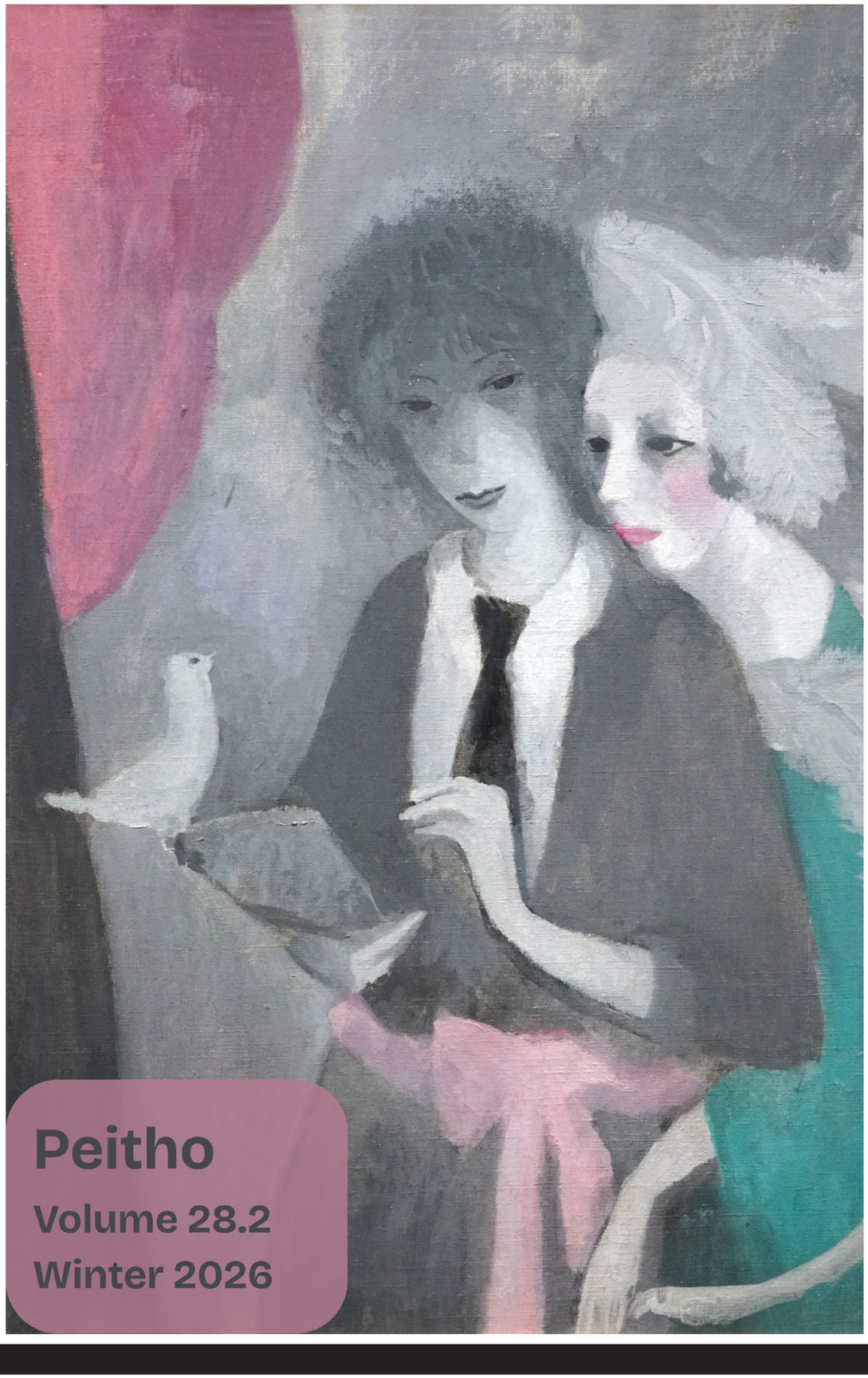

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Cover Art: "Femmes à la Colombe" by Marie Laurencin (Musée du Luxembourg, Paris). Pastel painting depicts two androgynous figures wearing formal attire, standing closely. One holds a book with a small bird perched on it. The scene is set against a muted gray and pink background, creating a serene and intimate atmosphere.

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Celebrating and Promoting *Peitho*-Level Generosity in Academe and Beyond

Cathryn Molloy, Bryna Siegel Finer, and Jamie White-Farnham

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As we prepare our second issue as *Peitho* editors on the brink of 2026, we join the rest of the world in being a bit worn down and out by all of the bad news inundating us on the daily. As we are writing in November, in fact, SNAP benefits are in peril, and families who rely on them are scrambling to find ways to continue to feed their families, while Jamaican citizens are experiencing unprecedented suffering and are absolutely reeling from the widespread destruction in Hurricane Melissa's wake—add these two tragic happenings to the long list of ongoing terribleness around the globe and the bafflingly poor and highly consequential decisions coming out of Washington here in the U.S., and it's quite hard to feel hopeful or kind or generous.

And yet, hope is something that we *are* feeling here at *Peitho*, even if in fits and starts, thanks to the extraordinary generosity in the *Peitho* community, particularly in our reviewers who are consistently delivering the most generous and mentoring-minded feedback to each and every manuscript we send their way. It's as if they are imagining themselves sitting across from a real, living, breathing, fleshy human with vulnerabilities and insecurities and hopes and pride in their work.They clearly, in earnest, want to help writers succeed and to write the best versions of their ideas that they possibly can. And because we've seen it in so few other places as of late, we've started to refer to this kind of feedback as "*Peitho*-level generosity."

We shouldn't find this generosity surprising, yet we do. Reviewing is not an easy undertaking. For one, it's entirely uncompensated and largely unrecognized labor. It is also a task that many of us try to squeeze in amidst several other day-to-day tasks, particularly during the academic terms. Catch us on a bad day with a lot of other things competing for our attention? That article that needs a *lot* of work is not always going to bring out our best selves. We three have had others check and quell our feedback harshness prior to sending it on to authors for this very reason. The fact that we've seen so many constructive, generative reviews that are incisive and insightful without being unkind seems truly extraordinary.

As we three have discussed the uncannily generous feedback we've seen reviewers giving to our authors and author-hopefuls, we've had to stop and reflect on why, exactly, it feels uncommon for reviewers to be kind in these anonymous reviews, and, naturally, that led us to talking about encounters that are quite the opposite of this impulse toward compassion and thoughtfulness that is too often at play in academic exchanges, perhaps especially in the worlds of peer review—the proverbial academic "tear down," the feedback that says, essentially, "I am far smarter than you are; you've gotten everything all wrong; you're not a very good writer or thinker, and if it were me writing it, I'd be doing these one million better things with your topic."

Those kinds of reviews, we imagine, are written by faculty who fit the trope of the self-important and desperately out-of-touch academic. Perhaps you know the kind—insufferably self-important, cannot be bothered with those they deem unworthy by virtue of an inferior rank or contract type, or, gasp, lack of a specific type of education; does not cooperate with anyone if it means giving even an inch; fetishizes their own

overwhelm and busy schedule and truly thinks that being a tenured professor is so arduous; doesn't know the names of the custodial staff they've worked with for years; definitely hates students. You get the sense that the review is saying, "You've wasted my time with this drivel."

Peitho reviews, in contrast, reflect an important standard for kindness that, yet, does not lack commitment to scholarly rigor. They show a willingness to self-efface, to respect writers' vulnerabilities with grace, and to nurture and support better scholarship through constructive and generative feedback that attempts to help the author craft the arguments they wish to make. Our own experiences and the experiences of those around us of late attest to the fact that these more generous ways of relating to other academics are too often in short supply. We recognize, as our opening alludes, that we are all living in trying times, yet we are delighted to see that our reviewers are not using the terrible state of the world as an excuse to behave poorly. We hope to see this brand of kindness spread and proliferate. May we all remember, at base, that we all share this fundamental truth that each of us will one day die, and then will be dead forever. It's a profound equalizer, and while we know that the inevitability of death and the shockingly bad state of things can engender self-importance as a way to cope with being the largely ineffectual specks of dust we all are, we are better when we remember that we are in the same waters, little boats that will all rise with the tide. May we all remember our humanity, may we strive for feminist humility, may we be able to sit with the fact that we are not as important as we like to think we are, and yet we are so important to each other. What we say and how we treat each other truly does matter. We hope that espousing this kind of generosity in our day-to-day work in academe and beyond can ripple and move all of our little boats in the right direction.

In This Issue

We're encouraged that the generosity of reviewers and of our own editing team has yielded the inspiring work we are very proud to share with you in this issue.

In the lead article, readers will find Chandler Mordecai's "Storiographies of #HealingJourney: Online Feminist Rhetorical Practices of Healing through Content Creation and Care," which analyzes the #HealingJourney trend on TikTok. She presents a framework for understanding feminist rhetorical healing on TikTok and the strategies that allow creators to accomplish healing work online. We especially appreciate how Mordecai frames embodied healing practices that happen online and how the content creators develop supportive communities through rhetorical approaches.

Next, readers will find Kristen Hoggatt-Abader's "Swallowing Voices: Mêtis and Its Enactment," in which the author introduces the concept of "swallowing voices" as a way to account for what happens when those with less agency and power have their words, contributions, and ideas delivered by those with more power—often against their will. It's when a more powerful and agentive voice is used to deliver a marginalized person's ideas. The entire essay is written in a way to enact mētis just as it explains and elevates the concept and argues for mētis's place in discourses surrounding accommodation and disability.

We're also pleased to include Kelli Gill's "#WhatIEatInADay *As A Fat Person Not on A Diet: Eating Online as Feminist Performative Symbolic Resistance," an analysis of several aspects of TikTok food-related

posts such as food diaries and those in particular that feature fat people eating. Drawing on frameworks of food rhetorics, rhetorics of eating, visibility, and ultimately, performative symbolic resistance, Gill argues that fat people eating on TikTok counteract a white-supremicist, anti-fat diet culture and offer hope for fat liberation in digital spaces.

Next, Alanna Frost's "In Order to 'Say What We Say': Archival Protocol that Attends to Indigenous Data Sovereignty" reflects on her research into the sovereign assertion of the Nazko and Kluskus First Nations in 1974 through the case of diplomatic correspondence by Chief Catherine Patrick to the British Columbian government to assert the tribe's voice into planned land management and in particular, a logging project. Focusing on letters of Chief Patrick archived in a retired professor's files at the University of British Columbia, Frost tells the story of the sovereign assertion that involved a blockade to stop logging activity while also questioning the feminist scholarly urge to "recover" Chief Patrick's letters. Frost concludes with an explanation of how principles such as Indigenous Archival Protocol and Indigenous Data Sovereignty inform this work.

Readers will then find Marcella Prokop's review of Linda Svitak, Christian Jaye Eaton, and Lee Svitak Dean's edited collection, *Kitchens of Hope: Immigrants Share Stories of Resilience and Recipes from Home* (2025). Prokop promises this book is more than a collection of essays and recipes, but rather it is a rhetorical tool for feminist scholarship seeking to counter a Eurocentric understanding of how and why people and stories move around the world.

In the second part of this issue, we are fortunate to present to readers a cluster conversation focussed on feminist visual culture. From visual resistance in feminist magazines in 1970s Arkansas to drag queens and various TikTok trends, the essays in this section converse about the multitude of ways that visual rhetoric acts in and on our culture. We are grateful to Hannah Taylor, Rachel Molko, and Alexis Sabryn Walston for editing this conversation and sharing it with *Peitho* readers.

Hope, and the Proliferation of Generosity

In *Rhetorical Feminisms and This Thing Called Hope*, Cheryl Glenn (2018) reminded us that, "we all have agency—and hope. Rhetorical feminism is fully committed to hope, and creating possibilities for realizing that hope is the key" (p. 193). Glenn remained hopeful in the wake of the 2016 election when she wrote *Rhetorical Feminisms*; now, almost ten years later, when the world seems not to have improved much (and may, indeed, have gotten worse), we take her call to feminist rhetoricians seriously: "to discover the potential of what is living within ourselves" (p. 196), which includes "how we treat and and collaborate with one another" (p. 198). We have seen the way *Peitho*'s reviewers have realized hope as "*Peitho*-level" generosity. Our hope is that the *Peitho*-level generosity we see from reviewers continues to proliferate beyond the pages of this journal, and that we see more of that generosity out in the world as we all continue to nurture the important work of rhetorical feminism.

Biographies

Cathryn Molloy is a professor of writing studies in the University of Delaware's English Department. She is the author of *Rhetorical Ethos in Health and Medicine: Patient Credibility, Stigma, and Misdiagnosis*. Before joining the co-editing team at Peitho, she was on the editing team at Rhetoric of Health and Medicine for eight years. Currently, she is co-editing the *Routledge Handbook on the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine* with Lisa Melonçon and J. Blake Scott.

Bryna Siegel Finer is a professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she serves as Director of Undergraduate Writing Programs. Her published work has appeared in *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Teaching Writing in the Two-Year College*, *Praxis*, and the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, among others. She has served as the associate editor of *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* and book reviews editor for *Composition Studies.* She is also the co-editor of *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research* (2017).

Jamie White-Farnham is professor in the Writing Program at University of Wisconsin-Superior, where she serves as Director of Teaching, Learning and Technology and the Jim Dan Hill Library. Her work appears in *Peitho*, *College English*, *Community Literacy Journa*l, *Rhetoric Review*, *Computers & Composition*, among others. She was previously the associate editor at Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments. She is also the co-editor of *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research* (2017).

Together, Cathryn, Bryna, and Jamie have co-edited *Women's Health Advocacy: Rhetorical Ingenuity for the 21st Century* (2019) and *Confronting Toxic Rhetoric: Writing Teachers' Experiences of Rupture, Resistance, and Resilience* (2024) and co-authored *Patients Making Meaning: Theorizing Sources of Information and Forms of Support in Women's Health* (2023).

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Storiographies of #HealingJourney: Online Feminist Rhetorical Practices of Healing through Content Creation and Care

Chandler Mordecai

Abstract: Social media users are co-opting the platform TikTok to generate discussions of trauma and to create healing spaces through content creation and platform interactions. In the following, I interview five content creators and document their experiences and motivations in using TikTok and developing healing-related content using the hashtag #HealingJourney. These content creators evoke a feminist ethic of care through specific feminist rhetorical strategies of reflection, community care, and disengagement. I present a framework for understanding feminist rhetorical healing on TikTok and the strategies that allow creators to negotiate their online identities, healing work, and use of technology.

Keywords: #HealingJourney, healing, multimodal composition, TikTok, embodied rhetoric, rhetorical practice, feminist disengagement, content creator, hashtags

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A content creator sitting at a desk stares into the camera lens and reflects on their "day in the life of a grieving college student," narrating the difficulties of returning to college after losing their parent (college-girlkait, 2023). Another creator in a close-up headshot details their experiences of being abandoned by and reconnecting with their birth mother, noting the "most painful part" and how they are "now ready to share it" (Hunterton, 2023). Using video and photo slide shows, another creator documents their journey to sobriety (sober.hag2.0, 2024). One creator posts a video montage of ice skating "fails and bloopers," stating in the caption, "never thought I would recover from my ED [eating disorder] but I did it!!! 2.5 years since my last relapse #edrecovery, #HealingJourney" (the.littlebeast, 2023). These are examples of content shared on the popular social media platform TikTok and tagged #HealingJourney. #HealingJourney is often used across TikTok to label content that discusses creators' experiences with trauma, ranging from domestic violence, friendship breakups, grief, and loss. Though varied in message and mood, these videos offer a brief glimpse into the ways content creators leverage TikTok and content creation to write about trauma and healing.

Many TikTok users are co-opting the platform to generate discussions of trauma and to create healing spaces through content creation and platform interactions using the hashtag #HealingJourney. The exploration of healing practices and discourses online enables examinations of the connections and conversations forming on TikTok and considerations of users' orientations to cultural and social contexts. On TikTok, the outreach of knowledge sharing, community formation, and connection increases drastically, as individuals can meet others almost instantly online without the limitations of location (Rajabi, 2021). Therefore, understanding TikTok users' negotiations of their online identities and use of the platform allows us to consider the unique perspectives, stories, and content choices that effectively link creators. While feminist digital rhetoric, media, and communication scholarship have addressed communities gained from social media, it is still unclear how TikTok and specifically multimodal composition are used to navigate healing and identity between users and across platforms (Mendes et al., 2019; Musgrave et al., 2022). Therefore, I conducted an interview-based study of content creators and their online disclosures of identity, healing, and trauma. By

interviewing #HealingJourney content creators, I attempted to center the voices of content creators, conceptualizing online healing praxis through creators' lived experiences. I present a framework for understanding feminist rhetorical healing on TikTok and the strategies that allow creators to accomplish healing work online.

In what follows, in total I interviewed five content creators, outlining their lived experiences and motivations in using TikTok and developing healing-related content using the hashtag #HealingJourney. I argue that these content creators evoke a feminist ethic of healing through specific rhetorical strategies: reflection, community care, and disengagement, such as muting, blocking, or logging offline. Using these rhetorical strategies, content creators are knowledge producers for how healing can occur online and offline. By healing, I am refering to the ways content creators leverage platforms to work through trauma and to find solidarity online. First, I show how embodied healing practices manifest as creator reflections, framing reflection as a central element to online healing and feminist knowledge production. Second, I situate how content creators invite community care through their video production and comment sections, demonstrating the importance of online community to healing. Next, I point out contradictions and difficulties that these creators note emerge from this genre of content and from the platform itself, and how these creators enact feminist disengagement to protect their healing journeys and their online audiences. Lastly, I explore the possibilities and complications of online healing and healing communities and conclude with implications for future feminist rhetorical research.

Healing as a Rhetorical Practice

The field of feminist rhetorical scholarship has long investigated and developed rhetorical theory related to women's experiences of healing, with close attention to mental and physical health. For example, rhetoric and composition scholar Tamika L. Carey (2016) has extensively defined rhetorical healing as "the persuasive messages, performances, and curricula writers deploy to teach individuals in states of crisis or discontent how to undergo the types of transformation the writer considers essential to wellness" (p. 2). Carey's work explored Black women's relationships to and experiences with self-help and wellness campaigns. Similarly, feminist rhetoricians have explored the rhetorics of healing and care in health activism (Novotny & Opel, 2019) and health information-sharing forums and platforms (Singer, 2019). More recently, feminist rhetoric and composition scholars have identified social media platforms as key sites for rhetorical inquiry regarding expressions of healing and trauma. Megan Schoettler (2023) has identified rhetorics of "feminist affective resistance" on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and WordPress as forms of advocacy for survivors of sexual assault (1). Krista Speicher Sarraf (2023) examined the connections between trauma, memory, and the #MeToo hashtag through interviews with Twitter users. These feminist rhetorical works, among others, have called attention to the ways feminist rhetorical approaches are applied to a wide range of healing-related contexts and how users' relationship to and use of digital tools is changing how we use and view technology and healing. However, as feminist rhetorician Cathryn Molloy (2016) wrote, "Less is known about what becomes of written emotional disclosures once they are shared with publics and what happens to writers' social and intimate relationships once they begin to circulate their narratives for public consumption" (p. 135). To address what happens in relationships once healing narratives are made public, I use inter-

views to explore the rhetorical strategies employed by healing creators to tell their stories and interact with audiences.

To further understand healing as a concept and digital phenomenon, it is important to situate healing as a rhetorical practice. Embodied rhetorics is a productive framework for understanding healing as a rhetorical practice on TikTok. As Maureen Johnson et al. (2015) have posited, "*All bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function" (p. 39). This viewpoint is useful in considering the ways creators often blend music, movement, and narration via the embodied form as a means to express themselves and connect with audiences. Creators often use their bodies to write and tell their healing journeys through monologues, performances, and reenactments. For example, one #HealingJourney video features the creator looking directly into the camera, reflecting on their previous addiction struggles and the sobriety strategies they currently maintain (@sober.hag2.0, 2023). #HealingJourney creators physically write and record videos and often take embodied approaches to expressing their joy, anger, and sorrow through speech, text, or movement. These practices mediate and communicate content creators' experiences with audiences. In their discussion of solidarity movements for Iranian women on TikTok, scholars Heba Sigurdardottir, Majid Imani, and Zahra Edalati (2024) have argued that "the body can be applied *rhetorically* through staging visual narratives via the body conveying specific bodily experiences (such as pain and sorrow)" (p. 531). As noted by participants later, these embodied expressions are serious forms of healing work. Feminist rhetorician Melissa Stone (2019) has noted, "Through our embodied choices, we have the agency to create rhetorical action that can empower or disempower our bodies" (p. 677). Content makes space for creators to reflect on their experiences, share with others, and navigate their journeys through their own agentic choices of disclosure.

Feminist rhetorics of embodiment also consider the relationship between technology and bodies (Smith & Swartz, 2022). For example, as Lisa Melonçon (2013) has argued, "The instrumental nature of technology means that human bodies exist as tool-beings that use a variety of equipment, or technology, to move through each day" (p. 71). Furthermore, Stone (2019) has written, "We are inextricably linked to technologies through our bodies and lived practical experiences" (p. 678). Healing via content creation often mediates the daily interactions and relationship between healing and technology, challenging notions of how we use technology for our physical and mental health. Many of the #HealingJourney videos focus on practices of self-care and resemble vlog-style diaries or "DITL" (Day In The Life) videos, chronicling creators' everyday experiences on their "healing journeys" and processes. They entail an embodied rhetoric that generates innovative ways to understand healing, trauma, and technology. Understanding healing as an embodied rhetorical action better informs how content creators articulate healing online.

However, these embodied rhetorics are deeply tied to technological artifacts, such as TikTok videos, and we must also consider the rhetorical implications of these ties. Sarah Hallenbeck (2012) has argued, "Practices gain strength and traction as rhetorical actions through their articulations within the networks that support or subvert them" (p. 22). TikTok potentially serves as a space where creators/users/writers can build communities of support, increase civic engagement, and narrate their lived experiences. However, it is also a

space where trauma, racism, and oppression exist and are often perpetuated (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). For example, TikTok's algorithm has recently been accused of promoting and only circulating specific Western beauty ideals and aesthetics (Raiter et al., 2023). Algorithms, content moderation, and online interactions affect users of color differently across platforms, and these realities have a direct effect on creators who share healing-related content. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that platforms have inherent power dynamics that affect users from marginalized communities disproportionately. Being able to navigate digital spaces in a way that has a positive effect on users is a privilege. Additionally, TikTok is dependent on Internet access, is constantly changing in design, and is at risk of being banned in countries such as the United States (Executive Order, 2020). Feminist rhetorical studies of TikTok should consider how platform dynamics enact or subvert creators' rhetorical moves and understandings of healing and trauma.

In this article, I center an embodied perspective that considers women's experiences of their healing journeys, as they are lived and felt, as the basis for online rhetorical healing. As Malea Powell et al. (2014) have recognized, rhetoricians have a tendency to "fetishize texts," turning bodies into texts in a way that "disconnects them from their relationship to humans and to place/space" (Act 1, Scene 2). Additionally, I echo Johnson et al. (2015) and their call that "feminist rhetorical commitments…deman[d] an ethical reading of bodies and recognition of bodies as *people*—not objects" (p. 40). Therefore, my contribution engages with people rather than just their content. I also acknowledge Johnson et al's (2015) claim that as researchers, we incorporate "the meaning-making *our bodies* carry with and through *our scholarship*" (p. 40). Thus, I also reflexively consider my positionality as a researcher. I interview creators who actively encounter and traverse TikTok and discuss the impact of their embodied and rhetorical choices on the platform and their healing journeys. I further explore how #HealingJourney can become a rhetorical act that encourages knowledge creation through reflection, community care, and disengagement strategies.

Methodologies, Methods, and Participants

To attend to the ways #HealingJourney has been rhetorically mobilized for healing-related content and purposes, this study questions: 1) the impact of TikTok and content creation on content creators' healing processes; 2) what strategies content creators use to narrate their healing journeys and support their viewers while minimizing vicarious trauma to themselves and audiences; and 3) how #HealingJourney creators negotiate their identities and healing. In the following sections, I detail my methodological framework and note the procedures taken to interview #HealingJourney content creators.

For this study, I prioritize narrative storytelling using Black feminist and technofeminist methodologies and interview methods, demonstrating how interdisciplinary and bricolaged methodologies better inform intersectional research practices. I engage with technofeminist scholar Kristine L. Blair's (2018) "technofeminist storiographies," a framework for using women's stories as a method to reveal the ways we use and are used by technology. Blair defines feminist storiographies as "a re-writing and re-telling of women's technobiographies to disrupt and talk back to larger cultural narratives that have excluded their voices and contributions" (p. xii). This frame is particularly useful when investigating the ways content creators post healing-related content on TikTok, a platform with a documented history of exclusion and suppression (Biddle et al.,

2020). Furthermore, storytelling as a methodology also emerges from Black feminist praxis. Black feminist scholar Sarojini Nadar (2019) has argued that storytelling as a methodological practice gives research a "human face" (p. 20). Black feminist approaches to healing are critical to the survival of Black women and Black communities in a world where anti-Blackness continually proliferates. A Black feminist lens pushes me to consider how marginalized people are affected in digital spaces and how such factors influence their healing processes. These methodological lenses also consider how knowledge-building and community-forming practices play out for communities with members from different genders, races, sexualities, and other social categories. I use Black feminism and technofeminism to account for positionality and to study healing *through* race and identity.

These methodologies also push me to consider my positionality as a feminist rhetorician. For this study, I, a white academic woman, understand that many of the participants will experience barriers I will not, and many may not feel comfortable sharing their stories with me. Thus, I prioritize the Combahee River Collective's (1977) values of reflexivity: "As feminists, we do not want to mess over people in politics…We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice" (p. 218). For my work, this means continually considering and collaborating with others within and outside of my research fields. This also means paying close attention to my relationship with my participants, making an effort to connect and foster a relationship, and considering how my positionality affects those relationships (Haywood, 2022). These are points that I considered while writing my interview protocol, recruiting participants, and interviewing content creators.

Methods

I selected TikTok for this project because of the role its recommendation and ranking system plays in its user experience design and its impact on content, creators, and content circulation. TikTok has also been used as a space to share healing practices and experiences, and I argue that its unique affordances and algorithm both enable and complicate the ways content creators share and make sense of their healing journeys. TikTok is a video-sharing app and "one of the fastest-growing short video platforms in the world" (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1872). Essentially, what makes TikTok so popular is its position as an entertainment app and its accessibility to content creation. The popularity of video content is not a new trend, and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram have features that allow users to livestream, create, or upload short videos (Anderson, 2020). However, TikTok's affordances allow users the opportunity for more creativity and flexibility with content creation. Users can select different filters, effects, background music, texts, images, and sounds for their videos. TikTok differs from other platforms in that users do not depend on followers to see or circulate content. TikTok's algorithm circulates content via the "For You Page" (FYP) and Discover Page.

One purpose of interviewing #HealingJourey creators—rather than using another method to learn from them—was to focus on their voices and first-hand perspectives. I selected #HealingJourney because it provides a substantial data sample and is representative of an ongoing, continual movement that aligns well with the tenets of healing work. I viewed videos tagged #HealingJourney and began recruiting their creators. I was

interested in content creators' stories and how they utilize TikTok's interface and affordances to create interactions through healing content. I use the term "content creator" or "creator" to reference users who generate platform content through various multimodal composition practices. My use of content creators differs from the term "influencer," which has also developed specific rhetorical boundaries (Maddox, 2024). Media scholar Sophie Bishop (2025) has defined influencers as "ostensibly ordinary platform users who accrue followings on social media via 'authentic' (yet stylised) coverage of their everyday lives" (p. 2110). Bishop further clarifies that influencers often market their content as "aspirational and commercially viable…and consistently upbeat" (p. 2111). In my preliminary viewing of the participants' videos tagged #HealingJourney, I found that they varied in tone, message, and production quality, often lacking a "stylized" delivery. The term influencer is also often linked to reach and monetization, and only one participant noted that they earn money from posting content. Due to the varied nature of posts, I felt that the term content creator most appropriately applied to participants.

Aligning with my methodology, I wanted to include a diverse range of voices to demonstrate how content creators navigate platforms. I initially wanted to prioritize recruiting and interviewing BIPOC content creators and LGBTQ+ creators, as these marginalized groups are most likely to be excluded from TikTok's algorithm and ranking system (Raiter et al., 2023). A developing concern by content creators of color and creators in the LGBTQ+ community on TikTok is that their content is not distributed by the algorithm due to racism and discrimination. In their study of Black content creators' experiences on TikTok, Harris et. al. (2023) identified shadowbanning as a "common challenge" Black content creators often face (p. 1). Shadowbanning occurs when a platform "hides" content from a user's audience without the user's knowledge. While TikTok has denied instances of shadowbanning, many Black content creators noticed a decrease in their video engagement via likes, comments, and shares when they posted content supporting the Black Lives Matter movement or any related #BLM hashtags (Harris et. al., 2023). Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) has also done extensive work in characterizing algorithms as active participants in racism that privilege whiteness. Additionally, scholars such as Jess Rauchberg (2025) have documented the ways that TikTok promotes "algorithmic ableism" or "disability-related discrimination as a platform logic that reifies long-standing western biases of who belongs in public life" (p. 1). As noted by participants later, platform visibility directly impacts their healing journeys and how they engage with their audiences. However, I ultimately had to expand my recruitment criteria to include a wider range of perspectives and backgrounds. By interviewing content creators about their experiences navigating TikTok, this project uses first-person accounts to address identity and accessibility.

Recruiting directly through TikTok proved to be challenging and required flexibility. I recruited interviewees by direct messaging via TikTok, and I emailed potential participants if they included an email address in their TikTok bio line. Specific recruitment criteria included that the content creator had to be at least eighteen years old, post from the United States, and post content using #HealingJourney at least once. TikTok's privacy settings restrict users' capabilities of direct messaging, so while the videos in this study were public, not all of the content creators' DMs and inboxes were publicly available to message. TikTok also restricts the number of direct messages users can receive from someone they are not following. Even though

I followed all of the accounts I attempted to recruit, they did not follow me, meaning I either could not send them messages or was restricted in the number of times I could send messages. Over a five-month period, I sent out inquiries to accounts that had email addresses posted in their bios and directly messaged the accounts that allowed messaging. I was able to successfully recruit five participants. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, and participants received the interview questions in advance of their scheduled interviews.

In designing and coordinating these interviews, I incorporated Black feminist scholars Patterson et al., (2016) theorization of Black feminist methodology in interview practices. They argue, "[B]lack feminist researchers commit to: making multiple truths visible, incorporating the interests and values of participants as a collective, and creating opportunities for self-definition and self-determination, all while emphasizing the importance of Black women's lived experiences" (p. 60). While participants received interview questions in advance, I began each Zoom session by positioning our time as a conversation and encouraged participants to decline to answer any question throughout the conversation or feel free to move our conversation in the direction of their choosing. My goal in sending interview questions in advance was to reduce any anxiety or suspicion participants could have had when agreeing to participate in academic research, as universities have a history of extracting and taking advantage of various communities and members for academic benefits and research (da Cruz, 2018).

I spent time at the beginning of each session learning more about each participant and building a relationship before asking questions. I also gave participants opportunities to ask me questions about myself, my healing journey, and the project. Methodologically, these practices allowed for a breakdown in some way of the rigid roles of interviewer and interviewee and created a flow between participants and me where we simultaneously learned from each other (Patterson et al., 2016). Participants consented to having their interviews recorded and transcribed; however, I acknowledge that the act of recording could negatively impact participants. The introduction of recording devices reinstates a power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, whether intentional or not. While I encouraged participants that they most definitely could decline to have their session recorded, some participants may have felt pressure to accept because of my initial role as the interviewer and someone in academia. I attempted to address this concern by continually checking in with participants and asking if they would like to continue our conversation, dialoging with them rather than simply asking questions, and anonymizing participants' names. I also resisted creating universal generalizations about wellness and healing practices and recognize that this content was captured at a particular time for each creator. Healing is a fluid process, and the experiences of creators documented here can and will likely change. Finally, I attempted to navigate inherent power dynamics within interviews by giving participants opportunities to respond to my analysis. After each interview, I continued correspondence with participants and sent them excerpts from my analysis. Participants were encouraged to send feedback on how I portrayed them and their experiences. Through this practice, participants were able to maintain levels of agency over their stories beyond TikTok and interviews. These challenges and concerns push me to consider how to improve how I prioritize care for research participants.

While the five content creators/participants share similar experiences related to their healing content and

platform interactions, they each have unique and specific positionalities and experiences. The purpose of this article is not to discuss their individualized trauma or traumatic experiences, nor is it to make broad assumptions about healing, healing-related content, or platform interactions about marginalized or underrepresented communities. Rather, I attempt to uplift their stories to recognize the critical labor of content creation and how their different positionalities mediate their experiences on TikTok in meaningful and important ways. Table 1 includes participants' demographics and pseudonyms, including in their own words and capitalization, how they identify their race and gender. In Table 2, I include positionality statements written by each participant because I recognize the role that individual positionalities play in creating environments of care. When initially discussing positionality with participants, I read aloud and sent my own positionality statement, which was written in the third person, to them via the chat feature on Zoom. Participants were able to write out their positionality statements and send them to me using the Zoom chat feature during our interview. Including the ways that participants identify and describe themselves humanizes participants and allows for their voices to be more fully represented.

Table 1. Participant Demographics, including race and gender

Pseudonym	**Race**	**Gender**
Danielle	Filipino, Black	female
Mary	Black	Woman
Jodie	white	Queer woman
Nicole	African American	Female
Chloe	white	Female

Table 2. Participant Positionality Statements

Pseudonym	**Positionality Statement**
Danielle	Identifies as a Filipino and Black first-generation immigrant. Her mother was born in the Philippines and her father is American. She was raised in a small town near western central North Carolina, close to the Appalachians. She is the oldest sibling also, and feels like that is the embodiment of her content.
Mary	Identifies as an African American single mom of two from South Jersey. She was raised in a two-parent household, and she has her MSN. Growing up watching YouTube videos, she feels a deep connection to TikTok and the ability to create content that connects with others.
Jodie	Identifies as a white, queer woman from rural Iowa. She was raised by her father in a single-parent household, noting her mother lost custody of her when she was a child. She wants readers to know that she is a recovering addict and creates content pertaining to recovery and mental health.
Nicole	Identifies as an African American woman originally from the East Coast who has lived many places and had many different experiences with different groups of people. She notes this has led her to her mission, purpose and passion to help others through empowerment, creative inspiration, and motivation.

Pseudonym	Positionality Statement
Chloe	Identifies as a white woman who was raised by her dad in a single-parent household. She is from Texas and is an internet personality. She is a full-time digital content creator and enjoys sharing her personal mental health, relationship, and health journeys.

Findings and Discussion: Rhetorical Practices of Healing and Care

Across my interviews, content creators articulated their motivations for posting healing-related content and how their content creation impacts their healing processes. In the following analysis, I focus on three main rhetorical techniques related to my research questions of how healing occurs online and how creators mitigate discussions of trauma for themselves and their viewers. I also explain that notions of healing apply differently to different people based on factors such as race, gender, (dis)ability, class, and their intersections, and these factors affect the rhetorical strategies content creators utilize.

To better understand TikTok as a healing space, I begin with how these creators each uniquely perceive the platform as a space for creativity, connection, and labor. In this section, I describe responses to the guiding question: How would you define your relationship with TikTok and content creation? Almost all of the participants described their experience on TikTok as positive but complicated. Danielle notes the complex relationship with posting content online on a public platform: "You know, sometimes I'm just like, okay, I feel good about this video. Let me just post it. It's very surprising when you read the comments about how many people have not only watched your video but can relate… So just being able to really hear from different people is just very eye-opening." Nicole describes TikTok as an "instrumental tool" for her work and passions: "It really has been an amazing instrumental tool in reaching the very specific groups of people I desire to help and who feel called to my mission and vision. I would describe it in short as very fluid, effective, and efficient." Similarly, Chloe describes TikTok as "a wonderful platform to not only connect with others but to share my journey, and it most of the time is a positive place." However, not all participants described their interactions as positive.

A common theme that emerged was the challenge of navigating popularity and online followings. For example, Mary notes that her experience changed when she reached a level of popularity on the platform: "I'll speak for when I was creating healing content. I had maybe about 5,000 followers. I didn't really have much of an issue. Currently, as a, I guess, bigger creator, I have 100,000 followers. The experience is a little bit different. You meet a lot more negativity." Similarly, Jodie also notes, "All around, it's been good. It is kind of a hard app to navigate, and it is hard to make content that flows and, I don't know, is aesthetically pleasing. That's difficult. It's a lot harder than it looks. So that's probably where I struggle the most in my experience." While the participants described their overall experience as positive, their comments serve as reminders that they are real people feeling and experiencing life in real time. Their comments also note the risk they take in putting themselves and their stories in digital and public spaces. I provide detailed examples of these risks later. Situating these creators' perceptions of the platform better informs the gravity of their content and choice to share their stories through #HealingJourney. Their perceptions of the platform also account for

the ways content creators from marginalized communities or "vulnerable rhetors" navigate their identities and employ resistance techniques to mediate online experiences (Molloy, 2016, p. 2). My conversations with #HealingJourney content creators describe how they engage with healing online and offline. I reflect here on the emerging rhetorical strategies from my study that push our understanding of how healing can occur through reflection, community building, and online disengagement.

Rhetorical Reflections

While each creator's content differs in topic, all note they began posting healing-related content for themselves as a form of reflection and not for a public audience. For example, Mary discussed how she initially viewed her profile as a type of digital journal: "When I was first posting healing content, I was actually talking to myself. So, it was geared toward advice, but it was advice that I needed to hear. I connect in that way, just because I still feel like it's stuff that I need to hear as a person." Similarly, Chloe describes using #HealingJourney as a "journal for [her]self." She notes, "I want to be able to look back at that content and see how far I have come in my healing process." Nicole sees #HealingJourney as an inspiration for her own healing: "The hashtag #HealingJourney inspires me to speak about the concepts and ideas that I needed to hear when I was on certain parts of my journey." For Jodie, #HealingJourney is a way for her to mark milestones in her sobriety and recovery journey by making TikTok playlists. Creating and posting healing-related videos is a form of catharsis and reflection for these creators.

Critical reflection has often been identified as a key feminist rhetorical practice. bell hooks (1994) has posited, "Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it usually forms the base of our theory-making" (p. 70). Creators within this study initially utilized their content as a means to do self-reflective healing work. In their rhetorical deliveries, these creators utilize TikTok's affordances, whether it is creating playlists like Jodie, filming emotionally expressive monologues like Chloe, or using a hashtag to chronicle their personal healing journeys. They document, record, and publish moments and stories that mean something to them, regardless of public interaction initially. These creators are making embodied and agentic choices that allow them to express themselves in the manner/content of their choice.

Participants also use first-person asynchronous reflections to form connections grounded in sharing emotions. This aspect of their compositions aligns with what Digital Black feminist scholar Catherine Knight Steele (2021) has cited as an "appreciation of Black feminist principles for dialogue, such as personal ways of knowing, validation of emotion, personal accountability, and a preference for narrative and dialogue over debate" (p. 49). For instance, Chloe described how her content is a vlog space to share her experiences of being raised by a single parent and feeling "abandoned by [her] birth mother." Steele has also reminded us that Black feminists have often used blogging as an avenue to create alternate narratives, express themselves, and create community through "long-form blogging" on sites like "Twitter and Instagram" (p. 79). I argue that this activity is also occurring on TikTok. These creators transform content creation into a specific outlet for their personal storytelling that directly intersects with their healing.

Furthermore, I found that participants created messages and meaning about healing as a process, as well

as a state of being, inserting an educational bent to their content. For example, Jodie feels a level of responsibility for her following, which determines how she organizes her TikTok posts: "I mostly post content about being in recovery and healing from abuse. That's really where my healing journey content comes in. I would use hashtag healing journey if I made content related to how I was doing in recovery outside of just the addiction, or how I was healing from abuse or what I was doing to get my life back." Jodie often shares content labeled "what I wish I would have known" about healing and recovery. In this kind of content, she shares advice and techniques she has learned throughout her sobriety. Jodie shares her personal experiences to potentially educate viewers. Thus, engaging with reflection is a feminist action that has an immense impact on the self and others. As Audre Lorde (2020) has noted, "As they become known to us and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas" (p. 5). Creators, like Jodie, exemplify the power of examining and recording their emotions and feelings as a means to radically heal and share knowledge with others. Through short-form multimodal composition, these creators take on roles as knowledge producers through their self-reflections. In the next section, I discuss community building and the rhetorical strategies creators use.

Community Care

Participants also identified how creating content encourages community and connections with other TikTok creators and users. Specifically, they cite the nature of healing content as being one of the biggest influences on digital and community relationships. Nicole stated, "I have fallen in love with using TikTok as a content creator because it allows you to connect with so many people organically and easily." Jodie similarly noted the power and connections that are formed by posting healing-related content: "It's really cool when people react with [my] content because you get to build a community. That's kind of how I got my platform, and a lot of people are there…It's more of a safer space where people are only viewing it if they're trying to heal or are healing." All of the creators shared their experiences posting healing-related content, noting how it requires a level of vulnerability that makes healing content real and relatable for many users. Nicole posited, "Healing content as a whole on the platform builds stronger connections, experiences, and furthers love amongst each other. It reminds us as people that we are not alone, and not the only one going through certain situations." As revealed by participants, the practice of content creation and the enjoyment of connecting with others are valuable to creators and reasons to post healing-related content. Community building motivates participation on the platform and healing journeys.

One of the ways communities are formed on TikTok is within the comment section of videos. Social media, and particularly affordances such as comments, enable users to communicate and share with others "they would not have met otherwise" and "provide capacity to create networks…from many different backgrounds and contexts in ways that physical gatherings cannot" (Nesbitt, 2008, p. 50; Carlson, 2019, p. 20). Feminist rhetorical practices of healing occur in TikTok comment sections. Danielle discussed how she feels when she sees someone positively interacting with her content: "It's just very eye-opening because it takes a lot for you to comment on someone's content, right? And then to come to something so intimate and so personal and say, 'Hey, this was my experience or this is how I felt,' and everyone can see it. I think it's amazing,

actually. I love seeing the connections that people are forming." As Kristi McDuffie and Melissa Ames (2021) have argued, sharing or responding to content promotes and circulates emotion as much if not more than the original content (p. 7). As these content creators have pointed out, many users approach and respond to healing-related content from a place of empathy and support. For example, Chloe describes the healing content she posts and responds to as "very authentic and raw." She notes, "Usually [TikTok] is geared toward funny or comical stuff, and whenever I started going through a lot, I decided to share the side of me that a lot of people don't get to see on the internet...Then I got to connect with other people who were experiencing things in their life that are normally not shared online." In her own words, Chloe idealizes the value of healing content and communities. On one level, sharing trauma and healing journeys are not "normally" done online, as there are still significant cultural stigmas related to trauma and mental health (Rajabi, 2021). Therefore, the act of posting healing-related content is a subversion of cultural norms regarding healing and trauma. As expressed by many of the participants, seeing others' healing journeys can be inspiring and comforting to both creators and users. Creators and users often do not feel as isolated or alone and can relate and connect with #HealingJourney posts because they feel a level of validation in their experiences.

These creators also take notice of other content creators and commenters and learn from their content, further enacting feminist practices of knowledge production (hooks, 1994). For example, Danielle describes how viewing comments on her posts expanded her perspective on her trauma and healing. Danielle notes that her healing content is often about her experiences being the eldest daughter and the weight of her responsibilities as the daughter of an immigrant parent: "I kind of felt like I was a co-parent, especially when my dad was in the military. It was literally just me and my mom, and my mom didn't speak English. I would go to school and teach whatever I learned to my Mom and then teach my siblings." Danielle beautifully summarizes how content creation can powerfully expand perspectives:

> When I'm reading my comments, I'm looking at the perspective as like the oldest sibling, immigrant family, small town. Then, I started reading comments from people who are younger siblings in immigrant families. I was like, 'oh man, like I didn't even think about the perspectives of the youngest kid, right?' I've seen some TikToks like, 'let's everyone share what our oldest sibling made us do?' And I was like 'Oh my gosh, do my siblings have trauma from me?' Like, I'm playing everything back in my head. So it's just interesting, to get different perspectives on trauma, because you can see it as I see it, like as the oldest sibling, but then you've got trauma from the youngest sibling, and the mother, and the middle child.

Danielle also articulates how positionalities affect content creation and perception. This also exemplifies how content creation can inherently urge viewers to reflect on their own life experiences.

However, while sharing healing-related content is integral for creating online healing communities, there are certain strategies participants noted they implement to maintain these communities. Content creators posting #HealingJourney often discuss the steps they have taken or are taking for their overall wellness, but also situate many of the triggers, such as breakups, grief, and abuse, that catalyzed their healing journeys. Many participants stated that they carefully consider the details of their stories before posting as a means to circumvent possible triggers for their viewers. Jodie, for example, is mindful of TikTok's community guidelines when posting about her trauma. Other creators, like Nicole, use specific rhetorical writing strategies

like "algospeak," or "abbreviating, misspelling, or substituting specific words" to avoid triggering audiences or TikTok's content moderation system (Steen et al., 2023). For example, she will say or write the letters "SA" as an abbreviation of "sexual abuse." Nicole feels that abbreviations are "less harsh" for audiences. Many scholars have pointed to how TikTok users subvert guidelines by using "algospeak" but Nicole's use redirects "algospeak" as a type of care communication for her audience. It's an intentional choice to express her trauma in her own words, but she carefully considers the reactions and lived experiences of her followers.

Danielle, though, notes the limitations of her authority in how her content is perceived: "My content can be sad, and you can sometimes tell when they [viewers] have not searched for help or done the internal work. I don't know if posting videos helps, but sometimes it does make me sad because what else can I say?" Online healing communities benefit creators and audiences but are also limited, as they are tied to platform rules and politics. These limitations serve as a reminder that not all content creators are licensed health professionals or feel qualified to take on more engagement with audiences outside of posting content. Learning directly from #HealingJourney creators and community members highlights the possibilities of TikTok as a space for users to engage and empathize with others and their trauma through relationships cultivated strictly online. Speaking directly with content creators also demonstrates how sharing traumatic experiences online is a legitimate form of care communication, but also has consequences and limitations for community building, as noted by participants.

Feminist Disengagement

Even though participants identified #HealingJourney content as a critical avenue in their healing processes and online communities, they also noted the necessity of logging offline to remove toxic online pressures. Participants discussed how their online interactions also require careful negotiation of their mental and physical health, time, and energy, resulting in many having to step away from the platform. For many, part of their healing process is engaging in what Sara Ahmed (2017) has defined as "feminist refusal," which is often brought on by feminist "snaps," or a realization/breakaway from society's expectations and norms (p. 187). As noted by participants below, sometimes it is needed to break away from followers, and these "snaps" are important moves in their healing and daily living. For example, for Mary, feminist disengagement means "reaching out to core relationships" offline and getting their opinion on the comment or issue. She notes, "I would never want to step on anybody in a way that they're like, whoa, that was too much. So I definitely always consult, and then I come back to the point of like, I'm a good person." Throughout our conversation, Danielle emphasized repeatedly that she posts "what makes her happy," and this means she creates videos about wide-ranging topics from healing to her daily activities. She mentioned a certain pressure from her followers to post certain types of content, like healing-related posts, and how she experiences some pushback when she does not. In response to this pushback, Danielle added that she now refuses to allow herself to be defined or boxed in by comments or content: "For me, I do things that make me happy. I'm not here to make everyone happy because you can't make everyone happy. I want to control my platform because I want to be able to unplug." Similarly, Jodie talked through having to take a four-month break from the platform: "I just came back to TikTok like a couple of weeks ago, because I didn't want to share any more about my life. It was

like people were finding my other social videos, they were in my DMs, and it got to be just really hard to kind of take it all." Mary, Danielle, and Jodi experienced what Ahmed (2017) refered to as a "snap" brought on by frequent negative reception or responses to their content. While "snapping" and disengaging are often perceived as negative, Ahmed (2017) has reminded us that "snapping might matter because a bond can be what gets in the way of living a life" (p. 193). TikTok is a new space for potential "snaps," as exemplified by these creators. These "snaps" are critical feminist and rhetorical actions that help creators continue living their lives offline. Ultimately, creators curate different feminist tactics for working through online hate, often turning to communities offline, "snapping," or enacting muting or blocking practices that help reduce negative experiences and maintain their healing journeys.

In addition to positivity, it was clear through these conversations, that Black content creators experience an increased level of hate and online racism, often forcing them to negotiate their identities in a way that differs from the other participants. For example, Mary defines her relationship with posting as "walking a tightrope." She discussed how, as she has increased in followers, she also experienced more negativity and racism online:

> Now that I have a bigger follower rate, about 100,000 followers, you meet a lot of people who don't see your perspective on things that you're talking about. Therefore, the interaction is a little bit more sour because I feel like people have disconnected with the fact that they're talking to a real person because there's a layer of the screen between us. If I say something, they're like, you're ugly, you know, like weird and racist stuff.

Black women and women of color are more likely to experience hate and negativity online and that directly impacts mental, physical, and healing wellness (Maragh-Lloyd, 2024). Mary detailed the mental trauma that online hate can cause:

> So half of me is like I don't care. But then the other half of me does care because I still consider myself newly healed, whatever that means, right? So, a lot of me still will get negativity and kind of take it personally and then it makes me reevaluate who I am as a person and reevaluate what I post and reevaluate what I said. It's difficult because again, I'm in this new arena of self-assuredness. So it's a tightrope walk right now that I hope to be more comfortable with. But as I grow, I'm not sure if it'll get worse.

Creators from different positionalities do experience pushback and online hate differently across the platform. For instance, Chloe stated that she had not experienced explicit hate like name-calling or critiques about her personal appearance, but noted, "There's always going to be someone who has a different opinion than what you're putting out." Rhetorical technofeminist scholars Kaitlin Clinnin and Katie Manthey (2019) have argued that users "experience technology differently because of their embodied identities" (p. 35). They call for rhetorical scholars to "consider how different bodies are able to produce different messages as well as how messages are received by differently embodied individuals" (p. 35). While all of the creators identified examples of negative pushback online, there are discrepancies in the intensity of online hate that each experiences, which directly impacts their disengagement strategies.

These conversations also give valuable insights into the emotional and physical labor of content creation

and the expectations audiences have for creators. For example, Danielle discussed the difficulties of continually posting healing-related content:

> When I hit a million views on my healing videos, I think 'like, do people want more of this?' At the same time, I don't know if I can mentally and emotionally keep it up. Sometimes it doesn't feel good to continue posting about my trauma because I kind of just want to move on. I've learned what I need to learn and then like, let us move on. Sometimes I want to say to people 'this [trauma] doesn't make us, this doesn't keep us and I don't want to still stay there.

Megan Schoettler (2023) has reminded us, "While there can be pressures for feminists…to always be 'on,' feminist theory has reminded us that sometimes we need to step away" (p. 12). Ahmed also notec the importance of having "permission notes to step back when it is too much," arguing, "The mere fact of having them there, as way to give yourself permission to exit a situation, can make the situation more bearable. You can leave; you can grieve" (2020, p. 244). Creators within this study demonstrate how important stepping away can be for maintaining their mental health and healing.

As Danielle and Mary remarked, being a content creator also comes with additional responsibilities and management that require extensive amounts of time and energy. One of these responsibilities is refereeing negative comments from other users. In our conversation, Danielle told an anecdote about seeing two users "fight" in the comments. She described feeling an added pressure to "say something," but questioned if that was her responsibility as the original creator. She mentioned she is still unsure about the rules of engagement with comments, but focuses more now on prioritizing her peace, even if this means turning off her notifications or comments. Danielle implements feminist disengagement strategies by muting comments as a means to create healthier digital environments that better support her healing journey. Similarly, Mary grapples with the notions of being chronically online and available, but also balancing her offline life. She told a story about traveling for her birthday and unplugging from TikTok to celebrate, but felt like there was a "job or school project" that she was not doing or forgetting to do. She stated people often tag her in their posts wanting her input and opinion, so she feels she has to constantly be available:

> I am chronically online to get information, so that I can talk and post and there's always somebody who's posted before me. I'm like, I have no idea how they do it because it's like, bro, I had to go to bed. So, how did you pump out three videos, and two responses while I was sleeping and I'm back online at 6:00 a.m? Like as soon as I open my eyes, which is not healthy at all. I definitely need to learn how to manage that because that's not sustainable. I can't be online all the time. I have a full-time job. I have two children. I have a part-time job. So like, it's just not, it's not feasible.

Mary noted she now focuses on managing her time by logging off and taking intentional social media breaks. Mary's perspective is critical for understanding how different positionalities affect content creation and reception. Chloe pointed out that her pressure comes more from developing content that audiences feel relatable to, rather than finding the time to be online. As these creators have made clear, content creation is often more than a hobby, but a responsibility that comes with various roles, often including creator, moderator, and entrepreneur. However, incorporating feminist disengagement practices is a method for creating agency in creators' online personas. Understanding these struggles and strategies generates "feminist hope" for creating

safer and healthier online environments where creators can freely express themselves (Ahmed, 2017, p. 210).

#HealingJourney Content Impact as an Embodied Healing Practice

As TikTok, its algorithm, and multimodal composition become more embedded in our communicative practices and online engagement, it is vital to learn more from the very people who drive the platform: content creators. Understanding their daily experiences better informs our interpretations of online rhetoric, writing, and communication, especially as it pertains to healing and trauma. I interviewed five content creators to better learn from their everyday experiences and platform interactions. I view the content creators in this study as knowledge producers, centering their experiences as expertise. I take up Constance Haywood's (2022) theorization that a feminist research ethic brings in "voices and thoughts of community members across non-academic and academic spaces" (p. 34). Therefore, the data herein illustrate a continued need for research that prioritizes the voices, reflexivity, labor, and actual experiences of people who directly engage with digital communities and algorithmic systems. Prioritizing such voices is especially important when algorithms have a distinct history of oppressing and suppressing certain marginalized groups and identities (Benjamin, 2019).

My conversations with participants helped to identify recurring feminist rhetorical healing strategies, including reflection, community care, and disengagement practices. Content creators often began posting healing-related content as a means to reflect and document their healing processes. The affordances of TikTok provided these content creators, across varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages, the opportunity to rhetorically engage with their healing journeys on their own terms. They chose to share their traumas, stories, and identities as a cathartic outlet, often dialoging in their comment sections with other users. Healing content proved to be both beneficial and informative for participants, expanding many participants' perspectives on trauma and healing. Through the use of #HealingJourney, creators connected with other users on healing journeys, forming communities through affective messaging. Even though creators are not physically meeting and interacting with other users offline, they create a community online based on embodied empathy and vulnerability. Utilizing TikTok and leveraging the nuances of their trauma, these women have cultivated powerful healing spaces.

However, race and positionality have a direct effect on the ways content creators disclose their healing journeys and navigate the platform. Engaging with Black feminist theories and methodologies pushes feminist rhetoricians to be mindful of the racialized experiences of our participants. As noted by Mary, she experiences various instances of racism that directly impact the online expression of her healing processes. Therefore, Mary's actions of logging off TikTok and reconnecting with support systems can be seen as a disengagement strategy and also an important self-protection measures. Disengagement, in this way, aligns with what Raven Simone Maragh-Lloyd (2024) has noted as a form of self-care Black women enact while online, positing, "filtering who is allowed in" is a form of care, protection, and resistance (p. 85). It is important for readers to understand that racism impacts the daily experiences of content creators of color and that the ways content creators utilize platforms are not universal. As I have demonstrated, incorporating intersectional methodologies better accounts for how positionality influences the rhetorical choices of content creators.

Similarly, social media users and content creators can learn from Mary about various ways to self-protect online and reconnect following racist encounters.

In addition to posting content, within these digital communities, content creators often feel like they have additional responsibilities, including recognizing those who view their content and profiles and moderating their comment sections. There is a level of accessibility that content creators give to their audiences that is hard to define and maintain boundaries. Participants noted that they feel certain expectations from their followers to continually produce content related to their trauma. Many participants noted they often feel "stuck" in their healing journeys because their audiences expect them to continually post and relive their trauma online. Additionally, the participants in this study are not trained healing or trauma professionals. These creators share healing practices they personally have implemented and often feel the need to give advice in their comment sections. However, there are risks to posting content related to healing by folks who are not licensed professionals. On one hand, this content provides some avenue of support for folks who may not have access to health, healing, and wellness professionals, but this content is also not fact-checked or tailored to each viewer, which exemplifies how social media cannot be the only source of healing and community for people.

Furthermore, Steele (2021) has identified the complications of taking complex ideas, like healing in this instance, and creating short-form content packaged for particular audiences and algorithms: "It is incredibly challenging to package nuanced and contextually rich content into a short video and produce immediate high arousal" (p. 135). Mary spoke to this issue, highlighting the issues with posting healing-related content on a platform like TikTok that is constantly changing: "Even from Covid, the app is completely different. People used to point at things and do challenges, and now it's more like talking. It used to be skits, but it's less of that, so I don't know the future of healing on TikTok, and I don't know the future of TikTok." Alternatively, as Danielle discussed, viewing content is a way to learn from others and different perspectives and positionalities. As creators build strategies of engagement and disengagement, they enact feminist rhetorical strategies that are critical to their healing journeys. While healing via content creation and engagement is not completely sustainable, as the participants pointed out, #HealingJourney content provides an entry point to critical and self-reflective work that many creators and users long to do.

Implications for Future Research

In this article, I have documented healing as a rhetorical practice online and the tactics creators implement to share and enact their healing journeys. Future research on the strategies of feminist rhetorical healing could question how platform monetization affects rhetorical healing. As TikTok offers opportunities for monetization through ads, sponsorships, and the Creator Fund, some users may feel pushed to have public accounts. In *Digital Black Feminism*, Steele (2021) warned about the selling and packaging of Black feminism online, and her viewpoints can also apply to healing-related content: "The commodification process provides superficial access to complex theories culminating in a more watered-down product palatable to a broader audience" (p. 134). As many creators leverage their popularity to tell their stories, offer advice, and promote services or products, they also create a lens to view healing as a product. Interviews with content creators

who are a part of the Creator Fund and those who are not would be beneficial in identifying rhetorical moves for monetization. Of my study participants, only Chloe was a member of the Creator Fund. Jodie, though, noted, "I haven't accepted a brand deal from anyone. I've been offered hundreds, but I haven't found a brand that I'm willing to put my channel on the line for." Future rhetorical research can also account for creators' agentic choice to participate in the Creator Fund. Throughout this article, I have argued that content creation introduces practices of healing through digital media labor and critical media consumption. Future research should also document the complexities of healing discourse when paired with practices for monetization, popularity, and visibility.

As Zeynep Tufekci (2014) has argued, sampling data from social media to note human activity often has limitations and challenges. A limitation of this study is the focus on only one hashtag relating to healing; therefore, the study presents a partial view of healing discussions on TikTok. I present the perspectives of five content creators, which also limits the number of voices speaking about healing journeys. Additional research can also focus on TikTok as a potential source of wellness and care, as many users are already posting techniques to promote healing. Seeking care from professionals is not always accessible, affordable, or an option for all people. TikTok could potentially be a space where users can build communities of information and practice sharing to help users on their healing journeys. Further research should focus on the impacts of knowledge and practice sharing on TikTok to help users who may not be able to access care from wellness professionals.

Biography

Chandler Mordecai (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Public Writing and Rhetoric at Middle Tennessee State University. Her research and teaching interests lie at the intersections of technofeminism, digital rhetoric, and Healing Justice, focusing on articulating connections among multimodal compositions and rhetorical writing strategies on digital platforms.

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Swallowing Voices: Mêtis and Its Enactment

Kristen Hoggatt-Abader

Abstract:
This paper
is not a paper.
It is a body that resists being swallowed:
Mêtis,
first wife,
forgotten cunning,
goddess in the gut
of Zeus.

Academia,
your syllabus teeth—fangs
that cut us deep,
your policy tongues,
your voices louder than mine,
than hers,
than ours.

Mêtis is not a name you remember.
But I do.
I carry her in the sideways glance,
in the hacked code,
in the silence that rewrites the rulebook.
We do not enter through the door.
We make a door where there was none.

Mêtis:
not compliance,
strategy dressed in disorder.
A limp, a pause, a workaround.
Note-takers
and extra time—
convenient offerings
on the altar of bureaucracy.

They flatten us.
Make us
legible,
manageable,
forgettable.

But we are not files in your cabinet.
We are normative hacks.
Clever breaks in the timeline.
Street-smart syntax.
Crooked solutions
to crooked spaces.

We are not asking for universal design.
We are imagining beyond it.
Dreaming blueprints in the margins.
We are building from the inside out.
From swallowed silence
to speech that splits gods open.

I stand with those
who name the speculative as scholarship—
Renita J. Weems, who rewrites scripture
with a womanist imagination.
Sarah E. Truman,
who stitches the poetic to pedagogy,
naming affect as method.
Susan Iverson,
who teaches with intellect's imagination.

This isn't metaphor. It's method. And it's mine.

Keywords: Mêtis; Disability rhetoric; Embodied knowledge; Normative hacks; Imaginative Design; Poetic scholarship

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Introduction

When I was pursuing my MFA, I worked closely with one advisor—call him Professor QB— who, I could tell, did not respect my creative approach as a poet. He worked with me on much of my work, scholarly and creative, never venturing to offer more than corrections to my grammar or derisions for using the passive voice. Near the end of the semester, I went to one of his poetry readings in Boston. A couple of other renowned poets read first, then he—quite renowned himself, mind you—stepped up to the podium. Professor QB announced that he was going to be reading a handful of poems from his latest book, and one "brand new" that he had just written. Now, poetry readings in Boston are a lovely experience, quite the opposite of the ones ridiculed by Charles Bukowski. As I have written before, the city itself is a haven for those who identify as poets (Hoggatt-Abader, 2022).. This reading was unfolding as delightfully as the numerous readings I had the privilege to attend as a grad student in Boston until Professor QB read the concluding line of his "brand new" poem: it was a line right out of one of my own! This was one of my poems that he had read and given me feedback on, so I thought it couldn't have been accidental. Could it?

To be clear, I almost erupted, but I held it together, calmly confronting him the next day in his office. He was caught off guard. After all, what authority did I have for such an accusation? I was a lowly grad student with a handful of lit mag publications; he was a tenured professor with several well-regarded books. He told me that, actually, he had been working on the poem for months. He said that, actually, he shared the poem with other poets to receive feedback and he could even dig up some emails as proof. He said that, actually, the two lines are different in this respect and that respect, and then he said something very similar to "I know you're stressed out working on your thesis. You probably got confused."

If this scenario makes your blood boil, there's good reason, but I offer it not to lay blame on Professor QB. I am not accusing him of plagiarism. Instead, I want to postulate that this scenario happens often in an act of what I conceive of as swallowing voices, a motif I am borrowing from the ancient Greek myth of Zeus swallowing his first wife, Mêtis. Never heard of her? Good reason for that, too. She has been swallowed. Silenced. Overpowered and subsumed by another mouth who voices her wisdom. Greek Historian Eric Havelock (1963) said that civilization relies on a cultural repository, "on the capacity to put information in storage in order to reuse it" (p. vii). I believe that the Western, traditional discipline of rhetoric and composition has, by virtue of its intimacy with Greek thought, furthered the tradition of swallowing female and marginalized voices. I define swallowing voices as using another voice, a more powerful one, to communicate someone else's ideas. I argue that writing professors, being in a position of authority can—unwittingly in the best of times and deliberately in the worst of times—swallow students' voices.

Swallowing voices happens when a person or institution in power appropriates, erases, redirects, or contains the voice of someone with less institutional or rhetorical authority—particularly when that voice belongs to someone from a marginalized identity. Swallowing is not always overt or malicious. It can be subtle. It can look like help. For example, in writing classrooms, swallowing can happen when a well-meaning instructor encourages a student to write about something "more academic" or "less personal"—steering

the student away from their lived experience in favor of a genre or voice that will be easier to grade. It can happen in peer review, when student feedback echoes normative language expectations rather than engaging with the rhetorical intentions of the writer. Or it can happen when professors "tidy up" a student's rough, raw paragraph during a writing conference, unintentionally replacing a student's voice with their own (I did that as a young teacher, and it bothers me to this day). These gestures are often pedagogically motivated—an attempt to scaffold or support. But if we don't recognize their cumulative impact, we risk becoming another mechanism through which students learn to doubt their own words.

In addition to being a swallowed goddess, mêtis is also a concept. According to Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1978), who reclaimed and elevated the role of mêtis in their book, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture*, it is a practical intelligence that all humans have. Perhaps many do not often have to rely on it as much as disabled people. It is distinct from phronesis, which is slow, reflective, and rooted in moral deliberation. Mêtis, by contrast, is a cunning, situational intelligence—improvisational rather than contemplative—often developed through the necessity of navigating environments that were never designed for us. Disability Studies scholar Jay Dolmage (2020) defines mêtis as "the rhetorical art of cunning...to transform rhetorical situations" (para. 4). He is the scholar I follow when spelling the word as I do, with a circumflex over the e (other scholars have used different spellings). In my own incident that I describe above, mêtis enabled me to avoid getting derailed: I finished my thesis and got my MFA regardless—I even used the wisdom from the experience in my advice to several readers as the "Ask a Poet" advice columnist for *The Smart Set*. I argue that mêtis is what enables disabled people to cultivate the ability to break codes—to hack into the system of "compulsary ablebodiedness" (McRuer, 2006, p. 2). Mêtis can be theorized as the classical archetype responsible for the successful hack—the skill that is required to break and rewrite prevailing conventions and assumptions.That skill is what we disabled people must use to function in a program that didn't anticipate our participation.

These everyday strategies emerge from mêtis itself: the cunning, adaptive intelligence disabled people cultivate to survive systems that would otherwise subsume or silence us. I am coining the term "normative hacks" to describe what many disabled people resort to in order to function in systems that are not designed for us. Normative hacks are interventions that crack the norms that govern our social, temporal, and physical spaces. These are practical forms of creative problem-solving by use of available means, whether it be using a pair of tongs to pick up something off the floor, or using books to elevate a screen to alter the built environment. Watch a disabled person go about their daily lives and you will see such normative hacks in action as they make breakfast, style their hair, or even negotiate time under the constraints of neocapitalism. The alternative ways we conduct our daily lives have equipped us with the knowledge necessary to design new systems, pushing beyond the paradoxical notion of "universal" design to what I conceive of as "imaginative" design.

I argue further that on an institutional level, one way that students' voices get swallowed is by providing bureaucratic accommodations that negate disabled people's capacity to use mêtis in the first place. Blunt, bureaucratic accommodations, things like note-takers and extra time on exams–blanket, one-size-fits-all

accommodations that are not tailored to meet the student where they are—nullify disabled people's distinct ability to break codes. Bureaucratic accommodations are a way of preserving norms and conventions—of permitting extra time or resources to succeed in a broken system. To demonstrate, in achieving my goal of writing an academic paper, I am relying on my skills as a poet and creative writer, something that may indeed violate academic genre conventions. I will use poems and creative writing to hack into the system of the academic genre, because as a disabled female myself, I don't feel I can march up to my goal and claim it by right. As I learned after my traumatic brain injury, I have to be crafty and strategic, and thus I rely on mêtis, giving me the ability to make unexpected moves to get around the constraints of genre and normative predictability.

I align my work with feminist scholars who have long upheld imagination as a legitimate form of knowledge-making. I stand with Renita J. Weems (1988), who rewrote scripture with a womanist imagination that refuses erasure and centers embodied Black women's spiritual authority. Like Weems, I believe that sacred stories—and scholarly ones—can be reentered, revoiced, and reimagined, as I hope this paper demonstrates. I align, too, with Sarah E. Truman (2022), who stitched the poetic to pedagogy and insisted that affect, relationality, and wonder are not detours from academic rigor but essential to knowledge production. In *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation*, Truman demonstrates how poetic inquiry functions not only as method but as epistemology, resisting the false dichotomy between emotion and intellect. Likewise, Susan Iverson (2015) calls us to "teach with imagination," foregrounding the ways creativity animates critical pedagogy and cultivates feminist praxis in the classroom and beyond. In my own example, it was poetry that helped stitch me back together following my injury; it supported the return of my linguistic expression, which is why I place such profound faith in it. When I write metaphor, remix myth, or render the poetic in scholarly form, I do so not in defiance of academic knowledge, but in alignment with a long feminist tradition that asserts imagination is a way of knowing. My speculative, poetic, and embodied interventions do not dilute scholarship. They are its evolution.

Understanding Mêtis

Meaning "wisdom," "counsel," or "skill" in ancient Greek,

Eickhoff (2001) says the word is a trick: Μῆ (not) and τις (anyone)--

The savvy to know which

Identity to

Show

Really, Debra

Hawhee (2004) says, mêtis

Exists as "immanent movement," rendering

Techne "difficult to locate strictly within the mind

Or consciousness" (p. 48). It is

Realized in the body as

Intelligent

Cunning

And

Limber smarts

Footnote, Robert Johnson (2010)

Only gives a footnote when he says that techne "can provide a disciplinary

Rationale for writing studies" (p. 673). That's it? Mêtis is "not often

Championed" (p. 688)? Okay then: I will

Elevate it.

In Hesiod's (2018) *Theogony*, the story of Mêtis is told in such a way that, to me, three characters appear linked: Athena, Hephaestus, and Mêtis herself. Mêtis, whose name means wisdom or cunning, was the first wife of Zeus destined to give birth to wise children, one of whom would overthrow him. As a result, Zeus, in consulting with the Sky and Earth, determined he would swallow her. He apparently didn't learn the lesson from his own dad that swallowing kin doesn't turn out as expected. Cronus, Zeus' Titan dad, had received the news that one of his children would overthrow him, so he swallowed his kids--Hera, Poseidon, Hestia, Hades, Demeter, and when it came time to swallow Zeus, Zeus' mother gave Cronus a stone instead. Later, Zeus would eviscerate his siblings from Cronus' belly, but more on that in a moment. I want to point out a small detail: whereas Cronus had swallowed his kids soon *after* delivery, in this case Zeus is swallowing the mother *before* she gives birth.

The reason history diverges slightly is important. Zeus knew the virtues of swallowing Mêtis. Mêtis had Titan blood, and her role in the victory over them was crucial. According to Apollodorus (2015), Mêtis was the one who gave Cronus "a drug to swallow, which forced him to disgorge first the stone and then the children whom he had swallowed, and with their aid Zeus waged the war against Cronus and the Titans" (p. 9). Possibly because she had intimate knowledge of Titan blood (i.e., she knew how to make Cronus barf), or more possibly because she had the cunning to get away with spiking his drink, she was able to administer a drug that would result in such regurgitation, enabling Zeus' siblings to help secure a victory over the Titans.

Swallowing Mêtis was Zeus' attempt to preserve her wisdom and cunning for himself, "so that the goddess would advise him about good and evil" (Hesiod, 2018, p. 75). But Mêtis was already pregnant with Athena when he swallowed her. Not long after, a battle-ready Athena burst from Zeus' head—an act that allowed Zeus to take full credit for her birth. Because she came from his body alone, he was seen as her sole parent, effectively erasing Mêtis' role. Hera, Zeus' sister and second wife (and yes, that's a lot to unpack), was so

outraged by this that she "without mingling in love gave birth to famous Hephaestus, expert with his skilled hands beyond all of Sky's descendants" (Hesiod, 2018, p. 77). If Zeus could have a child without her, she probably figured she could do the same. Hephaestus, born with a disability, is often associated with mêtis—in the form of cunning, strategy, adaptation. His motion was not linear but sideways, like a crab—an emblem of the clever workaround. Even in his conception, he was a rhetorical strike.

The important takeaway here is that in this interpretive synopsis, Mêtis, Athena, and Hephaestus are inextricably linked. In ruminating on these characters, I hope to align these characters with wisdom and cunning and assert the importance of mêtis as a rhetorical agent. In enacting mêtis myself--bouncing off my creative voice—I hope to assert the rhetorical potential of mêtis to those within and beyond the traditional Western domain.

Letters to Catrina[1]

I think of you as Mêtis, first wife of Zeus
Foretold to bear a child who would outsmart
That mighty king, and so he swallowed that
Possibility. Then Athena cleaved
Through his skull, body armor and all,
Swinging her happy blade. Mêtis stayed
As sage to offer wise woman's advice.

When Zeus turned bull and mounted Europa,
What did Mêtis do? When Leda screamed and wept
Did Mêtis, too? Our sacred parts have been
Defouled under holy names, the body
Peeled like forbidden fruit, like a blood orange...
It is not your fault. Nor is it mine.
Believe me: flesh has its own battle cry.

In *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture*, Detienne and Vernant (1978) defined mêtis as a form of cunning intelligence—a kind of shrewd, flexible, embodied wisdom used to navigate unpredictable circumstances. It is an ancient Greek concept distinct from logos (rational, systematic knowledge) and techne (applied skill). Mêtis is instead contextual, responsive, and often disguised, favoring subtlety over direct confrontation.

1 My sister, three years my senior.

The authors provide detailed explications of the theogonic myths, ancient Greek literature, and philosophy, using their extensive knowledge of the Greek language to point out nuances in original versions of ancient texts. Their book, the result of a ten-year study, is awe-inspiring in the scope of research, revealing that "By marrying, mastering, and swallowing Mêtis he (Zeus) becomes more than simply a monarch: he becomes Sovereignty itself" (Detienne and Vernant p.109). The authors argued that because he has swallowed her and all the possibilities of mêtis, "sovereignty ceases to be the stake played for in a series of indefinitely repeated conflicts and becomes, instead, a stable and permanent state" (p. 109). His swallowing her ends the cycle of usurping the throne. Not only would the prophecy not come to pass, but Mêtis will be with Zeus forever to provide wise counsel. According to the authors, the core features of mêtis include adaptability, the ability to adjust to changing environments or shifting circumstances, like the octopus, a frequent metaphor in their work; indirection, achieving goals not through head-on force, but through misdirection, illusion, or strategic disguise; embodied intelligence, knowledge that lives in the body, action, or instinct—not abstract thought alone; temporal sensitivity, knowing not just what to do, but when to do it; and practical cunning, an intelligence born from experience and survival, often undervalued by dominant systems of reason. Mêtis thrives in uncertainty and flux. It is the intelligence of the sailor, the trickster, the tactician—the one who wins not by force, but by navigating complexity.

The early philosophers did not consider mêtis as deserving of any formal treatise, definition, or discussion. Detienne and Vernant (1978) have pointed out that while there are no formal treatises on mêtis as there is on logic, Aristotle may have had some of its properties in mind when articulating phronesis, or practical intelligence (p. 3). In *Nicomachean Ethics*, which presents his inquiry into ethical life, Aristotle, after defining episteme, or scientific knowledge, and techne, or craft knowledge, describes another type of knowledge: "prudence (phronesis) is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being" (p. 105). Phronesis is similar to mêtis, in state and action—both are heady constructs that result in observable phenomena. In "Writing the Third-sophistic Cyborg: Periphrasis on an [in]tense Rhetoric," Michelle Ballif (1998) suggests that mêtis may be "a sophistic quality" that she uses to provide the metaphor of a "Third-Sophistic Cyborg" which she positions "not as a rhetorical subject/political agent in any traditional sense, but rather as a rhetorical figure that embodies postmodern rhetorical practices" (p. 53). Perhaps the Sophists were swallowed. Why don't we study them seriously in this discipline? Why do so few of their writings survive? One of the sophists, Protagoras, was exiled for being an atheist, and dominant authorities rounded up his books and burned them (Jarrat, 1990). That's one way to impose silence on a voice. Was Aristotle inspired by someone else's voice that didn't survive history? Did he voice the wisdom of someone else?

Believe me: flesh has its own battle cry,
And they would eat it, making mêtis
"more logical, prudent, systematic"
A way to study what can't be contained
Seafoam rolling on waves, crashing in doubt

Standing under, understanding the grain
That has since been blessed onto our pink tongues.

What is more sane than to eat and then shit?
Or was mêtis the hashish of the good
Ol days? Who will be the one to partake?
I'm more haunted by those highs, that rage
Than getting gobbled up by an angry
God (that only happens in times like these)
The daffodils are still there, but they're weeds.

In order to elevate mêtis above an adaptable propensity—a set of strategies, prone to whims—ancient philosophers made it food for thought. In reclaiming the role of the body—not only that but the extraordinary or disabled body—in the field of rhetoric, Jay Dolmage (2009) wrote"Metis, *Mêtis, Mestiza* , Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions" in which he described various aspects of mêtis, as well as details the ancient practice of eating it. The ancient Greek philosophers thought mêtis had to be digested, "placed into an ordered, proportional, hierarchized and cerebral epistemology (Dolmage, 2009, p.11). How often have we tamed a growling tummy with a midday snack? I haven't read any discussion of what its precise ingredients were, but I imagine it much like bread or wafers. Eating is a way of transforming our bodies, so we often attach heightened meaning to its occasion, often eating that which we don't understand as a way to aid our comprehension, or as Detienne and Vernant (1978) maintain, as a way to "provide the philosopher with a model of the activity of the *demiourgos*" (p. 4). *Demiourgos* translates as a demiurge, a powerful creative force. Perhaps the philosophers modeled themselves after the original act of swallowing Mêtis and gaining her savvy. Perhaps mêtis exists in the enacting of the creative force itself.

As her offspring, Athena is also "well -endowed in mêtis" and is sometimes given that same name (Detienne &Vernant, 1978, p. 179). In fact, Detienne and Vernant postulate that from her beginning, there were two Athenas: one with skills as a warrior, and the other with a arcane, magical craft: "the mêtis of the goddess in armor also employs other, more secret means which draw upon disturbing magic craft and mysterious spells" (Detienne & Vernant, 1978, p. 181). Having more than one signature trait, and the dexterity to navigate between them, is a hallmark of mêtis. That possibly can be seen as I weave back and forth between my scholarly and creative identities. In some stories, Hephaestus attempts to rape Athena, but he is not successful, and as both are endowed with mêtis, it is possible that Athena's skills as a warrior were what allowed her to defend herself. However, mêtis does not serve the overtly strong or athletic. Amber Jacobs (2010) pointed out that mêtis functions "on the side of the 'weaker', the 'frail' and the subordinate" (p. 4). Jacob's work seeks to underscore the relationship between Mêtis the goddess and mêtis the concept and align both with maternal instinct, especially in light of the fact that mêtis "in its transformative action that undermines power relations and does not keep what it wins, cannot be used in the service of notions of possession, own-

ership, legitimacy and sovereignty" (p. 5). Mêtis serves the underdog--it normally aids Hephaestus, but in the face of Athena, the direct descendant of Mêtis herself, it becomes inert. Athena's genealogy makes the difference. As her mother taught her, she knows how to avoid getting violated, appropriated, or swallowed.

While those words resonate with violence and negativity, those sentiments should not be entirely channeled toward Hephaestus. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod (2018) described Hephaestus as "the renown lame one"--for he was widely worshipped in ancient Greece, and not *in spite of* his disability, but *because* of it; the god is depicted in various instances riding a proto-wheelchair (Dolmage, 2006). In "Metis, *Mêtis, Mestiza*, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions", Dolmage (2009) maintains that "disability, throughout history, has not always represented loss, punishment, perversion, and alienation, but has instead often been seen as an embodied reality, a physical eventuality, even a desirable human variation" (p. 7). In fact, much of what we now define as abnormal or disabled is due to the pervasiveness of statistics and the standard of the bell curve in the mid-19th Century (Davis, 1995). Hephaestus is signified as disabled as a mundane fact of life, perhaps a natural byproduct of his blacksmith occupation. Disability has been welcomed as an inevitability. In that sense, mêtis is also an eventuality: as we age, as our bodies become transformed by labor, the wiser we become.

The daffodils are still there, but they're weeds.
Imagine a crown of them in place of
Athena's war hat, bold and bronzed,
A silk shawl for the aegis that defends
With its blinding light. Why did you come
to this world white-knuckled, gritting your teeth?
A hunter: always ready for the beast..

Some receive the gifts that come from the god
Of fire to forge the instruments that will
Save their life. Hephaestus, twisted and lame,
Legs outverted like a crab, moving in ways
That restore their last breath. What work is that
If not of mêtis? The strong fight back. Others--
Their smarts, their strength, come from the world beyond.

Additionally, Detienne and Vernant (1978) discussed the tradition of ancient blacksmiths being linked to celebrated creatures from the sea, in particular the seal and the crab, living on both the sea and land and having different ways of moving—as disabled people do. In discussing Hephaestus' curved feet, the authors maintain that "The peculiar shape of his feet is the visible symbol of his mêtis, his wise thoughts and his

craftsman's intelligence" (Detienne and Vernant p. 272). In "'Breathe upon Us an Even Flame': Hephaestus, History, and the Body of Rhetoric, Dolmage (2006) writes "there was a very positive association between Hephaestus's body and his mind: His outward-facing feet and his lateral thinking were allied, and both became a metaphor for mêtis, the ability to move from side-to-side like a crab, as opposed to the forward march of logic" (p. 125). Dolmage (2009) also illuminated the pattern of silencing Hephaestus: "The elision of Hephaestus and his mêtis from our view of rhetorical history is simply in keeping with a larger pattern of disavowals of Othered bodies and the maligning of embodied rhetoric" (p. 7). He will later extend mêtis to discussions of Anzaldua's mestiza consciousness and Helen Ciroux's Medusa, both of which offer lessons in the rhetoricity of mêtis, as othered bodies our field has neglected to center. Perhaps these voices have also been swallowed.

Since becoming aware of mêtis, I have been noticing it all around me, even the ways my pets use it, or don't use it as in the case of my dog who incessantly barks at each visitor, in contrast to my hamster's stealthy craft when she gets out of her cage. Detienne and Vernant (1978) also explored more examples of mêtis used by non-human members of the animal kingdom. In addition to exploring the mêtis enacted by the seal and the crab, the authors devote a chapter to creatures featured in the poems of Oppian, including the fox, the octopus, frogs and fish, in particular prawns, which are small in size yet able to kill the sea bass through their "cunning tricks" (p. 28). Small things often have to rely on their savvy to get ahead in life (for a human example, think Marie Curie or Ruth Bader Ginsberg). In various chapters in the book, the authors explain how those with lesser strength or power, or less prominent tools, can emerge victorious by using mêtis. In "Snake(s)kin: The Intertwining Mêtis and Mythopoetics of Serpentine Rhetoric," Kristin Pomykala (2017), traced the mythology, political mythology, and personal observation in recounting the mêtis of snakes (in addition to trees and other non-human subjects) in Western society, beginning with the serpent in the garden of Eden, to explore the deep connection we have with the creatures. Pomykala said, "Opportunities remain to re-member imaginatively, transversally, the feeling of raising serpentine energy along one's spine, sloughing off old skin, and slithering away in a sidewinding horizontal direction or down into the depths of uncertainty" (p. 272). In such a framework, we might easily see how the snake would capture the ambitions of the American Revolution, especially in light of the fact that mêtis is commonly used by the underdog. I offer these animal examples to increase the accessibility of the concept of mêtis, to provide another avenue of comprehension. I find it fascinating that they illuminate how marginalized voices often rely on such flexible smarts.

Their smarts, their strength, come from the world beyond.
Your daughter, my daughter, tell them before
The white suits lock us away: we create,
Innovate, love, and live the way most
(Many, I should say) have forgotten.
An apt title for our work of art: Love

and Thorns, red nourishment plaited by spines.

And who says we can't be both? A scholar
And an artist; an addict and a mom–
what does the law say? I remember when
They took her. I carry that grief for us
Both, have been for years. Tell: who swallowed you?
Who voices your smarts? And who speaks your truth?
I think of you as Mêtis, first wife of Zeus.

Hacking the System: Disabled Expertise

Mêtis enables disabled people to hack the code that provides the rules for how we do business, conduct our affairs, socialize, or study in school. Most societal systems are not designed for disabled people, so we often resort to what I am calling "normative hacks"—hacks that crack the norms that govern our social, temporal, and physical spaces. I define normative hacks as practical forms of creative problem-solving by the use of available means. I would like to push beyond the paradoxical notion of universal design to what I conceive of as "imaginative" design, which disabled people are uniquely qualified to design due to the alternative ways we conduct our daily lives.

I have had to use creative problem-solving since I sustained a traumatic brain injury over 20 years ago and I became hemiplegic and neurodivergent in an instant. I had to learn different ways to move: how to walk up and down steps, how to use a can opener with my new dominant hand, how to shave my underarms when I couldn't lift one arm above my head. I had to learn to read with double vision. I had to learn to think critically about texts when my only skill seemed to be remembering combination locks and zip codes. In other words, I had to learn how to hack the normative system. I had mistakenly thought that my body/mind was broken and needed to be fixed, so I entered the academy hungry to fix it. But the academy wasn't designed for a learner like me, even with the retrofit accommodations hurled at me from the institution. It wasn't until I was in my 30s that I learned about the social model of disability, and I realized that I wasn't broken at all. The system was broken. I realized the value in the other kind of learning I had to do as a disabled person: how to adapt the temporal, spatial, and physical environment so that I could function in a world that told me I didn't belong there. I believe all disabled people have this embodied knowledge and expertise, this propensity to read and break codes and hack systems, equipping us with a skill set that is undercut by blunt accommodations such as note-takers and extra time on exams. Routinized accommodations routinize disabilities in ways that reduce thinking about them to merely transactional concerns.

The first step in breaking code is of course reading it, as disabled people do all the time. We can tell which buildings are likely to have accessible bathrooms without going inside. We can tell when it's safe

to cross the street without seeing a green light. We can tell if we will encounter resistance to our ways of knowing by the design of syllabi. And we continually read the code in tired mantras: Be smart! Get thin! Be strong! Get healthy! Robert McRuer (2006) contends that we live in a system marked by "compulsory able-bodiedness" (p. 2) which is what produces disability in the first place. Ablebodiedness is not a choice, but rather the result of having been assimilated into a society that values the quick, strong, and normative over their counterparts. Eli Clare (2017) decries this phenomenon in their book, Brilliant Imperfection, noting, "In a world without ableism, defective, meaning the 'imperfection of a bodily system,' would probably not even exist" (p. 23). Recognizing how mêtis is swallowed makes visible the deeper mechanism of ableism: a system that survives by concealing the cunning, resourceful knowledges disabled people wield to move through an inaccessible world.

Next step: break into the code and figure out how it works. To be able to do that we need to first recognize that the code-makers had their own objectives in mind and they did not consider disabled people as users who should be considered in the design of the material, spatial, and temporal environment, necessitating that we must continually break into the system. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2011) has proffered the term "misfit" to capture the mismatch between these codes and the disabled experience, and through this concept we can realize the system's method of encryption:

> The idea of a misfit and the situation of misfitting that I offer here elaborate a materialist feminist understanding of disability by extending a consideration of how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects. (p. 592)

The design of most environments is encrypted in a way that keeps disability out. The codemakers did not anticipate our participation or interaction, and as a result, we do not fit, we mis-fit, in the environment. And as such, misfits will do what misfits will do: Perhaps dress in outlandish clothing (breaking normative sartorial codes) or listen to loud music (breaking sound control codes). Or conduct affairs in more subtle ways that break the codes of many areas of society.

One notable codebreaker was Ronald Mace, a wheelchair user who helped conceive of Universal Design, or put another way, one of the first hackers who broke through the system's method of encryption. After he entered North Carolina State University's School of Design in 1960, he recognized the need to rewrite building codes every time he was carried up a flight of steps. Those steps, which dominate many university environments, were part of the system's encryption method. They kept him out, necessitating that he break the code. With the principles of universal design, he helped to rewrite the code, becoming such the expert that architects as famous as I.M. Pei would regularly consult him regarding access standards (Hamraie, 2017).

Final step: Hack the system. After we have read the code and figured out how it works, then we need to change the system. Svetlana Nikitina (2012) has maintained, " the hackers' revolt is directed against imperfect designs, programming mistakes and security sloppiness" and although she does see limits in the creative and transformational potential of hacking she does see the possibility of "putting together new programs that are based on the eradication of flaws in the existing ones" (p.144).

To explore an example of a program flaw, let us imagine the steep steps that dominate university environments, maybe the ones Mace was carried up. All universities have them because, as we all know, if you are smart enough to be at college, you are smart enough to climb a bunch of stairs—wait. Okay, just a bit of sarcasm there to point out that academia has a tradition of equating physical and intellectual ability. Beyond the ubiquitous physical structures on university campuses, steep steps can also be theorized as time constraints and deadlines, and even the stigma of requesting disability services themselves. Being newly hemiplegic in college, I used to access my academic advisor's office in a building with those notorious steep steps that even lacked a handrail at the time. This was post-ADA so they did have alternative access on the side, but in any case, I wouldn't have noticed it (my TBI limited my spatial perception and visual acuity). However, those challenges were secondary to how I read the codes of social conduct at the time: I was a young girl who wanted nothing more than to be just like her peers, so there was only one way to access my advisor's office. Going up wasn't so bad, but going down presented too many variables for my body/mind to negotiate, so I had to sit down and scoot on my bottom. I was disabled by physical access problems AND by the way that I read social codes and expectations.

My code breaking was not unlike that of Hephaestus, the ancient Greek god I talked about in the second section, the builder, creator, and trickster who likewise broke through the system's encryption method. Because of his disability (either from birth or injury after Hera rejected him and threw him down from the sky), he could not move forward, but rather moved sideways like a crab. In all his stories, he is using hacks or creative workarounds to achieve his objectives within the normative code. Svetlana Nikitina (2012) has maintained, "Trickster gods in myths seem to offer a working prototype of the hacker. Just like hackers, tricksters defy definition" (p. 135). Importantly, Hephaestus continuously adapted the spatial arrangement to his body and his body to the spatial arrangement out of his creative problem-solving propensity. Here was a working-class god not born with a gift—he had to learn his trade—but with a capacity for cunning to accomplish his goals through whatever means available.

Institutional Swallowing

The potentials of mêtis often get lost in bureaucratic attempts to accommodate disabled people because they do not encourage awareness of the underlying norms that are often more disabling than a staircase. What especially seems to counter the ingenuity-born-of-necessity that can arise out of disability is using blunt instruments to provide academic accommodations. For example, one of the academic accommodations I received was double-time on examinations, and while this was necessary for me to have any hope of success, at times my peers' accusations would sink in: I was cheating. I wasn't hacking, I wasn't coming up with an adaptive measure, because the system anticipated it. The system anticipated that when I had an essay exam, I would go to the testing accommodation center and log in to a computer for not 50 but 100 minutes. Those bureaucratic accommodations were a way of preserving the status quo, of upholding the norms and conventions of a broken system. I will postulate here that I received that accommodation because the institution lacked imagination, the kind of imagination that can better plan more adaptive, more precise interventions. Many of those accommodations (ie, notetaking) are not offered at the graduate level perhaps because

grad students are coded as professionals, which is itself a code for neurotypical, able-bodied people. In that sense, academic accommodations create a glass ceiling that I, for one, have struggled to break through. One answer to Tanya Titchkosky's (2011) question, "What does it mean that bodies, minds, senses, and emotions are being managed under bureaucratic time?" (p. 102) is that students are given unimaginative accommodations by directive of a bureaucracy, which is, by its very nature, unimaginative.

Blunt, bureaucratic accommodations such as extra time on exams, and other unimaginative retrofit accommodations, can be seen as undermining the embodied, situational knowledge that is at the heart of the disabled experience. In *Building Access*, Aimi Hamraie (2017) traced the origins of the curb cut, created by sledgehammer-wielding activists in Berkley. Hamrai maintains that, though curb cuts are for the most part ubiquitous in ADA-sanctioned environments, we must still challenge such simple accommodations "because they risk depoliticizing and oversimplifying the material, epistemic, and technological force of designing ramps and curb cuts for disability access" (p. 102). Eliminating physical barriers does not mean that disability has been accepted, nor does it recognize the creative problem-solving that disabled people do every day. Wheelchair users formerly used hacks to get around the absence of curb cuts by carrying around a piece of plywood. I am not arguing against the necessity of them—rather I am theorizing that physical accommodations such as curb cuts and temporal accommodations such as extra time do not reduce the need to challenge prevailing codes. In this way, such accommodations risk swallowing mêtis itself—absorbing disabled people's adaptive intelligence into standardized fixes that neither honor nor learn from it.

Temporal accommodations are based on the assumption that we all experience time the same. Many disabled people have characterized their relationship with time with the phrase "crip time." Scholars of Disability Studies have characterized crip time as a "flexible approach to normative time frames" (Price, 2011 p. 63). Early articulations of crip time (Zola, 1988; Gill, 1995; Olkin, 1999) tend to reinforce the deficit model of disability and imply that an academic accommodation of "extra" time would be the right intervention. However, Dolmage (2018) identifies crip time as "an epistemology—a way of thinking and moving" (p. 179). It is a way of hacking the system. It is a result of our cunning, our mêtis—it is not a colloquial expression to imply that disabled people are always late. We aren't. Every disabled person I've ever known, myself included, is impeccably punctual, and we go to great lengths to be so. We know what it takes to work with time. Perhaps it is in those "great lengths" (never procrastinating, leaving early, etcetera) that crip time can be approximated. I used to start my papers weeks in advance, not because I needed "extra" time, but because I needed access to time's potential without its inevitable burden. When we design courses, we can honor crip time by centering flexibility—retrofit accommodations do nothing more than contribute to the impenetrable lid on the disabled academic experience. Retrofit accommodations have the capability to dull our propensity for creative adaptations. They swallow us.

If retrofit accommodations have such deleterious potential, then we need a new system. A model for how to build on the skill of rewriting normative codes is provided by imaginative design, which is an extension of what architects Alexander Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013) have called "speculative design." Speculative design "thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives...to create spaces for discussion and

debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely" (p. 2). Imaginative design extends beyond physical space to digital and temporal space. This form of design can help us rewrite normative conventions to value the creative thinking of disabled people. Hacking the system with the goal of adopting imaginative design would create a more welcoming space, experience, and timeline for all body/minds *that can be imagined*. To double down on disabled people's qualifications as master hackers, Garland-Thompson (2011) stated "the individual and collective experience of misfitting can produce the subjugated knowledge, outsider/insider standpoint, or privileged epistemic state from which one could launch a liberatory identity politics" (p. 600). In other words, the experience of being atypical grants one an advantage—smarts, resourcefulness, adaptability, imagination. Disabled people should realize how much they have to offer, now more than ever, as agents of positive change. And to claim this role fully, disabled people must reclaim the mêtis so often swallowed by institutions—our cunning, adaptive knowledge—refusing to let it be absorbed into designs that merely accommodate rather than reimagine.

When I lived in Alexandria, Egypt, years ago, I met a friend whose lower limbs had been blown off by a bomb that was left unattended on the Sinai Peninsula since the 1967 war between Egypt and Israel. He was a sight to see, being severed beneath the ribs, and he knew it, using his startling visage rhetorically to get a donation from a passer-by or a kiss from a girl, which would be inappropriate in an Arabic country under most circumstances. He used a piece of wood outfitted with four wheels on the corners to travel, using the palms of his hands to propel himself. He was fearless. I'd see him sail down the Corniche (the curving highway that separated blocks of high-rise buildings from the Mediterranean) at tremendous speeds, alongside vehicles speeding even faster in the capricious logics of Egyptian traffic. He moved with the deftness and artistry of Hephaestus, a trickster who knew exactly how to navigate his world.

And guess what? I wrote a poem about him!

Noos

Alexandria, Egypt

I have been thinking lately of my friend Noos, severed
beneath the torso, pushing his skateboard with his palms
to that spot near my school where he begged alms,
his lower three-fourths shoved into his ribs after a battle
in the war for the Sinai Coast. With his rotten teeth,
and make-shift skateboard, wheels on a fruit cart's base,
Noos thanked God in repetitions of an aspirated h:
"Alhumdilila, alhumdilila! I almost died," he said. "Now
I drink tea." Homeless, his entourage of school girls fought

to bring him a cup of tea after class. He kissed their cheeks.

The first time I saw Noos, October sunset, I thought
he was working in a manhole, his legs balanced
on pipes beneath the street. I walked closer and saw
that he was severed below the fifth rib. Each time
I saw him, I wondered how he excreted waste,
in what dark alley, and which lucky girl got to handle
his prosthetic penis, but I simply asked him how he was:
"A'ml eh, ya-captain?" "Alhumdilila, alhumdilila!"
I never asked Noos where his family was, or if the girls
sustain him, even in Alexandria's streets on the first eve
of Ramadan, when the Mediterranean breeze rolls
off the sea and through the open windows of celebrating
families, carrying their music to Noos's sunburned ears.
I never asked him if he likes the girls who kiss him,
or those who demure, or if he had been a woman
and didn't have to go to battle, would he marry for position
or for heart?

The first time I saw Noos, I thought
he was a regular man with a regular build, legs
the laboring thin of the Egyptian poor. I walked closer
and saw that he was severed below the fifth rib.
I squinted in the Alexandrian sunset's uncanny brightness.
He waved to me, and I waved back, though I was too stunned
to give him my spare change, and until the next time
I saw him and bent down so he could kiss my cheek,
and carried a conversation while resting on my knees,
after I pressed my coins into his soiled hand
and heard him proclaim, *"Thank God, thank God!*

I'm alive!" the incisor hanging on to blackened gums,

I had thought that he was one of those things that appear

after too little water and too much sun.

Conclusion

This paper has been structured around 6 poems that were meant to shake up the traditional, academic paper genre. I've ventured into anecdote, making this paper resemble a work of creative nonfiction at times. I've also covered a lot of myth, all the while making bold accusations at the institution. I mean, shouldn't I be grateful that there are academic accommodations at all? Something is better than nothing, right? Such sarcasm reminds us that one of this discipline's jobs by virtue is to find out what is just and unjust and to push for what is just. Anyway, I guess you could say I went all over the place, all within the genre of an academic paper. Is that what you'd call it?

Perhaps you have been irritated by the fact that I didn't follow the rules. Perhaps you've been bothered by my casual use of "phronesis" or "code breaking," without more scholarly explication that told you something new. Or perhaps you've been giving me the benefit of the doubt, letting me sail free with my poetic license. Some readers may have read some of the discontinuities in my prose as failures to provide a cohesive analysis. The reason why I have not obeyed each dictum of the academic genre is because I'm challenging the conventions of linear expository writing. I'm challenging with mêtis.

In the "Phenomenology of Error," published years ago in *College Composition and Communication*, Joseph Williams (1981) discussed the particular way writing teachers respond to error, and he concludes that there are four possible scenarios: We notice the error and it bothers us. We notice the error and it doesn't bother us. We don't notice the error and it doesn't bother us (ignorance is bliss!). Or we don't notice the error and it still bothers us (I guess we're cranky that errors even exist). In a similar way, I will predict four types of reactions to an academic paper:

1. Do something unconventional, and bother readers.
2. Do something conventional, and don't bother readers.
3. Do something unconventional, and don't bother readers.
4. Do something conventional, and bother readers (still cranky after all these years)

Williams (1981) said that when we set out as readers with an expectation (as writing teachers with expectant red pens), we inform our experience reading "with an intention to experience the material constitution of the text (p. 159). So, in my case, I already know that scenarios 2 and 4 are out. Therefore, in a warm embrace of specious logic, I guess I have a 50% chance of this paper being successful, and in this high-stress, competitive experience of being a Ph.D. candidate, that's good enough for me.

Williams' (1981) article was itself a little research project that had 100 errors in the text, and he called on

readers to recall which ones they noticed, with the errors steadily becoming more noticeable and egregious. He says that if you didn't notice errors on the first read, that's because you were not expecting them in the first place—you were reading like a reader who reads an author they trust. He concludes that that is the way we should approach student essays, not expecting error and only noting them when one caught us off guard, to "define categories of error other than those defined by systems of grammar or a theory of social class" (p. 159).

I wonder how the expectations of this academic genre shape the way you read my paper. If you were to grant me accommodations for writing in this form, what would they look like? I've tried to hack the system of the academic paper genre using the available means (my craft). Did I succeed?

Biography

Kristen Hoggatt-Abader (she/her) is a poet and scholar who teaches writing at the University of Arizona. She is the former "Ask a Poet" advice columnist for *The Smart Set*, and her research and creative work has been published widely in literary and cultural journals.

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#WhatIEatInADay *As A Fat Person Not on A Diet: Eating Online as Feminist Performative Symbolic Resistance

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Abstract: In this essay, I examine how eating operates as a feminist rhetorical act using digital food diaries as a case study. Tracing digital food diaries tagged with the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson, I argue that when employed by fat vloggers, eating operates as performative symbolic resistance (PSR). Drawing from Alicia K. Hatcher's PSR analytical framework, I examine how fat bodies, embodied eating, and online visibility work together to push back against normative diet narratives and take up space online to promote a feminist agenda. This work builds on scholarship in feminist food rhetorics, critical eating studies, and fat studies to expand our definitions of feminist activism online. Through this analysis, I argue that eating is a rhetorical act which changes depending on the body and place in which it happens.

Keywords: food rhetoric, eating, anti-fatness, spatial whiteness, social media

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"To be fat and feminine and any race in 'America' is disruptive, and in a lived politics sort of way, makes one who dares to be such, especially if unapologetic, kind of an instant feminist. Ultimately, being constructed as fat (and, accordingly, ugly in many cases) and feminine means that one is walking, breathing, and eating against the grain; one exists in spite of, as spectacle, for many."

There is no attribution to the epigraph quote; it should read:

-Krystal A. Smalls, *Fat, Black, and Ugly*

Introduction

I cannot remember a time in my life when I didn't think about my weight or what I ate. As a child these things were inescapable to me. SlimFast was a staple in my family's fridge. In our bathroom sat a collection of magazines like *Woman's Day* always offering confusing messages of how to lose weight alongside recipes for cakes and holiday treats. Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers advertisements played on our living room tv. A scale sat in my closet. My grandmother regularly announced her diets by sharing at Sunday lunches that *she had quit bread!* It seemed like every month my mom had a new diet to try—cabbage soup, Special K, HCG… Weight and womanhood were inextricably tied together for me; dieting was just another rite of passage.

I was around twelve when I started my own self-designated diet, prompted by a group of girls sharing their weights during reading class. Around fifteen I was invited by my school's gym teacher to join his "weight loss club"—an alternative for kids he felt were "struggling" during regular exercises in class. Our task was to lose one pound each week, which would be recorded by weighing ourselves in at the start of class in front of our peers. Diligently, I recorded my food intake in a journal and lost weight through a restrictive calorie deficit that I adopted off and on in the following decade. As I got older, fitness and weight loss media changed, and magazines gave way to to Instagram sponsorships; diet culture changed to "wellness" culture and diaries changed to calorie tracking apps. Yet, in all these shifts one thing stayed the same: the pressure to

be *smaller* by eating *less*.

I share my story in this introduction because like many women, the conflict between food and weight happens daily. I am bombarded online by diet content only exacerbated by my demographics and algorithms shaped by my research around food. At some points I've felt like a fraud presenting on how food has been used to liberate women when there have been many times in my life when I have hated food for how it made me feel about myself…trapped between myself, a scale, and a dinner plate.

As Melissa A. Goldthwaite (2017) shared in her introduction to *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics,*

> Messages surrounding food— its availability, its preparation, its consumption, its role in the lives of individuals, families, and cultures— are multiple and conflicting. Food is sustenance and poison, fuel and temptation, home culture and one of the most memorable introductions to new cultures and places. Preparing food is drudgery and joy, duty, and delight (p. 2).

As she points out, just as much as these messages can shape us, they can also be reflected on, questioned, critiqued, and changed (Goldthwaite, 2017, p. 2). I also find hope that in all the confusion and mixed messages about food and gender there is space for resistance, healing, and moving forward. I share these stories because I want to position how I come to this work and why it matters to me. Feminism can be contradictory and present challenges, but I believe it also provides space to question these contradictions and sort through them to find meaning. If "who is speaking and who is silenced" is a core feminist issue, as Vicki Tolar Collins (1999) has argued, then who is allowed to eat freely and who is not is equally of concern for feminist scholars whose work explores issues of gender, materiality, embodiment, and food (p. 545). Though mundane, the reinforcement and resistance of gendered eating practices is a feminist issue in need of greater attention.

Within this essay, I examine how eating operates as a feminist rhetorical act using digital food diaries as a case study. Tracing digital food diaries tagged with the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson, I argue that when employed by fat vloggers, eating operates as performative symbolic resistance (PSR). As explained by Alicia K. Hatcher (2021), PSR is an ideal tool for rhetoricians to analyze activism by focusing on "what occurs when people use their bodies and spaces and places to engage in resistant acts" (p. 19). Using PSR's analytical framework of *who, what, when, where, how, why, and intentionality*, I examine how fat bodies, embodied eating, and online visibility work together to push back against normative, diet narratives and take up space online to promote a feminist agenda. This work builds on scholarship in feminist food rhetorics, critical eating studies, and fat studies to expand our definitions of feminist activism online. Through this analysis, I argue that eating is a rhetorical act which changes depending on the body and place in which it happens.

While food artifacts such as cookbooks have been explored as a women's rhetorical tool (Dubisar, 2016; Mastrangelo, 2020; Moeller and Frost, 2016), eating itself as a feminist act is still underexplored. Examining digital food diaries created by fat vloggers reveals the ways that everyday acts such as eating *become* feminist by the body they are enacted through. When enacted by fat bodies, unapologetic eating online can operate as a radical form of survival and resistance against colonial structures that value some bodies over others. Author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) has argued that political and economic systems encourage self-hate through body shame, resulting in living day to day life in a state of constant fear (p. 52). She calls

this state "body terrorism" which she defined as:

> A hideous tower whose primary support beam is the belief that there is a hierarchy of bodies. We uphold the system by internalizing this hierarchy and using it to situate our own value and worth in the world. When our personal value is dependent on the lesser value of other bodies, radical self-love is unachievable" (Taylor, 2018, p. 58).

Examining the ways that self-hatred can be reinforced or resisted in genres such as digital food diaries can help us to understand how eating becomes transformative. With emphasis on the descriptor—*radical*—self-love in this context is not merely about self-esteem. It is political, anti-racist, and feminist because it pushes back against violent colonial hierarchies that value some bodies over others.

Feminist acts of radical self-love, however, come at a cost. Like many activists, fat vloggers who participate in digital food diaries risk opening themselves up to conflict through harassment, trolling, and hypervisibility online. While privileged bodies are able to "slip in and out of visibility and invisibility easily and when it is convenient for them," marginalized bodies in online spaces are often simultaneously dismissed and ridiculed simply for being present (Gailey, 2023, p.20). The risk of violence towards fat women online increases even further for BIPOC women who are already hyper(in)visible in digital spaces and whose bodies are already criticized online as "deviant, ugly, disgusting, or weird" (Johansson, 2021, p. 115). By continuing to take up space in a platform populated by "normative" (i.e. white, thin) bodies and moralized diets, fat vloggers engage in a symbolic performance of activism. The act of recording and uploading a food diary online comes at great risk to fat people and deserves serious attention from scholars.

The Rhetorics of Eating: A Feminist Approach

Feminist rhetoricians have long been interested in food and cooking as a site of women's rhetorical practices. Scholars such as Rosalyn Collings Eves (2005) and Carrie Helms Tippen (2017) have shown how cookbooks can be used within recovery work and feminist historiography. Others such Lisa Mastrangelo (2015) and Amy Mecklenburg-Faenger (2018) have explored how community cookbooks represent shared identities and women's cultural rhetorics. Scholars like Elizabeth J. Fleitz (2010) and Jamie White-Farnham (2012) have argued that recipes operate as a form of literacy that women use and remix for a variety of purposes. Lastly, landmark collections such as Goldthwaite's (2017) *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics* have firmly demonstrated the breadth and depth of work within the field with investigations into topics such as the senses and embodiment within recipes (Cognard-Black), commodification of women's imagery within food packaging (Salas), and construction of gender in diet books (Ingalls).

With all these various approaches, we have come to what many call a "feminist food rhetoric"—a method of approaching the field of food studies from a feminist rhetorical standpoint. As Abby M. Dubisar (2015) explains, a feminist food rhetoric builds on critical food studies by "bringing to the conversation rhetorical standpoints that show how food discourses subvert, complicate, and strengthen dominant understandings of gender in persuasive ways" (p. 119). For scholars interested in examining food artifacts as tools for activism, this approach recognizes that genres like cookbooks might be liberating for some, but not all. Technical communication scholars Marie E. Moeller and Erin A. Frost (2016) warned that as a technology, cookbooks

are not always used for subversion (p. 1). Their examination of cookbooks calls for a wider understanding of cooking texts beyond just the content of the page, but also "their situation in space and time" which "produces understandings of what women are or what they should be" (Moeller & Frost, 2016, p. 5). They show that cookbooks must be situated within the specific contexts of their production, rather than lumped together as one liberatory unified genre. Amy Mecklenburg-Faenger (2018) has shared similar concerns over the tendency for the field of feminist rhetorics to categorize cookbooks as feel-good spaces. She argued that food artifacts such as women's community cookbooks masquerade as harmless community rhetorics while perpetuating harmful ideologies of white supremacy (p. 229). Food and cooking rhetorics are complex technologies with potential to be both liberatory and oppressive. Just because a genre has been used persuasively by women, does not make it feminist.

I expand on the existing scholarship on cookbooks, recipes, and imagery within rhetorical studies by examining eating as a rhetorical practice within online spaces. Like Moeller and Frost, I argue that eating must be situated within the specific contexts of space, time, and importantly—the body. By focusing on how the body frames rhetorical understandings of eating, this essay brings rhetorical studies into conversation with the interdisciplinarity field of critical eating studies. As explained by Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2012), critical eating studies "shift food studies attention away from the *what* of food to the *how* of eating" by recognizing eating as an act which is raced, classed, and gendered (p. 11). Under this framework, the focus is on the embodied, performative act of eating rather than just on food or food texts, which shifts greater attention to the body engaging in the act. Allison Hayes-Conroy & Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008) noted that "eating – due to its sensual, visceral nature – is a strategic place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power" (p. 462).

This understanding of eating as a site of knowledge is foregrounded in the most recent work by Jennifer Lin LeMesurier (2023) whose monograph *Inscrutable Eating* argued that narratives around race are bound up with processes of the body (p. 18). She has identified eating as a vulnerable practice which is overladen with beliefs about the right and wrong way to inhabit a body and perform its identities" (LeMesurier, 2023, p. x). Critical eating studies help to extend current conversations around food, feminism, and rhetoric to focus more explicitly on eating from an intersectional framework. An examination of eating as a distinctly feminist rhetorical practice then might ask how eating itself can, to borrow from Dubisar (2018): "subvert, complicate, and strengthen dominant understandings of gender in persuasive ways" (p. 119). Examining digital food diaries through a critical eating lens considers how eating is rhetorically shaped through power structures and is bound up in beliefs about the right and wrong way to inhabit a body in online spaces. In the following section, I will explore how eating within digital food diaries both reinforces and subverts normative understandings of gender in online spaces.

Subverting the Genre: Gender Performance & Resistance within Digital Food Diaries

#WhatIEatInADay videos are a style of vlogging that operate as a digital food diary by recording everything that a person eats in a day. Shared across social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, their popularity has skyrocketed in the past few years as a form of lifestyle content, although

authors like Noël Duan note that food diaries, especially those of celebrities, have been popular in the media for a long time. In these videos, users (most often thin, white women), vlog their daily intake, promising to provide a real look into what they eat that day. The videos range from professional recordings of celebrity diets such as *Harper's BAZAAR's* (2020) Food Diaries series to first-person vlogs from social media users. A key feature of this genre is that they present an "authentic" account of what someone actually eats in a day. Many critics, however, have argued that these videos are performative, curated, and harmful to users who struggle with disordered eating and body image issues (Paul, 2021).

Figure 1 Harper's BAZAAR's Food Diary of Kylie Jenner (11 million views as of 2024).

For this project, I focused on TikTok because of its increased popularity as a food media platform and the popularity of digital food diaries on the platform. I examined videos on TikTok using the hashtags:

- #WhatIEatInADay and corresponding hashtags #wieiad; #EatWithMe; #WhatIEat
- #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPersonNotOnADiet and corresponding hashtags; #WhatIEatInADayAsA-Fat; #RealisticWhatIEatInADay; #wieiadfatty; #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatty

Over the course of three years (2022-2025), I explored the top results of the hashtags approximately every four months using the "trending" tab. Over time, more hashtags were added based on suggested content and trending key terms. TikTok's search results also include videos that do not explicitly list the hashtag but use key terms in the video description or audio. I provide a more in-depth discussion of this platform feature in the later section "Challenges, Consequences, and Limitations." What is discussed in this essay is based on my own personal experience of the hashtags from my account. TikTok utilizes highly personalized algorithms and content suggestions based on browser data, cookies, and previously viewed content. Additionally, it restricts the ability to view content without an account login. To account for this skewed dataset, I have analyzed the examples discussed in this essay alongside historical scholarship on weight bias and fat narratives over time as well as research on health and online wellness culture. This constellation helps to paint a fuller picture of how digital food diaries operate within a culture of anti-fat bias online and the ways that individual users resist this bias through their own content creation.

While #WhatIEatInADay videos may not explicitly give advice on how or what to eat, returning to Moeller and Frost, they operate as a form of technology that produces particular narratives and ideas about women and projects authority to those watching. Search results for #WhatIEatInADay on TikTok return thousands of videos, most of which feature thumbnails of young, thin, white women's bodies (rather than just food). Titles like "What I eat in a day as a model," "What I eat in a day as a nutritionist," and "What I eat in a day *just a normal girl," contribute to the assumption that what a user eats is tied to their identity.

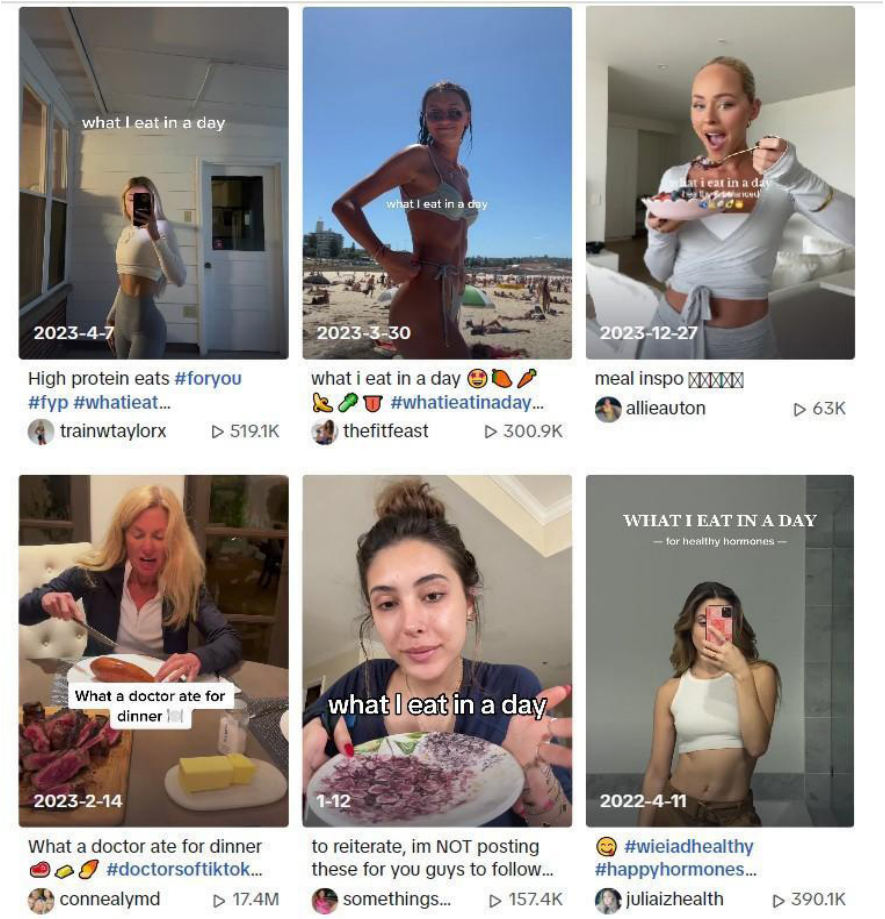

Figure 2 A Screenshot of TikTok's Search Results for #WhatIEatInADay.

Many videos follow the traditional food diary genre by sharing nutritional advice, calorie information, or weight loss statistics. The underlying assumption is not just that people want to know *what* someone eats, but that they will learn to eat in a way that will perform the identity of that particular poster. Here, the body and not the food itself is central to the interpretation of eating. Although digital food diaries center food as the subject, the act of eating is being rhetorically shaped and interpreted through the identity of the person recording the video and internalized by the viewer. This underlying logic explains how digital food diaries reinforce narratives about weight, gender, and diet even when the eating practices displayed are considered "unhealthy." So long as the person eating on screen performs their identity correctly, it doesn't really matter *what* they eat.

As a counter to these videos, many users have uploaded their own vlogs with a disclaimer: #WhatIEatInADay *As a fat person not on a diet. Fat vloggers who participate in this trend specifically counter the criticisms of digital food diaries as inauthentic, consumerist, and normative. Exploring the hashtag brings videos

and images not just of food, but of fat people eating on camera all pointedly telling the viewer that they are not interested in dieting. In terms of structure and content, many videos tagged #WhatIEatInADayAsAFat-Person are nearly identical to those of thin users with similar poses, camera angles, or video style. I argue that where they are subversive is in their use of the body.

Figure 3 #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson Results from TikTok..

Many resistant acts by women explored by rhetoricians often flip the script by utilizing traditional women's genres to advocate for radical ideas. Consider for example how suffragists utilized cookbooks to advocate for women's rights (Mastrangelo, 2020) or how women organizations such as CODEPINK use "cookbooks" to advocate for peace (Dubisar, 2016). Digital food diaries operate similarly by taking a genre traditionally used for restrictive eating and flipping it to push back against diet norms. How #WhatIEatInADayAsAFat-Person differs is in the embodiment of the author on screen. Whereas women suffragists were able to successfully utilize cookbook genres to advocate for change, they were successful because they visibly embodied what a good wife and mother looked like and used cookbooks to reinforce this "quiet" feminine imagery. In contrast, because fat vloggers do not fit the normative image online, their use of digital food diaries does not operate the same. Although digital food diaries are also a "quiet" form of activism, fat bodies always perform as "loud." The act of eating is being rhetorically shaped, not by food itself, but by bodies eating.

Cooking is a feminized act that can reinforce the image of the "good" woman but *eating* for the fat person reinforces the image of the "bad" fat person. Fat studies scholars define the "bad" fat person as a fat person who unapologetically eats. They do not give excuses for their size (such as medical histories), apologize for their habits, or discuss their efforts to diet or lose weight (Pausé, 2015). Instead of shame, the "bad" fat person embraces eating publicly. Lindy West, author of *Shrill,* explained that fat people are expected to perform a "public penance" and when they insist on living a happy public life and staying fat are met with hostility (Valenti, 2018). By eating online, rather than just presenting food images or creating a private log, fat vloggers resist expected norms of how a fat person should behave. Instead of utilizing a food diary to restrictively eat, fat vloggers disrupt normative discourses around fatness, food, and obesity.

Eating as Performative Symbolic Resistance

By creating digital food diaries, I argue that fat vloggers engage in performative symbolic resistance (PSR). Alicia K. Hatcher theorizes PSR as "what occurs when bodies, infrastructures, and political struggles meet" (para. 2). Drawing from scholarship in performance studies and performativity, Hatcher develops PSR as a language and analytical tool to describe how people use their body to engage in protest and identifies five characteristics which she argues PSR acts share,

1. The act must be performed by a member of/members of a marginalized community.
2. The act can be a verbal or non-verbal act.
3. The/A marginalized body must be used to both symbolize an embodied resistance and engage in the performance of a symbolic act.
4. The act must be performed in a white-dominant space or place for the purposes of transforming the meaning of the space, allowing it to become a symbol of resistance.
5. The act must be intentional, performed with a specific goal or purpose in mind.

When combined, these criteria form what Hatcher (2023) refers to as the "PSR Puzzle," an analytical tool used by researchers to determine acts of PSR. As shown in the diagram below, the pieces of *who, what, when, where, how, why,* and *intentionality* work together to form an act of PSR and distinguish it from other forms of activism.

Figure 4: PSR Puzzle. Image includes a puzzle diagram which labels puzzle pieces who, what, when, where, how, why, and intentionality (Hatcher, 2021, p. 10)

While Hatcher (2021) theorized PSR through the activism of Black athletes within physical sporting events, she notes that it is a flexible framework that can be used to analyze spaces both physical and virtual (p. 12) and can to some extent be used to "analyze the resistant acts of marginalized populations generally" (p. 100). Like other examples discussed by Hatcher (ACT UP, Standing Rock, and BLM), the digital food diaries discussed here make use of physical, marginalized (re: fat, BIPOC, women, non-binary) bodies for resistance in white-dominant online spaces. As I will go into further details in the following section, PSR is particularly useful for critically examining digital food diaries because it can be used to highlight the link between racism and anti-fatness in America and the violence towards marginalized bodies that results from this history. PSR's additional attention to how acts respond to specific crises and moments in time is valuable

for a study of digital food diaries that respond to platforms that glorify disordered eating and weight loss content. These factors give meaning to acts of eating online and are necessary to fully understand how they operate rhetorically. In the following section I utilize Hatcher's theory of PSR to examine specific components of #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson to establish it as a feminist rhetorical act.

Digital Landscapes: TikTok, Diet Culture, and the Hypervisible Fat Body (When + Where)

In this section I examine the role that space, place, and time play in the act of eating. Using the concept of kairos, Hatcher argues that protests are about taking advantage of an opportunity at a particular time within a white-dominant space in order to resist. Because marginalized bodies are not represented within the space they protest, they lean into their hypervisibility—effectively making their body's location a key part of the argument. In order to demonstrate the hypervisibility of marginalized fat bodies online, I first argue that digital spaces like TikTok are white-dominant. Modern social media spaces embody diet cultures which perpetuate historical intertwined visual images of whiteness and thinness as representative of femininity.

Hatcher (2023) defined a white-dominant space as "an environment—either physical or virtual—that has historically been controlled by and served white Americans and it is characterized by the existence of an audience in the form of a public" (para. 6). Michael Warner has identified publics in spaces that unite strangers and is constituted through attention (Warner, 2002, pp. 56-57). TikTok clearly meets the criteria of publics because it unites strangers online via attention to user-created content. Thus established, to better understand how social media sites such as TikTok are white-dominant, we turn to the history of fatness in America.

While a fat person can be any race or gender, fatness as a concept is bound up in narratives and beliefs about race, gender, and class. Fatness is a loose identity that has changed definitions over time, and hence, the idea of fat bodies as unfeminine or undesirable is more recent. Fat phobia in the West, according to sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019), stems directly from the transatlantic slave trade and Protestant religious ideologies during the early nineteenth century. Fatness, she argued, became stigmatized as black and sinful, and white women were directed to become slender as a result. She has noted the importance of understanding "the slender ideal" and "fat phobia" as two intertwined, raced developments. She states,

> The fear of the imagined "fat black woman" was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women. This is critical, since most analyses of race and aesthetics describe the experiences of either black people (and other people of color) or white people (Strings, 2019, p. 6).

We cannot understand fatness in America or the implied social contracts of how fat people are expected to behave without acknowledging that fat stigmatization is historically rooted in control of women via demonization of Black women. These ideologies further developed a power system that ranked bodies in a hierarchy (to return to Taylor's (2018) theory of body terrorism). The promotion of thinness online, then, can be understood as an extension of colonization and racism that has negative effects on women across different backgrounds and races, but which disproportionately affects BIPOC women. Researchers like Karen Wilkes (2021) explained that digital media specifically promotes the pursuit of thinness because "visual language

of these ideals stands in for white femininity" (p. 9). TikTok can be understood as a white-dominant space, because it reinforces dangerous diet cultures which are rooted in racism while centering whiteness visually through its content.

Careful analysis of spatial design can help us to see how white-dominant discourses of fat phobia and slender ideals shape social media spaces. Jessica Enoch (2019) explained,

> Human actors create space not only through design and material composition but also through the rules and expectations for the space, the presence or absence of bodies and objects within the space, the activities that happen within the space, and the symbolic representation of it (pp. 10-11).

In physical spaces we can easily identify the structural designs that indicate that fatness is not welcome—seats on airplanes, weight limits, narrow door frames, booths, or tight classroom chairs. Within digital spaces these types of structural designs can be harder to "see" because digital infrastructures are often hidden from users. This is why attention to visibility (who is present and who is absent) as well as activities (behavior that is praised or berated) can be useful for understanding how digital spaces are produced and the ways that white-dominant norms of thinness and fat phobia are reinforced.

It is not just that spaces like TikTok have instances of sexism, racism, or fat phobia, but rather that social media sites are designed to encourage that behavior. One investigative report shared internal TikTok documentation that outlined new rules for algorithms on the site. Within these documents were policies to de-prioritize uploads by users who were considered "less attractive," including individuals with "abnormal body shape, chubby, obvious beer belly, obese" (Biddle et al., 2020, para. 8). In the policy document the reason stated was that "if the character's appearance…is not good, the video will be much less attractive" (Biddle et al., 2020, para. 7). While these types of policies do not remove videos made by fat users, it does demonstrate how algorithms within platforms promote content based on appearance. Algorithmic design has a huge impact on spaces like TikTok, because unlike some social media sites, the default page on the app, labeled "for you," is curated based on algorithms rather than just accounts or hashtags followed.

Although TikTok is a newer social site, preliminary studies on the app have indicated that overwhelmingly diet culture dominates the app within content related to health, food, and appearance. Diet culture is a term used to describe the systems of belief that promote thinness through moralized and medicalized discourses around eating, food, and weight. While these narratives are presented as scientific fact, they are historically rooted in a history of racism that used weight as a means of demonizing Black women in order to argue for racial superiority (Strings and Bacon, 2020). Today, these narratives are promoted through the argument that weight equals health and that eating behaviors are directly linked to the two (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022, p. 4). This link between health and weight has historically been used as a means of surveillance, exclusion, and violence towards BIPOC bodies while uplifting others.

Spaces like TikTok are rhetorically produced through repeated content, images, and interactions that reinforce diet culture. Research studies have found that health and nutrition related content on TikTok often focuses on weight loss and body objectification (Raiter et al 2023) and weight normative views of health rath-

er than size inclusive content (Minadeo & Pope, 2022, p. 6). These trends have also impacted the app's technical structure. For example, in early 2025 the app introduced a "chubby filter" which used AI to alter user images to appear fatter. It was subsequently removed in March 2025 after many criticized the filter's use in body shaming and weight loss content (Ronald, 2025). TikTok's proliferation of diet culture is so dangerous and popular that in June 2025 the platform had to outright ban the hashtag #SkinnyTok due to its promotion of eating disorder content (Riddle, 2025). Today, any searches for #SkinnyTok result in a link to resources for finding support (as seen in Fig. 4 below).

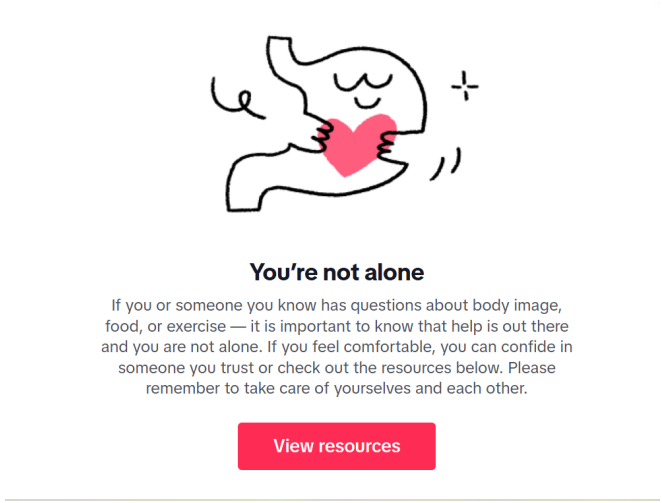

Figure 5: Screenshot of a failed search for #SkinnyTok.

Mapping out the digital landscape of spaces like TikTok demonstrates how visible a fat body is when eating online. Fat users who subvert popular hashtags like #WhatIEatInADay are able to utilize genres which previously have been used to suppress fatness in order to advocate for change. The hypervisibility of fat users in #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson is a key part of changing digital spaces to embrace fatness by visually filling people's feed with images of fat bodies eating. Hashtags take advantage of trends online, giving fat activists momentum and access to virtual spaces that might otherwise be closed to fat people. Further, unlike platforms like YouTube which usually need to be clicked in order to view, videos on TikTok are fast, short, and play automatically when on screen, making them more difficult to avoid when scrolling. Although this design feature often leads to the promotion of diet culture content, it can mean that body positive videos that do break through algorithms end up being seen by users who otherwise wouldn't engage.

*A Fat Person Not on A Diet: Coming out as Fat (Who + What)

Within this section I turn to the "who" and "what" portion of the PSR puzzle to analyze how fat, as an identity, frames eating as a feminist action. Within PSR, Hatcher argues that individuals perform an act that connects the protester to a collective marginalized identity. Identity in this way is understood as both the way the protester performs identity as well as how their body is read by others. Acts of PSR differ from allyship because protesters must embody the identity they are fighting on behalf of.

Users who engage in #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson identify as fat, a collective identity which is oppressed and marginalized in both online spaces, the media, and most importantly, through systemic bias in

healthcare. Although the definitions and boundaries of fatness as a social construct change over time, they are always racial and gendered. Through the paradigm of the "imagined fat black woman," white women are disciplined to be thin in order to avoid fatness and hence, Blackness (Strings, 2019). The concept of fatness as an unhealthy or even unattractive feature is rooted in the belief that Black women are *too much*, "deviant," "excessive" (Smalls, 2021, p. 13). Margaret Robinson (2019) noted that this same colonial logic was used to justify assimilation of indigenous women whose bodies were considered is "too big, out of control, and getting larger" (p. 25). While fat or fatness can be self-identified (such as the users in this study) and/or "read" onto the body, these readings are always enmeshed with beliefs about which bodies matter and which bodies need intervention. Because fatness is a social construction, the definitions and boundaries of who is considered fat change over time in order to fit new agendas and purposes. As explained by Stefanie A. Jones, "the term 'fat' pushes the limits of definitional boundaries in its looseness; because it can be used to critique any imagined difference from the social ideal" (Jones, 2014, p. 33). If fatness can be read onto any*body,* then how can we determine whether a person's eating is performative symbolic resistance?

While fat bodies generally share characteristics of being outside normative understandings of "thin" and by default white—self-identification as fat points to a user's connection with shared collectives. Here, the use of the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson alongside other popular hashtags like #PlusSize, #FatLiberation, or #AntiDiet, work to mark the body as fat and establish a connection with others. Like normative digital food diaries which label videos with identities such as "as a model" or "just a normal girl," many digital food diaries under the collective hashtag point not just to fatness, but to a dismissal of dieting or an embrace of happiness. Consider for example one video by a user on TikTok who starts her food diary with, "What I eat in a day as a FAT person who's not trying to lose weight" (@sylviathegnomad). Other users like @twotabbytarot label her videos with "What I eat as a happy, fat woman." These types of captions indicate to the audience that fat users are aware of how their body is read and the expectations for how it should behave. As Hatcher (2025) noted in her essay, "Embodying Resistance," acts within PSR result from a "cultural collective understanding—born out of lived and embodied experiences" (Hatcher, 2025, p. 115). These types of statements indicate that fat users have a cultural collective understanding of how they are expected to behave, which is developed out of their lived experiences as fat people. By telling the audience they are not interested in dieting they push back on beliefs and expected behaviors by embracing both their body and their actions. These statements wouldn't make sense to users if fat bodies weren't expected to diet or be unhappy.

Many fat scholars call this performance "coming out" because of how the act queers fat embodiment and rejects normative standards for how to eat, behave, and act online. This form of "coming out" acts as a destigmatizing strategy that affirms fatness and reclaims the term as a neutral identity rather than an insult (Saguy and Ward, 2011, p. 2). Fat activist and scholar, Cat Pausé (2015, para. 3) explained that because fatness is an identity in which the person is held responsible for the stigma (i.e.: *you're only being bullied because you choose to stay fat; you could receive better healthcare if you lost weight*), then they often are expected to manage their identity via passing, withdrawing, or covering themselves. A fourth option, "coming out," disrupts these stigmas by rejecting demands made to change, lose weight, hide, or stay silent. Fat people who "come out" perform fatness "wrong" because they act in resistance to expectations.

Coming out as "fat" or "obese" performs fatness publicly without shame. Videos tagged with #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson are less about what individuals eat, and more about showing individuals eating without shame, an act which isn't expected for fat people and can result in violence, hostility, and bullying within social media spaces. Fat users who share digital food diaries demonstrate an understanding of fat struggles, and an expectation of hostility as can be seen in the disclaimers or context they provide. For example, one video states, "if you don't like fat people eating scroll" (@simplyshay30). Disclaimers such as these recognize that fat people are aware that the act of eating as a fat person is not considered an acceptable behavior online, that simply engaging in the behavior will anger others. Returning to the PSR puzzle, these acts demonstrate a resistance "against established expectations for how bodies are expected to *exist* and *behave* in public space" (Hatcher, 2025, p. 120).

Digital rhetoric scholars have noted that online spaces punish marked or marginalized bodies simply for existing, an understanding reflected by users (Clinnin & Manthey, 2019, p. 31). One user states, "This is what I eat in a day as a fat girl that is literally just existing" (@tonsablush). Fat people understand their behavior will elicit comments even if they are "literally just existing." Simultaneously these declarations also recognize *eating* as a daily practice needed for existence but read differently depending on who is eating. This language recognizes that fat users not only understand their marginalization within white-dominant social media spaces, but also that their behavior is considered political regardless of what they are doing. Because eating is directly connected to the stigma around weight, eating online can be seen as an embodied performance which resists what is expected of fat users.

Intentional Eating: Coalitions of Anti-Diet Movement (Intentionality+Why)

Overall, #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson works to symbolically push back against diet culture and the belief that fat people should be stigmatized for eating publicly. Utilizing TikTok as a platform, fat vloggers lean into their hypervisibility within a space that has not been designed for them and promotes openly hostile content against fat bodies. In this section I situate these acts within broader anti-diet movements in order to demonstrate the intentionality of digital food diaries as a form of activism. Hatcher (2021) has defined intentionality as:

> A consciousness/mental state—simultaneously self-referential and group-oriented— that arises when a person from a marginalized population (subject) pays attention to systems contributing to their marginalization (objects). It is a purpose-driven, action-oriented concept concerned with how marginalized populations try to make sense of their environment while simultaneously forming and engaging in approaches designed to critique and change the world in which they live for the betterment of those with whom they share a common group consciousness (p. 76).

While users may be eating, recording, and uploading individually, many do so intentionally as part of a collective movement to destigmatize fatness and transform the way people eat and talk about food. This decades-long collective movement has become even more critical at a time in which weight loss drugs are on the rise and social media glorifies disordered eating to wider audiences—particularly young children online.

The anti-diet movement is a counter movement against food and weight myths that equate health to

weight and is connected toother movements such as fat acceptance, fat liberation, and health at every size.[1] The coalition of the anti-diet movement include feminists, fat activists, and healthcare professionals who recognize that dieting is a cultural practice which has reinforced harmful norms about food and women's bodies (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022, p. 2). Many fat vloggers who participate in digital food diaries demonstrate an intentional alignment with the anti-diet movement by utilizing a range of hashtags and captions which resist and push back against moralizing eating such as #AntiDiet, #FatLiberation, #FoodIsLove, #AntiDietCulture, and #FoodFreedom. These hashtags contextualize eating performances with specific messages.

Anti-diet intentionality can also be seen in the way that users frame their digital food diaries by explicitly asking or reminding viewers that they are not interested in weight loss advice. For example, one user explains during her video, "as a reminder I'm not looking for any guidance or advice" (@stephhello77). These types of statements acknowledge that by eating as a fat person, users anticipate getting unsolicited weight loss advice or guidance on how to start a diet. Scholars note that these types of reactions to fat people eating (diet advice) are a direct result of the ways that weight has been coded as "health." Tanisha Jemma Rose Spratt (2021) explains that "This shaming language is rooted in healthist discourse that promotes a 'facts over feelings' approach to excess weight, whereby any attempt to positively recognise bodies that are deemed medically unhealthy is deemed both morally wrong and potentially harmful" (p. 95). Understood through colonial lenses, bodies that mirror white-dominant ideals (i.e.: white, thin) deserve body autonomy, whereas women whose bodies are in excess require intervention (Robinson, 2019, p. 20). Anti-diet protesters recognize that intervention via unsolicited diet advice is prompted by the very act of existing and eating on screen as a fat person and combat this by shutting diet talk down. Across digital food diaries statements like, "I don't care about dieting" or "What I eat in a day as a fatty that doesn't care about being skinny" demonstrate a rejection of diet culture both through clear language as well as their commitment to continue eating, recording, and existing online.

Users who participate in the hashtag #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson engage with principles of fat acceptance, particularly destigmatization of the word "fat." The goal of destigmatizing "fatness" is to divorce fatness from an idea of moral weakness or failed citizenship and instead use the word as a descriptor of body difference (McPhail & Orsini, 2021, p. 1398). The hashtag #WhatIEatAsAFatPerson demonstrates intentionality by reclaiming the word fat in the hashtag as a descriptor for the person. Embracing the word fat has been noted as a critical strategy both for the fat acceptance movement as well as fat people who are working to build self-acceptance and self-esteem (Rose Spratt, 2021, p. 92). Examples of fat acceptance can be seen throughout digital food diaries observed beyond just hashtag uses. One user, for example, begins her video with her body on screen eating and smiling stating,

> What I eat in a day as a fat person healing my relationship with food. Did I say ugly person? No. Did I say stupid person? No. I did not call myself anything other than fat, which I am. Even though I appreciate it you do not have to comment you are not fat you're beautiful, because I am fat (@sisiiuwu)

1 There are some debates on whether Health at Every Size is aligned with goals of fat liberation, however many do consider this movement as part of an overall goal towards destigmatizing fatness.

Within this statement, @sisiiuwu demonstrates an understanding of the stigmatization of fat as well as her own reclamation of the word as a neutral descriptor for her body. She recognizes that fat is often used as an insult and instead directs the viewer to rethink their reactions or potential comments. While most videos that utilize the hashtag point to an acceptance of the word fat as a descriptor for their identity, statements like @sisiiuwu's point to an intentional usage of the word showcasing how the video works to redefine what "fat" means.

In reflecting on the "why" and intentionality of these digital food diaries, it's important to remember what is at stake for fat bodies. Studies have shown that in the US by age 9, 50% of girls have considered restricting food. The risk for eating disorders is even higher for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals in comparison to white and cisgender, heterosexual people (Montgomery and The Collaboratory for Health Justice). The likelihood of eating disorders and self-harm has been shown to be more linked to individual body dissatisfaction and *perceived* body size in teens rather than actual weight or BMI (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Young girls have been documented as being more at risk for suicidal ideation as a result of perceiving themselves as overweight (Baiden et al. 345). In adults, weight stigma in health settings creates barriers for women that have been reported to lower their likelihood of regular doctor's visits resulting in delayed screenings and exams which lead to early treatment and cancer prevention (Amy et al., 2006). These exigencies indicate that bias, stigmatization, and diet culture both on and offline systemically harm marginalized communities. Acts of PSR by fat vloggers attempt to intervene in systems which continually put their lives at risk through the pursuit of thinness.

Challenges, Consequences, and Limitations

Like many acts of activism, the goal of PSR and the importance of the inclusion of "intentionality" in the puzzle is that there is an effort made by the activist to be heard by those in power to eventually lead to social reforms (Hatcher, 2021, 89). As Hatcher (2021) notes, these changes can often only be seen in retrospect, so it's challenging to know if these goals are met (p. 90). Given the current changes in public health funding, rapid social media changes, and the rise and popularity of weight loss drugs (such as GLP-1)— it may be some time before we can look back and ask if social reforms around fatphobia and diet culture have been enacted. Within this section, however, I want to briefly look at some of the challenges of the trend #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson to resist in real-time as well as its impact on the research process.

Algorithms & Visibility

As noted in previous sections on TikTok's infrastructure, much of the platform's design and algorithms are hidden from users and change quickly. As a researcher, these changes created challenges because search results using the hashtag term did not always provide accurate results and frequently changed from day to day. In previous studies of hashtags, I've utilized programming packages to scrape associated posts containing identified keywords and was able to easily collect chronological public tweets containing a singular hashtag (Gill & Akkad). However, TikTok's design and searches are not set up for easy scraping or transparent search results. Unlike other platforms that offer filters to show search results containing only specific key-

words with certain date ranges, TikTok displays search results based on hashtags, key terms, video content, and captions. Additionally, these searches require an account login using your interests and cookies to shape results.[2] For example, a recent search for the hashtag returned a video from the user @no.food.rules with the caption, "everything I ate and WHY." Although the user does not identify as fat or use the hashtag, the video likely was shown in search results because it used hashtags commonly associated with the trend: #intuitiveeating #foodfreedom #nondiet. The content of the video might be similar to those of fat vloggers because the user shows herself eating unapologetically and identifies with hashtags associated with anti-diet culture. However, more attention to other components of the PSR puzzle (who, intentionality + why) illustrates how the content fails to resist. The user visibly embodies a privileged identity on the platform (thin, white) and does not convey intentions for activism. Instead, most of her content links back to meal guides and weight loss tools. These types of results illustrate the drawbacks of activism on social media spaces like TikTok, which reward users with high follower counts who make use of popular trends regardless of their intentions. For activists, this means that many videos by fat vloggers may not actually reach wider audiences or be visible to the public. Even if a vlogger was attempting to lean into their hypervisibility within a white-dominant space, this goal requires the user to be seen which might be impossible if their content is suppressed due to newness of account or a low number of followers.

Co-Opting Fatness

While TikTok algorithms limit the visibility of activist videos, users themselves also create challenges for representing fatness online. Because of the current status quo of fatness as a health descriptor, some videos in search results for #WhatIEatInADayAsAFatPerson demonstrated co-opting of the word fat. For example, the user @trindalyn begins her video with "what I eat in a day as a fatty." In contrast to most of her other food diaries on her channel in which she self-identifies as a "skinny legend," this one shows a day when she "overdid it and overindulged" by *gasp* eating some ice cream, three Oreos, and a handful of chocolate chips (@trinadalyn).

2 The algorithms that shape search results on TikTok is not very transparent and frequently change during app updates. These assumptions are based on my usage of the app, search results, and the information currently available from TikTok itself as well as platform users.

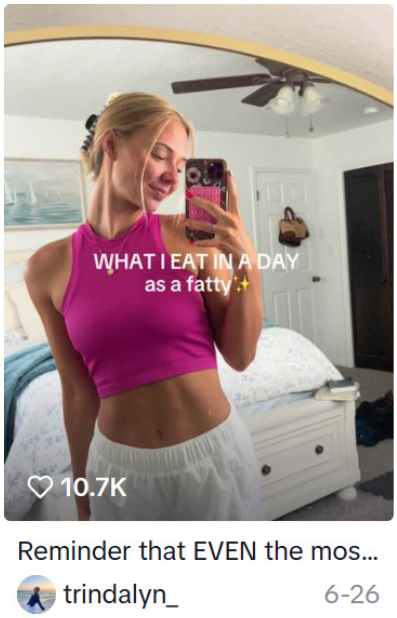

Figure 6: What I Eat in a Day video from @trindalyn.

Although their video depicts eating performatively on screen, we can see in the breakdown below how it fails to use their body to engage in PSR:

1. **Who**: @trindalyn frequently uses her platform to promote content which prioritizes thinness, weight-loss, and her identity as a "skinny legend"
2. **What**: Her food diary moralizes minor food consumption as shameful overindulgences
3. **When**: Her content is presented as a "balance" (one "bad" day of eating compared to her other "good" days) and perpetuates current narratives of wellness culture rather than anti-fat resistance.
4. **Where**: Her post leans into the ideals of TikTok's white-dominant platform while co-opting trending language around fatness.
5. **Why + Intentionality**: Her content reinforces diet culture and the promotion of thinness rather than challenging anti-fat systems. Other hashtags used in the post such as #caloriedeficit, #gymmotivation, and #realisticwhatIeatinaday indicate that fatness results from personal choices around food and exercise

Another form of co-opting on TikTok utilizes the app's stitching and dueting features. These in-app tools allow users to take clips of original videos and create their own response. These responses, often from health influencers, respond to user's eating habits with their own opinions. For example, in one video by weight-loss trainer @sarahinallsizes, she begins her video with a clip of a digital food diary which features the self-identified fat user @adigutierrezxoxo. After playing part of the clip, she begins talking about how she, as a former fat person, wishes she could still eat like the woman in the video and misses being oblivious to calories and nutrition (@sarahinallsizes). In another video, a fitness coach (@provingapointfitness) reviews a different video from @adigutierrezxoxo by estimating the calories and macros of the food she eats. While his video

doesn't critique her eating habits, the response clearly co-opts the message by recontextualizing it with diet culture and anti-fat narratives—all to redirect viewers to his own fitness services. Because fat users can be tagged in videos that stitch them, they also become exposed to comments, calorie tracking, or other diet content without their consent. For example, in the latter example, many users replied accusing the original video creator of lying about what she eats, under the premise that she couldn't be fat if she ate healthy food. Even though these types of videos do not include the hashtag, their use of the phrasing in their captions or clips from activist users redirect audiences toward diet content and potentially lead to bullying and harassment. They co-opt the language and labor of fat users to reinforce anti-fat narratives.

Trauma, Health, and Effects on the Body

Throughout the examples in this essay, we have seen how algorithmic platforms like TikTok promote toxic diet content which can have negative impacts on fat users. Participating in digital food diaries can offer a transformative experience, but its reliance on the embodied act of eating can also create negative effects on the body and the health of the user. Consider for example, one popular fat activist online, @yourcottagecorewhore, a non-binary Black content creator who posts about eating disorder recovery. Their videos use their body to engage in PSR, as seen in the breakdown below:

1. **Who:** @yourcottagecorewhore is a non-binary, Black self-identified fat user who frequently brings attention to fatphobia and anti-fat bias and its impacts on health.
2. **What:** Their digital food diaries center eating as a form of resistance
3. **When:** Their posts contextualize anti-fatness within the current moment by discussing systemic issues and technologies such as fitness apps, BMI, treatment centers, and social media trends
4. **Where:** They post on TikTok, a white-dominant space hostile towards fat bodies
5. **Why + Intentionality:** Their content clearly identifies recovery and healing from anti-fatness and eating disorders as their intention. They also utilize other hashtags and common anti-diet messages such as #fatliberation, #foodfreedomjourney, #antidiet, and #healing

Yet, their videos also show the realistic side of content creating when your body is central to the resistance. Frequently their videos discuss how what is shown on social media doesn't always match what is happening and that their journey towards food freedom has come with setbacks and relapses. In one of their last digital food diaries in 2021 they shared in the comments, "i love ya'll sm than you'll ever know & this lil community we have, but it's not fair to ya'll or me to post content like this until i get better <3" (@yourcottagecorewhore).

Figure 7: What I Eat in a Day video from @yourcottagecorewhore.

In addition to showcasing the side-effects of eating on the body, this post also illustrates the relationship between the content creator and the public audiences who engage with digital food diaries. The comment about fairness to both parties recognizes that their content impacts both their bodies and others' and shouldn't be shared when it's not healthy for either. Over time @yourcottagecorewhore's content has become less frequent and new content hasn't been released since 2024. Whether for personal reasons or health, the toll of creating eating-based content has real effects on fat users which can make PSR a challenge long-term.

Hope: Towards Fat Liberation

Within the introduction of this essay, I noted that the realities of body terrorism often place marginalized bodies in a state of fear resulting in internalized hatred and shame. Acts like eating become a means to survive and resist in digital spaces that argue that one's body is unworthy of space, unfit for food, and undeserving of love. To eat on screen is to make a choice that one's body becomes part of the message tied to gender norms, diet narratives, and colonial histories. While food genres have proliferated in social media spaces, we cannot ignore that to post about food without hate or backlash is a privilege unavailable to bodies that perform loud. Careful analysis, however, has demonstrated that fat vloggers not only know these risks but exploit their loudness for feminist aims.

Hatcher (2023) notes that intentionality on the part of the activist is not just about performing with a goal but is also an invitation. For example, when discussing Colin Kaepernick's act of kneeling silently as an act of protest she states, "These were hopeful acts performed as both an ideological stance and an invitation—and at times, even a plea—for members of a public to 1) recognize the voice(s) embedded within the silence and 2) engage in the act of rhetorical listening" (Hatcher, 2023, para. 18). Protests are invitations that require us, as members of the public and scholars, to listen.

My first engagement with #WhatIEatInADay videos was not as a researcher, but as an internet user and

as a woman who has experienced body-image issues and internalized fatphobia most of my life. Rhetorical listening didn't just mean writing this essay to center the problem. Listening also meant dealing with my own personal eating habits. Reading through hate comments and remembering my own memories and hateful feelings around food… Listening meant doing the work of understanding the ties between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness and thinking about how I, as a white scholar, can engage with these topics ethically. Rhetorical listening meant actually trying to engage in the real message of digital food diaries by letting myself eat when I was hungry and letting go of guilt. It also meant being kind to myself about the calorie app still on my phone and the scale still in my bathroom. Digital and food scholarship, like most feminist work, is intertwined with our daily lives. Like the PSR puzzle, we cannot simply isolate one piece.

Digital food diaries are complex and contradictory; they can be playful, angry, loud, sad, and even silly but through my examination of them, I also noted hope. When users tell viewers that fat doesn't mean ugly or remind them not to offer diet advice, they demonstrate a willingness to educate. They are hopeful that viewers will listen and learn to react differently. While it was often painful to read negative comments from users that bullied, fat shamed, or berated TikTokers for their eating choices, I also saw comments from users who were inspired by their bravery, their eating, and their willingness to take up space. Eating online is not just performative; it is transformative. By continually eating and posting, users on TikTok embrace their bodies and show others that existing in a fat body isn't a punishment. They deserve to take up space and eat just as much as anyone else.

Biography

Kelli R. Gill (she/her) is a rhetoric and composition scholar and currently serves as an Assistant Professor at Montana State University. Drawing from material and cultural rhetorics, her work explores the intersections between food, culture, and power. She is also the creator and manager of the scholarly website foodrhetoric.com.

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In Order to 'Say What We Say:' Archival Protocol that Attends to Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Alanna Frost

Abstract: As I begin a project to tell the story of a 1974 sovereign assertion, I pause to reflect on tensions inherent between the impulse to recover the rhetors that history leaves behind and Indigenous peoples' archival protocols. Archival investigations enrich stories about the roles that historically marginalized communities and disenfranchised rhetors play/ed in knowledge making, in coalition building, and in our collective literacy-story. But, as I reflect here, continuing to critique such interventions remains necessary when researchers engage evidence of Indigenous people's archival presence. "The archive" is simply too implicated in contemporary, historic, and scholarly colonial practice. Using one recovery-case and an exploration of Indigenous archival activism, I offer an illustration about the necessity of attention to Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Keywords: Indigenous data sovereignty, recovery methodologies, sovereign assertion, First Nations, Nazko First Nation, archival protocol

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Introduction

Enclosed please find the report we have made. It is our report to the provincial government on the things we know and feel and have been able to write with the help of a few people. It says what we say.

Catherine Patrick (Chief of Nazko Band)

Stanley Boyd (Chief of Kluskus Band)

Dennis Patrick (Nazko and Kluskus Band Administrator)

From: Letter to British Columbia (BC) Premier, Dave Barret, 25 August 1974

The report, noted above, is "The Report to the Nazko and Kluskus Band of Carrier Indians" (RNKB). During a moratorium on logging, compelled by a First Nations' (FN) blockade of the only road into the Nazko Valley, it was written by the "Nazko-Kluskus Study Team" (study team) comprised of settler-researchers who collaborated with Chief Catherine Patrick, her council, and members of the Nazko and Kluskus First Nations (NKFN). The RNKB's purpose, I have learned, was to describe to the BC Government the NKFN "use" of the valley as evidence of the impact to the community of planned logging in the valley. As a settler, a Canadian, a former resident of the region called "the Cariboo"[1] , and a literacy studies scholar, I am invested in analyzing a political moment, the NKFN who stood up for their land, those who supported them, those who opposed, and the ways it all was carried out and recorded by writing. I learned of the event, ultimately savvy negotiations at a significant time in BC for FN collective action, not from any history lesson in school but because my grandparents, who were cattle-ranchers in the Nazko Valley, kept copies of some of the blockade-relevant texts, most importantly the RNKB. The 55-page typed document, staple-bound with green construction paper, was originally a mystery to me; the only contributor's names it offers are offset quotes

1 When writing this reflection, there were many considerations of naming ("Nazko" in the Dakelh language is "Ndazkoh" for example) and referring to places ("Cariboo" is written as Caribou in several places). I chose to use the most current (I could find it in an official directory or I could ask a Nazko First Nation's person) combined with the most frequently used version of the name or referent.

from NKFN community members interspersed between NKFN history and Nazko Valley ecology. Chief Patrick contributed to the testimonials, asserting, for example, that "our natural resources are our only riches. If we lose that we are nothing" (13).

But since I first thumbed through the RNKB, I have learned more about the NKFN blockade that compelled it. Over the years, I have spoken with NKFN members who mention their historical political success, the blockade, and their patient and relentless appeals for the sovereignty the RNKB demands. I learned more from one of the only published mentions of events. A1976 Master's thesis, "The Caribou Tribal Council," by David Zirnhelt pertains to the 1969 formation of the regional FN council of which the NKFN are members. Zirnhelt's regional focus results in little mention of Nazko- and Kluskus-specific organizing. He notes that "Nazko elected its first council in 1971" (p. 15),[2] but does not identify Chief Patrick or the other elected council members by name; he mentions the Nazko blockade, and he describes more lengthy activist work, offering that "It was in 1973 that the Nazko and Kluskus bands developed an active stand [. . .] and sought to have a moratorium placed on the forest developments for a five year period until such time as the land claims and a joint Indian/industry development proposal could be worked out" (p. 29); but my understanding of the organizers of the "active stand" with Chief Patrick as leader of the Nazko First Nations (NFN)[3] was left out of any history I knew.

It was learning of the Alan Chambers fonds at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Archives that secured my understanding of the breadth and depth of the political work of the NKFN and individuals like Chief Patrick, who initially served as the name most attached to the intervention. Forestry professor Chambers' materials depict the actions as more than simply the "active stand" to which Zirnhelt refers. Indeed, Chambers' collection of letters chronicle negotiations lasting from 1973-1974,[4] the NKFN and settler-researchers' interventions, and the government's inaction. Most important to my reflection here is Chief Patrick's presence in the archives and her role as leader in the initiation of the "active stand." Indeed, Chambers' fonds suggest that during the period of Chief Patrick's tenure, she led her community through the initial organizing and letter writing, the blockade, the logging moratorium, and the submission of the RNKB to the B.C. Government.

I have taken to calling the "active stand" in its entirety a "sovereign assertion" (for reasons I will explain further), and I am compelled, at this early stage of the larger project of analysis of the literacy practices that illuminate the NKFN 1973-1978 political work, to consider Chief Patrick's role and the archival material in which her story sits. Indeed, her signature and presence in the archives evoke Scott Lyons' important introduction of rhetorical sovereignty to writing studies. Patrick's presence at the "colonized scene of writing" demonstrates the NKFN's "commitment to place" that Lyons marks as indicative of rhetorical sovereignty (p. 457). Indeed, given the absence of her title in any settler-publication, an effort to "write her into history"

2 Zirnhelt explains that elections were novel in the 1960-70s because more represented by "customary chief," by which I believe he means hereditary, although I've been unable to confirm this was the case for the NKFN.

3 Much of the archival material reviewed refers to the Nazko and Kluskus First Nations but some letters as well as my relationship with the current administration involve only the Nazko First Nation (as indicated by NFN)

4 1973-1974 (the moratorium period) is specifically when Chief Patrick led the "active stand." The sovereign assertion begun in 1973 continued until 1978. Ultimately, negotiations continue, between the NKFN and the BC Government

(Enoch, 2010; Prior, 2024; Dever, 2017) seems most pressing. Feminist recovery work, the use of archived materials to engage the work of "writing women and other traditionally disenfranchised groups into the rhetorical tradition" (Prior, 2024) has a long-established footing in writing studies and specifically in feminist methodologies. But, in this essay, I am equally compelled to reflect on my reservations about the recovery of Chief Patrick because as Dever notes: "Archives retain a sustained gravitational pull on feminist researchers. We experience them as sites of promise and desire, even as we recognize they are also sites of power and privilege that have long been implicated in acts of violence and erasure" (p. 1). In other words, prior to the broad project to understand the NKFN sovereign assertion, I am compelled to both "recover" Chief Patrick and to investigate the implications of the archive itself.

In what follows, I share reflections at the early stages of a project to understand a FN's sovereign assertion. As I read the archived evidence of one invested leader's work, I sought to understand the tensions between the compulsion of "recovering" Chief Patrick and the precepts of Indigenous archival protocols (IAP) and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS). Scant published materials offer the NKFN story. The materials collected by Chambers represent the unpublished details of the work of the NKFN leaders and a group of settler-sponsors, as the NKFN worked to secure "[their] lands and give [their] children a future" (Patrick et al., 1974, "Letter to the BC Government"). Chambers' files, though, if addressed by IAP and IDS protocol and policy, demand a researcher-praxis that is different from my settler-trained compulsion to "stop" at recovery work. IAP and IDS insist that scholars not simply celebrate the "discovery" that conjures and mimics colonial expansion[5]. Thus, in what follows, I share what I am learning. I foreground Chief Patrick's story, then describe where that story presently sits in the Chambers fonds, and finally, describe the contemporary work of IAP and IDS advocates. I use headings and italicized subheadings to summarize my process of learning and reflecting. The layers of this early work are, I would argue, instructive for its emphasis on my process; I share the context and content of Chief Patrick's presence in the archives prior to the broader context of Chambers' own work, and that is followed by a historical overview of IAP and IDS. By illustrating the specific situatedness of Chief Patrick and the NKFN sovereign assertion within a western archive, alongside a review of decades of archival protocol labor, I work to stress the importance of attention to IDS.

The History and Herstory

The story and context of Patrick's historical contribution

My people depend on animals and resources for our own lives. If logging comes in right now, it only would mean sorrow for my people.

Chief Patrick

(RNKB 15)

Patrick's archival presence illuminates her contribution to a NKFN "sovereign assertion," a reference that has become essential to my in-progress project. I use the term "sovereign assertion" because, although

5 Once I read IDS and IAP, I understood that recovery=discovery and therefore mimics colonial expansion. That is my own understanding based on an anamalgamation of the policy protocols, which span decades, and which work to check the unmitigated shelving of Indigenous people's data.

public memory is largely of the 1974 blockade, the work of the NKFN to assert their sovereignty in the face of the threat of unfettered settler resource extraction demands reference more comprehensive than "protest" or "blockade" (the more popular terms used by Canadian media). In part, this is because the blockade was but a small part of the rhetorical ecology of the NKFN work toward diplomacy. More importantly, I rely for this choice on the work of Indigenous Studies scholars who challenge inaccurate settler renditions, explaining "reliance on terms such as 'activism' and 'protest' can lead us to inaccurately interpret Aboriginal actions as token acts of political defiance rather than as deliberate strategies with explicit outcomes" (Belanger and Lackenbauer, 2014, p. 13). Sarah Nickel (2019) framed her work on the 1969 formation of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) similarly rejecting "myopic" historical focus on contemporary Indigenous activism, which completely neglects historic and "complex political systems and conceptions of sovereignty" that are not dependent on "recognition by the settler state" (p. 8).

Chief Patrick's role fits with much broader sovereign assertions that local newspapers' "blockade" stories obscure. Comprehensive historical context is not possible here, but recovering Chief Patrick also locates her and the NKFN in the wide variety of 1960–and 1970s activism of North American Indigenous Peoples. Two key organizations, the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the National Indian Brotherhood (Canada's AIM), were formed in 1968 and served to support Indigenous sovereignty. Indeed, the "1960s represent a qualitative change in indigenous political history" when "land rights became a central symbol around which disparate indigenous groups could find a common voice" (Balenger and Lackenbauer, 2014, p. 11). Specifically, the exigency for the moratorium period, with Patrick as Chief, directly connects to unprecedented provincial First Nations (FN) "political unity" (Nickel, 2019, p. 19).6 The publication of Prime Minister Trudeau's 1969 White Paper, described by Nickel as "an important political tool for mobilizing support," catalyzed a province-wide collection of FN (p. 47). Ostensibly, the "policy document" was intended to support Canadian FN and to "correct Indigenous People's inequality and oppression." but this "misguided and paternalistic" policy proposed to do so by "abolishing the Indian Act and historic treaties and eliminating the special rights and recognitions of Canada's Indigenous population" (Nickel, p. 27). FN saw the Canadian government dealing with the "Indian problem" by willing it away and by legislating "equality" (Belanger and Lackenbauer, 2014). What the White Paper did accomplish was the collective organizing required to respond to it and thus force its ultimate rejection in 1970.

In British Columbia, the First Nations' history of collective organizing along with the White Paper activism facilitated the formation of the UBCIC in 1969. This union involved nearly "two hundred First Nations bands" (Nickel, p. 3), and the UBCIC remains a powerful political force in BC to which is attributed much social and political change (Zirnhelt, 1976; Nickel, 2019; Belanger and Lackenbauer, 2014). Important to the Cariboo Region and Chief Patrick's archival presence, the UBCIC "is undoubtedly the most important organization affecting political evolution" in the Cariboo region, as they immediately organized a "Commu-

6 To stress, the 1960s political unity is noted with the essential note that scholars take care to emphasize the rich political work of Indigenous people pre- and post colonization to assert the history of "ongoing tradition[s] of diplomacy" (13 Belanger and Lackenbauer). Examples closer to the Nazko, the "Allied Tribes of B.C. was formed in 1915-1916 [. . .] to carry the land claim to Parliament in Ottawa" (Zirnhelt 16), as well "Native Brotherhood of B.C. in 1931" (16). Zirnheltt continues further, offering a series of long and short lived local alliances, from 1931-1969, which pressed for issues such as land claims and economic and social Band-welfare.

nity Development program" (Zirnhelt, p. 19). Thus, from the UBCIC the NKFN gained bureaucratic and economic support, as well as a designated Community Development officer. Zirnhelt notes that the NFN then held "council" elections in 1971. Chief Patrick is not named here as the first elected official, but Zirnhelt made clear that, of all the regional FN, NFN was the first, in 1973, to then develop "an active stand on independence and sought to have a moratorium placed on the forest developments for a five year period until such time as the land claims and joint Indian/industry development proposal could be worked out" (Zirnhelt, p. 29). Importantly, recovering Chief Patrick adds her name to what has previously been understood, more generally, as FN organizing in the Cariboo regions.

Chief Patrick in the archives

Chief Patrick's work is illuminated in the "correspondence 1973-74" file in the Chambers fonds. The file includes letters, beginning in March 1973, from the NKFN to various ministers in the BC Government, each of which argued for a pause in timber harvesting in favor of NKFN involvement in the development of the Nazko Valley. Through multiple 1973 exchanges, the BC Government offered terse responses in which various ministers and the premier pass responsibility to a different ministry. In the spring of 1974, clearly in the absence of substantive communication from the BC Government, the NKFN submitted a "Band Council Resolution" to the (federal) Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIA) requesting a five year "socio-economic and environmental" "study period" to determine "the extent" of the NKFN "claim and dependence on the area" (Alec et al., 1974). Information about the dramatic steps taken, on May 14, 1974, to blockade the road are absent from Chambers' collection, but the BC government's concession is clear from a May 22 "agreement confirmation" letter written by Solicitor Eugene Kwan, who ordered a three-month-moratorium to "allow the [BC Government] to re-evaluate [. . .] plans for development and for the Bands to gather the necessary information to enable them to evaluate their position" (Kwan, 1974). Three months later, the RNKB was submitted, evidenced by two cover letters. The first indicates that the study team submitted the report to the NKFN, "to assist in negotiations with the government" (Study Team, 1974); the second indicates the NKFN submitted the report to the BC Government (Chief Patrick, 1974, "Letter to Premier"). The submission of the report, for the purposes of my current research, "finalized" the moratorium period of Chief Catherine's leadership.

Chief Patrick's contributions to written diplomatic work, the patient activism of a blockade, the moratorium and the submission of the RNKB are made clear from Chambers' correspondence file. The file's content illustrates the rhetorical ecology of the sovereign assertion; in other words, they make clear that the NKFN, with Catherine Patrick as leader, are executing a diplomatic campaign and not just "a confrontation between Nazko Indians and crews working on a logging road" ("Nazko Logging Road Construction Delayed," 1974). Importantly, Chief Patrick is first author and is copied on most of the correspondence during this period. The initial March 1973 letter is from Chief Patrick to "The Honorable Robert William, Minister of Lands and Forests." In it, she and three others from the administrative team asserted their position as the "original residents" of BC and request that any government plans for their valley be "forestalled" until the NKFN is "included in all phases of planning" (Patrick, 1973). Two months later (May 15, 1973), Williams responded

addressing "Chief Catherine Patrick" with a very brief acknowledgement, both of her letter and of his understanding that the matter was being addressed by the "District Forest Office" (Williams, 1973). One month later (June 15, 1973), Chief Patrick and "Band Administrator" Dennis Patrick, wrote to Premier Dave Barrett, after, as they explain, learning from the "BC Gazette the plans of the government and more particularly the Forest Service to sell timber in the Nazko area" (Patrick, 1974, "Letter to Premier Dave Barrett."). Chief Patrick and Dennis Patrick explained that the NKFN have voted to oppose any logging in the Nazko and that they plan to do all they can to ensure their "rights and environment are protected from exploitation." Most specifically, Chief Patrick, again, requested a "moratorium" until the Band can create a plan that will "allow development without destroying" the Nazko Valley (Patrick, 1974, "Letter to Premier Dave Barret"). Two weeks later on July 4, 1973, Premier Barrett responded, just as briefly as Robert Williams, to explain that he had sent a copy to Williams"for his immediate attention" (Barrett, 1973).

There follows an eight-month gap in the collection, when Chief Patrick and two NFN Councilors appealed to the federal government in a "Band Resolution" form sent to the DIA signed by Chief Patrick and two NFN Councilors. Here, they continued to press for a "moratorium" on timber harvesting in the Nazko Valley for five years (Alec et al., 1974). Presumably because of the Nazko blockade, and shortly thereafter, Solicitor Kwan sets the conditions for the three-month (May–August) moratorium, making clear that "compromise" on "planned development" is the agreed-upon goal (Kwan, 1974). Here lawyers addressed the "Nazko Indian Band" and not Chief Patrick specifically. Indeed, this is the case for several of the moratorium documents that Chambers collects, which largely reflect exchanges between study team members. Chief Patrick is addressed directly in two letters from a forester, "DT Grant," who, following a meeting with the NKFN, confirms permission to continue with planned Nazko survey work, unrelated to timber harvesting (Grant, 1974). But, more frequently it is the case that Chief Patrick is carbon-copied for example, on June 12 1974, a DIA official "checks in" with his superiors on the progress of the study team in preparing the RNKB (Ragan, 1974).

When the report is complete, in August 1974, the study team submitted it to the NKFN,for their submission to the BC Government. Thus, the final NKFN letter sent during this moratorium period is a cover letter for the RNKB from Chief Patrick, her recently elected peer Chief Stanley Boyd (Kluskus Band), and Band Administrator Dennis Patrick. The cover letter is clear about the NKFN's demands to ultimately "protect our lands and give our children a future" (Patrick, 1974, "Letter to the BC Government"). Chiefs Patrick and Boyd and Administrator Patrick cite the recommendations listed in the RNKB; for examples, that a "special conservancy area" be designated, which would include "human and cultural resources" and that the NFN and "Kluskus Bands take the lead, in cooperation with the provincial government, in setting up an effective planning process for human development and resource use and protection" (RNKB, p.44). Chief Patrick and other contributors concluded their cover letter with a generous appeal to the broader local and provincial settler-communities with whom they wish to "cooperate on development." (Patrick, 1974, "Letter to the BC Government").

Settler Archives

The problem with collecting: the settler archives

The cooperative diplomacy evidenced in the archival materials, hearken, again, to Lyons' rhetorical sovereignty, particularly as the NKFN repeatedly stressed the protection of the Nazko Valley. But, I delay analysis in order to pay attention to "the colonized scene of writing"—in this case, Chamber's fonds as a locus for settler research. Chambers' archived collections must be explored with the acknowledgment of the history of violence that research has caused Indigenous people. Krystal Payne's (2022) assertion that "the inequitable power relations that exist in archives and archival practices contribute to the harms done to Indigenous people and communities" (p. 154) is repeated throughout the material I reviewed, and I believe this understanding to be foundational to any, and specifically my own, exploration of archival protocol. Even a cursory study of disciplines most clearly concerned with archives, archival science and history, lays bare the complicity of North American archival projects in the silencing of Indigenous story, history, and sovereign assertions. If indeed "the power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive," which indicates obvious "distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences" (Carter, 2006, p. 216), then that power has served settler colonizers far more often than First Nations Peoples.

Indeed, settler benefit and Indigenous cost frames much archival criticism. In this critique, settler-colonizers serve as gatekeepers to an archive that supports dominant cultural narratives. Reid Gómez (2005), for one, shares the argument that settler colonizer reliance on the archives to understand their own sovereignty, over land and culture, is merely one way to consider sovereignty, and it is one that ignores Indigenous worldviews. Gómez argues that the very reason for North American archives "require strategic manipulation of written evidence and narration, specifically tribal roll numbers; passports; and historical, governmental and ethnographic narrative documents" (2005, p. 146). As such, settler-colonial archives circumscribe (in her case) Navajo notions of accountability to the land (not simply "title"), to people (not simply a "tribal roll"), and to oral tradition (not simply "documents"). The settler-colonizer's use of archived historical records is more specifically explored in J.J. Ghaddar's (2016) review of two contemporary Canadian court cases for which judgements were made about the inclusion and exclusion of Indigenous (not-settler-created) records. Ghaddar made the case that, as the court ruled to preserve some and destroy others, "the incorporation of records by or about Indigenous people into the national settler archival repository" remains "crucial for the constitution of a settler historical archival memory" and one that is "at the expense of an Indigenous one" (p. 3).

The settler-memory to which Ghaddar refers is perhaps most evidenced in the historically pernicious settler-colonizer "use" of archival materials in the service of land-claims disputes since the preference of North American courts for settler-researched, written and archived documentation over oral history is clear. Adele Perry (2005) refers to this preference as the "unmitigated triumph of history and archives in the service of empire" (p. 326) in her review of a British Columbia case. In Delgamuukw V. British Columbia, a 1991 ruling against the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en land claims, a judge ruled against the First Nations Bands largely because their (copious) oral arguments were not admissible as evidence and were surely not as reliable as the

historically recorded "facts." That archives are employed "for empire" in the enduring 19th century Indian Land Question has implications for any scholar encountering Indigenous archival presence.

If the historical record wields such power in a legal proceeding, then what matters, in consideration of records not created or condoned by Indigenous communities, is an understanding of "where" and also "what" a researcher is retrieving from an archive. Chief Patrick's is present in a particular settler-archive because Professor Alan Chambers of the Department of Forestry was involved in the NKFN sovereign assertion, initially at the behest of the DIA, a government organization created to "administer" to First Nations people. It resonates that the most comprehensive information about Chief Patrick's work lives in a set of materials remarkable to scholars but separate from participants. In other words, to consider Chambers' fonds is to consider that he, out of vocation and interest, collected a version of history presently not immediately available to the historical actors and their descendants.

Chambers' direct involvement is described by archivist Jane Turner's, "Fonds Description," which is both a narrative and a list of three "series," each composed of all of the materials related to projects for which Chambers was recruited. Chambers collected numerous and varied documents (for example, correspondence, maps, and forms), while involved in the three research projects, which illuminate his history of research consultation with the provincial and federal governments. His involvement in each is indicative of the Vancouver-based BC Ministries growing their hinterland-resource extraction reach combined with their inexperience in (and avoidance of) FN relations. For example, Turner explains that the materials for the first of the fonds' "research projects," the "Purcell Range Study series," were created in the spring of 1973 when Chambers had been recruited by Robert A. Williams, B.C Minister of Lands, Forests and Water Resources to lead a study team of the Purcell Mountains, located far east and south of the Nazko Valley. This was a time when BC's Government was investing heavily in determining all of the ways to extract the province's wealth of natural resources. The study team, titled "Environment and Land Use Committee," comprised of ministers from multiple BC Ministries (e.g., Ministries of "Mines and Petroleum" and "Recreation and Conservation") was formed to "solve major environmental and resource management issues throughout the province, and to facilitate the flow of information, ideas and approaches between various departments in solving resource management and land allocation problems throughout the province" (Turner, 2022). Notably, no FN or community members were involved in the study.

Following the submission of the Purcell Study, and ten-days into the three-month moratorium-period, Chambers was recruited to participate in "Nazko Kluskus research" work by DIA representative Brian Carter. Three weeks later, and thus one month into the moratorium-period, he met with Carter and Brendan Kennedy (a member of the NKFN study team). Chambers "agreed to visit Nazko to try to get some feeling for the problem and to propose a course of action" (Chambers, 1974, "Letter to Ralph Ragan"). One month into the moratorium, Chambers did travel to Nazko, and he subsequently submitted a brief report of the visit to the DIA. But, following that visit, he stepped away from full-involvement, explaining to the DIA that he had to attend to "other commitments" ("Letter to Ralph Ragan"). Despite his recusal, and perhaps in spite of his own busy schedule, Chambers remained a participant as indicated by the subsequent 18 out of 37 letters that he collected or in which he was included.

These "included and collected" documents comprise Chambers' correspondence file and offer information about the breadth of the moratorium period, which, although limited in accuracy (in terms of a complete timeline of NKFN's perspective and collective work towards this sovereign assertion), give a sense of its rhetorical ecology. The file contains 37 chronologically organized letters. Eleven letters predate Chambers' involvement, presumably shared so he could "catch up." Thus importantly, the file's "first" letters are those of Chief Patrick to BC Minister of Forest and Lands and to Premier Dave Barrett regarding her people's "concern about the proposed developments in timber harvesting in the Nazko area" (Patrick, et al., March 8, 1973, "Letter to Honorable Rob Williams"). But other letters, exchanged after Chambers had recused himself, speak to the nature of the particular sponsorship of the DIA and the study team. Chambers, having just completed the Purcell study, was viewed by members of the study team as the expert among them. For example, "Study Director" Brendan Kennedy drops Chambers' name in an effort to involve the "Minister of Human Resources" (MHR) in negotiations; Kennedy noted that MHR staff would benefit from getting " in touch with" Chambers "UBC Forestry Department and author of the Purcell Study" (Kennedy, July 23, 1974). Further, study team member Walt Taylor writes a lengthy handwritten letter to request Chambers "help in identifying the most relevant questions to be presented to" the BC Government (Walt Taylor to Chambers July 31, 1974). The final collected letter, sent 22 months after the first, is Chambers' copy of his own thank-you note to the study team for keeping him apprised of their ongoing work (Chambers, 1974, "Letter to Nazko and Kluskus Indian Band Office").

Also, rich information about the proclivities and rhetorical strategies of the parties involved is made clear in Chambers' file, even minimally, by the amount and length of participants' letters. Despite the legal commitment for both the NKFN and the BC government to evaluate Nazko Valley "development" plans, implied by the Kwan letter, interest in the NKFN sovereign assertion ranged from deeply invested (for example study team letters) to "compelled" (e.g., terse replies from Premier Dave Barrett). In these determinations, document length speaks volumes. I found the story of the moratorium period to reflect the reality of BC's heartland/hinterland geography; the remote study team sends a substantial review of a history of concerns, and a request for a meeting to seek resolution or agreement; a "lower mainland" based government official responds tersely and, most often, with a "passing of the buck." In this way, Chambers' fonds offer both a glimpse into the NKFN's sovereign assertion, but much more so, the settler need to document and negotiate the NKFN sovereign assertion.

Indigenous Archival Protocol and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

The archives are haunted.

Writing studies scholars have contributed a rich sub-genre of archival research methods to inform the work I undertake. Particularly relevant is the recent collection, *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives* (*Unsettling*) because the editors acknowledge the "reckoning" required of a researcher as she retrieves settler-collected material from a western institution (Kirsch et al., 2023, 7). Contributors invested in "unsettling" affirm critical contentions that the settler-colonizer archives are "never neutral instruments of storing information, but rather always already involve knowledge production, and

hence, involve literacies, images, and rhetorics of power" (7). The "never neutral" frame is supported by (previously noted) archivist Ghaddar's acknowledgment that the archive is "crucial for the constitution of a settler historical archival memory" (3), and by Emily Legg's similar assertion, as she theorizes the archive as a traumatic space for Indigenous people because it "was never meant to preserve" their culture, but instead to "reinscribe what folks want to think about Indigenous people" (74). *Unsettling* productively faces the traumatic space by acknowledging its "haunted/ing and wounded/ing" (2) and by entreating scholars to confront or to "bear witness" in order to advance an "ethos and praxis" of unsettling (1).

The archives are an invention/Write with not about.

That the archives are haunted spaces must matter to my ethos as a researcher. I find equally important praxis-considerations in the work of Ellen Cushman, whose investment in language perseverance has been foundational for my own conception of the necessity of decolonizing archival projects. Cushman's research has long attended to the decolonizing work that has gained increasing traction in the past decade (in writing studies and in IDS). Cushman's (2019) assertions about the "troubled and troubling roots of the archive" inform the writing studies work cited above (p. 116). But, further, it is her interventions and collaborations to not only identify or "bear witness" (Kirsch et al., 2023) to the damage done but also to counter the "tenets of colonial thought" that "structure the archives" (Cushman, p. 119). Further, she began this work at least 20 years ago by working with "teams [...] that included Cherokee elders, language teachers, program directors, community leaders, and tribal leaders" (p. 117). I see Cushman's collaborations and relations-work presently being advocated across the humanities. For example, the focus of the 2020 American Philosophical Society's conference on "community-engaged projects" "reflect the larger shift over the past decade of institutions and researchers collaborating and building respectful relationships with Native American and Indigenous people whose collections they steward or with whom they want to conduct research" (O'Neal, 2024, p. 2).

Heed the protocol (Indigenous Archival Protocol) and policy (Indigenous Data Sovereignty)

With Cushman's community engagement in mind, I find essential connections in IAP and IDS, which have come to matter very much to my early investigation, and, I would argue, should matter to any scholar who encounters Indigenous material in an archive. I am confident in this assertion not because I have exhausted my review of these policies (I haven't) and not because any of them offers a particular researcher (be it writing studies scholar, archeologist, or geneticist) a clear road map or definitive protocols, (they do not –yet). Instead, my confidence stems from a.) the political and ontological foundations of the policies (IAP and IDS), which are grounded in the sovereignty of Indigenous nations, as reflected in their deference to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and b.) an understanding of the repeated and repetitive work (over many years) of the proponents of these important guidelines indicates that institutions and scholars need to be made aware of the continued-colonizing nature of data "about" Indigenous people. Two other important considerations are as follows:

1. IAP and IDS work largely lives in policy documents and is largely done by Indigenous community members, Indigenous scholars, invested researchers, and collaborators involved in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) institutions, who have formed coalitions and networks because they deeply understand the need, as writing studies scholars do, to decolonize archival practice.

2. IAP and IDS protocol and policy are contemporarily relevant. The 2007 Protocols for Native American Archival Materials took a "decade of debate" to be adopted by the Society of American Archivists (Ghaddar and Caswell, 2019, p. 71), for example. Further, following the Global Indigenous Data Alliance's (GIDA) 2023 Summit, participants posted a "Communique" asserting that "Universities are failing to affirm and uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty and operationalize Indigenous Data Governance" (GIDA site).

At minimum, when I am concerned with my own ethos as an archival researcher invested in understanding the work of one Indigenous leader, the repeated work of collectives, composed largely of Indigenous scholars, and the contemporary history of these efforts, demands attention.[7]

Essential archival coalitions and networks

IAP work "precedes" the most recent IDS activism and are best illustrated by two documents. Although nearly 15 years apart, they are similar in exigency and process. Both were collaboratively conceived. The first, the 2007 Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (Protocols), were created at a working meeting by "a group of nineteen Native American and non-Native American archivists, librarians, museum curators, historians, and anthropologists." The second, Indigenous Archives Collective's (IAC) 2021 "Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledges and Information Held in the Archives" (ROR, Indigenous Archives Collective, 2021), was developed at a 2019 symposium by IAC members (presently 18 named on their website) who are "Indigenous and non-Indigenous professional archivists and researchers" (Indigenous Archives Collective, p. 244).

Both protocol documents resulted from their proponents' understanding that the UNDRIP compelled a different relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the information and artifacts about them collected and held by institutions. Contributors to the Protocols (2007) worked to "identify best professional practices for culturally responsive care and use of American Indian archival material held by non-tribal organizations" (Protocols); more contemporarily relevant was the IAC's goal to "address developments in technology and the management and preservation of collections, which have the potential to either undermine or support Indigenous self-determination and data sovereignty" (Indigenous Archives Collective, 244). One essential component of Protocols policy is "the importance of consultation with and concurrence of tribal communities in decisions and policies" (Protocols). The RoR coheres with this practice and codifies "the rights of Indigenous peoples to challenge and respond to their information and knowledges contained in archival

7 A historical trajectory facilitates my understanding of the depth and breadth of Indigenous Nations' sovereign assertion-policy work but ignores centuries of Indigenous Knowledge practices. In other words, both IAP and IDS protocols in spirit or letter acknowledge that "Indigenous Peoples always were data stewards, collectors, analyzers and users" (Rodríguez, 144).

records held in Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museum [...] through a Right of Reply" (p. 246).

The RoR offers a list of principles beginning with the one most applicable to my work, which is to consider "the right to know," as it refers to the scattered and fragmented nature of documents archived about specific Indigenous Peoples in settler archives and the need to "facilitate access" (249). Further, in terms of prioritizing my own attention to the Protocols and the RoR, they both prioritize the following: consultation (Protocols) and consent (RoR); cultural sensitivity (Protocols) and safety (RoR) (i.e. "organizations holding Indigenous material must become more adept at identifying, acknowledging, and proactively addressing concerns relating to cultural safety and cultural appropriation"); and, finally, that settler institutions are facilitators and not owners of Indigenous materials.

IDS "reflects Indigenous Peoples' collective rights to self-determination and to govern data about our peoples, lands, resources and knowledges" (Walter and Carroll, 2021 p. 11)

My review of IDS is not exhaustive, but I have learned it is dependent on the presently-energized labor of multiple Indigenous scholars from First Nations across the globe whom I argue are staging their own sovereign assertion. IDS and attendant work on Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) denote collective efforts to secure comprehensive data-rights using multiple political, legal, and disciplinary means. Like IAP, IDS is premised on UNDRIP and framed using examples of colonial institutions' obsessive collection of Indigenous data about but not in the service of, Indigenous people. IDS proponents note two meetings (of many, many meetings, symposiums and conferences) crucial to catalyze the global movement. The first, in 2017, was to connect the IDS movement, at that time involving "three Anglo-colonized societies" (Walter and Carroll, 2021, p. 12), to the globally strong Research Data Alliance (RDA) by forming the International Indigenous Data Sovereignty Interest Group at the Research Data Alliance" (IIDSG) (p. 13). IIDSG shared the RDA's investment in "building the social and technical infrastructure to enable open sharing and re-use of data" (Research Data Alliance, 2016). To that end RDA itself promotes the FAIR Principles, that research data be "findable," "accessible," "interoperable," and "reusable." But, IIDSG recognized that the "open sharing" advocated by the FAIR principles"creates a tension for Indigenous Peoples who are also asserting greater control over the application and use of Indigenous data and Indigenous Knowledge for collective benefit" (CARE Principles). Thus, the 2017 alliance resulted in the IIDSG crafting of the CARE principles to complement FAIR. The CARE principles assert that researchers operationalize"collective benefit," "authority to control," "responsibility," and "ethics" (CARE Principles). In addition to the CARE principles, the alliance benefitted the IDS as it "expanded activities and advocacy beyond North America and Australasia [. . .]; engaged mainstream data actors; convened leading Indigenous data scholars in person for strategy, advocacy and policy advancement; and formalized a global movement" (Walter and Carroll, p. 13).

A 2019 meeting further cemented the global alliance that the IIDSG meeting "formalized" (Walter and Carroll, 2021, p. 13). At an IDS workshop to "collaboratively advance the legal principles underlying collective and individual data rights" (Founding), the Global Indigenous Rights Collective was formed that recognized the need for and the strength of "a global alliance [...] to advocate for and advance a shared vision for Indigenous Data Sovereignty" (Founding), and GIDA elected to "endorse and host" the CARE principles.

GIDA's goal is "to progress International Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance in order to advance Indigenous control of Indigenous Data" (Promoting).

IDS (and IDG) represent ongoing policy work that demands careful researcher attention. But attention to IDS policy is complex. Indeed, because the principles are meant to encompass any and all data collected from any and all disciplines, and, although many scholars are currently working to determine how to operationalize the principles, I cannot yet "take away" a specific methodological path for my own archival work. Indeed, according to Maggie Walter (one of the founders of IIDS) and Stephanie Russo Carroll, two Indigenous scholars who are prolifically publishing about IDS/IDG, "currently, efforts are underway to identify what implementing the CARE Principles might look like for both policies and mechanisms" (Walter and Caroll, 2021, p. 13); the efforts they describe are evidenced by the number of recent IDS/IDG publications, in scientific journals, forum, and open source publication venues. Particularly prolific are scholars, from a variety of disciplines, proposing means and methods of operationalizing FAIR and CARE.[8] IDS's contemporary conversations and the Protocols' 2017 adoption mean that researchers remain "debating" the operationalization of procedures for proceeding, particularly where my work is concerned, in archives that hold Indigenous materials. This fact alone gives me pause, as a settler-scholar.

Reflective Conclusions

Over 35 years ago, Indigenous scholar Henrietta Fourmile gave a lecture in Australia titled "Who Owns the Past: Aborigines as Captives of the Archives." Fourmile (1989) asserts that settler-colonizer control of "collections of information and documents concerning Aborigines" (p. 1) impedes Indigenous access to history thus denying the "making of our own history" (p. 2). I read Fourmile's argument for the need for Indigenous access to and legal ownership of archival materials pertaining to their citizens' history, culture, and health, as prescient of the IDS and as a framework for the contemporary archival-research protocols in which I am interested. But, in my cursory exploration of the history of such frames, I also note that Fourmile herself maps her own lecture (and title) from historian William Hagan's 47-year-old argument made in "Archival Captive: The American Indian." In Hagan's 1978 address to historians and archivists, he argues that an inordinate amount of historical data "about" Indigenous North Americans was in their settler-control when it, much more productively, should be stewarded by its subjects, for land and resource court cases. To consider 50 years of criticism of settler use of Indigenous archival material and the most recent GIDA message that universities are failing to pay attention troubles any project considering Indigenous work.

Importantly, I must take into account that Chief Patrick's story is best represented in the "fonds" of a professor, in a university archive, and more than 500 miles from the NKFN. In other words, to consider Chambers' fonds is to consider that he collected a version of history presently not immediately available to the historical actors and their descendants. To heed the repeated exhortations of IAP and IDS/IDG, the essential fact remains as articulated by Linda Smith, who, herself, remains ubiquitously cited in arguments for decolonizing research. Smith (2015) writes of spending time in the archives while visiting America and learning/

8 I collected far more publications pertinent to IDS/IDG than would be productively cited, but it is worth noting that most were published in the last 2 years and they cover many, many disciplines.

understanding that artifacts and information about her Maori culture were scattered to the countries-of-the-empire and that "colonialism has undermined, ridiculed, diminished, and fragmented Indigenous knowledge while at the same time it has been enriched by that knowledge" (p. 473-74). The tenacity of settler-researchers and GLAM institutions' collections and disseminations of Indigenous Knowledge and artifacts is evidenced by the repeated work engaged by collectives to involve FN in data collection and storage.

In the absence of policy recognized, as per the GIDA communique, by universities, I believe I can best depend on the repeated advocacy described in what follows:

> Given the majority of Indigenous data is controlled by non-Indigenous institutions there is a responsibility to engage respectfully with those communities to ensure the use of Indigenous data supports capacity development, increasing community data capabilities, and the strengthening of Indigenous languages and cultures. Similarly, Indigenous Peoples' ethics should inform the use of data across time in order to minimize harm, maximize benefits, promote justice, and allow for future use. (Carroll et al., 2021, p. 1)

It is clear that the most important part of my research is to confer with NKFN, to ensure they are kept apprised of any material I encounter and, in particular, the materials in the Chambers fonds at UBC. Accordingly, while writing this reflection article, I was engaged in an important meeting. I was able to visit The Nazko First Nations Band office in Quesnel, BC and meet with the NFN current Chief, Leah Stump and Referrals elder Terrence Paul. It was my intention to begin relations-work necessary for my broader project and to tell Chief Stump about the materials that I have found to date. In addition to connecting me with Terrence Paul, who will be my point person in the Band Office, Chief Stump told me the story of a NFN member who was surprised to find archived Nazko material in Ottawa. She was equally surprised to know of the Chambers fonds at UBC. We agreed that work toward access to the sovereign assertion, for the NFN members, matters greatly to children's education and to the broader Canadian project of Truth and Reconciliation. My discussion with Terrence Paul went equally well. Importantly, Paul echoed Smith's assertion about "research" being "one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (Smith, 2012, p. 1). He also challenged me to create written publications that could accommodate true reconciliation.

Chief Catherine Patrick's presence in the Chambers' fonds offers a unique opportunity for the recovery of a leader in a protracted sovereign assertion that remains largely unwritten history. As the granddaughter of Nazko settlers and as a writing studies scholar, I find the absence of the work done by NKFN Band members, in public and scholarly sites, to be remarkable, and I am excited to learn the complete history and rhetorics of the participants. But, as compelled as I am by the work of Catherine Patrick and her status as first elected Chief of the NFN, I have learned, here, that what I must be wary of is that scholarly compulsiom to be the one who tells the story. There are too many Indigenous scholars and public figures warning me otherwise, too many who demand recognition "that Indigenous people and communities, as the experts in the management of any record involving, made by, or invested in Indigenous knowledge, should ultimately have the opportunity to be stewards of these records." (Payne., 2023, p. 159).

Biography

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The Diasporic Cookbook as Chronotope, a Review of *Kitchens of Hope: Immigrants Share Stories of Resilience and Recipes from Home*

Marcella Prokop

Svitak, Linda S., Christin, Jaye Eaton, and Lee Svitak, Dean, editors. *Kitchens of Hope: Immigrants Share Stories of Resilience and Recipes from Home*. University of Minnesota Press, 2025.

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Edited by Linda S. Svitak and Christin Jaye Eaton, with Lee Svitak Dean, and published by the University of Minnesota Press, *Kitchens of Hope: Immigrants Share Stories of Resilience and Recipes from Home* (2025) fits neatly into the popular genre network of cookbooks that blend essay with recipe, mixing memoir with meals perfected over generations. But this book doesn't simply share the legacy of Liberian rice bread or summer beet soup. It explores the migration of these dishes and their cooks, contextualizing stories of displacement and development. Because of the breadth of this book, Mikhail Bakhtin might describe this collection as a chronotope of sorts, a configuration of time and space that "takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (qtd. in Bemong & Borghart, 2010, p. 4). Through Omedi Ochieng's lens of chronotopian humanitarianism, this book is a rhetorical tool for feminist scholarship seeking to counter a Eurocentric understanding of how and why people and stories move around and through the world.

As a manifestation of the literary chronotopian framework, this text allows readers to view migration as a series of events involving people and settings constructed over time. Here, stories and recipes serve as structures for time-space made physical. For readers seeking a positive rhetorics of migration, the ability to read about and then recreate food from someone else's kitchen is literally the production of meaning.

Kitchens of Hope offers a forward, an introduction to the book, and an introduction to The Advocates for Human Rights, a Minnesota non-profit representing immigrants and refugees, through which many of the featured cooks are connected. Each of six chapters thematically links narrative and recipe through "community, resilience, opportunity, justice, hope, and celebration." While every successful migration story certainly blends elements from each theme, shaping the book this way artfully allows readers to move through space-times experienced by the storytellers as they recall their journeys to and across the United States—and how food and community sustained them.

"This book originated as an effort to collect the mealtime memories—the recipes—of those who had left their home countries behind for life in the United States," write the editors in the introduction, "The Importance of Stories." It's clear that "[t]hese stories offered more than the stark numbers that often define

immigration of people from one country to another" (xv). But the editors do include data: From Cuban cook Concepción De La Caridad Diaz Morgan, or "Conchy," readers learn that between 1960 and 1962, more than 14,000 unaccompanied minors were sent to the U.S. from Cuba through a covert operation that promised family reunification but often led to children being placed in Catholic boarding facilities. Concepción was one of those children. She didn't see her mother again for 20 years, and family reunification came in waves over the decades. Today, Conchy has a family of her own, and "her children love picadillo and make it at home." Her recipe for this common dish includes beef, tomatoes, onions, peppers and garlic, a variation that differs from the Puerto Rican or Colombian versions I am familiar with. And in this lies the beauty of blending story and recipe in this book: Readers understand how the cook and her dish have come full circle, spanning countries and childhoods.

As the daughter of a Colombian immigrant, I've been a life-long advocate for migration stories—especially those of other first-generation Americans such as myself, who love foods from their homeland but don't often have a way of explaining them to young friends who grew up on chicken nuggets or the simplicity of salt and pepper. The growth of the ethnic cookbook-as-memoir genre has made it easier for people to learn about others through something we all share, the need for food, and the memories of childhood kitchen tables. Food and story, much like visits to my heartland, Colombia, have connected me to my heritage and helped me learn about other countries and cultures, transcending place and time.

Colombian Verónica Cadavid González is another author who narrates a story rooted in statistics and data, including in this book her recipe for Bandeja Paisa, a platter of meat, beans, arepa, salsa and plantains. Along with it, she documents the fact that more than eight million Colombians are internally displaced, living in their homeland, but no longer in their home, due to decades-long conflict. Her story illustrates that migration isn't always about leaving one's country, and that testimony, as much as protection, is a form of empowerment.

Today, I live in rural Minnesota, four hours from the Advocates for Human Rights office in St. Paul. Whether I'm referring undocumented families to them or supporting U.S.-born students, I use diasporic food and literature as rhetorical strategies made physical, so students recognize that both food and story are sustenance. For other educators working at the intersections of history, rhetoric, and culture, this collection provides a unique opportunity to engage with students through something they are already experts in: what they grew up eating and why. From there, opportunities unfold for discussions of transnational feminist approaches and humanitarianism over time, allowing students to understand how these concepts, like recipes, shift over time and context. Because the book is not a standard government report on immigration, the blending of personal story with data provides a guide for scholars and writers to consider effective ways of countering "official" or stock stories about migration.

Through the invitation to experience foods from kitchens once outside the U.S., this text upholds the editors' goals of collecting "mealtime memories," and it also provides additional outside resources. The final pages share further readings related to immigration and the human right to safety, as well as resources for acquiring the ingredients needed for the recipes. Regardless of the location of the story being told or the re-

sources shared, hope, resilience and celebration abound, focusing on what's been maintained and developed, rather than lost, as these cooks find ways to adapt to and influence new cultures and cuisines.

Like any skilled cook, Bakhtin isn't the only scholar to have understood the essence of the chronotope. Ochieng has approached the concept not just as a "historical-spatial-phenomenological" construct but also a "critique of the historiographical, social scientific and philosophical assumptions" made primarily about Africa, but extending to all "non-Western" time-places (123). He re-imagines a space-time framework for engaging in humanitarian work that encourages interaction, understanding and even support without the Eurocentric desire to intervene as a savior.

I came to this book with a desire to learn the recipes and stories within it while also supporting the work of an important nonprofit (The Advocates for Human Rights will receive the author's proceeds). Beyond complementing the genre in which it fits, this book also conscientiously models for students humanitarian writing by and about the displaced.

Kitchens of Hope, rich with stories, people, and places that make Minnesota a savory mix all its own, expertly fosters benevolence but moves beyond saviorism by centering lived stories of immigrants and refugees. Through weaving in the work of The Advocates for Human Rights and shaping a narrative that underscores agency without ignoring challenge, this book is a model for Ochieng's vision of a chronotope. It is a guide, a critique and a form of connection that offers readers their own way into understanding our interconnectedness and our momentary place in the world.

Biography

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Introduction: A Feminist Rhetorical Approach to Visual Culture

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Keywords: visual rhetoric, feminist methodologies, feminist research, 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*: Anti-colonial 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-

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En*vision*ing Rhetoric: Sensation, Orientation, Imagination

Kimberlyn R. Harrison

Abstract: I propose en*vision*ing rhetoric as a feminist rhetorical pedagogy that conceptualizes vision as an embodied, affective, and material practice. Drawing on scholars like Hawhee, Poole, and Ahmed, en*vision*ing rhetoric frames seeing as a situated, multisensory act—one that orients us to the world, and that allows imagining otherwise. I explore this framework through a visual rhetoric course structured around three conceptual anchors: sensation, orientation, and imagination. Students engage in exercises that foreground embodied perception, examine how visual technologies shape attention and affect, and create zines that visualize otherwise invisible systems or identities. En*vision*ing rhetoric challenges dominant regimes of visibility by attending to how perception is conditioned by power, infrastructure, and sensory experience. It offers both a pedagogical method and a theoretical lens for a feminist rhetorical approach to visuality and visual culture.

Keywords: visual rhetoric, feminist pedagogy, feminist science studies

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Introduction

While histories of visual culture often emphasize empirical observation, a feminist rhetorical reading of "the visual" attends to the material, embodied processes that shape perception. Rhetorical scholarship has explored the sociocultural dimensions of visual culture (Cram et al., 2016; Fleckenstein et al., 2007) and vision as a rhetorical medium (Gries, 2015; Hawhee, 2011). Feminist scholars, especially in science and technology studies (Haraway, 1988), have also considered vision's biological and affective dimensions—both central to an embodied approach to visual practice and culture. Yet there is a lack of sustained engagement with how we, as rhetorical educators, might enact a pedagogy that acknowledges these aspects of vision, particularly in the visual rhetoric classroom. A pedagogical focus on these dimensions of vision invites further exploration into how images persuade, how bodies see, and how vision is shaped by and contributes to uneven experiences across identity categories.

I thus propose "en*vision*ing rhetoric" as a feminist pedagogical approach that conceptualizes vision as a rhetorical capacity rooted in affective structures, embodied experiences, and material environments. This approach begins from the premise that seeing is not a neutral or disembodied act but a socially and politically situated process. En*vision*ing rhetoric insists that vision is not just shaped by rhetorical culture—it is itself a rhetorical practice, conditioned by the body's sensory engagement with the world. In doing so, it draws on feminist theories of embodiment, affect studies, and feminist science studies perspectives to account for how vision is not merely a tool of representation but also an instrument of orientation, differentiation, and power, and situates the classroom as a prime site for experimenting with vision as a rhetorical practice—one through which students can trace how perception both constructs and contests meaning. Envisioning rhetoric thus invites a rethinking of rhetorical pedagogy, where the visual is not simply added onto existing assignments, but integrated into how students invent, process, and revise their thinking. The following section grounds envisioning rhetoric in a feminist science studies approach to visual rhetoric, emphasizing material and affective dimensions of knowledge-making.

A Feminist Science Studies Approach to Visual Rhetoric

While visual rhetoric is a well-established subfield of rhetorical study, shifting focus to the bodily experience of interpreting visual rhetoric moves us toward biological considerations of vision, perception, and the body. These conversations are taken up by feminist rhetorics of science, which challenge traditional conceptions of objectivity, neutrality, and rationality in scientific discourse. Instead, this scholarship merges concern for the ways in which gender, power, and positionality shape relations with a new materialist emphasis on the entanglement between discourse and matter. As Booher and Jung (2018) put it, while a humanist rhetorical approach views inequality as arising from symbolic actions, a feminist posthumanist approach understands oppression as "material-discursive relations that produce distinctions undergirding asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 30). Building on the insights of feminist science and technology studies scholars like Haraway and Barad, feminist rhetorics of science largely consider reality to be "a dynamic process constituted through material–discursive practices" (Hill, 2021, p. 283).

This perspective requires attending to visuality as embodied. While the Western rhetorical tradition has long recognized visuality – through the Greek concept of *phantasia* – as embodied (Hawhee, 2011), a feminist emphasis on visuality places that embodiment within biopolitical regimes of power. In other words, not all bodies (are permitted to) see and are seen the same. Indeed, Rowland (2020) notes that "to be recognized as human is to live-in-hierarchy" (p. 44). Feminist rhetorical science studies contends with that hierarchy. In her examination of the work of Margaret Cavendish, Poole (2021) shows how even early women in science used the embodied nature of vision to forward an optics that countered dominant, male-centered scientific epistemology: "According to Cavendish…the truest knowledge came primarily through the body's biological way of sensing, through the lenses of the eye, rather than through mechanical instruments" (p. 201). Millbourne and Hallenbeck (2013) also explore this sentiment, considering how the eighteenth century pocket microscope functioned as a "material-rhetorical assemblage" that "enabled different possibilities for the performance of science and gender" (p. 403).

A feminist emphasis also highlights that visuality is affectively experienced and constructed. As Poole (2020) explains, "Sensing is an ongoing rhetorical encounter that occurs in non-rational channels, and rhetorical criticism that is attuned to interpretation at the level of the senses must unpack the affective connective tissue between non-symbolic affect and symbolic interpretation" (p. 616). This attention to affective experience resonates with Ahmed's (2006) reflections on embodied encounters with the material world, where even the sensation of a doorknob can generate a "becoming strange" of the body – an unsettling that occurs between hand and object, self and world. In such moments, objects take on a kind of liveliness; they impress upon the body and, in doing so, transform both the object and the subject. Ahmed extends this thinking to the social realm as well, where visual impressions are not merely perceptual but normative. Images, whether material or institutional, orient subjects toward particular expectations. "The 'hey you' is not just addressed to anybody," Ahmed writes, emphasizing how institutional spaces recruit bodies that can "reflect back" the organization's image in a "good likeness" (p. 134). In this sense, visuality becomes a site where norms are reproduced and bodies are sorted – not simply through what is seen, but through how perception itself is

structured by histories of power, race, and affect. Feminist rhetorics thus position visuality as a layered and consequential site of inquiry, shaped as much by sensation and orientation as by representation.

En*vision*ing Rhetoric

From a feminist rhetorical science studies perspective, I forward en*vision*ing rhetoric as a feminist pedagogical approach to visual culture that emphasizes the inseparability of sensing and perceiving visual stimuli from the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of visual media. Indeed, to envision is both "to visualize" and "to imagine," underscoring two key prongs of this framework. First, envisioning is an active process that reflects the dynamic relationship between viewer, context, and environment. Tsing (2015), for example, emphasizes that our bodies are always part of larger, interdependent systems of humans and nonhumans: she notes that matsutake pickers navigate the forest by sensing connections among mushrooms, trees, soil, and animals. This practice fosters a form of forest knowledge and attentiveness that values the liveliness of beings as subjects, not objects, rather than aiming for complete classification. In this sense, envisioning entails cultivating a mode of attention attuned to relationality rather than mastery. It reframes seeing as a practice of rhetorical engagement—one that recognizes knowledge as co-created through the interplay of bodies, environments, and affects.

This network of relations places visualization as a mode of what Hopkins (2025) calls *dialing in* (p. 2) – of emplacing ourselves in the complex web of social, biological, technological, and material forces that shape how and what we see. Envisioning is also imaginative, both negotiating the relationship between mental and empirical images to produce meaning, and thriving on possibility – it is "a mechanism for seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20). Like the visual performance of the word itself, (en)*vision*(ing) is situated *within* and *between* systems of interpretation, bodily experience, and material environments.

This framework has significant implications for the classroom, where the visual can enrich practice, process, and product. In what follows, I explore how en*vision*ing rhetoric shapes a visual rhetoric course I teach at the University of Texas at Austin. Through this approach, students reflect on how sensory apparatuses affect perception, how visual technologies orient us toward specific ways of seeing, and how imagination can generate just futures for their communities. The course is structured around three conceptual cornerstones of en*vision*ing: sensation, orientation, and imagination. This framework equips students to critically examine visual culture, reflect on embodied perception, and imagine more equitable ways of seeing and being seen.

En*vision*ing Rhetoric in the Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches

Sensation

The first unit focuses on sensation, emphasizing the embodied and material nature of visual practice. As Lupton and Lipps (2018) remind us, "our sense organs are connected to a head that turns, arms that reach, and bodies that wander and seek" (p. 10). This embodied vision does not occur in a vacuum but within complex, often invisible systems. Hopkins (2025) draws attention to the infrastructural and environmental

dimensions of sensation, noting that "we are knotted, tangled, trapped in webs of extractive intra-action" (p. 2). Vision, then, is not just bodily – it is infrastructurally and ecologically entangled in our material environments. Poole (2020) poses a pressing question addressing this notion: "how might understanding the materiality and sensation of vision alter rhetorical criticism?" (p. 617).

My own response to this question, in the context of the classroom, is to embrace rhetorical field methods as modes of knowledge-making that prompt students to reflexively engage with their own sensing abilities. Senda-Cook et al. (2019) describe rhetorical fieldwork as an approach that considers how material conditions, spatial contexts, and participation in rhetorical performances together shape meaning, audience response, and rhetorical practice. Fieldwork, as a result, expands both what "objects" rhetoricians can study and what methods we use to study them.

In particular, I ask students to take field notes in a space familiar to them, then take field notes viewing a photograph of the same location. Students critically compare their field notes, writing up a reflection that explains how their experiences differed and what that has taught them about sensation. For Pezzullo and de Onís (2018), rigor in rhetorical fieldwork depends less on strict methods and more on a scholar's ability to draw valid cultural critiques or evidence-based conclusions rather than relying on preconceived assumptions. I emphasize the latter part of this definition, asking students to make a compelling critique of their own experiences based on their observations.

The goal of this assignment is to encourage students to recognize how their embodied presence shapes visual interpretation. This goal is scaffolded by the reading I assign: students engage with Nick Sousanis' (2015) *Unflattening*, in which the author artfully illustrates through hand-drawn graphics how Western visual culture often "flattens" experience and non-traditional modes of knowledge by siloing off perspectives and contexts from one another. As a class, we consider what it means to *unflatten* our perspective of visuality, emphasizing vision as part of a larger embodied process. Isolating one sense—vision—from the other senses transforms the interpretive possibilities and affective experiences in the space. In fact, that was a point that most students made—seeing the space through only a photograph *felt* different. Most students remarked on this difference: viewing the space only through a photograph both drew their attention to details they might otherwise overlook and, at the same time, disoriented them by withholding other sensory inputs such as sound and touch. This prompted conversation about how 1) when we talk about vision, we are really talking about a multisensory network of perception; 2) how images attempt to isolate one particular sense from the rest; and 3) how visual representations of the world prompt a rhetorical response. This consideration leads us into the next unit, where we focus on orientation.

Orientation

The second unit centers on orientation, drawing from feminist and phenomenological theories to examine how bodies are directed in and through visual environments. Ahmed (2006) defines orientation as being "turned towards certain objects, those that help us find our way" (p. 1), emphasizing that what appears in our field of vision depends on where we are and how we are positioned. Orientation is thus part of a multisensory network shaped by visual technologies that direct attention, structure affect, and determine what is central

or obscured. Poole (2020) extends Kenneth Burke's engagement with orientation to show how "orientation as seeing—and reorientation as seeing double—reveal much about rhetoric's relationship to sensation" (p. 605). Together, these perspectives underscore rhetorical orientation as affective, embodied, and entangled in systems of power.

We explore two axes of orientation in particular: time and scale.

For time, we discuss how orientations, like affects, can accumulate over time, so that historical ways of orienting toward the world are passed on through our technologies. We begin with expanding the definition of what students might consider visual technologies to include analog instruments like eyeglasses and mirrors. This in itself was an orienting move on my part, to envision rhetoric moving beyond the tendency Hawhee (2011) identifies as focusing too much on "paintings, film, photographs, and posters," which she contends has the potential to "limit…the visual to an encounter with pictorial objects" (p. 140). Eyeglasses and mirrors, as orienting examples, resonated considerably with students as parts of their everyday lives. Assigned readings, as well as in-class and discussion exercises, prompted students to reflect on their experiences with these technologies, noting how they carry ideological assumptions about productivity and beauty. For example, students invoked Kelleher's (2023) *The Ugly History of Beautiful Things* to consider how mirrors cultivate a practice of visuality rooted in "looking" rather than "seeing" (p. 20), sparking discussion of how the male gaze persists and adapts through newer visual technologies, from selfies to gym photos.

For scale, we discuss how orientation changes what we see. We focus both on how technologies orient us conceptually and physically—how technologies change not only how we see but what we see. Students used handheld microscopes to take images on campus, noting not only how the image isolates visual sense from other sense-making abilities, but how scale drastically changes their ability to not only interpret what they see but define what they see. In reviewing images in class, some students forgot what the microscopic images actually indexed. This led us into a discussion of the prevalence of microscopic imaging, particularly in medical contexts. For example, Weatherbee (2023) examines how the visual depiction of the COVID-19 "Spike Protein" departed from historical traditions of representing disease through symptoms—how they manifest in the body. Weatherbee argues that this change in visual frame dehumanizes COVID-19 sufferers, since it directs attention away from the visible, recognizable body and towards the microbiological organism. Linking this reading to a recent measles outbreak in Texas, we compared prevention campaigns for measles and COVID-19, analyzing how different visual orientations shape rhetorical representations of disease.

The major assignment for this unit asked students to choose a visual technology to rhetorically examine, explaining how this technology orients users across time and scale, both physically and conceptually. I ask them to delineate how this results in what Berger calls a *way of seeing*—an orientation toward our perceptual field that shapes the pictures we surface with. As Berger (1972) explains, the invention of the camera transformed not just what we could see but how we see: "what you saw depended upon where you were when… it was no longer possible to imagine everything converging on the human eye as on the vanishing point of infinity" (para. 32). In other words, the camera revealed that vision is not fixed or universal but relational, contingent, and situated in time and space.

For this assignment, students traced how other visual technologies enact similar reorientations. I left the parameters of "visual technology" vague, and students chose a wide variety of instruments—from iPhone cameras, to drones, to microscopes, to telescopes. One student, for example, noted how an examination of telescopes oriented them toward the effects of light pollution—an issue they wouldn't normally have noticed. Another student used microscopes as an example of how visual technologies shape collective behavior and societal values, since the discovery of microscopic bacteria led to different standards of hygiene. Through this assignment, students demonstrated how technologies guide attention, shape perception, and orient us toward particular aspects of the world.

Imagination

The final unit of the course shifts from past and present temporal registers—how we sense and have sensed, how we are oriented and have been oriented—to a future-facing orientation, inviting students to *envision* what remains unseen. This unit draws on two strands of feminist rhetorical scholarship: Royster's concept of *critical imagination* and Benjamin's speculative methods. Royster (2000) defines imagination as "a commitment to making connections and seeing possibility," positioning it as a critical skill that enables scholars to question dominant narratives and remake interpretive frameworks (p. 83). In her work on African American women's histories, Royster uses critical imagination as a reconstructive tool to recover lives systematically erased from public records—however, I adopt this methodology following her and Kirsch's claim that imagination can "renegotiate the terms by which visibility... [is] determined" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 133). Imagination is not only a historical practice but also a generative prompt for students: to dig into their own knowledges, experiences, and observations to ask what they do *not* see represented in their everyday environments, and why those absences matter.

I supplement this approach with Benjamin's (2016) method of speculative field notes, which she describes as "a way to fashion possible futures and probable pasts, enabling analysts to critically reflect on the present." By encouraging students to "experiment with the line between fact and fiction," speculative thinking becomes a way to resist narratives of inevitability surrounding technological and cultural developments. This future-oriented lens guides students in identifying a phenomenon—an experience, identity, community, event, place, or process – that has been made invisible or marginalized by historical, infrastructural, or cultural forces.

Zines were the medium through which students realized these projects, chosen for their historical and rhetorical significance as tools of resistance, representation, and relational knowledge-making. Zines have long been a staple in composition pedagogy, particularly for their alignment with social justice values and their ability to foster "egalitarian social relationships, equity, and social justice" (Licona, 2012, p. 2). As Licona notes, zines "challenge, reimagine, and replace exclusionary and oppressive discursive practices" (p. 2), offering new modes of subjectivity and expression. Encouraging students to disengage from purely digital production in favor of tactile, hands-on design allows them to perform the ethos of imagination, inviting them to consider not only what is, but what could be.

Students responded with a wide array of powerful projects that brought their chosen topics to light, from

a digitally-designed zine on the cultural significance of matcha in Japan, to a tactile, DIY craft-based zine featuring interactive activities for caregivers to use with Alzheimer's patients, building connection through sensory and emotional engagement. Students were encouraged to think about how to utilize the "image part of imagination" (Hawhee, 2011, p. 42), not simply representing the unseen but rhetorically orienting their audiences toward new ways of sensing and knowing. Drawing on prior units, they considered how to guide perception through visual design, material texture, and even sound, using QR codes to link to videos, ambient noise, or spoken word. In addition to their zines, students submitted a reflection that asked them to consider how their own ways of seeing contributed to the topics they chose, and how their view of their topic changed throughout the processes of making the zine. One student, for example, noted how the process of creating their zine—a digital zine on the barriers to genetic testing for breast cancer in rural communities—provided new opportunities to connect with family members, changing what they thought they knew about an already personal topic. In an era where concerns about AI-generated student work are growing, zines function as a reminder that composition can be otherwise: embodied, speculative, and deeply human.

Conclusion: En*vision*ing Beyond Pedagogy

In an era marked by increased surveillance, algorithmic vision, and the saturation of everyday life with visual stimuli, a feminist rhetorical approach to visual culture reveals that who is seen, how they are seen, and what remains unseen are questions that sit at the core of both visual culture and power. En*vision*ing rhetoric offers a response to this moment, foregrounding the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of visuality. As a mode of orientation itself, envisioning rhetoric expands approaches to visual rhetoric by bridging sensory experience with speculative imagination. It asks not only how pictures persuade, but how perception itself is conditioned—and how we might imagine different possibilities for conditioning how we see. In the classroom, this framework invites students to slow down their looking, to notice what dominant habits of vision render invisible, and to experiment with alternative ways of attending to images, technologies, and each other. These practices cultivate critical habits of attention while advancing core goals of feminist pedagogy: fostering equity, amplifying agency, and grounding learning in lived, embodied experience.

As a result, the possibilities of en*vision*ing rhetoric reach beyond the classroom. Future approaches might consider digital interfaces and biometric platforms, where questions of accessibility, legibility, and algorithmic bias are central to how we see and are seen. It offers fertile ground for disability studies, where embodiment and perception are already being theorized in expansive and generative ways. And it invites renewed engagement with archival work, asking how we might visualize what history has hidden or erased. By anchoring visual culture in feminist rhetorical practice, en*vision*ing rhetoric offers one response to how we might resist dominant regimes of visibility—those that surveil, exclude, and flatten—and instead cultivate more equitable, embodied, and imaginative ways of seeing, knowing, and relating to and in the world.

Biography

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“Those pictures are peaches”: Gender Play in a Feminist Visual Underground

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Abstract: Focusing on a set of photographs taken by Frances Benjamin Johnston in the late nineteenth century, this article argues for the value of identifying, exploring, and interrogating historical and current instances of a feminist visual underground (FVU). Defined as a hidden material-relational space within which private gender play evolves, an FVU, past and present, forms in response of visual compression, or pressures from the ambient dominant culture to conform to binary gender prescriptions; it flourishes in material-relational safe spaces; and it employs a communicative medium that, marked by visual codes, promotes the unity and sustainability of the private cohort. To demonstrate the value of addressing FVU, this article examined one instantiation of a feminist visual underground: that revolving around Johnston and her photographic studio in the late nineteenth century. The examination underscored the value of expanding the purview of feminist visual culture to include feminist visual undergrounds: first, it revealed hidden pockets of resistance to gender prohibitions; second, it offered perspectives from which to interrogate both dominant patriarch and feminist visual cultures as manifested in particular historical moments; and, finally, in an era of increasing restrictions on freedom of speech, it emphasized the importance of scaling feminist visual activism, encompassing the quiet invisibility of private expression as well as public visibility of conventional feminist advocacy.

Keywords: feminist visual underground, gender play, visual compression, safe spaces, visual codes, nineteenth-century photography

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A“My dear Miss Fanny

“Whew!-----!!!! Those pictures are peaches. It was the greatest pleasure to get them so soon and I wish you could had been here to enjoy opening them with me” (Thompson, 1896).

So writes fin de siècle artist-illustrator Mills Thompson to close friend Frances Benjamin Johnston, famed portrait photographer and groundbreaking photojournalist. Delighted to receive a group of prints featuring Thompson, Johnston, and an unidentified female collaborator all dressed in gender non-conforming apparel, the secretary to The Society of Washington Artists gleefully requests the nationally renowned photographer to send him an additional set of “good prints. . . as soon as you can.”

The cross-dressing photographs themselves as well as the letter testifying to the recipient’s pleasure reflect one instantiation of what I call a *feminist visual underground* (FVU). Defined as a covert material-relational space within which visual resistance, solidarity, and friendship flourish, a feminist visual underground enabled Thompson and Johnston—if only for the snap of the shutter—to undermine late nineteenth-century rigid gender binaries. The poses Thompson extolls, as well as the emotions and desires they embody, underscore the vital importance of grappling with implications of sub-rosa dissent flouting socially prescribed gender roles.

Sensitive to the ways in which “feminism and visual culture. . . deeply inform one another,” Euro-western feminists have identified and critiqued the means by which dominant visuality—or learned ways of seeing in

a culture—"is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture" (Jones, 2007, p. 1). Such valuable scholarship has exposed and countered asymmetrical gender power permeating visual cultures throughout the West. But equally important to feminist political and social agendas are the ways in which gender inscriptions are re-visualized surreptitiously in small, intimate cohorts, or FVUs. Disinterring and interrogating the myriad historical and current formations of these secret enclaves reveal the private face of feminist resistance to a dominant visual culture. This practice also reveals the ways secret insurgents challenge the public face of visual gender activism.

To illustrate the benefit of exploring FVUs, I examine one instance of a late nineteenth-century subterranean rebellion alluded to in Thompson's letter and embodied by Johnston's alt-gender photographs. At the same time, I also offer a mode of engaging with such hidden cohorts, identifying three mutually constitutive elements integral to their existence: visual compressions, or societal and legal visual pressures that delineate and police gender boundaries; safe spaces, or material-relational sites that, hidden from public view, foster the formation of a trusted cohort sympathetic to transgressing gender binaries; and a visual medium deployed in that safe space to collaboratively "signal[. . .] a Refusal" of hegemonic gender dictates (Hebdige, 1997, p. 3). Such an exploration yields two critical benefits: it provides insight into scales of feminist visual resistance, from the invisible to the visible, and into matrices within which adherents reimagine gender identities. Equally important, it offers alternative perspectives from which to cross-examine an era's dominant patriarchal and feminist visual cultures.

A Feminist Visual Underground

One of the "peaches" Thompson (1896) receives from Johnston ostensibly features a photograph of a prosperous matron with two male scions hovering around her (see Fig. 1). Evoking the middle-class gendered mantra that celebrates ideal families, the image replicates the style of portraiture featured in family photo albums wildly popular in the final decades of the nineteenth century. [Place fig. 1 here.]

Johnston, F. B. (c 1896). Untitled 1: A Seated Mills Thompson in Victorian Dress with Frances Benjamin Johnston and Unidentified Woman in Male Apparel. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.04879/

However, rather than reinforcing dominant gender conventions, the photograph upends them. For the mother-figure arrayed in a rich, Victorian fashion is Thompson, and the mustached son leaning against his "mother" is Johnston. What results from this gender reversal is an image deliberately abrogating entrenched gender norms. An incarnation of resistance to status quo familial roles based on binary genders, *Untitled 1* testifies to the value of exploring FVUs as they offer glimpses into intimate visual dissent, thereby enriching scholarship focused on the public face of feminist activism. Simultaneously, inquiry into FVUs also provides vantage points from which to interrogate both dominant patriarchal visual culture *and* an ambient feminist visual culture.

First, attending to private subterranean visual resistance enriches work in subcultures as sites of underground rebellion, feminist or otherwise. Reflecting the 1970s emergent interest in cultural dissent, Hebdige (1997) theorizes and asserts the importance of the "expressive forms and rituals of. . . subordinate groups" (p. 2) that consciously deviate from the social dictates of the empowered group (p. 3). Complementing efforts to effect "a breakdown of consensus" in cultural realities (p. 17), Hebdige details the ways in which "spectacular subcultures" (p. 18) challenge perceived hegemony through the "level of appearances" (p. 17), employing visual strategies that upend "the process of normalization" (p. 18). Resistance, then, combines with visual style to undermine the dominant culture's overarching "principle of unity and cohesion" (p. 18). Similarly, marked by dissent, particularly transgressions of gender prohibitions, FVUs likewise engage in opposing "normalization." But, in contrast to subcultures, FVUs act in extreme privacy, finding in invisibility and protective enclosures invitations to—and protections for—nonconforming gender play. Addressing FVUs, then, potentially reveals new visual strategies for collaborative dissent that unfold through everyday actions among an

emotionally supportive cohort.

Second, in addition to enrichment, the study of FVUs promotes interrogation by providing perspectives from which to critique the dominant male-marked visual culture and the feminist visual culture itself. Johnston offers a case in point, especially as her enclave's gender play complemented and contested the visual turn in nineteenth-century women's activism. The public deployment of myriad forms of visual culture constituted a remarkable innovation in suffragists' efforts to secure rights for women, signaling the emergence of a feminist visual culture. Focusing on England's suffragettes, Cherry (2000) points to the women's embrace of spectacle activism—parades, banners, postcards, and protest art—all performances linked through "the importance which they gave to visuality and visibility" (p. 1). A similar canny innovation of feminist visual culture colors the advocacy efforts of U. S. suffragists from the campaign for bloomers in the 1850s to the use of photographs to woo members to the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) (Flexner, 1975, p. 230). While Johnston's FVU—self-named The Push—likewise embraced the explosion of visual technologies that characterized the nineteenth-century mediasphere, it did so in ways that implicitly interrogated late nineteenth-century feminist visual culture.

To illustrate, suffrage activism and Johnston's FVU differed significantly in terms of their visualizations of gender identities. On the one hand, NAWSA suffragists harnessed the tools of visual culture in ways that normalized rather than resisted white gender norms: "suffragists coordinated visual campaigns that painted white female citizens as virtuous mothers and wives" capable of balancing "domesticity with political participation and professional goals" (Lange, 2020, p. 2). On the other hand, freed by their invisibility, Johnston's circle of covert rebels contravened visually—if only privately—gender boundaries in ways ostracized, even criminalized, by the larger culture, including feminist culture. As reflected in *Untitled 1*, the messaging of The Push fundamentally re-imagined white, middle-class gender binaries on which suffrage visual activism predominantly relied.

Both complementing and critiquing, FVUs offer vital insights into the "'oppositional technologics'—'the political praxis of resistance being woven into low-tech, amateur, hybrid, alternative subcultural feminist networks that register below the mainstream'" (Garrison qtd. in Piano, 2003, p. 254). Those insights ensue from the nature and operation of FVUs, shaped by visual compression, flourishing in safe spaces, and reliant on a particular visual medium for dissent.

Visual Compression

FVU's birth pains ensue from the dominant culture's visual compression, or the multi-level socio-legal pressures that mark and punish any deviation from rigid gender prescriptions. Thompson's jubilant tone in his December 10 letter and his pleasure in *Untitled 1* implicitly acknowledge both the need for dissent and for its private expression, especially for those dependent for survival on middle-class respectability. That threat of visual compression propels FVUS and their subterranean dissent into existence. For The Push, visual compression operated across popular and legislative spheres through fashion, a tyranny *Untitled 1* mocks.

Fashion constitutes an overt tool of conservative values, especially in the nineteenth century, following

the explosive embrace of photography. Severa (1995) argues that photography elicited a cultural shift in identities, which were, "in a very large part based on appearances" (p. xv). Among the white middle-class, a "powerful drive toward a 'proper' façade" emerged, one that carried along with it a moral imperative (p. xv). Writing about the post-bellum U. S. scene, Mattingly (2002) extends Severa's insight to gender, noting that gender for women was "constructed largely in the visual impact created by their clothing and appearance," placing tremendous emphasis on visible surfaces (p. 1). Nowhere was that equation between proper dress and virtuous character more prevalent than in the 1890s, a moment of turbulent gender unrest particularly among bourgeois white men and women (MacIntosh & Norcliffe, 2016, p. 155). The pressure to conceive of and conform to binary gender dictates in dress and behavior stemmed from two intersecting sources: popular culture and local law enforcement.

Carrying the flag for visual compression in popular culture, *Godey's Lady's Book*, a leading women's periodical for more than 30 years, expressed horror at the idea of women appropriating male attire: "Will she be a hybrid sort of creature like one of the fabled monsters and in her raiment suggest both sexes?" (qtd. in Severa, 1995, p. 454). The equally popular *Ladies' Home Journal* goes even further: it narrates strategies for "curing" a monstrous "case of 'Mannishness" ("College girls' larks and pranks," 1900, p. 8). Excoriating as a "Freak" one young woman who sported bloomers, cut her hair short, and "doffed her fore-and-aft cap like a man," the class president and her court devise a cruel intervention: dressing as men and terrorizing the "Freak" as she returns home in the dark (p. 8). Chortling over the "Freak's" panicked responses, the students later congratulate themselves for the success of their brutal "cure" (p. 8). Those visual pressures joined legislation to increase the threat level when municipalities across the country passed "indecency" laws criminalizing behavior perceived as destabilizing gender roles. Notably, these codes banned *visual* infractions. Anyone who appeared in "'a dress not belonging to his or her sex'" was vulnerable to arrest and possible incarceration (qtd. in Sears, 2015, p. 2). As Sears (2015) details, "cross-dressing laws were not idiosyncratic or archaic regulations but foundational city codes . . . with remarkably long lives" (p. 3).

Social ostracism in conjunction with criminalization visually compressed the range of gender expressions, a strategy that, instead of eradicating resistance, drove it underground. Here in private FVUs, the disaffected made common cause, creating invisible cells of gender resistance in supportive environments. However, for separate individuals to coalesce as a congregation of dissenters, they require a safe space. Johnston offered one such refuge at the century's end.

Safe Space

While visual compression drives gender resistance underground, that factor alone is insufficient for the evolution of FVUs. Gender resistance requires a safe space in which to enact transgression without fear of reprisal. Feminist and queer scholarship on safe spaces underscores its necessary—and problematic—function. As the Roestone Collective (2014) explains, a safe space not only keeps "marginalized groups free from violence and harassment" (p. 1346), but it also invites participants to "'speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance'" (Kenny qtd. in Roestone Collective, p.1346). While no single "recipe" for crafting a safe space exists, two inextricably intertwined ingredients are necessary: a material site

for gathering and a commitment to "relational work," or the affective interactions which produce and sustain protected places (p. 1347). Johnston provided The Push with that combination.

"It's a daisy," Thompson (1896) writes to Johnston, employing a popular slang for "perfection" to extoll the $7000 extension to Johnston's family home. This two-story addition featuring a photography studio with a floor-to-ceiling window, reception area, dressing room, darkroom, and office in Johnston's hands became The Push's safe space. Here, Johnston and her circle of close friends challenged visual compressions through such transgressive photographs as *Untitled 1* and others. Essential to their "praxis of resistance" was the dual-level nature of the space: material design and relational energy.

Safe spaces are physical sites, and Johnston designed her photographic studio in ways that blurred gender-marked spheres. By confusing the boundary separating (male-marked) professional-public spaces from (female-marked) private-domestic spaces in layout and decor, Johnston crafted an aesthetic of gender fluidity, a generative venue within which adherents could experiment with gender nonconformity. To illustrate, Johnston (1897) presents her studio in a *Ladies' Home Journal* article as the quintessential professional—and a public—site. Built and decorated to her specifications, the impressive structure reinforced Johnston's reputation as a "truly professional photographer" (Asherman, 2009, p. 29) and provided the "perfect place for her work in portraiture" (p. 10). A photograph of the studio appeared in Johnston's 1897 article, situated to the immediate right of the headline, a position of visual prominence. Its inclusion provided concrete evidence of Johnston's public-professional success and thus evidence of a female gaining national success in a male-dominated arena. However, the interior appearance of the studio—its visual presence—also casts it as a private, female-marked space.

With a mantled fireplace and cushioned window seat, the studio embodied "a typical Bohemian residence of the Nineties. . . complete with tiger rugs, paisley throws, Indian basketry, a plaster Venus de Milo, Parisian posters and oriental bric-a-brac" (Kirsten, 1966, p. 53), indicative of Johnston's combination of domestic with professional. Even as public media celebrated the studio as the professional space, the reception and sitting area exemplified the warmth—the domesticity—of home. Through these design choices, then, Johnston obscured the lines between male- and female-marked. She reinforces this obfuscation by claiming the blurring as a professional virtue. Johnston (1897) explains, "[I] tried to make my skylight room as artistic, as cheerful and as inviting as would be the studio of an artist" as a means of ameliorating clients' fear of the camera (p. 7), consequently providing a gender-fluid safe space for The Push. However, an FVU requires more than physical space: it requires an emotional support structure.

As the Roestone Collective underscores, any safe space needs affective labor to create and sustain it, and The Push's members displayed evidence of trust and affection. From its opening, Johnston's gender-anomalous studio served as a favored spot for social gatherings involving these covert rebels. As Berch (2000) points out, it was "as suitable for entertaining as it was for work" (p. 26), an environment aimed at nurturing and sustaining affinities. Thompson (1896) alludes to the tight connections among friends, closing his letter to Johnston with the wistful "remember me to my friends." The gender-fluid materiality of Johnston's studio ameliorated not only the fears of her clients but also the fears of The Push, such as that embodied in what

Berch calls a "female culture" revolving around Johnston. One example—the nude photographs of Alice Berry—illustrates the depth and scope of the clandestine group's trust. A young and attractive D. C. socialite with a penchant for mischief, Berry requested Johnston to photograph her in various stages of dishabille. Johnston agreed, promising to keep the plates away from "'prying male eyes'" (qtd. in Berch, 2000, p. 30). Thrilled with the nude photographs, however, Berry happily shared selected poses with women in the Berry-Johnston circle. Both photographs and their viewing testify to the existence of close friends who felt safe disrobing for and taking pleasure in images of "attractive nude women" (p. 31).

Produced and circulated within Johnston's gender-fluid studio, *Untitled 1* and the Berry nudes highlight the material-relational integrity of Johnston's studio, where members of her intimate circle engaged in shared gender play banned in public. The photographs also underscore a third crucial element of a feminist visual underground: the medium of visual expression.

Medium of Visual Expression

In conjunction with visual compression and safe space, the medium of communication constitutes an integral requirement for FVUs. As Hebdige (1997) makes clear, medium fosters both the formation and sustainability of any underground group. Whether it is "dress, dance, argot, music, etc.," medium enables a subculture to "make sense to its members"–thus unifying them through a joint agenda–and to "signify disorder" (p. 101)–thus mobilizing them in rebellion. FVUs likewise depend on a medium of visual communication to solidify group membership and challenge entrenched gender binary roles, and photography served as the medium of choice for The Push. Two photographs—one of Thompson and one of Johnston, both taken in Johnston's studio, each employing different codes, and each imagining gender differently—highlight the power of a medium's visual to unify through resistance to gender normalization. Thompson's response to his gender-bending photographs—especially *Untitled 2*, which featured the youthful artist-illustrator in his self-named "Ethel" persona (see Fig. 2)—highlights the dual power of visual codes.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 2: Seated Mills Thompson in Woman's Fur Cape and Feathered-Flowered Hat [Photograph]. Library of Congress. https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/ppmsc/04800

As Thompson (1896) enthuses, the "'Ethel' photograph is great," underscoring *great* to communicate pleasure in his masquerade as a society matron. Arrayed in a fitted, luxurious fur cape and crowned with an elaborately feathered and flowered hat, Thompson smiles puckishly at the camera, inviting the viewer into his play. With his face nestled in the cloak's high fur collar and a curled right hand tucked under his chin, Thompson pokes fun at himself and at gender dominant prohibitions. His photograph manifests what Hebdige (1997) describes as "intentional communication," or "a visible construction" constituting "a loaded choice" that directs attention to itself (p. 101). Such communications "display their own codes," that is, codes chosen for the initiates of a particular underground community (p. 102). These codes are the vehicle of communal coherence and gender transgression. For *Untitled 2*, the most evident coded "intentional communication" ties to Thompson's (1896) personal title for his portrait: "Ethel" from "Ethelville."

Beyond Thompson needling gender conservatives—and municipal laws—by depicting himself as a society doyenne, he deploys the name "Ethel" and specific choices in his attire to provide The Push with an insider joke that simultaneously "give[s] new and covertly oppositional readings" to gender (Hebdige, 1997, p. 102). First, as a highly popular name for women during the Victorian period, *Ethel* as a visual code unifies, evoking for The Push a long history of nobility and wealth. It endows Thompson's Ethel with a haughty respectability dedicated to upholding gender traditions. The association of Ethel with Ethelville—Thompson's (1896) pet name for Boston, a city perceived by the artistic community as steeped in social and artistic conservatism with little tolerance for bohemian sensibilities—buttressed that satirical double meaning. It unifies by with The Push sharing humor and delighting in the transgression. Thus, the terms that Thompson playfully associates with the portrait already serve as a frame for that portrait's community uptake. At the same

time, the visual code serves dissent: it remakes gender by rendering the female-male binary as tantalizingly conditional, a role assumed and discarded with a change of apparel. Thompson's body and choice of attire carry that.

For Thompson and The Push, the oppositional value of *Untitled 2* emerges from the explicit visual contradictions underlying the artist-illustrator's masquerade, a contradiction alluded to in the name Ethel, which, derived from the medieval *Ethelred*, was assigned to both male and female children. That gender uncertainty is reinforced by the photograph wherein an invisible male body, in conjunction with the visible female identity, dismantles both body and identity, both the unseen and seen. The deliberate collision renders gender less a rigid binary and more a contingent choice, undermining cultural insistence on gender clarity. In addition, the source of Thompson's attire reinforces the construal of gender uncertainty: The clothing Thompson sports derives from Johnston's personal wardrobe. In fact, Johnston wears this exact ensemble—in a similar pose—for her own self-portrait as a wealthy and respectable socialite (see Fig. 3). This deliberate mimicry in the two portraits—a combination of codes accessible to members of the Push—subverts static male and female identities to reimagine gender as mutable, a vision that articulates dissent even as it unifies. A similar dynamic, but with a different code and vision, unfolds in *Untitled 4*.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 3: Seated Self-Portrait in Fur Cape and Feathered-Flowered Hat. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006689793/

Replete with mustache and bedecked in knickerbockers with a tam o'shanter topper, Johnston casually stands gripping the handles of a high-wheeler (see Fig. 4). In her self-portrait, this rebel in the shadows marshals her own array of codes in ways that invite The Push to share in a vision of gender as neither male nor female but a transmutation of (2009) points to Johnston's gender-transmutation as a professional artist, contending that Johnston "consciously broke from the confines of traditionally masculine and feminine aspects of photography" (p. 10). With hidden messages, *Untitled 4* denies neither female nor male qualities; instead, it embodies a sinuous composite more than the sum of its parts. Central to that transmutation is Johnston's

deployment of a mundane object in a mundane space as visual code.

Johnston, F. B. (1896). Untitled 4: Frances Benjamin Johnston in Male Attire with High-Wheeler. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsc.04884/

Hebdige (1997) notes that "the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups" can manifest in assigning mundane objects a double meaning (p. 2). Two mundanities Johnston doubles consist of high-wheeler and studio, both familiar to her cohort, both common alone but transformative together. By choosing the high-wheeler, situating it in her studio, and asserting her mastery of both, Johnston challenges the exclusive male-marked ownership of the bicycle as a pursuit and photography as a field. Barring women racers, whom society labeled promiscuous, the high-wheeler operated as an "overt expression of 'cavalier masculinity'" (MacIntosh & Norcliffe, 2016, pp. 153-54). Similarly, photography in the nineteenth century constituted a male-dominated, even misogynistic, field, with women denigrated as purveyors of baby pictures (Grover, 1988). However, the high-wheeler positioned *in* Johnston's studio disrupts the exclusive male-gendering of the bicycle and the profession the photographer regarded as her own. In addition, the bicycle *in* the studio underscores Johnston's professional flourishing as neither a man nor a woman but alt-gender. By 1896, less than a decade after publishing her first photographically illustrated article, Johnston had already established her reputation as the nation's "court photographer" with a substantial portfolio of political figures from Presidents to cabinet members. She was also one of the first female photojournalists to work as a stringer for the Bain News Service, and the first female member of the Capital Photography Club, all occurring *without* Johnstone disavowing her bread-and-butter portraits of babies, brides, and society matrons. Her success derived from neither male nor female attributes but from an alchemy—a transmutation—of both, presenting this reimagined gender as a viable option for members of her FVU.

As Thompson smiles mischievously from beneath a frivolous hat and Johnston commands her high-wheeler against the backdrop of her studio, both covert insurgents craft visual codes that unify and transgress gender's visual compression. Both demonstrate the ways that gender can be pictured anew through the lens of a camera, uncapped in a safe space and protected by a group of intimates.

The Rewards of Exploring FVUs

We live in a historical moment when pressure mounts to resurrect and impose nineteenth-century gender binaries in our twenty-first-century culture. We live, too, in a moment when "more than ever, the political sphere has become spectacle dictated by the rules of visual culture" (Griffiths, 2017, p. 12). Thus, as feminists, we are all called to expand and deepen our understanding of resistance in its myriad forms. FVUs offer one fruitful avenue.

While women throughout Euro-western history have asserted their right to visibility—to being seen and seeing as agents—important to that struggle is also the right of invisibility, the need to eschew the spotlight and experiment in private enclaves with radical opposition to dominant gender strictures. This snapshot of one such clandestine congregation—Johnston's fin de siècle FVU—offers five provocations for feminist visual cultural work. First, it encourages a deliberate search for the "in visible": pockets of feminist resistance coalescing around participants' shared visual—and lived—transgressions of fixed gender boundaries (Galvan, 2023, p. 1). Second, it illuminates the existence of covert feminist visual activism that operates, by necessity, in the shadows cast by an overweening visual "respectability," however defined. Third, it underscores the importance of such private visual havens where veiled aspirational desires serve as inspiration for overt political and socio-cultural advocacy. Fourth, it provides a proto-analytic for engaging in such an exploration: identifying visual compression, describing safe spaces, and analyzing a communicative medium's visual codes. Finally, it offers alternative perspectives for interrogating a dominant feminist visual culture.

We can find riches in the shadows of feminist visual culture.

Biography

Kristie S. Fleckenstein is Professor Emerita of English at Florida State University. Her research interests include gender and race, especially as both intersect with material and visual rhetorics. She is the recipient of the 2005 CCCC Outstanding Book of the Year Award for *Embodied Literacies: Imageword and a Poetics of Teaching* (SIUP, 2003), and the 2009 W. Ross Winterowd Award for Best Book in Composition Theory for *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom* (SIUP, 2009). Her current book project explores the intersection between nineteenth-century photography and the struggle for Black citizenship.
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Why We Blush: Metaphors Bound up in Cosmetic Packaging

Jess Borsi and Taryn Seidler

Abstract: Centering a visual rhetorical analysis of NARS Orgasm, a popular high-end blush product, this article illustrates how cosmetics in major retailers like Sephora use familiar metaphors and ideals of normative femininity in both product naming and packaging. By mobilizing ideas of cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985) and treating Sephora as a rhetorical ecology (Edbauer, 2005) where consumers align themselves with particular aesthetics and companies reproduce those aesthetics to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, we name five main metaphors at work: luxurious, salacious, innocent, artistic, and consumable. These metaphors manifest linguistically in product names (i.e., Orgasm, Virtue, Cloud Paints) and visually in cosmetic packaging, wherein the physical component can harmonize with the name (e.g., Virtue, an innocent-coded blush, having a light-colored, bubble-like packaging) or domesticate transgression, as is the case for Orgasm. As we conclude, the process of developing, buying, and using these blushes is always already rhetorical and a site of ongoing identity-making despite the linguistic brevity of their names.

Keywords: affect, beauty advertising, cosmetics, inductive coding, material rhetorics

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Introduction

Blushing is a physiological response tightly tied to affect. To blush is to be excited, stressed, aroused, shamed, attracted, or unsettled, but never unaffected. Blushing is, as Elsbeth Probyn (2005) describes, "the body calling out its interest" (p. 28). The physiological response lasts moments, but with cosmetic blush, the flush of interest is designed to last all day. So, the application and wearing of blush is an inherently rhetorical act in that it communicates an enduring interest (or at least the appearance of it), and the cosmetic products themselves carry concise rhetorical claims in their naming and packaging. These claims often explicitly reference the cause of blushing—like our central example, NARS Orgasm—as well as implicitly invoke an image of normative femininity, especially when the blushes at issue are carried by major retailers.

This exploration identifies five main metaphors at work today in the blushes at Sephora, a French multinational beauty retailer common in North America: the Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable. These metaphors are built from the branding of the product (both its name and packaging), and index neatly onto the hegemonic ideal of the feminine—which we define here as white, cis, heterosexual, young, thin, conventionally attractive, and upper middle class. We also add chaste and submissive to this list despite how cosmetics use sexualized branding because, as our analysis of NARS Orgasm explores, references to sensuality are necessarily domesticated within the confines of Sephora to appeal to their assumed (normative) customers.

Little scholarship in the field of rhetoric has interrogated how cosmetics themselves help propagate an ideal of normative femininity through their naming and packaging. Interdisciplinary research centers largely on how the use of makeup helps construct identity, wherein both wearing makeup *and* not wearing makeup clearly communicates something about the wearer. Merskin's (2007) textual analysis of lipstick naming ar-

gues that the act of wearing lipstick, of donning a particular color with a particular name, constructs femininity. This illuminates an intersection between capitalism and cultural hegemony where "cosmetics [are] viewed as tools designed to gain women's consent to their own (hegemonic) oppression" (p. 592). Cosmetics have, historically, been used as a mechanism for social control and judgement, and while Merskin's analysis of lipstick naming addresses this salient point, it does so without exploring *how* this language and its accompanying packaging might act persuasively in tandem with existing cultural hegemony to reinforce ideas of normative femininity. The "appearance-based self" Merskin describes is produced by the experience of adhering to hegemonic and capitalist logics, and that expression cannot exist outside the confines of social, political, and cultural spheres (Plante et al., 2016). Makeup is simultaneously a site of self-expression and of hegemonic influence, and wearers often use makeup to subvert traditional constructs of femininity; notably, White's (2018) analysis argued that makeup tutorials "assert the relationship between beauty practices and feminist politics" (p. 153).

Just as the act of wearing makeup is a rhetorical performance that communicates aesthetics (and allegiances, considering the at-time-of-writing recent Republican makeup discussion on TikTok), cosmetic naming and packaging are also always already rhetorical and often play into familiar narratives about femininity. For example, it's no accident that Carolina Herrera's Good Girl perfume is a glass facsimile of a stiletto heel. As a recognizable symbol of femininity in a readily accessible beauty retailer, the perfume's name and form circulate normative narratives, thereby maintaining them. This maintenance is powerful because, as Claire Colebrook (2008) observes, "if there is a biological and evolutionary basis to aesthetics, this is not because works of art bear a timeless value, but because they are composed in response to the brain's recognition mechanisms" (p. 53). So, cosmetics companies invoke familiar narratives through metaphor, and consumers implicitly accept those narratives when they buy from that constrained selection. Beauty retailers work hard to imply abundance and variety, but their offerings index onto only a few familiar (acceptable) identity expressions, a frequent feature of consumer culture (Rancière, 2009). Sephora as a rhetorical ecology (Edbauer, 2005), therefore, sits at the confluence of cosmetics companies looking to efficiently sell product by mobilizing metaphors about beauty, and consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, repeatedly encounter those metaphors when they purchase and use the products. To illustrate this, we begin by defining these metaphors (as well as the methods we identified them with) and discussing how they're expressed in products. We then turn to NARS Orgasm as our central example of how cosmetics can simultaneously be overtly sensual in name and yet domesticated through packaging, and conclude by suggesting how this research can be taken up and extended.

The Main Metaphors of Blush

Introducing the Metaphors

To identify the five metaphors—Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable—we started by coding blush names inductively in a large Sephora in the Twin Cities area. The relatively small sample on display allowed dominant trends to stand out, like how "berry" and other fruit names occurred not only

in the same display but also in neighboring blush lines. We observed the same phenomenon with sensually-coded names as well as references to luxury, innocence, and artistry. While these trends occurred in different proportions, one or more were reliably present in every display, and this held true when applying our codes to the wider selection available at Sephora online.

Following our coding efforts, we define these metaphors as:

1. Luxurious—invoking common markers of elegance and exclusivity like gold and silver accents, weighted packaging, branding, and literary devices in naming
2. Salacious—using sensually-coded terms or double entendre to reference sex, pleasure, or other "transgressive" behavior
3. Innocent—employing references to positive, aspirational states (both affective and physical) or child-like play commonly linked to goodness, purity, and youth
4. Artistic—referencing or recreating the look and feel of art supplies, or leaning on the notoriety and expertise of professional/celebrity makeup artists
5. Consumable—using edible or floral naming to suggest freshness, delicateness, decadence, beauty, or sweetness

Our examination of packaging found that it, too, largely followed these metaphors. While the expression is not bluntly one-to-one (we found no blushes shaped like berries), blush packaging (and sometimes the imprint in the product itself) either amplified or mediated the naming.

Figure 1: Glossier's Cloud Paint in Wisp (left) and YSL's Make Me Blush in Berry Bang (right)

To illustrate, Glossier's Cloud Paint (Fig. 1, left) aligns fully with the artistry metaphor—right down to its visual presentation, which mimics a tube of acrylic paint. The name and packaging amplify each other. As a counterpoint, the name of YSL's liquid blush line (Fig. 1, right) commands the user to be affected, and the individual shade name, Berry Bang, is a double entendre that also mobilizes the Consumable metaphor. This

sensual coding is mediated by the packaging, which prominently displays the YSL logo in gold, emphasizing the product's luxuriousness.

Figure 1 also exemplifies another durable pattern in blush packaging—component color as tone. More serious, mature, or sensually-coded products like those of YSL (and NARS) often employ rich colors or black, while lighter, more aspirational or playful products, like Glossier's, are more likely to use white, cream, or pastels. While there are exceptions, this pattern was so prevalent in-store that it often functioned as visual shorthand.

Applying the Metaphors

As shown above, these metaphors often overlap, and a consumer would be hard-pressed to find a blush in the 150 or so lines listed online at Sephora that didn't mobilize at least one or two. These metaphors harmonize with each other, working to amplify or mediate (as we explore with NARS Orgasm) a blush's overall presentation. The reason for these metaphors' ubiquity is that they neatly index against familiar feminine performances and aesthetics—like the girly ingénue in pink and the vamp in reds and burgundies. For example, Rare Beauty's Soft Pinch blushes (Fig. 2), typifying the Innocent metaphor, name their shades after aspirational states, like Love, Hope, and Happy, and come packaged in softly colored tubes and rounded compacts. Styled like bubbles or buttons, there's not a hard edge in sight, and the packages and names work together to suggest that the blush (and those who wear it) are just as positive and bubbly. To sell their product, Rare Beauty invokes visions of soft, unthreatening beauty which is valued because of its purity. This reference carries deep-seated moral judgements about how purity is linked to cleanliness, to goodness, and, further, to normative (i.e., white, cisgender, heterosexual) expressions of femininity. And other shade names in the same line—Faith, Worth, and Virtue—make the moral connection explicit, claiming through these objects that there is a "good" way to blush. But because these products exist in a sphere often considered frivolous, the work they do in the maintenance of patriarchal ideals can go unnoticed. After all, they're *just* blushes.

Figure 2: Rare Beauty blush marketing from Sephora's website

In reality, the metaphors bound up in the naming and packaging of these products function as *enthymematic* arguments that all draw from the same *doxa*—the patriarchal conception of normative femininity. This *doxa* is an unspoken "matrix of rules, rituals, and conventions" which benefits from the appearance of being

natural (McGee, 2016, p. 54), because in being perceived as natural, it becomes entrenched in the culture, and then is enforced as cultural hegemony (Lears, 1985). These products use both familiar linguistic and visual metaphors because they're already so entangled with the aesthetics of normative femininity, where pink and consumable cuteness come to represent an "agreed-upon" version of gender performance. In fact, these ingrained visuals act as *doxicons*—where their very presence suggests a cultural narrative (Cloud, 2006). The added layer suggested by these blushes is that the aesthetic qualities of identity performance, say innocence, can be purchased and worn.

Four of these metaphors exist as spectrums: from shy girlhood to unrestrained femme fatale; the elegant exclusivity of fashion houses to the wildness of an artist's studio. The only dominant metaphor to buck the spectrum format is the Consumable because its opposite would be the inedible, poisonous, or disgusting. While not found in Sephora, the opposite pole does exist in indie makeup whose aesthetics often skew more counter-culture (for example, Lunatick Cosmetics' death-themed products, and SushyGlowCosmetics' viral Bloody Tints, which emphasize the cracks in the wearer's lips). Owing to a long history of describing femininity in terms of flowers and fruits (the process of budding, blooming, blossoming, ripening, withering, and expiring), the Consumable metaphor is extremely common, and often pairs with the Innocent (e.g., Huda Beauty's Bubblegum) and Salacious (e.g., YSL's Lavender Lust). In being so prevalent and so tied to commodification, the Consumable metaphor gives the whole game away: all of these metaphors refer to consumable, commodified aesthetics.

The Innocent—Salacious and Luxurious—Artistic spectrums intersect and pair so reliably that blushes can be plotted against these aesthetics, as shown in Figure 3. The combination of these metaphors, as well as the presence of consumability (either directly, vis-à-vis "Bubblegum," or obliquely as in the consumable nature of cosmetic blush), amplifies or mediates the overall presentation. For example, Charlotte Tilbury's Cheek to Chic blush names—Pillow Talk, Ecstasy, Sex on Fire, and Walk of No Shame—are frequently salacious, but the brand's over-the-top emphasis on packaging that mimics vintage, keepsake cosmetics from the 1950s and 60s "pulls" the blushes' overall effect to the luxurious side of the graph.

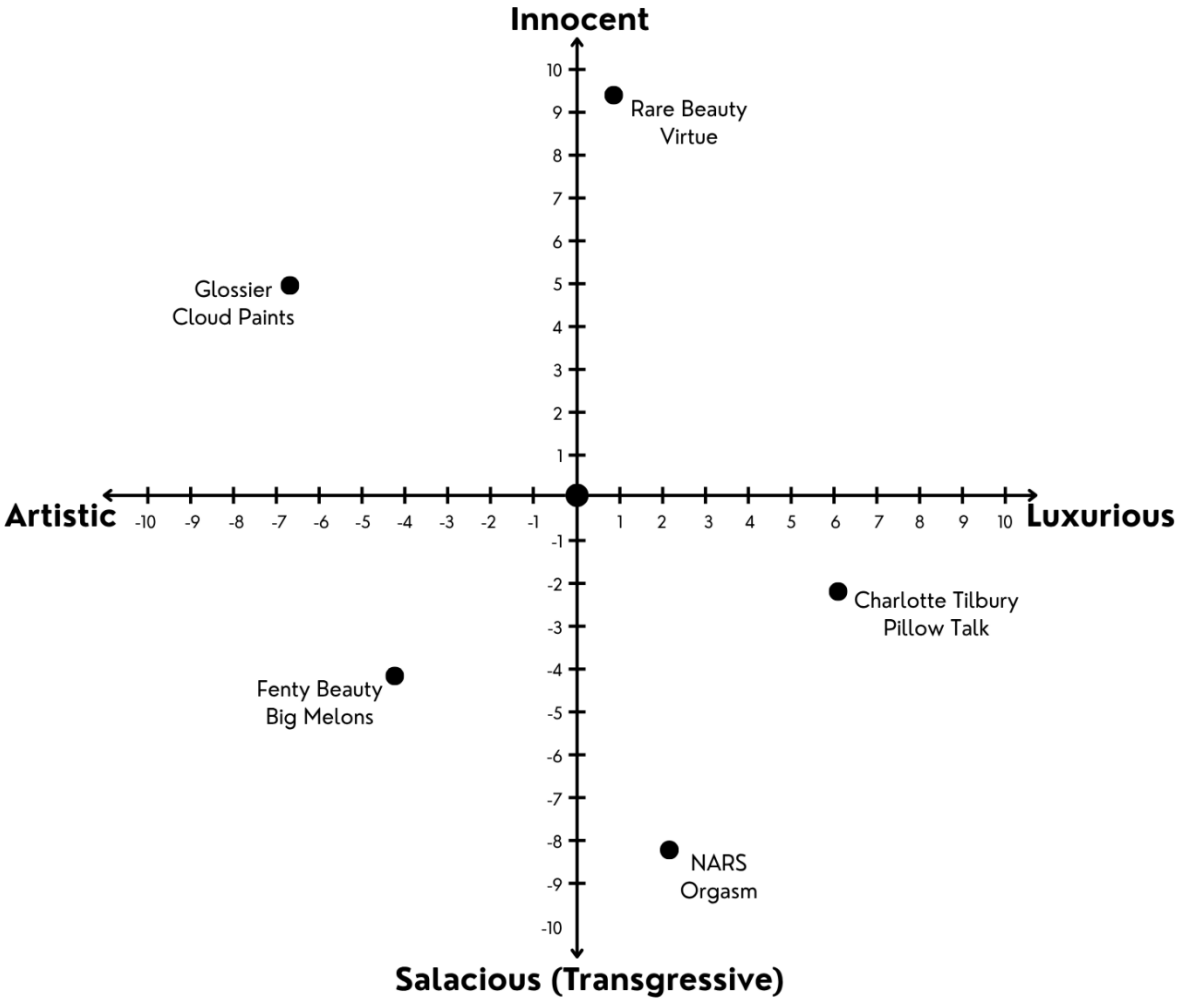

Figure 3: Blushes plotted against the metaphors

Likewise, brand tone can have a similar mediating effect, especially when it's tongue-in-cheek. Most of the blush lines in Sephora "read" earnestly, like how higher-end blushes often follow literary trends in using high language and French (Westman Atelier's Minette, Coquette, and Bichette, for example) to imply luxuriousness. In this sense, Fenty Beauty, created and owned by Rihanna, is an outlier.

At first glance, Fenty's Cheeks Out Freestyle Cream Blush appears to follow the metaphors as earnestly as the others mentioned in this exploration, but the overt linkages of consumability to sensuality and frequent puns make it clear that something more self-referential is going on. Set against similar products that forward the Consumable metaphor with sensual undertones (say, YSL's Berry Bang), Fenty stands out with shade names like Big Melons and Raisin Standardz which call attention to the practice it participates in. At the same time, its white octagonal packaging doesn't announce anything subversive or salacious. So, while Fenty and NARS both ostensibly follow the same sensual playbook, Fenty's tone is notably lighter, naming their blushes with more of a knowing wink.

Figure 4: Fenty Beauty's Raisin Standardz

NARS Orgasm, then, as both an earnest expression of the Salacious metaphor and a popular blush famous online for its naming, becomes a fruitful point of analysis for our exploration since it represents a baseline of the practices described in this section.

Case Study: NARS Orgasm

Our analysis uses NARS Orgasm as a case study, both because of its success (even ubiquity) as a product and how it fits neatly into a long tradition of sensually coded cosmetics. That is, naming cosmetics like lipsticks and blushes for sexual experiences and with suggestive metaphors is especially easy since the redness of lips and cheeks is tied to physiological arousal (Merskin, 2007). From NARS Orgasm's debut in 1999 to Urban Decay's Pocket Rocket lip glosses in 2009 to Isamaya's short-lived line of phallus-shaped lipsticks in 2023, cosmetics companies have become, on the whole, more willing to explicitly reference sex, a trend that parallels cultural attitudes about women's empowerment (in a "girl boss" sense, at least). However, to be carried in Sephora, a mass-market beauty retailer, these products can't go too far. The goal, as it were, is to shock and delight potential customers, but not offend them, because causing offense would narrow the audience for these cosmetics and run counter to the overall goal—to sell products.

Orgasm sits well with that tension because it references the most satisfying part of sex without opening the door to messier, less socially acceptable imagery. The argument that consumers can apply the appearance of an orgasm as easily as using this product also speaks to well-circulated frustrations of the normative female experience, thereby appealing to Sephora's (and NARS') imagined normative female audience. The naming of Orgasm is aspirational in the same way that Rare Beauty's Virtue or Charlotte Tilbury's Pillow Talk are—they all reference what is valued or perceived to be missing, whether that's satisfaction, purity, or emotional intimacy. These names are affectively charged, which speaks to their rhetorical power relative to their linguistic brevity. Additionally, these are products designed to take up space in the routine of the con-

sumer, meaning that they'll come into contact with the product's name and packaging repeatedly, creating a kind of echolalia which reinforces the aesthetic the product promotes.

As discussed in the section above, NARS Orgasm primarily mobilizes the transgressive, Salacious metaphor through its naming, while invoking Luxuriousness through its physical packaging. The pairing of these two metaphors mediates the overt sensuality of the name Orgasm, allowing the blush to be transgressive while still being appropriate to be sold in stores. In this case, the packaging does a lot of that mediating work.

Figure 5: NARS Orgasm, opened compact, promotional image from NARS

Orgasm's sleek black compact (Fig. 5) pairs a soft-touch, velvety surface with hard, squared corners. Compared to its affectively charged name, the packaging is minimalist, and a consumer would need to physically turn the compact over to see the label (though neither is it hidden). The haptic experience of holding and using the blush is also made to feel luxurious, with the brand's name in white raised letters on the front and the soft-matte touch coating smooth and silicon-y. The choice to wrap the hard, rectangular plastic case in this velvety texture is rhetorically suggestive of the contradictions in normative femininity, where the feminine is simultaneously self-assured and vulnerable. The velvety slip of the packaging also vaguely suggests a sensuous quality, like the touch of skin on skin. From the way it sits comfortably in the user's palm to its modern, minimalist aesthetic, the blush is designed to be desirable and claims to make its user desirable in turn.

The clash between Orgasm's minimalist packaging and salacious name is telling of how brands like NARS domesticate sensuality and make it luxurious or artistic to be acceptable for a mass market, which tends to value purity and judge overt sexuality. In this way, Orgasm's salacious naming is balanced by its packaging and thus fits into the pervasive rhetorical ecology that is beauty writ large and Sephora specifically. This ecology of beauty circulates acceptable definitions of femininity through consumerism, giving the illusion through multitudes of products that there is a wide range of aesthetics, but in reality showcasing only a few. This "soft totalitarianism," as Jacques Rancière (2009) says of consumer culture, feeds into cultural hegemony

because it not only presents "classic" ideals of normative femininity but also domesticates and commodifies subversion.

Figure 6: NARS Promotional image showing current Orgasm blush range (and other salacious names)

This commodification is on full display with Orgasm. While using sensual theming to sell cosmetics has a long history, Orgasm in particular has been so successful at it that NARS developed an entire suite of products themed after it, including lip products, eyeshadow, and a widening range of blush options that bear the same name, since the original Orgasm is a light shimmering peachy-pink which can appear ashy or metallic on deeper skin, if it shows up at all (Fig. 6). While the additional (more richly pigmented) Orgasm shades ostensibly work to address this, the inclusion of these shades in one palette (the Orgasm Four Play Blush Quad, Fig. 7) suggests otherwise. That is, if the shade expansions are meant for deep skin, why are Orgasm, Orgasm X, and Orgasm RUSH in a palette that will likely be purchased and used by one person?

In widening the range of products from blush to other areas of the face, the connection to the physiological action of blushing is strained. That is, blushing is tightly linked to sensual acts, so having a blush named Orgasm makes sense. The same can be said of pink lipsticks and glosses, but it's hard to make the same argument when applied to an eyeshadow palette that contains mostly bronzes and champagnes (Fig. 7). Shimmery, bronze eyelids aren't a common aftereffect of sex, unlike blushing and full lips.

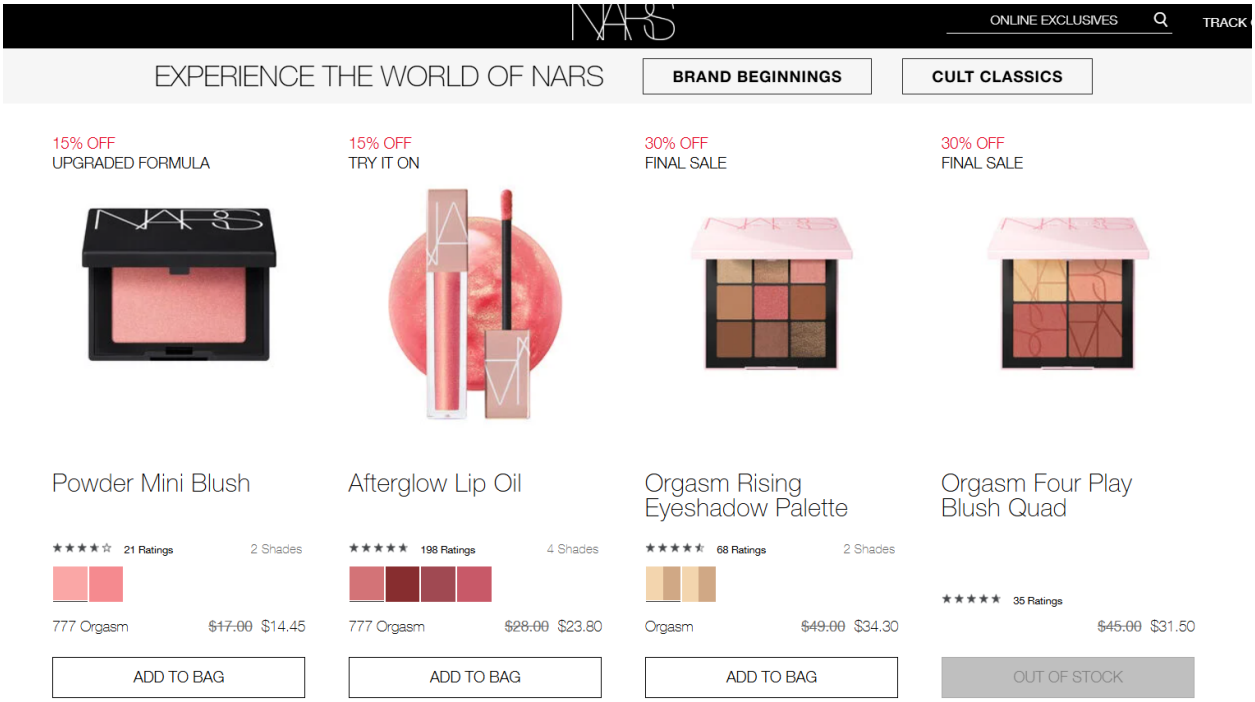

Figure 7: Screenshot of NARS Storefront, featuring Orgasm-themed products

It's here where the capitalistic game is given away again. The original use of orgasm as a single entendre is in a context where the name fits, but the further expansion of products seeks to capitalize on the blush's name recognition without the actual connotation to the physiological effects of sex that the blush implies. Whether by sleek, luxurious packaging or the titillation of their names, the goal has always been to sell products.

This additional facet of how Orgasm has been capitalized upon, extra-textual to the blush itself, reveals the way cosmetic companies like NARS use hegemonic ideals of femininity persuasively to make a profit, not necessarily because these ideals are correct or unchanging, but because they're *convenient.*

Conclusion

The act of purchasing and applying blush is inherently a rhetorical one, and because makeup is so often and easily trivialized, it may at first appear neutral—neither in service to nor in defiance of hegemonic frameworks. However, as our analysis of the linguistic and visual metaphors demonstrates, these blushes are using aesthetics to invoke deeply entrenched conceptions of normative femininity in order to sell themselves. Packaging also frequently works to amplify or mediate (especially in the case of sensually-coded blushes like NARS Orgasm) these expressions. In a neoliberal context where identity and consumption are linked, blushes like Rare Beauty's Happiness make concise arguments about the consumer's identity and what society values. As the blush is used, the consumer encounters that argument over and over, even if they ultimately reject the narratives their product suggests.

The five metaphors we identify here are persuasive precisely because of their familiarity; as part of often-repeated cultural narratives, they have the benefit of appearing natural and sometimes nearly invisible. For example, the blushes invoking the Consumable metaphor, with many references to candy and bright pink

packaging, seem innocuous. But when the connection between femininity, commodification, and the sweetness of candy is made explicit, we've seen more than a few people cringe in recognition.

We've found these metaphors and the inductive coding that led to them to be a fruitful approach because it allows us to efficiently analyze both the visual and linguistic dimensions of normally overlooked objects. In doing so, our goal is to investigate the continued linking of identity, performance, consumerism, and affect. But because this is a preliminary look at the rhetoric of cosmetics, there are doubtlessly more patterns and metaphors at work. In the future, this work will be extended to include indie makeup ecologies that often skew counter-culture, as well as into other areas of consumer identity-making.

Drawing attention to small objects and practices is where feminist rhetoricians shine, and these metaphors—Luxurious, Salacious, Innocent, Artistic, and Consumable—can surely be applied to and extended through further research. So, to conclude, we invite other rhetoricians to join us in looking closer at the labels and shapes of small objects.

Biography

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Queerlesque: Anticolonial and Anti-Heteropatriarchal Love and Abjection in (Rural) Queer Performance

Cheyenne Brown and Bibhushana Poudyal

Abstract: This article theorizes *queerlesque*, a hybrid of queer performance and burlesque, as a feminist and queer rhetorical practice of visual culture that resists colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal logics. Drawing on thirty years of drag and burlesque performance across the inland Northwest, including rural TabiKat Productions, the Queerly Arts Festival, the Fly Honey Show, and Tipi Confessions, we analyze queerlesque as a mode of worldmaking that fuses love and abjection to reclaim feminized aesthetics long dismissed as frivolous or excessive. Building on bell hooks's conception of love as a transformative political ethic and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as both horror and possibility, we argue that queerlesque reimagines the grotesque, erotic, and abject as generative rhetorical sites of feminist and queer resistance. Through costuming, bodily performance, and aesthetic excess, queerlesque performers transform social abjection into a visual rhetoric of survival, pleasure, and community. In contexts marked by rural conservatism and queer invisibility, these performances enact what Audre Lorde calls the erotic as power—transforming shame into spectacle and marginalization into futurity. Ultimately, queerlesque functions as an embodied archive of feminist and queer resistance, one that refuses erasure, embraces excess, and envisions rural queer futurity through affective, sequined acts of collective care and worldmaking.

Keywords: Queerlesque, Abjection, Anti/Aesthetics, Queer Visuality; Queer Worldmaking

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Figure 1 "Physically thicc and mentally sicc, the genderqueer showperson you'll wanna licc, Kxnni The Doll!" (Source: Queerly Arts Festival, 2025, May 31).[1]

1 The images might not directly illustrate the accompanying texts but speak to the broader themes and context of the article. Due to limitations of time and space, we have not been able to fully honor the depth of the stories and individuals featured. However, Instagram handles and relevant links are included for further exploration.

"Love always wins!": Contextulizing Queerlesque

During the Queerly Arts Festival in June 2025, a local conservative coalition decided to host a Hetero Awesome Festival outside the Idaho capital. According to a social media video promoting the event, "This festival is more than just an event… [but] a declaration that faith, [traditional heterosexual] family and freedom are worth protecting" (Old State Saloon, 2025a). Mark Fitzpatrick, the creator of Heterosexual Awesomeness Inc. and the owner of Old Street Saloon, said, "Our event is not about targeting any group but about raising awareness of practices we find troubling, such as the encouragement of 'gender transitions' among children or their exposure to inappropriate content" (cited in Yurcaba, 2025). For him, Pride Month exists so that "LGBTQ can march down the street doing disgusting and criminal activities while demanding to be celebrated" and that the community "encourages children to cut off their sex organs" (Old State Saloon, 2025b).

That weekend, the contrast between conservative exclusion/hatred and queering celebration/love became unmistakably clear. A local drag and burlesque performer, Aunt Tifa (Boise's Bucket Shitter, International Menace, Hometown Hero) decided to push back by producing a show entitled "But, What About Straight Pride?" On a Friday night in Boise, Idaho, two queer performance shows outcompeted (one was sold out and the other close) a Hetero Awesome Festival, followed with two sold out Queerly Arts Festival shows on Saturday and Sunday, leading to weekend long cries of "Love always wins!" (potentially, frequently, with a few more expletives proudly and lovingly added at varying points). In a small pocket of an incredibly conservative state a community came together to support one another, united by being queer and a love for performance and their community, in a beautiful way, exemplifying the power of hooks's (2012) "love ethic" and its power for collective care, reclamation, resistance, representation, and queer world building, which we call: queerlesque.

Figure 2 DRYAD, 2025

Figure 3 Queerly Arts Festival, May 29 2025

Queerlesque, a praxical theory developed after many months of our conversations and a disruptive fusion of queer performance and burlesque, functions as a feminist visual rhetoric that dismantles the visual codes of heteropatriarchal-colonial-capitalist systems. Emerging from the erotic, grotesque, and excessive, queerlesque refuses containment, respectability, palatability, and aesthetic discipline/ing. It revels in glittered mess, distorted beauty, and embodied ambiguity, mobilizing what the dominant culture deems "too much" as a resource for survival and worldmaking. As a visual and affective practice, queerlesque foregrounds the power of the feminized and the abjected, not as sites of shame or subdued marginalization but as wellsprings

of radical political-rhetorical possibilities. The costuming, glitter, and embodied excess of queerlesque radiate beyond the stage, seeding futures of recognition and inclusion that persist long after the performance ends. In this article, we propose that queerlesque is a feminist and queer rhetorical strategy that thrives on the generative interplay of *love*, *joy*, *monstrosity*, and *abjection*.

This article reclaims forbidden feminized (anti)aesthetic practices, makeup, costuming, bodily performance, body modifications, stylized surplus, not as frivolous indulgences but as powerful rhetorical interventions in both heteropatriarchy and binarized drag culture. Costuming, makeup, mannerism, and performance, often dismissed as superficial, trite, vain, loud, or ugly under capitalist-patriarchal logic, instead emerge as feminist and queer visual strategies of survival, reclaiming, visibility, defiance and futurity. As bell hooks (2012) writes, "the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible" (p. 281). Queerlesque enacts this possibility by reclaiming abjected-aesthetic labor as a radical act, one that queers visual-rhetorical culture by centering the affective and the embodied. In this article, queerlesque offers a lens for envisioning queer futures through four performance collectives that model resistance, creativity, and care across diverse contexts. This article is not a manifesto but one node in ongoing queerlesque work, a practice concerned not only with gender and sexuality, but with challenging systemic binaries imposed by capitalism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and beyond.

Flirting with Monstrosity and Abjection

Bearded femmes, pregnant drag kings, grotesque glamazons in smeared lipstick and torn fishnets: deliberately cultivating the aesthetic of the non/unhuman, the excessive, the obscene! These queerlesque performances are not about appealing to the gaze of respectability; they are about refusing it. In "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Cohen (1996) writes, "The monster's body is a cultural body... [it] quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy... giving them life and an uncanny independence" (p. 4). Monsters, as Cohen reminds us, always emerge in moments of cultural crisis and they mark what is unspeakable, uncontainable, or in excess of binary logic. "The monster," he writes, "is the harbinger of category crisis," a being that problematizes the binary oppositions and "introduces a crisis" (p. 6) by refusing neat resolution.

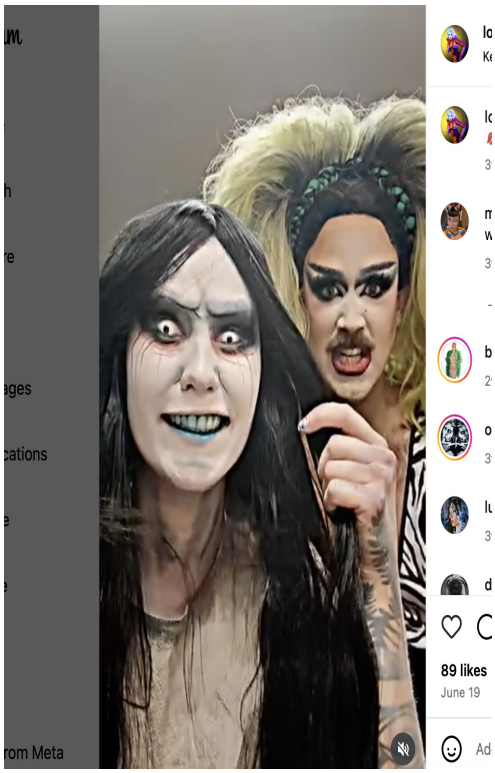

Figure 4 Roxy Albig / LobotAmie, 2025a

Figure 5 Roxy Albig / LobotAmie, 2025b

Night one of Boise, Idaho's first annual Queerly Arts Festival, Where the Wild Things Slay, opens with a pole and a stone well. A hand reaches out, followed by what is immediately recognizable as the antagonist from the 2002 horror film, "The Ring." In a dirty white dress and with long, stringy black hair covering her face, Lobot Amie ("the best source of brain rot entertainment in Boizeee!") climbs out of the well and moves toward the pole, where she proceeds with her pole dance, eventually stripping out of her white dress, but never breaking character from her sunken-eyed, stringy-haired persona.

The night continued with performances that pushed against the confines of all things binary, patriarchal, king, queen—embracing abjection and monstrosity, reclaiming their power, their agency, their joy, their love, their bodies, and their lives. Night one was hosted by Cookie Pusss, a drag queen with a chest full of hair, a deep baritone voice, an impeccable mustache, a bright green wig, and a sexy, tasseled silver dress.

It was a four-day festival of all things queer. There were "The Whores," a trio of vampiric, burlesque chair dancers. The Dryad ("the mother of fucking shit and witch of the wyrd anti-colonial burlesque clown") and her three Hell Hounds, dressed in leather and giving dom-and-their-three-subs vibes, stripped down to pasties as one of the Hell Hounds had their heart eaten out on stage.

There was Irish Lashes, emerging on stage looking very much like Buttons with Karl (the seagull) on his head, as audio from Our Flag Means Death played, and an anti-colonial love story unfolded as Karl was killed in the shootout and Buttons stripped down through their grief, transforming into a seagull themselves.

There was Bone Daddy ("The Beast in the Night, Boise's Gothic Drag King, bringing you some of that BD energy!"), an AMAB drag king disrupting the homonormative notion that drag means AFAB folks must be kings and AMAB folks must be queens—and affirming that drag is not binary or prescribed.

Gloriously messy, leaky, excessive, and unstable bodies, identities, and subjectivities. Glitter clings to sweat and shimmers in unapologetically existing all types of bodies; gender dissolves, hijacks, and reforms; and performances walk the blurring line between celebration and grotesquerie. Julia Kristeva (1982) has previously defined abjection as the process through which the self maintains its boundaries by expelling what is deemed impure, improper, or unclassifiable. She wrote that abjection "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (p. 2), a site of profound horror for normative systems that rely on clear distinctions between clean and dirty, masculine and feminine, subject and object. In this liminal space, queerlesque is born and thriving.

Figure 6 Kxnni The Doll, 2025

In the previous work (2025) I have theorized abjection as "completely disturb[ing] signified-posing center-seeking metanarratives of identity, subjectivities, structure, system, and order" that "disclose[s] the vulnerability of the borders and boundaries between semiotic and symbolic, self and other, private and public, internal and external, feminine and masculine, passive and active, woman and man created by phallogocratic signifiers" (Poudyal, p. 101). Borrowing her theorizing of menstrual leakage as that abjection, we say, queerlesque "is an abjection that not only makes these borders vulnerable but exposes that these borders are already vulnerable" (p. 101). The abject queer body and queerlesque is therefore not only rejected by the social order but also charged with potential—as something that "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and lies in the realm of "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). For instance, trans and gender-nonconforming performers (or even otherwise cis-gendered heterosexual folks in the "outside world" performing at queersleque, for that matter), often become lightning rods for this kind of abjection, as their embodiments defy the binary logics that systematize sex and gender. This ambiguity, while socially punished,

can also be reclaimed as an anti/aesthetic and rhetorical force.

Queerlesque performers often inhabit this abject position deliberately, using visual excess to claim agency within frameworks that would otherwise render them marginal, invisible, or obscene. This practice resonates with Juana María Rodríguez's (2011) extension of Kristeva's (1982) formulation, in which abjection becomes a resource for racialized and feminized queer subjects. In her writing on Latinx queer sexuality, Rodríguez reconceptualized abjection as a resource, particularly for racialized and feminized queer subjects, "for subaltern performers, regardless of the categories of Otherness they inhabit or explore" (Amend, 2024, p. 157; see also Alvarado, 2018). Rodríguez (2011) wrote, "For certain subjects, dwelling in the abject space of bottomhood and femininity can be a mode of critical resistance" (p. 337). Their performances do not aim to escape objectification or fetishization; instead, they stage it, manipulate it, and subvert it. Abjection, then, is not just a state imposed by systems of power; it is also a mode of rhetorical and visual agency. In queerlesque, performers don't just survive abjection—they stage it**,** glorify it**,** and turn it outward, forcing spectators to reckon with what the dominant order cannot assimilate. Through this practice, they dismantle the visual architecture of normativity, insisting that what disgusts the system may also be what transforms it.

LOVE, The Ultimate Driving Force, and Erotic, Excess, Joy

In the world of queerlesque, love is not merely sentimental—it is structural, embodied, and insurgent. Following bell hooks, we understand love as a political practice that actively works against the alienation imposed by patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. hooks insists that "to commit to love is to commit to a life beyond dualism" (hooks & Tworkov, 1992) and that "love is profoundly political" (hooks, 2001, p. 56). This notion resonates deeply with queerlesque's refusal of binary gender systems and its challenge to the visual aesthetics of conformity. Whether through bodily exaggeration, grotesque humor, or raw sensuality, queerlesque performers create spaces where love is neither neat nor respectable to power systems, but defiant and communal. In rural queer performance, where the visibility of queerness is often met with social hostility or institutional neglect, the act of showing up is a radical form of love: bodily, extravagantly, joyfully. It is, paraphrasing hooks (2000), a love ethic that transforms silence into speech and resistance into resilience (pp. 93–94).

Queerlesque is a love of life made visual. It is love on stage. It is a love of refusal, the joy of making a space for oneself. Love for the innate and immeasurable messiness of life, of building a life, of being queer. How is this visually represented on stage? The visual rhetoric of love and joy via queerlesque?

> *A hole in fishnets right before a performer takes the stage leads to a swarm of other performers surrounding them to tear more holes in their fishnets. An emergency call for a pair of suspenders is responded to en masse. In such moments, the act of dressing becomes more than preparation; it becomes an affective and communal practice of love and queer worldmaking.*
>
> *At the Queerly Arts Festival, local drag king Tucker Wright and partner Kxnni The Doll (Ken-nee-the-dawl, "physically thicc and mentally sicc") performed a chair-dancing burlesque duet. Kxnni is a well-known genderqueer performer in the Boise area, winner of Boise's Showperson Competition in 2023, and walks with a cane. It was not a performance highlighting Kxnni's disability, but rather queer love, the erotic, capable bodies, and joy. There was Calypso Pearl, performing with a video on*

the projector screen behind her chronicling the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) fight for equal pay, highlighting AFAB athletes who have used their positions to fight to leave both their sport and the world a better place. There was Frank Siracha, also using the video projector during their performance to bring attention to the recent ICE raids and protests, and to highlight the beauty of their Latine heritage and America's Latine community.

Love of community and of performance as resistance and reclamation is often on display.

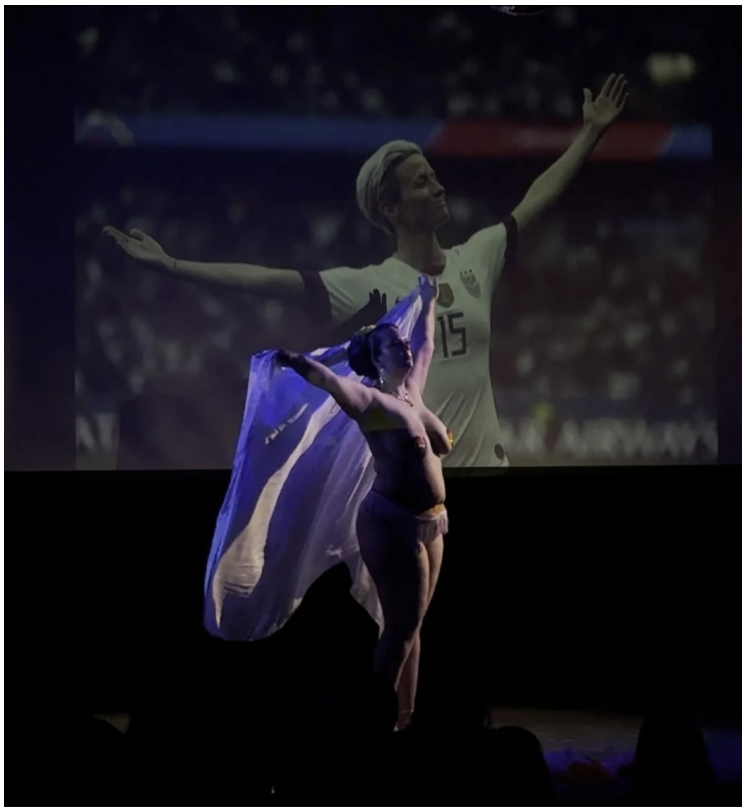

Figure 7 Calypso Pearl, 2025

The queer performer's theatrically extravagant makeup and bodily gestures, smeared and overdrawn lipstick, eye makeup, rhinestones, props and costuming are not just ornamental spectacle—though that is immensely joyous, too—but deeply communicative, shattering any forms of gender conformism. These expressions recall what Lorde (1984) described as the erotic—a "well of replenishing and provocative force" (p. 54). They invite us to trust once again "the power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge," a power the male world has taught us to distrust throughout our lives (p. 53). In queerlesque, the erotic is not confined to sex or the private sphere—it permeates performance, embodiment, and worldmaking. It provides "the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (p. 56)—and in the case of queerlesque, with the community that gathers to witness and co-create its possibilities. And "the erotic connection functions [as] the open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy" (p. 56). The Fly Honey show exemplifies this joy that comes from embracing bodies and the erotic and the queerness of it all, claiming space as a "femme-led, party-starting, ass-shaking, glitter-bombing, sex-positive queer punk performance group… a high-velocity spectacle that pulses with radical joy and self-love" (Thalia Hall, n.d.). In response to the question of who they are, they respond with:

Born in a sweaty DIY loft space in 2010, we're a dance-forward performance project that's indebted to the dance forms and cultures created by and for women, strippers, showgirls, burlesque artists, radicalized queer spaces, Black and Brown creative expressions and activist frameworks.

We honor every shaking thigh, every whispered 'yes,' every revolution born in a dark room pulsing with bass and bodies.

This Hive? It's made up of everything: dancers, doctors, dykes, teachers, mothers, enbys, artists, babysitters, bartenders, and best friends. We're a kaleidoscope of care, heat, and unapologetic joy. (The Fly Honeys, 2025)

Figure 8 The Fly Honeys, 2023

What we want to emphasize is that it would be easy to be trite, to fall into cliché, to exaggerate queer tropes of visibility—to indulge in a kind of queer triumphalism. Queer has won, queer has overcome, we are here, we are queer. But that's not what this is. That's not it! Queer is the joy of ongoing resistance. The joy and love found in community, in presence. It is joy grounded in radical sovereignty, in Laura Harjo's (2019) *este-carte* sovereignty, of queer as politics.

Figure 9 Aiden Antares, 2025

Aiden's performance at Queerly Arts, a joy and love for community. It is the joy and love of moments that are about oneself and the shared freedom and liberation from the male—capitalist, colonial, neoliberal, heteropatriarchal—gaze.

Queerlesque is a celebration of
bubble guns (The Fly Honeys),
the shaking of all the asses in all the colors, shapes and sizes,
of the more than human love between a man and a seagull (Irish Lashes Queerly Arts performance),
no asses as much as asses,
queer as politic,
the love of craft that goes into the embodiment of the visual.

Queerlesque is a celebration of how costuming, make-up, music, and movement become storytelling. Become griots. Become the moment.

It is a celebration of how the taboo becomes freedom.
The Dryad's dom-sub culture and cannibalism
Irish Lashes' more than human love of a seagull and man
Helen Dee Bed, dressed as a cow, audience members drinking from her teats, eating a burger for the final moment of the performance
Frankie Ficticious's dancing queerlesque with her mom.

It is a celebration of the love of inciting queer panic
It is the love the audience feels.
The joy. The discomfort. The liberation.

This is not joy or love in the commodified or neoliberal sense
This is not the sanitized joy of capital. Not the love of brand-sponsored pride.
This is not the happiness that comes from a "politics of recognition" (Coulthard, 2014),
that asks for permission, that asks for recognition, from outside.
This is the love and joy of labor and storytelling and sharing for us.

Queerlesque is a reminder that as queer folx we are more than just our trauma and damage, but also our resistance, our reclamation, our presence, our joy and our love. In embracing love not as an escape from conflict but as a tool for social transformation, queerlesque performers make visible a politics of care and possibility. They love publicly, fiercely, and queerly, offering affective blueprints for worlds not yet realized.

A Wrap-up: Rural Queer Futurity

Figure 10 Calypso Pearl, 2025

Figure 11 COOKIE PUSSS, 2025

Cheyenne Browne:

In March of 2024, the Idaho Legislature passed a resolution (Corbin, 2024) designating the month between Mother's Day and Father's Day "Traditional Family Values Month," which celebrates "the natural female mother and male father." This period deliberately overlaps with the first two weeks of Pride Month, signaling an effort to eclipse and erase queer visibility. In many rural areas, particularly in traditionally conservative states, these are the imaginaries we are immersed in and exposed to daily, these are the futures that are being built for us. Queer performance art and productions in our communities and seeing things like The Fly Honey Show and Tipi Confessions on social media helps expand the representation of what queerness is, what we can be, and the worlds we can make and inhabit. Especially in rural areas where our main exposure to supposed representation is things like Rupaul's Drag Race or The Ultimatum Queer Love that often perpetuate and highlight the drama and homonormative narratives and relationships in really patriarchal ways.[2]

So much of the queer culture we are exposed to are stories focused on hardship, tragedy, and overcoming, especially in rural areas. And they are usually centered in urban areas, and often with queerness portrayed in very specific ways, often hetero and homonormative ways. To be able to see ourselves just loving and joyful and being in community is everything. My partner teared up the

2 Brand-sponsored pride festivals and mainstream queer media often promote a sanitized image of queer identity aligned with consumer culture, corporate friendliness, and visual respectability. By contrast, queerlesque foregrounds mess, abjection, and non-normative embodiment as counter-visual rhetoric. Margot Weiss (2018) shows how queer subjects become valorized when they align with marketability and respectability, while corporate pride aesthetics delimit what forms of queer visibility are "safe" (refer to Lisa Duggan, 2002).

other day when they saw a gay couple holding hands in our rural community. Queerlesque and other queer performance art is about people expressing, embodying, and sharing their queerness. But it's more than that, more than just representation. It's also building futures and imaginaries for the rest of us. Not just to be like them but actively expanding our imaginaries, actively building a world, where we get to figure out what it is to be like ourselves, to embrace our queerness, in the bell hooks sense of "'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (qtd. in Brownworth, 2022).

For example: my cousin, neurodivergent, on the spectrum, a musical theater nerd, and often struggling to find belonging in rural Idaho, experienced firsthand how queerlesque generates spaces of recognition and futurity. Because of their cleft palate, pursuing a career in musical theater was not an option. I don't know their sexuality but to me they are one of the queerest people I have ever met. They often struggle to find community, to find connection, to find and experience love, to find meaningful work and ways to embrace their passions in the areas of rural Idaho where they live. One of the communities where they have found some semblance of belonging is in the queer performance community. They joined us for the last day of the Queerly Arts Festival. Drag king Tucker Wright hosted that performance and my cousin found him afterwards and Tucker took the time to talk to them for almost an hour post show. Watching the joy, watching their appreciation, the way it affirmed their place, their belonging, in the world; the way it lit them up and had them imagining their place in the world…that's the worldmaking of queerlesque and queer performance art, that is the visual rhetoric.

Queerlesque helps us imagine and invent and create together. It makes us feel less at odds with the world, makes us feel like we belong, or can build a place where we belong. The whole world is so fucking queer and beautiful and weird and monstrous and full of joy and love and queerlesque reminds me of this. It reminds me of how much love there is in this world, how many kinds of love, it shows me examples of how people are embodying and sharing love and their own kind of queerness, and how all these other queers embrace them, even when no one is queer in the same ways. It reminds me that queer is one of the most natural and beautiful things in the entire world. It actively builds better worlds, actively refuses to accept a smaller and narrower world while embodying resistance and queer worldmaking. Every time a performer steps on stage, they're changing someone's life for the better. What could be more loving and joyful than that? Visual representation of how things can be, of courage and excess and reclamation and…

In rural spaces often marked by erasure, invisibility or hostile visibility, or lack of resources, queerlesque emerges as a radical site where erotic meets abjection and monstrosity to resist the binary logics that relegate queer joy and love to shame. Rather than reproducing the pornographic gaze that commodifies or punishes non-normativity, queerlesque embodies what Lorde (1984) called the "deep and irreplaceable knowledge of our capacity for joy" (p. 57), a joy that is disruptive, erotic, and unapologetically communal. By inhabiting and amplifying the feminized, grotesque, and monstrous, performers refuse resignation and instead activate what Lorde named "the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 53), turning abjection into visibility, monstrosity into resistance, and love into a public, aesthetic act of reclamation. In this way, queerlesque does more than perform; it builds worlds—sequined, sweaty, defiant worlds where queer bodies are not just seen but celebrated, and where the erotic, joyful, and unruly become blueprints for queer futurity.

Biographies

Cheyenne Brown is a sixth-generation settler on the Palouse. Their work is focused on Indigenous geographies, particularly water geographies, political ecology, environmental justice, and forms of embodied resistance. They spent many years working in outdoor leadership and field-based environmental science on occupied Indigenous Lands throughout the Western United States. They have recently returned home to the Palouse to pursue their PhD through the Individual Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program at WSU with a focus on participatory action research, environmental justice, and ecocultural rematriation in the Columbia River Basin.

Bibhushana Poudyal is a Nepali assistant professor of English at Washington State University, awarded with the Buchanan Distinguished Assistant Professorship in 2024 and 2025. Her scholarship centers on comparative antiracism, anticolonial praxes, intersectional and internationalist feminisms, and multimodal-digital humanities. Grounded in Global South solidarities and internationalist philosophies, her research and teaching advance decolonial feminist knowledge systems and solidarities across academia and communities. She seeks to amplify voices of the global majority and plurality as transformative and dignified forces within academia and beyond. Her monograph *Gendering South Asia: Rhetorical Non-Phallic Bodies in the Global Capital* was published by Routledge in 2025.

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Take it Seriously: Bimbo Feminism and the Racialized Production of Erotic Capital on #BimboTok

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Abstract: Bimbo feminism, a particular feminist ideological framework rooted in the reclamation of hyperfemininity and bodily autonomy, is in part concerned with critiquing the historical whiteness of many strains of feminism, and its ensuing heteropatriarchal and anti-trans sentiments (Haigney, 2022). As these exclusionary dimensions of white-centric feminism persist in various feminist movements today, Bimboism is uniquely placed within contemporary feminist movements to weave together resistance to heteropatriarchal hegemony. A common critique, however, of the bimbo trend is that it is largely adopted by an overwhelmingly white crowd across social media platforms (Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Pierce, 2022; Sunder, 2021). While scholarship has covered the emergence of BimboTok and its rise to popularity (Granados, 2021; Haigney, 2022; Pierce, 2022; Rosaria & Wijaya, 2022), this presents a unique opportunity to further explore bimbo feminism and its entanglements with race. In this paper, we investigate how bimbo feminism (as it is circulated on TikTok) reframes erotic capital (Hakim, 2011; Montemurro & Hughes, 2024) through disidentificatory hyperfemininity, and how the platform logics of TikTok differentially racialize this practice. This exploration will be figured into a larger discussion on the ways that digital cultural production can "disseminate, incorporate, and commodify" cultural forms and content from the edges of dominant, mainstream society and culture (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013, p. 180), demonstrating that bimbo feminism both focalizes and subvert the pervasive norms of whiteness.

Keywords: Social media, femininity, race, popular culture

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Introduction

Bimbo feminism, a particular cultural and aesthetic feminist framework rooted in the reclamation of hyperfemininity and bodily autonomy, is in part concerned with critiquing the historical whiteness of many strains of feminism and its ensuing heteropatriarchal and anti-trans sentiments (Haigney, 2022). As these exclusionary dimensions of white-centric feminism persist in various feminist movements today, bimboism is uniquely placed within contemporary feminist movements to weave together resistance to heteropatriarchal hegemony.

Intersectionality, a foundational concept of contemporary feminism and feminist theory, is woven into the grounding principles of bimbo feminism. At its core, Kimberlé Crenshaw has defined intersectional feminism as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate and exacerbate each other" (Steinmetz, 2020). Though many content creators of the bimbo trend actively resist the superstructures of heteropatriarchal hegemony, a common critique of the trend is that it is largely adopted by an overwhelmingly white crowd across social media platforms (Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Pierce, 2022; Sunder, 2021). While scholarship has covered the emergence of BimboTok and its rise to popularity (Granados, 2021; Haigney, 2022; Pierce, 2022; Rosaria & Wijaya, 2022), the entanglements of bimbo feminism and race remain a critical gap.

In this paper, we conduct a conceptual study of the bimbo figure that has emerged across digital social media platforms by exploring how the embodiment of hyperfemininity acts as both critique and subversion. We complicate and disentangle the concept of beauty by exploring the racial complexities of bimbo feminism through putting three main theoretical frameworks in conversation with each other: intersectional feminism

(Ahmed, 2017; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Hoskin & Blair, 2024), erotic capitalism (Hakim, 2011; Montemurro & Hughes, 2024), and biopower (Foucault, 1976; Nguyen, 2011). These frameworks, in addition to our methodological approach consisting of digital dwelling and technocultural discourse analysis, will afford us the theoretical fulcrum to answer our research questions: How does putting erotic capitalism in conversation with bimbo feminism reveal the intersectional and racial dynamics of the trend? How do the racial and ethnic dynamics of bimbo feminism focalize and/or subvert the pervasive effects of bodies as consumption? Bolstered by these critical theoretical and methodological approaches, we explore how bimbo feminism, as it appears on the social media platform TikTok, reframes erotic capital through disidentificatory hyperfemininity, and how platform logics differentially racialize this practice. This exploration will be figured into a larger discussion on the ways that digital cultural production can "disseminate, incorporate, and commodify" cultural forms and content from the edges of dominant, mainstream society and culture (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013, p. 180), demonstrating that bimbo feminism both reproduces normative whiteness and enables openings for queer and feminist political and cultural critique of dominant heteropatriarchal conceptions of femininity.

Bimbo Feminism, Black Feminist Thought, and Erotic Capitalism

Though girlboss feminism as "a kind of hyperambitious you-can-have-it-all feminism" certainly has its value and its place, young women across social media platforms have been embracing and reclaiming hyperfemininity and frivolity as powerful and subversive expressions of mediated femininity (Haigney, 2022, para. 6). Bimbo feminism, existing in a corner of the internet coined "BimboTok," responds to the Generation Z and millennial disillusionment with capitalism and the desire to have it all by actively pushing back against the "idea that women shouldn't have to prove their economic worth or intelligence as a way of arguing for their self-worth and independence" (Haigney, 2022, para. 7). Bimbo feminism welcomes playful expressions of femininity that subvert what is accepted as normative femme bodies. Subversion of the normative is, in part, achieved through disidentificatory engagement with norms of gender and affect (Pierce, 2022, p. 201). Drawing from queer theory and gender studies, namely José Esteban Muñoz (1999), AP Pierce (2022) frames disidentification as the process through which a minoritized subject subverts power structures by "tactically and simultaneously work[ing] on, with, and against a cultural form" (p. 201–2). This entails absorbing norms of dominant culture in ways that "resignify" such norms and in doing so, reveals the "universalizing and exclusionary machinations" of power structures in order to feel and act empowered (Pierce, 2022, p. 202). Pierce understands bimbohood specifically as employing a process of disidentification to flip the misogynistic and pejorative use of the word "bimbo" on its head.

This is exemplified in TikTok creator Chrissy Chlapecka's viral videos on bimboism, where she defines what it means to identify as/with a bimbo. Chlapecka's definition of the "new age bimbo" rewrites the dominant script of the bimbo as a vapid, unintelligent, hyperfeminine woman, and instead is reimagined on TikTok as a politically active leftist. This reimagination of the bimbo extends the political potential of using the aesthetics of hyperfemininity, such as pastel pinks, frills, bows, and shiny lip glosses that relegate the aesthetics of the "girly girl" into the realm of unseriousness, for a distinctly political purpose. For Chlapecka, the

new age bimbo breathes new life into the existing figure of the bimbo––she reveals in her TikToks that the main characteristics of the new age, or Generation Z, bimbo to be a leftist, anti-capitalist and an ally for her "girls, gays, and theys" (Chlapecka, 2020). Chlapecka states that a bimbo doesn't exist for and because of the misogynistic male gaze; instead, she embodies bimboism for her own gaze and thus exemplifies a liberating self-acceptance and celebration of her own femininity. In making such open remarks on the polemics of the male gaze and sex-positivity, bimbos like Chlapecka encourage other women to take pleasure in simply existing as a woman in the world as a way to express and challenge contemporary notions of femininity, identity, and agency (McWebb & Luan, 2024).

Though bimbo feminism may inherit from the neoliberal logics of highly visible popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Butler, 2013; McRobbie, 2009), it is conceptualized as distinctly anti-capitalist and concerned with collective liberation. An advocate for queer voices, the bimbo foregrounds the body as a site of personal and political resistance, evoking a crucial and enduring pillar of intersectional feminism. bimboism is as much about reclaiming hyperfemininity to comment on and resist, the dominant norms of how people should exist in and present femme bodies as it is about feminine joy. Everyday expressions of femininity and the self-actualization that occurs with choosing to express hyperfemininity in the way that exists in cultural trends like bimboism thus epitomizes the political as personal, because at its core is a critical nature that is intertwined with individual identity. To be truly intersectional, though, it is necessary to consider that many representations of bimboism across platforms are largely white women who fit within media-centric conventional beauty standards; however, as bell hooks's (1981) writings reveal, femininity is not a monolith: it is deeply influenced by intersecting systems of oppression that shape social constructions and performances of race, class, and sexuality.

Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins (1990), we weave an intersectional feminist lens into our analysis of bimbo feminism, as it is crucial to acknowledge the foundations of Black feminist thought in the conceptualization of intersectionality. Social thought produced by Black feminists is designed to focus on collective oppression and liberation. It is because Black feminist thinking has always already existed in a political context that challenges its existence, Collins argues for understanding its theoretical formulation as a critical social theory (Collins, 1990, p. 4). It is within this understanding of Black feminist theory that we situate the critique that the bimbo movement makes of heteronormative, white, male, patriarchal domination as a primary driver of social inequality.

Further, bell hooks (1989) noted that a crucial part of feminist theory is to distill abstract theory and articulate it in a way that may resonate with all groups who are oppressed, colonized, or exploited, as "moving from silence to speech" is a gesture of defiance that can and should occur as a collective (p. 9). This is mirrored in Collins's (1990) feminist thought, where Black feminism necessitates "searching for its own expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals" (p. 14). Across the bimbo feminist social media trend, talking back as defiance can be recognized in the way that users stitch, duet, and collaborate to deconstruct the heteropatriarchal politics that have built up normative expectations of acceptable femininity. Though the bimbo movement prioritizes self-actualization

through a reclamation of the feminine, a bimbo needs their community so that they can talk back together.

Bringing the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality into conversation with bimbo feminism allows us to interpret key elements of Black feminist thought for the purpose of interrogating where intersectionality appears in bimboism. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) mentions that a key dimension of developing Black feminist thought is the reinterpretation of existing ideas and works through new theoretical frameworks. In putting the aspects of Black feminist theory that have founded intersectional critical social thinking together in a conversation about biopower and erotic capital, we present a unique framework through which to analyze the new age bimbo, thereby providing a critical dimension to previous understandings of the bimbo and her political potential.

Informed by Rachel E. Molko's (2023) sentiment of the physical and material elements of iconicity and discursive strands, our methodology blends together both digital dwelling (Wiens, 2021; Wiens & MacDonald, 2024) and critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2018) to analyze BimboTok through the six main elements of erotic capital (Hakim, 2010). We orient ourselves to our data via Molko's (2023) understanding of internalized misogyny as a "cultural configuration" produced and instilled by hegemony and patriarchy specifically, and that femininity can be construed, performed, and embodied to critique this hegemonic cultural configuration as a method of contradiction and resistance, rather than only existing as the counterpart to masculinity (p. 15). To collect our data, we surveyed the social media platform TikTok to gather a small, curated data set (Gajjala et al., 2024; Wiens & MacDonald, 2024) indicative of the kaleidoscopic racial dimensions of bimbo feminism on #BimboTok. Digital dwelling affords us the embodied, affective, and reflexive approach to lingering with our layered research scene, while a critical technocultural discourse analysis of our data will show the overlapping of the material, practical, and discursive in the way that bimbo content creators "perceive, articulate, and ultimately define the technocultural space in which they operate and exist" (Brock, 2018, p. 1016).

Biopower and Erotic Capitalism

A bimbo's subversion of the existing heteropatriarchal erotic capital demonstrates how a countersentimentality is produced through the embodiment of bimboism. Bimboism, at its core, is concerned about the body's power as a site of political resistance and as a locus of hyperfemininity. Following Michel Foucault's (1990) conceptualization of biopower as an intensification of the body with an intensification for pleasure, we turn to Mimi Ti Nguyen (2011), who expands on this to focus on how beauty can be theorized within biopower. Nguyen argues, "To take beauty seriously is to elaborate on its force as biopower, to which the hope that beauty might enliven us all would seem to lead" (p. 364). The privileging of beauty and its weighty marker of social status has continually been a tour de force of power. Bimboism, and its attachment to beauty as "a political issue––a matter of dignity," throttles the patriarchy's perception of hyperfemininity and sexuality (Nguyen, 2011, p. 364). With bimboism's emphasis on the body as a site of personal and political resistance, the bimbo inherits a philosophical consciousness of the body as an aesthetic and political site of intervention that critiques the vices of sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Bimboism outwardly declares a stamp of refusal against the nation's incarceration of the female body with leftist ideologies of bodily auton-

omy (Chlapecka, 2020). The body, as Nguyen has argued, is an important site of "signification, power, and knowledge about how to live" (p. 364). Bimbo feminism is concerned about the body's signification, power, and knowledge to express freely beyond a heteropatriarchal society. The bimbo aesthetic embodies hyperfemininity as independent, rather than a counterpart to masculinity, thereby critiquing dominant patriarchal standards of the body through biopower and erotic capitalism.

The term 'erotic capital' has received much attention from gender, sexuality, and sociology scholars (Hakim, 2011; Montemurro & Hughes, 2024). Erotic capital is the "usable characteristics that make someone sexually desirable in specific contexts" (Montemurro & Hughes, 2024). According to sociologist Catherine Hakim (2011), erotic capital has six distinct elements: beauty, sexual attractiveness, social flirtations, liveliness, social presentation, and sexuality (p. 500). Hakim argued that erotic capital is a "combination of aesthetic visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts" (p. 501), but the new age bimbo would severely oppose appealing to members of the opposite sex. While the presence of erotic capital is highly visible in labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, the arts, and in everyday social interactions (Hakim, 2011), these contexts are further complicated by the patriarchal features of society that "inhibit women from exploiting their erotic capital to achieve economic and social benefits" (Hakim, 2011, p. 507). While Hakim's six tenets of erotic capitalism are instrumental in conceptualizing the relationality between feminism, culture, and sexuality, bimboism operates within the erotic capitalism framework to actively subvert its hegemonic sentiments. That is, bimboism subverts the erotic capitalism framework by 'looking' from a feminist and critical gaze (Koch, 1985; Riley et al., 2016). By 'looking' from these angles, bimboism ultimately enacts a liberation of poignant erotic power, erecting full agency and self-empowerment. Erotic power, as Audre Lorde (1978) writes, "offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough." A bimbo does not fear erotic power, for erotic power is unleashed in temporal, cultural, and sensual corners of everyday life. In the following sections, we explore how the six elements of erotic capital are reframed under bimboism.

The precedence of beauty is certified as the first and "central element" of erotic capital (Hakim, 2011). Perceptions of beauty are malleable through cultural and temporal variations of society, and beauty standards ebb and flow through time (Hakim, 2011). In the world of bimboism, though, beauty is licensed from the enclaves of hyperfemininity and sexuality. Self-identified bimbo and TikTok creator Chrissy Chlapecka (2024) (re)affirms the liberating power of acknowledging beauty in her 14-second TikTok video, "ANYWAY." In this clip, Chlapecka lip syncs to her song, "I'm Really Pretty," while moving the camera in different angles as a form of "choreography." Chlapecka sings the chorus of her song:

I'm really pretty, you wanna kiss me

Oh, yeah, I'm perfect from my head down to my kitty

Oh, it's a pity, you want a quickie?

Oh, that's so tricky, I'm so busy 'cause I'm pretty

Plastered on the video is a block of text that says:

> news flash women can sing about being pretty / being scandalous and it doesn't make them misogynistic it just makes me think you hate yourself when you get mad over literally nothing.

Chlapecka's news flash blaringly calls out the patriarchy and the misogynistic attitudes that wage against women in the pockets of everyday life. A bimbo's disposition about beauty is not about conforming to a male optic; rather, a bimbo's telltale signification of power is to (re)claim perceptions of beauty for self-empowerment, a nod to Hakim's idea of a cultural and temporal variation of beauty.

Under the second tenet of erotic capital, sexual attractiveness is attributed to "personality and style, femininity or masculinity, a way of being in the world, a characteristic of social interaction" (Hakim, 2011, p. 500). As Chlapecka states in her debut video, "Damn, my tits look good," the suppression of female beauty and sexuality has been muted by the sirens of the patriarchy; however, the sirens of the patriarchy are readily silenced by a (re)orientation of the optics. That is, bimboism's focus on blurring the optics of the male gaze by sharpening the optics of the bimbo's own gaze sharply critiques the mainstream sexual signifiers of policing women's bodies.

Social interaction, the third tenet of erotic capitalism, is dramaticized to characteristics of flirting, which include "grace, charm, social skills in interaction, the ability to make people like you, feel at ease and happy, want to know you, and, where relevant, desire you" (Hakim, 2011, p. 500). While the bimbo figure has been critiqued for catering the bimbo's hyper-feminine aesthetic to the male gaze, a bimbo would say that they are "conscious of their own frivolity, and that it is precisely the hyper-feminine, yet politically critical, commentary that satirizes the heteronormative expectations of someone who may present as a bimbo" (McWebb & Luan, 2024). A bimbo would say, "I don't do this for the misogynistic male gaze, I do it for my gaze" (Chlapecka, 2020).

Cheeky, satirical, and comedic, a bimbo's liveliness is a mélange of "social energy and good humor" (Hakim, 2011, p. 500). Residing in the sentiments of third-wave feminism, the bimbo's humorous overtures are strung together with melodies of "sharp-edged satire or light-hearted laughter" (Ferriss & Young, 2008, p. 93). The sharp-edged political satire of the bimbo's leftist commentary punctures the production of right-wing political discourse. For example, TikTok creator Ve'ondre Mitchell places her phone on the floor as she proceeds to aggressively "stomp" on Trump supporters. Mitchell's exaggerated stomp on her phone enacts Muñoz's disidentificatory turn, to strategically speak directly against the power structures of right-wing political discourse that promote regressive heteropatriarchal politics. Episodes of satire, humor, and comedy is precisely a nod to the bimbo's political stance of being a "leftist" who is "pro-sex work, pro-Black Lives Matter, pro-LGBTQ+, pro-choice, and will always be there for her girls, gays, and theys" (Chlapecka, 2020).

The material artifacts of a bimbo are marked by the nostalgic sentimentalities of Juicy Couture, Playboy bunnies, and Bratz Dolls: a throw-back to the iconic Y2K aesthetic. In the collection of BimboTok videos we have encountered, these nostalgic artifacts are reminiscent of the early bimbos, for example, the pink-clad Elle Woods from the movie *Legally Blonde* (2001). Effervescent shades of pink are precisely a bimbo's

primary colour palette. Dolled up in pink clothing and accessories, the bimbo's distinctive taste for pink shades has become a bimbofied cultural signifier. While these nostalgic artifacts are largely celebrated, it is also necessary to critically assess the flip side of these cultural emblems. In recent years, former girlfriends of Playboy founder, Hugh Hefner, have spoken out about the mistreatment, exploitation, and objectification of women at the Playboy mansion (Dastagir, 2022). Scholars have also cited Bratz Dolls as catalysts for body dysmorphia and eating disorders (Anschutz DJ & Engels RC, 2010; Levesque, 2010). Perhaps one of the most telltale emblems of bimboism is indeed the Playboy bunny, which debuted in 1960 and empowered "women to embrace their sexuality and liberate them from the sexual repression of the Fifties" (Barlow, 2021). Alicia Amira, a real life self-proclaimed bimbo doll embraces the motto of the Playboy bunny and "adapts the way she performs, and that sexually she can function as submissive, dominant and everything in between" (Hjermind, p. 24). These cultural signifiers and material artifacts of the bimbo aesthetic are a nod to aptitudes of the Y2K era, and yet still need to be put into conversation with the lineages of such material and cultural signifiers within the realm of women's subjectivities. Within the context of bimbo feminism, though, this nostalgic aesthetic embraces these cultural emblems to reclaim hyperfemininity, girlishness, and frivolity for the purpose of rupturing the misogynistic male gaze. By reframing the second-wave feminist phrase "the personal is political" in an intersectional and digital context, the emphasis on self-actualization subverts phallocentric norms through conscious frivolity and cheeky comedic commentary (McWebb & Luan, 2024). The dichotomy of feminist theory, as Hakim (2011) argues, suggests that a woman is either valued for her human capital (cerebral capacities) or for her erotic capital (beauty) (p. 511). bimboism, though, is not measured via an either/or scale: a bimbo can fondly embrace both human capital and erotic capital.

Bimboism and Racialized Cultural Production

The reproduction of whiteness and white femininity in the bimbo movement is hypervisibilized with conventional features of the bimbo—a skinny, white woman with blond hair and blue eyes (Deliovsky, 2008; Reilly, 2024). Thus, "the white capitalist patriarchal compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes consistent with an imposed white feminine aesthetic" requires an urgent reconceptualization of bimboism's racial dimensions (Deliovsky, 2008, p. 50). In this section, we examine bimbo feminism through the lens of racialized cultural production, showing how platform logics racialize erotic capital and shape who is visible, monetized, and sanctioned. Specifically, we ask: How can we understand race and bimboism through racialized cultural production? Following David Hesmondhalgh and Anamik Saha's (2013) affirmation that "cultural production in the modern world cannot be adequately understood without taking account of race and ethnicity, and their relation to oppression" (p. 180), we seek to interrogate how social structures of oppression and privilege undergird the spaces of BimboTok by prying open the entanglements of race and ethnicity within bimboism.

Ve'ondre Mitchell, a trans woman of colour and self-identified bimbo, remixes Chlapecka's debut bimbo video, "who is the gen z bimbo?" to create her own rendition of this video. Additionally, TikTok creator meka.maraschino lip syncs to a sound bite from Dolly Parton while glamming up in gloss. In dwelling with the curated data set of BimboTok videos, we have noticed an inverse directionality of racialized commodi-

fication. That is, bimbos of colour are adopting the normative white bimbo's beauty norms and sound bites, which ultimately reifies whiteness as a marker of power (Deliovsky, 2008). Adopting beauty styles, attitudes, and behaviours consistent with a white feminine aesthetic reproduces the cultural discourse of "normative white femininity" and saturates BimboTok with ideologies of hegemonic feminine beauty (Bartky, 2003; Deliovsky, 2008). An intimate desire to gatekeep normative white femininity and whiteness is evident in a user's comment on meka.maraschion's video, "Please correct me if I'm wrong but isn't this cultural operation [sic] bc isn't this hairstyle original apart [sic] of white culture?" This user's comment foregrounds a searing reproduction of "the insidiousness that whiteness plays in constructing white femininity as normative" (Deliovsky, 2008, p. 51). Furthermore, the formation of this comment reinforces that marginalized women are "either noticeably absent in dominant cultural representations of beauty or when they are represented as whitified, 'contextualized in otherness' or distorted" (Deliovsky, 2008, p.56). The conflation of meka.maraschino conforming to whiteness is extracted in the user's comment, thereby (in)visibilizing her Blackness. Conversely, for new age bimbos like Ve'ondre Mitchell, who leverages the digital space of BimboTok to cultivate a safe space for queer and trans representation, racial diversity and genderqueerness are celebrated under the umbrella of the bimbo movement, illustrating how disidentification, for example, interrupts white normativity to create spaces of joy for queer people of colour. Although the inception of the bimbo emerged from cinematic adaptations for white consumerism, the new age bimbo prioritizes intersectionality through its core values of community and self-expression and creating a playful space for inclusivity.

Conclusion

Bimbo feminism is uniquely situated within contemporary feminist movements to weave together resistance against heteropatriarchal hegemony. On TikTok, bimbo feminism reframes erotic capital through disidentificatory hyperfemininity, and platform logics differentially racialize erotic capital and shape who is visible, monetized, and sanctioned. Oftentimes, platform logics reproduce normative whiteness even as they enable tactical openings for queer and trans creators of color. However, the digital space of BimboTok is leveraged by bimbos of color to cultivate a safe space for representation, racial diversity, and genderqueerness, illustrating how disidentification, for example, punctuates white normativity to create spaces of joy for queer people of colour.

The futurity of bimbo feminism and bimboism in general offers myriad new avenues of exploration, especially in the fields of Critical Race Theory (CRT), critical Internet studies, and digital rhetorics. Though we folded in an analysis of the aesthetic patterns of the bimbo feminism trend, further avenues of analysis might focus on the sonic aesthetics of bimboism, which would allow us to think critically about the discourse within soundscapes and the cultural ideologies that sound inhabits. Additionally, tracing the genealogy of bimboism through cinematic portrayals would also afford a fresh perspective of bimbo feminism through narrative explorations and character portrayals. What remains clear, though, is that bimboism is certainly here to stay, as in the words of drag queen Sugar, "a bimbo never dies."

Biography

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Patchworked Selves: Tattoos as Permanently Becoming

Tina Le and Jackie Chicalese

Abstract: "Patchworked Selves" introduces a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of tattooing as a feminist rhetorical practice of agency, identity construction, relationality, and meaning-making. The authors borrow from the relationality of tattoo consultations and the approach of patchworking tattoos to bring their identities and experiences as tattooed feminists into focus through narrative vignettes. The included vignettes gesture toward how tattooed authoring and reading are complicated by dimensions such as race, gender, and class. They argue that though tattoos are permanent artifacts, their meanings are not static; in the authoring and reading of tattoos, identities and meanings are under ongoing construction.

Keywords: art, autoethnography, bodies, conversation, narrative

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Inspiration

Tattoos can be conceived as embodied visual artifacts upon which we analyze, negotiate, and compose stories about our lives and identities. Jaan Valsiner (2020) has described how "our skin becomes the arena for human meaning construction," in which "the 'real body' becomes a 'cultivated body'" (p. 23). Cultivated by tattoos, the body carries "bold statements (i.e., resistance, contradiction, upheaval, satisfaction, etc.) that can be read and understood" (Diptee, 2011, p. 43). As an alternative modality for rhetorical agency (Feibush, 2024), tattoos can be understood as acts of feminist agency that allow "individuals to make their own decisions about how they wish to live their lives…to constitute their worlds as they choose" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4).

Tattoos are opportunities for the wearer to agentively construct meaning, as Nancy Kang (2012) has written, "Each moment of [tattoo] acquisition is accompanied by a set of motivations and circumstances that the wearer often wishes to narrativize" (p. 74). Tattoos then provide rhetors modalities to write themselves into relationship with themselves and others—and to be read (DeMello, 2000). However, in addition to, or despite, its origin story, a tattoo gets shaded by additional narratives each time it is viewed. What viewers "read" or inscribe onto someone's tattoo is textured by what they "bring to the table"—the meanings that viewers "walk away with after experiencing a tattoo" are influenced by personal histories and dimensions such as race, gender, and class (Baltzer-Jaray & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 45). The rhetorical interplay between how tattoos are composed, narrated, and read provides rich grounds for exploring how feminists may use tattoos/tattooing to assert rhetorical and bodily agency and create relational spaces.

Taking inspiration from tattooing's relationality and narrativization, our article is an autoethnographic conversation exploring tattooing as a feminist rhetorical practice. Much like the tattoo consulting process, we began with oral conversations, telling stories and reflecting on our experiences with tattoos as embodied visual artifacts. We took notes while listening to each other share. Then, similar to how artists layer sketches to arrive at a stencil, we layered our ideas and scholarly voices to arrive at autoethnographic vignettes that explored tattoos as sites of meaning-making. We printed, cut out, and arranged our vignettes on a canvas, testing out proximity and distance that we felt resonated or complicated our experiences and the ways our

tattoos have been authored and read. Our work, in essence, is a patchwork of narratives—reminiscent of tattoos acquired over time, in which each tattoo holds its own significance, but coalesces into more dynamic constellations of meaning.

We view autoethnography, which allows researchers to gaze "through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, [to] look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), as epistemologically feminist in its refusal to silo the critical and personal. Foregrounding the personal in critical exploration is especially crucial in feminist practices, as Vicki Bertram (1998) has noted that "feminist theory was, from its onset, shaped out of women's personal experiences" (p. 232). In the context of tattooing, this autoethnography is pointedly a response to how "before the popularization of tattoos in the late twentieth century, women were more often the subject of tattoos than the bearers" (Kang, 2012, p. 70). In other words, in using a feminist autoethnographic approach, we shift attention to our agency as bearers of tattoos and meaning-makers rather than subjects. We pose in reclaiming skin as a site of authorship, tattooing can be a feminist rhetorical practice—complicating externally-imposed readings, provoking conversations about the cultural forces that shade these readings, and creating relational spaces of solidarity where stories are exchanged.

Consultation & Stenciling

> *In the transfer from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional, the artist asks us to move around in front of the mirror, noticing how the stencil shifts with our movements and the contours of our body.*

Tina: During high school, I slowly saved money from my foodservice job for the day I could get my first tattoo. I remember asking my coworker, mid-40s, where he got his tattoos. He had accumulated most of his collection during "$30 Thursdays" at a now-defunct shop. Although he laughingly said that he would choose a different shop if he could go back in time, he spoke fondly about his reasons for the tattoos as he pointed at each one. I felt drawn to how tattooing could mark time and meaning. Rachel Falkenstern (2012) has explained that "the bearer of the tattoo is an integral part of the work, and yet, at the same time, he or she is not the artwork itself . . . . just as the tattoo is integrated into the person's body, so too is the bearer a part of the work" (p. 98). Looking at my tattoo collection now, I think about the self I was at the moment that I got each one. Each tattoo is like a prism's side; taken together, they reflect and refract how I understand myself as a whole.

Jackie: As a poet, I'm drawn to metaphorical understandings of space and topography. As Jacqueline Jones Royster (2003) has written, landscaping is a metaphor for the interpretive process wherein we "select, focus, and develop, bringing more clearly and vibrantly into view particular features that we frame and foreground, while simultaneously disregarding or minimizing other features and dimensions that we might have selected, developed, and showcased instead" (p. 148). Royster's metaphor lends easily to writing—we choose what to attend to in our writing and what to bypass or discard. Concurrently, I'm interested in how tattoos similarly define space and curate gaze.

My patchwork tattoos, for instance, are oriented horizontally and draw the eye up and down my arm. A crow's skull angles toward my wrist; a frond, alternating black and hatched leaves, bridges my forearm and upper arm, creating movement and elongating the visual surface of my arm. Against the high-contrast designs of my tattoos, my skin becomes white space. While it can be tempting to read negative space as empty, my poet-mind focuses on space. As Falkenstern (2012) has written, "Tattooing utilizes the body . . . the tattoo's medium is that its very existence depends on a person" (pp. 97–8). Falkenstern used this logic to pose the interdependence of body and a tattooed meaning, which I view not wholly dissimilar to the collaboration between poetry and page. Poet Jane Hirshfield (2017) has written that "most good poems hold some part of their thoughts in invisible ink" (p. 109). She spoke here primarily to hiddenness—what's left unspoken in a poem—which can be signaled by the presence of white space. Like a poem speaks in both white space and ink, so too does the tattooed body. The curation of my sleeve means that I'm able to exert agency over what or how I render hidden or visible of my body.

Tina: While my first tattoos came after long deliberations about symbolic meaning, my most recent ones could be categorized by some as "meaningless." They were the result of feeling drawn to an artwork—simply that *I liked it.* One is a dancing skeleton that, in my partner's words, is "gettin' silly with it," contrasting with my more serious tattoos. In "Bearing the Marks: How Tattoos Reveal Our Embodied Freedom," Jonathan Heaps (2012) shared the story of his first "meaningless" rather than "symbolic" tattoo and argued that the thought process behind seemingly "meaningless" tattoos also holds weight: "My willingness to get tattooed for different reasons has been expanded . . . . By making a series of decisions in this small way, I have developed my freedom" (p. 144). Similar to Heaps, each tattoo I've gotten has been a practice of asserting agency. In years of therapy, I've worked on separating my thoughts from others' voices that vie for attention during decision-making—the voices that say I should or shouldn't do something. It's hard to know what feels right, what feels like myself, when decisions are filtered through these audience apparitions. My tattoos, then, are external, embodied marks of this ongoing interior work.

As an alternative to acquiescing to imposed *shoulds*, Audre Lorde (2007) has offered erotic understanding, using "'It feels right to me'" as a "guiding light" (pp. 53-54). Using erotic understanding is subversive when "a 'woman's social existence' can be summed up as the 'object of the gaze of another'" (Baltzer-Jaray & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 43). Despite the potential for self-determination in how "a tattooed woman redefines beauty on her own terms, according to her individual taste," Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray and Tanya Rodriguez have pointed out that "universal taste" often overrides individual taste (p. 43). What I find beautiful—such as a dancing skeleton—might be dismissed as not capital-B Beautiful. While others have tried to convince me to not get tattooed through reasonings related to respectability and taste, the noticing of *what feels right* when encountering art to be tattooed is a small practice of honing Lorde's erotic understanding, defying "universal taste" and embracing self-determination (Baltzer-Jaray & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 43).

Outlining & Shading

After completing the outline—the tattoo design in its most distilled, straightforward form—an artist once explained that she shades colors in a particular order because certain colors tend to smudge and stain, making it difficult to see the intended design.

Tina: After a tattoo appointment, I ran into a former classmate from our conservative Catholic high school. She glanced at my wrapped wrist and said, "Why would you get a bumper sticker on a Ferrari?" In this comment, I didn't only hear her voice, but voices we had heard our entire upbringing: voices saying, "Your body is a temple of the holy spirit," voices condemning hemlines for not reaching our knees. They told us our bodies were valuable—in the objectifying way that Ferraris were valuable—but that they weren't ours. Margo DeMello (2000) has echoed Judith Butler in observing that the body is simultaneously a site for "the inscription of power" and for resistance and "counterinscription" (p. 173). While the primary intent of this tattoo wasn't to resist religious control of women's bodies, that took the foreground in this conversation. Baltzer-Jaray and Rodriguez (2012) have proposed that tattoos make an emotional claim on the viewer, related to "one's own experiences, cultural background, or taste. The quality of meaning you walk away with after experiencing a tattoo has as much to do with what you bring to the table" (p. 45). Sometimes, the tattooed person is seen more as text than rhetor. The audience brings logics, emotions, and histories that color how they perceive a tattoo and the tattooed person, making it difficult to understand the tattooed person in the way they wish to be understood. Krista Ratcliffe (1999) has asserted that understanding "means more than simply listening for our own self-interested intent," but "with the intent to understand" (p. 205). Flabbergasted and caught off guard after the Ferrari comment, I had quickly excused myself from the conversation. Looking back, I wonder what it could have sounded like if we had both approached it with rhetorical listening, with intent to understand the forces animating our choices and reactions.

Jackie: When I moved and began receiving tattoos away from the purview of my childhood, my mother, after we were reunited, turned over my arm and inspected my tattoos. Many of my 'harder' tattoo designs—a skull, a scythe, an archer's bow—are softened by fine lines and florals. She said, approvingly, "They're pretty—they still look feminine."

My mother's relief over my tattoos as still appearing feminine reflects a reading of tattoos as innately defeminizing. Indeed, tattoos, at least in Western societies, have historically been associated with men and masculinity (Antoszewski et al., 2010; Baltzer-Jaray & Rodriguez, 2012; Thompson, 2015). Since tattoos are, as Sheila Namir (2006) has indicated, "one way of expressing to oneself and to others many aspects of the presentation, performance, politics, principles and practices of self" (p. 221), under this historical influence, tattoos may be interpreted as expressions of masculinity or, at the very least, non-femininity. On my feminine-presenting body, tattoos can be read as incongruous with gender expectations, a sign of failure to ascribe to norms. In a more agentive sense, my tattoos, in addition to their aesthetic and/or symbolic appeal, allow me to self-make and articulate my own notions of gender and beauty. Though I don't view tattoos as gendered, I take pleasure in being read, with my tattoos, as non-prescriptive, indistinct.

Tina: One day, my mother casually came home with swollen lips and eyelids after getting permanent lipstick and eyeliner—the same process as getting tattooed. Laura Feibush (2024) has proposed that makeup is rhetorically "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" (p. 108). My mother's lipstick and eyeliner were rhetorical ways of conveying "presence and self-possession" to herself and others (p. 119). Yet, when I asked why she thought those procedures were okay but my tattoos weren't, she rationalized that permanent makeup enhanced beauty, while my tattoos detracted from beauty.

When we view makeup and tattoos as rhetorical acts, interrogating what makes the situations different can illuminate underlying ideologies. Karma Chávez (2018) has asserted, "If the body conforms to conventions, it is insignificant; if it does not, it becomes central to inquiry" (p. 247). What made permanent eyeliner seem closer to makeup than tattoos, and thus more conventionally beautiful and socially acceptable? In Chávez's words, "What kinds of actual bodies warrant unusual scrutiny, and whose voices and views are taken to be civil and appropriate?" (p. 248). To avoid scrutiny, the women in my family have endeavored to preserve youth, which they viewed as synonymous with beauty. In addition to makeup, they wielded dye and tweezers to combat white hairs, sunscreen and floppy hats to prevent wrinkles. Laura Hurd Clarke and Meridith Griffin (2007) have highlighted how "aged, female bodies become increasingly excluded from cultural acceptance and social currency" (p. 199). My family finds it ludicrous to spend money on something for the skin that doesn't have to do with anti-aging. Their thoughts echo the cliche worry, "What will your tattoos look like when you're 80?" Unlike many other body modifications, tattoos don't preserve youth. They age along with the bearer—my goldenrod's lines have blurred, petals merging into petals. My thistle's vibrant purple has faded to lilac.

Jackie: When I asked for my parents' permission to receive my first tattoo, they were initially hesitant in a way that surprised me. Tattoos weren't foreign to my family—my father and middle brother, who worked technically skilled, labor-intensive jobs, had tattoos in highly visible places. The placement I had in mind was the crook of my forearm, easily concealed by long or three-quarter sleeves.

My parents' hesitancy represents an awareness of how tattoos are contextualized within purviews of class and gender. As DeMello (2000) has tracked, around the 1990s, "the tattoo community was still largely working class" (p. 108). My father would have grown up exposed to tattoos' working-class beginnings, and by the time I became interested in tattoos, tattoos still would have had this association. My eldest brother and I are first-generation college students. In the years following the 2008 economic collapse, my family believed, like many others, that a college education was necessary for economic advancement and mobility for those who couldn't or didn't desire to work blue-collar jobs (Aronowitz, 2000). Still distantly associated with working-class professions, tattoos could sabotage opportunities for middle-class jobs for which college was thought to serve as a precursor.

Indeed, this fear is not unfounded. As Beverly Yuen Thomspon (2015) has explored, tattooed employees may bump up against dress code mandates to cover tattoos or promotion limitations due to tattooed appearances (pp. 91-92). Additionally, women may face heightened discrimination. Because tattoos are per-

ceived as masculine, "tattoos could be deemed acceptable for male employees but not female" (p. 94). As a feminine-presenting person breaking into white collar work, I could face a double-bind. I'm lucky that as a graduate instructor of record, I have been hired based on my scholarly and teaching potential and don't face much aesthetic oversight. I don't yet know how my tattoos will impact my navigation of the job market. Perhaps I'll follow Katharine Barlett's approach of "strategically covering up tattoos" until I'm established in my career (as cited in Thompson, 2015, p. 100). Or perhaps I'll use my tattoos as sites to exchange investments, bodily knowledge. This dilemma, at the very least, provides me with the opportunity to make a choice of how to present myself.

Tina: My parents' indignation was partly due to the religious "your body is a temple of the holy spirit" reasoning, and partly due to worries about employment. They had always worked blue-collar jobs after immigrating to the United States from Vietnam—assembly line manufacturing, housekeeping, and catering. They were adamant about capitalizing on opportunities for "better" employment and financial security. They didn't want their children to also work overtime for minimum wages under employers who viewed employees as expendable. In their minds, tattoos were a privileged waste of hard-earned money, a self-imposed hindrance to employability, and an affront to their efforts: "If you loved us, you wouldn't get any more tattoos." On my graduation day, their first reaction after I took off my gown—after becoming the first in my family to get a bachelor's degree—was, "You need to change into something that covers those tattoos before relatives arrive." Despite my having secured a teaching job, their fears lingered and overshadowed the celebration of my graduation. There was no such thing as reaching solid ground. Worries about the fluid precarity of employment and finances are hard to reconcile with the permanence of a tattoo.

Aftercare

Every artist gives slightly different tattoo aftercare instructions. Some insist on keeping it covered with SecondSkin overnight, while others advise to expose it to air after a few hours of being bandaged. Concealment and openness can both be acts of care.

Tina: Unprompted, my mother said, "Your wedding dress needs to have sleeves to hide the hideous tattoos you insisted on getting." Yet, I view the tattoos as the most beautiful parts of my body. I don't struggle to love them as I struggle to love other parts. They evoke early memories of noticing beauty: a red flower reminiscent of my bà ngoại's embroidery, a fan as a nod to my bà nội's collection. I did get wedding dress sleeves—but detachable and sheer. This choice was an assertion of embodied agency in self-presentation. I knew my mother would be angry seeing them, but that was simultaneously the point and not the point.

Most of the time when I see my parents, however, my clothing conceals my tattoos. They know the tattoos exist, so it isn't about preventing discovery. Perhaps it's a protective mechanism, shielding them from what they find appalling and shielding myself from their judgment. Perhaps I'm too cognizant of audience perception, knowing the tattoos' messages can't and won't be received in the ways I want.

Jackie: I have the opening image of Brigit Pegeen Kelly's (1995) poem "Song" tattooed on my arm: a goat's head hanging by ropes in a tree. I first encountered the poem in a graduate writing workshop and felt

afterward, as poet Jane Hirshfield (2017) has suggested readers often are, "ineradicably changed" (p. 264) having read the poem. On a literal level, my tattoo represents how the poem has altered me—both internally and externally.

The tattoo also signals to a niche few, typically poets, that we share a language and attention. At writers' conferences, writers are initially drawn to my tattoo for its aesthetic appeal. Once I mention it's after a poem, I can often see the recognition flash across their eyes. In this way, my tattoo is relational: it links me to poetic forebears, such as Kelly, and to other contemporaries who share similar investments in the written word.

Though I intend for my tattoo to be legible to a particular audience, I also have to contend with how it is perceived by folks beyond my intended audience. Some years after receiving my tattoo, in a hotel lobby, a woman approached me, saying, "She's a beauty." She clarified, "Your goat," and let her fingers skim my skin as she pointed. In that moment, I became aware of the way my tattoo was read as an invitation to begin a conversation and, quite literally, reach out to me. I thanked the woman, not exactly knowing what she read in my tattoo, it certainly wasn't the poem, but more aware of tattoos as a site of relationality, exchange.

Tina: While some viewers have responded with self-interested intent, visible tattoos have also created moments of invitational rhetoric that are "nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial," creating "an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equality" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5). Perhaps due to my tattoos' visibility when I teach, multiple high school students have approached me to share excitement about upcoming first-tattoo appointments, showing me screenshots and sketchbook pages of inspiration. In invitational rhetoric, "resistance is not anticipated" and "change occurs in the audience or rhetor or both as a result of new understanding and insights gained in the exchange of ideas" (p. 6). In these interactions, we are both rhetors and audience members. Baltzer-Jaray and Rodriguez (2012) have asserted that "once you get a tattoo, you join that community and running across someone else who is tattooed becomes a moment of shared experience: You share in the feelings about getting tattooed . . . the appreciation of the image and the craft . . . the meanings involved for you both" (p. 46). I have come to learn the significance a student holds about lavender, about another's remixing of motifs from their parents' tattoos. They have learned about my reverence for language from the alphabet monogram on my wrist. The questions asked during invitational interactions stem from curiosity and interest. They don't demand disclosure but create space for a shared reading.

This Isn't Even Our Final Form

Paradoxically, though tattoos are permanent artifacts, their meanings are not static. Our autoethnographic experiences suggest to us that, as the styles, sizes, and number of our tattoos have expanded, so have their meanings. The placement of a tattoo next to an existing one sometimes changes, complicates, or complements the meanings of both. Our original intentions for a tattoo sometimes take a backseat to interpretations based on new life circumstances, changes in audience, or interplays between our identities and viewers' identities.

Understanding tattoos as non-static, we extend conversations of tattoos as rhetorical artifacts to pose tattooing as an ongoing feminist practice of self- and meaning-making. Tattoos are always in a state of becoming—not only in that they may be continuously worked on, extended into a more cohesive piece, or integrated into a patchwork, but also that their meaning is always becoming (Smith, 2012). Baltzer-Jaray and Rodriguez (2012) have described tattoos' meanings as "horizontal . . . each image had some meaning before, that it has a meaning now, and that a new meaning will evolve" (p. 47). As Judith Butler (1988) established, gender is a doing/performance that takes place across time and repetitions. Further, Stacey Waite (2017) has extended queer notions of becoming to highlight that text and readers are always in the process of becoming. Waite has engaged with the contradiction in which "one is at once both a constructed subject and an agent of one's own construction . . . . at once constructing a text and being constructed by that text . . . . at once constructing a self and being constructed by whatever self they had constructed before" (p. 113). A tattooed person is at once constructing a text—their body—with tattoos and becoming, as a hermeneutic identity, constructed by their tattoos. Further, audiences, in their reading of tattoos, also construct meaning of tattoos and the tattooed body while becoming different in the process of their reading. In this way, tattooing is an embodied avenue for a feminist practice of cultivating identity, knowledge, and relationality.

Biographies

Tina Le is a PhD student in Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she teaches writing and teacher education courses. Bridging experiences teaching in high school, college, and community contexts, her research explores narrative identity, teacher development, well-being, and collaborative community-building.

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It's a Femininomenon: Chappell Roan, Queer Visual Culture, and Participatory Feminist Rhetorics

Sharon J. Kirsch

Abstract: This article examines pop artist Chappell Roan as a key figure in contemporary feminist visual culture whose drag-inflected, hyperfeminine aesthetic transforms spectacle into feminist rhetorical practice. Through multimodal performances that merge camp irony with drag embodiment, Roan constructs a participatory visual rhetoric grounded in pleasure, parody, and collective attunement. Her concerts, music videos, and fan collaborations mobilize what this essay calls the *femininomenon*—a queer-feminist method that turns femme excess into a world-making aesthetic and a pedagogy of joy. Drawing on feminist rhetorical theory, queer performance studies, and theories of kinesthetic interlistening, I analyze how Roan's visual and sonic practices blur the boundaries between performer and audience, sight and sensation, critique and celebration. In doing so, Roan's work complicates the visual turn in rhetoric by demonstrating how visual culture operates as an embodied, multisensory, and collaborative mode of feminist praxis that invites participation, feeling, and reimagination.

Keywords: Chappell Roan, feminist visual culture, participatory aesthetics, queer kinesthetic interlistening, drag performance, rhetorical feminism

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In an era where queer visibility in pop culture is both increasingly mainstream and politically contested, Grammy Award winner for Best New Artist (2025) Chappell Roan has emerged not merely as a performer but as a rhetorical force. Her work exemplifies how feminist rhetorics operate multimodally through bodies, images, and sound to create meaning within visual culture. Through camp aesthetics, hyperfemininity, and queer performance traditions, Roan's engagement with contemporary visual culture expands feminist rhetorical practice. This essay argues that her drag-inflected aesthetic enacts a participatory feminist praxis that redefines visual culture as embodied, multisensory, and collective. Her visual identity, rooted in drag, DIY spectacle, and an unapologetic embrace of excess, functions as both critique and celebration, challenging dominant ideals of beauty, gender, and performance. Roan's praxis invites reflection on privilege, lineage, and the ethics of participation within feminist visual culture.

Roan actively embeds drag culture into her work, from exaggerated, camp-infused performances to her decision to feature local drag queens as opening acts. Her aesthetic–marked by maximalist makeup, intentional "ugliness," and an embrace of imperfection–defies and deconstructs the constraints of conventional pop femininity. Across performances from the glittering apple entrance at Governors Ball to the prom-queen fantasy of her NPR Tiny Desk concert and the metallic Joan of Arc armor at the MTV Video Music Awards, Roan transforms spectacle into embodied rhetoric. Through theatrical exaggeration and sensory abundance, she constructs a visual language that amplifies feminist rhetorical theories of embodiment, affect, and performance (Moreland, 2019; Hawhee, 2004; Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 1999). Her rhetorical power lies in transforming visuality into a participatory encounter that teaches through pleasure, play, and collective attunement.

Situating Roan within the lineage of queer pop icons and feminist performers, including Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and the broader drag tradition, this article analyzes her visual work across music videos, live performances, and fan engagement. Her persona is not only a spectacle but a call to action: an invitation to trans-

gress gender norms, embrace imperfection, and participate in aesthetic world-building. In a media environment often structured by surveillance, control, and curated authenticity, Roan's work reclaims performance as a site of feminist pedagogy, pleasure, and community building. The concept of "femininomenon," the title of the riotous opening track on her 2023 debut album *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess,* serves as both a keyword and a framework for this article. By fusing "feminine" and "phenomenon," Roan signals her maximalist embrace of femme excess as method, message, and world-making practice, encapsulating the feminist rhetorical force of her aesthetic and demonstrating how her cultural work transforms visual culture into an embodied, collaborative, and unapologetically inclusive feminist praxis.

Feminist Visual Culture, Embodiment, and Rhetorical Participation

Feminist rhetorical theory grounds this analysis of Roan's visual praxis, emphasizing that meaning is made through bodies, images, and sensory experience (Hawhee, 2015; Moreland, 2019). Within this framework, visual culture functions as a rhetorical domain where identities are constructed, contested, and reimagined. Feminist visual culture challenges logocentric hierarchies by asserting that gesture, adornment, and aesthetic labor carry epistemological and persuasive weight.[1] Building on these insights and on rhetorical theories of embodied and affective listening (Moore, 2018; Ratcliffe, 2005; Lipari, 2014; Faris, 2020; Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 1999), I examine how Roan's aesthetic rhetoric invites audiences into a collaborative, multisensory feminist praxis. Through drag-inflected spectacle and a porous boundary between performer and audience, she constructs a feminist visual sensorium, a participatory aesthetic space her fans actively inhabit. To trace the rhetorical implications of this feminist visual culture, the discussion begins with embodiment as a central concern in feminist rhetorical theory.

Madison Moore's theory of "fabulousness" helps illuminate the rhetorical stakes of Roan's visual performance. In *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric,* Moore (2018) has previously defined fabulousness as a tactic of queer world making, an embodied aesthetic revolt against normative systems. Less about money and conspicuous consumption, Moore's fabulousness "requires high levels of creativity, imagination, and originality" and is a form of protest, a revolt against the norms and systems that oppress and torture us all every day—white supremacy, misogyny, transmisogyny, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, gender policing and racism" (p. 8). Roan's performances enact this visual protest, embodying Moore's theory through drag, religious kitsch, early 2000s pop culture, and Midwestern camp, as seen in her 2024 Governors Ball appearance, where she emerged from a cracked red apple dressed as a drag-ified Statue of Liberty, painted green, wielding a torch, and smoking a giant joint (Fig. 1). She embraces camp as both medium and method, describing her stage identity as drag performance, collaborates with local drag artists when on tour, and designs her shows as participatory spectacles. These practices frame Roan's aesthetic not merely as representation, but as an invitation, a world to enter, an embodied, co-authored space of feminist and queer becoming.

1 Posthuman rhetorical theory reconceives agency as emerging from distributed, material, and affective relations rather than from a singular subject. Casey Boyle (2018) has described rhetorical force as arising from "serial encounters within ecologies" and bodies as "part of and apart from multiple arrays of practices" (p. 27). Sarah Hallenbeck (2012) similarly frames rhetorical action as relational and emergent (pp. 17–22). While reading Roan's aesthetic persona as a posthuman rhetorical assemblage co-constituted by fans, costumes, and performance practices offers a compelling direction, that analysis lies beyond the scope of this article.

Figure 1: 2024 Governors Ball, *Flood Magazine,* Photo Credit: Merissa Blitz, https://floodmagazine.com/165010/live-in-photos-governors-ball-2024-chappell-roan-alex-g/

Roan's Statute of Liberty performance makes visible what feminist rhetorical scholars have already urged us to recognize: that bodies are rhetorical agents, reshaping meaning through embodied performance. In their 2015 Key Concept Statement, "Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics," Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny call on the field to "complicate the ways bodies are understood to work and perform as rhetorical agents" (p. 42) and to foreground embodiment not as ancillary to rhetoric but as central to how meaning, power, and identity circulate. This framework clarifies how Roan's visual strategies operate rhetorically.

Debra Hawhee's (2015) theory of the sensorium further elucidates this function by centering sensation and affect as central to rhetorical exchange. Roan's performances are less about being passively watched and more about feeling, sounding, and participating through the body. This fluid performativity invites audiences into a shared sensorium, a participatory aesthetic space in which rhetorical agency circulates through gesture, spectacle, and embodiment. In this space, meaning is made through adornment, sound, and style, and through collective attunement to an unruly, femme-coded rhetoric of joy. Yet, as Hawhee's own genealogical analysis of rhetorical history shows, appeals to bodily sensation have often lacked intersectional analysis. This model, like Aristotelian ethos more broadly, tends to overlook how race, gender, and class constrain bodily expression. In her reading of Serena Williams' "'Defiant' Black ēthe," Lorin Shellenberger (2020) calls for a more intersectional theory, an embodied ēthe, that accounts for how ethos and subjectivity are co-constructed through bodily difference and structures of social power. Roan provides one such example of embodied ēthe, not in opposition to racialized constraint, but through white femininity that is deliberately disjointed, excessive, and anti-decorous.

If embodied rhetoric opens space for alternative rhetorical praxes, then rhetorical listening deepens it by shifting from the speaker to shared, embodied practices. Rhetorical listening, as theorized by Krista Ratcliffe (2005), moves attention from persuasion to interpretive responsibility. Listening in this feminist frame is not passive, but relational, shaped by positionality, affect, and power. This framework reorients our understand-

ing of rhetorical activity away from speech-as-dominance and toward listening as an interpretive, ethical, and embodied mode of engagement.[2] In visual culture, rhetorical listening becomes a mode of experiencing otherwise, attending to how performances signify through the viewer's situated gaze. It insists on a visual ethics attuned to power, silence, and presence where viewers are not neutral observers but co-constructors of meaning. In Roan's case, the audience's embodied participation via dress, singing, and gesture echoes and amplifies this shared rhetorical labor.

If we take seriously the feminist imperative to theorize the body as more than a passive surface but as a site of knowledge and resistance, then Roan's aesthetic becomes legible as a rhetorical intervention. Her performances, which are at once loud and quiet, excessive and deliberate, invite multisensory forms of listening attuned to visual, affective, and corporeal cues. Her stylized persona, rooted in drag-inflected femininity and a deliberately disjointed trash-glam aesthetic, constructs a visual ethos that rejects traditional decorum in favor of audacity, excess, and queer inclusivity. These performances encourage us not simply to consume her spectacle but to feel its stakes and its invitation to co-perform gender fluidity, critique visual and social norms, and embody a feminist aesthetic of joyful defiance.

Spectacle and Subversion: Roan's Aesthetic as Feminist Critique

Chappell Roan's ascent to queer pop stardom is inseparable from her visual aesthetic, a maximalist, drag-inflected performance style that operates as both spectacle and critique.[3] Her costuming, makeup, and stage iconography deliberately rework and parody beauty norms, exposing the ideological underpinnings of heteronormative pop culture. Through drag, grotesque glamour, and camp, Roan constructs a visual grammar of queer feminist critique.[4] We can situate Roan's aesthetic within a lineage of feminist visual performance alongside Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, artists who also engage visual culture as a site of feminist and queer resistance. Beyoncé performs through historical reclamation, weaving African spirituality, Southern Black heritage, and antebellum tropes into narratives of Black womanhood and resilience in works such as *Lemonade* (2016) and *Homecoming* (2019). These spectacles center Black cultural forms on global stages.[5]

2 Steph Ceraso's (2014) work explores the sensory turn in rhetorical theory; in "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning," she offers "the concept of multimodal listening to expand how we think about and practice listening as a situated, full-bodied act" (p. 103). See also, Sounding Composition: Multimodal Pedagogies for Embodied Listening (2018).

3 Roan's career started with a social media shout out from Troye Sivan and a 2018 contract with Atlantic Records. She moved from her small Missouri town to Los Angeles only to be dropped by the label two years later, prompting her return home. Revamping her collaboration with producer and co-writer Dan Nigro in 2021 led to her 2023 debut album, The Rise and Fall of a Midwestern Princess, and her meteoric rise to pop stardom. In early 2024, she opened for Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS tour, followed by music festival performances including Coachella, the Governor's Ball in New York City, and Lollapalooza, a "performance [that] broke an attendance record for the largest day crowd ever seen in the event's 30-plus-year history — without a headline billing." See Daw (2024) and Montiel (2024).

4 While often used interchangeably, camp and drag mark distinct yet overlapping rhetorical registers in Roan's work. Camp, as an ironic sensibility that celebrates excess and artifice, shapes the tonal and visual wit of her performances, while drag operates as embodied practice, an enactment of gender's artifice through transformation and participation (Butler, 1990; Muñoz & Cabral, 1999; Moore, 2018). Their synthesis turns exaggeration into feminist method, transforming spectacle into critique and irony into collective pleasure.

5 Her 2019 Coachella performance, captured in *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* (2019), extends this ethos with a spectacular tribute to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, featuring step teams, a live marching band, and Black Greek iconography. Beyoncé underscores the political power of centering Black cultural forms on a global stage. Positioned as a Black woman reclaiming her lineage, Beyoncé performs history to rewrite it, rendering her work widely understood as counter-he-

Lady Gaga, by contrast, exemplifies what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) theorizes as "disidentification," a queer strategy that repurposes dominant cultural codes. Gaga's early work drew on Catholic iconography, drag, and club-kid aesthetics to expose identity as theatrical and constructed. Albums like *Born This Way* (2011) stage gender and fame as hypermediated spectacle.

Building on these traditions, Roan shifts the rhetorical mode from reclamation or ironic deconstruction to participatory co-creation. As Kelly Moreland (2019) theorizes, bodies function as rhetorical spaces, shaped by history, culture, and affect, and capable of generating meaning through their visual and material form (p. 405). Roan's body becomes such a space: not a fixed symbol of femininity, but a rhetorical site where femininity is contested, styled, and reimagined. She performs under a stage name, Chappell Roan, which she explicitly frames as a drag persona: "I really have taken that on as an identity, and it's been very freeing to be like 'Oh Chappell Roan is my drag project'" (Gibson, 2025). This alter ego allows her to disidentify from traditional expectations of pop stardom and femininity. Embodying Chappell Roan is "really liberating for me" because "the drag queen that I play … is very confident and comfortable singing…." (Tonic, 2024). Roan deploys drag not as imitation but as intervention, a strategic mode of visual exaggeration that refuses tidy containment of femininity and invites audiences into its joyful undoing.

Roan's commitment to drag culture is not only rhetorical but relational. In a pop landscape where drag is often mined for spectacle, her visual rhetoric emerges from embeddedness rather than appropriation. As drag's mainstream visibility has grown, so have questions about whether pop artists engage it meaningfully or simply exploit it for image-making. Roan resists the hollow co-optation that marks much mainstream drag appropriation. As British drag queen Bones notes, "Roan feels different …. I know American queens who know [Roan] as the girl who used to come to the club and support the queens. Like Lady Gaga, you know exactly who she is–there's a certain authenticity from the get go" (Snapes, 2024). This testimony positions Roan not as an outsider borrowing drag for aesthetic effect, but as someone whose visual practice is grounded in a lived ethic of participation.

That embeddedness informs her aesthetic debts to "trash drag," a tradition that embraces ugliness as both a political resource and stylistic excess.[6] At NPR's Tiny Desk, Roan squeezed her maximalist aesthetic into the intimate, fluorescent-lit office space, staging herself as a "grotesque" prom queen. (Fig. 2). Her face was painted a ghostly white that glared under the overhead lights, streaks of black mascara running visibly down her cheeks. A thick smear of lipstick bled across her teeth as she smiled into the microphone. A tiara on her beehive wig glittered not with jewels but with crushed cigarette butts, their orange filters catching the light. The clash between regal form and abject material literalizes what Jack Halberstam (2011) identifies as *queer failure*: the refusal of polish, glamour, or success as normative ideals. Ordinarily a symbol of feminine perfection, the prom queen crown is deliberately dirtied here, transformed into an emblem of refusal. Rather than reclaiming trash into empowerment, Roan revels in femininity's supposed "failures," unsettling the

gemonic rather than appropriative.

6 Trash drag emerged from underground queer communities that challenged the flawless femininity in mainstream drag. Heavily influenced by the grotesque and camp aesthetics of 1970s trash cinema, especially John Waters and the legendary drag diva Divine, this style took root globally. Roan paid homage to Divine's roles in Water's film Pink Flamingos. See Nesvig (2024).

very criteria of success and femininity that the tiara is supposed to signify.

Figure 2: NPR Tiny Desk Concert, Photo Credit: Elizabeth Gillis/NPR: https://www.npr.org/2024/03/21/1238815351/tiny-desk-concert-chappell-roan

On a massive stage at the MTV Music Awards, Roan appeared not as a sanitized pop product, but as an unruly feminist icon: part Joan of Arc, part Julie d'Aubigny, part DIY drag royalty (Fig. 3). Wearing shimmering body armor, red hair teased into medieval sculpture, and an overflowing gown made of cigarette boxes and rosary beads, she embodied what might best be described as a queer medieval fever dream. The gown of abject materials offers another example of queer failure, refusing couture polish in favor of assemblage and trash. By exaggerating sainthood into drag excess, Roan destabilizes both femininity and holiness, staging their supposed purity as always already constructed.

Jonathan Graffam-O'Meara (2024) has noted that Roan exemplifies drag precisely because she "leans into hyperfemininity, at times toying with beauty ideals and elements of 'ugliness' and trash," creating a visual contradiction that celebrates femininity while holding "a middle finger up at those same societal ideals and expectations. Her grotesque styling, lipstick on her teeth, smeared mascara, cigarette-butt tiaras, literalizes this "middle finger," enacting what might be called a feminist politics of distortion: a subversion not through rejection of femininity but through its exaggeration into satire and refusal. Her Statue of Liberty look at Governors Ball, with her painted green and smoking a giant joint, and her rhinestone cheerleader outfit spelling "HOT TO GO!" make Graffam-O'Meara's (2024) point visible: pep rally femininity, grotesque glamor, and trash camp collide in exaggerated contradiction. Roan's DIY self-styling becomes a form of feminist critique made legible through the visual grammars of drag, camp, and queer performative excess. By reworking archetypes historically associated with objectification, from Joan of Arc to the Midwest beauty queen to Lady Liberty, Roan's body becomes the canvas on which visual culture is remade. She exaggerates, distorts, and reclaims them as sites of unruly pleasure. "I love looking pretty and scary, or pretty and tacky," she told Jimmy Fallon, citing drag, horror films, and burlesque as key influences (2024).

Roan's participatory aesthetic also manifests in fan styling and co-costuming practices. Roan announces tour themes like Midwest Princess, Kink Is My Karma, and Pink Pony Club, encouraging fans to "Go full out" (Fig. 3). Audiences arrive in DIY costumes, perform choreographed movements, and share their cre-

ations online, participating in the rhetorical and cultural feminominon (Trebay, 2025). Rather than partnering with couture designers like Madonna did with Jean Paul Gaultier, Roan works with her stylist and creative director, Genesis Webb, to create signature looks that blend historical, modern, and avant-garde looks sourced from upcycled fashion, vintage items, and theatrical prosthetics. This conscious rejection of high fashion aligns her visual rhetoric with feminist material rhetorics of reuse, resistance, and unruliness. By rejecting exclusivity and embracing reuse, Roan builds an aesthetic world that is legible, remixable, and participatory, an invitation fans take seriously.

Participatory Aesthetics and Queer Kinesthetic Listening

This section extends Michael J. Faris's (2020) concept of queer kinesthetic interlistening beyond the classroom, showing how Roan's visual aesthetic and fan practices constitute a communal, affective form of feminist rhetorical invention. While these visual disruptions are powerful in their own right, Roan's feminist praxis extends beyond spectacle. She actively invites her audience to co-create it. Drawing on Moreland's (2019) theory of "body as space," we can understand Roan's visual persona as a rhetorical environment that reflects and remakes cultural imaginaries through performance. Moreland argues that bodies function as rhetorical spaces shaped by cultural, historical, and material forces, not just symbolic representations (pp. 405–7). Roan's grotesque drag body, then, is not a costume layered on top of an identity but a visual space through which gendered meaning is contested, embodied, and reimagined. Her body becomes a shifting surface of rhetorical inscription and resistance. We can understand Roan's body not as a static symbol but as mobile and contingent, constructed in and through aesthetic choices, audience reaction, and performance context.

Roan's invitation for fans to embody her aesthetic—through themed dress codes and choreographed crowd dances like "Hot to Go!"—transforms the audience from spectators to co-authors of the performance. This affective circulation is central to Roan's events, where queer joy, drag stylings, and emotional openness are felt collectively in movement, not just seen. In this way, Roan's visual rhetoric prepares the ground for a more radical mode of feminist performance, one in which spectacle is collectively co-authored.

At a Chappell Roan concert, the line between performer and audience dissolves into glitter, makeup, sweat, chant, and shared experience. Fans arrive in elaborate DIY costumes, clown wigs, thrifted corsets, pink cowboy hats, already embodying the themes for her concerts that Roan announces on social media: Lesbian prom, Pink Pony Club, and Hot To Go! (Fig. 4). The collective energy cycles back and forth between Roan and her audience as fans dance in sync to pretaught choreography, scream-chant lyrics of queer defiance, and hold their costumed bodies in radiant connection with Roan's own. In these moments, listening becomes an invitation to Faris's (2020) "queer kinesthetic interlistening," a rhetorical act where meaning emerges through affective, embodied, and participatory entanglement of performer and audience. Faris expands Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) notion of rhetorical listening, which tends to privilege "the discursive and epistemic at the expense of the embodied and material" (Faris, 2020, p. 2). Roan's performance offers precisely this material surplus: a fan dancing in neon heels to the "Hot To Go!" beat is not interpreting an argument; they are inhabiting it. For Faris, queer kinesthetic interlistening extends rhetorical theory to account for how listening hap-

pens through bodies in motion, and how "listening is polymodal … includ[ing] all of our senses, not just our hearing" (p. 8). Drawing from Lisbeth Lipari's (2014) work, Faris reorients listening from an epistemological to an ontological act, something that "touches" us, "vibrates through our bodies," and is shaped by rhythm, movement, and proximity (pp. 30–1).

Figure 3: Instagram post: "TOUR THEMES PART 2." Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CwqchjlSY-n/?img_index=1

This kinesthetic mode of engagement transforms Roan's concerts from spectacles into sites of rhetorical invention. Following Jennifer LeMesurier (2014), such bodily movement becomes rhetorical invention, where "somatic metaphors" emerge through proprioceptive experience and create openings for rhetorical action (p. 157). More than a choreographed routine, Roan's "Hot To Go!" becomes a multisensory act of rhetorical identification and co-creation. Fans learn it in advance on TikTok or Roan gives the crowd a dance lesson before singing the song, blurring the line between audience and performer. Here, rhetorical agency is distributed across a network of moving bodies. As Faris (2020) notes in his discussion of voguing, embodied practices can become "a site of memory and invention," particularly in queer communities whose histories are often erased or fragmented (p. 9). The audience's gestures echo Roan's even as they transform and remix them with their own bodies, generating meaning through reciprocal performance. Rhetorical meaning is no longer a message transmitted from artist to listener; it is co-performed, felt in rhythm and breath.

The participatory dimension of Roan's concerts is what Lipari (2014) describes as an "ethics of attunement," listening less for information and more "to the harmonic interconnectivity of all beings and objects" (p. 3). In this relational mode, to listen is to be with, to enter a dance of resonance and improvisation. Lipari's concept of interlistening is polyphonic, embodied, and intersubjective: "What if our entire body is one great listening organ?" she asks; "What if we are, in some sense, all ears?" (p. 30). At a Roan show, whole bodies listen through touch (glittered and sweaty skin, stomping boots), through sight (costumes mirroring Roan's), and through movement (group choreography). More than aesthetic echoes, these are rhetorical acts. Roan's

concert spaces transform commercial music venues into a feminist rhetorical commons where bodies—queer, trans, femme, cis, and unruly—become mediums of rhetorical participation.

Roan's aesthetic themes are open invitations, not identification with a fixed brand. Lipari (2014) calls this kind of relationality "akroatic listening," a non-hierarchical ethics that privileges resonance over control, synchronicity over persuasion (pp. 213–14). Fans take Roan's aesthetic cues like a campy Joan of Arc, a pink prom queen, or a drag-tinged Statue of Liberty, and remake them in their own image and collectively author its meaning in community. This co-authorship extends from visual mimicry to bodily rhythm. When the crowd collectively performs this "Hot To Go!", they are *attuning.* Faris argues that kinesthetic interlistening is habituated, emerging from "the sedimentation of repeated actions," creating rhetorical meaning through rhythmic, embodied memory (p. 10). Similarly, for Lipari , listening is shaped by a "listening habitus," a set of sensory and cultural dispositions learned over time. Roan's fan rituals, learned in bedrooms and performed in public, are precisely this: ritualized bodily rhetorics that teach queer attunement, belonging, and joy. While kinesthetic interlistening is often theorized within sonic rhetorics, Roan's performances reveal how listening and seeing are mutually constitutive within feminist visual culture, collapsing the boundary between audience and spectacle, transforming vision into a tactile and rhythmic mode of relation. Thus, Roan extends feminist visual methodology beyond observation toward attunement and a way of seeing that is felt, co-created, and sensorially reciprocal.

Roan's feminist visual rhetoric emerges from an ethos of collective attunement rather than individual display. Her performances materialize a feminist and queer sensorium, an embodied field of relation where audience participation becomes a form of knowing. By inviting audiences to feel, move, and co-create, Roan transforms spectatorship into pedagogy and visuality into relation. Roan's practice of queer kinesthetic interlistening clarifies how listening and seeing intertwine within feminist visual culture: her audiences listen with their eyes and perceive through the shared pulse of movement and sound. In this sense, interlistening becomes a visual method, expanding feminist visual analysis beyond observation toward attunement and multisensory reciprocity. Roan's work complicates the primacy of sight in visual rhetoric by insisting that seeing is never singular; it is always entangled with touch, sound, movement, and affect. Roan's methods thus expand visual rhetoric's scope from the optical to the sensorial, urging scholars to consider how visual practices might also be heard, felt, and inhabited. Through drag, hyperfemininity, and participatory joy, she models a feminist aesthetic that renders the visual porous so that it includes an opening for collective presence rather than a frame of separation. In this way, Roan's "femininomenon" challenges visual rhetoric to account not only for what is seen but for what is sensed, shared, and co-created.

Biography

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Fattie at the Front of the Room: Fat Professors as Embodied Visual Feminist Praxis

Katie Manthey and Rachel Robinson-Zetzer

Abstract: In this piece, we, two white, middle-class, cisgender, queer, female professors, bring together fat pedagogy, an approach that focuses on "reducing weight-based oppression in educational settings" (Cameron & Russel, cited in Hunt & Rhodes, 2018, p. 21), and fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) to argue that the bodies of fat professors can be both a site for and a place of practice of feminist visual rhetorics. We do this by building on Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "gaze" to see how the perceived gaze of students and the gaze of fat professors might contribute to what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze" as part of feminist visual rhetorics. This piece practices embodied writing (Banks, 2003) by combining threads of feminist, fat, and rhetorical theory into a frame for our stories—much like granny squares in a quilt of theory.

Keywords: fat, embodiment, pedagogy, feminist

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INTRODUCTION

In this piece, we, two white, middle-class, cisgender, queer, female professors, bring together fat pedagogy, an approach that focuses on "reducing weight-based oppression in educational settings" (Cameron & Russel, cited in Hunt & Rhodes, 2018, p. 21), and fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) to argue that the bodies of fat professors can be both a site for and a place of practice of feminist visual rhetorics. We do this by building on Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "gaze" to see how the perceived gaze of students and the gaze of fat professors might contribute to what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze" as part of feminist visual rhetorics. This piece practices embodied writing (Banks, 2003) by combining threads of feminist, fat, and rhetorical theory into a frame for our stories—much like granny squares in a quilt of theory.

A SCENARIO

Imagine it—your first day teaching at a new institution. You walk into class and you don't see anyone who looks like you—anyone who is fat. How do you feel? Do you show up differently for these students? Do you let this change your pedagogy?

In a similar scenario, when you turn to face your students, you are greeted with faces and bodies that mirror your own. You have fat students. How do you feel? Do you show up differently for these students? Do you let this change your pedagogy?

As two mid-career faculty, we would like to say that of course we treat all students the same all of the time; of course, we practice our pedagogy to the highest level regardless of the students in front of us. However, based on our own experiences as two fat women in front of classrooms in both types of scenarios, we admit that it's impossible not to teach differently based on the bodies of the students; both the real and perceived gaze of the students back at us will always affect our pedagogy. At the same time, just like our

perceived reception of the fat gaze from our students, we are looking at our students with a gaze that focuses solely on body size and making assumptions accordingly. Similarly, we feel our students' gaze holds us in a sort of limbo—we're aware of our bodies constantly while we teach, but there is nothing we can really do about it.

We argue in this piece that this interaction–this gaze–is feminist visual rhetoric, and we will offer embodied writing as a vehicle to further parse this out. Our hope in this exploration is to reveal the affordances of engaging with feminist visual rhetoric in embodied fat pedagogy.

Thread 1: Fat Pedagogy

Fat studies scholars have discussed size in higher education for years, drawing attention to the ways that size contributes to oppression in ways that are both very high stakes, such as being less likely to receive tenure (Fisanick, 2006) as well as microaggressions (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). There is also robust conversation about courses that explicitly bring in size as an identity category (Cameron, 2018; Guthman, 2019; Christel, 2018), with scholars noting that the practice of fat pedagogy in the classroom often results in discomfort (and potentially productive discussions about discomfort) for both the instructor and of the students. This piece contributes to fat pedagogy scholarship by focusing on the discomfort (and perceived discomfort) of being a fat professor in front of students. By focusing on our discomfort, we offer our own fat pedagogy that holds what we call the "fat pedagogical gaze."

Thread 2: The "Gaze" and Feminist Visual Rhetoric

Our offering of the "fat pedagogical gaze" is rooted in Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational idea of the "male gaze," which has been taken up by feminist scholars in various ways since its introduction. While Mulvey examines feminist visual culture through film, her idea is that film offers a view of women as passive objects for a presumed heterosexual male viewer, reinforcing an oppressive ideology towards women through beauty (Mulvey, 1975). In the fat pedagogical gaze, fat people (especially women) are viewed as passive objects that fail at meeting societal beauty and health standards (Gordon, 2020). Of particular interest to our work here, fat women are also often additionally seen as maternal (The Representation Project, 2025) since this is also something attributed to teaching evaluations for women more broadly.

Our idea of the fat pedagogical gaze consists of two parts: 1) the instructor gaze, where we make assumptions about our students, and 2) the student gaze, where the students perceive us. We offer that one of the most powerful parts of this idea isn't the actual act of gazing—it's our perception as instructors that we are being gazed at. It is when we think we are being judged by our students that we feel the most uncomfortable, highly due to our own internalized fat phobia—that is, when we adjust how we show up, what conversations we are willing to have, and even our own potential microaggressions toward our students. These actions aren't something we are proud to admit, but that admission is useful in service of further exploring how feminist visual rhetorics can reveal moments for potential understanding and even intervention in relation to being fat in the world today.

Thread 3: Embodied Fat Rhetorics and Writing Our Stories

While discussions of the fat pedagogical gaze focus on the looking and the perceived being looked at (with all the cultural assumptions that are embedded, such as internalized fat phobia), we want this piece to be a sort of intervention into the often presented disembodied, passive way that fat people are viewed: as viewers and passive receivers, not as living, breathing bodies. Rhetorical notions of embodiment (Knoblauch, 2022; Johnson et al, 2015; Banks, 2003) offer ways to keep the body and the lived experiences of the body as the focus of rhetorical scholarship. Fat rhetorical embodiment (Manthey, 2025) posits that size can be an "embodied orientation" that can exist strategically–purposefully–in opposition to cultural norms about acceptable size. Our stories that follow show some of the different ways and contexts in which we each do this as two fat women. Our hope is to show how embodied fat rhetorics can be an intervention for the fat pedagogical gaze–and how ultimately the fat pedagogical gaze might be able to be turned into a useful tool for intervention in educational spaces.

The Granny Squares: Our Stories

*Piece 1: Katie**

It's 2008, and I am a 22-year-old master's student teaching first-year composition for the first time; teaching anything college for the first time. I have two problems: 1) the students in front of me are just a few years younger than me and to me, it's painfully obvious, and 2) I am ashamed of my body. I think that I am fat, and that my body is a failure and needs to be modified through clothing until I can successfully lose weight

Luckily, the answer to both of these problems could be solved with a credit card from The Limited.

That summer, I got a part-time job at what I thought was the most sophisticated store in the mall and used my employee discount to purchase every single item that came through the store that was an XL, whether I liked the piece or not. I believed that as long as I am pretty, as long as it's clear that I am trying, I am not a failure as a woman.

Figure 1 Katie smiling at an academic conference with other panelists, who are cropped out of the image.

So I find myself standing in front of a group of students just a few years younger than me. They are dressed in casual "undergraduate" clothes, while I am trying to look very serious. I am aware of my body and its shape, and I'm doing my best to hide my curves. Even though the clothing feels artificial–not something I would ever wear on my own outside of this context–I wear it like armor. It both helps me show up in front of the students looking different and hides the parts of my body that make me feel vulnerable. No students ever said anything to me about my appearance, but I don't take off the blazers all semester, no matter how constricted or warm I get. This is me as an instructor. Take me seriously; please don't look at my fat body.

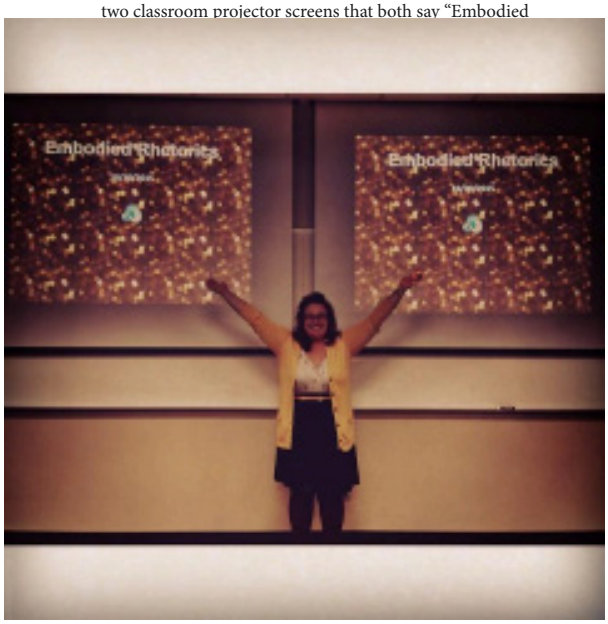
Piece 2: Katie

It's 2014, and I am 28 years old and teaching another first-year writing class at a different large state school in the Midwest. This time I'm a bit older than the students and, while I'm still establishing my ethos, being a PhD student helps me feel more confident.

Through the years between my first teaching experience and now, a few things have changed: I have aged, I have gotten fatter, and I have started to lean into my own style. I don't shop at The Limited anymore (they went out of business at some point–maybe because I stopped buying everything they had in my size?), but instead, I follow fat fashion blogs and know how to hunt for colorful blazers, cute cardigans, pants, and skirts that are playful but professional and, above all else, flattering.

I still wear armor when I teach; I am always cognizant of my body in space. The larger I get, the more important it is to me to keep the right shape. I hint at the shape with my clothes, but don't show bare skin–especially my arms. I am staunchly against "letting myself go"—it's still very important to me to try as hard as I can to be conventionally attractive in spite of the body that I have.

Figure 2 A picture of Katie with her arms raised in front of two classroom projector screens that both say "Embodied Rhetorics."



I distinctly remember one day when I was teaching the students about something I was really passionate about. I remember being excited about what they were saying and how they were making connections. There was a moment of misunderstanding in the discussion, and I remember feeling a rush of excitement, and then physical discomfort. It was hot and stuffy in the room, and I needed to write something at the top of the board, but my sleeves were tight and I couldn't easily reach. I remember at this moment I made a decision that, to me, felt big: I took off my cardigan so I could more effectively be in the moment and teach the class. I distinctly remember thinking to myself in the moment something along the lines of "I am sacrificing my body for these students."

While admittedly hyperbolic, it was also very true for me. At that moment, I could feel myself giving up something–I never wanted the students to see me as sexy, but I did want them to think I was conventionally attractive in an age-appropriate way. But for me, by shedding my armor, I went from being a cool, conventionally attractive young professor-in-training to a matriarchal pedagogue.

At the time, my response to this change–this potential bit of freedom–was overwhelmingly discomfort and disgust. To be clear, no students ever commented on my size or my appearance beyond general compliments; no one audibly gasped or fainted when I took off my cardigan in the heat of the pedagogical moment.

That year, I won an award from the university for excellence in teaching composition; I couldn't dislodge the feeling that part of me had given up because I had let myself go.

Piece 3: Katie

It's 2018, and I am 32 years old and teaching at a small women's college in the south. The campus is historic, which means that the air conditioning doesn't work well most of the time. In the fall and the late spring, it is ungodly hot both outside and in my classrooms. I still care about how I look, but I have embraced sleeveless clothing. I often bring a blazer with me to campus in case I need to put on armor, but that usually only happens around other faculty or administrators. I still teach first-year writing, but I have also created and taught classes like "Embodied Rhetorics" for the professional writing minor and "Fat Feminisms" for the women and gender studies program. These classes demand that I show up as myself—that I embody what I teach. I still care about being attractive, but I have pushed myself to try to let go of convention–or at least be more aware of it when making choices and perceiving judgment from others. I have found a space between fat fashion blogger and matriarchal pedagogue, and I dwell there. Because of the way my embodied orientation to my size has changed, I see opportunities to use my body as a pedagogical tool. When we talk about size in class, I tell parts of my own story. I rhetorically analyze my clothing in relation to fit, size, and societal expectations for women with my students during my lectures. In real time, we all experience rhetorical embodiment through fat pedagogy.

There are a couple of things that make this teaching context different from the other two: I am as old as the students' mothers (which someone seems to point out at least once each year), I am the fattest I have ever been, and I only teach folks who identify as women. The male gaze is present in the classroom, but only in a way that has been absorbed by AFAB (assigned female at birth) folks in our culture. Again, no students comment negatively on my size; this time, some students tell me in private that seeing me show up in class and talk about fat studies has helped them see themselves differently.

Figure 3: A picture of a polaroid of Katie in her writing center at Salem College.

I don't think I am resilient enough to practice fat pedagogy in a co-ed institution, but I find solace and even joy here.

Piece 4: Rachel

Where are all the fat people? This was my first thought on my first day at a small, private university in New England. As I pulled into the parking lot, I couldn't help but notice the absence of fatness. Going throughout my day, I realized there were no fat students–or faculty–anywhere I could see. They weren't in my classes, I didn't pass them

on the quad, I didn't see them in the library. Instead, I saw students clad in barely-there shorts and tops the size of my thigh (no judgment here!) darting to and from classes on our hilly campus, while I struggled and huffed up the sidewalk from the dining hall, constantly aware of my labored breathing. The absence of fat had me mesmerized. Much to my chagrin, I would often find myself staring at a student's flat midsection or the sliver of tummy right above their waistband with envy and a lot of curiosity.

When I did see a random fat person on campus (I can count them on one hand), I felt an uncanny kindredness to them, and I had to stop myself from frantically waving, drawing more attention to myself, just so that we could see each other safely. With their university shirts stretched over their rolls and hugging their curves, I would stare with a joy that bordered on obsession. Do I follow this fat student to find more fat people on campus? No, of course not. Right?

Figure 4:A collage with three depictions of Rachel with her face covered.

The desire to be both seen and invisible is a duality I've lived with since childhood. My own image of my body, and, therefore, my fatness, has developed over a long time. I've not always been nice to myself. I didn't accept the word "fat" as a descriptor of myself until about five years ago when I found fat scholarship; however, as a child, preteen, teen, and adult, I'd shunned the word with every fiber of my being. It felt so succinct a description for everything that my body held. The hard "t" at the end slipped through my gritted teeth each time I would utter the word: faT, faT, faT.

In fifth grade, a bully I had class with would call me "fatso" every single day during after-school care at the Boys and Girls Club. Of course, I didn't tell anyone because I believed him and felt deep shame for this perceived—and visible—flaw. Though he completely crushed my self-esteem, he did help me get used to the "fat" label being thrown toward me. He helped to desensitize me.

Something changed, though, in the 2010s. I started to see fat people, women specifically, in the media embracing their bodies. My Instagram page slowly started to become littered with images of Ashley Graham (not a fattie, but not a waif, either), Nadia Aboulhosn, and Tess Holliday. All of these women are beautiful and not straight-sized, something I didn't know could exist together.

In the years since my divorce in 2013, I've persistently worked on myself and my own view of fatness with the attitude that I had to be nicer to myself. There were now women who looked more like me on magazine covers and on television, and I couldn't deny the effect the visibility was having on me. I've never been loving toward my body; in fact, I downright hated the way it undulated and rolled with every step I took. I hated how each step would send visible waves along the surface of my body, never allowing me to hide my movements, and I constantly had to hide when I was out of breath from walking a normal distance (or, god forbid, up stairs). Where once I thought that my stomach roll that protruded out further when I sat down

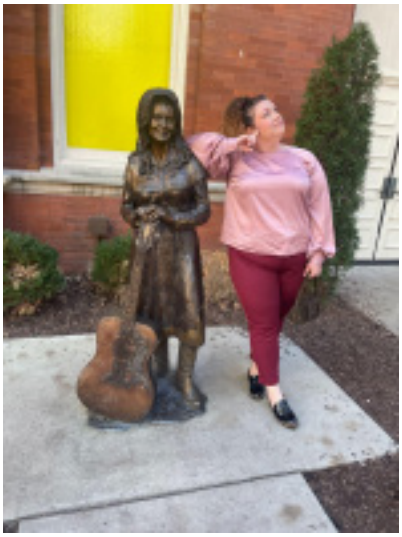


Figure 5 Rachel posing with a statue of Loretta Lynn outside the Ryman Auditorium.

was a sign of weakness, I have since tried to embrace it as a sign of… nothing at all. It's just a body, and all bodies are good bodies, right? If not good all the time, can a body–my body–actually be neutral? I've obsessed about my own body since I was five years old, and as a woman in her forties, certain elements of that obsession have grown stale. Other elements have become so ingrained I cannot see myself without them. For example, I don't care anymore about tucking in my shirt when it covers my fupa. My fupa is there, it's not going away, and I'm actually missing out (on fashion and comfort) when I cover myself up completely and hide in baggy, ill-fitting clothes. I'm also slowly embracing shorts for the first time in my adult life. Truthfully, both of these breakthroughs are still difficult to accept, but with every day, they are getting easier to enact.

Piece 5: Rachel

I've seen so many butt cheeks lately, I told my husband as I got home from work on the first warm day of the spring semester. In warmer weather, perhaps this sighting is to be expected, and I don't intend to body or fashion shame anyone for their choices, but I would find myself, once again, secretly marveling at my students' revealing backsides with something close to…jealousy. Not for their attire, but for their confidence. To be able to wear hotpants to class takes a certain amount of chutzpah that I truly didn't know my students had. When I was in graduate school taking pedagogy classes, a friend once told me that you should always "test" your outfits by turning to the chalkboard and pretending to write on it above your head. This act would help you see if your outfits were too short because when you lifted your arm, your clothes rose, too. I've considered this advice in every classroom I'm in, often opting for pants and long dresses/skirts to avoid this dilemma of exposed upper legs/backside entirely. When I stand in front of a classroom now, my confidence is mixed: I'm comfortable with my instructional material, but the material on my body feels like it will betray me at any moment. It bunches and hangs too low or is too tight, and I'm frighteningly aware of how I pull at my shirts out of habit and adjust my waistband when I stand. Of course, my students don't comment on my body, but they do comment on my outfits, often telling me they like them. These compliments tend to have an adverse effect on me, though. Instead of making me feel more confident and in control, I feel hyperaware of my students' gaze. If they can so clearly see my outfits and judge them, what else are they seeing and judging?

Figure 6 A collage with Rachel in black and white in the center. She is wearing regalia and bordering her are multiple eyes/faces to illustrate the student gaze.

Students stare at me when I'm teaching, as is to be expected, but their gaze doesn't comfort me. Instead, I feel like they are seeing through my shields, seeing me at my most vulnerable, and I just have to get through it. Or, I have to embrace it and allow my students to see me in ways that I dislike being seen, in ways that make me uncomfortable. Under the microscope of the classroom, I adopt the attitude of fake it until you make it with my confidence, but behind the closed door of my office, I crumble.

While my classrooms are always "safe enough" spaces for my students, I've never thought of extending that safety to myself. What am I supposed to do when my students' gaze makes me feel unsafe, or, at the very least, uncomfortable?

Conclusion: The Quilt

Our stories show different contexts for experiencing the fat pedagogical gaze. They show clearly how the perception of being perceived by students as fat is powerful—more powerful in our cases because there were never any moments of actual, clear verbalized negative feedback on our appearances. Internalized fat phobia prevents us from seeing the reality in front of us–that our students are just being students, staring at their professor without judgment (mostly). The question then is this: How do we, as professors, combat fat oppression in the classroom? How do we turn the perceived student gaze from something that might hurt us and the classroom space to something neutral, or even celebrated? As Katie's story shows, one thing professors can do is to talk about their bodies. Talking about the fat body and showing its experiences that are similar to the straight-sized body helps to normalize and make visible fatness. When we "present fat bodies as normative and desirable," we help to bring the student gaze, and the perception of the student gaze, into more of an equilibrium (Pausé, 2016, p.58). Though it is highly unlikely that we are the first fat bodies students encounter, we feel that it is our responsibility, as professors committed to teaching feminist social justice practices who are also the owners of those fat bodies, to move in our bodies and talk about our bodies in ways that help students see all bodies as good, powerful, and strong. For the two of us, we feel that it's our responsibility to help students understand that their gaze of fat bodies is powerful, and how they interpret that gaze can be oppressive or liberating. This, though, requires a level of acceptance and confidence in your fat body; a conscious embodiment of fat (Manthey, 2025).

For some fat professors, this embodiment is scary, dangerous even, and definitely vulnerable. But what vulnerability allows us to do–embrace, highlight, and describe–is to help us debunk old hangups about fat. When these hangups have been dissolved, embracing the fat, especially in the classroom when all eyes are on you, becomes slightly easier. Even when the fat professor embodies fat as an orientation, the work of parsing the powerful cultural assumption that fat people are bad comes with risk. As fat studies scholars in this piece have mentioned, classes that engage with discussions of size explicitly in the course material (such as Katie's "Embodied Rhetorics" and "Rhetoric of Health and Medicine" classes) are often uncomfortable for all involved. As writing professors, size as course content may show up in some places but is often not the focus of what we teach. In these cases, simply how we show up as instructors and humans is the lesson. The perceptions of the gaze will follow us, but how we react–whether in the classroom or not—to that gaze is the true measure of a fat professor.

**All images are the authors' own.*

Biography

Katie Manthey is an associate professor of English and director of the Writing Center at Salem College. Her research and teaching focus on the intersections of size, embodiment, and professional writing from a cultural rhetorics perspective.

Rachel Robinson-Zetzer is an assistant professor of English and director of the Writing Instruction Program at Northern Kentucky University. She has lots of experience being the "fattie at the front of the room," and she's still working out her pedagogical style, even after twenty-plus years in the classroom.

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Claws, Paws, and Menopause: Feline Metaphors and the Performance of Aging

Freddie (Fiona) Harris Ramsby

Abstract: In this article, I stage a critique of feline metaphors that pathologize women, sex, and aging. Through monologues modeled on the rhetoric of the duelling logoi in Aristophanes' Clouds, I spotlight the non-deliberate work that "cougar" and "cat lady" metaphors perform to reduce the complexity of later-life female sexuality to absurd caricatures. Indeed, drawing on recent research in critical metaphor theory, gender and aging studies, animal studies/human-animal interaction research, and cultural criticism, the performances I feature enact how these metaphors frame femininity as a choice between "polishing" oneself into sexual viability through intensive anti-aging labor or succumbing to the centuries old spinster trope. By making these metaphors deliberate through Aristophanes' rhetorical moves and bawdy humour, and taking inspiration from Caitlyn Moran's irreverent feminism, these performances render visceral how these metaphoric constructs work to delegitimize aging women's sexuality. This work advances performance-based methods for feminist rhetorical criticism while challenging linguistic structures that constrain aging women's sexual agency.

Keywords: Feline metaphors, cougar, cat lady, aging women's sexuality, Aristophanes comedy, conceptual metaphor theory, feminist rhetorical criticism, performance-as-method, embodied rhetoric

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Cat ladies have enjoyed something of a resurgence lately. *NPR* references Vice President JD Vance's 2021 hairball comments, coughed up prior to the United States 2024 general election: "Vance complained that the U.S. was being run by Democrats . . . and a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and [their] choices . . . so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too" (Treisman, 2024). While Vance has since admitted his comments were "dumb," (Maher & Bradner, 2024), celebrity cat lovers retaliated: Theo Larue (2024) reports that, while endorsing democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, Taylor Swift, adorned in red lipstick, black turtleneck, and a black and white cat, signed a photo "Taylor Swift—Childless Cat Lady" (p. 254). Cat ladies everywhere attempted to reclaim what has, for eons, been perceived as a slight.

This cattiness illuminates a broader phenomenon I've grappled with as a white, middle-aged, London-born academic. While acknowledging the limitations of my positionality, as I meander through my 50s, I'm increasingly intrigued by *why* (mostly) heterosexual femininity is often established through a menagerie of feline metaphors: If we are young, lithe, and "hot," we are *sex kittens.* If sexual partners feel risqué, they'll snarl out the *p-word.* Business-savvy women might be *tigresses* in the boardroom.

In the last 20 years, we've added another to the list: If a woman over a certain age wants to date younger men, rather than follow a sexual cultural script and date within her age bracket, she's labeled a *cougar*.[1] Vance's metaphor, which has enjoyed quite a lengthy history, rounds out the list: if we reject or lack romantic companionship as we age, we're *cat ladies*.

1 Since researching and writing this article, I have become aware of a new *cat-adjacent* term for Gen Z men dating older millennial women: "hagmaxxing" (Hadge, 2024). I call this *cat-adjacent* because it returns us to the original witch-and-familiar dynamic, wherein older women are once again cast as "hags" with their feline companions.

The conceptual metaphor of "women are cats" establishes visual frameworks evident in any Google search: "sex kitten" yields provocatively posed young women, while "cougar woman" and "cat lady" searches offer equally stereotyped imagery. For fun, watch "#coolcatlady" on YouTube, featuring young women responding to "what first comes to mind when you hear the phrase cat lady?" My favorite? "Has dust bunnies in their uterus and watches *The Notebook* 5 times a day."

Inspired by the comic playwright Aristophanes, who often characterized metaphors and put their linguistic limitations on the ancient Greek stage, I analyze these metaphors and the visuals they evoke through feminist comedic performance. Indeed, on closer examination, "women are cats" metaphors are so absurd, they deserve this bawdy ridicule. In this spirit, my project farcically *performs* cat metaphors that have enabled specific representations of older women and sex since the early 2000s. And following British journalist, Caitlyn Moran's (2010) approach of laughing at women-denigrating linguistic structures (pp. 13-14),[2] my performances spotlight what Gerald Steen (2023) terms the "non-deliberate" nature of these metaphors—unmasking how they prescribe visual and behavioral boundaries of acceptable aging femininity and sexuality through theatrical embodiment.[3]

Extending metaphoric influence from Amy Koerber's (2018) work on early 20th century metaphors that pathologized women's reproductive biology, I've written 2 monologues, performed below, in the style of two of Aristophanes' famed characters—Philosophy and Sophistry—from *Clouds* (423 BCE). In this spirit, both monologues satirize how 2 feline-related [4] metaphors—the *cougar* and *cat lady*—delegitimize aging women's sexuality. My monologues draw content directly from research that analyzes these metaphors and the visual cultures they conjure: the "cat lady" metaphor, and its accompanying representations, stigmatizes aging women's independence as pathological, while "cougar" both "celebrates" sexuality (somewhat) in terms of how she should look, yet undermines women's sexual agency by framing it as predatory. Finally, leveraging Sara Ahmed's (2023) "Killjoy Feminism" through what is termed the "Happy Idea" in Old Comedy, my cat lady and cougar performances also enact an underlying imperative these metaphors advance. Drawing from Ahmed's commentary that acts of "polishing" constitute feminine labor, my performances illustrate how women must polish (or not)—through beauty products, anti-aging treatments, and other appearance-management rituals—their "pathologies" to remain sexually viable as they age. My performances thus flesh out visual frameworks that delegitimize aging women's sexuality and render them humorously *felt*.

2 What she *actually* says in reference to her feminist agenda is as follows: "We just need to look ['all the patriarchal bullshit'] in the eye, squarely, for a minute, and then start laughing at it. We look hot when we laugh. People fancy us when they observe us giving out relaxed, earthy chuckles. Perhaps they don't fancy us quite as much when we go on to bang on the tables with our fists, gurgling, 'HARGH! HARGH! Yes, that IS what it's like! SCREW YOU, patriarchy!' before choking on a mouthful of chips, but still" (p.13)

3 See also F. McDermott (2019). You gotta laugh: Teaching critical thinking via comedy. *Pedagogy*, 19(2), pp. 339-351. https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-7296002

4 While "cat lady" describes women who own cats rather than metaphorically being cats, both concepts participate in cultural frameworks associating women with feline imagery.

Performance and Metaphor: A Very Brief Overview

As rhetoric and composition scholars grapple with artificial intelligence's impact on our field, Jessica Enoch and Jenn Fishman's call for multimodal research methods in their 2015 introduction to *Peitho* seems increasingly urgent, especially for those committed to re-centering distinctly human, embodied ways of knowing (p. 4). Using performance as a method for rhetorical analysis—in this case, critical metaphor analysis—challenges traditional textual approaches while repurposing ancient comedic traditions to tackle this moment in feminine visual culture.

I draw from conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), a branch of cognitive linguistics that examines how metaphors structure thought and social reality, with foundational theories asserting that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 6). Metaphor use is cultural, complex, often contradictory, and highly contextual, influencing perceptions of everything from emotions to societal structures and ideologies (Gibbs, 2008; Kövecses, 2020; Lopez Rodríguez, 2007, 2025). Metaphors can also establish relationships between language, meaning, and power. For instance, scholarship on metaphorical mappings that frame "women as animals" suggests a systematic pattern of linguistic control rooted in hierarchical thinking, justifying subordination to men of both women and animals (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, as cited in López Rodríguez, 2007).

Women are typically metaphorized as smaller or domesticated animals—until they deviate from norms, when their metaphors venture into the wild (López Rodríguez, 2008). Caroline N. Tipler and Janet B. Ruscher (2019) argue that animal metaphors often create false binaries of the hunted or hunter, where women "are inappropriately dominating, or appropriately subordinate" (p. 115). "Women are animals" metaphors also enable broader patterns of misogyny and violence (Lacallea et al., 2024; López Rodríguez, 2007, 2025; Tipler & Ruscher, 2019). Research also shows that while positive aspects are rarely transferred to figurative use, hostile sexist comments online systematically compare women with undesirable animal traits, portraying women as sexualized and demeaned (Lacallea et al., 2024; López Rodríguez, 2025). Broadly, the literature establishes that animal metaphors delegitimize women through problematic figuration,[5] which my project explores through the "cougar" and "cat lady."

A last thought here: metaphors establish social realities in ways that often operate undetected. Steen argues that metaphor use in context is typically *non-deliberate*—operating below awareness, sans one's conscious recognition of the relationship between the metaphor and to what it refers (2023). Rendering metaphors *deliberate* through performance can deconstruct linguistic damage, such as the pathologizing frame-

5 Lacallea et al. note that, "The negative moral attitude of zoomorphic language influences and is influenced, in turn, by the abuse to which animals are often subjected (Wasniewska, 2018). Hence, the interest in animalization processes expressed by ecofeminism (Twine, 2010) and, in general, in perspectives close to what Wyckoff (2014, p. 721) has called the Linked Oppression Thesis, 'according to which oppression of women and the oppression of animals are linked causally, materially, normatively and/or conceptually'" (p.3). Albeit tangentially, rhetoricians such as Debra Hawhee's (2016) *Rhetoric of Tooth and Claw* pushes back against non-human animals' inferior rhetoricity. This work, starting with Aristotle, accounts for non-human animals' contribution to rhetorical studies, which has typically amounted to "a tale of strict, one-way co-optation" (p. 5). As much of my brief overview on animal metaphors and the way they map meaning onto feminine sexuality suggests, the human tendency to reduce animals to symbols treats them as stand-ins for human concepts, values, and beliefs, rather than recognizing their communicative complexity (Hawhee p. 4).

works that feline metaphors conjure for aging women's sexuality.

Theoretical Landscapes to Aristophanic Critique

My Aristophanic exposé of the non-deliberate nature of cat lady and cougars metaphors is theoretically informed by Moran, Koeber and Ahmed: Bawdily, Moran lights up the absurd logic that connects cats to female sexuality. Koeber traces a history of metaphors that have pathologized women's reproductive biology. And Ahmed's killjoy disruption draws our attention to the ways women's bodies are pathologized into visual polishing to stay sexually "legitimate."

The Aristophanic tradition of using crude humor for social critique finds contemporary expression in Moran's feminist writing, which shares Aristophanes' unapologetically frank approach to sex, bodies, and bodily functions. And, again, like Aristophanes, Moran's bawdiness serves a social purpose: to wrestle feminism into the mainstream.

To pave the way for my performances, let's consider the way Moran treats perhaps the most salacious variation of the "women are cats" metaphor in controversial visual settings: the use of the P-word in porn. She writes,

> I've heard "pussy" referred to in the third person too many times in porn films for it to seem like a joyful or fun word. "Your pussy likes that, doesn't it?" "Shall I give this to your pussy?" . . . One day, I think idly, all the cats who are watching porn being made will rise up, revolted by all the uncouth dialogue ostensibly being aimed at them, wander onto the set, and ostentatiously vomit up a hairball in the middle of some bumming. (p. 61)

Forgive me while I snort coffee out of my nose. While Moran suggests "pussy" has become the dominating slang word in porn for female genitalia, she clearly understands how feline metaphors constitute women's sexuality, especially those that frame women as subordinate, as is the case with the use of the word "pussy" above. And, when Moran notes that "a whole generation of girls" now defaults to this terminology (p. 61), she infers that porn's visual frameworks naturalize the connection between female sexuality and domesticated animals.

And this subordination first works grammatically. In both references, female genitalia is the object of these sentences; it is the passive recipient that's being acted upon. However, by separating cats from women—imagining literal felines as offended spectators—Moran destabilizes the pussy metaphor itself, inviting us to see its absurdity, and rendering its non-deliberate nature visible. Like Aristophanes, she shows us how metaphoric plasticity can be exploited through humor to challenge entrenched linguistic pathologizing.

Moran's critique echoes a historical pattern of metaphorically pathologizing women's sexual bodies—a pathologizing that Ahmed tangentially takes up, as I discuss below. In From *Hysteria to Hormones*, Koerber analyzes how 1930s medical discourse framed women's reproductive biology as dysfunctional, with metaphors morphing from "women are hysterical" to "women are hormonal" (p. 129). Koerber goes on to explore how these metaphors were conflated to create a transitional slippery slope that moved from certain women having "abnormal" conditions to all women being framed as *inherently problematic* because of their repro-

ductive systems—the effects of which were longstanding well into the 1950s and beyond. This language of female bodily abnormality emerges in studies like Therese Benedeck and Boris Rubenstein's 1939 "The Correlations between Ovarian Activity and Psychodynamic Processes," which concluded, "Progesterone is the hormone chiefly concerned with preparation of the uterus for nidation and with maintaining pregnancy. The physiological preparation of the uterus for nidation implies a task for the psychic apparatus to be *dealt with* in every cycle, namely to solve the *problem of being a woman*" (p. 147, emphasis mine & in original). Given Koerber's observations, I'm unsurprised how these pathologizing metaphors about female biology have evolved "cat-ward" into today's visual culture around women, sex, and aging—from "women's reproductive health/hormones make them unstable" to "women's sexual choices make them predatory, or nuts." Hormonal metaphors disseminate into discourse about women, a branch of which extends to feline metaphors through registers of instability, maintaining the same underlying devaluation of women's sexuality.

While the "problem of being a woman" is cringeworthy enough, Benedeck and Rubenstein's assertion that hormonal womanhood must be "dealt with" infers the logic underlying the "aging cat" metaphors I examine. These metaphors perpetuate the idea that women—and their sexuality—require fixing as they age, an imperative that manifests through visual transformation, or what I term *polishing*, following Ahmed. Bear with me; I'm not talking about whipping out the Pledge and giving the sideboards a good going-over. I'm talking about the cultural demands that women polish to remain sexually viable. I'm talking about the billions of dollars women spend on trying to polish away aging.[6]

Vance's characterization of the cat lady, when compared to the cougar construct, creates a bizarre binary: women must either *polish* themselves into sexual viability or face pathologization—a lonely, miserable, childless future—for refusing to do so. I thus apply Ahmed's analysis of *polishing as feminist labor* in *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* to expose this binary function, in that it exacerbates an intensifying pressure for women to maintain their socio-sexual acceptability through visible effort. Ahmed writes,

> Polishing is an activity, a form of labor. To cover is to labor at an appearance . . . Polishing is about more than the removal of dust and dirt; it removes evidence of itself . . . If we refuse to polish the surfaces, we encounter what is real, all that has been removed to create a certain impression. (p. 98)

The visual cultures that contribute to metaphoric "cougaring" demand that women must labor intensively to maintain acceptable sexual appeal as they age. In these acts of polishing age, we varnish, we exfoliate, we highlight, we gild, we peel, we smooth, we wax, and we inject. The cat lady, on the other hand, embodies the pathologized consequence of refusing this labor—explored in-depth below. In revealing "what is real"—visible authentic aging—women risk being dismissed as sexually irrelevant and socially undesirable.

In the following section, I turn to performance-as-method. My performers embody scholarly analyses of cat lady and cougar metaphors (2010–present), which inform the content, setting, clothing choices, and language. Two speeches from William Arrowsmith's (1962) translation of *The Clouds* provide the rhetorical patterns, and an Aristophanic "happy idea" sets the scene.

6 Matej Mikulic (2024) shares that "The global market for anti-aging products was valued at around 47 billion U.S. dollars in 2023 and is expected to increase to nearly 80 billion by the beginning of the next decade."

The Agon at "The Curl Up or Dye" Salon

> Unlike traditional Greek rhetorical theory, Aristophanes' Old Comedy embodies social critique through wildly imaginative, bawdy performances that reveal how discourse actually functioned in 5th century Athenian civic life (Major, p. 6).

Three features of Aristophanic comedy serve my purposes here:[7] First, Aristophanes created absurd scenarios to satirize contemporary socio-politics through his "happy idea" of "what if…" in a ridiculous setting. For instance: In *Clouds*, Socrates runs a "Thinkery" that teaches students to make weak arguments stronger. [8] Second, his comedies feature debates in the "agon," such as the contest between Philosophy and Sophistry in *Clouds*, where these personified abstractions represent "traditional" versus "new ideas" and attempt, in the most lewd fashion, to recruit students to their respective schools. Third, this personification of abstractions, often related to commonplace language use,[9] typically indexes socio-political exigencies, revealing Aristophanic ethics through irreverent focus on bodily functions and sexuality.

My happy idea stages an "agon" between a cat lady and cougar metaphor at the "Curl Up or Dye Salon." Like Aristophanes' Thinkery in *Clouds*, this salon becomes the backdrop for a verbal battle between competing philosophies of later-life female sexuality as they enact the systemic and resulting visual frameworks their metaphoric use evokes, reinforcing the pathologizing of older women's sexuality and the pressure to "polish." The Cat Lady (modeled on *Clouds*' traditional Philosophy) duels the Cougar (modeled on Sophistry); both try to convince women to their side, with each character employing the same rhetorical strategies as their ancient counterparts in *Clouds*. I detail these "moves" in the video's accompanying transcripts.

Introducing Marge

Marge, the Cat Lady metaphor, resides in a special wing of "The Curl up or Dye Salon." She hangs out with multiple felines, listening to *Democracy Now*, and ruminating on her life as a liberal spinster. She delights in recruiting younger women to the cat lady lifestyle, while demeaning her opponent, Felicia, the Cougar Metaphor. To review Marge's pitch, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aNGp_jJOsI or review the transcript of her video in Appendix 1

Marge the metaphor reflects the research on her metaphoric effects: The cat lady trope evolved from Egyptian goddess associations to medieval witchcraft scapegoat, complete with cat (Barak, 2024; Kogan et al.,

7 The typical structure of Greek Comedy is as follows: a prologue and entrance of the chorus (parodos), characters engaged in a central debate (agon), followed by the parabasis where the chorus broke character to address the audience directly about contemporary issues. The play concluded with an episode that elaborated on the outcome of the debate and then an exode (exit song) which featured a celebration or some riotous event (MacLennan, 1999).

8 The plot follows Strepsiades, an old farmer drowning in debt from his son's expensive habits, who enrolls in Socrates' "Thinkery" (a school of rhetoric/logos) hoping to learn clever arguments to avoid paying his creditors. After Strepsiades proves too old and stupid to learn, his son Pheidippides takes his place and masters the art of making weak arguments appear strong. However, Pheidippides then uses these skills to justify beating his own father, which horrifies Strepsiades. In the end, the outraged dad burns down the Thinkery. The play mocks both sophistry and a traditional rhetorical education

9 Major describes this method as a three-stage process: "First [Aristophanes demonstrates] a commonplace expression containing a latent metaphor [or other commonplace expression]. Next, the metaphor takes concrete form on stage. Finally, the concrete form emerges in a new form that defines it ethically in the comic world" (p. 87).

2024), currently framing independent aging women negatively while reinforcing heteronormativity (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018; Barak, 2024). Typically portrayed as bitter and dismal with multiple cats, reminiscent of Miss Havisham (Suen, 2022; Barak, 2024), the cat lady is pathologized as "deviant" because she "departs from a conventional script of how a woman should live her life... [representing] an implicit rejection of heteronormativity... [caring] about cats more than—maybe even instead of—men" (Suen, 2022, p. 390). Alison Suen concludes that society deems suspect anything beyond heteronormative romance boundaries (p. 393).

Visually, cat ladies frequently appear in popular media and reflect both Koeber's comments on female pathology, and the anti-polishing sentiment raised by Ahmed: Elenor Abernathy *(The Simpsons*) suffered burnout from her career as an academic, is a raving alcoholic, and throws cats at people passing by (Suen, 2022). Angela Martin (*The Office*) "remain[s] classified as a cat lady based on her inability to relate or interact with her coworkers, her prudish attitudes, and her cat obsession" (Barak, 2024, p. 8). Susan Boyle, from *Britain's Got Talent*, whose media coverage emphasized her "middle-aged, single status, fizzy grey hair, and beloved cat" (p. 188) was noted for her subsequent breakdown (p. 191). Finally, reality TV shows and documentaries that feature animal hoarders further serve to ferment an understanding of the cat lady trope in that their homes are often filthy and uninhabitable (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018; Baraka, 2024). These narratives frequently link a woman's criminal devotion to cats—given the horrendous conditions these shows feature—to past trauma or emotional deficiency (Barak, 2024).

Recently, and especially in the context of the 2024 US presidential election and Vance's remarks about miserable, single, childless Democrats (Kogan et al., 2024; Larue, 2024), we've seen efforts to reclaim the term, to polish the cat ladies. As noted in the introduction, all manner of celebrities have come out to claim that status (Larue, 2024). And a [fancy] feast of articles in various editions of *Vogue* reflects a move to clean these ladies up, including links to $900 litter boxes and cat-related fashion (Kaplan, 2021). Recently, then, an alternate understanding of this metaphor, contrary to the spinster trope, indicates that far from being old, alone, and bitter, cat ladies are politically engaged, predominantly liberal, and satisfied with their lives (Kogan et al., 2024). In fact, making the decision to be childless has little to do with a lack of choice in romance and instead reflects factors like economic uncertainty and concerns about climate change. This has led to increased investment in pets, often referred to as "fur babies" (Kogan et al., 2024; Larue, 2024), which reflects a deliberate choice by women not to have children, even if they are married (Beasley, 2024). A browse through TikTok and Instagram reflects this shift, visually.

Introducing Felicia

Next up is Felicia, our cougar metaphor. Tottering in on Jimmy Choo shoes, fresh from the tanning booth, she perches at her favorite bar spot in the "Curl Up or Dye Salon," dirty martini in hand, latest boy-toy in tow. She's always ready to scoff at her opponent and evangelize against "graceful" aging to any woman willing to pay the steep maintenance fees.

Felicia does her utmost to pull off her "cougar" stature, but at times, the cracks appear. To review her pitch, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXmTFIFTdfg, or review the transcript of her video in

Appendix 2.

Felicia's performance embodies contradictions in the research. She appears empowered, sexually autonomous, and polished, yet this research reveals darker aspects of her metaphoric reflection: The "cougar" metaphor emerged in the early 2000s, characterized in *Cougar: The Musical* as "a woman empowered, strong, with loot... looks fine while sipping wine in her Armani suit" (as cited in Collard, 2011, p. 519). Following Valerie Gibson's 2002 book *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men*, the concept infiltrated media through TV shows (*Cougar Town*), films (who can forget Stiffler's Mom in *American Pie*), and dating sites (*dateacougar.com*) (Reyes, 2010; Collard, 2011; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013). With Demi Moore as its "high priestess" during her relationship with Ashton Kutcher (Kaklamanidou, 2012), the "cougar" is marked as financially independent, fit, glamorous, and sexually liberated. Yet simultaneously, she's pathologized—mocked for desperation, sexual predation, violation of sexual scripts, and obsession with anti-aging procedures (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Burema, 2017; Kaklamanidou, 2012; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013).

The cougar metaphor and its discursive effects have mapped an artificial binary onto age-hypogamous sexual relationships: on the one hand, scholars point out societal acknowledgment of older women's sexual desire (Alarie, 2019; Burema, 2017; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013), how the cougar phenomenon challenges age-hypergamous double standards (Alarie, 2020; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013), how it offers women sexual agency when such agency is culturally expected to diminish (Alarie, 2020, p. 6; Burema, 2017; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013) and how women find these relationships more sexually satisfying than those with same-age men (Alarie, 2019).

But, in line with Koeber's studies of the pathologizing of women's bodies, scholars argue the trope perpetuates ageist and sexist narratives, with ongoing effects visible in how these romantic relationships are perceived in 2025 (see footnote 1). First, they point out that terming women "cougars" reifies sexist binaries. As a big cat, the predatory cougar masculinizes older women, which subtly infers that any female power manifests through sexual conquest rather than alternative expressions of desire and autonomy (Burema, 2017; Collard, 2021; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013). In addition, studies find that in age-hypogamous relationships, women want to downplay their agency to avoid accusations of being "desperate," "pathological," or "deviant" (Alarie, 2019; Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Montemurro & Siefken, 2013).

And finally, the cougar trope epitomizes the polishing impulse Ahmed references. This is evident in how media representations, especially of celebrity "cougars," frequently fixate on the aging female body, evaluating women in terms of how "good they look for their age" and perpetuating the idea that attractiveness declines with age (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Burema, 2017; Reyes, 2010). Betty Kaklamanidou (2012) writes of the "representation of female panic" as Courtney Cox in the show *Cougar Town* consistently scrutinizes her image, starves herself before dates, so her stomach is flat (p. 83). Building on this observation, Milaine Alarie and Jason T. Carmichael (2015) nevertheless quote Rose Weiz (2010), who points out that the "'cougar' lifestyle is not presented in the media as accessible and acceptable for all middle-aged women, only for those who are "taut, dyed, trim, energetic, and fit, and . . . in their early 40s" (p. 1253). Consequently, this inability

to thwart natural aging becomes a source of "anxiety and self-doubt, thereby influencing [women's] sexuality or dating habits" (p. 1253). Some women simply don't have the resources to polish to "cougar standards."

Now What?

Now that we've watched the cougar and cat lady metaphors embodied, enacted and reflected, where do we go from here? Aristophanes' *Clouds* ending is ambiguous: He invites audiences to imagine alternative configurations of the rhetorical landscape his duelling arguments inhabit (Harris-Ramsby, 2021). Exposing the non-deliberate nature of Marge and Felicia's duelling metaphors also leaves us with a feeling of *what now*? This much I suspect: their performance asks us to reconfigure women, aging, and sex beyond these tropes, by forcing a conscious recognition of their absurdities, and drawing the curtain on the absurd traps that they lay for women as they age. Whether we polish ourselves into "cougars" or preen our "cat lady" beards, Marge and Felicia reduce the rich complexity of women's later-life sexuality to cartoon caricatures. The cougar trope demands we spend exorbitant amounts of money and time to maintain sexual viability, while the cat lady trope threatens us with social exile, if we refuse, (despite efforts to reclaim cat ladies as vibrant, feline-dependent democrats). Both metaphors deny women the right to age authentically, to desire (or not desire) without judgment. For this rhetorician's part, it's time to retire the feline menagerie entirely. Instead of sex kittens, cougars, and cat ladies, how about we're just women—in all our complexities, ages, sexual desires, and bodily shapes.

The performances I've shared—drawing on Aristophanes' ancient theatrical tradition—demonstrate how physically enacting metaphors can expose linguistic mechanisms that often remain hidden in conventional analysis. Indeed, as the disciplines of rhetoric and composition navigate an increasingly technical landscape in the age of AI, Marge and Felicia present a comical case for returning to more embodied ways of knowing. As composition increasingly happens in digital spaces shaped by algorithms, theatrical methods of knowing and understanding remind us that rhetoric remains, at its beginnings, an embodied art—one that gains particular power when it renders visible the metaphors that often quietly structure our social realities.

Biography

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Appendix 1

Marge at the "Curl Up or Dye" Salon

This transcript accompanies the video of Marge: The Cat Lady Metaphor. Her mission? To convert women to her vision of aging femininity and sexual behaviour. Matching the persuasive moves of the character "Philosophy" from Aristophanes' The Clouds (Arrowsmith, 1962), she alternates between speaking to potential followers of her philosophy, and directing accusations at her opponent: The Cougar Metaphor. Below are two columns: on the left is "Philosophy's" speech. On the right, Marge's.

"Philosophy" from *Clouds* (The duelling logoi at the Agon)	**Marge the Cat Lady**
Proem: I propose to speak of the Old Education, as it flourished once beneath my tutelage, when Homespun Honesty, Plainspeaking, Truth were still honored and practiced, and throughout the schools of Athens the regime of the three D's: DISCIPLINE, DECORUM, and DUTY—enjoyed unchallenged supremacy.	**Proem**: I am the epitome of elder femininity that flourishes under feline fellowship. I salute the ancient Egyptians where Cat Lady Wisdom was revered. I persevered through dark times, when evil men persecuted wise women and her feline familiars. And in America from the shores of the Pacific, through the Great Plains, to the temperate East, we honor the regime of the three Cs: CHILDLESS, CRANKY CAT-DEPENDENT--enjoying unchallenged sexual invisibility.
Our Principles: Our curriculum was Music and Gymnastic, enforced by that rigorous discipline summed up in the old adage: BOYS SHOULD BE SEEN BUT NOT HEARD. This was our cardinal rule, and when the students, mustered by groups according to region, were marched in squads to school, discipline and absolute silence prevailed.	**Our Principles:** Our principles were simple: LADIES OVER 40 SHOULD TUNE INTO NPR AND STOCK UP ON MEOW MIX. [*She exaggerates the meow*]. This was our cardinal rule, as we sat silently by fireplaces, our tweed skirts knitting our knees firmly together!
Nostalgic Hardiness: Ah, they were hardy, manly youngsters. Why, even on winter mornings when the snow, like powdered chaff, came sifting down, their only protection against the bitter weather was a thin and scanty tunic.	**Nostalgic Hardiness**: Ah, we were resilient, graceful women! Why, even during menopause, when hot flashes seemed sure to power the entire eastern seaboard, our only response was to dress in layers next to a well-placed fan, bearing our erotic extinction with dignity.
Rigid Discipline: In the classes, posture was stressed and the decencies firmly enforced:	**Rigid Discipline:** Independence was stressed, and dignified singleness firmly

the students stood in rows, rigidly at attention, while the master rehearsed them by rote, over and over. The music itself was traditional and standard—such familiar anthems and hymns as those, for instance, beginning A Voice from Afar or Hail, O Pallas, Destroyer!—and the old modes were strictly preserved in all their austere and simple beauty. Clowning in class was sternly forbidden, and those who improvised or indulged in those fantastic flourishes and trills so much in vogue with the degenerate, effeminate school of Phrynis, were promptly thrashed for subverting the Muses. In the gymnasium too decorum was demanded. The boys were seated together, stripped to the skin, on the bare ground, keeping their legs thrust forward, shyly screening their nakedness from the gaze of the curious. Why, so modest were students then, that when they rose, they carefully smoothed out the ground beneath them, lest even a pair of naked buttocks leaving its trace in the sand should draw the eyes of desire. **Modesty/Authenticity:** Anointing with oil was forbidden below the line of the navel, and consequently their genitals kept their boyish bloom intact and the quincelike freshness of youth. Toward their lovers their conduct was manly: you didn't see them mincing or strutting, or prostituting themselves with girlish voices or	embraced: we poised gracefully on the shelf in our unmarried truth—whether chosen or, y'know circumstantial—spoke wisely but softly, while, masturbating [sic] mastering the traditional arts: reading voraciously, gardening in flowery gloves with those big floppy hats, and sighing audibly in concert with public news radio. *She groans.* Other activities were time-honored and fulfilling—volunteer work with the local democrats, getting tattoos like Helen Mirren's, not really"loving" Taylor Smiths [sic] music but appreciating the impulse – the old ways of single woman wisdom were strictly preserved, whether born of choice or yog-dick-ally [sic] accepted. Namaste. Desperate husband-hunting, and coiffing beyond Susan Boyle, strictly forbidden! And it don't matter how many *Vo-gue* articles claim the "Cat Lady Cliche is Over Thanks to New Feline Fashion", [*she laughs*] woe betide any woman who dared bleach, pluck or wax. Those who indulged in any hair removal events were gently guided to relinquish their tweezers, accepting the migration of whiskers to their chins with grace. And those who batted their thinning eyelashes at men in a last ditch attempt at heteronor-may-tive coupling were quietly reminded to accept their status with dignity **Modesty/Authenticity:** At night in quiet and chaste acceptance of their romantic status, Women chose feline loyalty and watching reruns of *Midsommer Murders* over the frailty of romantic relationships, keeping their standards realistic and their cats close.

coy, provocative glances. At table courtesy and good manners were compulsory. Not a boy of that generation would have dreamed of taking so much as a radish or the merest pinch of parsley before his elders had been served. Rich foods were prohibited, raucous laughter or crossing their legs forbidden…	
Direct Disgust: And what do you teach? Modesty? No, vanity and softness, and the naked beauty of the body muffled in swirling clothes, gross and unmanly.	**Direct Disgust:** [*To the cougar metaphor*] And what do YOU teach? Sexual Empowerment? Post post post post post post post post post post post post post post feminism? *[To the prospective pupil*] No! Hey, read their instruction manual! "If you have a tracksuit, burn it, now!" Oh my gosh.
Visual revulsion: Why, at Panathenaia now it sickens me to see the boys dancing, ashamed of their own bodies, effetely forgetting their duty to the goddess while they screen their nakedness behind their shields.	**Visual Revulsion**: Why, now it sickens me to see women our age frantically prowling college bars, "teaching 22-year-olds bedroom tricks," covering their greys with chemicals, and taking out shares of botox, and claiming that "being very sexy [is] an enormous turn-on for younger men"(*Wikihow*).
The Challenge: No, young man, by your courage I challenge you. Turn your back upon his blandishments of vice, the rotten law courts and the cheap, corrupting softness of the baths. Choose instead the Old, the Philosophical Education. Follow me and from my lips acquire the virtues of a man: A sense of shame, that decency and innocence of mind that shrinks from doing wrong. To feel the true man's blaze of anger when his honor is provoked. Deference toward one's elders; respect for one's father and mother. To preserve intact, unsullied by disgrace or stained with wrong, that image of Manliness and Modesty by which alone you live.	**The Challenge:** [*To the prospective pupil*] No, dear sister, follow me and from my lips acquire the virtues of the proud cat lady. We report more life satisfaction!! We're politically engaged! We love our midsections. *[To the cougar metaphor]*: Meanwhile, you exhaust yourself making sure your man can legally drink, and teaching bedroom tricks to guys who've "only had boring sex" with age appropriate girlfriends (*Wikihow*). *[To the prospective pupil*] Forsake the gym, pilates, running, wearing those Jimmy Choo Choos. Choose instead the old, the time-tested path of spinster wisdom, cat companionship, and invisibility from the

Forsake the brothels and the low, salacious leer of prostituted love—which, being bought, corrupts your manhood and destroys your name. Toward your father scrupulous obedience; to honor his declining years who spent his prime in rearing you. Not to call him Dotard or Fogy…	romantic marketplace.
I promise you, not contentious disputations and the cheap, courtroom cant of this flabby, subpoena-serving, shyster-jargoned generation, but true athletic prowess, the vigor of contending manhood in prime perfection of physique, muscular and hard, glowing with health.	
Envisioning a future: Ah, I can see you now, as through an idyl moving—you with some companion of your age, modest and manly like you, strolling by Akademe perhaps, or there among the olives, sprinting side by side together, crowned with white reed, breathing with every breath the ecstasy of Spring returning, the sudden fragrance of the season's leisure, the smell of woodbine and the catkins flung by the poplar, while touching overhead, the leaves of the linden and plane rustle, in love, together.	**Envisioning a future:** Ah, I can see you now, as through a peaceful tableau—you with some lady companion of your age, modest and graceful like you, strolling through the farmer's market, or there among the library stacks, crowned with silver hair, breathing in the gentle fragrance of your homemade bread, not having to pay for a kid's college.
Your reward: So follow me, young man, and win perfection of physique. To wit: BUILD: Stupendous. COMPLEXION: Splendid. SHOULDERS: Gigantic. TONGUE: Petite. BUTTOCKS: Brawny. PECKER: Discreet.	**Your reward:** *[To the prospective pupil]* So follow me, sister and win perfection of spinster spirit. To wit: BUILD: heel free COMPLEXION: Justine Bateman SHOULDERS: tote bagged BUTTOCKS: cat haired PECKERS? None! (Duh)
The price you'll pay: But follow my opponent here, and your reward shall be, as follows: BUILD: Effeminate. COMPLEXION: Ghastly. SHOULDERS: Hunched. TONGUE: Enormous. BUTTOCKS: Flabby.	**The price you'll pay:** But follow my opponent here, and your reward shall be as follows: BUILD: Surgically enhanced COMPLEXION: spray tanned SHOULDERS: athleisure deprived TOUNGE; vapid ANUS: bleached

PECKER: Preposterous! (but thereby insuring you an enormous and devoted political following.) **Final Moral Warning:** What is worse, you shall learn to make a mockery of all morality, systematically confounding good with evil and evil with good, so plumped and pursy with villainy, sodomy, disgrace, and perversion, you resemble ANTIMACHOS himself. Depravity can sink no lower.	PECKERS: insatiable [*She spits up a hairball*] (ugh! And thereby ensuring you become a cautionary tale and object of pity, wasting effort on futile romantic pursuits!) **Final Moral Warning** What is worse, you shall learn to make a mockery of all natural order, systematically confounding wisdom with folly and grace with desperation, so plumped and bloated with vanity, surgery, delusion and desire, you resemble every tragic stereotype of the woman who refuses to age gracefully. Depravity can sink no longer [sic].

Appendix 2

Felicia at "The Curl Up & Dye" Salon

This transcript accompanies the video of Felicia: The Cougar Metaphor. Her mission? To persuade women to refute Marge, the cat lady's argument. Matching the persuasive moves of the character "Sophistry" from Aristophanes' *The Clouds* (Arrowsmith, 1962), she alternates between speaking to potential followers of her philosophy, and directing accusations at her opponent: The Cady Lady Metaphor. Below are two columns: on the left is "Sophistry's" speech. On the right, Felicia's.

"Sophistry" from *Clouds* (The duelling logoi at the Agon)	**Felicia: The Cougar Metaphor**
At last! A few minutes more and I would have exploded from sheer impatience to refute him and demolish his case.	Oh My Gawd. Any more of her mewling, and I'd have stuck a stiletto in my jugular.
A quick concession: Now then, I freely admit that among men of learning I am-somewhat pejoratively-dubbed the Sophistic, or Immoral, Logic. And why? Because I first devised a Method for the Subversion of Established Social Beliefs and the Undermining of Morality. Moreover, this little invention of mine, this knack of taking what might appear to be the worse argument and nonetheless winning my case, has, I might add, proved to he an extremely lucrative source of income.	**A quick concession:** Now, I freely admit some have dubbed me a Cougar and I understand they're concerned that my "cougaring" perpetuates the performative pecker parade of the patriarchy, linking my power to masculine sexual aggression, blah blah blah-eee–oww blah. But *why*? Because I founded an entire movement: I established *the* method for the *subversion* of age-appropriate dating; I dismantled her outdated norms, and pitiful descent into sexual insignificance. And, what of it if some women reject this little invention of mine, designating it desperate? BFD if some women resist the label, feeling ashamed to admit it; I am, nonetheless, securing limitless satisfaction in my pursuits. Come here darling [*She beckons to her "cub" who brings her a drink. She reaches for a cookie. He admonishes her and gestures to her to hand over the cookie. She is momentarily disappointed but relinquishes it. He points to her midsection. She sucks it in*]
Direct Challenge: But observe, gentlemen, how I refute his vaunted Education	**Direct challenge:** Shall we burst her bubble just a teensy bit? [*She scratches the cub on the head as though he is a cat*]

Rebuttal with Examples: Now then, in your curriculum hot baths are sternly prohibited. But what grounds can you possibly adduce for this condemnation of hot baths?	**Rebuttal with Examples.** [*Referring to the Cat Lady*]. Let's see now. Her preposterous philosophy relegates us mature ladies to the cardi-wearing whisker brigade, severing us from sex completely - no more making the beast with two backs with a lovely hunk like this gorgeous chap [*She gestures to the cub*] But really, what grounds does she have for this drivel?
Answer me this: which of the sons of Zeus was the most heroic? Who suffered most? Performed the greatest labors?	Answer me this: which female celebrity over 50 commands the most media attention in *People, US Weekly, Hello, Star, Entertainment Weekly, Ok!, The Sun, Weekly World News, The Enquirer. . .* Which star is most definitely *not like us. . .* I mean, *her*? [Refering to the Cat Lady]
Philosophy responds: In my opinion,the greatest hero who ever lived was Herakles.	*[The cub whispers in her ear*] Jennifer Lopez you say? But when we speak of J Lo, is she baking bread and cleaning cat boxes?
Sophistry continues: But when we speak of the famous Baths of Herakles,* are we speaking of hot baths or cold baths? Necessarily, sir, of hot baths. Whence it clearly follows, by your own logic, that Herakles was both flabby and effeminate!	NO! She's defying nature! She looks spectacular for her age! Whence it clearly follows, by her own logic, that a most celebrated woman is delighted to date younger men (Ben Affleck notwithstanding), making the age-appropriate sexual script both outdated and culturally irrelevant.
Another example: if you like, consider our national passion for politics and debating, pastimes which you condemn and I approve.	**Another Example**: And consider Madonna, an icon of female empowerment, consistently dating men *decades* younger.
But surely, friend, if politics were quite so vicious as you pretend, old Homer-* our mentor on moral questions-would never have portrayed Nestor and those other wise old men as politicians, would he? Surely he would not.	Admittedly, one requires her level of wealth and celebrity status to pull this off successfully—the rest of us must be more... strategic. [*She claps her paws and he fumbles for a mirror. She spots a chin hair and plucks it with her claws, hissing "pssfft, she dismisses the mirror.*] But surely, if age-gap relationships were quite so pathological as she pretends, would these ladies flaunt them so publicly? On red carpets? They would not.
Dismissing "Philosophy's" Core Values:Or take the question of education in oratory in my opinion desirable, in yours the	

reverse. As for Moderation and Decorum, the very notions are absurd. In fact, two more preposterous or pernicious prejudices, I find it hard to imagine. For example, can you cite me one instance of that profit which a man enjoys by exercising moderation? Refute me if you can. *[Dialogue has been cut here]* **Listing Denied Pleasures:**I might mention these: Sex. Gambling. Gluttony. Guzzling. Carousing. Etcet. **Rhetorical Question:** And what on earth's the point of living, if you leach your life of all its little joys? Very well then, consider your natural needs. **Practical Scenario:** Suppose, as a scholar of Virtue, you commit some minor peccadillo, a little adultery, say, or seduction, and suddenly find yourself caught in the act. What happens? You're ruined, you can't defend yourself (since, of course, you haven't been taught). But follow me, my boy, and obey your nature to the full; romp, play, and laugh without a scruple in the world. Then if caught in flagrante, you simply inform the poor cuckold that you're utterly innocent and refer him to Zeus as your moral sanction.	**Dismissing Cat Lady Values:** [directed to the Cat Lady]. Her insistence on "graceful aging" and "dignified invisibility"—pah! She moans about patriarchy? Her and your cat hair coated velour exacerbate the patriarchy, merely plucking older women off the sexual playing field. As for hiding in the library stack and farmers markets, denying herself *this* [*she gestures to a cub*]: two more preposterous or pernicious prejudices I find it hard to imagine. What fun is that? Refute me, if you can! **Listing Denied Pleasures** Specifically: Reliable hardwood. Quality plumbing. And my skilled handywork. *And here's some post feminism for ya: The thrill of defying ageist expectations*! Short-term excitement without the burden of long-term commitment [*an aside*] (although research suggests some of these relationships actually last longer than the media portrays) [*A cub whistles the first few notes of the wedding march*] But why burden ourselves with such tedious empirical details when we can enjoy such consequence-free pleasure? [*The cub lights a "cigarette."*] **Rhetorical Question:** And what on earth's the point of living, if you leach your romantic life of all its vital possibilities? Let's consider our *natural* needs. **Practical Scenario** Suppose, as a scholar of cat lady virtue, you encounter some minor temptation—28 year old Bradly Hotstuff who finds you irresistible. Suddenly those tweed skirts and teenWOLF beards don't seem so apropos. What happens? You're frozen because she's [*addressing the cat lady*] taught you that such

	passion is unseemly for women of our age?! Follow me and succumb to your wilder instincts: prowl the city at happy hour! Take that young man home. Be subtle about initiating— lest you're labeled desperate or deviant. And naturally, you'll need to maintain your appearance: [*The young man whips out a spray bottle and Mr. Clean magic eraser. He scrubs her forearm, her underarm, and her nails*] Get the highlights, and that $100 glow. And make sure you wax, (But wait a couple of days for the burn to tone down or your lady parts will look like you did several nights with Freddy Krueger) Then if those kill joys call you "predatory," simply inform them you're following your natural instincts as your moral sanction.
Ultimate Justification: After all, didn't he, a great and powerful god, succumb to the love of women?Then how in the world can you, a man, an ordinary mortal,be expected to surpass the greatest of gods in moral self-control? Clearly, you can't be.	**Ultimate Justification** After all, don't younger men reach their sexual peak in their twenties? But women, we're just getting started? Don't they benefit from our wisdom? Why, I hear the youngest generation has even coined a new term for pursuing us—though "hagmaxxing" does sound rather less flattering than "cougar hunting," doesn't it? Look, how in the world can a woman with *decades* of sexual knowledge be expected to suppress her desires when nature itself has designed this perfect complementarity? Younger men: at their sexual peak: Older women: undeniably adroit lovers. Clearly, she cannot be.

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Contemporary Mural Art, Personhood, and Utopic Visions of Reproductive Justice

Jill Swiencicki

Abstract: This essay argued that, in the post-*Dobbs* era, reproductive justice-themed mural art serves a memorializing function as well as a site of utopic imagining in a time of declining access to reproductive healthcare. The author has used personal experience as a clinic escort to ground a visual rhetorical analysis of three reproductive justice-themed murals across the United States. The essay has identified recurring aesthetic elements in the murals' compositions, including the female gaze, flowers in bloom, haloes, bold directional symbols, and affirming text. Drawing on reproductive justice scholarship and feminist rhetorical theories of place, the author argued that these aesthetic elements counter fetal personhood rhetoric and assert reproductive justice principles.

Keywords: reproductive justice, abortion, mural art, feminist, rhetoric

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As a clinic escort at Planned Parenthood, I am one feature in the rhetorical assemblage that makes up the street politics of abortion. Patients, anti-abortion protesters, bullhorns, healthcare workers, police, police cars, mural art, city signs, business signs, security guards, metro buses: so many elements exist in that clinic's physical space, competing to either provide access to reproductive healthcare or impede it. Protecting access to care in this assemblage makes visceral the knowledge that visual rhetorics are symbolic action: they perform actions with social consequences, constructing reality itself (Swiencicki, 2024). Here is one small rhetorical action I have taken there that may illustrate this point. One afternoon on my clinic escort shift, I noticed a tiny plastic fetus placed in the cracks of the brick wall of our Planned Parenthood building. On that wall, facing the street, is a huge mural of a woman, surrounded by flowers, releasing a bird that is taking flight. The text beside her face states that "your body is your story . . . and only you can write it." About an inch in length, the plastic fetus attempts to undercut a huge artistic rendering of patient-centered care, agency and self-authorship. I removed the plastic fetus, and a new one reappeared the next time I volunteered. What exchange of visual rhetorics are we engaged in, the anti-abortion protester and I? What is it a proxy for?

This experience and others on my escort shift have made me reflect on reproductive justice, visual rhetorics, and street art. In particular, I'm thinking about how our engagement with such visual rhetorics matters for the imaginative horizons of our feminist political activism. My short essay is not a systematic rhetorical study of the vibrant mural art that has emerged across the country around the time of the *Dobbs* decision in 2022, although such a study is needed. Instead, this essay identified the striking similarities in such murals despite their different purposes, artists, sponsors, and locations. I focus on three murals—in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Atlanta, Georgia; and the Planned Parenthood in my city of Rochester, New York—and have argued that they offer examples of "everyday utopias" (Cooper, 2014). In this context, an everyday utopia functions to assert a flourishing reality of reproductive justice amidst a deeply desperate time for reproductive health access.

We need such utopic visual rhetorics because arguments for fetal personhood are ascendant in the United States. In her history of the U.S. fetal personhood movement from the late 1800s to the present, legal scholar Mary Ziegler (2025) shows the durable, mutable nature of this rhetorical frame for the anti-abortion movement. Fetal personhood is an erasure of birthing people from the scene of reproduction. It is enacted through street activism, legislation, and judicial decisions that grant fetuses (and in some cases embryos and fertilized eggs) the same rights as a person. While the question of when life begins remains open for physicians, medical researchers and ethicists alike, Ziegler observes that in the framework of fetal personhood, it is a settled fact that life begins at conception or sooner (implantation). The warrant of the fetal personhood argument is the fundamental threat that the pregnant person poses to their own pregnancy. The warrant does not engage with the social context of the pregnant person, refusing a consideration of the material conditions in which reproduction occurs. The framework leads to the criminalization of miscarriage, surveillance of fertility and pregnancy for any action perceived as harmful to the fetus, restricted access to reproductive healthcare and hormones, refusal to provide healthcare in some states, and refusal of pregnant person's end-of-life directives to favor fetal development in extreme, recent cases.

Access to safe, legal abortion is decreasing, and in its wake emerges the surveillance and criminalization of pregnancy (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2022, p. 427). During this repressive rollback of rights, it is critical for reproductive justice activists to continue to communicate the right to abortion in inclusive, agential, relational terms (Yam & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2023, p. 5). In the *Dobbs* era, a project that examines and promotes reproductive justice visual rhetorics, like mural art, may seem out of touch with the present moment, a kind of retreat into aesthetics when so much harm is being unleashed onto gestating people. Yet public art, whether digitally produced and circulated, or art that is made in the built environments of civic and community spaces, can uniquely communicate the intersectional, queer, antiracist, and decolonial commitments at the core of reproductive justice. Visual rhetorics like public art offer a critical space for invention—for learning anew the feminist hopes, spheres of influence, and the symbols that best meet our political moment.

Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective created the four premises of reproductive justice: the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have children, to not have children, and to parent children in safe, healthy environments. It is a movement originated by Black women in 1994 to make visible the ways that inequalities and oppression structures people's decision-making about childbirth and parenting (Ross, 2018). In terms of abortion, reproductive justice rejects the oppositional binary fetus/pregnant person in the scene of reproductive healthcare. This movement insists that abortion be understood through the agency of the pregnant person as they are enmeshed in specific material contexts, precarities, affordances and constraints. I am called back to these four premises time and again as I search for recent mural art across the U.S. that features abortion rights. Artist-activists are aligning around the question of how abortion-seeking people might be rendered in a reproductive justice framework that rejects patriarchy and its many handmaids: racism, ecocide, colonialism, binary gender logics, ableism, misogyny, theocracy. In the pages that follow I have described a few significant aesthetic trends in public mural art featuring reproductive justice arguments. This mural art supports community organizing about reproductive threats and rights; this support happens in many ways, but two that are most striking to me are murals that serve primar-

ily as memorials to those who died while being denied reproductive healthcare, and murals that primarily feature reproductive justice utopias. I focused on the "conceptual lines" featured across these recent murals, the combination of textual, design, and compositional elements that carry the ideological weight of the work (Cooper, 2014). Conceptual lines are dominant rhetorical tropes within cultural logics; conceptual lines make cultural logics visible, giving them shape, form, and narrative realization (Ratcliffe and Jensen, 2022, p. 28). In observing how these conceptual lines recur across states and artists, I have witnessed a coherent aesthetic emerge. In compositions that feature flowers in bloom, directional symbols, haloing, and a compelling, assured female gaze, these conceptual lines achieve two goals: they refigure the repressive visual rhetorics of fetal personhood, and make powerful statements about the relation among agency, the state, and the material conditions of reproduction.

An example is seen in the 2025, Atlanta, Georgia mural "Born Together" by Jasmine Nicole Williams. "Born Together" sheds light on how Georgia's 6-week abortion ban disrupts medically necessary reproductive healthcare and disproportionately impacts Black women (Dahunsi and Kallis, 2025). The mural memorializes the deaths of Amber Nicole Thurman and Candi Miller. Amber Thurman died in 2022 in the hospital from sepsis due to an incomplete medical abortion. A ProPublica investigation (Surana, 2024, September 14) revealed that her death was determined by Georgia's maternal mortality committee to be preventable, a casualty of Georgia's new 6-week abortion ban which prohibits care for women outside this timeframe. Candi Miller died at home in 2022 of complications from a medical abortion, managing it alone, as a second *ProPublica* investigation described (Surana, 2024, September 18), because she feared repercussions from Georgia's 6-week abortion ban. By honoring their lives, murals like "Born Together" inform community members about the new threats to abortion care from laws unrelated to standard medical protocols. Thurman and Miller are centered in the composition and surrounded by a halo of yellow light. The two women meet the viewer's gaze, smiling and self-possessed. Through this portrayal the mural refuses to allow viewers to cast aspersions on the women's dignity; or suggest each woman's death was an individual case and not part of a newly imposed political framework; or generally erase the tragic impact of this legislation. Indeed, Williams wanted her design decisions, like framing the composition with a gold chain and green bandana print, to suggest the persistence of Black and Latina cross-cultural solidarity amidst reproductive oppression (Dahunsi and Kallis, 2025). The placement of magnolias in bloom on Thurman and Miller's torsos suggest an honoring of their fertility, bodies agential and free from the state's policing, penalizing, and experimenting with the lives of women of color.

Figure 1, "Born Together"

Along with the halo surrounding the two figures, the flowers in bloom are linked to a second, related trend I have seen in community-based, reproductive justice mural art: utopic representations of justice achieved. In case studies of what she calls everyday utopias, Davina Cooper (2014) investigates the ability of "adventurous social spaces" (p. 227) to impact what we can imagine as we galvanize a social justice politics of change. Everyday utopias are where "imagining and actualization intertwine" (p. 221). They work through "proximity" to everyday life (p. 221), revealing the potential of imagined futures in and among the constraints, abuses, and challenges of the now. If the rhetorical force of everyday utopias happens "through concepts in which imagining and actualization appear to converge" (p. 224), I'd argue that the concept of flowers in bloom—like the magnolias in the foreground of the "Born Together" mural—imagine for viewers the right to health, and the freedom to manage one's fertility with the support of medical professionals. That imagining could translate into actualizing those rights in the form of spreading awareness, collational activism, and pressuring representatives. The title "Born Together" suggests that a strong, uncompromising solidarity movement for reproductive justice was "born" in the wreckage of these women's deaths. This title implies a critique of the logic of fetal personhood—which demands the requirement of forced pregnancy and gestation and an erasure of the pregnant person's agency—the very logic that undergirded the abortion ban that prevented Thurman and Miller each from receiving proper care. The title seems to invoke this logic in order to critique it and confer a kind of new birth to Thurman and Miller. If everyday utopias marshal "the capacity of concepts to condense the movement between actualization and imagining," it means that "some lines will socially triumph over (potential and actual) other ones" (Cooper, p. 225). In expressing lives cut

short, the conceptual lines in the mural combine to represent Thurman and Miller as figures of access, rights, and justice, potentially influencing public vocabularies, practices, and notions of rights (Condit, 1989, p. 8-9).

As we see in "Born Together," the reproductive justice movement has offered an important intervention in the fetal personhood frame. Reproductive justice has asserted that reproduction happens in a complex web of social relations and material constraints. Within the claim that people have the right *not* to parent is a scene of agency, invention, and exigence. Centered is the agency of, for example, the pregnant person where a competitive notion of personhood is replaced with one that the ethicist Margaret Little (1999) might define as one of consent, one that is relational, enmeshed, and complex (p. 305; p. 312). As a scene of invention, the pregnant person holds the decision for action based on the assessment of the kairotic horizon of possibility: what is a family to me? How do I want to craft one? Within what conditions and structures of support? Is parenting possible, safe, or desirable to me now? Like any rhetorical situation, pregnancy is a scene of exigence: when is the right time to create a family? What is the opportune moment to be seized and how? The acknowledgement of birthing people at the helm of the exigence of pregnancy assaults theocratic, hierarchical constructions of fetal personhood. Reproductive justice first rejects this warrant and then replaces it with a scene of invention occurring in feminist materialist, decolonial, antiracist ecologies of access to care, social support, and physical safety.

In recent murals featuring abortion rights and access, utopic conceptual lines persist across mural compositions: the strong female gaze, flowers in bloom, haloes, directional symbols. Added to these elements are winged creatures, outstretched hands, and written text arguing for the value of personal story and agency. These additional utopic visual rhetorics of reproductive justice flourishing are essential responses to new limits to accessing abortion, to reproductive and hormonal regulation and surveillance, and to criminalization and punishment of those seeking care. An example is this 2019 mural residing on the Planned Parenthood clinic in Rochester, New York, mentioned earlier, spanning the length of the wall facing the street. It is part of a series of murals by Sarah Rutherford (2019) featuring women community organizers titled "Her Voice Carries." The composition is horizontal and has three parts: a bird; a textual affirmation; and the figure of a woman standing before a pink door. The woman is the Mexican-American poet and Rochester community organizer Rachel McKibbens. She is rendered gazing upward, framed by a golden, jeweled halo. Her face is determined, placid, purposeful. McKibbens is adorned by a garland of roses in full bloom that sweep around, behind, and across the length of her arm. Indeed, like Thurman and Miller in "Born Together," her body is rendered as blooms. Following the length of her outstretched arm and open palm, she releases a bird that is taking flight. The image behind McKibbens is a pink door, a reference to the Pink Door Writer's Workshop, a writing retreat she founded for LGBTQI poets of color that culminated in public readings across the city. In an interview on the "Her Voice Carries" website (Rutherford, 2019), McKibbens sums up her motives for doing literary, antiracist, queer-positive work: "It makes us less killable."

Figure 2, "Rachel McKibbens"

It is unclear if the figure of McKibbens represents a person seeking reproductive healthcare or is rather a kind of clinic escort or guide to those seeking care at Planned Parenthood. Either way she is rendered as an affirming, powerful presence. The statement in the center of the mural is McKibbens's: "Your body is your Story/its chapters full of Adventure & Hardships & Living/& only you can Write It." In this affirmation the mural holds a utopic space for patient consent to gestation amidst a thoroughly contested, embattled scene of healthcare (Swiencicki, 2024, p. 30). Through the metaphor of authorship, McKibbens asserts the right to bodily autonomy, and makes the project of having a body a squarely rhetorical enterprise. By invoking storytelling, McKibbens makes the process of having a body an act of self-interpretation, self-creation, self-expression. The "you"—"only you" alone—must grapple with "adventure" and "hardships" and make meaning of them, not deferring to law or custom. As a clinic escort at this Planned Parenthood, I have observed the way the conceptual lines of this affirmation exist in competition with the anti-abortion protesters' signs and arguments, blaring from a bullhorn, based in misinformation, shaming, and the discourse of sin. That the figure of McKibbens is freeing a bird, while speaking this affirmation, offers a soaring directional arc that hovers above the noise of the street politics of reproductive healthcare. Figuring the healthcare seeker as a bird/non-human may invite a degendering of the scene of authorship and agency in seeking care, creating an inclusive rhetoric most aligned with reproductive justice values (Yam & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2025, p. 366).

These conceptual lines—female gaze, extended arm, open hand, flower in bloom, ascending directional cues—also appear across the country in Alberquerque, New Mexico in the 2021 mural by Jodie Herrera. The mural is sponsored by the New Mexico ACLU for the purpose of raising awareness of SB10 and HB 7, bills that would repeal an abortion ban from the 1860s. Herrera is a photorealist oil painter and muralist of Latina, Apache and Comanche ancestry. Her long-term work is an international arts and activism project called Women Across Borders, illustrating the personal journeys of immigrant and refugee women. SB 10 and SB 7

passed in advance of the 2022 Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs* that removed the federal right to abortion. Herrera writes in her Instagram post on the day of the *Dobbs* decision, "Our fate as American women is not to be an oppressed products of 'circumstance' it is to grow into our full potential, positions of power and full equity!"

Herrera's mural, like the ones in Atlanta and Rochester, is rendered in a feminist declarative mode. The mural features a rendering of Tatiana Garcia, a reproductive rights advocate and aspiring doula.

Figure 3: Respect Reproductive Freedom Mural

Like the Rochester mural, the composition offers a three-part scene. On the left is Garcia making direct, assertive eye contact with the viewer. Her extended arm features a simple, rust-colored tattoo of a band of triangles. The center of the composition repeats the triangle design but horizontally this time, framing the command to "respect reproductive freedom." Unlike the softness of the font in the Rochester mural, the font here is in dialogue with the triangle pattern and reads as structural, reinforced, and permanent. The final third of the composition is in shades of pinkish rust and lavender, a new color scheme, and features Garcia's outstretched palm holding a cactus flower in full bloom, framed in a halo of triangles, a scene of fertility and freedom achieved, the gift of reproductive freedom. The directional lines dominate the composition: the vertical triangles insist that we focus on "freedom," and the outstretched arm running the length of the bottom symbolizes what that freedom means when gestational consent is "respected:" a flourishing, thriving, a flower in full bloom. Garcia's meeting the gaze of the viewer is important: to not turn away in an age of heightened bodily surveillance that is especially targeted at poor women, immigrant women, and women of color. Meeting the gaze of the oppressor echoes an observation by Fixmer-Oraiz in her reflection post-*Dobbs*: "The loss of Roe is not only a grave reproductive injustice and an expansion of the security state. It is also an attack on our capacity to organize for rights and justice in the first place" (p. 428). The cactus flower and the triangles that frame it suggest the indigenous southwest decorative tradition. These conceptual lines are

regionally and culturally specific, and represent reproduction in a non-human form; it may be that in doing so Herrera refuses to erase the "coloniality of gender" (Forchieri, 2025, p. 612), where gender alone is unable to account for the imbrication of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, cis-sexism, racism, and extractivism present at past and present scenes of reproductive control (p. 613). In reproductive justice visual rhetorics, gender is revealed as a "necessary but not definitive condition to capture the scope of oppression" (Forchieri, 2025, p. 609).

The recent murals I have featured in this essay argue against the legal framework of fetal personhood, their conceptual lines revealing a long, sometimes subtle, always high-stakes hegemonic contest. This contest matters, as Loretta Ross (2018) urges us to "work toward the reproductive liberation of people who are socially, culturally, and economically subjugated and whose lives are peripheralized in the arenas of class, gender, and racial struggles" (p. 174). We do this in part, she writes, by paying "close attention to many types of barriers preventing autonomy and self-determination and thereby affecting the symbiotic relationships within communities in which individuals seek to manifest their reproductive options" (p. 174). Scholars examining these barriers as they manifest in visual rhetorics are numerous. Mary Ziegler (2025) and Carol Mason (2022) have carefully charted fetal personhood arguments in the law, and in identity-based Christian nationalist men's movements. Feminist rhetoricians have assessed the visual rhetorics of the anti-abortion movement—from conscripting fetal ultrasound technology to enliven "fetal personhood" arguments (Mitchell, 2001; Wise, 2018); to monuments to the unborn and pilgrimage destinations (Rowland, 2017); to groups occupying campus quads with jumbotrons depicting fake abortion procedures (Mason, 2022); to spectacles of mass assembly on campuses and at clinics, like 40 Days for Life and the March for Life events; to billboards on highways with fear cues about abortion as a Black genocide (Dobbins-Harris, 2017). Taken together, anti-choice visual strategies rely on rhetorics of sin, regret, medical disinformation, spectral horror, conspiracy theories, and the erasure of the pregnant person from the scene of decision-making and the erasure of the context and resources in which decisions are made. These visual arrows combine in the anti-choice quiver to harass those seeking reproductive healthcare (Condit, 1989; Rankin, 2022), or simply act as normalizing, ambient anti-choice messaging for those occupying public space.

As a needed companion to understanding the visual cultures of fetal personhood, we must recognize and create everyday reproductive justice utopias—legislative, artistic, or otherwise. Everyday utopias bring about "new forms of normalization, desire, and subjectivity" (Cooper, 2014, p. 5), and have the potential "to contribute to a transformative politics specifically through the concepts they actualize and imaginatively invoke" (p. 3). The kinds of aesthetics I've featured in this essay are crucial for a post-*Dobbs* landscape. The symbolic weight of these recent murals provoke important questions as we actively imagine a world of reproductive justice. For example, when and how does personhood get figured as human in reproductive justice murals? In murals that serve as memorials to the dead, the human figure seems to matter to retain the memory of what is produced when law becomes divorced from medical protocols, and when religious discourse justifies violence against women. But in murals that serve as utopic visions, we see non-human symbols representing flourishing rights, freedoms, and agency. It seems there is an acknowledgement of the pregnant person as part of an ecosystem of which the fetus is one aspect, an ecosystem that can make the moment an exigent

one for fertility or an impossible one. Centered is a rights-bearing, thinking person in a state of interrelatedness. And yet, how might the fetus be represented in reproductive justice art to communicate the complexity of enmeshment and consent more persuasively? Margaret Little (1999) and Jeannie Ludlow (2008) have separately argued for decades that confronting the reality of the fetus would help the reproductive justice framework clarify its core premises. My battle to remove those plastic fetuses as they get embedded among the bricks of the mural is not helping the larger rhetorical challenge of centering the agency of the pregnant person without erasing the complex scene of decision-making.

We must keep examining what feminist Sara Ahmed (2012) calls "the brick wall" (p. 174): the set of oppressive rhetorical assumptions that structure white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In this essay I have argued that feminist rhetorical approaches to visual culture must continue to make art on "the brick wall," write on the wall, and scale the wall—making deliberate attempts to resist and imagine otherwise. I have argued here for more studies of reproductive justice aesthetics, possibly ones that discuss the ways the current digital and geographic aesthetics align rather than exist in contrast or competition, and help reveal the role of utopic, commemorative, and other activist discourses during times of reproductive healthcare repression. Of the precarity of this moment, Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (2022) urges that "there is no going back. Moving forward will demand deep imagination and solidarity—and a centering of reproductive justice as a cornerstone most critical to the future of U.S. democracy" (p. 429). With the loss of federal abortion protection, and the increasing state restrictions on services, providers, and legal protections, examining the visual responses to these assaults helps us to understand, develop and promote repeal and resistance.

Biography

Jill Swiencicki is professor of English at St. John Fisher University. Her scholarship identifies rhetorical practices that will increase democratic inclusion and equity. Her recent projects feature contemporary feminist orators in the reproductive justice movement; and the challenges of developing pedagogy in the civic humanities for the present time. Her work appears in such journals as *Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments, Women's Studies in Communication, College English, Peitho, Liberal Education*, as well as the recent edited collections *Inclusive Aims: Rhetoric's Role in Reproductive Justice,* and *Feminist Connections: Rhetoric and Activism Across Time, Space, and Place*.

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Reproductive Chronic Illnesses Social Media as a Guide for Care

Jessie Reynolds-Clay

Abstract: This article takes on a feminist visual rhetorical approach to reproductive chronic illness care capturing how the body is positioned in visuals, the emotions that are evoked, and how short-form videos can bridge emotional impact and practical advice that create, and maintain an intersectional feminist community. There is a growing number of individuals who seek care and guidance for reproductive chronic illness on social media platforms. Social media influencer Mik Zazon (@mikzazon) practices self-advocacy, exemplifying how reproductive chronic illness influencers use visuals to make embodied and "invisible" pain visible and accessible to the public. This article examines how Zazon's TikTok videos create a space for solidarity, acting as a guide for others to follow while also fostering engagement and networks of care. Drawing on theories in disability and visual feminist rhetoric, this article explores how viewers respond and interact with reproductive chronic illness content; ultimately demonstrating how social media can function as a site for embodied knowledge and collective care within a reproductive healthcare context.

Keywords: care, reproductive health applications, social media

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As reproductive politics have become more "radicalized," especially in the Donald Trump era (2016–present), the notion of care has been jeopardized. Because the American population *continues* to fight for basic reproductive rights, this ongoing battle for bodily autonomy has been set back (Briggs, 2017). Moreover, the tensions brought on by legislative battles regarding reproductive rights, coupled with disinformation on social media about moral responsibilities (i.e., religious beliefs, family values, etc.), reframes reproductive healthcare from a basic need to a contested ideological battleground. If reproductive care continues to appear as a debate influenced by moral standards or disinformation, then this "care" is causing those with existing reproductive conditions to experience more hardship as they navigate a landscape that prioritizes political battles over essential healthcare needs.

Through visual representations of rhetoric, this project centers on two videos from a social media creator and how they highlight embodied experiences of reproductive chronic illness and advice content. The advice content is crucial to this research because I argue that the visual within social media offers chronically ill communities a space to find care. These visuals are found through creators' shared guidance on how to manage chronic illness symptoms and through navigating healthcare systems. To capture audience engagement, this study examines viewer comments, focusing on the top comments as determined by "likes." When a comment on a video garners the most "likes," it allows for insight into how the viewers respond to the content and participate in the community.

Implementing Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) methods in care webs, "care collectives outside of hospitals, social services and the medical industrial complex…," and feminist visual rhetorical strategies, this research asks: How does this influencer use visual rhetoric to shape conversations around reproductive chronic illness, feminism, and disability? And in what ways does their social media platform foster community engagement and advocacy for individuals with endometriosis? The influencer is establish-

ing visuals within their videos that create a space for embodied knowledge and mutual recognition. The way they frame their body in the imagery such as their facial expressions, positioning of the body, usage of hand gestures and tasks performed can help the audience understand how care is implemented outside of medical spheres.

I use TikTok as the medium for this project because it allows for visual rhetoric to repeatedly take place. Viewers scroll, "like," and engage with short-form videos. Therefore, TikTok captures how the body is positioned in the visuals, the emotions that are evoked, and how short-form videos can bridge emotional impact and practical advice. I found the influencer for this study through the popular hashtags on TikTok, "#EndoWarrior" and "#EndoAwareness." To ensure reproductive chronic illness was the main topic of discussion within the chosen influencers' profiles, I viewed a range of content to see where and how care takes place digitally. Moreover, I have concluded that the chosen influencer provides a vast spectrum of approaches to care as they engage with their online community, primarily focusing on self-care and advice content. Therefore, for this project I analyze two videos from reproductive chronic illness influencer, Mik Zazon.

Guided by Rosemary Garland-Thomson's (2009) disability aesthetics and interrogative "staring" and Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) care webs, Zazon allows us to better understand how care is distributed among reproductive chronic illness communities online. Challenging traditional notions of femininity, Garland-Thomson (2008) has invited us to engage in staring to "make [and seek] meaning." This meaning-making emphasizes a visual feminist approach, one that acknowledges how "looking" itself becomes a rhetorical act. As we digitally "stare" at a woman who is experiencing, embodying, and discussing her reproductive chronic illness, the viewer is invited into the daily life of Zazon. Here, "staring" is reframed from an act of objectification or "mak[ing] sense of the unexpected" to an invitation of viewership on the audience's own terms.

Piepzna-Samarasinha emphasizes in their text, *Care Work* (2018), that care webs are not secondary or "lesser" forms of care, but rather radical re-imaginings of what care can look like when institutions fail. Crucial to these communities are the comment sections where Zazon interacts with her audience, offering more advice beyond the video posted. This is called "care webs." Care webs, as described by Piepzna-Samarasinha, are a way to,

> [B]reak from the model of paid attendant care as the only way to access disability support. Resisting the model of charity and gratitude, they are controlled by the needs and desires of the disabled people running them. Some of them rely on a mix of abled and disabled people to help; some of them are experiments in "cripmade access"—access made by and for disabled people only, turning on its head the model that disabled people can only passively receive care, not give it or determine what kind of care we want. Whether they are disabled only or involve disabled and non-disabled folks, they still work from a model of solidarity not charity —of showing up for each other in mutual aid and respect. (pp. 35)

Zazon helps to guide viewers through her endometriosis experience and diagnosis. Building TikTok communities such as these is a form of care because it allows others to receive indirect advice and provides a sense of community.

Thinking about how women's experiences shape the discourse around us can help us to think about care writ large, whether online or at a doctor's office. There is a wealth of information around reproductive chronic illness and reproductive care on social media. These systems have become crucial players in navigating how chronic illness is overlooked. Moreover, TikTok pages like Zazon's become an informal "how-to" guide for the public for understanding and living with reproductive chronic illness. Social media platforms such as Instagram and in this case, TikTok have seen the growing presence of chronic illness influencers. Zazon exemplifies how visibility of reproductive chronic illness care can act as a form of feminist care. There is a relationship that is built between the viewer and the viewed, a reclamation of the gaze.

Mik Zazon's TikTok profile is primarily used to raise awareness and share care tips about endometriosis. She is a self-proclaimed "Endo Warrior" who has garnered over 1.7 million followers on TikTok. When selecting the videos for analysis, I made sure they highlighted how Zazon uses her body and environment to communicate the physical and emotional dimensions of endometriosis. The videos help to translate invisible pain, or an invisible disability, into a visible one. This selection method helps to illuminate how visual embodiment operates as rhetorical strategy. Zazon's audience largely consists of viewers who are uncertain whether they have endometriosis or not, manifesting curiosity and solidarity in the comment section. Many of these viewers do not have a formal diagnosis and are actively seeking guidance about the symptoms they are experiencing. Viewers are doing so outside of medical spheres; Zazon is not a medical doctor, but she directly speaks to her audience about advocacy when it comes to medical intervention.

Zazon (2024) states in the TikTok video titled, "I[']m incredibly grateful [I] trusted myself…," "Last week I almost cancelled the surgery that could potentially save my life," she is filming herself in front of a mirror, her stomach is wrapped in bandages. She is relaxed, yet firm, while sharing her experience and recovery from endometriosis excision surgery. She frames her dialogue through a mirror, demonstrating her embodied experiences through a presentation of bandages showing the audience a physical representation of surgery recovery. The living room reflection behind her is brightly lit; she stands behind a white couch that has what looks like a peach-colored sweatshirt draped over the back with a stack of packages lining the floor. Zazon is speaking firmly to her viewers, with a serious expression on her face. Her firmness helps to reinforce the seriousness of self-advocacy, and this firm facial expression and tone continue throughout the whole video.

Zazon pulls down the top of her sweatpants to show the length of the bandages that are covering her entire lower midsection from the bottom of her ribcage to the top of her pubic area. She is showing what is hidden beneath and how much of her body was exposed to excision surgery. By exposing the bandages from her surgery, Zazon is disrupting the traditional "sanitized" representation of women's bodies, one that tells women to practice modesty, to uphold beauty standards, and to hide their pain. Through this act, Zazon is transforming her body into a site for feminist resistance, using visible notions of pain to perform what Garland-Thomson calls "politics of visuality," where the act of being seen or "staring" becomes a form of agency resisting both medical and patriarchal standards.

The video cuts to Zazon standing in her kitchen, a space historically seen as a domestic; she invokes authority over this space, redefining what counts as women's labor, in this case, laboring in invisible pain. She is

shaking a pan where she seems to be cooking food. She puts the pan down quickly as she continues, "In that surgery they found stage 2 endometriosis […] on my right ovary, in and around my bowels and […] lesions connecting my left ovary and bowel, fusing them together" (Zazon, 2024). Zazon used her hands to explain the results of her surgery. She gestures towards her body and claps her hands together to represent the "fusing" of her left ovary and bowels. She is narrating her movement to visually embody her medical experience. As she continues to paint the image of what doctors found during her excision surgery, she moves closer to the camera, at an angle that looks downward toward the audience, as if the viewer is a friend sitting at the kitchen table. Zazon then removes the bandages and shows the audience her scars, employing her own body as rhetorical text, by resisting the cultural impulse that tells women to cover up their bodies and conceal their pain. Instead, she insists on showing her scars and therefore controls her own narrative navigating, not only excision, surgery, but medical neglect. This evokes discomfort in the viewer and shared discomfort in those who may have experienced this surgical procedure before. Moreover, here the discomfort is transformed into feminist demand for recognition.

Zazon then sits down at a table, her cooked food, which looks like chili sitting in front of her, the camera is centered, as she continues to speak openly about the constant denial and dismissal of care she has received for ten years in the United States medical system regarding her reproductive health. "She moves her body closer to the camera, one hand is close to the camera, a bit out of frame as she taps the table, her other hand in a fist over her chest, just above her heart, encouraging her audience to be assertive towards medical professionals who often dismiss women's pain. "To think that I almost cancelled the surgery because of the things that I had been told, how I was gaslit in the medical system [...] I was made to feel crazy every single time I walked into the damn doctor's office" (2024).

This video garnered the top comment, "I was just diagnosed with […] endometriosis […] after almost 7-10 years of suffering. So happy for you! Advocate!!" This viewer was compelled to validate the experiences of Zazon after seeing a visual representation of endometriosis excision recovery as the body experiences pain, suffering and healing, createing a communal experience among viewers who are seeking care.

In her most viewed video, "Life with one of the top ten most painful conditions in the world," 5.4 million viewers observe Zazon's pain through vulnerability; however, this video is accompanied by captions and texts on the screen. There is no verbal communication in this video as Zazon communicates her pain through visuals of her body. Viewers can observe Zazon walking down a hallway, of what seems to be her home, in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, she stumbles towards the camera and her body is stiff. She gives the camera a thumbs up, with a serious look on her face as the video cuts to a new scene.

Her facial expressions invoke a painful experience, a fatigue. This invites the viewer to do "more than just look" but to linger or witness the embodied experience that Zazon is navigating (Garland-Thompson, 2008). The next scene shows her rubbing her eyes, her hair is disheveled a bit and she takes a deep breath. There are captions for the viewer to follow Zazon's thoughts and process of getting dressed for the day. Zazon then lifts her sweatshirt to show her bare stomach, seemingly bloated, and she includes the text "endometriosis" on the screen as she pokes the bloated area. Even more so, visuals like these encourage her community to comment.

Some comments are curious, asking about pain relief while others resonate with shared experience garnering comments like, "Gir[,] I'm just impressed you put jeans on. [...] My stage 4 flare ups require sweats." As we see later in the video, Zazon applies a lidocaine patch to her lower stomach and carefully puts on a pair of jeans. These visuals provoke the viewers to comment in solidarity and curiosity, "I thought I had endometriosis but everytime I see someone in pain like this I question it." The first comment validates Zazon's effort in getting herself dressed while simultaneously bringing attention to her own experience. There is an embodied reality here and again a moment of solidarity creating a moment for care webs to thrive. Moreover, comments like the second one demonstrate a self-reflective perspective as not all of Zazon's audience have endometriosis, but they may experience symptoms or a curiosity regarding the potential of possessing the illness. This does not invalidate the level of pain someone may experience but emphasizes what Zazon speaks on regarding advocating for yourself in medical settings. Furthermore, this video highlights the way that visuals can provoke empathy and self-reflection, where care webs can thrive bolstering collective care, inviting communities to "[shift] our [everyday lives] where people feel fine if they get sick, cry, have needs, start late because the bus broke down, move slower, [...] and [ensure] these aren't things we apologize for" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2024, pp. 93).

The videos from Zazon reflect the community-building, embodiment, and a chronic illness care narrative. By narrowing the scope in this way, I have highlighted how Zazon mobilizes personal chronic illness narratives to document embodied suffering, but also sustain communities organized around chronic illness. I close this article with a call for more informal analyses of vulnerable content like Zazon's. Zazon uses a video format that speaks to the raw emotional experiences that someone with a reproductive chronic illness faces daily. Though I have woven theory into this article, I do not want that to take away from the real experiences of endometriosis. Zazon's videos remind us that the pain, fear, and frustration are not mere abstract concepts but lived realities that are faced by many, often silently. By "staring" at content like Zazon's, scholars and reproductive bodies alike can understand how care and vulnerability operate together.

Biography

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Materiality of Memory: Firelei Báez & A Path Toward Feminist Visual Rhetorics

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Abstract: This article advances feminist visual rhetorics as a framework for examining how visual art enacts feminist rhetorical invention. Through this lens, Dominican-American artist Firelei Báez emerges as a feminist visual rhetor whose materially layered works intervene in colonial and gendered histories. Centering Báez's 2014 installation, *once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming*, the essay demonstrates how feminist visual rhetorics attends to materiality and memory as generative rhetorical sites. Báez's practice exemplifies how visual rhetors deploy material and citational gestures—layering, reworking, and remaking archives—to challenge dominant histories and imagine decolonial futures. In foregrounding feminist visual rhetorics, this essay expands the field's attention to how power, resistance, and identity are constituted through visual form and material presence.

Keywords: art, feminist memory, material memory, Caribbean diaspora, feminist rhetorics

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My works are propositions,
meant to create alternate pasts and potential futures,
questioning history and culture in order to provide
a space for reassessing the present.
— Firelei Báez

Thus history is not frozen, not merely the past.
It provides an approachable, disruptable ground for engaging
and transforming traditional memory or practice
in the interest of both the present
and the future.
— Cheryl Glenn

It has often been my experience with visual art that the message is found in more than the looking.

It is visceral.

It is textural.

And it is transcendent.

The structure that stood before me at the entry of the 2024 Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) exhibit *Firelei Báez* was no different. A wall with an arch, tilted and textured, as if transported from another time and place, told a new story in the museum room. Titled "once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming", the piece was a physical repre-

sentation of the tearing down/new sense of being by asking the viewer more questions than it answers. First, and most simply, I wondered, *what is this?* The arch on a slant is sculptural, but also textured with layers of paper, paint, and other artifacts, begging the question, *what genre does this inhabit*?

Firelei Báez (1981) is a Dominican Republic-born artist living in New York City, known for elaborate multi-media works on paper and canvas and large-scale sculpture and installations. Báez's work resonates with the echoes of history, weaving together myth and memory, rupture and resilience. In her hands, maps become palimpsests, rewritten with color and pattern, as if insisting that history itself can be undone, re-made, reimagined. A painter, a storyteller, and an archivist of the unseen, Báez weaves together the spectral traces of colonial pasts with the radical possibilities of feminist futures. Her art does not merely depict but speaks—layered, gestural, insistent—refusing the fixed categories of race, gender, and nation.

Báez's tectonic painting draws inspiration from the Sans-Souci Palace in Milot, Haiti—an iconic structure now a UNESCO site, built in the early 1800s for Henri Christophe I, the revolutionary leader and first King of Haiti. The palace, a monument to the triumph of the Haitian Revolution—where self-liberated enslaved people overthrew the French colonial forces—was a precursor to the abolitionist movements that would later unfold in the United States. Báez brings this monument to a museum on American soil in the prosperous port city of Boston, a location once ripe with imports of the sugar trade from the Caribbean. Residing now in a place developed from slave labor, the structure saturated with patina reclaims this revolution and offers an alternative present.

Báez's work extends the painterly surface into the realm of architecture, transforming the viewer's experience of space. Museums—historically colonial and patriarchal places—are therefore recuperated in Báez's hands. Visitors are invited to walk through this new iteration of history, entering her reimagined ruins via the archway, and engaging with the past through a re-visioned lens. By constructing a multi-genred piece, she is merging narratives, while disrupting "standard" approaches to "painting" and "sculpture." The intricate surface patterns of the sculpture draw from West African indigo printing, a tradition carried to the American South by enslaved peoples. Indigo, once a vital product in the early American economy, was an integral textile that became enmeshed with the cultural fabric of early America (Romualdez, 2024). In Báez's reimagining, this material—a symbol of colonial exploitation and cultural resilience—becomes a powerful marker of resistance, heritage, and transformation.

Báez's work exemplifies *feminist visual rhetorics*, demonstrating how art operates as a rhetorical force—one that reclaims memory, disrupts fixed identities, and materializes feminist resistance through layered embodied expression. Her work destabilizes dominant epistemologies by elevating embodied knowledge and memory as feminist modes of knowing. Báez's practice engages intersectional feminist concerns by centering the experiences of women of color, reclaiming diasporic histories and resisting erasure enacted by colonial and patriarchal powers. Feminist rhetorical scholarship on memory, materiality, and identity (Cedillo, 2025; Clary-Lemon, 2022; Enoch & Woods, 2025; Ede, Glenn & Lunsford, 2010; Mattingly, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2010) has expanded the field's understanding of rhetoric beyond the textual, creating an opening for feminist visual rhetorics as a vital subfield. Memory functions as a site of resistance and reclamation, challenging domi-

nant narratives by recovering silenced voices, retracing histories, and foregrounding how identity is shaped through the act of remembering. These areas of inquiry have established that rhetoric is embodied, situated, and enacted through the material traces of lived experience, whether through archival absences, embodied performances, or the objects and images circulating within culture. The concept of identity has been expanded to offer a more nuanced understanding of categories such as race and gender, emphasizing their fluidity. Given this trajectory, the visual offers new ways to engage with how power and identity are mediated through artistic and material forms.

Within this framework, artists are not only producing cultural artifacts but participating in rhetorical action. While figures such as Judy Chicago and the Guerrilla Girls explicitly align their artistic practice with feminist activism, other artists, such as Firelei Báez, provide an opportunity to examine how feminist visual rhetorics function outside of explicitly activist frameworks. Báez's work engages memory, materiality, and identity as rhetorical strategies, making her both an artist and a feminist visual rhetor. By exploring the materiality of her pieces, their self-creational gestures, and their reclamation of diasporic memory, I aim to show how Báez intervenes in the visual lexicon of power, making space for voices long silenced and histories yet to be written—an aim feminist rhetorical scholars have been advancing for well over two decades. To make this argument, I will utilize rhetorical analysis and historiography, with feminist scholarship on memory, materiality, and identity as methodological lenses. Alongside key field examples, I will explore selected works by Báez to demonstrate how fine art offers rich examples of feminist rhetorical practice and why visual rhetorics is a necessary and urgent expansion of the field. Ultimately, I argue that fine artists give back to the field of feminist rhetorics by reflecting on the key principles in theory and action.

Memory: Reinventing Time/Space

Within feminist rhetorical studies, memory functions as a dynamic, embodied, and political act. Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford (2010) reminded us that, in the classical tradition, memory was understood as a vital part of rhetorical invention, "Cicero's vision of memory as a wax tablet, gathering images in place (loci) to be called forth in future acts of creation, links memory not only to storage but to transformation, invention, and adaptation" (p. 116). Feminist rhetoricians have built on this expansive view of memory, reconceiving it as a site where knowledge, power, and identity are negotiated, particularly for those historically silenced. As these scholars have argued, feminist rhetorical studies reject boundaries that isolate rhetoric from lived experience.

Jessica Enoch and Carly S. Woods's (2025) work on feminist commemoration framed memory as active and relational, urging us to interrogate not just who is remembered, but how memory is shaped and what stories become enshrined in public consciousness. They argued that feminist work must reimagine the very conditions of memory's production. In public contexts, memory circulates through commemorations, monuments, and civic performances that simultaneously recover marginalized histories and expose exclusions (Cox, 2020; Blair & Michel, 2007; Crozier-De Rosa & Mackie, 2022). At the same time, memory is spatial, embedded in places, environments, and atmospheres that condition how rhetorical meaning emerges and

how subjects come to inhabit those meanings (Lueck, 2015; Rickert, 2013; Barnett & Boyle, 2016). Carol Mattingly's (2010) metaphors of the "Woman's Temple" (fleeting spaces where women's voices briefly surface) and the "Women's Fountains" (sites where those voices are erased) made clear that public memory is not an impartial record, but a contested terrain shaped by power. Memory, therefore, is both the space where gendered silences accumulate and the site where feminist rhetoricians might intervene, restoring what has been lost and making visible the rhetorical labor of women who shaped public discourse, even when history failed to record their names.

The embodied, recursive relationship between memory and invention — between inhabitation and reinvention — is particularly relevant to the work of Báez. In her architectural painting, Báez reimagines the ruins of Sans-Souci Palace as a living site of memory where past and present collapse into each other. The indigo patterns that cover Báez's sculpture carry their own layered memories, tracing a material genealogy that links West African textile practices to the plantation economies of America, a visual memory of survival encoded into cloth. Báez's work embodies feminist memory's capacity to link the personal and the historical, the embodied and the archival.

In an interview, Firelei Báez recalls, "Art for me was a form or a tool of survival. We moved around a lot and making of objects and things was a way that I could anchor as a little girl…." ("Art 21", 2021). Memory, for Báez, is not only something stored but something made through the crafting of objects that hold personal and cultural significance. Growing up, Báez drew from the Dominican tradition of making paper dolls for her classmates, a practice that became both a way to connect with new communities and a method for leaving traces of herself behind in each new place. Through these small acts of creation, Báez found ways to mark beauty and respite within the transience of constant movement. This relationship between memory and material practice—between what is remembered and what is made—threads throughout Báez's work, where memory emerges as something continuously assembled, layered, and reimagined through materials, bodies, and space.

Báez's work exemplifies how feminist visual rhetorics *practice* memory as an act of re-visioning. Her representative Sans-Souci is ruin and refuge, where visitors can walk through the fragments of history while imagining alternative futures. This echoes the feminist commemorative heuristics outlined by the scholars above, who urged us to ask not only whose stories are told, but how public memorial spaces feel, how they invited us to inhabit memory bodily and emotionally, and how they challenged or reinscribed structures of power. Báez's ruins invite us into a collaborative, relational process of remembrance—one that is at once personal, collective, and political. In Báez's work, we see how feminist visual rhetorics bring this practice into form, reminding us that memory is something we make.

Materiality/Identity

Material feminism represents a shift in feminist theory, inviting us to reimagine identity not solely as a product of language and social constructs, but as something entangled with the material world—the flesh of bodies, the pulse of the environment, the very fabric of lived experience. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hek-

man (2008) argued, this approach moves beyond traditional feminist discourse, which often centers language and culture while overlooking the agency of matter itself. In their view, materiality acts as a force that shapes experience and identity, resisting simplistic dualisms. This framework is crucial for understanding how feminist rhetors like Firelei Báez engage materiality as an active participant in self-making and rhetorical expression. Báez embeds identity within historical archives and the material world, showing how gender, race, and identity are not only represented but enacted. As Cheryl Glenn (2008) wrote, "identity determines who may speak, who merits an audience, and ultimately what the results of the speech will be" (p. 25). This underscores how material conditions—what we wear, where we come from, how we move through space—affect how our voices are heard.

The interplay between materiality and rhetorical agency appeared vividly in Mavis Boatemaa Beckson's (2020) essay on ceremonial beads in African culture. These beads were not mere ornamentation but symbols of identity and feminist resistance. In ceremonial contexts, they became tools of empowerment, allowing African women to assert autonomy and engage in cultural negotiation. As Beckson wrote, "for me and many other Ghanaian women, wearing beads represents a grassroots performance that strives to create a space for negotiation" (p. 90). These performances reclaim histories, assert presence, and resist patriarchal norms. A similar logic informs Jennifer Clary-Lemon's (2022) metaphor of the selvedge—the finished edge of fabric—as a site of material memory. The selvedge holds the story of the fabric's creation and transformation. Like identity, it is open to further revision. Objects, such as textiles, act as rhetorical artifacts, communicating who we are and where we've been.

The selvedge, like the beads, offers a way to think about how objects and memories shape identity, suggesting that who we are is not merely an abstract idea but a material process. Or perhaps, as Sewonda Leger (2025) suggested, the material offers a way to "make visible the diverse lived experiences of marginalized women." Leger explained, "Self-definition asserts, I am this person, while self-creation is the ongoing process of bringing elements of self-proclaimed identity to life through action, invention, and visibility" (p. 136). For me, this captures Báez's practice: through layered paper, textiles, paint, and architectural forms, she engages in self-creation. As we saw with the sculptural work that opens this article, by combining cultural materials—indigo printing on top of an arch representing Haitian freedom—she creates a new history, a new narrative for the self as immigrant, as (re)placed, as belonging. Her work resists a fixed identity, embracing *becoming*, a continual unfolding at the intersection of memory, materiality, and imagination.

When asked about her installation "once we have torn shit down…," Báez reflects on the significance of its material presence, saying, "that tilting wall when you first walk in, is to give that space I have in the studio where I can touch all the materials and I can see that as much as these are spaces of illusion, they are objects in space that exist with us, and I wanted it to be a permeable painting" ("Firelei Báez," 2024). For Báez, materiality is an active force in her practice—one that shapes process and meaning. Báez describes herself as "ceding control to the materials," allowing them to guide the unfolding story within the work. This surrender to material agency underscores Báez's investment in the ways materials themselves hold memory, history, and the residue of identity. Through this attentiveness, Báez's work embodies a form of material feminism by

using the material as co-constitutive, actively participating in the making of meaning and identity. Through the process of laying colors, images, and materials representative of Báez's vision of self over commonly colonial and patriarchal images, she replaces the dominant narratives for one more dynamic.

Toward Feminist Visual Culture/Rhetorics

The turn to the visual in feminist rhetorical studies marks not a departure from language but a necessary expansion, one that recognizes visual culture as a contested terrain shaped by gendered, racial, and classed forces. Feminist visual rhetoric and feminist visual culture share a mutual investment in understanding how images shape, circulate, and enact identities. Where feminist visual rhetoric offers the vocabulary and methods for analyzing visual meaning-making, feminist visual culture—particularly fine art—provides the material sites where these rhetorical processes unfold. Together, they reveal how feminist artists engage power and representation through visual means.

Feminist artists have worked within this terrain to resist dominant narratives and subvert stereotypes. Feminist visual rhetoric helps articulate how such resistance functions—how images intervene in and disrupt visual regimes that naturalize oppression, opening space for counter-visualities grounded in embodied knowledge. Scholars such as Efe Plange (2025) and Kristie Fleckenstein (2019) illustrated how instability and multimodality unsettle these regimes. Drawing on Barthes' notion of the image as a "floating chain" of signifieds, Plange showed how Angela Peoples' viral 2017 Women's March photo—Peoples, Black and resolute, holding a sign that reads "Don't forget: white women voted for Trump," as white women in pink hats sip Starbucks—revealed what dominant feminist imagery often conceals. Fleckenstein's study of Frances Benjamin Johnston likewise showed how women have long used multimodal strategies to assert rhetorical authority; Johnston's self-portraits and public lectures made the case for women photographers by performing competence and confidence in image and text.

The interplay between image and viewer underlines the stakes of feminist visual rhetoric, especially in fine art, where audience and intention are mediated by curated spaces such as museums and galleries. Even within these structured environments, viewers bring their own experiences, histories, and positionalities into dialogue with the work. Firelei Báez's practice exemplifies this theoretical intervention. Blending archival fragments, speculative portraiture, and diasporic storytelling, her paintings haunt colonial archives by layering bodies and imagery atop historical documents to assert the presence of women of the Caribbean diaspora while refusing containment. Báez transforms materials of domination into vessels of reclamation, making visible what official records suppress. Her work demonstrates that feminist memory must be visual and embodied, unfolding across time and medium in ways that invite constant reimagining. In this sense, Báez is not only making art, she is enacting a feminist rhetorical practice that unsettles how histories are recorded and how identities are seen.

Something New

"It is always within your grasp to make something new…" — Firelei Báez

Firelei Báez's words encapsulate the spirit of her artistic practice—one that actively reshapes history. Her work embodies the idea that the past is not a fixed inheritance but a material to be worked with, layered, and transformed. This ethos aligns with the instability of meaning in feminist visual rhetorics, where images refuse singular interpretations and instead invite ongoing negotiation. Báez moves within this space of possibility, often layering archival documents with speculative portraiture to craft narratives that resist erasure and assert new ways of seeing. One example, in a series of paintings focused on the history of New Orleans, Báez overlays figures, symbolic imagery, and calligraphic gestures upon the archival architectural surveys from the 1930s-era Historic American Buildings Survey, a project by the Works Progress Administration that documented significant New Orleans landmarks. Reminiscent of the piece from the introduction of this essay, "once we have torn shit down…", the series underlines how New Orleans and the Caribbean were acutely connected through the transatlantic trade networks of sugar and slavery. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Caribbean colonies like Haiti, Cuba, and Jamaica were major producers of sugar, an industry that was entirely reliant on enslaved labor. New Orleans, like Boston, was a key port city and a hub for the trade of enslaved people and a center of sugar refining and distribution. Báez engages with this history, reclaiming the archival materials by painting new imagery over the documents and declaring the power to overwrite the divisive histories they perpetuate.

In her hands, the archive is a dynamic site of reclamation, where myth and memory intertwine to create something entirely new. To fully appreciate Báez's contributions to feminist visual rhetoric, we must examine how her work bridges historical materials and imagined futures, offering a vision of identity as relational and in motion. Báez's painting, "the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)", demonstrates this archival reclamation, reauthoring a story bound to material and geographical histories. The painting features a *ciguapa*—an elusive female figure from Dominican folklore—her body curving across the architectural blueprint of the Illinois Central Railroad trestle, uniting two sides of the railroad tracks. This act of bridging is more than a redrawing of lines; it unsettles the boundaries the map once imposed, crossing racial and social divisions. As Báez explains, "She is quite literally bridging and forming space for communities to be able to carve out belonging and breathe." In this image, the *ciguapa*—mythical and material—embodies what Sewonda Leger defines as *self-creation*: an ongoing process through which marginalized subjects, particularly women of color, actively shape and perform their identities in real-time. By bending across lines, Báez's *ciguapa* asserts her place in a history that has long sought to erase her while refusing to be bound by it, instead offering a vision of identity as fluid, relational, and capable of crossing time and space.

The *ciguapa*'s "mutable body" is perpetually in transition, making and remaking identity in the face of historical erasure and displacement. Her flexibility—her ability to stretch across the tracks—speaks to the role women, especially women of color, have long played as bridges, uniting families, communities, and his-

tories. This act of bridging is a profound reordering of power. As Báez states, "In most power relationships, you have the victim trying to solve the situation. And I don't want to create narratives of victimhood. I want to flip it" ("New acquisitions reshape past histories," 2022). In "the trace...", Báez inverts these power dynamics, making the *ciguapa* a force of creative agency—her body and its material presence rewriting the histories that sought to constrain her.

In this light, Báez's work draws us back to the material, as we remember the selvedge and the beads, reminding us that identity is never a purely conceptual abstraction. It is woven into the material traces we leave behind, the objects we touch, the bodies we inhabit, and the spaces we move through. Like the selvedge—a boundary that holds fabric together while offering the potential for unraveling—Báez's *ciguapa* embodies the tension between continuity and rupture, between the inherited weight of history and the freedom of creative reinvention. And, like the beads, whose meanings are carried through the hands, stories, and memory, Báez's materials—paints over archival documents— become vessels of diasporic knowledge, collecting fragments of history and reassembling them into new configurations. Through this material language, Báez's "self-creation" is a collective gesture—an insistence that identity, memory, and materiality are forever intertwined, always under revision, and perpetually open to reinvention. Her transcending portraiture carries identity into a realm where it is both anchored in the past and free to break from it, liberated through the interplay of memory, materiality, and imagination.

Like many other paintings in this series, water plays a crucial symbolic role in "the trace." Referencing Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans's fraught history with weather-related devastation, the water in this painting seems to propel the *ciguapa* figure, aiding in her dynamic backbend. This movement evokes Báez's refusal to frame her characters within victimhood, offering instead the possibility of resilience and hope. Báez here aligns with Cheryl Glenn's insistence that hope is a critical rhetorical tool—one that can catalyze collective action and resistance. In this watery gesture, Báez's *ciguapa* becomes a symbol of survival and transformation, a powerful force for reimagining individual and collective futures.

A Closing

In an interview with Báez, she explains, "If I had to describe the work, it would be many two-dimensional and three-dimensional explorations of how to be a human in the world, especially a female figure, a female body, in culture as we are now." This has been exemplified in a body of work that reimagines the past, where history and memory merge through Báez's lens of transformation. Báez's work thus exemplifies the vital trajectory of feminist rhetorical studies, a field that has long championed the rhetorical significance of marginalized voices, embodied practices, and everyday forms of meaning-making. Feminist rhetorical scholars have demonstrated that rhetoric is not confined to speech or text but unfolds through material and visual forms that shape how histories are remembered and identities are performed. Fine artists like Báez, whose work blends archival reclamation, diasporic storytelling, and embodied memory, show how visual rhetoric can intervene in dominant narratives, offering new ways of being and imagining the world. As feminist rhetorical studies continue to expand to fully account for the visual, it reveals how art itself becomes a form of rhetorical action: a practice of memory, a material argument, and a site of individual and collective self-creation.

In recognizing fine artists as feminist visual rhetors, the field broadens its scope and acknowledges the many ways marginalized communities have long relied on visual, material, and embodied practices to assert their presence within and beyond history. In doing so, it creates space for new forms of engagement that challenge the status quo and offer paths for collective self-creation and re-imagination. Through their work, feminist visual rhetoricians provide a model of how art can serve as a form of rhetorical intervention and a tool for change.

Biography

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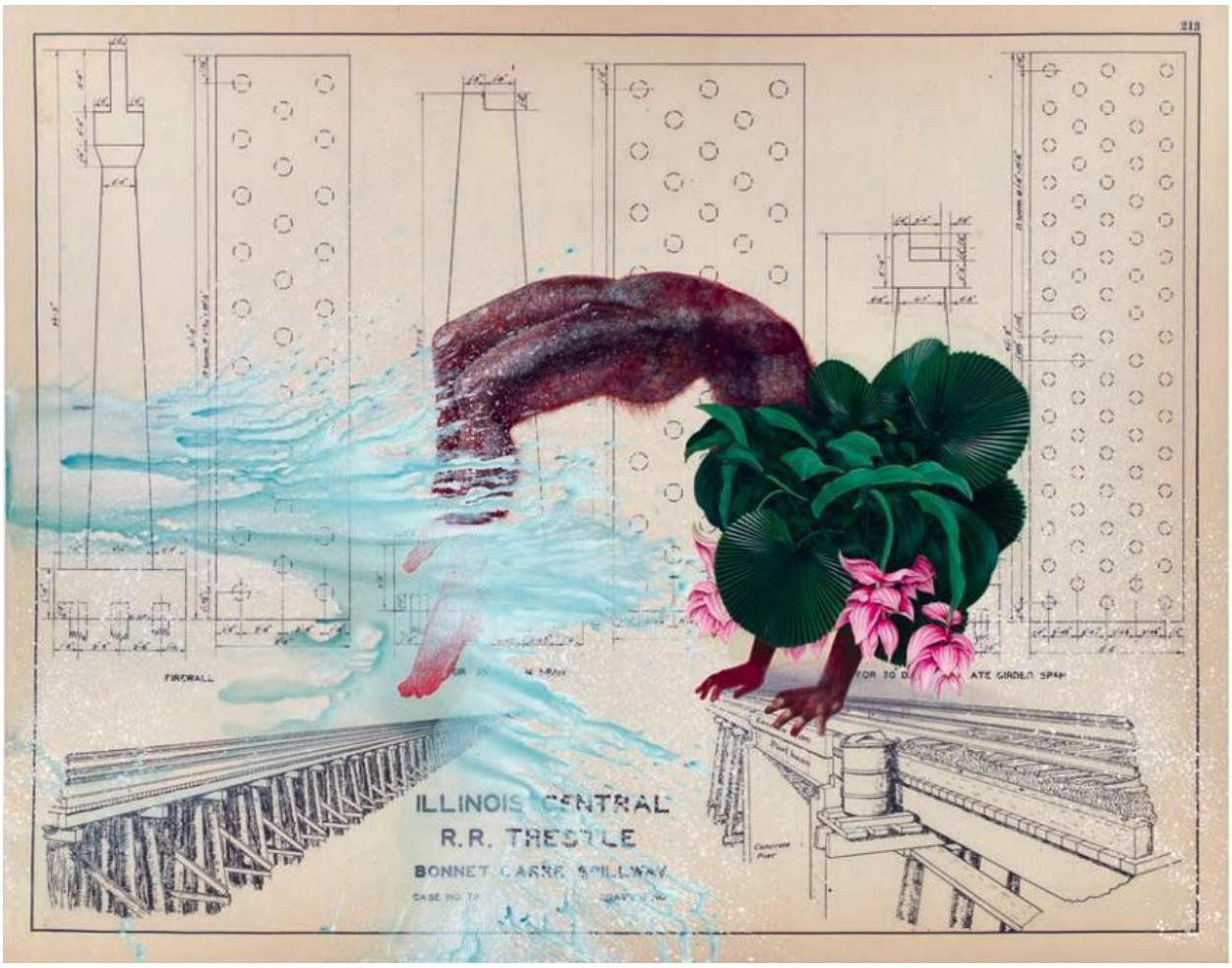
Appendix

Figure 1: *once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming*, (2014). Acrylic, gouache, sheet rock and steel, 168 x 144 inches. Installation view, Firelei Báez, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston 2024. Photo by Mel Taing.

Figure 2: Firelei Báez, *the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)*, 2019, Acrylic, oil, and transfer on archival printed canvas, 90 x 114 3/8 inches, Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle.



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"Seeing Red: Subversion, Appropriation, and the Feminist Gaze in Barbara Kruger's Art"

Rachel E. Molko

Abstract: This article offers a case study of Barbara Kruger's visual rhetoric to show how her signature fusion of found photography and sensational, headline-styled typography constructs a persuasive visual language that both inhabits and destabilizes dominant ideologies. Drawing on feminist rhetorical theory and cultural studies including Campbell (1998); Moi (1997); Balsamo (1996); Milkie (2002); and Dubriwny (2005), the analysis situates Kruger's art as a subversive engagement with the visual grammars of advertising and mass media. Through close readings of *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground*) (1989) and *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981), the article demonstrates how Kruger leverages collage to collapse binaries (subject/object, passive/active, high/low), expose the commodification of bodies, and reconfigure spectatorship via a feminist gaze. Ultimately, this study proposes collage as feminist iconography with durable subversive potential, offering a model for rhetorical invention within and against the visual regimes of consumer capitalism.

Keywords: Subversion, collage, art, resistance, gaze

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Introduction

What's black and white and red all over? Barbara Kruger's signature artistic fusion of image and text ranging in scale from designs on matchbook to supersized billboards. In this case study, I explore how Barbara Kruger's visual language serves to create dilemmas for audiences regarding identity, consumerism, and gender. Visual language refers to the system of signs, symbols, images, and design elements that communicate meaning and persuade through visual means - with or without words. It has its own grammar (composition, color, contrast, typography, spatial arrangement) and appeals that shape how audiences interpret and respond. For example, in Kruger's art, the red, white, and black color scheme and bold Futura typeface form a recognizable visual language of critique and confrontation. Born in 1945, Kruger put together a resume not from formal art education, but of work experience in graphic design, teaching, and creating.[1] Over the course of her career, her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at global museums and galleries.[2] One of the most influential artists creating feminist art in contemporary visual culture, Kruger utilizes photography and text to comment on the production of disempowerment in American society. Kruger's choice to engage with photographs that she did not take seems to offer a sustainable model of artistry with subversive potential. Utilizing photography, that which claims to hold reality or truth, continues to manifest itself as an ethics of seeing, as Susan Sontag (1977) asserted. However, Kruger's images never stand alone. Each work of art reframes the photograph with a new message born from the entanglement between text and image.

1 During her brief stints studying at Syracuse University and Parsons School of Design, Kruger made connections that led her to her position in design at Condé Nast Publications. In the 1960s, she contributed ad design and writing to publications including Mademoiselle, House and Garden, Artforum, and others (Martin). In the 1970s, she taught at University of California, Berkeley and is currently an Emerita Distinguished Professor of New Genres at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture . In 2021, she was honored as one of Time magazine's "100 Most Influential People."

2 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Palazzo Belle Papesse, Centro Arle Contemporanea, Siena, Italy; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Mary Boone Gallery, New York (Marshall, 2009).

While the images in Kruger's art come from found photography and are presented in their low-resolution and black and white form, the text in her work draws visually from sensational news headlines or advertising slogans. This choice capitalizes on viewers' prior experience with the visual rhetoric of headlines to invite a perception of urgency or immediacy. In a sense, the visual rhetoric of the text simulates the kairotic energy that traditional media outlets utilize to skew our perceptions of current events. For example, headlines typically choose the most sensational phrases to create interest in potential readers, stylizing them in alarmist capital letters and bold text. Think *The New York Times*' "NIXON RESIGNS." Now referred to as "clickbait," these strategies are meant to drive sales and circulation. Kruger, however, uses these strategies to prompt reflection in her viewers. Kruger (2000) commented on this intention, stating that "basically, in order for these images and words to do their work they have to catch the eye of the spectator" (p. 438). Kruger elucidated the exigence of her tactics, stating that "what the media have done today is make a thing meaningless through its accessibility. And what I'm interested in is taking that accessibility and making meaning. I'm interested in dealing with complexity" (p. 448). In this sense, she sought to inject the genres that are deployed as shallow mongers of consumer capitalism with social, political, and cultural criticism.

This case study unfolds through a discussion of the ways in which Kruger appropriates tools of the patriarchy—such as violent language, photography, and the gaze—in order to undermine visual and discursive rhetorics of commodification. I employ the traditional economic definition of commodification, where commodification is the process by which goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information, people, and/or animals are constructed as objects with monetary value. Because Kruger's work illuminates how bodies are commodified in society, I supplement an economic understanding of commodification with communications scholar Anne Balsamo's (1996) assertion that "the natural body is technologically transformed into a sign of culture" (p. 280). In other words, visual culture emphasizes the marked3 elements of bodies that are, in turn, presented as cultural signs that carry history, assumptions, valuations—also known as baggage. This baggage is read as an identity and in this reading "identities become signs and signs become commodities" (p. 280). In Kruger's work, the focus on mass media and popular culture functions to inform her viewers of the propaganda enacted by mass media itself. In what follows, I examine how Kruger's appropriation constitutes the visual language in her art and present her deployment of collage as a rhetorical move that reflects the subversive potentiality of feminist iconography.

Theoretical Framework: Subversion, Feminist Epistemologies, and Resistance

This review explores the concept of subversion in the spirit of Judith Butler as a visual-discursive space from which political transformation can arise. Subversion opens up a space for questioning and contesting the regulatory norms that govern bodies, identities, and desires. In "Inventing Women: From Amaterasu to Virginia Woolf, Women's Studies in Communication," Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) claimed that subversion is a central principle of rhetorical invention for feminist rhetoric (p. 112). Supporting her claim, she

3 In binary oppositions, the first category is understood to be unmarked (hence the "norm") and the second category as marked, hence other. The markedness signifies the ability to identify the difference that carries that mark. In the binary male/female, for instance, the category male is unmarked, thus dominant and the category of female is marked, or not the norm. These categories of marked and unmarked are most noticeable when the norm is departed from.

asserted that "the roots of change" rely on "processes that undermine or call…into question…the myths that justify women's subordination and the ideological barriers that [delay] social change" (p. 112). Toril Moi (1997) mused on the subversive potentiality of appropriation, stating, "there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology" (p. 105). Rather than the hegemonic connotation of cultural appropriation that results in the erasure of marginalized cultures, Moi urged feminists to appropriate or creatively transform resources within patriarchy, including language (p. 105).

Barbara Kruger both critiques and works from within a matrix of constraining systems, including cisheteropatriarchy, consumer capitalism, and white supremacy. Rhetoric scholars, such as Kohrs Campbell (1998), maintained that one must work from within the constraining system if one is interested in instigating change. Thus, the silver lining is that she has a plethora of content from which to enact this kind of productive appropriation. This type of appropriation serves as a means of critiquing the mass reproduction of images and the social interests served by the industrialization of mass culture. For example, Kruger creates and distributes her work on materials goods like tote bags, postcards, and T-shirts. In so doing, she blurs the boundaries between criticism and commercialism, high art and low (or popular) culture, and exclusivity and accessibility. Kruger stated, "I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are, what we want to be and what we become" (Marshall, 2009). Remixing seemingly innocuous images from mid-20th century popular culture or print-media sources with confrontational first- and second-person statements, Kruger creates a visual-discursive remedy, a counter-rhetoric, a striking billboard for consciousness raising through her art.

In the context of visual culture, the available resources are abundant and speak to us constantly through the images we consume. For example, images of the 50s housewife, sexualized images of women in advertising campaigns, and representations of "happy" women on social media represent potential sites of visual complicity in patriarchy that a scholarly feminist interrogation can illuminate. This move is especially important in the face of symbolic annihilation, or the portrayal of women in "narrow, demeaning, trivializing, or distorted ways" (Milkie, 2002, p. 841). According to Melissa A. Milkie's (2002) study on femininity and gatekeeping, symbolic annihilation is a central way women's disadvantage is created and maintained through cultural beliefs and stereotypes presented in magazines, television, and film, among other media forms. Valuing subversive texts by and for women and feminists has the potential to inform the everyday negotiation of self-expression, eroding the grip of normative femininity and inviting micro and macro instances of feminist rhetorical invention.

Kruger's interventions encourage viewers to question the messages they encounter daily and reflect on the broader implications of power and control in contemporary society. However, her work is not solely oppositional; it also plays with the language and aesthetics commonly employed by governmental and commercial entities. By assimilating to these techniques, she enters into a dialogue with the dominant forms of communication and mass media. In this way, her art can simultaneously disrupt and assimilate within the same systems. A feminist politics is one in which complicity functions subversively, a destabilizing contesta-

tion of meaning.

Collage as Subversive Iconography

Kruger's complementary (contradictory?) use of prose alongside imagery in a visual text ienables a fruitful opportunity for subversion. Campbell (1998) wrote that inventing women "assumed roles that gave them access to the argumentation reserved for males" (p. 121). The examples in this study reflect women's participation in public discourse as generative spaces for world-(re)making—where women invent themselves as rhetors, subjects, and authorities through the rhetoric of subversion. When Kruger assumes the role of rhetor through collage, she engages in a world-(re)making activity. Through this she is able to examine that which is already constructed, normalized, and taken-for-granted.

For example, Ron Rosenbaum (2012) for Smithsonian Magazine wrote on the importance of Kruger's involvement with words as a conceptual artist. He considered,

> The more words wash over us, the less we understand them. And the less we are able to recognize which ones are influencing us—manipulating us subtly, invisibly, insidiously. Barbara Kruger rematerializes words, so that we can read them closely, deeply.

This statement points to the inundating nature of the digital age, where we are constantly faced with news, opinions, imagery, and updates that desensitize us. In an era of overstimulation and overexposure, Kruger's pieces offer a declarative and domineering perspective that is consistent in her oeuvre from the 80s to the present day. It is important to note that the term "domineering" is not used negatively in this context. Rather, it reflects Kruger's deliberate and impactful artistic approach, where she takes a commanding stance to challenge and confront societal norms, power structures, and cultural narratives. Her work aims to disrupt complacency and encourage viewers to critically reflect on their own roles within the dominant systems she critiques. In this section, I explore how Kruger utilizes collage, particularly combining image and text, to undermine visual and discursive rhetorics of commodification in a visual medium.

The arrangement of visual elements within a collage contribute to Kruger's rhetorical impact, capturing attention, directing focus, and conveying meaning. "I think what I'm trying to do is create moments of recognition," Kruger explained, "To try to detonate some kind of feeling or understanding of lived experience" (Marshall, 2009). Through the process of appropriation and recontextualization, Kruger creates intertextual relationships that refer to or comment on the original sources. Rosenbaum wrote that her early collage pieces were "formal verbal defacements of glossy magazine pages, glamorous graffiti" (Rosenbaum, 2012). This statement rightly aligns Kruger with the defiant and reorienting nature of graffiti but contextualizes her activism in feminine forms.

The choice of materials, images, and symbols within a collage can reflect and critique prevailing ideologies, challenge dominant narratives, or engage with specific social, political, or artistic movements. The rhetorical impact of a collage is shaped by its cultural and historical context and the audience's reception within that context. Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art commissioned a collage from Kruger as recently as November 2022 entitled *Untitled (Hope/Fear)* (2022) (see Figure 1). In it, she remixes her most famous

image *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989) into a three-part installation that reminds visitors that the threats of war, reality of inequity, and pressure to capitulate in hegemony are running rampant as ever. Kruger originally composed it as a poster for the April 1989 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC to protest new laws limiting women's access to health care. As her most recognizable piece, it has played an important role in designating the iconic status of her artistry.

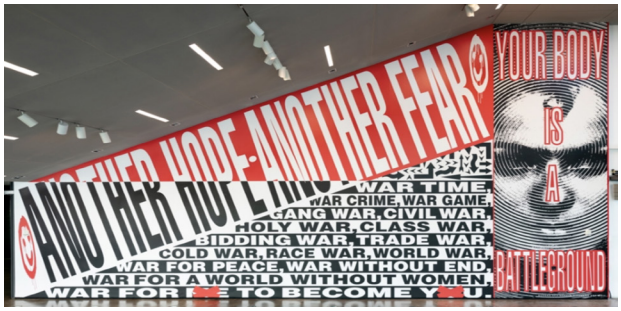

Figure 1: *Untitled (Hope/Fear)*, 2022, by Barbara Kruger.

In the stand-alone *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, she constructs the viewer as an implicit player in the militant policing of bodies in patriarchy (see Figure 2). In the context of the anti-abortion movement for which it was originally composed, the image could be interpreted as a critique of the fact that women's rights to their own bodies are second to inherently misogynist political interests and ideological motivations. Nevertheless, the picture could be interpreted in other ways and in a wider context than is the pro-choice movement. The viewer may understand themselves to be a player who imposes expectations on other bodies; who uses their own body for battle or defense; whose use of their own body is governed by outside forces. Generally, interpretation of this artwork revolves around the themes of agency, control, and the societal battles fought over women's bodies. The use of the word "battleground" implies a struggle or conflict, suggesting that women's bodies are sites of ongoing power struggles, both at an individual and a collective level.

Figure 2: *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, 1989, by Barbara Kruger.

The image of the woman's face, divided and juxtaposed with the text, represents the fragmentation and

objectification of women's bodies in society. The artwork challenges the traditional objectification and control over women's bodies, inviting viewers to reflect on the societal pressures and expectations placed upon women. The bold and assertive text asserts the ownership and agency of women over their bodies, turning the notion of the body as a passive object on its head. By presenting the body as a battleground, Kruger draws attention to the ongoing fights for bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and freedom from patriarchal control.

The use of the word "your" in the text is significant, as it addresses the viewer directly and implicates them in the discourse. It invites self-reflection and encourages viewers to consider their own complicity or involvement in the battles fought over women's bodies. Overall, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* is a powerful and provocative artwork that challenges the objectification and control of women's bodies. It calls for awareness, activism, and resistance against oppressive societal structures and invites viewers to critically examine their roles in the ongoing struggles for bodily autonomy and gender equality.

The original image in *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* is an editorial shot of a conventionally attractive woman, with coiffed hair and neutral makeup, with the corners of her mouth upturned ever so lightly. Standing alone, the viewer might appreciate the image as representative of a real woman, real womanhood, or aspirational beauty. However, Kruger offers the artificiality of the photograph on a silver platter by presenting half of the image in its negative form–the version of itself before it has been developed. Rosenbaum (2012) described the text on Battleground as an "agitprop aphorism" that "features a woman's face made into a grotesque-looking mask by slicing it in half and rendering one side as a negative." The choice immediately underscores the composite nature of photography, eschewing elements of (T)ruth from the documentary image form. Kruger's spliced image interrupts the viewer's conditioned response to photography as a conduit of truth. Neither the text nor the image would be, could be read the same way without the other. Thus, Kruger appropriates photography's appropriation of reality for the purpose of critiquing its system of production.

Working in a visual medium, Kruger rests her criticisms and confrontations to the status quo on the viewer's ability to see and perceive. In so doing, she challenges a number of binaries to demonstrate how collapsible they are as structures of meaning. Three of the binaries that she responds to include subject vs. object, passive vs. active, and high vs. low. As a result, Kruger constitutes a feminist gaze in the visual language of her oeuvre. Kruger's feminist gaze challenges the dominant male gaze by confronting and subverting its objectifying and controlling nature. Read as an accusation, text such as "your body is a battleground" and "your gaze hits the side of my face" gesture toward the effects of subjugation. It does so by framing viewers as consumers, abusers, and victims and confounding who is speaking within the piece and forces viewers to ask themselves which role they occupy in relation to the art. For example, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)* (1981) can be interpreted as a response to the gaze (see Figure 3). This piece offers a dialectic exploration of subversive rhetorical iconicity.

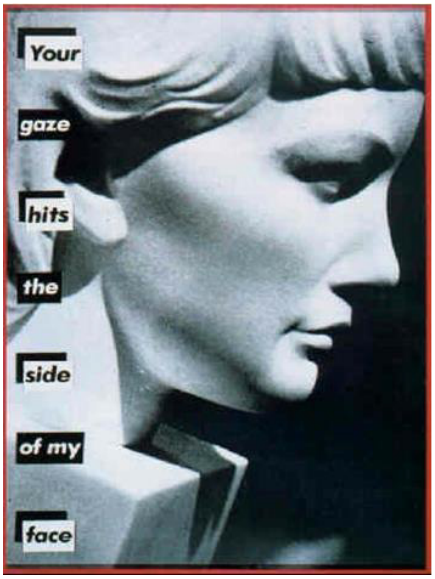

Figure 3: *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)*, 1981, by Barbara Kruger.

The image is a profile of a stone bust with the words "your gaze hits the side of my face" vertically imposed down the left-hand side of the image. The use of a classical statue, which often embodies idealized notions of beauty and perfection, draws attention to the historical construction of beauty standards and how they have been perpetuated and imposed upon individuals, particularly women. In a medusa-esque fashion, the sculpture calls out the spectator and interrupts their gaze, making them conscious of their own looking. By directly addressing the viewer with the text, Kruger shifts the power dynamics inherent in the male gaze. The abstraction of the gaze refers to the desire and pleasures of the dominant subjectivity and has historically produced consciousness through visuality, both consequently male. Individuals who wield the male gaze are typically white and heterosexual, mostly economically advantaged men who have wielded social and political power. As a result, these are the same men who have dominated the arts, literature, the media, business, and scholarship. In other words, this particular kind of gaze is cast from a position of power. By responding to (critiquing) the male gaze, Kruger speaks back to the way in which women have historically been portrayed and objectified in art and media, often for the pleasure of male viewers.

The juxtaposition of the statue and the text brings attention to the power dynamics inherent in the act of looking and being looked at. The text in the artwork asserts the woman's presence and demands recognition. It challenges the viewer to acknowledge her individuality, agency, and subjectivity beyond being a passive object of the male gaze. By giving voice to the woman[4] within the artwork, Kruger challenges the erasure and objectification of women that can occur under the male gaze. Instead of being the passive object of the viewer's gaze, the subject of the artwork asserts her presence and challenges the viewer's position of power. The directness of the address disrupts the assumption that the male gaze can freely objectify and control women. With the overlay of the text on the woman's face, Kruger interrupts the viewer's gaze, obstructing a complete and unobstructed view of the subject. This disruption emphasizes the subject's agency and challenges the objectifying nature of the male gaze. Thus, she calls attention to the act of looking itself and prompts viewers to question their own assumptions and the power dynamics at play.

4 I refer to the image as she/her because the piece is commonly referred to as "stone woman."

Both *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* and *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)* are useful for discussing Kruger's engagement with the opposition between passivity and activity. In both *Untitled* pieces, the female figures challenge dominant constructions of feminine visuality within the constraints of conventional beauty subject in one and inanimate sculpture in the other. Both images interrupt the passive vs. active binary within their constraints by utilizing confrontational text. Again, the use of personal pronouns used to frame an accusation creates a direct relationship between the viewer and the subject of the image. Kruger subverts traditional expectations by presenting passive or traditionally submissive figures in positions of power and agency by layering assertive text over potentially innocuous feminine symbols. She disrupts the notion that these categories are mutually exclusive, demonstrating that individuals can embody aspects of both passivity and activity simultaneously or at different times. By blurring these boundaries with collage, she challenges simplistic categorizations and encourages a more nuanced understanding of human agency and engagement. Through her artwork, she challenges the assumption that passivity equates to weakness or inferiority, while questioning the notion that activity always signifies strength or superiority.

The use of multiple modes enhances the rhetorical potential of collage, allowing Kruger to convey messages through a combination of visual, linguistic, and aesthetic means. "Panning for iconic words and images like a miner looking for gold in a fast-running stream," wrote Rosenbaum (2012), romanticizing Kruger's process, she "extract[s] the nuggets and giv[es] them a setting and a polish so they can serve as our mirror." The resulting "mirror" as Rosenbaum puts it, benefits from a rhetoric of subversion. Tasha N. Dubriwny (2005) reframed Kennerth Burke's concept of "perspective by incongruity" for social justice by likening it to the literary figure of oxymoron. She described it as "a yoking together [of] items that seem contradictory (or at least incongruous) within the context of the established orientation" (p. 398). The function of this rhetorical dissonance in Kruger's work is not only to confront assumptions that perpetuate dominant ideologies, but to radicalize the viewer—or at least leave them with more information about their own experiences. The juxtaposition of disparate elements within a collage can create unexpected connections and generate new meanings. Through the use of symbolism and metaphor, Kruger communicates complex ideas, challenges established narratives, and makes sociopolitical commentary.

Conclusion

Barbara Kruger's visual rhetoric stages a relentless confrontation with the forces that seek to define, commodify, and control identity. Through her strategic appropriation of found photographs, sensationalist typographic forms, and the techniques of advertising and mass media, she crafts a visual language that both inhabits and destabilizes dominant ideological systems. Situating images in a new context, framed by a striking phrase or pointed statement and a red border, she reforms the meaning of both and unifies them as a new entity. The result is an apparent representation of the insidiousness of patriarchal standards and dynamics that travel through visual culture. Kruger's use of bold statements and provocative imagery invites viewers to critically engage with the underlying power structures and cultural narratives that shape our society, often highlighting the ways patriarchal systems and consumerist culture marginalize and oppress certain groups or individuals.

By questioning these systems, she prompts viewers to reflect on their own roles within the larger social context. Her work exposes how bodies become signs, signs become commodities, and gazes become instruments of power—while simultaneously offering viewers tools to question and resist those very processes. By collapsing binaries such as subject/object, passive/active, and high/low, Kruger demonstrates how meaning itself is constructed, mutable, and open to subversion. Ultimately, her art invites viewers not merely to see but to recognize their own complicity and agency within structures of power. In transforming the familiar into the confrontational and the ordinary into the critical, Kruger shows how feminist rhetorical invention can reimagine visual culture as a site of resistance, making visible the ideological battles that shape our lived experiences and urging us to imagine new possibilities for agency, identity, and social change.

Biography

Rachel E. Molko is a first-generation Venezuelan and Jewish feminist rhetorician. At the time of researching and writing this case study, she was Assistant Director of Northeastern University's Writing Program where she earned her doctorate. Rachel's research explores feminist rhetorical theory and feminine visuality in contemporary popular culture. She is currently a Lecturer in Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication Program. Outside of work, she enjoys watching Jeopardy! with her husband, practicing hot vinyasa, and spending time with her cat.

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"The Modern Girl Wants to Have it All"?: Shifting Megarhetorics of Empowerment in *An African City*.

Nancy Henaku

Abstract: In 2014, Ghanaian-American filmmaker Nicole Amarteifio debuted on YouTube *An African City*, a web series that has been dubbed "Africa's Sex and the City". The show—which centers on the lives of five African women who have recently returned to the continent from their long stay in Europe and America—seeks to provide alternative representations of African women as modern subjects and for this reason, the show has been acclaimed as a counter rhetoric. Analyzing the show and receptions of it using perspectives from feminist theories of the cinematic gaze, transnational feminist rhetorics and Africana Critical Theory suggest a complex deployment of megarhetorics of empowerment and consequently, reflects on the limits and possibilities of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for visualizing women of African descent. This paper presents shifting—a present continuous word of action variously defined as transformation, liminality, circulation, code-shifting, embodied-affective response—as a trope/motif in African women's cinema. Shifting, in this paper, becomes a viable feminist approach for reading the rhetorical nuances and ambiguities of what can be designated as "difficult texts" not only in terms of content but also in form and audience reception. By attending to the complex entanglement of various shiftings in *An African City*, this paper highlights the rhetorical conundrum of Amarteifio's cinematic choices and how their underlying tropes or visions of empowerment—simultaneously interpellated, transformed and disrupted—present interpretive difficulties for feminist viewer-analysts. Ultimately, the paper presents An African City not only as a sample African-authored feminist visual text but also as a source of a rhetorical theory of transnational black women's cinematic politics.

Keywords: shifting, empowerment, transnational rhetorics, postfeminism, Afropolitanism

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Introduction

The camera pans over the city, capturing an expanse of multi-story buildings, moving vehicles and greenery. Two Black men walk briskly by the street, but they are not the subject of the cinematic narrative, so we hardly see their faces. The camera eventually settles on the exterior of an apartment painted in mild yellow and then enters the building, where we find five Black African women—all recent returnees from the West—animatedly discussing how a woman's financial independence can impede her sexual prospects in Ghana. The atmosphere is convivial as these close friends comfortably share intimate details of their lives. Their talk about their various romantic disappointments is peppered with wits and laughter as they (prepare to) wine together. They are in a newly-rented apartment owned by Nana Yaa, the narrative's protagonist who, having initially tried finding a man to fund the apartment, opted for a loan instead. Overlaying the opening visuals is a voiceover that proclaims, in a typical American accent, the following "postfeminist shibboleths" (Negra, 2009, p. 4): "the modern girl wants to have it all. She wants a job that she loves waking up to everyday. She wants financial stability. She wants great friends. She wants equally great boyfriends. She wants great sex. She wants a great love." This is the opening scene of an episode of *An African City* (hereafter *AAC*), a globally acclaimed web series that debuted on YouTube in 2014 and is set in Accra, Ghana. Created by Ghanaian-American filmmaker Nicole "Amerley" Amarteifio, the show seeks to present an alternative cinematic portrait of modern African femininities, characterized by expressiveness (in speech and fashion), sexual agency and cosmopolitan consciousness. Consequently, it provides

crucial material for reflecting on the rhetorical implications (in both theory and practice) of African women's cinematic contributions in contemporary neoliberal contexts.

This essay focuses on the deployment of a multilayered megarhetorics of empowerment in *AAC* to reflect on the potentialities and challenges of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for visualizing the lives of minoritized women. Megarhetorics of empowerment are neoliberal hegemonic narratives of progress that mediate self-improvement through capital. They emphasize choice, agency and consumption as indices of empowered subjectification. The taken-for-granted assumptions of empowerment discourses possess a "'mega' power" that enable them to "shape practices across the globe" (Scott & Dingo, 2012, p. 5). Informed by feminist theories of the cinematic gaze (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992), transnational feminist rhetorics—especially Rebecca Dingo's (2012) work on empowerment discourses, and Africana Critical Theory (Fanon, 1986; Mama, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997), my discussion introduces *shifting* not only as a trope in African women's cinematic representations but also as a feminist rhetorical approach for reading the nuances of complex texts and subjectivities. I define *shifting* in five senses: viz. aesthetic and social transformation—including "gaze shifts"—which refers to visual strategies that center and (re)vision *other* subjectivities; circulation of all kinds (including of people, ideas, sensibilities such as megarhetorics); codeshifting (shifts between variously-linked rhetorical forms in line with the palimpsestic character of megarhetorics); identitarian liminality (the in-between consciousness of postcolonial/diasporic subjects as transcultural people); and finally, the politics of somatic-affective resonances—e.g., laughter, joy, discomfort—experienced by consumers and producers of the series.

I use the present continuous tense to highlight the continued shifts that happen as audiences engage and circulate *AAC* and texts around it. This is especially crucial because, at least, the first season of the show is still freely available on YouTube and is constantly watched and commented on by audiences across the globe. Furthermore, *shifting* allows me to acknowledge the analytical possibilities presented by my positionality as a Ghanaian woman—born and bred in Accra—who has watched the show at different times in the U.S and Ghana. Each contextualized viewing allowed me to (re)read the series from a different angle. My constantly shifting reflections from these (re)readings underscored the complex textuality of *AAC* and the usefulness of critical ambivalence as a method. By attending to the various *shiftings* in *AAC*, I highlight the rhetorical conundrum of Amarteifio's cinematic choices and how their underlying tropes of empowerment—simultaneously transformed and disrupted in the show—present interpretive difficulties for feminist viewer-analysts. The conclusion critically reflects on how a visual rhetorical analysis that centers shifting as a critical lens unravels the layered aporetic meanings of texts like *AAC*.

The Cinematic Gaze and Neoliberal Megarhetorics of Empowerment

Discussions of the gaze in *AAC* are complicated by two crucial factors: one, the neoliberal (gendered) context of the series and two, the text's centering of African women as racialized subjects in transnational media. As shown subsequently, this essay assumes that neoliberal visuality structures *AAC*'s representations because of the series' complex suffusion of postfeminist and Afropolitan (African-inflected cosmopolitan) sensibilities. Both sensibilities are influenced by neoliberal politics, though one is linked with a mainly gen-

dered intersectional script and the other, a mainly racial intersectional script. This is further complicated by the series' postcolonial African urban setting with its complex histories, relationalities, cultures and representational codes. Thus, to account for *AAC*'s many *shiftings*, discussions must move beyond a unified view towards a more intersectional view of the cinematic gaze "as a dynamic site" for the convergence of multiple viewpoints (Lutz & Collins, 1991, p. 134). Such a view would enable readers to negotiate complex analytical positionalities as they unpack the multidimensionality of visual texts (p. 137).

One lens takes for granted the phallocentric and racialized representational politics of the cinematic gaze. Laura Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytical reading of classic Hollywood narrative cinema has argued that women are "coded for strong visual and erotic impact" in ways that associate women with "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 11). In this sexual politics, where men possess an active gaze and control the narrative, the woman is objectified to satisfy male desire and fantasy. While the context of Mulvey's work is vastly different from *AAC's* production context in terms of space and temporality, Mulvey's observations about the patriarchal psyche in Hollywood cinema foreground the gendered history of cinema as a representational technology—a history that is crucial even for texts like *AAC*, which are produced outside of, but remain in conversation with, mainstream cinema. *AAC's* attempts to center the female gaze does not completely disrupt the male gaze because of the series' emphasis on women's sexual lives. Furthermore, Black scholarship (see Fanon, 1986; hooks, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997) can extend analysis of African-authored texts beyond the male gaze, highlighting the need to consider cinema's engagements with other sites of differentiation. Writing about the Black condition, Fanon (1986) observed that the white gaze—described as "the only real eyes"—objectifies the black body resulting in silencing, invisibility and self-contempt (p. 116). Oyěwùmí's (1997) contextual theorization can expand Fanonian explanations beyond race through the argument that sight structures the "exaggerated presence" of the body in Western cultures, a phenomenon she designated as "bio-logic" (p. 2-30). Because "the body is always in view and on view," "it invites…a gaze of differentiation," with gendered othering being just one of such effects (p. 2). Crucially, Oyěwùmí argued that this Western "worldview" has become global. *AAC* attempts to disrupt colonialist misrepresentation of Blackness by centering the experiences of diasporic Africans whose links with the West complicates the gendered gaze with a racial and bourgeois gaze. However, the series' dependence on postfeminist and Afropolitan codes—both of which are shaped by global dynamics and engage the body as a site of empowerment, recirculates Western bio-logic.

The circulatory power of Western bio-logics is demonstrated in cinema that centers the "modern girl" and/or the Afropolitan. In these texts, the gaze is imbricated in the argumentative modes of "megarhetorics" of neoliberal development which circulate commonsense ideas about empowerment whose persuasive functions and effects shift in response to specific translocalities (Scott & Dingo, 2012, p. 2). Postfeminist "girly" films with their emphasis on consumption, choice and entrepreneurialism (see Radner, 2010), share with Afropolitanism the disciplinary power of neoliberalism and its constitution of specific modern subjectivities—that is, "normative global citizens" (Dingo, 2007, p. 105). Underlying representations of a highly stylized "empowered" woman, often situated in the city, who takes charge of her sexuality is a postfeminist gaze that engages ironically with the legacies of feminism. Afropolitans—cosmopolitans with African roots—are highly mobile, highly educated Africans with access to neoliberal capitalist resources of the Western world

especially; they wish to define themselves beyond the rigid confines of the nation-state, engaging ironically with PanAfrican ideologies. As Ede (2016) has argued, Afropolitanism "pander[s] to the white metropolitan gaze in targeting that public as its first literary audience" (p. 94). I read the intersections of the gazes linked with these perspectives as rhetorical effects of neoliberal biopolitics.

Because black experiences with coloniality are not monolithic, there are diverse ways to account for black relations with the gaze. hooks' (1992) argument that Black people are engaged in "a broad range of looking relations" besides resistance (p. 128) is especially significant. However, this point was made in the context of hooks' theorization of the "oppositional gaze": the capacity of Black people, as oppressed subjects, to cultivate a kind of visual agency that interrogates dominant and oppressive representational politics and imagines more transformative visions of reality. If "[t]he 'gaze' has been and is a site for resistance for colonized black people globally" (p. 116), how does one engage *AAC's* neoliberal (re)framing in its representations of new diasporic African femininities? As subsequently argued, *AAC* reflects an apparent ambiguity or paradox, for it attempts to be critical of dominant discourses only to fall back into these scripts in its revisioning of African femininity. Consequently, even the megarhetorics that shape the series are continuously shifting and the producers cannot be said to be unaware of these representational effects.

Are you a Ghanaian?: Shiftings in *An African City*

The series is framed as an "oppositional black gaze" (hooks, 1992, p. 117) in response to mediated racism against Africa and African women in Western media. Amarteifio (2016) indicates that she created the show to shift a dominant politics of visibility in Western media–one in which African women become "nameless victims in the front cover of poverty reports," receive little coverage and speak less on screen (Amarteifio, 2016; Christensen, 2021). While Amarteifio targets a Western audience, she also disrupts dominant masculinist representations of women as passive or dangerous (see Garritano, 2013, p. 17) in popular African cinema while triggering debates about who qualifies to tell African stories. Thus, from Amarteifio's perspective, her show was a rhetorical solution to a rhetorical problem. This context is crucial for reading the opening of the series, with its layered visual politics.

Titled "The Return," the opening episode begins at the airport in Accra, Ghana. Nana Yaa, the protagonist, has just returned to her home country after her studies in the US. The camera tilts upward gradually moving from her feet to her face, giving us a view of her appearance–one that some spectators say reminds them of Lauren Hill: she is in a black jacket on a white tank top, dangling earrings and a necklace. Her natural hair is styled in finger coils, and her lips are painted in bright red lipstick. From the tarmac, she walks confidently, to the upbeat rhythm of the background Afrobeat music, towards immigration only to be misrecognized by a Black male immigration officer who explains: "Madam, the line for the non-Ghanaians is at the other side." Nana Yaa responds saying "Yeah, I know. I am Ghanaian" in standard American accent. The officer responds "Huh? You're a Ghanaian. You don't look and sound like a Ghanaian [with rising intonation]." When she finally gives him her passport, she says "See, mi yɛ Ghanani" in an American-accented English-Akan codeswitching. The official mimics this accent when he jokingly responds "wu yɛ Ghanani" [You are Ghanaian]. Displeased, Nana Yaa gazes at him as if to register her discontent and persistence then

sarcastically says "Medaase [Thank you]" (with an American accent) before walking towards the exit even as the official, obviously perplexed, continues to stare. The airport, as a chronotope of mobility, indexes Nana Yaa as a liminal subject whose situatedness within this contact zone and performative sartoriality imply that her identity is always already in question. The scene intervisually engages with, and disrupts already existing discourses of the return of the African Diaspora, implying that not all who look African American (visually symbolized by echoes of Lauren Hill's iconic style) hold a foreign passport. As the first episode shows subsequently, Nana Yaa is not alone for there are four other women—her girlfriends (all returnees)—who also share this liminal identity.

A visual syntax of neoliberal worldliness frames the series' alternative visions of African femininity, ironically shaped by the very structures of domination that the series seeks to dismantle. The camera's constant lingering on high-rise or luxury buildings, billboards, historical monuments and vehicular mobility constructs Accra as a space of business, development and leisure. The camera lingers on the billboards and exteriors of businesses and recreational spaces long enough to have the names of these brands registered in a viewer's memories. The interior mise en scene of various episodes show expensive furniture and high-end art, complementing the luxurious looks of the women which are characterized by a diverse and modern high-end wardrobe often blending African vibrant fabrics and aesthetics with global fashion trends. The timing and angle of the camerawork connote to-be-looked-at-ness, inviting viewers to visually savor the cityscape and the signified bodies of the women. This is exemplified by a joyful comment on episode two: "The Hair! THE HAIR!!!! I don't care if the acting and the script could use some significant work... **look at them. I can't take my eyes off the screen.** They are all goddesses in their own right" (@darkinetix, 2014, emphasis added). Through their diverse African hairstyles (e.g., natural, weave, permed and braided) and chic clothes and accessories, the women perform "spectacular femininity" (see Dosekun, 2020) as a dimension of a gendered Afrocosmopolitan 'cool'. They are young, beautiful, successful, healthy and sensual African women living a life of glamour and consumption.

In presenting the narrative from these women's perspectives and making men the object of their sexual desires–evidenced for instance by Sade's sensual gaze at the "dark and chocolaty and young" male passersby in episode one, Amarteifio shifts the male gaze but not entirely. The emphasis on the spectacular fashion and sexual lives of the women highlights the political potential of the personal but they also reinforce the scopophilic ("pleasure in looking"; see Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p. 451) lens of mainstream gendered mediation. Crucially, the constant technological (camera) shift between the women and the urban space (see images 1.0 and 2.0) constructs both the feminine body and urban landscape as objects on which the signs of modernity are inscribed and both attract our scopophilic attention. One reading could frame the visual narrative of the series as a kind of love letter to Accra. However, such readings would have to contend with the fact that the series is visually presented as a kind of tourist guide and/or advertisement for the many businesses (e.g., hotels, salons, gyms, pharmaceuticals) showcased and linguistically referenced. In so doing, the series visualizes both the city and the women as signs of Africa's rise through a recirculation of postfeminist and Afropolitan megarhetorics. Underlying these rhetorics are complex instances of simultaneous objectification and subjectification, raising questions about the limits of resolving neoliberal poverty porn narratives

of Africa and its women with neoliberal narratives of empowerment.

Image 1.0: A Scene from Episode Six, Season One.

Image 2.0: A Scene from Episode Ten, Season One.

The interpellation of Global Northern white audiences constructs a looking relationship with biopolitical implications—that is, the idea that the ideal female body in Africa's rising narrative is that regulated by neoliberal logics. On *AAC*'s Twitter (now X) page, the show is described as "'Sex and the City' meets AFRICA!" (see @AnAfricanCity, 2012). NPR, like many other transnational media outlets (such as The New York Times, BBC, Indie Wire, Yahoo, ForbesAfrica), have also made this comparison, describing *AAC* as a "remix" of "*Sex and the City*" (Meraji, 2016). These framings call for a comparative analysis that emphasizes the transnational linkages between *AAC* and other extant texts but not without pointing to an underlying rhetorical hierarchization. This comparison—and the fact that the show prioritizes young women's lives in the context of modernity, sexuality and cultures of consumption—construct the series as chick flick, a quintessential postfeminist genre implicated in the global circulation of megarhetorics of empowerment. However, reading *AAC* merely as an African version of *Sex and the City* presents interpretive challenges because of the "other" histories and subjective positionings that composing in an African metropolis necessarily engages.

By comparing *AAC* to *Sex and the City*, the series takes on a Western capitalist/colonialist gaze of desire and reproduces the registers of Hollywood postfeminist cinema because ultimately the representation must be recognizable. The women are visually black, but they possess white sensibilities, exemplified when one of the characters indicates that "I have an obroni [white person's] mouth." To follow Fanon (1986), one could describe this as a case of "BLACK SKIN, WHITE TASTE." White taste is a synecdochic representation of the

characters' range of white middle-class sensibilities and consciousness, made possible through a racial reconfiguration that has expanded whiteness to include non-whites who can perform neoliberal success through accent, consumption pattern, sartorial stylization and a liberal ethos, for example (summed up in the following title of an NPR review: "Sex, Style and Success In 'An African City'"). The women love Starbucks coffee, they buy drugs from the U.S., and they are vegetarian. Though the polyphonic representation of the women allows audiences to hear multiple perspectives on postcolonial gendered relations and subjectivities—and thus, at least in this sense, the series challenges monolithic representations of modern African womanhood—a single narrative is presented of non-diasporic Ghanaians even if there are moments of tension and complexities. The men are sexually "psychotic," the maids steal bras, nieces ask for shoes, "aunties" use "fat" as a compliment, the politicians are corrupt and irresponsible, service providers cannot follow simple instructions. The argument is that local Ghanaians lack global ethical sensibilities. It is not clear whether Amarteifio is only making visible these women's views of local people, or her own views are filtering through the representation. Knowing that Amarteifio has degrees in African Studies and corporate communications, as well as work experience at the World Bank requires a reading of her show as intentional—rather than incidental—rhetoric. I suggest that the ironic tensions in *AAC* are partly linked to Amarteifio's liminal positionality as someone who is both within and outside Western modernity and its ideas of progress. She is not only literate in, but has also actively participated in the circulation of, the megarhetorics of empowerment shaping the policies of transnational development agencies. If, as Fanon (1986) argues, "to speak means…to support the weight of a civilization" (p. 17-18), then her appropriation of Western cinematic forms further reinforces Western ideas about Africa.

The women are so privileged, but they do not reflect on their complicity in the very system that subjugates their continent; and Afropolitan perspectives are projected as the modern voices of reason for the continent. Like all empowerment rhetorics, Afropolitanism and postfeminism are limited and ambiguous. In *AAC*, they construct an image of black men as unworldly and unable or unwilling to perform a kind of white respectability politics. In episode 3, Nana Yaa splits from Kofi, her "perfect on paper guy" who has a degree from Harvard and works as a junior partner in a top law firm, because he liked to take "an African dump" in her new apartment. In that breakup frame, Nana Yaa responded strongly to Kofi's announcement that he was going to use the toilet. She throws his clothes at him whilst holding her palm towards her nose, to symbolize foul smell. When Kofi uses the word "toilet" in their heated exchange, Nana Yaa responds that "the non-crass way of saying toilet is to say bathroom or restroom or lavatory." From Nana Yaa's view then Kofi lacked the self-restraint and refinement associated with being respectable. This and other examples suggest the rhetorical risks of appropriating an already existing generic template as a counterhetorical mode. Because of the histories of racialization, even a text such as this that seeks to privilege women's perspectives must be critical in its construction not just of women but their relations with black men, even if for comedic purposes. However, the show also seems to turn the rhetorics of empowerment on their heads. While the girls are poshly dressed and look empowered visually, the series' focus on their everyday struggles (e.g., the high cost of renting; water and power rationing) presents tensions that interrogate this dominant narrative that the modern girl can have it all even in a postcolonial context. Similarly, Afropolitan narratives of Africa Rising

are evoked (e.g., through the focus on brands and the girls' empowered looks) only to be dismantled by their everyday struggles. For one must confront (post)colonial histories and Africa's unequal geopolitical positioning to understand the not-so-pleasant conditions in Accra. In this sense, *AAC* is a countercritique of the very discourses in which it is implicated. Crucially, Amarteifio—in a feminist fashion—re-visions her representation in season one, by introducing in season two a voice that interrogates the white middle class consciousness of the five friends (evident for instance in "Another Return," an episode which calls forth a comparative reading of "The Return" episode in season one).

Conclusion

This essay engages visual rhetorical analysis from transnational and postcolonial angles, explaining how such contexts complicate interpretations of what is seen in *An African City (AAC)*. The analysis suggests that global cultural flows complicate visual semioscapes through processes of (re)circulation and (re)appropriation in specific translocal contexts. This highlights intravisuality—the dynamic constitution of various visual codes (each comprising a language and an ethos)—as a critical framework for examining transnational Black cinema. The discussion of *AAC* also foregrounds the critical power of ambivalence/irony as a visual methodology for composing and reading. For one, *AAC's* affirmative and expansive praxis are obvious in its centering of hair rhetorics, female friendships, codeswitching, sartorial authorship, and Black diasporic intimacies. However, Amarteifio's positionality as a transnational African subject with access to neoliberal megarhetorics of empowerment impacts what one sees and can therefore revise. For instance, because of Amarteifio's experience as a Black subject in the West and as a fan of *Sex and the City*, she is critical of some Western imaginations of Africa but not the postfeminist templates she transposes onto *AAC*. Amarteifio's (re)visioning of African subjectivity through a Western lens, raises critical questions about the political ("oppositional") potential of ambiguous cinematic representations. These contradictions present some interpretive challenges, but they are fruitful in understanding how the liminality of transnational black women necessitates a different reading of politics in ways that complicate and extend feminist praxis. Because things are not always black and white in *AAC*, viewer-analysts must deploy multiple lenses (visual metaphor intended) if we are to avoid myopic interpretations. *Shifting* then becomes a kind of critical and close rhetorical reading strategy for unpacking the implications of layered visual meanings and reflecting on the potentialities and challenges of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for reenvisioning Black female subjects. Ultimately, shifting foregrounds the rhetorical/analytical capaciousness of constantly reframing late modern visualities.

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Biography

Nancy Henaku is a lecturer at the Department of English, University of Ghana. She is an interdisciplinary scholar who uses rhetorical, sociocultural linguistic, critical and cultural theories to explore the transnational resonance of Global Southern discursive politics. In her work, Africa especially emerges as a critical epistemic space for messier theorizations of the workings of discourse, including those related to gender, sexuality and feminisms. Her research appears in the *Routledge Handbook of Rhetoric and Power, African Journal of Rhetoric, Critical Discourse Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, Companion to African Rhetoric and Disruptive Stories* among others.

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The New Woman and Visual Resistance: A Feminist Visual Rhetorical Analysis of *Hard Labor*

Martha Sue Karnes

Abstract: In response to changing social and political forces, feminist activists in Arkansas used community newspapers to spread awareness of events and topics, educate, and build coalitions in the 1970s. This essay examines the rhetorical choices of the cover image of one such newspaper, *Hard Labor*, arguing that the image, *The New Woman*, resisted notions of dominant narratives about womanhood in the 70s through rhetorical choices. By demanding that viewers resist as they look at images like *The New Woman*, cartoons contribute to coalition building by articulating feminist arguments about what womanhood is and can be in the 1970s and demystifying reproductive health.

Keywords: care ethics, resistance, visual rhetoric, coalition, archives.

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Introduction: Looking for Feminisms in Arkansas

As a scholar interested in reproductive health, feminisms, and technical communication, moving to Arkansas presented a unique set of challenges for me. Currently, Arkansas ranks 47 out of 51 states (including Washington, D.C.) in "women's health and reproductive care," ranks last in available maternity care providers, and second to last in infant mortality (Grajeda, 2024). The stakes are high for women and pregnant people living in Arkansas, and as cuts to funding threaten rural hospitals (Luthra & Rodriguez, 2025), pregnancy can be risky and dangerous, and reproductive healthcare can be difficult to impossible to access. These dismal rankings and facts point to a history of lack in reproductive healthcare in Arkansas. I felt an urgent interest, then, in uncovering what this historical context might look like.

This interest and urgency led me to The Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, located within the Central Arkansas Library System, which includes archival holdings focused on the history, literature, art, and culture of Arkansas. Here, I wanted to learn more about the feminist history of Arkansas, particularly relating to reproductive health. Given Arkansas's tenuous at best relationship with reproductive health, I was unsure what I might find as I requested a box of newspapers that claimed to contain materials related to reproductive health. In their piece on rhetorical attendance in the archives, Kat Gray (2025) has reminded us that, "the materials in the archive and the material lives they represent always exceed our expectations in ways we cannot predict until we encounter them" (p. 154). This rang true for me, as I was pleasantly surprised when I was met with issues of *Hard Labor*, a feminist community newspaper published by the Feminist Press Collective in Fayetteville, Arkansas in the 1970s.

The issues in the box were well-worn, with crinkling, rips and tears in corners, and faded edges. I was almost afraid to touch them for fear I might rip the pages further. Julie Homchick Crowe and Ryan Mitchell (2025) offered care ethics as a framework for scholars of rhetoric of health and medicine in the archives, and at that moment, I felt as if I were more than careful. However, Crowe and Mitchell urged that an ethics of care goes beyond caring for archival material physically in how we handle and preserve, but to "take archives

on their own terms" (p. 132). Taking these newspapers on their own terms, then, I forged ahead, remembering that these are "lively" (Cifor, 2013, p. 10) documents, meant to be handled, circulated, read, and discussed.

As I attended to these documents, letting the archives guide me as I thought, "What lives were present in these documents?" I was struck primarily by the use of visuals in the newspapers. Each page contains an image, a cartoon, an advertisement, or a photograph from an event as eye-catching as the content contained in the paper. Care ethics becomes an important framework for this project as I consider how to perform an analysis that is both careful and feminist in nature; these newspapers were circulated not long ago, some of the newspaper personnel still live in Arkansas. Royster and Kirsch (2012) wrote that, "an ethics of hope and care requires a commitment to be open, flexible, welcoming, patient, introspective, and reflective" (p. 145). Feminist care ethics is about returning to concepts and contexts, being slow and deliberate, and thinking. Care ethics thus naturally gives way to feminist visual analysis as I sought to "learn about the contexts of those who use rhetorical strategies under conditions that may be different from [my] own" (p. 145–46). Visual care ethics, then, lets me slow down. A framework of visual care ethics lets the images guide my viewing and understanding of the content contained in the papers. Visual care ethics is thus a feminist framework of looking that emphasizes attention to detail, lived experiences, and a reflection on how these multifaceted experiences may be present in feminist visuals.

These images challenge viewers to engage with the visual content in ways different from simply looking, they ask viewers to critically engage with feminist concepts and contexts by questioning dominant narratives about womanhood. In this essay, I present a feminist rhetorical analysis of how the cover image included in *Hard Labor* constructs and complicates feminist notions of womanhood. In particular, I am interested in the compositional choices presented in the images: the spatial arrangement, maximalist depictions, references to mythology, and gaze, and how these compositional choices may force certain receptions of feminist ideologies. The images and visuals included in *Hard Labor* represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s and a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices.

The illustrations adorning the pages of *Hard Labor* frequently came in the form of cartoon drawings, including the cover illustration, shown below. The images and visuals included in *Hard Labor* represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s and a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices. This tension between struggle and commitment forms a sort of visual resistance to conventional representations of and norms about womanhood, bodies, and health. By demanding that viewers resist as they look at the images, these cartoons contribute to coalition building by articulating feminist arguments about what womanhood is in the 1970s and demystifying reproductive health.

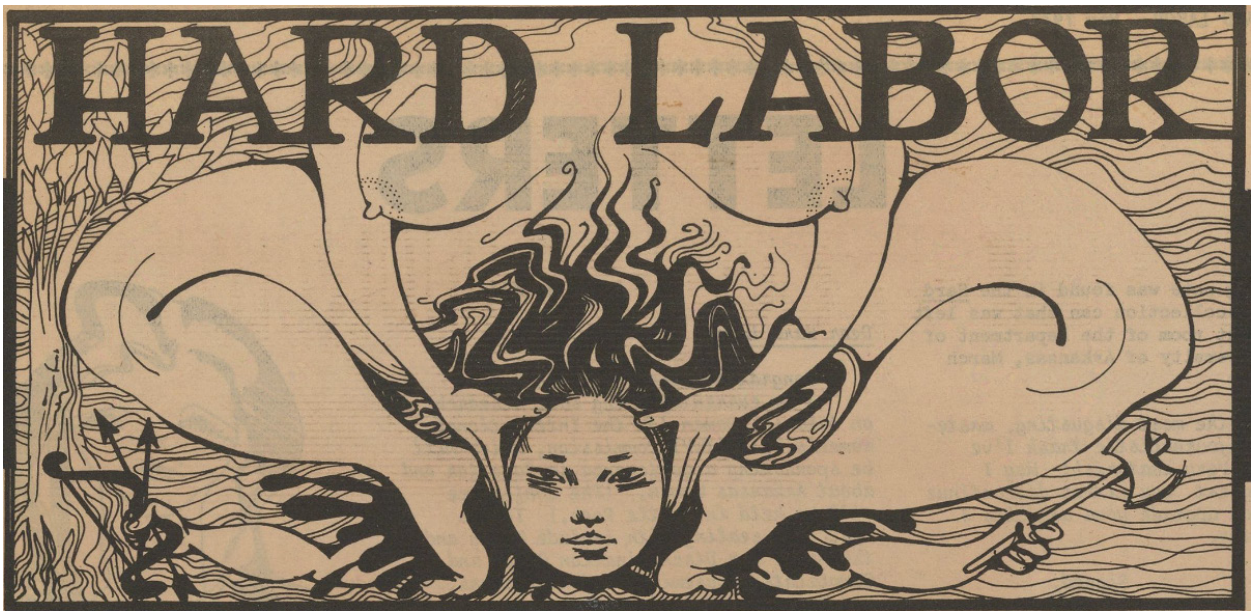

Figure 1: [The New Woman]. (1975.).

Hard Labor began its first issue with the claim that "Sexism in our society isolates us and keeps us mystified about our biological and social oppression… we must demand from society the right to understand and develop all our capacities and determine their uses" (Clevidence et. al, 1975, p. 2). One prominent way *Hard Labor* reaches its goals, as I will show in this analysis, is through its use of visuals. The images and visuals included in the newspapers represent both the struggle for reproductive freedom in the 70s *and* a commitment to education and liberation through visual rhetorical choices.

Hard Labor: Feminist Activism in Arkansas

Hard Labor was originally published by the Feminist Press Collective in 1975 and ran from 1975--1979. One such issue stated that *Hard Labor* is "A Journal of Feminist News and Opinion," which sought women's liberation and education in the wake of the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision by publishing community articles, reviews, letters, and poetry related to feminist and lesbian topics. In 1980, *Hard Labor* changed its name to *The Ozark Feminist*, but publication ceased after one year (Roberts Library).

Issues of *Hard Labor* are stored in the Lee Cowan papers at the Butler Center as well as the University of Arkansas Library Archives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The University of Arkansas Library Archives houses a collection on The Women's Library, a volunteer-run library in Fayetteville. Formed in 1982, the library ran educational events, community events, and of course, housed books related to feminist topics. The roots of the Women's Library, though, trace back to the 1977 death of Mari Spehar, a Fayetteville woman and activist who died from complications related to an intrauterine device (IUD). Her death would change the course of feminist activism in Arkansas, as issues of *Hard Labor* and the *Grapevine* would be dedicated to her memory, and the Mari Spehar Memorial Health Project would form. The Mari Spehar Memorial Health Project's goal was to educate women about their health by forming a clinic that provided educational materials, office hours, and cervix and breast exams (Zajicek, Lord, & Holyfield, 2003). When the space was closed, the library was born in downtown Fayetteville, and the library inherited the Mari Spehar Health Education Proj-

ect, over 300 books, sexual health education materials and photos of examinations, as well as files of women's periodicals (Zajicek, Lord, & Holyfield, 2003). The library received periodicals, newspapers, and journals as gifts and donations, so the holdings are not complete, but depict what feminist resistance was like during the time the Women's Library was open from 1982-2000. The Lee Cowan papers are similarly fragmented and incomplete; in addition to *Hard Labor*, the collection features two other newspapers: *Ours*, a newspaper published in Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1978-1987 and *Grapevine*, another Fayetteville newspaper that ran from 1970-1993. The University of Arkansas Library Archives has also digitized several issues of *Hard Labor*, so issues can be viewed online now as well.

Although incomplete, these fragments of newspapers display the "social circulation" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 23) of feminist resistance and coalition building in the immediacy of post-Roe Arkansas. Social circulation, a feminist methodology of analysis and understanding, focuses on "connections among past, present, and futures in the sense that the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified and can lead to changed rhetorical practices" (p. 23). The newspapers, thus, served as a form of social circulation for women as they allowed them to practice rhetorical resistance and build coalitions. These newspapers were material objects to be passed around and discussed, to be used by readers to find community, learn about their bodies, and share information. The first two issues were distributed for free before raising to 15 cents per copy for the third issue, as per the editor's note on the first issue.

One topic that frequented the pages of *Hard Labor* was sex and sexual health . Sample articles include: "Abortion–What is Happening to Our Right?", "Involuntary Sterilization: The Outrage Continues–Minority Women are the Victims", "Choosing Your Doctor" and "Manipulated Medicine." Through these articles, profiles, and letters, newspaper authors and editors sought women's liberation and education, particularly as it relates to women's health and wellness. Accompanied by these written texts were illustrations that worked to enhance a reader's experience by creating feminist meaning through their production. These cartoons challenged a viewer's assumptions about womanhood through their use of symbolism, density, and mythology. What follows is a close reading of the cover image, *The New Woman* drawing, and its rhetorical effects.

The New Woman: Building Coalition Through Resistance

The most striking image of all included in *Hard Labor* is the cover illustration, titled *The New Woman*. Featured in nearly every issue of *Hard Labor*, the drawing, created by an anonymous artist, features the body of a woman holding her head in front of her vagina. The artist provides the following statement in volume 3, number 2:

> The artist, who chooses to remain anonymous, would like to explain the symbolism of the cover illustration. Based on the existing title, HARD LABOR, the picture represents the New Woman emerging from the womb of womankind. Her face is round, like the full moon. Her hair, Medusa-like, is also the pubic hair of mature Womanhood– The Mother. The blood of birth–which is also menstrual blood– pours out, to mingle its salt with the salt of the primeval sea. In one hand New Woman bears the arrows and bows of Diana/Artemis, the Huntress (and sometime protector of men); in the other hand she bears the Labrys, the double-bladed ax, symbol of feminine love. New Woman, like ourselves, is ambivalent and paradoxical; She stands for eternity and rebirth;

> she is fierce yet gentle, outgoing and introspective, innocent and knowing. If you gaze beyond the still depths of her eyes, you will know that She is vitality itself, constantly recreating Herself and all Humankind anew. To the left, a Woman trapped in a tree weeps–for all our Sisters and ourselves who are still not free.

All images in *Hard Labor* are black and white, and each cartoon included is a drawing by an artist (most remain anonymous like *The New Woman's* creator). *The New Woman* image features a feminine body crouching down and holding her head in front of her vagina. Two more hands below her hold a bow and an axe. To the side, a woman's face is trapped in a tree. Behind the woman are curved black lines. Newspaper cartoons, particularly political cartoons, have a long history of being subversive and displaying resistance. This cartoon is no different. The medusa-like hair, serving as both hair on the woman's head and pubic hair, angles out across the body, ending just below two uncovered breasts. Spatially, the New Woman is front and center. She is the focus of the illustration, dominant and headstrong. The New Woman looks directly at the viewer, not shying away from confrontation. This distinct illustration serves as a form of visual resistance to dominant narratives about womanhood, birth, sexuality, and gender. The body is feminine with soft curves while holding weapons.

In fact, the image is composed of many feminine visual multiplicities: the New Woman is at once a warrior, mother, friend, and foe. In this way, she disrupts several archetypes that were commonly held about women in the 70s. While the New Woman appears naked in the cover illustration, the image is decidedly not sexual. The New Woman is ready to fight for the woman trapped in the tree–a warrior. But she has also just given birth—a mother. She does both successfully, gazing at the viewer with a stoic expression. She has not just two hands, but four, holding both herself and her weapons. She holds her own fate, in this sense, and must fight for her future, as well as the future of other women–coalition. Menstruation and childbirth may be deeply personal experiences, but the New Woman, with her direct gaze and readiness to fight for fellow women, bridges connections that a woman's personal struggle also has innate political and coalitional value. *The New Woman* image, I argue, becomes a symbolic representation of the multifaceted fight for women's and reproductive rights.

The New Woman is symbolically dense, almost to the point of overloading the viewer with imagery. No single interpretation can fully capture the multiplicities present in the image, and the symbolic overload forces engagement from the viewer rather than casual glancing. *The New Woman* invites viewers on a journey of complex feminist struggle against norms about womanhood. In her work on feminist iconography, Rachel Molko (2023) wrote that "feminist icons may be able to pierce emotion, experiential, and ideological dimensions of culture to build community" (p. 1) by "requir[ing] viewers to engage in critical and emotional ways that implicate both subjectivity and social change" (p. 4). I argue that *Hard Labor*'s use of cartoons operates in a similar function. Although not necessarily a feminist icon, the symbolism of *The New Woman* illustration in particular forces the viewer to directly acknowledge *The New Woman*—the direct gaze and references to mythology demand engagement from the viewer as they seek to uncover what *The New Woman* really is. Viewers cannot simply move on from this visual, but must directly grapple with the conflicting emotional response that might become present upon seeing *The New Woman*. She is both lover and fighter, and it is

impossible to ignore or overlook one of her many identities in favor of another.

The Medusa imagery in particular creates another interesting multiplicity. In mythology, Medusa turns those who gaze upon her face into stone. Similarly, it's almost difficult to look at the image because of the symbolic and graphic overload of *The New Woman*. There is just *so much* to look at, the gaze of the viewer may not know where to fall. Do you start with the New Woman's face, looking directly at you? Or the weapons she holds? Or her uncovered breasts? There is no one way to view *The New Woman*, once again reinforcing the multitudes she contains. The imagery of the Medusa-like hair, serving as both menstrual blood and birthing blood, is unifying rather than divisive. In this way, Medusa is a source of power and strength rather than fear or disgust. By reclaiming Medusa, *The New Woman* once again complicates ideas about what femininity is and can be.

By making the New Woman and her intricacies visible, *Hard Labor* is making an activist claim about the multiplicities of women while resisting traditional norms about womanhood. While the New Woman is still a caretaker, she is also a fighter, two identities that may not be thought of in the same person. In this way, the visual resistance persistent through *Hard Labor* serves as a form of visual activism. Eve Kalyva (2022) wrote that "visual activism can be understood as making a visibility claim: a gesture of critique that draws attention to itself as a way of making sense and claiming a presence" (p. 68). Just as the illustration of *The New Woman* asks us to reckon with ideas about womanhood, the cartoons throughout *Hard Labor* ask viewers to stop and look critically, and at times, such as with *The New Woman* illustration, sit in the discomfort. This uncomfortable viewing, I argue, functions similarly to the iconography Molko discusses: by forcing viewers to be uncomfortable, the image creates a sense of shared community and coalition.

Conclusion

Although these newspapers were published in the 1970s, their relevance still sings true today. Like Molko (2023) pointed out, feminist struggles still wage on, particularly after the 2022 US Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v Wade.* In fact, understanding and acknowledging the work of 1970s feminists may be more important than ever as we work towards further coalition building. One way feminists in the 1970s reached audiences was through the use of visuals in newspapers like *Hard Labor*, *Ours*, and *Grapevine*. What I have analyzed here only scratches the the surface of what is contained in these newspapers; the Women's Library in Fayetteville contains hundreds of similar feminist newspapers. These newspapers demonstrate the visual power of organization and display how visual resistance has long been an important strategy to feminist resistance of dominant narratives.

The New Woman displays visual resistance, an important coalitional building strategy for feminist in the 1970s, particularly through its use of symbolism, mythology, and maximalism. Not all cartoons included in *Hard Labor* are as maximally depicted, though. In contrast to *The New Woman*, other cartoons included in the newspaper are quite stark, such as the *At Your Cervix* illustration, which simply features an outline of a stereotypical woman shaped figure with her arms behind her back, turned to the side. Where the woman's cervix would be is instead a circular squiggle, which is then circled for emphasis. While *The New Woman*

illustration is bursting with detail, this piece has only the marks on the cervix. The choice to emphasize the cervix by squiggly marks instead of a cartoon cervix or more realistic drawing could be a way of visualizing the relative mystery of women's health issues in the 1970s, uncertainty about women's health, or detachment from the body. The stark contrast between *The New Woman* and *At Your Cervix* raise questions related to how feminist activists used images to build coalitions around community sexual health education. Future work may continue this line of inquiry, considering the relationship between visual rhetorical strategies and sexual health education in community settings.

Biography

Martha Sue Karnes (she/her) is an assistant professor of Rhetoric and Writing at University of Arkansas Little Rock. Her research focuses on reproductive health, feminist theory, and technical writing. Her work has been published in *Computers and Composition*, *British Medical Journal Open,* and has forthcoming work set to appear in *Programmatic Perspectives.*

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