

KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

Agency Matters

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For scholars of rhetoric and especially feminist scholars and scholars of women's rhetoric, agency has always mattered. Agency still matters. Agency will always matter. Agency mattered/matters/will matter because agency is epistemic (Foss), agency is formative (Foss; London Feminist Collective; Geisler), and agency is a matter of life and death (London Feminist Collective).

Agency has mattered because the Western rhetorical tradition was once about a good man speaking well (Quintilian), though an extensive cross-section of feminist scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s challenged this long-standing tradition. The scholars who produced this work, including Barbara Biesecker, Susan Jarratt, Andrea Lunsford, and others, offer a thoughtful reengagement with historical rhetorics that features women as historical, rhetorical subjects (Ballif; Campbell) and emphasizes disrupting existing, individualistic, women-less histories of rhetoric, often by turning attention to alternative subject formations and non-logocentric ways of knowing (Biesecker; Enoch; Jarratt).

As important theorists of rhetorical agency, feminist historiographers challenge not only the logics of traditional histories of rhetoric but also the centrality of the actor-hero-rhetor within them. For example, in their work, both Jarratt and Biesecker concentrate on the communal nature of ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical practices, and in doing so, they work to disrupt Enlightenment notions of individual agency. This move away from individual autonomy has had important ramifications for theories of rhetorical agency. An idealized, rational, autonomous individual has been portrayed as the primary possessor of rhetorical agency from Quintilian to Kenneth Burke. Though Burke's pentad and related ratios emphasize the roles of other participants in rhetorical situations, his work ultimately reinscribes the single human animal as the central progenitor of rhetorical agency. Instead of continuing to privilege individual rhetorical action, however, feminist approaches to rhetorical history emphasize the role of communal practice, with Biesecker arguing for revisionist, inclusive histories of rhetoric that "[work] against the ideology of individualism" (156-7). Further, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues in "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," agency must be "communal and participatory, hence, both constituted and constrained by externals that are

material and symbolic" (2). Communal practices of rhetorical agency emphasize, as Campbell does, participation and connection: scores of humans come together – even if only momentarily – for some shared purpose.

Theories of posthumanism offer feminist scholars of rhetoric another set of alternative frameworks for theorizing rhetorical agency. As D. Diane Davis posits in *Breaking Up (at) Totality*, traditional notions of agency, which draw on Enlightenment concepts of subjecthood and agency, cannot accommodate "the posthumanist notion that humans are always already functions of other functions" (23). As a result, "the (saving) power of rationality and, therefore, human agency have become suspect" (18). Indeed, she argues:

there never was

any autonomous

agency,

intention

or will . . . not even within the subject positions into which we are
called (44)

Seeking positive rather than negative responses to the disquiet that accompanies this loss of control, Davis proposes different forms of laughter not as individual acts of rhetorical agency but as communal tactics for producing shared agency and affirmative alliances. By opening itself to networks of causes and to nonrational ways of knowing, posthuman agency allows us to better account for how real-world change is often affected: political and cultural changes are the results of a myriad of extended, messy, sometimes inexplicable interventions.

Posthuman agency matters to feminist rhetoricians because the networks of material and immaterial forces that inform rhetorical agency have always mattered and will continue to matter. Human rhetors cannot achieve their goals without relying on and/or responding to other humans and without relying on and/or being constrained by surrounding nonhumans. Consider, for example, the act of teaching: in order to achieve anything in my classroom, I require students, desks, computers, materials for class discussion, authors, and any number of other humans and nonhumans. These other people and things comprise the network of my classroom and any agentive act must account for and/or respond to these participants. Acknowledging the existence and power of these networks allows us, particularly as feminist scholars, to more thoughtfully and deliberately engage with the other actors who guide and influence our participation in scholarly, political, and social conversations. This move to networked agency serves a number of purposes identified by Jaqueline Jones Royster in "'Ain't I a Woman': Using Feminist Rhetorical Practices to Re-set the

Terms of Scholarly Engagement for an Iconic Text.” As Royster argues, feminist inquiry is characterized by (among other things) “poly-logical patterns of inquiry, textually and contextually grounded analyses, the connecting of local analyses to more global enterprises, [and] consistency in linking ethical concerns more explicitly to our commitments to responsible rhetorical action” (60). Though Royster does not identify her work as posthuman, it is consistent with posthumanist notions of networked action, an approach to understanding rhetorical agency that serves feminist scholars well because it closely matches the kind of communal creation that Jarratt, Biesecker, and Campbell associate with feminist practices of inclusion.

How we formulate agency as feminist scholars matters and will continue to matter because arguments about our bodily rights, our democratic rights, and our human rights are constantly challenged by the whims of civic leaders, the consequences of culturally embedded attitudes, and the violence people wreak on each other. Agency will continue to matter because women still earn \$0.77 for every \$1 men make; white women are still more likely to gain employment than women of color, and on and on. Over the next 25 years, these life and death problems must be best addressed communally. With Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, we may work to identify the “infinitesimally small causes” of large events, the infinitesimal acts, like the flap of a butterfly’s wings, that “can transform successive conditions [. . .] such that they end up having massive but unanticipated effects” (14). Following Campbell’s call for a more participatory communal agency and building on Biesecker’s arguments against a totalizing history of rhetoric that relies on a central narrative of individual action, we can work to make room in our theories of rhetorical and material agency for the others – human and nonhuman – who have always worked against, with, and alongside human rhetors.

Agency mattered. Agency matters. Agency will matter.

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