

KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics

Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny

To think about rhetoric, we must think about bodies. To do this means also to articulate how scholars' own bodies have intimately informed our disciplinary understanding of rhetoric. The links between embodiment and rhetoric consistently appear in both discourses *about* bodies and research emphasizing the material *body itself*. Scholars of rhetoric, particularly those in feminist rhetorics, have worked to reveal the inequitable distributions of power across groups. We echo these scholars' concerns about the ways women and their bodies have been obscured in conventional scholarship. We also suggest there is more work to do: by recognizing the inherent relationship between embodiment and rhetoric, we can make *all bodies* and the power dynamics invested in their (in)visibility visible, thereby strengthening the commitment to feminist rhetorical work.

One approach is to cultivate an even more expansive view of embodied rhetorics, one that supports our discipline's movement beyond seeing the body in binary terms as either objectified or subjectified. Granted, feminist rhetorics has recognized embodiment by connecting areas like labor, literacies, cultural practices, and the bodies who regulate/are regulated by such. But what if we could *recontextualize* bodies and experience the physical body as an entity with its own rhetorical agency? This re-vision can provide insights, experiences, and questions into areas like ethics, community, pedagogy, and meaning-making.

In order to experience the physical body's rhetorical power, we start here: the physical body carries meaning through discourse about or by a body. But embodiment theories suggest that meaning can be articulated beyond language. *All bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function. Embodiment encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness or consciousness about how bodies—our own and others'—figure in our work. Just as considerations of our positions as researchers are critical to understanding our individual and collective commitments to arguments about the role of bodies and rhetoric, our bodies inform our ways of knowing. We offer some tactics for such an approach, and some

examples of the ways we have tried to broaden the idea of “embodiment” as a research topic.

Daisy, whose own body is marked by scars and stories of dance, injury, recovery, age, gravity, and clumsiness, asks: How does a body carry meaning over time? What is its relation to cultural practice, location, and other bodies? As one way to answer these questions, she turns to dance and movement education and theorizes rhetoric as an always movement-oriented phenomenon: insofar as we are intellectuals, we are also physical beings whose very physicality and movement employs rhetorical tactics beyond language. Of course, different sites of study reveal meaning-making in distinctive ways; these differences (both of the sites themselves, and the practices and tactics within) led Daisy to ask how her methodological commitments must respond. If we are as much physical as we are intellectual, then research must be undertaken with attention to bodies and practices, not just artifacts and textual residue.

In addition to the *rhetorical power* of the material body, we acknowledge the ways the body also carries *signifying power*, articulating some of any body’s many affiliations. This bodily signification is only one link to a particular group, which is complicated by other links (cultural, historical, geographical, linguistic, etc.). It helps connect individuals and groups to others in complex arrangements characterized by power distribution, access, and mobility. In many ways, these links between each signifying body and cultural groups are most visible as our field’s recognition of “other rhetorics.”¹ Simply put, our disciplinary tendency is either to presume one normative body (white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, abled) that is neither labeled “cultural” nor “signifier,” or to recognize an “other” body, which is both. We argue that this tendency strips our disciplinary work of the complex mechanisms through which some traditions become the norm and some are assigned to the margins, mechanisms we also believe feminist rhetorics has been committed to exposing. We call for emerging scholarship to go beyond exposing these mechanisms, and intervene. One method for intervention, which we model here, incorporates the meaning-making *our bodies* carry with and through *our scholarship*. As we have already argued, all bodies have rhetorical power, but so too do they all signify. As Malea Powell has claimed, in order to have anything meaningful to say about the last 10,000 years of rhetoric at all, we have to look at all of it—the good, the bad, and the ugly.²

We echo Powell’s claim about the history of rhetorics and posit that the concept of embodiment can renew feminist rhetorical commitments that have historically been marked as “othered.” This requires expanding the understanding of embodiment, and by extension, feminist rhetorics, which demands an ethical reading of bodies and recognition of bodies as *people*—not objects. Living in a fat body that has been deemed “unacceptable” by institutions such

as the beauty industry led Katie to a methodological approach that combines dress studies, fat studies, and cultural rhetorics to theorize dress as forms of rhetorical practice. Her approach insists that we not “read” people just by looking at them, but instead catch ourselves before we pass judgment and acknowledge our own biases. This act of reading a body ethically is informed by decolonial theory, which resists the fetishization of bodies as text and recognizes the multiple layers of *people and their bodies* as necessary to understanding. In the case of Katie’s body, an outsider looking at her likely sees a 5’4” woman who weighs 245 pounds. What’s invisible is how Katie is orientated to her size—the reasons she looks the way she does such as her genetic makeup, her emotional connection to food, her previous experiences that led her to find comfort and power in being “fat.” For Katie’s project, as with decolonial work, scholarship that intervenes in maintaining subject/other relationships invests in an understanding of rhetoric as an interrelated dynamic between material and cognitive worlds, a methodology sharing the feminist rhetorical goal of asking how to approach embodied research while maintaining an ethical methodology.

In addition to posing questions about ethical methodology, we ask: What alliances might exist among different communities and their frameworks for knowing? We are reminded that much of our current rhetorical tradition relies on multiple misunderstandings of embodiment (i.e., whiteness, heteronormativity, classlessness). We are also reminded of the important challenges that work on embodied rhetorics poses to these prominent misconceptions.³ When feminist rhetorics research aligns with these efforts, it often relies on one or more extra-disciplinary knowledge framework (i.e., performativity, non-normativity, paracoloniaity scholarship), and as a result can provide an effective means of understanding *all rhetorics*. Each of these knowledges helps us to consider power relationships as nonlinear and dynamic.⁴ In particular, we find decolonial theory useful in clarifying multiple frameworks, insisting that we not only cultivate awareness of how power structures and bodies are tangled, but also persist daily in un-tangling them from the “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 16).

The challenge of un-tangling pushes us to ask how bodies interact *actively* with discursive and linguistic rhetorical practices, which in turn compels Maureen to try to disrupt the recirculation of subject/other relationships between language and bodies. Specifically, the use of rhetoric to mark bodies including her own, leads Maureen to examine how the fat body is mocked in media and how humor operates as a form of subjectification. Media subjectifies fat bodies through humiliation (e.g., fat shaming) and self-deprecation (e.g., fat people making jokes to reject their own bodies). Maureen resists praxes that involve marking some bodies and turns to embodied rhetorics to assert

the agency of all bodies. This theoretical re-orientation is itself a disruption, which expands beyond one view of embodiment, and encourages listening to multiple voices. As Royster and Kirsch suggest, we must both *ask* new questions and *hear* multidimensional voices respond. Their proposed topology in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* is another model for shifting and accounting for the embodied experiences of rhetorical research.

The methodology of rhetorical listening proposed by Krista Ratcliffe is one such feminist practice that supports Royster and Kirsch's topology by broadening methods to recognize new sites of rhetorical research-- and the bodies within them. For instance, Maria's practice of rhetorically listening to her own body and its unease with cultural pressures to undergo fertility treatments revealed two imperatives within an embodied methodology: one, acknowledgement that the body is a legitimate and valid site of rhetorical research; and two, an understanding that embodied methodology supports feminist rhetorical commitments. While bombarded by Western medical discourse to "resolve" her infertility by undergoing expensive, invasive fertility treatments, Maria evaluated such pressures by embodying the practice of rhetorically listening. That is, she surveyed the multiple sites and voices that her infertile body encountered: Western medicine, Western cultural constructions of the heteronormative family and her own internal voice. She asked, what new sites of feminist rhetorical research may result when we rhetorically listen to the negotiations and practices of resistance that exist within our own bodies?

As highly relational practices, embodied methodologies and embodied rhetorics encourage complex relationships among past, present, and future, as well as across multiple identifications. We hope work in feminist rhetorics during the next 25 years will approach embodiment through these complex relationships to emphasize the role of the physical body in all rhetorics, to complicate the ways bodies are understood to work and perform as rhetorical agents, and to intervene in the ways bodies both inscribe and are inscribed upon. Just as we call for *bodies* to be seen for their multiplicity as conglomerates of intricate layers, forces, and parts, so too should we experience *rhetorics*. Both are assemblers of and assembled by their orientations to larger cultural forces. In this way, both are also inherently connected through feminist rhetorics to make visible the many valences through which power is attributed to particular groups and the impacts therein.

We are all moving, breathing, thinking, rhetorical bodies.

Notes

- 1 African, African-American, Chinese, Native, Subaltern, Xicana Rhetorics, et al. We hope to *join* our conversations about embodiment/rhetorics with cultures/rhetorics.
- 2 See "Stories take Place: A Performance in One Act," CCCC Chair's Address, 2012.
- 3 See Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace, "The Queer Turn in Composition"; Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, *Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive*; Gwendolyn Pough, "Bad Rhetorician: Pondering Why . . ." (Cultural Rhetorics Conference 2014).
- 4 See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*; Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*.

About the Authors

Maureen Johnson is a third-year doctoral student at Texas Woman's University. Her research focuses on embodied rhetorics, particularly depictions. She has taught first-year composition courses and serves as a mentor to other graduate teaching assistants as the graduate assistant for First-Year Composition. She has a MA in English and a Bachelor's in journalism from Marshall University in Huntington, WV.

Daisy Levy is an Assistant Professor at Southern Vermont College, where she is also the Composition Coordinator. She teaches courses in rhetoric, creative writing, literature, and first-year writing. Her research theorizes the physical body as a rhetorical site, through movement education, kinesiology, and modern dance. She is one of the founding members of the MSU Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, as well as one of four co-editors of an upcoming special issue of *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*.

Katie Manthey is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Salem College in Winston-Salem, NC. Her research and teaching are focused on cultural rhetorics, dress studies, and civic engagement. She is a body positive activist and moderates the website *Dress Profesh*, which highlights the ways that dress codes are racist, cissexist, ageist, classist, etc. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Spaces*, *Jezebel*, and *The Body is Not An Apology*.

Maria Novotny is a PhD student in Rhetoric & Writing at Michigan State University. Her research explores how medical discourses of infertility interact with embodied ontologies of infertility. This interdisciplinary perspective bridges rhetorical studies and medical humanities, examining the rhetorical assemblage of the infertility patient, fertility provider and infertility advocacy. She partners with *The ART of Infertility*, an art, oral history and portraiture project collecting and exhibiting the diverse experiences of infertility. Her research has been published in journals such as *Enculturation* and *Feminist Formations*. She received the 2015 CCCC Gloria Anzaldúa Rhetorician Award for her infertility research.