

Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

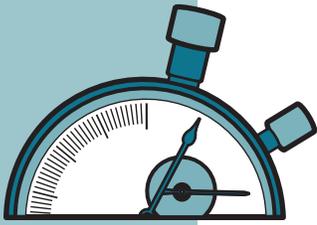
Methodological Dwellings: A Search for Feminisms in Rhetoric & Composition

Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Donnie Sackey, and Stacey Pigg
Michigan State University

Present Tense, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2011.

www.presenttensejournal.org | editors@presenttensejournal.org





Methodological Dwellings: A Search for Feminisms in Rhetoric & Composition

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The research presented in this essay began with a simple question: What does “feminism”¹ as a term evoke for contemporary scholars in rhetoric and composition? We came to this question as individuals who have experienced different relationships with feminism in our professional and personal lives. In reflecting on these experiences, we sensed that the relationships among feminism, scholarship, and other practices of the discipline, such as teaching methods and research methodologies, are oftentimes more tacit than explicit.² Thus, it occurred to us that people learning about our field may benefit from a better sense of where feminism lives in the hidden spaces of rhetoric and composition: in the practices and attitudes of those who constitute the field. We decided to conduct research that helps articulate some of these tacit associations between rhetoric and composition and feminism, by documenting the insights and experiences of both new and experienced scholars.

We developed a set of questions that would evoke accounts of feminism as it lives in scholars’ past and current lives in ways that do not necessarily pertain directly to published scholarship; that is, we selected questions that might be meaningful to all scholars and that might evoke different objects, associations, values, and relationships connected to feminism in the past, present, and future, including:

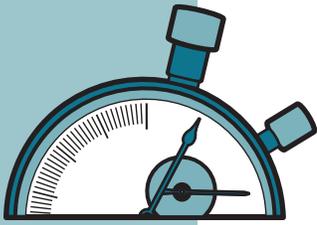
How did you come to feminism?

What does feminism mean to you?

What kind of feminist scholarship would you like to see more of?

To help us answer these questions, we contacted Professor Nan Johnson of Ohio State University, Associate Professor Dánielle DeVoss of Michigan State University,³ and PhD Candidate Staci Perryman-Clark of Michigan State University,⁴ three scholars in the field who are at different stages in their academic careers, have published on feminism or used feminist theories in their work, and who represent diverse areas of focus within rhetoric and composition, spanning from computers and writing, to writing program administration, to the history of rhetoric. Johnson, DeVoss, and Perryman-Clark graciously agreed to help us by sharing their experiences and allowing us to capture their “off the cuff” answers to these questions on video.⁵

While a number of interesting points for thought came from our discussions with Johnson, DeVoss, and Perryman-Clark, in this article we reflect briefly on how the concepts of inclusivity⁶ and decentralization of hierarchy intersect with the way people in rhetoric and composition understand and discuss feminism. Next, we discuss how these associations are complicated when feminism is associated with particular bodies and “agendas,” resulting in



situations where feminism is viewed as simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. Finally, we offer some ideas for using this tension as a generative starting point for building community by, first, recognizing the complexity and plurality of contemporary feminisms, and, second, by encouraging discussion and listening across them.

1. Inclusivity and Decentralization: Key Associations of Feminisms in Rhetoric and Composition

In our interviews, Johnson, DeVoss, and Perryman-Clark associated feminism with decentralization, inclusivity, and valuing individual perspectives and voices. However, as the following video illustrates, scholars who have had different experiences with feminism tend to link feminism with these values in very different ways.

[Video: How and Why Did You Become Interested In Feminism?](#)

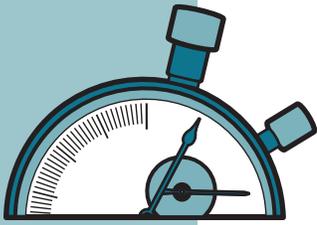
As Johnson points out, many feminists of her generation associate the term with equality, valuing the voices of all, and making sure that everyone has a space in the conversation. However, as Perryman-Clark suggests, when “feminism” is perceived as a disciplinary or academic stance that includes only the interests of women—and perhaps a narrowly defined understanding of what it means to be a woman—this inclusivity is undermined. In turn, feminism as a term in everyday use is associated for some with valuing all voices equally and for others with the fight for equality of a particular group that might exclude others.

This problem has been an ongoing concern during the course of feminist

thought. At many points in the history of feminism, scholars of color in particular have addressed the limitations of a feminism that includes only its own interests and experiences. In *Making Face, Making Soul*, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that women of color often have to mask their identities in favor of mainstream feminism; however, what they require is a space “to become subjects of [their] own discourses” rather than having identities imposed upon them (xvi). Similarly, Maivãn Clech Lãm says:

Indeed, from the position that I occupy alongside other women of color who have experienced racial or colonial discrimination and in consequence struggle to define and defeat it, certain white feminist agendas in the United States . . . come across as too cleanly and detachedly representational, with little connection to the ongoing lives of the women that I know best, or to the difficult consequences that these women face when they attempt change. (866)

Terese Guinsatao Monberg reviews some of the many difficulties that come with using a mainstream Anglo-American feminist approach to understanding the rhetorical work of women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. For example, she draws on the work of Hui Wu and Patti Duncan, who describe the problematic nature of binary oppositions on which Anglo-American feminism is oftentimes based: “masculine/feminine, mind/body,” developed/underdeveloped, empowered/oppressed, et al. (84-85). These sentiments have been echoed by a range of scholars of color.⁷



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[Video: What Does Feminism Mean to You?](#)

We see an inclusivity-exclusivity tension in this video, where the three scholars define feminism and its concerns in slightly different ways: DeVoss explicitly ties her understanding of feminism to the previous question as she describes feminism as an accumulative process wherein “those small potent gestures”—her early experiences in life that pertained to gender, access, and dominant narratives—build into scholarly curiosity over time. Perryman-Clark defines feminism as “anything that promotes equality of *women*” (emphasis added). Johnson, on the other hand, shows a concern with *anybody* “who might be marginalized,” broadly speaking.

2. Feminism Embodied: Complicating the Ideal of Inclusivity

To better understand how multiple attitudes toward feminism play out with regards to inclusivity and decentralization, we pause to reflect on some of the tropes of feminism, particularly as they intersect with embodiment.

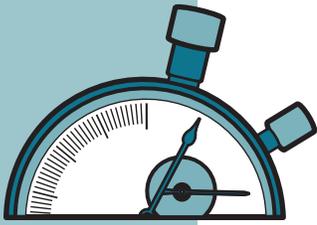
[Video: How is the Identity of Feminism Enacted as a Trope within the Field? \(Part 1\)](#)

“Tropes” of feminism, for Perryman-Clark, are generally negative and to be resisted presumably because of their exclusivity. This is interesting in dialogue with Johnson’s idea that feminism is built on ideals of inclusivity and of making sure that all voices are heard. DeVoss acknowledges that teachers “who have a feminist agenda” seem to likewise link feminism to

certain kinds of identities and values that are present in particular spaces of academia. This association, along with Perryman-Clark’s sense that feminism actually means inhabiting a particular kind of identity that may be sexed, classed, and even dressed in a particular way, is in many ways troubling for conceptions of inclusivity. The implicit identification of feminism with particular bodies—with particular kinds of people and identities—complicates some of the overarching goals of inclusivity that are at the heart of what feminism wants to accomplish. If rhetoric and composition prides itself on an inclusive attitude that welcomes all to the conversation, Perryman-Clark suggests that all do not find their bodies and ways of being in the world aligned with it.

[Video: How is the Identity of Feminism Enacted as a Trope within the Field? \(Part 2\)](#)

This conflict between the typification of feminism in particular kinds of bodies and “agendas” and the overarching goal of bringing diverse voices to the table is further complicated by the sense that feminism is an inherent part of rhetoric and composition (Flynn, Ritchie, and Boardman).⁸ Johnson speaks of rhetoric and composition as an inherently feminist field, and one that was strategically steered in this direction during the 1980s by women who wanted to make sure that this discipline was unlike any other through such ideals as having a welcoming and non-hierarchical attitude. This attitude does not “transmit” knowledge, but rather invites people to the table and draws on their unique expertise and knowledge in learning and scholarly practice. The complex nature



of feminism as simultaneously an analytical tool, social/bodily identity, and disciplinary identity, however, often obscures this liberatory history of feminism in rhetoric and composition, particularly for those who did not experience this important work firsthand. This historical association between feminism and rhetoric and composition may be lost if we do not take the time to articulate it explicitly, while finding ways to ensure that this inclusivity is real and open to all.

3. Ideas for the Future: Listening for a More Complex Feminist Community

Inclusivity and decentralization of hierarchy appear as common feminist values within rhetoric and composition. However, the complications of feminism as a disciplinary, social, and embodied stance mean that explicit acts of community building are necessary to acknowledge the complexities of contemporary feminism and encourage dialogue across points of view.

[Video: How Can We Realize/Build a Better Sense of Feminist Community?](#)

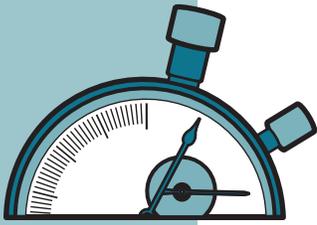
[Video: How Can We Realize Community and Value Resistance?](#)

As before, these videos show that both Johnson and Perryman-Clark value inclusivity and the decentralization of hierarchies, but have differing interpretations of feminism and its current state, and therefore different understandings of how we should best reach feminist goals. Both suggest better communication between different sub-communities of feminism—more movement and discussion across feminisms. The question remains, however: how

should we go about encouraging that dialogue? Several things must happen to facilitate communication across different experiences of feminism in rhetoric and composition: first, we need a stronger effort to listen in order to realize community and value resistance.⁹ We also need spaces where dialogue can happen. Conferences like *Feminisms & Rhetorics* are a start, and the *Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric* provides important opportunities for mentoring, knowledge building, and conversation. Within the blogs, roundtable discussions, and journals that already exist, we can work to ensure that a range of voices are included in the same conversations—on the same panels, in the same blogs, around the same tables. On these panels and in these blogs, we can try to help people listen to one another, creating dialogues with directed questions and responses rather than simply focusing on presenting or communicating one's own ideas. We can, as Johnson suggests, pay attention not only to who is there but to who is not. Contemporary feminism may gain better traction to achieve goals of inclusivity and decentralization of hierarchies through these kinds of efforts, and with that in mind, we suggest community building through two steps: 1) articulating the complexities of feminism in rhetoric and composition, and 2) encouraging explicit communication and listening across multiple feminisms.

4. Recognizing the Complexities of Feminism as Analytic, Identity, and Disciplinary Value

In conducting these interviews, it became apparent that feminism not only has a number of different associations, but indeed a number



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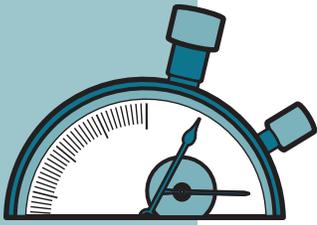
of feminisms are alive within rhetoric and composition. For instance, newer scholars who have come to feminism after its establishment as an academic approach may not have the same sensibility that comes from Johnson's experience with feminism as a liberatory tool for community-level sociopolitical activism. This situation raises the question of whether or not the ideal of a fully welcoming and non-hierarchical attitude is realistically attainable in academia, with the full gamut of junior scholars and established scholars, graduate students, assistant professors, and full professors, who all have different kinds of knowledge and scholarship garnering different kinds of respect. We might also understand that these distinctions sit between a perspective that understands feminism as a sociopolitical identity, and one that understands feminism as a disciplinary identity. Given this, feminism has multiple aims: the aim of legitimation as an established scholarly field with complex theories about gender and power and limited access, and the aim of inclusivity, in which all voices are valuable and through which some feminists give the "you're a feminist, too" argument to people who might not necessarily identify themselves as such.

Furthermore, women of color, as well as others who do not identify with the aforementioned tropes of mainstream feminism, risk feeling alienated when feminism is seen as associated most closely with the "agendas" of white women.¹⁰ We see this with Perryman-Clark, who feels a sense of exclusion from feminism despite Johnson's description of inclusivity as a central tenet of feminism.¹¹ In this way, feminism is associated with exclusivity in its narrow focus on

women, especially when "women" is defined by traditional gender roles and outside of cultural factors like race, class, and sexuality. Inclusivity and multiple feminisms are indeed central to general attitudes in the field toward feminism; however, we need more work to articulate a range of roles for feminism: as an analytical tool, as a disciplinary value, and as an identity. Within feminism as an identity, we can acknowledge multiple embodiments of feminism, particularly those with which women and men of different racial, ethnic, sexual, and class backgrounds can identify.

5. Encouraging Explicit Communication Across Feminisms in Rhetoric and Composition

Finally, we need more sharing of language between feminisms. The terms we use to refer to ourselves are important. Given this, we should be able to interrogate and historicize why these terms are important, retell the histories that have shaped our field, and acknowledge when new developments necessitate that we rethink what we thought we knew. While we recognize the problems of narrow definitions, it is also important for people who want to achieve the same goals to be on the same page. Therefore, it may be valuable for us to reassess what we want feminism to mean within the field, thinking more explicitly of its multiple nature. To do this, we will have to grapple with questions that have been raised in these interviews: What is the relationship of feminism to other facets of identity like race and class, especially as they are formed disciplinarily? What is the relationship between feminism and particular kinds of bodies? We also



might be well served to contextualize feminist contributions within the many kinds of contributions that have made the field more inclusive. Feminists have indeed taken great strides in their work of creating a more inclusive society, and surely we have much to gain as well as learn from the work they have done. But should feminism function as the groundwork for all who want to achieve inclusivity and decentralization of hierarchy? Is this even implied when we call a person a “feminist”?

As an initial step toward realizing community and valuing resistance, we should make use of disciplinary memory as it relates to feminist practice. Memoria is a huge component of doing feminist research in rhetoric and composition because ideals and practices of the past are often used as heuristics for present scholarship.¹² To use disciplinary memory to create more inclusivity means initiating moments of methodological dwelling wherein we force ourselves to consider how feminism has been used, whether it has been useful in those moments, who’s making use of it, and whether feminism serves as an appropriate descriptor for our research. We believe that this is a healthy space for future feminist scholarship in the field.

This article originated as a panel proposal and presentation at Feminisms and Rhetorics 2009. Listed reverse-alphabetically, the authors assert that all contributed equally to creating this collaborative document—each is first author; we believe all three made equal contributions.

Endnotes

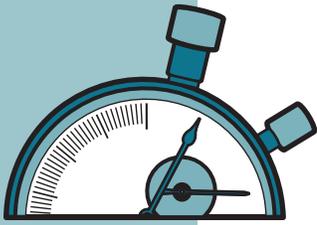
1. To offer a caveat: we use the singular “feminism” not because we believe there is or should be one kind of feminism, but strategically, to indicate a form of academic, scholarly inquiry that we believe is already plural. We use the plural “feminisms” in places where we want to explicitly emphasize the multiple concerns, approaches, and values that exist in the field.

2. In a similar manner, Ritchie and Boardman assert that “much early feminist work in composition is not documented in our official publications, having occurred in informal conversations, in classrooms, and in committee meetings;” however, “near-absence of feminism from our publications does not constitute absence from the field” (586, 587).

3. DeVoss is now full Professor at Michigan State University.

4. Perryman-Clark is now Assistant Professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing at Western Michigan University.

5. This research was declared exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University and conducted during September and October 2009. All three scholars generously agreed to have their insights shared publicly to promote dialogue on these issues. We thank them for sharing their time, as well as for agreeing to talk frankly about their experiences.



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6. To clarify, by “inclusivity” we do not mean inclusion of subjects into existing systems at work—for example, of feminisms into a feminism—but rather inclusion broadly of a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and subjectivities into the make-up of the system in ways that might influence broader social values. We thus understand inclusivity to include such concerns as recovery in feminist historiography as well as access in computers and writing.

7. See, for example, Collins (1990); hooks (2000); Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981); Wu (2002).

8. This issue has been raised previously in another context by Ritchie and Boardman in “Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption,” wherein the authors describe the trope of “metonymy or contiguity of feminism and composition” via such overlapping concerns as “coming to voice and consciousness, illuminating experience and its relationship to individual identity, playing the believing game rather than the doubting game, collaborating rather than competing, [and] subverting hierarchy in the classroom” (587, 593). Ritchie and Boardman explain that this overlap “may have delayed the emergence of feminist theory and continued its marginalization in the field” (593). In the current context, we add that this predicament further complicates the issue of feminism among people of diverse racial, ethnic, sexual, national, or other backgrounds.

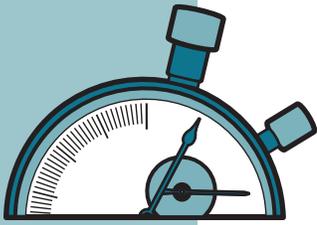
9. Drawing primarily on the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Malea Powell, and Gwendolyn Pough, Monberg describes a methodology of listening that goes beyond what is textually

visible and documented to oral history, arguing that a feminist methodology of listening beyond the text will allow us to uncover women’s rhetorical roles behind the scenes—for example, in shaping and enabling certain discourses to exist (87).

10. See, for example, Collins (1990), hooks (2000), Lâm (1994), Moraga (1981), and Anzaldúa (1990).

11. If we look to Moraga, we might gain a better understanding of why simply having a welcoming and non-hierarchical attitude is not enough: “Time and time again, I have observed that the usual response among white women’s groups when the ‘racism issue’ comes up is to deny the difference. I have heard comments like, ‘Well, we’re open to all women; why don’t they (women of color) come? You can only do so much...’ But there is seldom any analysis of how the very nature and structure of the group itself may be founded on racist or classist assumptions. More importantly, so often the women seem to feel no loss, no lack, no absence when women of color are not involved; therefore, there is little desire to change the situation” (33).

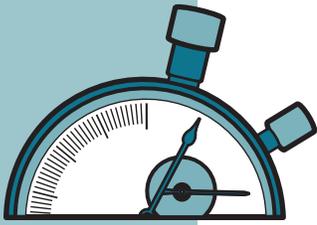
12. Rhetoric and composition scholars have traditionally associated the rhetorical canon of *memoria* with the act of memorization for rhetorical delivery. This definition has limited scholarly engagement of memory with regards to rhetorics of writing. Scholars like Victor Villanueva have revised this legacy by presenting memory as a methodological tool for the purpose of community engagement. Haivan Hoang’s work on rhetorical memory provides further clues as to how we can best build a methodology



for remembering. For Hoang, a tension exists where memory often oscillates between poles of stability and instability. We are conditioned to understand memories as stable artifacts that are recalled from our minds as mere recollection of events. This positionality reifies memory to the point where we are led to believe that the act of remembering is an objective activity that maps onto how an event may have been experienced by others. With Hoang, to remember often means both to analyze and recompose an artifact so that it has performative capabilities that can be liberating and empowering. The act of recomposition is a move to destabilize a memory (or dominant narrative) and allow for other memories to circulate and help define the boundaries of any given cultural experience. These memories often reside in what Lisa Lowe defines as the sedimented spaces (or fissures) within a cultural geography (125). We suggest that we follow Monberg's lead and dwell in these spaces and listen for these memories in order to foster a feminist rhetoric that is more attentive to inclusivity, enables complexities, values difference, and seeks engagement (86).

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Jennifer Sano-Franchini is a third-year PhD student in Rhetoric & Writing; Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, & American Cultures; and Graduate Fellow with the Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative at Michigan State University. She is interested in theories of time and the intersection of cultural and digital rhetorics. Donnie Sackey is a second-year doctoral student in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at Michigan State University. His scholarship focuses on rhetorical theory and environmental rhetoric. In the past, he has studied rhetorics of sustainability in institutional and community settings. Stacey Pigg is a PhD Candidate in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University, where she has taught writing, worked in the WIDE Research Center, and consulted in the MSU Writing Center. Interested in rhetoric and writing as embodied practice, Stacey's current research examines habits and routines of coffeehouse writers.

