

## Review: *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*

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Royster, Jacqueline Jones and Gesa Kirsch. *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012.

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In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of thirty-plus years of scholarship and practice of feminist research methods. The authors believe such a volume is necessary because feminist research practices have caused a “tectonic shift” in Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies (RCL), expanding the scope and practice of rhetorical inquiry. For Kirsch and Royster, feminist rhetorical practices are best understood through an analytic lens of four methodological practices: critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and a globalizing point of view. Taken together, this framework offers a means for (re)visiting and revising standard rhetorical practices, as well as a means for anticipating emergent rhetorical approaches.

Beginning with the claim that “stories matter,” Royster and Kirsch introduce readers to their own personal and professional stories, thereby enacting a feminist research method. Indeed, throughout the volume Kirsch and Royster work to reflect the very practices they describe. They highlight the kairotic moment (the Virginia Tech Feminist Symposium in 2007) that was the catalyst for this discussion of feminist research methods. Indeed, they emphasize in their own stories three key ideas: activism, meaningfulness, and respectfulness, that characterize how we as researchers might interact with our research subjects. They remind us, as feminist researchers, that we “need to learn to ask new questions and new ways to listen to the multidimensional voices that are speaking

from within and across the many lines that might divide us as language users” (4). Part I therefore is a call to action for scholars to recognize forms of knowledge production and dissemination that move beyond the traditional canon of rhetorical practice and research. They argue we need to develop a feminist operational framework that is “dynamic, flexible, and enlightening...as we move beyond the core agenda of rescuing, recovering, and re(inscribing) women into the history of rhetoric to work that is more transformative for the field” (18). Such a framework emphasizes the value of the ethical self, not only in the texts we produce, but in the texts we study and the pedagogical frames we use to instruct our students.

In Part II, Royster and Kirsch explore the landscape of rhetorical studies over the last thirty years to point out key ways in which feminist rhetorical practices have helped to shift and reform the criteria for what counts as “rhetorical performance, accomplishment, and rhetorical possibilities” (29). Namely, by establishing new criteria for excellence and for worthiness in RCL, feminist rhetorical practices have expanded both research methods (including reframing western traditions, rearticulating how, when, and by whom rhetorical performance might occur) and methodologies (decisions about what counts as data, and how we gather and interpret that data, embracing collaboration). They also look ahead, asking how research methods and methodologies will continued to be shaped, particularly with the movement toward more global and transnational rhetorical activities.

Chapter 4 and Part III trace four terms of engagement to showcase how, taken together, they form a matrix for understanding and utilizing both former and contemporary rhetorical practices, as well as anticipating future practices. These four methods are critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalizing point of view. Critical imagination, or “educated guessing,” is taken from Royster’s *Traces of a Stream* and suggests searching for what is likely or possible, given what is currently known. The importance of this inquiry tool is the reminder for scholars to “look more systematically beyond our contemporary values and assumptions to envision the possibilities of women’s practices in broader scope and to bring intellectual rigor to the analytical task” (76). Critical imagination asks scholars to be aware of their own presence in their research and to examine how our own biases, expectations, and

attitudes may shape our interpretations. Further, it asks researches to be open to new possibilities—new research subjects, methods, sources—even as we work to not overromanticize or overidentify with said subjects. Critical imagination asks us to perform a balancing act of sorts: to use our imagination to search for and unearth new research possibilities even as we maintain a critical perspective about the past.

Strategic contemplation suggests that researchers linger in the research space, “to take as much into account as possible but to withhold judgment for a time and resist coming to closure too soon in order to make the time to invite creativity, wonder, and inspiration into the research process” (85). The process of strategic contemplation enables the researcher to consider both the external and internal aspects of the research process. On the one hand the researcher can work in “real time and space” (85), e.g. the gathering of data and experiences to help understand the historical context of the subject; on the other hand, the researcher is also given license for more introspective process of imagining, meditating on materials, on possibilities, on connections. Social circulation indicates the diverse ways that women interact with each other in deliberate, communicative ways. This method also helps researchers to think about the fluidity of language use, moving beyond public domains and beyond traditional uses of rhetorical action, to more diverse, possibly private contexts. Simply put, social circulation recognizes rhetorical action in places not previously valued. The final method is globalizing point of view which acknowledges rhetorical action and innovation in a more diverse and inclusive global and geopolitical context. A globalizing point of view reminds scholars to be cognizant of the multiplicity of rhetorical practices from around the world.

Throughout this section of the book, Kirsch and Royster repeatedly perform what they refer to as “Tacking In” and “Tacking Out,” by providing examples of how these feminist research methods have been practiced. Thus, in addition to the literature review offered in part II, part III provides readers with even more examples of feminist rhetorical practices in action. Tacking In offers a closer examination of extant scholarship that itself looks closely at existing resources and scholarship. Tacking In helps researchers assess what we know, how we know it, and what still seems to be missing. Tacking Out, on the other hand, is a more long-range, anticipatory view that examines what might become more

visible “in broader strokes and [though] deep impressions” (72). Tacking Out is very much about the broader possibilities feminist rhetorical research might engender.

Another important element in this part of the book is the explicit attention to pedagogy. Each section ends with a discussion by both Kirsch and Royster of how they have utilized these four terms of engagement in their own classrooms. For example, after discussing critical imagination as a research tool, Kirsch recounts a story she shares with her students about her serendipitous, circuitous route to researching Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter. In the same section Royster discusses how she utilizes her text *Critical Inquiries* in her classroom. These pedagogical discussions are a particularly helpful element of the book because so many of their readers are educators themselves.

The final section of the book, part IV, moves beyond thinking about women’s historic rhetorical practices, and beyond the current, varied, and vital practices of today’s scholars, toward a “renegotiation of the paradigms by which we account for rhetoric as a dynamic phenomenon” (132). In other words, part IV looks at how feminist rhetorical studies vis-à-vis the research matrix will continue to enhance and deepen rhetorical knowledge. In essence, the feminist rhetorical practices will continue to help (re)define RCL. The conclusion of part IV positions the future of RCL in a “kaleidoscopic view” in which different analyses converge. They note four new “horizons” that are drawing interest and attention: the first is ways of “being and doing in rhetorical studies [that enables the] study of new rhetorical scenes, neglected sites, rarely studied groups of people, extracurricular locations, and unusual genres” (149); the second is a “need for critical and creative attention to be directed toward the interrogation of our listening and reading practices” (150); next is embracing the multimodal and multimedia texts now being produced; and the final horizon is pushing boundaries and understandings of “how knowledge travels, translates, mitigates, and shapes rhetorical actions” (151). Together, these new vistas reinforce the ethics of care and hope which underscore the diversity of practices celebrated in this volume.

Indeed, another welcoming aspect of the book is the personal interaction readers seem to have with both Kirsch and Royster. We, the readers, get to meet them as scholars and as teachers as they share with us their own growth as feminist scholars. This inclusion of their own

intellectual journeys enacts the reciprocal and dialectical interaction between researcher and subject they actively seek to create. Thus, they embody their goal of finding “innovative ways to engage in exchange with these women both critically and imaginatively” (14) by speaking with their readers. In celebrating their own noteworthy achievements within the field of RCL, and by celebrating the achievements of other feminist scholars, as well as pointing to the ongoing and substantial influence of these achievements, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* exemplifies their own polylogic analytical model by sharing multiple types and ways of doing scholarship, teaching, and research. I highly recommend this volume to all scholars in RCL, but particularly to graduate students and young academics beginning their own research journeys.

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### About the Author

Alexis E. Ramsey-Tobienne is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric at Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL., where she is also Director of the Writing Portfolio. She teaches courses in Analytic and Persuasive Writing, Advanced Research Methods, Visual Rhetoric, and Social Change Writing. She is co-editor of *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*. She has also published on the use of institutional repositories for preservation purposes and on archives and digital humanities.