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A Brief Summary of Feminist Research Methodologies in Historic Rhetoric and Composition from the 1970s to the Present
by Elizabeth Tasker, Frances B. Holt-Underwood, Cantice Payton Greene, Gina L. Henderson, Letizia Guglielmo, Xiumei Pu, and Alexis Anne Bender

This brief summary offers a snapshot of an inquiry conducted by graduate students at Georgia State University on feminist research methodologies in historic rhetoric and composition over the past thirty-five years. We, the authors of the study, are seven women who represent various age groups, ethnicities, and areas of specialization, including rhetoric and composition, literary studies, sociology, and women’s studies. Our study began as a project for Dr. Lynée Gaillet’s graduate class on writing for scholarly publication. When Dr. Gaillet proposed a bibliographic essay, we knew the task would first entail restricting the scope of the project. Thus we focus solely on scholarship that theorizes, describes, or employs methods of historical research, and we include only those works that directly create, innovate or solidify feminist research methods in rhetoric and composition. In other words, if a work does not deal with feminist research practices, historicism of some type, and either rhetoric or composition, it is outside the scope of our study.

We began our research by asking what we felt were good research questions, beginning with “What is feminist research methodology?” and “How is feminist historiography different from traditional historic research?” We wondered how these questions are answered in the fields of rhetoric and composition. From the totality of our reading (and especially from Patricia Bizzell), we learned that feminist research strives to identify the researcher’s emotional involvement with the subject; sees researchers as participants who are interested and often not neutral towards their subjects; gains its ethos not from objectivity but from community; and embraces pluralistic, rather than definitive, theories and conclusions (Bizzell “Feminist Methods of Research in the History of Rhetoric”). And, foremost, feminist research considers gender as a highly important factor in any study.
be it historical or otherwise.

We then focused our attention on distinguishing feminist historic research from traditional historic research. We learned that in recent decades the fact-finding mission of traditional historic research has broadened to include the practice of historiography, which views histories (written and/or oral) as stories with varying degrees of probability, some more verifiable than others. This broadened perspective of historic research has made room for feminist historiography, which emphasizes the need for historical recovery and revision to account for factors of gender. We found that feminist historiography of composition looks at gendered aspects of past composition instruction, teaching materials, student writing, and composition opportunities, while feminist historiography of rhetoric examines historic texts and contexts in which women had a voice, used language publicly, pursued an audience, or were rhetorically silent or silenced. We also noticed that feminist theory in rhetoric and composition has created a revised vision of mainstream (masculine) historical rhetoric. Our understanding of these concepts and practices has been critical to our development of this bibliographic survey.

The survey begins with the 1970s and looks decade by decade at scholarship the field through 2005. While not exhaustive, our survey is extensive and makes clear the steady growth of feminist historic research in composition and rhetoric. Following the pictorial overview presented in the timeline below is our brief interpretation of the major trends and debates reflected in this body of work.

One thing is clear: feminist scholarship in historical rhetoric and composition is a thriving field. Despite different views on canonicity and methodological approach, researchers will continue to look for, as Lunsford suggests, “the forms, strategies, and goals used by many women as ‘rhetorical’” (6). Collaboration will continue, as will a broadening of the canon to include working class, African American, Asian, Native American, and Latina women. Indeed, based on our survey of over 60 works, we are confident that researchers will continue to define, expand, question, and rethink feminist research methodol-ogy, theory, and canonicity. Our own more detailed discussion of this research will, we hope, be forthcoming. For now, we offer this summary to both new students and seasoned scholars of historic rhetoric as a resource for research and course development.

Publications Relating to Feminist Research Meth-ods in Historic Rhetoric and Composition

twentieth-century depictions of preaching and con-
temporary manifestations of “muscular Christianity” such as the Promise Keepers, but her treatment of the nineteenth-century context was much more sustained than the twentieth. Painting a more thorough picture of the state of gendered preaching performances might have made her ethnographic research richer and enhanced the stories of Pat, Reverend Barb and Pastor Janet.

Footnote
1 For the sake of anonymity, Mountford changes the names of the ministers and their churches throughout the book.
and the gains of women in the social life, the clergy lost status. To compensate for this loss, Mountford argues, homileticians used preaching manuals as a way to reassert their own authority. Pat and Reverend Barb have their differences (much of Reverend Barb's authority and delivery style come from the African American tradition of the jeremiad). Mountford analyzes how the physical moves these female preachers made away from the pulpit and into the aisle amongst the people enacts a populist theology. In practice, these women challenged Durkheim's conception of religion as the separation of the "sacred" from the "profane" and closed the gap between the two and their congregations. Mountford argues that they brought a localized intimacy to the art of preaching not found in the traditionally masculine biblical exegesis.

Mountford, using Michel de Certeau’s theory of the act of walking, argues that this intimacy is an act of transgression and dialogue. Both Pat and Reverend Barb use religion as a ritual communion between the sacred and profane. Mountford draws historical links to this phenomenon in that through the history of the Protestant church, women have largely been defined as profane and kept out of institutionally sacred realms. Mountford makes the convincing argument that these women are literally building an ethos on new ground. These women construct a gendered authority through their rhetorical performances that promises expressive messages of communal values and egalitarianism.

The book takes an interesting turn in its analysis of Pastor Janet, whose boundary and authority struggles are located outside of her delivery style. Although her congregation complained about her low voice, Pastor Janet spoke from the pulpit. This is in part, Mountford suggests, because she was never invited to move into a space outside of the pulpit like the other preachers (or she never felt comfortable making that move). This distance from Pastor Janet’s larger boundary issues of inviting and welcoming the local gay community into the established congregation of elderly and conservative work-class people. Mountford’s analysis of Pastor Janet problematizes the easy conclusions one could potentially draw from Pat and Reverend Barb’s chapters. Instead of bringing herself (and her ideology) closer to her congregation, Pastor Janet insists that her congregation move closer to her. Mountford points out that this is a moral and justified position, but nonetheless, this is an authoritarian position. Here we see the muddling of gender definitions. We get the sense that the implications of women entering the art of preaching are not as simple as a change from authoritarian, individualistic and masculine content and styles to communal, egalitarian, and feminine ones. “Gender ideology,” Mountford reminds us, “always manifests itself in local, historical contexts and is ever on the move” (130).

Overall, Mountford’s book is compelling. As promised in the Introduction, she addresses central questions in the practice of feminist historiography: “What does it mean for a field of knowledge to take into consideration the experience of women? In what way is a speech act the reflection of performance ‘gendered’? How does a woman earn the respect of an audience conditioned to regard her body itself as symbolic of lack (of authority, eloquence, power, substance)?” (13).

I would like to have seen more continuity from Mountford’s historical discussions of gendered spaces and preaching manuals from the nineteenth-century into her ethnoraphic analysis of twentieth-century women’s preaching. She does mention

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Portnoy, Alisse T. "Defining, Using, and Challenging the Rhetorical Tradition." 103-08.


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Footnote

1 We are currently in the process of submitting a detailed narrative of our study to a journal that features lengthier works.

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The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces
Roxanne Mountford, Southern Illinois UP, 2003
Reviewed by Emily Crawford
University of South Carolina

In The Gendered Pulpit, Roxanne Mountford presents a feminist reading of the rhetorical spaces of nineteenth and twentieth-century American Protestant traditions. In doing so, she responds to three distinct needs in the field of feminist rhetoric: a focus on the materiality of rhetorical performances (the physical space, the body); a recuperation of the importance of delivery; and an expansion of scholarly attention to religious subjects. Her research is largely ethno-graphic, but she situates her subjects both historically and theoretically. Most of Mountford’s chapters examine the delivery styles of three female preachers in different denominations as she probes the question of how or where these women find their authority to preach, or their ethos, within a historically masculine defined practice. Mountford asserts, “the twin legacy of a textbook tradition privileging the masculine body of the preacher and an architectural/cultural tradition that gives the body a home sustain gender bias and leave contemporary women preachers searching for ways to accommodate themselves to the physicality of preaching” (3).

For Mountford, material space is rhetorical space. Chapter one focuses on the architectural structure of the pulpit as symbolic of rhetorical authority. Using scenes from Moby Dick and Adam Bede, Mountford shows how the pulpit (or lack thereof) amplifies a speaker’s gender. Men become manlier behind this architectural marker of authority while women find a feminine authority on makeshift pulpits (like a horse cart in the case of

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