Although it was 30 years ago, I still remember my introduction to feminism. The oldest child and only girl in a working class family that had lived in mostly white, rural Western Pennsylvania for as long as anyone could remember, I grew up “in the church” as we described it then, attending evangelical Christian services three times a week and socializing exclusively with church kids. Though I was ranked 12th out of 744 in my graduating class, I was terrified of going to college, applying only to the church-related college most familiar to me and hoping, secretly, to find a husband by the time I was 19. I did marry at 24; my husband, someone who had grown up in the same church I had—was 20.

There was probably always a feminist spark in me. I remember more than one shouting match with my father when he insisted that women were created to be wives and mothers. In the 10th grade, I was the only one to vote for Shirley Chisholm for President in our class’s mock elections. I have no idea how I even knew who Shirley Chisholm was.

My introduction to feminism as a political position and a practice, including a teaching practice, came not from formal courses but from friends who handed me books. In college, a teacher gave me a copy of The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, and I fell in love with Sylvia Plath who that teacher referred to as a “barf-barf poet.” As an adjunct instructor at DePauw University, a mostly white, mostly conservative liberal arts college in Indiana, I was invited to be on the Women’s Studies committee by a radical librarian friend who introduced me to canonical second wave writers like Kate Millett and Carol Gilligan. I repaid the favor by recommending Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings to one of the few black students at DePauw,
who later told me it was the first book by an African American woman she had ever read. This was 1988.

One other memory of these formative years has stayed with me, the day my radical librarian friend—who had homesteaded with her husband in Canada for a decade, living without electricity or running water in a cabin they built with wood they felled themselves—looked down at my hands, and said, “Nail polish? You really don’t want to do that, do you?” I remember feeling affronted. And I remember thinking, what does nail polish have to do with feminism?

The point of the story is this: location matters. It matters where we are—physically, geographically, emotionally, intellectually—when we first hear the feminist gospel. It also matters how we as teachers locate ourselves—in relation to the material and to our students—when we share that good news. In teaching a women’s rhetoric course, I want students to learn to identify their cultural locations and understand how those locations shape their rhetoric. I also want students to explore how the cultural location of other women rhetors affects both what they say and how it is received. Finally, I want students to acknowledge how their cultural locations affect their response to the rhetoric of others, especially those they perceive to be different from them.

In the fall of 2012, I taught for the first time a junior-level Women’s Rhetorics class at Texas Christian University, a predominantly white, predominantly conservative, private university in north Texas. Slide 2[Here’s a screen shot of what comes up when you type “TCU Women into Google Images.”] In planning the course, I faced the challenge of how to share feminist texts with students whose cultural location made them likely to resist or reject feminism. Although the course counted toward the Women’s Studies minor, it also met a university writing emphasis requirement and a requirement for both English and Writing Majors, which meant students enrolled for a variety of reasons.
In the remainder of my time today, I want to talk about how my teaching of the course was informed by the principle that “it matters where you stand.” Both feminist theory and rhetorical theory have historically paid attention to the importance of cultural location for both speakers and audiences. Of particular interest to me here today, feminist standpoint theorists like Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Alison Jagger, and Sandra Harding make the case that “certain socio-political positions occupied by women (and by extension other groups who lack social and economic privilege) can become sites of epistemic privilege.” By working from our marginalized positions, we see what cannot be seen from dominant positions. In Sandra Harding’s words, “Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order” (1993: 56)

In my class, a number of pieces in Available Means, our primary text, helped introduce students to the epistemological advantages of a marginalized standpoint. Perhaps the best known example appears in Evelyn Fox Keller’s biography of plant geneticist Barbara McClintock who shook up the scientific orthodoxy by insisting on the importance of developing “a feeling for the organism” in order to understand it (324). We also read Ruth Behar’s “Anthropology that Breaks your Heart,” in which she credits her position as a Chicana woman “on the border” for enabling her to ask “Can we speak in a way that matters, in a way that will drive a wedge into the thick mud of business as usual?” (482) and legal scholar Patricia Williams’ “Death of the Profane,” where she describes how, in attempting to tell her own story of racial discrimination, she found her references to race erased by various publication outlets. These women’s scholarly rhetoric was clearly affected by their marginalized standpoint in ways that yielded a more complicated and complete view of things. It matters where you stand.
The challenge in my case is that standpoint theory highlights the value to knowledge-making of working from marginalized positions. To a casual observer, the 19 women enrolled in my Women’s Rhetorics class were not especially marginalized. [slide 4] Though many students at TCU receive scholarships, and employee children can attend tuition-free, the dominant culture at TCU is one of social privilege, with tuition and fees approaching $37,000 a year and total costs estimated at just over $50,000 a year. Forty percent of students belong to Greek organizations. In my class, 18 of 19 students were white (only 19% of TCU students are minority). None claimed identities (in their class participation or writing) as anything but straight.

But even privileged women have a standpoint as women that affects what they say and how their words are heard. Witness Sandra Fluke, [slide 5] whose story we discussed on the first day of class. Not even her status as a Georgetown University law student or her experience testifying before Congress on behalf of reproductive rights could protect Fluke from being called a slut by Rush Limbaugh, who bizarrely deduced that she wanted the government to pay her to have sex, and suggested that perhaps she should let him watch.

So being a woman, even a privileged woman, still matters to rhetoric. For many of my students, this fact was an intellectual hurdle. As one put it in her end-of-course reflection, “I was interested but skeptical at first, but I think seeing the progression of women’s rhetoric through history helped me see its importance.” And another commented: “I honestly held the perception that studying only women’s rhetoric was more of a detriment. I thought that by separating rhetoric by gender we would be further separating gender relations in a way. I cannot describe how much this view has changed for me. I get it now.” Opening the course with Sandra Fluke’s story helped drive that point home.

Although I hoped the course would eventually lead students to take account of their privilege, I thought they might be more willing to see their positions critically if the course also
provided some touchstones of identification, texts by women rhetors that would reflect standpoints familiar to them. It was after all, a class on women’s rhetorics—plural. I also wanted to avoid the “nail polish accusatory” moment. So while in the initial unit on theorizing women’s rhetoric, students read classic feminist texts by Virginia Woolf, Simone deBeauvoir, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich, later in the course, I also included conservative women rhetors Phyllis Schlafly and Sarah Palin. In a 1972 review titled “The Anti-Feminist Woman,” Adrienne Rich describes the conservative woman’s book she is reviewing as “Harmless, predictable, and sad,” but anyone familiar with Phyllis Schlafly [slide 6] who in the 1970’s mobilized thousands of conservative women in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and at the age of 89 continues to be politically active, might disagree with Rich’s contention that conservative women’s rhetoric lacks the power to persuade. To give students a chance to investigate that power, I chose to include Schlafly’s 1972 “What’s Wrong with ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?” as the counterpoint to Gloria Steinem’s 1970 Senate testimony on the ERA. Of course I wanted students to critically interrogate Schlafly’s claim that equal rights for women would harm them by taking away the special privileges they enjoy because they are women (like not being drafted into military service). But I also wanted a space where students could talk about the appeal of the lives led by their stay-at-home mothers, whom they did not see as dupes of the system and whose commitment to their children’s welfare was deeply appreciated. I provided such a space out of respect for my students’ standpoint, even as it also led to pedagogical challenges. For example, one woman tried to argue in her personal theory paper that her mother’s power as a rhetor came from her choice to submit to her husband, but when she was unable to offer any supporting evidence, I faced the task of pointing out the limits of her argument without seeming to personally object to her position.
The fact that so many of my students openly wrestled with how they would balance family and careers made Sarah Palin [slide 6] an interesting case for rhetorical analysis. I assigned her Vice Presidential acceptance speech at the 2008 Republican National Convention, which we both read and watched. Understanding her rhetorical appeal involved discussing what anthropologist Brenna McCaffrey called her “Motherhood Rhetoric,” which was used liberally in her acceptance speech. Students also astutely observed how during the speech, the cameras frequently panned to images of her family in the audience. Other students commented on how Palin’s feminine appeal [slide 8] —the soft pink jacket, lip gloss, and pearls—likely made it easier for her audience to accept her in a position of power because she conformed to gender stereotypes. As an ex-pageant girl, Palin knew the power of being pretty. This attention to appearance—and the power to influence others because of it—especially resonated with my students. One student observed on her final reflection, “As a woman, I find it important to learn that how I dress, how I present myself, and the many other factors of rhetoric play into how people perceive me.” Now, such a conclusion can be considered problematic—do we really want women students to become more convinced of the importance of their appearance to their ability to speak and be heard? But I hope our discussions of how Palin’s appearance was treated in the media complicated the simple equation of pretty with power.

Another element of the course designed to offer a familiar standpoint for my students was a unit on Texas women rhetors, which opened with a discussion of Molly Ivins’ [slide 9] “Texas Women: True Grit and all the Rest.” In this humor piece written for Ms Magazine, Ivins makes the case that “it is the virulence of Texas sexism that accounts for the strength of Texas women. It’s what we have to overcome that makes us formidable survivors.” (166) Ivins begins by sharing some history in support of her contention that Texas’s good-ol-boyism, machismo, and redneck culture are all “rotten for women.” She also points out the pressure on Texas
women to meet narrow social expectations. As Ivins describes it, there exists “a pat description of what every woman wants” that includes “Be a Pi Phi at Texas or SMU, marry a man who’ll buy you a house in Highland Park, hold the wedding at Highland Park Methodist (flowers by Kendall Bailey), join the Junior League...” and so on (169). Ivins, who grew up in an affluent Houston suburb, the daughter of an oil executive, and who attended Smith College and the Columbia School of Journalism remarked that only her being 6 foot tall--“a Clydesdale among thoroughbreds” saved her from the pressure to conform. The fact that Ivins could describe sexism in the Texas accent my students understood made it easier for them to accept her criticism of their own upbringings. Also important was Ivins’ insistence that “Texas women are tough in some very fundamental ways. Not unfeminine, nor necessarily unladylike, just tough.”

In this description, Ivins gets at a key concern for many of our women students—how to be strong without giving up their desire to be sexually attractive. Without having to give up their nail polish—or as we discussed one day in class, thong underwear. More specifically, Ivins assures them, “all this adversity has certainly made us a bodacious bunch of overcomers...”

[Having a sense of humor about men is not a luxury here; it’s a necessity” (168).

That bodaciousness was especially apparent in the soon-to-be-governor-of Texas Ann Richards’ keynote speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, which opened with these words:

“I’m delighted to be here with you this evening, because after listening to George Bush all these years, I figured you needed to know what a real Texas accent sounds like. Twelve years ago Barbara Jordan, another Texas woman, Barbara made the keynote address to this convention, and two women in a hundred and sixty years is about par for the course. But if you give us a chance,
we can perform. After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did.

She just did it backwards and in high heels.”

Although Richards is referring to the first President George Bush, any mention of George Bush can put TCU students in a defensive mood, given that George W. Bush lives in a tony suburb of Dallas, just 30 miles away. But seeing Ann Richards as a Texas woman rhetor, talking of her humor in the face of sexism, her blend of toughness and femininity, made her politics more palatable. My students may not have shared her standpoint completely, but they shared it in part. [slide 11]

The same could be said for my students’ response to the 2006 documentary “Shut Up and Sing,” which we viewed in the last weeks of class. [slide 12] “Shut Up and Sing” tells the story of the Dixie Chicks’ fall from the “Top of the World” in country music after lead singer Natalie Mains told a London concert audience on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq that “‘Just so you know, we’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Following that remark, The Dixie Chicks, who had been one of the best selling female bands, was widely banned by country radio, saw their album and ticket sales decline dramatically, and even received death threats. The documentary clearly depicts the Dixie Chicks as heroes fighting the tyranny of conservative country music, ending with their making of the song “Not Ready to Make Nice,” [slide 13] and although some of my students had vague childhood memories of their families forbidding the playing of the Dixie Chicks, by the end of the semester, they could easily read what happened through the lens of women’s rhetoric. When Natalie Mains was told to “shut up and sing or your life will be over,” students understood the cost of violating gender roles by criticizing the most powerful man in the United States from a public stage in London. The fact that the group neither shut up nor stopped singing [slide 14] demonstrates the true grit of Texas women in the face of adversity.
The next time I teach the course, I’ll likely include Wendy Davis [15], the Texas senator who gained national acclaim when she stood for nearly 13 hours to filibuster a bill that sought to restrict access to abortion in Texas. [slide 16]. Trust me, it matters that she is from Texas, a TCU graduate whose senate district includes Fort Worth. When Davis led a “Stand with Texas Women” grassroots rally at the Texas capital [slide 17], Natalie Mains sang the national anthem. These women’s standpoint as Texas women matters, but so do the standpoints of those Texas women who oppose Davis. [slide 18]

In the final unit of the course, students chose a living woman rhetor for analysis. Free to follow their own interests, [slide 19] students chose musicians like Beyoncé, Adele, and Lady Gaga; comedians like Tina Fey, Ellen DeGeneres, and Amy Poehler; and public figures such as Sheryl Sandberg, Condoleezza Rice, and Nancy Brinker (founder of Susan G. Komen for the Cure). These women are obviously not all feminists, but they all speak from a standpoint as women—whose gendered experience shapes what they say and how they say it, how they are heard and the effects their words produce. The student group who focused on women comedians ultimately characterized their subjects’ rhetoric as “sneaky feminism,” because they used humor to communicate their message indirectly. Perhaps my teaching of this class would fit that characterization as well. Of course I hope my students’ study of women’s rhetoric will lead them to embrace feminist ideals like gender equality and social justice, but I knew that to be an effective teacher of these women, I could not be seen as a radical feminist. Although I am a feminist, I needed them to see that I was willing to hear and understand why they might not be—yet. Perhaps unconsciously, I wanted to create for my students the experience of being handed a book by a friend and being invited, in a low risk way, a way that did not ask them to give up their entire personal history, to consider looking at the world from a slightly different
standpoint. Rather than pressuring my students to “Lean In,” I offered them the chance to “Ease In.”

There are costs, of course, to focusing overmuch on students’ identification with texts. As Krista Ratcliffe, Barbara Schneider, and others have argued, we need to teach students to listen to and affirm difference—not just encourage them to find some personal connection to every text that challenges their point of view and thus soften the beneficial psychic disruption such a text can provide. By offering my students a wide variety of texts, I hoped they would find both familiar and unfamiliar standpoints, gathered under the umbrella of women’s rhetorics. And the same text might prove familiar to some and unfamiliar to others. While reading bell hooks’ “Homeplace (a site of resistance)” enabled the only black student in the class to recognize for the first time how her gender and race together shape her rhetoric, for another, hooks criticism of white patriarchy led her to reject hooks, that is, until a class discussion highlighted hooks’ valorization of mothers who prepared their children to face a difficult world. Although students need to learn to hear bell hooks’ standpoint and better understand their own standpoint in relation to it, I hope that by allowing that student the connection she was ultimately able to feel to bell hooks as a mother, she will be more likely to return to the text or a text like it in the future.

When asked in her final course reflection, [slide 20] “What one thing could you as a student have done differently to increase your learning? “ one of my best students, who admitted on the first day that she was skeptical about the value of focusing on women’s rhetoric, wrote: “I would have changed my perspective coming into the class. I wasn’t as excited as I should have been.” Next time, she will be.