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BOOK REVIEW

Reframing Rhetorical Theory and Practice through Feminist Perspectives

Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin. *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1999. vi + 389 pages. \$61.95 (cloth); \$32.95 (paper).

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In 1995, *Communication Monographs* published an article written by Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin titled "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric." Foss and Griffin critique the notion of persuasion as an alternative to violence. Since persuaders coerce audience members to change their positions based upon the persuader's ability to convince them that the audiences' perceptions are inferior to theirs, Foss and Griffin argue that persuasion is akin to violence. This essay has generated renewed enthusiasm and interest about the merits of rhetoric and persuasion from rhetorical and argumentation scholars.

In *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, Karen Foss joins Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin to provide deeper insight into the origins of their critique of rhetoric and their advocacy of invitational rhetoric by reviewing the backgrounds of and arguments made by several feminist theorists who suggest that patriarchal values are embedded within the core tenets of traditional rhetorical theory. The first two chapters of the book review the core concepts of rhetoric, feminism, and theory and provide a brief overview of feminist scholarship that has been published within communication studies over the past thirty years. Following these introductory chapters, Foss, Foss, and Griffin summarize the scholarly writing of several feminists who inspired their own scholarship. These feminist writers include two notable women who have taught within the discipline of communication studies, Cheris Kramerae and Sally Miller Gearhart. Other featured scholars include bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mary Daly, Starhawk, Paula Gunn Allen, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Sonia Johnson.

Foss, Foss, and Griffin write that they seek to maintain a pluralist attitude toward contemporary understandings of rhetorical and feminist theory. They note that “many kinds of feminisms and feminists” exist and that by acknowledging this variety they open up “choices and possibilities” for their readers (2). They also emphasize that their scholarship strives to affirm the validity of each individual’s perspective (5). Consequently, they contextualize their own theoretical positions as well as the theoretical perspectives of the feminists who shaped their own theories in terms of each scholar’s background and experiences. Each chapter introduces the featured feminist of the chapter with an overview of the feminist’s early background and scholastic accomplishments. Following this introduction, each chapter describes how the theorist perceives the nature of the world, her definition of feminism, and the type of rhetor she sees acting and responding to the world. Each chapter then describes how the theorist defines the options available to the rhetor for acting in the world and concludes with a discussion of the transformations that traditional theories of rhetoric must undergo for rhetorical scholarship to cohere with these feminists’ perspectives.

Critique of social institutions and belief systems that privilege white, upper-class men throughout the world unites the scholars highlighted in this book as feminists. Each theorist reviewed by Foss, Foss, and Griffin argues that Western culture is characterized by competition, hierarchy, and domination. The rhetorical options that these theorists advocate for empowering women and other people marginalized in Western culture also indicate that these theorists share the belief that reality is constructed through language. Specifically, these theorists suggest that rhetors may use symbols to create worlds that are more hospitable to women than the world that exists as part of the dominant culture. For instance, Cheris Kramerae and Gloria Anzaldúa suggest that women rhetors create new metaphors that represent women’s experiences more fully than the principal metaphors of the dominant culture. Paula Gunn Allen, Starhawk, and Sally Miller Gearhart recommend that women use symbols to harness energy to achieve more meaningful relationships between women and other members of society. They also suggest that spiritual practices such as magic and ritual can liberate women from dominant social structures that oppress them.

These feminists’ beliefs about symbol use depart from traditional conceptions of rhetoric and contribute a unique perspective of the role of rhetoric in society. By including spiritual practice as a rhetorical strategy for the transformation of society, theorists in this book expand our notion of rhetorical practice. Several theorists outlined in this book also suggest that rhetorical scholars should broaden their conceptions about the appropriate realm for rhetorical practices. Kramerae and Mary Daly note that women’s lives are often validated and affirmed in spaces that are more private than the public sphere, where rhetoric is traditionally recognized and evaluated; thus, scholars of rhetoric ought to acknowledge the role of rhetoric outside of the public sphere where, the authors assert, women are more likely to live their lives.

Instead of using symbols to change others, these feminists urge rhetors to use symbols to reframe their own lives. These perspectives contribute to a definition of rhetoric that assumes different groups of people must remain divided from one another. The traditional concept of common ground that allows rhetors to engage members of their audience is

absent in the theories outlined in this book. The theorists highlighted in this book, including Daly and Gunn Allen, suggest that people of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds do not have interests or perspectives in common. Consequently, they cannot communicate with one another.

The assumption that people share little in common with those of different backgrounds corresponds with the notion that rhetors who are marginalized by the dominant culture must use rhetoric to create new worlds for themselves. Sonja Johnson, Gearhart, Trinh Minh-ha, Paula Gunn Allen, and Starhawk suggest that creating a new world through symbol use is preferable to attempting to change the old world. By attempting to change others, rhetors engage in forms of coercion that members of dominant society employ to oppress marginalized members of society. Johnson concludes that efforts to resist forces of domination only accord legitimacy to such forces. Throughout their summaries of the theorists who influenced their work, the authors emphasize that violence is inherent in any attempt to persuade another person. By suggesting that common ground does not exist between people of different backgrounds and that any attempt to persuade another person is inherently violent, these authors suggest that the practice of rhetoric as it is traditionally understood in the discipline has contributed to the oppression of women and other marginalized groups within society. Although they emphasize that feminist theories transform our conception of rhetoric, their rejection of persuasion and of the notion of common ground implies that traditional conceptions of rhetoric should be abandoned altogether.

Foss, Foss, and Griffin base their critique of traditional rhetorical principles on feminist principles of equality and the immanent value of each individual's perspective. These principles are also reflected by the authors' decisions to include some unusual perspectives of some of the theorists who have influenced their work. These authors note that Paula Gunn Allen's childhood was filled with "experiences with extraterrestrial abductions" (193). They also reiterate Mary Daly's belief that feminists ought to model nonhuman entities including gnomes who "protect treasures and information" (156). Since most references to gnomes and extraterrestrials appear in fiction writing, and not within textbooks about social theory, it is difficult to believe that entities commonly thought of as nonexistent can empower human beings. Consequently, Foss, Foss, and Griffin do not demonstrate how these feminist theorists suggest viable rhetorical options for people who are currently striving to eradicate social conditions that oppress women, minorities, and the poor.

In addition to the book's inability to articulate viable options for feminists to resolve social oppression that exists in the world, the authors' exclusive focus on the feminist theorists who have influenced them personally undermines the authors' commitment to providing multiple perspectives of feminism. The title of this book suggests that it is an introductory review of feminist rhetorical theories. The authors belie their expressed mission statement as they ignore the perspectives of feminists who might value traditional conceptions of rhetoric and believe that persuasion has an important role within feminism. The authors do not mention pioneers in the feminist movement who relied upon persuasion to attain voting rights as well as more contemporary liberal feminists who used persuasion to encourage legislators to support the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. This book also ignores feminists such as Rosemary Hennessey who have argued that patriarchy

is rooted in class struggles and that such struggles influence language about women's role in society.

Finally, feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who have argued that social policies should limit the public's accessibility to pornography because sexually explicit images threaten women's safety, were also absent in this book. Upon reading this book, a student new to rhetoric or new to feminism might surmise that all feminists denounce rhetoric as another form of coercion and violence against women. Perhaps, then, the most fundamental limitation of this book is its failure to fulfill its own expressed mission to provide a variety of perspectives on feminism that contribute to our understanding of language and social power.