

"Ain't I a Woman": Using Feminist Rhetorical Practices to Re-set the Terms of Scholarly Engagement for an Iconic Text

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In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Directions for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy*, Gesa E. Kirsch and I conducted an inventory of scholarly work in rhetoric, composition, and literacy, focusing on women's participation and achievements in rhetorical action, variously rendered. With the data generated, we created a topology of specific types of methodologies that take into account not just gender but other points of reference as well, for example race, ethnicity, class, status, sexuality, geographical location, ideological values, rhetorical domains, genres, modes of expression, and so forth. Our intention was to articulate the range of analytical and interpretive tools being used by feminist researchers and teachers in rhetoric, composition, and literacy. Our analysis resulted in our proposing an enhanced analytical model that, in broad strokes, draws attention to four inquiry processes that add value to our work in both research and teaching.^{1,2} These processes are critical imagination, strategic contemplation,

¹ I would like to thank especially Professor Tammie Kennedy and the undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who were enrolled in her Researching and Writing Women's Lives course in 2010 and who read and provided such thoughtful feedback to me on an earlier draft of this article.

² For a more detailed discussion of these processes see: Jacqueline J. Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Studies: New Directions for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP 2011).

social circulation, and globalization. We posit that each process constitutes a set of lenses by which we can interrogate rhetorical events and situations and gain a more fully textured insight into rhetorical action as a global human enterprise.

My intention in this essay is to take just one of these lenses, social circulation, as an opportunity to re-think the ways in which we might gain a more generative understanding of one of the most iconic texts of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman.” I apply the term as a touchstone for the complex ways in which feminist practices involve connections among past, present, and future in the sense that women’s rhetorical actions are intertwined throughout the overlapping circles in which women travel, live, and work and that these practices are carried on or modified from one circle to the next, from one generation to the next. My goal in using this approach is to re-tell the story of Truth’s speech with historical facts that we now know about the context in which it was made and to suggest that this re-told tale has considerably more to highlight for feminist discourses and American rhetorical history than we have brought attention to in the past.

Understanding the Truth speech within such a context requires a preliminary understanding of critical relationships between local and national women’s activism in the nineteenth century. From a local perspective, in Akron, Ohio, on May 28-29, 1851, an elite group of white women gathered to discuss women’s rights. The meeting raises questions about the relationship between this Ohio meeting and the first national meeting on women’s rights three years earlier in Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19-20, 1848.

The Akron Convention: A Landscape View

In contemporary scholarship, we acknowledge that the Seneca Falls meeting and the *Declaration of Sentiments* that emerged as its manifesto was the launch pad for the nineteenth-century woman’s rights movement. In the context of abolitionist activism

in the decades preceding 1850, the Seneca Falls Convention was an extension of liberation struggles and constituted a moment of coalescence for the passionate desires of white women activists to work in their own interests, rather than just the interests of enslaved African Americans. Their effort was to gain equal rights for women, including not only political rights, and specifically the right to vote, but also economic, educational, and social rights as well. By all accounts, Seneca Falls was successful in engendering the desired momentum. Women from across the country walked away from this meeting inspired and encouraged by the conversations and interactions. Such was the case with the women from Ohio.

The Seneca Falls meeting greatly energized the Ohioans, so much so that they organized themselves at the state level with their own interests and priorities in order to agitate for change motion. They set in motion in a generative way, the circulation of ideas, interests, and frameworks for action that were gaining momentum in the national meeting. Drawing from the national discourses, the Ohioans applied general frameworks for women’s rights to their local conditions. In Ohio, as in other places, the goal of equality—whether political, economic, educational, social, or a combination—was a very ambitious one, with considerable opposition not simply from white male power elites but also from a highly entrenched local and national culture in which patriarchy and sexist oppression reigned alongside the oppressions of race and class hierarchies. In this way, the Akron meeting as a local story was very much a part of a national story as well with the Ohioans working collectively across their communities for change and linking these efforts to the national agenda. Consequently, the Akron meeting offers specific evidence of both the desires of Ohio women for local change and the growing momentum of the national movement.

Quite interestingly, however, the Akron meeting had an unanticipated outcome. Over the generations, it has actually become best known, not for the way in which Ohio women

participated in forwarding women’s activist agenda—locally and nationally—but for one speech act that occurred during the meeting: an extemporaneous statement made by Sojourner Truth. As documented by media accounts of its own day, the rhetorical event, widely recognized now as the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, was deemed successful. Most powerfully, though, through the decades this speech has come to function instrumentally in race and gender discourses as a mythological display of equity, justice, and action.

Even so, in American feminist rhetorical history, the substantive potential of this much quoted and even more persistently appropriated speech still remains largely unrealized. Too often, it seems we swallow this event whole, as if it were indeed our own feminist version of a Camelot-like creation myth, a narrative within which Sojourner Truth is positioned and re-position in two ways: as inspiration—i.e., quite literally a breathing of life into our master narratives of feminist eloquence, activism, and action—or as essentially untouchable in the sense that the issues tied now to the veracity and credibility of the moment have made us turn away with academic fear and trepidation. Both positions, of course, are intriguing in that they seem to emanate from the same dis-ease, i.e, a lack of attention and priority to multi-dimensional analyses—to taking a reflective, reflexive, dialectical, poly-logical stance in interrogations, a process that might prime us to ask: So, what was really going on here? How do we stand back from the simplicity and forthrightness of the basic account of eloquence to see more than what we might perceive at first sight or hear at a first listening? How do we go beyond the pathos of the moment to the logos and ethos of it? How do we shift our viewpoints from one point of interrogation to another nimbly enough so that we can grab better hold of what’s what and what else—other than inspiration and fabrication—this moment might mean?

Social Circulation as an Analytical Lever

Social circulation, as used in addressing such questions, draws directly from cultural studies, and particularly from the concept of circuits of culture, as espoused, for example, by Stuart Hall (1997) and from similar uses in composition studies, as theorized by John Trimbur (2000) in his discussions of the circulation of writing. In *Feminist Rhetorical Studies*, we argue that by taking a closer look at the processes by which women engage rhetorically in various sites and domains—traditional or not, we’re able to see how a more multi-variant analysis of women’s practices sets in motion the idea that rhetoric is evolutionary, not just revolutionary. Paying attention to social circulation helps us to: 1) understand the analytical and interpretive values added by placing women in social space, rather than only in private, public, or institutional space and 2) understand how ideas and habits might seep beyond specific social circles and communities, travel through time and space, re-locate, and become re-used for many purposes.

Our use of the term, then, suggests that, social circulation is specifically useful as a tool in feminist rhetorical analysis. By encouraging multi-focality and multi-vocality across time and space, social circulation serves to illuminate women’s lives, practices, and achievements. It helps, on one hand, to bring visibility and audibility to the ways in which women’s words and action are mediated through personal, social, and political agenda and through the various and sundry relationships that surround them. On the other hand, the approach ultimately draws attention to the dynamic realities of the use and re-use of specific moments and actions for an ever-evolving range of self-determined or community-determined rhetorical purposes.

Using these types of inquiry strategies aligns well with Clifford Geertz’s (2000) sailing metaphor of tacking in and tacking out, with the idea of rendering views of our points of scholarly interests that are more thickly textured. Tacking out with the Truth speech, we

recognize the synchronic and diachronic success of the speech—in its original delivery and in the ways in which it lives on in rhetorical and feminist histories. Tacking in, we take the complementary on-the-ground step of examining more closely the specific moments: the moment of delivery, specific moments of use and re-use, the contexts and conditions of its migration. The goal of such analyses is to be diligent about the facts and features of the content, context, and conditions of the original rhetorical moment, as well as about the impacts and consequences of its uses over time. The task is to be deliberately reflective, reflexive, dialectical, and poly-logical in interrogating the act, scene, and situation, all with the desired outcome of enhancing our capacity to engage the speech as a rhetorical problem, issue, and challenge, not only in a robust way, but also a socially and ethically conscious one. As Geertz suggests, by such methods, we enhance our capacity to deepen and broaden insights, enabling a more generative understanding of the speech and its rhetorical functioning. The familiar and iconic territory of “Ain’t I a Woman,” as a passionate and provocative appeal, becomes, as Geertz would say, “strange,” and the “stranger” details of its ethical and logical implications become strikingly familiar, with the speech re-positioned as a provocative display of ideas in motion.

This approach aligns most immediately with the methodological expectation that looking and looking again and again at a familiar subject permits us to see that, with each examination, there may be more to be noticed, more to be heard, more to be understood. The value added is that social circulation as an inquiry tool helps us magnify and amplify the actual details of the moment; helps us establish specific points of reference for marking and monitoring the ebbs and flows of uses, for taking into account different contexts for different purposes; and helps us see with greater clarity how sense-making enterprises might morph and change across time, geographical space, and context.

Looking again at the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, we examine what we know about how the event functioned in its own time

and space as we track how it morphs and changes in the hands of others at different times, in different spaces, in response to different agendas. One implication of this analytical approach is the need to acknowledge explicitly, given feminist practices in rhetorical studies, that a dialectical perspective in knowledge-making is valuable. We gain understanding, not just from synchronic and diachronic analyses, but from their calibrations and intersections. By these sorts of dialectical, reflective, reflexive inquiry strategies, we enhance our capacity to notice within the matrix of details generated connections that might otherwise go unnoticed and unconsidered. Moreover, we gain not only a clearer sense of potential patterns created from the ways in which remnants and resonances of the original events travel, but also what factors from among these choices we either leave behind or continue to take with us—iconically, mythologically, and often rather transparently.

To illustrate that the Truth speech is a provocative case in point, this discussion posits it as a thrice-told tale: 1. as a materially constituted event that happened during the Akron convention; 2. as an account of the event as circulated through the socio-political prism of Abolitionist interests; and 3. as an account of an event that reached epic proportions as a result of being continually circulated and re-circulated over several generations through the socio-political prism of women’s activism and feminist analysis.

The Akron Convention: A Thrice-Told Tale The Convention as an Event

As stated earlier, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, with its production of the controversial *Declaration of Sentiments*, gave rise across the nation to a wave of white feminist desire for action and thus, the first woman’s rights movement. Women from Ohio were energized. In their second, 1851, statewide meeting, a gathering was planned for Akron. It was led by two women, both of whom had multiple socio-political interests and commitments—to

abolitionism, woman’s suffrage, and temperance.³ One of the leaders was Hannah Conant Tracy (Cutler) (1815-1896) from Rochester, Ohio. Tracy was a regionally recognized journalist and also very much a Renaissance woman who had studied “lyrically,” as suggested by Marcia Farr’s use of the term, in venues in which her husband was studying (e.g., law at Oberlin College). After her husband’s sudden death in 1844, in 1847, Tracey herself enrolled at the age of 32 in Oberlin. The next year she accepted a position as matron of the Deaf and Dumb Asylum (an institution now known as the Ohio School for the Deaf) in Columbus, and in 1849 she was appointed principal of the female department at a new publicly funded high school in Columbus. Later in life, at the age of 53, she also obtained a medical degree, evidencing her ongoing passion for knowledge-based activism, related particularly to the gendered realities of the time regarding property ownership, the nature of women’s bodies, and the implications of women’s health issues.

Tracy’s co-leader was Frances Dana Barker Gage (1808-1884) from McConnelsville, a well-known writer in the region, who used the name “Aunt Fanny,” to write children’s books and poetry. Gage was also a regular contributor of essays, letters, and poetry to several periodical publications as well, including the *Western Literary Magazine*, *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Saturday Review*. By 1851, Gage was becoming increasingly linked with the convergences of abolition, women’s rights, and temperance—in that order. At the Akron meeting, she was tapped to preside, with Tracy to serve as secretary.

The meeting had national as well as local participation. Attending was a cross-section of prominent activist women and

³ This account of the Akron meeting and key participants is drawn from several internet sources, related to the following topics, including *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*; “First Women’s Rights Movement” at *Ohio History Center*; Butler’s “Sojourner Truth Speeches and Commentary” at *Sojourner Truth Institute of Battle Creek, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, and *The Proceedings of the Woman’s Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio, May 28 and 29, 1851*. See also Sylvia D. Hoffert, 2004; Sally McMillen, 2008; Nell Painter, 1994; Swisshelm, 2005.

men from Ohio, as well as well-known participants from beyond Ohio, e.g., women leaders such as Jane Grey Cannon Swisshelm, a nationally recognized abolitionist, women’s rights advocate, and journalist from Pittsburgh. In addition, several letters were read from other national figures, such as Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others.⁴ Then, there was Sojourner Truth, who at the time was one of the best known African American women advocates for abolition and women’s rights in the United States. The question is: Who was Sojourner Truth? What is certain is that she was not an elite white woman and quite clearly, as an African American woman, she was in a minority, if not absolutely alone, within this group in terms of race and status. So, how did she come to be there?

Sojourner Truth as Un-invited Rhetor

Sojourner Truth was born in 1797 as a slave to Elizabeth and James Bomefree (Baumfree) in a Dutch-speaking rural community in Ulster County, New York, west of the Hudson River, north of New York City.⁵ She was one of 13 children, all of whom, including Truth, were sold away from their parents to be slaves in households other than the one into which they were born. Truth was treated as “property.” She passed through several hands over the first three decades of her life, doing, at the will of others, many different kinds of labor. In 1817, her owner at the time, John Dumont of New Paltz, New York, had the power and privilege to marry her to a slave named Thomas. Truth had a total of 5 children: two older children with Robert, an enslaved man whom she loved but who was forbidden by his owner to marry her and three with Thomas,

⁴ See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper. eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume 1 for a listing of women and men leaders who attended the meeting and others who sent letters (114).

⁵ The account of Sojourner Truth’s life is drawn from several sources including: Painter (1996); Truth (1988); and various websites as cited in the Works Cited at the end of this essay.

one of whom, as suggested by available evidence (See Painter 1996), died in infancy.⁶

In 1827, around the age of 30, Truth was freed under the state of New York’s gradual emancipation law—after she had already walked away from Dumont a year earlier and “freed herself” and her youngest child. In 1829, she began the sojourn that would move her toward a career as an itinerant evangelical preacher, an abolitionist speaker, and an advocate for the rights of Africans in America and women. With the help of various white activist friends, including Marius Robinson, editor of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Salem, Ohio), she traveled often, attending all sorts of meetings across the northeast where freedom and justice were at issue. At such meetings, Truth would speak; after 1850 and her autobiography’s publication, she would also sell her books. Venues at which she spoke included the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 in New York, the Worcester Convention in 1850 in Massachusetts, and in 1851, the Akron convention in Ohio.

As documented by Painter (1996), brief accounts of Truth’s speech were published in the *New York Tribune* (June 6, 1851) and *The Liberator* (June 11, 1851). A more complete version was published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (June 21, 1851). Twelve years later on April 23, 1863, Frances Dana Gage published a different version of the speech in the *New York Independent*. This 1863 version was re-printed after yet another 12 years in 1875 in *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume 1, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. This volume was, then, re-published in 1881 and 1889. The Gage version, popularly named the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, because of an often repeated refrain, began during this period to function as the standard account of Truth’s speech. This oft-circulated version has come to be received, over the generations in discourses related to social activism, as an

⁶ Robert’s owner was incensed by the fact that Robert was bearing children with Truth for another owner’s profit. Robert’s owner beat him nearly to death and then married him off to an enslaved woman on his own plantation. Robert died of his injuries shortly thereafter.

eloquent and poignant intersectional manifesto for freedom, equity, and justice.

A Twice-Told Tale: The Robinson Version

The frequently anthologized Gage version is familiar. For this analysis, however, it is instructive to consider the far less known Robinson version⁷ in order to acknowledge the conceptual differences between this more contemporaneous version and the Gage representation.

Truth made her statement on May 29, 1851 and Robinson published his journalistic report of the speech on June 21, 1851, in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* in Salem, Ohio. As indicated by the name of the paper, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* was an abolitionist paper. According to the website of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Rev. Marius R. Robinson [1806-1878] was an itinerant lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society in Ohio (1836-1839) and later editor of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Salem, Ohio). Born in Dalton, Massachusetts, July 29, 1806, Robinson was an apprenticed printer, bookbinder, and schoolteacher of the Cherokee Nation. He began his Anti-Slavery crusade in Cincinnati in 1836, the same year he met and married Emily Rakestraw [a fellow abolitionist]. In the fall of that same year, he was commissioned by the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Robinson had worked as a teacher among the Cherokee. By 1851, he had already worked as an abolitionist in Ohio for 15 years. Being an outspoken opponent of slavery during this time (1836-1851) was a very dangerous enterprise, since Ohio was indeed a battleground state, with some of the most contentious issues before the Civil War being slavery, abolition, and a range of ideological perspectives

⁷Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. 125-6.

about the presence of African Americans in Ohio.⁸ There were divisions between pro-slavery and abolitionist attitudes across the state, as well as divisions within the abolitionist group, with some of the more radical elements among the abolitionists based in the northeastern part of the state in sites such as Akron and Salem. Simultaneously, there were also Black Laws in Ohio enacted by the Ohio legislature, beginning with the founding of the state in 1803, to prevent African Americans from entering and staying in Ohio and to constrain their social, political, and economic participation in Ohio communities.

Despite these hostilities, the Ohio River served as a frequent passage for enslaved African Americans to freedom and from which many lines along the Underground Railroad extended, so much so that the African American population in Ohio grew in a lively way during the first half of the nineteenth century. Still, the Underground Railroad was underground because it functioned in defiance of law and practice. Being visible as an outspoken African American or being outspoken as a white advocate for abolition or a railroad agent was dangerous in many areas across the state, and men and women such as Sojourner Truth and Marius Robinson often took their lives in their hands when they engaged publicly in abolitionist activities.

Amid this environment, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* was an important voice in Ohio for the Abolitionist Movement, and it was, therefore, no surprise that Robinson attended the Akron meeting and took particular note of Sojourner Truth's participation as a frequent fellow speaker for abolitionist causes. In his report of the events, Robinson stated,

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience.

⁸ For more specific details about Ohio during this era, see: Lupold and Haddad, 1988; Roseboom and Weisenburger, 1996; Hagedorn, 2004; Middleton, 2005; Seibert, 2006.

Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity "May I say a few words?" Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? ----- I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart – why can't she have her little pint full? ----- You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, – for we can't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. ----- I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. ---- The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. ---- And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? --- But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him,

woman is coming on him, ---- he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard. [Original punctuation]

Consider this rendering of the Truth statement through the lens of the Abolitionist Movement. Robinson presents it as the perspective of an emancipated slave, with no particular attention drawn by Robinson, beyond Truth's statement itself, to the fact that she was a slave woman. Robinson acknowledged "her powerful form," and he emphasized her "whole-souled, earnest gesture," and her "strong and truthful tones." In other words, he noted her rhetorical presence and power and her physical prowess and forwarded this image and performance as embodied testimony against slavery. Notably, this version was not presented in a visual rendering of African American dialect, but as a less dramatic journalistic report. The Gage version was different.

A Twice-Told Tale: The Gage Version

Published twelve years after the Akron meeting, more than a decade removed from the original context and occasion, the rhetorical occasion for Frances Dana Gage's account was not to chronicle the original event as the news of the day. It was, as it was called, the reminiscences of the writer. The question, is how this re-use of the event function for a new social circulation. What were the occasion, imperatives, and purposes of the re-use?

Nell Irvin Painter's quite thorough study of the life of Sojourner Truth (*Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 1996) documents the details surrounding the Gage publication. According to Painter, during the Civil War, Gage was a volunteer who went to Parris Island, South Carolina, in 1863 to serve the Union cause as a teacher and nurse. In April of that year, she read an article, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sybil," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* by well-known writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁹ Less than a month later, on April 23, 1863, the New York *Independent*

⁹ See Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1863): 473-81. See also Chapter 17 in Painter (1996, 151-63) for a critical analysis of

published an essay by Gage focused on her reminiscences of Sojourner Truth. Gage introduces her essay in this way

The story of "Sojourner Truth," by Mrs. H.B. Stowe, in the April number of *The Atlantic* will be read by thousands in the East and West with intense interest; and as those who knew this remarkable woman will lay down this periodical, there will be heard in home-circles throughout Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois many an anecdote of the weird, wonderful creature, who was at once a marvel and a mystery.

Mrs. Stowe's remarks on Sojourner's opinion of Woman's Rights bring vividly to my mind a scene in Ohio, never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. In the spring of 1851, a Woman's Rights Convention was called in Akron, Ohio, by the friends of that then wondrously unpopular cause. I attended that Convention. No one at this day can conceive of the state of feeling of the multitude that came together on that occasion . . . (as quoted in Painter, 164-5)

With this introduction, Gage proceeds to offer the dramatic account of Truth's speech that has come to be known as the "Ain't I a Woman" speech.

Painter's research has now well-established that the Gage version of the speech is greatly flawed and arguably much farther from being "authentic" as a representation of Truth's actual speech than the Robinson version. For example, Gage represented the speech in a stereotyped Southern black dialect. By contrast, Truth's actual speech pattern was defined and shaped by the fact that Dutch was her first language, not English. She was sold at nine to an English-speaking family who was extremely impatient with her for not understanding or speaking English and beat her constantly. She learned English, then, under the lash. What were the sounds of a Dutch-influenced, uneducated English dialect in the nineteenth

Stowe's article. Painter establishes that, like the Gage article, the Stowe article is also flawed in terms of accuracy.

century? Quite likely, the sounds were not one and the same as those that we recognize as stereotyped Southern black dialects, or even as the dialectical patterns that would have been evident in 1863 in South Carolina or on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, where there were very strong Africanisms present in the language practices of a population that was fairly isolated on their island plantations.¹⁰

Evidence suggests that Gage also added ideas that were not actually spoken, assigning to Truth several assertions, such as the statement that Truth could bear the lash as well as a man; that no one ever offered her the traditional gentlemanly deference to a woman; and that most of her 13 children were sold away from her into slavery. In contrast, Painter documents that the actual evidence of Truth’s life suggests that in her talks Truth focused instead on work rather than physical abuse and on her strength rather than a desire for deference to her femaleness. Moreover, we know that, while Truth was one of 13 children herself, all of whom were sold from their parents, she gave birth to only 5 children, with one son being sold away at one point. (In contrast to the typically forced separation of a child from his or her parents through a sale, we know that Truth petitioned the courts for her child’s return, one of the few African American women to fight back through the legal system during this era. She was successful, and her son was indeed returned to her.)

In addition, Gage represented the atmosphere of the meeting as hostile to the white women who were attending and to the idea of Truth speaking. Other reports of the convention suggest, however, that the audience was quite congenial, filled mostly with abolitionists who were supportive of both women’s rights and civil rights. Still, it is quite likely true that while some of the women in attendance may have been anti-slavery, since such attitudes are already well documented throughout the course of the American

women’s rights struggles, these anti-slavery women may not have wanted their own cause as elite white women to be conflated with and tinted by the abolitionist cause of Black people.

So a reasonable contrast to the image painted by Gage is that, to the extent that there was hostility in the room, it might more likely have been directed toward Truth as a person with whom some in the room may not have wished to be identified. This possibility suggests that Truth did not “save” the day for the white women present, as the prevailing master narrative suggests. Instead, it is likely that she redeemed the day rather radically, not for white women, but for the inclusion of African American women’s vision and experiences as part of the discourse on women’s rights, a point of contention between white women and African American women that would resound through the decades and continues to do so even now.

As a “creator” of a historical narrative, Gage was successful, as confirmed by the length of its use and re-use over time, in presenting a profile of Sojourner Truth that was capable of competing with the profile presented by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Stowe presented Truth from an informal encounter at a social gathering. Gage presented Truth based on a compelling moment at a political event. Perhaps more meaningfully in the long run is that, in creating her narrative, Gage was astute in capturing, whether consciously or not, the intersectional eloquence of Truth’s speech, and in preserving for future generations what has now become a bedrock view of the social construction of “woman” as a category. One might make the argument, then, that, while Gage may perhaps have been motivated in 1863 by a perceived professional rivalry with Stowe, she nevertheless spent time in her narrative making more audible the silences between Truth’s ideas and then connecting the dots to make clearer the intersections of race **and** gender as the lived experience that Truth was proclaiming.

I suggest that Gage in doing this did not simply grab the authority to speak for Sojourner Truth and present a fiction.

¹⁰ See Turner, 2002 and Rickford and Rickford, 2000.

Rather, she took the authority and license of a writer, a storyteller, a composer of a narrative moment to use her rhetorical skills to dramatic effect, to tell a good and convincing story, one that was likely to bring recognition to herself as a leader and writer as well as recognition to Sojourner Truth as the person whom she was profiling. She wrote her memoir, of course, without indicating in her narrative that she was filling in conceptual logics and without confirming which details in her essay were factual and which were exaggerated or that she presented any exaggerations at all. She presented her reminiscences as the “truth” of Truth.

In exhibiting these skills and taking such bold liberties with the narrative, Gage succeeded, consciously or not, in offering not just a rhetorical display of her own worth as a writer and her personal knowledge of Sojourner Truth as the subject of her essay, but also a creative and cleverly rendered view of nineteenth-century womanhood. Again, consciously or not, she endowed the profile that she created with a version of womanhood that was not embodied by herself or by the particular white women present at the convention, but rather deeply embodied by the physical presence of Sojourner Truth in their company. This view of woman overtly recognized the richness of the category “woman” as gendered, raced, and also classed, a view that continues to resonate in the hearts, minds, souls, and experiences of women today—especially in terms of the continuities of oppressions imposed in American society by the intersections of race, gender, social status, and material experiences. So, in essence, Truth spoke on a specific occasion within a specific context from her own standpoint, and Gage wrote for a different occasion within a different context from her understanding of this standpoint. Both, in their own ways, were successful in mirroring their perspectives for others—Truth in her personal performance at the meeting; Gage in her re-invention and amplification of that moment twelve years later in the interest of achieving a different effect.

Shifting the Perspective

As a journalistic report, Robinson’s article did capture, nevertheless, some of the same discursive flavors as the Gage narrative, even though Robinson did not himself highlight the intersection of race and gender issues in Truth’s speech. His version offers an instructive balance to the Gage version for considering the nature, scope and impact of Truth’s performance as a singular rhetorical event in its own space and time. For example, both writers note Truth’s compelling physical presence and her oratorical power, and they both attribute to her similar figurative language. By contrast, Robinson’s version is shorter, less cohesive, and shows less evidence, thereby, of an experienced rhetorical hand, exhibiting by these means more markings of the extemporaneous speech that both Robinson and Gage categorized it to be.

Given the proximity in time between the speech and the Robinson article, we might easily conclude that Robinson’s journalistic version is likely to be closer to Truth’s actual speech than the Gage narrative one. This conclusion underscores the point that the Gage version was significantly separated from Truth’s performance moment in time and space; it emanated from a different exigency; and it shows more evidence of a writerly hand, a “composition,” as it were, rather than an account—as described in the analysis below. A simple interpretation, therefore, is to say that the Robinson version suggests that Gage engaged in a considerable amount of invention. Most certainly, she took considerable creative license in dramatizing and amplifying the details. By the same token, though, we must also take the Robinson version with caution. Though less dramatic in effect, his version is also quite likely not “fact,” as we defined by contemporary standards of evidence.

In matters of fact, with both the Robinson and Gage texts, what we know about what Sojourner Truth actually said within this setting comes to us second-hand. Both reports are part of a tertiary

cycle in the circulation of public memory and public lore. In other words, the extemporaneous speech delivered by Sojourner Truth was rendered differently in texts by two members of the listening audience. Over the decades, though, the Robinson version was ignored and Truth’s speech has been memorialized via the Gage version as a vibrant part of public memory. Obviously, at the time of her speech, Truth was not electronically recorded. We are unable, therefore, to hear the speech for ourselves as an original real-time speech. Further, there is no written text from which Truth spoke. Beyond the presumption that Truth was illiterate, the speech, in fact, was not from a prepared text but the result of a kairotic moment and an extemporaneous opportunity to express Truth’s vision, ideas, feelings, and observations, all of which were grounded in her lived experiences. The texts that exist, then, are both second-hand versions of an expressive moment, a function of how two members of the audience,—one male, one female—experienced the performance moment, remembered and rendered the words, and interpreted the experience as members of the listening audience. At the end of the day, instead of historic documentation of an event via these two textual renderings, what we have might be better characterized as two credible witnesses and their persuasive testimony of a remarkable moment.

Based on what we now know and acknowledge about the event, we must accept, therefore, the questionable status of the authenticity and veracity of the textual renderings. Despite the factual breaks, especially as evidenced in the Gage version, dialectical and dialogical viewpoints suggests that both the journalistic account and the memoir are still grounded by Truth’s performance, by the experiences and observations that Truth shared, and by the realities and responses that her performance invoked in the hearts, minds, stomachs, and backbones of (i.e., pathos, logos, and ethos conveyed to) the listening audience. We can accept the flaws, therefore, as substantial, but we can also consider a different analytical springboard.

Instead of yoking analysis to the accuracy of the rendered texts, we have the strategic option of weighing and balancing the written testimony of these witnesses dialogically and dialectically and situating our assessments of them within the context of the rise of the Gage version as an iconic (though often historically inaccurate) story, i.e., as a mythos in order to take advantage of the opportunity to gain a different perspective of the ongoing impact and success of the moment. Without a doubt, whatever Truth actually said that day, we have learned and can still learn more about race and gender discourses over time and about Sojourner Truth’s participation in these discourses. By examining how the Gage version has migrated from one social circle to another to another and by acknowledging both the agency and instrumentality of Truth’s roles in the creation and functioning of this version, we gain a clearer understanding of how the moment has been used and re-used in fomenting public discourses and social change for well over 160 years.

If we concentrate not just on the critical amount of documentable evidence that is missing, but also on the body of evidence that is actually present, the challenge becomes using the balancing of evidence and gaps in evidence as an invitation to dig deeper. In contemporary feminist rhetorical studies, we have an inclination to go beneath such surface interpretations. We recognize now that the analytical imperative is to develop inquiry frameworks that permit us to excavate—to go beyond basic notions of documentable evidence and “accuracy” in a situation like this one to ask questions capable of adding illumination, not only for the nature and scope of the rhetorical performance, but also for its ongoing impact and meaning in the grand schema of rhetorical knowledge and practice.

We might start in this case by asking What are the truths that we know? Well, we know that there was a convening of elite white women and men in Akron, Ohio, from May 19-20, 1848. We know that Sojourner Truth attended this meeting as part of her speaking circuit with George Thompson, the abolitionist with whom she

was traveling. We know that her habit on such occasions was to speak about anti-slavery and women’s rights, in recognition of the multiple jeopardies with which African American women are compelled to function, and to share her personal experiences as a slave. We know some other things as well.

We know that, by 1848 and the rise of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, Sojourner Truth was one of the most recognized African American women in the United States, and she was becoming even more so with William Lloyd Garrison’s private publication of her autobiographical narrative, as dictated to Olive Gilbert. We also know, that Truth was drawn to the Akron convention, not only by opportunities to speak out for justice and equality, but also by opportunities for a different imperative. Truth was entrepreneurial and practical (Painter, 1996). She wanted to sell books so that she could re-pay the considerable sum that she owed Garrison and so that she might garner an income that was sufficient enough to support herself. Thus, even though Truth had multiple reasons for attending the convention, she was still, in effect, an un-invited, though not totally unexpected, participant in a meeting that was not designed with women like her (by race, class, condition, or rank) in mind.

We know that the presence of Sojourner Truth and the incidence of her memorable statement at the convention was not officially noted in the documentary record. Truth’s name was not mentioned, neither in the proceedings from the meeting (*Women’s Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851: The Proceedings*), nor in the opening speech that Gage made on May 28th (*Women and Social Movements*). Despite the mythologies that surround Truth’s participation in the convention, she was not recognized in the documentary evidence of the meeting as present or as an “official” speaker. Instead, we can surmise that Truth was a self-authorized speaker—a woman who stood up, spoke up and out, and was tolerated, rather than invited. According to the reports from both Robinson and Gage, she did not actually assume the podium. She

made one, creating a space for herself to speak, rather than giving a “speech,” as others were doing as authorized participants.

The bottom line, though, is that Truth’s speech has migrated well beyond its original moment and context and well beyond the original purposes and intentions of the speaker as an entrepreneurial performer, eloquent rhetor, and intersectional thinker. Consequently, instead of laboring over the existence or non-existence of textual facts that will never be fully in evidence, we might benefit more from considering the impact of the public lore surrounding the speech as it has circulated over time in social context and look more closely at how the speech as this type of memorial, rather than as a historical text, functions as a socio-political symbol, a mythos, and as a curious and rather complex and strategic occasion for action.

For example, we can start by acknowledging that Gage’s narrative was a memoir, i.e., her own perception of a moment, a moment that re-emerged for her kairotically twelve years later as a rhetorical mechanism for claiming a relationship as an author to a bigger-than-life historical figure—as indicated by her statement, “Mrs. Stowe’s remarks on Sojourner’s opinion of Woman’s Rights bring vividly to my mind a scene in Ohio, never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it” (165). In essence, Gage talks back to Stowe and says, “I knew her too.” Moreover, twelve years after that, Gage again leverages her memoir about Truth by putting it forward in the effort of the National Woman Suffrage Association to historicize the women’s movement at the turn of the twentieth century and keep it energized. Within such a context, we can view Gage’s depiction of Truth as functioning within the territory of what Sharon Crowley (2004) explains as the use of ethical proofs.

By these terms, consider Gage’s description of Truth’s persona¹¹ as an indication, not of fact, but of Gage’s sense of Truth’s ethos—a use of Truth’s situated ethos, rather than an accounting of the

¹¹ All quotations from the Gage text are taken from Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper. (1889, 115-17).

invented ethos which Truth persistently fashioned for herself throughout her career. In other words, the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech is Gage’s representation of the moment, not Truth’s self-representation of the moment. The reminder is that Truth was neither writer nor collaborator in the Gage account. The point of view over the distance of 12 years was Gage’s. Gage described Truth in this way

The leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an uncouth sunbonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, ‘An abolition affair!’ “Woman’s rights and niggers!” “I told you so!” “Go it, darkey!”

With this description, Gage created an icon—and, as we now know 160 years later—the creation was successful. We carry with us the image of a strong African American woman with a commanding personal presence. Gage went on to say

There were very few women in those days who dared to “speak in meeting”; and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture as they supposed, of the “strong-minded.” Some of the tender-skinned friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere betokened a storm. When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head. “Don’t let her speak!” gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced, “Sojourner Truth,” and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments.

The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows . . .

With these words, Gage deepened the iconic image, such that at our point in history, the Gage rendering as well as the public lore that has followed it have so conflated our sense of Truth, the historical figure, with the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech as represented in Gage’s memoir, that, in effect, the icon has replaced metonymically whatever the original sense of reality we might have otherwise had for the historic figure and for the historic moment—whether the words were actually spoken by Truth or not.

After Gage shares her rendering of Truth’s words, she says
Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands with her, and congratulate the glorious old mother, and bid her God-speed on her mission of “testifyin’ agin concerning the wickedness of this ‘ere people.”

With Gage’s narrative, both she and Sojourner Truth moved boldly into public lore and into our circuits of discourse, looming rather magnificently in and out of our imaginations as we have made and re-made this event to suit ever-evolving purposes. What we know from our twenty-first century perspective is that, unlike

the Robinson version, the Gage narrative did not end its social circulation with its publication in *The Independent*.

A Thrice-Told Tale: The Gage Version in Social Circulation

In 1875, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper published the first volume of a six volume set entitled *History of Woman Suffrage*. The editors stated in the Preface

In preparing this work, our object has been to put into permanent shape the few scattered reports of the Woman Suffrage Movement still to be found, and to make it an arsenal of facts for those who are beginning to inquire into the demands and arguments of the leaders of this reform. (7)

These editors composed their history of woman suffrage from the point of view of their own organization, the National Woman Suffrage Association and from the viewpoints of individuals whose thoughts and experiences they deemed worthy of inclusion. The publication was designed to bring renewed visibility to the women’s movement and to re-energize activism on women’s issues, including still the right to vote, which in the 1870s had indeed not yet been granted to women.

Among the women whose viewpoints the editors solicited was Frances Dana Gage. Her contribution to the volume included a letter, a newspaper article on the 1853 Ohio women’s convention, and her previously published “Reminiscences by Frances D. Gage of Sojourner Truth.” By this mechanism, the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech found new generations of audiences as the women’s movement re-formed itself and gained momentum, well after the Civil War and the ending of slavery, after the passing of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution, and amid the rising concerns for woman suffrage, women’s rights to education,

and their rights to their own agency and authority as citizens and human beings.

With the re-publication in *History of Woman Suffrage*, Volume 1, and the 1881 and 1889 re-prints of the volume, the Gage’s version of “Ain’t I a Woman” was well on its way to becoming an iconic speech, not as a memoir, but rather as a quintessential example of women’s rhetorical performance, African American women’s eloquence, and intersectional analysis, along with Sojourner Truth as a female activist rising in regard as one of the best known and most highly respected African American women leaders.

To clarify this point, I offer one last example of re-use of Truth’s speech under the iconic umbrella of performance, eloquence, and intersectional analysis. I underscore that whatever Truth said in Akron in 1851 provided an occasion for the emergence of a mythical moment. Gage’s reminiscence functioned as the memorializing instrument. Fast forward to the twentieth century and the story continues. One hundred and thirty years after Truth’s extemporaneous performance, in 1981, bell hooks published *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. With this publication, hooks, an African American feminist writer and public intellectual, established herself as a key figure in re-setting the framework and terms of engagement for the late twentieth century development of American feminism as it grew out of the modern Civil Rights Movement and as a bellwether for the emergence of a distinctive, intersectional perspective for conceptualizing freedom, justice, and power as a global concept for all. In the Introduction for *Ain’t I a Woman*, hooks states

When I began the research for *Ain’t I a Woman*, my primary intent was to document the impact of sexism on the social status of black women . . . The book then evolved into an examination of the impact of sexism on the black women during slavery, the devaluation of black womanhood, black male sexism, racism within the recent feminist movement, and the black woman’s involvement with feminism. It

attempts to further the dialogue about the nature of the black woman’s experience that began in 19th century America so as to move beyond racist and sexist assumptions about the nature of black womanhood to arrive at the truth of our experience. Although the focus is on the black female, our struggle for liberation has significance only if it takes place within a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people. (13)

hooks credits Sojourner Truth with being one of the most outspoken African American women on these intersectional insights and honors Truth’s vision by naming her book after the clause with which Truth was most identified, i.e., “Ain’t I a Woman.” While hooks does not re-use the actual speech in her book, she makes clear in her introduction that her analytical interests are in furthering the classic intersections of race and gender from the nineteenth century, as suggested by the “Ain’t I a Woman” statement, and in thinking through the impact of these social hierarchies in the lives of African American women. She also makes clear that, through her research, she comes to understand that the struggles of African American women for liberation are viscerally linked to liberation struggles by all people, a viewpoint that, from a twenty-first century human rights perspective, seems a logical amplification of the ideological framework of race, gender, class, and status that is embedded in the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech.

In her twentieth century circle of engagement, hooks pushes forward the “Ain’t I a Woman” iconic message to a twentieth century context in quite a pointed way. She makes a new space for African American women’s experiences and intellectual power. In effect, she takes back the speech from public lore and from the purview of woman’s suffrage and the nineteenth century women’s movement, and she re-situates this intersectional viewpoint more explicitly within the ongoing lives and experiences of African American women. As a Black woman’s standpoint, the iconic message of “Ain’t I a Woman” assumes, as it quite likely did in

the actual delivery by Sojourner Truth, a provocative, in-the-flesh authority, and it constitutes a lever for formulating from its twentieth century perspective a more inclusive and a more generative feminist analysis within a modern socio/geo-political context. Thus “Ain’t I a Women” garnered new life at the end of the twentieth century and continues to be a resource for action into the twenty-first century, illustrating the importance of paying attention more explicitly to the values added by social circulation as an analytical tool.

Conclusion

Two questions remain for this analysis. First, what is the point here? As researchers, scholars, and teachers in rhetoric, composition, literacy, and digital studies, we certainly have the opportunity to note the methodological implications of seeing more and thinking more critically about the ways and means of accuracy, authenticity, and veracity. What seems more at stake for us is whether we have the capacity to articulate and to analyze kairotic moments and their impact and consequences on the trajectories of the subsequent flow of discourses. In effect, both Robinson and Gage re-used the Sojourner Truth incident for their own purposes—Robinson for abolitionism; Gage for her own career moves and in support of the history of women’s rights. Gage’s re-use held greater sway over time in functioning as a cleverly appropriated lever for powering a social movement. Ultimately, the momentum that Gage carries forward to the twentieth century was picked and forwarded in compelling ways by bell hooks.

Given this analysis, it should be emphasized that the same judgments against Robinson and Gage can also be made regarding our own contemporary re-uses of Truth. Contemporary writers have viewed Truth’s speech as a kairotic moment and re-used it for their own purposes. Using it as a lever for social advocacy, political activism, and socio-political change. Truth was “recovered”/brought back into social circles in the late twentieth century, not

only by bell hooks in re-setting the terms for feminist engagement, but also by Truth’s induction into the National Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls in 1981; by the making of a commemorative postage stamp of her by the United States Postal Service in 1986 to serve as a symbol of women’s activism, leadership, and achievements; by the naming of a number of organizations and publications in her honor in recognition of intersectional resistance to disempowering socio-political hierarchies; and so on.

By all accounts, in her own day, Truth was a powerful historical figure and an eloquent rhetor. With the help of Robinson, Gage, and others through the decades who have re-used her words and sentiments, her rhetorical itinerancy has continued across these many, many decades. Moreover, she remains still in the twenty-first century an icon that stands, with or without her own sanctioning, as a symbol of resistance to multiple oppressions and as an exemplar of the spirit of justice, equality and personal power.

The second question is what more do we learn from these types of analytical considerations? What does this type of approach inspire or set in motion as feminist practices in our field? What are the values added? What are the issues and concerns that emerge? These types of questions and more are what Gesa Kirsch and I raised in *Feminist Rhetorical Studies: New Directions for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy* (2012). In this volume, we suggest that, at this critical juncture in the history of feminist rhetorical studies, we face two quite fundamental challenges. One is keyed by three basic questions: What makes feminist discourses feminist? What are the values added? What differences do feminist informed practices make? We address these question by examining what we determined to be some striking habits of scholarly and pedagogical behavior that are linked, for example, to

- poly-logical patterns of inquiry,
- textually and contextually grounded analyses,
- the connecting of local analyses to more global enterprises,

- a consistency in linking ethical concerns more explicitly to our commitments to responsible rhetorical action.

We assert that these habits constitute patterns of engagement in feminist rhetorical analysis.

The second challenge is keyed by critical questions as well: What constitutes excellence in feminist rhetorical analyses? What is the evidence that these types of analyses are operating with consequence in the field more generally instead of functioning mainly at the periphery of concerns? In this case, we use a rather organic approach in trying to identify the critical edges of work in feminist rhetorical theory, history, criticism, and pedagogies. In turn, we pay attention to the extent to which such work has been gaining a clearer presence in our scholarly arenas and to the ways in which this work in the United States seems to be connecting in ethically and socially responsible ways to local and global concerns.

In that volume, Kirsch and I conclude that the good news is two-fold. First, in feminist rhetorical studies, we have developed and are continuing to refine a remarkable set of analytical tools (e.g., the use of social circulation) that are useful in getting us to another phase of operational strength in understanding rhetorical performances more fully. Second, there is a new and vibrant cohort of colleagues in rhetoric, composition, and literacy—regardless of gender—who see the importance of taking up this cause and who have a passionate desire to corral their energies to do the very hard work that remains to be done.

Challenges, of course, do indeed remain. We need to create broader and deeper knowledge of rhetorical practices, performances, and processes as a global enterprise. We need to connect rhetoric with ethically and socially responsible action. We need to hold as precious the hope and expectation that functioning well as teachers and scholars in our field has a huge capacity—not only to build knowledge about language well used; to nurture the heart as we find better ways to work with our students—to affirm the soul as we learn more generative and more dynamic ways to

make our knowledge do good work in the worlds that surround us. Considering the social circulation of Sojourner Truth’s iconic speech is just one example. In re-telling a familiar story, there is still value to be gained from shifting traditional paradigms and by considering different lines of sight in order to strengthen the quality of our vision and to enable a better understanding of things rhetorical.

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