The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
Department of English

AT THE INTERSECTION OF UTOPIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
THE SPATIAL-RHETORICAL NEGOTIATIONS OF 19TH-CENTURY WOMEN

A Dissertation in
English
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2010
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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this dissertation is to understand the role of space in women’s participation in 19th-century intentional communities and publics. Through their participation in 19th-century utopian experiments, my subjects were exposed to unconventional ideas about space, gender, labor, and community. Like many other participants in such communities, my subjects also formed rhetorical alliances with larger American communities concerned with business, politics, and social norms. The project follows these rhetorical trajectories from utopian space to the public sphere, guided by my overarching question: how does space affect the rhetorical alliances of 19th-century women?

Following the theoretical and methodological orientation in Chapter Two, I go on to examine three female rhetors, drawing from their published writings and speeches and archival sources within their communities or pertaining to the women themselves.

Chapter Three explores the infamous Frances Wright. Wright’s initial utopian reading of America prompted an aggressive campaign for abolition via an interracial communal experiment in Tennessee. After the community’s failure, Wright went on to become a leader in the freethought movement, employing spatial strategies such as relocating to New York and repurposing a church into a “Hall of Science” to promote the movement.

Chapter Four, in contrast, examines my most obscure subject: Gertrude Rapp. Rapp lived her entire life within the German pietist Harmony Society. Rapp’s letters, circulated among a network of silk-growers, facilitated her participation in the burgeoning silk industry of mid 19th-century America. By situating the Harmony Society at the forefront
of the “silk cause,” Rapp positioned her non-normative community as an integral part of America. Chapter Five explores the rhetoric of Abby Morton Diaz, who spent several years in the Transcendental Brook Farm. The community’s theories of space and labor were applied unevenly to the men and women of Brook Farm, belying gender hypocrisies that Diaz would expose in her writings about domestic space. Later in life, Diaz worked within a Boston women’s club to create urban space for cross-class relationships among women. In my final chapter, I consider some “Lessons from Intentional Communities,” lessons central to the study of rhetoric as a spatial practice.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. First, my heartfelt gratitude to Cheryl Glenn, who was always available with prompt and incisive guidance, but also respected my need to find my own way. Cheryl helped me to maintain ambitious but realistic timelines, to see the big picture, and to be kind to myself when “life intervened.” My thanks, also, to Jack Selzer, whose consistent good humor and faith in my abilities boosted my spirits and determination. Finally, I am grateful to Hester Blum and Melissa Wright, for their expertise in literature and geography, which contributed to the interdisciplinary scope of my work.

I am also greatly indebted to my colleagues at Penn State. I thank the members of several dissertation writing groups, who provided boundless support and useful critique: Rebecca Wilson Lundin, Matt Weiss, Brandy Scalise, Stacey Sheriff, and Pea Deas. I am also grateful to these individuals (and to Una Kimokeo-Goes), my “seminar cohort,” for sharing their innovative perspectives, which have shaped my approach to rhetoric and composition. Finally, thanks to other Penn State Rhet-Comp mentors for their encouragement and the high standards they set: Shannon Walters, Stacey Sheriff, Jenell Johnson, Abram Anders, Kevin Browne, and Rosalyn Collings-Eves.

Beyond these individual debts, this project has benefited from the support of several professional and institutional groups. First, my gratitude to the various libraries and archives that provided access to crucial primary documents: the Silk Letter Book and other documents at the Old Economy Village Archives in Economy, PA; the Abby
Morton Diaz Papers from the Sophia Smith Collection in the Smith College Library; and the Frances Wright Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. I am grateful to Penn State’s English Department for supporting my travel to archives and conferences through the Wilma R. Ebbitt Award in Rhetoric, the Center for American Literary Studies travel award, and the Phillip Young Memorial Endowment in American Literature. Finally, my gratitude to the Communal Studies Association and the Center for Communal Studies at the University of Southern Indiana for expressing their interest and faith in my work on intentional communities.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family. My parents, Jackie DeLaat and Mike Smith, set a strong example of the difference that academics can make. My indomitable mother raised me on sayings like “A Woman’s Place is in the House: And the Senate;” it is no surprise to those who knew her that she raised a daughter equally fascinated by and skeptical of norms of gender and space. I thank my dad for our talks, in which he always greeted my theoretical musings with enthusiasm, candor, and insight. My thanks to my sister, Meghan Walt, for offering sympathetic encouragement, tempered by the occasional dose of tough love. Finally, Dan Bonsall, my partner, for easing this process on a daily basis by sharing my life and offering his patient faith, listening, and love. Beyond Penn State, dear friends from various stages of my life have kept me sane and never failed to see my potential. One final note of gratitude to Tom and Mary Helen, and Betsy and Kenyon, for introducing me to homes and communities that first made me ponder the rhetorical power of personal and communal space.
Chapter 1

Gender, Rhetoric, and Space in 19th-Century America

A moral? Why, this:--that, in the battlefield of life, the downright stroke, that would fall only on a man’s steel head-piece, is sure to light on a woman’s heart, over which she wears no breastplate, and whose wisdom it is, therefore, to keep out of the conflict. Or this:--that the whole universe, her own sex and yours, and Providence, or Destiny, to boot, make common cause against the woman who swerves one hair’s breadth out of the beaten track. (224)

—Zenobia, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*

Few characters better portray the dichotomy of the public and the private and its relation to gender than Zenobia and Priscilla, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* (1852). Hawthorne’s fiction illuminates the ideals of and debates about womanhood that were all too real for 19th-century women. Editor Tony Tanner notes, “the book has more of the American nineteenth century in it than any other novel I know” (xli). The novel is loosely based in an actual historical community: Brook Farm, the Transcendental intentional (i.e. utopian) community in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Hawthorne hoped that this setting would allow him “to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics” (1). In other words, Hawthorne viewed the intentional community as a setting that might allow characters to explore their possibilities. Both the fictional community of Blithedale and its real-life counterpart offered a space where individuals might achieve more than was possible in the circumscribed larger society. Women especially might have the chance to transcend the limitations of societal norms and embody a natural, unadulterated womanhood. Through the characters of Zenobia and Priscilla, Hawthorne explores the possibilities for a liberated womanhood, positioning the two women as foils, prototypes of two possible models for unfettered womanhood, and
letting the reader determine which woman had most succeeded in throwing off the shackles of society.

From the reader’s first glimpse of Zenobia and Priscilla, they present a clear dichotomy. Priscilla represents the virtues of the retiring, quiet, passive woman. Sent to Brook Farm by her father, she is unable even to enter the communal house under her own power: “Hollingsworth received into his arms, and deposited on the door-step, a figure enveloped in a cloak. It was evidently a woman” (26, emphasis added). Priscilla, once unveiled, has a “wan, almost sickly hue . . . she shivered either with cold, or fear, or nervous excitement” (27). Painfully shy, Priscilla hardly speaks upon first joining the community, and her tones and mannerisms remain restrained even once she develops friendships with the other Farmers. In her most demonstrable moments, an excited Priscilla might be heard “babbling like a little brook” (50).

Zenobia, in contrast, embodies the opinionated, educated women that were increasingly present in mid 19th-century society. Zenobia’s formidable character is immediately evident: she enters the common house at Blithedale with an “imperial” bearing and “as much native pride as any queen would have known what to do with” (13). In addition to her aura and carriage, Zenobia’s physical being is also conspicuously hearty and robust. The reader learns that Zenobia is graced “with a combination of features which it is safe to call remarkably beautiful, even if some fastidious persons might pronounce them a little deficient in softness and delicacy” (15), and even though her hands are “larger than most women would like to have” (15). Finally, in contrast to Priscilla’s vocal timidity, Zenobia has a “fine, frank, mellow voice” (14) and a “mellow, almost broad laugh—most delectable to hear, but not in the least like an ordinary
woman’s laugh” (16). The unusual tone of Zenobia’s voice corresponds with her unrestrained choice of phrase. Zenobia spoke with “free, careless, generous modes of expression” and an attitude that suggested she was “scorning the petty restraints which take the life and color out of other women’s conversation” (17). Both the physical characteristics of her voice—its pitch and tenor—and her liberated expressions mark Zenobia’s speech as contradicting stereotypically feminine rhetorical norms, norms embodied in Priscilla’s silence and occasional brooklike babble.

In these archetypal characters, Hawthorne demonstrates that these two ideals of womanhood belong to different spheres (public and private) and, correspondingly, to different physical spaces. In both ability and temperament, Priscilla is best suited to private, domestic space. Before coming to Blithedale, Priscilla lived in the city, presumably by her skill as a seamstress, an occupation more and more understood as a female occupation pursued in private spaces. She sews unfathomably tiny and complex purses whose intricate openings are evocative, for our narrator, Coverdale, of the physical essence of female mystery: the vagina. Yet Priscilla’s skilled creations lack practical utility. The nightcap she brings to Coverdale during an illness is so “exquisitely wrought” that he refuses to sleep in it (51). On the whole, Priscilla is “as unserviceable a member of our society as any young lady in the land” (74). Beyond her occupational association with domestic space, Priscilla’s emotional attachment to and dependence on private, indoor space is clear in her response to her first storm at Blithedale:

The sense of vast, undefined space, pressing from the outside against the black panes of our uncurtained windows, was fearful to the poor girl,
heretofore accustomed to the narrowness of human limits, with the lamps of neighboring tenements glimmering across the street. (36)

Priscilla fears those spaces untouched by man, unsheltered by physical constructions and social norms.

In contrast, Zenobia shines more brightly the farther she ventures from the physical habitations and cultural constraints of 19th-century society. While Zenobia dutifully performs the role of the superintendent of the laundry and takes on other traditionally female chores, she does not excel in these domestic tasks. Coverdale notes: “Zenobia brought me my gruel, every day, made by her own hands, (not very skillfully, if the truth must be told)” (43). Zenobia’s true skills lie in the traditionally masculine—and public—arts of reading, acting, and, most of all, speaking. As Coverdale laments, “Her poor little stories and tracts never half did justice to her intellect; it was only the lack of a fitter avenue that drove her to seek development in literature. She was made . . . for a stump-oratress” (44). As the term “stump-oratress” implies, Zenobia not only longs for the chance to voice her views publicly, but also best expresses her ideas when physically outside the confining realm of the home. Liberated in the fields and woods of Blithedale, Zenobia “declaim[s] with great earnestness and passion, nothing short of anger, on the injustice which the world did to women, and equally to itself, by not allowing them, in freedom and honor, and with the fullest welcome, their natural utterance in public” (120). Without access to the lecture halls of broader society, Zenobia exercises her gifts for her own small audience in the unadulterated spaces of the wilderness around Blithedale.

Finally, beyond considering which spaces are most suited to their particular gifts and preferences, the two women also have different relationships to materiality in
general. Hawthorne places some of the keenest insights about Priscilla and Zenobia in the mouth of the villain Westervelt, who comments on the effects of Priscilla’s city life, spent bending over her needlework. Priscilla, he notes, “is one of those delicate, nervous young creatures, not uncommon in New England, and whom I suppose to have become what we find them by the gradual refining away of the physical system, among your women” (95).

At Blithedale, Priscilla betrays her unfamiliarity with her own physical being when she breaks into an awkward trot in a fit of high spirits: “Priscilla’s peculiar charm . . . was the weakness and irregularity with which she ran. Growing up without exercise, except to her poor little fingers, she had never yet acquired the perfect use of her legs” (73). And just as she has little control or agency over her own body, Priscilla floats through life “on the dark current of events, without influencing them by her own choice or plan” (168). As she herself notes: “I am blown about like a leaf. . . . I never have any free will” (171).

Through Westervelt’s observations and Coverdale’s descriptions, Hawthorne implies that the physical deterioration of women’s bodies resulting from their confinement to enclosed spaces and tedious labor has dire consequences: namely, the nervous temperament and lack of physical and mental agency depicted in Priscilla.

Zenobia, predictably, relishes her physical being and impresses those around her with her sheer earthiness, memorably described as an “uncomfortable surplus of vitality” (96). Again, the descriptions of Zenobia’s celebration of and care for her body illustrate the connection between the body and mind, or spirit. “It was one peculiarity, distinguishing Zenobia from most of her sex, that she needed for her moral well-being, and never would forego, a large amount of physical exercise . . . no inclemency of sky or muddiness of earth had ever impeded her daily walks” (156). That Zenobia’s moral well-
being depends on maintaining her physical condition is illustrative of her attunement to a connection between body and mind.

To sum up, as two contrasting models of womanhood, Priscilla and Zenobia differ in their bearing, their physical characteristics, and their manner of speaking. Interestingly, Hawthorne suggests that these prototypes of the stereotypically feminine and the newly liberated woman also differ in their relationships to space: via occupation, personal comfort, and their relationship to their own physicality. But which of these models of womanhood is embraced by the novel? On the one hand, one might disqualify Zenobia on the grounds that she presents a masculine temperament in a woman’s body, not a model of true or natural womanhood. But Hawthorne emphasizes that, however large Zenobia’s hands and “mellow” her voice, her powers are still specifically female:

We seldom meet with women, now-a-days, and in this country, who impress us as being women at all. . . . Not so with Zenobia. One felt an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying—‘Behold, here is a woman!’ Not that I would convey the idea of especial gentleness, grace, modesty, and shyness, but of a certain warm and rich characteristic, which seems, for the most part, to have been refined away out of the feminine system. (17)

Zenobia, then, is no man trapped in woman’s body, but rather a natural woman par excellence—the allusion to Eve suggests that Zenobia might represent an unadulterated woman, untouched by the “refinements” of society. And here it might be helpful to recall that the physical process of refining something generally involves applying acid, fire, or
boiling water. The “refined” woman in the above quote, with her “especial gentleness, grace, modesty, and shyness,” is clearly an allusion to Priscilla. Perhaps, then, Priscilla represents society’s diminished version of true womanhood, rather than the embodiment of natural woman. Hawthorne thus models the conflict between Zenobia and Priscilla as one between nature and culture: Zenobia offers a taste of raw womanhood, whereas Priscilla shows that womanhood whittled down, refined, processed by society. And while the two women might be appreciated side by side, they must inevitably come into conflict.

This conflict arises in the form of the women’s mutual attachment to one man: Hollingsworth, the philanthropist and mastermind behind Blithedale. For all her strength, Zenobia proves just as susceptible to romantic feeling, “ready to fling [her heart] away, as uncalculatingly as Priscilla herself” (79). But it is Priscilla who Hollingsworth chooses as his helpmate and, presumably, his wife. Coverdale muses:

I used to see, or fancy, indications that he was not altogether obtuse to

Zenobia’s influence as a woman. No doubt, however, he had a still more exquisite enjoyment of Priscilla’s silent sympathy with his purposes, so unalloyed with criticism, and therefore more grateful than any intellectual approbation, which always involves a possible reserve of latent censure.

(78-9)

In the realm of romantic interest, Priscilla’s culturally prescribed gifts—“silent sympathy” and gratitude—prove more valued than Zenobia’s “intellectual approbation.”

The novel ends with Zenobia’s suicide. The remaining characters marvel that an event as mundane as being crossed in love could destroy such a powerful, vibrant
A local farmer exclaims: “she has more means than she can use or waste, and lacks nothing to make her comfortable, but a husband—and that’s an article she could have, any day!” (231). Foster’s blithe assumption that a husband would have put Zenobia’s troubles to rest in fact pinpoints the final irony of Zenobia’s life, expressed, once again, by the sinister yet incisive Westervelt: “It is nonsense, and a miserable wrong . . . that the success or failure of woman’s existence should be made to depend wholly on the affections, and on one species of affection; while man has such a multitude of other chances, that this seems but an incident” (241). Zenobia successfully evades the confines of traditional domestic space, but she can not evade its emotional correlate—the ideal of woman as defined by her domestic relationship to man. In the end, the reader might lament of Zenobia, as she herself once bemoaned of Priscilla: “Poor child! . . . She is the type of womanhood, such as man has spent centuries in making it” (122). As Zenobia’s own take on the moral of her story (the epigraph to this introduction) suggests, hers is a cautionary tale about swerving “one hair’s breadth out of the beaten track” by violating gender norms.

While the gender norms Zenobia violated are many, here I have focused on those relating to rhetoric and space. I understand “space” as constituted by both physical components and dominant or resistant discursive constructions. This approach to space as both physical and discursive is justified by the fact that the spatial barriers women faced included both physical restrictions from entering certain spaces and more subtle discursive constraints that promised negative consequences for women who didn’t “know their place.” For example, Hawthorne depicts Zenobia as literally incapable of (barred
from) assuming the public podium, but Priscilla’s unease with open spaces is a more subtle result of her gendered socialization.

In this project, I ask how space shaped women’s ability to change their worlds using rhetoric. While there were undoubtedly many consequences of gendered norms of space, here I focus on their import for women rhetors. If women were normatively resigned to private space, what impact did this have on their ability to participate rhetorically in the larger public sphere? Were women who embraced their association with the private sphere still able to participate? Or were they only able to exert an influence through their husbands and children, as seems to be the case for Priscilla? Were women who went boldly into the public doomed, in one way or another, as Zenobia’s fate suggests? What real-life options existed beyond these idealized extremes? In order to gain a more nuanced sense of the role of space in women’s rhetoric, I introduce a second problematic: publics. Effective rhetoric requires an audience that shares specific concerns with the rhetor—a public. A rhetor might speak or write in isolation, but she will struggle to enact meaningful change without some affinity with a larger public. While I will define this conception of rhetorical publics in more detail below, for now I simply want to introduce my overarching question: how does space affect the rhetorical alliances of 19th-century women?

This first chapter articulates the demand for and framework of this study of 19th-century women, publics, and space. I begin by exploring in more detail the associations of women with specific spaces: these cultural commonplaces are what make a study of women’s rhetoric from the angle of space so promising, and necessary. Next, I explore the role of space in current conceptions of public formation. While many accounts of
public formation treat publics as placeless, ephemeral entities, the experience of women rhetors throws into sharp relief the role of space (and other physical factors) as a fundamental aspect of publics. The chapter concludes with an overview of the subsequent chapters and an introduction to the specific subjects of my study: women rhetors who formed rhetorical alliances with both 19th-century intentional communities and larger publics.

Public Women

Hawthorne’s cautionary tale evokes a debate over the proper or natural sphere for women in 19th-century America. For centuries, it had been common to associate “natural” women with the private space of the home (oikos) rather than the public space (polis), which housed, among other things, public deliberation over the common good. This norm is voiced most clearly in the Blithedale Romance by Hollingsworth, who asserts that women who venture into public roles “only dream of such things because they have missed woman’s peculiar happiness, or because Nature made them really neither man nor woman! . . . The heart of true womanhood knows where its own sphere is, and never seeks to stray beyond it!” (123). This commonplace association of women and domestic space was challenged in the 19th century, as women pursued employment and other means of fulfillment beyond the home in large numbers. Indeed, visitors from abroad commented on this shift: Henry James lamented that American women seemed determined to be “as public as possible” (Ryan, Women 58).

The success of public figures like Margaret Fuller, a possible inspiration for Zenobia, suggested that perhaps, after all, there was nothing natural about women’s
predominance in private space. In the novel, Hawthorne’s intimations that Zenobia herself might be the more “natural” of the two women supports this view. Yet, like Zenobia, women who entered the public sphere found themselves suffering the consequences of their aberration. When private space is considered the presumed “natural” environment for women and public space the “natural” environment for men, those who counter these norms become marked as “unnatural.” This backlash is more drastic in periods when greater numbers of individuals and groups are violating these norms, posing a more significant threat. In the 19th century, “public woman” became an epithet, a synonym for a prostitute, suggesting the deep resonance of the association of womanhood with private space for 19th-century Americans and the very real threat posed by women who ventured into the public sphere.

To understand the significance of these space-gender associations for rhetoric, it is helpful to consider the history of these linkages. Indeed, as Jean Elshtain relates, the understanding of two distinct realms, public and private, can be defined as one of a set of “fundamental, not incidental or tangential, ordering principles in all known societies, save, perhaps, the most simple” (6). In primitive cultures, Elshtain explains, the first such division appears between nature and culture, the natural and social worlds. Following this first distinction, the cultural realm is then split into the private and public spheres, polis and oikos. Oikos refers to the space of nature and necessity, and those physical demands are associated with the private space of the home. The polis goes beyond nature and necessity, but is still liked to that private realm, the “sphere of unfreedom” (12). Through these divisions, women become linked to private space, to bodily needs, and to physicality. Men become linked to public space, agency and sociality, and the mind. As
the *polis/oikos* or public/private distinction is transferred into more advanced and democratic societies, their problematic gender correlations are transferred along with them. In Elshtain’s words, political thinkers “have carried forward into later epochs not simply the categories public and private but much of the original content infused into those categories,” including not only “Greek misogyny,” but also “imperialism and the exploitation of slaves” (12).

In terms of rhetoric, what all this means is that women were excluded from the sphere of public debate. Ancient societies had the sense, as we do today, that not all that is thought should be spoken or shared, and thus a further distinction was made between the private speech of the household and the public speech of the *polis*. Women were “confined to private realms of discourse. . . . Their tongues were silent on the public issues of the day. Their speech was severed from the name of action” (Elshtain 14). And this silencing is part and parcel of women’s association with the private space of the home. The realm of women, the private home, was the realm of necessity, the realm of the body and all that comes with it: sexuality, dependency, uncleanness, vulnerability. Such topics were the only topics women, as private beings, could address, and thus women had nothing to offer in discussions of public concerns.

To the extent that women were able to participate rhetorically in specific publics—whether those publics centered on education, health care, abolition, or women’s rights—they participated in public discourse and helped shape the public sphere.

Following the work of Nancy Fraser, among others, I understand “the public sphere” not as an actually existing coherent entity, but rather as the web of multiple, overlapping discussions amongst competing interests at a given time. This understanding of multiple,
overlapping “publics,” deconstructs the monolithic “public sphere” and allows for more manageable analysis. Whereas the public sphere can seem to be evident anywhere and nowhere, individual publics may be grounded in specific public conversations. Moreover, by tracing the intersections among publics, scholars can gain a sense of the varied power relations of these groups; just because a discussion is public doesn’t mean that all discussants participate on equal footing. I define publics as groups of geographically dispersed, anonymous individuals united by a shared concern or commitment. My emphasis on anonymity in this definition is inspired in part by the work of Michael Warner, who explains anonymity as central to public discourse. Unlike private communications between known entities, public discourse “can be read [or listened to] and participated in by any number of unknown and in principle unknowable others” (Warner 40, emphasis in original). A public, then, may be composed in part by individuals who are acquainted with one another, but it involves the awareness that unknown individuals share their concerns and are engaged in similar discursive practices, whether through reading, writing, or debate.

Undeniably, women did participate in influential publics both before, during, and after the 19th century. Feminist rhetorical scholars have demonstrated that, despite the normative link of women and private space, there have always been women in public and that, where women enter the public sphere, they often contribute to public discourse.¹ Jacqueline Jones Royster and Shirley Wilson Logan have traced, for example, the public speaking careers of African-American women. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell offers cogent analyses of and access to early and proto-feminist speeches and writing. Such works

¹ Besides the scholars of 19th-century women’s rhetoric named here, Cheryl Glenn, Andrea Lunsford, and many other feminist rhetoricians have borne witness to the rhetorical contributions of women rhetors throughout the centuries and around the world.
illustrate that, despite the spatial norms I’ve outlined, 19th-century American women were not wholly relegated to the private realm: they were active participants in public discourse.

At the same time, scholars of women’s rhetoric have shown the public significance of women’s so-called “private” rhetorical endeavors. Anne Ruggles Gere’s analysis of the civic work of women’s clubs is exemplary here, as is Nan Johnson’s theorizing of “parlor rhetorics,” whose influence extended well beyond their physical locations. More recently, Jessica Enoch has troubled the idea of women’s teaching as a private occupation unrelated to public concerns, and Alisse Portnoy has uncovered evidence of women’s collective activism through privately-organized petitions that protested national policies towards Native Americans. The fact that a particular woman’s rhetoric was composed, delivered or circulated primarily, or only, in her own private sphere does not signify that her rhetoric had no public import. Historiographers of women’s rhetorics thus illuminate both the direct participation of women in public discourse and the public significance of women’s seemingly “private” rhetoric. The challenge of future studies of gender, space, and rhetoric is to celebrate the rhetorical contributions of both more private and more public women and avoid telling a monolithic, normalizing story of 19th-century women’s rhetoric.

Given the lingering power of the private/public dichotomy, it is easy to inadvertently fall into the trap of “refining” women’s diverse rhetorical experiences down to two equally unsatisfactory, extreme narratives. On the one hand, women who went boldly into the public and spoke are certainly brave and resourceful, yet they can seem like rhetorical suicide bombers, defying convention and thus sacrificing any chance of
acceptance by and influence over larger society. The public outcry against women like Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft undoubtedly undermined, to some extent, their rhetorical salience at the time. In this study, Frances Wright represents this quintessential “public woman,” drawing catcalls, stinkbombs, and accusations of being a “lady man.”

On the other hand, women who participated from the private sphere can be appreciated for their rhetorical awareness of the constraints of societal norms and expectations, yet their histories are haunted by the specter of the rhetor they might have been. The concept of “republican motherhood,” which emphasized women’s civic responsibilities to raise the next generation of good citizens, marks women’s more private contributions as secondary; they can influence society only insofar as they influence the men and (male) children in their lives. And it is hard not to feel disappointed by such a limiting understanding of how women might matter. The most private woman in this study is Gertrude Rapp, but however clear her role as a helpmate to her male relatives, the leaders of the Harmony Society, Rapp also forged her own role as an entrepreneur, and it would be ungenerous to focus on anachronistic “missed opportunities” rather than appreciating what she did accomplish.

This project aims to appreciate all varieties of women’s rhetoric: the proudly (or foolishly) public and the strategically (or obediently) private. Moreover, the chapter on Abby Morton Diaz suggests an alternative for conceiving the spaces women occupied and from which they mobilized in 19th-century America. Diaz herself utilizes semi-public spaces, safe harbors that promoted women’s public goals and purposes.2 Finally, while

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2 I borrow the term “semi-public space” from Mary Ryan, who also applies it to 19th-century women. Ryan notes that urban planners and businesses began providing semi-public spaces for women (department stores, special rooms in hotels, and separate entrances for the theatre) to protect them from dangerous urban space.
there is no one narrative of how physical and discursive space affected women’s participation in public discourse, this study explores and illuminates how, in all cases, *space mattered.*

The Placeless Public

If women’s association with certain spaces to some extent justifies investigating gender and space, why add publics to the equation? On the one hand, publics seem to have little to do with (physical) space. Jurgen Habermas’s foundational formulation defines the public sphere as characterized by open debate between citizens regarding matters of general interest. It is not evident that this debate need necessarily be linked to specific physical spaces. Similarly, Benedict Anderson’s account of the reading of the morning paper is illustrative of how elusive and ephemeral the process of participating in a public might be:

It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion . . . fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (36-7)

Certainly, according to such accounts, public formation is a largely (or even primarily) textual process.
Expanding on this notion, both Michael Warner and Richard Sennett understand publics as interactions between essentially *anonymous* individuals. In Sennett’s words, the public sphere “is the bond of a crowd, of a ‘people,’ or a polity, rather than the bonds of family or friends” (4). And what allows for this impersonal, anonymous connection is the circulation of ideas through discourse. As Michael Warner explains, the connection of two people via a public is felt “not as a relation between themselves as men, but rather as their own mediation by a potentially limitless discourse” (40, emphasis in original).

When members of a public consume a public text—Benedict Anderson’s quintessential example is the morning paper—they are abstractly united through the sense that anonymous but like-minded individuals all over the town, city, or nation are also reading that same paper at the same moment. Given such accounts, it is easy to consider public formation a mainly discursive (even ephemeral) process—occurring when people with shared interests engage discursively—and to overlook the question of how and whether physical spaces and factors facilitate or hinder such interactions.

Of course, the problem with a model of publics and public actors as anonymous, nameless, and placeless is that such accounts overlook the exclusions and discrimination that have always characterized powerful publics. Critiques of Habermas’s formulation often center on this question of exclusion. Warner notes that the anonymity accomplished by shedding your private self, what he calls the “principle of negativity,” is available only to those “whose social role allows such self-negation (this is, to persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital” (42). The seemingly “anonymous” public is in fact a public constituted by a very specific group: privileged white men. Nancy Fraser adds that the problem with asserting the existence of a public sphere where status differentials are
effectively bracketed is that it makes societal equality unnecessary for political democracy.

Along with a focus on the exclusivity of certain publics and the presence of multiple publics at any given moment comes a sense of publics as specific and linked to material circumstances. Paul Stob notes that even Habermas’s definitive account of the formation of the public sphere is in part a tale of the evolution of actual spaces: coffeehouses or salons that facilitated public debate. Moreover, a lack of access to sites serving this function in contemporary society contributes to the continuing unequal participation of minority and underprivileged groups in public discourse (226-7). Yet there is, in general, a tension between the more universal accounts of the public described above and accounts of publics as specific and material, as emergent, local, and transient. In different ways, scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, and Gerard Hauser have all contributed to this grounded, particular understanding of publics.

This project joins this scholarship in attempting to understand publics as both crucially discursive and as specific and material. In particular, I complement these theories of the public sphere with considerations of public/private space. I explore the role of space in the important process whereby particular, situated individuals find the means to participate in public discussions. For as long as the dominant conceptions depict public formation as a placeless process and publics as ephemeral (existing everywhere and nowhere), the material-spatial barriers to minority and underprivileged groups’ participation in publics will remain masked. Supposedly “placeless” exchanges always implicitly exclude those groups whose identities are tied to specific places, as women are
to the home. A stark reading might suggest that only white, middle-class men escape being defined by their relationship to a specific space and thus stand to benefit from such placeless accounts. Whether any group is exempted from these “politics of place” is to some extent beside the point; the point is that when discourse masquerades as unhinged from physical spaces, scholars should be wary of such claims and ask who benefits from that façade of placelessness, anonymity, or ubiquity.

Women Rhetors and Utopian Space

To investigate the intersections of space and publics, this project examines the rhetoric of 19th-century women who participated in intentional communities. I chose these subjects for four main reasons, reasons based in the fraught relationships of 19th-century women and intentional communities to space itself, and to the larger public sphere. Both women and intentional communities, I argue, are associated with certain kinds of spaces and spatial practices and are positioned, to some extent, as apart from or counter to the larger American public.

First, one reason for exploring women rhetors via spatial analysis is the complex relationship between women and space. In framing the project, I desired subjects who might push back against the theories of communication, publics, and space that I brought to their stories. Because women, in particular, have been identified through their association with and, at times, restriction to certain spaces, they might be expected to offer a more nuanced perspective regarding the constraints and resources of space in a rhetorical situation. Indeed, spatial theorist Kathleen Kirby suggests that women and other oppressed people might perceive space differently than more privileged individuals.
They might perceive space as marked more by potential obstacles than pathways, because they have learned to be always aware of the dark places that might prove dangerous, always instinctively locating the nearest exit. Female rhetors therefore might display a heightened awareness of the spatial factors operating in their own lives, and might be especially adept at developing rhetorical strategies designed to leverage, neutralize, or confront those factors. Moreover, because of women’s explicit association with specific spaces, spatial components of their rhetorical situations might be more readily identified, thus offering a framework that helps unearth the more implicit or subtle spatial factors acting on more privileged rhetors.

Second, intentional communities are also promising subjects for spatial analysis. Such communities are based on the premise that the intentional arrangement of one’s physical daily existence in certain ways allows one to live a certain kind of life. In other words, intentional communities practice a rhetorical conception of space, (re)ordering their physical world so as to encourage certain attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Rhetors who had participated in such spatial/social experiments might be expected to have some insights regarding the role of space in their own rhetorical undertakings.

My last two reasons for selecting these particular subjects have to do with the positioning of women and intentional communities vis-à-vis the larger public sphere. Nineteenth-century women, as I’ve explored above, were not typically associated with public deliberation over shared concerns. Yet, as the century progressed, more and more women engaged in public discussion and debate. Each of my three subjects participated in diverse public discussions ranging from slavery and religion to business and domestic

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3 The Shakers are perhaps the most widely known example. Famous for their simple and efficient designs for buildings, barns, and furniture, the Shakers realized that their physical surroundings affected their ability to achieve a peaceful mind and temperament.
labor. One goal of this project is to chart the means by which women participated in public discourse and to acknowledge the variety of the topics and issues that 19th-century women pursued rhetorically.

Like 19th-century women, intentional communities held an ambiguous relationship to larger American publics. Let me begin by stressing that I do not see these communities themselves as publics: characterized by face-to-face interactions and close personal relationships, intentional communities are in some ways conceptually opposed to publics, which are constituted by groups of geographically dispersed, anonymous individuals. Popular imaginings and understandings of 19th-century America (bolstered by some historical scholarship and textbooks) gives the impression that intentional communities were removed from the public sphere, with little say in the debates that shaped the future of the nation. Indeed, intentional communities have been popularly understood as isolated extremist factions who had (and desired) little influence over the contours of the broader society. Yet 19th-century intentional communities were in actuality quite public, springing up and talked of everywhere. As Emerson wrote: “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.” And besides serving as general objects of fascination, intentional communities were not without their own goals for the larger national public. Many founders hoped not to withdraw from but to reform American society: their communities were linked to abolitionist, socialist or other reform movements. Yet even intentional communities without such sweeping reform goals participated in public discussions concerning business, politics and religion. This project thus highlights the extraordinarily public role of intentional communities in 19th-century
America. The three communities I examine constitute social experiments in abolitionism, pietist religion, and philosophy (Transcendentalism).

Studying women rhetors who participated in 19th-century intentional communities affords a unique vantage point on the intersections of space (both physical and discursive), publics, and identity (particularly gender). In the next chapter, I explain my critical approach to these intersections, which is informed by not only studies of rhetoric and space and publics theory, but also theories of “material” rhetoric, feminist and critical geography, feminist rhetorical historiographers, and scholarship on intentional communities.

Overview of Chapters

The task of the current project is to consider the role of space in women’s participation in 19th-century intentional communities and publics. Following the theoretical and methodological orientation in Chapter Two, I go on to examine three female rhetors who participated in a diverse set of intentional communities and publics. I draw from not only these women’s published writings and speeches, but also archival sources within their communities, in the case of Gertrude Rapp, or archives holding papers by or pertaining to the women themselves, as with Frances Wright. As I examine the lives, spaces, and rhetoric of these women, I pursue the central question: how does space affect the rhetorical alliances of 19th-century women? How did their experiences with intentional communities shape their rhetoric, particularly their rhetorical engagement with larger publics? How did they use spatial-rhetorical practices to achieve their rhetorical ends? I will examine these spatial factors with the expectation that, as
much as women were constrained by their society’s ideas about space, they also found ways to use space to their advantage, through either their rhetorical constructions or physical occupations of specific spaces.

At its heart, this project is exploring the role of rhetoric and space in physical and discursive communities. The chapters are organized in line with these two themes. Each chapter begins by considering the space of the intentional community and one way it manifested itself in or influenced each woman’s rhetoric. The second part of each chapter explores the woman’s simultaneous or subsequent participation in a public, considering how space factored into that participation, often through spatial-rhetorical practices (spatial strategies) enacted by the rhetor or the public.

Chapter Three begins with the most well-known (and, in her time, infamous) of my three subjects: Frances Wright. Wright’s initial utopian reading of American space and the American public sphere led her to pursue an aggressive campaign for abolition through an interracial communal experiment in Tennessee. I read Nashoba as a rhetorical argument for the feasibility of gradual emancipation. Despite the seeming promise of the scheme, Nashoba could not maintain the public support necessary for the community to thrive, and the community ended with a scandal that tainted Wright’s public reputation from that point forward. From Nashoba, Wright went on to a career as a speaker and editor, emerging as a leader in the freethought movement in the 1820s. In this role, she used spatial strategies such as relocating her paper in New York and repurposing a church into a “Hall of Science” to promote the consolidation of the freethought public. Wright used her Hall to promote a certain view of public rhetoric, promoting rational over religious warrants as the means for healthy debate in America’s public sphere.
Chapter Four, in contrast, examines the most obscure of my three subjects:

Gertrude Rapp. Entrepreneur and grand-daughter of the founder of the pietist Pennsylvania Harmony Society, Rapp lived her entire life within her somewhat isolated community. From this location, she managed to become something of an icon within the burgeoning silk industry of mid 19th-century America. Rapp used letters, circulated among a network of silk-raising colleagues, to participate actively in a public that she could not access physically. To do so, she performed a kind of publicity in her letters that marked them as official public documents, not private epistles. Through her writings, Rapp depicted the space of the silk industry as essential to America’s identity as a nation capable of producing quality goods comparable to those of Europe’s industrial centers. By situating the Harmony Society at the forefront of this “silk cause,” Rapp positioned her community as an integral piece of American society.

Finally, Chapter Five explores the rhetoric of Abby Morton Diaz, popular children’s writer and women’s rights advocate. Diaz spent several years of her young adult life in the Transcendental Brook Farm community (immortalized as Hawthorne’s “Blithedale”). This experience exposed her to an understanding of physical labor as essential to the healthy development of an individual. Unfortunately, this elevation of physical labor was applied unevenly to the men and women of Brook Farm: women’s work was still “drudgery,” however noble farming and wood-chopping might be. In her writings, Diaz worked to establish domestic labor as requiring powers of both mind and body and argued that women needed more balance between physical and mental labor. Later, Diaz used her leadership role in the Boston-based Women’s Educational and
Industrial Union (WEIU) to create space for cross-class relationships among women, based in a mutual appreciation of all women’s domestic and paid labor.

As a whole, these chapters illustrate how 19th-century women participated in larger publics from within various spaces: public, private, and semi-public. While Wright assumed the podium (and the printing press), addressing her audiences from the most public venues available, the rhetorical constraints on Gertrude Rapp necessitated her participation in the silk public through the personal letter, from the private space of her own community. Finally, towards the end of the century, Abby Morton Diaz explored and exploited the opportunities presented by the semi-public spaces occupied by women’s clubs. From the downtown headquarters of the WEIU, Diaz offered women of all classes a safe harbor within the larger, presumably hostile, public space of Boston. This variety of venue depicts the range of spaces utilized effectively by women, from those who participated at either extreme (from the public podium or the private home) to those who found a mid-point in the semi-public spaces women came to occupy more and more towards the end of the century.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study is to understand the role of space in women’s participation in 19th-century intentional communities and publics. Through their rhetoric, the women of this study engaged with the space of their intentional communities, either promoting the community’s aims, countering misconceptions about the community, or translating the theories of the community for application in other spaces. In their interactions with larger publics, these women took advantage of particular physical
spaces, negotiated spatial limits, and worked for more inclusive public and semi-public spaces.

In pursuing these goals, this project questions several key assumptions. First, I question the notion of publics as formed through ephemeral discursive exchanges with little dependence on material factors, specifically space. I suggest that such placeless accounts of public formation overlook the spatial barriers overcome and spatial strategies utilized by rhetors who, like the women in this study, were culturally associated with specific spaces. Moreover, this project suggests that publics and spaces need one another. I trace specific publics in 19th-century America that were linked to, and in times dependent on, certain spaces. Second, I question the effectiveness of current theories of 19th-century ideologies of domesticity and femininity in expressing the variety of ways that women negotiated space in order to participate in public discourse. The women of this study, whether from within private space or through the assumption of (and sometimes, creation of) public and semi-public spaces, participated in central debates of the time. Finally, I trouble the general association of intentional communities with spatial and cultural isolation from spheres of rhetorical influence. The communities in this study were themselves the topics of public debate, serving as generative sites for new ideas and proposals that spread outward—often through the activities and rhetoric of current and former members—into larger society.

By bridging the rhetorical study of space and publics, this project demonstrates how space shapes the rhetorical alliances we perceive as necessary or possible, as well as those we never consider at all. Without an understanding of how our physical and discursive spaces facilitate and hinder public rhetorical participation, scholars across
disciplines cannot address the continuing uneven rhetorical access to various publics. My hope is that rhetorical scholars whose work forwards a more inclusive and diverse public sphere can learn from the ways the women in this study worked around spatial limitations, countered negative constructions of their own spaces, and used rhetoric to help produce more inclusive spaces and publics.
Chapter 2
Theory and Method:
Approaching Space, Publics, Utopia, and History

In this chapter, I trace some of the theoretical and methodological influences on my work, ranging from scholars of space within rhetoric and composition to utopian theorists. This chapter frames my work more specifically in the conversations that the project aims to join. I also introduce key terms and definitions that my analysis will employ and complicate. Thus, the following pages should help illuminate the rest of my project.

I begin with the larger conversation about material rhetoric as a way of situating my project within rhetorical theory at a broad level. Second, I explore the more specific conversations in rhetoric and composition that most clearly relate to my project—studies of space and publics. After situating my project amongst related work in the discipline of rhetoric and composition, I explore the methodological approaches to space that inform my project, laying out the spatial framework that will guide my analysis in the next three chapters. I also consider what difference it makes that the intentional communities in this study are utopian experiments. Finally, I situate my methodological approach to historical scholarship in rhetoric and composition.

Joining the Conversation: An Overview of Material Rhetoric

As the introduction to this project attests, one of the guiding precepts of this study is a view of rhetoric as inherently spatial. Yet this precept is bound up in a larger conversation about the ways in which we can and must understand rhetoric as material.
Considerations of the material aspects of rhetoric encompass not only spatial, but also bodily and visual aspects of rhetoric. But what is “news” here? Haven’t we always known that rhetoric is material? Indeed, on the one hand, viewing rhetoric as material may seem commonplace. As Celeste Condit intones, “[a]ll known communication is a matter of physical contact among material particles” (328). On the other hand, grasping rhetoric’s materiality can be deceptively tricky. As Carole Blair lucidly explains, scholars who set out to treat rhetoric as material are up against a centuries-old tradition that interrogates and comprehends rhetorical texts in terms of their symbolism:

“Paradoxically, the symbol is the material element of rhetoric, but the very notion of a ‘symbol’ teaches us to reach outside it for its meaning and to treat that meaning as if it were the real dimension of rhetoric, or at least the most important one” (19). In this section, I review some of the major scholarly moves and challenges involved in analyzing rhetoric as material. On the broadest level, I perceive my work as a contribution to the study of material rhetoric, a theoretical move committed to illuminating the interaction of discursive/ideological and physical factors in rhetoric.

*What’s the Matter with Material Rhetoric?*

Understanding rhetoric as material means attending to the ways in which the matter of rhetoric is produced, circulated, and consumed. One broad perspective suggests that rhetoric is material because it is situated in material contexts, or rhetorical situations. A second perspective offers a view of rhetoric itself as material. The current project contributes to both views of rhetoric’s materiality.

Those scholars who attend to rhetoric’s materiality via studies of the production of rhetoric often focus on the physical aspects of the rhetorical situation. Susan Wells, in
Sweet Reason, applies a material understanding of rhetoric to the discourses of modernity. She calls for attention to rhetoric’s embodiment in sounds, inscriptions, and systems of distribution, especially the material practices supporting science and public policy. Similarly, Michael McGee views material rhetoric as essentially about the material relationships structuring the practice of rhetoric. In this view, rhetoric is not (or is not only) material because it leaves a trace on a piece of paper, but because the process that resulted in that trace was itself material.

Other scholars attend to materiality as a part of the rhetorical situation for the recipient of the text, for rhetoric’s materiality also shapes the reception of a given text by the audience. Are audience members listening to a speech in a loud echoing hall? Walking around the Vietnam War Memorial? Sitting in a coffeeshop reading a newspaper? Reading a romance novel in a bathtub with a glass of wine? Along these lines, Richard Marback examines the sculpture of Joe Louis with a raised first as a text whose meaning is overdetermined by its physical location in Detroit (78). It is not enough, Marback suggests, to examine the sculpture in and of itself. The physical setting of the sculpture participates in its meaning.

However pressing the need to acknowledge the material contexts of rhetoric, other scholars have moved towards a view of rhetoric itself as material. For these scholars, attending to rhetoric’s materiality means more than considering what paper or printing costs, who has access to the internet, or the time lag of the postal service. Of this group, Carole Blair’s work is exemplary. Blair turns to memorials as an instructive starting point for exploring rhetoric’s materiality. Monuments are a promising subject for such an analysis, because, as Blair points out, monuments don’t fall silent; their materiality,
unlike more seemingly ephemeral spoken or written texts, is hard to ignore (17). Blair explores how the materiality of the memorials participates in the meaning they create. For example, memorials direct visitors along specific stops in a predetermined order that shapes their understanding of the memorial itself; if they disobey the prescribed order, the meaning of the memorial shifts. The Salem Witch Trials Memorial forces visitors to walk, literally, on the testimony of the accused women. The layout of the memorial thus materially replicates the historical reception of the women’s words, often evoking unease and confusion for visitors who, at first, don’t notice that they are walking on the pleas of the dead (47).

Blair’s point, however, is not that memorials are a more material rhetoric than texts, but simply that their materiality is more easily perceived. Like the monuments she studies, written texts also (attempt to) determine the movements of our eyes and hands, structure the order in which we receive ideas, and shape our expectations via the material employment of fonts and headings. Along these lines, Richard Lanham’s *Economics of Attention* demonstrates the tendency of readers in particular (more so than listeners, Web-surfers, or museum-goers) to look through, rather than at a printed text (46). As Lanham explains, readers are taught to read through a text to find its meaning, not to stop at its surface, unless we are arrested by unusual choices like printing right to left or frequent font type or size changes.

Without privileging one approach to rhetoric’s materiality over another, it is important to note that the view of rhetoric itself as material goes against the grain of our received and perceived experience of rhetoric: the tradition of symbolic approaches that tell us to look through a text for its meaning is formidable. Yet, at the same time, the very
staying power of symbolism suggests its usefulness and practicality as an approach that should be complemented, not replaced, by the methods and methodologies of material rhetoric.

Positioning Rhetoric and Reality

In all approaches to material rhetoric, one relationship remains central: that between rhetoric and reality. The question of which force (rhetoric or reality) determines (or most influences) the other, is undoubtedly familiar to my readers. In this section, I suggest that one of the main benefits of material rhetoric is that it serves as a corrective to the tendency to overstate rhetoric’s ability to shape reality.

Recent considerations of rhetoric’s relation to reality suggest that constructivist models have caused rhetoricians to overstate the power of rhetoric to shape reality. For example, Dana Cloud, in “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron,” points out two possible failings of material theories of rhetoric. First, such theories might fall prey to idealism by overestimating the ability of an audience to construct the meaning that best serves their purposes and goals from the shards of discourse (146-52). Second, Cloud articulates a fear that the view that rhetoric creates reality might lead to a politically dangerous relativism (152-58). Her most startling and grave point is that if rhetoric truly shapes and creates reality, if there is no situation prior to the rhetoric that designates it as such, then we lose the ability to judge ethical and moral quandaries. In other words, if rhetoric creates realities that seem ethical or unethical, then we will struggle to show that situations like pedophilia are, in their essence, good or bad. Change the rhetoric, and we could see pedophilia in a better light. Cloud’s point is a serious charge against the overemphasis on rhetoric’s ability to shape reality.
But material theorists of rhetoric do not maintain that reality is entirely constructed by rhetoric. Following Michael McGee, I view Kenneth Burke as useful for developing a material rhetoric, and I turn to Burke to explain the nuanced approach material rhetoric might take to the rhetoric/reality conundrum. Though Burke seems in many ways a staunch constructivist, he maintains that we cannot construct the world at will: the world fights back, offering “recalcitrance” for our constructions (Permanence 256). I can decide that I can jump out of a tall building and not get hurt, but the world will either prove me wrong or encourage me (strongly!) to revise my statement. My revision might assert, instead, that I can jump out of a tall building with a parachute and not get hurt. Similarly, in a recent seminar at Penn State University, Kwame Anthony Appiah remarked that he could stop thinking of the category of “man” as a viable part of his identity, but that it would be difficult for this to become “true” for him when everyone around him continues to address him as a man. We cannot construct at whim.

Material rhetoric’s answer to rhetoric’s intersections with reality is more dialectical. Beneath each case where a rhetor seems to control the truth of the situation is another situation that guides the rhetor’s interpretation: we are never free to interpret or construct however we wish. I find Burke’s concept of “occupational psychosis” to be particularly illustrative of this dialectical or layers-upon-layers concept of rhetoric and reality (Permanence 38-40). An occupational psychosis refers to the way that a person’s occupation can shape their approach to other parts of his or her life. For example, a member of a tribe that hunts for a living might also approach marriage as a hunt. The present day equivalent might suggest that living in a capitalistic society makes us approach other areas of our lives in terms of consumption and commodities: we perceive
time as something that we “spend,” or as an “investment.” To give one final example, a
doctor might see problems in the world at large as illnesses needing to be healed, or
quarantined, or vaccinated against. In regard to rhetoric’s materiality, the concept of an
occupational psychosis suggests that our approach to situations is determined by our
ruling “metaphors:” hunt, capitalistic consumption, illness, and so on. But those
metaphors are themselves based on real physical practices adopted, in the most primal
sense, as a means of “making a living,” of surviving. Thus, our prior material situations
shape the metaphors and terministic screens that determine our approach to future
rhetorical situations.

Advocates of material rhetoric thus ultimately suggest that rhetoricians must
attend to rhetoric’s materiality in order to avoid underestimating or overestimating the
sway of rhetoric over reality. In order to do responsible scholarship, we need to make
rhetoric accountable to lived situations that are unequal and cannot be talked away.
People living in poverty don’t need new ways of representing their identities: they need
homes and food, not rhetoric. Fortunately, Burke offers a model for analyses that
acknowledge that rhetoric’s shaping of reality is never divorced or detached from
material considerations. Indeed, lived material practices and conditions shape our rhetoric
just as much as rhetoric shapes our interpretations of reality. Procedurally, applying this
concept of rhetoric’s materiality to our scholarship means attending to two opposing
influences: how our spaces, practices, and labor shape our rhetorical frameworks and how
rhetoric can help us shape more equitable, tolerant, and inclusive realities.
Learning from the Literature: Rhetorical Studies of Space and Publics

This project contributes to the conversation about material rhetoric outlined above through joint attention to two concepts that I perceive as crucially discursive and physical: space and publics. Setha Low and Neil Smith explain the benefits of pairing studies of space and publics as follows: “Without an understanding of the connection between the public sphere and space, the public sphere remains ungrounded and public space insufficiently linked with social relations” (5). My work draws on studies of space and publics in rhetoric to show that both space and publics function discursively and physically to enact rhetorical effects. This section provides a brief introduction to the work on rhetoric and space and rhetoric and publics and introduces a few specific moves in each area that are central to my own approach.

Space as Rhetorical, Rhetoric as Spatial

Scholars in rhetoric have begun to turn to space as an important concept for theorizing rhetorical acts and effects. The existing body of work on rhetoric and space in the field of rhetoric can be helpfully divided into two broad categories: works that explore space as rhetorical, and works that explore rhetoric as spatial. My project engages both aspects of this work, studying how the spaces of intentional communities are rhetorical and how spatial rhetorical strategies play a role in public formation.

In the first category—comprising works considering spaces as rhetorical—is scholarship that presupposes that spaces make arguments. This work looks beyond the influence of spaces on rhetorical discourse and considers what is “rhetorical” about the spaces themselves. While spaces do not literally “speak,” they do have rhetorical properties that encourage certain attitudes in their audiences (visitors and inhabitants).
Gregory Clark, building from Kenneth Burke’s observation that “there is implicit in the quality of a scene the quality of the action that is to take place within it” (Grammar 6-7), explains the rhetorical quality of space as working largely through identification: “A rhetorical motive is indeed present in places, and particularly in carefully designed places. That is because places prompt identifications, identifications comprise attitudes, and attitudes are at the root of the rhetorical” (204). This “rhetorical motive” implies that, like texts, spaces can persuade us, even if they only do so, as Clark explores in his work on National Park rhetoric, by inspiring a particular attitude. Indeed, while it is perhaps not a traditional focus of rhetorical study, modern rhetorical studies, ranging from scholars such as Roxanne Mountford and Gregory Clark to Carole Blair and Richard Marback, maintain that physical places do rhetorical work, acting in some ways as texts do.

But scholars differ in their location of the rhetorical power of spaces. One view articulates the rhetoric of spaces as determined discursively. Advocates of this perspective focus on how discourse shapes spaces to have certain rhetorical effects. For example, drawing from extensive personal observation of three Protestant female preachers, Mountford’s The Gendered Pulpit explores the masculine space of the pulpit. Prior to her three case studies, Mountford considers the process which marked the pulpit as a masculine space. She carefully examines literary descriptions of preaching spaces to show that male preachers speak from phallic, exalted, raised spaces, while female preachers offer their contributions in natural open spaces: women preachers are depicted as quite literally among, not above, their audiences (18-19). This study of the gendering of the space of the pulpit suggests that it is these texts that shaped the pulpit as a
masculine space; there is nothing inherent in the space itself that demands to be
interpreted thusly.4

Other scholars attribute the rhetorical power of spaces to their physical qualities.
For example, in her “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric’s
Materiality,” Carole Blair shows that the physical qualities of spaces have rhetorical
effects. Each memorial competes for visual attention with nearby objects, achieves
different effects in different weather and with crowds of different sizes, and, most
fundamentally, directs viewer’s eyes and bodies. Richard Marback extends Blair’s
themes in his analysis of the Joe Louis sculpture of the iconic raised black fist in Detroit.
Marback maintains that while the sculpture is conceptually open to interpretation, it is
overdetermined by its location within the city of Detroit (78). Viewers are not in fact free
to construct the sculpture in any way: the agency of interpretation is constrained by the
physical placement of the sculpture within a city with a history of racial conflict.5 These
works demonstrate that the actual physical qualities of the spaces have rhetorical effects,
whether or not those physical qualities and effects were foreseen by a rhetor, designer, or
architect. Certainly, one of the hallmarks of this scholarship is its emphasis on the
random nature of spatial rhetoric, its inability to be contained and controlled, its excess.

The second overarching body of work on rhetoric and space explores rhetoric
itself as spatial, or spatially inflected. While the works discussed above consider space as

4 More recently, Jessica Enoch has also addressed the gendering of spaces, tracing the different genderings
of the space of the school over the course of the 19th century. Enoch’s work focuses on the fluidity of
rhetorics of space: the space of the school is inherently neither masculine nor feminine, but is determined
by the dominant discourse to serve certain ends at certain times.

5 Thus, rather than merely attend to the power of representation over space, Marback calls for more
attention to the power of space over representation, explaining that postmodernism has lessened awareness
of and attention to the power of the material and the corporeal (78). Rhetoric’s spatiality and materiality,
Marback concludes, must be considered in any theory of rhetorical agency.
a rhetorical object, studying spaces as one might study other rhetorical texts, this second body of work considers all rhetorical texts (spoken or written) as spatial entities.

Rhetoricians have long been aware that physical spaces influence the production of rhetoric, particularly in the context of rhetoric performed for an audience, but more recent work attempts to more thoroughly theorize the role of the physical space in the rhetorical situation. Pointing out the tendency of rhetoricians to focus perhaps too intently on discourses about space, Nedra Reynolds calls for scholars of rhetoric and space to “engage with the metaphorical—ways to imagine space—without ignoring places and spaces—the actual locations where writers write, learners learn, and workers work” (3). Reynolds herself provides an important analysis of the spaces of composition: the classroom, service learning locales, and students’ own spaces of writing and rhetorical production. Here, the physical spaces where composing happens influence the kind of thinking and writing that is possible.

To be sure, the sense in which physical spaces are containers for rhetorical action matters: if a rhetor cannot be heard in a large hall, that reality will impact the rhetorical work that can or cannot happen there, to give just one obvious example. Yet other scholars argue that the effects of spaces on rhetoric are not so simply determined and are in fact grounded in previous rhetorical encounters.

To sum up, scholarship on the subject of rhetoric and space generally considers either the ways that space is rhetorical or the ways that rhetoric is spatial. While my

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6 Jerry Blitefield theorizes rhetorical space as a temporal situation within a physical situation (69). His examples show how physical spaces—their sizes, shapes, and layouts—limit what we can do rhetorically. 7 Jenny Edbauer’s reframing of the rhetorical situation into rhetorical ecologies combats the sense of places as bounded containers, arguing for a conception of cities and places as defined by movements and processes. Offering another angle on how discursive space factors into the rhetorical situation, Rosalyn Collings-Eves explores how geographic space functions as an aspect of identity and part of a rhetor’s ethos.
project is itself more clearly a part of the second group reviewed here—those scholars examining rhetoric as spatial—the first group, considering the rhetorics of particular places, is still relevant. If spaces have rhetorical effects on action (symbolic and otherwise), then one must understand to some degree the rhetorical work of spaces in order to understand how space affects rhetorical production and reception. Beyond this theoretical stance, the questions that drive my project derive from some more specific foci of scholars of rhetoric and space: specifically, works investigating rhetoric and space in gender and publics.

*Woman's Place and Public Space*

In this section, I delve a little deeper into some of the work in rhetorical studies that is crucial to this project. Specifically, I discuss those works that explore how gendered identity affects experience of a space and possibilities for resisting dominant spatial models. In the second half of the section I explore some of the work exploring space and publics, specifically.

My work builds explicitly on projects investigating the role of gender in shaping a rhetor’s relationship to certain spaces. Indeed, perhaps the largest body of work on rhetoric and space is driven by the insight of feminist scholars, such as Lorraine Code and Nan Johnson, that certain spaces are either overtly closed or implicitly unwelcoming to female rhetors. But gender is not the only lens of identity that affects how a given space will affect a rhetor. In this project, I consider the identities of my subjects not only as women, but also as members of non-normative intentional communities, European-born transplants to America, celibate religious pietists, German immigrants, and wealthy descendents of the Pilgrims. Still, the need to attend to spaces as exerting an influence not
only through their own properties but also according to the identities of those who would enter a space provides an heuristic for considering how space affects rhetorical production.

A second insight afforded by previous works on gender, space, and rhetoric is an awareness of the ways that inhabitants and users of a space can fight back against or even subvert the dominant conceptions of that space. Feminist scholars of rhetoric and space have shown how women strategically negotiate gendered spaces. Mountford’s work on female preachers illustrates that her subjects managed to, performatively, work both with and against the masculine troping of the spaces. These insights shaped my approach to my own subjects, an approach that presupposes that the ideologies and rhetorics of spaces are in some part shaped by the people, actions and words that constitute them. My study explores, then, how rhetors can strategically respond to the spatial constraints of a rhetorical context, possibly lessening the power of those constraints for subsequent rhetors.

However important the role of identity in shaping a rhetor’s relationship to a given space, the ultimate goal of my project is to focus not on how identity shapes an individual’s rhetorical trajectory, but on how space affects the construction of crucial rhetorical alliances. Identity is important, certainly, but equally important is the need to bridge identity differences to form alliances and coalitions that benefit from the diverse views, perspectives, and, not least, power of the individuals involved. Moya Lloyd’s Beyond Identity Politics illustrates this crucial point. Lloyd’s work on feminism and its

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8 Similarly, the women rhetors in Collings-Eves’s project face rhetorical choices as to which discursive conceptions of the American West they will employ in their own speaking and writing. The circulating representations of the West were a part of the rhetorical situation that these women had to address, but also had the opportunity to revise.
struggles with identity politics argues that group bonds are formed not through intentional attempts to “create” publics, but through shared political action (which often involves forming or joining a public). People do not come together initially because of a shared identity and then determine that they have shared interests and begin to engage in political struggle. On the contrary, it is in the process of negotiating shared concerns that people begin to conceive of themselves as having a shared identity or a source of identification (14). It is one of the tricks of discursive activity that after the fact it seems that this identity was prior to the political action that actually consolidated it. A study merely focusing on how identity factors into the interplay of rhetoric and space would require overlooking the cross-identity alliances that are behind many influential rhetorical endeavors. Thus, this project engages the diverse practices and possibilities of public formation, not just identity-based alliances.

One last crucial touchstone for this project is work that focuses on the public-building properties of spaces. Just as Benedict Anderson’s work suggests that nations are formed through the consumption of “public” texts, this scholarship maintains that the public, yet anonymous, “consumption” of spaces, monuments, and tourist destinations also works to constitute publics. Leading scholars in this area are colleagues and sometime co-authors Gregory Clark and Michael Halloran. In his *Rhetorical Landscapes in America*, for example, Clark suggests that traveling to popular tourist destinations, such as Shaker communities and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, helped Americans to feel at home in an expansive nation. Americans’ sense of nation was comprised in part by abstract principles but in practice from their own experiences of people and spaces within that nation. Along similar lines, Michael Halloran’s “Writing
History on the Landscape” examines the conflict over the rhetorical message of the Tour Road at Saratoga. While Roosevelt’s initial monuments aimed to represent the glory, pomp, and heroics of the battle, the National Park Service’s more recent addition of audiotapes to the tour fight this conception, featuring the tales of nameless soldiers and aides: the “everyman,” rather than the hero. Halloran’s study evokes Roosevelt’s and the later custodians’ attempts to “write” on the landscape, shaping the rhetorical experience of future visitors and their notion of the historic battle. By demonstrating that spaces play a role in helping Americans identify with one another as Americans (ie, as part of the American public), these works gesture towards space as an important factor in the often unarticulated identifications that predispose us to heed or ignore certain rhetorical appeals.

*Reviving the Rhetorical Public*

This study presumes that a main function of rhetoric is to form alliances and lead people to identify themselves as members of large groups consisting of unseen anonymous like-minded others. Thus, it is the responsibility of rhetorical scholars to explore the workings of this process. Though certainly publics after their creation might pre-exist particular rhetorical acts, the rhetorical construction of publics suggests that each rhetor has the opportunity to shift or recast alliances and understandings of specific publics. In this section, I briefly describe the foundational concept of a public and some of the critiques and revisions to that concept that I believe can make publics theory useful to rhetorical studies.

Let me begin with a few terminological notes. In this study, I use the term “public” to refer to a group of people united by discourse surrounding a shared concern. I
argue that there are many competing publics in play at a given time, and so the plural form will appear from time to time. When I use the term “the public sphere,” I am referring to the national network of intersecting publics that comprises the larger sphere of public discourse. Finally, the work of scholars studying these concerns is generally termed “publics theory,” and so my project will refer to “publics theorists” and “scholars of publics,” when gesturing to that body of work.

Despite the claims of many scholars that a true public sphere never actually existed, the concept of publics remains useful for rhetorical scholars. For Jurgen Habermas, participating in the public sphere involves putting aside one’s personal identity and selfish concerns to debate over the common good. In *The Public and Its Problems*, one of the first works to explore publics specifically in terms of rhetoric, John Dewey defined the public as a group of people who didn’t know each other on a face to face basis but had shared concerns insofar as action of one person might have unintended consequences on the lives of the others (12-13). Dewey articulates rhetoric as a crucial part of not just the deliberation within an existing public but also the formation of that public in the first place. Dewey’s pragmatic focus on publics as groups of people united by a sense of shared “effects” stands in stark contrast to Jurgen Habermas’s more idealistic description of the public sphere.

More recent scholars of rhetoric and publics build upon Dewey’s sense that it is rhetoric that must forge the intuitive sense of shared “effects” that grounds a public. For example, scholars of constitutive rhetoric are informally if not formally aligned with publics theory in forwarding a view of publics not as pre-existing entities, but as formed by and through rhetoric. Maurice Charland’s work shows that the rhetorical texts arguing
for a sovereign Quebec state posit their audience of French Canadians as the *Peuple Québécois*, as people of Quebec whose very identity includes the necessity of sovereignty. Charland draws upon Kenneth Burke’s concept of “identification” and Louis Althusser’s “interpellation” to explain how these texts that might be read as appealing to an already existing identity in fact create that identity rhetorically. They create a people, the “people of Quebec,” which then seems logically prior to its own discursive construction (139-40). The creation of this public, of course, requires that the audience agree to be interpellated in this way and “choose” to identify with the proposed identity; such constitutive rhetorics fail when the audience rejects the proffered identity. From the standpoint of rhetorical analysis, then, Charland argues that rhetoricians should view texts as constructing publics—or attempting to—and not just appealing to already existing publics based in a non-linguistic identity.

*Anonymous Identities, Material Publics*

This project builds on the sometimes problematic, yet crucial, understanding of publics as characterized by anonymity. In most formulations, publics are understood as constituted through circulation of discourses between individuals who bracket their individual differences, often identity markers such as race, class, gender, sexuality, profession, age, marital status, and so on. It is one of the challenges of this project to acknowledge the anonymous *ethos* of publics without erasing (or implying the erasure of) identity. My work builds on revisionist theories of publics that emphasize the anonymous nature of publics and the continuing significance of identity.

While most famously outlined in Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere, the idea of bracketing personal identity markers persists in other theorizations of publics,
as well. One example is Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which provides a model for nationhood as an imagined community, though his definition of such an imagined community can and has been applied equally convincingly outside of the national formulation to publics more generally. For Anderson, an imagined community is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (7). The community is imagined insofar as any given member will never meet most other members and is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship between individuals who do not know one another on a personal level. The bracketing function of this nationalism is exemplified by Anderson’s hallmark metaphor: the tomb of the unknown soldier (9-10). He notes that we all know the nationality of the unknown soldier as German, American, or belonging to the nation in which his tomb resides, but that otherwise the soldier is generic and interchangeable; we don’t want to know his name, what town he’s from, his age, or whether he has any children. In order to form a public of national citizens, those other identity markers are bracketed. Likewise, public deliberation supposedly requires a bracketing of status differentials and identity markers so that individuals communicate not as unique people but purely as members of the public.

Since these formative models of publics and nations were proposed, there have been many critiques of such bracketing as an impossible and thus discriminatory ideal. To return to Anderson’s unknown soldier, feminist critiques have pointed out that it is not only his nationality that is assumed, but his gender as well. Joanne P. Sharp notes that Anderson doesn’t talk about the construction of the national citizen, but the citizen he presupposes without explicit discussion is gendered. Thus, the unknown soldier is not totally anonymous. In fact, we could probably posit several other identities to him as
well: he is likely imagined as young and heterosexual in addition to being male. Linda McDowell likewise critiques Anderson’s model of horizontal comradeship for the relationship between citizens in the nation; this comradeship is theoretically gender-neutral, but carries with it associations with masculine solidarity (195).

Besides unmasking these theoretically anonymous models as disguising dominant identity constructions, scholars have shown that along with this norm of anonymity comes a corresponding privileging of dominant individuals. For who is it that has the easiest time seeming anonymous, unmarked? Michael Warner demonstrates that this “principle of negativity” is available only to those “whose social role allows such self-negation (this is, to persons defined by whiteness maleness, and capital” (42). As McDowell elaborates, “dominated groups are defined as nothing but their bodies, and seen as imprisoned in an undesirable body, whereas the dominant groups occupy an unmarked neutral, universal and disembodied position, which is white and masculine by default” (48). In other words, being able to seem unmarked is a consequence of privilege.

Nancy Fraser’s work on the public sphere provides one of the most incisive critiques and reformulations of the concept. Her most important intervention is to note that there has never been a public sphere where differences of class, race, gender, and so on were bracketed and set aside. She argues that rather than attempting to achieve this impossible (and discriminatory) normative goal, public discourse should thematize difference and attend to its role in shaping public discourse and policy. Her second intervention is to point out the exclusivity of the notion of the “common good,” which serves to police the boundaries of public and private and relegate the concerns of women and minorities to the private sphere. Finally, Fraser argues that an overarching public
sphere never existed. Taking Fraser’s lead, rhetorical scholars can (and have) adapt(ed) the concept of an overarching public sphere debating a collective good to a view of multiple, competing publics and counterpublics.

Surveying Feminist Geography and Spatial Theory: A Spatial Model

In the previous section, I explored the literature in rhetoric and composition that this project responds to and builds upon. This section introduces some of the major theoretical approaches to space itself that inform my methods in this project. Keeping in mind Richard Marback’s directive for scholars of material rhetoric to attend to the power of representation over space and space over representation, this project turns to work in feminist and critical geography and spatial theory that contribute to that goal. Given the focus of this project on gender, I begin with an exploration of some of the approaches to space developed by feminist geographers who rework the relationship between space and identity. Second, I introduce the taxonomy of space, the spatial terminology that I employ in the remaining body chapters.

*Approaches to Space*

The work in feminist and critical geography that informs this project starts at a very basic level: how do we approach space, and what affects those approaches? In this section, I’ll explore some common critiques of traditional geographical (and lay) approaches to space. Second, I’ll introduce two key terms that I use to distinguish theoretical approaches to space throughout this project: essentialist and rhetorical approaches. Finally, I’ll relate some ideas about how identity may play a role in determining what approach to space an individual employs.
One of the first and most crucial interventions of feminist geographers is a critique of geographical methodologies. Specifically, they target the traditional geographical (and lay) view that spaces are transparent and empty. Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography* is perhaps the most comprehensive undermining of the sexist norms of geographical methodology, which is based on a sense of space as transparent and abstract. Such a view of space prompts a masculinist approach on the part of the geographer, who is bent on revealing, penetrating, and exposing a given space (4-10). In this view, the geographer can distance himself from his object of study and know it objectively; there are no errors or peculiarities of perception that stand in the way of thoroughly unmasking a given space. Geographical knowledge thus produced tends to feminize spaces and landscapes, depicting the geographer as laying bare the passive and helpless space. Feminist geographers, like feminist scholars across disciplines, advocate for a more situated positioning of the geographer vis-à-vis their space of study.

For the purposes of this study, I refer to approaches that treat space as empty and transparent as “essentialist.” I use the word “essentialist” consciously, drawing from the conceptions of essentialist approaches to identity. On the most basic level, feminist geography notes that the construction of the identities of places and of people is eerily similar, that “both people and places are gendered and so social and aptial relationships are mutually constituted (30). Like other feminist scholars, Kathleen Kirby remarks on the powerful Enlightenment conception of the self as always already bounded and internally coherent, going out into the world to encounter other equally bounded and coherent subjects and spaces. Just as this model marks the identities of people as supposedly authentic and coherent, similar essentialist ideologies are often applied to
places. Massey explores how such notions of places as having authentic, internal identities in need of protection from encroaching neighbors and global flows of capital and people often undergird reactionary political projects.

I contrast an essentialist approach to space with a rhetorical approach. A rhetorical view of space follows from Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that space is socially produced. Just as feminist geographers critique the transparent, empty spaces of traditional geography, Lefebvre critiques philosophers’ conceptions of space as abstract space, divorced from lived spatial practice. This abstract space overestimates discourse, relegating space to the mental realm. Concluding that (social) space is a (social) product, Lefebvre maintains that space thus produced is a tool of thought and action and a means of production and control (7). A rhetorical approach thus recognizes the social aspect of space and better acknowledges the role of lived spatial practice. While powerful, social space always escapes in part from those who would use it; it cannot be mastered completely.

Finally, feminist geographers have asked what determines the different approaches that people employ when considering space. One perspective suggests that a person’s identity may shape his or her very relationship to space. In a move that can be read as itself bordering on essentialism, these scholars argue that women (and other minorities) may actually have a different relationship to space as a phenomenon. Gillian Rose references Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the female gaze and asks whether this female gaze

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9 As always, essentialism is a hazard in work that aims to make larger claims about the power of identity. Following Gayatri Spivak, Gillian Rose proposes strategic essentialism as a tool for scholars whose work treads this ground. Strategic essentialism maintains that in order to combat the various guises of sexism (what Massey terms “flexible sexism”), feminists must be ready to employ both a more essentialist notion of “Woman” as a coherent identity and arguments based around the differences of “women.” Such an approach assumes that there is some truth in generalizations according to gender and, simultaneously, that there is endless diversity within genders.
gaze might approach not only images, but also spaces, differently from the male gaze. Rose wonders whether women’s gaze at landscapes, nature, places, cities might be distinct from men’s, more concerned with details or relational spaces, not broad vistas that attempt to master and cover a space, to penetrate and know it all (110-12). In “Remapping Subjectivity,” Kirby similarly suggests that women and other oppressed people might perceive space as consisting more of potential obstacles than of pathways; they’ve learned that they need to be always aware of the dark places that might prove dangerous, always instinctively locating the nearest exit. Thus, women and minorities might be expected to be more aware of the social power of spaces and less likely to perceive them as empty and transparent.

A Taxonomy of Space

As I noted above, spatial theorist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre also combats the notion of space as transparent and empty. Such a notion implies that spaces’ meanings can be determined by their users and that the spaces those users confront are not already laden with cultural and historical weight prior to that interaction. Lefebvre replaces transparent space with a model of the production of space that includes perceived, conceived, and lived space. This model provides a jumping off point for my theorization of a spatial rhetoric, a useful frame of reference as I explain the four key terms of my own spatial analysis: abstract space, spatial practice, projected space, and social space.

The first central term for my spatial analysis is abstract space. Abstract space deals with the way a space is mentally conceived. Abstract space aligns with Lefebvre’s notion of conceived space, space as imagined by powerful agencies. For example, the
abstract space of a city is the city as imagined by city planner, geographers, and architects. Abstract space is commonly associated with powerful agencies and institutions. In this study, I use abstract space to talk about the ruling conceptions of space behind an intentional community—the abstract space of Brook Farm refers to the conception of the Farm’s space according to its founders. Given its focus on mental conceptions of a space, abstract space might also be thought of as ideological space.

The second central aspect of space is spatial practice. Lefebvre refers to this concept as perceived space, comprised of an individual’s physical actions and movements through space. An individual’s spatial practice is of course limited in part by the abstract spaces in which s/he operates, but spatial practice remains the space of the user, and one of the main means for resisting the powerful agencies that shape the ruling ideologies of a given space. In this study, when I talk about spatial practice, I consider the extent to which the women in my study are able to travel, the ways they move in and through the spaces of communities, homes, and cities.

In Lefebvre’s model, these two aspects of space (abstract space and spatial practice) combine to create social space, space as it is lived and experienced by its inhabitants. But for my purposes, it is important to consider one more aspect of space before turning to the overall combination of these forces in the experience of social space. In considering spaces as rhetorical, it is important to consider the various audiences spaces have. The spaces of intentional communities, certainly, are in large part determined by their planners (through abstract space) and their inhabitants (through spatial practice), but a third perspective is offered by those outsiders who visit the community’s space. As I quickly observed, outsiders’ conceptions of the space of a given
community are not always tied to the abstract space behind that community or the lived spatial practices of its inhabitants. Yet outsider perspectives were an important force in intentional communities, which often became tourist attractions. Thus, I offer the term “projected space” to refer to the view of a space according to powerful outside observers. In my study, projected space is deduced from travel logs and published accounts describing the space of an intentional community, and these outside attitudes, prejudices, and misunderstandings form a powerful force acting on the space of the community itself.

Social space, then, the space as experienced by an inhabitant, is the product of the aforementioned forces. This experienced space is the result of a combination of ideological views espoused from above, the spatial practices of the user herself, and the intrusion of outside interpretations of the space. While the term social space is not employed as often in this project, it is helpful to keep in mind that all the individual aspects of space that are traced do not operate in isolation, but produce to combine the overall experience of a space.

Considering Utopia: Histories of Utopian Thought and Action

In any study of intentional communities, it is important to map out the proposed relation of these projects to utopianism proper. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the context of 19th-century intentional communities, specifically.

Nineteenth-century America embodied utopianism (of all kinds) in its prime. In this section, I explore the interrelations between utopian literature and utopian projects (intentional communities). I suggest that utopianism is more widespread both in its goals and its effects (particularly in 19th-century America) than is generally suggested. More
specifically, I explore the larger social goals and movements associated with utopian thinkers. I deviate from more traditional accounts of utopian communities by suggesting that these communities are linked with larger social processes and are not the isolated pockets of fervent unpopular beliefs that histories make them out to be. On the whole, the project aims to counter the sense of utopianism as isolated impractical dreaming and intentional communities as wholly opposed to their surrounding societies.

Nineteenth-century Americans were well aware of a utopian tradition of literature and thought. Followers of Thomas More’s prototype aimed to contribute to the tradition he had begun. For example, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* inspired many other utopian novels, such as Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and William Dean Howells’ *A Traveler from Altruria*. Similarly, the Labadists of Maryland, a community founded in 1683, inspired later communities such as Johann Kelpius’s Woman in the Wilderness community and Conrad Beissel’s Ephrata. George Rapp’s Harmony Society and Joseph Bimeler’s Zoar Society descended from the same branch of religious separatism in Germany, and many leaders of religious intentional communities visited one another and exchanged advice and thoughts on communal living and faith. This community of utopian thought and experimentation soon expanded to include secular communities as well. Robert Owen, in founding his New Harmony on land previously owned by George Rapp, exchanged letters with the religious leader about the practicalities and ethical issues concerned with communal living. Owen’s community, in turn, inspired the abolitionist proto-feminist Frances Wright to start her own inter-racial community, Nashoba, in Tennessee. The founders of Brook Farm had also been inspired by a visit to
New Harmony, PA. And so on. While communities were aware of and fostered their participation in this larger network, many were founded for more particular goals.

Scholars of intentional communities have long assumed that the goal of an intentional or utopian community is to establish the right way to live and set up a sustainable community that will continue for generations (often until the return of Christ for the millennium of his reign on earth). These assumptions ground work like Rosa Beth Kanter’s, which provides the guideline of thirty years’ existence for an intentional community to be marked “successful.” Longevity, however, should not be the only criterion for success. More recent work, most notably Donald Pitzer’s edited collection, *America’s Communal Utopias*, attempts to deconstruct this bias in historical work on intentional communities. Pitzer applies a developmental approach to intentional communities, proffering a reading of communal living as a common stage in many social movements. In this reading, the groups are engaged in a larger struggle for change in society, but find that, due to harsh contexts and backlash, it is preferable to consolidate their goods and live communally for a time. The decision to cease the communal lifestyle, in this reading, would not necessarily mean the “failure” of the group to achieve their ends, but might merely suggest that that particular stage in the movement had accomplished its goals and moved on to a new stage (12-13). In my own work, I embrace Pitzer’s developmental approach, and, given my focus on larger American publics, my project particularly benefits from the awareness of the broader social goals of intentional communities.

Contrary to the common view of intentional community participants as desiring to be shut off from society, many desired to reform their societies and had a widespread
impact upon America as a whole. Etienne Cabet’s *Voyage to Icaria*, which inspired many Icarian communities in the U.S., began as a social movement in France consisting mostly of artisans and shopkeepers who immigrated to America after losing the 1848 election. Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* provided the impetus for thousands of nationalist clubs around the country, whose followers were a major political player in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Robert Owen, according to Donald Pizter, was no romantic idealist, but was incredibly attuned to the beliefs of those around him, and adapted his reform ideas to the American context by rhetorically embracing such popular views as phrenology and millennialism. Certainly, of the three communities studied here, the philosophical goals of the Transcendentalists at Brook Farm and the social goals of Frances Wright’s inter-racial Nashoba community hoped to radically alter American life at the time.

I want to avoid contending, however, that most intentional communities were spawned as a means to advance a particular social movement; just as often, individuals and groups, immigrants in particular, formed communities as a means to adjust to a harsh literal and social climate, an unfamiliar language and economic system, difficulties with employment, and so on. Of the communities explored in this project, the Harmony Society of George and Gertrude Rapp best fits this model. Nevertheless, the rhetorical and practical impact of such utopian communities on the American landscape is significant. As Pearl Bartelt explains, Jewish agricultural colonies served as a means to help Jews escaping the Russian pogroms to adapt to life in America and to adopt a rural lifestyle unavailable to many other immigrants because of their lack of knowledge of the land and language. These communities affected the settling of Jews in America, an effect
that is still evident in the dispersion of Jews in rural areas today. Similarly, Robert Weisbrot describes the communities founded as a part of Father Divine’s Peace Movement, a religious African-American movement that used religious beliefs and unity to combat poverty in the Depression. These communities took up race and class issues and, though they ceased their communal lifestyles, continued to address their central concerns on a larger scale through the civil rights movement. Such accounts counter the view that intentional communities “fail” when communal living ceases: as in the case of Father Divine’s communities, communal living often shelters sparks that later blaze into a larger movement for change.

Historicizing Rhetoric: Methods in Feminist Rhetorical Historiography

This project joins a tradition of feminist scholarship in rhetoric and composition that approaches the work of history-writing consciously and carefully. In this final section, I’ll review some of the scholarship that informs this project’s approach to what I call “provisional historiography.” At the heart of this approach is a faith that histories accomplish things, that scholars can and must consider the goals of the histories they construct. Still, as I will explain, this consciousness about intent and purpose does not constitute permission to do away with rigorous standards for evidence and good faith efforts to construct histories that are, to the best or our knowledge and information, reasonable and plausible. I end by considering one of the recurring debates within feminist historiographical work, a debate phrased in large part as a question of subject selection: can accounts of individual women rhetors remake the rhetorical canon, or do they just add variety without questioning our standards of what belongs in rhetorical
history, what counts as rhetoric worthy of analysis? I relocate this tension in the realm of methodology and argue that, when it comes to attempts to write politically-informed historiography, methods trump subject selection.

_Telling it Crooked, Getting it Straight_

Feminist historiography presumes that the histories we tell matter—that our understanding of the past shapes our sense of agency in the present and for the future. My approach in this project is what I would call a provisional historiographical approach. In this section, I’ll explore some of the work that has motivated this stance.

While critical approaches aim to provide more accurate accounts, provisional approaches aim to be useful. Let me begin by explaining critical history a little more fully. Despite their critical and questioning nature, James Berlin’s histories suggest that they achieve a better grasp of the truth than other tellings. All tellings are interested, so the story goes, but some are better than others, or have the moral high ground. Sharon Crowley marks her _Methodical Memory_ as “a deconstruction, not a history,” but her project of deconstruction works to strip away ideology to reveal a more accurate account of how invention came to assume its modern form. This air of “stripping away” signifies the sense that whatever is underneath is closer to the truth, even if the truth itself is inevitably inaccessible and unknowable.

Though I am indebted to critical scholars who have offered such valuable frameworks for showing how histories matter, I embrace a provisional historiographical approach in my own work. One innovator who models provisional historiography is Susan Jarratt. In _Rereading the Sophists_, Jarratt foregrounds that her provisional account of Kennedy, Plato, and Aristotle will not be sympathetic to them, but that her aim is to
tell a slanted history. Her goal, to suggest the value of the sophists for rhetorical study, will affect how she treats the current leading historians and figures in the field who have, perhaps inadvertently, caused us to overlook and discount the sophists. Her account doesn’t aim to remove ideology and thus reveal a more accurate overall picture—she merely promises to usefully skew our perspective by foregrounding an unusual subject.

Provisional historiography, in Jarratt’s model, proceeds responsibly towards stated, established goals; the process of creating a provisional history is not a free-for-all, an exercise in creative writing. Telling a provisional history, Jarratt cautions, doesn’t mean consciously neglecting data or information that doesn’t fit the desired model. Scholars have a responsibility to create plausible narratives, but also to acknowledge their provisionality. My goal in this project, then, is to shape my collected data and impressions into plausible, provisional, goal-driven narratives and to foreground the provisional and goal-driven nature of my work.

In order to highlight the provisional nature of the story being told, historiographers must, in Kellner’s words, “make history less inevitable.” Similarly, Jarratt calls for a “denial of progressive continuity,” the sense that because one event followed another, it was the only logical outcome of the prior event. Historians work so diligently to link contexts and events that it is easy to write a story as if it was the only possible chain of events for that time and place. The model of history as the history of the “winning side” ignores, as Takis Poulakos so eloquently argues, the constitutive role of counterpositions in the history of rhetoric (and in history more generally). In such cases, we do our work too well: tying up loose ends into a semblance of inevitability works against an awareness of the myriad possibilities in any situation. Similarly, our methods
encourage us to attribute causality as simply as possible, rather than acknowledging the myriad factors at play in a given situation.

In embracing a provisional approach to my own historiography, I do not mean to imply that I have not been shaped and inspired by critical histories. My feminist approach is necessarily critical, but I work to avoid the assumption that the lens of gender through which I view my subjects necessarily reveals a more accurate story than another lens might proffer. As a provisional historiography, this study aims, first, to contribute to a larger project in the field of work increasing our awareness of women’s diverse rhetorical contributions. Second, I hope to forward an understanding of material rhetoric, which I pursue through my conscious attention to space. There will be times in this study, certainly, where the story I tell is determined by my attention and sensitivity to gender ideologies and spatial factors, where another historian might see market forces or national identity as the motivating impetus. That other history might be just as accurate as the one I tell here, but it would not advance my commitment to valuing women’s rhetorics and exploring rhetoric’s materiality.

Canonical Versus Communal Rhetorics

In selecting subjects for analysis, feminist historiographers must face questions regarding the degrees of oppression, marginality, or privilege associated with their subjects and thus with what their subjects can contribute to the larger feminist project. Feminist theorist Sandra Harding suggests that oppressed subjects have a unique standpoint and that their contributions should be epistemologically privileged over the standpoints of dominant groups. This general theory is visible in rhetorical histories that privilege the standpoints of those on the margins as best illustrating both the margins and
the center. Cheryl Glenn’s *Rhetoric Retold* illustrates how including and exploring the rhetorical contributions of women illuminates the boundaries of the “map” of rhetoric that seemed invisible or intuitive (rather than consciously constructed) from the center. For example, she explains that those who would attack Aspasia’s addition to the rhetorical canon for the lack of primary sources should re-examine their rationale for including Socrates, and if Sappho is excluded for being a poet, then what are we doing with Homer (23)?

Nevertheless, a counter-stance to the claim that historiography should privilege marginal standpoints is offered by Takis Poulakos and Laura Gray-Rosendale and Sibylle Gruber. In their collection, *Alternative Rhetorics*, Gray-Rosendale and Gruber point out that no rhetoric is completely alternative: all rhetorics respond to and shape the canon. In her essay in Vitanza’s collection, Poulakos similarly illustrates how scholars can trace the silenced groups in histories through dominant rhetorical attempts to constrain and contain them. In these works, the margin/center dichotomy is shown to be relational, so that the center is shaped by what is going on at the margins, and vice versa. Along the same lines, C. Jan Swearingen reads public denouncements of women’s public speaking as evidence that women must, indeed, have been speaking publicly—thus, these denouncements described a “detestable—and not fictional—practice” (26).

My stance on the question of the standpoint of my own subjects is both practically and politically motivated. Since many oppressed groups in history have had their works destroyed, I feel compelled to argue that some of their contributions can be reconstructed, as Poulakos suggests, by tracing their silences in dominant discourses. From a more political angle, I find that standpoint epistemology makes alliances difficult. Explaining
to people in dominant groups that their perspective “weighs less” because of their membership in that group seems a poor way to construct coalitions. Rather, I find that showing that dominant and oppressed groups’ rhetorics operate in a dialectical fashion, with each responding to the other and to the overarching systems of power and difference that construct us all, is much less alienating for members of oppressed groups.

The subjects of this study are, like most people, marginalized in some times, spaces, and contexts and privileged in others. They all produced public rhetoric that was valued enough to be preserved, which marks them as somewhat privileged vis-à-vis women as a class. They were all privileged within certain communities, but not necessarily with regard to those they hoped to affect. Frances Wright moved in influential transatlantic circles—among General Lafayette, Jeremy Bentham, and Robert Owen, among others—but was marked as scandalous and unfeminine in the American public eye. Gertrude Rapp was a member of the “royal family” in the Harmony Society, as the grand-daughter of the community’s founder. Still, within American society as a whole, the Harmonists were objects of ridicule and xenophobia, as members of a German-speaking, celibate, millenialist religious sect. Abby Morton Diaz, descendent of one of the original Pilgrim families, enjoyed a position of privilege among the leading philosophers and thinkers of Concord, MA—Thoreau, Emerson, and Fuller, to name just a few. Yet Diaz was asked to leave the Transcendental community at Brook Farm and lived a hard middle-aged life as a single mother of three children, an experience that shaped her later activism in the women’s club movement.

Subject selection is particularly important for feminist historiographers because they aim to reconstitute not only the canon, but also the rules of inclusion and exclusion
that shaped it in the first place. In her remapping of the rhetorical tradition, Cheryl Glenn aims to both situate women rhetors among their (canonically valued) male contemporaries and to question what counts as a valuable rhetorical text or contribution. Similarly, Andrea Lunsford notes that women were always practicing rhetoric, but just not always using forms, strategies, and goals that were recognizable as rhetorical (6). One challenge for feminist historiography, then, is to determine what texts we want to champion and how we assess rhetorical competence or innovation.

Feminist scholars offer many different models for selecting texts for rhetorical analysis—and inclusion in rhetoric’s canon. In her groundbreaking work on proto-feminist rhetoric, Man Cannot Speak for Her, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that she judged the rhetors in her study not by whether or not they achieved their aims (a method centering on intention), but by their adaptation to the situations and constraints they faced (rhetorical flexibility and ingenuity). Barbara Biesecker, in a critique of Kohrs’ work, suggests that its focus on individual female rhetors runs the risk of creating an impression that only a few exceptional women had rhetorical abilities. Of even more concern, Biesecker notes, is the tendency of individualistic models to elide women’s collective rhetorical practices (arguably women’s most common means of intervening in the public sphere) from our histories (“Coming to Terms” 143-44). Without a sense of the methodology that could trace a truly collective rhetoric, I do want to suggest a few ways that feminist historiographers might attend to this individual/communal tension.

One approach works consciously to acknowledge that the individual, isolated speaking subject is a necessary fiction. I believe this is the approach Biesecker herself suggests later in the public dialogue with Campbell, when she explains that scholars need
not completely abandon the speaking subject, but simply work harder to ground those exemplary moments in the collective rhetorical practices of women’s (and men’s) everyday lives (“Negotiating” 238). Susan Miller’s approach to individuals as “assuming” subject positions—with assumption connoting both presumption and submissiveness—also provides a model for viewing the independent speaking subject not as stable and eternal but as a temporarily fixed position assumed through discourse.

In this project, the lens of publics theory works to combat any propensity toward writing a history of “great women,” rather than contributing a sense of these women as several among the vast hordes of women whose everyday lives bore rhetorical significance. Anne Ruggles Gere’s Intimate Practices provides an example of another work of feminist historiography that heeds women’s collective rhetorical efforts. Gere views women’s clubs in the late 19th and early 20th century as participating in forming publics through their literacy practices. As such, the clubs “processed” concepts pertaining to the larger society’s “common good:” debating immigration, (re)defining womanhood, and developing consumerism (5). Similarly, by linking the individual rhetors I examine to the publics they joined and deserted, piloted and promoted, I avoid attributing seemingly individual rhetorical choices to uncanny genius, grounding them in the texts and contexts crucial to any individual rhetorical moment. Ultimately, I find that the fetishizing of the individual rhetor that Biesecker rightly fears is more a question of methodology than of subject selection: whether examining the Gettysburg address or the annals of a pro-temperance women’s club, a historian could construct a narrative of timeless heroes or communally-based everywomen.
Chapter 3

Frances Wright, Idealist and Outcast: Experimenting with Space

from the Interracial Nashoba to Freethought in New York

Who can look without disgust and abhorrence on such an one as Fanny Wright, with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected, and feeling no need of protection, mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with bare-faced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly[ . . . ] There she stands, with brazen front and brawny arms, attacking the safeguards of all that is venerable and sacred in religion, all that is safe and wise in law, all that is pure and lively in domestic virtue[ . . . ] I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of a woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting.


Frances (Fanny) Wright, a Scottish-born female radical, was one of the most perplexing, astonishing, and irreconcilable figures of the 19th century. She garnered early fame from the bestselling account of her 1818 visit to America. Inspired by America’s promise, Wright returned in 1824 and, one year later, founded an interracial anti-slavery community. Through her Nashoba community, in Tennessee, Wright hoped to demonstrate the feasibility of gradual emancipation of America’s slaves, thus removing the one imperfection from her adopted nation. Unfortunately, Nashoba proved unpalatable to the general public. The community was labeled a “free love colony” and ended in international scandal. Yet Wright went on to forge a career as an infamous orator and co-editor of the *Free Enquirer*, a newspaper at the fore of the freethought movement.10

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10 The freethought movement, discussed in more detail below, was a reaction against the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening—freethinkers encouraged rational over religious grounds for belief. See Brown for a general overview.
Given her radical agenda, Wright was destined to cause a stir. That she had numerous detractors is hardly surprising. Yet there is an interesting trend in the attacks on Wright: they often focus on her physicality—her appearance and spatial movements. Wright commonly wore Turkish trousers and a tunic belted with a sash (see Figure 1). Her uncommon pants emphasized her legs, and, by extension, her movement, her agency to direct her own body (28). Posed next to a horse, as in this image, Wright’s pants suggest that she is ready to straddle the horse, in unbecoming, unfeminine fashion, and go where she wishes. Indeed, it wasn’t just her dress that provoked harsh critiques: Wright was equally impugned for violating the gendered spatial norms of 19th-century America. Besides assuming the space of the public podium, Wright traveled internationally without a chaperone, founded a community in the Tennessee wilderness, and established what she termed a “Hall of Science” in New York. By situating herself unabashedly and independently in spaces traditionally barred to women, Wright became marked as unnatural, unfeminine, and potentially dangerous.11 The above passage from Catharine Beecher, a contemporary but more conservative female reformer, offers a vivid example of the almost desperate denunciations of Wright’s breach of feminine conduct. Further, Beecher’s rant illustrates how Wright’s lack of femininity in her dress, bearing and spatial movements (traveling without protection, mingling with men) were paired in the public imagination with a threat to public order (religion, law, domestic virtue).

11 Ryan’s discussion of how 19th-century women were coded as dangerous through their association with certain spaces—streetwalkers, public women—is suggestive of the linkage between female virtue and space in this era (Chapter Two, Women in Public).
Intriguingly, scholarship recovering Fanny Wright’s rhetorical legacy follows, to a certain extent, the model set by Wright’s contemporaries. Such accounts comment primarily on her harem pants or on her role as one of the first women rhetors to address a promiscuous audience (an audience composed of both women and men). Few scholars of
women’s and feminist rhetorics have offered a sustained analysis of Wright’s writing or speeches. This relative inattention can be justified in part by Wright’s ambivalent relationship to proto-feminist thinkers in her own time. Denounced by press and pulpit as an “unnatural woman,” a “female monster,” a “lady-man,” and a “petticoated politician,” Wright became a spectre for later feminists to avoid. The term “Fanny Wrightism” became an epithet for “ridiculous extremism.” The result is, as Robert Connors notes, that Frances Wright is “less known today than any other major female figure of the 19th century—a footnote to other, more understandable nineteenth century feminists” (31).

Those scholars who offer more detailed analyses of Wright’s rhetoric tend to read her radical strategies as alienating her from her contemporaries. For example, Connors calls her approach solipsistic, claiming that she never forged bonds with a particular community and was uninterested in any solutions but her own (47-8). Communication scholars Cary Voss and Robert Rowland offer a more sympathetic portrait. Still, their view that Wright’s own public rejection paved the way for other, less problematic female rhetors continues the image of Wright as ahead of (and thus apart from) her contemporaries.12 In this study, I hope to go beyond noting Wright’s unusual uses of space to examine how those moves functioned rhetorically, and to explore her leadership in the freethought movement as an often-overlooked brief moment of success in Wright’s rhetorical career.

In this chapter, then, I return to the overarching questions of this study. First, what is the role of space in women’s participation in 19th-century intentional communities and publics? And, second, how did physical communities shape their rhetoric, especially their

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12 Mattingly offers a contrasting view, claiming that because Wright was so vilified for her masculine dress and violation of other gender norms, she further normalized gendered divisions, rather than breaking them down (32).
rhetoric relating to larger publics? Wright is in some ways unique in my study, as the leader of her own intentional community. For this reason, I am able to explore what went into the creation of this space, a space I understand as a kind of rhetorical argument. The first section of the chapter focuses on this community, particularly how Wright’s essentialist approach to space and prioritizing of abstract space cause a disconnect between herself and her audience. The second section of the chapter examines Wright’s more successful venture as a leader in the freethought movement. In promoting the growth of the public of freethinkers, Wright begins to acknowledge the importance of spatial practice—both the physical allowances of New York City and the need for a space where freethinkers might engage in their own practices of public debate.

The Rhetorical Space of Nashoba: Space as Argument

In this section, I explore the possibility that a space can function as a rhetorical argument. Specifically, I argue that Frances Wright composed Nashoba with an audience in mind, hoping to persuade that audience, through this physical text, that gradual emancipation was a feasible solution to the problem of slavery. The failure of Nashoba was in large part due to Wright’s optimistic misreading of the American public, but she would continue to use spaces rhetorically throughout her public career.

An Essentialist View of America

Wright’s initial vision of America was circulated in the form of a collection of letters published upon her return to Europe as Views of Society and Manners in America. This overwhelmingly positive account brought Wright significant fame and marked her entry on the public stage. Here, I draw on Wright’s correspondence as she composed the
volume and formulated her plans for her community. I also employ Wright’s autobiography, written much later, juxtaposing these two sources of insight into her thought process at the time and in subsequent reflection on her activism. Through this process, I shed light on Wright’s thoroughly optimistic, *essentialist* approach to America, shaped in large part by a revolutionary era perspective of the abstract space of the young nation. This perspective convinced Wright that her attempts to combat slavery would be fruitful, that America could not maintain slavery for long. As she would soon become painfully aware, this optimism was overblown; the inevitability of slavery’s eradication was far from assured.

In my second chapter, I introduced the idea of two approaches to space: one essentialist, one rhetorical. An essentialist notion of space applies an understanding of spaces as bounded and internally coherent. In such models, spaces have a true identity, an essence understood here in terms of the abstract space that users operate within. For this reason, an essentialist model downplays the agency of users and their spatial practice, seeing those practices as overdetermined by abstract space. I contrast an essentialist approach to space with a rhetorical approach. In this second model, a rhetor does not interpret an already existing, passive space in order to act upon it, she *produces* that space as she acts upon it rhetorically. Just as an essential understanding of identity would lead to certain rhetorical choices, I want to explore how an essential understanding of space might affect a rhetor’s rhetorical approach. For Frances Wright, her initial reading of American space led her to expect certain responses to her views about slavery, expectations that were harshly disappointed.
Frances Wright formed her ideas about the abstract space of America early in her life. Born in 1795, Wright was orphaned early and separated from her younger sister, Camilla, for roughly ten years. During this time, the orphaned girls became heiresses, after the death of another uncle Major William Campbell, in India. Fanny was taken in by her grandfather, Major General Duncan Campbell, in London. Fanny and Camilla later reunited and lived for much of their adolescence in the home of their aunt, Frances Campbell, in Dawlish, England. Fanny found herself in rebellion against the Tory Campbell clan. Wright discovered America through the eyes of Italian historian Carlo Botta, whose history of the American Revolution sparked a personal and political awakening. As she wrote, “Life was full of promise; the world a theatre of interesting observation and useful exertion. There existed a country consecrated to freedom, and in which man might awake to the full knowledge and exercise of his powers” (Wright Biography 11). This exposure to America through the ideals of the revolution had a strong impact on her views of the country’s nature and promise throughout her life. At eighteen, in 1813, Fanny determined to live with another uncle more in sympathy with her views, James Mylne, a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow. In this environment, Wright gained a classical education and access to the diverse resources of the Glasgow library. Three years later, the Wright sisters moved back to London, as Fanny had grown restless with what could be learned in Glasgow. London itself seemed no less bleak, and in 1818, Frances and Camilla Wright determined to travel, unchaperoned, to see what for Wright had become a “promised land.”

The trip was a roaring success. The sisters were armed with letters of introduction from Robina Millar, a friend from the Mylne’s Glasgow circle, and soon befriended
many political exiles recently arrived in America from Europe. Among these new and lasting friends were Charles Wilkes, the future president of the Bank of New York, and Julia and Harriet Garnett, recent emigrants from Great Britain who would become lifelong friends of the Wright sisters. Wright began her American career as a writer by having a play, “Altorf,” produced on a New York stage (Connors 34). Through the Garnetts, she met senators, was introduced to President James Monroe, and conversed with other important personages. For example, Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House, is reported to have quoted one of Wright’s witticisms in the House of Representatives (Payne-Gaposchkin 227). Throughout her travels, Wright wrote voluminous journal entries and letters to friends back home. Later, these writings became *Views of Society and Manners in America*, the first serious account of America written by an Englishwoman, a rebuttal of Tory travel literature that stressed the backwardness of American society.

As she toured America, Wright saw the revolutionary ideals she had imbibed in her reading embodied in the physical society around her. Wright’s utopian letters compare the edenic America to the fallen state of Europe, especially England. One letter to the Garnett sisters admits that England “contains much of good and something yet of happiness, but . . . I cannot see begging in our towns and villages, and read of injustice in every paper I cast my eye upon, and meet political and religious hypocrisy wherever I turn without feeling pain, indignation, or disgust” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 223-4). At the start of her visit, Wright did not see such injustice and hypocrisy in America. Wright’s comparative approach to America is necessitated by her perspective as an outsider—in America, she perceived the remedies for Europe’s ills.
Wright celebrates, among other things, American institutions’ reliance on the people, on the American public. Suffrage had transformed American men into philosophers, and, in America, the public voice shaped the government in a way that was rare in Europe (Wright, Views 65). Indeed, American institutions were designed to adapt and respond to changes in the public. As Wright explains, American institutions were not only

Perfect in their theory, of which the principle is change, according to, and in unison with, the progress of the sovereign popular mind, and perfect also in that provision of their political framework, which facilitates, at all times, the moulding of the constitutional code of practice, so as to keep pace with that progress, the duration and continuous growth of the American empire appear placed above the shock of accident, even by the very nature of man, and by the nature of things as influenced by human power. (Biography 20, emphasis in original)

For Wright, privileging the changing public mind over inflexible institutions guaranteed progress. As she remarked, “the duration and continuous growth of the American empire appear placed above the shock of accident”.

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13 Wright’s faith in American progress is a hallmark of utopian literature. Because many utopian works simply plop the reader down in the midst of a utopian future, they possess an air of inevitability, that this future is destined for the nation or the world. Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888) is one of the strongest exemplars of this pattern. The presentation of his utopia as coming into being through (inevitable) evolution, not revolution, may have assuaged readers’ fears of radical change.

Of course, a counter-tradition has refused this model. William Morris’s rebuttal to Bellamy describes an improved society that could only be achieved through a long, bloody revolution. More recently, Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time similarly depicts a utopian future, but asserts that it is just that: a future, one of many possible futures for which people must fight and strive in the present. In such works, utopia is shown to be literally, in Fredric Jameson’s words, “barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being” (“Politics” 54).
Of course, if the country is to be governed by the public, that public must be sound. The most unique aspect of Wright’s vision is that it roots the American public in a relationship to the land, established in large part through labor. Wright describes the character of the American people thusly: “Its moral and intellectual, no less than its physical force—in other words, its soul no less than its body—is found in the fields of agriculture” *(Biography* 20, emphasis in original). For Wright, an attachment to one’s physical region is bound up with responsibility for and involvement in the governance of that region. This sense of personal responsibility is destroyed by centralized government, as in France. She describes “the annihilation of the provincial sectionment of the country” as blocking “the saving influence of the more intelligent land power in revolutionary France.” In place of a system that allows individuals to labor and govern smaller portions of the country, France now has a massive, central capital “drowned in luxury, effeminacy, and vice, of which the best theories are but visionary dreamings, and of which the absolute control is now vested in cannon-crowned bastiles, forts, and bastions!” *(Biography* 21). For Wright, a healthy public sphere requires responsibility for a physical geographical space, a sense of duty formed through labor.

The one dark spot in Wright’s otherwise rosy account is an American institution that disrupts this connection to the land and thus undermines the public sphere. Wright’s encounters with slavery in Washington DC and northern Virginia so disgust her that she refuses to go into the American south. Wright denounces slavery as “associat[ing] labor—the source of all that is good and great in man—with social degradation, political nullity, and brutal ignorance” *(Biography* 24). Slavery prevents white Americans from forming an attachment to their land through labor—alienating them from the land, their
neighbors, and the public sphere. Wright attempts to absolve America by holding England responsible for American slavery. Though this argument had been used before, Wright tweaks it by claiming that Americans had repeatedly tried to remove slavery from the land (Views 37-9, 202-5).

Indeed, Wright’s faith that America could not support slavery is one of the strongest indications of her essentialist approach. As she explains in another letter to the Garnetts, she believes that the essence of America itself will not tolerate slavery for long:

Many [causes] I see at present that operate in your southern States to delay the annihilation of Slavery; but this I rely on—that they can only delay it. It is not in the selfish passions of the masters, it is not in their shortsighted views of their immediate interests to do more than defer the day of emancipation. It is not in their authority to hold the African much longer in darkness,// already he feels the chain, & he who feels will soon snap it, especially in a country such as yours where all that meets the eye or the ear breathes of freedom & “prates of her whereabouts.” (Payne-Gaposchkin 225)

This faith in the inevitability of emancipation is grounded in her essentialist understanding of American space.

Wright’s Views was published in several languages in 1820 and became an immediate best-seller, launching Wright into the public eye. The young woman befriended Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher—the two referred to American as “our Utopia” in their correspondence. Further, Wright was approached by General Lafayette, the revolutionary war hero, who designated Wright’s Views “the first good
account given abroad of the country” (D’Arusmont, undated correspondence). In 1824, Wright joined Lafayette on his triumphant return to America (Connors 35). As a valued friend of Lafayette’s, the Wright sisters were introduced to many notable American figures: Monroe, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson (Egerton 17). Wright also met the radical philosopher, Robert Owen, whose socialist community New Harmony would be extraordinarily influential in the next major venture of her life: Nashoba. Wright was overjoyed to return to America: “Her mind now fixed, singly and unalterably, on the United States, as on the country in which human progress was rendered at once safe and certain, by the nature of its institutions, and the condition and character of its people” (Wright Biography 20). She returned with every confidence that she would soon succeed in finding a way to remove slavery from American soil.

Nashoba’s Compromises

In this section, I begin my case for viewing Wright’s Nashoba community as essentially a rhetorical argument. To combat slavery, Wright hoped to model gradual emancipation on a smaller scale, in an inter-racial intentional, or utopian, community. Rather than just attempting to implement her own ideal community, however, Wright shaped the tenets of Nashoba (the community’s abstract space) in response to the concerns and prejudices of southern Americans, the primary audience for her proposal. Rather than imposing her own solution devised in absentia, Wright recognized the need

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14 The Wright sisters stayed at Lafayette’s estate, La Grange, for a while, and an intimate relationship was formed particularly between Frances and “the dear Gen,” as she refers to him in her letters. At one point, Wright asked Lafayette to legally adopt her and Camilla. Lafayette’s family in particular opposed the relationship and insisted on the impropriety of the Wright sisters accompanying Lafayette on his return to and tour of America. Undaunted, the Wrights booked their passage separately and joined Lafayette’s entourage soon after their arrival in America (Egerton 16).
to study the lived context of the institution of slavery. As she later wrote, in order “to embrace all the difficulties—industrial, political, individual, local, states, and federal—with which the question was surrounded” she needed to “consider it more especially on the very soil of slavery, and in the interests of the two populations there brought into juxta position” (Biography 24). Wright diagnoses economic concerns, fears of uprising, and abhorrence of racial amalgamation as key factors in the attitude of Southern slaveholders. Wright then adapts her Nashoba plan, the abstract space of the community, to accommodate these primary concerns and passions.

The letters from Wright’s second (1824) visit to America detail her thought process as she traveled in the south for an extended period. As she wrote: “Slavery I expected to find here in all its horrors, and truly in all its horrors it is found” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 233). Wright was “obsessed” with the problem of slavery (Bederman 445) and determined to try to come up with a solution. The trip thus became a sort of research expedition, seeking to better understand American slavery—specifically, to get inside the mind of the Southern slaveholder.

Wright expected that if she could understand the perspective of the southern slaveholder, she would be able consider his views and devise a plan that would satisfy all parties. To persuade the slaveholder, she hoped to employ what Burke defined as identification more than a century later, by identifying her cause with her audience’s

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15 In 1825, Wright’s preoccupation was unusual: US slavery was not considered a white woman’s issue (Bederman 445). Further, Wright disdained to ally herself with the formal abolitionist movement: From the very outset, she had but little sympathy with professed abolitionists; among whom she usually found much zeal with little knowledge; and, not unfrequently, more party violence than enlarged philanthropy. Hatred of the planter seemed oftentimes to be a stronger feeling than interest in the slave. (Wright Biography 24)
interests (Grammar 548). A letter to the Garnetts spells out this rhetorical precept in no uncertain terms:

Man has in his nature much evil to balance against the good; he is capable of generosity but his generosity is seldom disinterested; his own good must be connected, or seem to be connected, with that of those he befriends. . . . I acknowledge that this is not an interesting view of human nature, but I believe we shall find it a true one; not that I deny the existence of disinterested virtue, I have seen it in others and I think I have felt it in myself, but I speak not of an individual man, but of man taken collectively, the rule applies to him, which in the other we sometimes find an exception. (Qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 225)

Wright was confident that if she could understand what slaveholders had to fear in losing slavery, she could convince them to support abolition. Embedded in this stance is a faith in her audience as capable of reasoning through what they had to lose or gain and choosing according to that reasoning. Moreover, Frances had an implicit faith in Americans as the products of democratic, rational, freedom-loving American institutions. Given her general faith in human reason and specific faith in American integrity, Frances found herself “inclined to expect that, if the complex difficulties that surrounded the subject could be satisfactorily met, the will to act justly would not be wanting” (Biography 22).

The first two concerns Wright realized her plan must address were the economic situation of slavery and the slaveholders’ fears of uprising. Wright’s faith in American ideals was borne out in her conversations with slaveholders, who, for the most part, spoke
of the system apologetically, but emphasized their financial dependence on slavery as something beyond their control (Egerton 18). Wright concluded that slave states were trapped by the economic system, a system that was involuntary for both the slave and the slaveholder, at least insofar as the slaveholders were born into the system and saw no feasible path for change. Wright determined that any solution to the problem needed, first and foremost, to address the economic disaster that could result from abolition. Wright’s visit also coincided with a wave of panic and fear among slaveholders that was in part a response to Vesey’s rebellion.\footnote{Vesey’s Rebellion was a plot led by Denmark Vesey, a South Carolina slave, to seize the arms and ammunition in Charleston and attack the white population of that city. Planned to take place on June 16, 1822, the scheme was reported to the authorities and resulted in the execution of Vesey and other leading conspirators.} Wright concluded that slaveholders would be more willing to free their slaves if they weren’t in fear of uprisings.

Another key component of the context of slavery that Wright discerned during her travels was an underlying fear of miscegenation. While at Monticello with Jefferson, Wright wrote to the Garnetts that this prejudice against and fear of amalgamation “is so deeply rooted that emancipation without expatriation (if indeed the word be applicable) seems impossible” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 230). She goes on to note that, inevitably, over time, mixing of the races “would in spite of prejudice take place—but how many years of suffering and what a time of evils including probably a servile war must ensue before that amalgamation could be effected” (230). Wright makes her lack of personal sympathy with this feeling clear:

An impartial spectator widens his eyes in amazement at this wonderful attachment to a pure white skin (the purity of which the climate destroys before the age of five and twenty) to which predilection, the morals,
happiness wealth and peace and finally the very lives of men a whole population are to be sacrificed. (Qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 240)

Though Wright denounced American racial prejudice, she was ready to acknowledge its formidable power and influence in her battle to convince slaveholders to free their slaves.

Wright designed her plan for gradual emancipation, the abstract space of Nashoba, with these key factors in mind. First, she addressed the fear of economic loss. With the money from donations to her cause, Wright would purchase slaves from their owners and establish them in a community where they would farm and do other physical labor during the day and attend classes at night. By using a system of cooperative labor, Wright expected that the community could earn substantial profits. Each slave would be given credit for his or her labor and freed once they had earned enough to cover the original purchasing fee and the funds to relocate elsewhere. In this way, her plan would not require slaveholders to simply “free” their slaves and incur steep economic loss—they would sell them to Fanny, who would then allow them to work for their freedom.

If the cooperative labor system was meant to facilitate the freeing of slaves without economic loss to Southerners, the plan of relocating the freed slaves outside America was Wright’s largest concession to her audience.17 Wright’s research had convinced her that the best manner of dealing with freed slaves was to remove them from America entirely, most likely to Haiti or Liberia. Her conclusion was a common one: most 1820s abolitionists, in fact, had re-colonization as their ultimate aim. Thomas Jefferson, with whom she spent a week during her visit, also favored a state-sponsored

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17 When noted in historical texts, Nashoba is usually described as an inspiring interracial utopian experiment (Bederman 438). The discussion of Wright’s real motivation for the community should temper such claims. Wright’s initial goal was not an interracial community, but universal colonization through benevolent education.
colonization plan (Bederman 446). James Madison and James Monroe also approved of Wright’s benevolent paternalism (Egerton 20). Yet Wright had not been disposed to favor a colonization plan at the start of her venture: her first idea had been for slaves to start working to pay for their freedom in America. But she found that “[t]he objection made here was always one and the same—the most foolish objection imaginable but not the less obstinately sustained on that account.” The objection was as follows: “It would tend to leave the emancipated slaves in the country—that they would in time assert equality with the whites and an amalgamation of the two colors be induced” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 240). Her letters suggest that Wright did not necessarily believe that colonization was the best or only way of solving the race problem, but that Americans’ fear of miscegenation required it.

Alongside these compromises, however, there is at least one aspect of Wright’s plan that is grounded in her own racism. Wright’s belief in gradual, as opposed to immediate, emancipation was based in her doubt that recently freed slaves could manage full participation in American society.18 She felt that slavery had created a gap between the races that could only be bridged through a program of benevolent education. She referred to the ex-slaves in the northern states as a practical warrant for this view, stating that “the absence of sufficient experience prevented [the whites of the north] from distinguishing the disadvantages, more especially to the enslaved race, of sudden emancipation: disadvantages everywhere, and at all times, immense” (Biography 23). Her doubts stemmed from her view of “human enfranchisement—which is but another name for civilization” as “in its beginnings, a slow, gradual, and complex operation” which

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18 Wright’s Views mentions one possible source of inspiration for this view. During her visit, Wright learned of Edward Coles, an Illinois abolitionist with a farm where he was preparing ex-slaves for self-sufficiency.
must be undertaken “simultaneously in the soul of the internal man, and in the external influences which surround him” (Biography 25). Wright felt that enslaved Blacks were less “civilized” than whites and thus unprepared for full emancipation. On the whole, however, a large part of what is considered questionable about Wright’s motives in starting the Nashoba community stems from her attempts to sympathize with Southern slaveholders—to make compromises necessary for the success of any peaceful eradication of slavery.

High Hopes Disappointed

Out of her conversations with southerners, Wright shaped her Nashoba plan, a plan for an inter-racial community that would be acceptable to southerners but would also demonstrate the feasibility of gradual emancipation of America’s slaves. Wright needed the support of the American public to enact this vision. Despite initial signs of approval, Wright failed to raise the necessary funds to form her community. Her unsuccessful fundraising venture suggested that, somehow, somewhere, she had misread her audience. This misreading, I suggest, began with her initial essentialist interpretation of American space and the American public.

Let me begin by reviewing Wright’s plan for gradual emancipation in a bit more detail. The goal was to purchase slaves and establish them in a community where they would farm and do other physical labor during the day and attend classes at night. Each slave would earn credit for his or her labor and, in this manner, earn their freedom. With a system of cooperative labor, Wright expected that the community would be profitable enough to both support itself and allow individual slaves to save money towards their own emancipation. For practical models, Wright relied most heavily on the cooperative
labor systems of George Rapp’s Harmony and Robert Owen’s New Harmony (Bederman 446; Egerton 21; Connors 36). Wright’s community would support, she imagined, five hundred slaves at first, buying replacements whenever a slave earned enough to purchase their freedom and relocate outside the U.S.

Armed with this plan, Wright began trying to muster support, and there were some initial signs of success. Wright took advantage of her connection to Lafayette to solicit funds from the leading figures of the day. Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe seemed enthusiastic about her plan of benevolent paternalism, educating slaves to prepare them for independence (Egerton 20). Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York informed Fanny that she “had given him a more correct view of the whole surface of Southern slavery than he had previously received” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 244). Fanny became confident in such praise, as she crowed to the Garnett sisters: “I have received encouragement beyond all that I had dared to hope or imagine” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 243). Camilla too communicates the general enthusiasm for the venture: “not one of those persons whose opinion Fanny has thought of sufficient importance to consult, but have pronounced the scheme [ . . . ] new and important and entertain not the slightest doubt of our ultimate and permanent success” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 251).

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19 Of the two communities, the influence of the Harmony Society was stronger at first. As she wrote in June 1825: “[i]t was not until I had visited for the second time the settlement of Harmonie in Indiana . . . that I distinctly conceived the only scheme which I believe capable of being rendered general and consequently efficient in its effects” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 239). She later wrote that during her visit to the Harmony Society in their Indiana location, she was struck not only by the advantages of united labor, “but with their peculiar appropriateness to the object which, at the time, engrossed her attention. Nor was there, indeed, much difference in the point of intellectual advancement between the mass of the German laborers . . . and that of the southern negro” (Biography 25).

20 Jefferson wrote to Wright with the following statement of support yet regretful inability to actively participate: “At the age of eighty-two, with one foot in the grave, and the other uplifted to follow it, I do not permit myself to take part in any new enterprises, even for bettering the condition of man, not even in the great one which is the subject of your letter, and which has been through life that of my greatest anxieties” (qtd in Hodin 417).
On closer examination, however, there are signs that the general response to Frances Wright’s Nashoba plan was more tepid. For one, General Lafayette’s support does not seem absolute. In fact, Fanny postponed telling Lafayette of her plan. She relates that she “found no favorable moment to break to him the subject” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 242). When she finally shares her plan, she says little of his response other than that he “passed a sleepless night after our conversation” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 243).

Frances is also secretive and selective in terms of what she shares with her other friends. She writes: “It is important that our proposed experiment should remain for some time as secret as possible that the south may not rise against it before it is set going. I make known my object for remaining in this country only to those who can promote it . . . ” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 246). She refrains from sharing her eventual goal of resettling the freed slaves outside the U.S., writing: “I do not nor would time permit me to explain our intentions or wishes respecting the future disposal of the people it is our object to redeem” (246). Fanny’s demands for secrecy and lack of forthrightness hint at a fear of disconcert or disapproval that belies her claims of complete confidence.

Camilla Wright’s letters likewise communicate some hidden uneasiness. She explains to the Garnetts that she and Fanny can’t go to England to explain in person why they must stay in America. She fears that, during their absence, the individuals who had pledged their participation in Nashoba would find other work, “not to mention the too probable abatement of that ardor and enthusiasm for the cause which Fanny’s eloquence has so powerfully excited in their astonished minds” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 250). Camilla is also comparatively quick to share the doubts of others, particularly Charles
Wilkes, one of Fanny’s closest confidants, whom she quotes as follows: “I am assured you would not have rested in peace without making the experiment and tho’ I have no belief whatever in its success I sincerely wish you all the satisfaction your ardor and enthusiasm in a good tho’ hopeless cause so well deserve” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 431). Likewise, Camilla notes that George Flower’s wife joins them in the experiment, “in the success of which by the way she has not the least faith” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 433). And Camilla admits doubts of her own: “I will confess to you my loved friends that I sometimes have forebodings of disappointment to come” (431).

In the end, these signs of ambivalence prove telling. When push comes to shove, General Lafayette’s influential friends and Fanny’s other powerful acquaintances do not offer the necessary financial support. Madison writes that he doubts “that there is such an advantage of united over individual labor as is taken for granted” in Fanny’s plan (qtd. in Bederman 449). Others pledge their sympathy, but are unwilling to invest their money.

On the whole, it seems that Fanny had mistaken general approbation of her scheme for passionate commitment. The reasons for her misjudgment are uncertain, and probably numerous. Perhaps Wright was used to being Lafayette’s right-hand figure and had not adequately understood that things would be different when she was seeking support for her own endeavors (Bederman 449). Wright may also have overestimated slaveholders’ fear of an uprising, which was not great enough to counter their desire to continue holding slaves. But another possible reason for Wright’s rhetorical missteps lies in her interpretation of America itself—an interpretation that undoubtedly shaped her rhetorical approach as she attempted to combat the enormous institution of slavery. Wright imagined an America tied to the land and to a commitment to govern in the spirit
of the revolution—in the spirit of freedom and justice. She expected that Americans sensed the overt contradiction between their ideals and the lived practice of slavery and that, if presented with a reasonable solution, they would logically choose the path to overturn this hypocrisy. She found out the hard way that this republican ethic was not as powerful as other forces, such as personal interest, tradition, and racism.

In her biography, Wright herself articulates a connection between her earlier reading of America and her failure to harvest support for Nashoba. She describes her initial perspective as an optimistic misreading:

The “Views” then rapidly formed I published on my return to England, with the single object of awakening the attention of European reformers to the great principles laid down in American government. Those principles had indeed so warmed my own feelings, as to have influenced my perceptions. During my first visit to America, I seemed to hear and see her declaration of independence everywhere. I studied her institutions, and mistook for the energy of enlightened liberty what was, perhaps, rather the restlessness of commercial enterprise. I saw her population active and thriving, and conceived that to be the effect of wise social regulations, which had, perhaps, rather its source in the temporary state of an artificial market. I saw neither princes nor bayonets, nor a church married to the state, and conceived, in very truth, that liberty had here quickened the human mind until it was prepared to act under the influence of reason instead of fear. (v-vi)
This reflective passage articulates how Wright’s familiarity with the revolutionary abstract space of America dominated her impressions of the actual space of the nation. Even more suggestively, Wright relates that her reading of American space led her to expect certain norms of judgment from the American public.

I suggest that Wright’s essentialist interpretation of America was a barrier between her and her audience, a contributing factor in her failure to raise public support for her community. But what was wrong with her interpretation of American space? One possibility is that her rhetorical goal was itself too ambitious—that no reading of America that implicitly promoted emancipation would have been embraced by the American public. Another possibility is that the American public had moved beyond the revolutionary ideology that Wright ascribed to them. But the republican ideals in themselves are not the problem—such ideals continue to do rhetorical work even today. Thus, the argument that Wright merely misread the space of America seems unhelpful. The problem lies in the assumption that a space can be read correctly or incorrectly—an assumption based in essentialist approaches to space. Indeed, Wright’s problem may have been that she did not rhetorically promote her understanding of American space. She didn’t realize that her interpretation was something Americans would need to be convinced of. Put another way, she invested too much in the power of the abstract space of America and too little in the spatial practices of Americans and their experience of their own social space, including slavery.

Conflicting Views of Nashoba

With little practical support and financial backing, Wright forged on and, in 1825, founded the Nashoba community, in Tennessee. She trusted that the public would change
its tune once it saw her plan in action. Though her initial abstract depiction of Nashoba as the solution to slavery had failed to persuade Americans, she trusted that the physical reality of the community would have more persuasive force. The physical community of Nashoba was meant to function as a rhetorical argument, demonstrating (when words had failed) that emancipation was possible. If she could just demonstrate, incontrovertibly, that her plan was feasible, Fanny expected that other philanthropists would see the success of the community and follow in her footsteps, resulting in the emancipation of all slaves in just eighty-five years (Bederman 448). But the reality of Nashoba drew no more public support than Wright’s idealistic plans. The space of the community is difficult to recover—but existing accounts demonstrate that Wright’s view of Nashoba was in stark contrast to the pitiable and uncivilized impressions recorded by visitors. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Wright overlooked the harsh spatial practices of her community, keeping her eye steadily on Nashoba’s abstract space. Wright’s Nashoba is an exemplar, then, of how spaces can make arguments, even when, like written and spoken arguments, they fail.

In 1825, then, Wright founded Nashoba using her own money and on a smaller scale than she had originally intended. Fanny purchased land fifteen miles from the Wolf River in Tennessee.\(^{21}\) The anti-slavery community was founded on Indian land, an irony that doesn’t appear to have registered. Wright purchased eight to ten slaves from Nashville, and a mother and her six daughters were donated by a planter, perhaps because the daughters were his illegitimate children (Bederman 450; Egerton 22). In addition to Fanny and Camilla, the original white residents of Nashoba included George Flower, one

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\(^{21}\) Fanny in fact considered Mississippi or Louisiana preferable, but the climate marked them as “out of the question” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 245). She had friends in Kentucky but felt the political machine was too out of whack—“a perfect mob being at the head of affairs” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 245).
of the founders of the English settlement at Albion, Illinois and a friend of Frederick Rapp’s; Flower’s wife and three children; James Richardson, a doctor possessing “a finely cultivated mind with every liberal and generous opinion and sentiment” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 435); and Richeson Whitby, a former member of the New Harmony society (Egerton 22).

Accounts of the physical space of Nashoba describe a battle between Fanny’s abstract vision and the physical spatial practices of the community. The first task of the group was to build two cabins and clear fifteen acres, a huge task for a group of fifteen adults and nine children. In addition, it can only be assumed that most white members of the group had rarely done such demanding physical work. The Tennessee summer’s malarial heat only intensified the hardships. Fanny assessed the site with characteristic optimism—“It promises health, being dry and rolling and second rate only as to richness of soil” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 429). Yet Flower’s children took ill within months, and he was forced to retreat with his family to the North (Egerton 22). Nonetheless, Fanny continued to see the space of Nashoba her own way:

Our land is gently undulating and hilly what is called thro’out the great western valley rolling—our houses are placed within ¼ of a mile from the pretty little Wolf river on the bank of which we shall raise our washing house bathing house and dairy and where in time we shall open some beautiful wooded pastures and retired walks extending our meadows . . .

(Qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 435)
The conflict between Fanny’s view of Nashoba and the harsh physical reality of the community is nowhere more evident than in Frances Trollope’s account of her visit to the community.

During a visit to Europe in the summer of 1827, Fanny Wright’s enthusiastic account of her community convinced Trollope to accompany her on her return to America. As Trollope exclaimed, “Will it be possible to let her depart without vowing to follow her? I think not. I feel greatly inclined to say, ‘where her country is, there shall be my country’” (qtd. in Heineman 56). Yet from her very first impression, Nashoba falls far short of the vision Wright had planted in Trollope’s mind. Trollope writes: “[ . . . ] one glance sufficed to convince me that every idea I had formed of the place was as far as possible from the truth. Desolation was the only feeling—the only word that presented itself” (27).

Though the final version of her travel narrative, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, attempts to be as generous as possible, Trollope’s rough draft includes telling commentary. She relates that Fanny Wright’s bedroom had no ceiling and let the rain in and that the log chimney was constantly catching fire (n4 28). Perhaps the starkest passage is the description of the food:

> When we arrived at Nashoba, they were without milk, without beverage of any kind except rain water; the river Wolf being too distant to send to constantly. Wheat bread they used but sparingly, and to us the Indian corn bread was uneatable. They had no vegetables but rice, and some potatoes we brought with us, no meat but pork, no cheese, no butter; and yet I verily believe that Miss Wright was unaffectedly surprised at perceiving
that I did not find this manner of life everything that reasonable beings could wish for. She herself made her meals on a bit of Indian corn bread, and a cup of very indifferent cold water, and while doing so, smiled with the sort of complacency that we may conceive Peter the Hermit felt when eating his acorns in the wilderness. (28 n4)

Wright’s stubborn, hermit-like insistence on her own abstract view of the community had little persuasive force for her visiting friend. Within a day or two, Trollope determined that she must depart immediately, fearing for the health of herself and her children. Filled with dismay at this sign of what Fanny had really been up to, Trollope heads back to Europe with her head swimming “at the savage aspect of the scene” (28), an image captured in a sketch later published with Trollope’s account (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Sketch of Nashoba. From Domestic Manners of the Americans, 1832.
As a friend of Frances Wright, someone hoping and determined to see the best in her venture, Trollope’s account and dismay are communicative of a large gap between Wright’s view of her community and its bleak reality. Moreover, the projected space of the community, its interpretation by outsiders, included views of Wright as a hypocritical leader out for her own profit. In 1826, rumors circulated that Wright started Nashoba to get free labor for her own plantation, further demonstrating the unlikelihood of widespread public support for the scheme (Bederman 450). Both Wright’s abstract presentation and the spatial practices of the community had failed to achieve public uptake.

After the early struggles of the community, Wright enlisted the assistance of Robert Dale Owen, the son of the famous utopian reformer. The two leaders became frustrated that the Nashoba residents seemed stuck in the master-slave discourse and relation (Egerton 23). Frances Wright’s declining health and financial status did not help the situation. Thus, in May of 1827, Frances left for Europe to convalesce and raise funds. In her absence, under the leadership of Camilla, James Richardson, and Richeson Whitby, Nashoba would take the final plunge into infamy.

Whatever Wright saw in her community, the public wanted to know just how the races were interacting—they had far more interest in the spatial practices of the community than in Wright’s lofty visions. Through Richardson, Benjamin Lundy acquired and published Nashoba’s log in his paper, the *Genius of Universal*

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22 In a letter written on June 20th, 1826, Fanny reported that she was bankrupt (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 436). Later that summer, she caught a fever that caused the community to fear for her life (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 438). She had only just recovered when Camilla fell ill, and, in tending her, Fanny brought on a relapse. Wright’s daughter, Sylva D’Arusmont, later reflected on the possible effect of her mother’s condition on her life choices: “To me, it has been a great comfort to find that that brain fever was more than a little responsible for the eccentric course she followed” (undated correspondence).
Emancipation. The log apprised the public of sexual relations between the races in the community. And, as Connors explains, the one mixed race relationship reported in the published log would come to characterize Wright for the remainder of her public life (27).

Wright’s response to the scandal did not soothe the fears of her friends or the tempers of the outraged public. On her return voyage to America, Wright prepared a “full and explicit” circular address stating the object and principles of Nashoba (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 446). In these “Explanatory Notes,” rather than distancing herself from and condemning the actions of the community’s temporary leaders, Wright defended the sexual policies implied by the log’s narrative and disavowed marriage entirely. The “Notes” also shared Frances’s discontent with the U.S., claiming that the government granted political, but not moral, liberty (Egerton 17).

The scandal branded Nashoba a “free love colony” (Connors 27). Wright’s proclamation aroused the most ingrained fears of the larger public: “To the surrounding society’s three sacred institutions—marriage, religion, and white supremacy,—the resident trustees of Nashoba had thus advocated three outrageous alternatives: free love, atheism, and amalgamation” (Egerton 26).

That Nashoba had failed was obvious by November of 1828. Camilla’s husband, Whitby, agreed to stay and manage Nashoba for a year. But eventually Wright was forced to admit that the slaves “cannot at the low state of agricultural produce which has prevailed from their first arrival there, raise a sufficiency for their food and clothing and far less lay by a surplus fund for their emancipation” and settled on “the decision of freeing herself from all farther responsibility regarding them, by their removal to a free
county” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 459). In 1830, Fanny sailed from New Orleans with the black residents of Nashoba, escorting the thirteen adults and eighteen children to Haiti (Egerton 28).  

The Spatial Rhetoric of Freethought: New York and the Hall of Science

As Nashoba’s fate became more and more evident, Wright began to distance herself from the community, teaming up with Robert Dale Owen, another utopian experimenter, and taking on the role of lecturer and co-editor of Owen’s community’s newspaper. Through the *Free Enquirer* and her lectures, Wright forged bonds with a specific public perhaps for the first time in her rhetorical career: the public of freethinkers. Wright’s success in helping to consolidate the freethought movement suggests some of the ways that space is necessary for uniting publics, and her strategies themselves suggest that she had learned that she must acknowledge the importance of spatial practice and social space if she hoped to affect change. Here, I explore two of Wright’s spatial strategies in this latter part of her career: relocating the *Free Enquirer* to New York City and carving out a semi-public space within New York specifically for freethinkers in the Hall of Science.

*Freethought in New York*

The relocation of the *Free Enquirer*, the previously-named *New Harmony Gazette*, to New York City was a central event in the development of the freethought movement in the 1820s. New York proved hospitable to freethought in several ways, and presumably Wright’s earlier acquaintance with the city from her speaking tour had

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23 Wright spoke at venues along the way and, once in Haiti, met with the President and placed her companions under his protection.
sparked the idea that New York might foster a young, growing publication. This awareness shows new attention to spatial practice. Here, Wright engages spatial practice in the form of the many advantages of relocating in New York. Besides gaining new publicity and readers, Wright used her periodical and her new location to consolidate freethinkers as a public.

Let me begin by offering a brief overview of American freethought.24 This tradition extends back to Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*. Paine’s Deist ideas were reincarnated as freethought around 1825, the year of the first public commemoration of Paine’s birthday. The movement was renamed freethought so as to reflect freethinkers’ increasing agnosticism (Kirkley 4). The specific goals of freethinkers were somewhat vague at the time. Many freethinkers opposed slavery, organized religion, and marriage, and supported universal public education, labor unions, religious freedom, and what we would now call open marriage and no-fault divorce (Egerton 28). Freethinkers were characterized more by their general oppositional stance than by a positive platform. The most trenchant freethought views were opposition to the clergy and to links between church and state. Freethinkers, for example, were against proposals to stop the Sunday mail service and to hire preachers to say prayers in legislatures. They were, as a group, enraged by Ezra Stiles Ely’s call for a Christian Party in politics (Ginzberg 201). From a rhetorical standpoint, it is important to note that the freethinkers’ disbelief in organized religion and *divine* revelation was accompanied by a corresponding faith in the powers of *human* reason.

By the early 1830s, the freethought movement had transformed from a loosely organized collection of like-minded individuals to a structured movement with a

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24 “Freethinking” is a seventeenth-century label for those opposed to Christian dogma.
recognizable center of power and activity in New York City. One of the main freethinking periodicals of the age, George Houston’s Correspondent, was founded in New York City in 1827, two years before Wright made New York the home of the Free Enquirer. Several attempts to institutionalize the movement were made in the late 1820’s, including the founding of the Free Enquirers in 1828 and the Moral Philanthropists, the longest-lived freethought organization, a year later. Both organizations were based in New York and benefited from frequent lectures by Houston, Wright, and Owen (Brown 35). Frances Wright’s leadership as writer, speaker, publisher, and organizer played a major role in the geographical and ideological solidification of the movement.

After the fantastic failure of her communal experiment in Tennessee in 1828, Wright left Tennessee and joined her colleague, Robert Dale Owen, at his father’s intentional community in New Harmony, Indiana. Here, Wright immediately assumed the role of co-editor of the New Harmony Gazette, a humble publication, the eight-page weekly newsletter of a failing intentional community. Wright’s first contribution to the Gazette, prior to her co-editorship, had been her “Explanatory Notes” regarding Nashoba, which, as discussed above, argued for mixing the races and condemned marriage (Karcher 84). Partly due to this earlier inflammatory offering, Wright’s notoriety improved the situation of the New Harmony Gazette. Her first speaking tour in Cincinnati, a counter-attack aimed at the city’s recent religious revivals, also had the desired effect of increasing interest in the publication. At the start of their co-editorship, Owen found himself preoccupied with the faltering New Harmony community itself, and so Wright managed the Gazette largely on her own. Unlike other female editors of the time, she did not hide behind her male partner—her name dominated the masthead and
was affixed to the majority of the paper’s editorials and other content, including reprints of her lectures, plays, and didactic fables (Karcher 80).  

In addition to increasing the publicity and readership of the *Gazette*, Wright also shifted the content significantly, signaling her new identification as a freethinker. As Wright took over the helm of the paper, the *Gazette* acquired a broader scope. Wright’s July 30, 1828 prospectus declared the following topics and genres within the purview of her paper: science, agriculture, politics, economics, anecdotes, poetry, foreign and domestic news. Whereas before the *Gazette* included agricultural as well as social and political discussion, it now focused on religion, politics, sociology, and education, topics “discussed with vigor and originality” (Mott 538). With this shift, Wright transformed the *Gazette* into the earliest freethought paper of the period (Brown 37).

Wright’s most inspired maneuver in her struggle to procure a national audience for the *Gazette* was moving the paper to New York City. Wright seems to have been planning such a move from the start of her work on the paper. Indeed, when Wright took on the responsibilities of co-editor of the Gazette, she refused to “pledge herself to carry it on at Harmony but claimed the privilege of removing it to Nashoba or anywhere else as she should deem advisable for its further and more successful promulgation” (qtd. in Payne-Gaposchkin 453-4). Though Wright and Owen had initially agreed to postpone the relocation until April 1829, Wright became increasingly agitated at not having a means to respond to the larger press’s attacks on her views. In October, 1828, Wright began publishing the ambiguously titled *New Harmony Gazette or Free Enquirer* for a

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25 Karcher’s important article contrasts Wright’s controversial publishing strategies with those of other female editors, authors, and journalists such as Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Josepha Hale, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and Margaret Fuller, among others.
New York audience. Shortly after, around January 1829, Wright herself relocated to New York, a city she had visited on her earlier lecture tour. With the move, she dropped the New Harmony connection entirely in favor of the simpler, more universal title: *The Free Enquirer*. Behind the move was Wright’s assessment of New York City as a hub for modern thinking and rationality.

In the late 1820’s, New York was a bustling metropolis. The city’s industrial significance had been cemented by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, which made New York the major point of access to the midwest’s agricultural markets. By 1830, the city’s population was nearing a quarter million. This is the city that caused Frances Wright to remark: “if free enquiry be impracticable in New York, it must be so everywhere.”

It’s impossible to know with certainty why Wright deemed New York hospitable for freethought, but three major advantages of the new location are apparent. First, New York housed diverse populations ripe for recruitment. The city’s economic diversity gave freethought leaders, who promoted labor unions and universal education, access to the working class citizens they hoped to recruit and aid. Moreover, this economic diversity also made it easier to convince middle and upper class Americans to take action on behalf of the poor. Citizens who witnessed for themselves the conditions of urban factories, for example, were much more likely to organize on behalf of workers.

Second, because New York embraced a diversity of sentiment and perspective, it provided direct access to the opposition. Historian Eric Schlereth notes that freethinking flourished in northeastern cities such as New York in part because religious revivalists

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26 The paper was simultaneously being printed in New Harmony—Wright began publishing in New York without Owen’s sanction.
were so active in those areas. New York, in particular, was a center for missionary financing and publishing. Rural locations were less likely to contain such radically divergent views, and thus lacked the spark of discord that often provides exigence for a public to organize.

Third, New York itself was in some ways ideologically aligned with the movement. With its ethos of rationality and progress, the city shared freethinkers’ celebration of human reason and rationality. For example, the 1811 Commissioners Plan, which imposed the street grid on the Manhattan landscape, has been interpreted by geographers as an attempt to create the “reasonable city.” Many Americans viewed New York as at the forefront of modernization and rational development; the leaders of the freethought movement were likely attracted to this reputation. New York also enjoyed, as a former capital of the nation, resonance as a place of political significance, which made it a likely location for a movement interested in questioning the standards of deliberation guiding the country’s governance.

After relocating in NY, Frances Wright began to capitalize on the material advantages of her new location through her own spatial practices. New York had risen to a position of national and international prominence in industry and commerce, including printing and publication, by 1820. In 1817, New Yorkers and brothers James and John Harper opened their high-speed printing press, destined to become the largest printing establishment in the United States. Clearly, New York could support Wright’s vision of widespread publication and distribution of the *Free Enquirer.*

27 The city housed important Bible, tract, and missionary societies, as well as the famous evangelist Charles Finney.
28 As welcoming as New York’s ethos of progress, political significance, and publishing boom might have seemed to freethinkers, it is of course the case that other cities at the time could offer similar advantages.
Wright used her periodical strategically to solidify and unite the freethinking public by promoting a shared textual tradition. By republishing editorials and articles condemning her speeches, Wright is able to guide her readers’ response to the public vilification of her person and ideas. In her commentary, she interprets her opponents’ invective as evidence that they cannot counter her rational arguments with reason. The Free Enquirer also re-printed extracts from freethought classics, both establishing and providing the public with access to a canon of freethought texts.29 Later, Wright and Owen reprinted these extracts in book form, creating what amounted to the first freethought publishing company. The dissemination of these works provided freethinkers with a common vocabulary and a sense of a common philosophical and literary history. Such shared textual traditions are crucial for the formation of a public and, as Wright correctly assessed, much more feasible from urban New York than from rural Indiana.30

PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THE HALL OF SCIENCE

Once she had established the Enquirer in New York, Frances Wright enacted her second spatial strategy. In 1829, Wright carved out a semi-public space within New York specifically for freethinkers—a safe haven—in her Hall of Science. In this section, I will

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29 Some examples of extracted works include Paine’s Age of Reason, Baron D’Holbach’s Good Sense, and Percy Shelley’s Queen Mab, as well as Frances Wright’s and Robert Owen’s own works.

30 For work on the shaping of a public through consumption of shared texts, see Anderson, particularly Chapter 2, and Warner’s The Letters of the Public Sphere. Anderson’s account of the reading of the morning paper is illustrative:

It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion . . . fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (36-7)

Paul Stob provides a more recent examination of Kenneth Burke and John Dewey as sharing the view that publics have a linguistic core.
first describe the Hall itself, and then consider how Wright shaped this space as the means to promote certain norms of public discourse and debate. Extrapolating from Wright’s use of the Hall to encourage certain rhetorical practices, I configure those rhetorical behaviors as a part of spatial practice. That is, spatial practice incorporates not only how we move through a certain space, but also the rhetorical acts that we undertake in a given space.

In addition to using the magazine to help shape and unite a public of freethinkers, Frances Wright also moved to create a physical space for that public. From her earlier days as a lecturer, when Wright was banned from certain public speaking venues, she developed a notion that every healthy community needed a Hall of Science—a “Temple of Reason.” At the end of each lecture, she called for donations for a hall for the local community, designating her surplus proceeds from a Philadelphia lecture for this cause and reportedly raising $1300 for a Temple of Reason in Cincinnati (Eckhardt 175, 205, 183). Frances Wright imagined these Halls of Science as a means to “build the institutions of a republican culture” through a peaceful revolution (Eckhardt 175). To achieve this republican culture, Americans needed to break out of their isolation and share their ideas. Wright envisioned the Halls as providing museums, libraries, and solid education. Further, the Halls would welcome women as both audience members and speakers, unlike other spaces of political discussion at the time.

Though she had not succeeded in raising adequate support for Halls of Science on her lecture tour, in New York Wright took matters into her own hands. She purchased the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Broome Street with $7000 of her own money and founded the first Hall of Science. Wright’s choice of a former church was clearly symbolic—a
material message that the battle between religious and secular ideologies was underway. By creating a space belonging specifically to freethought, Wright asserted that churches were not the only institutions that could offer citizens a chance to hear out their arguments away from the din of city streets and town halls. Freethought was, quite literally, on the map of downtown Manhattan. On the map below (Figure 3), the main road running from top to bottom is Broadway. The location of hall is close to the page division line, about two inches up from the bottom of the map. In other words, the location was right in the midst of downtown New York.

Fig. 3. New York City, circa 1850.
https://oceanlinerrow.com/Ocean_Liner_Travel_Posters.html

In purchasing and shaping the Hall, Wright marked herself as an exception to Mary Ryan’s observation that 19th-century women rarely produced spaces of their own,
but were dependent on support from men in order to shape spaces necessarily constrained by that dependency (Women 74). Indeed, in painting Wright as illustrative of the failure of women’s attempts to mingle with men in public political debate, Ryan overlooks Wright’s production of a space where her speeches would not be greeted with catcalls, stink bombs, and other outrages (“Gender” 204).

The internal layout of the Hall also proclaimed its message that freethought was accessible and viable for New Yorkers. Wright’s Hall of Science seated 1200, housed the offices of the Free Enquirer, and contained a bookstore on the first level. One historian describes the view from the street: “Boldly in the window they showed the heroes of heterodoxy—among them Paine, Shelley, Godwin, and Richard Carlile” (Eckhardt 193-4). The public was welcome not only to read historical freethought texts, but also to participate in the evolving life of the movement by learning together and discussing public concerns. Topics addressed in the weekly Sunday lectures and debates included arithmetic, anatomy, and natural history; reading, writing, and public speaking; chemistry and other higher sciences; and popular education, history, and political economy.31 The hall gained a following and became a central gathering place for liberal-minded New Yorkers (Eckhardt 191), leading Wright’s biographers to denote it “the only one of Fanny’s ventures in the cause of human improvement which had achieved an immediate and tangible success” (Perkins and Wolfson 310).

The Hall of Science bolstered freethought by providing a semi-public space where anyone was welcome, but where disbelieving hecklers were unlikely to intrude. But

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31 The educational aspect of the Hall was particularly important in that it provided “a much needed center for free enquiry among the more intelligent young mechanics of the Workingman’s Party to whom all other institutions of higher learning were hopelessly closed” (Perkins and Wolfson 295). Wright’s courtship of the working classes explains the minimal entry fees for the lectures and debates (Eckhardt 191) and the later decision to employ a physician to provide public medical care (Perkins and Wolfson 310).
surely this was not the only reason Wright considered the Hall of Science necessary. Wright viewed the work of the Hall of Science as to “present to a republican people a first example of republican union and republican inquiry” (Life 154). To better explore the rationale behind this space, I turn to Wright’s speech at the Hall’s opening ceremony on April 26, 1829—an occasion labeled by biographers A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson as “one of the few perfect moments of her life” (236). In this speech, Wright establishes the standards of discourse that will reign in the Hall of Science. As I will demonstrate, this speech fleshed out Wright’s vision of freethought as based on not a predetermined political agenda but a set of shared discursive norms. The Hall itself was a necessary forum for practicing and bolstering those discursive norms—in this sense, Wright’s Hall of Science was a means to promote certain spatial practices, here, the use of certain rhetorical forms.

Before delving into the speech itself, I want to establish a little context. Wright viewed freethought as a means to solve an underlying problem: namely, American education had failed to teach rhetoric—the ability to form and judge sound arguments. She explains this perspective in her preface to her collected works:

The effects of a pernicious education are in nothing more conspicuous, than in the universal activity of the imagination and the inertness of the judgment . . . to proceed step by step—to trace the outline and consider the details—to substantiate first principles, and then trace them out in their various applications, demands attention too patient, and reflection too dispassionate, for minds habitually unsettled by the day-dreams of fancy,
and accustomed to adopt conclusions without examining premises. \textit{(Life ix-x)}^{32}

The underlying basis of America’s problems is that the people are ill-prepared to distinguish between truth and error, reason and opinion. In trying to combat slavery, Wright had misunderstood Americans as being moved primarily by their interests (economics or safety). She discovered that, at bottom, Americans were more motivated by their opinions and prejudices than by a rational assessment of the dangers and costs of slavery or of emancipation. Thus, to heal the American public, Wright hoped to convince them to heed (at least in public matters) their reason over their opinions, to let rationality command their judgment. In this first Hall of Science speech, Wright remarks wryly: “The marvel is, (permit me the freedom,) not that we should encounter much knavery, but that we should meet with \textit{some} honesty” \textit{(Life} 149). Importanty, Wright clarifies that the clergy are not the only force preying on the public’s inept judgment; the press is equally culpable. Indeed, Wright laments: “[W]ere we to take the press for an organ of public sentiment, we might conceive that a mental palsy had fallen upon the nation” (qtd. in Karcher 85). Religion, for Wright, is not an evil in and of itself, it’s just the most obvious force currently preying on Americans’ weak judgment.

The Hall of Science will address the problem of the poor rhetorical skills of the American populace by promoting specific discourse norms within its walls—norms that Wright lays out in her speech. The first principle of this “freethought rhetoric” is the injunction to avoid individual warrants for arguments, which are often based in opinion or prejudice. Wright’s specific definition of opinion is central here—indeed, the term features prominently in her speech. She understands opinions as “more frequently the

\textsuperscript{32} This text was published under Wright’s married name, D’Arusmont.
consequence of early impressions acting upon peculiarities of temperament, than of any consistent reasoning from substantiated premises” (Biography 17). In this view, people can’t help their opinions, which is why Wright proposes “judging men, apart from their opinions, and even from those acts, however violent, to which opinion alone impels” (Biography 17). As a freethinker, Wright censures religious leaders for promoting their own favored opinions, but she insists that freethinkers should not counter-attack by attempting to impose contrary opinions. Indeed, she asserts: “opinions, whether true or false, are no proper subject for teaching at all. We have each of us to form our own, and we must each of us form our own, if we would really understand what our opinions are—know their foundation, and perceive their practical consequences” (Life 147-8). The Hall of Science, then, is introduced first of all as a forum for inquiry that excludes opinions.

Personal prejudice is another ill derived from “early impressions” and “peculiarities of temperament” that must be banned from public discussion. And it is not only religious believers who are prey to such vices. Wright warns her listeners that they too are subject to prejudice:

The effects of erroneous education, and the influence of unfavourable circumstances are, more or less, with us all. As believers, we have learned censoriousness with our creed of faith; as heretics or skeptics, we have learned intolerance from persecution. Judging or Judged, inflicting or enduring, our bosoms have been filled with bitterness from our youth up; our hearts estranged from each other, and our thoughts still bent rather on proving others wrong, than on seeking the right for ourselves. (Life 146)
This essentially human prejudice and shortsightedness necessitates that public discussion be limited to those topics subject to rational inquiry. If topics prone to conjecture and personal ideology are raised, they serve only to alienate individuals from one another, causing public discussion to wilt. As Wright explains:

> It is for this cause—it is for the frailties of temper, the errors of judgment, the harshness of feeling existing in us all, that I would deprecate in this place all discussions of speculative or abstract opinion. Were we all reasonable, gentle, indulgent, to discuss any or all subjects, real or imaginary, might be useful, or, at the least, amusing; but while we are all irrational, perverse, ill-natured, violent, prone to misinterpret, to offend in our manner, to irritate in our language, to wound and to be wounded, to give and to receive alarm, to judge ourselves in pride, and others with contempt—while we are as we are, and as all we see, or hear, or experience, in an ill-regulated state of society, combines to keep us, we are unfit to grapple with each other’s thoughts—ill prepared to elicit truth by the shock of opinions in the subtle field of argument. (*Life* 146)

Wright hoped that the Hall of Science, the *Free Enquirer*, and the freethought movement generally, would raise the level of public debate by acknowledging these human failings and establishing discourse norms that could, to some extent, circumvent them.

In place of personal opinion and prejudice, Wright promotes reason and rationality. In the Hall of Science, freethinkers will have direct access to the rational processes through which truth is discovered. The Hall will begin its educational quest with study in the natural sciences, using the rational-empirical process of observing
nature to arrive at scientific truths. Wright embraces the empirical model as the ideal for rational inquiry, as is clear in her advice to her listeners: “Endeavour to curb that futile curiosity, which, fostered by a vicious education, is ever winging the human imagination beyond what the eye hath seen, the touch examined, and the judgment compared” (Life 144). Strict empirical study will help the freethinkers to recognize the limits of human knowledge and contain their discussions within those bounds.

Wright’s underlying belief and goal is this: once discussion is guided by rational communal inquiry, rather than by pre-existing individual opinions, Americans with diverse personal ideologies and beliefs will be able to reason together about their shared world. By expunging the personal from public deliberation, individuals can change their means of identifying with one another. As Wright explains, those who aspire to be freethinkers must “throw aside the distinctions of class; the name and feelings of sect or party; to recognize, in ourselves and each other, the single character of human beings and fellow creatures” (Life 140). True freethinkers will identify with one another on general, not specific grounds—as human beings and citizens rather than individuals.

Of course, Wright’s insistence on complete rationality rings a bit hollow for us today. While Wright’s ideal public sphere was designed to be inclusive of diverse individuals, it dramatically limited the kinds of evidence that could “count”—eliminating emotion entirely. Freethinkers in general associated rationality with masculinity, and piety (understood as irrational, naïve, and emotional) with femininity.33 Wright’s staunch alliance with the freethinkers suggests that she shared this view and hoped through

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33 Ginzberg argues this point thoroughly and convincingly, concluding that “[i]n spite of their disdain for contemporary notions of woman’s place, women remained, in rationalist thinking, the antithesis of rational thought; reason itself was defined as a male trait by virtue of the fact that women remained largely loyal to religion” (215). Though some women, in addition to Wright, did become freethinkers, they were included hesitantly in the movement (Ginzberg 209).
education to make women’s minds more like men’s—it is perhaps no coincidence that many of her detractors remarked on her masculine tones and mannerisms. A contemporary standpoint struggles to sympathize with a view of women as needing to be “raised” to men’s level, yet no one would dispute that women’s education at the time was ripe for reform. However limiting her vision for public debate, Wright deserves recognition as a rhetor who publicized the sorry state of women’s education and provided women a practical forum for participating in public debate.

The freethought movement would die out around 1850. Still, Wright had succeeded in creating a space for the public of freethinkers in New York. In the city, freethinkers found the diversity they needed to develop a following as well as ready access to the opposition. On a smaller scale, the Hall of Science gave freethinkers a place to practice public discussion (a form of spatial practice) according to norms not embraced in other public spaces. These two key spaces undoubtedly strengthened what is being increasingly understood as a crucial movement in American history. Despite freethought’s apparent failure at the time, the overall dominance of rationalism and science in America’s later and contemporary self-image suggests that the tenets of freethought did seep into the groundwater at some point, even if they were rejected as the arbiter of moral and social truths in the first half of the 19th century.

Wright’s public activism in the freethought movement continued until 1830, when she escorted the remaining Nashoba slaves to Haiti. Upon her return, she continued to be slandered in the press, and this time she withdrew to Europe. Her public reason for the retreat was that she feared she was hurting more than helping her cause, but the real reason was likely that she was pregnant with the child of William Phiquepal D’Arusmont,
a colleague who accompanied Wright on her voyage to Haiti. Despite her opposition to the institution of marriage, Wright could not face bearing a child out of wedlock in America, and so she followed D’Arusmont to France, where they were married just a few months after Camilla’s death.34

The couple lived for a few years in Paris and then settled in Cincinnati, Ohio. Eventually, Wright chose to remain in the U.S. when D’Arusmont returned to Paris—shortly thereafter, his daughter joined him to be educated in Europe. The eventual divorce proceedings against D’Arusmont maintain that D’Arusmont coerced Fanny into signing over the Nashoba property in Tennessee and her inherited property in Scotland by withholding funds and refusing to let her see her daughter. Living on the Nashoba land, Wright lived a life of hardship: “she lives poorly and is poor: and has not means to lives and is compelled to sorrow: she is now advance in years and afflicted with bodily infirmaties in part brought on and greatly aggravatetd by the cruel treatment of M D’Arusmont” (“Summarization”). Wright died in Cincinnati in December of 1852 due to complications of a broken hip, from which she suffered much pain and delirium for about a year before finally succumbing in December of 1852, at the age of 57 (Perkins and Wolfson 381).

Conclusion

In some ways, the two portions of Frances Wright’s public career examined here can seem entirely divorced from one another. Wright turned away from the issue of

34 Years later, their daughter described Wright’s shocking marriage to D’Arusmont as follows: “My father accompanied my mother when she went over to Hayti and on arrival in NY his boys continued to print the ‘Enquirer’ till he had prepared for their return to France . . . My mother and her sister went some months afterwards and so happened that my parents married in Paris in 1831” (D’Arusmont to Dr. Rushenberger, April 25, 1896).
slavery specifically to the much broader agenda of freethought. She became a thorough-going radical, not lessening her opposition to slavery but taking on organized religion, education, the press, labor concerns, and marriage, as well. But one aspect of Wright’s rhetorical approach remained the same: from the start, she perceived the potential of using physical spaces to accomplish her goals.

On a broad level, Wright’s example demonstrates several possible interactions between space, rhetoric, and publics. The space of Nashoba functioned for Wright, I argue, as a rhetorical intervention on the American landscape, an argument that gradual emancipation was feasible. Guided by her revolutionary era essentialist view of America, Wright determined that Nashoba did not need to argue about the moral side of slavery, but only eradicate the logistical difficulties and roadblocks preventing Americans from freeing their slaves. As an argument, however, the community was unpersuasive and thus failed to sustain itself or achieve its goals. Americans proved only too willing to espouse the ideals of liberty while holding the chains of slavery.

I suggest that the failure of Nashoba might be attributed in part to Wright’s over-confidence in the power of the abstract space of America—which I referred to as an essentialist approach to space. Wright’s inattention to the spatial practice and social space of America—her privileging of abstract space—blinded her to Americans’ depth of prejudice and attachment to slavery. Perhaps because of this earlier misunderstanding, the physical community of Nashoba proved as unpersuasive as her rhetorical depictions of the community’s abstract space. This chapter thus suggests that essentialist models of a space downplay the role of the user and thus are likely to encounter trouble when the users of that space are the people you need to persuade.
The second half of this chapter considered how Wright’s leadership of the freethought movement mobilized several spatial strategies to consolidate a public. Rather than attempting to impose her abstract visions on a recalcitrant space and population, Wright used space strategically to support her endeavors. First, she moved her newspaper to New York, acknowledging the importance of location. The move signaled her understanding that Americans weren’t the same everywhere, that cities and towns weren’t the same, and that different accomplishments might be possible in New York than in rural Indiana. Though publics do not necessarily require a geographical center, the freethinking public of the 1820s was certainly “based” in New York.

As her second rhetorical strategy, Wright created a safe haven for freethought in her Hall of Science. Like Nashoba, the Hall of Science was itself a kind of spatial argument, a claim to the presence of freethinking on the New York landscape. In the Hall of Science, freethinkers could practice discourse norms that were not welcomed in other forums for public debate. I frame these rhetorical practices as essentially spatial practices, suggesting that our spatial practices include not just our physical movements through a given space but also the rhetorical acts (also physical) that we perform there. More generally, then, we can ask what rhetorical norms our spaces encourage and how we, like Wright, might go about encouraging the kinds of rhetorical norms that we assess as crucial to the formation of healthy communities and publics.
Chapter 4

Gertrude Rapp, Unlikely Entrepreneur:

Repositioning the Harmony Society through the Cultivation of Silk

My friend Jacob, after leaving the church, took me to a building where in a small room were a few females cleaning damaged cocoons. One of these, who appeared somewhat turned of thirty, had a very pleasing countenance, with more character in it than the rest, but in her dress and manner did not differ from them. Jacob conversed with her more than with the others; but whilst I was in the room, I never suspected her to be Miss Gertrude. The idea I had formed of her was that of a maiden to be seen rather in the spacious dwelling-house of her grandfather, than of a woman dressed in a plain blue garment, with her hands in hot water, picking cocoons in a steam-house. I was therefore not a little surprised when Jacob told me it was Miss Gertrude he had been talking to, and who had been giving him such a cheerful and encouraging account of her branch of industry.

—George W. Featherstonhaugh. A Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor.

In the mid to late nineteenth century, Gertrude Rapp was an unlikely minor American celebrity. Her grandfather, George Rapp, founded the Harmony Society, a religious intentional community, in 1785. Her family connections marked her as the “first lady” of the Society throughout her lifetime. Yet, as the above account attests, Rapp was not interested in remaining “in the spacious dwelling-house of her grandfather,” and made a name for herself through her hard labor in her own “branch of industry.” Gertrude Rapp became famous for initiating and directing the Harmony Society’s silk manufacturing business, located south of Pittsburgh in Economy, Pennsylvania from 1827 to the 1850’s. The silk business was widely acclaimed as the best source for quality silk in America, producing goods comparable or superior to foreign-made silks.35 Her

35 Governor Joseph Ritner praised the Harmonists’ silk as follows: “I may compare it with the German character which never gives more promise than can be fulfilled and which always is durable” (qtd. in Kring 187). See also Arndt (“George Rapp’s Harmony” 579), Lapisardi (27-8). Furthermore, the Harmonists were
entrepreneurial fame is unlikely because of her gender, her membership in a non-normative German-speaking community, and, presumably, her spatial isolation with the Harmony Society.

The little extant scholarship on Gertrude Rapp emphasizes her entrepreneurial leadership role and the public recognition of her skill and ingenuity. However, scholars have yet to examine what enabled her to take on this unique role of amateur scientist/businesswoman, much less what might have contributed to the American public’s acceptance of this unlikely entrepreneur. This chapter contributes an initial response to these questions, arguing that questions of space are central to her rhetorical and business success.

This chapter investigates the role of space in Gertrude Rapp’s participation in the Harmony Society and the 19th-century silk public. Of my three subjects, Rapp is the least mobile, and has the least contact with other spaces. Thus, the primary space I examine here is the space of the community itself. In my first section, addressing the rhetorical space of Harmony, I consider the social space of the community, as experienced by the Harmonists themselves, and the projected space of the community, according to those Americans who visited or read about the Society. Miss Rapp used the silk industry and her silk correspondence to counter the projected views of Harmony as an essentially German, grasping community, dominated by the whims of a dictatorial leader. “The Silk Letter Book,” the collection of outgoing correspondence dealing with the silk business

already respected for their business acumen: an article in the Journal of the American Silk Society suggests that the silk business must be profitable if the Harmonists are pursuing it (Cannarella 41). The two works specifically on Gertrude Rapp are articles by Emily Lapisardi and Deborah Cannarella. Deborah Cannarella’s article emphasizes that Gertrude Rapp continued in her grandfather’s tradition as a leader in business rather than religion (40). Lapisardi’s more recent article focuses on how Gertrude Rapp managed to be accepted as a cultured lady by the worldly model and still a much-respected member of the Harmony Society (32).
housed in the Harmony Society archives at Old Economy, Pennsylvania, shows how Rapp positions Harmony’s silk industry as evidence that while the community is ingenious and ambitious, those ambitions are directed for the good of America as a whole, not just the isolated pious community.

In the second section of this chapter, then, I consider how the limits on Gertrude Rapp’s spatial practice were combated through long-distance participation in the silk public via letters. First, I investigate how these letters function as public documents, rather than private correspondence. In other words, I consider the possibility that letters can achieve the level of publicity necessary for participation in a public. Second, I consider the import of the fact that Rapp could not physically attend the fairs and exhibitions of the silk public. Drawing from scholarship on the relationship of space and publics, I conclude that her spatial isolation did limit Rapp’s participation in this public. Finally, I explore the rhetorical effect of Rapp’s gender, unmentioned in the letters but surely still an influence on her audience. I suggest that, in this case, the prejudice about celibacy wrapped up in the projected space of Harmony may have exempted Rapp from certain gendered norms and facilitated her acceptance as a businesswoman.

The Rhetorical Space of Harmony: Conflicted and Contested

I begin this chapter with an exploration of the rhetorical space of the Harmony Society. The community’s spaces function rhetorically for both the Harmonists themselves, through the community’s social space, and for outsiders, in the projections of Americans visiting or reading about the community. In her silk letters, Gertrude Rapp negotiates these two perspectives, rearticulating the Harmony Society as at the vanguard
of entrepreneurial activity and as supporting larger American goals through their participation in the silk cause.

*Inside Harmony*\(^{37}\)

As in most 19\(^{th}\)-century utopian communities, the space of the Harmony Society was structured differently from the spaces of its surrounding cities, towns, and rural areas. First, these communities were conceived of as a whole and then implemented, for the most part, rather than growing up piecemeal. In other words, the abstract space of the community was much more coherent than in communities that developed in a more happenstance fashion. Second, members and founders of intentional communities had a strong sense that one’s physical environment was more than a matter of convenience or aesthetics and that the built environment influenced one’s relationship to nature, work, earthly community, and God. In other words, they embraced a rhetorical approach to space. The Harmonists were no exception. Lead by George Rapp, Gertrude’s grandfather, they developed their philosophy of the best way to live and went about building that idea into their daily existence, starting with the physical spaces of their communities. For the Harmonists, their community represents their communal values, their lifestyle choices (including their celibacy), their religion and, lastly, their economic ventures. The audience for this space, from this perspective, is the Harmonists themselves. By living in a space in accord with their goals and values, their physical surroundings would support them in living the pious communal life they desired.

Because the Harmonist community is probably unfamiliar to my readers, I’ll begin with a little background. George (Father) Rapp, Gertrude’s grandfather, founded

\(^{37}\) My analysis of the “space” of the Harmony Society draws on accounts of all three locations, focusing on the town of Economy, where Gertrude Rapp lived the majority of her life. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these spaces collectively as the space of Harmony, or the space of the Harmony Society.
the Harmony Society in Germany around 1785. A member of the larger Pietist movement, which emphasized lay reading and interpretation of the Bible, Rapp began preaching in his own home at the age of thirty and attracted many followers from neighboring towns. Though their initial intention was not to leave the formal church, the Rappites were labeled Separatists and chose to embrace that identity. Rapp was briefly imprisoned after declaring himself a prophet. In response to increasing persecution from the Lutheran church, exacerbated by his claims that God was speaking directly to and through him, Rapp decided to lead his followers from Germany to America in 1804.

Rapp and his followers settled on 3000 acres of land in Butler County, Pennsylvania. In 1805, the community placed all goods in common and was legally institutionalized as the Harmony Society, thus becoming one of a number of 19th-century intentional communities founded under similar circumstances.38 Father Rapp’s only son, Johann, died young, though not before giving Rapp a grandchild. Gertrude Rapp was born into the Harmony Society in its Butler County location, in 1808. To provide a leader to succeed him after his own eventual death, George Rapp adopted a young man of the community, Frederich Reichert, who took Rapp’s name as his own. Under Frederick Rapp’s leadership, the community relocated to Indiana in 1814 and built the town of New Harmony on the Wabash River. The community moved once more in 1824 to another tract of 3000 acres south of Pittsburgh on the Ohio River, where they lived until the community’s dissolution in 1906.39 After the death of George Rapp in 1847, Romelius L. Baker and Jacob Henrici took over as the trustees of the Society.

38 The Amana Society in Iowa and the Society of Zoar in Ohio are two other such German Pietist examples.
39 The Society lived relatively peaceably in Economie until 1832, when 250 of their 750 members (mostly young people) were “led astray” by Bernhard Mueller and eventually left the society after claiming their portion of the community’s property. This secession is generally seen as the beginning of the end for the
The community had not initially declared communal living as a part of their creed, but in America they embraced the model of the apostolic communal lifestyle, a life with no personal property. The other two main tenets of Harmonist belief were millennialism and celibacy. Millennialists believe in the return of Christ to restore the earth to its original state of paradise and to rule for a thousand years. The Harmonists expected this return of Christ to happen in their lifetime, namely, in 1829. The third distinctive ideological trait of the Rappites is their celibacy. Intriguingly, unlike the Shakers, their doctrine was not inherent to the group’s identity from the start and only developed after three years of communal life.

The space of the Harmonist communities emphasized their communal values by providing spatially demarcated central spaces for community gatherings. Indeed, a rectilinear grid was used in all three locations. The Harmonists’ first settlement, Harmony, PA, established on Connoquenessing Creek in 1804, covered fourteen square miles but housed 900 people in a dense central area. The second settlement, New Harmony, Indiana, founded in 1814, continued the rectilinear model, locating residents around a central town square. The models brought inhabitants together, emphasizing communal spaces over personal homes. A rectilinear plan is characterized by a gridiron pattern with regular blocks and straight streets crossing at right angles. Most rectilinear towns had a central square to serve as a civic center and maintained space for public greens. At the center of the Harmonist towns were the hotels, serving outside visitors, the Rapp Houses, and other important communal buildings and landmarks.40 In the third

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40 The spatial emphasis on the center of town may have privileged those individuals and families living closer to the center. Douglas has noted that families who had children while in the Society (remember that
settlement of Economy, PA (1824), the main route into the village was the Ohio River, not a road. Thus, the important street was Store Street, which led down to the river where goods were exchanged. Despite these differences, Economy maintained the general rectilinear pattern. Figure 4 shows the orderly town square of the third village, Economy, with the central gardens surrounding the grotto and meditation hut, the church in the foreground, and the Great House, the Rapp residence, directly across the street. Unlike other American farming communities, where farmers lived on their land and commuted into town for social, commercial, and religious purposes, in Economy, farmers lived in town and commuted out to work on their farms.

Fig. 4. Economy Bird’s Eye View. Douglas, Paul. Personal Correspondence. October 2008.

The rhetorical approach of the Harmonists to their space was also illustrated in the way that the physical organization of the communities drew on their religious principles.
The gridiron pattern, though common in both Germany and America (including Pennsylvania), closely resembles an earthly vision of the Jerusalem described in Revelations (Hayden 110). George Rapp claimed that the plan for the church at Economy was revealed to him by an angel (Hayden 39). Though the Harmonists used their sacred spaces in a somewhat earthly manner (Douglas points out that they stored grain on the second floor of their first church), even this merging of practical and religious life stems from the community’s insistence that everyday life and religious life should be thoroughly enmeshed.

Still, the Harmonists were less literal in applying religious tenets to their physical spaces than some communities. The Ephrata, to give just one example, used wooden joints instead of nails to imitate the construction procedures of biblical times. More often than not, the Harmonists’ religion played a more metaphorical role in their use of space. Meditation huts at Harmony and Economy were surrounded by garden mazes, a symbol of the confusing path of life in the outside world and the tranquil peace found in the community (see Figure 5). Similarly, the grottos in all three communities symbolize the contrast of man’s rough exterior with the beautiful spirit inside. Another example is the use of the golden rose, a millennial symbol appearing on Johann Rapp’s gravestone and forming part of the décor within the Rapp house (Douglas). The Harmonist communities were certainly interpreted religiously by other communards, such as the Mormons, who valued the various Harmony communities as examples of successful millennial experiments in this world.
Another signifier of the Harmonists’ rhetorical approach to space is the way that changes in Harmonist values and lifestyle can be traced through their physical structures. One prime example of a major change in Harmonist tenets is the adoption of celibacy. While the exact reason for the shift to celibacy is unclear, a few possible reasons for this change have been suggested. Utopian communities generally need to work against such individual and private attachments as monogamous romantic relationships between two individuals.41 The Rappites may also have been moved by a religious rationale for celibacy.42 In 1807, the Rappites experienced a religious revival: many of the youth of the community were attracted to Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, and her

41 Raymond Lee Muncy convincingly explains: In determining the institutions of a utopian community, one basic factor had to be observed: those which threatened the communal spirit by causing one to seek his own interest, or the interest of a particular group within the community, above the interest of the community at large, would have to be greatly modified or excluded. The one institution which more than any other caused concern among the communitarians was that of the individual or private family based upon monogamy, the most ancient of all social arrangements. (10)

42 The biblical basis for celibacy as a Christian duty is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which maintains that celibacy is the purest way of life, but cautions readers that, if they cannot exercise self-control, they should go ahead and marry, because it’s better to marry than be aflame with passion.
theology of abstinence. Furthermore, as one Rappite explained in an interview, if the Rappites truly ascribed to the millennial belief, then it would make no sense to resist the celibacy policy (Muncy 27). Because sexual reproduction sustains society, celibacy is an implicit welcoming of the end of society, a sign of the acceptance and readiness for the millennium (Seeman 399). Though some have argued that the Rappites’ celibacy was based in economic necessity, as the community had too many children, the decision was probably influenced by both practicality and religion.

As the Harmonists embraced a celibate lifestyle, the housing patterns in the community shifted. Harmony was a town of single-family houses; the celibate ideal had not yet been established. After the institution of the celibacy policy, New Harmony offered dormitories for single individuals: four three-story dormitories housing forty to sixty individuals each (Douglas). Finally, Economy saw the addition of larger houses meant to accommodate a communal family of eight to ten people, some of whom would likely be married, others of whom were not, but not all related to one another by blood. The focus remained on the membership to the larger community, but the housing situations encouraged ties to a smaller family. These smaller family modules were still larger than and distinct from the nuclear model of the larger society with its focus on monogamous romantic relationships.

Of course, not all the physical aspects of the communities represented their commitment to larger goals or social practices. The changing economic situation of the

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43 Though Rapp did not denounce all sexual relations, he agreed with Lee about the dual sexuality of God and Adam, claiming that Adam initially comprised both sexes and could have replenished the Earth himself had he not seen the animals in sexual pairs and chosen to be more like the animals and less like God. Adam’s rib, then, was his female component, and the removal of the rib to create Eve was man’s fall. 44 Lord Byron, in a verse about the Harmonists’ celibacy, attributes their decision to such economic factors (Muncy 23–4).
community was also reflected in the Harmonists’ communities. The first community, on a plot of 3,000 acres, was intended to be an agricultural community supplemented by manufactured goods: cotton and woolen clothes, as well as shoes and hats. New Harmony, covering a span of 20,000 acres, was intended for increased farming. Additionally, there was increasing use of steam engines in the factories, decreasing their reliance on the Wabash River (Douglas). The return to a smaller 3,000 acre plot for the founding of Economy suggests, perhaps, a decision to focus more on manufacturing and less on farming.

*Projections of Harmony*

Of course, the Harmonists were not the only audience for the rhetorical spaces of their communities. Those spaces also communicated certain tenets about the community to American neighbors and visitors, and the larger reading public. In this section, I explore these projections of Harmonist space. I find that the positive view of the communities as ordered, productive, and prosperous is complicated or defused by claims of the inhabitants’ ignorance, simplicity, superstition, and obedience. For these outsiders, the planned spaces of the community attest to the backwardness of the inhabitants, their gullibility and domination by a dictatorial leader.

Before engaging with the direct representations of Harmony and the Harmonists by outside visitors, it might be helpful to consider how the Harmonists interacted with larger society in general. For one thing, Harmony was a positive economic influence. In Indiana, neighboring backwoodsmen relied upon New Harmony to provide supplies

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45 I make a similar argument in my article about travel accounts of the Amana. I describe these accounts as a rhetoric of containment surrounding communal groups, where the threat of an uncommon way of life is neutralized or contained by depicting the inhabitants as brainwashed, lacking passion and drive, and so on. These unappealing characteristics are displayed as the price one must pay for the more positive aspects of the society’s way of life (connections to neighbors, a strong spiritual community, worldly prosperity).
unavailable elsewhere, to grind their grain, and to do their banking (Arndt 68). The Harmonists even played a role in the statehood of Indiana: Frederick Rapp was a delegate to the first constitutional convention. But despite these positive interactions, the community was still a source of tension. In Pennsylvania, pacifist Harmonists drafted into the War of 1812 would not serve in the war, a decision which angered neighbors. In Indiana, as Karl Arndt explains, the community’s prosperity, control of the river, political clout as a large unified voting block, and unusual celibate and religious practices created tensions which erupted into violence in 1820, resulting in charges against nine outsiders for rioting and Frederick Rapp and the Harmonists’ innkeeper for assault (69). Thus, there was an ambivalence in the relationship of the Harmonists to their neighbors that could swing either way, depending on the circumstances.

Neighbors and visitors to the community routinely remarked on the orderliness of the town and its outlying areas. Even before reaching the town, visitors became aware of a change in their surroundings. The strategic management of the fields was clear as they passed into Harmony territory. One visitor narrated: “I wanted nothing more than to behold this immense field of most beautiful corn to be at once convinced of all I had heard of the industry of this society of Germans, and I found, on proceeding a little farther, that the progress they had made exceeded all my idea of it” (Hulme 53). This quote demonstrates how the sense of the communities’ spatial order is directly linked to the Harmonists’ famed industriousness. Indeed, visitors might even have witnessed the men and women at work in the fields as in the late 19th-century photograph below (Figure 6). Their neighbors could not but be aware of this relative prosperity. Though the

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46 As Charles Nordhoff commented, “As you walk through the silent streets . . . it will occur to you that these people had . . . the advantage of a sensible architect, for, while there is not the least pretense, all the building is singularly solid and honest, . . . so as to produce a very pleasing and satisfactory effect” (64).
Harmonists were not a showy group, their practice of wearing silk clothing each Sunday demonstrated their enjoyment of fine things.

The sense of the Harmonist communities as strictly ordered spaces was reinforced as visitors came into the central, rectilinear downtown area. While scholars are unsure where the exact inspiration for this scheme came from, Rapp and the Harmonist may have been inspired by German towns, such as Freudenstadt, Darmstadt, Mannheim, Karlsruhe, and Ludwigsburg (Douglas). Yet American visitors would be most likely to associate the rectilinear plan with Philadelphia and New York. Rectilinear town plans allowed for orderly growth and were aided by the availability of standardized materials (Hayden 49). Wherever the method was applied, the rectilinear scheme mapped and cordonned off land into economically separate atoms, giving each lot a set of coordinates and facilitating the trading of real estate at a distance. The mapping and subdividing
impulse of the rectilinear scheme lends spaces an attitude of surveillance, by promoting in the eye of the inhabitant the birds’ eye view of maps of perfectly squared-off towns.

As compared with other American spaces, Harmonist towns would seem striking in their regularity and consistency. Even orderly towns like New York and Philadelphia had more divergence in the styles of their buildings than the Harmonist communities. Further, the air of surveillance suggested by the rectilinear scheme was strengthened in Harmony by George Rapp’s habit of sitting up in his special seat in a cave carved out of a hill to overlook the fields and, when necessary, holler down at his workers through his megaphone (Hayden 60 n27; Knoedler 11).

Indeed, American visitors associated the uniformity of Harmonist spaces with their submission to a dictatorial leader. Outsiders commonly viewed the Harmonists’ as physically well-off, but spiritually and intellectually starved. In the words of Robert Owen:

A shelter from life-wearing cares is something: but a temple typifies higher things—more than what we shall eat and what we shall drink, and wherewithal we shall be clothed. Rapp’s disciples had bought these too dearly, —at expense of heart and soul. They purchased them by unquestioning submission to an autocrat who had been commissioned—perhaps as he really believed, certainly as he alleged—by God himself.

(243)

The standardized, orderly spaces of the community therefore likely have something to do with their material economic success, but the cost is too great, in the eyes of the American public. Rhetorically, Americans saw in the strict standardization of the
community a sign of dictatorial control for which no amount of prosperity would compensate:

Instead of their improvements, and their success and prosperity altogether, producing admiration, if not envy, they have a social discipline, the thought of which reduces these feelings to ridicule and contempt: that is to say, with regard to the mass; with respect to their leaders one’s feelings are apt to be stronger (Hulme 60-1)

This perspective on Harmonist space neutralized the implication that the wealth of the community must mean that the Harmonists are doing something right (communal living, celibacy, religion?) that the average American is not.

Interestingly, there are some indications that visitors over-emphasized the uniformity and bleakness of Harmony’s space. First, Harmonists were architecturally creative, even promiscuous. They neither borrowed from the distant past nor looked explicitly to the future. Instead, they employed a mix of Germanic, American vernacular, and classical revival elements (Douglas). In addition to borrowing from the cultures with which they were or became familiar, the Harmonists’ used “worldly” styles in furniture and did not shun American style as ungodly or incompatible with their religious purposes.

Visitors remarked that the Harmonists’ spaces are full of “indications of plenty and material comfort, but with scarcely a touch of fancy or ornament” (Owen 243). Visitors looked past those facts and interpreted the lack of ornament of the community as a lack of culture. But there were some unique architectural features, or ornaments, in Harmony. One central doorway had a decorative carving over it that resembled an angel
but is believed to be the face of Sophia, signifier of wisdom and the female half of the deity. The cemetery gate, a unique pivoting stone construction, also showed an attention to detail and appreciation of fine design (see Figure 7). In addition, the Harmonist communities housed fine art collections, offered art instruction, and welcomed visiting musicians to enhance the musical curriculum. The Feast Hall in Economy included a museum established and run by Dr. Muller, containing whole collections purchased from outside the community. In the museum were many non-religious as well as religious paintings, including portraits of Columbus, Vespucci, and General Jackson. Yet when the Harmonists’ love of flowers and music was acknowledged, it was viewed not as a sign of taste and culture, but as “a strong symptom of simplicity and ignorance, if not a badge of their German slavery” (Hulme 53).

Fig. 7. Cemetery Gate, Harmony, PA.
http://jschumacher.typepad.com/joe/2008/10/index.html

However admirable the order and prosperity of the Harmonist communities, visitors projected this order as representing the inhabitants’ complete domination by a
dictatorial ruler. The tension between grudging respect for their accomplishments and the distance between the American visitor and the duped Harmonist followers is clear in the accounts. Thomas Hulme, a visitor to the Harmony Society, described the Harmonists as “far-seeing, ingenious, crafty and bold, and ignorant, simple, superstitious, and obedient Germans” (Muncy 22). In her work at the head of the Harmonists’ silk industry, Gertrude Rapp would work to continue the sense of the Harmonists as ingenious entrepreneurs, but would also construct the community as essentially American, not out for their own, foreign, “crafty” success.

*Gertrude Rapp’s Silk Industry*

Before considering how Gertrude Rapp positioned the Harmonists’ silk industry as evidence that they were not simply seeking their own material gain, but in fact forwarding a project that would benefit America as a whole, I want to give a little background on Gertrude Rapp, her position in the Harmony Society, and the community’s silk industry.

Raised by her mother, her grand-father, and her uncle, Gertrude Rapp grew up as unquestionably the most privileged woman of the Harmony Society. As a sign of her significance to the future of the German-speaking community, she was sent to the Shakers to learn English. This education prepared her, as a member of the Harmonist elite, to communicate and negotiate with the larger American society. Her education at the hands of the Shakers is but one of many unusual privileges bestowed on this “first lady” of the Harmonists, and by the time she was an adult, she was one of the principal leaders of the community. While her male relatives were shifting in and out of command due to illness and other preoccupations, Gertrude began to assume a leadership role.
Gertrude’s increased leadership within the Society is perhaps most strikingly illustrated by her handling of the unfaithful or deserting society members, a significant event in the lifespan of the community. In 1829, the community received a letter from a “Count Leon” who claimed to be a European aristocrat desirous of converting to the Harmonist way of life. The community welcomed him but upon his arrival learned that Count Leon was really Bernard Muller, a professional explorer. As the story goes, he came in like a conqueror, a military man at heart, and staunchly opposed celibacy. Eventually George Rapp bribed him to leave, but the damage had been done: Muller took with him a sizable group of Harmonists, an event that became known as the secession of 1832. Later, one of the deserters, Gertrude’s former teacher, wrote to her to explain and seek forgiveness. Her response refused to pardon the deserters (Arndt George Rapp’s 502). The letter and response demonstrate that Gertrude Rapp was perceived by both the defecting group and herself as qualified to speak for the community in granting or denying such a pardon.

Most consequential of all the signs of her privilege and authority, the nineteen-year-old marshaled the society’s first venture into the silk business, in 1827. Sending to Europe for the most recent writings on the cultivation of silk worms and spooling of silk, Rapp educated herself on the topic and proceeded to become the manager of the Society’s silk business (Arndt George Rapp’s 392). Unlike her response to those who had left the flock, Gertrude’s management of the silk business at Economy demonstrates that her authority extended beyond spiritual matters. Indeed, while many communal groups in 19th-century America seemed invested in emancipating women, on closer inspection
those emancipations consist mainly in sharing religious, but not economic, authority.\textsuperscript{47} While religious equality should not be discounted, the leadership enacted by Gertrude in economic affairs is notable because less common.

In their location at Economy, the Harmonists were best known for their material and economic prosperity. Robert Dale Owen attested to this material success:

> for at the time of their immigration their property did not exceed twenty-five dollars a head, while in twenty-one years (to wit, in 1825) a fair estimate gave them \textit{two thousand dollars} for each person,--man, woman, and child; probably \textit{ten times} the average wealth throughout the United States. (240)

In addition to agriculture and manufacturing of cloth, the Harmonists’ prosperity in their Economy location was in large part due to Gertrude Rapp’s silk business. This relative wealth was embodied in the Society’s practice of wearing their silk attire each Sunday (Lapisardi 30). The Society produced silk for over two decades: from roughly 1830 to 1850. As the “Silk Letter Book” contains only the outgoing correspondence from 1842-1847, my study of Rapp’s rhetoric is limited to that period.

The silk letters under examination in this chapter materially substantiate Miss Rapp’s authority and leadership of the silk business. Of the approximately seventy-five letters in the book, around one third are signed “Gertrude Rapp,” another third are unsigned, and a handful of the remaining third are written on Gertrude’s behalf by other

\textsuperscript{47} Among others, Lawrence Foster has convincingly demonstrated that the Shakers had religious equality, symbolized in their joint orders of men and women, but that they did not extend women’s equality into the economic realm.
Harmonists involved in the silk business. Many of the unsigned letters are in response to letters addressed directly to Miss Rapp, but the identity of the anonymous respondents is impossible to determine at this point. It is possible that those letters were answered by Gertrude Rapp herself, but potentially her male colleagues undertook to respond on her behalf. Even a handwriting analysis would be inconsequential, as the letters in the “Silk Letter Book” are copies and were most likely not transcribed by the original authors. In addition, because Miss Rapp’s English was superior to that of some of the male leaders, George Rapp’s in particular, several scholars have noted that it is nearly impossible to know whether she translated his letters from the German, translated and transcribed his letters, or simply wrote letters in his name. She may have done all three at different times, but because we cannot be certain of the authorship of the unsigned letters and are more confident as to the authorship of the signed letters, I’ve focused my analysis on those signed “Gertrude Rapp.”

The Harmonists’ success in the silk business confirmed the community’s reputation as entrepreneurs and innovators. Though the colonial years witnessed several attempts to make silk one of the cash crops of the new world—for the benefit of the colonizers—these attempts were largely unsuccessful (Field et al xx). In the mid-19th century, there was renewed interest in trying to produce silk in America. The community of silk growers was a fairly close-knit group, united in person for perhaps the first time at the New York Convention of Silk Growers in October 1843, the source of the eventual publication: The Silk Question Settled. The convention itself is strong evidence of the as

48 Other than Gertrude, Harmony trustee Romelius L. Baker is the most frequent letter-writer. Occasional letters from George Rapp or Jacob Henrici, the other trustee, are also available in the Silk Letter Book.
49 Lapisardi’s article is one of several sources that conjecture that Gertrude may have answered George Rapp’s letters for him to some extent (29).
yet uninstitutionalized state of the field: those who couldn’t attend sent their written testimonials (Field et al 44-5). This instance also demonstrates the willingness of the community to be linked via texts, rather than through face to face communication. Silk growers needed to consult one another often because silk raising was a new project for America, and a complicated one at that.

While the sale of silk goods is a lucrative business, the “raising” of silk is a science. Like many other silk ventures around the county, the Harmony Society raised and manufactured their own silk, from the purchase of the silk eggs to the eventual sale of silk handkerchiefs, dresses, cravats, and so on. Briefly, the process of silk raising is as follows: the silk eggs are stored in a cool place until they are warmed and thus prepared to hatch; the caterpillar, or silk worm, emerges from the egg and feeds on mulberry leaves (this stage lasts about thirty days); the silk worm expels a sticky liquid from its head and spins a cocoon out of roughly half a mile of liquid silk; the creature left inside the cocoon, the chrysalis, is killed with steam, boiling water, or frost; and, finally, the silky threads of the cocoon are unwound, washed and twisted into silk thread. To complete this process, silk growers had to determine which species of mulberry trees would fare well in their respective climates, what kind of silk worm eggs to buy, and what means of temperature control to use to keep the eggs cool and the cocoon-spinning worms warm, among other details.

The silk letters display Rapp’s quest to learn how best to carry out certain procedures through her communications with other silk experts of the time. One such “expert” is HP Byram, who Miss Rapp credits with the Society’s practice of slowing the
hatching of the eggs.\textsuperscript{50} She addresses Byram as an experimenter and a refiner of techniques: “We have been very successful in retarding the hatching, we adhere to your plan, and always met with good success, but it will give us pleasure to hear, that you have still improved on it” (to HP Byram, February 14, 1842). Two other silk expert correspondents of Miss Rapp’s are JR Barbour, a leading Massachusetts silk grower, and Gideon B. Smith, the corresponding secretary of the American Silk Society. The proceedings of the New York convention mentioned earlier illustrate that Miss Rapp is in the thick of this community: the two lengthy orations at the convention were by Gideon Smith and JR Barbour, the above-mentioned correspondents (Field et al 44).

Nor are such letters to experts a one-way exchange of advice and information. Miss Rapp’s letters to Byram include her own techniques as well as her approval of his. For example, she explains: “Shelves upon which the straws are placed for spinning are best to be 3 feet wide 16 inches apart, as many above one another as the height of the room will allow. Two rows of straw bunches of 15 to 25 straws each tied below, are first placed in the middle, length way in the shelf” (to HP Byram, February 18, 1843). Miss Rapp writes many such letters responding to queries about her own processes, experiments, and insights, down to the minutest details. Of especial interest appeared to be the Society’s aforementioned use of floss silk, often discarded as unusable, but with which she had a technique for producing everyday wear (to Clinton S Fay, March 8, 1843; to Layton Y Atkins, October 21, 1845; to JR Barbour, August 30, 1844). Other notable innovations of the Harmonists’ include producing the first American-made silk velvet (Lapisardi 28) and developing methods for using multiple wheels to spin the silk: “we have one set of

\textsuperscript{50} This passage most likely refers to the practice of placing the silk worm eggs in a tin box, enclosed in a wood one, and lowered into a hole in the ice at the bottom of an ice house (Field et al 47).
machinery for twisting silk by steam, we can make two kinds at once on it, and by putting in small wheels we can make divers six kinds at different times” (to CL Fay, October 4, 1844). As a member of the silk public, Miss Rapp contributes her own knowledge and experience, in addition to receiving and considering the advice and experience of others.

The Harmony Society was well-known throughout the country as the American vanguard of experimentation with various means of producing quality silk, and Gertrude received credit for much of this success. Most notably, she won a gold model from the Franklin Institute for the Promotion of Mechanic Arts for her silk velvet and fancy ribbons in 1838, two gold medals at the Boston Exhibition of the Charitable Mechanics Association in 1844, one at the exhibition of the American Institute in New York in the same year, and a silver medal from the American Institute in 1845 (Lapisardi 28). The gold medal from the Boston Fair in 1844 went to Rapp’s “Figured Velvet Vesting . . . an elegant specimen of the success in manufacturing Silks in the US” (Massachusetts). The silk business of the Society ceased in the mid-1850s, and Miss Rapp never took on another managerial position. She remained the “first lady” of the Society and lived in the Rapp family home until her death in 1889.

Harmony and the Silk Cause

Besides depicting Harmony as a site of entrepreneurial brilliance and experimentation, Gertrude Rapp’s silk letters reposition Harmony within the larger American public. Rapp contributed to the definition of the silk industry as a national cause, a proof that American industry could produce goods to rival those of European markets. In her letters, Rapp shows not only that the Harmony Society is innovative and
materially successful, but also that they are a key player in an industry depicted as central to the international reputation of the nation.

Those invested in producing American-made silk in the 19th century were, to a large extent, concerned not just about their own material success, but about what the industry could do for America as a whole. Silk was a luxury good, and at present it could only be acquired from Europe. To produce quality silk in America, then, would be an assertion of American independence—and independence of a peculiar and particular sort. American-made silk suggested that Americans were not only capable of providing for their own basic physical needs, but that they could be self-reliant culturally, producing art and fine goods to equal those of Europe. Thus, silk growers debated over what role the American government should play in what they called the “silk cause.” They eventually petitioned the state to bolster the industry by taxing silk from overseas.51

Rapp viewed her business as one of the premiere proofs that quality silk could be produced in America: “There is not much doing in silk in this country except what is done by our society” (to Layton Atkins, December 3, 1842). Perhaps the best evidence of the Harmonists’ self-understanding of their contribution is the letter to Wakeman accompanying the goods sent to the American Institute for the New York Fair and Exhibition:

They with those from other sources will serve as fact by which all reasonable doubters may be conclusively convinced, that the production and manufacture of silk . . . is as possible and can be carried on . . . as

51 The tariff was eventually unsuccessful for silk growers in that it only applied to finished goods, making it easy to procure unfinished silk from abroad, and this legislative failure, along with the technological increases that made it possible for large mills to produce silk cloth from unfinished silk, undermined hand-raising, -reeling, and –weaving ventures like the Harmonists’ (Field et al xxii).
fully in this country, as in any other on this globe. I have even the pleasure to be able to maintain that we can do here [in Harmony] what . . . has never been done in any of the old silk growing countries, namely to go, in regular succession through the whole process of the silk business in one season, beginning with the raising . . . of the mulberry seed and ending with the manufacturing of the woven fabric. (to Wakeman, September 25, 1844)

The Harmonists hoped to be a decisive argument in support of the proposition that silk production be pursued in America and thus perceived themselves as a vital part of this national endeavor.

Rapp’s letters demonstrate her interest in the state of silk growing in the country at large—in the American silk cause. Many of the letters inquire as to how other growers are doing, how different climates affect the trees and worms, whether her crops are doing well or poorly compared to others in the country, which silk worm eggs are preferable, and so on. The following letter is a prime example of this researching role of the silk letters:

My object in writing to you now is to enquire how you and some of your neighboring silk growers succeeded after the 11 of July last year, date of your last letter, and also this season? How did your worms and cocoons compare this year, as to health, weight and etc to the last? How many pounds did you raise? Which variety or kind of worm suits your climate best? How do the multicaulis trees seem to be adapted to your climate? Do you intend raising silk again at st marys GA next year? How do you
progress in weaving and manufacturing silk? Have you any white or northern Pea Nut SW Eggs . . . this season? (to Mr. Edwin P Lord, Oct 30 (?, 1845)

The Harmonists’ silk endeavor is not an isolated business, but is part and parcel of the larger move to make the silk industry a source of American pride.

As members of the silk public, the Harmonists also participated in deliberations over what role the government should play in assisting the silk cause and how the advocates could go about persuading government officials to aid them. Through their advocacy of the cause, the Harmonists persuaded the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to adorn themselves with silk cravats and undergarments made of Harmonist silk. Harmonists communicated with other silk manufacturers about the debates and consequences of the tariff on imported silk. Indeed, a later letter notes the unfortunate consequences of the end of the premium paid to silk growers in Pennsylvania: “Many of our small silk growers in western PA have abandoned the Cause, since the state premium has ceased” (to JR Barbour, May 8, 1844).52

Rapp’s letters also ascribe to the patriotic tone and purpose of the silk industry. Rapp expresses the purpose of this “new and most important branch of National Industry,” clearly articulating the need for Americans to produce their own luxury items. The success of silk ventures like that at Harmony must aim:

to convince every Patriot, that our own peoples hands themselves can produce and manufacture this so highly beloved article of luxury, with

52 The records regarding these premiums evidence the size of the Harmonists’ operation in comparison with others in the state. In 1839, Gertrude Rapp was recorded as producing 1440 pounds of cocoons and 141 pounds of reeled silk. The next highest product was A Hewitt’s: 42 ½ pounds of cocoons and 2 pounds, 6 ounces of reeled silk (Lapisardi 32-3).
which we are so fond to adorn ourselves, and in a garment of which if thus obtained, one may justly feel a noble pride, but if the product of foreign hands, we have the best reason in the world, to feel a noble shame when we reflect, that by the way of obtaining it, we have so much and so unpatriotically contributed to squander our national treasure, burden our country with an enormous debt, and there by lay the sure foundation of ruin and misery. (qtd in Cannarella 43)

To acquire luxury items from abroad is here portrayed as an act of disloyalty. Thus, in producing quality silk, the Harmonists are not only acting in a patriotic spirit themselves, but are making patriotic consumerism available to other Americans. In such passages, Wright positions the Harmonists as at the center of the patriotic silk cause, and thus positions her community as distinctly American.

Though the patriotic fervor of the silk cause is a common trope in most of the industry’s written texts, the rhetorical effect of this move shifts when employed by the leader of a pietist German intentional community. Past actions and decisions have placed the Harmonists more at odds than in line with the larger American public. They refused to participate in the War of 1812, relocated several times in part due to hostility from outsiders, and consisted of well over 95% German-speaking immigrants. The patriotic fervor of the silk letters, then, works not only to align the community with the silk public or forward the silk cause, but to counter some of the perceived distance between Americans and the German community in their midst. By forwarding the national silk industry, Gertrude Rapp writes herself and Harmony into the larger national public, re-constructing the space of Harmony along the way.
The Spatial Rhetoric of the Silk Public: Negotiating Spatial Isolation

In this section, I explore how Gertrude Rapp’s spatial isolation within the Harmony Society affected her participation in the public of silk growers. Because of the limits on her spatial practice, Rapp’s primary medium for participation was letter-writing. I argue that Rapp’s letters function more like public documents than private letters. I also consider the consequences of her inability to attend the key conventions and fairs of the silk industry, the primary spaces of the silk public. Finally, I reflect on the absence of gender in the silk letters, contemplating the possibility that the perceptions of the Harmonists’ celibacy may have excused Rapp from certain gendered norms.

Making Letters Public

One important aspect of Gertrude Rapp’s long-distance participation in the silk public involved marking her personal correspondence as public. Without arguing that there is no important difference between published texts and hand-written personally-circulated letters, I suggest that Gertrude Rapp attempted to incorporate some of these public qualities into her own letters. These strategies assisted her in compensating for the limitations of her spatial practice.

But why was her spatial practice limited in this manner? Despite her many privileges, Gertrude’s leadership role differed in some important respects from the roles of the male Rapps and other male Harmonist leaders. Most notably, Gertrude did not travel away from Old Economy to promote her silk business. For the most part, when Miss Rapp traveled it was not at her own behest, but under the direction and usually the supervision of her male elders (Kring 36). Despite the fact that Miss Rapp traveled widely as a member of the Society’s business elite, she appears not to have traveled away
from Economy in the promotion of her silk business at all during the years covered by the Silk Letter Book (Lapisardi 28). Obviously the silk business was important to the community’s well-being, but it was also Miss Rapp’s personal responsibility. There is an intimation that, though in charge of the silk business at Economy, Gertrude Rapp’s leadership role did not connote the right to decide when traveling to promote the business would be in the best interests of the Harmonists as a whole.  

Before considering the rhetorical moves that help designate Rapp’s letters as public documents, I want to address the general notion that printed texts are more likely to be involved in public formation. It is fairly uncommon to consider personal correspondence as evidence of membership in a public. Indeed, many and most theorizations of the public sphere center around the notion that print made this new form, the public, possible. For example, in addition to linking public-formation with the circulation of specifically print documents, Michael Warner’s The Letters of the Public Sphere also elaborates on the qualities of these documents that demonstrate their publicness. First, print becomes “normally impersonal,” or impersonal by definition (xiii). This notion is based on the conception of public-formation as requiring a way of relating to other people distinct from the communication patterns of personal relations. As he explains, “the very printedness of that discourse takes on a specially legitimate meaning, because it is categorically differentiated from personal modes of sociability” (39). The implication, then, is that print becomes impersonal in a way that letters cannot.

While one might not think of letters as capable of being “normally impersonal,” Gertrude Rapp’s business correspondence was, for the most part, not written to people  

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53 The only mention of Miss Rapp’s reasons for staying in Economy in the letters is that “It was not convenient for any one of our society to leave home at present” (to JR Barbour, August 30, 1844).
with whom she shared a personal relationship. Her audience was those strangers with whom she was only certain of sharing one thing: a dedication to the cause of silk growing in America. Just as Warner’s pamphleteers “encounter the exchange not as a relation between themselves as men,” Miss Rapp avoids sharing any particularities about her community or her gender in her letters. She irons out those other potential points of (dis)identification in order to portray her venture as more similar to than different from any other unnamed silk grower in the nation. This gesture to the impersonal nature of public texts in her own correspondence is one sign that Miss Rapp’s rhetoric worked to construct her letters as public documents.

Warner offers a second characteristic of texts that participate in forming a public. His further explanation of why the pamphlet, precisely in contrast to the personal letter, allows for the production of a condition of publicity centers on another central quality: the principle of supervision.

The pamphlet is not a personal letter, and must not be, in the conditions of the public sphere of representational politics. Writers’ unrestricted dissemination appears here as the ground of politics because in its very contrast with personal presence it allows a difference between public discourse and private correspondence. Freeholder and member alike encounter the exchange not as a relation between themselves as men, but rather as their own mediation by a potentially limitless discourse. (40, emphasis in original)
The principle of supervision refers to the awareness of writers that their published texts, unlike their personal letters, can be read and responded to “by any number of unknown and in principle unknowable others” (40).

The principle of supervision, the idea that others who you do not know will read your texts, is also active in Rapp’s correspondence. Rapp attempts to promote the circulation of her knowledge in the way that publishing, a venue not available to her, would have allowed. For example, she asks that her correspondents take advantage of the times that they see one another to communicate what they know of her processes and views. When Barbour inquires about the Harmonists’ production of floss silk, she chooses to “make my communication of all points verbally to our mutual friend Mr. O’Hara of Sharpsburgh during his next visit before he goes to New York” (to JR Barbour, August 30, 1844), with the idea that O’Hara will then convey those ideas to Barbour in person. She hopes “to give you through him the particulars about the floss silk manufacture” (to JR Barbour, October 1, 1844). This willingness to have others share her ideas amongst themselves in her absence is a sign of her desire for publicity, for the circulation of her ideas (as written or oral texts) apart from the circulation of her own body in space.

There is some rhetorical precedent for considering letters as a public genre. In discussing the history of theories of letter writing (ars dictaminis), James J. Murphy explains that letters were originally closer to oral language. For ancient rhetoricians, language was essentially oral, and letters were dictated aloud and read aloud upon delivery (194). Though letters evolved into a more private model, the 4th century Roman rhetorician, C. Julius Victor, made a clear distinction between official letters (negotiales)
and private letters (*familiares*). Official letters were written in the oral style of official announcements and petitions (195-6). The letters of Gertrude Rapp may be understood similarly as official, public documents, not personal epistles.

Further, it should be noted that, in the 19th century, letters in general were more public than that genre is today. As access to printing became more common, handwritten forms became more and more personal. But in the 19th century, letters were still used to accomplish many rhetorical tasks that would later be relegated to the realm of print. Those who left home wrote letters intended to be read aloud in front of family, friends, neighbors, and any other interested party. It is likely, therefore, that Miss Rapp expected that her letters would be distributed and shared with other silk growers and friends of the silk cause. Indeed, she encourages such distribution explicitly at least once in the letters, when she directs Barbour to ask their mutual friend Wakeman for one of Miss Rapp’s letters (to JR Barbour, October 1, 1844). This expectation that Wakeman would have saved or filed her letters and would thus be willing and able to produce the letter in question demonstrates the semi-public state of letters at the time.

Finally, not only informative personal letters but also printed and published texts were exchanged between the Harmonists and their silk correspondents. Circulars kept the Harmonists apprised as to what future publications on the topic of silk could be expected. The Silk Letter Book contains an unsigned letter to A.C. Van Epp asking that he send one copy of the American Silk Growers magazine to Gertrude Rapp, if he indeed produced this publication as per his stated intention in his April 26, 1844 circular (to A.C. Van Epp, September 19, 1844). Other texts circulated from the Society to interested silk amateurs and aficionados include three copies of the proceedings of the National Convention of
Silk Growers and Silk Manufacturers, revealingly titled “The Silk Question Settled,” sent to the Honorable John Dickey, Member of Congress on January 14, 1845, and a book by the secretary of the treasury on the topic loaned for one month to Leonard Kunkle (August 1, 1846).

While the focus on printed texts in publics scholarship is certainly dominant, I do not mean to suggest that publics scholars have argued that letters could never facilitate membership in a given public. Warner’s analysis, in fact, allows that the conditions of publicity, while perhaps established fully in text, might have spread to other media. As he explains:

The assumptions that made [public printed texts] possible could doubtless be translated to oral settings, as long as people agreed to behave as though they were being supervised by an indefinite number of others, any one of whom might occupy their own position irrespective of status. (40)

In this case, the assumptions of publicity were translated into the realm of letter-writing, with Miss Rapp intent on encouraging her correspondents to behave, as she did, as if they were in the public eye.

*The Limits of Long-Distance Participation*

In this section, I consider whether access to physical space has an impact on one’s ability to participate in a given public. As the previous section attests, written correspondence allowed Miss Rapp to circulate knowledge, goods, and texts, and to participate in the developing public of silk growers without undertaking travel away from her community. Her success and prominence in the silk public might suggest that physical space is, in fact, irrelevant to public formation. But while the ability to
participate by mail certainly facilitated her industry, this participation was nonetheless limited by its medium.

From a contemporary standpoint, the fact that Gertrude Rapp managed to participate in the 19th-century American silk public without traveling to participate in face-to-face meetings of that particular group is less than remarkable. The notion of groups of people brought together not physically but through textual interaction is no longer new. But this notion was less commonly accepted at the time. Indeed, the mid-nineteenth century, when Miss Rapp’s silk business was at its height, was a time when such ideas about group membership and participation were being negotiated, along with the attending concerns about spatial presence, absence, and distance. This negotiation resulted in what some scholars have termed a transformation from public space to public sphere, and this transformation was both essential to and exemplified by Miss Rapp’s participation in the silk public.

One of the most striking exemplars of the negotiation of the boundaries of public space and the public sphere is the 1864 Union Soldier Vote. The vote was the culmination of a long debate over whether soldiers stationed outside their home state should be able to vote from a distance. On the one hand, according to the view that prevailed, voting was understood as a question of content: a vote is an individual’s decision, a fact that can be transported over state lines without any damage to the integrity of the vote itself. On the other hand, according to the view ostensibly prevailing in America up until the shift from public space to sphere, the presence of the voting body is crucial because people went to the polls not just to vote but also to monitor the process. As the country grew and expanded, the increasing size of communities began to erode
this kind of community surveillance. Thus, one side of the debate, occupied by the republicans, maintained that the right to vote resided in the individual and therefore could be enacted anywhere. The democrats held, in contrast, that the right to vote concerned the completion of a ritual by a body in a physical community that could witness both the body and the act (“The 1864”). This debate demonstrates that the now-naturalized understanding of a vote as residing within an individual was once very much in question, that voting was once an issue of a physical identifiable body whose vote could only be valid if offered in the company of a community that could bear witness to that individual’s identity.

This shift from public space to sphere is not something that can be identified as occurring on a particular date, but clearly the debate was unfolding during the mid-nineteenth century, when Gertrude was writing. Just as the growing size of communities, making it impossible for people to reliably identify their neighbors, contributed to a shift in the idea of what it meant to vote, the general isolation and distance between American silk-growers facilitated a community joined more by exchanges of texts than by physical meetings.

Perhaps the most significant use of letters to facilitate the entry of Rapp’s silk goods into the public realm concerns the Boston and New York fairs of 1844. In the spring of 1844, JR Barbour sends a silk circular written by Charles A. Wells to the Harmonists (to JR Barbour, May 8, 1844, to Charles A. Wells, August 30, 1844). This circular, inviting silk manufacturers to send samples of their products for the Boston fair, prompts Miss Rapp’s participation in this fair and, perhaps indirectly, the New York fair (to JR Barbour, August 30, 1944).
Though her participation itself is noteworthy and, again, results in the gold medals that brought the Harmony Society so much attention for its silk production, it is also important to note that Gertrude Rapp herself did not attend the fairs in person to receive her awards, a circumstance unremarked by Harmonist scholarship. Her letters and the network of correspondents interested in forwarding the products of the Harmony Society—JR Barbour foremost among them—allowed her to participate in the fairs despite her physical immobility, but this participation was necessarily limited, as the letters make clear.

By the middle of November, a month or two after both of the fairs, Miss Rapp has heard nothing from anyone involved with either fair (to J.R. Barbour, November 19, 1844). In December, R.L. Baker, one of the Society’s trustees, writes to F.B. Wakeman, director of the New York Fair, to try to learn of the state of their goods and the proceedings of the October fair (to F.B. Wakeman, December 18, 1844). By January, however, Miss Rapp has heard the good news: “Mr. Wells has informed us that a Gold Medal has been awarded me at Boston, and . . . a Gold medal as a special award has been granted to me at NY. In both cities therefore our silks have met the approbation of the public . . .” (to J.R. Barbour, January 15, 1845).

While the information about the fairs is relatively quickly acquired, the material successes of the fairs—the medals and the payment for or return of the silk goods—is more elusive. Miss Rapp requests that Barbour sell the remaining goods, if possible, and, if not, return them to Economy along with the gold medals once “spring navigations shall have fully opened” (to JR Barbour, January 15, 1845). Despite these instructions, the location and possession of the medals remains unclear. Miss Rapp next issues orders to
Mr. Schoonmaker and Mr. Wakeman of New York for the diploma and gold medal and to Charles Wells of Boston for the other gold medal, unless they have already given them to Barbour (to JR Barbour, March 4, 1845). As of October, seven months later, Mr. Wells has not rendered payment for the silk goods or the goods themselves, though Gertrude has received “the beautifull and valuable gold medal,” which, she explains, “was not only gratifying to myself, but it was also very pleasing to all our good People engaged in silk at Economy” (to Charles Wells, October 20, 1845). While it may not, in the long run, be significant or surprising that it took approximately three months for Miss Rapp to learn of her success at the fairs, another three months to receive her medals, and at least a year to recover her goods or the appropriate payment, these circumstances show that Miss Rapp’s participation in the silk industry was highly mediated and not nearly as positive as the acclaim signified by the awards themselves might suggest.

Another example of the frustrations inherent in running her business by mail and thus relying largely on the ethics and promptness of others is Miss Rapp’s attempt to acquire silk worm eggs from France. Under the impression that the peanut silk worm eggs are the best America has to offer, Miss Rapp hopes to increase the variety of her production by importing eggs from France. Because it is impossible for her to travel to France and unlikely that her friends and acquaintances will themselves be making the trip, she plans to acquire the eggs through Mr. A. Fombelle, who will receive them in turn through his friend La Forte (to Mr. A Fombelle, October 12, 1844). Four months after placing her order, Miss Rapp writes to Barbour expressing her misgivings: “The eggs from France have not yet been heard from. I begin to fear I shall get none from that quarter” (to JR Barbour, February 27, 1845). Over the next months, the Harmonists send
several letters to Fombelle inquiring about the status of the project and questioning the
credibility of his contact. The following September, a year after the initial inquiry,
perhaps the strongest worded letter in the entire collection is sent to Mr. Fombelle. The
letters is signed “George Rapp” and gives the following specific instructions:

[In case you have not heard from La Forte] yet, I wish to know whether
you will write to him soon and whether you think it worth while, to renew
to him my desire of obtaining the articles above named. I am determined
to procure them through some person or other from France. . . . If
therefore from the tenor of his letter you would judge that it is not
convenient, or he shows any kind of reluctance to fill this order I would
thank you to inform me frankly that I may know what to do.

. . . Please let me soon hear from you, what you think of the matter, and if
you think Mr. Laforte would rather be excused, state your mind frankly,
that I may know, and look out elsewhere. (to Mr. Alexander Fombelle,
September 20, 1845, emphasis in original)

The letter is clearly written at Rapp’s behest, to try to hurry along the question of the eggs
from France. Whether written by her or by George Rapp, the fact that she feels the need
to sign the letter in his name, or to have him write the letter himself, is a further sign of
her own sense of dependence on others. By the following March, Miss Rapp has received
her French eggs (to HP Byram, March 24, 1846).

A close reading of the silk letters shows that while letter-writing certainly in large
part aided Gertrude Rapp in participating in the business and science of silk production,
there were also constraints on her participation because of her inability to travel.
Accounts of Miss Rapp’s work in the silk industry that overlook these constraints do not accurately portray her experience as a female leader in this industry. At the same time, limited participation is certainly preferable to none. In contrast to the above narrative of the change from public space to public sphere, Gertrude Rapp’s experience suggests that material spaces (and thus spatial practice) continue to matter to public formation, affecting who gets to participate and on what terms.

The traditional understanding of rhetoric and space suggests that public discussions are bound to specific spaces. Historically, rhetoric and the city were understood to be closely linked. In ancient Greece, rhetoric was the primary mode of civic life, and the city was the primary scene for rhetoric. While the works of Plato and Aristotle in part served to weaken this logos-polis bond, it was reaffirmed by Cicero and Isocrates. As David Fleming has argued, the design of the city in ancient Greece, especially the agora—the central democratic gathering place—served to provide a space for rhetoric (149). Fleming claims that, for the most part, discussion of Greek politics has overlooked this spatial dimension. If we understand the state of public discourse in Greece as extending through the classes, if not between races or genders, and the polis as a well-functioning public sphere, Fleming maintains, we must consider the role of the agora, the physical space of the Greek public, in this vibrant and multifaceted public.

Fleming investigates the relationship between space and argument through an examination of several key urban planning texts. Most crucial for my own extension of Fleming’s work is his review of Jane Jacobs’ 1961 text. Jacobs held that cities were by definition full of strangers and that good cities need good streets and sidewalks, places where strangers meet and have causal contact (Fleming 153). Here, Jacobs’ views recall
Theories of publics as composed of people with shared interests but who do not know one another personally. To achieve this crucial kind of contact, Jacobs calls for streets that serve multiple purposes—having stores and municipal buildings, not just houses—, short blocks, a mix of old and new, richer and poorer buildings, and a dense concentration of people. In Fleming’s words, her city is ultimately a “talkative city,” creating spaces for informal, casual talk (154). One might view Jacobs’ city as working towards a modern-day agora, a space for casual conversation about shared concerns.

The conferences, exhibitions, and fairs that 19th-century American silk growers attended likely provided the kind of space that Fleming describes as encouraging the class of talk associated with publics: talk at a level between intimacy and isolation. Attendees would have witnessed the same exhibits, perhaps noting points of interest to a fellow-viewer or asking questions of presenters. While Gertrude Rapp’s materials were in circulation at these events, guaranteeing, especially given the acclaim awarded them, that she herself was a topic of conversation within the silk public, she was not able to participate in this physical manifestation of the public. Though participation was possible without being in attendance at such affairs, these events no doubt contributed to the formation and the sense of the character of the silk public: the understanding of what kind of people those of “us” involved in the silk public are. While this understanding included the idea that one of the foremost growers was a female silk grower in a utopian community in Pennsylvania, it did not include her as a full-fledged participant, an anonymous woman walking in their midst, potentially overhearing their comments or standing up in a session to voice her own views. I would argue, then, that the inability of Miss Rapp to attend these conferences did affect her degree of participation in the public
in ways that theories of publics disavowing any link between publics and space must overlook. While publics may allow group formation largely through written texts, when those publics do have physical meetings and locations associated with them, members who cannot participate in those physical encounters are excluded from some of the crucial work of public formation.

**Bracketing, Gender, and Celibacy**

In this final section, I consider the most notable absence in Gertrude Rapp’s silk correspondence. To my surprise, when I turned to the silk letters, I found little to no mention (by Gertrude Rapp or her correspondents) of the fact that Rapp was a female entrepreneur. Here, I consider several interpretations of this silence—that Rapp succeeded in making her discourse truly public by “bracketing” her gender as irrelevant to her business pursuits; that ignoring questions of gender was a strategy for further marking the silk industry as a serious business, not a woman’s hobby; and that Rapp was able to ignore her gender because her membership in a non-normative celibate community served in some ways to exempt her from feminine norms at the time. I argue that Rapp’s strategic silence about her gender worked alongside cultural notions about celibacy (an aspect of her projected space) to promote her acceptance as an entrepreneur. Further, I suggest that her participation, such as it was, might have also been aided by her limited spatial practice—had she visited the spaces of the silk public, her physical presence would have declared her as apart from the general identity of that public.

First, one might read the lack of attention to gender in the letters as another sign of their publicity, another sign that Rapp succeeded in joining the public of silk growers as an equal member, regardless of her gender. The idea of “bracketing” personal identity
markers is a controversial theme within publics scholarship. Some maintain that publics are constituted through circulation of discourses between individuals who, for the sake of open discourse, bracket their individual differences, often identity markers such as race, class, gender, sexuality, profession, age, marital status, and so on.

While most famously outlined in Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere, the idea of bracketing personal identity differentials persists in other theorizations of publics, as well. One example is Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which provides a model for nationhood as an imagined community, though his definition of such an imagined community can and has been applied equally convincingly outside of the national formulation to publics more generally. The bracketing function of this nationalism (or publicity) is exemplified by Anderson’s hallmark metaphor: the tomb of the unknown soldier. He notes that we all know the nationality of the unknown soldier as German, American, or belonging to the nation in which his tomb resides, but that otherwise the soldier is generic and interchangeable; we don’t want to know his name, what town he’s from, his age, or whether he has any children. In order to form a public of national citizens, those other identity markers are bracketed. Likewise, public deliberation supposedly requires a bracketing of status differentials and identity markers so that individuals communicate not as unique people but purely as members of that public.

Since these formative models of publics and nations were proposed, there have been many critiques of such bracketing as an impossible and thus discriminatory ideal. To return to Anderson’s unknown soldier, feminist critiques have pointed out that it is not only his nationality that is assumed, but his gender as well. Joanne P. Sharp notes that
Anderson doesn’t talk about the construction of the national citizen, but the citizen he presupposes without explicit discussion is gendered. Thus, the unknown soldier is not totally anonymous. In fact, we could probably posit several other identities to him as well: he is likely imagined as young and heterosexual, in addition to being male.

Besides showing that these theoretically anonymous models mask dominant identity constructions, scholars have shown that, along with this norm of anonymity, there is a corresponding privileging of dominant individuals. For who is it that has the easiest time seeming anonymous, unmarked? Michael Warner demonstrates that this “principle of negativity,” his term for the negation of the unique self in public discourse, is available only to those “whose social role allows such self-negation (this is, to persons defined by whiteness maleness, and capital” (42). Similarly, Nancy Fraser’s significant critique of Habermas asserts that not only is it impossible to bracket status differentials, such norms work to the advantage of dominant groups (118-20). As McDowell elaborates, dominated groups are viewed as nothing but their bodies—in a sense, they are imprisoned in marked bodies, while dominant groups are unmarked, neutral, universal, and disembodied. Being able to seem unmarked is a sign of privilege.

These critiques suggest that interpreting the apparent absence of gender as signifying that Rapp was, in fact, “free” from gendered constraints might be too easy a reading. Further, it seems problematic to assume that ignoring gender is a sign of liberation. Fraser notes that a healthy public sphere must “thematize,” not ignore, difference and diversity (120).

A second interpretation of the absence of gender in the silk correspondence would look to the larger context of the silk industry itself. While not explicitly arguing against
the gendering of the industry, the conspicuous absence of any mention of gender in the letters can itself be seen as an implicit argument against such depictions. Certainly both Rapp and the majority of her correspondents would have wished the silk industry to be associated with the unmarked (masculine) spaces of industry, not the gendered (feminine) space of a hobby.

The silk industry in 19th-century America was largely open for interpretation. On the one hand, as I explored earlier in this chapter, the silk industry, or “silk cause,” was based in a nationalistic drive to produce quality luxury goods in America, by Americans, for Americans. States offered incentives to growers to develop sericulture and imposed tariffs on imported silk to enforce and encourage the purchase of American-made silk.54 On the other hand, silk raising was associated with weaving, sewing, and other women’s work. Shortly after the high point of the Harmony Society’s silk production, in the 1840s, the production of silk would be marketed as a leisure-time activity and hobby for middle- and upper-class women. Albert Heusser describes the decline of silk raising from a serious industry to a do-it-yourself fad in the mid to late 19th century, including a feature on the subject in the November, 1854 edition of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. By this point the silk business had lost its image as the next big national industry and had become thoroughly gendered.

Gertrude Rapp resisted this perceived “feminizing” of the silk industry. Her letters are unambiguous in their claims that the silk industry is a professional, not an amateur, venture. Over the course of the years covered by the “Silk Letter Book,” Miss Rapp appears to progress from an attitude of desiring to help educate anyone about the production of silk to one of annoyance with dilettante growers turning to her for help.

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54 For a detailed account of the tariff on silk, see Mason.
The two letters to Van Epps, in 1847, best exhibit this shift. In the first letter, Miss Rapp writes: “one point is certain: that if any thing requires care and attention it is the raising of silk” (to A C Van Epps, March 18, 1847). If this letter seems to question Van Epps’ earnestness in his silk endeavors, the second letter confirms this reading. In no uncertain terms, Miss Rapp states:

I am sorry to have to share: that we have for many years devoted a great deal of time to give answers to a large number of letters on the subject of silk, but have effected very little. We have therefore come to the conclusion to discontinue any correspondence on that point. We have always been, and still are, willing to give verbal instructions to practical silk growers or manufacturers. (to Mr. Van Epps, September 25, 1847, my emphasis)

This letter may well indicate Miss Rapp’s declining faith in the possibility of making silk one of America’s leading industries. As it becomes clear that this industry will not “take root” in American soil, she is disheartened. The many letters she has written to initiate new growers into the industry seem, at this time, to have “effected very little.” Nevertheless, she still holds open the promise to instruct individuals in person about the growing of silk, though this invitation is tellingly limited to “practical silk growers or manufacturers.”

The spatial practice of making silk at Economy also resisted the interpretation of the industry as “women’s work.” Though Miss Rapp ran the business, both male and female community members worked in silk production. Female adolescents cared for the worms, children harvested mulberry leaves after school, and grown men and women
wove silk and satin (Lapisardi 29). The profession was not considered dishonorable for men: Harmony trustee Jacob Henrici cared for the silk worms while Gertrude accompanied the ailing Frederick Rapp on his visit to a Philadelphia homeopath. Henrici also worked for a time in the silk house at a time of disillusionment with his leadership role (Lapisardi 29). Within the Harmony Society, the prestige of working with silk may have been aided by the fact that George Rapp himself was a linen weaver before becoming a prophet (Lapisardi 29). Fascinatingly, none of the letters themselves provide this information: they are silent on the topic of which individuals, adults or children, men or women, are assigned or are best suited to which tasks.

Few of the letters in the “Silk Letter Book” clearly address the question of the gendering of the silk industry. Two letters from Ephraim Bacon and H R Schetterly to Miss Rapp, however, do explicitly mention gender and the silk business. In these cases, Miss Rapp’s silence on the subject in her replies is particularly telling. Both Bacon’s and Schetterly’s letters are similar in that they implicitly define silk production as women’s work, whether for one young woman or the female population of an entire community. Bacon writes to ask Miss Rapp whether she might allow his daughter to come live in the Society and learn the silk business. Her response contains a good portion of practical advice about the business, but declines taking his daughter on as an apprentice (to Ephraim Bacon, February 14, 1842). Her refusal to address the question of gender here may be excused by the general inconvenience of admitting an outsider to the community, particularly one who most likely did not speak German. The correspondence with Schetterly, however, is more complex.
As one of Miss Rapp’s correspondents, Schetterly is particularly fascinating because he too belongs to an intentional community. Schetterly was the founder of the Alphadelphia Association, a community near Kalamazoo, Michigan based on the principles of Charles Fourier. His letter seeks Miss Rapp’s opinion of his plan to employ the women and children of the Alphadelphia community, “an Association somewhat similar to your own,” in the growing and manufacturing of silk.55 Appealing to Miss Rapp specifically as a member of a utopian community, who will likely “feel an interest in the welfare of your brethren and sisters, members of the great human family,” he requests that she “answer as many of my questions as you find it convenient, either in the English or German language as you may think proper.” The purpose of his letter is clear: “having a number of children and women for whom we can not now furnish suitable employment, some of us have thought of engaging in the cultivation of Silk next spring. But before we commence we should like to know whether we can make it profitable.” After this introduction, Schetterly goes on to ask, specifically, about the numbers of people needed to raise silk: “Will you please inform us, how many men we must employ, and how long, to do it, provided we employ children between the ages of 1- and 15 years old, and women? How many such women and children it will take, to do it with the least necessary number of men?” He stresses again at the end that his community has “no experience in the silk business” and does “not propose to go into manufacturing it.” Nevertheless, he notes: “it seems to us we could make the raising of cocoons profitable by employing our women and children.”

55 The Shakers also undertook silk growing at one point. See also Field et al for a discussion of a short-lived utopian community in Massachusetts based around a silk manufacturing project.
Miss Rapp’s reply to Schetterly is long and nuanced, yet avoids explicit discussion of the genders of either those involved in the work at Harmony or the proposed workers in his community. The letter is worth quoting at length:

Dear Mr. Schetterly,

I am pleased to hear of your resolution to commence the silk business, as it is better adapted for Societies where all have a common interest than otherwise, yet a great number of persons in different parts of the united states have turned their attention to it with good results, of which the silk journals give account and where you will find replies to your Enquiries more fully than it is in my power to give. You are aware that we pay no wages to ourselves, I mean to our people, therefore we do not keep a [record] of dollars and cents, nor did we commence the silk business as much from a motive of mere gain as from a desire to Experiment, and to supply ourselves with our own make of silks, instead of sending to foreign countries for it. Yet if well attended to, I am satisfied it is as good a Business as most any other Branch at this time, however if you are all strangers to it you cannot expect to make much the first year or two, and a beginning on a small scale is much the safest. .. I understand Mr. HP Byram of Brandenburg Mead County KY who is well experienced would undertake to go somewhere to make a beginning, I think you had better write to him . . . as well as Mr. Barbour of Oxford, Worcester Co Mass, both those gentlemen travel much, and are able to answer almost any question in relation to silk. (to HR Schetterly, September 26, 1845)
In large part, this letter frustrates most of Schetterly’s aims. Rapp emphasizes the great variety of individuals working in the silk business in America. At no point in the letter does she answer his questions inquiring about the work abilities of women and children, implicitly contrasted with those of men. Indeed, her excuse that the Harmonists don’t receive wages seems almost ludicrous: just because she does not pay her workers does not mean she has no estimate of how many workers she has, their general working hours, and so on. The suggestion that she does not know who works and for how long seems especially unlikely given the incredible detail in other letters as to how many times the silk eggs are turned in the night, among other minutiae (to William Hickman, February 14, 1842). Her instructions to refer to the silk journals and to her “expert” friends, Byram and Barbour, seem a move to emphasize that this is a serious business. While Schetterly writes to her as a caring member of a community and a female leader of what he seems to read as a domestic industry, she responds by bringing out all the big guns: the publications, the male experts, and so on.

Gertrude Rapp did not write a strong defense of the idea that silk production could be associated with both serious industry and women simultaneously. But surely she herself was an implicit argument against the opposition of gender and business. Regardless, Miss Rapp’s rhetorical construction of the space of the silk industry as a serious business did serve her own rhetorical ends. Had she been seen as merely a female “dabbler” in silk, her products would not have warranted invitation to or acclaim at fairs and exhibitions, in silk journals and circulars. Interestingly, in her letter to Schetterly, she herself claims the patriotic silk cause as the motive for the Harmonists’ silk venture, undertaken not as a means of employment (as the Harmonists “pay no wages” to
themselves) “nor . . . from a motive of mere gain,” but rather “from a desire to Experiment, and to supply ourselves with our own make of silks, instead of sending to foreign countries for it”—further constructing the community of Harmony as she rejects both the goals of useful employment for women and children and general economic wealth.

While the desire to position the silk industry as a serious business, not a woman’s hobby, might have prompted Rapp’s silence on the subject of gender, it does not explain the willingness of the other silk growers, the friends of the silk cause, and the general public to welcome this businesswoman without commenting on the fact that she was a woman. I’ll end this section, then, by considering yet another contextual factor that shaped Gertrude Rapp’s reception: her role as a member of a celibate intentional community.

While her inability to travel was certainly a hindrance to Miss Rapp’s full participation in the silk industry, it is possible that this more limited participation was a boon in terms of the public perception of her leadership. Had she traveled in person to the silk growers’ convention in New York in 1843, or to the New York or Boston fairs in 1844, her gender would have been much more difficult to overlook. Without going so far as to suggest that written correspondence allowed Miss Rapp to rhetorically “cross-dress” or “trick” her readers into forgetting she was a woman, it seems reasonable that her physical female presence would have made her gender much more concrete for her audience. Thus, while her inability to travel might seem like a constraint, it is possible that by participating through letters, Rapp positioned herself as a less threatening female business and scientific leader.
Further, Miss Rapp was not just a woman, but a woman from a particular community, a community which happened to be celibate. Thus, I argue that her projected space exempted her from certain mainstream American gender expectations. Scholars of intentional communities differ in their estimation of how the Harmonists’ celibacy was perceived by the larger public of the time, in part because there seems to be reasonable evidence for several views. On the one hand, as marriage and family were regarded as the foundation of society in 19th-century America, to undermine them was to attack political and social order. This view holds that traditional familial life is in direct conflict with associational or communal tenets. More support for this view lies in the hostility towards the Shakers. On the other hand, other evidence suggests that, in contrast to other more radical sexual practices like polygamy, polygyny, polyandry, and free love, celibacy was easily accepted in the larger society. Some scholars argue that “although ordinary society regarded celibacy as unorthodox, it did not regard it as an evil or as a threat” (Muncy 231).

Overall, there is reason to believe that there was a long history of strident opposition to celibacy in America’s recent past that likely informed the public response to the Harmonists. Erik R. Seeman notes New English clergy’s intense opposition to lay vows of celibacy. Only a tiny percentage of New England colonists refrained from having

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56 Charles Lane, a friend of Bronson Alcott’s, forwarded this view in articles in The Dial attempting to convert Transcendentalists to celibacy. He maintained that either associationism or the private family must be wrong (Muncy 233).
57 The Shakers’ role in breaking up marriages and separating children from parents made their practice of celibacy seem unnatural, against nature, and hostile to the norms of larger society; it was the severing of personal emotional ties that former Shakers criticized most often when they publicized their reasons for leaving the society (Foster 31).
58 In this view, rather than overturning a societal norm, celibacy was just an extreme expression of the general move in the 19th century towards smaller families and more self-control over propagation. As opposed to earlier notions of women as the more lustful sex, middle-class 19th century women were meant to be passionless and pure, a model that promoted voluntary motherhood. The cult of true womanhood, famously theorized by Barbara Welter, held that the ideal woman was essentially asexual.
children, and the atmosphere in America embodied the exhortation to be fruitful and multiply, a colonial imperative towards spatial and reproductive expansion. Further, New England depended on a voluntaristic model for enforcing family stability. Because celibacy threatened the patriarchal family as a means to instill important cultural values and controls, it was a threat to society.  

The idea that a woman’s body would never be used for procreative purposes marked her as different from the ideal woman. Evidence that celibate women were perceived as unnatural exists in many descriptions and accounts of women in celibate communities. One male ex-Shaker, for example, noted that Shaker life made women unwomanly: they had unusually harsh voices and they “belched” their words (Chmielewski et al 140). Other Shaker apostates denounced the effects of celibacy on Shaker men and women, noting a loss of reason, sense, judgment, will, and affection, as a result, and a reduction to a feminized emotional frenzy (Seeman 412). Nevertheless, the manifestations of celibacy were more problematic in celibate women, who were described as monstrous beings, deformed after abandoning their natural role as vessel (413).  

Novelist Rebecca Harding Davis offered in her “The Harmonists” what might well be a representative account of the contemporary image of celibate women: the Harmonist women are “dried-up” and “withered,” mourning lost children and lovers, with “shriveled” breasts (quoted in Pfaelzer 130).

My point, here, is not that other silk businesspeople thought of Gertrude Rapp as monstrously unnatural, but that her industry could be understood as either the

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59 This fear of individuals not bound by a private family is exemplified by the weekly twenty shilling tax on “lone-men” in Hartford, Connecticut, for the “selfish luxury of living alone” (Seeman 405).

60 The physical attack on Mother Ann Lee, the leader of the Shakers, to determine whether this woman who proposed celibacy as the true path could actually be a biological woman, demonstrates this sense of celibate women as not real women, as deformed (Foster 33).
entrepreneurial output of a “female man” or as a substitute for the family she could not have. Thus, her celibacy might have “explained” the oddity of a woman in charge of such a successful business; ironically, this less-than-flattering aspect of her projected space might have counterbalanced some of the limitations of her spatial practice.

It is difficult to conjecture as to how Gertrude Rapp’s gender affected her participation in the silk public, given the absence of explicit discussions of gender in the letters. Without arguing that appearing to the silk public in textual form masked or bracketed her gender, I suggest that attending the silk fairs and exhibitions in person would have more drastically marked her as female. In addition, her celibacy undoubtedly played a role in the perception of Miss Rapp as a gendered being. Miss Rapp might have been more palatable as a female entrepreneur than women from mainstream American communities who were already or were expected to become mothers. In this case, though Rapp’s projected space and spatial practice both seem limiting (she can’t travel, and she is exposed to prejudice as a celibate woman), they might actually work together to allow her some degree of agency as a businesswoman.

The lesson, here, in terms of the larger discussion about whether gender (and other identities) can be bracketed in public discourse, is that gender can never be considered alone. It might seem like Miss Rapp successfully bracketed her gender, since it does not come up explicitly. But upon further consideration of other aspects of her projected space, it becomes clear that the particular gender identity ascribed to Miss Rapp may explain the seeming openness of the public to this female businesswoman. Rather than a study of bracketing or unbracketing of gender, this chapter is a proof of how gender varies with geography, time, religion, and nationality. Miss Rapp’s story, then, is
not a story of a woman who escaped gender discrimination through letter-writing, but a more nuanced story of a woman whose complex positioning contributed positively and negatively to her rhetorical and industrial success.

Conclusion

These musings about the spaces of Harmony and the nature of Gertrude Rapp’s participation in the silk public raise questions of boundaries. In contrasting the social and projected spaces of Harmony, my first section articulates how differently the same physical space can be perceived by insiders and outsiders. When we see a space, we don’t just perceive it in its physicality—we interpret and explain it. The Harmonists explained their spaces to themselves (before and after their actual construction) in terms of their communal and religious values. Visiting Americans, perhaps through ignorance or prejudice or both, explained these largely (but not entirely) uniform spaces as the result of a uniform mindset, the sign of this total domination by a corrupt religious leader. The boundaries of the 19th-century American silk public are the focus of the second half of this chapter. I explore how those boundaries are somewhat permeable, in the sense that Gertrude Rapp participates via letter-writing. Still, there is a distinction between her participation and the participation of those who can attend the fairs and exhibits where that public physically manifests itself. Her identity as a woman and a member of a non-normative community further plays up the difference between herself and the majority of the members of that public.

My reading of the space of Harmony foregrounds the importance of projected space as a category for analysis. As I explored in my previous chapter, the ability of a
space to exist and sustain itself depends not only on how those within the space imagine it, construct it, or live in it; the projections of surrounding communities will determine to some extent what can be done in and through that space. For the most part, current spatial terminology centers on the perspective of the planners/designers and the users, ignoring the perspective of those who look on from without. While the Harmonists largely focused on themselves as the audience for their built spaces, the views of the Americans who visited their communities had the power to impede the Harmonists’ goals. Scholars of rhetoric and space should work to consider how projections of space circulate and impede the spatial agency of groups and individuals. How does exposure to or ignorance of outside understandings of one’s space play into rhetorical and spatial agency? I think here of students who are exposed to international perspectives on America and Americans for the first time in their first-year writing courses. Do those perspectives change their writing, their self-conceptions of their agency in the world, as Americans? Perhaps students in such a situation might consider how to acknowledge those other perspectives, or how to work with them, as Gertrude Rapp mobilized ideals of American patriotism in her letters. Gertrude Rapp’s work to reposition the Harmonists as committed to the patriotic silk cause countered the projections of the community as self-serving and essentially German, not American.

My overarching assessment of Gertrude Rapp’s participation in the silk industry is admittedly ambivalent. On the one hand, this determined entrepreneur did achieve much success and renown, aided in part through her use of letters as a means to participate in the silk public. Still, in considering how her limited spatial practice barred her from the spaces of that public, I conclude that spatial practice is indeed an important
component of public formation. Though publics may function largely through exchanges of texts and ideas, there are often important occasions where members gather in a physical space and get an impression of who “we,” as members of a public, are. Still, Rapp would likely not have been perceived as “representative” of this community, even had she been present.
Chapter 5

Abby Morton Diaz, Renaissance Woman: Reconfiguring Labor and Gender

in Brook Farm, Fiction, and the Urban Women’s Club

Abby Morton Diaz gave her first public lecture, “Character in Schools,” at the fourth Woman’s Congress in 1876. The setting for both the Congress and her talk was the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, a heady occasion celebrating the anniversary of the United States and the accomplishments of its citizens over the previous century. The Exhibition was the first World’s Fair hosted by the United States, welcoming nine million visitors at a time when the entire population of the country was just forty-six million. The Exhibition established the United States as an international industrial power: the daunting fourteen acre Machinery Hall displayed state-of-the-art machines using steam and hydraulic power. But the Exhibition was also a venue for establishing the position of women in American history and society. When women were denied the right to exhibit in the Main Hall, a committee formed and organized a Women’s Pavilion. The other Halls and Pavilions were all, by default, “Men’s Pavilions,” and, thus, the Women’s Pavilion constituted the first World Fair exhibit specifically honoring women’s work.

The Women’s Pavilion was a fraught endeavor, striving to display the capabilities of women in both traditional feminine arts, such as needlework and cooking, and masculine, industrial arts, such as construction and engineering. The founder of the Pavilion, Elizabeth Gillespie, was careful not to alienate visitors by mentioning women’s suffrage or aligning her exhibits with more radical women’s activists, such as Susan B. Anthony, who infuriated opponents of women’s participation in the Fair by distributing a
“Declaration of the Rights of Women” at a July fourth ceremony. The Women’s Pavilion at the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 symbolizes the spatial role of American women at the time: semi-public, a segregated portion of the larger public sphere. Abby Morton Diaz, a participant in these events, continued on from this speech to become a renowned public speaker, a leader who would herself create (semi) public spaces for women and whose spoken and written rhetoric embodied the tension between cries for women’s full public participation and the lingering attachment to a separate spheres model.

Abby Morton Diaz was a rhetor linked to various influential American publics throughout her lifetime. Born on November 22, 1821, Abigail Morton of Plymouth, Massachusetts was a direct descendent of George Morton, author of the first printed record of the Plymouth settlement. Her parents, reformers Patty Weston and Ichabod Morton, hosted many famous reformers during Abby’s youth, including educator Horace Mann, Transcendentalist and teacher Bronson Alcott, and the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The least-known period of Diaz’s life is her young adult years, spent at the Transcendentalist intentional community of Brook Farm. Subsequent to her time on the Farm, Diaz raised two children as a single mother and began to write for a living, gaining a reputation for her children’s fiction and, eventually, for the didactic fiction that established her as a social critic. Diaz’s prestige increased to the point that she was invited to the Atlantic Monthly’s 1879 birthday breakfast for Oliver Wendell Holmes, the first such celebration that included women writers (Donovan 1-2). Towards the end of her life, Diaz lived in a suburb of Boston and held leadership roles in organizations such as the Boston Women’s Education and Industrial Union, the Massachusetts Women's Suffrage Association, and the Belmont Educational League.
The scholarship on Diaz focuses mostly on just one aspect of her work: her children’s literature, her didactic non-fiction, her speeches as the President of a woman’s club, or her later writings about New Thought, Bellamy Clubs, or the Nationalist movement. Unfortunately, because her work has been approached from so many angles, with few scholars addressing more than one facet of her public participation, Diaz can seem like a bit of a dabbler. Though it is impossible to cover the breadth of Diaz’s work in a single chapter, this chapter aims to explore interconnections between Diaz’s Brook Farm experience, her didactic fiction, and her leadership in the women’s club movement.

Though most scholarship focused on just one aspect of Diaz’s corpus, a few scholars have taken up Diaz’s participation in Brook Farm as a context for her later rhetoric. In her article, “Creative Women of Brook Farm,” Lucy Freibert attributes much of the inspiration behind Diaz’s children’s literature and lectures to the Transcendental philosophy of the community. The study frames Diaz’s later work as borrowing from and enacting the philosophies she was exposed to at Brook Farm. I join this work in reading Diaz’s time at Brook Farm as an important lens for her later work, though my focus is specifically on Diaz’s approach to space.

Unlike these earlier works, however, this chapter does not read Diaz’s later accomplishments as her transplanting the Brook Farm philosophy into different contexts. The Brook Farm community itself showed the difficulty of translating theory into action. I want to explore the process by which Diaz adjusted and tailored Brook Farm theories to

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61 For scholarship on Diaz other than the works addressing her role as a member of Brook Farm or a leader of the WEIU, see Parris on Diaz’s children’s literature, Strauss on her role in the Bellamy Clubs and Nationalist movement, Michell on her writings regarding New Thought, and Marsh and Farnham on how her didactic fiction participated in a reconceptualization of marriage and the home.

62 Similarly, Ann Cro’s master’s thesis argues that Brook Farm’s utopian socialism influenced Diaz’s later work as a writer and reformer.
better consider women’s spatial practices in the rural home (the subject of her didactic fiction) and in urban Boston (the site of her women’s club activism). Moreover, I argue that Diaz’s thinking benefited from both the theories of Brook Farm and the community’s unequal application of those theories. At Brook Farm, Diaz witnessed how quickly even the most well-intentioned theories can break down when they confront the messy realities of difference. In her later works, Diaz uncovered similar tensions operating in the rural home and the urban landscape of Boston.

Of my three subjects, Diaz is most clearly engaging questions of gender and space in her own work, and so that is the focus of the chapter. I begin by showing a gap between abstract space and spatial practice at Brook Farm, especially for women. Though the abstract space of the Farm incorporated a sense of physical labor as elevating and valued, women’s labor continued to be perceived as drudgery. In her didactic fiction regarding women’s domestic spaces, Diaz argues for a better fit between the ideals and realities of women’s domestic labor. I argue that Diaz’s didactic fiction attempts to correct the mismatch between abstract space and women’s spatial practice that she witnessed at Brook Farm.

Later in her life, Diaz became active in the women’s club movement. As the President of the Boston Women’s Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU), Diaz utilizes two spatial strategies. First, she leads the WEIU in shaping semi-public spaces for women that make urban space safer and more navigable for women of all classes. Second, she articulates the spaces of the WEIU as a site for a cross-class sisterhood. In place of a charity model, Diaz argues that wealthier women can learn from working women just as working women learn from them. As part of this vision, Diaz articulates
working women’s spatial practices of labor as valuable and admirable, encouraging more well-off women to consider the ennobling benefits of such labor.

The Rhetorical Space of Brook Farm: Theory and Practice

This section examines the abstract space of Brook Farm. The Brook Farm philosophy, despite its vaunted idealism, encouraged an understanding of the power of matter over mind, including a valuing of physical labor alongside and in support of mental and spiritual exertion. Yet this re-valuing of labor seems not to have applied to women’s labor at the farm, which continued to be perceived as drudgery. This conflict between the stated philosophy of the community and its lived practices bears close resemblance to Abby Morton Diaz’s critique of domestic space and labor in her own writings. In her later writings, as I’ll explore, Diaz reworked this abstract space to show the dominance of matter over women’s minds in the spatial practice of the rural home.

Brook Farm’s Abstract Space

In this section, I explore the abstract space of Brook Farm, its manifestation in the physical spaces of the community, and its grounding in the Transcendental philosophy of its founders. Among the most interesting components of this abstract space is the idea that one’s relationship to the material world, forged through labor, is crucial to a balanced and harmonious life. This balance aids not just the individual but also heals the divisions between classes, which stem in large part from the association of the lower classes with the material realm and the upper classes with the spiritual or mental realm. Ideally, then, Brook Farm was a place where all labor was valued, where physical labor was viewed as a means of achieving transcendence and finding fulfillment.
In the spring of 1842, Ichabod Morton visited Brook Farm and quickly decided that he would build a double house for his own family and that of his brother Edwin (Delano 96). Called Pilgrim House, in reference to the family’s Plymouth origins, the residence was the third new building in under a year, but it would not fulfill its intended purpose: Morton left two weeks after the house was finished. His daughter, Abby Morton, remained. The Brook Farm community, where Abby would reside until its collapse in 1847, was a philosophical intentional community with its own theories about space. Brook Farm was based on a branch of Transcendentalism that emphasized the power of the material aspects of life and held that social change could best happen on the level of a community or public with a shared understanding of how material existence could aid individual fulfillment and development. This section explores this abstract space, the ideal space of the Farm.

An obvious prerequisite for the community’s goals was a good amount of land for farming and laboring. The Brook Farmers intended to grow and raise their own food and sell any surplus for profit. George and Sophia Ripley purchased the 170 acre Ellis farm in 1841 and soon after purchased the Keith lot, an additional 22 acres (Delano 71-2). The farm was bordered by a low stone wall and a brook (which later gave the farm its name) on the south and eastern sides. The Charles River bordered the land on the west, with Pulpit Rock—the site from which John Eliot preached to the native tribes in the 17th century—at the northern perimeter (Delano 43). The land itself was mainly pasture and meadowland, with some hardwood lots and a pine forest (Gura 155-56).

But Brook Farm was far more than a farm. George Ripley referred to his community as “a company of teachers” (Delano 79). Classes were taught by Harvard
graduates and accomplished women, and the school became a prototype of later elite boarding schools in New England. Adults in the community were also an educational priority, and Brook Farm’s evening lectures and talks were a forerunner of later American adult education programs (Delano 81).

The carefully selected location of Brook Farm reflected the Farmers’ goal to unite the intellectual and the laborer in the individuals living there. The location of the Farm itself spoke to this desire (see Figure 8). An early circular for the Farm described its site as a “place of great natural beauty, combining a convenient nearnesss to the city with a degree of retirement and freedom from unfavorable influences unusual even in the country” (qtd in Delano 39). Indeed, with a location just one mile northwest of West Roxbury, a town that could supply their most immediate needs, and eight miles west of Boston, the Farmers were careful not to completely isolate themselves from the outside world. The constant stream of visitors to the Farm made it clear that total isolation was hardly a threat. The Farm was close enough that members could attend meetings and talks in Boston and that visitors—some illustrious, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, some intent on visiting family and friends living at the Farm, and some merely curious—had relatively easy access to the community. The Brook Farmers did not wish to shut out society, but merely to distance themselves from the competitive marketplace.
The public spaces of the community celebrated the Farmers’ social goals: common dining and entertainment, solid educational programs for children of all backgrounds, and opportunities for individuals to enrich their lives by following their own passions and interests in work and play. Figure 9 shows the community as painted by a 19th-century visitor. The Ellis farm, accessed from Dedham Road via a break in the aforementioned low stone wall, had a two and a half story white clapboard farmhouse just to the right of the entrance (the building on the far right in this picture). The house had a long ell extending from the back, as was common at the time, and a large kitchen. This building became known as “the Hive” and housed several rooms for sleeping over the ell and on the ground floor. The large kitchen and dining area made this the center for communal meals, and many evenings were spent reading aloud and talking after dinner. The second major building on the Farm was the farmhouse on the former Keith lot. This space, to the far left in Figure 9, dubbed “the Nest,” was designated for the school and classrooms (Delano 71-2). By March of 1842, the Brook Farmers needed more rooms for sleeping, and so they built the Eyrey (the large structure on the hill in the picture).
three-storied building housed Ripley’s library, a music room, and living quarters (158). It seems to have been a sort of secondary Hive, more for quieter or solitary enrichment (music lessons, individual reading) than its neighbor, with the bustle of the kitchen, joking and games.

Fig. 9. 19th-Century Painting of Brook Farm.
http://www.masshist.org/periodicals/mhr2006.cfm

The values of the Farmers were echoed not only in their practical approach to building and using their space, but also in their attitudes regarding adorning their own persons. Kirby relates that the men no longer shined their shoes unless they were going to town and that the women shared two bonnets throughout a winter, the best of which “was forced on whomever was going to town” (90; 132). The women and men at Brook Farm are rumored to have developed their own practical styles for dress, with the men adopting
“a tunic in the place of the more expensive, old-world coat.” These “typical” outfits, however, were not a required uniform; individuals could wear what they chose (133).

These physical and spatial decisions were the result of a specific philosophy: the desire to combat the mind-body split evident in 19th-century American society. Scottish writer and reformer Thomas Carlyle referred to George Ripley, the founder of Brook Farm, as “‘a Socinian [that is, Unitarian] minister, who has left the pulpit to reform the world by cultivating onions’” (Gura xiii). While Ripley did not aim to heal social ills by farming alone, he did feel that physical labor was what men of his class—the intellectual class of physicians, lecturers, professors, and preachers—were lacking in order to embrace their entire selves, body and mind. As Sterling Delano intones, “[t]he Boston intellectuals’ heads had become as distant from their own bodies as the whole scholarly class had become from the suffering workers” (Delano 133).

This philosophy is expressed in the title of community, termed a “Practical Institute of Agriculture and Education,” and eloquently explained in perhaps the most-cited document pertaining to the West Roxbury community: Ripley’s November 9, 1840 letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson explaining his vision and seeking Emerson’s participation in the community.

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education
and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions. (Felton 123-4)

Contemporary society demanded that individuals cultivate their minds or their bodies, but not both. Ripley thought that truly fulfilled, happy, and spiritually sound individuals would be the result of a life that encouraged both mental expansion and physical exertion.

At the heart of the Brook Farm community is the faith that individuals would better be able to divide their time among mental and physical enrichments in a community of people dividing their time likewise. As Francis explains, Ripley’s point was not just that the physical and intellectual should co-exist and be co-valued in an individual, but that “this reconciliation must also occur between social classes, since they have traditionally been separated on the basis of intellectual and manual roles” (Francis 43). Brook Farmer Georgiana Kirby explains this mindset:

It was argued that labor, far from being a curse, was, and had been, the greatest cause of our continuous development, that it conduced to the health of mind and body, when equally divided among all. But that in our present state, the artisan and laborer were degraded to only one step above chattel-slavery, in order to maintain a few in luxurious idleness. Defrauded of these refined conditions, which he himself had created, the workman lost courage, self-respect, elasticity. (Kirby 92)

The Farmers’ goal was not just to reunite workers with their powers of mind and intellectuals with their birthright of bodily capabilities, but to bridge the gap in the classes
that resulted from the association of one group with solely the mind and the other with the body.

These radical theories about labor played out in interesting ways at Brook Farm. Workers could choose their labor, though it was understood that each individual should devote some time to physical and some to mental labor: even teachers, like Diaz, and students did their stints in the field each day. “No particular job, no matter how menial, was coerced, because all labor was ‘sacred, when done for a common interest’” (Gura 157). Community members paid for their room, board, fuel, lighting, and washing through labor; those who did not contribute through labor owed four dollars per week. Members could become shareholders for 500 dollars per share (Gura 157). During the lighter (spring and summer) months, members worked a six day sixty-hour week, and when it was darker, they worked six day 48 hour weeks (Delano 67). These were comparatively generous working conditions, as compared with the standards for physical laborers in the larger society.

*Women’s Work at the Farm*

Brook Farm scholars have thoroughly demonstrated the persistent class divisions in the community between the more elite and the working class members, largely due to inequal divisions of physical labor amongst these groups. Still, some of the hardest working physical laborers on the Farm have been largely overlooked in these discussions. In this section, I focus on the impact of the Transcendentalist abstract space and its corresponding theories of labor for the women of Brook Farm. The Brook Farm women,

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63 Of all the ways that the Brook Farmers’ ideal of labor in their community clashed with the reality, the most famous is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s disillusionment with the labor he was assigned and its impact on his writing. As Hawthorne wrote to Sophia Peabody: “It is my opinion, dearest, that a man’s soul may be buried and perish under a dungheap or in a furrow of the field, just as well as under a pile of money” (qtd. in Delano 56).
including, presumably, Abby Morton, completed the traditional labor apportioned to women: cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child care. This work constituted a daunting workload, due in large part to the disproportionate numbers of men and women in the community. Moreover, the general theories of physical labor as liberating and valuable were not viewed as applicable to this “women’s work,” which continued to be viewed by women and men alike as drudgery. Women in the community sought fulfillment through other means, but their continued association with domestic spaces and “unproductive” domestic labor suggests that their spatial practice belied the abstract space of the community.

When Abby Morton came to Brook Farm in 1842, she joined perhaps the most extraordinary collected group of women in New England at the time. Sophia Ripley, the cofounder of the Farm, set the tone for the women of the community. A student of languages and history, subjects she would teach in the community, Ripley read Dante in the original, participated in Margaret Fuller’s “Conversations,” and published her own article, “Woman,” in the Dial. In this piece, Ripley asserted that, in the current society: “Woman is educated with the tacit understanding, that she is only half a being, and an appendage” (364). Delano describes the Brook Farm women as “well-bred and genteel, independent and intelligent, and socially conscious and reform-minded” (82). Given her family background, Abby Morton certainly fit the bill.

Like many of the other women of the Farm, Abby was young and single. As Marcus Spring (a friend of Margaret Fuller) intoned: “if I were a single man I should certainly go to Ripley’s” (Delano 82). Yet the single women of Brook Farm were in the minority (of the 61 unmarried members, 41 were men), perhaps because joining the
community as a single woman was still a little risqué. That the young single women, in particular, possessed a distinct ethos is attested by an anecdote about an older woman at Brook Farm, who complained to her husband: “Did you know, dear, that Marie Dillen had promised to come out and spend a few days with me? It will be such a relief, for she doesn’t understand the meaning of the word ‘idea,’ and she has perfectly conventional manners” (Kirby 121). The young Abigail Morton does appear to have had ideas of her own, evidenced in no small part by her decision to remain on at the community once her father reversed his decision to live there after a few scant weeks.

Written accounts of the community do not make large mention of Abby Morton, except as the teacher of the infant school, a position in which she excelled. Even more unfortunate is the fact that none of Abby Morton’s writings while in the community have survived. In order to gain some sense of her experience at Brook Farm, I’ve been forced to rely on other women’s accounts from the community, specifically the writings of Georgiana Bruce (Kirby) and Marianne Orvis (Dwight). Georgiana Bruce was Diaz’s co-leader of the infant program, for children under six. The two collaborated as a part of Ripley’s “company of teachers.” Bruce, who later published a memoir of her time at Brook Farm under her married name, Kirby, joined the community in 1841 at age 23 and, like Diaz, pursued writing as a career after her departure in 1844. Like these two educators, Marianne Orvis was also young and single when she joined the community.

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64 Anna Parsons, an illustrious correspondent of Brook Farmer Marianne Dwight, could not join the community because her parents didn’t think the community lifestyle proper for a young single woman (Rose 187). Rose hypothesizes that the lower numbers of married women at the community can be attributed to the unspoken hostility between the middle-class nuclear family and community. Only six of the nineteen couples at Brook Farm were not from the middle or upper classes (Rose 187).

65 More personally, Ora Gannett Sedgwick notes that Abby’s “peculiar combination of liveliness and dignity, together with her beautiful singing, made her a favorite with all the members” (qtd. in Cro 27).

66 Kirby’s later writings focused on women’s health and the powers of the mother over the intellect and development of the child, a theme that surfaced in Diaz’s later work as well.
Unlike Bruce, Diaz and Orvis (later Dwight) stayed with the community into its change to Fourierism. Dwight’s collected letters are a particularly valuable source, as “the only considerable body of letters now in existence which were written on the spot by a member of the Brook Farm Community with the definite intention of describing the life of the place” (Orvis ix).

Given its principles, Brook Farm should have been a liberating space for women. The Constitution of the Community stated that “all rights, privileges, guarantees, and obligations of members expressed or implied . . . shall be understood to belong equally to both sexes” (qtd. in Kolmerten 172). At Brook Farm, husbands and wives were autonomous members, with wives having the power to vote and hold office (in the outside world, married women had no legal existence apart from their husbands until 1848). Women and men were paid equally for their work, and Brook Farm instituted the first nursery school (day care) system in the country so that the women could be relieved of child care duties, freed to devote their time and energy to other pursuits.

In many ways, the community seems to live up to its commitment to gender equality. The accounts of Orvis and Kirby attest to their appreciation of their increased rights and independence at Brook Farm. As Marianne wrote to her brother in September, 1844: “I could not feel contented again with the life of isolated houses, and the conventions of civilization . . . life is so full and rich here, that I feel as if my experience were more valuable, and I were growing somewhat faster than when I lived in Boston” (Orvis 41). In particular, the educational opportunities at the Farm set it apart from life on the “outside.” Kirby expresses the effects of this environment: “The very air seemed to
hold more exhilarating qualities than any I had breathed before. . . . Had the world denied 
you opportunity for education? Here your highest needs should be satisfied” (99).

Kirby’s question, “Had the world denied you . . . ?” and Orvis’s comparison of 
communal life to the “life of isolated houses, and the conventions of civilization” 
highlights that these young women saw the Farm as offering a better life to women as a 
class, not just to them as individuals. This awareness is evident in Marianne’s reflections 
on the death of one woman:

Our sister associate M. A. Williams was, this morning, released from her 
severe sufferings by death.—The first death that has occurred here—A 
beautiful grove of cypress trees back of our house has been selected for 
her grave. She has been taken care of in the best and kindest manner, and 
received the universal sympathy; nowhere else could this poor woman, 
who has no near relatives and no property, have fared so well. Here is one 
of the pleasantest blessings of Association. (55)

The women of Brook Farm, then, saw not just their own beneficial growth under the 
liberating circumstances of community life, but also how Brook Farm offered a haven for 
working class women without family to protect them.

However enlightening the cultural and educational opportunities at the Farm, the 
gendered spatial practices of Brook Farm looked much like the outside world. As Delano 
relates: “The early arrivals settled into a routine right away, the women and men 
immediately reverting to the traditional gender roles to which they had been accustomed 
away from the farm” (46). Rising before five o’clock in the morning, the women 
prepared breakfast while the men cared for the livestock. Women served the meal and
then spent the rest of the morning cleaning up the kitchen, straightening the rooms of the houses, and gardening, while men did farm work. Later, the women devoted most of the afternoon to preparing the supper (Delano 47).

While the women’s responsibilities on the whole consisted of cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child-rearing, there was some variation among the individual women. Marianne records her daily responsibilities in a letter to her brother. After taking “a joyful leave of the nursery and the babies,” who “with one exception . . . were not to my taste, and not such angels as I love to minister to,” she outlines the rest of the day as follows:

I wait on the breakfast table (1/2 hour), help M. A. Ripley clear away breakfast things, etc. (1 ½ hours), go into the dormitory group till eleven o’clock,--dress for dinner—then over to the Eyrie and sew till dinner time,—half past twelve. Then from half past one or two o’clock until ½ past five, I teach drawing in Pilgrim Hall and sew in the Eyrie. At ½ past five go down to the Hive, to help set the tea table, and afterwards I wash tea cups, etc., till about ½ past seven. (7-8)

Kirby, in contrast, describes her duties on first entering the association as “three-fold:” “ironing on the afternoons of certain days’ preparing vegetables every morning, for the noon meal and helping to wash the cups and plates after supper” (100). This variation among women’s tasks might have been perceived as more desirable than presiding over a single household where there is no such “specialization” and a woman must master all the trades her family requires. Indeed, the women at Brook Farm benefited from their shared housekeeping duties, the aforementioned child care system, and the relatively simple food and dress of the members of the community.    Communal efforts may have made
the women’s labor more enjoyable and less lonely, but the Brook Farm women had more work, proportionally, than those women isolated in households across America. Male associates outnumbered females sixty to thirty-nine between 1841 and 1845, and the women were also responsible, of course, for the needs of the children, the students enrolled at the school, and the boarders. In other words, each woman at Brook Farm bore the burden of caring for at least twice as many individuals as the average woman in the larger community.

The stress of the workload is evident in Kirby and Orvis’s accounts. Marianne relates: “We need more leisure, or rather, we should like it. There are so many, and so few women to do the work, that we have to be nearly all the time about it” (Orvis 8). Recall that leisure time is meant to be one of the boons of community life. The sense that labor is getting in the way of the elevation of mind and spirit that the community is meant to foster continues in the accounts: “It seems wrong to lose a moment of so much beauty and prophecy; --I would be abroad in the midst of it all the time. But alas! Indoor duties present their claims” (Orvis 98). Orvis’s sense of duty to the community, the duty of completing her gendered labor, battles with her awareness that labor in the community is meant to complement, not drown out, the enjoyment of nature.

In theory, Brook Farm’s looser gender roles should have given women some respite from their chores. Freibert describes the playfulness regarding gender roles and its effect on labor thusly: “Because such menial tasks were community activities completed in a spirit of play, gender stereotyping of work declined” (76). Yet the overworked state of the Brook Farm women suggests that these gender swapping occasions were entertainments set apart from the day to day life of the community. Indeed, Kirby’s
recounting of stories shared by a male acquaintance in the community support this view: “Tom told gay stories about helping the girls with their work, and how jolly they were over it. It was particularly pleasant to lend a hand in the evening when there was no need of hurrying” (109). Surely the women did appreciate such assistance, but the occasional evening help with the cleanup of the meal apparently did little to alter the general sense that the women were swamped and overwhelmed by the community’s physical needs; at bottom, this was “women’s work,” no matter how good the men were to “lend a hand” from time to time.

The Brook Farm women’s traditional chores and unreasonable workload suggests that, in Brook Farm, “women’s work” was not necessarily the kind of labor that could be idealized, uniting mind and body to help form a whole and balanced individual. One fascinating passage from Kirby’s memoir specifically raises the question of whether housework has the same ennobling qualities that the Transcendentalists ascribed to farming and physical labor more generally. Kirby relates:

Some argued that it must be intrinsically beautiful, or its effects would not be so strengthening and purifying. . . . When the garment is finished on which we have expended our time and skill, what a gratified sense of power ensues; when an apartment is put in thorough order, what compensation one glance around it affords; when a dinner which requires much thought and care is at last on the table, a proper pride on the part of the chef is quite permissible; a completed house gives a similar satisfaction to its builder; and what man’s head does not feel lighter at the sigh of growing grain which his own hand scattered. (137)
This passage equates men and women’s work as both capable of reaching the Transcendental ideal. Yet Sophia Ripley responds: “I must differ from those of you who find any thing aesthetic in scrubbing, washing, preparing vegetables, etc. . . . I shall never admit that there is any thing ideal in scraping saucepans” (138). Like Sophia in this passage, Kirby’s and Orvis’s accounts suggest that women’s work at Brook Farm not only was stereotypically gendered, but also failed to reach the standard of labor that could be experienced as balancing and complementing mental and intellectual growth and expansion.

Marianne Orvis’s letters about her work on the Farm confirm the impression that feminine work (domestic labor) was not valued as highly as more masculine work (farming or paid labor). In contrast to her complaints about ill-behaved babies and the burdens of cooking and cleaning for the large community, Marianne’s later letters show her discovering a form of labor that does feel valuable and beneficial to her spirit. She explains:

I belong to a group for making fancy articles for sale in Boston. . . . We have been very busy at it of late, and Amelia Russell and I are often much amused at the idea of our having turned milliners and makers of cap-tabs. Our manufacture is quite workmanlike. I assure you, we realize considerable money (!!) from this, and hope, women tho’ we be, to have by and by the credit of doing some productive labor. (Orvis 24-5)

Marianne’s evident pride in this work stems from the “credit” due their “productive labor,” despite the fact that they are women. While her former labor is, on paper, as valued as men’s work, this new venture, with its promise of “considerable money (!!)” is
clearly perceived (by Orvis at least) as a more useful, more “real,” more valued contribution. Certainly the actual income of the articles seems a large factor in elevating this work above the more “natural” feminine work of cooking, cleaning, housekeeping.67

When the Brook Farmers set out to “combine the thinker and the worker,” they seem to have not had women’s spatial practices in mind. Given the traditional division of labor on the Farm, there was too much work for the women. This labor, furthermore, was not experienced as fulfilling, especially in comparison with work with a direct economic reward. Still, these realities did not entirely diminish the women’s appreciation for the great opportunities granted by communal life. As Orvis wrote upon leaving the community:

No words can tell my thankfulness for having lived here, and for every experience here, whether joyful or painful. It certainly is very unusual for me, and I think it may be quite wrong, to look for less in the future than we have derived from the past, but it does seem as tho’ in this wide waste of the world, life could not possibly be so rich as it has been here . . . life is more rich to me at this very time than ever; my inner life is more true and deep,— but I want a field for external action, a very small and humble one, of course, but I want something. (178)

Diaz, too, seems to have been interested in broader venues for women’s participation than were allotted at Brook Farm. She departed the community a single mother about to

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67 One of Orvis’s goals for this new work, indeed, is to lessen the burden of housework on the Brook Farm women. “[I]f we have success . . . it will be very desirable for other ladies to come here on purpose to take a part in our fancy work; then our domestic work which now presses too heavily, will get more divided, and we shall each have less house-work and more fancy work” (33).
experience not just the joys but the necessities of making an income to support a family and poised to begin to explore her own potential as a writer.

*Domestic Matter over Female Mind*

In this section, I explore Abby Morton Diaz’s writings regarding the domestic spaces and labor of the rural home. Just as the abstract space of Brook Farm conflicted with the spatial practices of the Brook Farm women, the abstract view of domestic space is contradicted by women’s lived practices in that space. The reality of the domestic space of the home is that women exhaust themselves in order to provide physical amenities and privileges to their husbands, children, and neighbors. Diaz shows that women’s enslavement to physical demands starves their minds and, through extension, the minds of children, as well as husbands, neighbors, and entire communities. Her exploitation of the idea that material demands and labor are destroying women’s minds likely drew from the theories of abstract space at Brook Farm: indeed, Diaz shows her commitment to trying to achieve a mind/body balance for women, through a reconception of domestic space.

After leaving Brook Farm, Diaz relocated to Plymouth. She and Manuel Diaz had had three children, one of which died at a young age. The couple separated and Diaz was left a single mother of two. To support her children, she taught in public schools, gave private singing and dancing lessons, and worked as a practical nurse, a housekeeper, and a seamstress for a clothing manufacturer during the Civil War. During these years, Diaz and her children lived primarily in her parents’ home, in Plymouth. The early years of her children’s lives were undoubtedly difficult on Diaz emotionally and physically, as she
cobbled together a living from these varied, fascinating, and yet, like much women’s work, often unpredictable sources of income.

In 1861, Diaz broke onto the literary scene with the publication of her first story, “Pink and Blue,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. With the success of this early sentimental story, she began publishing in children’s magazines, writing morality tales meant to edify children, in part compensating for the religious instruction that was no longer provided in schools (Cro 38). Her best-known works of this sort were *The William Henry Letters* (1870), a collection of letters from a boy away at boarding school popular with Theodore Roosevelt, among countless others, and *Lucy Maria* (1874), a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman about a girl striving to become an accomplished teacher. While Diaz continued to write children’s stories, starting in the mid 1870s she turned her attention to didactic pieces for adults, exploring the role of women as homemakers, mothers, and teachers. Diaz had alluded to her views on women’s lives in her work for children, but her works for adults were more explicit and more potentially alienating or threatening to her audience. Indeed, “The Schoolmaster’s Trunk” and *A Domestic Problem* marked Diaz as a political and feminist writer, a social critic.

Diaz first explores the theme of matter over mind in women’s lives by arguing that women are made slaves by housework: they are materially exhausted. Diaz invokes this theme most compellingly in her work, “The Schoolmaster’s Trunk.” This delightful text, originally published in “Hearth and Home,” is a collection of the written reflections and musings of a male schoolteacher employed in a country village. The schoolteacher undergoes a sort of conversion upon witnessing the physical, mental, and emotional deterioration of the wives and mothers in Tweenit. As he laments: “Pies again! Always
pies! One, two, three, four, this is the fifth time, within, say, ten days or a fortnight, that, to my knowledge, pies have stood in the way of better things” (5). The mother of the household cannot take a morning ride, and the daughter cannot read, because they must start on the pies. When our narrator, Mr. McKimber, asks why they must make pies, he receives a discouraging response: “‘Twould take off the heft of the cookin’,” said Mrs. Fennel thoughtfully; ‘but’ (with a sigh) ‘you couldn’t satisfy the men-folks.’” (8). The schoolteacher concludes ruefully: “Pie, then, is one of the household gods in Tweenit” (8).

Despite the humor with which she exploits her theme, Diaz emphasizes the severity of the damage done to women by their cooking and cleaning. “It is about time, one would think, to put a stop to this woman-killing. A harsh phrase? It is not more harsh than the truth” (“Schoolmaster’s” 16). McKimber considers that the men in the family cannot realize the toll of their innocent demands for multiple-course meals, and especially sweets and pastries.

Do they not taste something in those delicacies? detect a flavoring that was never set down in any grocer’s bill? They probably do not. Long habit has so accustomed them to the flavor of this essence of life, this compound extract of backache, headache, exhaustion, prostration, palpitation, that they do not notice its presence. (18, emphasis in original)

Diaz concludes that husbands and sons mean well, but that custom has led them to expect certain material comforts that they do not relate to the well-being of the women who provide them.
Diaz’s second main point about the dominance of “matter” in women’s lives is that their extreme toil is dedicated solely to the material needs of others. Diaz’s narrator in “The Schoolmaster’s Trunk,” McKimber, comments ironically on the customs that reduce women to serving others’ physical needs: “the idea occurred to me that woman might not have been created mainly for the purpose of getting three meals a day. If she were, thought I, what a waste! for, certainly, a mere meal-getter might have been fashioned out of cheaper material” (14). But the real problem is not that women slave away to provide physical necessities, but that they often slave away to provide physical unnecessities. Diaz’s main target is conventions of food preparation and consumption. She scorns those who require pie to “top off” a meal, claiming that the phrase “topping off” shows the root of the problem: we do not “top off” with essentials.

Besides showing that women exhaust themselves to serve the physical whims of others (the desire for pie and for fancy trimmings on clothes), Diaz emphasizes that the cost of these whims is not only the health but also the quality of mind of the women themselves. The more women’s lives are dominated by physical labor and attention to physical needs, the more their mental, emotional, and spiritual lives are diminished.

Besides the physical toll of housework on women’s bodies, Diaz laments that women’s enslavement prevents their exposure to the goods of culture, which is crucial to their roles as wives and, especially, mothers.

Diaz goes on to explain how the mental and cultural tone of the entire society is harmed by enslaving women to housework. Indeed, in a community where entertaining is one of women’s main occupations, the cost of preparing the house and food and dress for such events is lowering the quality of the social encounter. Here is McKimber again:
Company? Thanks for teaching me that word. . . . I am aware that much time is spent in the preparation of viands to set before me, which, for variety and richness, could not be excelled. Shall I add, that whenever, at the bountifully-spread tea-tables, I have attempted to start a rational conversation, the attempt usually has been a failure? Books, public men, public measures, new ideas, new inventions, new discoveries, what is doing for the elevation of women,—on none of these subjects had my entertainers a word to offer. (11-12)

Without the pleasure of a substantive conversation, McKimber implies, a visit is a waste of an evening. He concludes his diatribe with a pithy request: “I petition for less variety in food, and more culture. And your petitioner further prays, that some of the spices and good things be left out in the cooking, and put into the conversation” (12). What lowers the level of women’s minds, Diaz maintains, is detrimental to the community at large because of women’s intimate connections to children and husbands, certainly, but also their social connections to neighbors and visitors, like McKimber himself.

Diaz’s solution to the problem of harming women’s bodies and minds to provide “fripperies” is to attack the true culprit: the social norms that make unnecessary physical labor seem a worthwhile use of women’s time. For Diaz, the spatial practices of women reflect the values and priorities of the entire community. How we spend our time and energy reflects our priorities: we cannot say that children are our top priority if we demand so much other labor from mothers that all they can do for their children is dress them and tell them to stay out of the way while they cook. The problem arises not because women love making pies, but because the “men-folk” must have their pies. And
Diaz drives this point home, asking what our priorities truly might or should be: “Now, if we were created only a little lower than the angles, there certainly should be a wider space between us and the inferior animals than such a state of gormandism denotes” (“Schoolmaster’s” 111).

Diaz’s empirical sense of one’s priorities—as defined by spatial practices—is clear in her consideration of well-intentioned men who nonetheless demand that their wives prioritize their physical preferences over her own well-being. McKimber explains: “If the direct question were asked Mr. Fennel, which he most values, his wife’s life, or the nice things she prepares for the table, he would answer with horror, if he answered at all, the former. In reality, however, he answers the latter” (“Schoolmaster’s” 16-7). This contrast between professed (or, print) priorities and lived priorities is particularly powerful and compelling, and it gets at the conflict between the abstract space of the home and women’s lived practices in the home. She does not allow that cooking and sewing “must be done” and that they simply take the time that they take: she insists that cultural expectations play the largest role in what is considered necessary.

In order to make women’s lives more closely mirror the society’s true priorities, women need time away from their mundane housework to educate their children, enjoy substantive conversations with their husbands and neighbors, seek cultural enrichment, and cultivate their minds through reading. To find this time, Diaz proposes Simplification, more modest expectations in the realms of food, dress, and housekeeping. She calls her audience to recognize that they can choose their expectations, that they have control over what they demand of themselves (for women readers) and the women in their lives (for men):
It is curious, the way people assume, that, because the present system of cooking and serving meals is customary, it is, therefore, natural; as if the courses of a dinner, each with its central dish, and that with its revolving lesser dishes, were, equally with the solar system, an established order of nature. (116)

Acknowledging the social cost of throwing out convention on one’s own and the unlikelihood of an immediate and entire societal paradigm shift along these lines, Diaz proposes a more modest and communal beginning: “as an immediate measure of relief, suppose a dozen or twenty mothers in each town should agree to adopt a simple yet tasteful style of dress for themselves and their little girls” (90). The many benefits to mother and daughter that would accrue would prompt others to join the project and inspire other time- and labor-saving measures. Diaz imagines a future where “[c]omic writers will hold up to ridicule . . . elaborate passages from the cook-book, thus handing them down to posterity, by whom they will be considered as relics of a barbarous age” (74). Diaz ends this reverie with a reminder of her primary focus: women do not exist solely to cater to the physical demands of home, husband, children: “Let woman, then, while insisting on neatness, remember her mission. Let her, sailing on life’s seas, keep the ship in order and wholesomely provisioned, but at the same time steer for some port” (77).

Diaz proposes a dual devaluing of the physical trappings of fancy food and dress and a valuing of the physical labor that goes into them, detracting from more important uses of women’s time and bodies. Embedded in this attitude is a prioritizing of women’s bodies as worth saving. “Now, these bodies are nearer and dearer to us than any other
earthly possession. And, what is more, they will cling to us. We are joined to them for better or worse; and from this union there is no divorce, till death do us part. Why, then, scoff at them?” (117). So in urging less attention to physical needs, Diaz is not valuing education and culture and child-rearing over and above the physical realm, she is insisting that the division between the physical and the mental/spiritual is illusory.

The conclusion to Abby Morton Diaz’s *A Domestic Problem* is optimistically titled “Means of Escape Already in Operation.” In this section, Diaz looks towards her future career in the women’s club movement, suggesting that the problems she has outlined cannot be addressed except through joint action. Specifically, Diaz exhorts women to “meet regularly for the purpose of discussing such matters as especially affect them,” to “have a paper for this same object,” and to come together with women from other regions of the country to “compare views on these matters” (104). Diaz articulates women’s clubs as the practical means in place for the first of these three goals—gathering women locally to discuss matters specific to them, as women. Diaz’s third goal, insisting on the importance of communicating across geographic regions, is suggestive of her sense that women’s experience varied according to context and location. In the next section of this chapter, I’ll explore Diaz’s work in the WEIU, where she showed a similar desire to cross class lines in battling women’s universal and particular struggles.

The Spatial Rhetoric of the WEIU: The Street and the Sisterhood

In this section, I explore Diaz’s leadership in the women’s club movement, particularly her role in the Boston Women’s Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU). As part of the larger public of women’s clubs, Diaz worked to create a cross-class
alliance among women. To this end, she utilized two spatial strategies. First, she helped to reform urban space to make it safer and more hospitable to women of all classes. In this manner, she changed the social space of the city. Second, she used the spaces of the WEIU to encourage a re-valuing of the spatial practices of working women to lessen class divisions within the club.

Women in Urban Space

During Diaz’s tenure at the head of the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU), the club worked to make the social space of the city more welcoming for women. In particular, the club provided semi-public spaces, safe places where women could pursue education and cultural enrichment or address other concerns such as grievances against employers, health care, or housing. Like Frances Wright’s work in the freethought movement, Diaz’s WEIU made physical spaces to assist in forming a women’s public. Though these spaces were semi-public, to a large extent a mediation between women’s private spaces and the public spaces deemed too dangerous for them, they served an important purpose in helping women navigate treacherous private and public spaces. Moreover, as spaces created by and for women, the buildings of the WEIU asserted women’s right to participate in producing the social space of the city.

The WEIU of Boston was founded in 1877 by Dr. Harriet Clisby. The group, which historian Sarah Deutsch describes as having been “founded in an Emersonian glow of transcendentalist unity,” aimed to increase women’s fellowship in order to secure educational, industrial, and social advancement (388). The WEIU membership was “full

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68 Clisby was born in London, lived for a time in Australia, and returned to England to train as doctor. After rejected by British schools because of her sex, Clisby determined to study medicine in New York City. Here, she lived in a house for professional working women established by Henry Ward Beecher, and became President of Working Woman’s Association of the residents with guidance from Susan B. Anthony (Blair 75).
of women known in their own right, women who had already broken bounds by joining the professions or having a public writing and speaking career” (388). Of the eight original members, three, including founder Harriet Clisby, were practicing physicians. Diaz, of course, was one of the publicly known writers and speakers to help found the group. And the WEIU continued to attract both notable and unknown women to its fold, growing from eight to 400 members in its first year, with 1200 members by 1887, ten years after its founding (Deutsch 390). When Clisby became unable to fulfill her presidential duties in 1878, Diaz became the temporary president. Later, she served as the WEIU president from 1881-1892, and vice president from 1892-1902. In her annual addresses as president of the WEIU, Diaz outlined her understanding of the trajectory, future, and legacy of the club. Because the tradition of printing the talks had been established at this point, Diaz was likely aware of a larger audience for her words beyond just those women present.

The WEIU aimed, in particular, to address some of the problematic aspects of women’s lives in an industrial urban setting. In Women in Public, Mary P. Ryan describes a shift in the space of American cities over the course of the 19th century. At the start of the century, she maintains, American cities were “walking cities,” where people, including women, circulated at will. The rapid growth of industrializing cities eradicated the traditional methods for ordering people in space, that is, through detailed knowledge of individuals garnered through the personal interactions of people living closely together over a period of time. Filling with newly-arrived strangers, American cities in the early 1800s did not yet have areas of ethnic segregation. Under these conditions, women (as
well as men and other racial and ethnic groups) enjoyed relatively anonymous, unsurveilled access to city streets.

Yet by the time Abby Morton Diaz arrived in Boston, city space had been (re)ordered into public and private spaces designated for particular groups. The spatial division of public and private hinges, for Ryan, in large part on the creation of political discussion spaces intended for men. When women, most notably Fanny Wright, entered those spaces, they were treated extremely poorly, essentially (and sometime literally) run out of town. Cites of commercial amusement and theatres were also designed for men, and along with those spatial designations came the sense that women who frequented such spots were harlots, “public women.” Additional male-only spaces included after-work destinations linked to occupation: mechanics’ halls, for example. By 1840, in Ryan’s estimation, the space of the city had been separated institutionally into the gendered-differentiated realms of the public and private.

In late 19th-century cities, then, like Diaz’s Boston, city streets were coded as dangerous, and dangerous women took their identities from their occupations of space (public women, streetwalkers—and the temporal variation: women of the night). “Good” women did not spend more time than necessary out in public spaces, and industries took the opportunity to provide semi-public spaces to house these newly endangered women. Department stores, specifically allotted parlors and areas in hotels, separate entrances to post offices, ferries, and theatres gave women a way to circulate in the public sphere without risking their safety or their reputations. Importantly, though, these semi-public spaces served commercial needs and interests and were for the most part developed for women by men. Just as domestic space depended on women’s ties to male fathers,
husbands, or other relatives, these semi-public spaces, in Mary Ryan’s terminology, were produced for, not by women.

The greatest growth in the WEIU’s spatial development occurred in the 1880s, the zenith of Diaz’s presidency. The WEIU purchased rooms and buildings in central downtown, contesting the social space of downtown Boston by occupying a spot in the heart of the male-dominated central city (Deutsch 390). Within these spaces, the group hosted classes, receptions for celebrities, social entertainments, and social and quiet time in the club rooms, which housed a library and reading room.

WEIU members shared the general sense of public city space as unsafe for women and set out to create alternate spaces for women. In particular, the WEIU feared the conditions of life for working women in the city. Consider a passage from Diaz’s 1882 annual presidential address:

I have heard this equal need denied, on the ground that “men are going into business life, and women are only (?) going into family life.” Think of that “only”! A keener insight would assert the need, and change the place of the “only” to that part of the sentence to which it so justly belongs. We must remember, too, that many young women go “into business life” in our cities, and need every protection that can be thrown around them. (17) Diaz’s call for protection echoes the sense of danger associated with public city space in the late 19th century. And the WEIU responded to that sense of danger in much the same way as Ryan describes, through creating semi-public spaces for women.

Yet the spaces created by the WEIU differ markedly from department stores and hotel parlors and “ladies entrances” to theatres and other public venues. For one thing, on
the most primal level, these are spaces for women, shaped by women. The women of the WEIU participated in shaping both the abstract space and the spatial practices of their buildings. A second distinction is the lack of commercial interest on the part of the WEIU; rather than benefitting financially by providing women a semi-public place where they might be shielded from danger to self and reputation, the spaces created by the WEIU aimed, first and foremost, to benefit the women themselves. The WEIU rented rooms, hoping to encourage fellowship among women by drawing them out of their isolated dwellings and into each other’s company (Deutsch 389). This building and the other spaces controlled by the WEIU served the important function of providing a safe public space for women, a space where middle- or upper-class women wouldn’t be declassed by their presence.

But the WEIU used its spaces to protect women from other dangers besides the urban streetscape. The Hygiene Committee offered bi-weekly talks from doctors to address ignorance about bodily functions and care (Blair 81). Lecture topics included, among others, disease prevention, nutrition, and the workings of the brain and the eyes. The Committee also established a hygiene room where trained medical professionals offered free advice. The aptly named Committee for the Protection of Women, a forerunner of the Legal Aid Society, offered free legal advice for women with work-related complaints (Cro 74).

Diaz articulates the need to maintain and increase the space controlled by the WEIU in her 1882 address. Indeed, one of the main tenets of the annual speech is her request for donations for rooms for lectures and classes (16). She also stresses that the WEIU needs to hire a superintendent for existing spaces and to shape the ground floor of
the building into a space where women can display goods. The Secretary’s Report from the same year similarly emphasizes the necessity of controlling their own spaces in order to achieve their needs: her report includes a reverie imagining the future accomplishments of the union, if only they had the means to purchase more room. “Were this the report of 1892 instead of 1882, after fifteen years of labor, instead of five, I would tell you of a spacious building owned by the “Women’s Industrial and Educational Union” (18). The secretary goes on to describe a store on the ground level selling the women’s wares and an inviting restaurant where passing women could find a reasonable, hygienically prepared meal. Under Diaz’s leadership, this vision for what could be accomplished through the spaces of the WEIU was realized.

Spatial Practices and Cross-Class Alliances

In addition to making more safe spaces for women in the urban landscape, Diaz used the internal spaces of the WEIU to foster cross-class relationships among women. In particular, she framed attitudes towards paid labor as one of the largest obstacles to healthy respect and appreciation between classes. In her annual talks, Diaz offers a depiction of the value of labor very much in line with the principles of Brook Farm. Diaz directly challenges the upper-class members of the group to revisit their attitudes towards labor and to change their spatial practices. In particular, she encourages them to produce goods for sale, not for financial gain but for their own growth and development. Diaz argues that by valuing labor more (achieved by engaging in the spatial practices of labor themselves), upper-class women can erase some of the divisions between themselves and their working class “sisters.”
The WEIU membership was to a large extent familiar with women’s clubs and associations, many of which articulated a “charity” ethic in the relationships forged between upper class club members and lower class beneficiaries. Many members had been active in the New England Woman’s Club (Blair 76), a group that sought, like other women’s clubs, to form alliances with working-class women (Scott 160). Indeed, the New England Woman’s Club’s “Friendly Association” for working class women led to the formation of the WEIU. Diaz embraced this particular aspect of the history of the WEIU and articulated a view of women’s clubs where women of all classes would benefit from each other’s experience. In contrast to the more traditional one-way perception of higher class women reaching down to assist those of lower class, Diaz argued that women needed to recognize and respect the value of labor in their lives. This adjustment would both help upper class women better spend their time (and bodies) and reduce prejudice against women who had no choice but to work for profit.

Of particular importance to Diaz, based on the recurrence of the theme in her talks, was the articulation of the goals of the WEIU regarding economic class. Indeed, the spaces for women described above were of most significance for working class women who often lived in the homes where they were employed or subjected their bodies daily to the destructive and deteriorative spaces of factories. The WEIU worked to attract more working-class women by recognizing and adjusting for the constraints of women in tight financial circumstances: one small example is the WEIU’s modest one dollar annual fee.

Diaz works, in her talks, to combat the idea that the WEIU allows wealthier women to “help” less well-off women. Her talks show her awareness of a larger audience that may have misconceptions about the work of the WEIU. As the president of the
organization, addressing these questions in front of the WEIU membership provides an opportunity to coach the other women as to how they might answer similar questions and correct these misconceptions. One question Diaz particularly wants to prepare her hearers to put to rest is the following: “Do you reach the class you wish to reach?” Diaz’s response belies her goal for the WEIU: for women across class lines to help each other.

She explains: “As imperfection is general, it matters not where improvement goes on . . . we can point to no one class and say, here we have humanity at its best; there the type or divine idea stands revealed” (1881 9). Diaz rejects the typical model of charity for women’s organizations: “The Union is a union. It is not two divisions, the richer reaching down to help, the poorer reaching up to be helped” (9).

The physical spaces of the WEIU are where this union must take form. The space of the WEIU must function, to some extent, as a classless space. The larger city is comprised of spaces where working class women are not welcome, or where middle or upper class women risk damaging their reputations. The space of the WEIU is crucial, for Diaz, “[b]ecause it affords a place where women may meet socially and on no narrower plane than that of womanhood” (1883 14).

Diaz emphasizes that the work of the WEIU is relevant to all women, regardless of class.

Those who recognize the broad scope of our work will never ask that often-asked question, Do you reach the class you want to help? referring to the lower classes, so called. To that question, we answer, Yes; for, while there are reasons for taking special pains to reach those who have few social and educational privileges, we want to help all. (1882 12)
Diaz goes on to clarify that upper and middle class women are as in need of the services of the WEIU as women of the “lower classes, so called.” She explains: “I wish to combat the implied idea, the low and material idea, that money places its possessors beyond the scope of philanthropic effort” (1882 13). Indeed, she questions any substantial difference between the classes other than convention, stereotype, and wishful thinking: “Our pity and condemnation go easily forth to the degraded classes, so called, whose weaknesses and wickednesses are covered by no glamour of respectability. . . . But we can find in the ranks of the respectable, wide scope for pity and condemnation, and a great deal of lowness, and a great deal of danger” (1882 12).

Diaz hoped to elevate women’s understanding of labor (some upper class women even thought she was demanding that they seek paid employment) in order to stop associating bodies that labor with lower minds and spirits. Again, Diaz emphasizes the Brook Farm sense of unity: healthy, balanced individuals use their bodies and minds, and those who cultivate solely their minds are certainly no better off than those who, by necessity and due to a lack of opportunity, employ mainly their bodies.

Diaz’s goals for the relationship of the upper or middle class women and their lower class counterparts in the group were borne out in the spatial practices of the club. This relationship was not to be that of philanthropist and beneficiary, but of women coming together and recognizing class as a false division. The group combined typical philanthropic activities (visiting the sick, charity drives, collecting clothing) with newer and more radical efforts (getting women to hospitals, providing a week at a quiet farm, offering homes in the country, serving as a boarding house agency, and agitating for police matrons in women’s jails). While many of these activities focus specifically on the
lower classes, the WEIU’s spaces are also helpful to middle and upper class women. For example, the WEIU provided women’s lunchrooms in downtown Boston. The first of these, the Providence Street Lunch Room, provided cheap and nutritious meals and was soon followed by another lunchroom on Boylston. These spaces provided leisured women respectable places to eat while shopping or undertaking other tasks in the city; created work opportunities (cooking or serving) for wage-earning women; and offered educational experiences for college students preparing for careers in food management (Blair 81).

Without denying the particular needs of the lower classes, Diaz also articulates the needs of women of the middle and upper classes. The WEIU, she explains:

recognizes the fact that there is worse than money poverty, that the woman possessed of all the resources of wealth may still have needs. She may need motherhood enlightenment; may need inspiring; may need humanizing, may need to be rid of narrowness and self-conceit; may need to exchange frivolous pursuits for a noble purpose; may need to be drawn into sympathy with all womankind; may need that familiar intercourse with her less fortune-favored sisters, which shall reveal to her the worth in all, the divine in all. These needs are as urgent and as worthy philanthropic effort as are the more generally recognized ones of the lower classes, so called. To inspire a rich woman is as well worth doing as to teach book-lore to a poor woman. (1881 9-10)

This passage recalls Diaz’s earlier non-fiction, with its insistence that women have been diverted from more noble aims by social directives to spend their time, labor, and
Diaz’s vision of how to combat class bias, how to unify her union of women, involves finding a new appreciation and value in labor. Undoubtedly, much of the work of the Union addresses the mind—the classes and lectures, reading groups, and so on—but, as Diaz explains, the WEIU “aims to improve the condition of women, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Of all women” (1881:9). Besides employment in the lunchrooms or self-employment selling goods in the shop, the WEIU established a job registry for positions ranging from domestic service to professional employment.

The WEIU, under Diaz’s leadership, stressed that this focus on labor was not just relevant for the working classes. Middle and upper class women might benefit from learning useful skills. “Consider also the improvidence of the rich in bringing up their daughters to no money-winning occupation; and here is cause why we hear from so many genteel impoverished women that familiar cry: ‘I must do something! I don’t know how to do anything!’” (1882:13). Diaz herself spent many years supporting herself and her children with various skills in a manner that it is unlikely her family expected. She was inventive in finding ways to earn a living from her talents and abilities and, as a leader of the WEIU, knew that life was not predictable enough for women of any class to trust that they would never need to support themselves. In addition, the above mention of women engaged in “frivolous pursuits” suggests that perhaps some engagement in the marketplace might help women to direct their energies towards more worthwhile ends.
Diaz’s clearest discussion of the involvement of wealthier and poorer women in labor comes via discussion of the Industrial Department, which had a store for the sale of women’s goods on the ground floor of one WEIU building. Through this means, the organization achieved Diaz’s goal of opening “new avenues for the industries of women;” the store provided a safe space for women to sell needlework, baked goods, and other crafts and products. Prior to this innovation, women might have been prompted to sell such goods door to door or on the streets, or might, given these alternatives, have abstained from attempting to benefit financially from these skills. In discussing the practices of the store, Diaz quotes another common question about the WEIU: “Does the Industrial Department receive articles from the poor only, or also from the well-off?” (1890 8). She makes several points in her reply, first making reference to situations where seemingly well-to-do women are in fact quite poor: “The circumstances of a woman cannot always be known by her appearance” (8). But the most important is her third point: “For the well-off to place their work on sale helps to remove the stigma from labor, and no greater service can be rendered the poor,--or the rich, than to make labor honorable” (8). Here, labor is an equalizing force. If women of all classes place their work on sale, then they are on the same plane, and customers pick amongst their wares guided not by charity, but by appreciation for the quality of the work, appreciation for the labor of the worker, and thus, appreciation for the worker herself. Diaz concludes with a final point: “Money-need should not be made the only consideration. A community is entitled to the best its members have to give” (8).

To those who insist that “out of kindness to the poor woman the richer woman must withhold her labor from the market” (1882 13), Diaz responds: “it should be
considered that the probably better work of the richer woman helps to educate the poorer woman, and that the richer woman in placing her work on sale does that much to make labor honorable and to remove dividing lines” (13). While the assumption that the richer woman’s goods will be of better quality might seem unjustified, Diaz’s point is that all workers are better off if conditions encourage them to do better work, to take more pride in their labor. Charity does not have this effect, does not honor the labor and laborer for their own sake. As Diaz puts it: “Paying for poor work is charity, and the Industrial department is not a charity. It educates in the direction of self-support” (1890 9). To help bridge class differences, then, upper and middle class women should cultivate their own skills and put their work in the marketplace. By doing so, they do a better service to working women than any charity. Diaz repeats her maxim: “for the well-to-do, to place their work on sale helps to make labor honorable and to remove dividing lines. And to make labor honorable and remove dividing lines will be to the poor a far greater gain than any immediate money gain” (1881 11).

Diaz’s legacy to the WEIU is, in large part, her sense of the need to control their own spaces in order to effect change in women’s lives. This focus suggests that Diaz saw the male domination of the social space of the city as a cause of many of women’s problems. Diaz felt that both working-class and well-to-do women were in need of the women-centered spaces of the union, as she expressed in 1890, towards the end of her long tenure as president:

[T]he Union does by its mere existence show reason for being. Here in this city besides those engaged in household services, are twenty-five thousand women employees. The Union is open day and evening, a place where any
one of these women can find friends. . . . Also, the attractions and advantages of the city are continually drawing to it well-to-do women, many of whom find in our rooms a social centre, together with the varied information likely to be needed by a stranger in a strange land. (7-8)

By all accounts, Diaz and the WEIU succeeded in providing this necessary woman-run space for Boston women. As Deutsch intones, the WEIU had, “by the turn of the century, turned Boylston Street in downtown Boston into virtually a woman’s mile” (390). Besides recognizing the practical value of this space for women of all classes, Diaz also noted, just after the remarks quoted above, the ideological valence and significance of the spaces of the WEIU: “[T]he Union stands among women, a power for women; a shield against injustice, as well as a means of advancement” (1890 8).

Conclusion

In her lifetime, Diaz experienced a broad range of the spaces available to women in 19th-century America. Her childhood was spent in relative privilege along the leading families of Plymouth; as a young adult she witnessed the spatial and social experiment at Brook Farm; from there, she worked for a living as a single parent in a rural home; and finally she settled as a writer and activist on the outskirts of urban Boston. Yet despite the range of spaces explored in this chapter, there is a common thread: the importance of labor as spatial practice, as a way of articulating one’s relationship to the physical world. Physical labor in particular has the power of associating women and the working classes with the presumably lower, physical world, rather than the supposedly higher, mental/spiritual realm. Diaz’s career illustrates a tension in the ways one can address this
prejudicial binary: either one can try to rearticulate physical labor as ennobling and thus “higher” than it is usually understood to be, or one can acknowledge that simply addressing the physical needs of others and performing manual labor does not allow for a fulfilled life. At different moments in her career, Diaz was willing to employ both arguments, as they suited her context.

At Brook Farm, this attention to labor as spatial practice highlights an imbalance between the abstract space of the community and the spatial practices of the community’s women. Indeed, one lesson to take away from Brook Farm is that well-intentioned abstract spaces can still elide the spatial practices in a community, particularly those of women and underprivileged groups. The Brook Farm ideology articulated a vision where all individuals would participate in both physical and mental labor, with the understanding that both forms of labor are beneficial to the individual. But the spatial practices of the women show that the physical domestic labor they were still expected to manage was dominating their time and energy, making higher pursuits nearly impossible. There are also indications that while farming was viewed as ennobling, housework and other women’s work continued to be perceived as drudgery, not as the kind of labor that could lead to transcendence.

In her later writing, Diaz analyzes the space of the home and identifies a similar gap between abstract space and women’s lived practices. Ideally, women devoted their time in large part to cultivating the minds and spirits of their children and husbands. In practice, however, women had little time left for such loftier goals after completing the housework and meeting the physical demands of their families and communities. Here is where the tension in Diaz’s approach to space and labor becomes clear. While she does
argue that women’s physical labor demands mental acuity as well as physical labor, she maintains that the intense physical work is exhausting women and making mental and cultural pursuits impossible. Rather than simply argue that housework be more highly esteemed, Diaz advocates that housework be lessened, through simpler standards for clothing and food, in particular. Strategically, Diaz takes domestic ideology at face value and claims that if society really wants women to focus their energy on these high, lofty goals, then society must free women’s time (and bodies) to pursue them.

The second portion of this chapter considers some of the ways that a public might confront social spaces that exclude them or fail to meet their needs. The WEIU assessed the social space of Boston as inappropriate and/or unsafe for women. Though this assessment of public space as unfit for women was common at the time, the WEIU took a unique approach, attempting to make urban space safer for women by creating their own semi-public spaces. The buildings of the WEIU, housing lunchrooms, reading rooms, and other spaces open to women of all classes, thus intervened in the social space of the city and changed the spatial practices of women in that space. With the central location of the WEIU’s buildings, members of various classes were more apt to be out and about in the spaces of downtown Boston.

Finally, in her leadership of the WEIU, Diaz returned to the theories of labor that were so central at Brook Farm and that backed her subsequent critiques of domestic space. Her strategies show an awareness that individuals are defined, in large part, through their relationship to the physical world, established through labor. Within the spaces of the WEIU, Diaz argued for a re-valuing of physical labor. In particular, Diaz wanted the more well-off members of the club to appreciate the labor of working
women—and to consider the demands that they placed on the domestics, seamstresses, and other working women in their lives. As with her approach to women’s domestic labor, Diaz hoped to provide opportunities for working class women to develop their minds through classes, lectures, and cultural activities. At the same time, though, the spaces of the WEIU worked to improve the conditions of working women’s labor and to encourage women who didn’t need to work for pay to engage in paid labor anyway, to learn a useful skill and better appreciate their own abilities and those of the working women in their midst.
Chapter 6

Lessons from Intentional Communities

Coverdale notes that his fellow workers act as if they are the land’s first tillers and, by association, the nation’s first utopians. But the community’s historical amnesia with respect to the utopian projects that have preceded it reveals that American history has never been written or even thought. It has only been repressed, buried by new “dirt,” new stories. America, in this view, is always distinctively post-Utopian, but has never “known” it.

—Lauren Berlant, qtd. in Hawthorne xxv.

The spaces of intentional communities might seem the last place to turn for a practical analysis of the role of space in rhetoric. They are, indeed, fantastic places. Tradition and the very idea of the “good life” render these as spaces composed, in narrator Miles Coverdale’s words, of the “airiest fragments,” in stark contrast to the “ponderous realities” of everyday life (11). If these are the spaces of dreamers, those who withdraw from the harsh realities of the real world to create a “waking dream” of another life, then what can they show us about how space operates for those of us who are trying to cope with, even improve, the dire situations around us?

But, as Lauren Berlant notes, America itself is built on a history of utopian thought and experimentation. An attempt to establish the “good life” may mean blinding oneself to the other “good lives” that have come before, but even Brook Farm itself was inspired by other utopian experiments of the 19th century. Moreover, the intentional communities of the 19th century were very much a part of the larger tapestry of the American public sphere. In addressing this blind spot, then, about the role of utopian projects in American history and the American public sphere, this project also asserts that there is much to be learned about rhetoric and space from these communities and the people who shaped and were shaped by them.

In other words, the spaces of intentional communities are not as remote from our own spaces as we (might) think. Fredric Jameson’s Archeologies of the Future argues compellingly
that the utopian seed that prompts such experimentation is the same that operates in each of us, giving a sense of hope for the future, hope that things may be other than they are. Few of us today may be able to exclaim, with Coverdale: “let it be reckoned neither among my sins nor follies, that I once had faith and force enough to form generous hopes of the world’s destiny—yes!—and to do what in me lay for their accomplishment” (Hawthorne 11). Yet even if we lack, as individuals or groups, the ambition of these projects, they are based in the same utopian impulse that prompts our own attempts at change. The difference is one of scope, not quality.

Yet there is a reason why turning to intentional communities for a study of space makes especial sense. What is different about the spaces of intentional communities is that they thematize space by consciously attempting to materialize a theory or vision. Intentional communities are grounded in the faith that changing one’s material world can change all other aspects of life. And, as a whole, these projects reject the default settings of the physical arrangements in society around them. At Blueberry Hill, a co-housing intentional community where I spent a summer, the roads went around the houses, not through them, to create safe places for children to play. Such an arrangement is uncommon in most housing options and was made possible by a communal agreement about the kinds of spatial arrangements that would support a desirable lifestyle.

In selecting intentional communities for this project, I, like Hawthorne, sought “a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of [my] brain may play out their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives” (1). I sought the perspective such communities might offer not only on the dominant spatial arrangements of their historical time, but on our own attitudes about space and understandings of how space functions in our lives.
As I pursued my research questions, my sense of intentional communities as special spaces, separate from larger society, was undermined. The more I examined the unique spaces of 19th-century intentional communities, the more I recognized that they can only be understood in relation to the larger context of American space at the time. In my body chapters, I emphasized that these communities had many interactions with and even goals for broader American society, but I was not able to fully consider how these spaces made arguments about the developing American landscape: rural or urban, industrial or agricultural. Intentional communities were not the only 19th-century groups who asked what kind of physical space allowed a desirable lifestyle, or who conducted spatial experiments. Future work on the spaces of intentional communities might draw upon scholarship in critical geography that traces 19th-century developments in urban planning, the parks movement, and spatial responses to increased immigration and industrialization. By considering these communities in light of these larger spatial discourses, one could gain a fuller understanding of the rhetorical nature of intentional communities.

In this final chapter, I share my findings, my potential insights, and possibilities for future applications of this work. First, my conclusions are that spaces are rhetorical and that publics do indeed need spaces. Second, I consider some new themes that arose in the course of completing this project: possibilities for spatial resistance and the importance and parameters of spatial practice. Finally, I offer several potential applications of the project for rhetorical analysis, teaching, and the spaces of rhetoric and composition.

Drawing Conclusions

On the most general level, this study examines the interactions of space and rhetoric from the perspective of two particular kinds of communities: geographical and discursive. In this first
large section, then, I present my findings regarding how space impacts the rhetorical alliances of these two forms of communal activity.

*Spaces are Rhetorical*

The intentional communities in this project show that not all spaces are rhetorical in the same way, that there are different facets to the rhetorical nature of our spaces. Each chapter explores some of the different ways that an intentional community can function, rhetorically. In my chapter on Gertrude Rapp, for example, I show that the space of Harmony has distinct rhetorical effects for its inhabitants and quite different effects for the outsiders who visit and project their own understandings upon its space. The order of the community speaks to insiders as evidence that they are living in the way that God intended, but from an outside perspective this same order reads as the imposed, harsh exactitude of a dictatorial leader. Gertrude Rapp writes her silk letters and conducts her business at the intersection of the abstract space of the Harmonists and the projected space of Harmony as perceived by larger America. But there is yet another way that the space of Harmony functions rhetorically. Of the three communities, the Harmonists’ communities were formed earliest. Indeed, the Harmonist communities were visited by the founder of Nashoba, Frances Wright, and the founders of Brook Farm, George and Sophia Ripley. Wright and the Ripleys found inspiration for their own communal experiments in the Harmonists’ model of cooperative labor and communal living. In this way, the Harmony Society provided an argument that utopian experiments could thrive in 19th-century America.

A second angle of the rhetorical nature of intentional communities is demonstrated in their prioritizing of abstract space over spatial practice. One of the reasons intentional communities seemed promising for a project examining rhetoric and space is that the communities themselves demonstrate an awareness of the rhetorical aspects of space. Often conceived as a whole before they are implemented, intentional communities have an unusually
coherent abstract space. This is not to say that incidental factors never influence the physical development of a community, but the principles of the community’s physical arrangements are consciously and carefully articulated from the outset. Yet this project demonstrates that this focus on actualizing an abstract space can happen at the expense of spatial practice and can elide the experiences of individuals or groups within the community. In Brook Farm, for example, the abstract principles about ennobling labor did not apply, in day-to-day life, to the spatial practices of the overworked, exhausted Brook Farm women. The abstract space of Brook Farm made one argument about labor and gender equality, and the spatial practice of the women asserted another. Thus, the rhetorical effect of Brook Farm space was to make the women feel unappreciated and excluded from the larger Transcendental goals of the undertaking. This tendency to overlook human realities in service to a larger goal permeates utopian imaginings and grounds the dystopian fear that any attempt to implement a utopian vision must assert unreasonable, unachievable demands to make the inhabitants the right kind of people to inhabit this “perfect” space. Since the space itself is already understood as perfect, its inhabitants must adapt to fit the space, not the other way around.

Finally, the spaces of the intentional communities of this project are rhetorical because they address outsiders—neighbors and visitors and readers—as part of their audience. To persist, a community needs some degree of public tolerance and support; a community needs to persuade the surrounding environs to accept it. I’ve introduced the term “projected space” to talk about those outside interpretations of a space. Projected space plays a significant role in several of my chapters, particular in the case of Frances Wright and the Nashoba community. Of my three subjects, Frances Wright seems the least aware of the projected space of her community. What she sees as a concrete, feasible plan for emancipation, others see as dreaming. Even the reality of Nashoba—with its malaria, leaking roofs, stale and scarce food, and other hardships—fails to
penetrate her utopian gaze. Moreover, the projected view of the space of the community is mapped onto the entire project, including the individuals involved. The primitive perceptions of the community are seemingly confirmed by the reports of inter-racial sexual coupling, condoned by the community’s leadership. Wright’s complete lack of perception of how her space is being projected by others (and her dismay when she realizes that her own perspective is not commonly shared) results in a final complete break with this outside audience, and her remodeling of herself as a kind of public pariah. Any assumption that a space need only be accepted by those who will live there overlooks the importance of projected space.

Publics Need Spaces

Another goal of this project was to investigate the relationship of publics to particular spaces, and I conclude that publics do need and use spaces in drawing a public together. First, publics often convene in certain spaces, and the sense of the identity of a public is shaped in these spaces. The public of silk growers with whom Gertrude Rapp corresponded forged their ties to one another, physically, at their expeditions and fairs. Though Rapp was, in my reading, a member of this community, her participation was limited in part because she was not able to circulate in these shared spaces, anonymously. The point of such expeditions and fairs is not to actually meet everyone present—this is not a family reunion—but to get a sense of the type of people that “we,” the silk growing community, are. Perhaps Gertrude Rapp would have stood out too much, a woman in Harmonist garb with a strong German accent, but she didn’t get to find out.

A second way a public might use a particular space is to foster certain spatial practices. Abby Morton Diaz and the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU) used their buildings in downtown Boston to shape the spatial practices of women as laborers, as mothers, as learners, and as citizens. In the lectures and their hands-on training sessions housed in this
sheltered space, women developed new ways to think about how they move through their homes, their workplaces, and the city itself, and they also learned new practical strategies for completing the tasks associated with these spaces in more independent, safe, hygienic, and informed ways. The WEIU buildings provided safe spaces to practice ways of communicating, working, and moving that were not encouraged in other spaces of the time.

Finally, in creating its own space, a public marks its existence within the landscape of the city or town. By repurposing a church into a Hall of Science, Frances Wright declared that the freethinking public was a demonstrable component of New York. Wright’s Hall was in the heart of New York, and its presence argued that the community of people it represented had the means to make their voices heard. In similar ways, other publics also change the landscape (ideological and physical, abstract and practical) of the cities, towns, and rural locations where they form.

Making Inferences

Though this project began with the goal of examining the ways that space affected women’s rhetorical participation in intentional communities and publics, along the way I discovered that, many times, that participation was accomplished through resisting certain spatial tendencies. That is, when space seemed to be impeding a woman’s means of communicating, she worked against those spatial limitations, in one of several ways. Similarly, as I worked to consider the spatial practices of the women in my study, I recognized that certain patterns emerged. Thus, in this section I share my tentative thoughts on the nature of spatial resistance and on the category of spatial practice as a lens for analysis and an agent of change.

Spatial Resistance

The most straightforward possibility for resisting spatial power is suggested by Frances Wright. Despite her skill as a rhetor, Wright spent her career using physical spaces to forward
her goals. Most notably, the Nashoba community was designed to counter the larger institution of slavery. To remove this blight from the space of the nation, Wright planned to start a small community that could be replicated until enough Nashoba-like communities were in place to educate and free all of America’s slaves. Later in her career, as a leader in the freethought movement, Wright founded the Hall of Science in New York to similarly resist certain spatial practices: namely, the discursive standards that were causing Americans to fall prey to the bombast of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening. Rather than work within the spaces available to her, Wright forged her own spaces and hoped that the practices therein would spread, virally, to affect change in the larger society.

A second means of enacting spatial agency is to rhetorically counter projected interpretations of one’s spaces. Rapp used her writing to counter projections of Harmony as slavish and lacking in refinement or creativity, showing her silk industry as evidence of the Harmonists’ inventiveness. Moreover, by vocally supporting the “silk cause,” Rapp positioned Harmony within the abstract space of America, evincing their patriotism and downplaying the differences outsiders perceived between the pious celibate community and the larger American society.

Finally, a rhetor can counter an abstract space by playing up how it elides and fails to account for the experiences of some portion of the space’s inhabitants. In her writings about domestic space, Abby Morton Diaz shows that the lived drudgery of wives and mothers hardly measures up to the ideals of women caring for the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual needs of their husbands and children. Employing some of the principles of abstract space behind the Brook Farm community, she shows that the spatial practices of wives and mothers in fact demonstrate that their families’ expansive physical needs are all that these women have the time, energy, and physical fortitude to address.
Reconceptualizing Spatial Practice

At the start of this project, I expected the category of “spatial practice” to be fairly straightforward. Borrowing the concept from Lefebvre, I imagined spatial practice as combining the allowances and limitations of one’s physical spaces and one’s physical movements through those spaces. Spatial practice, then, is comprised by your physical surroundings and what you do there. This project shed light on some of the most influential aspects of spatial practice in the 19th-century, and perhaps still today.

All three of my chapters, in addressing spatial practice, address labor, paid and unpaid, as a primary means through which individuals articulate their relationships to space. The chapter on Gertrude Rapp focuses, mostly obviously, on her work in the silk industry, on how this work is understood (in terms of gender) within the Society. Rapp insists, in her letters, on a particular positioning of the silk industry as serious work, not a woman’s hobby. Here it becomes clear that the gender of a person in a space of labor impacts the overall attitude towards that occupation or industry. By working as a businesswoman, Rapp risked either her own dismissal as a “manly” woman or the dismissal of the silk industry as a hobby, not a serious business. These links between labor and gender operate spatially, through considerations of the location of the work (the home or a factory) and the nature of the physical work (the spatial practices) of individual gendered bodies. In addition, this chapter illustrates that the larger society’s understanding of a community is often shaped by their view of what that community does for a living, its labor-related spatial practices. Think, here, of Americans’ understanding of the Shakers or the Amish—the community is synecdochally represented in the goods they produce, and in how they produce them—their spatial practices of labor.

Another insight about spatial practice grew out of my consideration of the Hall of Science in New York. Though I began the project with an understanding that rhetoric is spatial, I did not
necessarily consider it as a component of spatial practice, defined as how we move through and occupy our physical spaces. In reading about Frances Wright’s goals for her Hall of Science, I saw that she imagined the space largely as a space forwarding certain rhetorical practices. I then wondered what made it necessary to have a specific space to promote these norms of rhetoric—why not just promote them in her newspaper, or out on the street, or in her own public lectures? I realized that the implication of setting aside a particular space for a particular kind of rhetoric was that the other spaces available at the time would not (to the same extent) allow this kind of rhetorical practice. The implication, then, is that rhetoric is a spatial practice; rhetoric is part of how we articulate our physical relationship to the spaces of our lives. Our spatial practices involve not only our physical movements, but also how we talk or write (physical acts, after all) in a given space. Through our spatial-rhetorical practices, we write and revise the discourse norms of the spaces we occupy.

Finally, my work on Abby Morton Diaz led me to ask about the power of spatial practice to shape a society’s dominant conceptions about space. Certainly, spatial practice is a key component of this chapter. Abby Morton Diaz witnessed, at Brook Farm, the tensions that arise when abstract space and spatial practice are severed. Through her writings about women’s lives, Diaz attempts to reform the popular notions of the abstract space of the home. Her later turn to directly challenging and changing the spatial practices of urban women suggests that she may have recognized that interventions into abstract space alone would not change the social space of women’s lives.

The WEIU’s efforts to change the spatial practices of urban women suggest that there is a hope that changing spatial practices can change social space, the lived experience of the spaces women inhabit. But in order to change social space, abstract space must change as well. Can changing the spatial practices in Boston shift the abstract space of Boston? This must have been
the ultimate hope of Diaz and the other activists in women’s clubs at the time: that changing their own spatial practices might trickle up to help reform a view of urban space that didn’t allow for their needs and experience. Ultimately, spatial practice is still the space of the user, and so we have to hope that these practices can affect the dominant conceptions of our spaces. To some extent, then, perhaps the spatial practices of women’s clubs might be seen as belonging to the same genre of resistance as later spatial activism. What was Rosa Parks doing at the front of that bus, if not hoping that an unusual spatial practice might shed light on a dark aspect of the abstract space of Birmingham? In the same way, then, the WEIU’s work to get women out in the city in new ways might have foregrounded the abstract assumptions about urban space, class, and gender that served to help constrain women’s movements.

Suggesting Implications

In this section, I look outward to the field of rhetoric and composition and consider the implications of this project for that community. First, I consider this project’s two models for conceiving of space: essentialist and rhetorical. I turn my gaze towards the approaches to space in rhetorical scholarship and explain the pitfalls of the essentialist approach from the standpoint of rhetorical analysis. I also consider how exploring a rhetorical approach to space with our students might encourage them to view themselves as participants in shaping the spaces of their lives. Finally, I explore how this project can guide a re-examination of the spaces of the field itself, from our classrooms and institutions to the conferences and other venues where “the field” is materialized.

Approaching Space

My conceptions of essentialist and rhetorical approaches to space grew out of a sense that how a rhetor conceived of a space would affect her rhetorical approach as she attempted to
change that space. But the same categories can apply to thinking about how we approach space as an element in our own rhetorical analyses. If we give in to essentialist conceptions of space, then we are stuck with analyses where a rhetor either read the space correctly or incorrectly, depending upon whether or not they were successful. While a rhetor might accurately assess the abstract space of a site for her rhetorical intervention, it is more difficult to read the social space of such a site, because that social space will vary depending on which inhabitants’ experience you are attempting to understand. An essentialist approach to space implies that all users will experience a space in the same manner and that a rhetor need only understand that ruling abstract space in order to make change in that space. Frances Wright stands as a cautionary tale, in this respect. Guided by her faith in the abstract space of America (understood through the lens of the American Revolution), Wright found that the practices of Americans were a far cry from ideals of liberty and equality. Wright’s reading of this space was not “wrong,” per se, but her faith in this abstract space is such that she imagines it as foolproof, an essential and primary component of each American’s decision-making process.

Not all rhetors rely so heavily on a particular conception of an abstract space. We might find more interesting sites for analysis by looking for rhetorical interventions that contradict the dominant understanding of a given space, for those rhetorical interventions might be based in another aspect of that space. Indeed, many rhetors speak or write in order to respond to their perception of a social space, or their familiarity with or observation of spatial practices that belie the story told by abstract space. In this study, Abby Morton Diaz offers an indictment of an abstract space that ignores the spatial practices of an entire group of people. The abstract space of the rural home is troubled by the actual spatial practices of the women therein. As Diaz demonstrates, the spatial practices of women and other underprivileged groups often serve to highlight the prejudice or shortsightedness of abstract space.
Identity is crucial to spatial analysis because abstract spaces that are defined by one group and applied to another will generally be at odds with the spatial practices of the excluded group. The abstract spaces of the WEIU, defined in large part by the middle- and upper-class leadership of the club, most likely continue to gloss over some of the spatial practices of working-class women. In this case, my suspicion is that the working-class women were not nearly as cowed by the chaotic, dangerous spaces of urban Boston as these ladies who lunch imagined them to be. Still, the WEIU took the steps that rhetorical scholars should imitate, doing their best to track the physical movements and lived conditions of these women’s lives. Where they failed, perhaps, is in asking the women what their experience of those spaces was—how they understood their own social space.

The power of space in the classroom lies largely in the opportunity to expand students’ understanding of what is rhetorical. Our spatial practices, the way we wield our bodies, are themselves rhetorical. Whether we occupy a space cringingly, confidently, or calmly, our physical motions make an argument about the space and our right (and the right of people “like us”) to be in it, doing what we are doing. We can talk about the spatial metaphors we use—“breaking new ground,” “leading the way,” “exploring,”—and return them to spatial ground, by asking students to think about the paths they take to get around campus, and why, and what determines those choices. We might ask them what kinds of students they tend to see in certain spaces, and what we can learn from those differences. What might make a certain space more welcoming to Asian students, or to athletes? An interesting journal prompt might ask students to analyze the rhetorical effects of the designs of a few different dorms on campus.

Once students grasp that how we occupy our spaces is rhetorical, we can encourage a rhetorical notion of space. That is, rather than asserting an essentialist view of space as transparent, empty, and knowable, we can encourage students to explore the ways that they are
subject to the limitations of spatial power and the ways they can employ their own spatial agency. Indeed, my chapter on Gertrude Rapp suggests that spatial power and spatial agency might be better understood as a network of effects resulting from the interactions of similar variables. In my original conception, I understood spatial power as those forces beyond the individual (whether physical or cultural) that hinder their movements and spatial choices. Spatial agency, then, involves the way that individuals work against those limitations, occupying and understanding spaces in ways not encouraged by those larger structures. But the chapter on Gertrude Rapp shows that it’s not always easy to tell whether a given force works in the form of spatial power or spatial agency. The larger public’s misconceptions about celibate women were certainly a negative force in some ways, but they may have facilitated public acceptance of Rapp’s unusual entrepreneurial role. Similarly, while her community’s demands prevented Rapp from attending the exhibitions and fairs of the silk public, her presence there might have played up the idea of how different she was from the other silk growers, endangering her role as an icon within the movement. Though this example illustrates that what looks like a mechanism of spatial power can sometimes function as spatial agency, and vice versa, I maintain the two concepts as useful for analysis, keeping an open mind regarding their potential to interact and morph into one another.

*The Spaces of Rhetoric and Composition*

If spatial agency comes from the ability to participate in determining both the abstract space and the spatial practices of our lives, then what kind of spatial agency do we, as rhetoric and composition scholars, have in our professional lives?

We might begin by thinking about the classroom. Scholars in rhetoric and composition have begun to tackle the implications of our spatial practices in the classroom. We recognize ourselves as bodies, not just minds, and see that those bodies do physical work as we confront
the bodies of our students and occupy space together. And many teachers also attend to the spatial practices of their students in the classroom, how their body language and use of notebooks, cell phones, and laptops work to create the social space of a given class. In her classroom, the Hall of Science, Frances Wright espoused certain rhetorical practices. What sort of spatial-rhetorical practices do we encourage our students to use, not just in their formal assignments, but in the day-to-day practices of pre-class chat, question asking, large group discussion, small group work, and draft workshops? We might ask whether our students are participants not only through their spatial practices, but also as co-constructors of the abstract space of a class?

At the next level, rhetoric and composition scholars could revisit their institutional spaces. Rhetoric and composition scholars are, I would suggest, pretty well versed in these kinds of considerations. How are rhetoric and composition scholars included or elided in the abstract spaces of departments, programs, and colleges? Are these abstract spaces in line with the spatial practice of rhetoric and composition in the space of the college or university? For years, the attention of rhetoric and composition scholars to their location in basements or spaces far from the heart of the department has attempted to play up the hypocrisy of abstract spaces that portend to equally value the different branches of a department. Just as the Brook Farm women were painfully aware of how the grand abstract space of the community masked some serious problems in their lived space, rhetoric and composition scholars are quite capable of laying out the breakdowns among the abstract spaces and spatial practices of their institutions, tensions manifested in their own conflicted experience.

Finally, at the most general level, we might consider those spaces specific to rhetoric and composition. The conferences of the field, like the silk growers’ fairs, offer a physical manifestation of who “we,” as a field, are. Even when we feel that we circulate, or at least the
non-celebrities of the field circulate, as anonymous beings, this is still the space where we
“picture” ourselves for one another, as a field. We might question the role of these physical
gatherings. How do our conferences relate to the other manifestations of our field in journals,
publications, and bookshelves? What difference does attendance at these conferences make, and
how is that attendance experienced differently by different cohorts within the field? Should the
goal of the conference be to display the best work in the field, the widest cross-section of diverse
work in the field, or an accurate portrayal of the demographics of our field? Do different
conferences achieve different goals, in this sense? Are our conferences spaces of privilege? What
is privileged, and how? Do the abstract spaces of our conferences—laid out in the documents
expressing the goals of these gatherings—break down if the social space of different attendees
and non-attendees (members of our “community” who are unwilling or unable to attend) is
considered? These questions matter because what we do in our professional spaces and
gatherings isn’t just about the talking, the exchange of ideas; it’s where we engage in the spatial
practices of the field.

Concluding Thoughts on Rhetorical Alliances

This study began with an investigation into two kinds of communities and their
intersections with space and rhetoric. Intentional communities are defined by their location
within shared physical spaces in the world, spaces designed with an eye to certain goals for the
inhabitants’ shared lives. Publics are groups of individuals, often geographically dispersed, who
are united by discourse surrounding shared concerns. From the start, then, this project began by
looking at the rhetorical alliances that unite physical communities and discursive communities.
The organization of my three cases also reflects this division, beginning by investigating the
intentional community where each woman lived and then turning to her rhetorical participation in a given public.

As much as it makes sense to differentiate between intentional communities and publics, and as important as it was for me to make clear from the start that I was not addressing intentional communities as publics, I found that this division was less clear and definitive than I first imagined. The intentional communities I examined often were based in larger discussions and concerns—whether abolitionist, Transcendentalist, or, in the case of the Harmonists, German pietist. Similarly, the publics, the communities I thought of as primarily discursive, emerged and made their presence felt in local, concrete ways. The silk growers came together in the spaces of exhibitions and fairs in large, northeastern cities, and the freethinkers and women’s clubs emerged in nodes of physical activity in particular urban spaces. Methodologically, then, it seems that it makes sense to treat these two kinds of communities as belonging on a continuum. Such a methodology would acknowledge the spatial practices and local clumpings of publics and the participation of intentional communities in larger public discussions and concerns. Certainly such a methodology would serve as a corrective to the common tendency of treating intentional communities as isolated, extremist groups with little relation to the larger flows of public interest and engagement.

One of the implications of this study for teaching composition is an approach to rhetoric as ultimately about alliances and communities grounded in materiality. Through texts, we negotiate the terms in which we can align ourselves with people who share our concerns about how we live in the world. Those alliances can range from discussions over which candidate to vote for in a given election, to how the United States should respond to international terrorism, to what music can be played in a dorm room. In other words, these alliances are all crucially constructed through discourse and through materiality. Thinking about how all rhetoric is spatial
can help students to consider the politics of location, the importance of medium, the role of places that are invoked in their rhetoric, and the social space that ultimately prompts each rhetorical act. We use rhetoric because we need it to understand one another, but we need to understand one another because we want to make changes to our social spaces, our shared world, and because our experiences and visions for that shared world differ. Thus, rhetoric is ultimately a way of communicating about the spatial practice that differs for each individual and about constructing abstract spaces we can believe in.
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organizational scheme of the book.
“Painting the Living Scenery of Amana: A Case Study of a Rhetoric of Containment.”

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