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Feminist Praxis of Comparative Rhetoric

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CHAPTER 30

“A Feminist Praxis of ‘Comparative’ Rhetoric”

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ABSTRACT

Why is a feminist praxis necessary for a comparative study of rhetoric? What would a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric do? mean? be? What can we come to know with a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric? Offering first a critique of the idea of a comparative approach through feminist theories challenging binary epistemology and metaphorical meaning making, this essay proceeds to theorize a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric. This feminist praxis engages the study of histories and theories of rhetoric across cultures by analyzing along intersectional lines of power exposing injustices and exploring potential for equity, decolonizing knowledge, and deconstructing violence—physical, epistemic, and otherwise—towards abolition. Using the example of a comparative study in Gayatri Spivak’s critique of *sati*, and my own example of comparative study of story-telling in ancient Greek and ancient Hindu culture, this essay displays some of the many offerings of a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric, namely equitable historiography and theory making in the study of rhetoric across cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comparative rhetoric poses the possibilities and problems of studying rhetoric across different cultures. Well known in the scholarship are both: the possibilities arising from the hope of getting in excess of the hegemony of the rhetorical tradition with its fourth century ancient Greekness pervading what can be thought and practiced as “rhetoric”; the problems arising with comparative rhetoric’s means of getting in excess, namely “comparison.” As Arabella Lyon asks, for example, “If we always are comparing and distinguishing, what is its [comparison’s] force on differences (245)?” Lyon exposes comparison as an activity generating binary oppositions and hierarchies warranting the need to develop a critical sensitivity to these oppositions and hierarchies when doing comparative scholarship. Yet, still, she affirms no possibility of escape from “the perils of comparing (245).”

That the Other gets understood via comparison to the self reveals what Mary Garrett calls the “methodological paradox” of comparative rhetoric: from concepts or terms of reference familiar to us, we start comparative studies of the Other. This comparative step imposes a conceptual framework on and of the Other. The self/other paradox pervades comparative approaches.

Lyon and Garrett are two among a critical collective of rhetoric scholars affirming and articulating the urgency of cross-cultural rhetoric while exposing the problems with comparative approaches and theorizing new methodologies (See for example Binkley; Lipson; Binkley and Lipson; Hum and Lyon; Lloyd; Mao; Simonson; Swearingen; Wang). Drawing from areas such as sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, literary studies, hermeneutics, continental

philosophy, post-colonial studies, feminist theory, and critical theory, comparative rhetoric scholars infuse comparative methodology with critical ways of producing knowledge, as LuMing Mao puts it, “responsibly.” To do comparative rhetoric responsibly, for Mao explicitly and others in alliance, means to be mindful of our own positionality and the consequences of our own claims (“Doing Comparative Rhetoric” 64). Such responsibility would be committed to “enacting the art of recontextualization as a discursive third (Mao “Beyond Bias” 209).” By this Mao explains he means “a metadisciplinary stance that helps us become more self-reflexive about our own biases, binaries, and boundaries and more attentive to the increasingly blurred and shifting boundaries between self and other, past and present, and local and global (209).” This art of recontextualization “relies on terms of interdependence and interconnectivity to constitute and regulate representation of all discursive practices (218).” Scholars then bring their own contexts and those of the other into “simultaneous view,” foregrounding dialogism and discursive openness (218).

Collectively this work forms a line of resistance to the colonizing effects of comparison and blazes paths of reformation. This work of resistance and reformation is imperative, for left unchecked, comparative rhetoric, with its binary epistemology of self and other, and its metaphorical eclipse of difference would be poised as a method to enact violence on others, colonize knowledge, and fail to recognize inequitable systems and experiences of power in the production of what we consider knowledge of rhetoric as well as in the praxis of rhetoric.

My purpose in the present essay is to outline a feminist praxis of ‘comparative’ rhetoric, yet in so many ways, these critical approaches seem already in solidarity with feminist praxis, some being overtly theorized as such (Wang; Hum and Lyon; Lyon; Jarrett; Swearingen;). On the whole these critical approaches perform a key practice of feminism, namely enacting

resistance to patterns of destruction, injustice, and inequity in knowledge production and in the orchestration of geopolitical relations.

Drawing from existing research in rhetorical feminism and feminist rhetorics, along with post-colonial, new materialist, post-humanist, intersectional, and transnational feminist praxis, I will for present purposes frame feminist praxis as acting with a particular set of commitments that are justice oriented (Ahmed; Barard; Binkley; Bradiotti; Chávez and Griffin; Cixous; Crenshaw; Garrett; Glenn; Hum and Lyon; Jarratt; Lloyd “Beyond ‘Dichotomous’”; Manne; Moraga; Royster and Kirsch; Royster and Simpkins; Schell and Rawson; Shome; Solnit; Spivak; Sutton and Mifsud; Swearingen; Wang). These commitments work to expose injustices and advance equities along intersectional lines of identity bringing issues of gender and sexuality into analysis with race, class, ability, ethnicity, nation. These commitments work to decolonize knowledge and dominant meaning, decentering traditional ways of writing history, doing theory, critiquing texts. The commitments of feminist praxis are to anti-violence, whether violence be defined as epistemic, ontological, physical. I will debrief each of these commitments then, in solidarity with Garrett and Wang, I take a self-reflexive turn on my own work to see ways in which feminist praxis can guide comparative rhetoric.

2. EXPOSING INTERSECTIONAL INJUSTICE; ADVANCING INTERSECTIONAL EQUITY

What is intersectional injustice? What is intersectional equity? Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality trains our eyes to see patterns of subordination intersecting along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and other identity markers at the heart of understanding injustice and discerning sources of political empowerment and social reconstruction to live more

equitably together (Crenshaw, 1989; 1994). Patricia Hill Collins affirms intersectionality, in some form, as central to Black women's epistemology.¹ Intersectional analysis becomes central to a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric.²

A feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric would interrogate race, for example, so that resistance strategies of feminism could avoid replicating and reinforcing the subordination of people of color. A feminist praxis would engage anti-racism to interrogate patriarchy so as to avoid reproducing the subordination of women. Likewise, interrogating heterosexism, ableism, nationalism, classism so as to avoid reproducing these patterns of subordination as rhetoric is studied across cultures would be central to a feminist praxis.

A feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric would do rhetorical theory, history, and criticism across different cultures in a way that attends to patterns of subordination at the intersections of identities *and* would work to discern sources of political empowerment and social reconstruction.³ Rebecca Solnit writes of feminist praxis possessing the power to change the world to some degree and that the world is going to change, again and again, with contingency and instability its ever-present measures (23). This contingency as Solnit frames it and Cheryl Glenn affirms becomes grounds for hope (Solnit cited in Glenn 197). Feminist praxis is not just about exposing injustice, it is about redesigning worlds so as to live more justly together, with equity as the measure of justice. Equity is that justice in excess of the law, that justice which the law cannot accommodate for the infinite number of different possible cases requiring law, and the biases of law makers. A feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric would pursue the hope of equity in cross-cultural knowledge production as well as in the social and geopolitical orchestration of our lives lived together on this planet (Bradiotti; Mifsud "To the Humanities").

3. DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE, DECENTERING MEANING

The praxis of reflexivity is a primary act of resistance to the appropriative and colonizing tendencies of comparative knowledge production in the study of rhetoric. This decolonizing praxis of self-reflexivity forms a cornerstone of post-colonial, transnational, and intersectional feminisms. While comparative scholars have pursued the central importance of self-reflexivity offering guidance on how to engage the practice (Garrett; Wang; Mao), this pursuit and guidance is typically not within or from rhetoric but outside of it, appropriating psychology, epistemology, critical theory and the like. A feminist praxis of decolonizing and decentering knowledge and meaning through reflexivity would require us to go further than this, namely to take a reflexive look at rhetoric, and at reflexivity. Such a turn aligns with what Henry W. Johnstone saw in rhetoric, namely the very operation of the wedging of consciousness hence of “the self” as a space of recognizing personal dilemma (“Rhetoric as a Wedge; Mifsud *Rhetoric and the Gift* 35-43). The experience of the self, for Johnstone, was a rhetorical experience, where the self emerges from a person in dilemma as a wedged open perspective on the dilemma. This rhetorical view of the self reveals the contingency of the self in place of the commonly assumed fixed self operating in comparative rhetoric.

The praxis of being self-reflexive that is at once feminist and rhetorical decenters the self as a space of acting on, and colonizing, others. One’s subject position via the rhetorical wedge of the self becomes the subject of exploration, analysis, and critique first, not the other as subject of comparison. To decenter one’s subject position is key to the decolonizing action needed for a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric.

If a feminist praxis is not decolonial, taking that first step of self-reflexivity, we get, for example, a white feminism colonizing and excluding women of color. Cherríe Moraga describes the urgency of reflexivity in this way: “I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress, is when they’ve come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally (33).”

Moreover, if feminist praxis is not decolonial, taking that first step of reflexivity, we get, for example, a feminism focused on individual or collective women, to the exclusion of, say, the earth, a dangerous exclusion as we face a climate crisis threatening apocalyptic environmental destruction. New materialist and post-humanist feminisms critique such exclusively human foci for the dangers of silencing our location and highly contingent situation on the face of this earth (Barad; Bradiotti). Feminist praxis resists colonization not just of people and culture but of the earth as well.

4. ANTI-VIOLENCE

Feminist praxis is committed to anti-violence. This is a challenging claim to make. On the one hand, as Sara Ahmed tells the story so well, we have the long-standing trope of the murderous feminist (252-254). “The figure reminds us how feminism is often understood as a form of murder; calling for the end of the system that makes ‘men’ is often understood as killing men (252).” On the other hand, we who engage in feminist praxis are murderous feminists, albeit redeployed in the figure of the feminist killjoy. The feminist killjoy is “assembled around violence; how she comes to matter, to mean, is how she exposes violence. Just remember the *kill* in killjoy (252).” But, “Feminists are not calling for violence. We are calling for an end to the

institutions that promote and naturalize violence . . . It is because we expose violence that we are heard as violent, as if the violence of which we speak originates with us (253).” The violence is on women’s bodies not originating in them. As Kate Manne prefaces her analysis of misogyny in *Down Girl*, sexual assault, stalking, intimate partner violence, rape, and other forms of homicide are all crimes whose victims are generally women, rather than men, and the perpetrators are generally, and sometimes almost exclusively, men rather than women (xii).

Gendered and sexualized violence originates in misogyny. A feminist praxis of anti-violence is a praxis of exposing misogyny for the way it polices and punishes gendered and sexed bodies who step outside of sexism’s place for them, or are perceived as doing such. Manne and Ahmed share an understanding that “misogyny is a self-masking phenomenon: trying to draw attention to the phenomenon is liable to give rise to more of it (Manne, xix).” Despite the catch-22 situation as Manne terms it, she admits there is no way around this need to expose misogyny to stop the violence. With no way around this, feminists stay committed to anti-violent praxis, recognizing as Ahmed does that feminism “helps you to make sense that something is wrong; to recognize a wrong is to realize that you are not in the wrong (27).”

5. COMPARATIVE RHETORIC AS FEMINIST PRACTICE

When we do comparative rhetoric by way of feminist praxis, we study rhetoric across cultures so as to discern intersectional injustice and the possibilities of equity, to decolonize knowledge and decenter meaning, and to deconstruct violence.⁴ One such ready example of a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric is Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of widow-sacrifice in Hindu culture, *sati* in Sanskrit, transcribed *suttee* by early colonial British (21-78). The Hindu widow ascends the funeral pyre of her dead husband and immolates herself upon it. The British

abolished this rite in 1829 a move Spivak writes as being generally understood as a case of “white men saving brown women from brown men (49).” Lacking an intersectional commitment, white women, Spivak notes, from the 19th century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly, have not produced an alternative understanding of *sati*. The Indian nativist account, as an alternative understanding, offers nothing better, as Spivak calls this nativist account “a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: ‘The women wanted to die (50).’”

In these two accounts, we never encounter the women’s voices. Granted women’s testimony would not for being women’s necessarily be free of the respective ideologies structuring these two accounts. Women’s testimony would though “constitute the ingredients for producing a countersentence (50).” To ask oneself, “How is it possible to want to die by fire to mourn a husband ritually (47),” is to ask the question of the gendered and muted subaltern woman. Spivak describes herself in asking this question as tactically confronting the immense problem of the consciousness of the subaltern woman. In what follows of her writing on *sati*, details of which I defer to a primary reading of Spivak not my summarized account, she works through ancient Hindu texts (*Dharmasastra* and *Rg-Vada*), British Colonial Law in India, Hindu Law, records of the East India Company, Hindu mythology, Greek mythology, Sanskrit etymology, Sanskrit translation, contemporary work on women and/in development, critical theory (Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze), psychoanalytic theory (Freud), and her own “impulse (48)” and position as a feminist literary critic to explore the rhetorical structures of the subaltern woman. She exposes the rhetorical tropes orchestrating the confluence of meaning-making and power. Allegory. Catechresis. Synecdoche. Metonymy. Irony. Exemplum. All these and more find their way into her “constructed counternarrative of women’s consciousness, thus woman’s being, thus woman’s being good, thus the good woman’s desire, thus woman’s desire (60).”

I see what Spivak is doing as a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric. But seeing as such is a metaphoric projection of myself on Spivak's work. She self-identifies as a literary critic, not a rhetorical theorist or historian of rhetoric, let alone practitioner of comparative rhetoric. So, I will take a reflexive turn to make myself my subject of study and critique.

6. STORY-TELLING AS SOUL TUNING REVISITED

I set out to write "Story-Telling" in response to an open call for submissions to Roberta Binkley and Carol Lipson's, *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetoric*. I had just gotten tenure when the call came out, and I had just returned from a research trip to India sponsored by my University. I had been wanting to complement my study of ancient Greek rhetoric in Homeric epic culture with a study of ancient Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata* and especially the *Ramayana*, for various good and scholarly reasons, but perhaps honestly because my mentor Henry Johnstone told me of his travels in India and gave me many of his books related to his interest in intellectual traditions of ancient Hindu culture. These books I accepted as treasures, the two epics included, along with a host of significant Sanskrit lexicons and reference works, including a classic *Teach Yourself Sanskrit*. I got started writing for the Binkley and Lipson volume.

The outcome of that work was "Story-Telling." And even before the essay appeared in print, I was facing my writerly regrets. What had I done in my venture to explore this new land and language? Had I fetishized the foreign other as subject of study? (Mao "Reflective Encounters 408-411). What elements of power, privilege, and dominant meaning did I naively reproduce? Perhaps asking these very questions are essential always to doing comparative rhetoric responsibly?

Granted, I approached with more critical consciousness some things better than others. I was well aware from my study of rhetorical tropes that comparison needs disrupting in its assimilative orientation of judging what is other to what has been the norm. I introduce an aggregate method drawing from Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method*. Aggregation rather than assimilation requires a particular figuration of thought and speech which I use the Greek word "parataxis" to describe in the epic. That this paratactic aggregate rhetoric is a description of the epic speech of the *Ramayana* is a carefully enough made description, and it aligns well with Mao's call for a simultaneity of perspectives and Wang's suggestion of metonymic possibilities in transrhetorical comparative rhetoric ("Rethinking" 39; "Transrhetorical Practice" 248). But, I did not see when writing "Story-Telling" the dangers of where I go next. I celebrate the aggregate, paratactic rhetorical use of "and" in epic speech arguing that as a conjunction characteristic of ancient Hindu and ancient Greek epics, "and" frees meaning from the dictates of logic imposed by other more overt copula (e.g. but, yet, or, because, nor, although, since, unless, while, where). Spivak is careful to point out the "and" as a conjunction is not so free for the subaltern woman for it has a "concealed charge of supplementation," in relation to subaltern woman and "development," for example. Spivak judges it better to announce the logic of connection so this logic is made available to be seen and critiqued (52).

The bigger point of critique, though, I want to make of myself is this: in "Story-Telling" I was oriented towards making a case about rhetoric, what it can be in excess of the Greek tradition. Yet, a feminist praxis must go further with this critique to the question of justice. What concern really is a disciplinary concern unless that disciplinary concern somehow advances justice? The point of justice I seem to be constructing in "Story-Telling" is about bringing cultural pluralism to our rhetorical studies so as to get in excess of the hegemony of the Greek

tradition, and this is no small point of justice. However, a feminist praxis invites me to work not out of concern for a discipline but perhaps for that discipline's impact on creating "more bearable worlds (Ahmed, 1)."

I know now better, but I knew even at the time, where I need to go to make "Story-Telling" matter beyond the question of comparative rhetoric for the sake of cultural pluralism in rhetorical studies, in other words to perform a more robustly feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric. I need to go to that place where I can write about the sexual violence and misogyny of the epics. From my commitment to a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric, I want to change my question, my context, my orientation so as to face this violence. The epics haunt me with this violence. Both the *Odyssey* and the *Ramayana* have in their respective traditions been regarded as telling the stories of namesake heroes, Odysseus and Rama. Kathleen Erndl writes against the long-accepted interpretation that the Rama story, more than any other sacred story in India, is a blueprint for right human action (67). So, too, the story of Odysseus has been interpreted as a blueprint for right human action, namely deliberative action, especially as compared to the other hero Achilles of the epic the *Iliad* interpreted as uncivilized, impulsive, brutish. Yet in both epics we find haunting scenes of these heroes and their leadership of sexual violence. Two scenes in particular haunt me: the murder of the handmaidens in the *Odyssey* and the mutilation of Surpanakha in the *Ramayana*.

At the end of the *Odyssey* after Odysseus has returned home and killed all the suitors of his wife, he gives one final command to his son Telemachus, to kill the handmaidens for being disloyal. Telemachus does. Odysseus the model of masculinity and right action makes as his penultimate heroic act an act of heinous violence against the handmaidens. Why? From his early moments returning home, he observed secretly what looked like to him his handmaiden flirting

with the suitors. The scene so tore him apart that Homer tells of Odysseus making a strategic decision as he ponders whether to kill the handmaidens immediately or wait for a better time and occasion. He decides to wait. One of the rare scenes in the *Odyssey* where Homer gives us a reflexive account of the rhetorical self emerging in deliberation is a scene setting up a climactic scene of gendered violence. The violence is told as warranted by Odysseus' wrath over his seeing the sexual agency of the handmaidens.

In the *Ramayana*, the story of Surpanakha offers another haunting scene of sexual violence, though not murder, mutilation. Rama orders his brother Laksmana to mutilate Surpanakha after she proclaims her love and desire to Rama. Laksmana does. He cuts off her nose and ears leaving her screaming in pain and covered in blood. The scene is a turning point in the *Ramayana* as Surpanakha runs to her brother who seeks revenge for his sister's mutilation, warranting the abduction of Sita, which then takes place and carries the tale forward. Not only does Rama order Surpanakha's mutilation, he taunts her before doing so with a combination of sexual playfulness and misogynist shaming of her body and her desire.

My labors in "Story-Telling," though I do not share this in the essay, are so very much about these two scenes, and others we are told of sexual and gendered violence. To show the rhetoricality of these ancient epics is a radical reconciliation. By radical here I mean what Moraga means in her writing on radical feminism: everything is open to question. Can the sexual violence of these poems (poems that still have living legacies) be reconciled by showing these stories are always already called into question as tellings, meaning story-tellers are offering these stories as stories, not prescriptions of moral code, or the fixing of principles of right action? The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* both open with "Tell me, Oh Muse . . ." telling us the whole to follow is a telling. "Story-Telling" makes the case for the *Ramayana* being not the story of Rama but the

story-telling of the story of Rama. When we see the reflexive turns of epic rhetoric, we see the rhetoric of epic. This rhetoric calls attention to contingency, and contingency of the story helps us see sexual violence is no necessity for right action. If we see these epics as rhetorics in their full contingency as stories of stories being told we have hope that changing the story, hence changing the world, is possible.

7. CONCLUSION

For me a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric means in my study of ancient Greek and Hindu epic, I need to tell, of the telling of the telling of the story. This is the history that I need to do, a history that calls all into question for the reflexivity and metaformations that show our situation in contingency, or as Hayden White calls it, meta-cognitive awareness of the tropics of discourse. With such a feminist praxis of comparative rhetoric, I would write as a means of not only exposing injustice, decolonizing knowledge and meaning, and resisting violence—deconstructing its logic and exposing its rhetorical operations, but also as a means of revolution within and across cultures, locally and globally to end heinous, chronic, cross-cultural injustice, like sexual violence, to name just one form.

NOTES

¹ While Chavez and Griffin trace the origins of intersectionality as a concept in U.S feminist scholarship to Black women in the 1970s, Marsha Houston, writing the “Forward” for Chávez and Griffin, and others like Monika Alston-Miller show that the roots of intersectionality are

even older, traceable to 19th century Black women rhetors, such as Maria Stewart (Houston xi; Alston).

² See Griffin and Chávez for an “overview of key moments in the past fifty years of communication and rhetorical scholarship (3)” representing foundational attempts to attend to race, gender, class, or sexuality that moved our thinking about intersectionality (3-19).

³ Cheryl Glenn’s theorizing of rhetorical feminism attends extensively to both the search for justice in rhetorical feminist work and the hope of imaging, creating, manifesting future possibilities of justice.

⁴ See Bo Wang, “Rethinking Feminist Rhetoric and Historiography in a Global Context” for an extensive review and engagement of research in comparative feminist rhetoric.

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