

Glenn, Cheryl. *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope: Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms*. Southern Illinois University, 2018. 296 pages. \$40.00 paperback. ISBN: 978-0-80933-694-4.

Reviewed by Wendy Piper

These are fraught political times. Economic inequality has been on the rise for decades, and chronic injustices, such as those concerning race and gender, persist. These social problems make their way into the classroom as teachers see their effects in the students they teach. Children from impoverished backgrounds come to school hungry, and students of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds struggle for acceptance among peers and a curriculum that addresses their needs. While various efforts at reform have been made, such programs as “No Child Left Behind,” “Race to the Top,” and “Common Core,” ultimately mandate standardized testing as a measure of student and teacher success. This leaves teachers feeling that they have to “teach to the test,” and often sacrifice their better judgement to the need for high test scores. In the face of all these challenges, everyone seems today to be looking for “hope.”

A senior scholar in Rhetoric and Composition has written a new book that offers such “hope.” Cheryl Glenn, Distinguished Professor of English and Women’s Studies Director at Pennsylvania State University and 2019 winner of the CCCC Exemplar Award, brings her career-long record of administration, teaching, and research interest in equity to the task of reforming our classrooms in a way that empowers students and teachers alike. In *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope*, Professor Glenn introduces her concept of rhetorical feminism, a theoretical concept intended to bring the ideology of feminism to bear on the field of rhetorical studies. Her goal is to make the traditionally male field inclusive of women, people of color, the disabled, and diverse Others. As the field becomes more inclusive, Glenn intends that her theoretical concept will also render the field more democratic and vibrant for future scholars of rhetoric.

Glenn's study is divided into eight chapters:

- Activism
- Identities
- Theories
- Methods and Methodologies
- Teaching
- Mentoring
- (Writing Program) Administration
- This Thing Called Hope

As the titles suggest, the chapters range from a history of activism, to a survey of theories rhetorical feminists have used as they seek to energize the field, to methods and means of bringing such theories into our research and teaching. By applying the theoretical concept of rhetorical feminism to such different rhetorical contexts, Glenn's book revises the field so as to create equality and agency in our classrooms. In the paragraphs that follow, I will focus on selected chapters of interest to the *Journal of Teaching Writing* readers.

Chapter One provides a history of feminist activism in the United States, beginning in the 19th century and including black and white women rhetors who worked for the causes of both abolition and universal suffrage. Names of several high-profile activists are put forth in the chapter, but her discussion of Sojourner Truth stands out for the way in which she exemplifies key features of Glenn's theoretical concept. Glenn writes that the "dignified black woman," standing six-feet tall, moves and challenges her white audience as she redefines the concept of woman in her "Aren't I a Woman" speech at the Woman's Rights Convention in Akron in 1851. As Truth describes her work in the fields, Glenn writes that the speaker's reliance on personal experience as evidence, vernacular language, and her physical embodiment of an alternative reality work to subvert the dominant paradigm of the dainty, helpless white southern woman. This introductory chapter provides needed groundwork for the sophisticated theoretical concept that Glenn will later develop, as

it displaces the art of persuasion with the feminist values of collaboration, silence, and emotion.

Chapter Three provides more helpful examples of the feminist rhetor, this time within the realm of academic theory. In “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers,” Glenn argues that Gloria Anzaldua transcends accepted models of argument by utilizing the epistolary form; the letter is not unilinear or “finished” as, by its nature, it calls for response. Expressing herself in earthy, vernacular language, Anzaldua writes directly to her “sister rhetors,” those third-world women who might be writing in multi-lingual texts and under socioeconomic and cultural situations not shared by “the white man.” She thus embodies Glenn’s rhetorical feminist strategy of purposeful “disidentification” with the dominant tradition. This example will help readers to think creatively about form and about diverse identities in the classroom. Writing instructors will recognize in Anzaldua’s “unfinished” form the emphasis on process rather than product. The example from this professional writer will be useful to teachers focusing on reflection, or the metacognitive moments that enable our students to “transfer” their writing knowledge from one context to another.

The focus on diversity, inclusion, and agency in our classrooms is developed further in Glenn’s chapter on “Teaching.” Her practical concern for our students is impressive. Glenn notes that “Americans know that having a good teacher is linked to higher income as well as to a range of other social results” (128). In a way that echoes her discussion of Anzaldua, she puts the current concept of “intersectionality” to use in this chapter that mixes theory with practical teaching advice. Rhetorical feminist teachers focus on the cultural location of students in their classrooms; they acknowledge Linda Martin Alcoff’s concept of “positionality” that accounts for “gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, language, religion, or other features of our identity that mark relational positions rather than essential qualities . . .” (131). Similar to her example of Anzaldua as a writer on the margins who manages to move herself as “subject” from the periphery to the center, Glenn’s treatment of identity and intersectionality encourages teachers to help students to discern their own cultural

positions. By empowering students in this way, we can help them to have the confidence to join with their teacher and others/Others in making meaning or constructing knowledge.

While Glenn's final chapter on "Hope" is inspirational regarding the possibilities of the concept she has introduced, her chapter on Writing Program Administration provides a final reflection on the progress of the movement of rhetorical feminism. As it reflects on the success of WPAs in implementing feminist ideals into the real-world environment of the programs that they administer, it's the only chapter that gives me pause. Speaking as an Administrator in a very large Composition program at Penn State, Glenn laments the status of "beleaguered" feminist WPAs, who oversee "a cadre of equally overworked, often underappreciated writing instructors, most of them women" (176). She cites feminist WPA scholar Sue Ellen Holbrook as she argues that the "professionalization of composition was actually a 'feminization' of composition" (176). "Composition's embrace of feminism . . . 'with its values of nurturance, supportiveness, [and] interdependence,'" has normalized "writing instruction as 'women's work'—neither serious, rigorous, or intellectual" (Schell 76, qtd in Glenn 177). This is a convincing argument, and I'm not sure how this irony that Glenn notes, this task of rhetorical feminism as both a celebration of "the feminine, the margins, while actively working against such a code" (177) is able to be accomplished.

My own perspective here comes from my work experience. As an instructor of writing at an elite liberal arts college for the past fifteen years, the conditions described above that have been attributed to the "feminization" of composition prevail. The writing faculty at Dartmouth is a "cadre" primarily of women, most are at the rank of lecturer, and almost overwhelmingly, we're non-tenure-track. We are collegial and collaborative. (We drew up the "Outcomes" for our required first-year writing courses together, for instance.) We share office space. For the most part we are non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and democratic. As we all know, the teaching of writing as process is labor intensive. Much of our time is spent in commenting on drafts and meeting with individual students. The labor intensiveness

of teaching writing alone is prohibitive to publishing for most of us. It's difficult to see, then, how the prestige of a writing department can rise within an academic environment that values research. Indeed, writing programs are often made up of graduate students, adjuncts, trailing spouses, and often individuals without the PhD. The interest of many hard-working instructors lies primarily in teaching rather than in research in Writing Studies, and with that interest no doubt comes the feminine values of nurturance and supportiveness toward students. I wonder, then, if we can ask—at the same time that we celebrate these values—that writing departments move out of their subaltern status.

Glenn does acknowledge that despite the efforts of feminist WPAs, the continued conditions over which the WPA presides have not changed much. A constellation of factors, including the very “feminization” of the field that Glenn reports, prevents rising in that hierarchy. The book ends on “Hope,” however, as its final chapter. Glenn’s intention is to offer not a “conclusion,” but to “pause” on “a sense of openness that includes contradictions, incompleteness, and hope” (193). These are days when such “hope” is especially needed. The inequities that plague our society and provide easy slogans for political campaigns show up in concrete and often distressing forms in our classrooms. We need to be able to address the needs our students bring us. Cheryl Glenn’s new book helps us with this task. She asks important questions, and it is up to readers to give serious thought to the intellectual project she poses. How is it that we go about breaking down conceptual barriers that have caused women, people of color, LGBTQ, the disabled, the global poor, the marginalized, to be left out? Glenn offers a theoretical vision as well as practical suggestions for teachers in the classroom that possibly provide an answer.

Works Cited

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