

Reading Children’s Book Editor Ursula Nordstrom: Archives of Literacy Sponsorship, Workplace Persuasion, and Queer Networks

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Abstract: *This essay examines the rhetorical strategies of Ursula Nordstrom, a lesbian editor at Harper and Row from 1931-1980 who had a progressive vision for children’s literature. Nordstrom’s charismatic ethos enabled her to achieve professional success, as did a vital network of women. The essay asserts that Adrienne Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum is relevant for understanding the role Nordstrom’s network played in her career. While positioning children’s publishing as a worthy site to study workplace communication, the essay also explores how the inaccessibility of women’s corporate archive, as well as the shifting intersubjective space between the researcher and the subject over time, impacts feminist historiography.*

Keywords: *workplace writing, corporate archives, lesbian, queer, historiography, literacy sponsorship, strategic contemplation*

“This apartment full of books could crack open,
... Once open the books, you have to face
the underside of everything you’ve loved—”

—Adrienne Rich, “Twenty One Love Poems”

In 2005, the summer after my senior year of college, I interned at a children’s book publisher in New York City. I began a delicious routine: working by day in Penguin’s bustling, colorful offices just south of the Village, and returning each night to read in a cramped bedroom in the meat packing district, near Times Square. I would lie across the low, full-sized bed in the tiny apartment and read books about children’s literature. I was twenty-two years old, alone in the city, and very, very happy. This nightly reading was my first encounter with Ursula Nordstrom, whom I first encountered by way of *Dear Genius*, Leonard Marcus’s brilliantly edited collection of Nordstrom’s letters.

Dear Lavinia:

It was such fun seeing you at luncheon; you make such sense and also look so pretty. Grand combination. You did not talk too much about problems. I enjoyed everything. [. . .]

What I want to say to you today is that I love you all the more for your confession about not loving *The Hobbit*. It is one of the several books I have tried my best to read but I simply could never get into it and I have had to hide my shame, but now I can admit it in view of the fact that I will have your distinguished company. Bless you, Mrs. Russ, and long may you rave.

Ever Affectionately,

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Twelve years later I have, in Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch's term, strategically contemplated Ursula Nordstrom, and I see someone engaged in very tricky rhetorical work, someone whom Suzanne Bordelon might refer to as a muted rhetor, a person whose powerful persuasion worked behind the scenes of institutions to encourage social change, often through command of mundane documents. She preferred, in the words of Leonard Marcus, to "make her mark . . . with invisible ink" ("Introduction" xvii). Feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition should read about Nordstrom because she fought ideological battles on an unusual battleground. She was a very successful sponsor of literacy for young children, as well as artists and writers. Not only did she offer challenges to her contemporaries in children's publishing, but she offers us challenges today, too—about how to study writers in corporations, about the complexity of literacy sponsorship, and about the intangibility of queer feminist networks. And, finally, about the slipperiness of the relationship between the historian and the rhetor she studies.

I want to introduce Nordstrom to a new audience—to explain her accomplishments, to look at her rhetorical strategies—and, amidst this familiar work of recovery, to explore what Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum may offer us as we seek to understand Nordstrom's female networks in children's book publishing. Such a move follows K.J. Rawson's call to upset the familiar assumptions of heteronormativity that characterize feminist rhetorical history. As I open up children's publishing as a worthy site to study workplace communication, I will also raise points about the accessibility of women's corporate archives—an accessibility question that continues to have implications in the study of workplace writing today. Most importantly, though, I want to theorize how Royster and Kirsch's concepts of *strategic contemplation* and *critical imagination* have played out in my own understanding of Nordstrom. As

Adrienne Rich's poem quoted in the epigraph above suggests, there is danger in reopening cherished rhetorics. We may have to encounter the underside of our intellectual icons.

Ursula Nordstrom's Context and Significance in Children's Book Publishing 1930-1980

"What does an editor of books for young people do? Well, that all depends. It depends on the type of house with which the editor is associated, his or her relationship to the management, the type of management, and the type of economy." -Ursula Nordstrom, "Editing Books"

Ursula Nordstrom worked at Harper & Brothers from 1931 through 1980. Mary Stoltz, one of her authors, described her presence years after her death: "She was a bit plump and she had a wonderful intelligent face that was kind but not in the least bit sweet. She had spectacles and these marvelous blue eyes looking out at you. She had great legs. She had a very low, precise, musical voice" (Marcus, "Tapes," 137). She was hired to work in the college books department. In the cafeteria, she befriended the head of the children's department, Louise Raymond. She became Raymond's assistant, and, after Raymond left the company, Nordstrom took over her job. (It wasn't hard to get; one historian says, "the publishing house casually passed the directorship to Nordstrom" [Stevenson, "Nordstrom," np]). She ran the department for thirty-three years, nurtured new talent, and oversaw new editions of classics. She steadily accrued successes within the company, becoming the first female Vice President and a publisher. Leonard Marcus, in his collection of her letters, the only published volume devoted to Nordstrom, calls her "the single most creative force for innovation in children's publishing in the United States during the twentieth century" (xvii). He explains her significance in this way:

It was she who published many or all of the children's books of Margaret Wise Brown, E.B. White, Garth Williams, Ruth Krauss, Crockett Johnson, Charlotte Zolotow, Maurice Sendak, Mary Stoltz, Louise Fitzhugh, Else Holmelund Minarik, Mary Rogers, Karla Kuskin, Russell Hoban, John Steptoe, and Shel Silverstein. Put another way, it was Nordstrom who edited a major portion of the children's classics of our time, including *The Runaway Bunny*, *The Carrot Seed*, *Stuart Little*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Little Bear*, *Bedtime for Frances*, and *The Giving Tree*.

Nordstrom, propelled by a progressive view of childhood and an affinity for creative types, effectively broadened the range of issues that could be

explored in children's and young adult literature. In 1972, *Publishers Weekly* summarized her contributions to the field: "she has pioneered and turned increasingly toward books that deal honestly with contemporary problems" (Freilicher, 32). Young adult books that dealt honestly in contemporary problems may have been more popular due to larger cultural shifts wherein realism came into fashion and sentimentalism declined. But it was Nordstrom's ability to move within this trend, and perhaps even to direct it, that distinguishes her career.

A recent collection devoted to the intersections between queer theory and children's literature locates one of the books Nordstrom edited, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* as the first book for young adults to explore homosexual desire (Abate and Kidd). Another of her titles, Louise Fitzhugh's *The Long Secret*, was the first book to mention menstruation, famously prompting Nordstrom to write in the draft's margin, "Thank you, Louise Fitzhugh!" (*Letters* 239). As Nordstrom recalled in a speech, she was one of the first to accept and publish a book written in Black English vernacular ("Assorted Thoughts" 25). Yet, as the epigraph to this section suggests, Nordstrom's job was characterized by her relationship to the "upper management" of a patriarchal publishing company—her role was the female children's book editor in what was otherwise a boys' club. Along with her tremendous output, her successful management of this dynamic makes her, and the field of children's publishing more broadly, especially worthy of analysis for feminist historiographers today. "Work-related rhetorics" write Sarah Hallenbeck and Michelle Smith, "might offer feminist rhetoricians a robust, sustained area of inquiry, spanning both historical and contemporary research. [. . .] workplaces and professions are often key axes in the maintenance or disruption of gendered, raced, classed, and ability-based differences" (200).

Like teaching writing in the academy, children's publishing could be considered an underclass in the book world.¹ This was one reason Nordstrom was so free to experiment in the department, and why she was able to rise to a place of authority as a non-college-educated woman (though her lack of degree troubled her). Like teaching writing, where it was held that women

1 In *Bookwomen: Creating an Empire in Children's Book Publishing* (2006), Jacalyn Eddy describes the important role that women played in professionalizing children's literature. She profiles six women—two booksellers, two editors, and two librarians. Working across their respective sites, often in tandem, these women increased the volume of children's books being published, established review magazines to evaluate and promote the books, created awards that celebrated top books, and established spaces within libraries and bookshops devoted to children's literature.

were especially suited to work closely with student writers and nurture their prose, it was believed that women publishers were especially suited to work on books for young children. And it was mostly middle and upperclass white women who held these editorial roles. "Subscribing to the culture of middle-class status also involved performing the role of 'women,'" cultural historian Jacalyn Eddy writes of women in the publishing industry during the early-to-mid twentieth century, "thus 'niceness,' 'mannerliness,' and 'civility' set the boundaries of their language and social behavior" (9). Or, as scholars in rhetoric and writing might put it, "workplaces, work tasks, and work arrangements are also sites where gender and work themselves are rhetorically contested and construed" (Hallenbeck and Smith 201). Nordstrom had to work within the gendered expectations of her company and the larger publishing industry. Her stylish self-presentation, combined with a vital network of female allies, helped her achieve tremendous success within those parameters.

Residue of old arrangements—wherein publishing was a literary club made of up white, privileged males—lingers. A 2015 survey indicates that the workforce in publishing is predominantly comprised of white women, which grants credence to the often-heard claim that publishing (like teaching) is a feminized profession. At the executive level, however, the survey results indicate, the industry is still led by white men (McGee). Traditions of publishing have other implications, too, for studying editors like Nordstrom; the Harper archive, like many corporate archives, is not open to the public. Archival inaccessibility has a bearing on how feminist historiographers like myself approach figures like Nordstrom and on the role that critical imagination and strategic contemplation must play as we try to, in the words of Cheryl Glenn, identify "a pocket of rhetorical activity" (11).

Archival Limits and Methodological Approach

"Historiography, reading it crookedly and telling it slant, could help me shape—re-member—a female rhetorical presence." —Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold*

Because Nordstrom worked for Harper and because the papers related to each book project on which she worked must be approved by the author's estate manager before they can be quoted, relatively few of Nordstrom's words can be easily accessed today, though it is obvious that Nordstrom spent hours each day writing. Many papers are stored by Harper in an off-site facility, unavailable to researchers. Leonard Marcus was one exception. He describes his process of spending two years reading tens of thousands of letters before selecting 350 of them for inclusion in *Dear Genius*. The letters, wonderful as they are to read and rich as they are in examples of Nordstrom in action, are

also maddeningly incomplete. Deborah Stevenson, reviewing the book in a children's literature journal, notes:

One can't help but wonder about what's not included. The lengthy correspondence with Sendak addresses moral questions, creative dilemmas, and family matters, but there's no elaboration on the artistic evolution of *Wild Things* or *In the Night Kitchen*. Selected letters to Louise Fitzhugh explore details about *The Long Secret*, but there's no hashing through of *Harriet the Spy*. Did these landmarks emerge without epistolary coaching, or were those letters less memorable, or less effective, than those Marcus included? [. . .] Are there things missing that we don't even know to miss? ("Letters" 260)

I wanted to see Nordstrom's thousands of letters for myself, of course. I first reached out to children's literature scholars whom I knew had seen papers from the Harper archive. One kindly offered to forward my request to the corporate archivist but was not enthusiastic about the prospects. He explained that the archival material is located off-site and must be requested and relocated for review, and that the office did not have enough staff and resources to respond to research requests. He concluded: "I suspect that [the archivist] may not be able to help at this time."

He was right. While I eventually communicated with the archivist directly, sending a letter emphasizing my commitment to studying Nordstrom and offering to cover the costs associated with moving papers from the storage facility, the archivist politely demurred, explaining that while my request was interesting and valid, the company policy was not to allow any outside access into the in-house archival materials. This decision, I learned, is not unusual. Peter Carini, an archivist at Dartmouth College, explained, "Because the mission of many corporate archives is to support the administrative work of the company, they can be difficult to contact and do not have public-facing presences" (Carini).

In lieu of access, then, researchers must focus on documents already available to the public. In Nordstrom's case, these documents are, in fact, quite varied: letters, interviews, speeches, newspaper and magazine articles, book

chapters, and even her own novel for young people.² As a feminist historiographer curious about how Nordstrom articulated a rhetoric that enabled her to move purposefully through her work situation, I was especially interested in finding themes that appear across these documents. By looking across these disparate pieces, I hoped to see Nordstrom "slant," as Cheryl Glenn would say. For Glenn, looking at a subject slant will enable a project to take shape, sight-lines begin to converge, and a portrait emerge (173).

I also wanted to be reflexive and attentive to my own readerly approach to Nordstrom's public archive. Jacqueline Jones Royster has eloquently described the importance of historiographers acknowledging their passionate attachments (*Traces* 280), yet the development of an attachment to particular rhetorics and rhetors progresses in stages. As the relationship between the researcher and the subject shifts, the way the pieces of the archive fit together will also move, and the portrait they suggest to the historian will alter. By offering a very specific example of this phenomenon, it is my hope that we might be able to consider the role that the intersubjectivity between the researcher and the subject plays in feminist historiography more broadly. Such work has already been undertaken in anthropology, in scholarship such as Margery Wolf's *A Thrice-Told Tale*, which depicts the same event as described by the researcher in three different genres and at three different times in her life. Taking up Wolf's framework, scholars in rhetoric and composition have studied the "lost subjects" in narratives about service learning. They conclude: "conflicts of representation and responsibility. . . haunt ethnographic encounters" (Carrick, Hamler, Himley, and Jacobi 59). Perhaps many feminist historiographers are also haunted.

Nordstrom's Ethos and Enthymemes

When I was 22 and encountering Nordstrom for the first time, it was the star power of Nordstrom's prose that kept me turning pages. One reviewer, after reading Marcus's collection of letters, commented, "[Nordstrom's]

2 We have the letters from Marcus's volume, supplemented by a critical introduction which contains passages from additional letters not included in the book; a book chapter Nordstrom wrote later in her career about her work; four short articles she wrote for public audiences (two of which were published in the *New York Times*); two profiles which appeared in *Publishers Weekly* (one from the forties, one from the seventies); several accounts of working with Nordstrom in the public record; and, finally, Nordstrom's own novel *The Secret Language*, which was published in the early sixties. All of this is in addition to, of course, to the sizable archive of children's books Nordstrom had a hand in publishing.

epistolary persona is witty, engaged, and dramatic, with a stylish New Yorkeresque breeziness" (Stevenson "Letters" 257). Marcus also described the letters in performative terms: "Letter writing was a form of theatrical improvisation for Nordstrom. Her letters were her stage" ("Introduction" xxxiv). Barbara Dicks, who worked as Nordstrom's secretary, recalled her boss's writing process: "She typed her own letters, mistakes and all, at the speed of light. That was how she expressed herself" (Marcus "Tapes" 145). Like other women rhetors, Nordstrom relied on humor to persuade.³ Recounting in an interview how she acquired and edited one of her most famous books, *A Hole is to Dig* by Ruth Krauss, she said:

Nobody expected *A Hole is to Dig* to do what it did. Ruth brought it in to me all on three-by-five cards, and I went into hysterics over some of the definitions, they were so marvelous and there had never been a book like it. She said she had a certain man in mind to illustrate it, and I thought he was the worst man in the world, but I always tried to make the authors happy . . . (Natov and Deluca, 121)

She described the atmosphere around Harper following a successful awards night in a personal letter:

What do you think about good old Harper having published books the authors and artists of which won both the Newbery and the Caldecott medals? We are so happy—unaccustomed as we are . . . We've been living in this sort of cold-water flat for a long time, trying to keep things scrubbed and neat, and the rats under control, and doing the best we can, don't you know, and everyone's braids neat, and fresh pinnys on, and not getting discouraged or bitter—not gambling or swilling cheap wine. And finally we got moved out into a better neighborhood. . . . It's been a long wait, but finally we're respectable, and all. Forgive effusion. We're all slightly light-headed. (*Letters* 175)

If descriptive hyperbole was one half of Nordstrom's ethos, the other half may have been self-assured directness. While she often experienced feelings of inadequacy, perhaps, as she put it, because she was a child of the depression or because she lacked a college degree, and she was confident enough to express these feelings in speeches, articles, letters and interviews. In one interview she explained: "I was always nervous I went by hunches. A librarian once said to me, 'How dare you think you can be a children's book editor—you haven't been a teacher, you haven't been a librarian.' And I said, 'Well,

3 For a discussion of the role of humor in women's rhetoric, see Zwagerman.

I'm an ex-child and I haven't forgotten a thing" (Natov and Deluca 122). That Nordstrom located her authority in once having been a child stands in contrast to many of her peers who were determining what children should read, who often located authority as *mothers* or *parents* or *psychologists* rather than former children (see Eddy on the importance of authority in children's book publishing). Nordstrom's boldness informed her style and success.

One of Nordstrom's often repeated goals was to "publish good books for bad children." In this phrase, Nordstrom simultaneously offered a critique of the field, which she saw as offering bad books for good children, and a direction for future work: she wanted good books that met children where they were, that were not didactic, that were close to children. Once, writing in 1954 to a sales representative who was not enthusiastic about the newest book by Ruth Krauss, Nordstrom defended the author and drew the salesman's attention to the very end of the book. "Just look at the last line of the *How to Entertain Telephone Callers*" she wrote. Krauss's line, which was "whatever your talent," was evidence to Nordstrom of how Krauss spoke to children:

Believe me, that [line] is so close to children, so exactly right, so damn warm and perfect that any little child can't help but feel happier at the moment when it is read to him. Happier isn't the right word. I guess I mean that 'whatever your talent' can't help but make any child feel warmed and attended to and considered. And, believe me, not many children's books make children feel considered. No child would define it that way but you'll know what I mean. (*Letters* 72)

While I will return to this idea of what it means for a child to be "attended to" in a book, I want to draw attention to Nordstrom's rhetorical flexibility, made possible through her stylish ethos. She concluded the letter: "Oh hell, it all boils down to: you just can't explain this sort of basic, wonderful stuff to some adults, Jim." To read over her correspondence, Marcus writes, "is to witness the creation of an artfully drawn, unfailingly vivid character named Ursula Nordstrom, a literary persona by turns leonine and Chaplinesque, cocksure, and beguilingly off-balance" ("Introduction" xviii). While she did occasionally engage in outright conflict, she more typically charmed her audiences, often through humorous stories that gently revealed an underlying point.

When Nordstrom talked about her male-dominated workplace, for example, she repeated key vignettes to establish a larger narrative about Harper and her role within it. Consider this letter, written in 1950 to author Meindert DeJong:

Did I ever tell you that several years ago, after the Harper management saw that I could publish children's books successfully, I was

taken out to luncheon and offered, with great ceremony, the opportunity to be an editor in the adult department? The implication, of course, was that since I learned to publish books for children with considerable success perhaps I was now ready to move along (or up) to the adult field. I almost pushed the luncheon table into the lap of the pompous gentleman opposite me and then explained kindly that publishing children's books was what I did, that I couldn't possibly be interested in books for dead dull finished adults, and thank you very much but I had to get back to my desk to publish some more good books for bad children. (*Letters* 64)

Nineteen years later, Nordstrom brought this story up again in another letter, calling the offer "patronizing" and asserting "I almost killed the man" (*Letters* 286). She also told versions of this vignette in a *New York Times* article and a *Top of the News* article, in a speech, and in an interview with *Publishers Weekly* ("Stuart, Wilbur, Charlotte" [345]; "Joyful Challenge" [38]; "Assorted Thoughts"; Freilicher [33]). This vignette—and its central character, the Harper man—was evidently very important to Nordstrom. It helped her explain her career to a variety of audiences and to pointedly distance herself from the company for which she worked. It was a central narrative of her public life.

To listen to the telling of the story like this is to see a treasured psychological object, one that is useful and comes easily to hand. Adrienne Rich writes, "the workplace, among other social institutions, is a place where women have learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries" ("Compulsory" 1598). Nordstrom used this story to publicly reject male violation and to position her involvement in children's publishing on her own terms. "The most creative people today are working in children's books," she told the interviewer at *Publishers Weekly* after finishing this vignette. "Children's books is the most rewarding field there is in publishing" (Freilicher 33).

In 1981, writing from a house in Connecticut so remote that "it can't easily be found, even with a map" (Marcus xxxvii), Nordstrom would again refer to the men of Harper, but this time in such a way that one can see more of her workplace philosophy. She wrote:

One has heard (not often, but one has heard) of the heads of adult trade departments who have suddenly thought to themselves, and repeated this thought to the top management, "Hey, why don't we put the junior books and the adult trade into one department? Really that would make more sense. They're all trade books, actually. The same salesmen sell them, and I just think the junior books and their profit should now become part of the regular adult trade department." (Note: Throughout the above, the publishing head of the adult trade

department probably referred to junior books as “juvies,” which is salt in an easily opened wound.) Well, when this happens, it is time for the editor to fight for the department’s turf. It is important for those departmental figures to be kept separately, and to show that the department is making money. (If they don’t show a profit, of course, the conversation between the adult trade editor and top management will never take place.) If the department shows a healthy profit, top management must admit that “they must be doing something right” and keep hands off. (“Editing Books” 152)

While the tone of this piece is light, as when Nordstrom suggests the use of the word “juvies” to be “salt in an easily opened wound,” the threatening nature of the encroachment is clear: the reason for conflating the departments would be to use the profit from the children’s department to mask a deficit in profit in the adult trade sector. Though Nordstrom employs no pronouns in this brief vignette, it is clear the “heads of adult trade departments” are men in social connection with each other, or what Heidi Hartmann would later call a “kinship network” (101). The relationship between adult trade and upper management must be subverted in order for (female) independence to be maintained. But the relationship cannot be undermined through Nordstrom’s own social capital. Instead, Nordstrom must demonstrate by way of financial data that the children’s department is earning a healthy profit to maintain her autonomy. Capitalism is thus positioned as a woman’s weapon against patriarchy—a subtle positioning that underlies many stories about the office that Nordstrom enjoyed retelling.

Nordstrom’s focus on the bottom-line may be a “double-voicing” strategy, described by Suzanne Bordelon as when “muted or subordinate groups must use the language of controlling power in order to be heard” (339). Talking numbers forced men to back down, which may explain why Nordstrom frequently discussed of book sales, even when she wasn’t asked about them. In 1979, she offered many sales figures to interviewers at the *Lion and the Unicorn* and went out of her way on another occasion to say that thanks to her leadership the children’s division was the most profitable sector at Harper. In a collection of interviews about Nordstrom, one author remembered Nordstrom consistently bringing up money to demonstrate the viability of her taste and her success (Marcus “Tapes” 151).

While Nordstrom’s books were financially successful, her rhetoric is troubled because the kinds of texts that most animated Nordstrom—including her own book, *The Secret Language* (1960)—were not typically among the most profitable. Further, Nordstrom’s capability at earning money did not transfer neatly into power within the company. As author Margaret Warner reported:

As for her own career—it ended unhappily in her view. I'm a bit fuzzy on the details, but in her final years at Harper, she was denied a seat on the board. Here she was, running this incredibly successful seven-million-dollar department, which was a big deal in those days. She was a giant in her field, a recognized trailblazer. But inside the company, she wasn't admitted to the "club." [. . .] I know she felt she'd been patronized—and in the very end, she felt she was expendable. I think she was quite bitter—and that's not too strong a word—that she hadn't been recognized. She warned me to take a lesson from her experience. The message was: as a woman you're going to have to work twice as hard and be twice as good as a man, and even then do not assume you are going to get the same recognition or rewards. (Marcus, "Tapes," 151)

Overall by reading across these documents, we see a beloved line of argument—that capitalism can protect female turf—and the limits of that argument. Reading between the lines, we may infer that Nordstrom's vision was for certain profitable children's books to allow for other less popular, more controversial titles to be published.

What Nordstrom focused on in her public and private self-presentations was creating a powerful persona—a funny, witty, breezy self who could persuade writers to work with her, communicate her triumph over sexism at work, cast a vision for the field of children's publishing, and defend her taste in children's books. Her rhetorical strategies of establishing core narratives about her industry and using humor and exaggeration to persuade readers were not unique. For me, even more than these rhetorical maneuvers, Nordstrom's ideas about children and reading were fascinating.

Imagining Nordstrom's Vision of the Child Reader

I saw something in Nordstrom's vision for children's literature that deeply appealed, particularly what I perceived as her desire for children to feel recognized by the books they read. Louise Rosenblatt, as paraphrased by Annika Hallin, offers a view of reading that seems to elaborate Nordstrom's view. Rosenblatt, resisting the New Critical approaches, emphasized the viability of students' diverse reading interpretations. Rather than prescribing a particular way to read, Rosenblatt preferred for students to engage the text associatively and saw reading as a process by which "the text will be remade through its combination with the student mind" (286). Ultimately, she thought that "literary education ought to help students integrate their linguistic competence with who they are as persons." Nordstrom also believed that children could make what they wanted to out of the books they read. She often said that a child would respond creatively to the work of a truly creative person (see *Letters*,

168; "Assorted Thoughts" 28; Freilicher 33; "Joyful Challenge" 40). Rosenblatt's idea about the power of reading to develop individual identities is echoed in Nordstrom's statement that children must feel *considered* in the reading, a statement which seems to suggest that an empathic connection between the child reader and creative person will forge a unique and valuable reading experience. Similarly, in "Girls Reading, Narrative Gleaning," Janice Radway suggests a book to be akin to an attic wherein the girl reader can try on clothes she finds appealing and see how they fit. If a reader likes how something fits, Radway writes, she will take it out of the text and use it for her own self-fashioning. When Nordstrom talks about the magic that happens when a child encounters the work of a creative person, these are the associations I bring to her archive to help me interpret what she's saying. As Gary Weissman writes of his reading of the short story "The Man in the Well" by Ira Sher: "intertextual associations made Sher's story seem thematically familiar to me. Whether or not I reference the ideas and terms I know from reading Canetti and Foucault . . . they have affected how I think about [the story]" (106). I see myself similarly finding Nordstrom's vision for reading "thematically familiar," and I locate language to describe it by returning to Rosenblatt and Radway.

The interpretive stance does not seem to overread the archive, which demonstrates repeatedly Nordstrom's alliance with creative writers and artists. For instance, Nordstrom published Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, a controversial book even in its early days in print (see Holmes and Galchen for a sense of why people disagree about this book). To recap, the plot details a female tree's willingness to be completely used—down to the stump—by a young boy. Asked by the *Lion and the Unicorn* what, exactly, she thought the book was about, Nordstrom neatly evaded the question. "What I know is that I love what is in [Shel Silverstein's] head," she said, "and that's what I want to publish" (124). Nordstrom's insistence on supporting creative people is echoed in a 1967 article, in which she wrote: "We simply try (and it is really not so simple to try) to find and recognize creative people and then let them write or draw the way that they want to" (40). She went on to write, "we trust the creative person . . . Children respond to what is fresh and original and honest . . . anything less is not good enough for a child" (40).

Her description of the sacred engagement between the child reader and the creative artist seems to articulate what I see as some of the mystery and power of childhood reading, a process that is both internal and external, as Radway and Rosenblatt elaborate. But as I write this, I'm aware that I'm creating Nordstrom's theory of reading in the space between myself and the archive. Put another way, the view of reading I ascribe to Nordstrom is not fully inflected in Nordstrom's prose, because Nordstrom never wrote out a theory of child reading—or if she did, it lies among her papers in the storage facility. Instead,

I'm critically imagining Nordstrom's theory. This is not unusual. We bring our intellectual passions to the rhetors we admire and see their words as connected to our deeply held beliefs. Perhaps this is the nature of having intellectual icons at all and the rhetors themselves are uncomfortable companions to our mental projections. In her essay about Adrienne Rich, titled "The Intellectual Icon Across the Street," Harriet Malinowitz writes that meditation on certain pieces of Adrienne Rich's writing so deeply shaped her critical consciousness that she hardly knew how to interact with the person Adrienne Rich when they became neighbors. The actual Adrienne was a secondary, charming, fascinating, intimidating decoy who was ultimately irrelevant to what the Malinowitz made of Rich's prose. As feminist historiographers, we must balance fidelity to the archive with our interpretive stances. This balancing act is complicated because of our own investments in these rhetors. We take up studies of feminist rhetorical history in part because they offer insights for our contemporary moment.

Studying Historical Queer Networks

"No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees, sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air, dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding . . ." —Adrienne Rich, "Twenty-One Love Poems"

That Ursula Nordstrom was gay is not a secret to someone who comes to know Nordstrom well after her death, someone who comes to know Nordstrom, that is, retrospectively and on the page (see a variety of secondary sources about Nordstrom, including Stevenson "Ursula Nordstrom" and Marcus "Introduction"). Yet how open Nordstrom was about her sexuality in her life is not well documented. Certainly, though, there are connections between the editor's life story and her creative vision for children's literature, connections she almost makes explicit in a 1981 interview with children's literature journal *The Lion and the Unicorn*, "I had also said for years that I hoped someone would do a book . . . on the different varieties of love" (Natov and Deluca 125).

As I wondered how Nordstrom's sexuality shaped the work she did at Harper as well as her own writing for children, a topic which I approached in a public profile of Nordstrom ("Ursula"), I began to notice how relationships with women were just at the edges of her public archive. She traveled to Europe with a friend and fellow bookwoman, Frances Chrystie, who was instrumental to her professional life, most famously because Chrystie introduced Nordstrom to Maurice Sendak (see Lanes). She dedicated her novel, *The Secret Language*, to her colleague Charlotte Zolotow, who was also involved in the book's editorial process (*Letters*). Nordstrom returned the favor by editing

a number of books by Zolotow, who was also an author. She met her life partner, Mary Griffith, at Harper (see Stevenson, "Nordstrom," np) and went out of her way to publicly locate her own career in a longer trajectory of women working in the book world (Natov and Deluca 119). Long before Eddy wrote about the first generation of bookwomen, Nordstrom traced her own genealogical line back to Virginia Kirkus, who founded *Kirkus Reviews* and was the first editor of children's books at Harper & Row.

Adrienne Rich wrote in the eighties that women who form unlikely alliances in the face of male domination should be considered members of "the lesbian continuum," a phrase that seems to speak to the powerful life-giving relationships Nordstrom fostered at work and described in her fiction. (Her novel *The Secret Language* details what I suggest elsewhere is a queer friendship between two little girls and their housemother ["Ursula"].) Of the lesbian continuum, Rich wrote, "I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experiences . . . to embrace the many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . ." ("Compulsory" 219). My sense is that Nordstrom—in her work life, in her home life, in her fiction, and at the edges of many of her public presentations of self—evidenced the "primary intensity" of the network of women in her life. However, she was rarely forthcoming about these relationships.

In her interview with *The Lion and the Unicorn*, for example, she referred to her decades-long partner as "the friend I live with" (131). As this euphemism demonstrates, Nordstrom often seemed to speak in code when talking about sexuality, to, as Jaqueline Bacon put it "encode her particular concerns . . . in an acceptable form" (qtd Bordelon 335), and so I found myself having to fill in many gaps, to supply what seemed likely to be true given what I knew was true. Feminist historiography provides a justification to engage our subjects in this way. Patricia Bizzell writes that critical imagination "invites hypothesizing beyond what traditional scholarship might regard as rigorously demonstrable, a technique made necessary by the fragmentary and faint character of much evidence on women's rhetorical activities" (x). Such an approach can be justified because subjects don't write about everything, and, in the case of Nordstrom, certain representations seem purposefully left out of view. After my profile of Nordstrom was published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, children's poet Lee Bennett Hopkins commented, "An interesting article. I knew Ursula, Maurice and John ... all of whom were 'out' with those who where [sic] in." As controversial representations-of-self get lost, we risk losing marginalized histories altogether. These histories are, however, tremendously

important for feminist historiographers interested in the rhetorical activities of queer women operating in heteronormative spaces.

Adrienne Rich's piece explicitly sought to destabilize heterocentric assumptions, as she explained in a later foreword to the essay:

I wanted the essay to suggest new kinds of criticism, to incite new questions in classrooms and academic journals, and to sketch, at least, some bridge over the gap between *lesbian* and *feminist*. I wanted, at the very least, for feminists to find it less possible to read, write, or teach from a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity. ("Foreword," 203)

Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum provides one theoretical framework through which I can view these faint traces of primary intensity with other women that are at the edges of Nordstrom's archive. It seems an appropriate frame, too, given that Rich wrote the piece while living in New York around the same time Nordstrom was there. Taking up Rich's term to make Nordstrom's female network more visible helps me see the role that women *likely* played for Nordstrom more clearly.

Rich's desire to bridge the gap between lesbianism and feminism has been critiqued by others, including Cheshire Calhoun, who argues that Rich's lesbian continuum was already passé in the late nineties: "Contemporary lesbian theorists are less inclined to read lesbianism as a feminist resistance to male dominance" (200). My aim here is not to argue that the lesbian continuum is a relevant theoretical concept for studying all queer feminist networks, but rather to point out its salience in making sense of Nordstrom's references to women in her work, life, and fiction. If there is something to be drawn to other studies of queer feminist networks from this example, it may be to follow Lisa Ede's advice and "always historicize" (183), to resist heterocentricity in historiography by reviewing and contemplating work from the subject's contemporaries who were writing more openly about queerness. While such an approach runs the risk of essentializing the queer experience, it offers a useful way to place the primary rhetor in a richer context that could contribute to a more kaleidoscopic view of the rhetor's self-disclosures. The aim is to avoid absorbing and neutralizing the queerness of rhetors like Nordstrom, and to see, at the highest resolution possible, the role Nordstrom's sexuality may have played in her professional life. It is noteworthy that a number of Nordstrom's most famous authors were also queer, though not publicly out, including Maurice Sendak, Margaret Wise Brown, M.E. Kerr, and Louise Fitzhugh. As I've suggested elsewhere, Nordstrom's sexuality may have contributed to her stance as an unconventional and supportive reader of texts by these authors, thereby shaping how Nordstrom sponsored their literate activity.

Nordstrom as Literacy Sponsor

"This is pure surmise, but I think that Ursula connected immediately with people who felt themselves to be outsiders and who had some basic feeling about speaking a different language from that of the average kid. I never met Louise Fitzhugh, but I suspect it was true of her and that it was true of M.E. Kerr, and that with writers like that Ursula would extend herself greatly to get at the central, crucial story." —Doris Orgel (Marcus "Tapes" 142)

Nordstrom's career is a brilliant example of literacy sponsorship, a term coined and defined by Deborah Brandt as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" ("Sponsors" 166). As Nordstrom's career demonstrates, sponsorship in book publishing is uniquely enmeshed between the aesthetics of individual editors and the powerful institutions they represent. Recalling that Brandt developed the concept of sponsorship from the history of artistic patronage, it is interesting to regard Nordstrom as a patron to her writers. Her letters include many anecdotes of times she floated writers money, trusting that a manuscript would be turned in eventually; or even published books she considered weak because she believed eventually the writer would produce something more valuable ("Assorted Thoughts" 28). While Nordstrom was not the same kind of patron to all her writers and artists, recollections from some of them make it clear how important her endorsement and encouragement was (see "The UN Tapes" for many examples). In an interview during the 1980s, Maurice Sendak spoke glowingly of the impact that Nordstrom had on him early in his career:

I loved [Nordstrom] on first meeting. My happiest memories, in fact, are of my earliest career, when Ursula was my confidante and best friend. She really became my home and the person I trusted most. These beginning years revolved around my trips to the old Harper offices on Thirty-third Street and being fed books by Ursula, as well as encouraged with every drawing I did. We had our disagreements, but she treated me like a hot-house flower, watered me for ten years, and hand-picked the works that were to become my permanent backlist and bread-and-butter support. (Lanes 38)

In part, Nordstrom could be this kind of sponsor because she had complete control over the Harper list, which is not typically the case today in publishing. Most new acquisitions must be approved by an editorial board which, as an industry website explains, is "typically comprised of an acquisitions editor, as well as representatives from the sales, marketing, and finance departments"

("Commonly Used Terms"). Nordstrom's battle for the turf was waged, I suspect, to keep such a committee from upending the rhythms she had at Harper, including an occasionally unconventional cash-flow.

While scholars have examined how institutions shape sponsorship (see Duffy et al.), Nordstrom offers a compelling example of sponsorship shaping an institution. In other words, her efforts changed the institution she represented as well as the discourse within and around children's book publishing. Absent the details from Nordstrom's archive, her role within the Harper operation as a sponsor would be rendered invisible. The identical symbol of the Harper logo, printed across the spines of books, suggests a uniformity in sponsorship. But behind this uniformity is a hive of activity. Looking at particular editors within publishing houses offers a richer picture of literacy sponsorship in action and raises questions for future studies.⁴ How do internal institutional policies impact editor's ability to sponsor writers they admire? How do material facts of the business—such as the average size of a book run—impact the emergence of new talent? How does the work of a particular editor shape the broader flow of discourse? What turns in book culture can be traced back to particular editors who served as influential literacy sponsors? All of this exposes what Brandt has called the "deeply textured history that lies within the literacy practices of institutions and within any individual's literacy experience" (*American Lives* 56).

Not only the literacy of writers and artists, but also the literacy of children was sponsored by Nordstrom, though she rarely faced this audience directly. Her letters and interviews are peppered with anecdotes about particular responses children had to books, some of them lovely, and others—to Nordstrom's mind, anyway—entirely off point. (She recalls one letter she received in response to her own book, *The Secret Language*, to which she wanted to reply "That's not what I meant" [Natov and Deluca 132].) Thinking about direct and indirect recipients of literacy sponsorship, as well as the role particular sponsors play in directing the power of an institution, could usefully broaden our understanding of the causes, workings, effects, consequences, and significance of literacy sponsorship—and its impact on book culture writ large. Three years into my doctoral program, I began to think about writing my dissertation on just this topic. The realization that Nordstrom's papers would

4 Work from the history of the book field seems poised to engage this kind of frame, such as Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books*, which examines the Book of the Month Club's process for choosing feature titles; Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, which studies the role of certain review periodicals in shaping reader's tastes; and Cecilia Konchar Farr's *Reading Oprah*, which studies the television mogul's book club.

be difficult to access coincided with a development in my personal life: I began to read some of my favorite Harper classics to my son, who was six. My relationship with Nordstrom was about to shift again.

The Perils of Strategic Contemplation

One of the first books we shared was *Harriet the Spy* (for an explanation of why this book was controversial, see Seo). Reading my childhood paperback aloud to my child, I found myself interfering with the text, omitting words such as “kill” and “fat.” I also felt uncomfortable about what I suddenly perceived as Harriet’s uncharitable point of view. Later, writing a parenting column for a local magazine, I described my son as a reader before turning the gaze to myself as a mother reading:

[J]ust as I cannot anticipate the things he takes from the stories, so I am also sharing thoughts about them that never occurred to me before reading them as a mother. “It was a bad idea for Harriet to write mean things in her notebook. We need to be kind to friends.” This kind of casual moralizing, so quick to my tongue, is likely irritating to my son (it certainly would have annoyed me as a kid), but I can’t help myself. Suddenly the stories seem useful in a new way, in what they can tell us about how to be good in the world. (“Old Books”15)

When I wrote about casual moralizing as “likely irritating” to my son, there was actually another audience I had in mind—the great editor herself. Like Harriet Malinowitz, who reported having a version of Adrienne Rich talking in her head after spending years reading her prose, I was now hearing my own version of Ursula Nordstrom, and she did not like what I was doing.

“Oh, parents!” Nordstrom lamented in a book chapter, one of her final pieces of public writing (“Editing” 153). Parents—like editors, reviewers, and librarians—were in the cadre of adults Nordstrom had to work around to deliver her books to children. Suggesting her to be a “seasoned campaigner” at such work, Marcus observed Nordstrom’s skill in securing “endorsements when necessary from psychologists, educators, and others for a book deemed too risky—or risqué” (“Introduction” xxv). She also firmly adhered to her policy of loyalty to her creative writers and artists, regardless of a book’s content. Once, when a sales rep asked Nordstrom to omit a scene from a children’s book that made fun of someone with a disability, Nordstrom replied in a letter, “there always have been and there always will be children who will imitate physical disabilities and they will do it whether or not Ruth Krauss writes a book” (*Letters* 70). She proceeded to defend all the questionable bits in the book. In a copy of the letter that was circulated around to the staff, though, she wrote “I begged her to take it out” in the margin (71). This dual response

demonstrates Nordstrom's most deeply held belief: if you want to work with a creative person, let them write what they want to write. But what I realized, reading *Harriet* with my son, is that I was now inclined in a different direction, to be loyal to him by negotiating and interpreting the text alongside him (and yes, by pulling lessons from it). As my responsibility to my particular child came into the foreground, the pleasure I took in reading these books as a child shifted to the background. In addition to seeing books like *Harriet the Spy* differently, my response to some of Nordstrom's most famous escapades changed.

Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* became controversial because Mickey, the young protagonist, is pictured without any clothes on ("STAKE NARKID from the front. Like, wow!" as Nordstrom put it in a private letter [282]). A librarian painted underwear on the boy, which Nordstrom responded to in an open letter, referring to the action as "censorship by mutilation rather than obvious suppression" (*Letters* 334). A rather elaborate controversy unfolded. Librarians banned the book. Booksellers returned the book. Bruno Bettelheim, reviewing the book for *Ladies Home Journal*, indicated that children should not be allowed to read it. (It was later revealed Bettelheim himself had not read the book [Sonheim 11]). In the midst of the fray, Nordstrom deemed librarians censoring the book "neurotic" and wrote to children's book reviewer Zena Sutherland that working on books like *In the Night Kitchen* was "[t]hrilling, absolutely thrilling" and that it "makes up for some of the second rate Shakespeares I'm trying to love to day" (*Letters* 290).

When I read this story early on, of course I didn't perceive myself as wanting to participate in what Sendak called "all the fuss over [Mickey's] penis" (Rehm). But now, the mother of a boy, I better understand why a librarian would draw on underwear. While Sendak suggested that if the unaltered illustration was presented to children without comment they would "not even notice" the nudity (Rehm), my experience suggests otherwise. And thus, as my identifications have shifted, I find myself mentally extending sympathy to Nordstrom's historical opposition.

Fluctuating sympathies and readerly complications renew my fascination with the role of books in childhood. Perhaps books are an important supplement to the guidance and care of a parent. "Most adults seem to have very poor memories of their childhood," Sendak told Diane Rehm in a 1993 interview. "Maybe it has to be that way." Many prominent children's book creators were not parents. I wonder if parenthood blocks the memory of being a child, a blockage that can, in contrast, be channeled more freely by creative people like Sendak and Nordstrom who ably remember. "The creative writer of children's books has his or her younger self more easily available to him or her than it is to most of us," Nordstrom commented once ("Assorted Thoughts"

26). Or perhaps actual children are less important to the work of publishing great children's literature than the satisfaction of what Marcus called "the Wonderland rush of venturing headlong into territory that was marked off-limits" ("Introduction" xxvii). With such a thought, certain pieces of Nordstrom's archive gleam more prominently, such as her epistolary comment, "I don't expect creative artists who do books for children to think about children all the time. They rarely do—the really great ones—because they do what they do for themselves . . ." (*Letters* 156).

While these archival reconsiderations may seem idiosyncratic to my own life and interests, I'd argue they are really the mundane result of strategic contemplation, of lingering in the research space, of considering the internal aspects of the research process (Royster and Kirsch 85). The intersubjective space between the researcher and subject shapes the interpretation of the archive. While I cannot predict the future, I do expect that my perspective on Nordstrom will continue to evolve.

Concluding Thoughts

"feminist practices involve connections among past, present, and future" —Jaqueline Jones Royster, "Ain't I A Woman"

As feminist historiographers, we don't work with our actual subjects in their context, but inevitably bring them into our own. Strategic contemplation, then, is fundamentally unstable. When we apply these concepts to our approximations of our subjects, what results are partial, idiosyncratic, deeply felt, and even personal portrayals of the rhetors we admire.

In the end, we need a way to acknowledge our own subjective response to our subjects, even as we try to move closer to them. Adrienne Rich has written—and composition scholars like Lisa Ede (*Locating Composition*), Krista Ratcliffe (*Anglo-American Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition*), and Jessica Restaino (*First Semester*) have echoed—that theory is only good if it smells of the earth ("Notes" 213). In the context of feminist historiography, the material landscape Rich references may be our actual research subjects and the theory the way we use them to further our conversations. To attend to the rhetor requires closely examining their papers. Yet Nordstrom's documents, like those of many workaday writers, are mostly unavailable to us, raising again the complicated question of who owns writing. As Deborah Brandt points out in *The Rise of Writing*, "When people write for pay, they write at the will and under the control of the employer, and their skills and experiences as writers belong among the assets of their organizations" (163). While Brandt draws attention to contemporary corporate settings, Nordstrom's workplace writings can be used to demonstrate that this state of affairs also has a history. As feminist historiographers continue to explore women's rhetorical strategies

in professional settings, Nordstrom's story calls for action: to find corporate archives and to persuade gatekeepers to make documents available. This is something I hope yet to do with Nordstrom. "To even hold something in Ursula Nordstrom's penmanship would be a thrill," I wrote to the Harper archivist, seeking entry to her papers. Years later, I still feel that way.

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