

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Dr. Risa Applegarth received the Junior Research Excellence Award for her work in rhetoric. As an associate professor of English and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, Applegarth focuses on scientific and professional discourse and social movements. She is widely recognized for her scholarship and teaching, with accolades including the Outstanding Book Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication and UNCG's Mary Settle Sharp Award for Teaching Excellence.

TRUTH TO POWER

"My upcoming book will be about youth protest and will include the upsurge of climate activism among youth. Quite a few people have taken umbrage with the challenging nature of young climate activist Greta Thunberg's rhetoric. 'You should be ashamed,' she tells leaders. 'Our house is on fire and you've done nothing.' She uses a lot of condemnatory language that can be hard for audiences to hear.

"Conversely, I've already written about a group of youth who, starting in 1990, connected tens of thousands of young people to support a statue, in Los Alamos, against nuclear war. These teens worked, in a conciliatory manner, with adults who shouted them down at council meetings. Those adults behaved pretty abominably – and were ultimately successful. Civility doesn't always get the job done, and civility doesn't only go one way."

PARKLAND PROTESTS

"I find youth activism around the school shootings issue really inspiring, and my recent research analyzes youth involvement in March for Our Lives protests. I'm frustrated with media coverage framing their activism as success or failure – the idea that elections will show whether they succeeded. As though that will settle whether anything of note has come out of this massive show of support. By listening to what these teens have to say, I hope to demonstrate additional ways their activism matters – from networks they've formed, to speaking, writing, and organizational capacities developed, to engagement with local and state officials and organizations."

WHO TELLS THE STORY?

"My first book was 'Rhetoric in American Anthropology: Gender, Genre, and Science.' Anthropology developed in a colonialist vein, connected to a nineteenth-century desire to control and contain. But by looking at work developed by white women, women of color, Jewish women, and older women who joined the field of anthropology, we see that was not the entirety.

"Women anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict wrote out of different relations with the communities they studied.

Some wrote as insiders, like Zora Neale Hurston or Lakota writer Ella Cara Deloria. They often wrote in experimental forms, resulting in less problematic, more reciprocal approaches.

"There's a lot of discussion in creative nonfiction and many academic disciplines about the line between fact and truth and knowledge and reality. These women researchers were wrestling really early with questions of how representation affects reality and whether the way you write can shape both the perception and reality of the thing you're writing about."

BEING DIFFERENT

"My research considers how people use their bodies to disrupt public space and try to bring attention to different matters – from their clothing and appearance to demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests.

"Our understanding of an issue can be changed by bodies making us think differently. I am inspired by how many of my students came to UNCG because they want to be in diverse classrooms. When we talk about challenging issues – that they do not all have the same prior experiences with, that they do not all agree about – they bring so much openness, energy, and honest, earnest desire to engage and understand one another."

ACT LIKE A PROFESSIONAL

"A feminist perspective on gender, language, and communication is central to everything I do. I've written about the 'The Independent Woman,' a feminist periodical in the 1920s that promoted economic opportunity for women. It focused attention on grooming, appearance, dress – ways to look unassailably professional in order to not have your competence questioned, to not disrupt the tastes and sensibilities of people around you in the workplace.

"Women bore the burden of being seen as having a gender, while men represented themselves as gender-free, merely objective in their tastes and preferences. A lot of advice readers received was about ways to minimize disturbance: 'don't wear heavy scents,' 'don't draw attention to your body in any way.' They had to scrupulously survey their own bodies to ensure no one was ever disturbed by the fact they were female.

"My interest came in part from the lack of change in this area. I help graduate students who are on the job market, and a lot of the advice that circulates is still extremely gendered, heteronormative, racialized, and about having a body no one can object to. That puts all the burden on women, on people of color, and on sexual minorities to make sure everyone else is comfortable in the workplace."

Interview by Mike Harris • Applegarth pictured (center) with leaders from March for Our Lives Greensboro and March for Our Lives North Carolina. Learn more at english.uncg.edu/directory/applegarth

