FEMINISMS, RHETORICS, AND THE POLEMICS OF STATE-SANCTIONED MARRIAGE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my dearest friend, Beth Dees Gatti. Much of this dissertation speaks directly to the challenges you so fiercely and bravely confronted in your too brief life. I miss you.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation contributes to the discipline by demonstrating successful and productive incorporation of feminist research methods and methodologies in rhetorical studies and the application of the rhetorical arts to feminist projects. Specifically this dissertation examines the history of state-sanctioned marriage in the US and its contribution to normative discourses of family that problematically inform public policies and mainstream arguments directed at some working and parenting women struggling to care for their families and provide for them economically. Through feminist rhetorical analyses of congressional testimony on welfare; feminist rhetorics on women, work, family, and economics; and narratives of women’s lived experiences derived from an interview-based study, this project renders visible and disrupts mechanizations of privilege and oppression deployed through hegemonic discourses on marriage and family. It concludes that feminist rhetorical scholars are uniquely trained and therefore called upon to address inequities promulgated through national attachment to state-sanctioned marriage and normative models of family.
CHAPTER ONE

FEMINIST RHETORICAL STUDIES: PUSHING BEYOND THE THREE “R’S”

The impact of feminist rhetorical studies on the field of rhetoric and composition has been far reaching. That impact has been noted by scholars Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacquelyn J. Royster in their 2010 article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence,” who state that “feminist rhetorical scholarship . . . is establishing new watermarks of regard and worthiness in rhetorical studies” (642). As such, the authors call for scholars to push beyond the paradigm of “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” to develop scholarly projects of import to the field more generally. Such broader engagements are central to how feminism has been defined outside studies of rhetoric and composition, and to how it needs to be practiced within our area of study. While working to shift feminist rhetorical practices from the margins to the center of the discipline, feminist studies in rhetoric and composition has benefitted greatly from many decades of feminist scholarship. In turn, many feminist rhetorical scholars have drawn on rhetorical studies to contribute to broader feminist projects of improving the lives of women beyond the walls of the academy. A few examples of such scholarship are Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegars’s “Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts,” Karma Chavez’s “Counterpublic Enclaves and Understanding the Function of Rhetoric in Social Movement Coalition Building,” Perlita R. Dicochea’s,

1 Their book that expands upon in this article was published in February of 2012: Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies (Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms)
“Chicana Critical Rhetoric: Recrafting La Causa in Chicana Movement Discourse, 1970-1979,” Elizabeth Britt’s *Conceiving Normalcy: Rhetoric, Law, and the Double Binds of Infertility*, and Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*. Like these scholars, I seek to develop scholarly projects that can result in rhetorical action on behalf of women outside of academia. Toward that end my work in this dissertation theorizes ways for feminist rhetoricians to contribute to social change that can benefit at least some women outside the academy. In particular, I examine US normitization of the white, heterosexual, married nuclear family model comprised of a breadwinner husband/father and a stay-at-home wife/mother and its concomitant ramifications for some women. The understanding of feminism that informs this project is bell hooks’ definition in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

> Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.

(26)

In this dissertation, as a feminist scholar of rhetoric and composition, I work toward dismantling ideologies of domination by theorizing ways the rhetorical arts can be used to benefit some women marginalized by public discourses and policy invested in the hegemonic “ideal” normative model of family described above.

My project responds to Kirsch and Royster’s suggestion that the definition of feminist rhetorical studies needs to be kept “dynamic and open” (642). My work has also
been guided by Krista Ratcliffe’s assessment that feminist rhetoricians might work from the assumption that “Woman and Man occupy different relationships to language” and that “each woman occupies a particular subject position . . . depending upon her ever changing intersections of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, history, nationality, culture, and so on” (1). Ratcliffe’s definition reflects liberal feminist principles of foregrounding gender as a rhetorical analytical lens while attending to concomitant differences produced by intersecting markers of identity. However, my project pushes beyond merely exposing the way differences are manifested in language to considering rhetorical strategies aimed at interrupting hegemonic discourses that exploit such differences. Feminist critiques of the primacy of such rhetoric are, according to Kirsch and Royster, examples of “new watermarks of regard and worthiness in rhetorical studies” (642). According to the authors, three decades of work in feminist rhetorical studies have challenged traditional Western, masculinist, and elitist ideologies to demonstrate that accepted notions of rhetorical excellence are no longer a given in the discipline. They demonstrate that new standards for excellence in the field of rhetoric have emerged that should inform the scholarship and praxis of rhetoric and composition studies more generally.

Specifically they delineate three areas of feminist rhetorical inquiry for scholars of rhetoric to pursue: “critical imagination,” “strategic contemplation,” and “social circulation.” To invoke “critical imagination,” scholars are asked not only to account for knowledge based on evidence derived from traditional research methodologies but also to account for probabilities “between, above, around, and beyond” such evidence and to articulate what else might “likely be true” about the topic at hand (650). “Strategic
"contemplation" asks scholars to bring their whole bodies and emotions to the experience of their research praxes in ways that “permit the researcher to gain perspective from both close and distant views of a particular rhetorical situation or event,” an approach that would allow researchers to see things that aren’t readily visible through traditional research methods (657). In the area of “social circulation,” Kirsch and Royster call on rhetoricians to work toward concurrently producing knowledge that “use feminist ideologies in rhetorical analyses” and uses “rhetorical theories and criticism in feminist analyses” (660). While my work draws on all three areas of feminist praxis, it falls most squarely in the area of “social circulation,” for I focus on using the rhetorical arts for feminist projects that seek to benefit women in general, not just women in academia, by intervening in the circulation of dominant ideologies in the everyday lives of women. For instance, in this dissertation, I engage feminist rhetorical methods and methodologies to gain a greater understanding of how normative discourses of family problematically inform public policies and mainstream arguments directed at working and parenting women struggling to care for their families and provide for them economically.

A review of the literature demonstrates clearly that feminist rhetoricians have mastered uses of feminist ideologies in rhetorical analyses and that a great deal of work has already been accomplished by feminist rhetorical scholars in making rhetorical praxis available for use in feminist analyses. New research agendas, including my own, build upon and extend work that has previously been accomplished. Because of the evolutionary nature of our work, Kirsch and Royster call on feminist scholars to function “with a well-grounded metacognitive awareness . . . about the ways and means of the work [feminist rhetorical scholarship]” (642). According to educational theorist Shawn
Taylor in his work on teaching students how to learn in academic settings, operating with such deliberate attention demonstrates “an appreciation of what one already knows, together with a correct apprehension of the learning task and what knowledge it still requires, combined with the agility to make correct inferences about how to apply one’s strategic knowledge to a particular situation, and to do so efficiently and reliably” (37). In response to Kirsch and Royster’s call and guided by Taylor’s characterization of how to strategically produce new knowledge, in the next section, I review three accounts of the evolution of feminist rhetorical studies.

(R)evolution

This literature review mines three accounts of the evolution of feminist rhetorical studies: one in the history of women in rhetoric, one in feminist research methods and methodologies in rhetoric and composition, and one in feminist theory in composition and rhetoric pedagogy. While there are many, many excellent resources to survey, I chose these three works because in their introductions each provides what Taylor would characterize as a “deliberate, planful, and goal-directed account” of how the history of the discipline informs their own particular subjects of interest and each points readers to numerous other scholars and strands of scholarship to pursue in their own advancement of feminist rhetorical studies (36). In addition, these works are exemplary of the conscientious application of feminist studies to rhetorical studies.

For scholarship in the history of women in rhetoric, I look to Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald’s 2001 edited collection, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetorics*. For feminist research methods and methodologies, I turn to Eileen E. Schell and K. J.
Rawson’s 2010 edited collection, *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*; and for pedagogy, I look to Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie’s 2006 edited collection, *Teaching Rhetorica: Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice*. Another reason I chose these three works is that they are in conversation with each other even though each covers a different area of feminist rhetorical studies. For example, *Rhetorica in Motion* draws on several ideas presented in *Teaching Rhetorica*, and the editors of *Teaching Rhetorica* reflect upon ideas in their earlier collection, *Available Means*. This willingness to be in conversation with others, reflect upon one’s earlier work, and to revise it as called for is exemplary of excellent scholarly practices highlighted by Kirsch and Royster and demonstrates the productivity of such practices in advancing a line of inquiry. In this section I summarize the introductory chapters to the anthologies to highlight the significant contributions each work makes to feminist rhetorical studies, and identify aspects of these works that inform this dissertation project as well as points of departure.

Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald’s 2001 edited collection *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetorics* demonstrates that “praxis—the intersection of theory and practice—is a central feature of women's rhetorical stances” (xxviii). Their anthology shows how and why women’s rhetorical acts can and should be read as rhetorical theory. Asserting that the feminist rhetorical studies has established that women rhetors exist throughout history, Ritchie and Ronald’s aim was to gather women's rhetorical texts together in a means available for study by scholars and students of rhetoric.

The authors mark the inclusion of women in the history of rhetoric as a turning point in feminist rhetorical studies, evidenced by then emerging scholarship that began addressing the question: what is women's rhetoric? In addressing this question, the
authors provide an account of the evolution of feminist rhetorical scholarship and identify multiple recurring themes that have emerged as characteristic of women’s rhetoric. Characteristic themes identified include that women’s rhetorics often reflect an assertion of the right to speak rather than an assumption and that it is often motivated by exigent circumstances; and that it “works toward, inspires, [and] calls for change” (xvii, xxiii). Further, such rhetoric often “engages in changed practice and offers strategies to readers for enacting change themselves” and seeks to “refute, correct, and revise depictions of womanhood that have placed women in inferior, vilified, stigmatized positions” (xxiii, xxv). Foregrounding “differences among women, the differential privileges those differences entail, as well as the dangers of erasing or ignoring those differences” is another common theme of women’s rhetorics as well as articulating that “women's subjectivities are socially constructed within the ideologies of cultural, racial, and economic situations” is another significant theme. A final characteristic of women’s rhetorics is “that many women writers use the body, their bodies as a topoi from which to write” (xxv, xxvi). Ritchie and Ronald’s observations clearly demonstrate the importance of drawing upon women’s rhetorical acts as a foundation for a liberal feminist rhetorical theory, stating that “women's rhetorical acts cannot be neatly separated from women's rhetorical theory despite the existence of these categories in the masculinist rhetorical tradition (xxvii).” Feminist rhetoricians who have responded to Ritchie and Ronald’s call to read women’s rhetorics as theory have laid a foundation from which rhetorical theories or frameworks might be developed for feminist projects.

However, it is not just women’s rhetorical acts that are important in formulating a feminist rhetorical theory, the authors maintain, but understanding that historically,
women’s rhetoric has emerged from exigent circumstances, with little time for “leisurely or abstract theorizing, unconnected to practical action” (xxviii). Feminist scholars interested in generating feminist rhetorical frameworks might look to Kirsch and Royster’s strategy of strategic contemplation, whereby scholars consider work already done in a manner that “opens up spaces for observation and reflection, for new things to emerge, or, rather, for us to notice things that may have been there all along, but unnoticed” (658). By engaging in such deliberate and contemplative thinking, scholars might more readily heed Ritchie and Ronald’s call to “keep the context, the immediacy of experience, attached to theorizing” and avoid “creating an abstract set of prescriptions disconnected from the contexts or stripped of the exigencies of everyday life” (xxvii). In my own work, I draw on Ritchie and Ronald’s general understandings of women’s rhetoric as a rationale for theorizing Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Women and Economics. However, unlike Ritchie and Ronald, I do not believe analyses of Gilman’s rhetoric can contribute to a general understanding or women’s rhetoric. To do so, I would have to assume that there is something essential to all women and thereby ignore or erase important differences among women—a stance that I work against throughout this dissertation. In “Feminism, Differences, and Rhetorical Studies” Bonnie J. Dow’s argues that “an essentialist understanding of woman is almost always ahistorical” and that feminist rhetoricians “should be committed to the notion of situated, contingent knowledge” (111). As such, my analysis of Gilman’s work in chapter three demonstrates the rhetorical acumen of Gilman in her own time, for her own purposes, and to her own audience. The question I leave readers with in chapter three is how might feminist rhetoricians learn from and make use of Gilman’s rhetorical strategies when advancing
arguments for feminist economic practices today? Perhaps future scholarship might extrapolate a useful feminist rhetorical theory of economics based on the body of Gilman’s work.

While working to formulate feminist rhetorical theories is a more recent endeavor, exemplary feminist rhetorical research methods and methodologies have already been developed. These have been derived from “over two decades of scholarship on feminist research methods and methodologies in rhetoric and composition studies and over three decades of research in feminist social sciences and in feminist communication studies” (Schell 7). Eileen Schell details trends, changes, and pivotal moments in the history of feminist rhetorical research in her 2010 edited collection, *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminists Rhetorical Methods & Methodologies*. *Rhetorica in Motion* demonstrates the intense negotiations and time inherent to developing key aspects of a disciplinary strand. Feminist rhetoricians who are developing practical uses of the rhetorical arts for feminist projects as a scholarly agenda can expect similar challenges, debates, and unresolved differences as we begin, particularly since even the underpinning terminology of such work is highly contested, including *feminism/s, women’s rhetoric/s, and feminist rhetoric/s*. Such contestations are acknowledged within the discipline as evidenced by the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition’s naming of their bi-annual conference, Feminisms and Rhetorics. As such, Schell’s work can be invaluable for feminist rhetorical scholars, as she, like Kirsch and Royster, calls for pushing feminist rhetorical studies beyond the paradigm of “rescue and recovery” by asking scholars to address the “so what?” of our work. What Schell is looking for are
useful applications of feminist rhetorical research, such as those modeled in the essays of her collection.

Schell’s account of the evolution of feminist rhetorical studies is also invaluable because it highlights key aspects of feminism that many scholars now incorporate into feminist rhetorical research. Schell’s collection encourages feminist rhetorical scholars to engage in contemplation, reflection, and revision of their practices in keeping with similar changes and trends within feminist studies. Components of feminist studies that Schell integrates into feminist rhetorical studies include conducting feminist research that invokes an ethic of care; interrogations of epistemology, such as what counts as evidence in historiography; and uses of standpoint theory that consider the impact of social location and lived differences such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. In addition, Schell highlights the vigilant attention feminist rhetoricians should pay to the potential pitfalls of essentialism through their continual questioning of the productivity of knowledge created based on the category “woman.” For example, Schell includes an argument from Rosemary Garland-Thomson on how feminist rhetoricians might best engage the term, which I abbreviate here:

Feminism questioned the coherence, boundaries, and exclusions of the term woman—the very category on which it seemed to depend. Consequently, it expanded its lexicon beyond gender differences. . . . Our most sophisticated feminist analyses illuminate how gender interlocks with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class system. (12)

Further, K. J. Rawson argues that feminist rhetoricians might “benefit from engaging with historical and political projects that define and locate ‘woman’ as a complex identity
production [sic] and performance” (41). Schell’s collection demonstrates our discipline’s rigorous commitment to attending to feminist complications of rhetorical research and shows that many scholars have developed skills of “conscious decision making and self-regulation” in their feminist rhetorical praxes (Taylor 37).

Schell gives an account of feminist research practices in the history of women in rhetoric that details significant debates and persisting questions. Schell concludes that “feminist research has changed how we teach feminist rhetoric and redefined what counts as rhetoric and rhetorical theory.” She asks some very important questions about feminist rhetorical research, including “How can feminist rhetorical research make a difference, and not only for scholars taking up feminist rhetorics? How can feminist rhetorics be useful in addressing many of the pressing issues of our day, such as ongoing gender and racial discrimination and continued economic, social, and political injustices and inequities in a globalized world?” (15-16). Essays collected in this anthology address some of Schell’s concerns within the discipline of rhetoric and composition. In keeping with Schell’s call for scholars to ask how their work might make a difference in today’s pressing issues, in this dissertation, I make lived experience a focus of my dissertation. For example, I draw upon the work of feminist scholars of standpoint theory including Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Marjorie DeVault, Nancy Hartsock, and Sandra Harding in designing and implementing my interview-based study that is the subject of chapters four and five. In addition to employing feminist methods and methodologies that work to highlight difference, rather than subsume it, I also make a point to be specific about which women I am writing for and about. In “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” Raka Shome argues that “much of feminist
scholarship in rhetorical studies has been carried out from a relatively liberal and generalized perspective,” a practice which can elide the fact that “the experience, functions, and goals of rhetoric differ in the different cultural spaces of women” (53). By referring to specific women, rather than “women” categorically, I am working against liberal tendencies of universalism that Shome sees in some feminist rhetorical scholarship.

Like Schell, Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie’s edited collection, *Teaching Rhetorica: Theory, Pedagogy, Practice* seeks to address the “so what” of feminist rhetorical work in the history of women’s rhetoric. In particular they seek to identify the usefulness of their own liberal project, *Available Means*, in conjunction with other collections of women’s rhetorics that they describe as “an emerging canon of women’s rhetorics” (3). In putting this collection together, they were motivated by a desire to know what difference such work makes. While they found that their contributors had little interest in establishing a canon of women’s rhetorics, they became aware of the diverse feminist theories their contributors employed. As a result, they claim that the collection demonstrates how to draw on—what they call “one of the primary strengths of feminist theory” and what others might call, one of the primary problems with feminist theory—“its fluidity, multiplicity, contingency, and polymorphous complexity” (3). An important contribution of this book is that it models productive uses of the body of scholarship produced through the era of “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” that Kirsch and Royster call on scholars to push beyond. For example, Ronald and Ritchie identify productive uses of women’s rhetorics to include not only want counts as rhetoric and who counts as rhetors but to also consider the “expanded contexts, experiences, and topoi on which women rhetors draw”
Drawing on an expansive understanding of rhetoric, this volume provides tools for pushing “the heuristic possibilities of rhetoric for constructing and deconstructing knowledge and power” (6). Constructions of knowledge and power are foundational points of inquiry for feminist studies, and deconstructing discursive constructions of knowledge and power is a central focus of feminist rhetorical studies. Further, the authors demonstrate that such an understanding of rhetoric can lead to political action and social change as evidenced by many of the rhetors included in their earlier anthology.

Most importantly, I believe, Ronald and Ritchie push “students, ourselves, and the contributors to and readers of this collection to ask difficult questions about the implications of research into women’s current and historical rhetoric and women’s rhetorical practices. We ask that pragmatic so what?” (3) They conclude their introduction to *Teaching Rhetorica* with a discussion of pragmatism and a focus on how best to make use of women’s rhetorics. The authors argue that a responsible reading of women’s rhetorics should lead to more ‘fruits and facts,’ to possibilities for action and to changed practices, for our students and for us as teachers and scholars, especially if this renaissance of recovery is to make a difference to our professional, pedagogical, and public lives. (12)

It is Ronald and Ritchie’s pragmatic call to action, together with Schell’s call for vigilant attention to the “so what” of reading women’s rhetoric, that I focus on in answering Kirsch and Royster’s call for feminist scholars of rhetoric and composition to produce knowledge for reciprocal use by feminists. One way I accomplish this in my dissertation is by bringing rhetorical attention to an issue of feminist concern—disrupting normative discourses of family that do not reflect the lived reality of most women in the US.
As I stated earlier, my project responds to Kirsch and Royster’s call on rhetoricians to work toward concurrently producing knowledge that “uses feminist ideologies in rhetorical analyses” and uses “rhetorical theories and criticism in feminist analyses” (660). My review of the three important scholarly works in this section demonstrates the ways in which feminist rhetoricians have incorporated feminist ideologies into rhetorical praxis. Likewise, I argue that feminist rhetoricians should continue to further develop rhetorical praxis for use in feminist analyses. As a case in point, in this next section, I present a feminist rhetorical analysis of Congressional language on marriage promotion programs in welfare funding. My purpose in providing this example is to introduce my subject of inquiry in this dissertation by examining the implications of public policy for some poor working and parenting women that is predicated on normative assumptions of family. Further, through my analysis, I demonstrate how feminist rhetorical studies can be helpful in analyzing and critiquing hegemonic ideologies and institutions. More importantly, though, I aim to demonstrate the need for feminist rhetoricians to follow through on their analyses by engaging with the lives of women they study to explore strategies for further rhetorical action. I engage in such follow-through in subsequent chapters, which I outline in the section following this example.
What’s Love Got to Do with It?: US Congressional Arguments for Heterosexual Marriage as an Economic Practice

In this section I analyze testimony presented at the 2004 Congressional Hearing “Healthy Marriage: What Is It and Why Should We Promote It?” This hearing contributed to passing legislation that currently allocates $150 million per year from funding for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to “encourage healthy marriages and promote involved, committed, and responsible fatherhood.” The most recent announcement of funds available for marriage promotion and fatherhood was announced by the Administration of Children and Families on June 29, 2011 (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/news/press/2011/fh_hm.html). I will demonstrate through my analysis how masculinist ideology informs the language used in this hearing and contributes to what bell hooks calls “the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels” (Feminist Theory 26). Krista Ratcliffe observes that ideologies of domination that pervade Western discourses are often derived from its Aristotelian (classical or ancient Western) rhetorical roots, stating that such rhetoric is “so pervasive in our culture that it is inscribed on and in our bodies and that, consequently, we should understand it and use it for our own ends.” She cautions, however, that feminist rhetoricians must also be aware of its “limitations” including its “gender-blindness” (17). This gender-blindness, I argue, is achieved through the use of traditional enthymemetic rhetorical arrangements that render differences, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability invisible with, in this instance, disempowering consequences for poor working women with dependent children.
From a feminist rhetorical standpoint, one example of problems with this legislation and contributing testimony is that single women with dependent children have typically been and continue to be primary recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (formerly known as welfare), yet the word father is mentioned three times more often than the word mother. This overshadowing of women’s presence through the noted absence of men demonstrates the ways in which some women’s interests (in this case working mothers) are subsumed by the state’s investment in promoting traditional marriage as a societal good (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/). It is also an example of how political rhetorical strategies can contribute to contemporary silencing and erasure of some women’s voices. Krista Ratcliffe, whose foundational scholarship is cited by each of the works reviewed in the previous section, observes how Aristotelian-based political rhetoric is problematic for some feminists. She presents an example from Roland Barthes: “Aristotle’s ethics/politics . . . . imply a balance, a center agreed upon by most people (read ‘men in power’ and ‘those men who may attain such power’)” and that this definition of an ideal state “erases the divisions between rich and poor, free and slave, men and women; as such, it privileges the first term—propertied, free, male—while presenting it as the universal subject of rhetorical theory” (26-27). Universalizing a masculine-privileged subjectivity still dominates public discourses. For example, Senator Michael B. Enzi testified in support of the marriage program during the hearing, stating that “simply put, my son and I, along with many other male Enzis in the past have been blessed to find that special someone in our lives who helped us to set goals in our lives and worked with us to achieve them” (3). At the time of this hearing, unmarried and parenting women with dependent children were the primary recipients of TANF funding.
yet the focus of Enzi’s statement is on the benefits he and his sons have received from being married, reducing their wives to extensions of themselves—invisible, nurturing partners who support their husbands. Enzi seems unaware of the chasm of difference in terms of privilege in his life and the kind of spousal relationship that such differences in education and income levels engenders, yet he clearly feels that his experience is adequate evidence for using government money set aside for temporary assistance to needy families to encourage marriage as a solution to poverty for working and parenting women.

Ironically, supporting testimony given by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of “The National Marriage Project” for the “Healthy Marriage Initiative” demonstrates the disparities between the Enzis’s experiences of marriage and people in poverty. Whitehead testified that

though marriage itself may not lift a family out of poverty, it may reduce economic hardship. This effect occurs because marriage, especially if it is long lasting, allows couples to pool earnings, to recruit support from a larger social network of family, friends, and community members, to share risks and mitigate the disruptions of job loss, loss of benefits, or loss of earnings due to absenteeism, illness, reduced hours on the job, or lay-offs. (23)

Whitehead’s argument is that heterosexual marriage provides an economic advantage for individuals with precarious employment. Clearly Senator Enzi is not economically disadvantaged, nor do he and his family need to be concerned with job loss or loss of benefits. Considering his position as a State Senator, his experience of marriage is likely to be radically different from the women whose lives his testimony potentially addresses.
and impacts. However, these differences are easily buried in the context of Congressional hearings. Perhaps this is why Kirsch and Royster argue for a move away from privileging “public domains (political, judicial, religious, academic), that is, arenas in which white elite males have dominated historically” as exemplars of rhetorical excellence. (641). Instead, feminist rhetorical projects might work to disrupt the hegemonic power relations inherent to these arenas that silence and oppress some women.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Krista Ratcliffe calls on feminist rhetoricians to address the shortcoming of gender-blindness inherent to traditional political rhetoric, noting that contemporary rhetorical theories, such as Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification, “perpetuates a centuries-long tradition of gender-blindness,” stating that “like many other theories of rhetoric, no mention is made of men’s and women’s cultural positions. . . . So deeply entrenched in the dominant ideology are such sex and gender biases and erasures that they appear as the natural order of things, not subjects for investigation” (11). In seeking to understand constructions of gender bias and the erasure of women’s perspectives in the hearing, I deconstruct the statement of Senator Jeff Sessions’ who uses, in his opening, an argumentative structure that privileges masculine positionality represented by leading participants in the hearing, such as Senators Jeff Sessions, Michael B. Enzi, and Wade Horn.

The opening statement of the hearing is framed in a classical enthymematic form. This form of argumentation leaves unstated or relies upon implicit assumptions. In this case the unstated assumption is that a healthy family is defined as the normative, white, heterosexual, married, nuclear family. Sessions produces binary oppositions of us and them, good and evil based on assumed normative ideals of family. He establishes these
binary oppositions by using an emotionally charged ethical appeal to defend marriage, stating that it is “unquestionably one of the fundamental institutions in our society” and a “pillar of our civilization” that is currently under attack by “certain academics, the popular media, [and] the secular left” (1). It is an appeal that attempts to cast those against promoting healthy marriage programs as enemies of civilization. Ultimately, though, it is an appeal that aims to cast unmarried working and parenting mothers, the primary recipients of TANF funds, as a root cause of the nation’s ills—and the ultimate enemy of our civilization. For example, at the time of this hearing, most recipients of TANF funds were unmarried women with dependent children, yet, single mothers is a term rarely used. Instead all participants giving oral testimony used the term single-parent families. For instance, in his opening statements advocating for government endorsement of “the traditional definition of marriage,” Senator Session states, “Let me begin by emphasizing that while discussing the value of marriage to individuals and to society, I do not mean to in any way disparage single-parent families” (1). A word count and close reading of the use of the key terms, single mother and single parent, reveals that the twenty-five times that speakers refer to single parent(s) they are in actuality referring to single mothers, a term that is used only eight times—never by a congressman—and, interestingly, the term single father is never used. Unmarried women with dependent children, a.k.a. single mothers, and the primary recipients of TANF funding, are rendered invisible at the outset by the continual use of the term single parent. And although Sessions claims that he does not wish to disparage such women, the enthymeme he uses to establish his argument ends with the unstated conclusion that unmarried mothers are, themselves, a social ill.
Building from his opening statement about enemies of civilization, Sessions develops his enthymeme in a straightforward manner. Because of the “physical, emotional, and economic” benefits experienced by families “led by a married man and woman”; “marriage is good for individuals and society”; and “Marriage . . . is beneficial to the country as a whole” therefore, “Government has a very real interest in promoting marriage” (2). This enthymeme implies that single women with dependent children are an economic drain on society because they contribute to high “rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, chronic illness, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and other social problems” (2).² The arrangement of Senator Sessions’s opening remarks reflect an undeveloped understanding of the purpose of political rhetoric, similar to that of the ancient rhetorician and philosopher, Aristotle, who stated that “the man who is forming a judgment is making a decision about his own vital interests. There is no need, therefore, to prove anything except that the facts are what the supporter of a measure maintains they are” (180). By using the enthymeme as he did, Sessions constructs his argument to focus auditors solely on a woman’s unmarried state as the reason for her poverty, eliminating considerations of other factors contributing to these women’s economic dependency on the state.

Because Sessions has focused the subject of the debate on the economic benefits of heterosexual marriage for poor women with dependent children, emotional pleas about the violence many female TANF recipients have suffered at the hands of their husbands

² There is an expansive body of research that refutes this implied conclusion. An excellent, rhetorically grounded critique can be found in Robert Walker’s “Welfare to Work” Versus Poverty and Family Change: Policy Lessons from the USA.” The major works he reviews in this article as well as his list of works cited points to additional research that refutes normative and disparaging claims about single motherhood.
are easily dismissed as evidenced by the Congressional testimony itself. For example, Stop Family Violence submitted written testimony opposing marriage promotion programs that included more than twenty-five personal narratives from TANF recipients who have suffered from domestic violence.\(^3\) The purpose of providing the narratives was to “provide real examples of how critical it is not to coerce women into marriage as a means to move them out of poverty” but to provide other “programs that will help move them out of violent relationships, as well as out of poverty” (60). Unfortunately, this appeal was easily and summarily dismissed by each congressman providing oral testimony, such as the statement made by Senator Wade Horn, who said that “government ought not—intentionally or otherwise—implement policies that will trap anyone in an abusive relationship” and that “government is in the business of promoting healthy marriages. The fact is healthy marriages are good for children; dysfunctional and abusive marriages are not” (7, 8). While Horn clearly understands that not all marriages are healthy, he does not seem to hear the fact that most of the women whose lives he is attempting to legislate do not have the option of a healthy marriage. The fact that 60% of the working and parenting women who receive TANF assistance are survivors of domestic violence and that “trying to escape an abusive relationship can be one of the hardest things for a woman to do, particularly when a woman is financially dependent upon her abuser” are rendered moot points (60). The ease with which such emotional and

\(^3\) These narratives came from a collection called *Marriage Diaries* put together by Stop Family Violence. The collection contains hundreds of stories submitted by women from around the US, that Stop Family Violence argues, “show the importance of public assistance—including education, training, counseling, child-care, food stamps and health care—in helping women escape domestic violence and become self-sufficient” (“Healthy Marriage” 60).
logical appeals are dismissed or, worse, incorporated, within the constructs of enthymematic arguments is expounded upon by Krista Ratcliffe who observes that “feminists’ arguments frequently emerge as emotional pleas that are too often received [as] . . . improbable within the consensus of public opinion and impossible within the logic of dominant discourse” (19). The responses by Horn and others in favor of heterosexual marriage promotion to objections and concerns raised by the Stop Family Violence organization can be read as, “obviously no one wants women to be abused, that’s not what we are talking about here.”

In the face of such easy dismissal of their concerns, what help can advocates for working and parenting women in poverty gain from understanding and using feminist strategies in rhetorical situations such as the Congressional hearing in question? Kirsch and Royster are well aware of the “primacy of such a deeply entrenched paradigmatic framework” in traditionally esteemed rhetorical arenas such as politics, and they acknowledge the difficulties of debunking the power base of such rhetorical strongholds (642). Likewise, Ratcliffe has demonstrated the need for feminist rhetorical scholars to become savvy with the ways and means of traditional political rhetoric, and how to use it to our own ends while recognizing its limitations for feminist projects. Further, as Ratcliffe notes, in addition to differences in gendered experiences, dominant political rhetorical practices easily erases all differences, per se, not just any one difference between individuals in particular. For example the heterosexism underpinning the proposed legislation seemingly goes unquestioned, even by those groups in opposition to it. In addition, concerns specific to women of color, in particular African American women, become subsumed when all women are lumped together categorically. For
instance, Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates how African-American women’s experiences of and relationships to heterosexual marriage and family differs from those of white women, due, in part, to America’s history of slavery and racism. As such, Collins concludes, “Rather than trying to explain why Black women's work and family patterns deviate from the seeming normality of the traditional family idea, a more fruitful approach lies in challenging the very constructs of work and family themselves” (47). Foregrounding difference rather than subsuming difference is a primary concern of many feminists and is an important practice for feminist rhetoricians to take up in their own projects.

An example of this practice, intersectionality, is characterized by Kirsch and Royster as a consideration of the ways in which all actors/actions in any given situation are “complicated by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, or any number of specific personal identities” (658). In their work on feminist studies, disabilities studies, and feminist rhetorical methods Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson draw attention to the ways in which terms of identification can also erase difference such as the term woman or disabled. These terms, they argue, “actually mystify which identity groups enjoy privilege and power” maintaining that “people with disabilities—like women—also experience oppression because of their race or ethnicities, their gender, their class, or national identifications” (32-33). Legislators have become, perhaps have always been savvy in their use of terminology as a means of erasing differences between themselves and those whose lives they attempt to legislate according to their own social norms. The willful absence of the term single-mother throughout the hearing replaced with the term single-parent renders the historical feminization of poverty in the US invisible as well as
the issues unique to women as a group, rather than men, who are dependent upon TANF organization funds. For example, according to testimony provided by Legal Momentum, a not-for-profit that advocates for the rights of poor women

the reasons that women, more than men, experience an economic downfall outside of marriage include: primary care giving responsibility for children which—without attendant employment protections and due to lack of quality, affordable, accessible child care—makes unemployment or underemployment inevitable; discrimination in the labor market; and domestic violence. Without addressing the factors that keep women from being economically self-sufficient, marriage and family formation advocates are merely proposing to shift women’s ‘dependence’ from the welfare system to marriage. That certainly does not promote individual responsibility, nor is it a policy solution for genuine, reliable, economic security. (75)

I include this extended excerpt because I believe it touches on multiple issues that feminist rhetorical scholars are uniquely trained and therefore called upon to address. For example, Foss argues that feminist rhetoricians should also theorize how the “process [of domination] can be challenged so that all people understand that they have the capacity to claim agency and act in the world as they choose” (157). While feminist rhetoricians can work to develop more immediate rhetorical strategies for use in political arenas such as Congressional hearings, I believe we must also take on the project of larger rhetorical campaigns to influence public opinion. For instance, while child care issues pose distressing problems for working and parenting women in poverty, the United States’
attitude toward child care is problematic for women and families in general. bell hooks argues that “future feminist organizing (especially in the interests of building mass-based feminist movement)” should use child care “as a platform. As she observes, “women are doing most of the parenting,” and child care “centers would relieve individual women of the sole responsibility for child rearing as well as help promote awareness of the necessity for male participation in child raising. Yet this is an issue that has yet to be pushed by masses of people” (Feminist Theory 143). Feminist rhetoricians potentially could contribute to a radical shift if US attitudes toward child care and childrearing responsibilities by contributing their talents to a national campaign to raise awareness about the benefits that state-subsidized quality child care for all children would confer upon US society in general, not just women or women and children in poverty. This is just one example of how feminist rhetorical studies might aide some women and children in poverty, thereby contributing to feminist goals of improving the lives of women in the public sphere. In the next section, I conclude this chapter with an overview of the work I undertake in subsequent chapters that build upon and extend existing feminist rhetorical scholarship by exploring applicable strategies to improve the lives of some women beyond our own disciplinary walls.
Following Through: Exploring the Possibilities for Feminist Applications of the Rhetorical Arts

I believe that US Congressionally-legislated marriage promotion programs posed as a solution to working mothers’ poverty begs the question of how to support women of all classes, sexualities, and races in the US in not only caring for their families but also meeting their financial needs. As such, in the second chapter, I explore the liberal underpinnings of normative ideologies of families that informal public policies and discourses on working and parenting women. To begin, I provide a feminist history of state-sanctioned heterosexual marriage to contextualize how the legal institution of marriage in the US is explicitly and implicitly bound up in normative ideologies of family. In particular, I demonstrate the patriarchal, religious, sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist underpinnings of the institution. My purpose in providing this history is to highlight normative assumptions of heterosexual marriage and family formation that not only inform conservative welfare policies as described above, but also some well-intentioned liberal feminist theorizing. I believe that arguments for wide-spread cultural changes on behalf of working women with children based on theorizing that assumes heterosexual marriage as the model for families is ineffective for the generic group of women targeted as beneficiaries of such theorizing. As a case in point, I conduct a feminist rhetorical analysis of Anne-Marie Slaughter’s recent article, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.” While Slaughter claims that she is only talking to and about professional women of privilege (implicitly white, heterosexual, and married), in the end she argues that benefits derived by women like her in achieving a work and family balance will somehow benefit all women in the US. It is this generalized claim that I
interrogate in my analysis. I present, in juxtaposition to Slaughter’s argument, a third-wave feminist rhetorical analysis of a public policy proposal for New York City that works to address work and family balance issues for women across the socio-economic spectrum.

In chapters one and two I demonstrate a need for addressing oppressive and marginalizing effects for some families that arise from public policies and practices predicated on normative and dominant assumptions of family, particularly those comprised of working mothers with dependent children. In chapter three, I argue that feminist rhetoricians can play an important role in advancing public arguments for improving how the US values traditionally unpaid and/or underpaid nurturing work predominantly carried about by women in their roles as mothers. As a case in point, I extend feminist rhetoricians’ work in reclamation and recovery by examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1898 rhetorical treatise on heterosexual marriage and privileged white women’s economic dependence on men. This chapter responds to Kirsch and Royster’s call for scholars of feminist rhetorical studies to ask in our feminist work in recovery how we might “make what was going on in their [historical women rhetors’] context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context” (649). Perkins asserted long ago what feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman posited more recently, that “there are societal values and concerns beyond that of [economic] efficiency,” particularly when considering laws applied to “relationships as complex and varied as those involving sexual and emotional intimacy” (xv). Regarding marriage laws specifically, Nancy F. Cott argues that “law and society stand in a circular relation: social demands put pressures on legal practices, while at the same time the law’s public authority frames
what people can envision for themselves and can conceivably demand” (8). I argue that feminist rhetorical scholars are uniquely trained to interrupt the “circular relation” of law and society regarding heterosexual marriage and family by offering sound critiques of the rhetoric that informs the laws (and the gendered, classed, and raced assumption that circulate around parenting). Such critiques might contribute to work aimed at destabilizing perceived connections between state-sanctioned marriage and social well-being. This chapter suggests that a good place to start moving forward is through looking backward to existing feminist rhetorical theories, such as that by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

In chapter four I begin by detailing the process of my own growth as a feminist rhetorical scholar to contextualize the origin of my project and shifts in my own feminist thinking that occurred throughout the researching and writing of this dissertation. This narration of my process is a feminist research methodological practice involving “reflexive autobiographical work” as described by Marjorie DeVault in Liberating Method. I then introduce my interview-based study of ten women on feminism, marriage, and family and explicate the feminist epistemology of standpoint theory that I used to frame my study including formulating my research questions, selecting my participant pool, and structuring the interviews. Finally I describe how I use third-wave feminist theorizing as lens for reading and analyzing participant narratives, pointing out various participant narratives that speak to subjects examined in the first three chapters.

Through my analysis of women’s narratives on feminism and family in chapter five, my dissertation provides an example of a feminist inquiry strategy, characterized by Kirsch and Royster as “deeply and respectfully” listening to women and “taking as a
given that women have much to teach us if we develop the patience to listen in a more paradigmatic way” (649). In this chapter I model the use of personal narratives as a rhetorical strategy for interrupting governmental attachments to state-sanctioned marriage by offering feminist examples of intimate relationships, parenting, and family that unsettle, subvert, or otherwise do not conform to normative models of state-sanctioned families and concomitant political rhetoric. Specifically, I extrapolate a theory of family from the interviews I conducted with ten women struggling to create healthy families in spite of patriarchy. I do this by piecing together a feminist rhetorical theory from their rhetorical practices when talking about how feminism informs their family formations in opposition to hegemonic expectations of women and family. Finally, this chapter contributes to the overall goals of my dissertation by demonstrating successful incorporation of feminist research methodologies in feminist rhetorical studies and the ways feminist rhetorical research methods can be applied to feminist projects.
CHAPTER TWO
LIMITATIONS OF LIBERAL FEMINIST THEORIZING
ON WORK AND FAMILY THROUGHOUT THE “WAVES”

In chapter one I noted that US Congressionally-legislated marriage promotion programs posed as a solution to working mothers’ poverty begs the question of how to support women of all classes, sexualities, and races in the US in not only caring for their families but also meeting their financial needs. In this chapter I bring a rhetorical perspective to bear on the many complicating factors of feminist inquiry into achieving a work and family balance for women in the US. My feminist rhetorical analysis of testimony in support of marriage promotion programs builds on other work recent work in the field concerned with impoverished mothers’ marital status. For example in “Linking Transnational Logics: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Public Policy and Networks,” Rebecca Dingo points out that the legislation related to the 2004 hearing grows out of 1996 Congressional welfare legislation that “focused mainly on the harms of single motherhood, the perceived benefits of marriage as a social and economic institution, and the moral and economic advantages of paid out-of-home work” (491). In particular, she observes that the rationale of the 1996 welfare legislation was “that, to prepare women for the neoliberal economy, the policy must attempt to make women better caregivers inside the home and better workers outside the home through the institution of marriage” (497). According to Dingo, assumptions of heteronormativity, and a two-parent nuclear family (and implicitly whiteness) are central to ideologies of a US neoliberal political economy, and are a driving factor behind current welfare
programs aimed at shifting economic responsibility for poor working mothers from the state to marriage.

Similar assumptions continue to inform some contemporary liberal feminist theorizing on achieving a work and family balance for women, and, I argue, thereby limit their efficacy. As an example, in this chapter I provide a feminist rhetorical analysis of Anne-Marie Slaughter’s recent article “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” from *The Atlantic Magazine*. Slaughter was the first woman Director of Policy Planning for the United States Department of State until she decided to leave her government position at the end of its two-year term. She did so because she felt she could not meet the demands of both her job and her family, particularly because her teenage son was in need of extra attention due to emotional health issues. In her article Slaughter argues, based on personal experience, that the significant underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is the US is due to systemic economic and social structural problems that preclude professional advancement for working mothers. Her article garnered significant national and international attention both positive and negative.⁴ Some feminist thinkers also weighed in with heavy criticisms of her argument.⁵ The far-reaching and wide-ranging discussions on work and family in response to Slaughter’s article reaffirms feminists’ longstanding attention to marginalization and oppression of women in our

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⁴ According to *The Diane Rhem Show* on NPR, the article “got more hits in a 24-hour period than anything the magazine has ever done.” Within days of its online posting, editor James Bennett reported that it had already been viewed by more than “800,000 unique visitors” and had generated numerous responses both online and in print in the US and countries around the world. When I googled “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” nearly a month later, I found 132,000 responses to the article including Slaughter’s own.

⁵ For instance, see Linda Hirshman’s “The Having-It-All’ Crisis isn’t about Women; It’s About the 1%” and Katie Roiphe’s “There’s No Such Thing as Having It All.”
culture in relation to marriage and family law, public policy, and societal expectation. In addition, it suggests that addressing the limitations of liberal feminist thinking on these issues might facilitate more immediate and aggressive action to addressing the stark reality of the dearth of female leaders world-wide. Following my analysis of Slaughter’s article, I offer as an alternative to Slaughter’s liberal approach an example of feminist theorizing on achieving a work and family balance for women that is inclusive in terms of race, class, sexuality, and family structure. I do this by conducting a third-wave feminist rhetorical analysis of a policy agenda report, “The Work-Family Dilemma: A Better Balance” published by A Better Balance: The Work and Family League Center and the Barnard Center for Research on Women. Proposals for achieving a work and family balance in this report are inclusive of the needs of women across classes, races, and sexualities contra to Slaughter’s narrow focus on primarily white, heteronormative, married women professionals.

In the end this chapter articulates a need for developing a contemporary feminist theory specific to resolving competing interests of work and family in the US which I begin to address in chapter three through my feminist rhetorical analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics*. Prior to presenting my analyses and

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6 To demonstrate this point, Slaughter quotes Sheryl Sandberg’s statistical representation of the dearth of female leaders: “Women are not making it to the top. A hundred and ninety heads of state; nine are women. Of all the people in parliament in the world, 13 percent are women. In the corporate sector, [the share of] women at the top—C-level jobs, board seats—tops out at 14, 16 percent” (7).

7 I use the term heteronormative rather than heterosexual because both Slaughter and Sandberg make references to husband and/or partners, leaving room for the possibility of a homosexual relationship—regardless of the parents’ sexuality, family, as characterized in these arguments is still presumptive of the two-parent nuclear family model.
arguments, however, I think it is important to provide a historical context of the hegemony and concomitant privileging of the white, heterosexual, middle-class, married, nuclear family model in the US.

The Nuclear Family Model

Marriage and family as a site of women’s oppression have been theorized by feminists throughout the history of feminist thought. In fact, Estelle B. Freedman argues that feminist revolution in the United States first occurred in response to disruptions in “reciprocal family relations” due to the rise of capitalism that “initially enhanced men’s economic opportunities and defined women as their dependents” in addition to new political theories that “extended [public and political] privileges to men only” (2). Carolyn Merchant details this shift in white family relations through her historical account of European colonization of New England and the imposition of patriarchal agrarian societies. In addition to upsetting the gender balance of power among native New England Indians, Merchant observes that colonial agriculture depended on the division of labor by gender. Women and men each had separate tasks and separate genderized production spaces. Male and female were equals in subsistence production, each sex being essential to the family’s economic survival. The reproduction of social roles took place in the separate spaces. Girls participated in their mothers’ space-time zones and boys in those of their fathers’.

(167)

She notes, however, that even though “women and men were equal partners in production, colonial relations of reproduction were patriarchal. Lineage and property
rights that reproduced family power passed through the male” (168). Overtime “patriarchal land inheritance reduced farm sizes so that all sons could not inherit the farms that reproduced the extensive system” and so the need for other means of providing for landless sons made capitalism appealing (156). As such, Merchant states that “New England’s capitalist ecological revolution began in the late eighteenth century and was structurally complete by the 1860s” (198). At the same time white, Christian colonialist and capitalist expansion continued throughout the US propelled by elitist rhetorics of manifest destiny and upward mobility (202). As a result, industrialization in conjunction with capitalism radically shifted American culture in the first half of the eighteen hundreds. This transformation impacted family formation and concomitant gender roles for white citizens. Merchant writes that “the capitalist revolution separated private from public life. The public sphere of marketplace and politics was dominated by men, the private sphere of the home and family by women” (251).

Likewise, Freedman demonstrates how family structure solidified as a problem for white women in the US in the early eighteen hundreds, due to the joint rise of a capitalist economy and a politic of individualism. Together, these two hegemonic forces, she maintains, constructed the white middle-class family as an economic unit consisting of a husband/father wage earner and a wife/mother home nurturer. At the time this structure was perceived as the norm among white middle-class Americans and became, on a national level, the ideal family structure for all citizens.

The implications of this family ideal throughout US history are profound. Indigenous populations, people of color, homosexuals, and poor and working-class individuals have all suffered marginalization and punitive characterizations of deviance
for not being able to or not desiring to conform to this preferred family model of US
citizenry. Most significantly, slaves were excluded from the model altogether. Angela Y. 
Davis points out that:

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, 
were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as 
far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, “the slave 
woman was a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother 
and homemaker.” Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of 
femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle 
companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically 
anomalies. (5)

Further, Davis reminds us that infant children of slave women were sold away from them 
based on the classification of slave women as breeders and not mothers. She writes that 
“one year after the importation of Africans was halted, a South Carolina court ruled that . 
. . children could be sold away from their mothers at any age because ‘the young of slave 
. . . stand on the same footing as other animals’” (7). Since the end of slavery, Patricia 
Hill Collins points out that 

racially segmented labor markets, gender ideologies in both segmented labor 
markets and family units, and the overarching capitalist class structure in which 
Black women’s specific race, gender, and social class positions are imbedded all 
structure Black women’s work. And yet, traditional social science research 
assesses African-American women’s experiences in families using the normative
yardstick developed from the experiences of middle-class American and European nuclear families. (*Black Feminist Thought*, 1st ed. 46)

When it comes to the private/public divide of work and family life in the US, Collins points out that “Black women’s experiences and those of other women of color have never fit this model” (*Black Feminist Thought*, 1st ed. 47). However, the political economy that contributed to the normalization of this family model also contributed to early white women’s movements for equality with men. For example, Freedman demonstrates that after eighteen hundred in the United States:

The ideal of woman as mother in the home, removed from productive labor dependent upon her husband’s income, defined middle-class family status. Although women’s unpaid labor within families provided critical economic services, the ideology of separate spheres reserved economic and political rights for men. The legal precedent of coverture made husbands the legal guardians of dependent wives. Education, however, would provide middle-class women with an initial wedge into the public sphere, from which they launched movements for equal and legal political rights. (47)

Unfortunately, white, heterosexual women’s dissatisfaction with oppressive gendered systems of work and family failed to consider the ramifications of this model for those situated outside of it, particularly women of color, lesbians, and poor and working-class women. In the next section, I provide a short history of the ways in which class, race, and heterosexual privilege informed white, liberal feminist theorizing of the first- and second-waves. I do this to provide a context for the subsequent analysis I present of Slaughter’s
article. This short history also provides important context for my analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s rhetoric in the next chapter.

Limitations of Liberal Feminism

It has been well researched and documented that first- and second-wave white feminist theorizing on women, work, and family focused primarily on improving the lives of white, middle-class, heterosexual women and that leading thinkers of both movements were susceptible to theorizing through the lens of social privilege. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft was concerned with women’s ability to be autonomous as wives and mothers. This concern arose from the influence of ancient English common law ideology (an influence that persists today) on marriage laws in the US that mandated women to give up their civic presence and rights upon marriage. For example, in the late seventeen hundreds, when Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, if a white woman married, her legal and economic rights and those of her children were subsumed under her husband. Nancy Cott contextualizes women’s social positioning at the time:

In the longer Western political tradition on which the common law drew, a man’s full civil and political status consisted of his being a husband and father and head of household unit, representing himself and his dependents in the civic world. Wives and children did not represent themselves but looked to the male head of household to represent and support them, in return for which they owed their

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8 See for example histories of feminist thought by Barbara Arneil, Estelle B. Freedman, and Rosemarie Tong.
obedience. A man’s headship of family, his taking the responsibility for dependent wife and children, qualified him to be a participating member of the state. The political tradition thus built on monogamous marriage; the two complemented each other. (7)

Rosemarie Tong writes that while Wollstonecraft initially argued that women needed to be politically and economically independent from men in order to be fully autonomous, she ultimately limited her analysis to women like her, concluding that well-educated white women could retain their personal autonomy even if they were economically and civically dependent upon a husband. According to Tong, for Wollstonecraft, a white woman with personal autonomy in marriage was one “strong in mind and body, a person who is not a slave to her passions, her husband or her children. . . . the ideal woman is less interested in fulfilling herself . . . than exercising self-control” (15). For Wollstonecraft it was not the state of economic dependence upon a man that limited her autonomy, rather it was the way in which she allowed herself to be treated by her husband and children which determined her degree of personal autonomy.

Likewise the theorizing of another renowned first-wave feminist thinker, Harriet Taylor, was limited by class and racial bias. Taylor, who published “The Subjection of Women” in 1869, argued that for white married women a sense of autonomy in the relationship could only be gained by contributing financially to the support of the family through earned wages in the work force. However, when contemplating how white women (whom she presumed would be the primary caretakers of children) could achieve a work and family balance Taylor suggested hiring servants to ameliorate the demands of housekeeping and mothering. In her time, only white women of at least upper-middle
class financial privilege could afford to hire such help. Tong asserts that Taylor fully neglected to consider the lives of working-class women and how they might balance work and family while taking care of other women’s homes and children. In sum, she writes, “Thus, Taylor, a product of class privilege, offered rich women a way to ‘have it all’ without offering poor women the same” (18). The limitations of this argument are reproduced in Slaughter’s article which I demonstrate in my analysis.

In addition, other feminist leaders were hampered by a sense of entitlement due to their social privilege. For example, some white women suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, because of race privilege, felt entitled to having the right to vote before black men and black women (Tong 21-23). In her historical analysis of first-wave feminist politics, Arneil includes a quote of Stanton’s that reveals her sense of white entitlement:

If Saxon men have legislated thus for their own mothers, wives and daughters, what can we hope for at the hands of the Chinese, Indians, and Africans? . . . I protest against any enfranchisement of another man of any race or clime until the daughters of Jefferson, Hancock, and Adams are crowned with their rights. (159)

The elitism that permeated early white feminist thinking on women, work, and family continued in the second-wave with mainstream attention focused primarily on issues specific to highly educated, financially privileged, white, heterosexual women. For example, leading feminist activist Betty Friedan initially focused on the male-breadwinner, female-homemaker economic family unit as a primary source of women’s oppression. Like Taylor, she urged women to find their autonomy and personal fulfillment outside the home by pursuing careers. In particular, second-wave feminist politics focused on eradicating the exclusion of women (white, educated, heterosexual,
middle and upper-class women) from the public spheres of work and politics and agitated for women’s equal access to participate and excel in any professional field they chose.

Tong describes liberal second-wave feminists as

the 1960s and 1970s feminists who belonged to women’s rights groups such as the National Organization for Women [and] believed they could achieve gender equality by reforming the ‘system’—by working to eliminate discriminatory educational, legal, and economic policies. (48)

While Friedan and other feminists of her time expanded their reach to include the concerns of working-class and impoverished women, their proposed solutions often failed to consider the ways in which social structures were implicated in the creation and maintenance of class stratification. Tong’s assessment of Friedan’s 1981 book, The Second Stage, highlights the limitations of some liberal second-wave feminist thinking on class:

It envisions a society in which men and women assume equal burdens and experience equal benefits in both the public and private worlds. But it fails to ask whether a capitalist society can afford to develop ideal work and family conditions for all of its members or only for the “best and brightest”—that is, for those professionals and quasi professionals who are already well enough off to take advantage of joint appointments, parental leaves, the mommy track, flextime, leaves of absences, and so on. (44)

The limitations I have identified in first- and second-wave white feminist thinking derive from a liberal political ideology that subscribes to a distinct public and private divide that
has a racist, classist, and heterosexist history that underpins the very tensions between work and family that liberal white feminist thinking tries to address.

Permutations of second-wave classist and racist thinking still inform some liberal feminist theorizing of today as exemplified in Slaughter’s article. Slaughter’s article is lengthy and covers a wide array of issues and possible solutions to advancing women into positions of power in the US. The topics available for feminist critique are numerous, ranging from, but not limited to, problematic assumptions regarding capitalism, gender, race, class, and sexuality. However, I find classism to be one of the more significant limitations of Slaughter’s argument and a perpetual Achilles heel in liberal feminist theorizing. However, racism is imbedded in classism in this instance because few women of color comprise the elite corps of women to which Slaughter directs her argument. Further, Collins points out that “race and economic class are such tightly bundled constructs in shaping actual economic outcomes in the United States that one construct loses meaning without referencing the other” (Fighting Words 209). As such, I focus my analysis on demonstrating how Slaughter fails to negotiate class privilege in a manner

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9 A similar instantiation of liberal feminist theorizing on work and family by Sheryl Sandberg, called Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead was, published on March 11, 2013. Her book makes a similar argument go Slaughter’s—that the way to improve the lives of women in the US and around the world is to advance equal numbers of women to leadership roles as men. The difference between Slaughter and Sandberg’s argument is that in order for this shift in leadership to occur, Slaughter focuses on institutional changes, whereas Sandberg focuses on encouraging women to rid themselves of internalized patriarchal and sexist messages that contribute to their own “pulling back” in their professional careers, rather than “leaning in” (4). Together, Slaughter and Sandberg’s are compelling arguments for challenging structural and internal barriers to women’s professional success. However, these books are written primarily for and about elite heteronormative women, and therefore are limited in their potential to effect real change in the quality of lives for women across the socio-economic spectrum in the US.
that is inclusive of women from varying racialized economic standpoints, and that this failure (among others) reflects the continued limitations of liberal feminist thought. Critical feminist rhetorical attention to arguments such as Slaughter’s highlights the need for promoting existing contemporary feminist theories that move beyond the confines of liberal dichotomies of exclusion, which I do in my subsequent analysis of a public policy initiative in New York City addressing work and family balance issues.

“Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” was published in The Atlantic’s July/August edition of 2012. The 155-year-old publication was established by leading intellectuals of the time including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Indvik). It is a medium that “combine[s] the qualities of general-interest magazines, of political magazines, of intellectual magazines, and of literary magazines” (Murphy). It has an impressive history of authors published and awards won and, according to its own website, “its articles frequently set the agenda for political and cultural debate and policy” (“About The Atlantic Monthly”). According to Lauren Indvik, in 2008 its readership was at about 450,000. However, once it allowed free access to its online version of the magazine, by the end of 2010 “traffic to its three web properties . . . surpassed 11 million uniques per month.” Indvik argues that “The Atlantic was primed for web journalism” because it remains today what “co-founder Francis H. Underwood described as an ‘outspoken organ of opinion,’ representing multiple sides of a debate.” Based on its history, range of topics covered, and high profile website, readers of The Atlantic are numerous, likely diverse in political thought, and highly educated.
Anne-Marie Slaughter, in addition to being the first and so far only woman State Department Policy Planning Director, is currently the Bert G. Kerstetter ’66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. She is the mother of two teenage boys and is married to Andrew Moravscik, also a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton. She is a prominent public figure. According to her Princeton website, she is frequently published in “major newspapers, magazines and blogs around the world,” has “40,000 followers on Twitter [and] appears regularly on CNN, the BBC, NPR, and PBS.” Slaughter has been characterized as a role model for some young women both nationally and internationally. For example, the German magazine Der Spiegel had this to say about Slaughter and her recent career and family choices: “As a role model for many young women, her choice has sparked a major debate over the desire to reconcile career and family.” Slaughter’s piece has been read around the world. In a follow-up commentary by Slaughter herself, she writes that she expected strong reactions, but

what I did not expect was the speed and scale of the reaction—almost a million readers within a week and far too many written responses and TV, radio and blog debates for me to follow—and its global scope. I have done interviews with journalists in Britain, Germany, Norway, India, Australia, Japan, the Netherlands and Brazil; and articles about the piece have been published in Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, Bolivia, Jamaica, Vietnam, Israel, Lebanon and many other countries. (“What’s Stopping Women?”)

Clearly, based on the response to Slaughter’s piece, the subject of balancing work and family for women is a topic of national and international interest and import—which is
why it is equally important for feminist rhetoricians to point out the ways in which some prominent mainstream discourses essentialize women as a whole in their attempt to persuade action on behalf of one group of women’s needs before any other. For example, while Slaughter maintains that her argument is written for and about elite women like her, she explicitly argues that improvements in work and family balance for women like her will benefit all women in the US. She writes that “The best hope for improving the lot of all women, and for closing what Wolfers and Stevenson call a ‘new gender gap’—measured by well-being rather than wages—is to close the leadership gap” (89).

Slaughter’s conviction that improvements in the lives of women like her will ultimately benefit women across the socio-economic spectrum not only invites, but necessitates sustained feminist critiques.

The overarching purpose of Slaughter’s article as previously mentioned is to render visible the obstacle’s to women’s professional advancement in the US due to “the way America’s economy and society are currently structured,” particularly in regard to the impossibility of meeting the time demanded by high-powered professions and that demanded by motherhood and family obligations (87). It is also a call for immediate action by corporations and government to address the obstructions by allowing all employees more flexibility with schedules, valuing the family caretaking demands most employees experience at one time or another, and by redefining the timeline of a successful career. That Slaughter’s concerns are feminist concerns are unequivocal and her efforts are based on the work of liberal feminism in all its good and bad.

*The Atlantic’s* print version of Slaughter’s article runs seventeen pages. In its introductory section, Slaughter relates her personal story of being unable to meet both the
demands of her high-profile government position and the needs of her teenage son. She includes examples of other high-profile women who have done the same in support of her argument that something needs to be done to stem the tide of women choosing their families over their professions. The second section details three prominent strains of advice often given by mentors and role models to working mothers—advice that Slaughter characterizes as cliché and to which she offers counterpoints. The clichéd advice given to women about “having it all”—meaning having a husband, kids, and fulfilling career all at the same time—are: “It’s possible if you are just committed enough,” “It’s possible if you marry the right person,” and “It’s possible if you sequence it right” (7, 8, 10). The remainder of the article details concrete examples of enacting social change that will enable greater participation of mothers in the professional workforce.

Slaughter is motivated to speak from her personal experience and her perception that exigent circumstances impact the well-being of women in general. Rhetorical scholars on the history of women in rhetoric, such as Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, have noted these two patterns among others as characteristic of women’s rhetoric (xxv-xxvi). Using a typical feminist style of writing, Slaughter opens her piece by telling readers her own personal story. In fact, because Slaughter is openly challenging the feminist values she grew up with, her voice, in this instance, falls under Rebecca Walker’s definition of third-wave feminism because her writing has “done the difficult work of being real (refusing to be bound by a feminist ideal not of their own making) and telling the truth (honoring the complexity and contradiction in their lives by adding their experiences to
the feminist dialogue” (xxxiv). It is in this truth-telling, however, that Slaughter’s sense of entitlement is revealed and warrants further feminist interrogation.

As a direct benefactor of the work of white, liberal, mainstream second-wave feminism, it was not until she was in her early fifties (when she became the first woman policy director at the State Department, working directly under Defense Secretary Hilary Clinton) that she first felt she was experiencing socially structured opposition to meeting the demands of both her professional position and of being mother to two teenage sons. Slaughter observes that her decision to give up the career she loved (which is a privilege in and of itself) as a high powered government official in order to spend more time with her troubled teenage son while still working as a full-time tenured faculty member at Princeton prompted her realization that most women in America don’t have even have access to the possibility of “having it all”:

In short, the minute I found myself in a job that is typical for most working women (and men), working long hours on someone else’s schedule, I could no longer be both the parent and the professional I wanted to be—at least not with a child experiencing a rocky adolescence. I realized what should have perhaps been obvious: having it all, at least for me, depended almost entirely on what type of job I had. The flip side is the harder truth: having it all was not possible in many types of jobs including high government office—at least not for very long. (4)

That someone as educated and in such high-powered government and university positions should only now be realizing the kinds of struggles that most women face on a daily basis is likely infuriating for many women. However, the delay in her realization, together with the fact that it was personal experience that brought her around to a
different perspective are important factors for feminist analysis because they render visible the tenacity and limitations of white, liberal, feminist thinking. While many feminist readers might be hopeful at this point in Slaughter’s narrative that her new found awareness will lead her to advocate for social change that benefits most women, some readers are likely disappointed by her immediate return to problems specific to “elite” (her term) women in the following paragraph. In this paragraph she lists the names of other prominent government women who left their jobs to be with their families and in the following ten paragraphs she analyzes Capitol Hill practices of devaluing family time in general.

Slaughter likely reengages more progressive feminist thinkers toward the end of her introductory section when she returns her attention to the “far greater” problems that the majority of women face in the US, writing “I am well aware that the majority of American women face problems far greater that any discussed in this article.” Once again, however, some readers are likely quickly disappointed when she immediately turns her attention away from “the majority” following with:

I am writing for my demographic—highly educated, well off women who are privileged enough to have choices in the first place. We may not have choices about whether to do paid work, as dual incomes have become indispensable. But we have choices about the type and tempo of the work we do. We are the women who could be leading, and who should be equally represented in the leadership ranks. (89)

Slaughter’s acknowledgement that the “majority of American women” experience “far greater” hardships than she contributes to her ethos as someone compassionate and
informed about the plight of most women in the US. However, Slaughter’s immediate shift from “those” women to women like her conveys to some readers that she is not willing to engage with the lives of women who are not “highly educated” and “well off.” For example, in the on-line version of UK’s The Independent, Laurie Penny wrote an excoriating response to Slaughter’s piece, interpreting it as representative of mainstream feminist thought that is small-minded and out-of-touch, asking “when did feminism narrow its horizons so that the absolute maximum we're prepared to fight for is the rights of a minority of women to be admitted into a sexist labour market whilst managing the school run on the side?” Penny acknowledges, however, that even with all its limitations, Slaughter’s observations do offer something important—high profile, public acknowledgement of the myth of “having it all” even for type A overachievers like Slaughter. Further, Slaughter’s article reveals the backlash mechanizations of such a myth, i.e., blaming women for all that they are not achieving. Slaughter’s presents her ideas in a way that reinforces a class divide among women on issues of work and family—precluding the possibility that addressing barriers for women of all classes in achieving a work and family balance might be approached simultaneously.

In addition to stating that she is writing for women like her, this class division and her alignment with the interests of the US’s elite women is further communicated through her shift from first-person singular to first-person plural. She starts the first and second sentences with “I am” and through those first two sentences communicates that she is not part of the majority of women in America, but part of a smaller, elite group of women. This elite group of women is further defined in the third sentence when she shifts to the first person plural, saying “We may not have choices about whether to do paid work . . .
but we do have choices about the type and tempo of the work we do.” Here she is defining herself as a woman who works—not a woman of leisure. Finally, in the last sentence, she states that it is these elite working women who should be America’s leaders. While I agree that she and other women like her “could be leading,” I disagree with her assertion that they are the particular women “who should be equally represented in the leadership ranks” alongside men. If Slaughter is an example of the type of women we can expect in leadership positions, what does her late-in-life revelation say about privileged women’s abilities to appreciate the difficulties most women face in meeting employer demands, their own financial needs, and fulfilling familial obligations all at the same time? What can the rest of us expect from a group of women leaders seemingly blinded by their privilege?

Further, I am taken aback by the degree to which her personal experience seems to warrant urgent, immediate, and systemic action. As I mentioned earlier, throughout feminist history, exigent circumstances are what prompt women to speak out publicly on issues that concern them. However, in the paragraph following the one just analyzed, Slaughter recognizes that “millions of other working women face much more difficult life circumstances” than she does. If she is truly aware of the extent to which most women are at a social disadvantage, why hasn’t this knowledge prompted her to take urgent and immediate action on their behalf? Why did Slaughter have to experience barriers to professional success due to conflicting parenthood demands herself before she really was willing to act beyond her own interests? For instance, after detailing the challenging experiences she had as a high-powered government official who could only come home on weekends to be with her husband and teenage sons, experiences from which she
concluded she could not continue in government service and be the kind of parent she wanted to be, she asserts the following:

I still strongly believe that women can ‘have it all’ (and that men can too). I believe that we can ‘have it all at the same time.’ But not today, not with the way America’s economy and society are currently structured. My experiences over the past three years have forced me to confront a number of uncomfortable facts that need to be widely acknowledged—and quickly changed. (86)

Why would addressing the specifics of her experiences instead of someone else’s provide both women and men the opportunity for “having it all”? Slaughter does not address these questions, but instead focuses solely on the concerns of women like her and therefore limits her analysis to the structural barriers faced by elite, financially and educationally privileged young women who have the potential to rise to powerful government positions like Slaughter—American economic and social structures need to be modified to accommodate these women first, according to Slaughter.

I argue that Slaughter’s visions for change are limited due to her use of traditional rhetorical strategies predicated on hierarchical thinking and universalizing practices. For example, bell hooks argues that the purpose of feminist rhetoric is to facilitate the eradication of the ideology of domination that pervades Western culture. She asks that rhetoric be used to transform the culture of domination into a culture characterized by equality, mutuality, and respect. This purpose contrasts dramatically with the primary goal assumed for rhetors in traditional rhetorical theory, which is to have their own perspectives prevail—or
dominate—and to accomplish their own goals, often at the expense of the achievement of the goals of others. (qtd. in Foss, Foss and Griffin 93)

Arguably, the quality of Slaughter’s feminist theorizing is hampered by her use of traditional modes of argumentation identified by hooks. For instance, I have already demonstrated how, in just one paragraph comprised of five sentences, Slaughter accomplished ranking herself and elite women like her as the group of women who should receive unequivocal support, before all others, in achieving their professional goals and family aspirations. In the subsequent paragraph, rhetorical arrangement lends to the erasure of difference among women by characterizing women’s “advancement” in terms mostly relative to elite women. Because the whole of this lengthy paragraph is central to my analysis, I excerpt it here in full:

Millions of working women face much more difficult life circumstances. Some are single mothers; many struggle to find any job; others support husbands who cannot find jobs. Many cope with a work life in which good day care is either unavailable or very expensive; school schedules do not match work schedules; and schools themselves are failing to educate their children. Many of these women are worrying not about not having it all, but rather about holding on to what they do have. And although women as a group have made substantial gains in wages, educational attainment, and prestige over the past three decades, the economists Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson have shown that women are less happy today than their predecessors were in 1972, both in absolute terms and relative to men. (89)
The first two-thirds of this paragraph build Slaughter’s ethos as someone knowledgeable and concerned about the plight and numbers of women experiencing significant social and economic disadvantage. However, Slaughter shifts from using words that draw attention to the differences among women—particularly those relevant to economic disadvantage—to universalizing language that defines gains for all women in terms most relevant to professional working mothers such as “substantial gains in wages, education, and prestige.”

So who are the women that comprise the “women as a group” to which Slaughter refers? Likely it is the “those professionals and quasi professionals who are already well enough off to take advantage of joint appointments, parental leaves, the mommy track, flextime, leaves of absences, and so on” mentioned earlier (Tong 44). If these are the women who are representative of “women as a group,” then Slaughter’s transition to the “happiness” factor makes a little more sense to me as a reader when she writes at the end of the paragraph excerpted above “that women are less happy today than their predecessors were in 1972, both in absolute terms and relative to men” (6). If most professional women are still living the “second-shift” described by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, then, like Slaughter they are overwhelmed by their work and home life responsibilities and less happy than their male counterparts who don’t, generally speaking, carry the same load at home.10

But this analysis does not apply to working mothers whose lives are organized around something other than a two-parent two-income heteronormative nuclear family. Further, she implies that single motherhood in and of itself is a hardship. Consider for

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10 For more on this subject, see Arlie Hochschild’s *The Second Shift*. 
example the first “type” of woman Slaughter listed as an example of a working woman who “face[s] much more difficult life circumstances” than she. “Some are single mothers” she writes. I argue that single motherhood is often experienced as a hardship because we living in a society that presumes that family income and child care needs should be met according to a two-parent family model.

Slaughter asserts in the subsequent paragraph to the section just analyzed that the best way to measure improvement in the quality of life for women in the future is by measuring their well-being rather than their wages. I argue that this is a dangerous move for women in poverty because it further removes income level from analysis of the quality of people’s live and leaves greater room for more conservative attacks on women’s family formations as the reason for their predicaments. This suggestion further reveals Slaughter is thinking only of her own demographic here, because it is only elite women who can afford to give up some wages and prestige in exchange of a more well-rounded and happy life.

In the following section, I analyze the crux of Slaughter’s argument, which relies upon the hierarchy established in the section just analyzed in which Slaughter divides women into three groups—elite women, women of leisure, and poor women. This stratification is required in order for readers to agree to with Slaughter’s call to action—that the US should take immediate action to remove the barriers to professional success experienced by elite working women with families. Slaughter writes:

The best hope for improving the lot of all women, and for closing what Wolfers and Stevenson call a “new gender gap”—measured by well-being rather than wages—is to close the leadership gap: to elect a woman president and 50 women
senators; to ensure that women are equally represented in the ranks of corporate executives and judicial leaders. Only when women wield power in sufficient numbers will we create a society that genuinely works for all women. That will be a society that works for everyone. (89)

Here Slaughter proposes that closing the leadership gap in the US between women and men will result in a better society for all. The implied premise in this argument comes from Slaughter’s previous assertion, that “we are the women who could be leading, and who should be leading” which likely leads many readers to logically conclude that funneling attention to professional women is the most expedient way—recall Slaughter’s early assertion that barriers to professional women’s success must be “widely acknowledged—and quickly changed”—to achieve equal representation of women in leadership in government and corporate positions. Slaughter aims to convince readers that the following sequence of events is necessary if we are to create “a society that works for everyone.” That sequence of events starts first with removing the obstacles to professional success experienced by the US’s most elite women who parent, because only then will proportionate number of women be elected to high political offices, and only then, will we elect a female president.

At the conclusion of her essay, Slaughter re-emphasizes her commitment to improving the lives of potential women leaders before the lives of working-class women with her statement that “we may need to put a woman in the White House before we are able to change the conditions of the women working at Walmart” (23). Considering women have had the right to vote since 1920 and we have yet to elect a woman president, I’m thinking that the more likely event will be that when we improve the conditions for
women who work at Walmart (at the very least), then we might actually put a woman in the White House. To improve the lives of working class women, for example the working mother at Walmart, it is likely that more wages, reliable childcare, quality education, and affordable healthcare for her family are what will produce immediate results in improving her happiness factor. For Slaughter, happiness resides in the ability to spend more quality time with her family while achieving professional success. She envisions this as a possibility for the nation, writing

It's time to embrace a national happiness project. As a daughter of Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of Thomas Jefferson and the university he founded, I grew up with the *Declaration of Independence* in my blood. Last I checked, he did not declare American independence in the name of life, liberty, and professional success. Let us rediscover the pursuit of happiness, and let us start at home.

I fail to see how working class and poor women will benefit from privileged women gaining more opportunities for the pursuit of happiness both at work and at home. In the end, Slaughter’s claim that prioritizing the needs of professional women will in turn improve the lives of all women reinscribes liberal feminism’s historical inability to negotiate privilege in a way that truly does benefit all women.

Yes, Slaughter’s willingness to raise her voice about the obstacles that privileged career women face in trying to achieve a healthy work and family balance meets the criteria of feminist awareness and action. However, her argument that elite women’s issues should be addressed first limits her feminist politics to that of a white-middle class politic characteristic of white heteronormative first- and second-wave liberal feminist thinking. In fact, Slaughter can be read as subscribing to neoliberalism’s commitment to
maintaining an elite class. For example, David Harvey argues that today’s social, political, and economic policies are derived from the adoption of neoliberal economic theory by nations such as the US and England, beginning in the early 1970s. Harvey writes that

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2)

However, material policy manifestations of this theory also occurred at a time when the power of elite classes and ruling classes around the world was threatened. Harvey maintains that the control of the wealth by the top one percent of the population in the US that was in place throughout most of the twentieth century was severely challenged by the economic situation of the 1970s and that neoliberalization was instantiated in one aspect as a means of restoring class power. He describes how national and international practices and policies that ensure “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” have restored control over the majority of US wealth to the top one percent that we see today (1; 14-16).

In fact, Lisa Duggan argues that the social and economic systems Slaughter critiques are predicated on neoliberal discourses that assume/insist that married women are
responsible for children and dependent on wage-earning husbands, and are often advised to stay home during their children’s early years. . . . [and] encouraged to volunteer, as the bulwarks of civil society and “faith-based” social service provisions, with their unpaid labor underpinning the privatized social safety net.

Discourses such as the one identified by Duggan, Harvey argues, have become the dominant discourses of the US neoliberal state, embedded in our consciousness as “common sense . . . to be taken for granted and not open to question” (5). Perhaps Slaughter is so entrenched in neoliberal ideology that it precluded her from seeing, prior to her own experience—that the political economy of the United States simply does not allow for gender equality—even for the most socially privileged of women.

In a sense, Slaughter’s feminist vision is limited to what Rosario Morales characterizes as a white, middle-class, heteronormative politics. In her 1979 essay, “We’re All in the Same Boat,” Morales writes:

_I am not white. I am not middle class._

I am white skinned and puertorican. I was born into the working class and married into the middle class. I object to the label white & middle class both because they don’t include my working class life and my puertoricaness, but also because “white & middle class” stands for a kind of politics. (91)

Third-wave feminist Krista Jacob observes that third-wave feminism is doing important work reflective of the racial and economic diversity of women that often goes unacknowledged in the mainstream media. Third-wave feminism builds upon the work of lesbian and third-world women of color feminists that took mainstream second-wave
feminists to task for their myopic attention to white, heterosexual, middle-class interests. Such revolutionary thinkers are many, including Audre Lourde, Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga to name a few. An example of this critique can be found in the “Combahee River Collective Statement”:

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. . . . The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (210)

Jacob notes, however, that “just as we saw in the second wave, the feminists that draw the media attention are white, middle-class, and presumably heterosexual women”—or at least representative of such a politic as described by Morales and enacted by Slaughter. While she acknowledges that such women are doing important feminist work, she maintains that third-wavers “must continue to work even more diligently than the second-wave to make sure that feminism and women are more accurately represented both in feminist discourse and in the broader society” (203). It is this topic to which I turn in the next section.
Third-Wave Feminism on Work and Family Issues

Throughout this chapter, I have made use of the wave metaphor of feminist movement to contextualize historically different instantiations of white, liberal, feminist thinking. I use this metaphor cautiously because I am cognizant of and in agreement with some critiques of the ways that applications of the wave metaphor can homogenize feminist thought and thereby erase, not only plurality of feminist thought, but the continuity of pluralistic thinking throughout and in between the waves. For example, in a dialogue between Adela C. Licona and Jacob on the potentialities and limitations of the wave metaphor, Licona states:

I often hear that envisioning plurality is the practice of third-wave feminism. As a woman of color, I do not simply envision plurality, I experience it. It is how I know and understand the world in which I live. Those who validated my “plural” experiences and understandings in an academic context and beyond include, among many others, Chela Sandoval, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Emma Pérez, Toni Morrison, Yolanda Leyva, bell hooks, Catriona Rueda Esquibel, and Paula Gunn Allen, for example. While I am excited about the ways in which fragmented, ambiguous, and even contradictory subject positions are being acknowledged in the context of third-wave feminism, the realities of multiple-voiced and multiple situated subjects predates the waves of feminism as they are being defined and codified. Again, where many apparently see neat divisions, I see continuity in practice—practices that have long and rich histories in and across diverse communities. (204)
Jacob herself acknowledges weaknesses of the wave metaphor, stating that “in terms of race and class, and even overall accuracy, the wave metaphor falls short of the mark” (203). Further, third-wave feminist Amber Kinser observes that “the ideas of feminism were alive and well long before the ‘first wave’” and that histories that mark “the first full-scale women’s rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848” fails to acknowledge the much earlier movements of African American women and First Nation American women and their contributions to “paving the way for Seneca Falls.” Such inaccuracies in feminist history, she writes, “points to a major problem with the wave metaphor in discussing women’s movement; it highlights white women’s movement and ignores that of women of color” (127-28). If the wave-metaphor is so problematic, the question remains, then, why use the wave metaphor at all?

Nancy A. Hewitt in her recent Feminist Studies article, “Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor” observes that no matter how fallacious uses of the wave metaphor are in their characterizations of feminist histories, the metaphor is a permanent part of our national imagination. She writes: “In fact, the Library of Congress has now adopted First Wave, Second Wave, and Third Wave as topical categories, entrenching them further in academic and popular discourse” (659). Another case in point is President Barack Obama’s reference to Seneca Falls in his 2013 Inaugural Address, which I have identified is a problematic historic marker. Hewitt points out that dominant narratives of the first wave as primarily a suffrage movement (focused on white women) leaves out important feminist work on “racial justice, labor rights, divorce, religious authority, domestic abuse, the plight of prostitutes, sexual freedom, and international politics” (665). She notes that this same erasure of important political work has occurred
through every wave, for example in the “1960s and 1970s, campaigns for welfare rights and economic justice occurred alongside and in collaboration with more familiar feminist campaigns” (665). Even though there is significant scholarship now complicating and contesting the wave metaphor, Hewitt argues that due to the tenacity of the metaphor, scholars might find productive ways to make use of it—ways that add dimension to historical renditions of feminism that resist the flattening out of events and the erasures of participants.

Like Hewitt, I seek to make use of the wave metaphor in a way that does not misrepresent feminist history. As such, in this dissertation I employ third-wave feminism as a theoretical and analytical framework rather than a historical one. To that end, in this section, I draw on feminist scholarship of the third-wave that specifically identifies itself as third-wave feminist theorizing, thereby setting it apart from, rather than subsuming, concomitant scholarship and activism by third-world women of color feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists, transnational feminists, queer feminists, radical feminists, ecofeminists, and postmodern feminists. Some scholars whose work I draw on for an understanding of third-wave feminism include Barbara Arneil, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, Barbara Findlen, Estelle B. Freedman, Amber Kinser, Jennifer Purvis, Deborah L. Seigel, Rosemarie Tong, and Rebecca Walker.

Barbara Arneil argues that third-wave feminism aims “to define politics from an overlapping and even contradictory set of women’s perspectives” (153). Specifically, it tries to work past the limitations of first- and second-wave liberal feminist efforts to
bridge or break the public/private divide of work and family. She describes one such limitation:

Rather than . . . fundamentally challenging the dualisms themselves, feminism, particularly liberal feminism, has instead argued that as certain groups of women move into the public/cultural spheres, men have simultaneously to move into the private and natural spheres. This has not been entirely successful. Instead of men filling the spaces vacated by these women, they have been increasingly filled by poor women of color. (156)

These same limitations are reflected in the previous analysis of Slaughter’s essay. While Slaughter theorized that making accommodations for professional women who parent would somehow benefit all women, third-wave feminists argue that such change might be accomplished through work conducted simultaneously from different vantage points.

Arneil argues that the potential of third-wave feminism lies in its focus on coalition building. To make her point, she quotes from Deborah L. Seigel’s 1997 *Hypatia* article, “The Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's Third Wave”:

Third wave practice seeks to create what Angela Davis calls "unpredicted coalitions." We should have several smaller organizations, each with its own agenda and approach, rather than replace each with bigger or better ones. We need to use each other as resources, pulling together our strengths and abilities in order to be effective and efficient in reaching our goals. Simultaneously, we need to strive to move beyond the boundaries that exist between us. We must challenge our own fears of difference, whatever the shape, size, color or name. (219).
As previously noted, the limitations of liberal theorizing on work and family permeate the arguments of Slaughter, primarily because she appears to believe that the problems that elite women face in trying to achieve a healthy work and family balance are not only different than, but distinct from poor women’s issues. Freedman explains that women’s oppression categorically is a result of state investment in a capitalist economy predicated upon property ownership and the nuclear family. Women experience the oppressive ramifications of this system differently due to the class differentiation produced by the intersecting interests of the political, social, and economic systems of a patriarchal capitalist society (2-8). Hence the weakness in Slaughter’s argument is her assertion that it is in meeting the needs of women of her class that eventually all women’s needs might be met. Not only is this a weak proposal, it is a vague one that requires individual women to trust that a future cadre of powerful women will in fact work in their best interest.

In contradistinction to Slaughter’s argument, I highlight existing coalition-based political work on work and family issues that reflects the intersecting interests of white liberal feminists and third-wave feminist thinkers. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier define third-wave feminism’s goals as those articulated by black feminist writer Barbara Smith:

Feminism is a political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women— as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement” (8).
I offer an analysis of the policy agenda report, “The Work-Family Dilemma: A Better Balance, Policy Solutions for All New Yorkers” published by A Better Balance: The Work and Family League Center and the Barnard Center for Research on Women in 2007 by the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) and a Better Balance: The Work and Family Legal Center (ABB), located in New York. Working in partnership, they recognized “the need for a forum to discuss work-family issues with a focus on class” and initiated a day-long roundtable discussion of fifty participants including academics studying the issues, advocates for better policies, and “actual stakeholders (labor, business, and elected officials in New York City). While the policy agenda speaks specifically to the concerns of New Yorkers, the report argues that New York City’s issues are predicated upon national ideologies and practices, proposing that “New York City could be a tremendous laboratory for innovation around work-family issues, and could serve as a model for the rest of the country” (14).

That this work was taken on by BCRW as an enactment of their “effort to link feminist struggles to those for racial, economic, social and global justice” is why I read it as reflecting third-wave feminist thought. Herein, when I reference third-wave feminism, I am referring to contemporary feminist instantiations reflective of a continuity of feminist thought committed to centering diversity in its theorizing. That this report specifically addresses the issue of work and family balance across classes is why I offer it in juxtaposition to Slaughter’s article. It is a lengthy report comprised of eighteen pages (including the front and back covers), divided into three sections. The first section is a two-page introduction to the issue from a national perspective followed by a summary page that introduces a ten-page section titled, “Agenda For a Work-Family Balance in
New York City” that identifies specific policies needed by working New Yorkers to guarantee their abilities to care for their families. The final four pages comprise the section title, “Next Steps: Toward a Better Balance,” that articulate strategies for getting the previously identified policy needs established.

In my analysis I focus primarily on the introduction because, like Slaughter, it situates the need for addressing the complexities of achieving a work and family balance within a national context in order to find a “better balance that makes sense for all of us” (1). The difference between the two is that Slaughter spins national failings to promote attention to the needs of professional women whereas this report recognizes that national under or devaluing of caretaking work impacts individuals across the economic spectrum. As such, the report “seeks to broaden the concerns of the debate to include workers across economic class” (2). While the language of this report focuses primarily on class, the rhetorical strategies used implicitly include women of diverse racial, sexual, and family composition backgrounds as well.

Successful attention to diversity and inequality regarding work and family balance for women is effectively achieved in this report through the use of gender neutral language that shifts the framing of caretaking work as a private concern contained within the family to a public concern central to the production of an effective labor force in the US. The authors of the report seek to gain national attention to this matter at the outset when, in its opening paragraph, it takes advantage of US investment is seeing itself as a world leader by demonstrating the ways in which it is not. For instance, they write that while “America exceeds all other industrialized countries in average hours worked . . . we
lag far behind other industrialized countries—and even behind many developing
countries—in public policies that support working families” (1).

Even though the reality is that most of the caretaking work in the US is done by
women, the authors rightly focus on the negative impact such national practices have on
every individual, stating in the next paragraph that “One of the major problems facing all
individuals in US society is that the labor of caregiving is undervalued.” In the next
sentence, caregiving is defined as “caring for children, older persons, and those who are
sick or disabled” that is “secondary to other forms of labor.” By ending the sentence with
the unmodified term labor, the authors are setting up their argument that such labor
should be compensated in a manner similar or the same as other forms of paid labor.
First, however, they render visible caretaking work as that work which takes place
outside of “our working lives” arguing that “because caregiving is treated as a private
concern, the labor it involves becomes invisible, and caregivers form part of an invisible
labor force” (1). 11 By positioning caretaking work as labor and those who perform such
work as a labor force, readers will likely be more persuaded by arguments that address
caretaking concerns across class—rather than focusing on caretaking work as something
that gets in the way of “real” work or the professional work done by women like
Slaughter. In fact, the double bind of women who do caretaking work for other, more


11 For scholarship that speaks to caregivers as an invisible labor force, see “It
Shouldn't Have to Be A Trade”: Recognition and Redistribution in Care Work Advocacy
by Cameron Lynne MacDonald and David A. Merrill; “Feminising the Economy:
Metaphors, Strategies, Politics” by Jenny Cameron and J.K. Gibson-Graham; “Care
Work: Invisible Civic Engagement” by Pamela Herd and Madonna Harrington Meyer;
and The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values by Nancy Folbre.
privileged women when it comes to taking care of their own families becomes more tangible when all caretaking work is viewed as a labor issue.

The authors make a concerted effort to decenter professional women as the subjects most impacted by work and family balance issues. For example, the labor of stay-at-home parents and domestic workers is highlighted prior to the mention of professional workers’ interests. And when professional workers are introduced at the opening of the third paragraph, primacy of mainstream attention given to this group is questioned through highlights of the many privileges such professionals have in terms of work-place practices that low-income and middle-income workers don’t have such as paid sick-leave. In contradistinction to Slaughter’s argument for tending to the needs of professional women in particular, these authors argue that “work-family policy that is informed by the needs of all workers would avoid the pitfalls of exacerbating existing inequalities and would promote equal opportunities” (1). Throughout the remainder of the introduction, when addressing the similarities and differences in needs according to class, the authors’ commitment to lower-income families is revealed in the sequential presentation of lower-income family needs first, then middle-income earners, and lastly professional workers.

The authors conclude their argument for attending to all class needs when proposing work and family balance policies by putting some faces to the invisible labor force for which they are advocating. They point out that the real economic costs to undervaluing caretaking work can be seen in the life of the low-income single mother who has to choose between being a good mother or a good employee. . . . the unionized father who works the late shift so that one
That the authors firmly believe that work and family balance issues take a toll on every individual in the US is evident in their use of gender-neutral language at the outset of their argument. However, their visual presentation of individuals doing the caretaking work at the conclusion of their argument demonstrates their critical awareness that it is primarily women who comprise and suffer from the unpaid work of this invisible labor force. Even though the authors include a male subject position to represent the middle-class worker, he is still working outside the home so that the other parent (perhaps a stay-at-home mom) can be with the children. In addition, such framing allows for policy attention specific to the biological needs of pregnant and nursing women while disrupting gendered conscriptions of caretaking as women’s work, so that we may see an increase in the numbers and extent of caretaking work done by men. Finally, with its focus on creating a productive work-force, its argument to view education as work to fulfill welfare-to-work requirements as a path out of poverty is also likely to gain favor (13). In the end, the use of gender-free language and the framing of caregivers as a labor force provide greater potential for improving the lives of all women across class than Slaughter’s hoped for cadre of female leaders.

**Conclusion**

This coalition-based effort in New York City to address the needs of working families across classes supports third-wave feminist claims that feminist movement is
active and vibrant in contemporary culture, and just as needed as it has always been.\textsuperscript{12} Further, Rosemarie Tong suggests that perhaps “enough time has passed for feminists critical of liberal feminism to reconsider their dismissal of it” (47). Based on my own analysis, I believe liberal feminism does do important work, but for a limited group of women, primarily white heteronormative professional women of privilege. Further, the assumption that the work liberal feminism does will somehow benefit all women is deeply problematic. For example, I revisit Slaughter’s concluding statement that “we may need to put a woman in the White House before we are able to change the conditions of women working at Walmart” (22). This is an essentialist assertion that assumes that women, categorically, are more progressive in their thinking than men, categorically. It is important to remember how close the US was to voting for Sarah Palin, former Republican Governor of Alaska, into the office of Vice President in 2008, and that Republican Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachman was a serious contender for the Republican presidential candidate in 2012. Both of these women are members of the conservative Tea Party Movement, a movement that is anti-choice, anti-gay, and anti-government.

Without a critical mass of \textit{progressive} thinking men and women in political power, the pathways to enacting the policies proposed by BCRW are likely to meet an impasse at the legislative level. Consider, as a case-in-point, The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA), recently introduced by Democratic lawmakers in the Senate. According to Christina Wilkie of the \textit{Huffington Post}, this law “would require employers

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Baumgardner’s and Richards, \textit{Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future}.\text{ }
to make the same kind of workplace accommodations for pregnant women that current law requires them to make for people with disabilities.” While pregnant women are legally protected from being fired for being pregnant, employers are not required by law to give women temporary accommodations warranted by medical conditions related to their pregnancy. Therefore, they can be fired for failing to perform their duties or for necessarily violating work-place regulations related to their condition. An example of such an occurrence involves a woman working at Walmart. Wilkie reports:

When Heather Wiseman began to suffer from bladder infections as a result of her pregnancy, the Walmart sales associate started carrying a water bottle during the day to stay hydrated. But the Walmart that employed Wiseman technically allowed only cashiers to have water bottles, and a note from Wiseman's doctor made no difference. Caught with a water bottle again, the pregnant Wiseman was fired from her job in 2007 for insubordination based on her failure to follow the water bottle rule.

Wiseman lost her suit for wrongful termination against Walmart. According to the article, presently, more than half of the US workforce is comprised of women and in 2010 forty-one percent of working women were their family’s primary financial support. Clearly, protecting the rights of pregnant women to work is a US labor force issue. However, according to Wilkie, this act will likely not pass, as “the Republican-controlled House has consistently opposed workplace bills like PWFA, which they argue place an unnecessary burden on businesses, lowering overall profits.” The work of BCRW and ABB demonstrate that workplace issues for women of all classes can be and should be addressed simultaneously.
Such work might take up Hewitt’s proposal for making productive use of the wave-metaphor. For example, she proposes using or adding “radio waves” to the wave metaphor for “illuminating multiple and conflicting strains of feminisms across the terrain of US history” (668). She writes that during the time span of the first wave, there were many different actors and foci operating on many different waves and frequencies. Hewitt argues that “the so-called First Wave thus included a range of frequencies within a particular time period, frequencies that sometimes overlapped, but could also be as distinct from each other as they were from later eruptions of feminism” (670). Further, she demonstrates how a particular short wave might reach back and carry forward voices from earlier times (672). Taking up Hewitt’s suggestion, in the next chapter, I “reach back” to the first-wave and “carry forward” into the present the voice of Charlotte Perkins Gilman for consideration by feminist rhetoricians interested in contributing to feminist theorizing on work and family in the US.
CHAPTER THREE

THE FEMINIST RHETORIC OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: A CONSERVATIVE APPROACH TO RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE

In chapter two I demonstrated that the idealized white, heterosexual, married, nuclear family model comprised of a male breadwinner and female homemaker is one that has been imposed upon the heterogeneous populace of the US as the ideal family model for all citizens. According to Merchant, this family model became dominant in national discourses and policies beginning with European colonization and was further concretized through the rise of capitalist practices in conjunction with liberal democratic ideologies of individualism. Further, in chapters one and two I demonstrated a need for addressing the ramifications for some families that arise from public policies and practices predicated on this model, particularly those comprised of or including working mothers with dependent children. I believe that feminist rhetoricians can play an important role in advancing public arguments for improving how the US values traditionally unpaid and/or underpaid nurturing work predominantly carried about by women in their roles as mothers.

One avenue feminist rhetoricians might take in accomplishing this work is through Kirsch and Royster’s strategy of strategic contemplation, whereby scholars consider work already done in a manner that “opens up spaces for observation and reflection, for new things to emerge, or, rather, for us to notice things that may have been there all along, but unnoticed” (“In Search of Excellence” 658). Further, Kirsch and Royster call for scholars of feminist rhetorical studies to consider feminist work in recovery and ask how we might “make what was going on in their [historical women
rhetors’] context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context’” (“In Search of Excellence” 649). It is in this vein that I conduct a feminist rhetorical analysis of nineteenth-century orator and social activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1893 treatise Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution, a work that brought her great renown as a leading social thinker of her time.13

Through my analysis I demonstrate that Gilman’s work is an instantiation of feminist rhetoric that was successful due to her tactical manipulation of classical (traditional ancient Western) rhetorical strategies for specifically feminist ends. Further, I present this analysis for consideration by feminist rhetoricians to make use of in contemporary theorizing on issues of women, economics, family, and work that might serve to debunk the tenacious and often pernicious hold of ideologies of the nuclear family on the organization of work and family life in the US. I say this because the subject of feminist critique in Gilman’s work is the economically privileged, white, heterosexual, marital relationship of the nineteen hundreds; a relationship that I have demonstrated is still the idealized norm for today. Drawing on theories of individualism, social evolution, and capitalism, Gilman demonstrated that the economic patriarchal

13 Women and Economics according to historian Carl N. Degler, “both announced her entrance into the field of social thought and brought her the greatest renown” (22). The significance of her work at the time is evidenced by its translation into multiple languages, including German, Japanese, French, Dutch, Italian, Hungarian and Russian and its many editions, the ninth and final of which was published in 1920 (Allen 1, Degler 22). Early on, Gilman was hailed “on both sides of the Atlantic for having written ‘the most significant utterance’ on the women’s question since Mill” (Degler 21). Nancy A. Allen writes that Gilman “was the most significant Western feminist theorist of her period 1890-1920” and Women and Economics was her most “important contribution to feminist theory” (1).
family unit is a detrimental social institution to both individual liberties and the collective social good—adherence to traditional family values are, she effectively argued in her treatise, the root source of society’s ills—exactly the opposite of what conservative politicians advocated then and still do today.

My analysis is also a contribution to rhetorical studies in general because Gilman’s treatise has received little attention for its rhetorical acumen in academia. For instance, while there are a spattering of journal publications throughout the disciplines that focus on rhetorical aspects of Gilman’s writings, Gilman’s most renowned work, *Women and Economics*, has only recently received attention within the field of rhetorical studies, primarily due to feminist reclamation projects in the history of rhetoric and composition. My analysis answers Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald’s call for attention to Gilman with their inclusion of an excerpt from *Women and Economics* in their 2001 collection, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*. Prior to this nod by feminist rhetoricians, a sustained rhetorical analysis of Gilman’s writings can be found in Karyln Kohrs Campbell’s 1994 edited collection, *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1925-1993: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*. While limiting the purview of their work to rhetoric, Dale M. Bauer and Mary V. Marchand took care to analyze the whole of Gilman’s work, situating their analysis within the historical context of her time in order to more fully comprehend the theoretical contributions Gilman has to offer. While this approach provides a comprehensive view of the underpinnings of Gilman’s arguments, their rhetorical analysis is limited, as Amy Slagell notes, to a “focus on the speaker’s ideology as revealed in what was said” with little attention being paid to “how it was
said” (204). From a feminist rhetorical standpoint, Gilman’s *Women and Economics* is significant for both what she argued and how she argued it.

**Methodology**

I conduct my feminist rhetorical analysis of *Women and Economics* through a reading of it as classical five part model of oration. Some readers might view this as a conservative point of reference; however, I do this intentionally because my main argument in this chapter is that Gilman’s feminist rhetoric was primarily effective due to the ways she made use of traditional rhetorical methods. Moreover, Gilman’s rhetoric, written near the end of the nineteenth century, is an example of a shift in disciplinary understandings of the overall purpose of rhetoric as observed by Gertrude Buck in her 1900 essay, “The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory.” Buck notes that rhetorical practices had shifted over time from the self-interested manipulations of the Sophists to more civically vested desires to communicate absolute truth as understood by Plato to Quintilian’s understanding of discourse as self-expression. Contemporary rhetoricians of her time, she observed “are not now-a-days on such joyfully intimate terms with the absolute truth as was Plato.” In terms of understanding Gilman, the most significant shift in rhetorical theory that Buck observes is the “practical value of even a little relative and perhaps temporary truth has become clearer to us—such truth as touches us through our personal experiences and observations.” As such, Buck concludes that rhetoric’s function was recognized as serving the interests of both speaker and hearer, “to the equal advantage of both” (*Available Means* 212-17). Buck describes aptly the rhetorical approach employed by Gilman in her treatise:
Before discourse takes place the speaker has a certain advantage over the hearer. He perceives a truth as yet hidden from the hearer, but necessary for him to know. Since the recognition of this truth on the part of the hearer must ultimately serve the speaker’s interest as well, the speaker, through the act of discourse, communicates to the hearer his own vision. (Available Means 214)

As my analysis will show, the rhetorical arrangement of Gilman’s treatise follows the pattern Buck describes and concludes with Gilman’s offering of her own vision on the subject. Ritchie and Ronald summarize Buck’s rhetorical theory as a “‘Platonic’ understanding of discourse, whose goal is to establish equality between speaker and hearer in a democratic effort to advance the common good” (209). I argue that Gilman’s motivation to speak and the means by which she is persuasive are in keeping with Buck’s social theory of rhetoric articulated above.

I offer here one more point about my methodological choice. Royster and Kirsch suggest that feminist rhetoricians studying historical figures should do so with “ethos, humility, and care.” They argue that:

One of the most ambitious goals in enacting this ethos of care within this context, however, is connected neither to the past nor the present. Instead, it connects both us as scholars and the women as rhetorical subjects to the future. The enterprise shifts in the sense that the ultimate goal becomes enhancing our capacity to articulate a vision for the future, a vision of hope. (New Horizons 73)

A strategy the authors offer in practicing an ethos of care is through “tacking in and tacking out” whereby scholars consider their subjects in the context of their own time and their own purposes distinctly from the purposes for which we wish to make use of their
rhetorical actions in our time and for the future. They provide an example of this practice in Carol Mattingly’s work on women rhetors of the temperance movement, writing that her work encourages us to recast our conceptual frameworks so that we might better understand historical women within their own cultural contexts, rather than ours, and to render their lives more fairly and respectfully. . . . Taking the time to tack out, we learn to look more systematically beyond our own contemporary values and assumptions to envision the possibilities of women’s practices in broader scope and to bring intellectual rigor to the analytical task” (New Horizons 76).

As such, I argue that my use of classical methods in my feminist rhetorical analysis aims to work within the same rhetorical moves employed by Gilman as I strive to illuminate how her feminist rhetoric was effective in both form and content. Throughout my analysis I point to specifically feminist aspects or her rhetoric, be it the purposes she advances or the strategies she uses. A more implicit message conveyed through my analysis is the potential for applicability of Gilman’s rhetorical strategies and arguments for addressing similar contemporary feminist issues. My hope is that this thread will be taken up and developed more explicitly either by myself or other feminist rhetoricians at some point down the line.

The Rhetorical Situation

Ritchie and Ronald remind readers that “one of the most basic tools of rhetorical analysis is to ask of any discourse, ‘Who is speaking?’” (xxiv). Concomitantly, scholars must always ask to whom is she speaking? Further, Freedman points out that when
conducting feminist analysis of women subjects, scholars must also be careful to answer the questions, “‘What about women?’ and ‘Which women?’” (9). As such, I begin by identifying the limited standpoint of both the rhetor and her audience as white, heterosexual, Christian, educated, middle- and upper-class US citizens of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The limitation of her audience to men and women like her is intentional and provides evidence to support criticisms of xenophobia and racism in her other writings. For example, Catherine J. Golden and Joanna Schneider Zangrando in the introduction to their edited collection, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, note that “though [her] work . . . is still regarded as visionary for its own time, and to an extent, our time, critics today are disturbed to find evidence of problematic issues such as racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and classism in her vast oeuvre” (13-4). I think it is important to note, however, that Gilman is explicitly criticizing dominant social mores of the white race—an important critique today, considering the historical imposition of said mores on the US populace as a whole. That she is specifically critiquing her own race is evidenced throughout the work. While there are many evidentiary examples throughout her text, this excerpt from her conclusion clearly establishes her subject as the white race and reveals the inherent racism of her work:

> With a homogeneous nature bred of two parents in the same degree of social development, we shall be able to feel simply, to see clearly, to agree with ourselves, to be one person and master of our own lives, instead of wrestling in such hopeless perplexity with what we have called “man's dual nature.” Marry a civilized man to a primitive savage, and their child will naturally have a dual
nature. Marry an Anglo-Saxon to an African or Oriental, and their child has a dual
nature. Marry any man of a highly developed nation, full of the specialized
activities of his race and their accompanying moral qualities, to the carefully
preserved, rudimentary female creature he has so religiously maintained by his
side, and you have as result what we all know so well,—the human soul in its
pitiful, well-meaning efforts, its cross-eyed, purblind errors, its baby fits of
passion, and its beautiful and ceaseless upward impulse through all this wavering.

(163-64)

The inherent racism of Gilman’s treatise, together with its wide success belies the racism
of its audience as well—and begs inquiry into how Gilman’s success relied upon
racialized discourses of social evolution at the time, a question I explore in the conclusion
to this chapter. While Gilman’s rhetorical treatise, *Women and Economics*, is limited due
to its ethnocentrism and racism, a rhetorical analysis demonstrates that Gilman does
successfully renders visible institutional gendered oppression of elite white women.
However, because she does not critically engage the ways in which race and assumptions
of heterosexuality also inform the gendered oppression of women like her, Gilman
contributes to their socially normativizing functions by rendering homosexuality and
whiteness invisible in her analyses.

Ritchie and Ronald argue that Gilman “especially defines her audience as women
and states her goal as to ‘urge upon them a new sense, not only of their social
responsibility as individuals, but of their measureless racial importance as makers of
men.’”(204). While I agree that this is one of Gilman’s goals directed specifically at
women in her book, I disagree that women were her primary audience. Rather, as my
analysis shows, Gilman directed arguments throughout her treatise to both men and women in order to achieve her ultimate goal of rendering visible to her readers that the marital unit of her day was a state-constituted economic institution organized according to patriarchal gendered ideology that subordinated women to men. This oppressive relationship, she maintained, creates a devastating ripple effect that negatively impacts society both individually and collectively. Bauer and Marchand concur with my analysis of the purpose of Gilman’s work, writing that it aims “[t]o draw out and develop the subversive implications of a change in women’s economic relations” by “[d]isputing the ‘naturalness’ of the sex differences and social arrangements on which the domestic social order was founded” (365). They further characterize her audience of elite white men and women as the “popular mind” comprised of individuals deeply resistant “to the changes she advocated” (366). Understanding how Gilman persuaded a socially privileged popular audience to consider her radical theories of social reform is a key focus of my analysis.

Her overt critique of the institution of marriage was unusual for white feminists of her time. While critiques of the institution were levied and reform was sought, it was often in relation to other arguments. For example, Carol Mattingly in her book on women’s activism in the temperance movement notes that participants’ rhetoric on the effects of male intemperance on their wives and children exposed the inequalities for white women in marriage. She writes that when women married, their personal property, and to differing extents their real property, their persons, their labor, and their children came under the ownership of their husbands. Therefore, all personal property and income—whether from
rents, investments, or wages, and often from real property—were subject to a husband’s disposal and could be confiscated by his creditors. While women’s property might be misused or squandered by any husband, chances of loss became greater when husbands became alcohol abusers. (14)

Mattingly demonstrates how arguments for marriage reform were constituted by arguments for temperance, writing that “women’s inability to protect themselves or their children from abusive, irresponsible husbands who drank thus provided effective ammunition for speakers to point out women’s precarious position with regards to the law” (14). Gilman, along with some other white feminists of her time recognized a need for making heterosexual marriage a focal point of their critiques.

For example, when Women and Economics was first published, the women’s movement was in full swing advocating for white women’s right to participate “more fully in the public affairs of society through political engagement and civic action” (Smiltneek). The women’s movement of this era was also known as the suffrage movement due to its heavy focus on attaining the right to vote for women, with an explicit focus on white women. But for many participants in the movement, the right to vote was only one of their concerns—oppressive patriarchal marriage was another. Nancy Cott argues in Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation that characterizations of first-wave feminist focus on the right to vote as being the primary driving factor is overstated, observing that complaints about marriage and white women's roles as wives were more often the subject of women's conventions (64). For example, she notes:

Elizabeth Cady Stanton found her female audiences far more moved when she talked about the wrongs of marriage than when she talked about the vote. “How
the women flock to me with their sorrows,” she reflected on her speeches about marriage. She wrote to Susan B. Anthony in 1853: “I feel as never before that this whole question of women's rights turns on the pivot of the marriage relations.” (67)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, seeking to understand the oppressive relations of marriage and family theorized that it was the conflation of the marital unit with economic subsistence that lead to white women’s dissatisfaction as wives and mothers across classes. It was against this socio-economic positioning of women that Gilman was writing in *Women and Economics*. According to Margaret O’Donnell, “Gilman was writing in response to cultural attitudes toward marriage at the turn of the century and to the legal framework of the marriage contract, which at the time, determined women’s role in the social structure” (178).

Some turn-of-the-century white suffragists felt that Gilman’s theories for social change were too radical, for while she aligned herself with advocates for white women’s right to work outside the home, she also believed that significant changes to elite white women’s family structure were required. Such changes, she believed, would contribute to alleviating the host of social ills that she linked to the dated patriarchal practice of requiring white women’s economic dependence on men in and through marriage. As such, Gilman argued for systemic changes in how white society met the individual economic needs of each of its heterosexual members and their children. Specifically she argued for the elimination of marriage as an economic practice and against the formation of families as economic units. It is important to note, however, that she did not advocate against marriage and family. Rather, she argued, should marriage and family be detached
from gendered economic (and implicitly and explicitly racialized) practices, then both marriage and family would evolve to higher, more fulfilling social institutions for individuals who themselves, now free from economic coercion, could evolve to their natural individual potential for the greater good of society. How she used rhetoric to persuade her readers of her point of view is explicated in the following.

Analysis

In *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Edward Corbett argues that ancient theories of arrangement, particularly demonstrates that “the disposition of one’s material is not an indifferent matter.” Corbett tells us that the orators knew “that the best arguments could be weakened or nullified if inserted in the wrong place or if presented with inappropriate emphasis or proportion” (276). As classical rhetoricians fully appreciated, a text such as Gilman’s *Women and Economics* cannot be adequately understood by reducing it to its arguments in ways that historians and philosophers have generally tended to do. Gilman was keenly aware of the import of the order of the presentation of her argument in gaining a sympathetic audience, and her rhetorical awareness was integral to her work and its significance.

While arrangement is a key aspect to Gilman’s rhetorical success, most, if not all, analyses of *Women and Economics*, regardless of the discipline, focus on the substantive argument of the fifteen chapters that comprise Gilman’s economic analysis of women’s oppression. This focus often obscures how she affected her audience and ignores the rhetorical strategies she employed. By situating *Women and Economics* within an interpretive framework of classical rhetorical arrangement, I am able to highlight
particularly effective rhetorical strategies that Gilman uses and demonstrate how
Gilman’s rhetorical choices reveal her acute audience awareness and how she played on
that awareness to advance her overarching purpose—to make accessible to white women
the full range of human experiences. Viewing *Women and Economics* as a classical five-
part model of oration can help us to understand its rhetorical structure, give us a sense of
its rhetorical dynamics, and allow us to develop an analysis attentive to audience,
situation, and time. As such, I conduct a rhetorical analysis that views the “Proem” and
“Preface as the *exordium* and *narratio* (the introduction to and narrative account of her
argument), chapters 1–4 as the *confirmatio* (the exposition of her argument), chapters 5–9
as the *refutatio* (anticipation and negation of counter arguments), and chapters 10–15 as
the *peroratio* (imagined alternatives).

*Exordium and Narratio*

According to George Kennedy, an effective introduction, aside from announcing
the subject of the discourse, gains an audience’s attention and “secure[s] [their] interest
and goodwill,” typically through the use of artistic appeals of ethos and pathos (*A New
History* 4-5). He also notes that Aristotle observed that “the argument of a speech needs
to build on what an audience already believes,” and that he recommended that orators
make use of popular referents in order to draw their audiences into their arguments (58).
Another important aspect of some introductions, Kennedy notes, is Cicero’s strategy of
*insinuatio*, which is useful in particularly difficult cases when a more subtle or indirect
approach may be required to create a well-disposed audience (120). Following the
introduction is a narration that details the history of the subject at hand “in a clear, brief,
and persuasive” manner (5). The following analysis of first Gilman’s “Proem” and then “Preface” demonstrates how she uses each of the rhetorical strategies detailed above to effectively garner the attention of her readers, provide evidence to support her claims, and dispose her readers to consider the probability of her subsequent argument.

**Proem**

Gilman opens her book, *Women and Economics*, with a poem. She labels this introductory material the “Proem,” a synonym for the Latin term *exordium*. Corbett writes that, “instinctively, we feel that an abrupt, immediate entry into the body of our discourse would unsettle and confuse the audience. We sense that in most instances an audience must, as it were, be ‘eased into’ the subject of the discourse” (277). In some cases, an audience is familiar enough with a text that introductory remarks can be reduced to a gesture; however, Gilman knew that, in her case, her text was not only persuasive but didactic in nature, and so needed to predispose her audience to learning and engaging new ideas.

An additional function of the *exordium* is *insinuatio*, meaning to ingratiate or establish credibility with the audience (282). For instance, Corbett writes, “Sometimes an author has to convince an audience that he is qualified to speak on some subject” (282). As such, Gilman builds on her own ethos as a Protestant and introduces to her readers the possibility of gender equality by drawing on Christian ideology of the soul. The first stanza is an emotional appeal that uses vivid language to help her readers imagine a time when man and woman were equal: “In the dark and early ages, through the primal forest faring / Ere the soul came shining into prehistoric light” (lines 1-2). Here she provides a picture of what free male/female relationships looked like and names it for her readers:
“Twofold man was equal; they were comrades dear and daring / Living wild and free together in unreasoning delight” (3-4). It is in this relationship as equals, Gilman maintains, that the souls of both man and woman developed, writing, “Ere the soul was born and consciousness came slowly / Ere the soul was born to man and woman too” (5-6). Relying upon her audience’s familiarity with the Bible and the book of Genesis, Gilman transitions her reader from imagining gender relationships in prehistoric times to those described in the Old Testament in the second stanza. She does this in order to fulfill another purpose of the exordium which is to “counteract prejudices or misconceptions either about himself or about the subject of his discourse” (282). In this instance, Gilman needed to address misconceptions about the subject itself, i.e. she needed to disrupt the idea that women’s dependency on men was a natural or God-given occurrence. Being a woman, Gilman was required to “proceed with the utmost subtlety” in her “Proem.”

In the second stanza, Gilman continues to build her ethos as a Christian by referencing the Tree of Knowledge. According to this Biblical story, God plants the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in the Garden of Eden and directs Adam (the first man) not to eat from that tree stating, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:17). The story goes on to say that Eve (the first woman) allowed herself to be tricked into eating an apple from the tree who gave some to Adam, which he ate even though he knew it had come from the forbidden tree. A typical interpretation of this story is that woman is responsible for the fall of man and all of humanity’s sufferings (Genesis 3:16). By opening with a familiar Biblical story, Gilman draws her readers into her narrative but then maximizes what Bauer and Marchand call “the potential in the shock
tactic for sudden defamiliarization” by providing a new and different reading of the familiar story (367).

Rather than focusing on the sin of woman committed in the Garden of Eden and refuting traditional “blame” of woman for all men’s follies, Gilman suggests that the greater sin was man’s in his failure to resist the temptation to dominate. In Gilman’s version, upon eating from the “Tree of Knowledge,” man became aware of both “Pain” and “Pleasure” and equated possession of woman with pleasure: “Close, close he bound her, that she should leave him never / Weak still he kept her, lest she be strong to flee” (21-23). This unequal relationship between man and woman, she argues, has stunted humanity’s progress: “And, ah, the long journey! The slow and awful ages / They have labored up together, blind and crippled, all astray! / Through what a mighty volume with a million shameful pages” (25-27). Evidence of the folly of man’s subjugation of woman, Gilman narrates, can be found in contemporary manifestations of crime, prisons, and disease (28-30). She maintains that society will continue to suffer until man and woman become the “friend and comrade of the day when life was younger” (33). At this point, Gilman takes her readers back to the Garden of Eden, where she reminds them of her earlier suggestion that the source of mankind’s pain and suffering throughout the ages is the original sin of man (not woman) who “sought to conquer Pleasure and have her for the taking / And found that Pleasure only was another name for Pain” (39-40). Here, she argues that man’s pleasure gained through dominance over women has been the source of all his suffering. Gilman effectively hooks her readers’ interest through a reimagining and simultaneous defamiliarizing of a familiar Bible story. More importantly, the rhetorical impact of the “Proem” transcends engagement and prepares readers to entertain
further challenges to their common-sense understandings of their world by “render[ing] the audience attentive, benevolent—that is, well-disposed toward the writer and his cause, and docile—that is, ready to be instructed or persuaded” (Corbett 285, emphasis in original). For example, this theological engagement at the opening of her treatise prepares her readers to think about male/female relationships and religion in two different ways: first, it gets readers to consider the impact that Christian ideology has on forming these relationships; second, it provides readers with a way of thinking about men and women outside of conventional religious dogma. In addition to being rhetorically effective, the “Proem” reflects Gilman’s belief that “recasting our religious assumptions will do more than [anything] to improve the world.” Finally, Gilman’s ethos as a Protestant might have persuaded some readers to seriously consider her rereading of the Biblical story (Gilman [1923] 1976, 6-7 qtd. in Upin 39).

The primary point Gilman aims to convey through her “Proem” is that woman does not exist due to her subordination to man and that this absence of woman creates the suffering of man and humankind. Further, it is a plea for man to release woman from her subordination so that all may experience love rather than pain in their human relationships. Gilman relies on pathos to demonstrate her claim that woman does not exist in a patriarchal culture. In particular, she appeals to men when she writes, “And he never once has seen her since the prehistoric time” (32). She taps into any feelings of isolation her male readers might feel, implying that man is lost and alone without woman, writing, “Toiler, bent and weary with the load of thine own making! Thou who art sad and lonely, though lonely all in vain!” (37-38). This is actually the crux of her economic analysis as well—that man’s subjugation of woman through economic dependence is a
social construction of his own making, one with harrowing consequences for women, men, and society as a whole, and one that can be undone, if men so choose.

In the last two stanza’s, Gilman anticipates emotional reactions to her argument that, if not addressed, will lead male readers to reject it. These emotional reactions and potential rejection of her theories are addressed by Gilman in her economic analysis but are foreshadowed and tempered in advance in the “Proem.” She suggests that woman rising to consciousness against male dominance is God’s will: “God hath not forgotten, though man doth still forget! / The woman-soul is rising, in spite of thy transgression—” (42-43).

Anticipating fear and resistance in her male audience, Gilman, assuming heterosexuality, maintains that man should not be afraid of woman’s rejection or retaliation because woman has been formed throughout the years to only be loving and forgiving, writing, “Loose her now, and trust her! She will love thee yet!” (44). Gilman turns from tending to the needs of her male audience in the “Proem” to specifically engaging her female audience in the subsequent “Preface.”

**Preface**

The inclusion of the “Preface” is highly conventional and something her readers are likely to expect, for, as Corbett asserts, “the fact of the matter is that most discourses, of whatever kind, do devote a section—the one immediately following the introduction—to a statement of fact” (289). Using an emotional appeal, Gilman lays out her purpose in the “Preface” to incite women to social activism and then follows up with a narration of what readers can expect from reading her subsequent argument. Having already established in her argument in her “Proem”—that the worst evils of mankind result from men’s oppression of women—Gilman uses the rhetorical figures of *propositio* and
partitio as well as the strategy of repetition to move women to action. In this five-paragraph statement, she lays out exactly what she will be arguing in the remainder of her treatise, stating that she will “offer a simple and natural explanation” for this historical pattern of human behavior, demonstrate how it is a “result of arbitrary conditions of our own adoption” that can be removed, and reveal the invisible “social forces of to-day” that are reacting against this social construction so that movement toward egalitarianism “may be greatly quickened by our recognition and assistance.” Evidence of her direct address to women is apparent when she states that an additional purpose of her book is “to reach in especial thinking women of to-day.” That she is seeking action from her readers is evidenced by the order of the presentation of what she aims for her book to accomplish. In the first paragraph, she states her aim is “to offer” an explanation for human suffering; in the second, “to show” the social construction of conditions that contribute to human suffering; in the third, “to point out” obvious, yet unrecognized social backlash against this social construction; in the fourth, “to reach” women in particular, and “to urge” them to action; and in the fifth, “to give rise” to consideration of her argument. The emotional appeal she uses to move women is the repetition of the word evil to refer to women’s subjugation to men and calling on them to take responsibility for recognizing and removing “the worst evils under which we suffer” because of “their measureless racial importance as makers of men” (viii). This appeal was likely effective due to the influence of feminist theories of maternalism at the time. Freedman writes that “they articulated a politics that simultaneously criticized the domestic realm for limiting women and celebrated the superior values attached to women because of their maternal and domestic roles” (68). This appeal to maternalism not only attempts to persuade women to take
action due to their moral responsibilities as mothers, but also establishes credibility on Gilman’s part as a like-minded thinker with the women to whom she is writing. In regards to rhetorical arrangement, Corbett describes Aristotle’s approach to the length of the statement of facts as “just enough,” and so the fact that her “Preface” is brief is conventional and also a likely expectation of her audience.

While the direct address to women in her “Preface” suggests that her primary audience is women, gestures to alleviate men’s anxieties in the “Proem” might lead readers to suggest that her primary audience is men. However, the fact that she ends her partition with a call for consideration of her theory suggests that her audience is both men and women but that she recognizes the need for multiple rhetorical strategies targeting each gender, respectively. For example, she recognizes that men must be made aware of the pain and suffering they bring to society because of their patriarchal practices. Yet she also recognizes that women must be encouraged to continue to rise against their subordination so that they may “work together as comrades and friends” to change things. Gilman recognizes that social change can only be accomplished through the combined efforts of men and women, but that different genders will be moved by different rhetorical strategies.

*Confirmatio in Chapters I-IV*

According to George Kennedy in *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian & Secular Tradition*, confirmation is the first part of the proof section of an oration in which the rhetor demonstrates the validity of her argument. Gilman’s confirmation relies heavily on strategies of ethos and logos. Kennedy notes that Aristotle believed rhetoric was useful
because “audience[s] cannot be expected to come to the right conclusion if the truth is not presented so that people can understand it, and there are those whom it is difficult to instruct” (67). Gilman understood the difficult nature of her subject matter and the resistance she could expect from her audience and so relied heavily upon enthymematic arguments to make her points. For example, one of Gilman’s main goals in this section is to convince her readers that women’s economic dependence upon men is a problem. To do this, she must demonstrate the validity of her concerns about her claim that “the male human is thousands of years in advance of the female in economic status. Speaking collectively, men produce and distribute wealth and women receive it at their hands” (5). Readers find that her claim is sound when Gilman presents an enthymematic argument that effectively turns the reader into a witness of the point that she is arguing. For example, she writes:

   From the day laborer to the millionaire, the wife’s worn dress or flashing jewels, her low roof or her lordly one, her weary feet or her rich equipage,—these speak of the economic ability of the husband. . . . And, when the woman, left alone with no man to “support” her, tries to meet her own economic necessities, the difficulties which confront her prove conclusively what the general economic status of the women is. (5)

In addition to turning readers into witnesses for her argument by presenting everyday examples of her claims that readers cannot deny, Gilman makes subtle and extensive use of the rhetorical strategy of ethos to achieve her overarching purpose in this section.

The purpose of Women and Economics, as laid out in this section, is to get her contemporaries to view gender relations as socially constructed, not naturally occurring.
To persuade her readers, Gilman denaturalizes everyday occurrences by demonstrating through example her claim that “What we do, as well as what is done to us make us what we are” (1). Here, Gilman is employing an early instantiation of feminist standpoint theory. Hartsock describes the potential of this theory: “an analysis which begins from the sexual division of labor—understood not as taboo, but as the real, material activity of concrete human beings—could form the basis for an analysis of the real structures of women’s oppression” (qtd. in Arneil 103-04). Using gender as a primary lens through which she filters her arguments, Gilman demonstrates that the conflation of economic relations and sexual relations is not a natural relationship, but one that is socially constructed. The socio-economic framing of her analysis likely builds Gilman’s ethos—particularly with those enamored with ideologies of individualism and capitalism—as someone fluent in prevailing political, economic, and social discourses, contributing to her success in leading readers to interrogate traditional practices of combining economic relations with sex relations through the institution of marriage.

Gilman’s arguments in this section have been thoroughly examined and heralded for their contributions to feminist theory and validated for their soundness in political, social, and economic theories. While the success of Gilman’s argument has been attributed widely to her use of contemporary political and economic theories of her time, the reason it was so effective is largely due to its rhetorical strategy of ethos. Kennedy notes that Aristotle believed the use of ethos was a more effective strategy of proof when deployed in a subtle manner that produced credibility for the rhetor rather than building from already existing authority:
In Aristotle’s view, ethos should be accomplished through the speech and not be a matter of authority or the previous reputation of the orator (1356a9-10). The reason for this is that only ethos projected in this way is artistic. The authority of the speaker would be analogous to his role as witness and would thus be *atechnos*, something not created but used by the orator. (*Classical Rhetoric* 68)

One example of where Gilman created ethos through her argument by delivering a Marxist-based economic analysis of use value and exchange in the marital relationship.¹⁴ She further produces ethos by combining her economic argument with social evolution theory to convince her readers that women’s economic dependence on men is an unnatural state that wastes resources.

Having established credibility with her audience, Gilman presents a line of argument based on social evolution to assert that women’s economic dependence on men is unnatural, stating that “we see in evolution . . . a gradual orderly development of monogamous marriage, as the form of sex-union best calculated to advance the interests of the individual and of society” (13). Through comparative examples in nature, she leads her readers to concede the point that “The moral quality of monogamous marriage depends on its true advantage to the individual and society” (14). Assuming that she has achieved stasis with her readers at this point, Gilman now sets up her audience to consider that infusing economics into the marital relation has perverted the natural goodness of monogamous marriage, resulting in a polarizing and excessive sex-

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¹⁴ According to Laura Desfor Edles and Scott Appelrouth, in *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era: Text and Readings*, Gilman’s “multidimensional theory of gender inequality” draws in part on “a Marxist emphasis on the economic and political basis for gender inequality” (197).
distinction between men and women that has been “carried to such a degree as to be
disadvantageous to our progress as individuals and as a race” (15-17). Again, through
comparative examples in nature, Gilman concludes that humans have developed an
“abnormal sex-tendency” due to the “abnormal economic relation” of marriage that
requires “one sex get its living from the other by the exercise of sex-functions” (20).

I have laid out this line of Gilman’s argument in detail to address the rhetorical
significance of Gilman’s stated belief in the natural goodness of monogamous marriage.
At this point in her treatise Gilman needs to reassert her credibility to continue to engage
her audience as she is aware of what Corbett heeds, that “when we are about to launch
forth into a particularly delicate argument, we may have to make another play for the
good will of our audience” (288). As such, Gilman needs to convince her readers that
her ideas are not so radical as to undermine the bonds of marriage. In addition, helping
her audience to imagine different ways of organizing relationships is a central rhetorical
strategy of Gilman’s. Monogamous marriage is a familiar context in which her readers
might imagine the male/female relationship Gilman presented in her “Proem,” where
“Twofold man was equal; they were comrades dear and daring, Living wild and free
together in unreasoning delight” (vi). Gilman’s theory is so rich and complex that her
assertion of the natural goodness of marriage is not even necessary to uphold the logical
foundations of her claims, but is only rhetorically important as a means of keeping her
readers with her to continue to consider her point of view.

For example, in addition to maintaining her credibility, this move keeps readers
focused on the problems with the economic infusion of market value into the marital
relationship not on the value of marriage itself. For Gilman, work outside the home
versus work inside the home was not a primary concern. Rather, she was concerned with the social consequences of funneling economic subsistence for women via men through marriage. What she wanted her readers to conclude was that a fundamental shift needed to occur in how society economically valued the nurturing done by women—way beyond domestic duties of housekeeping—to include mothering, nursing, education, and caring for the elderly. Further, Gilman aimed to persuade her readers that economically valuing nurturing work, rather than socially gendering it, would free up men and women to contribute socially through doing work for which they were best suited.

Another move Gilman makes to maintain credibility with her audience is her contention that sex is for reproduction. To do this, she returns to the rhetorical strategy of drawing on already-established authority. For example, drawing on biological evolutionary theory, she claims there grew “the gradual development of masculine and feminine organs and functions in two distinct organisms . . . strongly drawn together by the attraction of sex, and fulfilling their use in the reproduction of the species” (15). She extends her claim that sex developed naturally to fulfill reproductive functions to say that “the unnatural feature by which our race holds an unenviable distinction consists mainly in this,—a morbid excess in the exercise of this function” (15). While some might claim that Darwinian theory is lacking in its ability to address sexuality and sexual pleasure outside the function of procreation, I argue that Gilman’s use of this limited view of sex can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy on her part rather than an ideological commitment. By focusing her analysis on how the infusion of economics into marriage has perverted sexual relations, Gilman is once again able to turn her readers into witnesses of this phenomenon in their own society. For example, Gilman presents to her readers the
impact of, what she calls, the *sexuo-economic* relationship of marriage on children, observing that “Our little children, our very babies, show signs of [over-sexualization]” and that the “forcing upon girl children of an elaborate ornamentation which . . . fosters a premature sex-consciousness [and] is as clear and menacing a proof of our condition as could be mentioned” (28). Using juxtaposition, she demonstrates for her audience their own complicity in the over-sexualization of children:

The most normal girl is the “tom-boy” . . . a healthy young creature, who is human through and through, not feminine until it is time to be. The most normal boy has calmness and gentleness as well as vigor and courage. He is a human creature as well as a male creature, and not aggressively masculine until it is time to be. Childhood is not the period for these marked manifestations of sex. That we exhibit them, that we admire and encourage them, shows our over-sexed condition. (29)

While I believe Gilman is passionate in her excoriating of the sexualizing of young children, the placement of this observation is also rhetorically effective in advancing her argument because it holds the potential to evoke sympathy from her audience. Gilman was perhaps banking on the sympathetic feelings of her audience to soften the blow of the subsequent indictment she delivers in the next chapter. The excerpted quote above concludes the third chapter, which leads into the final chapter of her confirmation. In this chapter Gilman narrates an evolutionary account of how society has arrived at such a sad state of affairs. She concludes her narration with the following claim:

All this human progress has been accomplished by men. Women have been left behind, outside, below. . . . Man is the human creature. Woman has been checked,
starved, aborted in human growth. . . . This is the way in which the sexuo-economic relation has operated in our species. (38)

It is likely that Gilman continued to hold her readers’ attention after handing out such a radical indictment of men as well as oppressive societal structures and their concomitant gender constructions due to the credibility she built by advocating for monogamous marriage and the sympathy she engendered by describing the impact of the same socio-economic relation on children. Gilman’s confirmation predictably engenders objections even from the most sympathetic of readers, objections which Gilman seems to want to draw out with her forceful conclusion in this section. Such objections she anticipates and effectively counters in the next section of her book, the refutation.

*Refutatio in Chapters V-IX*

The refutation is the second part of the proof section of an oration in which the speaker “refutes objections that might be made against” her argument (Kennedy, *A New History* 5). In this section Gilman maximizes the potential of the refutation by countering objections in a manner that continues to build her own argument for social change. She opens this section by addressing general objections relevant to the human condition and then addresses objections specific to the era in which she lived. Using the strategies of logos and ethos employed in her confirmation, Gilman continues to forward her argument by countering objections to women working outside the home and ending with an examination of ideologies of motherhood. The first objection she anticipates to her argument is presented in the form of a question, “If the sexuo-economic marital relationship is so detrimental to society, how could we have failed to recognize it?” She
responds simply by stating, “We are used to what we do not notice,” and she uses everyday occurrences to demonstrate the soundness of her claim. For example, she writes that “the ticking of a clock, the noise of running water or the waves on the beach, even the clatter of railroad trains, grows imperceptible to those who hear it constantly,” concluding that “It is perfectly possible for an individual to become accustomed to the most disadvantageous conditions, and fail to notice them” (39).

In order to get others to consider the possibility of her argument, she starts by addressing common individual experiences of habituation and then moves her readers to consider more gendered, collective experiences, such as the discomfort experienced when wearing a corset or an ill-fitting shoe. She then moves to considerations of collectively rejected, disagreeable, historical social practices such as monarchy, slavery, the persecution of Jews by Christians, and the serfdom of the Middle Ages. Having taking the reader from considering individual experiences of habituation to collective social practices that once seemed natural, she asserts that “Social conditions, like individual conditions, become familiar by use, and cease to be observed” and reasserts that the “sexuo-economic relation is such a condition” (40-41).

Having already established that habituation contributes to perpetuating unjust social practices, Gilman shifts her focus to interrogating instances where individual behaviors rather than general conditions are claimed to be the causes of social problems, observing that “in our common life, individual instances of injustice or cruelty are observed long before the popular mind is able to see that it is a condition which causes these things, and that the condition must be altered before the effect can be removed” (42). As evidence, Gilman, again presents agreed upon perceptions of monarchy and
slavery as systems that enabled and produced abhorrent practices by individual kings and slave-owners. Regarding slavery, she states, “It inevitably tended to produce these evils, and did produce them, in spite of all efforts of the individual to the contrary” (42).

She applies these analogies to the marital relationship claiming that the painful experiences of men (which she details and effectively connects to states of economic dependency inherent to the relationship in the preceding four chapters) are most often attributed “to the evil behavior of some individual, and never [though of] as common to us all” (43). To explicate, Gilman argues that prostitution is not a result of individual vice, but a direct result of marriage as an economic practice. Further, she demonstrates that marriage itself is perverted by its patriarchal economic structure, equating the normative social practice to that of prostitution stating, “We justify and approve the economic dependence of women upon the sex-relation in marriage. We condemn it unsparingly out of marriage” (49). Having addressed counter arguments to her theory in general—by demonstrating that marriage as an economic practice is itself a social condition which manifests in unjust and exploitive relationships between individuals—Gilman turns to addressing counterarguments to removing the economic function from the relationship. Tong demonstrates how Gilman’s argument in this section builds upon Marxist theory as understood by Richard Schmitt. According to Schmitt, she writes that the idea that

“Human beings create themselves” is not to be read as “Men and women, as individuals, make themselves what they are,” but instead as “Men and women, through production collectively, create a society that, in turn, shapes them.” So,
for example, people in the United States think in certain ways about liberty, equality and freedom because their mode of production in capitalist. (97) Gilman’s goal was to peel back and reveal to her readers the many layers of ideology, in particular capitalism, which shaped conceptions and white women’s experiences of marriage and family.

Objections Gilman addresses arise in response to her argument that the economic family is a disadvantage to society. That it is a disadvantage, she argues, is due to its production in men of “the frequent practice of sacrificing public good to personal gain, that the individual may thereby ‘support his family’” and its production in women an unhealthy and “elaborate devotion to individuals and their personal needs.” Men and women so adversely affected by the economic marital family, she maintains, together produce individuals oriented to “personal selfishness” (54, 60). The economic marital unit, she summarizes “sexualizes our industrial relation and commercializes our sex-relation” (60). Gilman concludes that it is only through allowing women economic independence that men and women can both maximize their individual potentials to do work that contributes to the greater common good of society.

At this point Gilman returns once again to her social evolutionary argument that monogamous marriage is both natural and good. Here Gilman assumes that her audience’s attachment to marriage is strong and so she plays into that emotional attachment by arguing that marriage will be greatly enhanced by the removal of economic relations within it, stating that “The best marriage is between the best individuals; and the best individuals of both sexes to-day are increasingly injured by the economic basis of our marriage . . . which make[s] marriage more difficult and precarious
everyday” (71). In addition to relying on emotional appeals to resistance from those attached to the romantic ideology of marriage, Gilman subtly addresses readers who might not be convinced of the natural goodness of monogamous marriage. She does this by using language that allows for selective reading and rather subtly implies that not all individuals naturally tend toward marriage; but for those that do, if women were economically independent, marriage would be a much more fulfilling arrangement, with a “higher sex-life than has ever yet been known” and “a union between man and woman such as the world has long dreamed of in vain” (71, 72).

In addition to addressing concerns about the impact women working outside the home will have on marriage, Gilman addresses concerns that working women are a threat to men’s earning potential. In her response she continues to advance her case that women are individuals that have the right to access the full range of human experiences, evidenced in this response:

Those who object to women’s working on the ground that they should not compete with men or be forced to struggle for existence look only at work as a means of earning money. They should remember that human labor is an exercise of faculty, without which we should cease to be human; that to do and to make not only give deep pleasure, but it is indispensable to healthy growth. (78)

Furthermore, she argues that resisting women’s entrance into the workforce is futile, because the change has occurred over time, stating, “She is assuming new relations from year to year before our eyes; but we, seeing all social facts from a personal point of view, have failed to appreciate the nature of the change” (76). In light of this fact, she admonishes readers to accommodate the changes to family life that women’s
participation in industrialization necessitate, arguing that “pain and strain must increase with the advance of women until the new functional power makes to itself organic expression, and the belated home industries are elevated and organized, like the other necessary labors of modern life” (78).

The crux of Gilman’s argument is that resistance to women’s movement into the work force and public sphere is futile and that most arguments against it, such as ‘she will become less feminine,’ are hardly worth the effort to refute. However, Gilman recognizes the rhetorical potential in addressing counter arguments to maintain credibility with her audience and to get them to consider the radical structural changes she introduces in her conclusion—much of which involves changes to social approaches to motherhood. Due to her focus on mothering in the final section of her treatise, Gilman focuses her final counter argument on concerns embodied in the question, ‘What about motherhood?’ The responses she offers to these concerns are practical in nature—the first appealing to men: “With industrial development and the increasing weight of economic cares upon the shoulders of the man, children come to be looked upon as a burden, and are dreaded instead of desired by the hardworking father” (84). Further, she argues, that the current economic arrangement does not incentivize women to become mothers in both the working classes and the privileged (85).

Gilman recognizes that logical counter arguments regarding the impact that women’s economic independence might have on motherhood will not suffice in advancing her own agenda. As Bauer and Marchand note, “[Gilman] saw further and more deeply than most into the nature and sources of her audience’s resistance to the changes she advocated. . . . she recognized the need for ‘special mental preparation’”
As such, her presentation was designed to “help audiences differentiate between what is ‘normal,’ and should not be disturbed, and what is ‘abnormal,’ and should be removed” (366). Hence, she was aware that obstacles to achieving the goals she lays out in the last ten pages of the refutation were formidable. This rather lengthy quote details the substantive arguments she makes in this section:

To meet this, it is necessary to show that our highly specialized motherhood is not so advantageous as believed; that it is below rather than above the efficacy of motherhood of other species; that its deficiency is due to the sexuo-economic relation; that the restoration of economic freedom to the female will improve motherhood; and finally, to indicate in some sort of lines of social and individual development along which this improvement may be “practically” manifested. (86)

In order to accomplish what she lays out here, Gilman must first get readers to recognize their emotional attachments to the subject. She does so by stating, “A man may question the purposes and methods of his God with less danger of an outcry against him than if he dare to question the purposes and methods of his mother” (86). This statement is a gesture of understanding to her audience, an acknowledgement that we are conditioned to this prejudice and that Gilman is sympathetic to her audience’s attachment to their ideas of motherhood. Further, she concedes to her audience that nothing is as important as the mother, “Nothing can ever exceed the truth as to the value of the mother” (88). Assuming that she has gained her audience’s goodwill by assuring them that she is not going to attack the sanctity of motherhood, she can now ask them to consider motherhood as a subject for inquiry. At this point, Gilman subtly shifts the topic to the socially constructed aspects of motherhood that concern her, stating, “Our instinct is a right one,
as all deep-seated social instincts are; but about it has grown up a mass of falsehoods and absurdities such as always tend to confuse and impede the progress of great truths” (88).

In the next paragraph, she lists all the things that mothers do for which they should be valued, thereby establishing their importance, not just to women (remember, she is trying to move women to consider their significant importance in the future of the world), but as a subject for study. At this point in human development, regarding motherhood, Gilman argues, “[we] need not merely to consider whether or not we will enter upon the duties of maternity, but how best we can fulfill them” (88). Gilman positions motherhood within the realm of scientific study by asserting the following, “Motherhood is but a process of life, and open to study as all processes of life are open” (88). Further, she states that “Primarily, its purpose is to reproduce the race by reproducing the individual; secondarily, to improve the race by improving the individual” (88). How one improves the individual, she maintains, is “To leave in the world a creature better than its parent: this is the purpose of right motherhood” (89). We do this, she argues, first by nursing the infant, then by educating the children, noting that “The young of the human race require for their best development not only the love and care of the mother, but the care and instruction of many besides the mother” (89). Arguing that changes in society’s approach to motherhood ultimately benefits children, Gilman shifts her rhetorical attention to her female audience, noting that “The sexuo-economic relation has its inevitable ill-effects on both motherhood and fatherhood. But it is to the mother that the appeal must be made to change this injurious relation.” Her argument becomes a call to action, specifically for mothers: “To build up and improve the human race through her enormous power as mother; to make better people” maintaining that “we know that
we could make better progress if all children had the same rich endowment and wise care
that some receive” (93). Gilman concludes that woman “as a sex specialized to
reproduction . . . has little to show in the way of results which can justify her position”
(98).

Having demonstrated that women, marriage, motherhood, and children are not
served by the conflation of sex and economics, Gilman focuses lastly on motherhood,
which is an important rhetorical move considering the rise of republican motherhood and
historical attachment by women to their roles as mothers as an empowering position. This
focus also demonstrates Gilman’s conviction that women’s economic dependence upon
men within marriage was not in the best interest of individuals or society and that
transforming society’s approach to motherhood and educating its children was the key to
achieving the full human potential of women and men. The primacy of her conviction is
evidenced in the fact that the entire last third of her book is dedicated to revisioning
domestic duties, primarily motherhood, child care, education, and maintenance of the
home. Because she has tended so diligently to the needs and expectations of her audience
throughout her treatise, it is at this point that she can engage her readers to seriously
consider the radical changes for which she advocates. Had she presented her ultimate
goal for gaining readers acquiescence of how “the complex ways in which capitalism and
patriarchy allied to oppress women” at the outset of her arguments, readers would likely
have dismissed consideration of her work altogether (Tong 111). Having gained her
readers attention and goodwill throughout, readers cannot summarily dismiss her
conclusion which envisions ways of accomplishing the nurturing functions associated
with family through a more collective and social endeavor that still accommodates the private needs of the individual.

*Peroratio in Chapters X-XV*

In classical rhetorical arrangement “the epilogue is often divided into a recapitulation and an emotional appeal to the audience” (Kennedy, *A New History* 5). While the arrangement and the purpose of Gilman’s conclusion follows the dictates of traditional oration, the content draws upon feminist rhetorical theory demonstrating an awareness on Gilman’s part, that for her argument to effectively move her audience to act, she must provide them direction in their action—she must envision for them the possibilities. For example, she states:

So to-day, in questioning the economic status of woman and her position in the home and in the family, it is far easier to provide present evil than future good. Yet this is what is most exactly demanded. It is required of the advocate of social reform not only that he convince the contented followers of the present system of its wrong, but that he prove to their satisfaction the superiority of some other system. (102)

Gilman displays empathy for her audience by recognizing that human resistance, complacency, and fear make social reform a nearly impossible task, but maintains that it is a process that must be undertaken in the name of human progress, arguing that economic independence for women necessarily involves a change in the home and family relation. But, if that change is for the advantage of individual and race, we need not fear it. It does not involve a change in marriage relation except in
withdrawing the element of economic dependence, nor in the relation of mother to child save to improve it. (104)

Here again, she reassures her audience of her commitment to marriage and motherhood, and calls on her readers to do the difficult work of “deliberately set[ting] ourselves to imagine, by sheer muscular effort as it were, a better kind of motherhood.” In addition, she asks readers to tap into their own experiences, to acknowledge that “each generation of young men and women comes to the formation of sex-union with higher and higher demands for true marriage, with ever-growing needs for companionship” (108). The actualization of fulfilling marriages is compromised by “the economic status of marriage” which, she argues, breaks up “the sweetness and truth of the sex relation” (108). Further, she argues, “The change in the economic position of woman from dependence to independence must bring with it a rearrangement of these home interests and industries, to our great gain” (110). By restating her arguments here, Gilman is making an effort to predispose her audience to considering alternatives to fulfilling human needs that have traditionally been met by women. Specifically she argues for communal kitchens and the professionalization and systematizing of cleaning and cooking, and for socializing child rearing and education. She provides sound justifications for such changes as well as practical alternatives throughout. These changes would bring about a decentering of family life, which is necessary, she argues, because women’s restriction to serving her immediate family is detrimental to society as a whole:

The main feature of her life—the restriction of her range of duty to the love and service of her own immediate family—acts upon us continually as a retarding influence, hindering the expansion of the spirit of social love and service on
which our very lives depend. It keeps the moral standard of the patriarchal era still before us, and blinds our eyes to the full duty of man. (166)

At this point in her conclusion, Gilman brings her readers full circle back to the point she started with in her “Proem”: that women’s subjugation to man is the source of human suffering and that women’s economic dependence on man in marriage at the turn of the century is merely the contemporary expression of this relationship.

She also takes readers full circle back to the point she makes in her “Preface” by returning to a discussion of the nature of evil. In a final rhetorical gesture of understanding to her audience, Gilman implies that readers are not crazy to think that there is something to the story of Adam and Eve or Pandora’s Box, but that they misunderstand women’s role in this mythology. Returning once again to the already established authority of social science, Gilman suggests that there is a sociological explanation for the struggle between good and evil. Evil, she maintains, exists, though it is not inherent in women but inherent in the ways in which women have been treated. She writes, “And, fumbling vaguely at the source of our pain so far as we could trace them, judging always by person, and not by conditions” women have been blamed for the evils of the world, when really it is “not woman, but the condition of woman, [that] has always been a doorway to evil” (163). She argues this evil manifests in man’s inability to see “that it is not woman as a sex who is responsible for this mis-mothered world, but the economic position of woman which makes her what she is” (164). Gilman concludes her treatise by focusing her readers’ attention on a specific course of action they can take to remedy the evils of society they witness and experience—working to remove economic dependency from the family unit.
Conclusion

While economic independence within marriage is now available to some women (primarily white, educated, and financially privileged), economic disparity between classes continues to grow, and women remain the majority of people in poverty in the US and around the world. Lisa Duggan in *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* argues that this economic disparity results from, in fact relies upon, the false “definition of economic policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise.” Such an understanding of economics, she maintains, denies the certain reality that “the economy cannot be transparently abstracted from the state or the family, from practices of racial apartheid, gender segmentation, or sexual regulation.” Duggan argues that this view of economics, culture, and politics is a neoliberal manifestation of Anglo-European Liberal ideology that “was altered and adapted to the U.S. context during the early nineteenth century.” As I detailed earlier, it was this nineteenth-century conception of “discreet spheres of social life” that Gilman was writing against in *Women and Economics* (xiv).

Based on Duggan’s analysis of contemporary economic policy, the substantive arguments of Gilman’s treatise are clearly still applicable today. Just as important as her arguments, though, are the rhetorical strategies she uses to render visible the hidden relationships between political and economic institutions and collective and individual lived experience. Duggan realizes that advancing Progressive left politics today requires rhetorical intervention, arguing that “The master terms and categories of Liberalism are rhetorical; they do not simply describe the ‘real’ world, but rather provide only one way
of understanding and organizing collective life” (5). Gilman’s treatise demonstrated exactly the point Duggan makes, and Duggan, like Gilman, recognizes imagining as a key rhetorical strategy for creating a better world when she writes, “For it is pleasure and collective caretaking, love and the egalitarian circulation of money—allied to clear and hardheaded political analysis offered generously—that will create the space for progressive politics that might both imagine and create . . . something worth living for” (88). One way Duggan envisions that we accomplish this goal is by finding “ways of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting that are engaged and curious about “other people’s” struggles for social justice, that are respectfully affiliative and dialogic rather than pedagogical, that look for the hopeful spots to expand upon, and that revel in the pleasure of political life” (88). Arguably, in many ways, Gilman’s work is an excellent example of the kind of work Duggan is seeking.

Where Gilman fails miserably, however, is in her engagement with the struggles of people different from her. Aside from cursory examples of working-class women’s struggles, Women and Economics is clearly a treatise written for and about members of the privileged classes in nineteenth-century US and Anglo-European societies—people who accepted race privilege, heterosexuality, monogamous marriage, and Christian ideology as the norm. As Gold and Zangrando note, “Even the most astute social critics and visionaries, exemplary in their social analyses and suggestions for progressive change, may themselves embody their society’s prejudices and biases” (21). However, Toni Morrison, in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, argues that doing little more than acknowledging such “failures” in white literature reduces the significance of what we can learn about not only white writers and their audiences, but
about American history and the “Africanist persona” deployed in such writing. She writes that literary criticism

as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well; it can dismiss the difficult, arduous work writers do to make an art that becomes and remains part of and significant within a human landscape. It is important to see how inextricable Africanism is or ought to be from the deliberations of literary criticism and the wanton, elaborate strategies to erase its presence from view. (9)

Gilman clearly makes use of the nineteenth century feminist woman-as-slave analogy in her treatise. For example, Freedman describes how Harriet Taylor’s 1851 essay, “Enfranchisement of Women” drew “on the language of the abolitionist movement” that “she compared women to slaves and called for their emancipation through education and legal reform” (52). Gilman compares women and children’s economic subordination to men to that of slaves, using the metaphor of a horse—extending arguments that if it is unjust to treat slaves as animals, it is similarly unjust to treat women and children as such:

The horse, in his present condition of slavery, is economically dependent. He gets his living at the hands of his master; and his exertions, though strenuous, bear no direct relation to his living. In fact, the horses who are the best fed and cared for and the horses who are the hardest worked are quite different animals. The horse works, it is true; but what he gets to eat depends on the power and will of his master. His living comes through another. He is economically dependent. So with the hard-worked savage or peasant woman. Their labor is the property of another:
they work under another will; and what they receive depends not on their labor, but on the power and will of another. They are economically dependent. This is true of the human female both individually and collectively. (4).

In addition to comparing white women’s oppression to that of slavery, she also draws on the “hard-worked savage or peasant” to make her plea that wives and children of privileged elite males should not be treated in the same manner as animals, slaves, or working-class and poor women. My point here is that Gilman makes use of her and her audience’s shared belief in the inherent superiority of the white race to advance her own argument. The degree to which the success of her treaties relies upon this belief warrants greater investigation. For example, Morrison notes, “The rights of man, for example, an organizing principle upon which the nation was founded, was inevitably yoked to Africanism. Its history, its origin is permanently allied with another seductive concept: the hierarchy of race” (38). As such, if scholars wish to make use of Gilman’s work in advancing contemporary feminist rhetorical theories, greater attention is needed to the ways in which the success of her work is “ill-gotten” because, as Morrison argues, “there is still much ill-gotten gain to reach from the rationalizing power grabs and clutches with inference to inferiority and ranking of differences. There is still much national solace in continuing dreams of democratic egalitarianism available by hiding class conflict, rage, and impotence in figurations of race” (64). If contemporary feminist rhetoric on women and economics is to be successful in debunking neoliberal ideologies of family and economics it must take into account the historic racialization of concomitant discourses. Duggan writes that:
During every phase, the construction of neoliberal politics and policy in the U.S. has relied on identity and cultural politics. The politics of race, both overt and covert, have been particularly central to the entire project. But the politics of gender and sexuality have intersected with race and class politics at each stage as well. (xii)

Gilman’s gender and economic analyses as well as her rhetorical theory can be most useful to us today if the boundaries of her perspectives are pushed to encompass the diverse array of women’s individual lived experiences. Fishkin observes, “There is still much cultural work left for [Gilman] to do” in the 21st century and beyond (220). For future work based on Gilman to be effective, however, requires an understanding of the hierarchical arguments of race and class that she mobilized in order to recognize and resist reification of such strategies in contemporary feminist theorizing.
CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTING EPISTEMOLOGIES: EVOLVING AS A FEMINIST SCHOLAR

Throughout this dissertation I make apparent often invisible socio-economic privileges and oppressions embedded in discourses that stem from US investment in state-sanctioned marriage as a normative model of family. In this chapter and the next, I incorporate lived experiences of women relating to marriage, motherhood, and feminism through an analysis of interviews I conducted with ten women. Including women’s voices in my research is a feminist practice that values experience as a source of knowledge. For example, Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka argue that “what counts as knowledge must be grounded on experience” (x). Further, they argue that because we live in a patriarchal culture, women’s experiences of the world are distinctly different from men’s. They write that “human experience differs according to the kinds of activities and social relations in which humans engage. Women’s experiences systematically differ from the male experiences upon which knowledge claims have been grounded” (x). As such, when studying women’s lived experience, I drew heavily upon feminist standpoint theory in formulating my research questions, selecting my participant pool, and structuring the interviews.

Feminist standpoint theory and its variations have been developed by feminist thinkers and social scientists including Dorothy Smith, Nancy C. M. Hartsock, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, and Donna Haraway. Hartsock’s understanding of feminist standpoint theory is that “women’s life activity does form the basis of a specifically feminist materialism, a materialism which can provide a point from which both to
critique and to work against phallocratic ideology and institutions” (305). However, it is also important to avoid erasing differences between individual women or making essentializing claims based on the category woman. In order to avoid such problems, Sandra Harding, according to Dorothy Smith, “has pointed out, the opening of public discourse to multiple voices and perspectives calls into question the very notion of a single standpoint from which a final overriding version of the world can be written” (68). This multiplicity has also been theorized by Donna Haraway as “situated knowledges” arguing that only “partial perspectives promise objective vision.” For Haraway, standpoint theory is about “the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view” (583). For Smith, it means bringing in standpoints of groups of women who have been written out of hegemonic discourses. As an example, she observes how Patricia Hill Collins’s application of standpoint theory in studying African American women’s experiences of family “subverts the sociological relation that has written into sociology the exclusion of Afro-American women, and it continues to write in other exclusions whose representatives have still to be heard” (68).

My desire in conducting this participant-based interview study was to “learn to see faithfully from another’s point of view”—in this case the perspectives of some women who have been written out of national discourse of marriage and family due to their nonnormative experiences of marriage and family.

In addition, my process of professional growth as a feminist scholar led to my choice of feminist standpoint theory as the epistemology that informs this portion of my
dissertation. In the next section I narrate an account of my process. I provide this account for three reasons. First, Marjorie DeVault argues that “the self as resource” is a valid source of inquiry that researchers should be willing to share. She writes that “feminists and others in opposition to ruling regimes often want to ask, ‘Who says?’ The question suggests that they in turn should be willing to reveal their own authorship when they proffer competing claims” (105). Second, according to Smith, standpoint theory’s pioneer, a project arising from the personal is a foundational practice of feminist standpoint. DeVault describes Smith’s ideology, writing that “the feminist sociologist, in her formulation, must refuse to put aside her experience and, indeed, must make her bodily existence and activity a ‘starting point’ for inquiry” (39). As such, I believe that not only are the results of my study valuable to readers, but also the origin and process by which I came to my results are valuable as well, if only as an example for other feminist researchers to draw upon when considering making use of the personal in their own scholarly pursuits. Finally, I employ third-wave feminism to engage and analyze my participant’s narratives, and have experienced, at times, the feeling of not being feminist enough, a feeling recognized by some third-wave feminist thinkers. And so I share my process in response to third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker’s call for “being real” by

15 The narration of my process can be contextualized as feminist research methodology involving “reflexive autobiographical work” as described by Marjorie DeVault in Liberating Method. She writes that “learning more about how and why we see things as we do will allow us to understand more about the meanings others make of their (and our lives), and to locate ourselves (and others) in more complex and meaningful ways rather than through simplistic identity categories” (210).

16 Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards explore third-wave feminist identity in Manifesta. They claim that “third-wave women have been seen as nonfeminist when they are actually living feminist lives” and acknowledge that while third-wave feminists make choices that might seem nonfeminist to some second wavers, they are still feminists (48).
“honoring the complexity and contradiction in their lives by adding their experiences to the feminist dialogue” (xxxiv). In the next section, I follow feminist scholar Amber Kinser’s example in “Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism” of “Situating the Writer” by situating myself as the researcher (125).

Situating the Researcher

I was enrolled as a graduate student in the University of Arizona’s (UA) Women’s Studies program from 1998 to 2000. I started the program as a newly married, heterosexual, white, college-educated, professional woman. I was twenty-eight years old and working in professional administration at UA. My husband and I owned our home. We were middle class and had one child and two dogs. At the time I could have been read as either a liberal feminist success story of a young professional woman, or the embodiment of postfeminist claims that feminism had achieved its goal of equality for women and was no longer needed. What I felt upon admittance to the program, however, was a bit unnerved because I perceived an incompatibility between claiming a feminist identity and being a wife and stepmother. According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, such tension can be attributed to the hegemonic second-wave perspective that “marriage was a sullied state from a feminist perspective” (39). I was curious to understand the tension better and for my Master’s thesis I researched the validity of and gained a greater appreciation for feminist critiques of oppressive mechanizations of state-sanctioned marriage, particularly for poor women, women of color, and gays and lesbians. Further, I gained a greater understanding of my own race and heterosexual privilege in relation to marriage. While heterosexual privilege inherent to state-
sanctioned marriage is made obvious by its exclusion of same-sex couples, race privilege remains, for the most part, invisible. For example, as detailed in chapter two, the significance of state-sanctioned marriage to the political economy today, according to Merchant and Freedman, is due, in part, to the imposition of white settler’s Christian ideologies of family. Indigenous populations and people of color were left out of national ideologies of family and slaves were excluded altogether. As such, regardless of my own experiences of oppression in relation to marriage and family, I do occupy a position of privilege as a white middle-class wife—for example, because of my husband’s income, I have had, at times, the “choice” to stay home with my children or to work. Most women in the US do not have this privilege, due in part, as Collins points out, to the bundling of class and race in the US (Fighting Words 209).

As I pursued a Master’s in Women’s Studies, my sense of not feeling feminist enough was further reinforced by comments from members of the program about “hating marriage.” One of my committee members had to clarify for me that she didn’t hate married people, she just hated the institution. At that time separating critiques of the institution from participants in the institution was difficult for me. In my studies I focused on understanding feminist critiques of marriage rather than theorizing my own experiences as a partner in a feminist marriage. Had I shifted my focus to inquiry about my own experience, I might have come across then recent works that addressed such confusion or conflict about feminist identity. For example, in 1995 Walker published her book To Be Real. In it she writes:

The concept of a strictly defined and all-encompassing feminist identity is so prevalent that when I read the section in my talk about all the different things you
can do and still be a feminist, like shave your legs every day, get married, be a man, be in the army, whatever, audience members clapped spontaneously. (xxxi-xxxii)

After defending my Master’s thesis, rather than continue to explore the conflict I felt or try to resolve it, I simply let it go. I graduated from the program, moved on in my career, and two years later had my first baby. The conflict I felt between what I understood a feminist to be and the choices I was making in my life resurfaced again as I shifted into my new identity as a stay-at-home mom. This added component to my identity and my earlier experiences are the seed of my dissertation project.

At the time I found that many of my friends whose lives and claimed identities were similar to mine felt a similar conflict. Why, I wondered, did living the “traditional” heterosexual, nuclear family lifestyle of the stay-at-home mom with a breadwinner husband render claiming a feminist identity problematic for me? Why did my friends and I find that taking on traditionally gendered roles associated with wives, moms, and homemakers made us distinctly uncomfortable as feminist-identified women even though we enjoyed the work? There were points of contention that we shared, like feelings of isolation and disagreements with our spouses over distribution of labor, and feeling undervalued in our work. What competing discourses had we internalized that made us feel so conflicted about our understandings of feminism and family? In retrospect, I believe my discomfort, and perhaps that of my friends, was due in part to the frustration and bewilderment I felt as my marital relationship shifted from an egalitarian one in which financial and housekeeping burdens were shared into a more bifurcated relationship in which “bringing home the bacon” seemed to me, at times, to be more
valued than “frying it up in a pan.” My experience is explained by Baumgardner and Richards who write that “in terms of equality, our married friends tell us that snags occur when couples have children” (43). They write that “The biological determinism imposed by the wage gap, unequal parenting responsibilities, and men needing to learn how to do what women do, remain the same problems our generations face” (45). I would add to that however, that my husband was a single father for two years before he met me, had nursed his father through the last months of his life, and provided a home for his destitute mother—in terms of caretaking, he knows how to do what women do. However, Richards and Baumgardner note that “not only does sexism load the pressures of parenting on mom like as nasty girdle, but it makes fathers’ roles more distant and rigid” (43). I believe social conditioning of the masculine imperative to be the family provider contributed to the tensions we experienced in our early years of parenthood.

When my first child was four years old and I was pregnant with my second, I decided to apply to the doctoral program in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona—in large part because I was interested in developing and pursuing a research project that examined discourses of feminist identity, marriage, and family. In my “Statement of Purpose” for the application, I wrote that I was “committed to adding a contemporary feminist perspective on marriage and family arrangements to both academic and more mainstream bodies of literature.” I already had in mind an idea for my dissertation which was to “create a feminist paradigm for talking about marriage and family that departs from the initial second-wave critique of these as the site of women’s oppression.” I argued that the validity of those earlier critiques were undermined and distorted by antifeminist rhetoric that appropriated second-wave
theorizing in portrayals of feminists as antimale and antifamily. Such portrayals, I opined, undermined current feminist efforts to improve the lives of women by making invisible women’s experiences of marriage and family today.

In retrospect, the beginning of my abbreviated project proposal was pretty sound—until I started talking about women as a category. For example, the goals I proposed were twofold: “First, to offer a critical analysis of these problematic public representations of feminism; and second, to offer a contemporary feminist perspective on marriage and family based on what women actually have to say about their experiences.” At this point in my studies, I see the problematic assumptions and generalizations in the ways I used the terms woman, feminist, and feminism. My initial vision of this project was very much informed by my own point of view as a feminist-identified woman who enjoyed marriage and its concomitant privileges.

To begin, in the fall of 2006, I researched and wrote a paper for Roxanne Mountford’s “Research Methodologies” course in which I interviewed four women about their perceptions and experiences of feminism, marriage, and motherhood. At the time I had planned on reanalyzing these interviews for my dissertation. Unfortunately, I cannot gain retroactive approval by IRB to use these interviews in my current study. As a result I can only reference these initial interviews by reporting on the seminar paper on which they are based. I revisit this research to demonstrate how continued feminist consciousness-raising on my part impacted my scholarship. Chandra Mohanty in her work on third-world women’s narratives notes that feminist analysts know that “the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness
and self-identity” (78). Remembering and rewriting of my own research process is one way that I continue to grow as a feminist scholar.

Regarding my initial research, in retrospect I realize that my research questions, analysis, and conclusions were guided by a liberal feminist epistemology. Nancy A. Naples asserts that “the specific [research] methods we choose and how we employ those methods are profoundly shaped by our epistemological stance” (3). For example, the conflict I and the women I interviewed were experiencing is one particular to our socio-economic privilege as white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women. Women such as us have choices due to our social privilege that many women do not. Rather than interrogate the privilege such a standpoint offers women like me, I simply noted it as one of the demographic markers that informed my study and proceeded to interview women who were socially privileged in terms of race, class, and sexuality. Had I been aware of Smith’s feminist standpoint theory then, my analysis of my data would likely have started with our standpoint. For example, Smith asks:

Why was it that the social sciences wanted to explain people’s behavior (to whom?), rather than, say, to explain the behavior of the economy, or the society, or the political process to people, particularly as these enter into, organize, and disorganize people’s lives? (32)

Earlier, I wrote that my initial inquiry focused on identifying discourses that I and women like me had internalized that made us feel so conflicted about our understandings of feminism and family. Now I might ask—how do discourses of feminism and family play out in the daily lives of some feminist-identified stay-at-home mothers that conform to normative models of marriage and family? This question keeps the participants’
standpoint as part of the inquiry and analysis, preempting universalizing assumptions about women or erasure of difference. Further, such work becomes situated or partial knowledge about some women that together with other situated knowledge can paint a fuller picture of work that can be done to improve the lives of some women.

Not only were my research questions framed by my liberal approach, the pool of women I drew on automatically limited my data to that of an elitist perspective. Naples notes that “what counts as data and how these data are interpreted and reported will vary significantly depending on the specific epistemological stance undergirding the research process” (3). Because a liberal feminist epistemology attempts to work within existing structures and systems rather than question or change them, my analytical focus was on identifying and problematizing discourses of and on feminism that conflicted with our lifestyle choices. My analysis was grounded in Ernest G. Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory and fantasy-theme method. This approach helped me achieve my purpose of identifying shared rhetorical visions among the interviewees—three of whom were feminist-identified and one who was not.\(^{17}\) In my paper I argued that the four women and I were a representative sample of the demographic most often portrayed in the media when reporting on marriage and motherhood—white, middle-class, college-educated women in their thirties. Media portrayals I referred to included mainstream articles with the following titles: “Can a Career Woman Really be a Good Wife?”; “Unleashing the Wrath of Stay-at-Home Moms”; and “The Happiest of Wives; What Women Want Turns out to be a Variation on the Traditional.” The most significant

\(^{17}\) For an understanding of Bormann’s theories, see his book *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* and his article, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality.”
finding of my research was that all four women shared a fantasy-theme of feminism and family that included three defining points: first, that women who have children should also have careers; second, that being a wife and mother isn’t good enough; and third, that traditional gender roles in parenting should be rejected rather than embraced. Our understanding of what feminism expected of women in terms of familial roles conflicted with our life choices.

Based on this conclusion, I asked, why did such feminist-identified women still marry? My focus at this point in my research was on explaining the role discourse played in people’s behavior. From my research I concluded that the way that the nuclear family is constructed is an almost inescapable reality for most people. Drawing on that finding, my interview data, and Bormann’s theory of emotion and symbolic cues for understanding human behavior, I argued that the term nuclear family can be seen as a symbolic cue for a rhetorical vision that is so powerful that even the more nonconforming members of society are still compelled to act in line with that vision. I realize now that my rhetorical understanding of the behavior of the interviewees supports earlier conclusions reached by third-wave feminists. For example, Baumgardner and Richards assert: “Nowadays, marriage is less likely to be a compromise for women and more likely to be a choice. There is still incredible pressure to choose marriage, but it’s fair to say that women and men now have a better chance of equality within the union” (37). Another line of inquiry I pursued was the source of conflict between the interviewees’ lived experiences and their understandings of feminism. I concluded that the deployment of second-wave feminist rhetoric as antifamily had been internalized by all four women because the age at which they came to an awareness of feminism was during the late
nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties. According to bell hooks, it wasn’t until the mid-eighties that feminists became more vocal about their revaluing of motherhood in particular (Feminism is for Everybody 76). Further, because feminism was so important to the three feminist-identified women, in their interviews each took pains to identify how their understandings of feminism had changed over time, up to and including their standpoints as wives and mothers.

When I conducted this research, I was focused on challenging dominant discourses that contributed to conflicted feelings of feminism and family for women like me. Now, after several years of research, conversations with feminist colleagues and friends, and the guidance of my committee members, I view the conflict I felt in two ways: first, that it was a distraction produced by antifeminist rhetoric and related postfeminist discourses aimed at suppressing feminist social justice efforts, in particular, those critical of social practices and values serving intersecting interests of patriarchy and capitalism; and second, that it is an anxiety resulting from some second-wave liberal feminist expectations of women’s activities. I continue to believe that interrupting those discourses is important; however, I am committed to engaging in scholarship that pursues a social justice agenda relevant to the lives of some women in the US and I determined that continuing to engage a liberal feminist epistemology was counterproductive to my goals.

Naples counsels that “since there are diverse feminist perspectives,” it is important to ask how “different feminist theoretical perspectives inform the application of different methods” (4-5). As such, I focused part of my comprehensive exams reading lists on more clearly articulating my own feminist epistemology as well as defining my
methodological approach to my study. As I researched feminist history and critiques of marriage in the context of the evolution of liberal ideology and capitalist economic practices in the US, it became increasingly important to me to foreground difference rather than sameness in my study. The feminist epistemology that informs this dissertation is one that opposes cultural, economic, and political privileges afforded to individuals in normative models of family organized through state-sanctioned marriage. I am guided by Patricia Hill Collins’s approach to theorizing black women’s standpoint on family when she suggests that “rather than trying to explain why Black women’s work and family patterns deviate from the seeming normality of the traditional family ideal, a more fruitful approach lies in challenging the very constructs of work and family themselves” (Black Feminist Thought, 1st ed. 47). This does not mean that I oppose marriage—my fifteen-year wedding anniversary is right around the corner. However, it does mean is that I am aware of the social privileges I garner as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, and highly educate married woman particularly as a mother of dependent children. It also means that I continuously strive to be aware of the social marginalization and economic oppression that many women experience whose interpersonal and family relationships deviate for normative models of family. And it means that as a feminist, I actively work to render visible and disrupt the mechanizations of privilege and oppression deployed through hegemonic discourses on marriage and family.

I was raised by a second-wave liberal feminist who did everything she could to be sure I succeeded in the life we knew. My mom and dad are highly educated Christians who were married for twenty-eight years. They were civil servants for most of their professional lives, and their current income comes mostly from their Federal retirement
benefits. My brother and sister and I grew up in a homogeneous neighborhood nestled in a curve of the Potomac River between Old Town, Alexandria and Mount Vernon, Virginia. Most of our neighbors were families like ours—middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, and white. I continue to grapple with the liberal world-view in which I was raised. Likewise, I continue to work at shifting away from a liberal feminist epistemology, a philosophy that continued to inform my research through the dissertation proposal phase. It did not become clear to me the ways that my research inquiry was still shaped by a liberal feminist epistemology until the dissertation proposal meeting. At that gathering, I listened to my Chair defend the validity of my liberal project to other members of my committee. I was clear at that point in my studies that “liberal” meant maintaining the status-quo and that was something I was committed to disrupting to create opportunities for women of varying standpoints (all people, really) to live a life free from oppression. I came away from that meeting confused and disappointed that I still didn’t “get it” somehow. In surveying the data I had collected for my project thus far, I recognized that the perspectives of women I intended to draw from, including the women whom I had interviewed and other sources such as Peggy Orenstein’s *Flux* or Cathi Hanauer’s *The Bitch in the House* only addressed the perspective of women like me in relation to marriage. I found that if I were truly committed to a feminist epistemology that examined difference and inequality, then I had to shift the focus of my inquiry. Before revising my dissertation proposal, I decided to conduct interviews with women who did not involuntarily reap social benefits due to their standpoints as white, heterosexual, middle-class, and married. I revisited Collins’s definition of feminist research methodology:
Methodology refers to the broad principles of how to conduct research and how interpretive paradigms are applied. The level of epistemology is important because it determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put. *(Black Feminist Thought, 2nd ed. 252)*

In short, I needed to actively engage the feminist standpoint theory that I had researched for my comprehensive exams. In the next section, I further define this theory and how it informed my participant selection and interview structure.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory: Methods and Methodology**

First, I wish to make explicit my reasons for focusing solely on the lives of women when examining the oppressive mechanizations of state-sanctioned marriage. Nancy C. M. Hartsock argues that women’s material experiences in a patriarchal society afford them with a distinct standpoint, stating that “feminist Marxists and materialist feminists more generally have argued that the position of women is structurally different from that of men, and that the lived realities of women’s lives are profoundly different from those of men” (284). She further explicates that women’s standpoint exists due to the historical division of labor between men and women. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, state-sanctioned marriage contributes to this structural, gendered division of labor. Stand-point theory makes the material impact of state-sanctioned marriage on individual women available as an object of study. As such, it provides a point of departure for theorizing oppositional political action to social privileging of the nuclear family.
My focus on feminist-identified women originates from my personal experiences of feeling at times in my life like I was not “feminist enough”—specifically when I was first married and later when I became a stay-at-home mom. My interest was further stimulated by the research I conducted for the seminar paper in Roxanne’s class in which the three feminist-identified women I interviewed articulated that they also struggled with their feminism and similar life choices. Hartsock notes that applications of standpoint theory run the risk of erasing some women’s experience, writing that she “adopt[s] the strategy with some reluctance, since it contains the danger of making invisible the experiences of lesbians or women of color.” However, she maintains that in order to identify a standpoint, researchers must assume that “there are some things common to all women’s lives in Western class societies” (290). Clearly all women in the US do not share similar experiences of marriage and feminism, however we all share living in a culture that privileges state-sanctioned marriage. As such, I designed this dissertation project to explore some women’s experiences who share the intersecting standpoints of state-sanctioned marriage and feminist identification.

Some critics argue that theorizing based on women’s standpoint offers a limited view that risks universalizing one perspective. Such arguments, explains DeVault, miss the point of standpoint theory, which is to view it as partial or situated knowledge that together with other standpoints might paint a more complete picture of women’s experience (39-41). My reason for interviewing participants of different socio-economic backgrounds is to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of women who comprise a standpoint. Such an approach would likely be more effective for many women rather than a select few (a criticism of liberal feminist theorizing) when theorizing oppositional
action to the privilege and oppression associated with state-sanctioned marriage. DeVault reminds us that “oppositional research is meant to promote social change. We choose projects and design studies in the hope that they will make a difference” (225). In choosing the five women who comprise my initial set of interviews for my dissertation, I intentionally spoke with women whose perspectives and life experiences of family and feminism (I define family as some expression of intimate partnering and child-rearing) differs in some way from a white, heterosexual, middle-class perspective. From this set of interviews, I identified an additional shared standpoint that I required for future participants. For these participants it was being nonnormative in relation to state-sanctioned marriage, meaning their intimate relationships and parenting choices oppose, subvert, or otherwise do not conform to cultural expectations that privilege the heterosexual nuclear family.

I knew each of the first five women I interviewed personally and found this beneficial. Since I was privy to intimate aspects of their lives, I was aware that their differing standpoints offered a richer understanding of the complexities and challenges of feminist identities and experiences of marriage and family. While this group is diverse in terms of sexual identities and socio-economic class, all are highly educated, and all but one—who identifies as Chicana—identifies racially as white. The generosity of the women who participated in this phase of my research study guided the way for me to pursue a more visionary feminist project. However, as I continued my research and writing, I became distinctly dissatisfied with my research pool in terms of racial diversity. As hooks notes, “much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives
of women and men who live on the margin” (*Feminist Theory* xvii). Wanting to work against this trend, I decided to conduct an additional five interviews—these I conducted throughout the fall semester of 2012. Assuming that feminist-identified women are likely to know other feminist-identified women, I employed the sociological method of convenience sampling called *snowballing*. I asked participants for referrals to women of color that might be interested in participating (Weiss 25).

I had attempted gaining additional participants through this snowball method early on by asking my first round of participants if they knew of any feminist-identified women whose education level did not include a Master’s degree—i.e., some equivalent of a high school education or no more than an undergraduate degree. While I and the women I asked all know women who met my education or income criteria, none of those women identified as feminist, save one—a working-class, single mother of three who declined to participate due to lack of time. This phenomenon might speak to charges that contemporary feminism has been relegated, for the most part, to academic circles. Regardless, because I primarily used word-of-mouth and snowballing to recruit participants, my pool for the most part is highly educated. However, their class backgrounds are diverse and speak to some of the issues regarding intimate partnering and parenting specific to low-income individuals (the assumption I was operating from was that people who are less educated would have less income, and therefore more likely identify as working-class). This time, I went back and asked current participants and one woman, who contributed to my “Research Methodologies” seminar paper, if they knew any women of color who identified as feminists who would be willing to participate. Interestingly, my own assumptions about who might be a feminist as well as two of my
participant’s led each of us to identifying participants (whom I recruited) who did not feel comfortable identifying as feminist, though they did advocate many feminist principles. Nevertheless, this time my inquiry was much more fruitful and three of the five women I interviewed in my second round are women of color.

In summary, my research participants were identified through personal or professional connections and personal or professional connections of some of the participants. The following chart identifies demographic markers at the time of the interviews demonstrating the diversity and similarities of my participants:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Intimate Partner</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>ABD</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Chicana</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Low-middle class</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian woman</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>ABD</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Does not identify</td>
<td>Working poor</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Upper-middle class</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Eight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This small participant pool is not intended to be representative of any particular social demographic. Rather, the life experiences and perspectives shared by these women is meant to contribute to feminist theorizing on challenges faced by women of varying standpoints that arise from or in response to social, professional, economic, and political structures that privilege heteronormative, nuclear family arrangements. Originally, I limited my participant pool to American women born after 1960. I did so because I was particularly interested in narratives on marriage and family from women of the third-wave generation of feminism. This limitation turned out to be a problem because one of the women I interviewed happened to be older than I thought and that required me to request a modification to include women of all ages. I had assumed Participant #5 was born after 1960 when we set up the interview and was surprised to learn that she was born in 1958. Based on further research and reading on and of third-wave feminism, I decided that drawing on third-wave feminism primarily as generational marker of identity limited the potential theoretical applications of third-wave feminist thought—which I expand on later in this chapter and more fully in chapter five. As such, my IRB modification rationale reads:

My initial assumption that women born prior to 1960 would not have fully experienced the impact of second-wave feminism on US culture was incorrect. Thus, I have identified individuals (and have already interviewed one) who are interested in participating that were born prior to 1960 whose narratives would add important dimensions to my study.

One way that third-wave feminist theorizing is useful in terms of my participant pool is that although each of the participants who volunteered understood that I was looking for
feminist-identified women, during the interviews three said they were not sure they could claim feminist identities. Baumgardner and Richards understand such women to be part of a “generation leading revolutionary lives . . . best known for saying ‘I’m not a feminist, but . . .’” (48). I follow up with analysis of this observation in the next chapter.

The interviews I conducted are an example of a feminist inquiry strategy characterized by Kirsch and Royster as “deeply and respectfully” listening to women and “taking as a given that women have much to teach us if we develop the patience to listen in a more paradigmatic way” (649). In the research I conducted for Roxanne’s seminar I practiced such listening, however, at that time, I didn’t view such practice as a feminist inquiry strategy but rather my own adaptation of guiding principles to qualitative research in Robert S. Weiss’ *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. While I continued to draw on Weiss for this project, the feminist sociological research scholarship I studied for my comprehensive examines figures predominately in my feminist research praxis.

I conducted open-ended interviews because, as Shulamit Reinharz notes, such “interview research explores people’s views of reality and allows the research to generate theory” (18). Like DeVault, my goal was to speak “in ways that open the boundaries of standard topics” so that participants could “provide accounts rooted in the reality of their lives” and articulate meaningful categories of their own for analysis (63). I employed this approach to move away from deploying dominant narratives and categories about women’s lives for the following reasons: first, dominant narratives and categories often reflect the experiences of a small, yet more socially powerful group of women; second, using predetermined categories limits the ways that women can narrate their own lived
experiences; and third, continued privileging of dominant narratives silences and renders invisible women’s experiences that cannot be articulated in terms of privileged discourses.\(^{18}\)

Starting interviews with open-ended questions is a key component of successful open-ended interviews. Like feminist research, Leslie Rebecca Bloom, I started my interviews with a general question like can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Starting with this type of question set the course for the interview to be more “interviewee guided than researcher guided” (18-19). I strived for open-ended questions throughout. For example, rather than providing demographic markers for participants to choose from to describe themselves, I tried to create opportunities for participants to choose their own terms when describing themselves. While every interview progressed differently and the points at which issues of identity were discussed varied greatly, examples of how I worked to encourage participants to articulate their own identities include: Tell me a little bit about yourself. How do you describe yourself to others? What are your demographic markers? Using marriage as a marker of identification, how do you identify? Can you tell me about your socio-economic status, where you’ve gone over time and where you are now?

Asking open-ended questions like this was sometimes confusing to participants and the conversational approach I took in the interviews aided participants in their descriptions. Bloom reminds us that feminist methodology “encourages interviews to be more like conversations between friends” (20). I found that this approach invited

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\(^{18}\) My ideas here derive from methodological approaches to feminist narratology in Leslie Rebecca Blooms’ *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*. 
participants to more fully narrate their lived experience. Consider the following excerpt from my interview with Participant #2:

Adrienne: So using the term marriage as a marker of identification, how do you identify?


Adrienne: So what I’m getting at, my understanding is, that the word marriage is thrown around all the time in terms of people trying to figure out someone’s relationship, who they are in the world, all that kind of stuff.

Participant: Oh yeah, totally.

Adrienne: So I know that you are not married to Pete, so how do you explain your relationship?

Participant: Oh, man. [Sigh]. Usually I call him my partner. But that gets a lot of looks because people sometimes think I’m a lesbian when I say that. I don’t mind that ‘cause I kind of like pushing people’s buttons in that way to see their reaction, but Pete doesn’t like the term partner and he gets all hurt when I use it. Because he’s like, ‘you’re my girlfriend. There’s nothing wrong with that term. We’re boyfriend/girlfriend.’ It’s not any less of a term, but I guess the word partner sounds to me like something a little more than boyfriend/girlfriend. Boyfriend/girlfriend seems so college, so undergrad. But we’ve been together eight years and we both are in this committed relationship that’s a partnership.

By asking Participant #2 to describe her relationship in her own terms she reveals the messiness, even conflict that arises in trying to name and live a nonnormative relationship
in terms of being a long-term, monogamous, heterosexual couple who chooses not to marry.

I was also conscious of constructing open-ended questions that assumed difference rather than sameness. DeVault argues that “feminist theory has outpaced our methodological innovations” when it comes to examining “multiple oppressions” in our research projects. My questions were designed to “maintain the visibility of ‘differences’ that are socially significant” to my study (207). For example, some questions I asked were: How do you describe your family? Can you tell me what being a feminist means to you? What does the word marriage mean to you? Participants’ answers revealed that family upbringing contributed greatly to their feminist identities. The following excerpt from my interview with Participant #7 demonstrates how her feminism is deeply tied to her lived experiences being raised by a single father as a child:

Adrienne: Do you identify as a feminist?

Participant: I think so. Yeah.

Adrienne: Can you tell me what feminism means to you?

Participant: I think it’s really just being empowered and not being—not ever feeling less than because I’m a woman. I guess I say I think so because that was how I was raised. I mean my dad just raised me to believe I could do whatever I wanted to do, be whoever I wanted to be, there was no limitations and so I was not brought up under the ‘you have to do what a man says and you have to get married’ . . . I was never raised that way, which is kind of odd for a man in the sixties to raise his daughter that way. That’s how I was brought up. And in our house, when my parents were married, probably my mom was more of the
controller of the house, the matriarch, than my dad in terms of who was kind of running the show, so to speak. And it wasn’t a power issue, it was kind of a mutual respect for what she was great at, which was organizing the home, making sure things were taking care of, stuff like that, which I found interesting because when she got sick, she taught him a lot of things. So he never remarried but he had to—he was in school for about six months, he calls it, learning all the things that he kind of took for granted which I think shaped how he raised me. Because he took so much of that for granted when they were married, that my mom just did it, that when it came time for him to do it and he was starting to learn all the things he had to do to keep the house going and doing all those things, then he realized how hard it is on most women. And so that’s what I think really empowered him to raise myself to never feel less than, and to raise my brother to respect women on a whole different level.

The above excerpt is rather lengthy, but I include it in its entirety to demonstrate how open-ended questions invite participants to examine and share how their lived experiences influence their understanding of overdetermined concepts like feminism and family. The participants’ narratives on feminism and family were rich and varied. For example, this participant’s definition of feminism differed significantly from another participant who had no feminist role models as a child, but acquired her knowledge of feminism through deliberate study.

While I generally followed an interviewee guided interchange, there were specific points of inquiry that I wanted each participant to address. For the most part, narratives on these topics occurred organically over the course of the interview, but occasionally I
had to be direct in my questions. For example, one participant identifies as bisexual even though she understands herself to be in a life-long, monogamous relationship with a man. Why she identified as bisexual and how that showed up in her relationship did not spontaneously occur in her narratives. Because issues of identity are central to my project, I asked directly if she would expound upon her sexual identification to which she readily replied.

For practical reasons mostly related to time constraints—on the participants’ parts, time from their daily lives, and on my part, time to conduct, transcribe, and analyze the data—I aimed for interviews to run about sixty minutes. In actuality, each of the interviews lasted from fifty to ninety minutes long. I tape-recorded and transcribed each interview and gave copies to the participants for their feedback, inviting them to add to the narratives, make changes to their answers, and to strike through any material they did not want included. I experienced some technical difficulties along the way but only with my first five interviews. For the first two interviews I used a hand-held digital recorder and the process went well. I used the same recorder for the third interview, but did not realize I had used the full memory capacity with the first two interviews and so the beginning of the third interview went unrecorded. Luckily, the participant was familiar with free audio-recording software that she downloaded for me to my computer and the rest of the interview was recorded clearly. I used the same software for the next two interviews, but the quality of the recordings was greatly diminished compared to my interview with the third participant (I don’t know why) and so transcription was arduous and words at times were undecipherable. I recorded the fifth interview in two parts and so had two different audio-files. Unfortunately my hard-drive crashed shortly after I
completed my fifth interview and before I had transcribed the data. I learned the very hard lesson of the importance of backing up one’s data, because the second portion of the fifth interview was not recovered from my hard drive. Regardless of these technical difficulties, the data I gathered is substantial and rife for feminist analysis. Further, I encountered zero technical difficulties when conducting the latest five interviews, as I used a hand-held digital recorded with sufficient memory and backed up the audio files immediately upon completion of the interview. To protect participants’ confidentiality, I have followed the guidelines set out in my IRB application:

- While the study is open and linkages are maintained, confidentiality of the participants will be maintained by changing any personal identifiers that might link content information to participants, such as first and last names, place names and geographical locations, children’s names, spouse and partner names, etc.

Further, all information is stored in a locked file cabinet at my home and computer files are protected with a password. Once the study is closed, confidentiality will be maintained by deleting computer data and shredding documents containing personal identifiers of participants and any linkages of content data to participants.

As noted above, because much of the topics covered in the interviews are intimate in nature, I assured the participants I would change any information that might indicate their identity to a reader. It was my hope that such anonymity would allow participants to share with me more freely and honestly their lived experiences when they otherwise might hesitate. Another strategy I used to encourage authentic narratives was giving “both focused attention to the respondents and non-judgmental validation of their experiences” (Bloom 20). I believe I created a safe environment for participants to
provide spontaneous and authentic accounts. As an example, consider this moment from my interview with Participant #3—hers was the one in which I failed to record the first part and so I am repeating to her things she has said:

Adrienne: Okay. Cool. So we talked about what the word *marriage* means to you—it grosses you out, wife and husband terms gross you out, the whole history of marriage is nasty [she starts laughing].

Participant: I’m sorry. I hope this doesn’t offend you.

Adrienne: The only reason I’m repeating these things—I’m not offended—is because I don’t know what I’ve got on tape and what I don’t.

Participant: Please don’t use my name.

Adrienne: Oh, no. And that’s the other thing. If you, at any point, when I give you the transcript, you decide that you don’t want something included, it strikes at any time, okay?

Participant: Okay.

I truly wished for participants to be authentic in their narratives and so ensuring anonymity was important as was striving to remain nonjudgmental.

**Situating Participant Narratives**

In my first dissertation chapter, I argued that a goal of my project is to push beyond exposing ways that sex and gender differences are manifested in language to exploring strategies for disrupting the hegemonic discourses that exploit such differences. One strategy I identified is for feminist rhetoricians to follow through on their analyses of oppressive discourses by engaging with the lives of women oppressed by those
discourses to explore tactics that they can use for rhetorical action. Through her studies of the differing applications of standpoint epistemology, Naples developed a framework for ethnographic research on the political praxes of low-income women. She found that her application of a materialist feminist standpoint approach was particularly useful to “explicate how to treat ‘experience’ and negotiate shifting intersections of race, class, and gender as well as account for changes over time in the social, political, and economic context” (67). My interview-based study is more limited than Naples’s ethnography, but my interviews do provide insights into the rhetorical potentials of some feminist-identified women’s experiences of family, work, and state-sanctioned marriage throughout the course of their lives.

To develop those insights, in this section I draw on Naples’s analytical framework, particularly her understanding of women’s experience “as an axis point of investigation” (67). I begin to analyze the data I collected to build on the analyses of rhetorical artifacts that I developed in the first three chapters. Throughout this dissertation I have examined themes of privilege and oppression in the US in relation to state-sanctioned marriage and the nuclear family. Below I revisit those themes and highlight sections of participants’ narratives that specifically speak to them. The purpose of this cursory presentation of my data is to demonstrate how standpoint analysis allows researchers to analyze lived experience in a way that “moves beyond a fractured account of difference to broader understandings of how relations of ruling can be effectively brought into view and resisted” (75). For example, knowing the stories of women who have accessed welfare benefits illuminates the material implications of the legislation that
is predicated upon the marginalizing and oppressive discourses that I have critiqued in earlier chapters.

My feminist rhetorical analysis of the 2004 Congressional Hearing “Healthy Marriage: What Is It and Why Should We Promote It?” identified heterosexist, masculinist, classist, and racist ideologies informing the political rhetoric of legislators promoting heterosexuality marriage as a solution to working mothers’ poverty. In particular, I problematized the rhetoric of two supporters of the legislation, Senator Michael B. Enzi’s and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s of the “National Marriage Project.” Enzi’s testimony focused on how he and his sons achieved their life goals through the nurturing and support of their wives. His characterization of marriage erased the primary subjects of the proposed legislation from the picture—poor working mothers, not to mention their life goals and need for nurturing as well. Enzi’s testimony is based on the assumption that if single working mothers can marry a man, they will no longer desire work outside the home because their husband will earn enough money to support them.

This assumption is completely removed from the experience of the women I interviewed. Both Participant #2 and Participant #4 have relied upon state assistance as unmarried working mothers. Their stories reveal the classist and sexist assumptions of Enzi’s testimony and just how out of touch he is from the women’s lives he desires to legislate. Their narratives can be read as counterstories to narratives of dependency implicit in welfare legislation. For example, Participant #2 came from a working-class family and lived on her own without economic support from her family after she graduated from high school. She told me that
I paid for my undergraduate degree through student loans. In my senior year [of college], I met Pete and got pregnant. We were definitely struggling for the first few years of our relationship because we were both college students . . . at that time I was on welfare, food stamps and Medicaid throughout my pregnancy—that was how I financed my pregnancy.

Like Participant #2, Participant #4 also experienced an unplanned pregnancy. However her pregnancy occurred in her senior year of high school. She too is from a working-class family and has relied upon state aid to financially support her family. At the same time, she continued her education uninterrupted including graduating from high school, earning a bachelor’s degree, then a master’s degree, and finally, her doctoral degree.

Based on the stories these two women tell, an alternative reading of such entitlements might be one of state investment rather than handouts as both participants relied upon state assistance to help support themselves and their children while they put themselves through school and gain success in their respective professions. While the successes of single mothers are impossible to imagine in discourses such as “The National Marriage Project,” President Barack Obama’s 2013 inaugural takes up a different point of reference useful for countering hegemonic discourses of dependency that currently frame entitlement debates. While Obama carefully avoids discussing welfare as an entitlement program, his perspective is attentive to the experiences of the economic hardships that follow upon unexpected pregnancies:

We recognize that no matter how responsibly we live our lives, any one of us, at any time, may face a job loss, or a sudden illness, or a home swept away in a terrible storm. The commitments we make to each other—through Medicare, and
Medicaid, and Social Security—these things do not sap our initiative; they strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great.

Obama’s rhetorical framing of social programs as a safety net that frees individuals to overcome hard times is ostensibly what heterosexual marriage is for, according to the testimony of Whitehead. She claims that it is through long-lasting heterosexual marriage that one gains access to “a larger social network of family, friends, and community members” for caretaking support when experiencing economic hardship (23). Identifying such support with heterosexual marriage upholds a limited view of family and community. Participant #4 demonstrates that the father of her child simply did not provide economic or nurturing support. It was the caretaking assistance provided by her mother and sister along with state aid that allowed her to successfully complete her education and move into the workforce. Further, Participant #7 illustrates that heterosexual partners are not the only ones who have extended family ties. She and her partner are lesbians who have been together for twelve years and parents for the last six. They have a large family of four adopted children and four foster children. “There are a lot of us under one roof,” she told me. Both work full-time and are the primary caretakers of their children who range in age from five months to seventeen years. When I asked if they had any help, she replied that “her [partner’s] parents live in town so they help us out. We also have a really large support network that help us at our church and friends and stuff like that. It’s been an amazing kind of journey.”

In my analysis I have examined how welfare marriage promotion programs assume the primacy and normalcy of the heterosexual, nuclear family as an economic
unit in which women and children are dependent upon wage-earning men. Such assumptions inform enthymematic arguments that focus on a woman’s unmarried state as the reason for her poverty. This hegemonic view of family precludes considerations of other factors contributing to a working mother’s poverty as well as considerations of the viability of diverse family models. I followed up on my critique of constructing family as an economic unit in my analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics*, an historical work that elucidates for readers the unhealthy and unproductive gender roles produced in white, heterosexual, middle-class families that define women by their economic dependency on men. While her analysis focused on the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it remains relevant due the continued hegemonic imposition on all citizens that caretaking and economic needs be met through heteronormative nuclear family arrangements. All of the participants in my study disrupt this normative assumption of healthy families, and I present their oppositional narratives as a starting point for new ways of theorizing family. Collins points out that “theorizing from outsider-within locations reflects the multiplicity of being on the margin with intersecting systems of race, class, gender, sexual, and national oppression, even as such theory remains grounded in and attentive to real differences of power” (qtd. in Naples 73). The participants in my study live on the margin in terms of family construction in a variety of ways. For example, of the ten, only one relies on her partner for economic support. The other nine are either the primary income earners or share in meeting the financial burdens of their family with their partner. Further, the stories of Participant #7 and Participant #9 make explicit the heterosexist assumptions informing social policies in the US. Both are
lesbians who shared with me the discrimination they experienced in their journeys to become mothers.

Participant #7 told me that when she and her partner decided they wanted to have children, that her partner felt that she was too old at the time to get pregnant. She said:

I tried to get pregnant through in-vitro. I think it’s a great system if you have a lot of money, but it was a one shot deal because it’s like twenty-five thousand dollars. And most people don’t get pregnant the first time around with in-vitro. It takes a couple of different tries. I just couldn’t afford a couple of different tries.

Just this short excerpt introducing her adoption story points to lines of inquiry regarding US social privileging of biological families and the exclusion of poor families (often not white) from equal access to reproductive technologies like in-vitro. Moreover, Participant #7 was aware of her marginalized status as a lesbian and potentially adoptive parent, and so when in-vitro failed, she was strategic in her pursuit. She did as Supreme Justice Sonia Sotomayor suggests in an NPR interview about her life, “you can’t let a closed door stop you. You have to find a way around it.” Participant #7 and her partner began their journey to adoption with foster care. Regarding her first meeting for would-be foster parents, she said:

I was a little nervous to go because I know that in this state and in probably most states they frown upon same-sex foster parents. And I’m thinking for all the foster kids that need homes you should really lighten up a little bit on that philosophy. But we went anyway and it was kind of clear to us who we would talk to and who we would not, just based on kind of what they were talking about and some of the video presentations. There are lots of different agencies in town that do it, but we
narrowed it down to two or three that we felt would be willing to work with us and not frown upon us being a same-sex couple.

Even though they were able to find an agency willing to work with them, they and the agency have to work with laws written only for married, heterosexual couples. She continues:

The laws really are kind of strange. So even though we are together—we do the same home study, live in the same home—we both have to be licensed separately, so we’re both single-parent foster parents. It’s the craziest thing. So I have some kids that I foster, she has some kids that she fosters. It’s the stupidest thing.

In addition to the economic waste of the redundancy in the fostering process for Participant #7 and her partner, legal discrimination against them as a homosexual couple became even more pernicious as they progressed toward adoption. This is because the law only allows for one of them to adopt. Participant #7 is in a precarious position, legally, in terms of her rights as a parent should something ever happen to her partner who is the adoptive parent. For example, she tells me that “right now, she [her partner] does all the adopting. And so I have to legally become guardian at some point. Because if something were to happen to her, technically, I could lose rights to all the kids even though they’re my kids.” They are working on Participant #7’s guardian status, but becoming a legal guardian is also a tricky, costly, and time-consuming business that requires the couple to retain a lawyer. When she explained the ways that she sees the law getting in the way of healthy marriages (she considers herself married to her partner), she compared it to the assumption of legal parenthood that accompanied birth. She noted that if one gives birth to children, “you don’t have to go do some legal paperwork to make
them your own; they’re your own kids.” She made this statement to point out that an assertion of marriage to another person should suffice in establishing legal claims and benefits associated with that person, much like the act of giving birth automatically binds parents legally to their children. This statement demonstrates the degree to which family law, as one of the “terminal forms power takes,” is manipulated to reproduce and maintain the primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 92). Likewise, the actions of Participant #7 and her partner in creating their family can be read as a point of resistance to heteronormativity. As Foucault tells us, “Where there is power, there is resistance,” and “these points of power are present everywhere in the power network” (*History of Sexuality* 95). Like Participant #7, Participant #9 exercised resistance to heteronormativity when creating her family.

Participant #9 is a middle-class, highly educated, white lesbian who chose to become a single mother. Like Participant #7, she tried in-vitro reproductive technologies and for her it worked. However, it took four tries and she is aware of the economic advantage she has that other women like her do not. For example, in addition to stating that she felt really bad due to the discrimination she experienced against single women and homosexuals when trying to adopt, she also felt “fortunate because I have a job that provides health insurance where I could do IVF, and I had cash that I could adopt internationally if I wanted to. But somebody who was like me, who had half my income or less, would never have been able to do that and I don’t think that’s fair.” Another privilege that Participant #9 experienced contra to Participant #7 is that even though the children she bore were not biologically hers (she used both a donor sperm and donor egg), she is legally their mother because she birthed them. Further, the facts of this
conception and pregnancy complicate the neat boundaries of biological identification that normative models of family reify. The lived experiences of these two women becoming mothers and raising children are much richer and more complex than my presentation of their stories can illuminate. However, I present these narratives as points of departure for theorizing a different approach to kinship and family formation.

Conclusion

One of the goals of my theorizing in the next chapter is to highlight the theme of kinship that links together my subjects of inquiry in preceding chapters, in particular, how the US defines family and approaches caretaking issues for family members. For example, in chapter one, while the Congressional hearing ostensibly focuses on promoting state-sanctioned as means of providing for dependent children, the implicit issues were, and still are, how to define family and how to provide for vulnerable and impoverished members of a family. Further, in chapter two, while the overt focus of inquiry was on finding a balance between work and family, the more pressing question that arises is how to care for dependent members while meeting professional and economic demands? In chapter three, however, the focus on defining family and how to care for children is an explicit focus of Gilman’s treatise. Again, Gilman’s vision is limited by assumptions of heteronormativity, and her race and class bias. However, the goal of her argument is to persuade readers to consider that meeting the caretaking and nurturing needs of women, men, and children might be more effectively and efficiently met through a revisioning of family itself. Foucault argues that “the strategies which will make it possible to modify the relations of force, to co-ordinate them in such a way that
such modification is possible and can be inscribed in reality” are yet to be invented. He says that to bring about change, we need “to imagine and bring into being new schemas of politicization” (Power/Knowledge 190). I argue that Gilman’s treatise was an attempt to inscribe a new reality by imagining an alternative schema to organizing society around family units of economic dependency.

Further, hooks argues that a “fundamental goal of visionary feminism” is to “create strategies to change the lot of all women and enhance their personal power” (Feminism is for Everybody 111). I believe that one way to accomplish this goal is to open up definitions of family and kinship, and to rethink how states organize and distribute benefits, accordingly. The third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family that I advance in the next chapter works towards that goal. As I mentioned earlier, I analyze the narratives of my participant pool though a third-wave feminist theoretical framework—such a framework allows me to put the perspectives of these differently situated subjects into conversation with one another and draw conclusions based on the group as whole. While I describe in detail in the next chapter how I make use of third-wave feminism in my analysis, in addition to points already made, I provide a few more examples of how it is useful here. For example, I read participant narratives as coming from what Rita Alfonso calls a “political generation” that are a “group of people (not necessarily of the same age) that experiences shared shaped formative conditions . . . and that hold a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances” (qtd. in Arneil 192). As such, in the next chapter, I analyze participant narratives and examine in-depth what the word feminism means to each of them, either through personal identification, lived practices, or political beliefs. In addition, Arneil argues that second-wave feminist
thought in the West has tended to negate the female body and that “third wave feminism has made the body and ‘embodiment’ a central feature of its analysis” (197). I found that the physical body was central to many participants’ narratives and therefore make it a focus of part of my theorizing in the next chapter. For examples, some participants discussed embodied experiences of racism or racism witnessed or felt by their children, while other participants’ described a heightened commitment to reproductive choice upon experiencing being a pregnant body.

After identifying what feminism means to this group of participants, I then examine participants’ understandings of how feminism informs their life choices, particularly in regards to family and state-sanctioned marriage (as a reminder, throughout this project, family means intimate partnering and/or parenting). I follow-up on my analysis by looking specifically at the ways that participant narratives reflect and/or counter dominant discourses of feminism, marriage, and family. As a feminist rhetorician, I am responding to hooks call for “visionary feminist thinkers to address “the needs of girls and boys, women and men, across class” by “produc[ing] a body of visionary feminist theory written in an accessible language or shared through oral communications” (Feminism is for Everybody 112). It is with that goal in mind that I move readers on to the concluding chapter where I present and analyze the life stories generously shared with me by my research participants and offer a tentative third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family that some scholars and activists might find useful in their own work with kinship and social justice issues.
CHAPTER FIVE
TOWARD A THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST RHETORICAL THEORY OF FAMILY

“What is this amorphous blob we call feminism?”—Participant #3

In this concluding chapter, I bring together the three primary strands of scholarship that inform my dissertation: feminist rhetorical studies, feminist standpoint theory, and third-wave feminism. Kirsch and Royster argue that feminist rhetoricians are creating new standards of excellence in rhetorical studies. As an example, the authors point out how attention to lived experience contributes to excellence in research methods and methodologies. They write that excellence demands that we pay attention to how lived experience shapes our perspectives as researchers and those of our subjects. It means engaging in a dialogue, in an exchange, with other women, even if only imaginatively, to understand their words, their visions, their priorities, even if they differ from our own. It involves an effort to render meaningfully, respectfully, honorably, the words and works of those whom we study, even when we find ourselves disagreeing with some of their values, beliefs, or worldviews. It entails an open stance, strategic contemplation, and creating a space where we can see and hold contradictions without rushing to immediate closure, to neat resolutions, or to cozy hierarchies and binaries. (“In Search of Excellence” 665)

I demonstrated in chapter four how applications of feminist standpoint theory might achieve the scholarly goals articulated by Kirsch and Royster. Further, my rhetorical analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Women and Economics in chapter two
demonstrates that Gilman herself theorized based on her own lived experience. In the conclusion to her treatise, Gilman writes,

> What the human race requires is permanent provision for the needs of individuals, disconnected from the sex-relation. Our assumption that only married people and their immediate relatives have any right to live in comfort and health is erroneous. Every human being needs a home, —bachelor, husband, or widower, girl, wife, or widow, young or old. They need it from the cradle to the grave, and without regard to sex-connections. We should so build and arrange for the shelter and comfort of humanity as not to interfere with marriage, and yet not to make that comfort dependent upon marriage. (“147).

I argued at the conclusion to chapter two that for Gilman’s work to be useful today, scholars must account for the limitations of her work in terms of race, class, and sexuality. Such attention is in keeping with Schell’s observation that feminist rhetorical studies works to “account for the way gender intersects with race, class, nation, and culture,” as well as sexuality and ability (110). My work in this chapter builds upon Gilman’s conclusions regarding kinship and caretaking and responds to calls from feminist rhetoricians to theorize based on lived experience in a way that is accountable to the intersectionality of situated standpoints.

I do this by extrapolating a feminist rhetorical theory of family from the lived experiences of ten women who struggle to create healthy families in spite of patriarchy. I piece together this theory from their rhetorical practices when talking about how feminism informs their family formations in opposition to hegemonic expectations of women and family. I frame the feminist rhetorical theory I extrapolate as a third-wave
feminist rhetorical theory of family. By starting with the immediacy of women’s experiences, I am heeding a call from Ritchie and Ronald that I noted in the first chapter, which is to “keep the context, the immediacy of experience, attached to theorizing” and avoid “creating an abstract set of prescriptions disconnected from the contexts or stripped of the exigencies of everyday life” (xxvii). Through my analysis of interview transcripts, I articulate a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family that might be useful to some women as they navigate and negotiate the terrain of intimate partnering and parenting in their lives. To articulate this theory, however, I first had to identify what feminism meant to this group of women. Drawing on the work of Foss, Foss, and Griffin in their book *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, which defines feminism according to the words of the subject whose theory they delineate, I also derive an understanding of feminism from participant interviews. First, however, I wish to make explicit the reasons that I situate this theory as specifically third-wave. I did not discuss third-wave feminism in particular with most participants, nor do I wish to impose such identification on them, rather, I invoke third-wave feminism as an analytical framework for their narratives.

In “What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay,” R. Claire Snyder maintains that “third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (176). While much of third-wave feminist writing focuses on generating collective feminist movement, Snyder observes that “third-wave feminism is not yet a social movement—and it may never be. Because it strives to be inclusive of all, collective action constitutes one of its
biggest challenges, and one that it shares with other antifoundationalist discourses, such as radical democracy” (193). I believe that third-wave feminism’s greatest contributions to date are its theoretical contributions to feminist thought and activism. For example, third-wave feminism’s focus on coalition building and antifoundationalism works well with feminist standpoint epistemology, because it desires to accommodate differences and contradictions that arrive when creating knowledge from situated standpoints. As such, I employ a third-wave feminist analytical framework to extrapolate a feminist rhetorical theory of family. According to their dating, the third wave is twenty years old now—third wavers grew up in a world changed by second-wave feminism and are now middle-aged. Dicker and Peipmeier define third wavers as those of us “who have developed our sense of identity in a world shaped by technology, global capitalism, multiple modes of sexuality, changing national demographics, and declining economic vitality” (14). Third-wave feminists “themselves are multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multi-issued (17). Most importantly, we are aware that “we live in a society undergirded by racism and sexism and propelled by capitalism; in such a culture, we are all shaped by the operation of invisible systems of power and privilege. A feminist perspective acknowledges this reality and seeks to change it” (19). I am hopeful that a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family can contribute to scholarly and activist efforts to continue to render visible the oppressive history of marriage that I outlined in chapter two and the discursive power deployed through it—power that aims to manipulate through punitive measures the family formation of individuals in society. In the next section, I sketch a model of third-wave feminism based on participants’ understandings of
feminism. Building from this, I then advance a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family.

A Model of Third-Wave Feminism

Below, I outline a model of third-wave feminism based on my analysis of participant interviews. The model is organized according to three concepts: that there is no typical route to feminism; that individual feminist practices are vital to collective action; and that an understanding of the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and sexuality are central to the model.19 I sketch this model against early assessments of third-wave feminist thinking. I do this because in many ways the third-wave feminism I draw from my participants contradicts criticisms of early third-wave thinking and leads me to wonder if dismissals of third-wave feminism were perhaps premature. Jennifer Purvis in *Grrls and Women Together in the Third Wave: Embracing the Challenges of Intergenerational Feminism(s)* reviews critiques of early third-wave feminist texts that characterize third-wave feminism as “apolitical and exclusively interested in the presumably narrow matters of sexuality and identity.” Purvis argues that it is “counterproductive for feminisms to dismiss divergent perspectives on perceived shortcomings” (94). Because some third-wave feminists have argued that their feminism arises contra to second-wave ideology, Purvis points out that some of the perceived

19 Kathy Davis in “Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful” defines intersectionality as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (69). Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited for the term *intersectionality*, however her work builds upon earlier feminist and critical race theory, such as that found in the “Combahee River Collective Statement” (72-73).
conflicts between second- and third-wave feminism are valid yet cautions against totalizing narratives of the wave metaphor. For example, she aptly articulates the tension that I and the women I interviewed for my seminar paper felt between our identities as feminists and as wives and mothers. In her survey of prominent third-wave writers, Purvis highlights Baumgardner’s and Richards’s assessment of second-wave feminism as giving off a “sense, or ‘a vibe encouraging women to censor themselves as individuals, to remain connected to collective opinion’” (102). Our understanding of feminism as prioritizing professionalism or activism over child-rearing and homemaking left us feeling apart from what we imagined to be a feminist collective. Further, Purvis highlights Walker’s insightful observation of the human need to feel a sense of belonging, be it to family or feminism: “Walker elucidates, there is a desire among feminists not only to remain faithful to ‘the ever-shifting but ever-present ideals of feminism’ but to belong” (103). For Walker, who was raised by a feminist community of family and friends, she feared not only losing her feminist community but also her family if she digressed from the feminism she grew up with.

Purvis also notes the disparaging assessment some feminist writers have made regarding third-wave feminists who tote “choice” as their mantra. According to Purvis Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein purport a third-wave tendency to reject collectivity altogether, in favor of an incoherent politics of difference and an individualistic sense of empowerment . . . they state, ‘Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are. (98)
A more generous reading of this attitude might be that perhaps some women who felt that they don’t quite belong led them—the subjects of my seminar paper included—to conclude that the most important thing feminism gave women was choices. I also question which women these writers are referring to.

If I include myself as a voice in the group of women I interviewed for my research paper, one could argue that some women who privilege choice in their understandings of feminism are speaking from the standpoint of white, middle-class, college-educated feminists and are reacting against the mandates of their second-wave feminist “foremothers” about how to be a feminist. The reason I say this is that none of the women I interviewed for my dissertation included “choice” as a term to describe their feminism—perhaps this is because only one participant can be described as white, middle-class, heterosexual and married, and unlike me and the women I interviewed for my seminar paper who grew up middle-class, she grew up working-class. Thus, the women I interviewed for this dissertation offer a different perspective than the critics surveyed by Purvis of third-wave feminism. For example, in addition to offering more complicated understandings of feminism than “choice,” none of the women defined their feminism in opposition or relation to “past” understandings of feminism, as Shurgart, Waggoner, and Hallstein claim third-wave feminists do. As such, these women do not define feminism in the ways that third-wave feminists have been said to by Shurgart, Waggoner, and Hallstein who claim they “defined themselves first in what they are not; namely they reject the feminism of the second-wave, claiming that it reflects almost exclusively the perspectives and values of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who define themselves as oppressed victims of patriarchy” (96). While my participants who
are familiar with scholarship on second-wave feminism might agree with this definition, it is not in opposition to it that they define their understanding of feminism.

For example, Participant #3, who is a university professor and strongly feminist identified, said that she was born a feminist. When I asked what feminism means to her, she responded,

Well, what it means to me is my mom was a feminist and so I was raised a feminist. And so when I was little, I thought of feminism as an ethnicity. It was just something that I was. . . . I’ve always been feminist identified through my mom who worked for the ERA and her state’s Commission on the Status of Women. . . . I didn’t sit down and look at my options and come to knowledge about it and say ‘oh wow, look at what’s happening?’ I’ve just always accepted these things.

As a woman whose mother was a second-wave feminist activist, it makes sense that felt that she was born that way. While she is unique among the rest of the participants as she is the only one raised in an explicitly feminist environment, Participant #4 also described herself as having always been feminist. She said,

I think looking back I have always been a feminist. I think I practice the principles of feminism. I am committed to questioning what you’re told, not buying into gender stereotypes, and troubling people's assumptions. I think those are feminist practices and I've done them forever.

Several others told me they became interested in feminism at a young age, and two told me they weren’t really introduced to feminism until college. Most of the participants said that their early feminist ideas developed in opposition to some aspect of their lived
experiences. For example, Participant #8, the only non-college educated participant, told me that she came to identify as a feminist in opposition to her mother’s highly gendered parenting. She told me that

I have a twin brother and growing up seeing how my mom would delegate things to us girls in the family, like chores and certain things in the house that my brother didn’t have to do. He’s my twin, and I was like, ‘hell no. Why doesn’t he have to do that stuff?’ And I think that’s probably when I started identifying with it. And then when she remarried my stepdad, seeing how she catered to his every need and serving him and things like that. To me, not that you shouldn’t do it, but seeing the differences in how she treated the men in the house as opposed to us young girls in the house, and I think that’s probably when I started identifying with feminism. Absolutely.

For this participant, being brought up in a sexist household led her to a feminism that questions and opposes strict gender dichotomies and to value “nontraditional” expressions of femininity and masculinity. As an example, she describes her brother’s behavior as atypical for a Hispanic man:

And my brother is definitely not a typical guy, like he is very I’d say in his own way feminist. He isn’t like, ‘oh, I’m not going to do things because it’s the woman’s role.’ He takes on other roles that you just wouldn’t identify with a man. Especially in our culture, being Mexican, Hispanic, or growing up where it’s

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20 This participant chooses the term *Hispanic* to identify her ethnicity because she feels that “if I say Mexican-American I feel like I’m choosing Mexico when I was born in America. So I’m American of Hispanic or Mexican descent. So I don’t classify myself as a Mexican-American because I’m an American first.”
typical for the Mexican man to have everything served to him, ironed for him, just
the way my mother was raising him. But he doesn’t identify with that at all. He
definitely takes on roles of taking care of the children and cleaning, baking, stuff
like that. So I feel like we’re all pretty much on the same track.

Participant #8 defines her feminism in relation to her refusal to conform to the gender
roles expected by her mother and culture, and she communicates that she felt a sense of
unfairness at a very early age about the differences between what was expected of males
and females and how they were treated.

Likewise, Participant #4, whom readers have already been introduced to, defines
her early feminism as arising in opposition to the unfair treatment her brother and sister
received while growing up—her brother by the judicial system when he was arrested for
selling methamphetamines and her sister by her peers at school for her overt sexuality.
About her sister she says, “I was six years younger, but I witnessed somebody just
deviating from the norm of what you were supposed to do as a good girl. And I think that
is a pedagogy in and of itself when you watch your family do things that deviate from
your friends.” She said that her experiences growing up led her to develop a feminist
consciousness and to ask a lot of questions like, “What are the adults trying to get me to
do? What are the narratives that we hear about what women are or should be; who white
people are; who black people are; normal families and not normal families; what are good
behaviors and bad behaviors?” Based on the excerpts I have provided, it is clear that each
of the participants’ paths to feminist consciousness is different, occurring at different
times in their lives, and for unique reasons. What makes their process of feminist
identification unique to third-wave feminism, unlike first- or second-wave feminism, is
that they grew up in a time when feminism readily existed as a movement, a theory, and an identity for these women to seek out to further develop their oppositional politics.

Third-wave feminism also validates quieter, individual feminist practices as important contributions to feminist movement in general. Baumgardner and Richards contend “that feminists today are more likely to be individuals quietly (or not so quietly) living self-determined lives than radicals on the ramparts” (36). Consciously shifting from participating in collective activism to practicing a less visible feminist politic was an important part of Participant #5’s life. She came to feminism during her college years in the late seventies and early eighties. Like many of the other participants, her identification with feminism is rooted in lived experiences of discrimination and oppression. Specifically, she opposed the sexist and heterosexist discrimination she experienced and witnessed as a lesbian attending a fundamentalist Christian college and living on campus. After graduation she was active in political protests and community organizing through about the mid-eighties. At the time of the interview I had known the participant for eight years and was surprised to learn of her participation in political activism that resulted in more than one arrest. Because the stories she was telling me seemed so out of character for the person I knew, I asked if there was a shift in her feminism at some point, to which she replied:

There was a shift. There was a conscious shift in my life. Doing activism, I became very anxious and at one point I felt like just couldn’t do activist stuff anymore. And I . . . made a conscious decision that my work would be where I would be practicing those things. In my personal life I grew . . . where I could make the strongest difference, was in who I am and what I do and in my work
with children. In my work with children—not strongly gender identifying children when they are young. And allowing children the possibilities of exploring life without having those identifications placed upon them and that I would train other people who would do that also.

I include Participant #5 in my extrapolation of a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family in this instance because she challenges assumptions that to be a true feminist one must be also be a political activist. Baumgardner and Richards do appreciate quiet feminists in their introduction, though their clear aim is to inspire collective political action as evidenced by the thirteen-point agenda they present in their conclusion. Some participants identified activism as an important part of their feminism, and one participant in particular believed that to be a true feminist, she must act on her political beliefs. However, Participant #7 expressed reservations about claiming a feminist identity because she does not consider herself a political activist. For example, she told me:

Participant: I think part of me feels like I just haven’t really earned it.

Adrienne: What does that mean?

Participant: Cause I haven’t really fought for the cause. I just kind of believe—like I think of Gloria Steinem. Like to me, that’s a feminist, and everything that she’s done to really empower women and not take a backseat and to really put us in the forefront and I’ve never done anything like that, so I’m thinking at that level I can’t rank as a feminist. But I also . . . don’t have it as part of my daily vocabulary, daily thought. I think I just approached the world that I was never less than, and so I think that I don’t think about it often—like I know a lot of my
friends and women that do identify as feminist do, so I don’t think that I qualify to take on that label for the work behind it.

Participant #7’s sense of not having done the political work necessary to “earn” the title of feminist is a common theme in third-wave feminist texts that Purvis attributes to “an implicit command sensed by many third-wave feminists to ‘honor thy feminist mothers’” (104-5). This participant identifies Gloria Steinem’s work as an example of feminist activism which she cannot accomplish in her own life. She observes that

you know I don’t believe there’s enough Gloria Steinem’s in the world. And part of that is society again sets us up not to be able to even fight some of those fights. If you have a family, if you have kids, if you are remotely trying to advance yourself in the world yourself, it’s kind of hard to do that and take a stance. Sometimes you have to choose.

Third-wave feminism recognizes that for a variety of reasons some women enact their feminism primarily at the interpersonal level. For example, when explaining how feminism shows up in her relationship with her partner, Participant #7 explains:

Participant: I think it’s just that it is a partnership. Neither one of us is better than the other one. In terms of ability, in terms of finances, all of that, and the reality is that I make more money than Evelyn, substantially more, but I don’t see that as leverage over our relationship. So I don’t think there’s any part of what I bring to the relationship, what she brings to the relationship that is leverage over the other person and that balance is hard to do. I think sometimes, especially if, like Evelyn is very shy, more of an introvert and I’m more of an extrovert and I’m not shy at all, so I think for myself I just have to be more aware that I’m not overbearing and
not minimizing her existence. And that doesn’t mean she doesn’t count, but she is just okay with being in the back sometimes.

Many of the participants articulated creating egalitarian relationships as key to their feminism. However, I don’t find participants’ use of this term to be in keeping with first- and second-wave understandings of egalitarianism as agitating for women’s equality with men. Rather, I hear these women advocating for a sharing of power and responsibility in their personal and professional relationships. For example, when I asked Participant #2 what feminism means to her, she initially stated that “it’s really hard to articulate.” After talking through it a bit, she asserted that “it’s all about egalitarian relationships and working toward a model that is egalitarian.” She described her teaching practice as a model of establishing egalitarian relationships:

In the classroom, my feminist practices are letting my students know from day one, I am not the possessor of knowledge. I tell them, you know, I want to hear from you, I want your experiences to be centered in our class discussions. I want you to feel comfortable in relating texts and ideas to your own experiences and I want those to be a part of our everyday classroom experience.

What I hear this Participant working toward is a learning space where power and knowledge are shared as much as possible between the instructor and students. In addition, an egalitarian model of relationships for her means “acknowledging difference and celebrating difference” particularly in regard to race and ethnicity. I found that most participants gave thoughtful consideration to issues of race, class, and sexuality in their discussions of feminism.
Purvis highlights a critique of the wave metaphor by Lisa Marie Hogeland who argues that some third-wave writers use it to distance themselves from the racism or classism of earlier movements. She recognizes that such a deployment allows feminists to “refuse to engage in critical appraisals of their own privilege and internalized prejudices, or conscientiously locate and eradicate the racism and classism within feminist discourses and practices” (107). While this may be true of some of the early third-wave feminist texts that Purvis and the critics she surveys are looking at, I do not find refusing to engage in discussions of race and class to be true of the participants I interviewed. Participants were also willing to discuss sexuality in the context of their feminism. I found this to be particularly true of participants who studied feminist scholarship. For example, Participant #6, a strongly identified feminist and scholar of women’s studies and queer theory defines feminism as a movement against all oppressions:

I define it as a social and cultural and political movement to end relationships of domination and oppression. I am not going to put sex, gender, race, or anything in there specifically because I want to suggest that they are all related. . . . That’s what feminism wants to deconstruct and rebuild with new material so that we can have relationships that are equitable and acknowledge the humanity of everyone else. Because that’s one of the things that feminism challenges is the dehumanizing of subjects. The dehumanizing of children. The dehumanizing of people who identify as women or who identify on the spectrum as feminine. People of color.

While some participants recognized the concept of intersectionality in their definitions of feminisms, others did so in how they identified themselves. For example, in our
discussion of how she identifies herself demographically, Participant #3 said, “I’m willing to own my identity as a white, middle-class, educated, lesbian, woman, academic, queer.” She told me that identifying both as a lesbian and a woman was important to her because I identify as a woman in solidarity with all women. . . . And I identify as a lesbian, I pay specific attention to the issues that gay women face. You know, I identify as white understanding the privilege that that affords me in this culture. And calling attention to the fact that I understand, you know, the raced nature of the way we relate to each other. And middle class also and the privileges that that gives me. You know what I’m saying?

Others demonstrated an understanding of intersectionality in their description of their lived experiences. For example, Participant #4 when discussing her dissatisfaction with the lack of feminist scholarship on the needs of teenage mothers, questions the role classism plays in that blind spot in the literature:

I think that white middle-class women buy into that narrative that if you finish high school and you focus on yourself and your career in this man-eat-man world and you fight your way in there and you establish your career and you buy your home, then you're set up for the experience of motherhood. . . . That doesn't work for everyone. If you're low income from the get go or in high school, that narrative doesn't work for you. Unless privileged things happen to you like you get a scholarship, you are constantly working for your family or your extended family, everyone contributing to the household income. There isn't the time to focus on yourself, and that I think a lot of middle-class feminists might see that as
a problem with teen pregnancy. It's a distraction from your time to focus on your education and work. That doesn't really work for a lot of people.

For Participant #4, a low-income woman who was a teenage mom herself, her lived experiences of classism together with her scholarly knowledge inform her understandings of feminism and family. For the most part, participants spontaneously owned whatever privilege their particular standpoint afforded them. For example, I talked with most participants about how they described their family to others. Participant #6 is in a monogamous, committed relationship with the father of their baby. For political reasons, they have chosen not to legally marry. She pointed out in her response that simply not having to explain yourself, going unquestioned, in and of itself can be a privilege:

I guess we don’t have to do a lot of explaining of our relationship which is a function of white heteronormative privilege. We can walk down the street as a mama and a papa and a baby and no one—it’s so naturalized that people don’t have to wonder or question it, so I guess that’s part of my point is that I don’t have to explain it a lot of the time.

Participant #10’s understanding of the intersecting oppressions of race and gender became clear in our discussion about the reasons she encouraged her child to attend an elite private school:

Participant: And I explained to her that it’s really important for her to get a good education and that I wanted her to understand that even though we try hard and try to live our lives where we don’t think about race, it really is harder for us as

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21 Here again, I remind readers that by family I mean some expression of intimate partnering or parenting.
black women. And so the stronger you are academically the better the chances you have.

Adrienne: When you said you don’t talk about race or you don’t pay attention to race with your daughter, what do you mean by that? I don’t remember exactly what you said, but it was something like that.

Participant: That even though you try not to make that difference, like I’m white, you’re black—because we know how it was back in the day and how we have moved forward from that but we know that those differences still exist. And I want her to be aware of that. I don’t want her to dwell on it, but I want her to be aware that the opportunities that may exist for your daughter may not be the same as for my daughter. And essentially, it’s because of skin color and people don’t always see it, because it’s subtle, it’s more subtle. People are not as blatant always, so I want her to be aware of that.

That this participant makes her point about racism by pointing out to me that her African-American daughter might not have the same opportunities as my white daughter, tells me that she assumes that I understand white privilege.

Based on my analysis of the interviews, I argue that an awareness of intersectionality and a commitment to eradicating oppressions of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism are part of this group of women’s feminist rhetoric. However, I think some participants were surprised by my claim that some of their seemingly nonfeminist issues were taken up by feminist thinkers and activists. For example, Participant #9, who is a physician, maintains that she believes in equal rights for women, but feels she has never experienced gender discrimination and always believed that she
could do or be anything she desired. If she were in a partnership with someone who could financially support her and her kids, she says she would like to be a stay-at-home and doesn’t think of that desire as feminist. She thinks that feminism privileges professionalism over nurturing work. We talked about her life and what feminism is or is not for close to an hour and thirty minutes. We identified her relationship with her stepmother as a possible starting point for her resistance to claiming a feminist identity. She told me that she felt a need to distance herself from her stepmother, a person who came into her life in her early teens and who did not treat her and her sister well. She told me that her stepmother was a feminist and highly successful in her career:

Late fifties, early sixties is when she went to medical school. And then she had to, she chose a field, pathology, which is predominantly male, and she had to excel. So I think of it very much like my friends who are Hispanic or African American, that they feel like they have to excel above Caucasians to be accepted. And I think that she felt that she had to excel and be better than anyone to be accepted. And she fought. And she actually was a full professor at the University of Michigan. And when she retired she was probably one of three hundred faculty members, of which only sixteen women were full professors.

While Participant #9 appears to respect her stepmother’s struggles and accomplishments, at the same time she found her difficult because she had to fight so hard for equal rights, saying:

And so she was really a bright person, and she was really more of a selfish person. She looks out for herself, and she fights hard for equal things, and she knows that she didn’t always get equal pay or equal compensation in regards to time because
she was single. She was more often put on call on holidays because she was single because it didn’t matter and things like that. . . . And maybe it’s true. Maybe I don’t relate to being a feminist because she is such a hard person to deal with. For this participant, her stepmother embodies her understanding of who a feminist is—and she rejects that identity. Further, as a lesbian who experienced the fear of familial rejection and discrimination in her efforts to become a mother, she was surprised when I told her that those issues were taken up by feminism. We continued talking after the interview was “officially” over, and that is when she came up with a definition of feminism she could subscribe to: “Feminism is not having to depend on someone else to survive.”

The third-wave feminist model I extrapolated above is grounded in ideologies of diversity, inclusion, and the eradication of domination or power over others. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to continue drawing on the rich testimonials that participants provided to this assertion, I hope that my demarcation of the three themes that I list above is persuasive. In the next section, I theorize a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family. I extrapolate this theory from participants’ narratives on feminism and how feminism informs their family formation, intimate partnering, and parenting choices and practices. As I stated in my introduction, one reason I do this is to see what, if anything, a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family can offer feminist rhetoricians who wish to pursue scholarly and activist work in alliance with other interested groups in “securing governmental and private institutional recognition of diverse kinds of partnerships, households, kinship relationships and families.” This quote is excerpted from a 2006 vision statement, “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for all our
Families & Relationships,” authored by a “collection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and allied activists, scholars, educators, writers, artists, lawyers, journalists, and community organizers” and signed by over 250 individuals, many of whom are familiar to readers of this dissertation, such as Lisa Duggan, Judith Butler, and José E Muñoz. Because I deliberately interviewed women with families who were nonnormative in some way, I believe their rhetoric is of specific interest to the vision proposed above. My insertion of queer theory at this point in my dissertation arises from K. J. Rawson’s deployment of queer theory as “a critique of the normal, wherever and however normalcy exists” (41). Similar to Rawson in “Queering Feminist Rhetorical Canonization,” in the next section I use queer theory in my formulation of a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family as an “analytic” to “investigate the normatives that dominate” hegemonic discourses of state-sanctioned marriage and family (42).

A Third-Wave Feminist Rhetorical Theory of Family

Nancy D. Polikoff observes in her book Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage: Valuing All Families under the Law that the early “gay rights movement was part of broader social movements challenging the political, economic, and social status quo and seeking to transform society into one in which sex, race, class, sexual orientation, and marital status no longer determined one’s place in the nation’s hierarchy.” She argues that due to “sweeping changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. . . . Marriage was in the process of losing its iron clad grip on the organization of family life.” Further, she maintains that the conservative antigay and antifeminist “marriage movement” and the LGBT “marriage equality” movement are “not interested in meeting the needs of all
families. Her goal is to “reclaim and build on the principle that law should support the diverse families and relationships in which children and adults flourish” (6-7).

To illustrate her point of how justice for all families can be achieved, she narrates a number of stories of families disenfranchised and marginalized by marital laws. While many of the examples she provides are of same-sex couples whose problems would be alleviated by legal marriage, she points out there are other ways to remedying the harmful situations that privileging marriage in a sense created. Further, some of the familiar relationships and concomitant problems she listed could not be addressed by marriage laws because they dealt with other kinship issues as well as elder-care. I detail her rhetorical strategy here to point out that the persuasive solution she offers hinges on rhetorical reframing of how one “reads” the situation to begin with.

I will just provide one of her examples as a case in point. Polikoff tells us the story of Karen Thompson, whose lover of four years, Sharon Kowalksi, lay in a hospital bed, having suffered brain injury. . . . Because Karen wasn’t a family member, the nursing staff would not let her see Sharon; this would be the beginning of a decade-long struggle pitting Karen against Sharon’s parents over control of Sharon’s treatment. (1) Had Sharon and Karen been legally married, Karen’s right to care for Sharon would not have been questioned; however, Polikoff writes “I see these stories differently” and argues that it is not marital status upon which care for Sharon should be established, writing that

Karen was the right choice to be Sharon’s guardian because she knew Sharon best and was indisputably committed to her, because Sharon progressed when Karen
worked with her while she was institutionalized, and because Karen was willing
to take Sharon out of an institution and care for her in their home. (2)

I argue that what Polikoff is doing in this instance is offering readers a rhetorical theory
of family that departs from or is separate from marital status. It is the same rhetorical
strategy that Gilman used to persuade white, middle-class western European and US
readers that women and children’s economic dependence upon men in marriage was
dehumanizing to all parties involved.

Marriage is simply not the cornerstone on which most US families are built. For
example, according to Beyond Marriage, “U.S. Census findings tell us that a majority of
people, whatever their sexual and gender identities, do not live in traditional nuclear
families. Recognizing the diverse households that already are the norm in this country is
simply a matter of expanding upon the various forms of legal recognition that already are
available” (1). Further, from my own perspective as a legally married heterosexual
woman, I maintain that should the legal status of my relationship with my husband
somehow be dissolved or its social privilege erased, the essence of what makes our
family such, including me, my husband, my step-daughter, my son, my daughter, and my
mother, would still exist and continue to thrive.

Of the ten narrative I draw on in formulating this third-wave feminist rhetorical
theory of family, two are legally married and two have previously been legally married—
but legal marriage is not how they define their families. And all participants had
thoughtfully interrogated the implications of legal marriage for their own lives and for
others. While I asked each of the participants to discuss their choices regarding legal
marriage, whether they “believed” in marriage or not, what each participant reiterated
was that family was a committed, loving, care-taking unit that shared in meeting the practical and economic necessities of daily life. That is the third-wave feminist rhetorical theory that I extrapolate below. This theory focuses on intimate partnering and parenting and therefore maybe limited in its relevance to other family formations. For example, Beyond Marriage provides an extensive bulleted list of other family formations to consider:

Senior citizens living together, serving as each other’s caregivers, partners, and/or constructed families • Adult children living with and caring for their parents • Grandparents and other family members raising their children’s (and/or a relative’s) children • Committed, loving households in which there is more than one conjugal partner • Blended families • Single parent households • Extended families (especially in particular immigrant populations) living under one roof, whose members care for one another • Queer couples who decide to jointly create and raise a child with another queer person or couple, in two households • Close friends and siblings who live together in long-term, committed, non-conjugal relationships, serving as each other’s primary support and caregivers • Caregiving and partnership relationships that have been developed to provide support systems to those living with HIV/AIDS. (2)

Yet I maintain that its commitment to a theory of family as diverse and fluid is applicable to family justice efforts in general.

Foss, Foss, and Griffin argue that “rhetoric constructs, through interaction, a shared understanding of the world . . . and raises questions about whose construction of reality is privileged in a culture” (6). Polikoff argues that when it comes to visions of
family, the construction that is privileged right now as a “real” family is a legally married one. As *Beyond Marriage* points out, most people in the US don’t live in nuclear families. One way that feminist rhetoricians can contribute to a “new shared understanding” of the reality of family formation is by making those families visible in the public eye. Foss, Foss, and Griffin define rhetoric as “any kind of human symbol use that functions in any realm—public, private, and in between” (7). I argue that the participants’ family formations themselves contribute to a rhetorical theory of family as something other than marriage. As such, in the following section, I provide a description of each participant’s family as part of a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family. Further, I offer excerpts from each participant interview that support definitions or expressions of family other than marriage. One of the participants is married and some have been married in the past and still others say they desire to be married in the future. As a married person myself, I want to stress that to me, marriage is not the problem, but it is the privileges and exclusions that operate through marriage that are problematic and even abhorrent at times. I believe that married people can work in alliance with those, like Polikoff, seeking to identify “what all families need and then seeking just laws and policies to meet those needs” (7).

Participant #1’s family is comprised of the participant, her legal husband, and their young son. For all intents and purposes, their family model is what marriage advocates claim is the ideal family formation. However, she tells me that she did not want to get legally married, that she “felt like it was a state sanctioned thing” but that her husband’s family and “my family as well, are very old-fashioned. His family is Church of Christ, so living together was not even an option,” and that if they hadn’t gotten
married “his family I don’t think would have gotten over it.” More than one participant articulated that they married in response to family pressure rooted in religious beliefs and so I propose that this third-wave feminist rhetoric of family sympathizes with arguments for a complete separation of church and state.

Another aspect of third-wave feminist rhetoric on family draws on the attention participants paid to the terms they chose to refer to their intimate partners. For instance, this participant chooses to refer to her legal spouse as her partner rather than her husband. She does so, she says, because “I felt like by saying you’re my partner, I’m saying, you’re not someone I’m bound to by the state, you’re someone I choosing every day when I wake up, I want to be your partner, and I want to go through this life together.” Finally, this participant does not feel the need to be legally married to legitimize her relationship. She said,

[marriage] symbolizes all of these icky things I don’t like about the world right now. You know homophobia and people staying together and living without joy for all the wrong reasons. And you know that’s the vision of marriage that I have and it’s very negative, so it makes me feel like, ‘alright, well I’m married, but I don’t have to be.’ Like that means nothing to me. The fact that we’re together and we’re committed, that’s what matters to me.

Like Participant #1, Participant #2 chooses the term partner to describe her relationship with the father of her young son. At the time of the interview, she and her partner had been together for eight years. Her partner had been married before and shares a son with his ex-wife. She told me that her pregnancy was unplanned and that she was
trying to decide if she wanted an abortion. Further, she said that she was scared and that his love and reassurance is why she decided to go ahead with the pregnancy. She told me:

He said, ‘you know when you say you love me, to me, if you love me, then what’s the big deal? If we love each other, then what’s the big deal? Why are you scared?’ And so, just having that reassurance, it kind of really made sense. You know, maybe it was the sunset, maybe it was the mountain air, but I was like, ‘yeah, you know, I really do love this guy.’ . . . I’m getting all teary eyed, now.

While that is a romantic remembrance, this participant does not romanticize her family relationship. She said, “anyway I ended up getting pregnant. . . . It was like, well we’re having this kid together, now we’re kind of partnered. And it’s been a good thing, but it wasn’t certainly what either he or I anticipated it being, you know?” I point this out because love and commitment were emphasized in participant narratives about their intimate partnerships over sex and romance. While sex and romance might be important to the participants, it is not how they defined their partnerships—another important aspect of a third-wave feminist rhetoric on family.

Participant #3 is very clear that she would not choose marriage even if that were a legal option for her. She and her lesbian partner had been together for nearly eighteen years at the time of the interview and have chosen not to have children. The reason she would not choose marriage she tells me is that “feminism taught me that marriage is fucked up and it comes from a fucked up background” and that “for most of human history up until the 20th century, marriage was about ownership and property.” Like the other participants, for her, family is about love and commitment. She says of romance that “you feel butterflies and champagne for, if you’re lucky a couple of years, you know.
And then if you’re going to partner with somebody, you stick with it.” But love is what binds her to her partner. She says, “I didn’t choose it [my partnership]. I fell in love and I don’t feel like that was a choice. We just sort of got together and stayed together. I don’t feel I ever made that choice.” Like most of the other participants, she discussed division of labor in her household. For her, it was very important that she and her partner share the domestic labor equally, regardless of who was home more. Negotiating economic and nurturing contributions is also central to a feminist rhetorical theory of family. Many participants were particularly invested in interrupting naturalized gender assumptions about housework.

Like Participant #3, Participant #4 finds the history of marriage to be problematic and she wants no part of it. She told me,

I don’t want to get married because I don’t see the reason for it. In fact, what I understand about the institution and how it came about is it’s always been to the benefit of white property-owning males. . . . It’s always been to maintain the man’s property and the children and their money as the man’s property and to keep society organized in this nuclear family structure that’s very oppressive. I don’t want to be a part of that history. And I know there are tax benefits and child benefits and all these benefits they try and persuade you to do it, but I don’t need it. I don’t need it. I can wake up every day and look at my partner and say ‘I love you. Let’s do this another day.’ . . . I think it’s so much harder to wake up every day and say, ‘okay, we’ll give it another go’ and promise to each other that ‘today I love you’ and say ‘I’m your partner.’
Like the others, this participant draws on themes of partnership and commitment to describe her family. She has a middle-school-aged daughter whom she had when she was seventeen. She has been with partner for nearly ten years and together they have a five-year-old son. She considers her partner a father to both her children. Even though she has legally terminated the parenting rights of her daughter’s biological father, she is not able to gain legal parenting status for her partner because she is not married. This puts their family in a precarious position should anything ever happen to the participant. For example, a judge told her: “Should you really want him to be the parent should you go, then you should get married and have him adopt.” To protect her family she wrote into her will “that my daughter will go with my mother and my sister who are on board with keeping her with her brother and father. We all love each other, and we can trust that, and so I know that they would try and keep the family together.” It is because of this extended family relationship, she says, that she is able to resist state pressure to get married in order to care for her family. In addition, her nonmarital status prevents her from accessing the same health benefits for her son that she gets for her daughter:

I had the welfare people on the phone telling me that my son no longer gets state benefits for health care and I was trying to figure out why. Why does my daughter get it but my son doesn’t? And it was because our income looks like it goes just to my son. Whereas, if we were married, then our income together would go over a family of four, which is well below the poverty line. But because we’re not married, we’re not considered a household. I said that doesn’t make any sense. And so he said to me on the phone, ‘I hate to promote marriage or force the idea of marriage on you but if you guys were married then you would get these
benefits.’ And I’m like, ‘okay, I guess I’ll pay out of pocket for my son’ you know.

I include these extensive excerpts from this particular participant to demonstrate the problems of defining a family or a “household” in terms of marriage, because even though marriage is available as an option to this participant, other familial ties of dependency that don’t center on an intimate partnership would not be aided by a marital definition of family. And so a third-wave rhetoric of family insists that family be defined in a way that is inclusive of all family arrangements, not just some.

Participant #5’s story demonstrates the fluidity of sexual identity and family formation that can occur in an individual’s life over time. She told me that she appreciated the legal protections heterosexual marriage offered her that she didn’t have access to in her lesbian partnerships. Her experience suggests that a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family considers how to protect individuals from emotional and economic exploitation by an intimate partner who is not bound by legal marriage. She described to me how she saw her sexual identity and her marital status as intertwined:

I don’t identify as a lesbian. And I also don’t identify as a heterosexual. I don’t identify that way. Because my life of being a lesbian was like twenty years long. I was a lesbian for a long time and then I got married. And I had a big shift in my sexuality and my way of thinking about myself, and although it was a little bit confusing, it was kind of—my getting married was kind of—a natural progression in my friendship with my husband. And then being married makes you not a lesbian.
Her husband died more than ten years ago, and when that happened, she also lost her stepdaughter who moved out of the state with her mother. She told me that she didn’t have a family anymore. And then an unexpected opportunity to be a mother was presented to her:

So my niece was having a baby and requested that I adopt him when he was a baby. And I thought about it for a long time because I could have gone on being a single adult without a child, but I decided that at that point in my life it was important for me to be a mom. I wanted to be mom and that was not an option with my husband because of his illness. And it just seemed like this was my baby who was dropped on my doorstep.

The decision to offer Participant #5 the possibility to adopt her niece’s child renders visible a need to extend familial concepts beyond the nuclear family. Her niece was unable to care for the child, and her niece’s mother had already raised five children of her own and was raising another child of her niece’s and so taking on the care of an additional child was not possible. The mother and niece decided to view this child’s birth as a gift to Participant #5 who was without a family and wanted one:

[The adoption] was facilitated in kind and supportive way. She had had a child already and he was with my sister. My niece had had some psychological difficulties, and when she got pregnant, my sister knew that she wouldn’t be able to care for the child. She was using some drugs and they knew that if the baby was born with any drugs that the state would take the baby away anyway. And so my sister sort of facilitated it in a way of talking about me not having a family anymore. It was a decision they made between themselves and my sister sort of
supported her daughter through that process of making that decision and then finally talked to me when I had heard through the grapevine that they had made this decision and what my niece said was that she wanted to do something that would make me happy. It was a very kind and unselfish act on her part.

Participant #5 rhetorically positions her niece as “kind and unselfish” rather than as “irresponsible” as some conservatives might view her. Such a viewpoint suggests that a third-wave feminist rhetoric or family can assist in countering disparaging discourses of those who cannot care for their children.

Participant #6 has a two-and-a-half year old daughter. She and her daughter’s father have been partners for more than ten years. Neither of them wants to be married for political reasons but they wanted to have a child. She told me that being in a relationship with her partner means being in “a committed, monogamous relationship with the understanding that we intend to be—that we’re life partners. Two and half years ago we had our first child, Penny.” She feels that becoming a parent has changed the nature of their commitment to each other:

I mean parenting changes your relationship, you are parents now. So if anything I feel like we are more committed to each other now. It kind of feels strange for me to say that because I wouldn’t have said before that we were any less committed. But I guess it just changes the nature of your commitment having a small person that you are responsible for. . . . I know what the worst thing in the world would be, it would be to lose her and it really focuses you, and he and I are united in that. We share that, and we don’t share that with anyone else.
In sharing this excerpt from her interview, I don’t mean to minimize the commitment between individuals who don’t have children. What I am trying to stress here is that a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family stresses commitment to a partner and/or to children as a key definition of family—not marriage. Another important contribution that this participant makes is that unqualified access to reproductive rights, including birth control, abortion, and reproductive technologies is also a key aspect of a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family. For example, she states that when she was pregnant

I experienced how long those nine month are; the toll it takes on your body—which I don’t mean to suggest is all negative but it can be intense—the way people treat you, the process of birth, the postpartum depression. That shit is very intense, and I came out of it thinking, ‘well I’ll be damned if anyone is going to tell me what I get to do.’ No, no, no. That is her business and I just became very committed to that, like even more committed to that than before.

While not all participants addressed reproductive rights in their interviews, half of them did because it was relevant to their lived experience.

Participant #7 also expressed feeling a greater sense of commitment to her partner once they had children. She told me that having kids put a whole different dynamic on our relationship because now our partnership and relationship wasn’t just about us. It was about these other people in our lives and what we were doing to help bring them to a place in the world where they can be whoever they want to be and the best they can be, and I think it really does take a partnership to do that and that’s where I started to really see the importance of marriage.
She and her lesbian partner were together for six years before they decided to have children, and they have now been together for twelve years. They have eight children whom they either foster or adopted. She told me that if the legal option to marry were available to her, she would marry her partner but only so she can access the legal benefits it affords:

I think we [need marriage] only because of all the legal benefits that you can’t get if it’s not legally done. I don’t think it necessarily needs to be a legal institution either, but the law has made it that way, so it’s almost like if you’re not legally married in the eyes of the law you don’t get the benefits of being legally married. So you don’t get the tax benefits. You don’t get all the things that you get by being legally married.

Like Participant #4, she and her partner have to negotiate legal parenthood without being married. For them it means that only her partner is considered a legal parent, and that if something were to happen to her partner, she could likely lose all of their children. Again, her story speaks to the need for legal protections and benefits to be afforded to family members outside of legal marriage.

Participant #8 is very opposed to legal marriage but agreed to it because her partner wanted her to have the health benefits offered to a spouse through his military service, and she had never had good health insurance before. Her husband is ten years older than she and has four kids ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-six. She has a sixteen-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter from different fathers, both of whom she refused to marry. She told me,
Here’s the thing, my children are not from my husband. This is my first time ever getting married. So my first son, I had him when I was twenty and I didn’t get married to his dad. I was just like, ‘no, I don’t have to get married just because I’m having a kid.’ And I waited nine years and met my daughter’s dad and absolutely did not want to marry him.

Although she would have preferred not to legally marry and really struggled with coming to that decision, she said that she did so because she really loves him and he is her best friend. Like the other participants, she refers to him as her partner, rather than her husband. She said, “I actually, a lot of time catch myself not calling him my husband but calling him my partner, and so people think, ‘partner?’ And I’m like, ‘yeah.’ And they think I’m gay and I’m like ‘no, my husband,’ but I don’t say husband, I usually say my partner.” Another contribution this participant makes to a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family is a reminder that reproductive freedom also includes the right to choose to have a child and be supported in that choice. She had her son when she was twenty and did not want to marry his father. She told me that her mother encouraged her to have an abortion, and when she wouldn’t have an abortion, to give the child up for adoption. When I asked if she received any support from her family in helping care for her kids when she was on her own, she told me,

Nope. I did it all by myself. When my son was born, I did live with my mom periodically. For a little bit—for like three or four months. And then I got a job. I didn’t have my license. So when I turned twenty-one I got my own apartment—it was my son and I. I was working at Dillard’s. And I was going to Mesa Community College. And I had a bike with a bike seat on the back for my baby.
I’d take him to daycare in the morning, ride to school, and then come home, change, and then walk to work since it was right across the street. I had to get off work, walk home, get the bike, and pick up the baby. She did that routine for about a year until she saved enough money to buy a car. She said that, “I didn’t have anybody help me. I did it all by myself” and that it feels really good to have accomplished that, saying, “Oh, hell yeah. And it feels really good when I hear of young women have kids who are like, ‘I don’t know if I can do it.’ I’m like, ‘no, I know you can, because I did.’” She and Participant #4 share the experience of raising children as unmarried young mothers in a culture hostile to their lived experiences and contribute to a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family that maintains that all families are deserving.

Participant #9 is a forty-eight-year-old single, lesbian mother of three-year-old twins whom she was able to have through In Vitro Fertilization (IVF). In addition to the discrimination she experienced as a single woman trying to adopt, which I detailed in the last chapter, her story too contributes to a third-wave feminist theory of family that treats all families as deserving. She told me:

I had always said to my one cousin who is unmarried that if I get to thirty-five and I haven’t found anyone that I want to spend the rest of my life with, I’ll probably start thinking about having kids. And then at thirty-eight, I started doing something about it. I started using fertility medication and donor sperm and then I did what’s call IVF. . . . And I did that and the fourth time it worked.

When I asked her why she wanted to have kids, she said it was “because I wanted to have a family. Because I think I am a nice enough and neat enough person that I could teach somebody to be a nice person.” Her desire to have children as a single woman, much like
many of the other participants, suggests that reproductive technology should be available to all women who wish to have children, not just financially privileged, married, heterosexual woman. This third-wave feminist rhetoric of family advocates for that right.

Finally, Participant #10’s story reminds us that a third-wave feminist rhetoric of family must advocate for a woman’s legal right to choose an abortion in all circumstances. She is a single mother of two children. She told me that she never wanted to be a mother but gave into her first husband’s wishes to have a child. However, after her son was born, her husband became addicted to drugs, and she decided that it was in the best interest of her child to divorce him. She later remarried a man twenty years her senior and had been married nearly eighteen years when he died. She told me that neither of them wanted more children and that her pregnancy with her now sixteen-year-old daughter was accidental: “When I worked for UCLA, I was stuck with a contaminated needle. And the patient was high-risk so I ended up on HIV meds and it just knocked my birth control pills out of whack and that’s how I ended up getting pregnant.” She wanted an abortion but the law at that time required the consent of her husband, and he would not consent:

Adrienne: So did you know at the time that you found out you were pregnant that the law required consent?

Participant: No, and what happened was I was just so tired and I couldn’t understand why I was so tired and so I went to the doctor. And so my nurse practitioner who I had been with forever, she did all these tests, she did a pregnancy test. She said come back after lunch. I come back after lunch, and she told me and I just cried. Because I really did not want any more kids. And I said,
‘I don’t want to have this baby, I want to have an abortion.’ And she said, ‘Now you need to think about this.’ And she had a long chat with me but she also told me you have to sign the papers. And she gave me the papers, and I’m like, are you serious?

Adrienne: So if that law hadn’t existed, do you think you would have gone ahead and had an abortion?

Participant: I would have, and I would have never told him. And it would have gone against everything that I truly believe, but you know what, I know how strong he was about that. That’s the one thing we probably would have bumped big heads on.

Throughout the pregnancy she was severely depressed, and when her daughter was born, she had significant difficulty bonding with her. “A friend told me, ‘you know, you are not bonded with this baby. And if you don’t bond, there’s going to be problems. You’re good at taking care of this baby and that’s it’. . . And so it wasn’t until my friend said that to me—I think that’s the point that I really had to reach out, to really work hard at bonding.”

She told me she didn’t know what shifted, but that something did. I asked her about what she thought of the law now:

Adrienne: So something obviously changed for you in your relationship with your daughter, because you told me when you walked in that she was your blessing. So even though she is your blessing now, do you still feel that those laws should be different and that you should have had access to the choice that you wanted at that time?

Participant: Yeah, I do. I don’t think it should have been like that.
Like Participant #6, the love these two women have for their children is separate from the rights they feel women should have over their own bodies and reproduction.

Above, I sketched a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory of family drawn from the lived experiences of ten women, the diversity of their family formations, and their individual feminist beliefs. The major themes of this rhetorical theory are that family is defined by loving and committed relationships, not legal marriage. Such families negotiate the sharing of economic and nurturing work; interrupt gendered assumptions of housework between partners and among children; advocate for legal rights of non-biological parents; extend the concept of family beyond the nuclear family and/or committed couples; advocate for unqualified access to reproductive rights, including birth control, abortion, and reproductive technologies; and assume the right to choose to have a child and be supported in that decision.

**Conclusion**

In this dissertation I have explored ways for feminist rhetoricians to intervene in the contemporary political world on behalf of the needs of some women. I have situated my work in the field as a contribution to feminist methods of inquiry in response to Kirsch and Royster’s call to continue to push the boundaries of our work beyond rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription. Specifically, I focused my analyses on state interventions in some women’s lives through the legal contract of marriage and its contribution to hegemonic discourses of family. In this section I retrace primary arguments of my chapters and point to current work in transnational feminism that addresses some of the concerns explored herein and I aim to explore in future instantiations of this work. In
conclusion, I argue that individual women in the US might contribute to shifting national ideologies on kinship and caretaking by sharing their lived experiences in relation to the material impact of normative discourses of family on their lives.

As I discussed in my first chapter, Kirsch and Royster’s call can be read as a desire to shift feminist inquiry in the field away from a liberal focus on “women” as a subject to a focus on more progressive feminist goals. For example, as previously noted, bell hooks argues feminist work should aim to “eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture” and commit to “reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (26). I noted that Eileen Schell’s essay stresses the importance of addressing the “so what” of our work as feminist rhetoricians. As a starting point, I identified a need for my project in my feminist rhetorical analysis of the 2004 Congressional Hearing “Healthy Marriage: What is it and Why Should we Promote It?” I argued that the rhetorical strategies used in this instance contribute to the silencing of impoverished working mother’s voices in public-policy making and result in disciplining and normalizing policies directed at poor working mothers’ marital status. Further, I demonstrated that opposing testimony submitted by Stop Family Violence was easily coopted and dismissed by proponents of the legislation. A question readers are left with at the conclusion of this section is how can feminist rhetoricians work in alliance with advocates seeking to remove marriage promotion from state-aid programs for working mothers in poverty? I presented one suggestion by the advocacy group Legal Momentum which argued for addressing the difficulties of balancing care-taking work and
employment demands rather than shifting poor working mother’s economic dependency from the state to marriage.

As such, in my second chapter, I turned my attention to first- and second-wave feminist thinking on work and family. I reiterated that mainstream thought of these movements primarily benefited, white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This was due, in part, because leaders such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Betty Friedan tended to theorize through the lens of social privilege. My point in detailing this history was to demonstrate that racist, heterosexist, and classist limitations of first- and second-wave feminist thinking continues to inform some liberal feminist theorizing of today. As a case in point, I conducted a feminist rhetorical analysis of Former Director of Policy Planning for the United States Department of State, Anne Marie Slaughter’s article “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.” In this article Slaughter laments the inability of even elite married women like her to manage the competing interests of work and family. I argued that her proposed solutions are limited by her liberal political ideology. For example, rather than interrogating the problematic social and economic structures she identifies that impede women’s abilities to be both mothers and professionals, she argues that business, government, and women themselves should make accommodations that will allow for the most elite females in the US to advance to positions of leadership in politics and industry in equal ranks to their male counterparts. She argues for widespread cultural support in mobilizing highly educated women into positions of power with vague allusions of promises for future changes that would benefit all US women.

In response, I concluded that the primary weakness of Slaughter’s argument lies in her classist assumption that solutions to resolving tensions between the need to work
and the need to care for family are somehow different for elite women than for women in poverty. In contradistinction to Slaughter’s argument I offered an analysis of a policy agenda report on work and family by the Barnard Center for Research on Women and a Better Balance: The Work and Family Legal Center of New York. The detailed agenda worked to resolve tensions between family and work across classes. Through my third-wave feminist rhetorical analysis, I demonstrated that this work is an example of an inclusive approach to work and family issues. I did so in response to Krista Jacob’s caution that media attention to feminists still generally focuses on “white, middle-class, and presumably heterosexual women” and call for third-wavers to work “diligently . . . to make sure that feminism and women are more accurately represented both in feminist discourse and in the broader society” (203). As a feminist rhetorician, pointing out classist, racist, and/or heterosexist assumptions informing public feminist writing is important (as well constantly interrogating our own work for such assumptions), and so is making visible more inclusive and progressive approaches to such feminist work. The ability to render visible, I maintain, is a key component of feminist rhetorical theory.

As such, in my third chapter, I built on prior feminist rhetorical work in reclamation and recovery by returning to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Marriage and Economics*. I argued that this treatise was rhetorically successful because it effectively rendered visible the interplay between political and economic structures, social institutions, and the lives of educated, middle- and upper-class whites. However, the fact that it was well received and highly acclaimed by her elite readership was peculiar because it advocates radical ideologies, both then and now, about gender relations, family formations, and economic practices. I maintained that she was successful because she
drew on prevailing liberal ideologies of her day to make her argument against those same ideologies. Working within the framework of ancient Western rhetorical theory, Gilman successfully rendered visible to her readers how the economic patriarchal family unit was oppressive to individual liberties and worked against the common good. A major drawback of Gilman’s treatise is that it is steeped in xenophobia, assumes a class-based society, and is wholly heterosexist. However, that does not render her radical feminist rhetorical theory moot; instead feminist rhetoricians might look to her work for ways to appeal to contemporary neoliberal audiences by drawing on their subscribed ideologies to demonstrate the ways in which they too are oppressed by hegemonic discourse of marriage, family, work, and economics. As an example, I pointed to Lisa Duggan’s argument about the rhetoricality of Liberalism, “the master terms and categories” of which “provide only one way of understanding and organizing collective life.” (5). As I noted in my first chapter, Eileen Schell maintains that one way of gaining other perspectives is through the integration of standpoint theory into feminist rhetorical studies.

In chapter four I argued for women’s lived experiences to be central not only to feminist theorizing but also to public policy making. I introduced feminist standpoint theory and detailed how I drew on that framework to formulate my research questions, select my participant pool, and structure my interviews. Because all of the participants in my study disrupt normative assumptions of family, I presented their oppositional narratives as a starting point for new ways of theorizing family. Based on the narratives of ten women I interviewed, in this chapter, I proposed a third-wave feminist rhetorical theory on family that I argue is relevant to feminist and queer scholarship and activism.
working in alliance with movements in opposition to marriage as a functional contract that supports hegemonic constructions of heteronormative nuclear families. A related question examined throughout this dissertation has been how can feminist rhetoricians contribute to efforts towards social and economic policies that value the caretaking work of women (and men) in our current political economy?

In this concluding section, I suggest that work of Rebecca Dingo in her article, “Linking Transnational Logics: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Public Policy and Networks,” begins to address that question. Dingo argues that “policy makers across the globe now focus on women’s individual abilities to be core economic actors for their families and countries” (492). She is concerned that such policies are motivated by neoliberal interests that ultimately work to women’s disadvantage globally. Dingo urges feminist rhetoricians to pay attention to such policy articulations because they focus on “the attributes that make a citizen successful in a neoliberal economy: tenacity, personal responsibility, and individualism” (498). Yet, rendering visible oppressive mechanizations and manifestations of neoliberal economic and political ideologies in women’s daily lives is a difficult challenge.

Chandra Mohanty asks “what kinds of feminist methodology and analytic strategy are useful in making power (and women’s lives) visible in overtly nongendered, nonracialized discourses?” In answer to her question, she argues for an analysis that “begins from and is anchored in the place of the most marginalized communities of women—poor women of all colors in affluent and neocolonial nations; women of the Third World/South or the Two-Thirds World.” Here, Mohanty is arguing for an application of standpoint theory from a transnational perspective. Such a viewing, she
argues, “allows for a more concrete and expansive vision of universal justice” and is “is
the very opposite of ‘special interest’ thinking.” Anne-Marie Slaughter’s rhetoric can be
read as such “special interest” thinking because Slaughter’s focus on herself and women
like her limited her analysis to a space of privilege. When analyses begin where
Slaughter’s did, Mohanty points out that “our visions of justice are more likely to be
exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges”
(231). Throughout my dissertation, I have tried to make visible blinds spots in feminist
theorizing, including my own, that result from theorizing from a space of privilege.

I revisit here, Rosemarie Tong’s suggestion that perhaps “enough time has passed
for feminists critical of liberal feminism to reconsider their dismissal of it” (47). In
chapter two I argued that liberal feminism does do important work, but that it mostly
benefits a limited, elite pool of women. In addition to using Slaughter as an example of
liberal feminist thinking, I also made reference in a footnote to Sheryl Sandberg’s new
book, Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead which I argue is limited in ways
similar to Slaughter’s. However, the loud voices of prominent figures such as these
women are important, regardless of their limitations, for they draw national attention to
issues of work and family. Other more progressive advocates can similarly garner
national attention for their own work by inserting it into the national dialogue generated
by the rhetoric of women like Slaughter and Sandberg. For example, on March 12, 2013,
The Atlantic published online “Many Working-Class Women are Already Leaning In”
noting that “across this country, groups of women, many of them in the most precarious
and least supportive jobs, are already leaning in because they have been leaning
together.” They highlight the work of the National Domestic Workers Alliance that
helped pass the National Domestic Bill of Rights Law in New York. Further, they point out that

Women of color, including many immigrants, are often leading these fights to change the opportunities and realities for all women. Women like Ai-jen Poo, Saru Jayaraman, and Maria Elena Durazo are transforming the public face of labor leaders. They remind us that the fight for gender equality goes hand in hand with the fight for racial justice and a voice on the job.

This is exciting an important work that should be highlighted and promoted in the mainstream media. Unfortunately, it only seems to have garnered space in the publication because it could easily be attached to the national dialogue around Sandberg’s new book. For instance, the lead for the article reads, “The gender-discrimination lawsuit against WalMart, New York's new Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, and other efforts show that Sheryl Sandberg's advice isn't only for the elite.” That such progressive action and legislation should receive little attention remains unsurprising considering the degree to which mainstream media outlets continue to disseminate antifeminist rhetoric that is both heterosexist and sexist, that privileges heterosexual marriage, and assumes a dichotomy between work and family.

Consider, for example, a February 5, 2013 article at FoxNews.com by Susanne Venker titled, “To Be Happy, We Must Admit Women and Men Aren’t ‘Equal.’” Ostensibly, the purpose of this article is to promote her new book, How to Choose a Husband and Make Peace with Marriage. In her article Venker laments changes in women’s approaches to marriage and family—i.e., their refusal to marry and, if they do marry, their refusal to adopt the traditionally gendered behaviors of wives and mothers.
Venker claims that this phenomenon is why women (and men) are unhappy. Unsurprisingly, Venker blames feminism for ruining marriage and thereby society as a whole. She writes: “It’s time to say what no one else will: Feminism didn’t result in equality between the sexes—it resulted in mass confusion. Today, men and women have no idea who’s supposed to do what.” While scholars of feminism and rhetoric readily understand the logical fallacies informing Venker’s arguments, her beliefs about marriage, family, and feminism are still dominant narratives that I believe intentionally aim to confuse what feminism is and for whom.

As an example, consider this Facebook post and comment stream from the online community Being Feminist posted on February 7, 2013. The group posted a query from their email inbox from a feminist philosophy student who works at her university’s writing center. She described how she continuously encounters individuals (including students, faculty, and friends) who are confused about what feminism is and is not and who can be a feminist and who cannot. She states that even her partner “doesn’t identify as a feminist because she could never come up with a clear definition of it or its goals, despite the fact that her views on sex, gender, and sexuality are similar to mine.” The writer’s query to Being Feminist was “Would you be ever so kind as to ask your followers how they define feminism so I can get a larger and hopefully more diverse (professionally speaking) view on how actual feminists define their philosophy?” There were sixty-seven posted replies giving a wide variety of definitions of feminism. My point in sharing these two very recent highlights on feminism is that antifeminist discourses clearly define feminism as antithetical to marriage and family.
However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, feminist online communities are prevalent, and sharing individual women’s stories to raise awareness is a primary strategy of many online feminist communities. For individuals interested in contributing a non-academic perspective on feminism and family that “pivots the center” from marriage to kinship, one way they might do this is by carving out a space to be heard today in online communities, particularly feminist ones that are prevalent in social media outlets such as Facebook.\(^{22}\) By sharing our individual stories of kinship and caretaking, we might make more visible Gilman’s observation that “this is a world of persons as well as of families. We are persons as soon as we are born, though born into families. We are persons when we step out of families, and persons still, even when we step into new families of our own.” (150). Gilman argues that the care and well-being of individuals should not be bundled up with marriage, and so do the participants in my study. If a collection of narratives such as those in this chapter were collected in an online space for public consumption, they might contribute to counter arguments to marriage promotion programs, such as those mobilized through welfare discourses and normativizing discourses of same-sex marriage advocates. Like Schell, I am interested in “making feminist rhetorics useful in addressing many of the pressing issues of our day”—one such issue is the detangling of rights and benefits for family members from state-sanctioned marriage (16). As I mentioned in my first chapter, I believe that feminist rhetorical scholars are uniquely trained and therefore called upon to address inequities promulgated through national attachment to state-sanctioned marriage and normative

\(^{22}\) *Pivoting the center* is a concept derived from Elsa Barkley Brown’s black feminist theorizing of feminist standpoint theory in “African-American Women’s Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African American Women’s History.”
models of family—to which all of the issues I have explored in this dissertation directly relate.
WORKS CITED


