

## How to Compose Queer Histories of Rhetorical Education

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At the third Octalog a decade ago, Arthur Walzer called for histories of Western rhetoric to consider “how instruction in rhetoric has created historically appropriate subjectivities.”<sup>1</sup> This historiographic work is well underway, with scholars investigating rhetoric’s pedagogical role in the dynamic creation *and resistance* of subjects with respect to gender, race, class, and disability.<sup>2</sup> Another scholarly invitation was also issued about a decade ago. In Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace’s review of the “queer turn in composition studies,” they called for attention to “how the most seemingly personal parts of our lives are densely and intimately wrapped up in larger sociocultural and political narratives.”<sup>3</sup> The decade since has been marked delightfully by a flurry of scholarship on queer pedagogies.<sup>4</sup>

There remains an opportunity, however, to bridge these two scholarly calls in the form of queer histories of rhetorical education. What role does rhetorical education play in shaping romantic, erotic, and sexual life prior to our present-day understandings of sexual identity? And *how* do we go about composing queer histories of rhetorical education? Today I suggest three queer methodological moves—conceptual, epistemological, and archival—that are productive for enacting this historiographic work.

This work first necessitates a queering of the field’s commitment to civic engagement. The predominant concept of rhetorical education is that it prepares people for civic engagement.<sup>5</sup> As Karma Chavéz argues, this concept is tied to “a normative claim about what rhetoric does”: it “educates the citizenry.”<sup>6</sup> A queering of this claim creates space for examining what I call

“rhetorical education for romantic engagement,” defined as “the teaching and learning of language practices for composing romantic relations.”<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, my research has examined the heteronormative instruction of nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals that taught the romantic letter genre.

The historiography I am describing involves, second, a queer epistemological orientation to sexuality. Informed by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes’s work on queer rhetoric and the archive, this orientation focuses not on sexual *identities*, but on queer rhetorical *practices*, meaning those that were nonnormative in their own historical contexts. Letter-writing practices can be understood as queer, for instance, insofar as they transgressed the heteronormative pedagogy of manuals. This focus on practice avoids imposing present-day categories, such as lesbian or bisexual, within knowledge-making about the past.

Third and finally, composing queer histories of rhetorical education involves becoming what Charles Morris calls “archival queers.”<sup>8</sup> While the archives fruitful for queer histories of rhetorical education often are not the ones typical in our field, such as textbooks, curricular records, or even student writing, archival queers may search for other kinds. For example, in my research on Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two freeborn African American women, I consulted their romantic letters in order to analyze their rhetorical education and practice.<sup>9</sup>

Through queer conceptual, epistemological, and archival moves, we can indeed develop queer histories of rhetorical education. We can queer Walzer’s call for histories of rhetorical education and, simultaneously, compose a longer history of the queer turn that Alexander and Wallace describe. This historiography will challenge our ideas, both past and present, about not only the rhetorical shaping of sexuality, but also the normative understandings of archives and civic engagement that have long constrained rhetorical studies writ large.