

# Feminist Rhetorics in Writing Across the Curriculum: Supporting Students as Agents of Change

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Feminist rhetorical theories and practices, applied across disciplines, have the potential to shape students' writing and research processes and to support the goals of writing across the curriculum. When deliberately guiding course design and writing to learn (WTL) activities, feminist rhetorics and pedagogical practices foster collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, and they can begin to decenter authority and disrupt hierarchy, centering student voices and amplifying marginalized perspectives. Feminist rhetorical theories and practices not only support the goals of writing to engage (WTE) activities, but also extend their goals, inviting students to join and to contribute to conversations in ways that actively diversify, reshape, and disrupt dominant narratives and meaning-making practices within those disciplines and professions, and facilitating students' engagement in change agency. Guided by a collaborative ethos, this article provides a multivocal exploration and reflection on the authors' experiences as students and instructor to both perform and to theorize feminist rhetorics and to demonstrate how individual positionalities and disciplinary expertise informed and were shaped by course content, ultimately supporting the authors' work as change agents across disciplines.

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## Introduction

In her foreword to *Diverse Approaches to Teaching, Learning, and Writing Across the Curriculum: IWAC at 25*, Mya Poe (2020) reminds us, "WAC is about people making texts together, not studying texts in isolation, and forming meaningful collaborations has long been central to successful WAC programs" (p. xiii). Later in their introduction, the collection's editors argue, "Collaborative ethos and the drive to integrate diverse approaches, perspectives, and expertise remain the backbone of the

WAC movement, our enduring point of connection” (Bartlett et al., 2020, p. 7). With similar goals in “integrat[ing] diverse approaches, perspectives, and expertise,” feminist rhetorical and pedagogical practices value collaboration in facilitating a decentering of authority and the inclusion of multiple voices and lived experiences as an active and ongoing process of meaning-making. Significantly, “this increasingly diverse range of work is not being done by women professionals alone, or only by scholars who label themselves as operating within feminist rhetorical studies, or even by single scholars” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 43).

This article grows out of an online interdisciplinary writing intensive course (WIC) on feminist rhetorics offered during the spring 2021 semester. As both a cross-leveled (undergraduate and graduate) and cross-listed section with three distinct prefixes, the course enrolled students across seven departments and multiple programs, including graduate students in American studies, professional writing, and secondary and middle grades education, and undergraduate students in English, interdisciplinary studies, philosophy, and technical communication and interactive design. At the conclusion of our course, and with new knowledge gleaned from our exploration of feminist rhetorics, we found ourselves asking how we can engage and apply feminist rhetorics in spaces outside of a feminist rhetorics course, spaces that allow us to underscore foundations of feminist rhetorical theories and practices as part of broader writing and research processes. This question prompted our continued collaboration, reflection on course assignments and activities, and work on this article. We extended the collective writing and meaning-making we’d engaged in during the semester with both individual reflections on our course experience and the final project, and pre-writing via email developed by guiding questions. In online virtual meetings, we identified points of connection in this initial self-reflection and writing and began to articulate how feminist rhetorical theories and practices had allowed us to make meaning and connections with disciplinary expertise and to envision the applications of these practices in a variety of rhetorical spaces.

In the sections that follow, we engage in a multivocal exploration and reflection on our experiences to both perform and to theorize feminist rhetorics and their potential in underscoring the goals of writing across the curriculum (WAC). Guided by and engaging with a robust scholarly tradition on the role of writing to learn activities (WTL) within WAC, we explore how feminist rhetorics and pedagogies both contribute to and extend the broader goals of WTL, including meaning-making writing tasks and deep approaches to learning (see Anderson et al., 2015; Gere et al., 2019) and support the higher-order activities that Palmquist (2020) has more recently termed Writing to Engage (WTE). According to Palmquist (2020),

As a part of a larger conceptual framework for the design of writing activities and assignments in WAC courses, the use of this concept [writing to

engage] increases the nuance and precision with which we can discuss the relationship between writing and critical thinking as well as the role that writing can play in helping students advance in their disciplines and professions. (p. 17)

We extend Palmquist's (2020) argument to demonstrate how feminist rhetorical theories and practices not only support the goals of WTE activities, but also extend their goals, inviting students to join and to contribute to conversations in ways that actively diversify, reshape, and disrupt dominant narratives and meaning-making practices within those disciplines and professions, and facilitating students' engagement in change agency. Essential to these processes we argue, are collaboration and opportunities for communal, collective meaning-making.

### **Feminisms Across the Curriculum**

Although our course focus on feminist rhetorical theory and practice required engagement with a number of foundational texts, including primary and secondary sources that continue to circulate in current conversations in the field, for the purposes of this article we point to a few key texts that have broad application across disciplines, contributing to the aims of WTL and WTE pedagogies and shaping the work of writers and researchers in engaging diverse perspectives. These foundational theories and practices may serve WAC practitioners and scholars in a variety of courses without the requirement that course content shift exclusively to a study of rhetoric. Broadly, feminist scholars have engaged rhetorical theory and practice from a number of angles, including expanding the traditional rhetorical canon to include women and other marginalized rhetors; expanding the scope and location of rhetoric, including challenging what counts as rhetorical theory, practice, and space; questioning who gets to speak, when, where, and to or for whom; and actively listening for silences and erasures and recovering or centering those voices, perspectives, and lived experiences (see Royster & Kirsch, 2012; Buchanan & Ryan, 2010; Ede et al., 1995; Foss et al., 1999; Reynolds, 1993). Central to these theories and practices are new methodologies and methods for conducting research and ways of understanding feminist rhetorics as embodied and performed (Royster & Kirsch, 2012). In the WAC classroom, feminist rhetorics also inform, and may be supported by, feminist pedagogical strategies that shape WTL and WTE pedagogies.

In her 1987 article, "What Is Feminist Pedagogy?" Carolyn M. Shrewsbury explains,

Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning—engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism

and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change. (p. 6)

In the last three decades, women's studies teacher-scholars and those outside the discipline have continued to engage, to expand, and to apply in a growing number of contexts the liberatory, decentered, and activist potential of feminist pedagogical strategies and theories (see Crabtree et al. Licona, 2009; Byrne, 2000). In teaching and learning environments guided by feminist pedagogy, students take more active roles in and responsibility for their own and their peers' learning, guided by reflective engagement with each other and with course content, and they identify opportunities for applying that learning outside of classroom settings. Feminist pedagogy is often supported by collaborative classroom practices and feminist rhetorical strategies like intervention and interruption that highlight and amplify marginalized voices and perspectives (Reynolds, 1998; Rinehart, 2002; Ryan, 2006; Guglielmo, 2012). Exploring the intersections of feminist pedagogy and online learning, Chick and Hassel (2009) claim, "Within this community, students care about others' learning and well-being as well as their own, and they feel free to use their sites of authority—where they already stand and what they already know—to help contribute to the knowledge of the course" (p. 198)

In their groundbreaking text *Transforming Scholarship: Why Women's and Gender Studies Students are Changing Themselves and the World*, Michele Tracy Berger and Cheryl Radeloff (2011) argue that "students pursuing questions in women's and gender studies are part of an emerging vanguard of knowledge producers in the US and globally . . . trained to consider how their efforts in the classroom can be translated to affect the status of women and men (and anyone outside the gender binary) beyond the borders of their college or university" (p. 5). Graduates who enter professional fields with gender studies coursework are better positioned to foster diversity, equity, and inclusivity in the workplace and in their communities (Colatrella, 2014). In addition to the language and strategies Berger and Radeloff (2011) provide students to apply their classroom learning outside of classroom contexts, they invite students to identify as "change agents," which they define as including "a commitment to public engagement beyond the borders of the academic classroom" (p. 25).

Centering these theories and practices, we engaged feminist rhetorics and pedagogies in a variety of ways throughout the semester as part of our online writing activities and meaning-making practices. As we'll discuss in later sections, feminist rhetorics facilitated our collective use of feminist intervention and discursive interruption and allowed us to remain mindful of how and when we were centering specific voices and perspectives and particular rhetorical practices and sites. In terms of research, feminist rhetorics informed research across disciplines, allowing us to engage with

disciplinary expertise and knowledge in new ways. As a research methodology, feminist rhetorics allowed us to ask new and different questions across disciplines and to find multiple ways into this work. Finally, as a pedagogical strategy guiding our writing and research activities, feminist rhetorical theories and practices facilitated the co-construction of knowledge—collaborative meaning-making—in the online course, shaping our understanding of the potential and possibilities for feminist rhetorical practices outside of our (virtual) classroom space. In guiding WTL activities and the final project for the course, feminist rhetorics became a strategy for intersectional activism and engagement and for advancing our individual and collective understanding of change agency.

### Critical Imagination, Strategic Contemplation, and Self-Rhetoric

In their landmark text *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) introduce “four critical tasks” that both map and expand the terrain and scope of feminist rhetorical theory and practice and provide a framework for future work (p. 13). Within this framework are two concepts that became central to our course and to shaping our WTL and WTE activities: critical imagination and strategic contemplation. As an “inquiry tool,” critical imagination invites “seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20). This process, Royster and Kirsch (2012) explain, facilitates “the possibility of rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription while bringing attention to the challenge of expanding knowledge and re-forming not only what constitutes knowledge but also whether and how we value and accredit it” (p. 20). Closely connected to critical imagination, strategic contemplation constitutes a “consciously enacted contemplative process” that allows us to “pay attention to how lived experiences shape our perspectives” and to consider how “an ethos of humility, respect, and care [can] shape our research” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 22). In practice, this work requires deep reflection and listening, including learning to identify silences, omissions, and erasures and the reinforcement of dominant narratives.

Combined with critical imagination and strategic contemplation, and certainly informed by these practices, Kimberly Harrison’s (2003) exploration of self-rhetoric and ethos in Southern U.S. women’s civil war diaries provided us with a third critical concept for our work:

Self-rhetoric . . . posit[s] the self as a site for rhetorical negotiation of competing ideologies and material conditions that allow for possibilities and limitations of self-definition and presentation. The term implies the personal

rhetorical negotiations that then result in the public presentation of self. . . . In constructing one's sense of self in response to social, cultural, and material forces, the rhetor relies on self-persuasion to internalize and reconcile new and perhaps conflicting views of identity. (p. 244)

As we will explore in greater detail in later sections of this article, it was not only Harrison's (2003) definition of self-rhetoric that became significant to our work, but also her focus on diaries as a rhetorical space and on the rhetorical activities of confederate women, a subject that allowed us to apply strategic contemplation and discursive intervention in our reading and discussion of the text to highlight the silencing and erasure of Black voices and, particularly, of Black women's voices.

Together these texts and three concepts made salient how feminist rhetorics can become significant across disciplines even if the focus of the course is not rhetorical. We engage in rhetorical practices regularly across disciplines, even if we are not identifying those practices as rhetorical, and these rhetorical acts facilitate telling our stories and sharing our perspectives and listening to or looking for the stories and perspectives of others. Also significant in our work together was a recognition that rhetoric was not simply an academic pursuit but a way for women and other marginalized people to survive and fight for change. In their application, these concepts significantly shaped WTL activities throughout our course, activities that allowed us "to use writing as a tool for learning rather than a test of that learning, to . . . explain concepts or ideas to [our]selves, to ask questions, to make connections, to speculate, to engage in critical thinking" (McLeod & Maimon, 2000, p. 579). Shaping these connections and this critical thinking as part of writing to engage activities "well suited to encouraging the use of cognitive skills such as reflecting, applying, analyzing, and evaluating, skills that are valuable for grappling with the information, ideas, and arguments within a discipline," (Palmquist, 2020, p. 12), as part of our writing and research, these three concepts helped us to know what questions to ask, where to look for information, what to look for in those sources, and how to identify who and what was missing. We came to understand the significance of rhetorical position in research and how and when to ask questions about voice, perspective, experience, visibility, silencing, and erasure. As we illustrate in the following section, WTL activities grounded by feminist rhetorics and those that guide research and writing processes can help students to diversify their research topics and resources and to engage in active and communal meaning-making.

## **Reflections and Connections: Feminist Rhetorics in Theory and Practice**

In this section we explore—individually and collectively—how we put theory into practice throughout the semester and how course content and our collaborative

engagement shaped our learning, writing, and research. In order to highlight and to amplify our individual voices and experiences at key moments, and to provide a diversity of perspectives, we self-identify by first names to demonstrate the extent to which feminist rhetorics facilitated a variety of connections and ways in that were at once interdisciplinary and individual. Furthermore, we demonstrate how individual positionalities and disciplinary expertise informed and were shaped by an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to course content, ultimately supporting our work as change agents across disciplines. We identify WTL and WTE activities as sites for not only discussing, theorizing, and exploring but also applying feminist rhetorics. Furthermore, we find collaborative inquiry as essential to this process, both in our meaning-making within the course and in extending this meaning-making outside of the immediate course context.

### *Letizia*

As a significant part of my teaching and scholarship, feminist rhetorics have both informed my professional work and helped me give voice to my experience as a cisgender woman and child of immigrants grappling with liminal and contested spaces (see Daniell & Guglielmo, 2016; Guglielmo, 2019). Although I had previously taught graduate and undergraduate courses in both writing and rhetoric and in gender and women's studies that included texts in feminist rhetoric and that were grounded in feminist pedagogical practices, this course offered a unique opportunity to center these theories and practices with students and to engage them through inter- and multidisciplinary lenses. Both guided by and embodying the interdisciplinary nature of feminist rhetorics, this course was designed to introduce students to feminist rhetorical theory and practice, to draw students into ongoing scholarly conversations on feminist rhetorics, and to prompt them to begin contributing to those conversations in ways that were meaningful and relevant for their ongoing academic and professional work across disciplines. From low-stakes writing assignments to the final project, students were invited, "to connect on a personal level, to find meaning beyond the specifics of the assignment itself, and to imagine future selves or future writing identities connected to their goals and interests" (Eodice et al., 2017). According to Palmquist (2020) this meaningful connection is essential to the critical thinking required of WTE activities (p. 15).

From the outset of the course, I designed module introductions and overviews to support students' engagement with course readings and module content with two general goals in mind: modeling the kinds of questions that could grow out of and be shaped by feminist rhetorical theory and practice and demonstrating that our learning was in process and co-constructed, subject to revision, expansion, and deliberation. For example, during module one, I asked:

- What does it mean for the work of feminist rhetorics or feminist rhetoricians to be interdisciplinary? What are the benefits of interdisciplinarity?
- What role do silence, reflection, embodiment, and “linger[ing] deliberately” play in feminist research and in feminist rhetoric? (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. x)
- What *is* feminist rhetoric and where do we find feminist rhetorics or feminist rhetors?

We would return to or expand the scope of many of these questions during each subsequent module, and online writing and discussion activities were designed to allow us to reflect on, deliberate, and reconsider and refine responses, reinforcing the collective and fluid nature of our learning (e.g., How does this reading shape your understanding of rhetoric? Of feminist rhetorics? Of what counts as a rhetorical space? Of what counts as feminist rhetorical practice or feminist rhetorical activities?)

Given our online format, reflection on these questions as part of our collaborative meaning-making was facilitated during each module by our learning management system’s (LMS) online discussion board. According to Mays Imad (2021), “Meaning-making gives us a sense of control and increases our sense of belonging, self-worth, and personal fulfillment. At the same time, it also helps us feel as if we are a part of something bigger than ourselves” (p. 8). Although I typically posted questions in the module overview similar to those included above to guide reading and analysis, students were invited to find their own ways into the discussion by drawing on those questions and posing questions of their own (see sample questions embedded in the bulleted list). In addition to initiating their own and responding to one another’s posts, the act of reading each other’s reflections and analyses and considering peers’ questions offered opportunities for continuing to engage in critical imagination and strategic contemplation, as subsequent sections of this article will illustrate. Within online courses, discussion board activities “provide a timely opportunity to build collaborative bridges between professors and students, with an objective of sharing power and innovating feminist praxis on both sides” (Turpin, 2007, p. 19). Online discussion boards can serve as the center of writing and reflection activities in online courses, and those digital spaces have the potential to invite increased participation and to facilitate a variety of feminist rhetorical activities (see Chick & Hassel, 2009; Guglielmo, 2012; Guglielmo, 2009).

Fulfilling different purposes over the course of the semester as part of our writing and research processes, discussion activities were often public and sometimes private, facilitating a variety of WTL and WTE activities. In addition to space for reflection, these posts also offered space for low-stakes prewriting activities for longer writing assignments and for sharing what we already knew or didn’t know about rhetoric and feminist rhetorics at the start of the semester and revisiting that knowledge at



mid-semester. In addition to the questions shared above, at mid-semester I asked students for a more cumulative reflection on their engagement with feminist rhetorics, thinking about their own way into the work and about opportunities to extend, contribute to, or complicate the conversations we'd been tracing on feminist rhetorics as they looked ahead to future work and the final project for the course.

As a deliberate strategy to decenter my own voice in this online space and to reinforce the co-constructed meaning and collective knowledge among the group, I rarely responded directly to posts on the discussion board and at the start of each week's module overview, I began with a reflection on the previous discussion activity, centering students' voices (each by name) and the connections and contributions they were helping us to make in our ongoing exploration of feminist rhetorics. In that way, we were prompted to return to, reconsider, and reframe key concepts, our own analyses, and our engagement with content in the next module with our colleagues' reflections as a deliberate part of that process:

- Consider Judson's guiding questions, "who is speaking and who is being silenced?" and reflection on specific course readings with those questions in mind: "Both essays reclaimed words and texts from those who used it to silence women and brought attention to how vital context, history, culture, and communication frame a world that seeks to control those who challenge it."
- Note Dominique's reminder of the powerful role of critical imagination as a guiding practice in feminist research.
- Regarding rhetorical space and practice, spend time with Kara's post: "My idea of a rhetorical space has been radically improved because before taking this class, I was under the impression that traditional rhetoric was not for women, and that rhetorical spaces were generally those antiquated texts that are continually studied; now, I know that rhetorical spaces exist all around us because texts and speakers are all around us, and rhetoric is for anyone who is willing to think critically about any given rhetorical moment. . . .Before, I did not know that was an option—to generate a new approach to discover solutions to problems that have not been considered (or acknowledged) before."
- Reflect on the questions Dominique poses regarding silences: What silences do these diaries reveal? And recognizing that "One does not need an external audience to perform rhetorical acts . . . how can a writer effectively use silence in rhetoric?"
- Consider, too, how Dominique applies Nedra Reynolds's rhetorical strategy of speaking from—or analyzing from—the margins in multiple ways both in planning for the final project and engaging with readings

and discussion board posts. Note Dominique's reference to a significant keyword connected to our work in feminist rhetorics: counter-narratives. How do/can counter-narratives provide a rhetorical strategy for disrupting dominant narratives and revealing silences?

- See Judson's response to the effect of Royster and Kirsch's geology metaphor as well as feeling of a "tidal wave" in assessing the potential scope of feminist rhetoric. This idea of scope can be both exciting (in terms of possibilities) and overwhelming (in terms of mapping the field). How might we approach our work this semester as an opportunity to find a place for entry or connection in a corner or small section of the work?

Although the structure of online discussion board activities did not always allow for spontaneous discussion and sharing of initial questions as Judson will explore below, these asynchronous discussions also facilitated increased participation from students who might find it difficult to find space to speak up in a face-to-face discussion or synchronous interaction. The nature of the discussion board also allowed for amending or shaping thinking based on engagement with peers' responses and for visible collaborative meaning-making. Finally, as Dominique explained during one of our online writing meetings, the discussion board also allowed for self-rhetoric, "personal rhetorical negotiations that then result in the public presentation of self" (Harrison, 2003, p. 244). Below, both Dominique and Judson illustrate the effects of the internal and external dialogue facilitated by WTL and WTE activities and their effects on facilitating meaningful contributions to communal discourse within and outside of our virtual classroom space.

### *Dominique*

My first introduction to feminist rhetoric came not from the prototypical academic readings of feminist researchers, but concrete examples the women in my life displayed, particularly my mother, aunt, and grandmother. At that time, I didn't have the vocabulary to label what I witnessed as feminist actions. These people that the academy noted as unworthy of research, I assumed uninteresting enough to qualify as subjects. How wrong I was. I witnessed how these women moved throughout the world simultaneously handling the patriarchy outside and inside of themselves. And the feminism I witnessed wasn't feminism popularized in early academic feminism because of my family's makeup, which consists of a multicultural Blackness originating from coastal South Carolina, Queens New York, and Jamaica.

My 'proper' introduction, in an academic sense, wasn't through a well-researched, thematically-structured article but a fiction book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, in my African American literature class—subsequently being

by way of the academy. My experience with a single mother and my introduction to Hurston's work sparked an inextinguishable fire, demanding more fuel to feed its roar, pushing me to scour for more Black feminist texts by authors like bell hooks, Joan Morgan, Feminista Jones, and Audre Lorde and the different courses stemming from feminist ideology. This inquiry led me to this feminist-focused rhetoric course. To be clear, I am not your prototypical scholar-in-pursuit. I am not in search of my second or third degree. I am a Black boy from Decatur, Georgia who enjoys grandiose concepts and critical thinking. I was able to work the course into my schedule because of my integrative studies major and with my aspirations of becoming a professional writer, I assumed the class would assist me on my journey.

I'd eventually be proven right repeatedly because of several writing assignments, such as discussion boards and reflections. I was consistently challenged by my peers, my professor, and the material in front of me to think critically about concepts and situations. While the online course format could be seen as a potential dam to free-flowing ideas, I'd argue that it acted more like a tributary, allowing ideas to coast without restraint. Exchanging thoughts through an online medium made it easier to debate difficult topics without fear of retaliation. In-person discussions, while great for fostering immediate and more visceral reactions, do not bode well for someone like myself who has difficulty speaking out loud in a public arena. With the ability to ruminate over my thoughts before presenting them to the discussion board, I participated more willingly and freely. As before when I spoke about witnessing feminism in action without the vocabulary to label it as such, the online assignments allowed me to practice another concept I didn't know the words for, self-rhetoric (Harrison, 2003). With no immediate pressure to respond with an engaging critique, I was allowed to meander on the topic and contemplate my biases to gauge how best to engage with the new idea presented on the discussion board. These WTL activities allowed me to engage critically with theories by way of interrogating the self (McLeod & Maimon, 2000).

Before, I assumed rhetoric was essentially meant to stay in the realm of academia, but after critically engaging with Black women's cookbooks (Collings Eves, 2005) and Southern women's diaries (Harrison, 2003) the mirage was destroyed. Colling Eves's and Harrison's works that surveyed the real-world examples of rhetoric in action gave me something to reference and apply as I viewed spaces I interact with regularly, such as Facebook and Twitter, as locations of rhetoric in action. Now with a new insight into these social media platforms, I regularly find rhetorical value in them. I made a genuine connection with a new concept, I, at first, struggled to comprehend. As a framework, feminist rhetorics, and critical imagination in particular, granted me the thinking tool to critically engage with the concepts, what Palmquist (2020) defines as the goal of WTE activities.

While engaging feminist ideology, I continually encountered voices and perspectives that were excluded in the majority of my studies. I was introduced to the concept of how rhetorical position constructs the ethos of a speaker or writer, how someone's place inside or outside of the margins can affect their perception and how they are perceived, and how voices of the unheard are centered in feminist rhetoric (Reynolds, 1993). Feminist rhetoric reworked my concept of writing from an isolated act of typing onto a white void into a community undertaking. You don't write for yourself or for your papers to die in a hole, but to connect with scholars of the past, present, and future. You write to join the conversation. Which I only understand because of learning about rhetorical position and seeing how the seed of rhetorical study began focusing on communal debates. When we understand writing in general as a communal effort, we start to consider what has been said in the conversation and what we can bring to it.

Before I was introduced to the notion of critical imagination and the ethos of an author through my engagement with the course, I placed my limited perspective on a pedestal, essentially accepting it as truth. First impressions cemented my feelings about particular subjects. There was limited space available for new information to alter my feelings, particularly when it concerned race. Race for me, a disabled Black man somewhat well-versed in the studies of the African Diaspora, is more than theory. It is my life. So much so that, initially, I hated learning about Black history. Too many times, I sat in history class viewing pictures of swaying bodies attached to trees and brutally lashed backs. Those images would often make me queasy, not from the brutality alone, but because those people resembled people on my family tree. Coupled with these experiences was the gratuitous flying of rebel confederate flags I witnessed as a lifetime resident of Georgia. So when, as part of our assigned reading, I had to read Kimberly Harrison's (2003) "Rhetorical Rehearsals: The Construction of Ethos in Confederate Women's Civil War Diaries," I immediately became enraged—partially because of my past experiences with other college courses, specifically regarding history. In one class, I was tasked with arguing for the South's right to disband from the United States, inherently arguing for slavery. Naturally, with this experience in mind, I quickly prejudged the article. What did I, a Black American born and raised in the U.S. South, have to learn from confederate women, the swinging pendulum in the grandfather clock of oppression? Without deviating much from my belief of white women being active participants in oppressing Black people, I read the article. Royster and Kirsch's (2012) critical imagination gave me a blueprint on how to analyze the words before me; I let go of my preconceived notions of truth and knowledge and allowed Harrison, along with the women's diary entries, to tell me their story and location. Without this concept, it would have been impossible for me to consider their struggles. I have even been able to use the concept outside of

class and realize that critical imagination is nothing more than an intellectual way of describing empathy. When utilizing critical imagination, we become active participants in the conversation and engage with intent to dissect the information in front of us. I applied the sum of all we learned in the class to my final project: a study of the rhetorical activities of Camille Bell whose son Yusef was murdered during the Atlanta Child Murders. I painted Bell with the fine silk-haired paintbrush of feminist rhetorical knowledge, drawing a detailed depiction of her and her activism. Now I pack this tool with me, tucked into my intellectual painter's pouch, ready for use with all my future projects, spanning from fiction writing to advocacy.

### *Judson*

This course was my first experience with feminism and feminist research. I decided to take an American studies course as an elective to fulfill my doctoral coursework and did not know the title of the course until a few days before the semester started. My anxiety was high due to my limited interactions with feminism and feminist thought. Fearing the worst, I quickly memorized that add/drop date for the semester.

However, the first assignment put me at ease. We were tasked with defining and outlining the goal of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. Bitzer (1968) defines rhetoric by stating that "In short, Rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action" (p.4). The course used his writings as a starting point for defining rhetoric so that we were able to understand feminism within that frame. I hoped that others in the course would understand that rhetoric was the base alloy of the course and that engaging in such behavior would be key. As we progressed through the curriculum, we would be able to see and engage with each other so that our perspectives would be challenged and further understood. My initial fears of an oppressive course, in which one truth was supreme, quickly dissolved, and I was more willing to listen to what the course, and my classmates, had to say.

Between my experience as a combat veteran and a classroom educator, I felt like I was in a very different place than some of my classmates. This course was also the only one in my program of study that was not designed for educators seeking a graduate degree. Due to the limiting nature of the written word, I was afraid my questioning would be taken as something other than my exploration. In this way, the virtual setting was very challenging. However, I noticed that as the course progressed I was able to maintain an open internal dialogue that helped me try to understand rather than dismiss my classmates' comments and arguments completely. Due to the online format, I had more time which allowed for a slower analysis and, thus, a better understanding of what my classmates and I were trying to say. Our dialogue, both

internal and external, allowed knowledge to be co-created just as much as it was individually created. The outside perspectives of my classmates allowed me to see the curriculum in ways that I would have missed in the moment of a physical class. Though limiting, the online format provided space for an internal dialogue that allowed me to engage with perspectives rather than people and thus pushed the boundary of what I accepted as truth. Typically, I have outright dismissed the arguments and thoughts of others while citing my own experience and worldview as proof they were wrong. This time, I was slower to close that door as I sought to understand my perspective while juggling my classmates’.

Throughout the course, I discovered that feminist thought, specifically feminist research methodology, could help serve humanity by providing a critical foundation for analysis and thinking. I took this foundation and asked how I could apply this to my world. As a social studies educator, I sought to create a tool where my students could benefit from the high level of analysis and understanding that I undertook while engaging with the course material. I began to think of feminist research methodology and social studies education as allies. After all, social studies education aims to educate students on how to become citizens capable of critical thinking (National Council for the Social Studies, 2020). I saw feminist research methodologies as a pathway to accomplish this goal.

The flexibility and openness of the final assessment for the course allowed me to explore the literature surrounding feminism, feminist research methodology, and social studies curriculum. Most of the literature focused on the lack of diversity in social studies curriculum and textbooks, which offered minority stereotypes. Some studies called for a feminist research mindset. However, the complete lack of information detailing a feminist research methodology at the middle grades level gave me a blank canvas to start working on a tool that my students could use that blended the goals of both social studies and feminism. Combining both the ideals of citizenship provided by Johnson and Morris (2010) and the categorization of identity provided by Williams (2019), social studies goals aligned with feminist research methodology. Wu’s (2010) outline of feminist research methodology bridged the gap between both disciplines and showed that an alliance could indeed be made between social studies education and feminist research methodology. I was also guided by Gurung’s (2020) identification and outline of feminist standpoint theory. With this information, I created a tool that could be used in the middle school social studies classroom based on feminist research methodologies.

The CSEW (creation of source, source’s message, examination of the source, and the whole picture of the source) was created to allow students to interrogate sources and uncover missing perspectives while helping them reveal systems of oppression. Though it looks like a simple outline or guide, the CSEW form is designed to

promote and use critical thinking to determine how sources interact with the world and the systems of domination that stem from such sources. Ideally, students would better understand a historical source through this tool because students would be challenged to analyze a source deeply, “seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead” (Royster & Kirsch, 2021, p. 20).

This tool aims to disrupt the idea of a perfect source and critically examine it. This examination asks students to look at the creator/author of the source and analyze specific identity markers; analyze and summarize the message; explore the source for both its role in history and the action expected of the audience; and synthesize the whole picture. The final portion of the tool asks students what is missing, what groups might be hurt by the source achieving its goal, and what information is needed to create a complete picture. Allowing students to imagine and seek out other information that might help them understand what’s going on is a real goal of feminist research methodology and social studies education. It equips students to understand that the idea that the perfect source exists is flawed, and students should be encouraged to seek out additional information and perspectives. The development and encouragement of such critical imagination and strategic contemplation would help push against the passivity of a traditional social studies course while encouraging students to question sources to better understand them.

This course combined my ideas of what it means to be a patriot and an educator and allowed me to strengthen my resolve to be a better advocate for my students. However, I found that the true lesson of the course was a rediscovery of why I became a teacher. I want to help my students and give them the skillsets necessary to create a more harmonious, pragmatic, and global democratic society. I want them to seek to understand each other and develop a core sense of community and citizenship. This course, especially the development of the final project, allowed me to reengage in these ideas and recommit to them. Ultimately, I was able to bring my passion as a social studies educator to the course and come away with a tool rooted in critical thinking that would help my students develop as competent citizens within their communities.

## Conclusion

As these collective and individual narratives illustrate, feminist rhetorical theories and practices, applied across disciplines, have the potential to shape students’ writing and research processes, to support the broader goals of WAC, and to extend the critical thinking of WTE activities. When deliberately guiding course design and WTL activities, feminist rhetorical and pedagogical practices foster collaborative meaning-making and co-construction of knowledge, and they can begin to decenter authority

and disrupt hierarchy, centering student voices and amplifying marginalized perspectives. Extending Palmquist's (2020) claims regarding the role of WTE activities "that support students' acquisition and understanding of knowledge central to a discipline, that lead students to work more deeply with that knowledge, and that prepare them to participate in disciplinary discourse" (p. 17), our narratives illustrate how framing these activities within feminist rhetorics allows us to engage in collective meaning-making practices that can reshape that disciplinary knowledge and discourse through a diversity of voices and perspectives. These reflections further demonstrate meaning-making outcomes that were flexible and adaptable for work outside of our course and that demonstrate broader implications for students' roles as change agents. Framed within the affordances of online teaching and learning environments, WTL and WTE activities guided by feminist rhetorical theories and practices facilitate a process of internal and external dialogue that support students' active engagement with and contribution to disciplinary knowledge.

Recognizing "that connection and diversity are keys to sustainability in WAC at this moment in time" (Bartlett, et al., 2020, p.5) and, as Palmquist (2020) reminds us "that designing a successful WTE activity or assignment will involve far more than a deep understanding of critical thinking . . . [and] will require instructors to draw on their expertise as teachers, their experiences as writers, and their awareness of what they must do to provide appropriate feedback to their students" (p. 17), we invite WAC practitioners and scholars to explore the range of possibilities that feminist rhetorical theories and practices may facilitate in achieving these goals. Future work might consider, for example, what WTL activities guided by feminist rhetorics look like in a variety of courses, including those in STEM fields, and how inquiry tools like critical imagination and strategic contemplation may prompt students' engagement with disciplinary knowledge and their advocacy for "seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead," while "pay[ing] attention to how lived experiences shape our perspectives" (Royster & Kirsch, 2021, p. 20, 22). Recognizing the affordances and possibilities that we address related to online discussions, we also encourage continued explorations of the intersections of feminist rhetorics and WAC in online learning environments, particularly those that further theorize how online discussions may support WTE. Finally, as we have done here, we encourage future work to both theorize and perform "making texts together . . . and forming meaningful collaborations" (Poe, 2020 p. xiii) as an essential part of this process.



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