

Small and Subtle Feminist Rhetorical Doings: An Introduction

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She taught us to never complain about injustices but to do something about them.

—Kamala Harris, 2024 DNC Speech,

describing the influence of her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris

As we initially imagined this special issue, we didn't fully consider the tension in the *something* we were asking our contributors to *do*. For context, we were both at the luncheon at the Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference in 2019 when Lisa Melonçon presented on quiet feminism, and we were there for the semi-contentious discussion that followed. Melonçon's notion of quiet feminism sparked our curiosity: Where does quiet feminism fit with radical feminism, and how are we understanding different enactments of feminism? With this special issue, we called for contributors to engage with the question: What constitutes "feminist enough," particularly in feminist rhetorical acts that are considered small, subtle, or quiet? Co-editor Tammie Kennedy noted this phenomenon as she studied women athletes at the same 2019 conference. Although this data was collected during a workshop on feminisms and social sports and fitness at the conference, many of the participants did not identify as "feminist," but they considered their actions within fitness spaces to denote a focus on gender equity and social change. Co-editor Jessi Thomsen has also felt the pressure of these questions while chatting with friends from grad school, turned colleagues in the field, who expressed frustration in projects that they thought were feminist but were consistently turned down from

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inclusion in the conference. Building from Melonçon's talk and these subsequent interactions, we argue that feminisms that are small, quiet, subtle, implicit, and incremental are feminist enough to do transformative rhetorical work. Each article in this special issue demonstrates how, opening up spaces to enact and theorize the ways in which these subtle feminisms work alongside, with, as, and through the radical feminisms that have been so crucial to our collective survival.

As we've been wrestling through this issue on small and subtle feminisms and what is feminist enough—plus, the ideological assumptions embedded in these concepts—we found ourselves wondering what these terms might mean within different contexts. When, in their DNC speeches, Michelle Obama and Kamala Harris echoed Shyamala Gopalan Harris's mandate to “do something,” we wondered if that *something* and that *doing* could be small and subtle yet yield change or forward movement. Obama and Harris were imploring the audience to vote, to encourage others to vote, and to engage in civic participation. But in this political climate, to *do something* might actually require a small or subtle act—because big and bold actions can be dangerous or seemingly only productive when communicating with those who are already listening and agreeing. Gender relations and practices are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and political institutions that necessitate a better understanding of the many forms of feminist action in the west and across the world, which can't look the same in place and time or satisfy a monolithic notion of “feminist” (Mohanty). To paraphrase contributor Charlotte Hogg's musings: Maybe the problem is that we need to reimagine feminist actions as both/and. We need the big and the bold, *and* we need the small and subtle.

What is “feminist enough” persists in fourth wave feminisms, and postcolonial scholarship challenges the Western, democratic assumption that activism must be loud, fierce, and visible (Koggel). Western feminisms have not only ignored the differences between women, they have also privileged the same patriarchal tools to make equitable changes that have oppressed many women (Lorde). Certainly, we need to *do something*, given the extremity of violence and dehumanization—especially toward queer folk, trans folk, women, and BIPOC—which demands action that is radical. Much like feminism, radical has a core definition but can also mean and do and be many things. If, at its foundation, radical is the refusal to play by the rules of the established system, then radical can be implemented in layers, woven through and in tension with the fabrics of a multiplicity of systems. However, so much of feminist rhetorics has seemed to prioritize and implement radical as big, loud, and now. It's in the Women's Marches, the BLM protests against police violence, and the #MeToo movement. But feminism can be deployed in a multiplicity of ways and, perhaps at its strongest, to reconsider feminism itself. Sweeping radical feminist action will not, for example, solicit productive conversations with conservative neighbors. However, small, subtle feminist acts may open a door. And that opening is both generative and radical despite its potential for complicity within an oppressive system. These actions subtly push against the larger oppressive systems in place and simultaneously ask us to, as Royster and Kirsch argue, examine what is beneath, behind, between, and under any “system” of feminism or feminist action that allows one to “do something.” This issue chronicles how the notion of feminist action is even more complicated than we had initially imagined and offers contributors and readers a space to build upon how numerous scholars have interrogated feminism as a small or everyday practice (e.g., Cooper; Glenn; Mensik). Further-

more, the issue invites us to pick up and sustain conversations about the relationships among binary road-blocks, such as good/bad and small/loud, which beg for more robust understandings of both/and methods and mindsets.

To introduce this issue, we want to pull back the curtain on these complications by looking “beneath, behind, between, and under” three tensions that have emerged from the thoughtful contributions of our authors and our own wrestling with the possibilities and shortcomings of small and subtle feminist rhetorical acts. These tensions provide a place to consider the both/and:

- first, *being* feminist in tension and conversation with *doing* feminism;
- second, the building of a journal issue on the topic of small/subtle that simultaneously relies on the big/bold acts of authors’ writing, research, and vulnerability; and
- third, the potential for small/subtle/quiet to be coded as privileged (especially white privilege) in tension with its potential to offer everyday, subversive, accessible, and powerful opportunities for transformation.

To the first tension: So what is feminist enough? Who decides? And if you don’t identify as a feminist, can transformative actions still be considered feminist? Volume and visibility contribute to radical change, but we hesitate to dismiss feminist acts that are small, subtle, or quiet. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards provide an early exploration of this tension in *Manifesta* (2000), explaining “We dedicated it to the people who say ‘I’m not a feminist, but. . .’ and to the people who say ‘I am a feminist, but. . .’ It was our observation that many people felt like they were “disqualified” from feminisms because they hadn’t worked out all of their shit” (qtd. in Baumgardner). Furthermore, Roxane Gay explored the notion of being a “good feminist” or “feminist enough” in *Bad Feminist* (2014). Despite the depth of her discussion, there seemed to be more to interrogate on the subject, especially within the space of *doing* rather than *being*. And doing is critical, as bell hooks describes in her 1984 critique of mainstream identity-based feminism: Linking an identity to a social movement or philosophy assumes that calling oneself “feminist” equals a form of collective action that benefits all women’s marginalization and strategies for disruption and dismantling gendered practices (qtd. in Falconer Al-Hindi and Kennedy 1). In short, it may be just as important to “do” feminism as it is to be a feminist, whether those actions are radical or small and subtle.

A second tension emerged that was unexpected: the material reality of what we asked of our contributors when exploring the notions of the small, subtle, and quiet. In short, preparing an article for publication is never a small act. It is big; it is labor-intensive; it is putting our thoughts and hearts and bodies into the world in ways that are anything but small and subtle. Vulnerability is never small, and neither is the act of writing, both ideas widely explored by scholars in rhetoric, composition, and critical theory. For example, Tiffany Page, building on the work of scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, J Halberstam, and Eve

Sedgwick, argues that vulnerable writing is a process that “challenges feminist methods to remain open and receptive to what will always resist sense-making, while continuing to respond to the demand that we do justice to the lives of others” (13). So we have, without fully intending to, tasked our contributors with the both/and. Go big and bold enough to write, go small and subtle enough to open conversations that have been overlooked, and go feminist enough to reconsider how our projects do something.

To hold space for the third tension, we found ourselves asking: Is it possible to contribute in small and subtle ways without falling into the complicity of privilege or sustaining the status quo? Feminism that uncritically lands in the realm of white feminism is old news—and pernicious, as such. And it revealed itself in how small and subtle acts can be tethered to notions of privilege. We found ourselves echoing Leigh Gruwell and Charles N. Lesh’s concern: “How can we ensure that our curation of this conversation doesn’t solely include experiences that reflect our own?” (8). Although we imagined small and subtle feminist action as a way to account for those rhetors who may not feel safe enough to act loud and bold or those whose actions go unnoticed or whose contributions are not remembered (e.g., those living in conservative communities with strict gender/sexuality roles), it seems that small and subtle can easily be coded as white and steeped in privilege, and often has been, historically “haunted” as such (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe). Those with marginalized identities may feel that they need to *do* in ways that are big, loud, and radical because the change that needs to happen is big and urgent. However, we had hoped (and this issue begins) to push in new directions, acknowledging, on the one hand, the complicity of privilege with small and subtle and, on the other, open a space to see that small/subtle is not just for those with privilege and that it can serve for those who most need big change—in fact, small and subtle may actually do necessary work where big and loud cannot or where big and loud has been falling short or failing to make those changes. To adrienne maree brown’s point about fractals and patterns, “what we practice on a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale” (54). Although this special issue, perhaps, hasn’t fully realized the potential of small/subtle, particularly for marginalized folks (i.e., in terms of race, queerness, transness), we see it as a place to open these conversations beyond its perceived complicity with privilege, and our contributors have begun to do this work, complicating a privileged notion of small/subtle feminism by considering race, labor, disability, class, and embodiment.

Given the tensions foregrounded in this introduction, it is fitting that we open this issue with **Kristie S. Fleckenstein** and **Nancy Myers’s** consideration of quiet activism in the coalitions and fissures across gender and race, as demonstrated by nineteenth-century labor activists Virginia Penny and Lucie Stanton Day. The authors define quiet activism as “modest acts in everyday contexts with modest intents.” Furthermore, they demonstrate how quiet activism serves to sustain feminist social movements by binding stakeholders in invisible and conditional ways, contributing to the survival of that movement in moments of division. **Lynée Lewis Gaillet**, **Jessica Rose**, and **Tiffany Gray** also use feminist recovery methods and public memory to explore the intentions, actions, and reflections of collectors, who are often ignored, and who gather material artifacts, ephemera, and oral histories to preserve and sustain feminist work and activism operate as integral research partners. The authors contend that acknowledging, supporting, and joining

these efforts, despite their subtlety, enriches and amplifies feminist work. **Katie Powell** draws on the concept of haunting that Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe lean into for how whiteness permeates but also shadows everything—there are always echoes and resonances that have broader repercussions, and remain more insidious because they often masquerade as a default or ever-present operating system, such as home ownership and the need to engage in storied community listening detailed by Powell’s experience of inheriting a home in the midwest. **Abigail Long** continues examining material feminisms and invites readers to consider how a repeated small, feminist act—a turn to the seams of our composing processes—can illuminate sites of friction in the writing process where writers can renegotiate access.

Building from personal experience, **Maureen Johnson** acknowledges the difficult and sometimes contradictory work of being an advocate for her own embodiment, particularly with the conflicting social narratives of being shamed for being fat and being praised for being a cancer survivor. Rather than subjugate ourselves for perceived shortcomings or considering ourselves poor feminists, she encourages the subtle shift of existing as both a “good” and “bad” advocate at the same time, recognizing that the degree of difference between the two is riddled with contextual nuances. In a different exploration of how bodies contribute to rhetorical action, the next two articles examine subtle forms of feminist action by examining how makeup tutorials function as powerful spaces for realizing feminist agency. Following the steps outlined in YouTube’s “Get Ready With Me” video series, **Laura Feibush** argues that makeup can be understood rhetorically as a form of subtle feminism, not just in the way that it appears to others once finished and on display, but in how it instantiates a particular relationship to the self in its application. **Rachel Molko** explores the nuanced ways that Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez engages beauty as self-care, subtly intertwining it with her role as an American civil servant in her Vogue “Beauty Secrets” tutorial. By examining how her understated rhetoric challenges the politics of beauty, this article demonstrates that beauty can serve as both wellness and a quiet form of political resistance.

At the end of the issue, **Charlotte Hogg** grapples in depth with how to navigate expectations of a “right way” to be a feminist when the jumbled and shifting realities of our personal and professional lives sometimes ask for us to adjust the dial based on the rhetorical situation. “The Purple Collar Project” introduces a feminist manifesto addressing class erasure in academia. **Jessica Rose Corey** and **Rhiannon Scharnhorst**, women professors from working-class backgrounds, explore the tensions between gratitude for educational opportunities and anger at persistent systemic barriers. The project advocates for “subtle feminism,” emphasizing small acts of resistance against institutional norms.

Even as we turn up the volume in our feminist rhetorical action, activisms, and movements, how do we also maintain and create spaces for the small, the quiet, the subtle? A former student of intersecting marginalized identities once explained that they created pockets of resistance in chats with janitors and whispered friendships at the back of classrooms. This special issue seeks to recognize, recover, and reconsider these pockets, these moments of small and subtle feminist rhetorical action that may not be loud but are every bit as crucial—and are “feminist enough”—for our collective survival and movement toward transfor-

mation. Even so, we still have work to do, both in terms of who we hear from and what we are talking about. So here is what we offer—and the shortcomings of this issue that we hope readers will take up and consider within a diversity of contexts:

- Small and subtle are crucial to feminist rhetorical work.
- Small and subtle accumulate and are enough for feminist rhetorical work.
- Small and subtle need to be better recognized as valuable and forward moving.
- Small and subtle remind us that these acts can occur in a variety of contexts across all sorts of identities and spaces.
- Small and subtle shape scholarly publishing, often maintaining a gatekeeping mechanism that affects who proposes and publishes, reifying marginalization and disempowerment within academic spaces.
- Small and subtle push both to implement anti-racist reviewing and editing practices and to skew knowledge production within the limits of its system.

We seem to have circled back to the question we started with: Is small, subtle, and quiet enough to *do something*? Is it tethered to privilege as well as representative of how *kairos* illuminates the need to disrupt the small/loud dichotomy? The contributions to this issue tell us yes, *but* small and subtle acts only work if we notice and build from them, focusing on generating actions that don't reify the same issues over and over again. So we hope that this issue is an initial noticing, an articulation of some small/subtle feminist rhetorical acts that are out there, which we can build on with more small/subtle work that lead to potentially radical and transformative changes. Like Corey and Scharnhorst articulate, this is not so much a calling out, but a calling to: a calling to all of the work, the moments, the conversations that so often go unnoticed but could do great things if they are seen as filling the same bucket. And maybe we are doing both in this special issue, also. We are calling to, but we are also calling out feminist acts that are not immediately seen as such. Naming has great power. If we convince folks that feminist rhetorical action can be small/subtle/quiet, might we find more folks to bring along with our coalition? Those who might not see themselves as big/radical feminists—instead of having them opt-out, what if we could have them opt-in, even in the smallest of ways? If we are trying to tip a scale or build momentum, every bit counts. Can we *do* feminism without necessarily identifying as feminist? Can we build enough to reach a tipping point to collectively call ourselves feminist enough?

Enough, perhaps, suggests arrival. But maybe it's really just a starting point. We want folks to feel like what we collectively do is feminist enough so that we keep doing it. We are feminist enough, we are contributing, and let's build from there. Feminist enough isn't an arrival, it is a point of departure. Let's affirm "feminist enough," not to assume our rhetorical, transformative work is done, but to feel empowered enough to push forward in increments, to keep *doing something*.

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