
Triece, Mary E. *Tell It Like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement*. University of S. Carolina P. 2013. Print.

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Mary E. Triece's *Tell It Like It Is* offers feminist rhetorical scholars interested in the history of women's rhetorical practices new methodologies for situating those rhetorical practices within wider political, social, and economic contexts. In the spirit of books like Lindal Buchanan's *Regendering Delivery*, Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space, 1866-1910*, Roxanne Mountford's *The Gendered Pulpit*, and Jessica Enoch's *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicana/o Students 1865-1911*, *Tell It Like It Is* importantly demonstrates how women, even in dire circumstances, use each other for support to create both eloquent and witty arguments that not only explain their own struggles against poverty but also expose the classed, gendered, and raced differences between them and policy makers. As a result, Triece's book also complements and extends Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's book *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, as it offers a rhetorical analysis of more contemporary women's rhetorical practices and grounded theories. Additionally, *Tell It Like It Is* offers methods for feminist rhetorical scholars to engage with texts situated within specific gendered, economic, social, and political contexts by using black feminist and feminist theory. Centering on the speech acts and use of bodily and activist rhetoric of members of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), established in 1967, Triece's study importantly highlights the ability of welfare rights activist women from this time to demonstrate agency under social and economic constraints (especially under the intersections of extreme racism and sexism) and shows the usefulness and importance of lived experience for making knowledgeable and credible rhetorical claims. Thus, for scholars and students working in the area of feminist rhetoric and especially feminist rhetorical historiography, this book importantly demonstrates how to study an archive of women's speech acts and activism while attending to the ways that race, class, gender, economics, and state and geopolitics impact and compel those speech acts/activism.

Yet, of equal importance, this book offers a way for scholars to explicate the explanatory power of historical materialist methods just as feminist rhetoricians continue to hone their methods for examining modes of oppression and possibilities for rhetorical intervention. As a strong demonstration of how

Triece treats her archive (and indeed the women she is representing), she advocates for historical materialism precisely because it accounts for identity politics within geopolitical and national politics in her analysis of the women's speech acts. Historical materialism, Triece shows, makes it possible for scholars to "affirm human capacity without subscribing to a naïve account of subjectivity that ignores discursive and structural constraints of the actor" (21). In other words, Triece importantly makes clear that agency is not a thing inherently possessed by individuals but that it is a "situated intervention" that emerges in the dialectical struggle between subjectivity and structure. Triece's intervention uniquely draws from feminist standpoint theory and black feminist scholars and thus sees agency and its relationship to individual speech acts as something that an individual does not organically possess, but rather as cultivated when individuals work in a group to begin to reflect upon, examine, and then act to change their life circumstances. As a result, one of Triece's core feminist rhetorical theoretical interventions is her conceptualization of "agency as dialect" (21), which she describes as a three phase process: the development of critical awareness; the mass collecting of first-hand experience; and then how that awareness and experience is mobilized publicly through activism or other modes of public expression. Each chapter in the book addresses one of these phases.

In the first chapter, Triece lays out the theoretical assumptions that undergird her analysis of welfare rights rhetoric throughout the remainder of the book. In Triece's study, an individual's activism and speech acts are aided by reflection and conversation with other welfare recipients who share common experiences and thus justify, affirm, and give credence to those experiences. Consequently, Triece draws her readers' attention to the importance of accounting for historical materialism within the context of oppression. In doing so, in Chapter One Triece introduces the term "reality referencing," which she describes as "both a strategy and an epistemological stance that calls up the interplay among experience, consciousness, and rhetorical intervention" (23). For Triece, existing life experiences can influence communication strategies for social change and these life experiences give speakers and their arguments authority. The chapters that follow demonstrate how a marginalized group can "make epistemological claims to knowing" (39) not only through their words but also their choices to be present at some events and not others, direct action, and even bodily presence (or absence) in the welfare debates of the 1960s and '70s.

Drawing from feminist standpoint theory, Chapter Two examines how welfare rights activists cultivated a critical awareness of their collective experiences as poor black women and then used that awareness in their public speaking and extradiscursive actions focused on changing welfare policy and

the welfare system. Triage places archival research, specifically the speech acts and activist activities of figures like Johnnie Tillmon, the founder of Aid to Needy Children-Mothers Anonymous, in conversation with Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill-Collins to show how these welfare recipients drew from first hand experience and consciousness raising to create collective agency to respond to discriminatory economic and political structures. Building on Chapter Two, Chapter Three introduces several new key figures in the welfare rights movement including Beulah Sanders, Joy Stanley, Simone St. Jock, and Betty Meredith, each of whom offered testimonies at welfare hearings. This chapter focuses specifically on how these women rhetorically represented themselves as credible workers deserving of solid employment and as mothers deserving of welfare support in order to stay home with their children (especially after years of forced and exploitative labor). In doing so they drew attention to the dually racist and sexist assumptions policy makers made about welfare recipients while also exposing the contradictions of the ideograph “opportunity” for their lives where there have been few viable opportunities. Triage’s rhetorical analysis in this chapter clearly illustrates how welfare recipients worked against the stereotype of the “chiseler,” a racist ideology that presumed black women as employable regardless of their status as mothers and that also rhetorically constructed black women as always avoiding labor. She analyzes how welfare recipients drew important attention to the fact that their poverty was rooted in social and economic systems and not due to a lack personal choice or to the fact that they did not embrace opportunities.

As an example of this, one of Chapter Three’s most notable contributions to the field of feminist rhetorical study is the importance of scholars looking not only at earnest and political rhetorical agency but also humor and exaggeration of the obvious, or as the title of the book so clearly describes it, “telling it like it is.” To illustrate, during her speech to the Pima County Welfare Rights Organization, Tillmon states: “The best way to get me to work is to pay me a decent salary. Folks tell us we have to be making an honest living—what’s so honest about slinging a mop for \$1.25 an hour?” As this instance exhibits, Tillmon exposes the limitations to the notion of opportunity by showing that unless opportunities pay they are not really opportunities but another form of exploitative labor. In Chapters Three and Four Triage continues by showing how welfare recipients actively made clear how race and exploitation within a capitalist system work alongside the welfare state to ensure a pool of desperate and cheap laborers. Chapter Four begins by exploring the dominant discourses about African American motherhood and shows how policy makers used arguments about African American women’s social and biological degeneracy to garner national support for their policies. Much like Chapters

Two and Three, then, this chapter shows how welfare recipients used spirited rhetoric to expose this racist and sexist discourse.

Chapter Five ends the body of the book by shifting gears slightly to explore how welfare recipients used direct actions to try and make policy makers see their economic and political influence on recipients' private lives. Situating this chapter within classic definitions of rhetoric as persuasion—and specifically using the art of persuasion to change attitudes and actions—as well as contemporary feminist approaches to rhetoric—as invitational, as a way to develop relationships rooted in equality and collectivity (see Foss and Griffin)—Triece offers new examples of persuasion rooted in what she describes as a tradition of black women's resistance and militant motherhood. In this final chapter, Triece explores how welfare recipients brought their children to political events and welfare hearings to show how discrimination against them as black women and mothers trickled down to impact their children. For example, during the National Governors Conference in 1972, welfare activists skirted the secret service to enter the conference and asked Gov. Nelson Rockefeller to be allowed to speak. Rockefeller, however lectured the women and their children, instead suggesting that welfare recipients took part in welfare fraud. In the spirit of "telling it like is" and African American women's talking back, one of the activists replied, "The Fraud is when people like Reagan don't pay taxes" thereby making "[their children] starve" (103). In this instance, the activists' bodily presence with their children and their speaking back disrupted business as usual and made clear that activists needed to be part of the decisions that policy makers made that impacted the recipients' lives.

Overall, Triece's book offers scholars not only theoretical intervention into historiography but, as the conclusion of the book makes clear, she also offers insight into praxis. In the conclusion, *Tell It Like It Is* extends its focus to the twenty-first century where the author connects praxis to neoliberal policies that continue to marginalize the poor. She makes clear that as scholars it is our job not only to uncover rhetorical practices but to engage with politics and promote activist rhetoricians who draw attention to the connection between governmental policies, labor conditions, and people's abilities to survive in a neoliberal economy.

Ultimately, for the fields of rhetoric and communication studies at large, Triece emphasizes that as scholars address agency and oppression they must consider how agency and oppression relate to and are informed by political, social, and economic policies and contexts; these contexts can also notably create possibilities for agency and rhetorical intervention. From the very start of the book, *Tell It Like It Is*, author Mary E. Triece demonstrates a rare humility with her archive of speeches, welfare hearings, conversations between and among welfare rights organizers, and interviews with welfare recipients from

the late 1960s/early 1970s. As she asserts early in the book, within the field of rhetoric and communication studies there has been little research or attention paid to how poor women on welfare represent themselves and even less work examining how they cultivate personal and collective agency in creative and often unacknowledged ways. Triage's study then importantly highlights the ability of welfare rights activist women from this time to demonstrate agency under extreme racism and sexism and shows how lived experience and community involvement can be the basis for credible and well-informed rhetorical claims. She importantly situates the speech acts in her archive within the social, political, and economic milieu of the late 1960s and 1970s global capitalism and illustrates how policy makers employed gendered and raced stereotypes of women to justify arguments about national labor demands and welfare policy restrictions. In doing so, she documents how those policy makers also used raced, gendered, and economic arguments to scapegoat black female welfare recipients and ultimately keep them in poverty. Then, turning to the speech acts given by welfare recipients from the NWRO, Triage productively shows how, through speaking back and using direct action, these women confronted policy makers and the state, drawing attention to the complications they experienced of being poor and on welfare, working in low-waged labor, raising children, and having to be under the surveillance and management of caseworkers. More to the point, for rhetorical scholars to fully understand agency within the confines of oppression they must look beyond an individual speaker and look at a wider community functioning under particular social, economic, and even geopolitical constraints. For "telling it like it is" does not happen organically only from within a speaker; rather for an audience to truly understand the material and social limitations of oppressive regimes like welfare policy, several activists must "tell it like it is" so that rhetoricians speak not only as a singular voice but as a community of voices that echo one another.

About the Author

Dr. Rebecca Dingo is an associate professor in Women's and Gender Studies and English (rhetoric and composition) at the University of Missouri where she has also served as the Director of Undergraduate Studies for Women's and Gender Studies. She has published several articles and has published two books on this topic: *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing* and *The Megarhetorics of Globalized Development* (edited with J. Blake Scott). She is currently writing another book on the rhetoric of anti-gender oppression campaigns, focusing specifically on those that target girls in the two-thirds world. Rebecca is the recipient of the South Africa Linkages Grant, two University of Missouri Research Council Grants, and a University of Missouri Research Board Grant.