The recent Occupy Wall Street protests, which began in New York and eventually spread to cities throughout the country, highlight the important role presence can play in social activism. By inhabiting unlikely spaces, individuals are able to draw attention to broader social problems. For groups who feel excluded from political, economic, and other means of power, presence has often served as an effective rhetorical resource. Southern lunch counters, factory floors, the streets of Washington, DC, and town squares throughout the Middle East have all served as sites where individuals’ presence became powerful sources of persuasion. Historically, this has especially been the case for women. From early temperance crusaders who prayed and sang hymns inside taverns to Jane Addams’s residency in Hull House to the Silent Sentinels who stood outside the White House advocating women’s suffrage, women have used their presence to highlight social problems, particularly those negatively impacting other women. Margaret Prior, who became the American Female Moral Reform Society’s (AFMRS) first female missionary in 1837, offers another example of the rhetorical role of presence. By walking through some of the poorest areas of New York City, Prior entered places rarely visited by respectable middle-class women. Her presence in such unlikely places attracted the attention of the residents in these poor neighborhoods and individuals who later read her reports. Moreover, Prior’s presence became an important ethical resource.

Through her presence, which occurred during what tract and benevolent societies commonly referred to as “walks of usefulness,” Prior argued that these neighborhoods and the people living there were worthy of attention and assistance.
In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau conceives of walking around a city as a “pedestrian speech act” in which individuals neglect or highlight certain spaces through the act of walking (98–99). He suggests that the paths individuals choose make statements; in other words, their steps compose, argue, and persuade (104). By walking throughout some of the neediest sections of the city, Prior made a statement: these neighborhoods and their residents were worthy of attention and assistance. Much like the recent Occupy Wall Street protests, Prior’s walks of usefulness highlighted inequitable economic systems in need of reform. In fact, the suffering and dire conditions that Prior and other AFMRS members observed ultimately shifted AFMRS’s focus away from moral reform to the economic plight of antebellum women.

Initially organized to combat immoral sexual behaviors, AFMRS construed its mission broadly, as did its first female missionary. Not only did Prior walk door-to-door in some of the city’s poorest and most sordid neighborhoods distributing tracts and issues of AFMRS’s biweekly periodical, the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, she evangelized, provided counsel, visited the sick, attained assistance for the needy, organized prayer meetings and Sunday schools, helped locate suitable jobs and lodgings for women, confronted libertines, reproved gamblers, and ardently encouraged temperance. Prior documented these efforts in her missionary reports, which were printed in the *Advocate*. Consequently, her words and actions extended far beyond the people she visited. After her death, selections from her reports were compiled and published in the 1843 memoir *Walks of Usefulness, or, Reminiscences of Mrs. Margaret Prior*, thus extending her influence even further.

Driven by the activist revivalism that arose out of the Second Great Awakening in the 1820s and 1830s, countless numbers of women joined benevolent and reform organizations in order to enact their religious convictions. In doing so, they bravely stepped beyond the domestic sphere and expanded their rhetorical influence and boundaries. Today, most of these women remain nameless, and their influence is often overlooked. Even when records from women’s reform and benevolent groups exist, they primarily detail membership, money raised, or the number of tracts distributed, which offer only scant traces of women’s contributions and their modes of persuasion. Prior’s memoir, which was published after her death, reveals her identity and her authorship of numerous unsigned missionary reports published in the *Advocate of Moral Reform* between 1837 and 1842. Hence, by studying Prior’s memoir and missionary reports, we can gain a broader conception of female reformers, their public advocacy, and their rhetorical methods, especially the way women established ethos. At the same time that Prior’s presence helped her attract attention, it also became a source of ethos in the communities she served and among the wider audiences who read about her efforts.

In her discussion of location and discursive authority, Nedra Reynolds claims, “Locating *ethos* in written texts requires attention to the mediation and negotiation
that goes on in the spaces between writers and their location.” This requires us to examine the “rhetorical strategies writers use to locate themselves, their texts, and the particular discursive communities they are mediating between” (333). In the case of Prior’s missionary reports, location was a critical component of her persuasion. Through her walks of usefulness, I argue that Prior exerted an ethos of presence, which undergirded the appeals she made to her different audiences. Prior’s willingness to traverse the seediest sections of the city, call on any person, and address any need demonstrated her faith and commitment to serve and “save” others. Thus, her regular presence became an ethical resource that helped her proselytize, pursue moral reform, and promote temperance in the neighborhoods she visited. Moreover, the authority Prior garnered through her presence in these neighborhoods and her interactions with residents helped her demonstrate the value of her work through AFMRS and reveal the dire economic conditions that existed to individuals who read her missionary reports in the Advocate of Moral Reform.

**AFMRS’s First Female Missionary**

The Advocate was the primary weapon used by AFMRS. Established in 1834 in New York, AFMRS was the first national reform movement organized, led, and comprised solely by women. During the early nineteenth century, private citizens in the city had launched various moral reform initiatives aimed at prostitution and to uphold the seventh scriptural commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Although women had been active in these earlier endeavors, they eventually became frustrated with city and church leaders’ complaisance. Through AFMRS, women took matters into their own hands and ultimately decided that they were better suited to the cause. In particular, they took aim at the double standard that overlooked promiscuous behavior in men while harshly condemning women for the same offense. Their efforts resonated with women in and beyond New York: by 1838, AFMRS had 361 auxiliaries across the country representing 20,000 women; and by 1840, the Advocate had a circulation of 36,200, making it one of the most widely read reform newspapers of the era (Whiteaker 124; Advocate 1840: 82). AFMRS used the paper to create a public forum for women, claim moral authority, publicly censure male philanderers, condemn gendered double standards, and encourage women to take action (Shaver). Reports from the society’s missionaries were a regular feature in the paper.

AFMRS initially dispatched male missionaries to make visits and distribute the Advocate around the city. Female members often accompanied these men, and in 1837, by hiring Prior to act as its first female missionary, AFMRS signaled its belief that women could serve as missionaries on their own. The move to hire female missionaries was also motivated by a desire to expand women’s employment options. From its visits and interactions with prostitutes and impoverished citizens, the AFMRS leadership came to recognize limited economic opportunities as a root
cause of prostitution and other social problems impacting women. In addition to female missionaries, AFMRS hired a female editor for its periodical, female agents to organize auxiliary societies, and female typesetters and bookkeepers, all of which were occupations customarily filled by men (Whiteaker 128).

In 1843, AFMRS expanded its publishing efforts with the publication of Prior’s memoir, *Walks of Usefulness, or, Reminiscences of Mrs. Margaret Prior*, which was compiled by Sarah Ingraham, AFMRS’s corresponding secretary. AFMRS’s decision to compile and publish a memoir indicates both the popularity of Prior’s missionary reports and their perceived rhetorical value. Indeed, the importance of the visits made by Prior and members of the AFMRS Visiting Committee is repeatedly acknowledged in the organization’s annual reports. For instance, the annual report, printed in the June 1, 1840, issue of the *Advocate*, attests:

> To those employed it has been arduous and self-denying, but not without its reward. During the past year, between four and five thousand families have been visited, many temperance pledges obtained, over 80 children gathered into the Sabbath school, and one hundred and fifty respectable seamstresses and domestics provided with places, where a religious influence is exerted over them. The pressing wants of the needy have been relieved to some extent; papers, testaments, bibles, and a large quantity of tracts given to those visited, and some of the seed sown has already sprung up [. . .] there have been reported sixty-three hopeful conversions. Of this number twenty-four have occurred during the last year. (83)

Reports such as this one denote not only the influence Prior and others had on the individuals they visited, but also signal their influence on AFMRS. Clearly, AFMRS’s officers believed that visits by Prior and others carried out an essential part of the organization’s mission. Ingraham’s opening letter in Prior’s memoir also notes that the memoir came about because of several requests, which likely came from AFMRS members and *Advocate* readers. Prior’s 324-page memoir is primarily made up of extracts from missionary reports she compiled from 1837 until her death in 1842.

Prior, who was sixty-four years old and a widow at the time she was hired by AFMRS, seems an odd choice to become the organization’s first female missionary, but she had been active in many of the city’s benevolent causes, including moral reform. Prior had also served as a tract visitor, so she knew the city well. A letter from a friend included in the memoir explains that AFMRS had trouble finding women who were suitable and willing to serve as missionaries, and Prior eventually decided it was her duty to undertake the work (46–47). As a missionary, Prior was required to write reports detailing her actions so extracts could be published in the *Advocate*. Prior admitted that she had written little in many years, and at her advanced age felt unable to write reports suitable for publication. So AFMRS suggested that she ask someone to write for her, and Ingraham explains that “she chose the writer of this memoir as her amanuensis” (Prior 43). Disclosing her role transcribing Prior’s missionary reports, Ingraham describes the dictation and composing process:
Her reports, as given verbally, were briefly narrated, together with her remarks, and then read to her for correction and alteration, so that the statements and sentiments expressed might be entirely her own. She generally came to us with such a variety of incident, that after hearing her through, it was somewhat difficult to begin and end right. She perceived this, and often while we were writing would sit in silent prayer, with her eyes closed, asking the Lord to make the communication she had given fully understood, and what was said about it, the means of doing good. (43)

As an active church member and former tract visitor, Prior and her reports were influenced by religious rituals and evangelical publishing. She would have understood the value of affective narratives and examples. Moreover, AFMRS convinced her that publishing extracts from her reports in the Advocate could “do good”; however, Prior asked that her name be withheld from these reports, and she probably never imagined her reports would become part of a memoir.

Though Prior felt called to the role of missionary, it was not an easy job. In a letter included in her memoir, a member of AFMRS explains, “As a missionary, proclaiming the gospel from house to house, she was wonderfully successful; yet she did not please all—even good people sometimes treated her coolly. Her feelings were often tried by indifference or open opposition, so that she was moved to tears; and her only solace was found in committing the matter to the Lord” (Prior 47). This writer noted that Prior often encouraged herself with the mantra, “No cross, no crown” (49).

Prior’s devotion to this work is illustrated in a story retold by a friend in Prior’s memoir. According to the story, Prior stopped at the house of a fortune teller to drop off some tracts, yet she was distressed by the long line of ladies waiting to have their fortunes read. Prior began encouraging the women to turn away from black magic and look to their own souls to discover their destinies. Her passionate exhortations, which brought some of the women to tears, convinced almost all of them to leave. However, when the fortune teller emerged from his private room to see his customers walking out the door, he became irate and chased after Prior. She managed to escape by a back door that led to an alley. Yet Prior soon halted her getaway when she encountered a group of men gambling in the alley. Again, she seized the opportunity to share the gospel and pass out copies of the Advocate. Even as some of the men accosted her with insults, she continued, aware that others in the group were listening (Prior 55–56). Driven by her religious convictions, Prior was not easily deterred. She traveled wherever she was dispatched and wherever she saw people in need.

**Ethos and Presence**

To reach these different audiences, Prior used various means to establish her ethos. Along with pathos and logos, ethos is one of three modes of persuasion that
Aristotle delineates in his *Rhetoric*, and the one that Aristotle acknowledges is most important. Drawing from Aristotle’s discussion of ethos, Michael Halloran suggests, “In its simplest form, ethos is what we might call the argument for authority, the argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe” (60). Hence, ethos involves a negotiation between a speaker/writer and audience. One of the factors that contributes to ethos is presence; indeed, examinations of ethos either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the significance of presence. For instance, Halloran notes the importance of bringing a good reputation to a rhetorical situation. In most cases, reputations are established in an area where individuals’ actions are associated with their names. In other words, presence is usually a prerequisite for reputation. Indeed, a person may leave a particular place in order to escape a bad reputation.

By stressing the communal nature of ethos, Karen LeFevre similarly acknowledges the value of a person’s presence in a community. “For Aristotle,” she explains, “ethos refers not to the idiosyncrasies of an individual, and not to a personal and private construct such as is often meant by ‘personality’; rather, ethos arises from the relationship between the individual and the community” (45). In Prior’s case, her actions, her reputation, and the relationships she established in the communities she served all contributed to her ethos.

Risa Applegarth’s study of ethos in Mary Austin’s writing shows how place can also become an ethical resource for rhetors by exemplifying their participation, values, and commitment. In this sense, ethos draws “persuasive power from the shared symbolic resonance of such places” (43). With her definition of rhetorical space, Roxanne Mountford similarly argues that rhetorical spaces are not only “the geography of a communicative event,” they may carry cultural and material dimensions as well as “a physical representation of relationships and ideas” (17). Both Applegarth and Mountford acknowledge how a rhetor’s presence in a particular place contributes to the way the rhetor is perceived by his or her audience. Through her ongoing presence in neglected areas of the city and through the descriptions of those areas, these places became an important source of ethos for Prior because they symbolized her commitment to those in need, her Christian beliefs, and her pursuit of moral reform.

Of course, conceiving of some of the poorest neighborhoods in antebellum New York as ethical resources may seem peculiar because these were not locations where power resided—they were neglected and disadvantaged. However, Reynolds shows that rhetors can exert discursive authority from “positions not traditionally considered authoritative” (326). Prisons, insane asylums, brothels, factory floors, porter-houses, and the ramshackle dwellings inhabited by the poorest residents of the city—these were the marginalized locations Prior visited and described in her reports, and in my conception of an ethos of presence, these locations became sources of her authority. Prior inscribed who she was (a good Christian committed
to combatting sin and suffering) by showing where she was (poor neighborhoods, prisons, brothels, and so on) (Reynolds 325). Ultimately, all the elements described in these discussions of ethos—actions, reputation, communal relationships, and the symbolic nature of place—contribute to understanding how Prior successfully exerted ethos from her presence in marginalized locations in New York, and from her position as an older, middle-class woman with little more than a basic education. In the remainder of this essay, I delineate Prior’s ethos of presence by showing the different ways her presence contributed to her actions, reputation, and relationships, and also demonstrated her compassion and Christian beliefs. In particular, I discuss her holistic approach to assistance, her fearlessness and the emboldening influence she had on other women, the acknowledgment that her assistance was sought, the way she situated her reports as part of an unfolding narrative, and her explicit descriptions. Altogether, these tactics convey Prior’s presence and demonstrate her compassion and concern.

**Holistic Approach to Assistance**

In one report, Prior states, “I have made it my business to follow to their homes numbers of poor, ragged children, found begging in the streets” (221). What she discovered and described were scenes of abject poverty, disease, and drunkenness, from which children were relegated to begging in order to support themselves and their families. During her walks of usefulness, Prior assisted families living in the most degraded conditions. She helped destitute mothers and widows obtain food for their children and heat for their homes. She helped individuals secure lodgings, find suitable employment, orchestrate adoptions, and even arrange funerals. Evident in countless reports, when Prior saw a need, she made it her business. Consequently, Prior’s missionary reports provide proof of the compassion and care she exhibited in the neighborhoods she regularly visited and the reputation she garnered among residents. If she ran out of resources, she gave from her own pocket, solicited contributions, and in some cases, even took individuals home with her in order to feed and attend to them (120). Moreover, Prior’s assistance came without conditions. Although she was motivated by her Christian beliefs, Christianity was not a prerequisite for her care. For example, she provided food for a poor widow with four children, reporting, “For a week they had lived only on a few potatoes, received from the ward committee. One little child of two years and a half had been sick for some weeks, and was pining away from actual want. Their distress was alleviated for the time, and they were earnestly exhorted to seek the bread of life” (114). In this instance, Prior first attended to the family’s temporal needs, and then she addressed their eternal ones. According to Dana Robert, this approach resembled the methods female missionaries later used. During the modern mission era, as women
were dispatched to posts abroad, their approaches to the communities they served tended to be personal and holistic—focused on both immediate needs and evangelism (xviii). These methods were clearly linked to the women’s presence. They were not debating solutions in some government chamber or theorizing approaches in the administrative offices of a church or national charity. Like Prior, they were looking directly at individuals in need.

Even though it was not a prerequisite for her aid, Prior undoubtedly believed that religion was a powerful form of assistance. In addition to evangelizing, her reports show her praying, reading scripture, and singing hymns. She reports a visit to one family where the daughter took care of her mother, whose rheumatism had rendered her an invalid. The older woman was angry and depressed. When Prior suggested that she might find solace in reading the Bible, the woman admitted that her poor sight and arthritic hands made it impossible for her to read or hold a Bible. Persistent, Prior bought the woman a pair of spectacles and found a carpenter who, at no charge, constructed a stand that would enable the woman to hold her Bible. According to the woman’s daughter, reading the Bible put her mother at ease and completely changed her demeanor (Prior 299). Prior’s efforts in this case highlight her sincere desire to help as well as her willingness to attend to any need. Overall, the array of compassionate acts outlined in her missionary reports offer evidence of the relationships she cultivated in the communities she served. As Halloran notes, “To have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks” (60). In Prior’s case, her presence symbolized her sincere commitment to helping others. For residents, both the religiously inclined as well as those individuals who might have felt ignored by churches and people claiming to be Christians, they saw Prior in their neighborhood “practicing what she preached.” At times, this commitment put her in dangerous situations, but the contents of Prior’s missionary reports portray her as fearless.

**Fearlessness**

Under the mantles of moral reform and religious revivalism, Prior ventured into areas usually considered off-limits to respectable women. She confronted adulterers, bar owners, brothel madams, and anyone else who stood in the way of her assistance, evangelism, and reform. In one report, she admits going to an area “considered so degraded, that the tract agent could find no visiter [sic] willing to take it” (206). Countering the view that antebellum women’s reform and benevolent endeavors were gentle, peaceful, and generally unseen—what Lori Ginzberg terms the “rhetoric of female benevolence”—Prior’s reports show an ardent reformer willing to travel anyplace and confront any sinner (Ginzberg 15). In one instance, Prior attempted to take some issues of the Advocate into a brothel, but when some of the prostitutes saw
the words “moral reform,” they locked the doors—claiming Prior as their prisoner. According to Prior,

> For a moment my heart was tremulous. I said nothing till the risings of fear were quelled, and then replied pleasantly, “Well, if I’m your prisoner I shall pray here, and would sing praises to God if I were not so hoarse. Yes, bless the Lord! his presence can make me happy here or anywhere, and you can have no power to harm me unless he gives it. This is a dreadful place, to be sure, but it is not so bad as hell; for there, there is no hope. The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever! What compassion in the blessed Jesus that he spares us, when our sins are every day so great!” I talked to them in this way till they were glad to open the door as a signal for my release. Indeed, they seemed quite ashamed, and tried to apologize for their rudeness by saying that they had nothing at all against me, it was only the paper that displeased them. (Prior 142–43)

By turning her fear into a powerful demonstration of faith, Prior exerted an ethos that unnerved and persuaded her captors. Transforming these women’s malice into shame, Prior exerted an influence that was anything but gentle or unseen.

Prior’s faith and presence resulted in another daring act when she decided to confront an adulterer. While visiting one of her districts, she explains, “I was led to speak plainly and faithfully to a man who had a family, but was known to be keeping a mistress at the same time.” Acknowledging how presence played a role, Prior states, “as he was thrown in my way,” she felt incumbent to “set his sin before him” (101). Prior’s confrontation angered the adulterer, and he repeatedly threatened her life. Although she was not easily frightened, afterward she admitted that she avoided the vicinity of the man’s house until one day when she received a note asking her to come to his residence immediately. Although she feared “a plot had been laid to ensnare me,” she reports, “after commending the case to God, I went as requested” (102). There she found the same man on his deathbed pleading with her to pray for him, admitting that he was not prepared or fit to die. Evident in this story was the impact of Prior’s earlier confrontation. Even though she had angered this man, her willingness to confront him had persuaded him of both his immoral behavior and her faithfulness; thus he sought her help as he faced his own mortality.

Even when bolstered by moral reform, her faith, and her age, confronting the male head of household was an audacious act for an antebellum woman. Undaunted, Prior put herself in this unlikely place, and her presence and fearlessness helped persuade. Prior entered neighborhoods, establishments, and situations that were unimaginable for most respectable women of her era, and because of her willingness to stand her ground, her opposition often relented. Moreover, these actions often emboldened other women to take action.

In one instance, after she visited the suffering family of a drunkard, Prior went to the local grocer to urge him to stop selling rum. When she found the merchant’s
wife waiting on customers, Prior reports, “I begged her to go and visit this wretched abode, and witness the fruit of her labors” (242). After visiting the family and taking them some groceries, the woman told Prior she would never sell rum again. In this instance, Prior used the woman’s own presence to persuade—in essence, demonstrating the power of observing these situations firsthand.

On another occasion, a woman told Prior that if Prior would accompany her, she would have the courage to confront her husband, who had been seeing a prostitute at a nearby brothel. The story of this encounter turns into an amusing tale. When Prior and the wife went to the brothel, the wife angrily accosted the woman she believed her husband had been seeing. The accused woman adamantly denied that she was a prostitute and denied knowing the wife’s husband. Seeing the two women quarrel, Prior decided the issue could not be resolved, so she suggested that they all pray. However, as they knelt to pray, the wife spied her husband hiding under the bed. Initially, he refused to come out until “that moral reform woman had left the room,” which again seems to indicate Prior’s reputation (203). When he finally emerged, a conversation between the wife and husband ensued, and the husband promised reformation. In both of these examples, Prior’s ethos is evident in the way she successfully motivates these women through her presence and ultimately encourages them to act. Indeed, AFMRS formed auxiliaries, because women were often emboldened by the presence of other women; and because women comprised a large portion of the Advocate’s readers, AFMRS hoped Prior’s reports would also inspire them.

The courage and actions described in her reports not only provide evidence of Prior’s ethos in the communities she visited, but also contributed to the ethos she conveyed to Advocate readers. In the neighborhoods that she frequented, Prior relied on a situated ethos that drew from her reputation and actions. Reading her reports, we see glimpses of Prior’s situated ethos. However, for individuals reading her unsigned missionary reports, Prior used an invented ethos, in which she intentionally constructed her character within the discourse (Crowley and Hawhee 198). In constructing this ethos, Prior not only recounted her actions, she made other ethical moves, such as showing that her assistance was requested, presenting her work as part of an unfolding, and providing explicit descriptions. In addition to showing the dire needs in these neighborhoods and the importance of AFMRS’s work, these rhetorical choices also present Prior as a reliable narrator who knows (and is known) in the communities she serves.

**Answering Requests for Assistance**

The fact that Prior was known is often evident in the opening lines of her reports. Here, she frequently acknowledges individuals asking for assistance, suggesting
people or places she should visit, or reporting the impact of a previous visit. Prior likely included these requests as a way of showing the value of AFMRS’s work. At the same time, these acknowledgments demonstrate her relationships, influence, and reputation in these neighborhoods where she traveled. For example, in one report Prior notes how a woman who overheard her talking to a family that lived in the apartment below asked Prior if she would come speak to her husband, who was confined to his bed with a badly sprained leg. Prior reports, “I went up, not knowing what the Lord had for me to do,” but she soon discovered that the man was intemperate, and his present injury had resulted from a drunken bout. Prior began counseling him and then asked if he had ever taken the temperance pledge. According to her report, “He answered no, for he did not think he could keep it if he did, but if I thought it was of the Lord he didn’t know but there was some hope.” She encouraged him to commit to the pledge, and as he signed it, he “uttered a whispered prayer, ‘Lord, help me keep it.’” Prior notes, “My heart was full for I had never before seen an habitual drunkard pray as he put his hand to the pledge, and I was more than ever convinced that the hand of the Lord was in all this” (279). By including this incident in her missionary report, Prior affirmed the power of Christianity and the good work done on behalf of AFMRS. This exchange also demonstrates her ability to engender trust with the husband, who she addressed directly, and with the wife, who overheard Prior speaking to her neighbors and then sought her assistance. As with most missionary reports, Prior was not simply observing, but actively assisting, and in this particular instance reforming. Moreover, using what Applegarth terms the “strategy of attestation,” Prior’s missionary reports repeatedly locate her within the communities she serves (Applegarth 55).

In another instance, an Advocate subscriber asked Prior to visit a sick young woman who was a boarder in her home. Prior, who realized the woman’s recovery was unlikely, spoke to her earnestly about preparing to die. Noting the difficult situation, Prior says, “She wept as I spoke of a dying hour, and confessed that she was unprepared.” Prior adds, “She seemed grateful for my call, and desired me to come again” (Prior 107–8). Similarly, another report tells the story of a woman suffering the final stages of consumption who sent for Prior. This young mother asked Prior if she would promise to find good homes for her three children after her death. Prior consented to the charge, and helped comfort the woman (206). As each of these cases show, in difficult situations—addressing an intemperate husband, telling a woman she was about to die, or agreeing to oversee the welfare of a dying mother’s children—people sought Prior’s help. By acknowledging these requests for help and locating herself amid these trying circumstances, Prior demonstrated to readers her ethos and the standing she had garnered through her presence and past actions. Residents in the neighborhoods she visited knew Prior; they trusted her, and individuals who
were reluctant to listen to others often listened to her. Prior also used her reports to show the fruits of her labor, which were not always immediately apparent.

**Unfolding Narrative**

By referencing individuals and stories that had previously appeared in the *Advocate*—often citing the particular issue of the paper—Prior documented the impact of earlier visits. Indeed, presenting her reports as an unfolding narrative was another ethical tactic Prior used to invent her ethos for readers. In one instance, she reports visiting a house where “I supposed I was among strangers,” when a woman reminded Prior of a visit she had made to a nearby house seven months earlier. During that previous visit, Prior had found a group of fashionable young ladies working around a quilting frame. While Prior conversed with the mistress of the house, the young ladies ridiculed her. Before leaving, Prior “pointedly warned them of their coming wrath, and pressed upon them the duty of repentance.” Reminding Prior of that earlier scene, the young woman told Prior “the remarks then made, were sent by the Spirit directly to her heart,” and remained with her until her conversion. Prior ends this report by making a direct address to the readers: “What encouragement does this fact present to the faithful exertions of tract visiters [sic], who may by a word in season save a soul from death, and hide a multitude of sins” (94–95).

By highlighting her continued presence in the neighborhoods she visited, Prior modeled the virtues of constancy and patience—encouraging Christians and reformers to continue their efforts even if the impact was not immediately apparent. This is especially evident in another report in which Prior relays a conversation she had while visiting a sick gentleman:

> When I inquired kindly whether he expected to recover, he replied, it was quite immaterial to him whether he should get well or not. “But my friend are you prepared to die?” “None of your business,” said he roughly. “O yes,” I continued, “the Lord makes it my business to care for the souls of my fellow-beings, and it is my duty to say to you that if you do not repent, and love the Lord Jesus Christ you will be lost for ever.” He replied, “I do not believe in Christ.” “Then,” said I, “it is useless to talk to you, for you are now a lost man!”

Prior turned to leave, but says, “on opening the door, the conviction was so strong that the Lord would have me pray with him,” so she knelt and prayed out loud next to the man’s bedside, and then she left. She felt inclined to return in a few days and discovered the man completely changed, to which he credited Prior’s prayer for sending conviction his soul (144–46). Prior’s faith and persistence not only paid off in this instance, they also helped distinguish her from other evangelicals. During the antebellum period, it was not uncommon for religious and secular reform groups to visit poor neighborhoods in order to evangelize, hand out tracts, or evaluate potential
recipients for relief funds (Lewis 248–49). Prior performed all of these actions as well, but her ongoing presence and commitment, which is acknowledged and documented in her missionary reports, became a key element of her authority.

Although Prior never aspired to be a minister, her reports show that the people she visited often granted her ministerial authority. Again, this authority was linked to Prior’s presence. In her study of three contemporary women preachers, Mountford describes how one of the women stepped outside of the pulpit and moved closer to the congregation to preach. Mountford claims that her movement “served a mimetic function—it simulated that movement of the divine to the people and therefore evoked an emotional response” (130). Similarly, Prior’s walks performed a mimetic function—extending Christianity to individuals who were often excluded or unwelcome in churches. For instance, a woman who Prior had helped convert thanked Prior for her visits and kind instruction, stating that no one had conversed with her about her soul or told her about Christ and heaven (Prior 253). In another case, a friend asked Prior to go with her to visit an elderly blind woman who wanted to repent of her sins. According to the blind woman, “the preaching she had heard had not reached her soul, and she now desired to see some Christian female who knew by experience the value of a Savior, that she might open her heart to her, and obtain obstruction” (127). Prior proved to be the right woman for the job; her words, presence, and lived Christian experience persuaded the blind woman, who finally felt the Lord’s compassion and forgiveness. Even though she lacked institutional sanction, Prior’s presence and actions became powerful symbols of her Christian beliefs, and her audiences frequently granted her ministerial authority, exhibiting further how presence became an ethical resource and an important part of the persona she constructed for readers.

Explicit Descriptions

Another facet of Prior’s invented ethos came through the explicitness of her reports. Prior’s work as a missionary for AFMRS occurred amid a severe economic depression that stretched from 1837 to 1842, and her firsthand accounts provided her readers with grim images of suffering that most may not have seen otherwise. For example, one of her reports vividly describes this dire scene:

At the farther extremity of a dark alley, and up two pair of outside stairs, so broken as hardly to afford safe passage, we found a poor woman afflicted with rheumatism. She was lying upon the floor, with a log of wood for her pillow. She had been obliged to part with her bed, and most of her clothing, to procure bread; and all she had left, which was a few old garments, she had spread under her on the floor, and over her hard pillow. (115)
Firsthand accounts such as these bolstered Prior’s ethos of presence by locating her there. At the same time, her detailed descriptions made these grim scenes present in the minds of her readers. Similar to the way Chaim Perelman explains the power of rhetoric to create a presence in the consciousness of audiences (36–37), my conception of an ethos of presence stresses the interplay between physical presence and heightened awareness. Prior’s presence not only makes her reports credible, it also makes the conditions and problems she describes tangible. Through her presence, she attempts to draw attention to the residents in these neighborhoods and the grim conditions in which they live.

In another report, Prior describes visiting a poor family living in a dank basement. “On entering the apartment, and beholding its emaciated and sorrowing inmates,” she confesses, “my heart grew sick. In one corner sat a feeble mother, with tattered garments, bending over her sick infant, who was apparently near its happy release from want and wo [sic]. On the other hand was another little one, nearly blind. Three other half-clad and half starved children made up the group” (215). Noting that the family’s drunkard father was in prison, Prior describes her efforts to raise the funds necessary to relieve the family’s suffering. This scene, like many other sad circumstances illustrated in Prior’s reports, made a strong pathetic appeal. Though women are often associated with “emotion-laden appeals,” Patricia Bizzell suggests that ethos can provide another avenue for understanding the persuasive impact of these appeals (396). Through her presence, Prior not only attached human faces and suffering to the city’s economic and social problems, she lent credibility to these accounts. These were not simply emotional appeals, but ethical appeals as well. Prior’s walks and observations substantiated these scenes, but more important, in the same way that de Certeau suggests that walking speaks, Prior’s walks of usefulness argued that ignoring these types of living conditions was unconscionable (de Certeau 98). In essence, she added moral authority.

It is no coincidence that many of Prior’s reports detail the dire circumstances of women. During the nineteenth century, New York City’s population and its poverty grew in tandem. From 1790 to 1800, the city’s population nearly doubled, and then doubled again in the next twenty years as immigrants and individuals from rural communities came in search of factory jobs. Moreover, the city’s new urban economy was a patriarchal economy, making women dependent on a man’s income. Thus, if the male wage earner died, lost his job, became ill and unable to work, or deserted his family, the consequences for women and their children were usually dire. Few employment opportunities existed for women outside of domestic service, sewing, washing, and light factory work, and these paid little; thus female-headed households were almost always poor (Stansell 2–18).

Prior’s reports provide stories of women “ruined” and abandoned by men, intemperate husbands who spent all their income on alcohol, and women unable to
support themselves through any respectable means. Hence, her reports demonstrate why women were drawn to moral reform and temperance and how these efforts aligned with women’s rights. In one report, Prior describes the situation of two orphan sisters who lived in one small rented room that they could not even afford to heat. “We found them engaged in sewing on fine shirts, which they were making at sixty-two cents apiece, and by their utmost endeavors they could only pay for their food and rent” (162). In a direct address to readers, she states, “It is painful to see the deserving of our own sex, when dependant [sic] upon their own efforts, oppressed and doomed to unrequited toil [. . .] there needs to be radical reform on this score” (162). Evident here, Prior used her reports to highlight and denounce the limited economic avenues available to women.

Indeed, by showing how economic and social systems conspired against women, Prior’s missionary reports contributed to the feminist consciousness that emerged out of AFMRS. The conditions among the city’s poor, particularly women and their children, that Prior and other AFMRS members observed and reported influenced AFMRS’s agenda. Eventually, the group moved away from moral reform to focus on women’s economic struggles. In 1846, AFMRS opened an asylum for indigent women and children, and in 1849 the society changed its name to the American Female Guardian Society (Whiteaker 144, 147). Prior’s reports demonstrate how women’s involvement in reform efforts, especially those that moved them beyond their households and neighborhoods, shaped their views about social and economic issues. Seeing social problems firsthand made women more confident in speaking out, thus demonstrating the effect of presence on women’s perceptions of themselves.

**Conclusion: Presence as Public Advocacy**

With reform and revivalist endeavors, antebellum women broadened their spheres of influence and enacted their religious convictions. According to Susan Hill Lindley, they also carried “some of their own ‘female’ values of personal concern, neighborly charity, and nurturing into the public sphere, which they believed needed more of those values” (66). These values are evident in Prior’s missionary reports, as is her frustration with the economic and social structures that relegated so many individuals, particularly women, to such desperate situations. With her steps, Prior composed her missionary reports. She provided AFMRS members and Advocate readers with a glimpse of different sections of the city and attached human faces to an array of urban problems. At the same time, she showed how individual efforts could make a difference.

Altogether, Prior’s missionary reports highlight some of the ways early female reformers established ethos in the communities they served and how that ethos was then transferred through print. As Applegarth notes, “[E]thos is a situated practice,
never fully and freely chosen nor yet thoroughly determined, but shaped through the interaction between individual rhetors and the social and material environments within which they speak” (49). Prior’s audiences used her presence to judge her connection to the community, her level of commitment, her religious convictions, and even her treatment of nonbelievers. Her readers took their cues from the people she served, or at least her depictions of their interactions. Like many antebellum women who lacked social standing, positions, titles, or any formal rhetorical education, Prior earned trust through repeated actions in local neighborhoods and then conveyed that trust to a broader textual community. In doing so, she foreshadowed ways that female religious and social reformers could exert a powerful ethos from their location as women and from other marginalized locations, such as urban neighborhoods, North American Indian missions, and foreign missions halfway around the world.

At the same time, Prior’s path beckons us to consider different ways that presence operates as public advocacy. Like the Occupy Wall Street protests, Prior’s regular presence in an unlikely place captured attention. She used this attention to persuade the people she encountered and to make visible to Advocate readers the inequitable economic systems that existed and their consequences. Similar to the protestor’s placard that projects alarming facts or images, Prior’s missionary reports tried to make the appalling situations she observed real and untenable. In their discussion of alternative discourses, Mike DePalma, Jeff Ringer, and Jim Webber point to the power of nondeliberative rhetoric, claiming that it “sets out to make itself visible, heard, felt, smelt, tasted. It does not seek a reasoned posture nor does it aim to maintain a respectful tone in persuasion. It acts” (331). Prior boldly walked to the poorest neighborhoods in New York City; she entered barrooms, brothels, and sickrooms. She visited prostitutes, confronted libertines, and entered the dirtiest and most dire dwellings to read scripture, kneel in prayer, and offer comfort to individuals on their deathbeds. In other words, she acted, and she acted in a fashion uncustomary for most antebellum women. Yet, unlike the strident walks of civil rights, suffrage, labor, and antiwar protesters that have left an indelible impression on our nation’s psyche, Prior’s steps are easily forgotten. She was not protesting; antebellum women rarely protested. Nonetheless, her actions and presence operated as a powerful form of public advocacy that should not be overlooked. Prior used her feet, her faith, her sweat, and her tears to motivate, and, in many instances, she changed the individuals she encountered. And by infusing both herself and her subjects’ desperate situations into her reports, she exhorted her readers to demand change as well.

With the limited means of persuasion available to antebellum women, Prior and countless other female volunteers took to the streets advocating reform. Later generations of women would march and protest, but Prior and many other antebellum women visited, provided assistance, prayed, counseled, and even condemned. All the while, their audiences judged their intentions by the steps they took.
**NOTES**

1. For detailed discussions, see Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*; Lindley, “You Have Stept out of your Place”: A History of Women and Religion in America; and Marilyn Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600–1850*.

2. In 1839, the New York Female Moral Reform Society changed its name to American Female Moral Reform Society (AFMRS) to better reflect the national reach of the organization. Throughout this article I refer the organization by this latter name.

3. The temperance pledge was a document individuals signed pledging that they would not drink alcohol.

**WORKS CITED**


