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## Establishing Rhetorical Feminism by Challenging Normative Identities

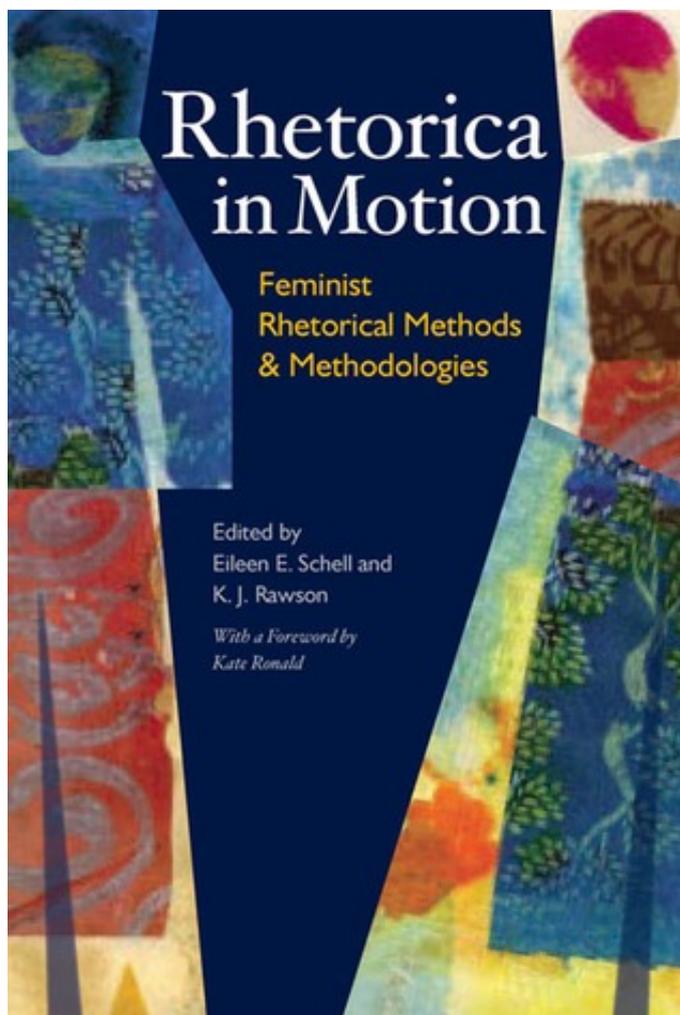
Review of *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*

Edited by Eileen E. Schell and K.J. Rawson

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[Michelle Villarreal](#), Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

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In *Rhetorica in Motion*, editors Eileen Schell and K.J. Rawson open the doors to several perspectives of feminist rhetoric that are not new ideas, but new to the field of rhetorical feminism. The collection focuses on the

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reevaluation of the canonized idea of feminism and poses the question: what is rhetorical feminism and which methodologies were left out of previous collections. The collection is divided into three sections; the first part "Theoretical and Methodological Challenges" displays several essays that have not found their place in rhetorical feminism, but certainly need the attention. The second section of the collection "Reflective Applications" offers essays that give examples of applied feminist rhetorical methods. The collection's final section is "Pedagogical Postscript," and while it only includes one essay, it embodies the overall objective of the book by exploring feminist rhetorical methods with the teaching of writing. The book spans a variety of topics which include queer, disability, transnational, and aging studies that are divided into their appropriate methodological sections, but all maintain similar ideas. Overall, the feminist rhetorical collection of research and methodology creates a historical content of how far feminism has come and where it still needs to evolve. Previous collections such as, Molly Meijer Wertheimer's *Listening to Their Voices: Essays on the Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women* (1997), and Hui Wu's *Alternative Rhetorics: Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition* (2001) question the traditional rhetorical canon, but they limit themselves by excluding issues of culture, age and sex. *Rhetorica in Motion*, however, tackles current rhetorical feminist issues that have been overlooked by previous anthologies and includes an array of methodologies and give a voice to those women that struggled to find their place in feminist rhetorical methods.

### Challenging the Norm

The book's first section challenges current normative approaches to feminist methodologies by exploring disability studies, the problems of canonization, and the inclusion of sexual preference. Schell and Rawson introduce the collection with an essay on disabilities studies and their ingenious technique of introducing a study that most would not think of as being associated with feminist rhetoric, opens the eyes of the reader. Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiechi-Wilson question the feminist norms in the essay "Refiguring Rhetorica." The disability theorists challenge the absence of a discussion of disabled bodies in feminist research and present the many identities that are consolidated into one particular category know as disabled. This discussion points to the question of what defines rhetorical feminism is not simply the term woman, but what creates the identity of a woman.

In his essay "Queering Feminist Rhetorical Canonization," Rawson discusses the limited historical perspective of feminist research by defining *woman*. In the past, feminist rhetoric was defined only by sex, which excluded other identities such as race, age, ability, religion, and sexuality, which, as Rawson says, are integral to a person's rhetorical experiences. He says, "Though it is certainly the case that no one research project can account for all identities, it is possible to become increasingly aware of the identities we privilege to the exclusion of others" (46). Rawson's statement early in the collection reflects the attitude toward the privileged canonization of certain feminist texts such as Andrea Lunsford's *Reclaiming Rhetorica* (1995). With the inclusion of Rawson's essay, the collection brings further awareness to other feminist issues that can broaden the scholarship. His methodology serves as recognition that many different perspectives make up queer theory. Rawson's essay embodies the multifaceted understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality and how each level differs from the other, but each constitute an inclusive identity. He questions the normative male and female opposition by considering, "What options are available to those who do not identify with either side of the his/her binary?" (50). The essay allows transsexual, transgender, and queers a place in the rhetorical feminist orientation by challenging the normative reference to biological sex; exploring only the male or female as a sex eliminates those that do not define themselves by the binary. Rawson addresses Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* where she uses feminist rhetoric to challenge the consequences of silence and silencing women. Rawson uses Glenn's essay as an example of limiting gender politics by detaching the silence from femininity. Glenn writes, "In other words, whether people are male or female, masculine or feminine, is not so important to their purposeful use of silence or speech to fulfill their theoretical purpose, whether it is to maintain their position of power or resist the domination of others" (51). The sex label is not as important as the identity that the individual associates themselves with.

Kathleen F. Ryan's essay "Making Pathways" addresses the canonized rhetorical feminism and the necessary

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need to move away from such historical references, not because they are not valuable to the scholarship, but because it limits the scholarship. The field of research is narrowed by the canon of historical feminist rhetoricians, which simultaneously narrows the thought process of how to move forward. Ryan cites feminist rhetoricians such as Winifred Horner and Gerda Lerner as rhetoricians and historians who similarly understand that canonized feminist texts of the past help shape the genre, but it needs “newly constituted areas of inquiry” (94). Textual research in connection with historiography, ethnography, and theory in feminist rhetorical studies create “different pathways in our disciplinary landscape” (103). Once again, the focus is about combining various perspectives, which ultimately influence feminist identities. Ryan generalizes these identities when she cites Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe who say scholarly conversations on feminist issues allow inclusion of voices that were previously silenced. The inclusion not only broadens the field of inquiry, but also draws attention to their issues (95).

### **Experiences Reflecting Identities Reflecting Writing**

The collection’s second section discusses the ways in which rhetorical identities are limited to the borders of the United States and Western methodologies. In her chapter, Wendy Hesford discusses the problematic international perspective and advocates transnational feminisms, which focus on cultures, governments, people, goods, and ideas that create a transnational identity. Hesford mentions authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa who has paved the way for border writers by utilizing her native Spanish language throughout her essays and will give the English translation only in the form of footnotes, as to not take away from the profound connection with her mother tongue. As Hesford puts it, a transnational feminist rhetoric allows for the perspective of seeing what or who travels across borders, what or who doesn’t, and why. She says, “a relational understanding of subjectivity can shift the ground of global feminist rhetoric from uncritical cosmopolitan practices to interpretive practices that acknowledge the different axes of domination and shifting relations among women in diverse locations” (70). Without the representation of the transnational feminist rhetoric, multicultural identities would be voiceless, thus giving more power to the normative and canonized feminist theories. A transnational rhetoric calls for a recognition, not of likeness to others but the identification of differences. The individuality and global feminism that Hesford discusses also highlights the methodological risks in developing a transnational feminist rhetoric. Hesford mentions feminist playwright and activist Eve Ensler who traveled around the world to study and document women whose lives were shaped by war, sexual violence and social injustice. This transnational feminist movement travels outside of the nation’s boundaries, which further extends the rhetorical scholarship and provides a richer understanding of global feminisms.

As mentioned before, race and skin color are also prevalent issues when discussing feminism because the rhetorical canon constructed the “ideal” historical collection, which is selective in including established women of color and white women. While her essay, “Rhetorics of Possibility” is included in the second section of the book, Bernadette M. Calafell discusses theories of flesh and how they are critical to the survival of women of color by allowing them to relate to experiences that are not the traditional forms, which corresponds to identity issues that are discussed in the first section. Calafell calls the connection between writing and identity “intimate” (106), which is a developed relationship, created through experiences and interactions. Previous feminist rhetoricians of color, such as Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and bell hooks opened the door for others like Calafell, thus helping create the personal bond of color with rhetorical identity instead of being portrayed as the victim. It is not uncommon to consider women of all color when discussing feminism, but scholars frequently overlook the correlation of the life experiences that reflect their writing. Calafell identifies the personal level that a writer has to the text, but also questions if the rhetorical critic acknowledges their own subjectivity and relationship with the text. Again, she asks that the reader look beyond the words on the page and try to understand what the author went through to produce such writing and how they are reflected in the text itself. The theories of the flesh are not restricted to only persons of a specific color, in fact as Schell continuously references in her collection, it is about experiences, cultures, languages, sexuality, and ideas that form a feminist identity. Each one of these is displayed through the rhetorical writing and is relatable on various levels for women of all races.

Ethical issues surround feminist research methods as Frances Ranney discusses in her essay “Mining the

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Collective Unconscious.” As she describes, Ranney is faced with an ethical dilemma upon conducting research about wealthy elderly women who later need financial assistance during the Great Depression. Upon further investigation, Ranney discovers a case file entitled “Fontina R.” that provided a detailed record of her life from June 1929, when she first applied for aid, to May 1945, when she died. Ranney sits on Fontina R.’s story for about two years because of the ethical issues that surround the situation that she refers to as “ethic of care” (124). Schell includes this essay in the collection to shed light on ethical issues that should be considered more often. In Ranney’s case, she could have easily written Fontina R.’s story, published it, and nothing would come of it, especially since she already had legal clearance. But the ethic of care was more important to Ranney, her research, and her conscious. Her solution to the dilemma is what she calls “imagin-activation,” which is a two step process of aesthetic and scientific steps. The documents are translated into conversations “in order to actively see the raw emotion in which they are all constructed” (130), so the research becomes more about analyzing the formations of the experience and beliefs, rather than simply discussing and evaluating them.

### **Writing Practices of Rhetorical Theory**

In the final essay of the book, Laura Micciche asks readers to consider different methods and methodologies when teaching students about rhetorical feminism. Creating a space for students will allow confidence in their writing, but also a way to participate in new discourses that reflect feminist methodologies. Micciche advises writing instructors to utilize various methods in the classroom such as political tools, applying literature methods, linguistic paths, and play and imagination, which is often reserved for creative writing. She also provides sample classroom assignments that are designed to engage the student with various alternatives to the typical writing process that Micciche says are “ways to integrate feminist methods into the conception and performance of writing” (184). This chapter appropriately concludes the collection because it offers the teaching perspective that will encourage writes to break away from normative theories. She says the writing and documenting of feminist experiences is crucial to the scholarship because “writing is not a transparent reproduction of what is; it is an active construction that reflects and refracts, creates and distorts, imagines and displaces... it establishes links between language, action, and consequences” (176). Ultimately, Micciche says the teaching of writing feminist rhetorical methods will unearth one’s relationship to the world.

By spanning research methods, *Rhetorica in Motion* serves as an introductory collection of contemporary rhetorical feminist theories and methodologies that allow critical thinking into feminist movements, which introduce new issues to the conversation. While most collections embody the same rhetoricians, this collection includes authors that are not limited to feminist norms defined by sex. Many of the collection’s authors such as Dolmage, Lewiecki-Wilson, Hesford, and Heidi A McKee and James E. Porter, who write about feminist research practices online, discuss innovative trends in feminist rhetorical scholarship, which will launch further research. Throughout the collection, Schell and Rawson embrace multiple feminist identities through their inclusion of essays and encourage development for future feminist rhetorical studies.

### **Works Cited**

Schell, Eileen E. and K.J. Rawson eds. *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. Print.