

Feminist Rhetorical Furtherance:

How Feminists Have Grown Discursive Activism

Julia M. Allen
Professor Emerita
Sonoma State University

Please do not copy images or cite this presentation.

While researching the feminist discursive activism of a group of Bryn Mawr College students during the early 20th century, I found that many recognized their rhetorical advantages and understood their location at the heart of the women's movement. With these assets, they were eager to make discursive space and skills available to others. Examining subsequent feminist activism, I have noted similar patterns. Thus, I offer *feminist rhetorical furtherance* as a term describing the multiple ways by which feminists have sought to develop and strengthen social equity by enhancing the voices of those lacking access and facility.

* * *

As I am defining it, *feminist rhetorical furtherance* can take a variety of forms, depending upon the situation. It often means enlarging or modifying the space to welcome the voices of those otherwise suppressed or ignored. Or, it could mean stepping in to protect those whose speech is threatened. It could also mean speaking *about, for, with, or as* another in order to amplify their voice. In contrast with hierarchical

emphases on individual rhetors, *feminist rhetorical furtherance* is a lateral mode of growing the movement.

Of course, such efforts run the risk of being charitable, at best, or colonizing, at worst, but even within flawed situations we may find evidence of *feminist rhetorical furtherance*. Because, let's face it, both the perfect feminist rhetorical situation and the perfect feminist rhetor are rare, if not non-existent; we work within what we have, with the affordances available and within institutional constraints. Indeed, Amy Dayton and Jennie Vaughn and their stellar crew of commentators in *Ethics and Representation in Feminist Rhetorical Inquiry* have carefully outlined for us the pitfalls and possibilities. For those of us who are searching for our rhetorical ancestors, this means that we need to consider the cultural and material forces within which women have worked, evaluating the contexts and understandings shaping any discursive effort.^z

As feminist rhetoricians, what have we done so far to build our collective ancestry?

Researchers have located sites of past feminist rhetorical activity, have revealed the work of overlooked feminist rhetoricians, have charted the various ways feminists have shaped their arguments to evade the informal censors, and have theorized methods of "hearing" un-recorded ancestral women's voices. Feminist speakers and writers have documented their struggles to shed the influence of dominant discourses, to articulate their lives, and to enter unwelcoming discursive spaces. Activists have established presses to publish feminist voices disregarded elsewhere.

In more formal efforts, Cindy Griffin & Karen Foss, building on the work of Sally Gearhart, have designed a new rhetorical method de-emphasizing persuasion. They labeled it “invitational rhetoric.” Krista Ratcliffe has infused the often disregarded fourth canon, rhetorical listening, with new opportunities and new meanings, showing its functionality in addressing current social conditions.

Feminist rhetorical furtherance may overlap with these and other practices in that it describes a feminist-inspired effort to expand the discursive universe, to make space for voices ignored or silenced. However, although elements of these practices may be found in instances of *feminist rhetorical furtherance*, they are not necessary components.

How might *feminist rhetorical furtherance* as a concept or frame be useful?

Certainly, expanding acoustic space for feminist discourse is critical for current feminist rhetorical practice. What’s more, as a researcher participating in efforts to build a collective feminist ancestry, I find that considering the possibilities of *feminist rhetorical furtherance* enables me to access and parse otherwise obscure feminist discourses.

To illustrate, I will explore a tangled and problematic instance of *feminist rhetorical furtherance*, showing how 1906 Bryn Mawr graduate and missionary Alice Ropes Kellogg used the voices of her students at Han Mei Academy for Boys in Shaowu, China to carry a message challenging female enslavement to a community audience as part of a Christmas pageant. I will then link Kellogg’s efforts with

decolonizing work by her granddaughter, poet Alice Derry, 100+ years later, tracing the through-lines furthering women's voices.

* * *

Alice Rogers Ropes graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1906 with a degree in mathematics and physics and a deeply felt desire to serve as a missionary. This desire sprang from a family history that had fused global trade with Protestant evangelism over the prior century. Her great-grandfather, using profits from selling cotton and kerosene in Russia, helped to finance the American Tract Society, an early publisher of evangelical tracts in the US, and was a member of the organization's executive committee. His wife organized her friends to raise money for missions. Successive generations produced clergymen, businessmen, missionaries, and consuls.

At Bryn Mawr, Alice Ropes joined the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, whose recruiters drew women students to Protestant mission stations by describing women's enslavement and female infanticide in foreign countries and asking "Am I My Sister's Keeper?" When her campus SVM chapter shared with each other their beliefs about the "Efficacy of Prayer Upon Foreign Mission Work," she "spoke of the compassion, the sympathy that should result from earnest prayer." This open-hearted approach to others drove her determination to become a missionary. As I considered her choice, I had to remember that the opportunities for paid work for women at that time were limited, consisting mostly of teaching. Mission work, in contrast, offered the chance to travel, the ongoing admiration and support of a congregation at home, and the certainty that one was carrying out the Biblical

commandment known as the Great Commission, Matthew 28: 16-20. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Thus, shortly after graduating, Alice Ropes, with her new husband, Rev. Edwin Kellogg, sailed for Shaowu, China, where she would teach English in a mission-run school for boys. That the boys were motivated to learn English in order to engage in global commerce rather than to become Christians probably came as no surprise to her. Nonetheless, in a signature effort to change conditions for girls and women, she adapted Henry Van Dyke’s “The Other Wise Man” for a school Christmas pageant, which meant that audience members listened as students recited lines celebrating the choice of an alleged fourth wise man who used his gift for the infant Jesus to rescue a girl from being sold into slavery to pay her father’s debts. While this instance of *feminist rhetorical furtherance* exhibits all the traits of colonizing, at the same time, it challenges a received belief in women’s inferiority, indeed, in patriarchal ownership of girls and women.

While it is important to identify and acknowledge feminist misuses of power and privilege, at the same time, understanding that we cannot erase the past, we also can look for elements that may be rhetorically progressive. As Fan Hong, Chinese-British professor of physical education, points out:

These better-educated missionaries, influenced by recent developments in the West

concerning women, brought new emancipatory perspectives to the task of ministering to the “Women’s Issue.” Their aim was to influence Chinese women’s religious beliefs, but their historic function, as it turned out, was to help transmit new ideas and images to Chinese women and to free women from feudal bondage. In the interests of spiritual imperialism, missionaries, therefore, ensured women’s freedom from temporal imperialism. It was missionary education that constituted the first step up the women’s emancipatory ladder.¹

It was not long, however, before Alice Ropes Kellogg began to experience the unexpected difference between being a missionary and being a missionary wife. As babies arrived, four in total, and illnesses struck the family, she had little time for teaching or evangelizing. What’s more, enthusiasm for missionaries’ spiritual imperialism, increasingly clearly allied with economic and political imperialism, was in decline. In January of 1927, the American consul told them it was time to leave; the family was evacuated in the middle of the night to an American gunboat. Alice Ropes Kellogg returned to the US with her family. Her husband, Ned, however, returned to China where he remained for several years, more devoted to his evangelical career than to her or their children. Her youngest daughter, finding herself an object of fun in her American grade school, rebelled, never speaking Chinese again and disdaining her mother’s guileless nature.

I could have stopped here, having found and explored a trace of *feminist rhetorical furtherance* in a well-meaning missionary over a hundred years ago. But then

¹ Fan Hong, *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 51.

her name cropped up in a recent publication by her granddaughter, showing me that Alice Ropes Kellogg's *feminist rhetorical furtherance* had not guttered out in China after all.

It was precisely Alice Kellogg's benevolence—the compassion and sympathy for which she had prayed in college and which had sent her to China—as well as her Bryn Mawr-nurtured feminist convictions that empowered her to foster the spirit and voice of her namesake granddaughter, Alice Derry, who would become a nationally-recognized poet. Naming her grandmother in a poem celebrating the centenary of her birth, Alice Derry finds the source of her strength in their bond:

...The womb makes up the child—

You be Alice, my parents said,

And I carry her.

The elder Alice, whose Chinese cook marveled, “Four girls and still she smiles,” inhabits the breath of her namesake and steadies her, leading her to challenge received logics and narratives and hear through them a suppressed voice.

In “He Named Your Basket *Harbor Lights*,” Alice Derry brings decolonizing awareness and sororal understanding to her attempts to recover the voice of an indigenous artisan whose basket—made in the western United States not long before her grandmother sailed for China—she has encountered in a museum.

At the same time, she traces her own growing understanding of how she, too,

He Named Your Basket *Harbor Lights*

A Coiled Willow Basket, ca. 1900

at Seattle Art Museum's *Indigenous Beauty* 2015

Louisa Keyser, Washoe, 1831-1925

Just that I thought your basket represented two words
for safety, but you were reaching into
nothing known, into black water you understood—
weaving “on the northern bank of Tahoe’s Truckee
River outlet.”

You crossed the lake each summer to your dealer, you *his*
discovery.

White women coming to view your baskets
still called you *dirty* in front of you, their way
to appease guilt—settlers stealing land, timber, fish.

Your basket’s round shoulders rise from river willow,
its weedy crowding to Western streams.
Onto the ripened surface you’ve patterned red and black,
red bud and fern root—like him, I could see
miniature shores with flames leaping above them,
water shining them back to us, harbor lights.

Periodic and small, they disclose the walkable land,
telling the night water, as it disappears into shore,
fragrant with deep, of their bright boundary.
People won’t stumble and drown.

Next to your basket, the 1907 photo
wraps your tall and bulky body in ill-fitting calico;
only around your waist a beaded belt reminds us,
another custom of clothing still carried beauty.

92

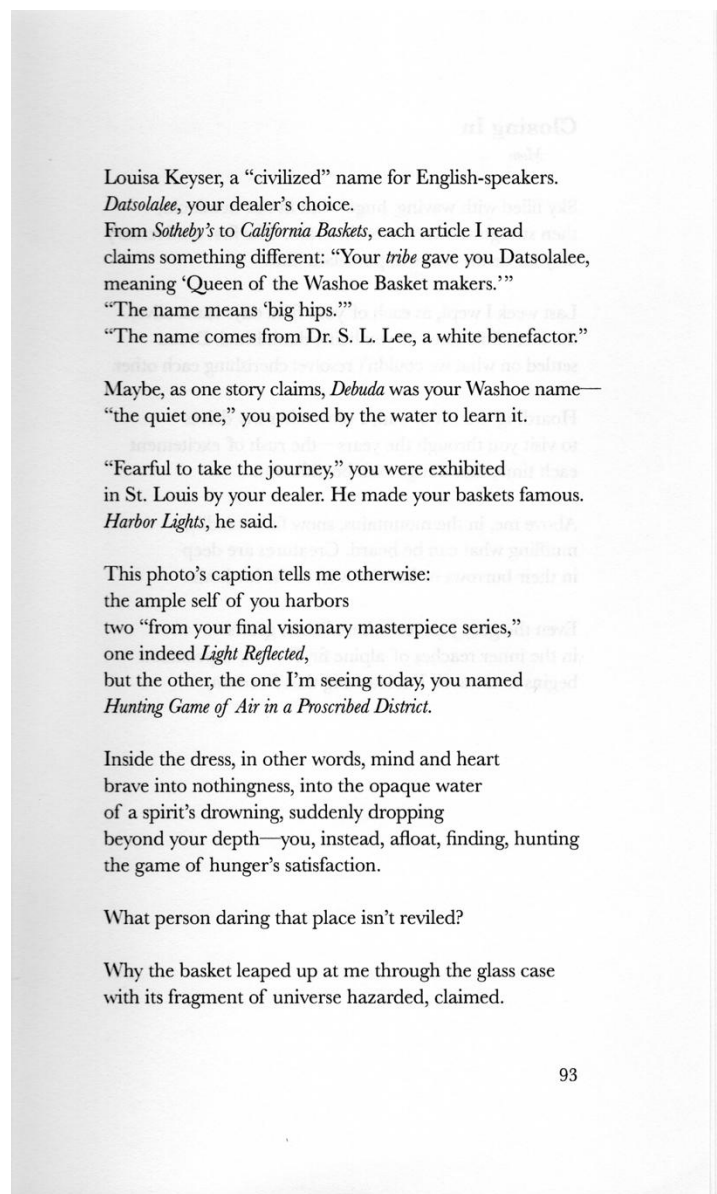
had been shaped by those
cultural forces that had silenced
the woman who had woven the
basket.

In “He Named Your
Basket *Harbor Lights*,” Derry
speaks to the maker of the
basket, first acknowledging,
mid-thought, as if stepping into
a river, her own assumption that
the name a colonizing dealer
had assigned to the basket was
correct and, then, her
realization of her mistake: “Just
that I thought your basket
represented two words/ for
safety, but you were reaching

into nothing known, into black water you understood—/ weaving “on the northern bank of
Truckee’s Tahoe River outlet.”² She goes on to explain how the European settler culture

² Alice Derry, “He Named Your Basket *Harbor Lights*,” *Hunger* (Tillamook, OR: MoonPath Press, 2018): 92-93.

considered the basket-maker: "...you *his* discovery," centering the woman's artistry in



the consciousness of the
 colonizers, the italics emphasizing
 the ownership assumed by those
 occupying territories.

Reporting on the rude behavior of
 the settler women who came to
 view the basket-maker and her
 products, Derry says: "White
 women coming to view your
 baskets/ still called you *dirty* in front
 of you," not unlike those
 missionaries for whom "clean" held
 such a panoply of meanings that it
 sometimes served to separate them
 from the "sisters" whom they had
 come to liberate. She gives the
 settlers a weak psychological

excuse, more damning than expiating: "their way/ to appease guilt—settlers stealing
 land, timber, fish." Returning to the dealer's name for the basket, however, she
 comments again about what she thought she could see in the basket: "miniature shores
 with flames leaping above them/ water shining them back to us, harbor lights."

But then Derry brings us to a photograph in the museum display of the woman who made the basket, and, lest we think that the 1907 photograph represents the woman, she comments that the “photo/ wraps your tall and bulky body in ill-fitting calico;/ only around your waist a beaded belt reminds us,/ another custom of clothing still carried beauty.” This reminder is short-lived, however, as in the next stanza she tells us the basket-maker’s Anglicized name, Louisa Keyser, and the name, “*Datsolalee*, your dealer’s choice,” with various disparate English explanations found through research. Then, she offers another name, *Debuda*, meaning “the quiet one,” that may have been the basket-maker’s original Washoe name. Or not.

Derry tells us that the dealer “exhibited” the basket-maker in St. Louis, her language recalling other colonists’ exhibitions, often of women, such as Sartje Baartman.³ The baskets, thus, were not the only commodities; the basket-maker herself was a key element in transforming the baskets into cash. “He made your baskets famous./ *Harbor Lights*, he said.” But then Derry reveals the caption on the photograph: “The photo’s caption tells me otherwise:/ the ample self of you harbors/ two ‘from your final visionary masterpiece series,’/ one, indeed, *Light Reflected*,/ but the other, the one I’m seeing today, you named/ *Hunting Game of Air in a Proscribed District*.” In this moment, Derry recovers the voice of the basket-maker, whether she is Debuda, Datsolalee, Louisa Keyser, or none of these. With Alice Derry’s act of rhetorical furtherance, we have learned the original (likely translated) name of the basket, which holds within its few words a narrative of anti-colonial resistance.

³ Saartjie Baartman, also multiply-named as Sarah Baartman and “the Hottentot Venus,” was taken from South Africa by European colonizers and exhibited in England and France during the early 19th century. She was an object of prurient fascination due to her comparatively large buttocks.

Harbor lights, we realize, are significant only to those who sail, crossing seas to occupy the land of another, then subdividing that land into “districts,” forbidding those for whom the land holds the means of survival from entering therein. But the woman who made the basket found a way to survive and to tell her story: “Inside the dress, in other words, mind and heart/ brave into nothingness, into the opaque water/ of a spirit’s drowning, suddenly dropping/beyond your depth—you, instead, afloat, finding, hunting/ the game of hunger’s satisfaction.”

Finally, Alice Derry asks us, “What person daring that place isn’t reviled?” Then, linking herself to the woman who made the basket, she says: “Why the basket leaped up at me through the glass case/ with its fragment of universe hazarded, claimed.”

Saying “my grandmother’s spirit definitely lives in my voice,” Alice Derry strips the accreted colonial meanings from this basket—and from our consciousness—recovering and furthering the voice of the woman who made it. At the same time, she both draws strength from and furthers the voice of her grandmother, Alice Kellogg.

This is just a single example. Once I realized the many ways in which feminists had been facilitating the voices of others, I began to see a profusion of linkages, crossing boundaries of years, nations, classes, and ethnicities, showing how feminists have grown discursive activism.