

Constricting Keywords: Rhetoric and Literacy in our History Writing

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As a composition historian working with nineteenth-century American literacy artifacts, I have become increasingly aware of how particular keywords have come to dominate our histories. Specifically, I have noticed how the keyword that most resonates with my research—literacy—has been eclipsed and to some extent erased by the dominance of the keyword “rhetoric” in our history writing over the last decade. Why has this happened? How does this trend affect the materials historians look for and the questions they ask? How do our keywords modulate the voices of our artifacts? How do our keywords determine the uses we claim for history?

I have surveyed book-length American composition histories published between 1999 and 2010 in order to describe the major trends shaping the kinds of histories we are producing to see if we can identify gaps and fissures, the roads not taken, in relation to these major trends. The preliminary thesis I put before you is that we are in danger of closing off certain types of materials and questions because our histories are increasingly dominated by the keyword “rhetoric.”

Raymond Williams, in constructing his keywords project, would choose a word because it “virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss” (15). Williams’s description of the ways our keywords are simultaneously epistemological and fraught with “problems of meaning” is particularly useful for thinking about how history is summoned by the present and circumscribed by the language we use in the summoning. Historians and archivists work with partial vision: our keywords, key questions, key interests point our gaze in certain directions and there is little assurance we are not missing important elements just beyond our peripheral vision.

The recovery work by feminist historiographers in the past forty years has served as a corrective lens to traditional vision. From this work, we have recognized that women have been disappeared from canonical historical traditions and that recovery efforts must ask different types of questions of different types of material to unearth women’s traditions. In rhetoric, feminist historians have looked beyond rhetorical theory to conduct manuals, diaries, and letters, for instance. Particularly over the last decade, feminist historians of rhetoric have looked for women as public speakers in the nineteenth-century United States. They have been concerned with how our historical tradition has silenced women, and in response these historians have tried to ask the right questions to unearth their voices. The restoration of these women’s voices is invaluable. But, knowing that our keywords lead to certain key questions and recognizing that there is a developing orthodoxy about describing

women as language users in the nineteenth century, we need to continually challenge ourselves about the limitations imposed by our keywords. So the question I pose today is, how do questions anchored by “rhetoric” prepare our ears to hear voices differently from questions anchored by “literacy” in the historical record?

I identify “literacy” as the countering keyword here for a number of reasons: 1. As I read the record of our histories, “literacy” has been a strong alternative to “rhetoric” in our history construction, especially as it adapts itself easily to the composition side of our composition/rhetoric dyad. 2. Literacy has been deployed as a synonym for or close relative to rhetoric, and frequently the definitions of these terms bleed into each other even in the same text. 3. Even James Berlin’s foundational history, *Rhetoric and Reality*, starts with this sentence: “Literacy has always and everywhere been the center of the educational enterprise” (1). I will return in a little while to what I think the keyword “literacy” accomplishes for historians.

DESCRIBING THE TERRAIN

I surveyed fifteen book-length nineteenth-century American composition histories published since 1999. I read for the keywords framing the questions the historians asked and the materials they investigated. I also charted out the citation trends in these books to see which writers were cited or were excluded from the relevant scholarship. Based on citation and keyword trends as well as the artifacts identified and examined by the histories I also visually mapped the continuum between rhetoric and literacy oriented histories.

There are general trends one notices when creating an archive of contemporary histories of composition/rhetoric. Where “rhetoric” is the keyword, the historians are often working on recovery projects, identifying and placing particular individuals in our history. Perhaps because of this emphasis on recovery, rhetoric-driven histories also tend to suggest that the usefulness of these histories is that they can recover potentially forgotten practices we might use today. Histories motivated by rhetoric often tend to focus on the public or civic realm; this orientation combines with an Aristotelian emphasis on audience to set up a situation where the historian focuses on how the writer or speaker tries to move or accommodate others. Finally, there is a notable use of classical rhetorical theorists in histories motivated by rhetoric as their keyword: in these histories the contemporary scholar uses classical rhetorical theory to describe and analyze their nineteenth-century material. This is a distinct contrast to histories motivated by literacy in which scholars treat classical rhetorical theory as a primary source to be analyzed instead of a secondary source to be used as an analytic frame. Below are some other specific trends:

Both rhetoric and literacy motivated histories examine similar artifacts, including letters, memoirs, diaries, and textbooks. There are, however, artifacts we can identify as linked to the contrasting keywords of rhetoric and literacy. Rhetoric historians evince particular interest in oratory and public speaking, an interest which coincides with rhetoric’s focus on audience, persuasion, and Burkean cooperation. On the other hand, literacy histories incorporate imaginative writing, including fiction. Rhetoric historians do at times refer to literature but they often don’t work with it in the same way

literacy historians do, who tend to incorporate literary studies approaches to literature. It's worth mentioning that when rhetoric-identified scholar Roxanne Mountford does interesting work with nineteenth-century literature in *The Gendered Pulpit*, she feels compelled to write,

So why turn to literary examples to explore a real-life phenomenon, the gendered nature of the pulpit? Because writers, like all spectators of life, offer a fresh lens for understanding the nature of rhetoric Who better to explain what an audience understands instinctively than a novelist? Of course, the average person is unlikely to encounter a preacher climbing a rope ladder to reach his pulpit, but they are likely to encounter pulpits with staircases, as I point out later in this chapter. Through this literary exaggeration of a common rhetorical space, Melville illustrates a profoundly important matter about the nature of pulpits: as architecture they communicate something to the audience quite apart from the sermon itself. They have communicative powers of their own. (23)

That Mountford feels the need to defend her use of literary texts as part of a rhetorical historical study is instructive. It is a symptom of what Steven Mailloux has described as the "reception/production antagonism" within what he characterizes as broad rhetorical study (96). Mailloux hopes to reintegrate the "fragments" of rhetoric which have been differentiated as reception disciplines—"literary and cultural studies"—and production disciplines—composition and rhetoric—under the label "rhetorical hermeneutics," which is "*the intersection of cultural rhetoric study and rhetorical pragmatism*" (97, 100 italics in original). Both Mountford's defense of her use of Melville and Mailloux's argument in favor of reintegrating rhetoric and literary/cultural studies attests to a limitation of rhetoric as a keyword in historical study. This particular limitation does not apply to "literacy" as a keyword since literacy refers both to reception and production activities and artifacts.

The ways the historians define rhetoric and literacy often overlap. Nan Johnson labels "speaking and writing" as "rhetorical skills" (21); Shirley Wilson Logan likewise identifies "reading, writing, speaking, listening" as "rhetorical arts" (*Sites*, 7). Logan amplifies this definition when she associates "rhetorical skills" with "reading, writing, debating, keeping diaries, gathering in associations, [and] editing newspapers" (23). The activities identified as rhetorical by rhetoric scholars are the same activities literacy scholars associate with literacy. Jacqueline Jones Royster, for instance, associates literacy with "communicative competence," which envelopes all of the language activities identified by the rhetoricians above. Even more significantly, Royster writes that "a useful definition of literacy is that it is a sociocognitive ability. It is the ability to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time" (45). For Royster, literacy is both other- and self-directed. The literate person communicates with others by "articulat[ing] lives and experiences" while also self-reflexively exploring "problems" which may become open-ended inquiries. Literacy is a hermeneutic platform which allows the literate person to actively seek and interpret information, engage in self-reflexive discovery, and communicate with others about this process.

Contrasting Royster's "literacy" keyword and rhetoric scholar Susan Kates's "rhetoric" keyword

provides insight into the values and practices motivating both projects. Kates writes,

I define rhetoric broadly to include education in speaking, reading, and writing, and I have chosen the term *rhetoric* over *composition* because of the former's historical association with philosophies of language. Because the educators in this study promoted courses in speaking, reading, and writing that asked students to examine the ideological implications of communication, I chose a term that is more indicative of a sophisticated interrogation of language and the curricular politics that inform the study of speaking, reading, and writing. (2)

Kates's reasons for privileging rhetoric as her keyword are very telling; she associates rhetoric with "philosophies of language" and with "sophisticated interrogation." Rhetoric is a prestige term in a way that composition and literacy are not, and its claims to prestige are bolstered by moves like Kates's here in which composition serves as rhetoric's degraded other. By underscoring these qualities of rhetoric in opposition to composition, Kates implies that composition is unconcerned with "the ideological implications of communication" and is unsophisticated in how it approaches language and "curricular politics." The complete absence of literacy here—its erasure as a keyword for describing reading and writing—is related to the diminishment of composition in this formulation. The impetus to distance rhetoric from composition emerges from the same source of disciplinary anxieties which made it necessary for Mountford to defend turning to literary examples. The rising visibility of rhetoric as a disciplinary keyword over the past decade relates to rhetoric's promise to shield composition from the disrespect we have too often perceived in our treatment from colleagues in literature and across the university. Rhetoric seems to give us gravitas; it certainly allows us to claim a much more ancient discipline than our literature brethren. Literacy is nowhere to be found in the dyad formed by Composition/Rhetoric (or Rhetoric/Composition—which order you choose functions as an inkblot test). If we embrace rhetoric because it offers prestige, literacy, a topic often written about by scholars in Education, drops to the wayside.

The privileging of rhetoric as a keyword manifests strangely at times by actively erasing literacy as a keyword. For instance, let's look at how Nan Johnson talks about Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream*. The following quotation is an excerpt from Johnson's book in which she discusses Royster's work:

In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster expresses an expansive insight into the diversity of rhetorical practices that efforts to remap the territory of the history of rhetoric can offer:

Ultimately, then, within a context of inhospitable circumstances, nineteenth-century African American women used language and literacy as a tool to authorize, entitle, and empower themselves; as an enabler for their own actions; and as a resource for influencing and inspiring others . . . [N]ineteenth-century African American women "read" and rewrote the world. They succeeded in developing a critical consciousness by which they envisioned their context, shaped their realities, and charted courses of action. They redefined their sphere of operation, imagining intersections for themselves among private, social, and public domains, and inventing ways to effect change using whatever platform was available to them. (234-35)

Although designed to define the particular parameters of African American women's rhetorical traditions, Royster's description of the rhetorical inventiveness of African American women also illustrates the kind of qualitative gain in historical insight into the range of what we can call *rhetorical* that feminist revisions of the rhetorical tradition have generated. (9)

Johnson erases any traces of literacy in her recapitulation of Royster's discussion of how nineteenth-century African American women "used language and literacy." Rhetoric is not a keyword for Royster in this excerpt, yet Johnson insists—four times—that Royster is describing rhetoric. Perhaps Royster's "language and literacy" may be understood as part of a "rhetorical tradition," but Johnson's willful blindness to Royster's actual keywords distorts one of the most important points Royster makes in this passage. When Royster says that nineteenth-century African American women "develop[ed] a critical consciousness by which they envisioned their context, shaped their realities, and charted courses of action" (235) she is speaking about how literacy activities foster critical consciousness or what Paulo Freire calls "*conscientização*," which describes a richer, more complex process than that implied by the English approximation of "consciousness-raising." For Freire, "*conscientização* represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness" (19). This critical awareness is the recognition of how an individual is constituted by culture and can himself actively shape culture and through this process reconstitute himself; this recognition which can only occur through praxis, the combined process of action and reflection (20). This is qualitatively different from what Johnson calls "rhetorical inventiveness," a frame which restricts Johnson's sight to how these women addressed others. Royster is talking both about how they addressed others and how they experienced and reshaped themselves as "people in the world" through literacy. This difference is significant and materially affects the questions posed by these scholars about history. For instance, Johnson poses these questions after her discussion about Royster: "How might we define rhetorical practices differently if we take the eloquence of women in its many forms into consideration? How might we define the rhetorical tradition differently when the roles of women in the history of rhetorical practices are taken into account?" (9). Contrast Johnson's questions with Royster's:

1. When we examine material conditions surrounding the acquisition of literacy by African American women, what do we notice about the impact of these factors on the choices they have made in using literacy?
2. How have these practices developed over time?
3. What is particular about this connection between writing and activism?
4. What have our analyses of African American women's writing, especially their essay writing, made in our understanding of language and literacy more generally in our understanding of the practices and achievements of this particular group? (25)

What I notice in comparing Johnson's and Royster's questions is the contrast between how the two scholars relate to their keyword. Rhetoric functions as an all-encompassing paradigm for Johnson and as a historian she is seeking to add to the paradigm by identifying unnoticed "forms" of "eloquence" and "rhetorical practices." Her questions prompt historians to supplement the exist-

ing “rhetorical tradition,” and through this supplementation, to expand the definition of what can be counted as belonging to “rhetoric.” Royster is similarly posing questions which would lead a historian to use the specific “language and literacy” practices of a particular group to conceptualize literacy itself. However, Royster is not contextualizing this inquiry within anything equivalent to the rhetorical tradition. Because literacy, unlike rhetoric, does not have an unified theoretical tradition consciously reinforced and reiterated over centuries, questions about literacy practices more freely assume that literacy as a concept is always understood as dependent on context. In other words, literacy-driven historians are not compelled to demonstrate how the practices they want to add to the tradition conform to the wisdom of ancient scholars. As a discipline, rhetoric is inherently conservative, actively conserving past practices, past knowledge, and insisting on the continuous application of these practices and knowledge in the present. In fact, this conservatism itself created the need for recovery efforts by rhetoric historians since this conservationist impulse creates a canon and builds a genealogy. Feminist historians of rhetoric have been grafting discarded branches back on the family tree of the rhetorical tradition.

So, why does it matter that Johnson translates Royster’s literacy into rhetoric, besides the fact that it is done quietly? As I read Royster, literacy is her keyword—although she also makes use of rhetoric—because it allows her to pay attention to women as essayists and the process of self-creation particularly supported by the essay. She says, “The essay as a generic form offers a unique opportunity to analyze how a writer foregrounds experiences, establishes a speaking self, and showcases a mind at work” (21). Royster describes the essay as multivocal and flexible. It is not merely an other-directed genre, but also self-directed. This is the key distinction. In practice, rhetoric allows us to see language acts as other-directed while literacy encourages us to consider how they are self-directed as well. The essayist uncovers herself to herself as she writes. In this way, the essay hosts what Michel Foucault calls a technology of the self. The act of writing occasions self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-correction, activities more visible when literacy and not rhetoric is our keyword.

As scholars we need to always be asking ourselves what the strengths and weaknesses of our keywords are. What do we gain, as historians, when we choose rhetoric or literacy as our keyword? How do these keywords make artifacts speak differently? As always, the importance of writing and reading histories are that they allow us to see ourselves through different eyes. From my review of contemporary Composition/Rhetoric histories I think we need to ask if the trends in the historical scholarship reflect trends in contemporary pedagogy. Are we privileging an audience-driven rhetorical approach over a self-exploratory literacy approach? How should we balance these competing visions? On another level, how are the material conditions of publication fostering certain keywords in scholarship? Finally, are we developing an orthodox approach to our own history that is making it harder for us to imagine what lingers just beyond our peripheral vision?

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NOTES

¹ A version of this essay was first presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta, Georgia, 2011.

² I specifically looked at: the keywords the writers used; the ways they defined keywords such as “rhetoric,” “composition,” and “literacy”; the materials they examined; and the scholars they cited. Here are the books that comprised this study: Lindal Buchanan’s *Regendering Delivery*; Carr, Carr, and Shultz’s *Archives of Instruction*; Donahue and Moon’s *Local Histories*; Enoch’s *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*; Gold’s *Rhetoric at the Margins*; Johnson’s *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*; Kates’s *Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education, 1885-1937*; Logan’s *Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America* and “We Are Coming”; Mattingly’s *Appropriate[ing] Dress*; Miller’s *The Evolution of College English*; Mountford’s *The Gendered Pulpit*; Robbins’s *Managing Literacy, Mothering America*; Royster’s *Traces of a Stream*; and Schultz’s *The Young Composers*.

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