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In Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch offer a comprehensive review and analysis of thirty years' worth of research and practice in feminist rhetorics. The authors view feminist rhetoric as a range of practices best understood within a matrix of four methodological strategies: the critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization. Taken together, these four strategies construct a new framework for analysis of feminist rhetorical practices, one which enables them to rework—and subvert—traditional rhetorical approaches. The authors offer a lens for examining the rich multiplicity of rhetorical practices today: traditional, non-traditional, and emergent—a revision based in the “ethics of care and hope,” in which the inclusivity and recovery of lost or unrecognized voices are central priorities to “responsible rhetorical action” (136).

From the outset, and with the clear intention of asserting an ethical standpoint, Royster and Kirsch quickly abandon the notion that the term “feminist rhetorical practices” applies to rhetoric articulated only by women. Instead, the authors offer an interdisciplinary lens for viewing various rhetorical practices, both inclusive of traditional approaches as well as non-traditional approaches, and with the acknowledgment that there are other approaches, representative of written and non-written rhetoric, still to be included. To this end, Royster and Kirsch divide Feminist Rhetorical Practices into four parts, beginning with part 1, “A Call for Action in Research, Teaching, and Learning”; then part 2, “Re-visioning History, Theory, and Practice”; followed by parts 3 and 4, “Recasting Paradigms for Inquiry, Analysis, and Interpretation” and the “Conclusion,” respectively.

The authors contextualize their analysis in part 1 by opening with reflective accounts of their own encounters with traditional rhetoric. In their narratives, Royster and Kirsch anchor their relationships to traditional rhetorical approaches by identifying themselves in terms of race, gender, and nationality. They document their experiences by noting significant rhetorical texts that shaped them as scholars and rhetors, including related works such as Carol Tavris’s Mismeasure of Women, a historical account of the ways predominant academic disciplines undermined women, or as Kirsch notes, “set out to prove women’s inferiority” (5). Her point thus emphasizes the urgency of Feminist Rhetorical Practices: traditional rhetorical models consciously and unconsciously prioritized the voices and research of privileged
white men. Royster’s personal narrative underscores the necessity of analyzing and broadening traditional rhetorical approaches. She recounts her frustration with researching less traditional subjects—in her case, African American women—and explains that she found herself asking: “Why is it that I have to learn about remarkable African American women whom I’m coming to know and admire inside a circle of women friends and colleagues (mostly African American), rather than inside traditional classrooms and other anointed academic structures?” (8). Together, the authors’ disappointment with traditional rhetorical practices have led them to assemble this comprehensive review of texts dedicated to prioritizing women’s voices and rhetorics, as well as the multiplicity of ways modern scholars can approach them. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the authors demonstrate models for understanding and practicing feminist rhetorics by incorporating the four categorical strategies that organize the text into their own narratives.

The rest of part 1 and the following chapters in part 2 identify work that points to “tectonic shifts” in the field of Rhetoric. The authors argue that feminist practices have already begun to transform the rhetorical “landscape” and “have also been instrumental in expanding the scope and range of factors that we now perceive as significant in determining the highest quality of excellence in both performance and professional practice” (13). These chapters, like nearly all of the chapters, offer what are in essence selective bibliographies that support the authors’ claims, as they seek to demonstrate that feminist rhetorical practices have not only changed the scholarly landscape in the last thirty years, they have necessitated a new framework for perceiving and understanding rhetorical practices in general.

Particularly in parts 3 and 4, Royster and Kirsch apply the four categorical approaches they outline at the beginning of the text to their survey of rhetorical work. Critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization provide lines of inquiry that overlap and interweave to create a matrix for understanding the multiplicity of rhetorical practices that exist and anticipate the potential for those still to come. Critical imagination, as a method of inquiry, they argue, may expose gaps in understanding created by traditional rhetorical practice, even as this understanding relies on traditional rhetorics to create a foundation for analysis. On the other hand, strategic contemplation searches directly for marginalized rhetorics and prioritizes reflective process in research and “allows scholars to observe and notice, to listen to and hear voices often neglected or silenced, and to notice more overtly their own responses to what they are seeing, reading, reflecting on, and encountering during their research processes” (86). Social circulation seeks to reframe feminist discourse work in a way that broadens rhetoric as an all-inclusive, human endeavor. Within this third category, the authors begin to demonstrate the “recent” shift away from traditional rhetorical approaches, and they suggest that social circulation might be best understood “with a disruption of the dichotomies associated with rhetoric being defined within what has been considered historically to be the public

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domains of men” (98). Globalization provides a fourth strategy, one which underscores the continual need for practitioners and students of rhetoric to stay vigilant to the world beyond what they know, to be cognizant of the voices from around the world, and to recognize the multiplicity of rhetorics as relevant to their own specific work.

Within the matrix of these four strategies, Royster and Kirsch argue that feminist rhetorical practices have become central to studies in Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy (RCL). They view a convergence among the fields of rhetorical studies, feminist studies, and global studies within RCL, “showing evidence of a growing commitment to shift rhetorical studies away from traditional, imperialist perspectives of rhetorical performance and knowledge to a more democratic and more inclusive one that recognizes transnational constructions of rhetorical enterprises, not just Western ones” (111). Furthermore, the conclusion in part 4 outlines a new vision of RCL, one that acknowledges and builds upon this convergence. The authors refashion the traditional framework for researching and understanding rhetorical work and present a well-articulated argument for the diversity of interrogation strategies founded within an ethics of care and hope, which recognizes the importance and relevance of rhetorics different from one’s own.

Royster and Kirsch’s Feminist Rhetorical Practices is a comprehensive text, spanning thirty years’ worth of work in feminist rhetorical studies and solidifying the place of that work as a central component in RCL today. The world has changed, they argue; compositionists cannot ignore the global nature of their work. Feminist rhetorical practices offer a re-visioning of that work to accommodate the diversity and complexity that characterize RCL. The authors’ own expansive knowledge and research in traditional and non-traditional rhetorics ground this study, and because they offer scores of resources, the text is very appropriate for students and scholars of RCL who are actively researching feminist rhetoric and new rhetorical approaches. One especially useful component of the study is the sections that make deliberate “pedagogical connections.” Since most compositionists are teachers, more of these sections would have provided a bonus in an already important book. But for instructors who are teaching a diverse student body, and that is most composition instructors these days, Feminist Rhetorical Practices offers a new vision for the field of Rhetoric, one that is inclusive of diverse voices, and one that opens the possibility for further inquiry and exploration with a clear shift away from the exclusivity of traditional rhetorical approaches.

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