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Doing it Herself: Cultivating a Feminist Ecological Ethos as a Female Graduate Student

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Introduction

Doherty (2018) addresses the challenges of establishing a "suitable academic self" as a female graduate student, which is a sentiment echoed by countless women in higher education. From well before the feminist revolution of the 1970s to beyond the girl power movement of the 1990s, female graduate students have consistently felt the ways that academia was not made for them, the ways that they lacked access to the pervasive boys' club around them. The female graduate student identity is informed by the precarity of gender in higher education, and it is vital that we continue to investigate these power dynamics that are still in play today. Though all obviously enter graduate school with different backgrounds, positionalities, and temperaments, women still have "interconnected experiences [of oppression] under patriarchy" (Ryan, Myers, & Jones, 2016, p. 13).

For us, these feelings and experiences have consisted of wondering if we belong in both the field and graduate school, negotiating how to enter into and articulate oneself in classroom discussions, and crafting our own unique teaching personas. Even though most of the people in our field of Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp) are women, the majority of scholars we are reading in our coursework and in preparation for our comprehensive exams are not. Indeed, as Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016) assert, the patriarchal traditions of the academy cause many female academics to find it difficult to cultivate a "comfortable ethos" (p. 2). We have turned to their "alternative theory of ethos" (p. 2) to account for the different discursive and agential choices that we have made, especially their three rhetorical strategies: interrupting, advocating, and relating.

While traditional scholarly conceptualizations of ethos belittle and often reject first-person ways of knowing, we believe that using our own lived experiences provides something valuable that other kinds of research cannot. Inspired by Martinez's (2014) use of counterstory to document institutionalized issues of oppression in Rhet-Comp and joining González (2020) in his scholarly use of autoethnography, we have determined that the best way for us to illustrate the feminist practices of interrupting, advocating, and relating is to narrativize our own first-person experiences of responding to sexism as scholars in Rhet-Comp.

Interruption-Interrupting: Laura's Story

During my final semester of coursework, I was responsible for compiling a reading list for the qualifying exam I would take the following fall. The list was to include approximately 100 texts, and it was intended to provide me with comprehensive knowledge of our field's history and key concepts, as well as reflect my unique scholarly interests. To get started, my advisor encouraged me to reference syllabi from our program's core classes, reading lists from previous exam takers, and the tables of contents from popular edited collections. Taking that advice, my list came together easily, and it quickly exceeded the number of texts required. However, as I looked it over, I realized only a quarter of the texts were composed by or included women, and I worried it didn't reflect the feminist values that inform my scholarship, teaching, and daily life. I wasn't sure what to do; I anticipated that the list would be approved because it included some of the most popular works in our field, and it looked similar to the lists my peers had compiled in years past. I wasn't comfortable, though, studying a reading list that did not include more women's voices.

I use this example not to suggest that previous students had purposefully left women off their lists, but instead to acknowledge one of the ways in which the rhetorical tradition itself often goes unquestioned despite its lack of female voices. There are real, material consequences for this. As a female graduate student, I have struggled to find my place in our field—to find perspectives that adequately represent my gendered experience as a speaker and writer. An uninterrogated rhetorical tradition excludes entire populations of people and their lived experiences as rhetors; it does not account for the unique rhetorical strategies disenfranchised communities must use in order to be heard. Therefore, I could not re-inscribe that tradition.

So, I decided to interrupt it. Interruption, as Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016) suggest, is a strategy that women have used "to grasp agency and shift normative discourses for some time" (p. 23). By interrupting dominant discourse practices and traditions, women can call attention to their marginalized position, and reveal "the constructed nature of what we consider normal" (p. 24)—and that's what I tried to do. For each male voice on my list, I worked to find a woman's that would challenge or complement it. I worked to interrupt the tradition in our field that prioritizes masculinized rhetorical discourse, and by doing so, I found a place for myself within it.

Advocacy-Advocating: Sarah's Story

In week 12 of a 16-week course taken to fulfill my individualized "Race and Writing Studies" minor, my professor assigned a text by a female author—the *first* female author he had assigned all semester. As Laura illustrates, male-dominated, or even male-exclusive, canons are the norm in higher education,

and as a result, they are largely left unnoticed and unquestioned. During week 12, though, Megan realized this gendered oversight; when I expressed my excitement about reading a book entitled, *Landscape of a Good Woman*, she expressed her excitement about finally reading a book that featured a woman's voice altogether. And when she informed me that she did not have plans to ask our professor about his oversight, I acknowledged that the "risks of silence [were] too high" (Ryan, Myers, & Jones, 2016, p. 3) and ultimately felt I "had no choice" (p. 153) but to advocate for her, myself, and our female peers.

According to Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016), "Advocacy entail[s] rhetors advocating for their own right to speak authoritatively and negotiating the complexities of speaking for others" (p. 111). Given my limited authority at the time as a first-semester female graduate student, and the precarity of speaking on behalf of unknowing others, I decided to carry out my advocacy in a private conversation. After class one day, instead of accusing, arguing, or assuming, I asked my professor why he waited so long before introducing a female author. His response was powerful. Without hesitation, he apologized to me and immediately accepted accountability by admitting that this was an oversight that deserved to be corrected. But more, the very next course meeting, he apologized to the class and delivered handouts of photocopied tables of contents and fostered a discussion about the importance of diversity in the field and in course design.

The texts we read have material effects on the way we make meaning in and of our worlds. A syllabus containing entirely male authors provides the class with a narrow understanding of the field, which is especially troublesome in an introductory course that should function as a broad survey. But perhaps more importantly, this limited scope would be dangerously perpetuated in our final projects: individually designed syllabi of subsets of the field, which several students intended to submit as actual course proposals in our university. And most personally, while every text's masculine pronouns and unrelatable masculinized examples served as micro-frustrations, their large-scale assumptions of a shared male-centered, logocentric pattern of thinking were a forceful reminder that I did not belong in academia. But my advocacy resisted; it showed me that I belong here. Because *women* belong here.

Relation-Relating: Megan's Story

For Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016), relating emphasizes the ways that women rhetors' ethē are "socially constructed" (p. 195). For a female rhetor, therefore, three general modes of relating with people develop: "collaboration, connection, and coalitions or alliances" (p. 195). Thankfully, I have been lucky enough to experience these different modes of relating throughout my life. But as I reflect upon my time during graduate school, I have realized that these three ways of relating have been bound up together, inextricably linked in the relationships that have helped me to cultivate a feminist ecological ethos in graduate school.

Collaborating with Sarah and Laura is a way of relating I have relied on to breathe life into the isolating moments that can often accompany academic work. I have spent countless hours speaking with both of them about the ideas we were grappling with in our coursework. They are the ones who help me see things I missed in my own readings of texts. They are the ones who continually push me to think about ideas that matter. Collaborating in these ways has allowed us to connect over shared experiences of being in the same graduate program but also our shared interests in feminism and social justice that extend beyond the work we do as graduate students.

Finally, Ryan, Myers, and Jones (2016) remind us the last general mode of relating for female rhetors is through coalitions or alliances (p. 196). Due to the collaborative and connective nature of our relationships, coalitional and allied aspects of our friendship have been a natural progression. Laura's choice to interrupt the rhetorical tradition in her qualifying exam helped pave the way for future members in our program to do the same. Additionally, when my apathy was stronger than my desire to understand if there was a pedagogical reason for our lack of female-authored texts, Sarah took the collaborative and connective mode of relating a step further into a coalitional approach that enacted feminist principles in our daily lives. While this coalitional kind of relating isn't always met with a warm reception, these strong feminist friendships have helped me uncover some of the small ways one can rely on daily feminist actions to foster an ecological ethos. Female rhetors' relation-relating has taken various forms I haven't discussed due to my own limited experience, but I hold on to the hope that everyone can develop supportive, empowering relationships with the people in their lives. Because you are not alone. You belong here.

Conclusion

When maneuvering through graduate school, it is difficult for anyone to make sense of how they fit in. We must, however, consider the ways that some women can cultivate their scholarly ethē more easily than others (Sales, 2020). For instance, our positions as white women in the academy situate us to more readily interrupt, advocate, and relate. We all felt more comfortable in our acts of resistance because of our whiteness, whether we were entirely conscious of it or not. But moreover, because of the multitude of ways in which the university inherently caters to us—to our needs and our desires—it is also our duty to help others cultivate their scholarly ethē; we must interrupt, advocate, and relate not only for ourselves, but for—and with—all persons who exist in marginalized spaces.

Ultimately, we hope these stories prompt Rhet-Comp programs, and the discipline as a whole, to consider how they can make institutional changes that better represent and support their graduate student body. And above all, we hope that they remind you, female graduate students, that there is a place for

you here; that you belong here; that you are not alone. We hope they inspire and equip you to actively struggle for what is yours when you may need to. This space is *yours*. Interrupt it. Advocate for it. Relate in it.

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