

NEGOTIATING WITH OUR TRADITION: REFLECTING  
AGAIN (WITHOUT APOLOGIES) ON THE  
FEMINIZATION OF RHETORIC

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The/A woman is never closed/shut (up) in one volume.

—Luce Irigaray, "Volume Without Contours"

As a feminist theorist, what I find most disturbing about Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's impassioned rejoinder ("Biesecker Cannot Speak for Her Either," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 26, no. 2 [1993] 153–59) to my recently published essay, "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric" (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 [1992]:140–61), is her decision to decipher the piece as a misogynist assault on her work as well as on the work of other feminists doing archival research. It is her less than veiled accusation that my essay—which, on her view, effectively boils down to little more than a "wish" on my part to "silence once more" those "women [who] were partially or completely silenced for centuries" (158)—is motivated by careerism, and that my drive to work my way up the institutional ladder has led me to exploit a system that, as she puts it, "empower[s] women who are willing to attack other women who attempt to change the status quo" (154). Indeed, I am genuinely distressed by Campbell's read since it seems, among other things, to miss completely or ignore my essay's declared political and decidedly feminist aim: namely, to urge feminists working within the discipline of Rhetoric to labor scrupulously on *two* fronts at once. On the one hand, I argue we cannot not follow Campbell's lead, that we must remain firmly committed not only to recovering women's rhetorics, but also to struggling for their integration into the canon.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand,

I suggest it is also vital that we persistently critique our own practices of inclusion and exclusion, that we vigilantly attend to the criteria against which any particular rhetorical discourse is assessed in order to grant or deny it a place in the canon, so as to make visible to ourselves the unacknowledged masculinist agenda to which those practices have (un)wittingly contributed.

That the productive and quite practical implications of my essay for a feminist revisionary history of Rhetoric escape Campbell's grasp can be attributed to (what is at least for me) her profound misreading of "what [I am] up to" (158) theoretically. Most importantly, where she interprets my essay as urging rhetorical critics and theorists to "cast off the efforts of extraordinary women" (156), I understand myself to be calling for the radical contextualization of all 'extraordinary' speech acts, women's and men's alike. But how I am to account for the drastic disparity between her understanding of what is going on in those "seventeen pages, plus footnotes" (158) and my own? As one might suspect, I am more than a bit wary of broaching an answer to such a question. For Campbell's unseemly rendition of the motives that underwrite my essay has convinced me that putting on the diagnostician's robe is a precarious, even precocious, enterprise. Thus, I will refuse the temptation to produce a symptomatic reading that seeks to decode the psychological or ethico-political subtext of Campbell's response, and will instead use the few pages left to me to restate the key assumption that subtends the original essay and to retrace the central theoretical moves made therein. In the long run it is my hope that by taking this tack I will make it possible for Campbell—and perhaps for other readers as well—to take up the enabling points of contact between our projects rather than to come all too quickly to the conclusion that an intractable distance obtains between them. In other words, I want ultimately to move us from the destructive politics of the either/or to what has elsewhere been called "the productive politics of the open end."<sup>2</sup>

At the most general level, "Coming to Terms" was governed by one of the many sobering lessons to be gleaned from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the gendered subaltern: that "the way to counteract Western [i.e., Eurocentric and patriarchal] historicism is not simply to produce alternative or counter-histories but to contest and inflect the more far-reaching implications of the system of which they form a part."<sup>3</sup> Transposing Spivak's directive to the discipline of Rhetoric, I looked carefully at the work being

done by feminists in the field (here I took Campbell's work to be both trendsetting and exemplary) and began to calculate the relationship between their knowledge production and the status quo. What I discovered was that the project of situating "great women speakers" alongside their better-known male counterparts was a double-edged sword. To be sure, the inclusion of women's rhetorics has done nothing less than begin to destabilize the subject of Rhetorical history that up to this point has been exclusively male. And, as I remarked in the earlier essay, this is no small thing. At the same time, however, what cannot go unnoticed is that even as the list of "great works" has expanded over time to include women's rhetoric, the dominant features of that list have not changed.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, I argued, even recent feminist revisionary histories of Rhetoric reintroduce the ideology of individualism that has underwritten our mainstream histories. In privileging (perhaps *fetishizing* would have been a better choice of terms) the autonomous speaking subject who is both the origin and master of her discourse, these new histories, like those that came before, continue to efface a vast array of collective rhetorical practices to which there belongs no proper name but within which those discrete and celebrated rhetorics find their conditions of emergence.<sup>5</sup>

Thus motivated, not by the wish to "silence once more" the voices of extraordinary women rhetors, but, instead, by the desire to open up the space for a new storying of our tradition that brings within our field of vision the rhetorical practices that prepare the way for the emergence of distinguished spokespersons, I turned to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of identity and Michel Foucault's theory of subject positions. The work of these two poststructuralists could, I claimed, help us begin to construct an alternative to our current historiographical approach that reaffirms the presumption that being a subject of history is equivalent to being a speaking subject, wherein speech is taken to be the expression of full subjectivity or autonomous agency.

First, then, Derrida. What is useful about the work of Derrida for the purpose of sketching the outlines of a feminist history of Rhetoric that, as I put it in the earlier essay, aims to produce something more than the story of a battle over the right to individualism between men and women is his doubled morphology of the subject. On the one hand, Derrida decenters subjectivity by showing us that the identity of any subject is structured by and is the effect of its provisional place in a shifting economy of differences.

Hence, subjects are never coincident with or identical to themselves and are always already open to change. On the other hand, Derrida insists that subjects are always at any given moment centered, but that we must recognize that "this centering is an 'effect,' shored up within indeterminate boundaries that can only be understood as determining."<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say here (and I encourage readers to return to the previous essay for a fuller, and thus more satisfactory explication) that what this doubled morphology of the subject does for the feminist historian of Rhetoric is shift the focus of inquiry from the question "Who is speaking?" to the question "What play of forces made it possible for a particular speaking subject to emerge?"

Second, Foucault. It was my argument that our rendering visible the specific forces that make it possible for distinguished speaking subjects to emerge (over and against simply rendering vocal individual speakers) depends upon our moving from Derridean deconstruction to Foucaultian archaeology. More to the point, I suggested that Foucault's theory of subject positions, which thinks individuals-in-power (and, again, I invite interested readers to turn back to the earlier essay for a more developed argument), can teach us to chart the discursive practices that insure the production and reproduction of *differentially situated subjects*. However, if Foucault's work makes it possible for us to specify concretely the forces that constitute particular and assigned subjectivities by "determining what position[s] can and must be occupied by any individual if he [or she] is to be a subject" at all, it provides little assistance for our writing a history of Rhetoric that seeks to avoid the pitfalls of the ideology of individualism, but still account for change.

Third, and finally, crosshatching the Foucaultian theory of subject positions with the Derridean deconstruction of the subject. It was my closing argument that by grafting Derrida's insight that the subject, which is always centered, is nonetheless outstripped by a temporality and a spacing that always already exceeds it, it becomes possible for us to recognize the formidable role discursive formations play in the (re)constitution of subjectivities and the capacity—albeit non-intentional in the strictest sense of the term—of those subjectivities to disrupt that structure. Hence, locating with Derrida the very resource of change in the exorbitant possibilities of acts, it becomes possible for us to both draw from and push beyond the limits of the Foucaultian archaeology: In claiming with Foucault

that individuals are manufactured and sustained through specifiable discursive forces, we need not presuppose that their practices are nothing but reflections of such forces or are thoroughly disciplined by them. The gesture that closed the theoretical section of the essay was to posit *techne* as the name for this structure of reserve that breaks open a pathway within the hegemonizing effects of power, as the name for a heterogeneous history of practices performed in the interstices between intention and subjection, choice and necessity, activity and passivity. For feminists interested in rewriting the history of Rhetoric, then, the plurality of—what Campbell calls “mundane”—practices that together constitute the everyday would have to be taken seriously as we work not only to celebrate “memorable” rhetorics, but also to calculate their conditions of possibility and effects. We would, in other words, become obliged to read differently.

Of course much more could be said. However, given that my assigned space is nearly used up, I will simply state that when it comes to the moment of political action in the narrow sense, I suspect that Professor Campbell and I will find ourselves walking under the same banner, that our common passion for social change will surely cross the divide between (my) theory and (her) criticism—even as they bring each other into productive crisis. At least, as I stated at the outset, that has been and still is my hope.

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## Notes

1. About my use of the double negative, Campbell writes: “Cannot not want? Not, I think, a locution ordinarily chosen to praise” (153). Perhaps it should be said that the rhetorical purpose of the locution was intended neither to condemn nor to praise per se, but, rather, to signify a necessary political move that must, nonetheless, be critiqued if feminists are, as one theorist has put it, to break “the mesmerizing focus of the history of the female becoming individualist.”

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Practical Politics of the Open End,” in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 95–112.

3. Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 172.

4. Were Campbell to take this seriously, she would be compelled to rethink her statement that “she prefers the memorable to the mediocre” (156), a statement that refuses to recognize that having good taste, or being able to recognize the “memorable” when one sees it, is itself an effect-structure.

5. A couple of points need to be noted here. First, Campbell’s presumption that this critique is an accusation directed against her personally misses completely my earlier suggestion that the ideology by which our knowledge production is written is

larger than individual consciousness and will. Second, in her response Campbell writes: "The attack must also be directed toward my work on the earlier and contemporary women's movements and on the rhetoric of individual women, and here the charge begins to collapse. I have written of Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, and many others. These women wanted to 'maintain things as they [were]'" (154). Here again Campbell misses my point. I was not arguing that these women rhetors were supporting the status quo, but, rather, that the way in which they have been narrativized in our histories renders the historian complicit with the dominant structure.

6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 279.

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