Bakhtinian utterance as a site of action and agency; and actor network theory. In the following section I explore how feminist action was constituted in the forum focusing on how the Internet's virtuality and connectivity interact with feminist discourse.

### **Constituting feminist action**

A distinguishable feature of feminism has been its overtly political nature and its commitment to material and social change. The rhetoric of transformation, struggle and resistance is present across feminist projects, ranging from awareness raising groups and collective political actions to the textual politics of radical feminist manifestos and feminist critique. In my previous

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<sup>62</sup> In the context of semiotics, Greimas speaks of grammatical subjects which may or may not reveal themselves as persons. 'An actant can be thought of as that which accomplishes or undergoes an act' (Greimas and Courtes 1982: 5). In actor network theory, the term 'actant' refers to both human and non-human actors.

analysis I suggested that the CEE Women's Forum was generically projected as a feminist activist site through feminist semiosis and feminist modes of address. Here I would add that the forum as such performs or enacts a political urgency for action manifested in feminist discourse and as such constitutes a feminist social action of awareness raising and knowledge exchange.

### *Social action, genre and intersubjectivity*

My discussion of feminist *praxis* debates pointed out that feminist analysis has always stressed the links between knowledge and action, theory and social relations, and the importance of critical thought for the potential of social change. This emphasis on action and change could be traced in the majority of the participants' postings, I suggest, that social transformation/action/change as a trope of feminist discourse could also be considered as one of the commonsense idioms/generic themes of feminist speech.

Across all the text of the forum at least two structural regularities related to the constitution of textual action can be observed. First, the participants in their messages identified a problem, for instance, war rape, women's exclusion from knowledge production, discrimination against women in sweatshops, in political decision making, and in business, etc. Their second move involved questioning how to resist and defeat the women's oppression or the consideration of strategies to overcome these problems. Consider the following extract from a comment made by Linda:

- 1 As a feminist I am opposed to sweatshops. Sweatshops are factories that
- 2 employ workers to make something, pay them as little as they can, pay no



3 attention to work safety hazards, often use sexual harassment or even  
4 violence to intimidate, require long hours of work with few breaks and use  
5 the threat of firing to keep their people in line. Sweatshops have  
6 accompanied the globalization of companies looking for a place to make  
7 their products at the cheapest cost so the company can make the most  
8 profit. <...>  
9 The general way to pressure changes is to require a code of business  
10 conduct, which often reflects accepted laws and practices in the countries  
11 from which the companies moved. There are many places on the web  
12 where you can find examples of campaigns to do this. You can find a  
13 good list with more links under connections at  
14 [www.traditionsfairtrade.com](http://www.traditionsfairtrade.com). <...>

In her first move Linda states her oppositional feminist politics and describes the discriminatory practices of sweatshops (lines 1-8). In her second move she provides some strategies to effect change as well as gives references to further information about anti-sweatshop campaigns (lines 9-14). Linda makes good use of Internet technology and hyperlinks a fair-trade website, offering a journey to the new terrains of fair-trade activism.

At the level of the forum's discourse, Linda's message functions as a speech act which constitutes an exchange of knowledge. However, Linda's account on sweatshops also has a broader generic function shared with feminist discourses - that of effecting change. In this message, women's oppression as an objective social reality provides Linda with a motive to seek change. Similarly, in feminist discourse women's oppression is a recurrent situation

which requires transformative action. The recurrent cultivation of narratives of change in the forum indicates that 'change' could be understood as an idiomatic element of the feminist speech. If we consider idiomatic feminism as a feminist speech genre, I propose that the main function or purpose of this genre is change: we write, analyse, critique, and post messages on the forum because we want to achieve structural and/or individual transformation. Hence, Linda's message is not only the description of strategies of change but a performance of action which aims to achieve transformation.

Building on what we know about speech acts (Austin 1962), the dialogic aspects of utterance, and genres as extended and active utterances (Bakhtin 2004[1986]), I suggest that the performance of a feminist speech genre is an action.

Bazerman, analysing the patent genre, presents the vision that 'people create individual instances of meaning and value within structured discursive fields and thereby act within highly articulated social systems' (1994: 79). He argues that action is accomplished through performance of genres which are highly specific, systematic, contextual, and define consequences for further generically shaped action. The feminist speech genre performed in the forum's pages is not very systematic and does not have the same level of specificity as the patent genre, however, the participants of the forum were able to grant value and meaning to the statements of others by sharing the same mode of address, feminist standpoint, and topics. Furthermore, they named the performed action as knowledge exchange and awareness raising. The understanding of the participants' postings as knowledge exchange and awareness raising or action/activism could be encouraged by genre. For instance, Bazerman suggests that genre identifies a repertoire of actions that may be taken in a set of circumstances as well as maps

out possible intentions that one may have (1994: 82). It follows that the feminist speech genre, similarly to other genres, embodied a range of social intentions towards which the participants oriented their actions in the CEE Online Women's Forum and called them awareness raising and knowledge exchange.

Not all the messages in the forum included an analysis of women's oppression and possible strategies of resistance. Some participants limited themselves to sharing some theoretical insights about feminism, while others described women's situation in their own countries. However, activists like Linda elaborated on the contributions of others and provided numerous examples of off-line actions and ideas, to support female political candidates, encourage women's businesses, raise money for women's projects and oppose the war. Although the forum discussions were assembled from individual utterances, these fragmented interjections could be read as one text, whereby the 'completeness' of the text is conjured not only by the themes of the discussion, the dialogic characteristics of utterance, but also by a performance of action – awareness raising and knowledge exchange.

### *Women's place and technology*

Acts of self expression and communications were always understood as intrinsic elements of liberation in feminist practice. According to Youngs, that understanding encouraged the creation of 'safe' environments such as women's groups of various kinds, which provided temporary disruption of patriarchal conditions and the threat of exclusion, which inhibit 'forbidden speech' (1999: 62). The notions of a women's place were transported to and celebrated in the Internet by various women's groups, and the CEE online women's forum could be considered as one of them.

For instance, according to Linda:

‘Exchanges such as these give us the opportunity to share knowledge, wisdom and experiences from which we can learn and effect change’.

On another occasion she notes:

‘This forum is a wonderful chance to hear and be heard globally’.

Here Linda’s comments validate the forum as a place for feminist interaction. I suggest that she ‘recognises’ the forum through the radar of cultural<sup>63</sup> and dialogic<sup>64</sup> feminisms. In this remark, the cultural feminism is recuperated in references to ‘wisdom and experience’; and dialogic feminism is acknowledged by tropes of voice and hearing.

Nadine validates the forum by building on the notion of gender issues as global:

‘This on-line forum provides an excellent opportunity for us to engage in meaningful dialogue and to collectively raise our levels of awareness about the issues surrounding gender that are not merely geographic; they are global’.

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<sup>63</sup> This label is applied to feminists who posit the existence of women’s culture and privilege culture in their analysis (Segal 1987). Cultural feminists engage with such topics, such as spirituality (King 1989); language (Spender 1980); violence against women (Dworkin 1981); etc.

<sup>64</sup> Dialogic feminism can be defined as a school of thought in contemporary feminism which deploys the concept of dialogue to oppose the implications of postmodernism and relativism. The dialogue here is an approach that helps to approximate the truth between differently politically, socially, and geographically situated subjects (see Collins 1990; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002).

The 'global gender' issues in this comment are evocative of transnational feminism. However, it is more likely that the summoning of 'global' as well as 'dialogue' here is prompted by the connectivity of the World Wide Web. Nadine's description of the forum, like Linda's, depicts it as a place where dialogue and awareness raising take place. From observations by Danica in the Women and War discussion, - 'When I review the replies for this forum I understand that I am facing a wealth of wisdom that tends to not surface in research, politics, or policies', - we can infer that the forum provides a space not only for knowledge sharing but also for oppositional and subversive politics.

Linda's, Nadine's and Danica's remarks about the forum, from the perspective of their intentions, function as the speech acts that validate the forum as a space for feminist inter/action. The types of action invoked and performed in the forum – knowledge exchange, awareness raising, and learning – are reminiscent of typical feminist offline practices carried out in grass-roots or academic women's groups.

However, what is notable about this forum is a performance of the Internet medium which in the participants' comments is invoked by tropes of 'voice', 'dialogue', 'globality', and subversive potentials. The Internet as technology or acting reality enabled the interaction between participants from various countries, provided dialogic interface (through the forum's software), and global publicity. The Internet technology in Linda's, Danica's and Nadine's comments is framed as dialogic, global, and empowering. Here the Internet technology performs/works and also gets performed by other network actors and actants, such as the participants and speech genres, and already available stories about the Internet and feminism. Feminist theorising on women's knowledge, exchange, equality, and voice seems to be a

perfect 'fit' for online environments, which are usually characterised and celebrated by feminists because of their non-hierarchical, egalitarian structure, and subversive potentials (Harcourt 1999a; Youngs 1999). Linda, Nadine, and Danica looked for some shared politics in a connective, public, and potentially global online space to constitute feminist action. In doing so, they recuperated idiomatic second wave feminist tropes of women's space, knowledge sharing, awareness raising, subversion, and global gender issues. The emergent notion of feminist action in the forum seems to dovetail with 'internetness', idiomatic feminism and intersubjective recognition through conversation or dialogism. However, does this generically and technologically mediated public performance of action constitute a bid for activism?

The next section continues the consideration of the underpinning meanings and contradictions in play in the constitution of feminist action, suggesting that there is masculinised mode of thinking in what counts as political action.

### *Awareness raising and 'female' communication*

Feminist movements, since 1960s, have come to view mainstream political activity such as lobbying, party politics, and petitions as ineffective in resolving some of the pressing problems in women's private lives. A slogan the 'personal is political' was coined to reinscribe the 'political' to the 'private' and bring attention to issues such as domestic labour, childcare provision, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. It was also used to recognise structural inequalities through the collective telling of personal stories, as I discussed briefly in the previous chapter. The focus on the 'private as political' required new strategies for bringing about change. Feminist activists started to organise various educational and self-help women's groups, whose primary goals were awareness raising and the creation

of a 'safe place' where women could meet, discuss, and organise against the discrimination of women which occurs in the private sphere (Coote and Campbell 1982). These early second wave feminist groups legitimated female communication, including sharing, learning, validating, and listening, as a form of activism – or consciousness and awareness raising.

However, even though awareness raising is important, indeed might be the most important part of activism, it is likely that the feminists were successful in achieving significant social and political changes for women because they combined awareness raising campaigns, publishing, and networking with focused, targeted, political action, drawing on the repertoire of traditional forms of activism - protests, demonstrations, political campaigns, and lobbying. In the context of the forum then, the concern of some participants and non-participants for action which goes beyond raising questions and 'only words' has to be explored within the tension whereby awareness raising may be seen as a prelude needing to be advanced and transformed into a more focused political activity.

Nonetheless, the effects of various social change efforts depend on their context and the characteristics of the social realm which they attempt to change. For instance, an online awareness raising campaign about water shortages experienced by people in remote villages in need of water pumps might not be understood as 'action' as just 'talking about it' does not provide them with needed water; on the other hand, development organisations will certainly construe these campaigns as a legitimate form of action and activism. Because of changing contexts, topics, and the addressors and addressees of action, it is very difficult to evaluate the effects of textual/symbolic actions carried out in online space versus traditional forms of political activity based on direct action and in some cases 'perceived' change.

As another example of this complexity, most people would agree that the massive anti-war demonstrations in European cities prior to and following the invasion of Iraq were an example of direct activist action. Did they stop the war in Iraq? No. Did they bring about any political, structural, or individual change? Most probably. Given these problems of definition, in this chapter I do not seek to decide whether or not the Online Women's Forum achieved any individual and structural change or constitutes a legitimate bid for activism. Instead I am interested in expanding and contesting the definition of online activism by focusing on the discursive constructions of action as political activity.

### *The Male/Female dichotomy and political action*

Foucault suggests that discourses are the products of social, historical and institutional formations, and meanings are produced by these institutionalised discourses (1972 [1969]). It follows that the infinite meanings that language is capable of producing are always limited and fixed by the structure of social relations which prevail in a given time and place, and which in itself is represented through various discourses. John Frow comments thus on the relationship between discourse and reality: 'The discursive is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic and distinction between them. It assigns structure to the real at the same time as it is a product and a moment of real structures' (1985: 200 cited in Mills 1997: 50).

Drawing on idiomatic feminist claims that one of the dominant discursive formations as well as social relations in contemporary societies is patriarchy, I propose that as a legitimated and naturalised discourse, patriarchy can be traced in various other discourses and such dichotomies as self/other, subject/object, male/female, culture/nature, public/private,



action/reaction, doer/done by, gazer/gazed at, etc. which structure Western binary thinking. I consider the male/female<sup>65</sup> dichotomy as one of the dominant discursive hierarchies which is reproduced in other dichotomies by assigning more power and value to the actions and things that carry marks of the 'male'.

For Foucault, discourse is characterised by the 'delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories' (1977: 199). These assertions suggest that our perception of objects is formed within the limits of discursive constraints. The above characteristics of discourse imply that in order for an object or discourse to be activated, the knower has to establish a right to speak; and that the statements made by the knower are fixed: the statement has the power to map out possible uses of subsequent actions and statements.

I propose that traditional offline definitions of activism with their emphasis on direct action, results and change, narrow the perception of the sort of online activities that could be considered as real, effective, and worthy of attention. Although demonstrations were not effective to stop the war in Iraq, we do not doubt that they constitute a prominent bid for activism. However, when it comes to the 'soft' forms of action, such as awareness raising, knowledge exchange and various symbolic and textual actions, there is always a struggle to convince ourselves that these exchanges also constitute a transformative action or a thing. Here I suggest that a longing for 'action', 'results', and 'things' on the one hand, and the

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<sup>65</sup> Ortner suggests that women are symbolically associated with nature while men are associated with culture; and women's subordinate position stems from this culturally constructed association (1982). This association produces other dichotomies; and 'male' and 'female' symbolism runs through other binaries such as cultivated/uncultivated, public/private, active/passive, rational/emotional, effective/ineffectual, deeds/words, etc.

perceived 'ineffectuality' of women's communication ('only words'), on the other, could be understood as shaped and produced by the dominant discursive dichotomy of male/female. In Chapter 6, I have suggested that the yearning for action was constitutive of an authentic feminist standpoint and moral community which defined one's 'outsider' or 'insider' status in the discussions on violence. Here I consider how this yearning for action could be shaped by other discursive underpinnings and speech-act tensions.

The forum participants validated and prioritised female communication, but the tensions between deeds/words, action/reaction, and male/female were clearly played out not only in the accounts of the non-participants who labelled the forum as 'only words' but also in the discursive constructions of feminist action. Stephanie's comment made on the Women and War forum reflects discussion of some of these discursive tensions:

1 <...> In my work with women, I confess I have been disappointed that we have  
2 been unable to use our incredible power to be heard on this issue of war. We are  
3 still sort of weeping in the background as the bodies are carried in. I know  
4 patriarchy has weakened us... but still. Why can't we mount a protest so powerful  
5 that men will have to take heed? And why don't we also generate an agenda: this  
6 is the way we can solve our problems without resorting to war.  
7 I confess I have become burned out with trying to push the rock up the hill and I  
8 am moving now into the background to come to a place of peace within myself,  
9 and see what comes from me after that. There's a sort of martyr's ego about trying  
10 to change the world, and that isn't going to help. Stopping war has to come from  
11 a really powerful place of solidarity and love. It's got to be so positive that no one

12 can resist it. And it has to be international, beginning in our own communities and  
13 spreading out. And it has to include everybody. Men too!  
14 Is there a way to stop war? If not, we might as well talk about baking cookies and  
15 going to the zoo! But if we think we can do it — well, I'd love to hear your ideas.  
16 <...>

In the beginning of this extract Stephanie asserts 'our incredible power' and at the same time expresses her disappointment with women's efforts to stop war (lines 1-2). For Stephanie, a way forward is to abandon the position of passive/weeping female subject assigned by patriarchy; and to take an active stance - 'to mount a protest so powerful that men will have to take heed' and take a lead in generating a political agenda which does not resort to war. What we can see here is an exchange of meanings between the categories of passive/ active and male/female: in order for women's action to be successful it has to have certain characteristics, such as a protest and political agenda setting, which are usually associated with the category 'male'. However, this action has to be 'peaceful', and the peacefulness here is clearly attributed to women and the 'female'.

From the powerful metaphors used in the next paragraph (lines 7-13) we can infer that Stephanie's anti-war activism is confrontational ('push the rock up the hill' and 'martyr's ego to change the world'). What is interesting here is that these metaphors themselves carry dense cultural meanings, for instance, the rock is pushed by Sisyphus and the sacrifice for beliefs is made by Jesus Christ. The use of these metaphors not only imbues the language with the markers of struggle and confrontation but also infuses the portrayal of feminist struggles with tropes of heroism. However, Stephanie secludes herself from this active position to 'the

background to come to peace' with herself. In the following piece of text (lines 9-13), she partially negates and modifies these 'male' characteristics (confrontation and sacrifice to change the world) as not helpful and tries to instil 'female' emotions and values, such as love, solidarity, as well as inclusiveness in the imagery of anti-war action.

Stephanie finishes her message raising the question, 'Is there a way to stop the war?' We can gather from the final sentences (lines 14-15) that this question is not just rhetoric – she expects to hear ideas which 'can do' things. She makes a sharp distinction between 'talk' and 'ideas', 'baking cookies and going to the zoo' and stopping the war. A form of 'feminine' activity, such as 'talk' and 'baking cookies' here is contrasted with more meaningful, valued and solid activity - the exchange of 'ideas' that make things happen.

In this extract we can unpack how the dichotomies of male/female, action/reaction, and active/passive shape what kind of actions and activist strategies are perceived as more effective, valuable, and real. In Stephanie's comments these dichotomies are partly disrupted by feminist discourse, which legitimates and puts on the top 'soft' feminine values in anti-war action. However, the traditional discursive hierarchies keep coming back to the text through the language, metaphors, and focus on making things happen through traditional forms of political activity.

A modification of the conceptualisation of feminist anti-war action could be observed in the following comment made by Sandra:

- 1 <...> Gender is Not Enough to Oppose the War!!! Sentimentalizing women has
- 2 always been part of peace movements. Usually we hear that women are peace

3 keepers and life savers. <...> Unless women who are in the role of mothers do not  
4 develop clear political position of their resistance, the sole being mother cannot  
5 oppose the state's logic of war, on the contrary most of them, in case of Serbia  
6 and Croatia were afterwards used by the same army fathers for the aims of  
7 defending the nation. <...>

8 Some of us believe that if we are to work toward the aim of inclusion of everyone  
9 in equal rights and therefore work toward overcoming the concepts of minority  
10 and the Other, we need to work on taking care of oneself and others equally. It  
11 includes questions about solidarity in the wartime, about children we take care of,  
12 students we deal with... Once we slip into discourses of '-ours' being more  
13 important and better than the 'other'.... child, woman or man, black or white, mad  
14 or rational... that is the end of the idea of civil society. Some of us believe  
15 in beauty of exchange among different as the political principle which will then  
16 put into discussion privileges, victims, guilt feelings, accomplices.... Is that not  
17 working toward end of patriarchy?

In contrast to Stephanie, Sandra starts her message by downplaying the importance of the gender category. She points out that women's association with 'peacekeepers' and 'life savers' can be easily misused by the war generals if they do not have a clear political position of resistance (lines 1-7).

While Stephanie depicted resistance as a powerful positive action based on love and solidarity led by women, Sandra here suggests that the key is the politics of difference, which through inclusion of different groups overcomes negative processes of 'Othering'. We can see quite

similar discursive repertoires invoked in both accounts: Stephanie also draws on notions of inclusiveness and difference, referring to international, communal, and 'inclusive' aspects of the anti-war action (lines 11-13).

However, Sandra prioritises the difference and defines it as inclusion and equal rights for the minorities and the 'Other', and, most importantly caring for 'oneself and others equally' (line 10). What is notable here is that even though Sandra might be seen as distancing herself from the 'feminised' politics of peace by investing in the principle of difference, 'female' values through the references to care, solidarity, and inclusiveness also strongly shape her depiction of anti-war action.

Direct, confrontational and public action (traditional/hegemonic activist tactics) carries the signs of the 'male', whereas talking, sharing, learning, listening carries the idea of 'female' communication marked as emotional, ineffectual, and private. In following this vein, we can suggest that as long as action carries the 'masculine' markers it is perceived as more effective, real, and solid. Thus the construction of feminist action has a combination of both: the female communication/action values of co-operation, validation, dialogue are asserted but at the same time the striving for change/ action/ transformation is frequently invoked not only through peaceful resistance but also confrontation, protest, or an active political stance.

The attachment of 'masculine' markers to feminist action can also be illustrated by another example:

1 <...> Often the women themselves just 'don't know how', just 'can't do it

2 now', will do it 'after I'm done with this'. It takes time. We can all relate to  
3 that. I'm so thankful for all of you out there in the world busting down  
4 doors, yelling as loud as you can, making the world notice you because  
5 those of us here making smaller noises get our courage from you.  
6 Don't stop!

This comment validates the feminist action depicted and carried out by the forum participants. Silvana constructs her acknowledgment of the participants' efforts by invoking the dichotomy passive/active; whereby women's lack of knowledge, time, interest, and general passivity is shared with ('We can all relate to that') but also contrasted with feminist activists. What is interesting here is the use of language – 'busting doors', 'yelling loud', and 'making noise'. In other contexts, these expressions could be used to belittle feminist action as aggressive, out of place, and 'only noise', however, here the aggressive and marginal activities of busting doors and yelling loud are deployed to mobilise the meanings of courage and effectiveness ('making the world notice you').

This analysis of examples of constituting anti-war feminist action shows how the participants attempt to privilege feminist discourse over patriarchy, however, they also draw on traditional 'male' markers to imbue their actions with signs of effectiveness, resistance, courage, and political edge.

### *From Talk to Action?*

In the Networking thread of the forum there were a few attempts at off-line mobilisation and action. One participant was looking for women's groups from Eastern Europe to collaborate

on a project. Another participant wanted to establish some links with the CEDAW experts. Danica, a moderator of the Women and War discussion, was trying to invite grass-roots organisations from Central Eastern Europe and raise funds for her conference on remembering war crimes against women in Bosnia:

### **Extract 1**

- 1 <...> It is difficult to reach out to the women's organizations in Bosnia, Serbia,
- 2 Croatia and Eastern Block Countries to inform them of the upcoming conference.
- 3 Not only is this the problem but finding sponsorship to cover their travelling
- 4 expenses to attend is also of great need.
- 5 Any suggestions? I am asking for all grassroots women's organizations to come to
- 6 this movement and join the Balkan women from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia in 'We
- 7 remember' movement December 1st - 4th, 2005 to heal memories from the
- 8 gynocides and rape camps <...>.

In this part of the message Danica asks for suggestions as to how to reach out to women from 'Eastern Block Countries' and how to raise funds for their travelling expenses, as well as invites 'all grassroots organisations' to join this 'movement'. What is notable here is that Danica uses the word 'movement' twice to describe grass-roots organisations as well as the conference 'We remember'. The 'movement' here invokes the meanings of large scale, opposition and support/membership which usually characterise transformational social movements. She continues the posting by providing the list of the rape camps and committed crimes:



**Extract 1 (continued)**

- 9 Vogosca (near Sarajevo), where witnesses speak of the murders of women after their  
10 rapes
- 11 Foca-indoor sports arena next door to a police station, where women were held for  
12 months & raped
- 13 Brcko Lucka death camp, town of Brezovo Polje terrorized and raped the forty  
14 young women and sent their mothers across death highways to Tuzla
- 15 Omarska, most dreaded Serb concentration camp holding doctors, lawyers, political  
16 leaders, intellectuals women were raped on a schedule of once every four days and  
17 washed the dishes for the 2,200 men held as prisoners
- 18 Trnopolje, Northern Bosnia
- 19 Miljevinina, Eastern Bosnia
- 20 The conference and grassroots movement will listen to Bosnian women's  
21 presentations of:
- 22 First person stories of Bosnian Muslim War Crimes Survivors living in the aftermath  
23 of war <...>
- 24 Experiential peaceful events to express opposition for violence against women and  
25 children. <...>

The focus on facts and detail including the locations, and the age group, profession, and numbers of victims shapes a very 'real' and documentary picture of violence against women. Danica's astute observations, such as 'sports arena next door to a police station, where women were held for months and raped' (lines 11-12); and also that professional and intellectual women were raped on the schedule between 'washing the dishes' for men prisoners (lines 15-

17) - speaks of state orchestrated and highly organised violence committed against Bosnian women. In these short factual accounts women are invoked as victims of brutal violence committed by the men and the state. I suggest that what we see here is the deployment of the bid to trauma to persuade the participants to take necessary action – in this case to remember the rape camps. My analysis in Chapter 6 has suggested that a feminist bid to trauma is constitutive of a moral feminist community premised on privileging of victimhood and orientation to action. The ‘action’, in this case, is understood as the telling and listening to the first person stories of war crime survivors.

Remembering and speaking about war rape publicly are described by Danica as political acts of resistance and opposition (lines 20-25). She calls the Bosnian women’s presentations of first person stories as ‘events’ and ‘movement’, even though the conference itself could also be understood in a different context by more ‘action’ oriented activists as ‘only words’. Danica draws on the repertoire of social movement/action to invest peaceful remembrance events or just ‘listening’ to a first person story with the meaning of resistance and opposition. Furthermore, the exposition of brutal violence in her documentary account of rape camps calls for protest and movement – it cannot be ‘only talk’.

We learnt from Austin that speech acts are defined and brought to existence by social context. This means that different social environments, subjects, and audiences can imbue speech with more or less powerful marks of ‘action’, ‘resistance’, and ‘opposition’. For instance, the first person story of violence told in the Hague War Tribunal will be an act which brings perpetrators to justice; the same story in the conference ‘We remember’ will constitute an action of opposition, resistance, and awareness raising; whereas the story published on the

online forums can potentially raise awareness on a large scale and lead to the bringing of justice if the story is discovered by the 'right' audiences.

Danica's message received several responses. Linda suggested that 'women's groups in other places who realistically cannot go, could help a sister more local' to attend the conference. I proposed exploring the regional UNIFEM and Soros foundation programmes, which have strong peace-building agendas, to raise funds.

At the end of the discussion on Women and War, I exchanged several emails with Danica about the conference. She explained that the event was postponed due to the difficulties in raising funds and the illness of the keynote speaker. I do not have the evidence to suggest that any of these networking actions 'materialised' in off-line environments – whether the participants networked with each other or the conference 'We remember' took place. However, my reading of Danica's posting and other participant's responses indicates that there was an attempt to mobilise people for a further offline action. It seems that the participants used the forum not only to distribute information and raise awareness about the topic on women and war but also to mobilise activists for more proactive actions such as Danica's conference.

### *Ways forward: looking for new metaphors*

My analysis in this chapter has focused on the notions of action in the community of words, suggesting that the strong yearning for action, change, and results in participant's postings was generically and discursively constituted. It seems very useful when online conversation translates into the local actions of women's groups such as campaigns, networks,

demonstrations, conferences, that is, traditional embodied forms of action. But what if it doesn't? How are we going to evaluate the viability of online feminist action that does not result in embodied activity? In this concluding section, I consider how cyberspace may yield 'results' for feminist activists drawing on Butler's concept of performativity and the understanding of cyberspace as fluid and lacking traditional 'materiality'.

This opening line of Star Trek is arguably one of the most famous television monologues ever:

Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Her five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.

The outer space - 'final frontier', 'strange new worlds', a place 'where no man has gone before' - is strongly gendered. Even though in the 1980s the phrase 'where no man has gone' was replaced by the more egalitarian 'where no one has gone' (Joyrich 1996: 63), the invocation of space as new, strange, unknown, and dangerous, as well as something that has to be explored/conquered/controlled/colonised imbues it with the signs of traditional dichotomies such as self/other and male/female.

Cyberspace has attracted a vocabulary with similar cultural references. The metaphor of 'frontier' is frequently invoked to describe the unclear and unknown aspects of cyberspace, where cyberspace cowboys (mainly white males from computer science backgrounds) take up the challenge of exploration, regulation, and protection of the space (Miller 1995).

Wakeford observes another popular construction of the Web as trivial (2000: 352). In her research Wakeford encountered attitudes which label the activity of 'surfing' or browsing WebPages as 'playing around' rather than real (field) work. For her the challenge is to 'reclaim the activity known as surfing as *serious*<sup>66</sup> play which can create and maintain relationships, be they between individuals, organisations or hypertext documents' (Wakeford 2000: 352). I would add that construction of online activity as trivial is shaped not only through the binary of work/play but could be traced to other dominant dichotomies such as self/other, male/female, deeds/words, etc.

Wakeford suggests that the way forward to make cyberspace 'serious' is 'a more radical configuration of the relationship of (woman/) woman /machine rather than solely concentrating on man/woman/machine'; and the retaining of oppositional, hybrid, and situational identity politics encapsulated in a figure of cyborg (2000: 357). I share with her an understanding of the need for radical politics and the search for a new vocabulary and metaphors to investigate women's presence on the Web. However, it seems that the radical feminist presences on the Internet are still shaped by the dominant dichotomy of male/female: these spaces make their politics radical by imbuing feminine or feminist space/action/language with the markers of male/geek/nerd/self-taught/independent/asexual. The websites such as Cybergrll, geekgirl, NerdGrrl certainly defy some traditional stereotypes associated with women and computing but they do so partly by adopting the markers of particular types of 'male behaviour'.

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<sup>66</sup> Italics in original.

The characteristics of cyberspace, such as 'unclear', 'undefined', 'unknown' and 'new', suggest that the space can yield new possibilities and new performances. The lack of traditional materiality, rituals, and 'set in stone' status indicate that cyberspace as a discourse has the potential to congeal new actions and materialities. Butler's understanding of performance is useful to clarify this utopian reading of cyber-performance. Butler suggests that over time the repetition of a performance congeals because it starts to become the normal, the expected, and the familiar (1990). When performance becomes the norm, it also becomes materiality. Furthermore, for Butler the doing of the thing is the being of the thing. The performance of feminist action is doing and it becomes the thing by doing. If we do things differently in a virtual space then materially what occurs or takes place will be different; we will get different products, and new possibilities. Therefore feminists have to take cyberspace more seriously and explore its full potential by developing new ways of performing, acting, and making politics on the Web.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to engage with discourse and social action debates by exploring the constitution of feminist action in online environments. The first part explored the tension of speech and action in second wave feminist debates and actor network theory/ feminist technoscience. This discussion suggested that in feminist *praxis* debates, the words and deeds tension played around the distinction between theory and research methods, academia and activism, knowledge production and politics. These feminist debates asserted that we can have only words but what we need is to make sure that we put deeds with words, that is, the feminists have to have a social agenda for change. At the same time, speech act theory as articulated in feminist pornography debates, and a Bakhtinian understanding of utterance and

genre showed that speech and action cannot be easily disentangled. If we understand words as utterances rather than artifacts we are placing them in an arena of agency and *praxis*. Furthermore, actor network theory and feminist technoscience approaches suggest that we have to treat human and non-human actants symmetrically and consider the role of technology in the constitution of action. That inevitably raises questions of what does happen with the notion of action in a virtual community of words.

Taking as a departure point an understanding that speech can constitute action, this chapter argued that participants' messages on the Online Women's Forum could be understood as social actions invoked and constituted by the discursive, generic and technological contexts of online interaction. The chapter considered postings as speech acts, which not only described or represented feminist struggles but also constituted a discourse which itself could have performative effects (Butler 1990; MacKinnon 1993). The 'performative' in my analysis was not limited only to speech acts; it also applied to the Internet technology, which performed/enacted the feminist online action alongside the forum's participants, speech genres, and texts.

I did not suggest that the participants' postings about women's rights and feminism somehow instantaneously accomplished structural or individual change; but the politically engaged texts were not innocent and they certainly did something more than just said things. They performed and enacted various notions of feminism, activism, and Internet technology and shaped our understanding about them. The participants of the forum constituted feminist action, recuperating versions of early second wave feminism and assigning the meaning of knowledge exchange and awareness raising to the action performed in the forum.

My focus on the discursive construction of feminist action revealed that the participants' (and my own) yearning for 'doing things', 'actions' and 'results' could be shaped by the traditional notions of political activism; and this in itself could be biased thinking which devalues feminine or 'soft' communication practice. An analysis of the modes of yearning for action indicated how the participants tried to imbue feminist/ female actions such as awareness raising, remembering, and the sharing of knowledge with the marks of 'action' and 'movement', to secure the meanings of resistance, opposition, and tangibility.

Even though the virtual/textual/symbolic online environments lack the traditional markers of 'action', 'materiality', and therefore 'tangible results' this does not mean that they cannot yield material results for feminist activists. Virtuality as discourse, which at least at first glance lacks traditional hierarchies and 'set in stone' status, is capable of different performances, actions, and materialities.

The feminist take up of cyberspace is typically either an overoptimistic celebration of new possibilities or a pessimistic critique of the recuperation of traditional inequalities in cyberspace. Having in mind the power of cyberspace to yield new materialities, feminists have to engage with it more seriously and use cyberspace to its full potential for their political interventions, tactical texts, artwork, networking, activism and new performances.



## **Chapter 8: CONCLUSION**

This thesis brings together a number of lines of research investigation: the reciprocal/intersecting character of feminist social action and feminist action research; the complexities of transnational identifications and how they dovetail with problematics of CEE feminist politics; the discursive character of community and the relationship between speech and action. These themes arose and were explored through a web-based speech/action site focused on CEE.

By way of conclusion, I first map out theoretical and methodological specifics of a feminist cyberdialogic approach, highlighting its contribution to the study of online sociability practices. At the outset I noted that there is congruence between the methodological and epistemological questions of this thesis. Therefore, I revisit my methods of inquiry in the second section, detailing the wider thematic invoked in relation to the conceptualisation of the speech/act distinction for *praxis* and feminist action research in cyber-world. I then draw my arguments on feminist cyberdialogics together from the analytical chapters, followed by a systematic review of my research questions, and my conclusion to them. I end by considering the implications of cyberdialogics for theorising feminist sociability practices and outlining the possibilities for future research.

### **Feminist Cyberdialogics**

The character of the Internet enables us to access international dynamics as well as feminist idiomatics in a different way, by highlighting the situational, technological, interactive, generic and strategic nature of communication. I situated my study of feminist cyberdialogics

as a cyberfeminist inquiry that can be characterised by attention to relational subjectivities and mutual shapings of the technological and social. In addition, my cyberdialogic approach found particularly useful epistemologies which focus on the role of language and the rhetorical-material context of communication to understand online sociability practices. In terms of theoretical and methodological specifics, feminist cyberdialogics is grounded in four interconnected areas of thought: feminism, actor-network theory/feminist technoscience, speech act theory and Bakhtin's theory of language.

The technologically and linguistically mediated context of the Internet, with its new connectivity, dialogic environment and the potential for diverse and egalitarian communication, seems to be of particular relevance to feminism. Feminists have always been concerned with negotiations of sameness and difference, the possibility of dialogue among differently situated women, power relations, and the transformative potential of feminist agency. These feminist concerns are central to my proposed feminist cyberdialogic approach which, similarly to feminist methods of inquiry, focuses on questions of the interrelation of theory and practice, speech and action, power relations, and transformative agency. Contemporary feminist standpoint theory argues that we must acknowledge our positionality and situatedness as the beginning of critical agency and action. Bakhtin's dialogism - like standpoint theory and cyberfeminism - has its base in understanding that subjectivity is contingent, ongoing and dependent on different contexts. The conjunction of feminism, a cyberfeminist mode of thinking, speech act theory and Bakhtinian dialogics led me to investigate how the Internet invites new possibilities of thinking about feminist activism, community and identity by shifting traditional notions of positionality and creating spaces for dialogue.

The 'cyber' dimension of my approach is primarily connected to the cyberfeminist mode of thinking, that is, the blurring of boundaries between the technological and social. Drawing on actor network theory, my analysis of feminist online action and agency suggests that the Internet as acting reality performs and gets performed by a network of other human and nonhuman actants: users; computers; speech acts; generic forms. Feminist cyberdialogics not only attributes agency to the participants behind computer screens, but also understands technology as agentful and significantly implicated in the expansion of feminist agency and action on the Internet. Indeed, the Internet enables women to cross the private/public divide, connect and network with women across the world, and, at least in a theoretical sense, it creates spaces where anyone could have a voice. These new characteristics of the Internet raise questions about the nature of feminist social action/change and how it works.

Feminist cyberdialogics builds on the premise that language influences how we think, feel, and act. It emphasises the textuality of the Internet and its performative and dialogic nature. The texts are produced by the users whose messages are constantly performing and enacting different worldviews, moralities, identities and versions of social action. This calls for theoretical approaches that see language as dialogic, active, processual, non-singular and socially situated (Austin 1962; Bakhtin 1984, 2004). The importance of these approaches is that they allow the theorising of feminist online sociability practices, including the notions of social action, identity and community, as emergent social formations conjured through technology, language and a dominant feminist discourse.

Feminist cyberdialogics acknowledges that the new connectivity of the Internet and dialogic environment brings different feminist voices together and has the potential to create a more

inclusive feminist theory and practice. It also accentuates the dialogic environment of the Internet as a space of resistance in which differing discourses fight and compete with one another for dominance and influence. Bakhtin's ideas on the social situatedness of utterance and genre demonstrate how the authoritative language of discursive communities not only invites but also constricts. A feminist speech community, as any other community, is formed on the principals of boundary control and exclusion, as well as inclusion. Thus, feminist cyberdialogics understands the Internet as an arena where the forces of inclusion constantly struggle with the forces of exclusion. It works to uncover the particularities of hegemonic/common sense feminism and strives to understand the meanings and contradictions involved in the constitution of shared feminist identities and social actions in international feminist communities.

Feminist cyberdialogics is, above all, an example of a feminist analysis of online sociability practices that considers agency and social action as processual, generically, discursively, interactively and technologically constituted by human and non-human actants. It is an understanding that online feminist agency is polyvocal, co-authored, and intersubjective. By combining feminist action, reflection and textual analysis, my feminist cyberdialogic approach calls, in particular, for the rethinking of social action and community on the Internet, in this way extending the theorising of online sociability practices and revisiting feminist positions on these long standing debates.

### ***Praxis in cyber-world***

The common criteria of action research can be articulated in the following terms: knowledge is produced through action; people who comprise the research population are also active

participants in the research process; data comes from participants' experience; and research aims to improve organisational practice and outcomes. This definition of action research has certain assumptions about what is action, who are participants, what is the role of the researcher, what is going to follow and what will be produced. The notion of action research has a strong focus on social change and an inclusive/ democratic orientation towards knowledge production. These politics of research are reminiscent of feminist *praxis*, which also requires feminist researchers to have an agenda for social change and produce useful knowledge (Stanley 1990). In Chapter 3, I argued that this perception of action research is based on a modernist understanding of self determined subjectivity acting in the world and doing things. I have suggested that this modernist understanding of action does not lend itself easily to the textual, interactive, technological and fluid environment of the Internet. The new arena of the Internet requires rethinking what we mean by action, location, community, and identity, troubling the traditional understanding of action research and feminist action research.

Action research is about doing things – improving practice, changing organisation, and achieving planned results through a spiral of action and reflection. Did I do action research? This question is not so easy to answer if we hold to the traditional definition of action research. In terms of critical reflection on my experience about building and participating in a research site, my inquiry corresponds with action research criteria. However, did I do it in the traditional sense – did I, for example, transform gender relations and enhance women's empowerment? Furthermore, the participants in my action inquiry did not take an active part in research design; they were not co-researchers as such. This perceived lack of fulfilment of

the criteria for action research raises questions about what counts as action and what power approves the collective production of knowledge as more useful and valid.

In the course of my research, I found most compelling the distinction between words and deeds and the implications of this distinction for the understanding of what action means. From a feminist *praxis* point of view, my action inquiry as a form of consciousness raising and community building practice undoubtedly constituted a deed. However, the running tension of speech-action in second wave feminist *praxis* debates, and also in my research data, indicated that there was an imaginative possibility that online conversation might not have a real meaning in the world. How do we evaluate actions? By their impacts? By their intentions? Or by the fantasies which we attach to them?

My research is situated in a poststructuralist terrain in terms of its epistemological and ontological groundings. The poststructuralist critique urges us to avoid reductionism and take into account how we are invested in the regimes of power. Therefore, I argue that in some respect feminist action research that invests in embodied, human agency and progress-driven versions of action has some delusions about what the acting in the world might mean. My online action inquiry suggests that there are other ways of acting in the world. The distinction between speech and action has been ruptured and reconfigured in a new way in the age of the Internet and 'action' here is constituted through various sites: embodied human actions, technology, language and social interaction.

The modernist understanding of action that frequently informs feminist action research is based on local, geographically defined, and embodied action. In my project I was acting in the

poststructuralist and postmodernist world of technosociality. The speed and connectivity of the Internet reshapes notions of physical space and proximity leading to a re-conceptualisation of time and space, and hence of what it means to be local and possibilities of human interconnection. The geographical boundaries here became attenuated and locality is more defined in terms of bonding through social interaction and participation in a community of words. What happens to the notion of action in the locality which is constituted through words, at the same time spanning both the virtual and physical worlds of its users? And how do we 'translate' actions in these spaces? From an activist perspective, it is very useful when online conversation translates into traditional local action. But what if it does not? How are we going to evaluate the viability of the 'action' which occurs in online space and does not go beyond it? This thesis does not aim to validate the concept of words as actions which have material/local results, but by raising these critical questions it troubles the understanding of action. I have demonstrated that action in the forum took place at various levels: participants' discussions; our rehearsal of feminist action as awareness raising and knowledge exchange; and my own acting and reflecting as a researcher. That in itself shows different sites of action as well as a complexity which does not lend itself to linear and cause-effect driven definitions of action. However, the interpretation of these textual and technologically embodied actions is frequently circumscribed by the presumptions of local activity, with material results and improved *praxis* or social democracy as dominant criteria of the viability of action research as well as activism. The notion of locality has been reconfigured and is accessible on the Internet predominantly through language, suggesting that the notion of action also has to be revisited.

The question of action is also connected to the concept of community. I noted earlier that the formation of online community can be understood as a deed/action. It is a deed in terms of

association and social interaction as well as the construction of a new online locality. Online communities emerge from the intertwining of sociality and technology in ways that makes it difficult to clearly separate these individual influences. Given this hybrid nature, this thesis proposed the concept of feminist cyberdialogics to understand the mutual shaping of technological, interactive, social and discursive elements in the constitution of online sociability practices. I developed the argument of feminist cyberdialogics through the course of four analytical chapters.

### **Rethinking identity, community and action**

In Chapter 4 I set out the key concepts that aided my analysis throughout the thesis and considered their interrelation in the framing of a feminist cyberdialogic field. I investigated the structures of the website as the frame/context of feminist action, focusing on the generic summons and mode of address deployed in the forum. My analysis suggested that I as a researcher constructed the website through two commonsense speech etiquettes/genres: feminist, inflected with activist/academic communalities; and online writing/publishing generic forms. The examination of the character and shape of participants' responses to my established frame of action supported these findings. The participants engaged in the forum primarily through established generic rules and expectations but there were also some modifications and changes in the frame of activity. I considered these modifications through Goffman's category of 'footing', used to consider one's stance and alignment issues in a conversation. My analysis revealed that the generic rules of the forum were negotiated through the participants' alignment and orientation to each others' footing and that these negotiations and changes have to be considered within the context of a feminist idiom of inclusiveness and



its intersection with internet speech genres (electronic message schema). Finally, my investigation of the wider context of women's participation suggested that women's engagement with the Internet might depend on a variety of intertwined causes such as institutional and socio-political context, digital skills and 'fluency' in feminist, activist and academic genres.

Chapter 5 extended the argument of feminist cyberdialogics exploring the constitution of feminist identity and community through the repertoires of 'I' and 'We'. This chapter chiefly considered the authoritative feminist self presentation through the category of 'standing' or a 'right to be heard'. The examination of postings in the established dialogic structures of the site revealed a range of repertoires constituting an authoritative 'I'. These repertoires were grounded in the experiential standpoints of 'radical' feminism through their references to 'the personal as political' and emphasis on women's experience and knowledge. The repertoires of 'I' (as mother, woman and professional/academic/activist) formed the basis of feminist authoritative standing in the forum. The move from 'I' to 'We' was established through both the repertoires of 'I' and interactivity as well as the shared/idiomatic feminist knowledge in play. Overall, the chapter argued that the participants, through various generic tools and interactivity, constructed an identity that reflected their association with the group.

Chapter 6 pursued arguments concerning key aspects of idiomatic feminism as a feminist speech community 'out there'. This chapter argued that foundational concepts of sisterhood and patriarchy constituted the key repertoires of a feminist speech community as well as the terms of its membership. Another set of arguments was connected to my investigation of 'Women and War' postings. I unpacked the ways in which the discussion on violence

articulated a particular version of 'authentic' feminist standpoint, and in doing so, constituted the terms of 'insider' and 'outsider' that bid this particular instance of feminist community. I argued that this 'authentic' standpoint was grounded in a version of 'radical' feminism and human rights discourse. The rhetorical tools in play, such as a bid for trauma, a moral privileging of victimhood and women's experience, as well as the orientation to the claiming of universal women's oppression, signalled their link to 'radical' feminism. At the same time, the claims to 'truth' and 'justice', as well as the use of various rhetorical persuasion tools, indicated that an 'authentic' feminist standpoint was also shaped by human rights discourse. The exploration of participants' messages indicated an emergent speech etiquette which, through persuasion and identification practices of dramatisation and testimony, linked feminist identity work with a particular version of feminist morality; this in turn demanded 'justice' and necessary 'action' on the behalf of the victims of violence. My analysis demonstrated that the strands of second wave 'radical' feminism have constituted the commonsense/ idiomatic speech repertoires of an international speech community invoked in the discussion on violence.

Chapter 7 extended the questions of authoritative claiming and authentic feminist standing/idiomatic feminism into one ongoing point of tension running across the discussion threads of the Online Women Forum: the place of speech and action in the articulation of feminist politics, community, and identity. My exploration of the speech-act tension in feminist *praxis* debates, actor network theory and feminist technoscience identified several positions/approaches. The approaches developed in feminist *praxis* debates seem to assert that we can have only words but we need to make sure that we put deeds with words, that is, feminists have to have a social agenda of change. On the other hand, the positions articulated

in speech act theory and feminist pornography debates suggest that speech and action cannot be so easily disentangled. Finally, actor network theory and feminist technoscience approaches add another critical edge to the speech–action tension by suggesting that we have to treat human and non-human actants symmetrically, and consider the role of technology in the constitution of action. Drawing on all these approaches (in a critical manner) I argued that the participants’ messages could be understood as social actions invoked and constituted by discursive, generic and technological contexts of interaction. My analysis suggested an emerging definition of feminist online action that dovetails with ‘internetness’, and also idiomatic feminism and intersubjective recognition through conversation.

In relation to my first research question, which asked how feminist identities are constructed on the Internet, I have shown that interactivity and generic framing are important to understand these representational feminist practices. I have pointed out that I, as a developer of a web site, summoned particular versions of feminist, activist and academic identities/communalities which chiefly matched with the self presentations of the participants. However, in opposition to my expectation to attract women activists from the CEE, my actual participants came from all over the world and they partly renegotiated the forum as an international feminist space. This raised questions about authority, authenticity and the right to speak and be heard in transnational feminist discourse. Although the CEE identity was acknowledged as significant in the forum, the participants negotiated their right for speech and hearing claiming universals and prioritising identities of mother, woman, feminist/activist and professional. I have shown that these repertoires of self presentation were grounded in ‘radical’ feminism through their emphasis on women’s experience and knowledge, and references to ‘the personal as political’. I also pointed out that interactivity embedded in the

dialogic interface of the forum contributed to the emerging sense of community through acknowledgment, citation, and expressed appreciations for contributions to ongoing discussions. My analysis of generic summons and authoritative claiming revealed that identity claims were shaped by generic, interactive, situational, and strategic elements of communication.

My second question considered how the coherence of an ad-hoc online activist community is sustained and whether the discourse of the forum could be understood through the concept of genre. I found that a genre approach was particularly useful to investigate the framing of the forum and identity claims. The forum as such was constituted through a variety of generic forms, including electronic message, autobiography, CV, testimony, and academic writing. These speech etiquettes have particular forms of authority, identity repertoires, and values/morality inbuilt in their form of address and generic themes. However, the feminist genre/idiom of communication was the most prominent in terms of articulation of identity, community, and action in the forum. I have shown how the emergent speech etiquette or idiomatic feminism in the forum can be recognised through a feminist mode of address; forms of authority and identification practices specific to an experiential/radical feminist standpoint; the deployment of idiomatic feminist concepts and themes; a particular version of feminist morality; and a feminist speech act articulated as awareness raising and knowledge exchange.

My third question investigated the constitution of feminist action on the Internet. In the previous discussion on action research, I pointed out that the notion of action on the Internet is reconfigured: actions here are mostly achieved through the means of words; and action, and thus social agency, here is a product of techno-sociality. I have shown that the notions of

feminist action are on the one hand shaped by the pre-existent discursive constructions and assumptions about what feminist and political actions mean, and on the other by the Internet's new connectivity and interaction. My analytical focus, grounded in the understanding of language as active, dialogic and performative, enabled me to rethink the notion of feminist social action in terms of utterance and speech act. I have shown that utterance can be understood as a site of deeds/actions, where 'action' acquires between speaker and addressee through sharing a reciprocal agency, by acknowledging each other's semantic and social position. Through analysis of speech acts, I have also demonstrated how dialogic exchanges in the forum constituted acts of identity and community building as well as knowledge exchange and awareness raising. Building on Butler's notion of performativity, I have argued that feminist action on the Internet is doing and it becomes the thing by doing, therefore, it has the potential to produce new products and materiality in a less regulated and ritualised cyberspace.

My fourth question asks about the reciprocal effects of feminism and cyberspace. The Internet, because of its mode of operation and accessibility, opens up new avenues for feminist politics and enables alliances and identifications that otherwise might never occur. As a communication medium it undermines views of speaker/listener and author/reader as stable points of authority. Potentially that creates spaces for talking back to hegemonic discourses of patriarchy, global capitalism as well as Western feminism. Indeed, the participants from all over the world, including the CEE, raised awareness about the questions of women's participation, anti-war activism and feminism. However, my analysis revealed that the participants tended to prioritise a particular version of feminism to claim their standing, identity and evoke their united political platform. In the case of the CEE online community this united platform was constituted through the pre-existent repertoires of second wave

feminist politics, which prioritised women's knowledge and experience, claimed universal oppression of women and demanded justice and necessary action on behalf of victims. I argued that these recuperations of second wave radical feminist politics implied the existence of idiomatic feminism as meta-narrative and meta-political commonsense that crosses international borders.

In sum, whilst the Internet seems to create new possibilities to challenge hegemonic feminism through connectivity and international participation, the case of the CEE online community has shown that this does not necessarily happen when we take up or are given authority to speak. The international participants of the forum constructed their identities, community and action chiefly by recuperating the politics of second wave radical feminism, suggesting that this version of feminism has constituted rhetorical commonplaces for feminist activists.

### **Feminist identity/communality as social action**

My arguments about online sociabilities as situational, interactive, generic and technological indicated the fracturing of any presumption of stable identity and locality. Action, community, identity are embodied as technology on the Internet and are first and foremost rhetorical and linguistic practices. Through the course of this thesis I have shown that identity and community can be understood as social actions. If we consider identity as action rather than as characteristics of a speaker, we assume that they are both imposed and strategically claimed. To assume that the participants' simply reproduced a certain version of Western feminism ignores the ways in which they may be strategically appropriating claims of universalism, bid for trauma and political action to negotiate their terms of participation in a speech community as well as their political causes. My analysis has shown that the participants often deployed

idiomatic feminism for strategic purposes. Therefore I understand idiomatic feminism as a rhetorical commonplace to negotiate one's feminist identity and belonging to community as well as to reclaim hegemonic notions of movement and action through the new structures of opportunity (technology). However, is this rhetorical strategy needed to cope with the challenges raised by technology for feminism? It seems that idiomatic feminism as a rhetorical commonplace was quite useful to negotiate shared identity and politics, however, its deployment does not withstand traditional critique of universalism and the isolation of woman as a primary category of analysis. Idiomatic feminism as a commonsense speech genre requires revisiting a number of issues, including the politics of location, self-reflexivity, action and agency. This thesis does not propose another 'locational/situational' epistemology but, through the concept of feminist cyberdialogics, suggests we become more attuned to the strategic mobilisation of commonsense feminist identity narratives and politics and calls for new methodologies that enable contextual and rhetorical/generic understanding of feminist action and agency.

### **Contributions of the research**

Both in terms of its methodological and epistemological framing, this thesis raises interesting speculative questions with regard to the interconnection of the Internet, feminist politics and language in the constitution of social action and agency. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis contributes to a dialogue between feminist cyberculture studies, sociolinguistics and CEE gender studies. In relation to online sociability practices, in particular, it extends the theorisation of social action and thus feminist agency as mutually shaped and constituted through interaction, technology, various generic forms and feminist discourse. The

relationship between feminist activism and the Internet has been under-researched and much more can be said through local and empirically grounded investigations such as these.

This thesis claims methodological originality in terms of research design as well as making an empirical and theoretical contribution to the fields of online activism, cyberfeminism and computer mediated discourse analysis. Through an online action inquiry which encompassed the design of a feminist website, it has offered a simultaneous focus on various sites where feminist action surfaces, allowing the reflective analysis of the notions of action on the Internet. The project, by opening up debate about action research on the Internet, suggests that the modernist understanding of action has to shift. The claim that I make also urges us to revisit the notion of action in a political left that bases its progressive politics on traditional forms of action.

My project helps to 'fill in' the gap in knowledge about women's online sociability practices as well as adds to cyberfeminist investigations of women's online activism in a new context. In particular this project contributes to debates on the question of 'feminism' in cyberfeminism, proposing that feminism in online environments gets articulated through a feminist idiom of communication which could be understood as a feminist genre/ speech community. It also extends the investigation of feminist online subjectivities, highlighting the importance of interactivity, speech genres and the rhetorical-material context of communication. My project further contributes to research on cyberactivism, by advancing the understanding of action as generic and interactively constituted and adding to the theorisation of political action on the Internet. Equally, through the application of linguistic approaches to the analysis of subjectivity and interaction, this project contributes to computer mediated



discourse analysis. In particular, it advances a genre approach in online community studies and extends debates on discourse and social action.

### **Directions for future research**

I would suggest two key directions for future research. This thesis raised a number of questions about social action on the Internet, its meaning, constitution and power regimes driving our valuation of 'action'. However, the issue of online action and its political impact seems to be the most urgent for feminist activists. Building on the notion of performativity, I suggested that online action can become materiality in terms of constituting new feminist identities, actions and politics. Although this argument gives some insight into how online actions can yield results for feminist activists, it has little to say about online action and its immediate results. In order to explore 'immediate effects', it would be interesting to study feminist websites on the Internet in terms of their persuasiveness: critically focusing on how this persuasiveness is constituted; how it 'translates' into further online or offline actions; and what it means to be persuasive on the Internet. The focus on persuasiveness as an 'impact' could further extend online action debates, by focusing on a 'common sense' criteria according to which we evaluate actions.

A second key direction for research is connected to idiomatic feminism. I started this action inquiry with an expectation that the Internet somehow would enable specific articulation of 'local feminist voice' and perspective from the CEE, shifting the dynamics in the East-West feminist debate. However, my research findings did not support these expectations. A study focusing on national feminist websites in CEE countries could extend the debates on East-

West politics. It would also allow assessing and testing of the argument of idiomatic feminism as strategic commonplaces for identification and politics, but now in a national context.

Finally, it must be remembered that cyberspace, by blurring boundaries of speech and action, human and technological, geographical location and online locality, allows us to act in a different way. Feminist activists and researchers have to give more thought to both: the development of new forms of action on the Internet and the evaluation of these actions, even if, at first glance, they do not produce embodied and material results in terms of a report, a campaign, or change in policy.

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