

“... not aspiring to be humble”: 19th-Century Women Writers, the 2024 Presidential Election, and Developing a Feminist Rhetorical Stance

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In the fall of 2024, I taught “Readings in Early American Literature.” Amidst our scheduled coursework, I helped my students grapple in real time with the U.S. Presidential election. The observations my students shared during the election affirmed my assumption that our 19th century U.S. cultural texts help students cultivate an expansive public self during a time when such robust visions of self are under threat. Here I will reflect on two moments when my students placed their observations about the election front and center in the classroom and we made sense of them by applying our knowledge of the rhetorical moves of select antebellum women writers. We ended up in a surprising place: that of creating a theory of feminist stance-taking. We described a “feminist stance” as taking up and enacting an embodied, purposeful, inclusive point of view about the public sphere and our role in it. Students are seeking help in making sense of what is happening in this historic time. If this short essay rises to a purpose beyond personal reflection, it is to invite faculty to

be responsive and alert to this fact, to co-create activities with our students, to find the through-lines in our literary and rhetorical traditions, and apply them to develop informed, agential stances.

My Early American Literature students were already developing their public selves but hadn't quite thought about it. For context, at my small liberal arts college, we have precious few English majors. Most of them are women-identified people majoring in Inclusive Education with a dual major, or a minor, in English. They are studying to become middle and high-school English teachers and are already engaged in field work in classrooms across our city. The classroom buzz was often about their field observations, or their student teaching. They were finally moving from the identity of student into developing their public teaching selves. Some of them were designing and teaching lessons. They were getting to know their individual students, experiencing being mentored, and were developing a curricular point of view. Along with the English/Ed students, I had two English majors with a focus on creative writing. They were excited too, as they stepped into the identity of being writers. They were attending dinners with our visiting authors, editing our literary magazine, submitting their work for publication, applying for and completing internships. These students were designing public selves in the fall of 2024, just as bolder and bolder conservative discourses moved to design them out of the public sphere, especially women, people of color, immigrants, student protesters, and the LBGTQIA+ community. Students felt this push and pull and wanted to discuss it within the bounds of our class.

One such moment happened in early October of 2024 when, as I walked into the classroom, a group of students were talking about Vice President Kamala Harris's interview on the October 6th Alex Cooper podcast *Call Her Daddy*. Curious, I cued up the part of the episode they were discussing--when Cooper asked Harris to respond to the comments of Arkansas governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Speaking at a rally for President Trump, Sanders credited her children with her ability to keep a humble, godly disposition. "Kamala Harris doesn't have anything keeping her humble," Sanders said. When Cooper asked for her response, Harris said: "There are a whole lot of women out here who, one, are not aspiring to be humble, two, a whole lot of women out here who have a lot of love in their life and children in their life."¹ I shelved my class plan and asked students about the underlying warrant of Sanders' claim: that humility is a necessary stance for a public woman. What does she mean by humility? How does a discourse on humility intersect with normative ideas about gender? Motherhood?

Nationalism? Religion? What do our readings by antebellum women writers thus far have to say about discourses of humility? One student talked about Anne Hutchinson, Phyllis Wheatley, and the arduous rhetorical framings of the humility they each had to perform when making their work public. Students proposed that a stance of humility was a kind of pre-scripted social role. Humility could act as a disciplining agent, constraining new kinds of public, literary selves. Women writers had to work within gender norms to appear less threatening to get access to the audience they seek.

I asked them about Harris's point, "not aspiring to be humble." They saw in it a rejection of this pre-scripted gender role. Her comments suggest that women need to consciously make a choice: women must comply, resist, or strategically negotiate such gendered audience expectations. I asked students to sum up what we were learning about feminist stance-taking, and we settled on something unwieldy: to use embodied, textual, and visual rhetorics to strategically orient oneself within or against a dominant gender ideology to reach a specific audience for a specific purpose. Harris inspired us to consider that we are all active agents in crafting our place in the deliberations of our time.

I asked for more examples and had students pair up and reconsider our past course readings with this in mind. One group mentioned the kinds of humility that Harriet Jacobs performs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) for a white audience of potential sponsors of the abolitionist cause. They discussed her references to the "reader"—a rhetorical strategy meant to provoke identification and create empathy in a situation of sexual predation and severe abuse.² When exactly in the narrative did she directly address the reader? Why then? Another group mentioned Sojourner Truth at the 1851 Akron suffrage meeting. Instead of negotiating codes of humility, they talked about how Truth challenges the norm of whiteness in suffrage discourse and asserts black female personhood. They identified the strategy of repeated rhetorical questions in "Ain't I a Woman?" as amounting to a bold insistence on inclusion.³ We talked about her speech being mediated by a white transcriber, and how our stances are always, at the moment of reception, being reframed and exceeding our complete control. Students talked about feminist stance as involving risk—the risks these writers and speakers took to unsettle assumptions about women's morality, rights and fitness for public life. We started by thinking about humility as a rhetorical tactic, and moved on to naming other tactics: sass, boldness—names proliferating as we went. It was playful, the whiteboard was a mess, most thoughts were unfinished, but students felt a sense of accomplishment as they created a

rhetorical through line from Phyllis Wheatly to Vice President Harris.

That was a classroom moment in October, before the election. In November on the days immediately after the election, selections from Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit" (1843) were on the schedule. Most students came to class without completing the reading and writing on Fuller, admitting to election distraction. I asked if they'd like to share what that "distraction" felt like. The first student to speak said that, as a survivor of sexual assault, she is beginning to imagine life with a President convicted of such crimes, and with the knowledge that voters chose him despite that. Other students described equally moving concerns from their particular experiences, religions, sexual orientations, political commitments. They were imagining the worst, and they did not want to read Margaret Fuller.

Together we read aloud a few pages from "The Great Lawsuit," taking turns with a new reader for each paragraph. We read Fuller's assertion that the cultural norms established to reassert biological sex are sexist and harm both men and women. She argues against "the slavery of habit," and to free souls "incarcerated" by rigid gender binaries: "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman."⁴ We were reading how one woman was designing a theory of gender for herself with few imaginative models. I asked questions like: what is she saying about gender here? How does her claim have implications for developing a public stance? What is the role of imagination in crafting a public stance? Or, why is it important to try to describe what doesn't quite exist yet in your sphere of knowledge when you are developing a public self? How might the ideas about gender Fuller describes invite you to think about your ideal future selves and relationships?

Students responded, but my questions were clumsy, and the energy remained low. I then asked them to do a kind of hokey activity: take a minute and imagine yourself, living fully into your purpose, and describe what you see. Eventually, students talked about themselves as teachers, as leaders of their own classrooms. They described in detail about how they will decorate their classrooms (no overhead lights! Cozy reading nooks!), how they will speak to their students, the curiosity they want to create about learning. They talked about being writers of fiction and poetry, designing the space they write in, and talked about the pleasure of capturing ideas on the page that feel authentic. They talked about

being a coach of a high school athletic team, of being inspiring and reliable. The room perked up. “This is fun.” “No one has asked me to do this before.” Together we turned this conversation into an essay prompt we called “Peak Imaginative Flow” (see [Appendix](#)). I wanted them to move a loose, associative conversation about a future, purposeful self into a polished, written declaration, and thread in references to the readings in early American literature that align with their thinking.

The assignment suggests that the future we want for ourselves must be imagined beyond what may exist. It also suggests that our stance must be consciously crafted in relation to our audience, purpose, and vision. One student, Jaenid Ayala, an English major with an emphasis on poetry and African American literature, wrote her description of “peak imaginative flow” in ways that taught me and her peer workshop reviewers a lot about crafting a stance. She writes,

Fuller tells us that “women should write and speak, if they feel the need of it, from having something to tell; but silence for a hundred years would be as well, if that silence be from divine command, and not from man’s traditions.” I’d rather live in a box than live a life for the sole purpose of making money. If there is no passion behind the things that I am doing then there is simply no reason in doing it. Part of my passion lies in being able to live a life in service to others, creating opportunities for people of color to fall in love with literature in some sort of capacity. Maybe that’s being able to host an annual book swap, where people from the community are able to come and swap the books that they loved for new books and experiences waiting to be had. Or maybe it’s hosting an after-school club at a local library, where kids are able to not only see themselves but interact with texts in a way that makes them want to keep going back. Or maybe it’s hosting a seminar where teachers can come and learn how to create representative libraries in their classrooms for students to feel comfortable reading. Or working with the Rochester City School District to figure out ways to help kids foster a love for reading. I don’t care what the scale is but I know how detrimental it is to have an upcoming generation of students who hate reading because they don’t believe they’re “good at it.” My peak imaginative flow is simply giving back but more specifically, giving back in a way that is rooted in community, love, and patience & now that I write this, is in some ways, rooted in indigenous practices. It is also rooted in a type of feminism that prioritizes me living my life the way I want, and not the ways in which others think it should be done.⁵

Jaenid references Fuller to emphasize the intention and purpose women writers need to in order to cultivate their communal, intellectual stance. Her metaphor of living in a “box” is the opposite of the flourishing community she describes in much of her reflection. It is Jaenid’s “passion . . . to live a life in service of others.” Hers is a specifically literary passion: to enable “people of color to fall in love with literature.” Her feminist stance is one of sharp clarity about her purpose and audience. Jaenid conjures scenes of action, and her descriptions are so abundant and multiple that she needs the connective tissue of “or” to string these scenes of literary service together. For her, the library is the public hub, and Jaenid is the “host.” The word “host” repeats, as she facilitates connections across generations and roles and literary traditions. In a way, Jaenid’s role as host harkens back to Fuller’s Boston salons—making a community through dialogue, didacticism, and reading. As she describes it, Jaenid is “rooted,” rooted in her Puerto Rican and indigenous heritages, in “love,” and in a feminist stance that is inclusive of all her identities, and in honoring those of others. Hers is an achieved stance, one that is speculative, futurist, uncompromised, and invested in human flourishing.

It is notable to me that this assignment emerged in a moment of student refusal and pedagogic redirection: the class refusing to read, but still permitting space for speculative, even utopic visions of stance. I wonder, writing this reflection in March of 2025, if it is an affront to argue for helping students identify and develop a public stance, and a feminist stance at that. I write this as ICE is arresting student dissenters and presumed dissenters across the country. I write this just after my faculty senate held a meeting with our administrators to clarify our ICE protocol and publicly articulate our solidarity with students. I write this as federal funds vanish for higher education research, especially research falling in the category of diversity, equity and inclusion. I write this as our U.S. history and literary archives are being shuttered and digitally erased. Taking a stance can quite literally make us vulnerable to surveillance, denial of job and resources, capture, and disappearance.

As a professor with expertise in U.S. social and political reform rhetoric, helping students understand the ideological flow of discourses, the hegemonic struggles that reformers and dissenters are waging to define what is real, true, and just, is my job description, election season or not. The work of identifying ideological struggles playing out in language, the ways our cultural texts help us trace them, find through-lines, and identify ruptures, is a crucial education for any

time, and for this time especially. It is a student's choice about how to use the stance they identify and cultivate in my American literature classroom and in other arts and humanities classrooms. Minimally, this work helps students sharpen a point of view as events spiral around them. More broadly, this work is holding a space for them to imagine an active, agential self. Rhetoric scholar Cheryl Glen writes that "teaching is hope embodied. It is a forward-looking endeavor, one that has the power to change lives, our own and our students" (Glen, 125). Watching U.S. women writers develop a stance—strategically orienting themselves to a specific audience for a specific purpose—and asking students to craft and describe their own public stance, is a use of 19th century American literature in the service of agency during a precarious time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kamala Harris, interview with Alex Cooper, Call Her Daddy, podcast audio, October 6, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/vice-president-kamala-harris/id1418960261?i=1000671959211>.

² Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1865, 10th edition (New York: Norton, 2023), 843; 850.

³ Sojourner Truth, "Speech to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, 1851, The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1865, 10th edition (New York: Norton, 2023), 738.

⁴ Margaret Fuller, "The Great Lawsuit," The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1865, 10th edition (New York: Norton, 2023), 762.

⁵ Jaenid Ayala, "Peak Imaginative Flow," (English 297, Readings in American Literature, December 2024). Essay cited with permission of the author.

APPENDIX

Essay Exam #3: My Peak Imaginative Flow

Part I. 4-5 page final essay, whole class and peer workshop draft process

Margaret Fuller's ideas about gender, women, and intellectual development were radical for her time. As we've been discussing, Fuller believed that the gender binary (rigid ideas of masculine and feminine social roles) harmed women

and men. She argued that, ideally, women cultivate a "purpose" for their life and create a community around that purpose. She also argued that women should aspire to an "intellectual companionship" in their romantic partnership. To believe in Fuller's ideas, at that time, was to modify and even reject the patriarchal social order.

Let's modify it, too, at least for the purpose of this exam essay. In 4-5 pages, describe your "peak imaginative flow," and how readings for this unit support you to imagine this engaged self. As you remember, we co-invented the term "peak imaginative flow" in class and defined it as the image you have in your mind of you living into your life's purpose, goals, meaning/value, and pleasures. "Peak Imaginative Flow" compels you to imagine, without limits, you as a realized human being, living into your purpose.

Make reference to passages from a selection of the writers we have read this semester. You should use the first person ("I") and write a combination of personal narrative (description), analysis of the ideas and language of literary texts, culminating in an argument you are making about the extent to which the antebellum American writers we've read help to support your vision of peak imaginative flow. You will use direct quotation, as well as summary and paraphrase, conforming to MLA practices of in-text citation.

Part II. Optional Pinterest Board

Create a Pinterest Board titled "Peak Imaginative Flow." Include Boards within it with various headings: books, movies, media that capture my vision of flow; places and spaces; organizations and groups; art, fashion, photography. If Pinterest's algorithm or photo archive is holding you back from finding visuals that capture your "peak flow," find them elsewhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jill Swiencicki is a professor of English and former director of Women and Gender Studies at St. John Fisher University. Her scholarship draws from historical, feminist, and anti-racist methods to identify rhetorical practices that increase democratic inclusion and equity. She pairs such methods with historical cases: antebellum and progressive era social reformers, and African American, feminist, and LGBTQ+

rhetorical critics and theorists. Recently she is publishing on contemporary feminist orators in the reproductive justice movement; case studies involving murals, monuments, and public memory; and the current challenges and opportunities in teaching academic writing and research. Her work appears in such journals as *Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *College English*, *Peitho*, *Liberal Education*, as well as the edited collections *Inclusive Aims*, *Feminist Connections*, *Going Public*, *Multiple Literacies for the 21st Century*, and *Rhetorical Education in America*.

CHICAGO CITATION

Cheryl Glen, *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope*. Southern Illinois UP, 2018.