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Review of *The Erotic as Rhetorical Power: Archives of Romantic Friendship between Women Teachers.*

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Many misunderstand the erotic as something distinctly sexual. Though the erotic is indeed grounded in shared intimacy, it is not necessarily sexual. Drawing on Audre Lorde, Pamela VanHaitsma argues that the erotic should be understood as a creative power that can spur social change, break down the public-private binary, and ignite rhetorical practices such as writing, teaching, and public speaking. Specifically, VanHaitsma builds a rhetorical theory of the erotic as that which holds the potential to animate intellectual, pedagogical, and political desires. She builds on several strands of scholarship, beginning with Black feminist work by Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, and Sharon Holland. She also extends both queer and feminist history, complementing scholarship by Jessica Enoch, Lillian Faderman, and Ela Przybylo. In line with the work of Karma Chávez and Qwo-Li Driskill, VanHaitsma engages conversations about decolonizing the archive. In all, *The Erotic as Rhetorical Power* offers readers a compelling rhetorical theory while exploring historically marginalized modes of relationality and challenging traditional historical-archival methods.

Vanhaitsma advances a rhetorical theory of the erotic through what she calls an eroto-historiography of romantic friendships in the long nineteenth century. She pulls from settler archival material to understand same-sex romantic partnerships between four pairs of women: three white couples and one Black couple. Sarah Holley and Caroline Putnam were educators and abolitionists; Irene Leach and Anna Wood were educators at a women's seminary; Gertrude Buck and Laura Wylie were administrators and educators of rhetoric at Vassar College; and Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown, were educators and domestic workers. The chapters of the book interrogate the white women couples' romantic friendships. These romantic friendships were traditionally deemed nonsexual, an alternative to the domestic and reproductive labors associated with heterosexual marriage. VanHaitsma instead understands them as potentially, but not necessarily, sexual, yet marked by passion and erotic intensity that functions as a source of energy. Meanwhile, between each chapter, VanHaitsma writes what she calls "imaginative interludes." In these interludes,

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VanHaitsma uses Jacqueline Jones Royster's "critical imagination" and Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" to imagine alternative lives for Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown. Primus and Brown's romantic friendship was disrupted by racial and economic constraints that caused them to part ways. Further, VanHaitsma was unable to locate Primus's letters to Brown in existing archives, necessitating the process of critical fabulation.

VanHaitsma is keenly aware of the settler colonialism and racism infusing the archives of her study, particularly in the way details about Primus's and Brown's lives are absent. Throughout the book, VanHaitsma persistently uses decolonial language in acknowledging the settler occupied lands on which the rhetorical practices of the erotic took place. Through the critical fabulation in the imaginative interludes, VanHaitsma displays awareness of the ways structural racism informs her study. These imaginative interludes allow VanHaitsma to depict a new story for Primus and Brown that interrupts the white eroto-historiography of her other chapters.

VanHaitsma begins her archival analysis by looking at how Putnam and Holley's romantic friendship propelled their pedagogy and abolitionist work. Choosing a same-sex romantic partnership permitted these women to evade domestic and reproductive labor, allowing them to channel their time and energy into teaching without being labeled as spinsters. Before teaching, Holley spent several years speaking on the abolitionist circuit. VanHaitsma elucidates that though she spoke to "promiscuous audiences," the fact that she lived with another woman (ironically) subdued any notions of sexual promiscuity in her personal life. Interestingly, Holley and Putnam actually reproduced traditional heterosexual relationship dynamics with Holley performing public-facing lectures and Putnam taking on private "conversational rhetorics," or more interpersonal engagements about abolition. This power imbalance would later lead Holley to exert abusive control over Putnam, not allowing her to see her close friends. Additionally, though the women teachers were radical in their pursuit for abolition, VanHaitsma shows how the residues of settler colonialism haunted their later work at the Holley School. In all, Putnam and Holley's case demonstrates how the erotic can fuel radical abolitionist ends while simultaneously reifying power structures like the public-private sphere and settler colonialism.

Dwelling further on the erotic's potential to reify certain power structures, VanHaitsma's next chapter turns to Leach and Wood. She argues that the erotic of Leach and Wood's romantic friendship energized particularly conservative intellectual desires that reified western notions of beauty and white nationalism. Leach was Wood's school-teacher-turned-friend; and ultimately, these women lived and taught together at the Leachwood Seminary in Norfolk, Virginia. Their archival material is significant, but little attention has been given to their romantic partnership, as most scholars largely explain their relationship as a strategic way to skirt reproductive labors. VanHaitsma contends that whether or not their relationship was sexual, their erotic fueled their commitment to conservative and belletristic rhetoric. By belletristic rhetoric, she means a form of commonplace rhetoric that encourages students to draw beauty out of ordinary things. Unfortunately, these notions of beauty were very white and Western. Further, Leach and Wood prioritized

teaching wealthy, white women, and their erotic was "thus constrained by their ongoing investments in hierarchical distinctions, culturally as well as politically" (104). Thus, though they educated women, Leach and Wood's same sex romantic partnership shows how the erotic as rhetorical power can be constrained by and used for hegemonic ends.

Of course, while the erotic as rhetorical power has the potential to be used for conservative ends, it can also be used toward radical ends. VanHaitsma elucidates a sapphic erotic of egalitarianism between Wylie and Buck. Buck was the first person to earn a PhD in rhetoric from University of Michigan and Wylie hired her to help run the English department at Vassar College. The two women lived together in what was known as a "Boston marriage," a long-term financial and emotional commitment between two unmarried and educated women. Throughout the chapter, VanHaitsma develops an erotic of "sapphic egalitarianism" based on the way Buck and Wylie ran the Vassar English department together. Unlike other relationships in the book, Buck and Wylie's was not hierarchical. Even though Wylie was Buck's superior, they largely worked together and advanced an egalitarian approach to leadership. Additionally, the women's division of labor allowed Buck to publish in large quantity and Wylie to be the leader of the local suffrage organization. While their egalitarianism was progressive in many ways, it was also problematic in that it neglected to engage meaningful difference, especially when it came to race. As VanHaitsma points out, "Buck and Wylie's evasion of difference was not passively neutral or indifferent, in other words, but actively exclusionary" as they only hired teachers with the "right" background (168). Additionally, Buck practiced what was then known as the organic theory of education, tied to ideas of natural social differences and thus part of a larger racializing, colonial project. In all, while Buck and Wylie's erotic of sapphic egalitarianism was in some ways progressive, the radical nature of that relationship was limited by white feminism and settler colonialism. Their case is a good example of how the erotic as rhetorical power can be used for both liberatory and hegemonic ends. VanHaitsma reminds us that the erotic is merely potential, and the practice of the erotic can subvert or solidify oppression.

VanHaitsma disrupts the accounts of white women's romantic friendships in her interludes. First, she imagines that Primus and Brown were able to spend ample time together, sneaking between each other's rooms each night, generating an erotic that fueled their abolitionist endeavors. Employing Hartman's critical fabulation, VanHaitsma imagines an alternative reason why the letters between Primus and Brown stop. Instead of Brown marrying a man, VanHaitsma envisions a life in which Brown was hired to work at the Primus Institute. Their erotic continues to fuel their educational pursuits and racial justice advocacy as they live and work side by side as white women did. Finally, VanHaitsma imagines a future archive that includes the lost letters that Primus wrote to Brown, allowing more fuller rhetorical attention to this partnership. In this interlude, Vanhaitsma acknowledges the shortcomings of her own imaginings to paint Primus and Brown as cis-women in a stable queer relationship in short stories that fall between the pages of larger stories about white women. She admits that in some way she is trying to "console" herself with these imaginings, and perhaps that is not fair to these women.

Perhaps VanHaitsma is right that her attempt to recover the romance between Primus and Brown is in some way self-gratifying. Yet is it not the truth that rhetoricians often engage in an affective process of criticism, attending to what *feels* significant to them? I know I do. What if this affective engagement is just what the erotic as rhetorical power demands of us? In VanHaitsma's consoling of herself, she is enacting the erotic by *imagining* a different story. She *desires* a different ending for Primus and Brown. Perhaps her interludes are her application of the erotic as rhetorical power in her own work. She may find it self-gratifying, but her critical awareness of this process actually distinguishes her scholarship and opens up space for other scholars to deliberately study archival materials and marginalized modes of relationality. In all, VanHaitsma literally and figuratively speaks to rhetoricians' affective engagements with criticism, opening up space for more exploration of the creative rhetorical power of the erotic.