



OPEN WORDS: ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES

Vol. 12, No. 1 (December 2019): 149–154

DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2019.12.1.09

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online)

<https://wac.colostate.edu/openwords/>

Review of *Persuasive Acts:*

Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by Charlotte Hogg, Shari J. Stenberg. University of
Pittsburgh Press, 2020. \$31.94, ISBN-13: 978-0-8229-6613-5.

Kandice Diaz
University of Texas at San Antonio

Persuasive Acts: Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-First Century stands as a testament to women and the power of their collective words and actions when faced with adversity in terms of their treatment living and working in a patriarchal society that, despite the progress that has been made on women's issues, continues to subjugate women and their lives to that of their male counterparts. Editors Shari J. Stenberg, a professor of English and gender studies at the University of Nebraska, and Charlotte Hogg, a professor of English at Texas Christian University, compiled an impactful, yet beautiful account of women's voices ranging from the highly recognizable and beloved Michelle Obama to women such as YouTuber Kat Blaque, whose voices would have likely remained in relative obscurity had this anthology not been assembled in such a meticulous manner. This compendium of strong, influential female voices will appeal to feminists and those interested in rhetoric pertaining to women's rights, activism, and social justice initiatives taking place in many different places around the world. This is a relevant and timely topic in our time because women are speaking out in larger numbers, in unison, and in multifaceted ways chronicling their experiences existing as females in patriarchal societies around the world.

In this poignant collection of voices, Stenberg and Hogg pay special attention to including a myriad of influential acts that cover many topics that affected women who came before and are still relevant today. Topics covered in this anthology range from politics, police brutality, LGBTQ issues to sexual harassment, immigration, education, and beyond, with each powerful act presented taking on the form of such varied media as speeches, magazine editorials, Twitter hashtags, and even

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).

Diaz

photographs. Each piece chosen to not only underscore women's issues, but also to incite conversation, highlight injustice, and bring attention to the plight of women around the world. Prior to selection, Stenberg and Hogg present the reader with pertinent information about each woman to include why she is influential, what her many contributions to change have consisted of, and contextual information pertaining to the included persuasive act. For example, immediately before Iranian judge Shirin Ebadi's excerpt from *Until We Are Free*, the reader is told that Ebadi is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and that her addition to *Persuasive Acts* discusses the threats she and her fellow protestors endured from the Iranian government when attempting to protest laws that violated women's rights.

Stenberg and Hogg open their journey through women's voices with an astute introduction entitled "Gathering Women's Rhetorics for the Twenty-First Century," that guides the reader through their thought process for compiling this volume. They state that now is the time to "assemble and engage in women's rhetorics, as we are hearing the voices of more women, and in more ways, than ever before" (3). There is no better time than now to release this powerful collection of female voices because women are being represented in arenas in which they were never allowed entry before, speaking out about issues women face in increasingly multifaceted ways, and declaring that they are leading the charge to social change through words and actions. As such, Stenberg and Hogg assert that with the persuasive acts included in this compilation, women are "changing the shape and tenor of traditionally masculine public arenas" (3-4). Such strides are even more timely with the rise and popularity of social media platforms that allow said rhetoric to reach a larger audience than ever before.

The introduction also introduces the reader to concerns that Stenberg and Hogg faced when compiling *Persuasive Acts*, which are clearly spelled out and dealt with in a graceful manner. They expand upon the fact that it was difficult for them to decide whose voices would be selected for inclusion in this volume alluding to the plethora of impactful women speaking out multitudinously in a variety of ways about pertinent issues. This conundrum was further complicated by the fact they had to continuously cut the number of pages down because they were constrained by space. In regard to how these women were chosen for inclusion, the editors state that they did so according to what they call "rhetorical sway," which they define as "rhetorical impact demonstrated through creating or connecting to cultural flashpoints that forward or respond to gendered issues" (14). The pieces deemed to demonstrate "rhetorical sway" were selected based upon "traditional rhetorical theories and features...but more profoundly influenced by women's rhetorical theories that value inclusion and representation and that encompass expansive forms of argument, evidence, and ethos"

(14). As evidence of the way in which Stenberg and Hogg apply their definition of “rhetorical sway,” they operated under ideas of feminism, transfeminism, intersectionality, identity, humor, language play, political correctness, personal experience, embodiment, and positionality, all of which played a large role throughout the book manifested through the women’s voices featured therein. In terms of positionality, Stenberg and Hogg acknowledge this head on by stating that they realize that they are speaking from a position of privilege as being white women, and were quick to point out that this compendium provides “opportunities to better understand that rhetoric by white women has been the most visible but not the most viable” (16). Thus, the inclusion of women from across the race, ethnic, gender, experience, and identity spectrum.

Stenberg and Hogg divide their anthology into four sections, each of which covers various issues and topics in multiple ways. Section I, “Rhetorics of Civic Engagement,” contains fourteen entries that deal with issues related to the lack of women in public office positions and is comprised of women who are among the first to hold “judicial or political roles” (23). Among the selections included is a speech given by Hillary Rodham Clinton, “the first female major party nominee for president” at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, an excerpt from Shirin Ebadi’s (the first female judge in Iran) *Until We Are Free*, which relays the violence that women in Iran faced when they attempted to peacefully protest Iranian laws and how they oppressed women, and a strong voice from El Salvador, Jeannette Urquilla (social worker/activist), who writes about the criminalization of abortion in her country. Speaking from distinct perspectives and on varied issues, the common thread present in the rhetoric of these powerful women is a call for change, something that echoes through the following three sections.

Moving from the political arena to the “Rhetorics of Feminisms” in Section II, the eleven selections that make up this section discuss the dynamism of twenty-first century feminism in that it has evolved to be more inclusive of an assortment of identities, “transnational views,” and its “rhetorical reach through art, activism, and digital media” (107). As such, the women’s voices represented in this section include a piece, “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” written by attorney and civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw in which she discusses the intersectionality of discrimination and oppression on the basis of race and gender, an excerpt from “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in which Emi Koyama offers a definition of transfeminism as a means of confronting “gender norms,” widen the boundaries of feminism, and “imagine more inclusive futures,” and a commencement address given by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in which she discusses her notion of feminism as rooted

Diaz

in her personal experience as being “a party full of different feminisms” (129; 135). What ties these selections together is not only a call for the expansion of the notions of identity and the importance of intersectionality when it comes to discrimination, but also the flexibility of the definition of feminism within the context of these ideas. The interesting part of this section is that some of the women featured have been openly critical of one another’s ideas (Adichie and Koyama), but that has not stopped the editors from featuring their voices as a collective, discussing interrelated issues.

Section III, entitled “Rhetorics of Protest and Resistance,” covers how the current American administration reflects “misogynistic and xenophobic” ideals, environmental concerns, racism, and even war. Among the many women featured in this section are the voices of Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, who discusses the importance of refraining from appropriating the movement for purposes that it was not meant for and why it must retain its focus on “black lives,” well-known author Edwidge Danticat, who uses her personal immigration narrative to discuss the Trump administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy and its impact on immigrant families because of separation, and lastly a piece written for *The New Yorker* by Sasha Weiss, “culture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*,” which serves as an example of the ways in which the #YesAllWomen movement has been covered by the media and how it has provided a forum for women to speak out about their experiences of sexual harassment and finding solidarity in such an act (222). The writing that the women in this section accomplished serve as counterpublics to what has been accepted as the status quo for far too long in this country when it comes to the treatment of those that exist at the edges of society, such as African-American communities, immigrants, and women as sexual objects, and how this fact is supposed to justify the poor treatment of these populations.

The last section of the book is dedicated to education, entitled “Rhetorics of Education,” this portion of the anthology discusses how the way that education systems are structured around the world “reinforce practices and values that obstruct girls’ and women’s educational opportunities,” focusing primarily on women and girls of color (251). The women whose rhetoric are included in this section are Malala Yousafzai’s address to the United Nations, in which she discusses the danger that children face in her country when seeking an education because they are part of a community that is dealing with issues of “poverty, war, and gender discrimination,” and the voices of women like Adrienne Keene and Capo Crucet, who highlight their personal experiences to shed light on the struggles that Native Americans and Latinx students face when it comes to pursuing an education. Tying the voices in this section together is the assertion that all people, no matter who they or where they come from,

are entitled to an education without having to fear what could happen to them in this pursuit.

Despite all the positives that this book has to offer, there are, of course, limitations. One of the most apparent limitations is the fact that even though Stenberg and Hogg discuss some of the issues they faced when compiling their book, they did not discuss them in sufficient detail. Issues that were glossed over were those related to the fact that “rhetorical sway” has routinely been “associated with well-established (meaning well-accomplished but also socially and financially secure; read: usually white) women” (15). While Stenberg and Hogg bring this discussion up, it ends just as abruptly as it began, with a statement that acknowledges this issue as a truth followed by an attempt to counteract it with the following: “For us, a rhetor with sway is sometimes well-known, but just as often is one we have deemed powerful because she represents a perspective and position not often heard,” adding that they deliberately included women from various backgrounds to counter the homogeneity that has traditionally characterized “rhetorical sway” as something reserved for white women of a particular kind. However, as an ongoing issue facing not just women’s rhetorics, but rhetorics produced and circulated by underrepresented populations, the topic deserved more than just a brief nod.

Another limitation to the book is the notion of expanding the definition of feminism to being more inclusive, which it does a fairly good job of doing, except for in one instance, and that is the attention given to transfeminism. While a profound treatment of the topic was provided by Emi Koyama with “Excerpts from ‘The Transfeminist Manifesto,’” this was only one voice and certainly not enough to lend credence to the goal of expanding the definition of feminism. It would have been beneficial had a few more voices discussing this point been included, not only for comparison, but to demonstrate the enthusiasm that the idea is garnering, per the assertion of the editors.

Overall, this compendium of strong female voices provides a plethora of examples of the power of “women’s rhetorics” in a mostly male dominated world by featuring women who have something vital to say and demonstrating that even though we have made progress on women’s issues, there is still a lot of work to be done. With their goal of including voices that will allow the reader to “trace how the rhetorics in this collection have circulated in ways that shape gendered narratives and social action,” Stenberg and Hogg have essentially done this and more by providing a forum that encourages women to speak, acknowledging women’s voices and experiences as essential to the fight for equality, and encouraging these “rhetorical acts” to move beyond the page into social action (13).

Diaz

About the Author

Kandice Diaz is currently working on her PhD in English at the University of Texas at San Antonio with an emphasis on Rhetoric and Composition and Linguistics. She holds a Masters' Degree in Communication from the University of Texas at El Paso. She currently teaches Technical Writing courses in addition to having taught public speaking and organizational communication at Alamo Colleges and San Antonio Independent School District.

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).