Introduction: A Feminist Rhetorical Approach to Visual Culture

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As co-editors and self-proclaimed bestie-scholars, we (Hannah, Rachel, and Lexi) initially bonded over a shared research interest in feminist visual culture at a feminist rhetorics RSA summer institute workshop. As then-Ph.D. students, we shared our passions for visual advocacy and media (Hannah), popular culture and embodied femininity (Rachel), and makeup as a rhetorical device (Lexi) while supporting one another through comprehensive exams, the job market, and transitioning to faculty roles–among personal trials and triumphs as well. As feminist rhetoricians, analyzing feminist visual culture through a rhetorical lens seems both obvious and exigent to us; however, rhetorical studies' focus on the visual has, at times, leaned toward more "traditional" rhetorics (graphic design, advertisements, and periodicals) and–following rhetoric's long history of doing so–has not paid quite as much attention to the visual culture of women and feminists.

The exigencies for studying feminist visual culture abound. The draw of visual culture continues to expand as social media platforms and new media forms volley for our attention alongside more traditional artistic avenues. Feminized spaces that focus on the visual–including beauty, home decor, wellness, and much more–warrant further rhetorical study if we are to better understand how feminist rhetorics function within the realms of visual culture. This cluster conversation invents, addresses, and expands feminist rhetorical approaches to visual culture, asking: How can we apply existing feminist methodological approaches to the rhetorics of visual culture? How can we design new mindful and ethical approaches to visual culture that account for the nuance of digital mediums? What forms of visual culture would benefit from a feminist rhetorical approach, and why?

In communication studies, media studies, and art criticism, visual culture has been a scholarly preoccupation within and beyond feminism for decades (Evans & Hall, 1999; Howells, 2012; Jenks, 1995), including the interdisciplinary international *Journal of Visual Culture.* Visual cultural studies is, as Lisa Nakamura argues in *Digitizing Race* (2008), "an interdisciplinary type of theoretical and critical practice with practitioners from all sorts of backgrounds who share a focus on the production of identity in visual forms" (p. 5). Visual culture scholars have developed feminist frameworks for thinking about and discussing popular visual culture that reveal persistent ideologies about sex and gender roles, with particular attention to how they manifest in visually mediated spaces. In "Conceiving the Intersection of Feminism and Visual Culture," Amelia Jones (2003) writes that visuality conditions how we see and make meaning of what we see; consequently, it is one of the key modes in which gender is culturally inscribed. Jones situates visual culture as a

site for critical thinking about the world of images saturating contemporary life. Further, pioneering visual culture scholar W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) broadens the scope of visual culture from a field constituted by images to one concerned with the visual construction of the social, the everyday practices of seeing and showing. In this sense, we are interested in rhetorical provocations on visual and verbal signs and meaning making; the disembodied image; the embodied artifact; the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked; and the material and tactile.

Feminine and feminist rhetorics have been, as we know, understudied and often exist in the unseen and overlooked. The feminist historiographic work of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition has greatly expanded the field's approaches and understandings of myriad forms of rhetoric. One way we can continue this work is by studying feminist visual culture, as feminist rhetoricians have done and continue to do. For example, Carol Mattingly's (2002) *Appropriate[ing] Dress* argues for the significance of women's attire; David Gold's (2015) "Whose Hair Is It, Anyway?," explains how the bobbed hairstyle of the 1920s was a form of resistance through women's outward appearance; Brittany Hull, Cecilia D. Shelton, and Temptaous Mckoy's (2019) "Dressed but Not Tryin' to Impress" explains how race and gender impact the ways we present ourselves in (white, masculine) spaces, and how our outward appearances affect and are influenced by our embodied, rhetorical selves. Despite these important forays into visual culture and work in visual rhetoric, there has yet to be sustained attention to the shifting landscape of more and different types of visual culture in feminist rhetorics, and a lack of acknowledgment of how feminist rhetoricians can use our approach to language, culture, and identity to respond to these shifts. Visual culture within and beyond digital spaces are constantly changing with new technologies, approaches to identity and gendered norms, and aesthetic modes of influence. This is the gap this cluster conversation seeks to address.

Visual culture in mainstream media is a prolific space for such rhetorical provocations because popular culture constitutes a space for theorists to problematize the ways experience and identity are represented in dominant ideologies. If the messages inherent in mass media remain unarticulated, confronting and disrupting patriarchal structures will be limited by abstractions in theory. For example, communications studies scholar Sara Benet-Weiser (2018) argues in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* that feminism without critical examination will continue to uphold patriarchal norms. In such cases, visual messages composed through aesthetics can and will continue to rule sex and gender norms. All the while, new generations of artists and creators are circulating empowering messages through popular culture. For instance, technical communication scholars have pioneered work in analyzing the ways YouTube makeup and hair tutorials do more than share tips and tricks for beauty, but also create community through various forms of technical communication (Ledbetter, 2018; Yusuf & Schioppa, 2022). Importantly, texts are not always purposefully feminist, or perfectly feminist. Even still, the multitudinous nature of personhood is continuing to be established through mainstream media. With this in mind, our special issue seeks to ask audiences to move away from passive spectatorship and toward an active engagement with media to explore previously marginalized representations of identity.

The short pieces in this cluster conversation advance this work. Several contributions argue for new methodologies in feminist rhetorics. Forwarding en*vision*ing both as a methodological and pedagogical ap-

proach for feminist praxis, Kimberlyn R. Harrison exhibits her course arc that integrates the visual "into how students invent, process, and revise their thinking" (p. 102). In her historiographic treatment of photographs from the late nineteenth century, Kristie Fleckenstein makes the call to chronicle the rhetorical significance of feminist visual undergrounds (FVUs) as socio-material sites of affinity and resistance. Other contributors discuss the relationship between identity and visuality. In "Why We Blush: Metaphors Bound up in Cosmetic Packaging," Jess Borsi and Taryn Seidler unpack the visual and linguistic markers of blush, in turn identifying five common metaphors used to appeal to heteropatriarchal ideals of femininity. In "*Queerlesque*: Anticolonial and Anti-Heteropatriachal Love and Abjection in (Rural) Queer Performance," Cheyenne Brown and Bibhushana Poudyal analyze queer performances in rural America to develop the theory of *queerlesque*, which "functions as a feminist visual rhetoric that dismantles the visual codes of heteropatriarchal-colonial-capitalist systems" (p. 137). Operating in celebratory excess and intentional aesthetics, Brown and Poudyal argue that queerlesque performances are a feminist and queer visual resistance to oppressive forces.

Building on ideas of hyperfeminine visuality as a rebuke of problematic beauty standards, Rency Luan and Anna McWebb establish bimbo feminism as a contemporary feminist movement manifesting on TikTok, which celebrates femininity while critiquing the male gaze. Further considering outward appearance and embodiment, Tina Le and Jackie Chicalese parse out the visual, rhetorical nuances of tattoos in relation to gender, class, and audience in their essay, "Patchwork Selves: Tattoos as Permanently Becoming." Expanding on previous arguments that drag and hyperfeminity are essential to feminist visual culture, Sharon J. Kirsch argues that Chappell Roan's aesthetics and performances craft a queer and feminist praxis of world-making in her article, "It's a Femininomenon: Chappell Roan, Queer Visual Culture, and Participatory Feminist Rhetorics." Threads of embodiment and pedagogy continue in Katie Manthey and Rachel Robinson-Zetzer's "Fattie in the Front of the Room: Fat Professors as Embodied Visual Feminist Praxis," in which they discuss fat pedagogy and fat rhetorical embodiment to argue that the bodies of fat professors act a site for the practice of feminist visual rhetorics. These many and varied contributions about embodiment, the visual, and outward appearance further assert the importance of a close attention to the visual when we think about rhetorical constructions of identity.

Finally, a group of contributors consider how visual logics shape public discourse of media, art, and activism. Freddie Harris-Ramsby takes up performance to rhetorically analyze the implications of women-as-animal metaphors represented in popular discourse in her piece, "Claws, Paws, and Menopause: Feline Metaphors and the Performance of Aging." Jill Swiencicki's "Contemporary Mural Art, Personhood, and Utopic Visions of Reproductive Justice" explores three reproductive justice murals' common conceptual threads, illuminating the rhetorical power of art as symbolic action. Also contemplating art and reproductive justice, "Reproductive Chronic Illness Social Media as a Guide for Care" offers an analysis of reproductive disability advocacy on Tiktok, in which Jessie Reynolds-Clay argues that content creator @mikzazon helps to "translate invisible pain…into a visible one" by transgressing traditional notions of feminine visuality on a public platform (p. 230). In "Materiality and Memory: Firelei Báez and a Path Toward Feminist Rhetorics," Angela Muir discusses how art acts as a rhetorical force through Firelei Báez's work, specifically as "a practice of memory, a material argument, and a site of individual and collective self-creation" (p. 241). Rachel E. Molko argues

that Barbara Kruger's art enacts a feminist visual rhetoric of subversion, using the language of mass media to expose and disrupt systems of power in "Seeing Red: Subversion, Appropriation, and the Feminist Gaze in Barbara Kruger's Collage Art." Considering media as an art form, Nancy Henaku's "'The Modern Girl Wants to Have It All?' Shifting Megarhetorics of Empowerment in *An African City*" analyzes the Ghanaian television show, *An African City,* to introduce intravisuality–or the dynamic constitution of various visual codes– as a critical framework for examining transnational Black cinema. To conclude this cluster conversation, Martha Karnes develops a framework for visual care ethics that "emphasizes attention to detail, lived experience" through an analysis of feminist publication, *Hard Labor*, in "The New Woman and Visual Resistance: A Feminist Visual Rhetorical Analysis of *Hard Labor*" (p. 266). Taken together, these contributions argue for sustained attention to the visual and visual culture within discussions of feminist rhetorics.

As three feminist rhetoricians who study embodiment, appearance, and pop culture, we find ourselves regularly arguing *against* the triviality of these themes and *for* their significance as visual rhetoric more often than we like. Too often, we face resistance to the importance of visual culture; all three of us have experienced belittling attitudes from faculty toward our research in social and popular media that focuses on stereotypically feminine topics, such as makeup, Instagram, and embodiment. If we, as feminist rhetoricians, claim feminine visual culture as significant to the field, perhaps we can avoid further erasure of feminine rhetorics that the patriarchy deems trite and vain. This new ground offers an opportunity from which to develop research and methodologies that focus explicitly on implications of identity—including race, gender, sexuality, culture, class, generation—and their intersections in visual culture.

Biographies

Rachel E. Molko (she/her) is a Lecturer in Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication Program. Her research explores feminist rhetorical theory and feminine visuality in contemporary popular culture. Her work appears in *Peitho* and she is an enthusiastic member of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric. Outside of work, she enjoys watching *Jeopardy*! with her husband, practicing hot vinyasa, and spending time with her cat.

Alexis Sabryn Walston (she/her) is the Assistant Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Inquiry at Rice University, where she oversees a variety of programs that support undergraduate research and faculty development in inquiry-based pedagogies. Her research circulates around rhetorics of appearance and archival studies; she has publications featured in *Feminist Pedagogy, Computers and Composition*, and *Composition Studies*. In her free time, she enjoys baking and over-analyzing reality TV.

Hannah Taylor (she/her) is a Senior Lecturer in the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University. Her research focuses on reproductive justice, feminist methodologies, and digital rhetoric, particularly at the intersections of health, disability studies, and gender. Her scholarship has appeared in *Women's Studies in Communication, Technical Communication Quarterly, Peitho*, and *College English*. She also serves as Web Coordinator for Peitho and is an active member of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric. Beyond academia, she engages with reproductive justice activism in Durham through local advocacy organi-

zations and community partnerships.

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