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Robin E. Jensen
Purdue University

Erin F. Doss
Purdue University

Claudia Irene Janssen
Eastern Illinois University, cijanssen@eiu.edu

Sherrema A. Bower
Purdue University

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Theorizing the Transcendent Persona: Amelia Earhart's Vision in *The Fun of It*

Robin E. Jensen, Erin F. Doss, Claudia I. Janssen, & Sherrema A. Bower

In this article, we define and theorize the “transcendent persona,” a discursive strategy in which a rhetor draws from a boundary-breaking accomplishment and utilizes the symbolic capital of that feat to persuasively delineate unconventional ways of communicating and behaving in society. Aviator Amelia Earhart's autobiography *The Fun of It* (1932) functions as an instructive representative anecdote of this concept and demonstrates that the transcendent persona's persuasive force hinges on one's ability to balance distance from audiences with similarities to them. Striking such a balance creates a platform for rhetors to promote transformative visions of society. Earhart utilized the transcendent persona to illustrate an alternative vocabulary of what contemporary theorists might call feminine gender performativity. The article concludes by exploring the implications of the transcendent persona as an enduring, rhetorical resource for communicators, as well as for scholars of persuasion and social change, religious communication, and communication history.

Most contemporary audiences remember the aviator Amelia Earhart for her disappearance in 1937 while nearing the end of an around-the-world flight. Numerous theories exist about Earhart's fate and that final flight (Gillespie, 2006; King, Jacobson, Burns, & Spading, 2001; Long & Long, 2000; Loomis & Ethell, 1985), while comparatively less attention has been paid to Earhart's role as a public intellectual, feminist, and communicative innovator.¹ Prior to her disappearance, Earhart distinguished herself as a person who not only accomplished amazing feats but also drew from the symbolic capital of those feats to articulate new visions of women in society. She spent more time writing about her flights and what she hoped they meant for others than she ever spent in the sky. As a magazine editor, author of countless news and magazine articles, and vice-president of public relations for a commercial airline, Earhart's rhetoric played a central role in 1920s and 1930s U.S. culture—albeit White, middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual culture—and modeled increasingly unconventional ways of communicating about gender and society within that context.

Earhart's autobiography, *The Fun of It*, was published in 1932 directly after she earned the title of first woman to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean. Arguably the most popular and influential of Earhart's writings, *The Fun of It* chronicled her childhood, the history of White women in aviation (she did not include female pilots of color such as Bessie Coleman; Haynsworth & Toomey, 2000), and her experiences soaring above the clouds, all while championing the idea that privileged womanhood and adventure-seeking were not mutually exclusive concepts. Selling for 2.50 USD, the book was an instant success, with positive reviews, distribution to all female Junior Literary Guild members aged 12–16, reception as a foundational document for the Ninety-Nines—the first international organization of women aviators—and circulation to millions of young readers who had not previously conceived of women as aviators (Book Notes, 1932; Amelia Earhart's Life, 1932).² Earhart's interpretation of

her boundary-breaking feat in *The Fun of It* was pivotal in transforming communication about gender and its privileged, feminine performance in modern society.

In this article, we explicate a theory of the “transcendent persona” and offer Earhart’s *The Fun of It* as an instructive representative anecdote of this original communicative construct. Communication scholars have discussed the constructs of transcendence and persona separately, but theorists currently lack a way to analyze these constructs when they work in combination to circumscribe unconventional models of subjectivity. We define the transcendent persona as a discursive strategy in which a rhetor draws from a boundary-breaking accomplishment and utilizes the symbolic capital from that feat to persuasively delineate unconventional ways of communicating and behaving in society. Earhart’s book offers more than just “fun” in this case as it illustrates the transcendent persona in action and specifies how one can make an argument for social transformation using the discursive resources available in a specific time and place. Philosophers Davidson (1984), Kristeva (1989), and Rorty (1979, 1989) have argued that social transformations are dependent upon rhetorical change. In this sense, explorations of rhetorical change—persuasive attempts to alter how the world and its subjects are communicated—illuminate discursive variables with the potential to contribute to social transformation. In Earhart’s case, her discourse delineated how a persona grounded in transcending the world’s assumptions and its expectations could, somewhat paradoxically, aid rhetors in persuasively communicating alternative perspectives on performing gender in certain contexts. As Earhart transcended societal expectations for her gender, she was in an excellent position to demarcate herself as a credible role model and inspire rhetorical, and therefore societal, transformation.

Overall, although the transcendent persona we delineate here is a communicative construct grounded in the historical situations and contingencies of its use, it is also a theoretical framework for elucidating strategies that rhetors use to alter historically situated norms by performing unconventional subject positions. For Earhart, we argue that the transcendent persona she utilized in *The Fun of It* played a role in the social transformation of mainstream (i.e., White, middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual) feminine gender performance in the early 20th-century United States. We begin this article by first reviewing the existing literature on transcendence and persona. This review sets the stage for delineating and theorizing the transcendent persona as a rhetorical strategy with inherent qualities that allow for communicating atypical ways of interacting and behaving. Next, we briefly lay out the historical context in which Earhart utilized a transcendent persona, focusing on the “modern attitude” that accompanied the popularization of aviation during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and Europe. Then, we outline how Earhart’s transcendent persona in *The Fun of It* functioned to help her create an influential vision of what contemporary scholars might call feminine gender performativity that stood in contrast to established understandings.

Finally, we discuss the transcendent persona as a rhetorical resource with enduring, essential qualities (apart from Earhart and her specific claims and gender

performance), and highlight implications of our theoretical findings for scholars of persuasion and social change, religious communication, and communication history.

Literature review

In this section, a review of the existing scholarship on persona and transcendence will offer a point of comparison and the ground upon which to begin explicating a theory of the transcendent persona. Scholars of communication have long been interested in the discursive power of transcendent appeals. Generally, “transcendence” has been characterized as an argumentative *topoi* used to overcome disagreements and justify arguments from a higher plane of reasoning. Patton (1977), for example, explained that an appeal to transcendence “always involves the idea of becoming, of moving from one set of circumstances to another” in the realm of the symbolic (p. 249). Correspondingly, Burke (1937/1984) framed transcendence as a central mode of communication that allows rhetors to overcome existing hierarchies. By linking established ideas to new motives emerging from broader and/or different contexts, transcendence can function as a bridging device that fosters understanding among those with distinct experiences and interests. Politicians such as former presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Franklin D. Roosevelt have utilized transcendent rhetoric to bring the nation’s citizens together and frame dichotomizing issues in a new, expansive light (Brummett, 1981; Daughton, 1993; Goldzwig, 2003; Jordan, 2003). Olson (1989) described Reagan’s attempt to transcend conflict by eclipsing the differences between memories of the Holocaust and memorializing the Holocaust under a broader dichotomy of “remembering” in general. In this dichotomy, the major differences are between remembering and forgetting, rather than between the different ways in which an event might be recollected (p. 136). These transcendent appeals were enacted by those in powerful leadership positions, but such appeals have also been successfully appropriated by those in disenfranchised subject positions. For instance, Lucretia Coffin Mott and other early women’s rights activists grounded their arguments for woman suffrage in transcendent appeals about the “inner light” of all humanity, strategically categorizing men and women together as humans, and thus positioning them as hierarchical equivalents (Carlson, 1992). In the right circumstances, creating an appeal to transcendence in an argument can, for instance, transform the act of giving money to a beggar into the fulfillment of a moral obligation or, as Brummett (1982) observed, recharacterize the “sin” of shopping as an act of patriotism (p. 549).

In discourses such as Amelia Earhart’s (1932/2006) *The Fun of It*, however, we find that it is the persona rather than the argument itself that transcends the situation and reveals an alternative perspective. A rhetor’s persona is a constructed character, “the created personality put forth in the act of communication” (Gibson, 1969, p. xi). Originally a Latin term for masks used in ancient theatrical productions, the concept of a persona emerged as the voice rhetors employ to represent the self, or, as Booth (1961) has termed it, the “second self.” Sometimes rhetors adopt personae that allow them to take the form of a cultural archetype, drawing from literature, myth, or history and facilitating relationships with audiences through

this symbolism. For instance, Ware and Linkugel (1982) found that Marcus Garvey adopted the persona of a Black Moses when he communicated with Harlem residents who were awaiting someone to deliver them from their struggles. Beyond the Black Moses persona, corresponding research has illustrated a number of different types of personae such as “priestly,” “republican charisma,” “pastoral,” and “prophetic,” the latter a persona that Angelina Grimké used to establish credibility for herself as a speaker at an 1838 antislavery convention (Browne, 1990; Campbell, 1989, pp. 28–33; Hogan & Williams, 2001; Lessl, 1989). According to Cherry (1988), a rhetor’s persona “is most fruitfully approached as part of the larger question of how writers define and portray rhetorical situations in the text they produce” (p. 263). In this sense, each persona is intertwined with the context in which it was created and studies about the performance of specific personae provide an important point of departure for scholarship on historically situated communication and social change.

Ware and Linkugel (1982) discussed transcendence and persona in a specific combination of critical orientation that they labeled “transcendent formism,” which is targeted at instances when a rhetor adopts an archetypal persona and, by doing so, transcends the material world for the myths grounding that archetype. In such cases, transcendence occurs because the rhetor draws from a preexisting “transcendent myth,” as both Rushing (1985) and Burkholder (1989) have called it. Therein, the rhetor’s credibility is derived from long-established narrative values. By contrast, we argue that the proposed transcendent persona does not morph into preexisting forms depending on the narrative or archetype at hand. The transcendent persona emerges out of the status quo as something unusual, yet not so unusual that audiences struggle to identify with its speaker. As we lay out concretely in the next section, the transcendent persona contributes an alternative voice into the public sphere of ideas and, because of the unique perspective it offers, is ingrained with the potential to inspire rhetorical and societal transformation.

A theory of the transcendent persona

The theory of the transcendent persona is grounded in tenets of performative and constitutive language, specifically the idea that discourse can act (Austin, 1962; Foucault, 1969/2002) and create material opportunities and limitations for discursive subjects (Charland, 1987). The example we offer as a representative anecdote of the transcendent persona involves the performance of an unconventional feminine gender subjectivity. Butler (1990) argued that subject positions—in particular gendered subject positions—are performances of cultural values that are naturalized through discursive repetition. With the transcendent persona, rhetors utilize an unconventional vocabulary to describe the world and their positions therein. As others begin to utilize this vocabulary, the once-unconventional performance of subjectivity becomes a resource that others can more easily integrate into their own vocabularies. This process occurs within the confines of the historical, sociocultural situation in which the persona is communicated. Thus, there is no one universal way to perform a transcendent persona as its persuasive force relies on the symbolic

appropriation of discursively available resources.

Beyond this understanding of the transcendent persona as performative and contextually grounded, the remaining qualities of the transcendent persona are threefold. First, the transcendent persona draws from a rhetor's experience of having surpassed boundaries, be they material, cultural, or spiritual. Often this involves being the "first" or the "only" person to have accomplished something (e.g., the first woman to solo the Atlantic Ocean in an airplane or the first African-American man to be nominated for president of the United States). In a number of these situations, the ability to position one's self as a "first" or "only" depends on initially being situated in a power-down hierarchical position (e.g., not male, not White, not Christian, not heterosexual, not American, etc.). Thus, the strategy involves an inversion of power where the previously disenfranchised becomes revered for having triumphed over disenfranchisement. But rhetors can also build a transcendent persona from experiences that are impossible to prove empirically (e.g., speaking with the dead or translating spiritual messages), and therefore may not trade so obviously in the inversion of hierarchical positioning.

No matter the specifics of the boundary-surpassing experience—real or imagined, celebrated or suffered—the rhetor speaks from the position of having done that which others assumed was impossible, thus establishing credibility by proving wrong basic assumptions about the world. Rhetors' discussions of the boundary-breaking accomplishments that distinguish them from others play into what Burke (1969) labeled the "mystery" of social hierarchy. He argued that the separation of classes or castes in a civilization depends on the "pageantry of social distinctions" that dress and thereby mystify those with power and a voice (p. 122). In this way, the transcendent experience works to mystify the rhetor for audiences and grants the rhetor's perspective special play in shaping the ways of the ordinary world.

Second, the transcendent persona's persuasive force hinges on a rhetor's ability to balance distance from audiences—the mystery—with similarities to them—identification. This balance can be achieved by demonstrating that a rhetor (a) has many things in common with audiences, (b) is not above discussing mundane situations and concerns, (c) appears to be operating within the realm of the normative, and/or (d) is building from ideas that correspond with societal developments for which audiences can derive their own experiential evidence. These appeals demonstrate that a rhetor is consubstantial with audiences (Burke, 1969) in that the rhetor has established a sense of what Cheney (1983) called identification through common ground. As Rorty (1989) explained, the widespread acceptance of any novel language game depends on an appeal to the common or familiar, which then functions as a foundation for the introduction of new vocabularies. In this way, the persona's discursive transcendence is limited because it is forged from the realm of the acceptable. It is only when rhetors balance separation from audiences with identification to them that the transcendent persona functions to buttress their discursive selves, thus framing them as relatable yet respectable leaders, leaders who offer others legitimate (even if unfamiliar) tools for living in society.

Third, the transcendent persona communicates an alternative vision of society, one that the rhetor has “seen” through the perspective of a boundary-breaking experience. In this sense, to draw from the transcendent persona is to highlight the visual landscape of a situation, thereby helping audiences glimpse what the rhetor has surveyed during extraordinary exploits. The rhetor’s vision of society and the subject positions made available by that vision function as the tool box from which audiences can draw to begin communicating and acting in transformative ways. The vision a rhetor puts forth contains an alternative vocabulary and/or reasoning for explaining relationships in the world and thus for enabling historically situated individuals to change how they communicate their identities and expectations. Thus, in the most basic respect, the transcendent persona establishes a sense of the rhetor’s separateness from audiences, in combination with appeals to the familiar, in order to help individuals visualize unconventional vocabularies for describing the world and their subjectivities; and all of this is situated within the contingencies of a rhetor’s social location and historical context.

Historical context: Modern progress and opportunities for women in aviation

Earhart published *The Fun of It* from a historical context (the early 20th-century United States) that was framed by technological advances, modernization, and appeals to consumerism, as well as overt sex, race, and class discrimination. Aviation technology was introduced to the world when Orville Wright piloted the first powered airplane in 1903 while his brother Wilbur looked on. The Wright brothers’ subsequent flying demonstrations throughout the United States and Europe created a frenzy of public attention. Historian Wohl (1993) explained the symbolic role that aviation played for early 20th-century audiences, arguing that “the flying machine was interpreted as a confirmation that the Western peoples had subjugated nature to their will and intelligence, and hence as a promise, even a guarantee, of greater victories to come” (p. 106). Herein, Wohl identified the colonial and gendered discourses of this era (e.g., the taming of non-Western people and of nature, which was repeatedly gendered as feminine; de Beauvoir, 1949/1989; Kolodny, 1975), discourses that functioned to naturalize U.S. supremacy and subordinate women, immigrants, and minorities. By defying the laws of gravity, aviation gave rise to widespread beliefs that White, male American society was progressing into something unbeatable, something faster, stronger, and ultimately better than anyone could have previously imagined.

his “winged gospel,” which was prevalent in both the United States and Europe, preached that flight would usher in “a wondrous era of peace and harmony, of culture and prosperity” (Corn, 1983, p. xiii). Such utopian descriptors may have worked to downplay the roles that airplanes and fighter pilots would inevitably occupy in battles to reign supreme. During World War I, aviators became “knights of the air,” heroes who held on to their celebrity status into the postwar years when they were featured in a number of successful Hollywood films. In 1927, Charles Lindbergh became the first person to fly the Atlantic solo, and the “Lindbergh Boom” following his achievement solidified the public obsession with air travel (Ward, 1958). Upon

completing her first record-breaking feat in 1928 as the first female passenger on a transatlantic flight, the press situated Earhart as Lindbergh's female counterpart, a "Lady Lindy" who looked as if she could be his sister with her long, lean body and pale, freckled skin. Titled the hero and heroine of the skies, Lindbergh and Earhart became media icons, their whiteness and heterosexuality (i.e., their normativity) repeatedly fetishized by the media and then naturalized as a sign of their modernity. Before long their photographs became visual ideographs (Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Finnegan, 2001; Palczewski, 2005) for the "modern attitude" celebrating technological progress and American exceptionalism.

But the public's excitement about aviation did not translate into a willingness among individuals to fly, nor did it necessarily change their personal orientations to the world. Aviation may have been an entrepreneur's dream as it was the stuff of exciting newspaper articles, big-screen storylines, and poetic stanzas, but most lay people could not envision themselves feeling at home in a cockpit or passenger seat. Many people viewed flying as dangerous, an activity reserved for "birdmen" with extraordinary strength and courage (Corn, 1979). In this respect, Lindbergh, Earhart, and other aviators may have seemed too mysterious and otherworldly to dictate ordinary people's actions.

To counter this pervasive aversion to flying, those in commercial aviation began to recruit women aviators to sell flying to the mainstream public. One such saleswoman, aviator, and winner of the 1929 U.S. National Women's Air Derby, Louise Thaden, explained "nothing impresses the safety of aviation on the public quite so much as to see a woman flying an airplane" (Debnam, 1932, p. 11). That is, if women, known for their delicate bodies, emotional dispositions, and preoccupations with commonplace tasks (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and caring for others), could fly, then people would realize that anyone, and especially any man, could fly. Corn (1979) noted that airline owners' decision to frame women as subordinate in order to ignite ticket sales reiterated stereotypes about the "fairer" sex and reified their power-down position in society, but the strategy also served to open the doors of aviation to women (p. 560). Although many male pilots continued to resist women's presence on the runway, citing their "imbalance" during menstruation and their lack of physical and emotional fortitude, courageous female pilots such as Thaden and Earhart headed skyward and encouraged others to follow their lead (Earhart, 1935).

In Earhart's case, she found herself swept up into the aerial age while employed as a settlement house worker and "hanging around" airfields during her spare hours to see about all the surrounding fuss. She became eager to experience piloting's freedoms for herself and, like many of her fellow modern idealists, convinced that aviation was an indication of better things to come, especially for women. In aviation, Earhart saw an opportunity for women to prove themselves capable of more than what tradition laid out for them. Historian Ware (1994) explained that Earhart "truly believed that if women proved themselves competent in aviation, and by extension in all aspects of modern life, prejudices would fade and barriers would fall" (p. 25). In this respect, her reasoning was at odds with the airline's deployment of gender

subordination to sell airline tickets to the American public. Earhart recognized and at times even reiterated the airlines' depiction of women as subordinate to men, but she hoped to leave that logic behind once women had the chance to prove themselves in the skies. Soon communication about her own successes heralded "the great age of the aviatrix" in the 1930s when, as Earhart's husband George Palmer Putnam (1935) explained: "We just can't travel without tripping over women pilots . . . I don't know the exact number, but somehow or other they crop up all over the country" (p. 333). These "heroines of modern progress" signaled a changing society (Adams & Foster, 1913), one that Earhart claimed to have witnessed from the skies and was eager to illustrate for the lay public in *The Fun of It*.

The transcendent persona in *The Fun of It*

Having provided an overview of Earhart's historical positioning, we now offer a general description of *The Fun of It* and then an analysis of the book guided by the theory of the transcendent persona. Earhart wrote the majority of the book before she left for her solo transatlantic flight in 1932, and then wrote the last "stop-press" chapter immediately after landing and wired it to her publisher from abroad (Book Notes, 1932, p. 16). Partly autobiography, partly history of aviation, and partly instruction manual, the 218-page manuscript included 17 short chapters focusing on Earhart's childhood and path to becoming a pilot, her love of "vagabonding" in the air, her predictions for future air travel and women's role therein, and, most importantly, her solo transatlantic "hop." Her unconventional portrayal of feminine gender performance and society garnered rhetorical force via the theoretical elements of the transcendent persona: (a) drawing from boundary-breaking exploits to establish respect and mystery, (b) attention to identification and the performance of normalcy, and (c) illustration of an alternative vision of society.

Breaking boundaries and creating mystery

Prior to Earhart's 1932 flight, no woman had successfully flown over the Atlantic Ocean by herself, and many people assumed a woman was incapable of completing such a dangerous task. Earhart's description of her accomplishments in *The Fun of It* worked to reframe audiences' world views and position her as a cultural leader. In the first half of her book, Earhart warned readers, "if you ever figure in any unusual exploit, be it a flight, a voyage in a small boat, or, say, a channel swim . . . 'There's a publisher close behind you who is treading on your heels.'" She positioned herself principally as one who had experienced an "unusual exploit" (p. 87) and as one who was aware of the potential for monetary gain in such accomplishments. There and elsewhere Earhart communicated from the position of having surpassed boundaries of space and time, as well as boundaries of gender and tradition. Her descriptions of boundary-breaking feats drew attention to what she had accomplished and others had not. For instance, she described flying over the Atlantic and doing so rapidly when "probably few people realize fully what goes on behind the scenes of any major expedition" (p. 60). Later she recalled piloting airplanes on extraordinarily treacherous voyages. She often used confident, first-person language, perhaps to liken herself to traditionally masculine

adventurers, and noting that in one case, “I made the journey to the coast via the northern mail route where no autogiros [sic] had ever been before” (p. 136). At another point, Earhart recalled breaking so many records that she was often not aware she broke them until after the fact. For example, she explained, “I later found that [my flight] marked the first solo trip a woman had made from the Atlantic to the Pacific and back again” (p. 89). Earhart’s presentation of herself as a boundary breaker garnered her persona a degree of mystery and framed her as someone to be respected and one who possessed privileged knowledge that situated her apart from audiences.

Her writing style often reiterated her position as someone speaking from a separate, almost otherworldly plane by emphasizing the fantastical and ideal. She peppered her pages with whimsical illustrations of her flying experiences through clouds like “fantastic gobs of mashed potatoes” (p. 20) and locations where “colors stand out and the shades of the earth, unseen from below, form an endless magic carpet” (p. 46). Of her recent venture over the Atlantic, she recalled: “As daylight dawned, I found myself between two layers of clouds, the first very high, probably twenty thousand feet, the lower ones little fluffy white clouds near the water. This was the first sight of the sea in daylight” (p. 216). Not only did these beautiful passages highlight the amazing nature of Earhart’s feats but, as both Jordan (2003) and Daughton (1993) have demonstrated, this type of romantic language worked to excite the imagination and persuasively introduce audiences to unfamiliar ideas. Readers of *The Fun of It* were frequently treated to descriptions of a world with which they had little to no first-hand experience and thus could only access through Earhart’s rhetoric.

Creating identification and highlighting normalcy

Earhart balanced appeals highlighting her separation from audiences with appeals demonstrating her similarities to them, thus providing evidence of her normalcy and helping audiences identify with her. She demonstrated she had something in common with her reading audiences by comparing life “in the air” to life “on the ground,” maintaining that both may “depend on a split second” and thus required preparation (p. 36). Connections between the new and the familiar continued as she utilized an array of analogies, synonyms, and similes to explain the experience of flying. For instance, she noted that “the descent of the plane is much less noticeable than the dropping of the modern elevator. It comes down in a gentle glide at an angle often much less than that of a country hill” (p. 42). Here, Earhart presumed a limited subject position for her readers as only those who visited urban centers had access to elevators. But those readers who had not yet ridden in an elevator were at least familiar with the slight dip of a hill in the countryside and could then imagine the feeling of descending from air to land in a plane. Later, Earhart explained that flying in a fast plane felt like being “in a canoe which rocks lazily on wavelets” (p. 45). Familiar forms of transportation such as boats, trains, and the omnipresent automobile frequented *The Fun of It*, offering points of comparison and ties to the well known.

Earhart also demonstrated that she had much in common with audiences by showing humility in the face of her achievements and highlighting her feelings at different moments in her career. At one point, Earhart admitted she did not understand why her initial role as a passenger in a flight over the Atlantic Ocean garnered so much attention or “why such an expedition should fit one to go into a totally different occupation than any one has ever taken part in before” (p. 98), especially when she simply flew for “the fun of it.” In these claims and others, she revealed her unwillingness to buy into her own hype, which allowed audiences to see that she did not view herself as worthy of undue praise or have delusions of grandeur. And unlike figures who hoped to be seen by others as unerring, Earhart was willing to discuss her inner turmoil, confusion, and disappointments. She recalled that she felt self-conscious in the presence of other, well-known pilots, nervous upon learning to fly an auto gyro, and silly after landing her airplane poorly. Earhart’s feelings were something to which readers situated in a variety of different social locations could relate.

Beyond revealing herself as fraught with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, Earhart worked to identify with readers by devoting sections of her book to everyday, pragmatic concerns, and thus appearing to operate within the realm of the normative. To those individuals who wanted to know what she ate while in the air, she recalled that she would often “puncture and sip” a can of tomato juice through a straw (p. 217), snack on malted milk tablets and chocolate, or, if she was not flying alone, eat some cold scrambled eggs and nibble on oranges (p. 72). Sometimes these discussions of the seemingly mundane aspects of life in the skies would focus on fellow female aviators like Louise Thaden, who managed to fly only a few weeks after giving birth to her son and, thereafter, frequently brought him with her during flights. Earhart often mentioned how women in aviation managed traditionally feminine concerns (e.g., their wardrobe; the lunch menu; caring for young children) in an effort to identify with female readers and help them visualize adopting alternative subject positions on a practical level. Earhart’s transcendent persona was, in this sense, circumscribed by and tied to existing norms of feminine gender performance. The mystery of her unusual exploits was tempered and grounded by her occasional acceptance of the normative portrayal of White, middle-to-upper-class women as guardians of hearth and home.

And although she might have appealed to a more diverse audience by discussing her interactions with female pilots of color such as Bessie Coleman (Haynsworth & Toomey, 2000), Earhart never explicitly mentioned issues of race and only touched on issues of class in her book, perhaps because she feared that doing so would characterize her as extremist and therefore decidedly abnormal. By largely avoiding these issues, she drew from the strategic “transparency” of her own whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Rockler, 2006) to frame herself as commonplace and familiar. Her position as “racially privileged and gender subordinated” (Rowe, 2000, p. 64) enabled her to perform normalcy more easily than, for instance, women of color. Thus, Earhart escaped into the rhetoric of color-blindness that has a long, troubled history of pervading feminist ideology in the United States.

Finally, Earhart encouraged audiences to identify with her by referencing societal developments for which they could derive their own experiential evidence. One of her major arguments in *The Fun of It* was that aviation technology would become increasingly common in the near future (and that this societal change would be intertwined with progress toward achieving gender equality). To further her contention about aviation technology in particular, Earhart included a laundry list of the many ways that air travel had already improved in the few short decades of its existence, a list that would ring true for air-minded readers: Motors rarely “conked” as they had in the past, piloting pedagogy had advanced, and planes were easier for aviators to handle. Problems that still presented themselves, such as “the most routine blunder” of selling the same seat to two passengers, Earhart framed as comparatively banal and easily overcome (p. 115). Here, her discourse of progress and modernity overlapped explicitly with the capitalist and consumerist structure in which she operated. She reasoned that if aviation continued on this path, then “planes will doubtless become as reliable as older forms of transportation” (p. 43) and, correspondingly, those invested in air travel would see unending financial returns. The evolution of these older transportation modes provided Earhart with evidence of aviation’s eventual integration into mainstream, consumerist society. As many readers knew well, the automobile, for example, was at one time unreliable, difficult to operate, and too expensive for most families to purchase. But now, Earhart noted, a reader’s automobile “may be among the [then] 20,000 cars going to a football game, say, not one of which will experience a single mechanical failure on the way” (p. 29). She encouraged readers to draw from their reserves of experiential knowledge to check her claims and then to come to the same conclusions she had about the future of aviation. That their sense of technological development matched hers would have further positioned Earhart as a person with whom lay people and capitalists alike could identify.

Envisioning a new society

The transcendent persona’s balance of boundary-breaking mystery with identification and normative performance serves as a buttress for the rhetor’s viewpoint. The transcendent persona privileges the visual landscape of a situation, offering an alternative perspective on acceptable ways of communicating and behaving in that situation. In *The Fun of It*, Earhart discussed the advantaged sight she gained from the vantage point of her plane where “there is a different world than any encountered elsewhere” (p. 74). She continued to emphasize the special nature of her vision by explaining that everything seemed clearer when looking down at it from the sky; what seemed far revealed itself as near, people who looked different appeared similar: “[E]ighty miles an hour at several thousand feet is substantially the same as one hundred and forty, so far as the sensation of sight and feeling are concerned” (p. 41), and “distances shrink and cities and towns miles apart look as if they were neighboring stops on the Toonerville Trolley line” (p. 135). *The Fun of It* repeatedly demonstrated that the speed and height Earhart achieved while breaking boundaries propelled her onto a higher plane of vision. In this way, she implied that audiences may not immediately see the truth in her claims but, because her claims were derived from the enlightened perspective of having done what once was thought impossible

and because she remained grounded in the day-to-day happenings and beliefs of the normative world, they should see her interpretation of the world as trustworthy and accurate.

To help audiences evaluate the visual landscape she offered them, Earhart frequently drew from a comic frame, thus providing audiences with a perspective by incongruity through which to consider her claims. Burke (1954) explained that the comic frame operates by highlighting the incongruent elements of a situation and offering a lens of “maximum consciousness” to audiences. The vantage point of the comic frame enables onlookers to see things from several different angles, lightheartedly noting the bigger picture with all of its faults and inconsistencies (p. 41). At one point, Earhart mentioned that people often confused her with Gertrude Ederle or Ruth Elder and congratulated her for their achievements: swimming the English Channel and copiloting a flight that almost made it across the Atlantic Ocean, respectively. Earhart made light of the situation, exclaiming, “I have always felt that the three of us were somewhat thoughtless to have names all beginning with E” (p. 100), a move that accented the lack of societal differentiation among high-achieving women while still offering a charitable read of society at large. The argument underlying Earhart’s “E” tale was that, while most people might not intend it to be so, society as it was at the time did not offer women the same opportunities for recognition and success that it offered men. Here and elsewhere, Earhart tapped into Duncan’s (1962) astute observation that “under the guise of play, our most sacred values are opened to reason” (p. 398).

Correspondingly, the comic frame helped Earhart encourage audiences to review and reevaluate their existing beliefs about social acceptability. In *The Fun of It*, she played with spelling and word pronunciation in order to help intolerant readers see themselves and their ideas in a critical light. For example, in taking up the cause of immigrant rights in the United States, Earhart maintained that “half the trouble caused by the so-called ‘furiners’ is only because no one has taken the trouble to interpret to them the best these United States stands for” (p. 56). In reading this passage, audiences were positioned to picture themselves and their impassioned mispronunciations and realize how inane they looked, especially when Earhart placed some of the burden of responsibility on them for failing to help immigrants transition into the country. She encouraged native-born readers to reassess their own judgments and thus reconsider their discriminatory beliefs and actions, all without attacking them overtly or putting them on the defensive, but also while situating herself firmly in the position of a White, middle-to-upper-class woman and thus in the realm of the normal.

But the societal value Earhart most hoped to “open to reason” was that women were valuable only for what they contributed to others (rather than in and of themselves). Her transcendent persona in *The Fun of It* buttressed an alternative vision of society, complete with discursive tools for helping audiences reconsider existing expectations for women. In an environment where the ideal woman was often described as “unselfish,” “thoughtful,” “obedient,” and “humble” (words that are relational and other-oriented) (Calls submission the lot of women, 1925, p. 20), Earhart framed herself as passionate, motivated, interested, and determined (words

that are not necessarily relational and are thick with agency). She described her exploits as “adventures,” a term most frequently associated with the experiences of men and boys (e.g., Mark Twain’s (1885) celebrated novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), labeled her mishaps “experiments,” a word often linked with the traditionally male-dominated world of scientific research, and communicated the value in trusting one’s own feelings and doing something simply because it was a “joy” and a “pleasure.” Condit (1990) explained that once a rhetor introduces new views, vocabularies, or associations into the public sphere, other people will find those ideas easier to draw from “because supporting practices and warrants from the arguments are already in place” (p. 7). In Earhart’s case, the active terms she used to describe her life, and the justifications she offered for using those terms, communicated an alternative mode of feminine gender performativity. Earhart’s portrayal of an alternative feminine gender performance featured women who were not defined by serving others and who were involved in first-hand interactions with the world. When these values were communicated in *The Fun of It* and then repeated by other communicators, Earhart’s brand of White, middle-to-upper-class feminine gender performance and its surrounding terms and justifications became resources from which others could potentially draw to define themselves. The combination of mystery and normalcy in Earhart’s persona would have made it easier for audiences to consider her discursive choices legitimate.

Just as influential as what Earhart did include in her societal vision and accompanying discursive toolkit, was what she did not include. In these pages, there was no space devoted to the traditional, self-sacrificing woman, and therefore readers were led to believe that Earhart must not have seen this particular form of feminine gender performance from her views on high. Neither did Earhart discuss “flappers” who rejected women’s traditional dress and conduct but were known more for carousing than for their professional aspirations (Kitch, 2001), which was not the brand of “fun” Earhart had in mind. By contrast, the women Earhart described in *The Fun of It* were like herself, professionally motivated, gutsy, enthusiastic, and interesting in their own right. The ways she described them (and herself) modeled values that the society she envisioned would celebrate in feminine gender performances. For instance, Earhart devoted several pages to discussing the achievements of Anne Morrow Lindbergh for her piloting, navigation skills, and all-around good sense. Morrow Lindbergh was known by the public primarily for her connections to her record-breaking and notoriously controlling husband Charles Lindbergh, as well as for her role as grieving mother to the “Lindbergh baby” who was murdered in a kidnapping just a month before *The Fun of It* was released to the public (Ahlgren & Monier, 1993), but Earhart discussed her as an individual contributor to the success of aviation and a self-motivated, self directed personality. She explained that Morrow Lindbergh “does what she wishes. She reads, writes, and drives her own car. She slips out of the house when she pleases and goes where she pleases” (p. 171). Although she was the wife of a world-famous man, she still valued herself as an individual and followed her own interests and dreams, even if she had to “slip out” of her everyday life to do so—a point that demonstrated the hardships inherent in taking on new or alternative subject positions. In Earhart’s book, Morrow Lindbergh’s actions—her balance of traditional feminine roles (e.g., wife and mother) with attempts to “do what she wishes”—functioned as

an illustration of an emerging mode of privileged feminist subjectivity.

Beyond Morrow Lindbergh, Earhart celebrated the achievements of other adventurous women including Raymonde de Laroche (the first woman to earn a piloting license), Harriet Quimby (the first woman to attempt a long-distance aviation stunt), and Laura Ingalls (stunt flyer and record holder for most consecutive loops and barrel rolls in the air)—all of whom were in positions to make use of the transcendent persona in their own right (Lebow, 2002). These women may not have been housewives or stay-at-home mothers, but Earhart hinted at the cultural signs that marked them as traditionally feminine (e.g., Laura Ingalls was “diminutive,” p. 179; and Anne Morrow Lindbergh had “large blue eyes which look out from long lashes,” p. 170). In this way, she assured readers that she was setting out criteria for feminine (rather than androgynous or masculine) gender performativity, and more specifically White, middle-to-upper-class feminine gender performance by highlighting her examples’ small statures, light eyes, and privileged social class. Earhart communicated all of this even as she positioned traditional markers of femininity in a critical light. In this way, she seemed to be drawing upon the idea that attempts to inspire social transformation tend to be most successful when they avoid a complete break from existing, mainstream values (Rorty, 1989).

But despite Earhart’s apparent support for some aspects of existing gender expectations, her discourse ostentatiously avoided narratives that involved women giving up on a personal dream for the sake of someone else or holding back because of fear. Earhart advocated following one’s interests, even if it was not clear where those interests would lead, for “the knowledge or contacts somehow or other will be found useful sometime” (p. 57). She encouraged women to try new things and thus enact a new performance of their identity, not because it would make them better wives, mothers, or hostesses but because it was important for them to interact with their surroundings, to feel what it was like to test themselves in a variety of ways, and be in the world. They may not have been in a position to see where their exploits would take them, as they had not achieved Earhart’s heights, but Earhart assured them (through both her achievements and her performance of normalcy) that they would not regret following their passions and, in the process, transforming into better versions of themselves. Ultimately, Earhart’s vision of a society where privileged women were valued for their own adventures included discursive tools (e.g., a vocabulary and rationale to support an alternative performance of femininity and gender) to allow for individual and eventually societal change.

Implications

In a time when the achievement of “firsts,” “bests,” and “mosts” are frequent headlines, it seems fitting to theorize how these boundary-breaking titles can function as symbolic capital in persuasive campaigns toward societal transformation. The theoretical elements of the transcendent persona identified here offer scholars insight into discursive variables and opportunities for promoting social change. As Earhart’s *The Fun of It* demonstrated, the act of having exceeded beyond widely accepted

boundaries, and balancing the resulting sense of mystery with identification, can function to situate a rhetor in a position to illustrate and promote alternative modes of subjectivity. Whereas a rhetor who draws from a transcendent myth to communicate will recreate existing archetypal relationships with audiences, a rhetor utilizing the proposed transcendent persona offers audiences alternative and potentially new modes of communicating and behaving in society. The former garners rhetorical force from the realm of literature, art, and history, while the latter garners rhetorical force from the realm of the newly possible. Upon being exposed to ideas communicated through a transcendent persona, audiences can potentially draw from the vision that the rhetor has offered to reframe themselves and their potential, a process that may inspire a larger societal-level transformation in cultural expectations. Although the level of discursive transcendence a rhetor can achieve through the use of the transcendent persona is limited, especially because the performance of normalcy is one of its key theoretical elements, even small shifts in societal communication patterns will inevitably alter how individuals function in society.

Although Earhart's use of the transcendent persona may make this rhetorical strategy appear unusual or far-fetched, the transcendent persona is an enduring rhetorical resource that does not require a communicator's literal transcendence. A rhetor utilizing the transcendent persona gains perspective and credibility by drawing from an experience that proves wrong (or appears to prove wrong) basic assumptions about the world and relationships within it. In this way, opportunities for communication via the transcendent persona are common. Beyond the many examples listed in *The Fun of It* of individuals who were positioned to speak using a transcendent persona (e.g., Raymonde de Laroche, Harriet Quimby, and Laura Ingalls), recent examples of public figures in the position to draw from the transcendent persona include President Barack Obama as the first African-American U.S. president, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton as the first woman in recent U.S. history to make a viable run for the White House, and swimmer Michael Phelps as the first person to earn eight gold medals in one Olympic Games. In the latter case, Phelps's recent drug use, which was covered widely by the media (York, 2009), could ultimately work in his favor to foster in audiences a sense of his normalcy, at least to the extent that it demonstrates he is imperfect. Senator Clinton, on the other hand, has repeatedly been criticized for failing to balance her boundary-breaking achievements with appeals that would help audiences identify with her (e.g., Sullivan, 2005). Thus it may be more difficult for her to cultivate a transcendent persona than it would be for, say, the seemingly down-to-earth President Obama (Andelman, 2007; Vecsey, 2009). Striking the appropriate balance of mystery and similarity is an element of the transcendent persona that deserves further attention and that would be illuminated by research on historical figures who successfully (or unsuccessfully) utilized the transcendent persona to buttress an alternative vision of society. Such research should interrogate the differences between cases where rhetors use a transcendent persona driven by an inversion of power (e.g., moving from a subordinated position to a position of reverence for having overcome subordination) and in cases where rhetors use a transcendent persona and have always been positioned largely in the realm of the normative (e.g., White, male, middle-to-upper class).

Political leaders and Olympic athletes are obvious examples of individuals who could make use of the transcendent persona. But anyone could utilize a transcendent persona, regardless of the empirical nature of their accomplishment, as long as they make persuasive cases for having done (or experienced) something that defies common notions about what is possible. That the transcendent persona could be utilized by those who have claimed to defy religious or spiritual boundaries extends the implications of this study in compelling ways. The transcendent persona is a discursive resource that may help to explain the emergence of spiritual leaders representing diverse religious communities (e.g., Joseph Smith, Jr. founding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the 19th century; Nichiren Daishonin founding Nichiren Buddhism in the 13th century). Also, although Earhart's transcendent persona was intertwined with the comic frame, the transcendent persona could easily work in combination with other communicative frames such as that of the religious and the sublime, which function to expand audiences' spiritual sight. In this way, the transcendent persona offers scholars of religious communication a point of departure for studying spiritual leadership and religious transformation.

Additionally, the transcendent persona offers scholars of communication history tools for evaluating historical attempts to alter societal expectations. All communicators are, to a certain extent, historically situated, culturally contained, and socially accountable, and some are able to negotiate those variables to their advantage. Communicators who draw from the transcendent persona are also those who realize how they are viewed by others in society, balance and manage that perception, and then transfer the synergy of their historical positioning to the realm of the symbolic. In this way, historically situated analyses of the transcendent persona can both shed light on how change agents invite social transformation and allow for increasingly accurate predictions concerning future communicative endeavors. Future exploration of the transcendent persona as it functions in different historical and situational contexts should continue to offer insight into its application, particularly its role in introducing new lines of thinking into seemingly stagnant discursive landscapes.

Finally, this study demonstrates the value in theorizing how rhetorical constructs that have been explicated in isolation (e.g., transcendence, persona) might function in tandem. Such a theoretical project is reminiscent of similar moves in experimental research where exploring more than one independent variable at a time (i.e., interaction designs) became popular (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). These studies resulted in increasingly representative understandings of communication in action. Such work may be the future of rhetorical theorizing as studies continue to clarify the relationships among discourse, communicative constructs, and social transformation.

Notes

1 Contemporary audiences' focus on Earhart's disappearance, rather than her life work, may be at least temporarily alleviated by two recent motion pictures featuring Earhart and depicting elements of her adventurous and feminist-oriented philosophy

(Barnathan & Levy, 2009; Wait & Nair, 2009).

2 Most recently, *The Fun of It* (Earhart, 1932/2006) was explicitly cited in the motion picture *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* (Barnathan & Levy, 2009), demonstrating the book's continued cultural significance even into the present day.

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