Rhetoric and feminism: the possibilities of women and beyond

Cheryl Glenn

> *Our past is seeded in our present and is trying to become our future.*
> *— Adrienne Rich*[1]

I've spent a good deal of my career emphasising the contributions of women to the rhetorical tradition, but — like the feminist project itself — my research agenda has moved beyond its primary work of recovering female rhetorical figures. Through the years, I've worked on the intentional inequalities of rhetorical education, the rhetorical power of "others" and rhetorical displays that are delivered in "other" ways (silence and listening, to be sure), and the epistemic power of identity. These scholarly projects have sparked my curiosity as to the ways feminist rhetorical practices now extend into and challenge research methods, rhetorical theories, and pedagogies. This research trajectory is the subject of this essay.

1. Where are the women?

> *The words are purposes. / The words are maps. / I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail.*
> *— Adrienne Rich*[2]

Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment, indicating who may speak (or who may or must remain silent), who may listen (or who is listened to), and what can be said (or must remain unspoken). Every one of us knows how rhetoric works: we gauge the situation, our audience, our social rank. Only if we think someone will listen to us (i.e., if we have an audience) will we move our language — or our silence — forward as appropriately as we can toward our intended goal. If we're not successful, we rethink how we should have proceeded given our purpose, our audience, and our rank.

Yet despite our inherent rhetorical know-how and our formal rhetorical training (neither of which is genetically limited to the Y chromosome), rhetorical history has, for the most part, represented public, political, aristocratic males. Traditional histories of rhetoric are Kenneth Burke's "terministic screens",[3] reflecting our institutional focus on the discursively powerful, while deflecting the rhetorical contributions of

---

[1] Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (New York: Norton, 2001): 149.

[2] Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (New York: Norton, 1984): 163.

[3] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1984); *Language as Symbolic Action*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

everyone else. These rhetorical histories have been written from a position of alleged ideological neutrality and gender-neutral epistemology, illusions available only to those who already espouse dominant ideology.

Only in the last twenty years or so has much mention been given to all the "others" who have practiced persuasive discourse all along. The biggest group of "others" has been women, of course, who have been *gendered* invisible and silent. (I decouple gender from genitalia and relate it instead to the "primary way of signifying relations of power").[4] In terms of Anne Phillips's "politics of presence"[5] and Nancy Fraser's "politics of recognition",[6] then, women have been mostly absent from or unrecognized in rhetorical histories and theories. And yet despite the upsurge of scholarship to the contrary, women's status as rhetors and rhetoricians still remains provisional.

My work has long been rooted in the belief that surely some others (women, the silenced, the ignored and discounted) can legitimately be regarded as creative participants in Western intellectual life and, therefore, as suitable objects of scholarly inquiry. So in a move that can be defined as "strategic positivism" (echoing Spivak),[7] I began the research necessary for writing a history of rhetoric inclusive of women, a regendered rhetoric, if you will. Although I was pointing to a different set of subjects (women, rather than men) for historical inquiry and admitting the interestedness of my historiographic project, I couldn't completely abandon the "fact" of a male-only rhetorical tradition until I had responsibly accumulated enough evidence — through historically deep and wide research — to support a new "fact": women had, indeed, participated in the rhetorical tradition. Knowing that historical "facts" are socially constructed, historically contingent, and theory bound doesn't make them any less useful — this knowledge simply helps us understand history and history writing as human activities.

The reception of my early work was met mostly with excitement — but there was also a measure of disbelief. To wit, when I first argued that Aspasia had taught Pericles how to deliver persuasive speeches in fifth-century BCE Athens, I was reminded that I hadn't found any of her primary texts, so she couldn't be a rhetorician. (That we've never had any of Socrates' primary texts seemed to be beside the point). When I wrote about Hortensia's successful argument before the Roman triumvirs in 42 BCE, which resulted in the reduction of taxes women were to submit, I was told that Hortensia could not be a rhetor because she'd spoken publicly, politically, and persuasively only one time. (No such charge has ever been leveled at American oratorical hero Patrick Henry, of "Give me liberty or give me death" fame). When I described the rhetorical power of Margery Kempe's fourteenth-century autobiography (the earliest extant autobiography written in English), I was told that she composed it when she was suffering from postpartum depression, was crazy, and, therefore, could not be a rhetorician. (Being crazy and being a rhetorician were mutually exclusive categories for Kempe but not for Nietzche). And when I described the powerful public manipulation of England's Queen Elizabeth I, I was reminded that her rhetorical display couldn't count because she was queen.

---

[4] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 12.

[5] Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[6] Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age", *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68-93.

[7] Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987): 197-221.

That last admonition should have been my biggest hint of what I was up against: those unwilling to re-think the rhetorical tradition had decided long ago that it was a male-only tradition of mastery and dominance. Only when I rethought the grammar of rhetoric (the definition for each of its basic terms) was I able to answer my mostly well-meaning critics and write women into the history of rhetoric. If self-conscious, persuasive language use (i.e., rhetoric) could circulate in the private sphere as well as in the public sphere, then women could be rhetors. If collaboration, invitation, and dialogue could be considered persuasive techniques, then women could be rhetoricians. If so, then many female voices — from Sappho and Aspasia to Margery Kempe and Queen Elizabeth I — could responsibly be written into the tradition, on the same grounds that men had been. Women could be moved from positions of silence and invisibility to the positions of rhetorical voice and presence they now inhabit.

Although it's still difficult to write women (or anyone, for that matter) into rhetorical history, doing so is no longer considered to be out of the question. Since my initial feminist historiographic project, women have entered rhetorical territory in impressive numbers. Their rhetorical practices are regularly recuperated by scholars rereading primary and secondary sources, reconsidering their cultural contexts, and listening to the long-silent voices of these rhetorically savvy women.

2. Silence and silencing

> *The silences, the empty spaces . . . tell us as much as the content, once we learn to watch for what is left out, for the unspoken.*
> — *Adrienne Rich*[8]

At every turn of *Rhetoric Retold*,[9] I faced the central problem of the collective feminist historiographic project: silence and silencing. Of course, much of the past remains irrevocably silenced: gestures, conversations, and original manuscripts can never be recaptured. Silence and silencing still greet us in every library, every archive, every text. Yet as I knitted together material that brought a number of historical women into rhetorical history, I came to appreciate the rhetorical value of silence, for *Rhetoric Retold*[10] provided me a venue for piercing the gendered silences that speak through women *and* men. I first became aware of the paradoxical rhetorical properties of silence (its powers and limitations) when I studied the rhetorical display of Anne Askew, an aristocratic English woman who, in 1546 CE, was arrested on grounds of radical Protestantism, publicly interrogated, brutally tortured, judged by a jury, and burned at the stake. Through it all, Askew demonstrates how compelling the delivery of silence can be. She refused to speak about anything but her Protestant faith, refused to share the names of any other members of her sect, and revealed no concealed information besides her extraordinary mastery of Scripture: "God has given me the gift of knowledge, but not of utterance. And Solomon says, that a woman of few words is a gift of God, Proverbs 19".

---

[8] Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986): 3.

[9] Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through The Renaissance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997).

Askew's delivery harkens to silence as an under-understood rhetorical strategy, particularly because her silence was not persuasive in terms of the traditional interactional goal of rhetoric, that of prevailing over her auditors. The delivery of silence doesn't always achieve that goal, and even when it does, it isn't always recognized as doing so. Little wonder, then, silence has been gendered a lamentable essence of femininity: of weakness, passivity, stupidity, obedience. On the other hand, "speaking out" has long been gendered the signal of masculinity: of strength, liberation, authority, especially given the Western tendency to overvalue the spoken word (except, of course, in the case of the idealised male — the powerful tightlipped hero as portrayed by Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, and Javier Bardem). Yet despite these cultural codes (perhaps because I was reading them *as codes*), I began to imagine silence as a rhetoric, as a constellation of symbolic strategies that — like spoken language — serves many functions. And I began work on *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence.*[13]

Unspoken relies on traditional library and archival research as well as two naturalistic studies, one of which I conducted with academics. Although the accounts of these academics only *partially* represent the findings of the overall project, their moving narratives of gendered silence and silencing illustrate the *power* of silence and the *powerlessness* of being silenced.

Academics often *consciously* exert silence-as-control, as power. One of my interviews included a senior female professor, who was serving on a department committee with an opinionated new assistant professor, whom the senior professor describes as having "no sense of the shared enterprise". When I asked the senior professor why she didn't try to enlighten the assistant professor, she explained that the assertions of the assistant professor are "repeatedly met with silence because anyone who talks to her knows that there's no point in trying to exchange views if... you are opposed.

---

[10] Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold.*

[13] Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

Often her wrong-headed views are met with silence... because they are so appallingly ignorant. For instance, at one meeting, she said, "Why shouldn't we just hire our own PhDs who don't get jobs"".

Naturally, there's another side to the story. When I interviewed the younger professor, she told me about that same committee (not knowing that anyone else had spoken to me about it), confiding that her suggestions were usually met with silence. She found the silence puzzling, insulting — and even threatening, given that she was untenured. In response to that silence, she felt silenced.

This brief example demonstrates how silence can be used strategically, without the kind of spoken, one-to-one confrontation that can be witnessed by others or regretted later. Thus, when willfully employed, the delivery of silence can be powerful, can help maintain control, especially when the profound human need to communicate with words is not met. And for the assistant professor, the silent response to her language disciplined her into silence, indicating that silence would be the safest position for her to inhabit, for whatever she said might be used against her.

Throughout my many interviews with them, every academic remembered the use of silence long after the disciplining silence itself was suspended.

The recovery of women and the recuperation of silence are just two ways that the feminist historiographic rhetorical project has resisted and transformed the field of rhetoric. In the next section, I consider an expanded realm of feminist rhetorical studies.

3. Feminist rhetorical possibilities

We stream / into the unfinished / the unbegun / the possible.
— Adrienne Rich[15]

When I wrote *Rhetoric Retold,*[16] feminist rhetorical historiography was just taking root, in a past that now seems like a bygone era, a time when all the rhetors were men, rhetoric was a masculinised field, and our *only* project was the recovery and recuperation of women's contributions to rhetorical history and practice. Given the explosion of recuperative feminist work since, studying the rhetorical accomplishments of women is no longer exceptional; rather, it's the norm, whether the woman under analysis is Aspasia, Diotima, Julian of Norwich, Kathy Acker, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews, Anna Julia Cooper, Zitkala ša, Sarah Winnemucca, whether she's on the platform, at her desk, on stage, or in the parlor. Without the foundation that feminist *recovery* work provided, I'm not convinced that we feminist historiographers could have begun dreaming of a new field, our field of dreams, where rhetorical appreciation takes into consideration the place, ethnicity, culture, class, ability, movements, and orientation of human beings throughout time.

---

[15] Adrienne Rich, "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York: Norton, 1978): 5.

[16] Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold.*

In this section, I'll identify *five prominent features* on our field of dreams, a field in which feminist rhetoricians are moving steadily beyond a *sole* focus on women's rhetorical contributions. These I mention are not the *only* features, nor are the feminist rhetorical researchers I cite the *only* researchers, but, together, they are generating feminist rhetorical scholarship that moves us "beyond women".

Perhaps foremost is the feminist historiographic move to consider identities as epistemic resources, our own as well as others'. Twenty-five years ago, we began with our identities as women, recognizing the power and politics of our own individual location: how "a place on the map is also a place in history" within which we are "created and [are] trying to create".[17] Given the limitations of the white feminists who universalised their personal experience and fixated on the overriding primacy of *gender* oppression, painful controversies among all activist women resulted in a vigorous interrogation of identity politics. This interrogation led to a recognition of *multiple interlocking* oppressions as well as to concerted efforts to bring greater representation and inclusivity to rhetorical studies. After all, identity is created in the presence of complex others, largely through speech and action, but also through skin, which "mediates the most important transactions of our lives", particularly "our relationships with others".[18]

This turn toward identity politics writ large has led feminist historiographers to join the research efforts already underway that help to bring greater representation and inclusivity to rhetorical studies. Feminist scholarship on African American, Chinese, Native American, and Mexican-American rhetorics as well as on global rhetorical issues signifies just a few of the many ongoing recovery projects that are anchored in feminism and identity studies. Thus, through the double lens of feminism and rhetoric, scholars recognize identities of *all* kinds as epistemic resources that can be tapped for their knowledge-generating potential.

Secondly, in addition to extending feminist rhetorical interests into identity studies, our field of dreams is also redefining *rhetorical display*, moving into other realms and dimensions of delivery, from the spatial and architectural to the emotional, spiritual, and chronological. (Among noteworthy scholarship is Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion*,[19] which offers a fantastic voyage into these realms). In addition, while coediting *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*,[20] Krista Ratcliffe and I were astonished to learn all the new ways feminist rhetoricians are articulating methods for theorising, historicising, analysing, and teaching silence and listening as rhetorical delivery.

---

[17] Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry,* 212.

[18] Nina Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[19] Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002).

[20] Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliff, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* (Carbondale: Southern

Third, in addition to widening our understanding of *who* and *what* can be defined as rhetorical, feminist rhetoricians are intervening in research methods, methodologies, and epistemologies. Thus, our research has moved beyond text-based studies to tap the rich potential of person-based studies, fostering opportunities for even *deeper* transformations and *broader* invitations into the field. Now feminist rhetoricians are routinely paying especial attention to issues of Burkean "trained incapacities" as well as to those positions of alleged objectivity that have conditioned and constrained our research. In terms of traditional library and archival research, two new books are certain to invigorate our practices: *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition* by Alexis Ramsey, Wendy Sharer, Barbara L'Eplattenier, and Lisa Mastrangelo[21] and *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies* by Eileen Schell and K. J. Rawson.[22] In brief, both collections call for recovery and gender critique at the same time that they expand the definition of library and archival research to include whatever materials illuminate the project (from student essays and diaries to newspapers and photographs).

As we sharpen our focus on more traditional research methods, we're also interrogating the epistemological and ethical implications of naturalistic studies, ethnography, and interviews. Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch's *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, and Beverly Moss's *A Community Text Arises*;[23] Brenda Brueggemann's *Lend Me Your Ear;*[24] and Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford's *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*[25] all exemplify the evolution of feminist rhetorical research methods. Heidi McKee and Jim Porter's "Rhetorica Online: Feminist Research Practices in Cyberspace"[26] illustrates yet another key tenet of feminist rhetorical research, that of considering the agency of the participants whose writing is being studied and whose actions

---

Illinois University Press, 2011).

[21] Alexis Ramsey, Wendy Sharer, Barbara L'Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo, eds., *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

[22] Eileen Schell and K. J. Rawson, eds., *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods & Methodologies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

[23] Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch, eds., *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers, 1993); Beverly J. Moss, *A Community Text Arises* (Hampton, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2002).

[24] Brenda Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear,* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999).

[25] Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis and Roxanne Mountford, *Women's Ways of Making It* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[26] Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter, "Rhetorica Online: Feminist Research Practices in Cyberspace", in *Rhetorica in motion: feminist rhetorical methods & methodologies* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2010): 168.

are being observed. In all of this scholarship, we researchers acknowledge the locations of *ourselves* in research and writing: we recognize our own self-interest, realize how that interest might affect others, and resolve to participate in a reciprocal cross-boundary exchange, in which we talk *with* and listen *to* others. Still, as Gayle Letherby[27] admonishes, we must remember that the production of knowledge is a dialectic loaded in favor of the researcher herself, no matter how hard we try to do just the opposite.

The transformative feminist engagement with rhetorical theory accounts for the *fourth* feature on our field of dreams. The scholarship of Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, Cindy Griffin,[28] Sally Miller Gearheart,[29] and Starhawk,[30] for instance, has helped move the interactional goal of rhetoric from *only* persuasion (whether conquest, conversion, or advice) to one of *shared* understanding, attended by invitation, productive reception, and collaboration. Other feminist rhetoricians are also making contributions to the paradigm shift, including Ellen Gorsevski, who offers practices for "peaceful persuasion" and "nonviolent rhetoric",[31] echoing Gearhart's belief that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence".[32] What all of these feminist rhetorical scholars hold in common is the belief that many people (especially women) have trouble engaging in traditional rhetoric because of its inherent patriarchal bias (based on strategy, agonism, competition, and power-over), which embodies the "experiences and concerns of the white male as standard".[33]

In response, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin offer their theory of "invitational rhetoric", which they define as "an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination".[34] They demonstrate invitational rhetoric by juxtaposing the rhetorical theory of feminist writer and activist Starhawk with that of one of the most influential rhetoricians of our time, Kenneth Burke. Using Gearhart's method of "re-sourcement", which communicates rhetors' differences without damaging the connection between them, Foss and Griffin[35] place Starhawk's and Burke's rhetorics alongside each other, not exactly as Burke does with his "perspective by incongruity",[36] but rather as reflection and negotiation. Thus the authors offer Starhawk's rhetoric of "inherent worth", "power-with", and "empowered action"[37] in dialectical tension with Burke's theories of hierarchy and power-over, ideas that have long dominated the discipline of rhetoric. With their theories of invitational rhetoric, re-sourcement, enfoldment, and power-with, these scholars have worked to align feminist goals with rhetorical goals, goals that require us to consider rhetoric from a completely different point of view. And as Paula Moya reminds us, "Unless we have access to alternative perspectives… we risk being arrested in the process of our intellectual and moral growth".[38]

---

[27] Gayle Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice,* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003).

[28] Sonja Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for Invitational Rhetoric", *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 1-18; "A Feminist Perspective on Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Clarification of Boundaries", *Western Journal of Communication* 56 (1992): 330-49; "The Womanization of Rhetoric", *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979): 195-201.

[29] Sally Miller Gearhart, "Sally Miller Gearhart", *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory,* ed. Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin (Long Grove, Ilinois: Waveland Press, 2004): 239-70.

[30] Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

[31] Ellen Gorsevski, *Peaceful Persuasion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

[32] Gearhart, *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory,* 239-70.

[33] Foss, *Western Journal of Communication*, 330-49.

[34] Foss, *Communication Monographs,* 5.

[35] Foss, *Communication Monographs,* 1-18.

Finally, a return to rhetoric's roots constitutes the *fifth* feminist feature on our field of dreams. After all, rhetoric has always been a teaching-mentoring tradition, the pedagogical pursuit of good (i.e., artful and ethical) speaking, writing, and being, which took root in Socrates' teaching and mentoring of Phaedrus. Traditionally, the teacher/mentor role has indicated a master-apprentice model, one too often reflecting upon the glories of the teacher/mentor and the teleological promise of the student/mentee. The feminist intervention into teaching and mentoring points to a different model — that of a *mutually* supportive and *generative* relationship put into the service of sustaining friendships, professional diversity, scholarly responsibility, ethical action, and the shaping of the *next* generation of teachers and mentors. As Adrienne Rich reminds us, it's folks like us — intellectuals, writers, *teachers and mentors* — who must make and write our future through the "sheer power of a collective imagining of change and a sense of collective hope".[39]

4. Toward a transformed, inclusionary rhetoric

> *What's realistic fantasy? — call it hope.*
> *— Adrienne Rich*[40]

The stubborn facts to which all rhetoricians seem to hold fast is that rhetoric should *do* something, that rhetorical inquiry should make a *difference* in the world. And although agency is a contested term, always contingent, it can be adopted strategically (in yet another echo of Spivak),[41] as well as rigorously, to rewrite rhetorical history and theory, to represent and include more users and uses of rhetoric, to represent ethically and accurately the dominant and marginalised alike, to prepare the *next* generation of rhetorically empowered scholars, teachers, and citizens — but most of all, to envision a dynamic, generative, rhetorical future that we all want to share. In other words, we can use our agency to build our field of dreams.

---

[36] Burke, *Attitudes* 308ff.

[37] Starhawk, *Truth or Dare.*

[38] Paula Moya, *Learning from Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 131.

[39] Rich, *Arts of the Possible,* 167.

[40] Adrienne Rich, "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender, or Judged Unfit to Send" in *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006* (New York: Norton, 2007): 65-70 (66).

[41] Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987): 197-221.