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Framing Failure and Success: Retrospective Remembering in Oral History Archives

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Abstract: This article applies feminist rhetorical microhistory (FRM), a methodology combining feminist rhetorical listening practices with microhistory, to the oral history of Linda Kurtz, a women's rights activist and Equal Rights Amendment advocate in Georgia. Drawing on the Georgia Women's Movement Project archives, McCrary examines how Kurtz retrospectively frames the ERA's failure in Georgia as part of a longer trajectory of feminist progress. FRM enables a renegotiation of the scholar-subject relationship, positioning oral history narrators as co-authors of recovery scholarship and restoring rhetorical complexity to historical narratives flattened by grand narratives of success and failure. Through close attention to Kurtz's retrospective remembering, McCrary argues that Kurtz's oral history offers not merely a personal account but a theory of feminist historical memory that extends and complicates rhetorical recovery scholarship.

Keywords: recovery methodologies, microhistory, rhetorical listening, women's movement, Equal Rights Amendment, Linda Kurtz, oral history, feminist rhetorical microhistory

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On the afternoon of January 20, 1982, Linda Hallenborg Kurtz sat in the gallery of the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta, GA watching as state legislators voted on whether to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This constitutional amendment would guarantee women protection from discrimination on the basis of sex, and the activism that had become part of Kurtz's daily life was at unprecedented levels—with women mobilized on both sides of the debate. The proposed amendment was set to expire that year, and only three more states needed to ratify to achieve the two-thirds required for an amendment to be added to the U.S. Constitution. With this deadline looming, Georgia could be one of those three remaining states. Along with other community organization leaders in the state, Kurtz spent nearly five years mobilizing women in Georgia towards this goal, and now she sat waiting for the results. She turned to her colleague Sharon Hannon and said,

"Sharon, we will always remember that on this day, at this time, for this event, we [sat] next to each other."

The day remained vivid in Kurtz's memory, but not for the reasons she had hoped. On that winter day in 1982, with Kurtz and thousands of others watching, Georgia legislators voted 116 to 57 against ratifying the ERA. In an oral history recording in 1998, Kurtz recalls the minutes and hours after the vote:

> It was devastating to see…how easily [the ERA] was defeated—how no one stood up—how all of our work seemingly—and I underline seemingly—had no effect […] Everybody was disoriented and upset. I just knew that I had to be really clearheaded, and I had to present an approach to the defeat that would be giving a hopeful message. (p. 39 of transcript)

In that moment of defeat, Kurtz had to focus on a longer-view fight for equality. Amid camera crews and reporters that afternoon, she spoke directly to those feeling discouraged, assuring everyone listening that this loss was one "in the overall progression of the human spirit" and that eventually, women would achieve equal rights.

Later that year, on June 30, 1982, the ERA expired and was not added to the Constitution. The national debate over the ERA in the 1970s and early 1980s was a galvanizing experience in the lives of many women and is remembered in macro narratives as part of the significant and flawed women's movement of the mid-twentieth century. The goals of what is sometimes called "second-wave feminism" were thwarted by the movement's emphasis on equality with men, which favored white, middle-class, Protestant women and excluded the very many women who faced additional disenfranchisement due to race, class, religion, and/or sexuality (Hewitt, 2010; hooks, 2000; Cobble et al., 2014). During the ERA debate, tension arose for the women in that privileged group, between "their desire for diversity and their need to moderate increasingly heated and emotional accusations from amendment opponents" (Aaron, 2012, p. 1). As the debate became codified in historical memory, two "sides" seemed to emerge: the conservative anti-ERA faction who embodied traditional southern values—set in Christian and American "family values"—and feminists who were perceived as "anti-religious" "women's libbers" (Aaron; Morris, 2010; Spruill, 2017). After the amendment failed, the conservative right became the victors in this political battle that left little room for historical nuance, further hardening established stereotypes of the American South. By the 1990s, many women in Georgia felt that 1) the tag of "failure" vastly undersold their experience of this important era and 2) the labor they invested to make feminist inroads in a racist and homophobic social fabric were already being dismissed or discredited based on the limits of second-wave feminism. Women like Linda Kurtz did not see their labor nor their feminist values represented in what emerged as the grand narrative of second-wave feminism and a post-WWII South.

How we have come to understand the murkier, more complicated, parts of grand historical narratives may be the victory of applying feminist theories of rhetoric to the present case study and to many other crevices within twentieth century history. The dissonance between how individual women in Georgia remembered their experiences advocating for the ERA and how it was interpreted in historical memory provides the central tension I explore in this article. Kurtz's retelling of the legislative vote in 1982, of her excitement and then quick move to speak to the press to center long-term goals, is part of an archival collection established to ensure work by Georgia activists to have the ERA ratified would be part of the history of the state and could be studied. The founders of the collection understood that adding an oral, narrative component to written and physical records of their activist work would expand the historical record. I encountered the Georgia Women's Movement Project (GWMP) archives during my doctoral studies; I had questions loosely centered on how women in mid- to late-twentieth century Georgia felt about work—paid or unpaid. As I read transcripts and later listened to the audio recordings of the oral histories, I learned not only about efforts to ratify the ERA in Georgia, but also about the very intentional actions taken to preserve the history and the ways in which women like Kurtz were speaking to contextualize their activities. The added complexity, however, is itself constrained by what the collection contains; the GWMP oral histories, while an extraordinary act of recovery, largely preserve the voices of women with the social and financial capital to build an archives[1]. The experiences and labor of Georgia's Black women, women of color, and queer activists remain largely absent from this collection, a gap this study can name but not fill.

1 Editors' note: "archives" is taken as a singular noun throughout this piece.

I am weaving numerous strands together in this article. First, I briefly introduce the ERA battle in Georgia, the archive inspired in its wake, and the role Kurtz played in both. Then, I outline feminist rhetorical microhistory, a methodology that builds on the feminist practice of rhetorical listening combined with components of microhistory. I establish the symbiotic strengths of feminist rhetorical listening practices and microhistory, especially their ability to disrupt the scholar-subject relationship. Next, I apply feminist rhetorical microhistory to Linda Kurtz's oral history as a case study to contemplate the intentional acts of remembrance she uses throughout her oral history and to figure her experience of the women's movement in Georgia. I suggest through this process that Kurtz defined her work within a broader understanding of "failure" that becomes significant for feminist scholars of both history and rhetoric.

Another goal of this article is to call attention to the complexities and value of oral histories for rhetorical feminism and encourage scholars to sit in the rich intersection of feminist rhetorical practice and microhistory when approaching oral history sources. Oral history sources are a fruitful location for insights, for new knowledge creation and complication of macro narratives of history, and perhaps even for locating hope. For those of us doing archival work, realizing the "conversational" component of our research subjects presents challenges; an oral history recording affords reflexivity when subjects are no longer living. Oral history—both engaging existing records and collecting new ones—places conversation squarely within rhetorical and historical research. In my experience, passionate community archivists are collecting valuable stories and are excited to partner with scholars willing to listen.

Opening this essay with Kurtz's voice instead of mine is intentional. Because the women who created the GWMP archives were so aware of their representation in historical record, even to the point of enabling women to expressly *say* what they felt in a literal recording, I was inclined to challenge the scholar-subject relationship when I began this research. I was looking for methodologies that invited a disruption. While I have used FRM to facilitate that disruption to analyze oral history archives specifically, I see potential for its application with other archival materials; I am excited to see what other scholars might discover with its uses.

The Georgia Women's Movement Project Archives as Intervention

In the early 1990s, several women who had been deeply involved in the women's movement and ERA activism in Georgia recognized that history was already misremembering the work they had done. In fact, by the '90s, younger generations seemed to be forgetting the ERA struggles altogether, and the divisive role it played in second-wave feminism and the advancement of economic, professional, and personal rights for women. The ERA had "mobilized women to political activism at levels not seen since suffrage six decades earlier" (Morris, 2010, p. 163) and yet, less than two decades later, it faded from national consciousness. As Margaret Miller Curtis recalled in her self-published memoir, "women will continue to be ignored in historical records unless feminists [intervene]" (p. 101). The small group of women who came together to form an archival collection of their work in the women's movement was responding not only to the exigency to get their story right, but to be included in history at all.

Curtis and others, calling themselves "Founding Mothers," began the process of collecting and preserving documents and narratives of their experiences. Activist and long-time organizer-collector Lucy Hargrett Draper led the effort, approaching numerous universities to determine where they might establish an archive, after ruling out independent archives (due to financial sustainability and community access concerns). Her collecting was motivated by the recent unexpected deaths of two important Georgia feminists (Margie Pitts Hames and Martha Wren Gaines) and the conviction that "future feminists might learn from [their] experience" (Curtis 101) and carry the torch. The archives, established in 1995 at Georgia State University, serves as a permanent collection preserving what the leaders of this charge saw as the "unsung heroines of the women's movement in Georgia from 1967-1997" and is today the Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives: Georgia Women's Movement Project (GWMP). Draper, Curtis and a full advisory board of women worked for nearly a decade to see the collection become a reality.

Early in the process of collecting materials for this new archives, the GWMP Oral History Project was created as part of the collection. Between 1995 and 2004, oral histories from dozens of women and a couple of men were recorded and archived, as both transcript and audio file. I initially examined the oral histories of the three women listed as its "Phase I" leaders, which included Kurtz. I was struck by the intentional acts of remembrance she maintains throughout her narrative, which seemed to claim important restorative aspects of the ERA battle in Georgia—capturing what the work meant for so many regular women and its meaning in larger human rights contexts.

The GWMP collectors and interviewers were responding to the coupled exigencies of an unfinished feminist movement and historical narratives that rarely frame "failure" like that of ERA ratification in Georgia accurately or completely. Given their location in the U.S. South, where macro narratives reinforce conservative cultural stereotypes of women, the activists who advocated for and advanced women's equality in Georgia risked erasure. Indeed, the flattened historical record suggests minimal women's movement activity in Georgia. The drive to form community archives is based on the founders' "real or perceived failure on the part of mainstream heritage institutions to collect, preserve, and make available collections that accurately represent th[eir] experiences" (Sheffield, 2017, p. 366). Like mainstream nineteenth-century women activists, the GWMP founders were intentional about documenting the history of their movement (see Mattingly, 2002); Kathleen T. Leuschen and Risa Applegarth's (2021) comparative study on activist memory illustrated how some activists—particularly 1960s–1970s feminists—face 'narration fatigue' from repeatedly defending against cultural amnesia and misrepresentation (p. 191–2) which highlights the ongoing complexities of "memory texts" and that contestation itself can function as a stabilizing force in collective memory (p. 181; p. 190). These examples illustrate the rhetorical richness of feminist activist archives over time. GWMP founders feared more "effective" rhetoricians like Phyllis Schlafly and her STOP-ERA organization would stand as the assumed position of all southern women. Lest their hard work be forgotten, the formation of an archives was a final extension of the work: remembering the ERA battle and imagining what it might mean for future listeners. That so few people today know this history is a testament to their urgency. Those who recorded an oral history were consciously staking a claim to their individual and collective histories, as the "losing" side of a very difficult and time-consuming state political battle. Understanding the full weight of Kurtz's rhetori-

cal framing of failure, however, requires stepping back from these specific campaigns to consider the broader political and personal context she brought to her 1998 oral history.

Feminist Rhetorical Microhistory

I use Feminist Rhetorical Microhistory (FRM) both to understand Linda Kurtz's activist work and to study how she chose to characterize and engage that work nearly two decades later. I apply feminist listening practices and microhistory together in my analysis, arriving at feminist rhetorical microhistory as a productive methodology. Feminist rhetorical microhistory draws on and advances scholarship in two disciplines, overlapping in productive ways that renegotiate the scholar-subject relationship. Combined, microhistory and feminist rhetorical theories that center listening invite a deeper and more complicated understanding of events in history viewed through an individual's normal and exceptional lived experiences. FRM encourages a renegotiation of the scholar-subject relationship by establishing the subject(s) as coauthor of recovery scholarship; thus, it works especially well with recollective sources like oral history and memoir. FRM operates like other feminist rhetorical methodologies that center individual experiences that highlight how their subjects' rhetorical activity runs counter to prevalent social and/or historical narratives. FRM weaves in microhistory where it productively overlaps with feminist rhetorical recovery methodologies, enabling scholars to study movements past and present that have remained occluded in the tendency to narrate simpler, grander stories of success and failure.

Methodologically, microhistory demonstrates possibilities for establishing more complicated historical understandings when we consciously engage sources as *biased* and *rhetorical* rather than an impossible—and uselessly bland—objective. Microhistory grew out of 1970s Italy, where dissatisfied Marxist historians viewed an abstract, decontextualized historical narrative as not only overly simplistic but inaccurate. Early microhistorians sought "to negotiate a methodological middle ground," emphasizing "contextualized lived experience over lifeless abstractions and isolated events" and frequently beginning their work in the archives (McComiskey, 2016, p. 15). Microhistory offers a new way of looking at personal stories connected to larger historical events. Bruce McComiskey (2016) argued that microhistory brings together "a full collection of related methodologies, all of which together reduce the scale of historical analysis and increase the complexity of our current historical knowledge" of a subject of study (p. 14). His effort looked to me a lot like the recovery work that has been conducted by feminist rhetorical scholars. Microhistory enables researchers to adjust their scopic levels, engaging both individual experience and larger historical context. Contrary to its name, however, microhistory does not engage close-up historical study at the expense of larger context. Rather, practitioners recognize the role social, political, and economic factors can have on individual decisions and experiences, and that studying one without the other provides a stunted, simplistic interpretation of complex conditions. Engaging microhistory enables the researcher to ask different questions and potentially uncover new knowledge of historical moments that have been well documented in history and popular memory.

Such potential new knowledge includes both what we can ask of archival records and the unexpected/unsettled responses from the voices those records contain. Microhistory, then, is not unlike Cheryl Glenn's "remapping" metaphor, which she uses to complicate our view of rhetorical history, to "look crookedly" to

see what is "less inevitable, less familiar" in standard locations of historical documentation (1997, p. 7). Feminist rhetorical microhistory is less concerned with singular, linear narratives and more concerned with the moves, experiences, and remembrances of individuals, for what those actions may contribute to our understanding of larger historical events. In other words, I am less concerned with documenting factual accounts of historical events and far more concerned with subjects' experience of and relationship to those events as recounted in archival materials.

FRM allows interrogation of how women have been recovered and remembered—in this case in the self-reflexive context of their own memories and storytelling; encourages deeply listening to oral histories to discover their means of remembrance, especially related to their retrospective view of political activist work and legacy of success and failure; and reveals the rhetorically rich, reflexive nature of oral history sources. Although FRM is especially useful to study oral histories, I have also used it to conduct research on the self-published memoir of another GWMP founder that is part of the archival collection. While nascent, FRM could be applied to other source material that shares self-reflexive and/or recollective qualities in which practices of rhetorical listening are valuable.

Kurtz's narrative offers as much memory—recounting the events and details of her work—as it does reflection and framing. In other words, using rhetorical listening practices paired with microhistory, I can consider and complicate the rhetorical moves Kurtz enacts in the act of remembering activist work to understand the larger context of the women's movement in Georgia. Recent scholarship in these fields centers the subject and their lived, flawed, everyday experience, and establishes the value of their *experience of* larger historical events. For scholars engaging archival materials for historical rhetorical analysis, FRM enables us to "confront, reveal, and amend the epistemic privileges of a proper Memory and History that remains responsible for the marginalization of other histories and memories" (García et al., 2023, p. 14, capitalization in original). Archivists and/or collection creators' decision to include oral histories alongside other historical material suggests an awareness of the value of oral personal narrative to disrupt traditional forms and sources of historical record. Adopting feminist rhetorical microhistory restores complexity to the experiences of interviewees sharing their stories, the realities of which are frequently excluded from macro narratives of historical events.

The methodologies central to feminist rhetorical microhistory have roots in the same era when activists like those in Georgia were working to preserve their own voices from historical erasure. In the same decade that feminist scholars like Jaqueline Jones Royster (2000) and Cheryl Glenn (1997) were recovering the rhetorical lives of women from the past, a cohort in Georgia was working to ensure their own voices wouldn't suffer the same historical erasure—establishing an archives to preserve their stories for future recovery work. Feminist scholars have expanded the definitions of rhetoric and their value to understand women throughout time, especially when speaking required tools beyond those used by men (Kohrs Campbell, 1989; Goggin, 2002). With this expansion, methodologies that center listening, empathy, and a slow and intentional relationship with rhetorical subjects have enabled decades of recovery work. It is within this tradition of expanded rhetorical definitions and listening-centered methodologies that my approach to studying women like Kurtz emerges. Studying women like Kurtz through the records she chose to leave in the GWMP ar-

chives extends recovery work on misunderstood regions, events, and individuals in U.S. history; in this case, on how activist work to codify women's rights played out in a southern city by women who continue to be flattened in macro narratives of second-wave feminism.

Kurtz's narrative operates in strong contrast to dominant narratives that suggest that many southern women opposed the ERA. Instead, via feminist rhetorical microhistory, experiences like Kurtz's enable a deeper understanding of social movements in the U.S. South. Building on this strong scholarly tradition of recovery work and drawing from my training in history, I observed that microhistory—with its attention to the lived experience often flattened in macro narratives—has been underutilized as an aligned tool. I also noticed that oral histories remained understudied as rich locations of rhetorical intention and recovery of twentieth-century feminist rhetors. Thus, in this article, I use feminist rhetorical microhistory to observe Kurtz's rhetorical intention in the act of recording an oral history; her case study demonstrated the many revelations oral history as a site of study might hold for scholars in feminist rhetoric. I have found this methodology advantageous in answering research questions that straddle rhetoric and history, concerning how historical movements are remembered on both large (state, nation-state) and small scales (community, individual).

Across generative research on the nature of remembrance of women, scholars in feminist rhetoric challenge accepted narratives of known women and recover individuals and stories previously absent or not properly historicized (Lunsford, 1995; Royster, 2000; Glenn, 1997; Gaillet & Bailey, 2019; Gold & Enoch, 2018; Ramírez, 2009; Greer, 2023; Enoch, 2019; Hallenbeck, 2018; Goggin, 2002; Wilde, 2019; Prior, 2024). Central to this body of work is the interruption of prevailing narratives of women's rhetorical agency. Scholars in history and critical archival studies have also complicated, over the last few decades, the nature of women's agency and subjectivity in and as historical record (Caswell and Cifor, 2016; Cifor and Wood, 2017; Cifor et al., 2018; Eichhorn, 2013; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Kumbier, 2014; Moseley, 1973; Voss-Hubbard, 1995; Hartman, 2019; hooks, 2000; Schuller, 2021). This body of reframing, recovering, and "re-collecting" (Guglielmo, 2019) invites me to collaborate with the subjects of my research—something possible by listening closely and centering the person and their literal voice.

Rhetors like Kurtz emerge, as Royster acknowledged, "not just as subjects of research but as potential listeners, observers, even co-researchers, whether silent or voiced, in the knowledge-making processes themselves" (p. 274). By recording an oral history, Kurtz is performing the role of co-researcher. Microhistory is feminist to begin with—acknowledging complex and multiple experiences of the same events, valuing and centering lived experience—but pairing microhistory with feminist rhetorical listening practices adds a level of engagement with the research subjects that allows them to speak—as co-authors via their remembrance of experience. Allowing the subject to speak, to be heard, while withholding or suspending the urge of the researcher to respond and interpret is central to feminist rhetorical practice, and combined with microhistory becomes a valuable methodology for understanding the actions and experiences of actors in history.

Engaged in a slow research process based in both rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2006) and strategic contemplation (Royster & Kirsch, 2012), this work engages the tangled reality of memory—and its siblings

misremembering and erasure—within rhetorical activity. Within FRM, memory and remembrance are not discounted, and individuals' memories constitute the complexity we seek to collect, listen to, interpret, and contextualize. Letizia Guglielmo's premise of "re-collecting," helps us to better understand "the plurality of the term 'remembering' and its role in feminist historiography" (p. 2). Emily Legg's work (2023), listening to the voices of her Cherokee ancestors in colonial archival locations, also suggested the value of expanding our definitions of and relationship with both memory and storytelling.

The act of listening forms the weft—critical to the integrity and structure of any weaving—stabilizing the theories woven into my analysis. Rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2006), rhetorical empathy (Blankenship, 2019), invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 2020), and strategic contemplation (Royster & Kirsch, 2012) emphasize a restored logos, *sitting with* another (an Other) as the goal of rhetoric, and suspending my voice to instead center the speaker (see Fig. 1). Each of these practices helps me listen deeply to how women like Linda Kurtz used the location of their oral history narrative to understand success and failure within their life's activist work. Feminist rhetorical theories, focused on listening, paired with microhistory's affordance to adjust the scopic lens on a specific person and/or historical experience, work especially well for understanding and analyzing oral history collections.

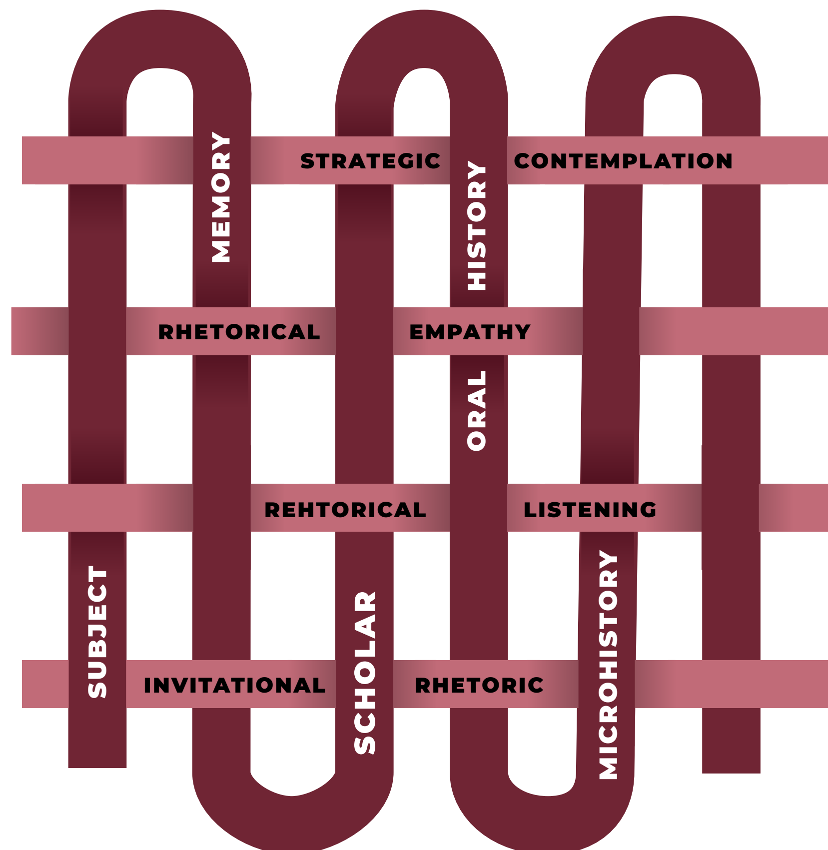

Figure 1: A warp and weft as visual representation of the interwoven aspects of feminist rhetorical listening practices alongside microhistory and the scholar-subject relationship.

The highly subjective nature of oral history has always made it a controversial location for tracing the historical agency of individual people. Oral histories are often recorded months or years after the events they recount, and are thus mediated by memory, and malleable based on subsequent life experiences and the social and political context of when they are recorded. For example, many of the GWMP oral histories were recorded in the mid- to late-nineties, and the subjects directly address 1990s feminism and late-twentieth century social issues. Those who defend oral history as a medium for historical documentation counter that any form of human history contains some mediation; given this baseline, valuing and using oral history sources enables more voices to be part of the historical record. Oral histories, as unabashedly subjective, reveal "truths" expressed in memories that then force us to look more closely at what the narratives represent (Frisch, 1990).

Using FRM to study oral history sources embraces the dissonance between the individual experience of leading a coalition of ERA supporters in Georgia and the vast opposition forces that "won" when the amendment failed. This dissonance is the "exceptional normal" that McComiskey described—normal because it happened to women like Kurtz, exceptional because experiences like hers did not become part of the grand narrative of the women's movement in the South. Oral history can be a source documenting "an inner reality very much at odds with the public image of historical events" (Frisch, 1990, p. 163). In other words, oral histories are an incredible archival location for conducting feminist rhetorical microhistory, as the subject's agency in storytelling invites consideration of the ways those experiences align with or contradict macro narratives. How the subjects understand and frame their experiences, and how they *feel* about those experiences, are just as important to "the facts" of history—especially for rhetorical study. FRM enables restored historical rhetorical complexity.

Rhetorizing Success and Failure: Applying FRM to Linda Kurtz's Oral History Remembrance

Kurtz's oral history narration provides a fruitful location for understanding, through feminist rhetorical microhistory, the meaning of her actions during major events, and the intentional framing of successes and failures upon reflection. As I illustrate, Kurtz was intentional both at the time events occurred and especially upon remembrance years later, in how she framed success and failure. Vanessa Kraemer Sohan (2019) noted that studying "failed" action in social and political movements is not only worthwhile, but overdue for more expansive means for scholars to define and understand it. It is important for scholars of rhetoric to understand "the seemingly ordinary means and materials available" to women in social and political movements—including and especially when those movements or their efforts may fail (Sohan, p. 3). Agents might "deliberately reform, reinvent, and reconstruct the languages, media, and modes available to them" (p. 3), and Kurtz was doing so retrospectively using oral history as the media and mode to appeal to her audience—intended future listeners.

Rhetorizing the Failure of the Equal Rights Amendment

For Kurtz, advocating for women's rights in Georgia during the 1970s and early 1980s was already an uphill battle, especially in the context of a "good ol' boys" state legislature and coming on the heels of Civil

Rights legislation that white, male southern lawmakers saw as a threat to the social system. As her oral history illustrated, the momentum she and others built toward the ERA was already a victory in that social and political context. When Kurtz moved with her husband to metro Atlanta in the mid-1970s, she was writing her dissertation. She would not ultimately complete the degree but was surprised to find no women's studies programs (the relatively new field in which she had been teaching and studying at University of Pennsylvania) in Georgia. Instead, after a year cloistered and toiling on the dissertation, she looked for ways to channel her energy into political activity, interested to see "what was happening in the women's movement here." She said she was "constantly discouraged from becoming involved" and assured that "there's nothing happening here. There's no possibility of passing the ERA. Just don't even put your energy there." The mobilization, leading up to the vote in 1982 and in the wake of its failure, was monumental for the state, representing a push toward the advancement of women's rights in the U.S. South that many thought impossible. This shift is part of the reason Kurtz confidently recalled that while the Georgia legislature didn't take up the banner of women's rights "at this moment in time," they would someday, and they would in other ways. In another oral history narrative, Cathey Steinberg, a member of the Georgia General Assembly who voted for the ERA on that fateful day, reveals that many of her colleagues said as much to her: their constituents wouldn't stand for this vote, but they would be sure to back other bills she put forth, on other inroads for women.

After the Georgia legislative vote in January 1982, Kurtz framed the failure in a way that she hoped would motivate and inspire. She spoke to news cameras and reporters outside the capitol, reminding her audience "we had lost the battle but had not lost the war." In her oral history narrative, she characterized this setback as "merely one" battle in "the overall progression of the human spirit towards equality and justice for all." In her memory of the day, she framed her response to this failure as "a greater educational opportunity for more people." She canceled travel related to her leadership role in the National Women's Political Caucus, feeling that those reeling from the vote results needed her optimistic leadership and affirmation that their effort hadn't been in vain.

To build support for the ERA in the mid 1970s, ERA Georgia, Inc. (referred to as simply ERA Georgia) was established as a coalitional organization bringing together aligned groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW), American Association of University Women (AAUW), People of Faith for the ERA, and some labor unions. Other women whose oral histories are included in the GWMP held leadership positions in ERA Georgia, while some worked alongside their volunteer staff in other capacities. The eventual breakdown of the organization after a crisis of leadership merits its own study to learn about organizing for social change even today (McCrary, 2023). Organizers with ERA Georgia built momentum at the grassroots level, but the work "became limited because ERA Georgia could not, under law, undertake lobbying," Kurtz recounted. She saw this as a major limitation to the coalition's power, so with others, Kurtz started the Georgia Women's Political Caucus (GWCP) and was elected the organization's first president. ERA Georgia and GWPC representatives fought side by side to support the ERA in the state, but the Caucus had more far-reaching goals. The distinction between the organizations was contentious at the time, but Kurtz maintained that the Caucus was not a "break" from ERA Georgia, it was "a logical step in the evolution of the process itself, the political process and consciousness of women." As ERA Georgia faded, its mission moot

after the ERA expired, leaders of the Caucus could fully focus on other aspects of legal and social change that impacted women's lives in Georgia. The failed vote was also a wake-up call for women who had not yet been mobilized either for or against the ERA. When the ERA was not ratified, "the [Georgia Women's Political] Caucus took off completely," Kurtz recalled. "Women all across the state [became] irate. We formed eight local caucuses within the next two years."

Kurtz emphasized that the most effective advances for women in Georgia came after state legislators voted against ERA ratification. The vote's failure mobilized a whole new collective energy towards a different goal: electing more women to office. In the wake of the failure, activist women observed with renewed clarity that without representation in elected spaces—city councils, mayoral offices, state legislatures—advancement of women's rights would remain stagnant. This unifying moment made many women sit up and realize they needed to do something to see change in their state, Kurtz said.

Kurtz reframed success metrics here; instead of defining success as passing the ERA, the goal shifts to improving the legal status of women through achievable reforms. As a transplant to the South, Kurtz was conscientious of what it took to lead a lobbying organization in a southern state: "There was no way to present these ideas if you were going to be a flag-waving person. Your credibility would be shot before you… started." Instead, she spoke in a "non-threatening, non-confrontational, non-judgmental way." She advocated for real women, with varied lives, supporting legislation on domestic violence, the establishment of battered women's centers, prison reform, economic equity, and financial access. Kurtz viewed her job post-ERA vote as "defusing the total misinformation, fear, and ignorance that had been perpetuated upon the ERA and some of these other organizations" to garner support for state-level legislation that *could* "improve the legal status of women" and make a difference in their lives.

Kurtz wasn't just reframing failure rhetorically; she was reconstructing the entire mode (in Sohan's framing) of feminist political action—from constitutional amendment to electoral strategy. Kurtz's belief in the lobbying goals of the Georgia Women's Political Caucus illustrated her political strategy and philosophy of feminism. The Caucus's "baseline mission" was to elect more women to office. Kurtz recalled: "All across the state we were pinpointing women who were [political] candidates, who were thinking of being candidates, who could be candidates, and moving them up. In the Atlanta City Council, we started getting more and more women [there] to the point where they were in the majority." With a focus on supporting women candidates and men who were supportive of women's issues, the GWPC shifted their work to making sure any future vote on the extensive list of issues that affected women would not face landslide opposition as it had with the ERA vote in 1982. As Kurtz put it: "The strategy was and is at the national, state, and local level to get more women elected to office because the whole philosophy is that only women are the bearers of the feminine vision that can bring in a sense of balance to the male vision that is there. And that is the only way we can hope to have a healthy balance in life and in the legislature." Her leadership in Georgia was informed by her work with the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), and she would eventually serve as vice chair from 1983-85. By the mid 1980s, the GWPC was "becoming mainstream," she said, giving her the confidence to shift her labor to the national branch.

Placing the ERA and Post-ERA Advocacy in Context

When Kurtz recorded her oral history in 1998 framed around her involvement in the women's movement, she expressed disillusionment with the state of activism at the end of the twentieth century. At 50, Kurtz was by now reflecting on decades of work that had started as a college student at Brandeis University. Kurtz is a white, Jewish woman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who moved to Atlanta due to her first husband's work. She represents the majority of the oral history collection's narrators who identify as white, middle-class, and college educated. She narrated a collection of personal experiences following the failed ratification of the ERA, comprising a lifetime of political and activist work. Throughout, she maintained a strong position that failure is a short-term understanding of longer-term goals, that every professional failure she experienced was part of a shift forward—progress she characterizes as a victory. That stance is maintained throughout her oral history narrative, informed by her evolving ideas on women's and human rights as her career progressed. The movement was not over, she answered—rather, "its energy is shifting" and "its focus changes." The anecdote at the start of this essay illustrates how quickly she articulated a long-range vision of success in the immediate aftermath of Georgia's failure to ratify the ERA. Examining how Kurtz rhetorically constructed this narrative of failure-as-progress requires the kind of attentive, reflective listening central to feminist rhetorical microhistory—paying attention not just to what she accomplished, but to how she frames and remembers that work.

The interview questions guiding Kurtz's narrative invited reflection, though of the many oral histories I studied, Kurtz was the most focused on refiguring failure and success. The oral history interviewers had a bank of questions they asked every subject, that started with childhood influences and education, continued to the women's movement in Georgia (especially the ERA) and culminated in several questions that seemed to invite reflection. The last few questions also suggest the creators' awareness of critiques of the women's movement and aims to complicate its meaning in public memory:

- What do you feel the women's movement has accomplished?
- What do you think the biggest obstacles to the movement have been?
- Has there been a time when you felt that the women's movement was over?
- What do you think about the relationship of younger women to feminism these days?

Each question provided an opportunity for Kurtz to rhetorically engage success and failure in a way that recognized her labor and framed a longer trajectory for audiences to consider when measuring both constructs. Building on the momentum of her work as vice chair of the National Women's Political Caucus, Kurtz ran for chair in 1985. She embarked on a "massive… nine month, twenty-two state campaign" against her opponent, New Yorker Irene Natividad. Eventually, she lost by 50 votes, she recalled. She framed this endeavor as a "very growth producing, a very interesting experience" that ultimately led her to "to look at a broader view of change in the world." She noted:

> What I say in my life now, and I said at the time—this was the best thing that ever happened to me because I did absolutely everything in my power, everything I could, to manifest my vision. There was not one stone that was left unturned. But when I lost, it released me back into my life in

a different way.

Kurtz came to see many of the destructive patterns of human behavior as inextricably linked to patriarchy, which is deeply ingrained into social, political, and economic structures: "What the women's movement in America has done is foster this massive global awareness of women's right for potential to be manifest and to balance the male energy in the world." This perspective informed her shift to grassroots action as the more effective means to solving humanity's larger issues—a marked shift from her stance during her years in political advocacy. The future of feminism, to Kurtz, is a "female presence at the lowest grass roots level to affect change." Kurtz's career after the events central to the oral history collection informed her arrival to this philosophy of feminism and is not widely repeated or shared across other GWMP oral histories. She noted the way we (collectives, individuals) measure success can impact our ability to observe real change: we must measure things on a different scale than simple or obvious progress. She insisted, "we have to measure it in the way that we can measure global, slow political change."

Through the rhetorical listening practices central to feminist rhetorical microhistory, we can hear how Kurtz unquestionably established that, at the time, and especially two decades later, the ERA battle was not a loss. As with any social movement, large and small actions taken by many women were not viewed as failures to them, at the time or in retrospect. Kurtz's detailed and reflective account of her work to advance the ERA in Georgia, as well as afterward to improve conditions for women in Georgia and then throughout the United States, illustrated the value of individual actions and motivations set against the flattened backdrop of macro historical narrative. If we prioritize neat, logical storytelling of social movements in Georgia, or specifically of years of work by activists in coalition to ratify the ERA in the state, experiences like Kurtz's are outliers. But personal stories of activism and effort allow scholars and other listeners to witness the humanity and normalcy of people who become enshrined as historical characters (or worse, weren't ever included) for the imperfect people they are/were. These stories, Sohan suggested, "underlin[e] the value of taking action and fighting for a cause, even when the challenge of collaboratively imagining a better future seems insurmountable" (p. 69). This goal has perhaps long been central for scholars whose research illustrates how activist work has real impact on policies, practices, and our current realities. However, it remains crucial that audiences like the ones Kurtz imagined can listen, sit with, critique, and reflect on her experiences.

Kurtz continued, to the very end of her narrative, to frame issues of the women's movement as not only ongoing but just getting started:

> I disagree with the people who don't think the Women's Movement has accomplished a lot. It has changed the face of our country and the world. Period. And that's… only the very beginning, because we are in the process of creating the most massive change that we only now see the very, very tip of. Look at just the time between [where] we are here now in this moment [1998] and the time that our grandmothers lived. The reason why women might not say they belong to the women's movement is that we have already done so much of what, seemingly, is obvious.

Kurtz's final framing is not optimism for its own sake—it is a rhetorical argument about the problem of measuring political change on too short a timeline. She does not hold this belief abstractly; she applies it directly to the movement itself, distinguishing between the "obvious" progress that is already visible and the

deeper, slower cultural transformation still underway. Through feminist rhetorical microhistory, we can hear in this closing statement not just confidence but a theory of feminist historical memory: that what looks like stagnation or failure may simply be progress at a scale our inherited metrics aren't built to capture.

The Value of the Exceptional Normal

Kurtz's oral history is significant because she was a relatively minor player by the measure of history; she was not an elected official and would not typically appear in histories of the ERA battle. One well-known ERA-era leader whose work *is* documented is Kathryn Dunaway, chair of the Georgia STOP-ERA campaign (nationally led by Phyllis Schlafly). This is where McComiskey's suggestion of the individual's "normal exceptional" lived experience becomes important. Kurtz illustrated this concept—a relatively minor player whose story nonetheless reveals the complexity that macro narratives obscure. It is valuable to consider the role and impact of one person in a movement in a place that is typically flattened into its cultural and historical stereotypes. It is easy for scholars to "ignor[e] the complexity of the feminist movement in order to focus on a discrete moment that is easier to study" (Fredlund et al., 2020, p. 9-10). Events that took place in Georgia, involving several "minor" actors, are more nuanced when we adjust scopic level. That each oral history in the collection is specific to an individual's experience of organizing for the ERA, how they felt organizational shifts within that movement, and their perceived outcomes afterward becomes valuable as a set of records that complicate events in history. Discrepancies among accounts make clear that past events are highly mediated and situated at the time they occurred and remain malleable in our memories afterward. For a meaningful microhistorical analysis of action and meaning, "the most important thing is to understand what action means for the actors themselves" (Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013, p. 27). It is not my job, nor would it be epistemologically useful, to define the women's movement on a large scale. Instead, by listening rhetorically, I can understand the complexities of real, flawed people pushing for social and political change. The oral histories of Kurtz and others in the GWMP archives invite—and directly narrate—those compelling nuances.

The initial unifying cause for the women who founded the archives—to ratify the ERA and thus see women's equality codified in the U.S. Constitution—was not successful. Yet, the nature of the women's movement as a "failure" or "success" depends as much on the local contexts, livelihoods, and other outcomes of the movement's goals and the people driving it forward. In addition, rhetorical success for historical women is often measured in ways beyond "persuasion," as for most of history, patriarchy prevented that as a reasonable goal (Campbell, 1989). In a larger historical context, it can be distressingly easy to lose sight of the smaller battles, negotiations, and successes enacted throughout a large movement like the U.S. women's movement between roughly 1962–1982. Defining success, likewise, becomes a moving target informed by political landscape, local context, religion, race, class, and many other factors.

In Kurtz's narrative and throughout the GWMP oral histories, the subjects are expressly concerned with their audience—sometimes it manifests verbally with a mention of "future generations" listening and the imagined inspiration or confusion their stories might elicit. Frequently, both subject and interviewer are aware of real and imagined, present and future audiences. Krista Ratcliffe suggested that rhetorical listening allows us to "mak[e] meaning via language via others" (2006, p. 31). The women who sat and recorded

their oral history for the GWMP had the express goal of contextualizing their activist work, viewed from the 1990s, with an imagined twenty-first century audience. They sought to remember, to be listened to, to stake their claim in larger historical forces, and to make meaning of that claim. Such listening may help the audience (scholar, student, activist, community member, and other identities) invent, interrupt, and ultimately judge actors in history differently.

Kurtz's intention, her message to her imagined audience, was to contextualize perceived failures in the larger, longer timeline of progress. She is consciously defining parameters for success and failure, "[exposing] the complexity," as Sarah Hallenbeck (2018) suggested, "of what it means to 'succeed' or 'fail' as a rhetor, in the first place" (p. 71). Hallenbeck suggested that scholarly focus on only women's rhetorical successes limits not only what we learn about these actors in history but also what we can understand about rhetorical failures. In listening to Kurtz's narrative while resisting my own response, I identify her awareness of what she was up against historically—if even rhetorical scholars are quick to pass by stories of "failure" and focus on examples of women's success in activism movements. Instead, she demands that we hear her, interrupting expected interpretations of failure, and forcing us to observe localized activities she took part in from a wider angle. The outcomes of her work, she said in no uncertain terms, were not failure and had a meaningful impact *despite* perceived failure. Using tools of feminist rhetorical microhistory—rhetorical listening, rhetorical empathy, invitational rhetoric, and strategic contemplation—I can view her decisions and activities during the women's movement, as well as those of other narrators in the collection, as successes too, especially those aspects of her work that shaped subsequent activist movement, advocacy work, and legislative actions in the state. Kurtz's rhetorical moves in her oral history narrative enabled *interrupted* interpretation of large-scale historical events. Those same moves also interrupted my proclivity as the researcher to interpret and explain—for example, resisting the urge to write off her reflections as a positive "spin" on failures by both Kurtz and the women's movement.

Kurtz reflected throughout her oral history recording, typical of the genre. Other women's oral histories also illustrated their contemplation over time of the failures that ultimately held the movement back—namely exclusion of women of color and LGBTQ+ communities, and the lack of understanding of the intersectional realities those communities faced as well as the role that socioeconomics and race played in the fight for women's rights. This dissonance across even a small segment of oral histories reiterates the complexity of the "number of sometimes conflicting social movements," including the women's movement (Fredlund et al., p. 10). Our understanding of rhetorical actors within social movements must include their dynamic and fallible selves. What makes Kurtz's narrative distinct is the way she sat comfortably in the conversation of "failure," as though she's had decades of time to consider her work against the work she did subsequently and how her philosophical approach has evolved. She is not quick to defend or change the subject, or to gloss over critiques of the tactics that didn't work. In fact, listeners might interpret her language as positive rhetoric, having an almost over-optimistic stance. Her characterizing of progress as forward and upward may feel dissonant and even disrespectful to audiences in the 2020s (see Ratcliffe, 2019). As I listen, and resist a presentist interpretation of feminism, women's rights, and notions of "progress," it becomes valuable to learn from Kurtz's rhetorical framing of failure rather than critique her positive rhetoric.

Oral History as a Location for Rhetorical Study

I found advantages applying feminist listening practices and microhistory—together as feminist rhetorical microhistory—to the GWMP oral history archives and in this example, to Kurtz's narrative. I am buoyed by scholarship like Emily Legg's, that affirms oral storytelling as the epistemological equal to written storytelling (2023). The reflexive nature of the oral history medium is unabashedly subjective and emotional, both aspects appreciated within feminist rhetoric. Listening to Kurtz's recording as opposed to only reading the transcript became critical to hearing her—the energy and emotion as she recounted her experiences and interpreted them for the record.

At times when her words feel toxically positive to my ears, I resist the urge to dismiss her perspective. Other times, I am buoyed at all that has been done before, that activist movements with all their weaknesses can also enact meaningful change. Both responses are valid, and I think, Kurtz anticipated them. She was highly intentional with her framing of failure as ultimately, part of the work on the way to longer-term change. Sohan reminds us that even in their failure, social movements "contribute to ongoing sedimented change, enabling composers to redefine how they identify and position themselves in relation to dominant structures" (p. 34). Kurtz composed, through her oral history narrative, her relative success set against dominant forces working against her, in different modes and degrees, throughout her activist, educational, and professional life.

FRM, by combining feminist rhetorical practice and microhistory provides the tools of inquiry to continue recovery work, allowing for adjustment to the scopic levels that add further complexity to the sources and subjects we study. If we are to understand historical actors in their often-unknowable complexity, then using FRM can help us consider those actors' individual experiences. Historical figures are often "performing highly personal and individual acts and other times participating in highly overdetermined and institutionalized acts" (McComiskey, 2016, p. 18). There is often dissonance between individual experiences and grand narratives of history, abstraction of what it was like to *live* during "history." In order that we might understand any one lived experience against the backdrop of historic events, microhistory and feminist rhetorical theory approach the challenge with symbiotic overlap. The agency afforded to individuals when I use FRM is a renegotiation between the rhetor and the audience. I am conducting an analysis of lived experience as history and as interruption, with an intentional view to the individual's everyday experience.

As oral history is a highly subjective, messy record of human action and experience, feminist rhetorical microhistory provides a tool that applies to other oral history narratives and collections. I think this methodology has specific strength for oral sources. However, in the larger study I conducted in the GWMP archives, I was also able to effectively use FRM to examine written sources donated by some of the same women who recorded an oral narrative. While my work is just one initial project explicitly working at the productive intersection of feminist rhetorical listening practices and microhistory, much of the recovery work in feminist rhetoric is already utilizing aspects of microhistory without naming it as such. Combining those methodologies creates a tool for embracing messiness, humanity, and a suspension of the scholarly urge to respond and interpret.

I am aware of the irony of writing so many words centered on the premise that I am listening to others—have I failed by even attempting this research? Recently, Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe spoke to a standing-room crowd at CCCC about *listening*. Glenn discussed the dissonance of being the speaker in work that centers her role as listener. I resonated with this tension, because as scholars, our job *is* to speak, to share our ideas. Ratcliffe's premise of a restored logos cedes *half* the floor—typically dominated by speaking—to listening. The energy of the audience and panelists in that session suggests that I am not the only one grappling with these unresolved questions.

An additional limitation to FRM is one that plagues archives—logistical and systemic biases that continue to exclude many voices from the historical record. These voices remain occluded in a study centering the oral histories of women who at least had enough social and financial capital to create an archival collection to ensure their stories were not lost. Even though this is an incredible act of intention and recovery, many voices are absent from the GWMP oral histories, ones that would further complicate this story. What victories and failures did the women's movement achieve according to the lived experiences of Georgia's queer women, or of Georgia's Black and women of color? I hope future studies can elucidate those stories, too.

The actions of women before me were not fated and often came with risks. Many GWMP subjects expressly note that they were not necessarily the best, smartest, or most prepared person for the situations and challenges they were dealt. They were regular people who decided that, despite the odds, they would take action to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. Real people act in the spaces they inhabit and with available tools. This reality is frequently diminished in personal and cultural memory over time. Linda Kurtz's story reminds me of Glenn's hopefulness in the potential of rhetorical feminism (2018), its ability to keep us moving, doing, thinking, pushing on—even and especially when that feels harder than ever to do. I can listen to Kurtz and feel hopeless and cynical, or I can consider the hope in her confidence, in her evidence that what looks like a failure has more to offer. There is hope in actions that, from first glance, are labeled failures, but which accomplish all sorts of things we may miss if we don't look again—and listen closely.

Biography

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