

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ARCHIVIST

Nan Johnson

There are several myths attending the archive. One is that it is unmediated, that objects located there might mean something outside of the framing of the archival impetus itself.

—Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in America*

In the mid-1980s, I was a young assistant professor with no training in historical research whatsoever who had set for herself the task of writing a project entitled “Nineteenth-century Rhetoric in North America.” I was working in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia teaching the history and theory of rhetoric, composition, and argument courses. Nothing I was doing professionally and nothing I had done up that time, including writing a dissertation, had prepared me to do historical research. When I look back on it, I am surprised I ever came up with anything, so haphazard was my lurching after method. I certainly did not know that archival research, acts of collecting, and “framing” historical evidence would transform my understanding of historiography and my definition of what it means to account for the history of rhetorical practices as cultural phenomena.

Like most English studies folks, I had been trained in close reading. As I cast about for a sense of historical method, my first hunch was that my colleagues in the “old” periods like medieval and Renaissance must know *something* about historical research. I sought them out in their offices, cornering them with what must have seemed the most obvious question of all time: “I want to trace the development of nineteenth-century rhetoric, what do I do first?” Lucky for me

they had an answer: “Identify archives where there are holdings that would help you, go there, study the texts, start gathering evidence.” At the same time, I knew that Andrea Lunsford (my colleague at UBC at the time) and Winifred Horner (the first history of rhetoric scholar I met) had been doing historical research on Scottish rhetoric. These good women had even *traveled to Scotland* to gather editions of texts and study archival material.

Pointed in the direction of archives and gathering primary texts by good advice and example, I filled out my first grant proposal requesting travel money for archival research. Startled to actually get the money, I traveled to the British Library, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, rare-book collections at Cambridge University, the Canadian National Archives in Ottawa, and Robarts Library at the University of Toronto. I imposed on the patience of archivists and research librarians as I learned by trial and error how to identify sources and to record and copy what seemed important. I found, as most archival scholars do, that there is a great deal of serendipity in archival research. Sometimes I found what I thought I was looking for, sometimes I did not; sometimes I found something else instead and that led me to material I never expected. As time went on, I would come to have a high regard for the discovery of the *unexpected*; so often evidence I had not anticipated would lead me to knowledge I had not envisioned.

In the early days, I was unconscious of all this as an intellectual process. In addition to traveling to archives, I also consulted archives at a distance, becoming a familiar face to our interlibrary-loan librarian and staff as I sent for college catalogues and nineteenth-century American textbooks and materials I could not find in Canada. I began to write, relying on piles of note cards, photocopies of textbooks and dissertations, a fledgling collection of hardcopies of nineteenth-century rhetoric texts, and manila folders galore packed with secondary articles on nineteenth-century rhetoric. I plunged into writing *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America* with the illusion of the innocent: I thought I had located, studied, copied, and collected enough data.

About two-thirds the way through and writing under a preliminary contract from Southern Illinois University Press, a creeping sense of panic started to come over me. I realized I did *not* have enough material to finish the book. I had ended up writing an account that led to a final chapter that I could not document. (Anyone else had *this* experience?) *Now*, I know that this kind of gap is actually a wondrous opportunity for intellectual and archival invention. *Then*, all I knew was that I wanted to finish the book with a discussion of how the formal discipline of rhetoric supported the cultural agenda for liberal education in North America, and it looked to me like I did not have the primary materials to do it. “Not a whole other round of archival research,” I moaned. Desperate and racing for the tape of a submission deadline, I culled through my piles and folders and library of texts just

in case I had missed something! This was the moment that without consciousness of my method, I visited the archive of my own for the first time.

Within the archive I already had, I was intrigued to find that I had more than enough material to pursue the argument I wanted to make in what became the last chapter in *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America*, "Habits of Eloquence" (173–226). Packed into small, Girl Scout cookie-size cardboard boxes arranged across the old couch in my cramped study, tucked into folders in my two rolling files, embedded in stacks of already much-beloved old textbooks, I located evidence I did not realize I had already collected: speeches by key educators addressing the importance of rhetoric in a liberal education; essays by similar figures published in nineteenth-century education periodicals; arguments for the benefits of rhetorical study in the introductions of textbooks by Samuel P. Newman, Alexander Bain, and John Franklin Genung; and annotations in college catalogues explaining the intended outcomes of rhetoric classes. The recognition that I had the evidence I needed in my own untidy collection of research materials, not yet an "archive" in my own thinking, was a key moment in my life as a writer of archival histories. This was the first time it occurred to me that there was reason and rhyme in what and how material gets collected that was not always immediately clear.

As I did my archival research for my first project, the acts of "framing" that shape how an archive becomes an archive and the configuration of the knowledge it represents observed by Diana Taylor were well underway in my process. I can see, looking back, that as I researched, identified, studied, found, made choices, and followed leads, I was giving contour, weight, direction, and angle to the materials I collected. Those configuring choices affected the substance of the historical narrative I ended up writing. Perhaps, the surprise that I had material I did not really remember collecting was just a *forgetting* of methodological choices I had already made. I do not think this process is as simple as saying one finds the evidence in an archive that one is looking for. It feels messier than that: more creative, more intellectually intuitive, more metonymic. I understand what Taylor means by "framing" and by likening the archival process to an inexplicable dance between what we go to find and what is there to recognize. This sounds a bit like comparing the archival experience to making art.

The autobiography of my life as a collector and archivist picks up again after my first project was published. After writing my narrative about nineteenth-century academic rhetoric, I seemed to have material "left over." After moving to take job at Ohio State University, I unpacked my materials for the completed project thinking I would store what I had already used. (Interestingly, it never occurred to me to actually dispose of any of these materials.) Instead, I found myself trying to make sense of these leftovers. Upon closer inspection, I could see

that I had collected a greater range of rhetoric texts than I treated in my discussion of academic rhetorical theory and practices. In the leftovers were assorted letter-writing manuals, elocution texts, rhetoric reciters, and reading anthologies. I had not used this historical material because in my original mindset, these texts represented popular rhetorical education, and that fell outside the territory I had charted for myself in the first book. Actually, these leftovers comprised a "collection within the larger collection." In the terms I would use now, I had compiled an "archive within an archive," and that newly recognized material would point the way toward a new historical project. The leftovers, appropriately recognized and framed as new evidence, were pointing toward another narrative waiting to be written. As it turned out, at the very next Conference on College Composition and Communication, I presented a paper on popular rhetorical education in nineteenth-century America. It was at this time that I also began working on the parlor rhetoric concept that would coanchor my second project, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866–1910* (2002). I never did store any material. I was thinking like an archivist even then.

There is an important postscript to this moment in my story when I first re-categorized leftover material as part of the archival core for a new inquiry. As amazing as it is to me now, twenty years ago I was aware of but not focused on the gender and class politics of rhetorical education, or so I thought. Interestingly, the unpacking and pretense at organizing storage revealed yet another set of leftovers, yet another collection within the collection. I had also collected material on nineteenth-century attitudes toward women's education, curriculum information from women's colleges, and flagged passages or references to women in the textbooks or documents already in the archive. It would take much more time before the force of this second collection within the collection would reveal the connection between parlor rhetoric and gendered rhetorical space that emerged later as the dual focus of my second project.

The years unfolded in a crowded and intense way. Persistently in a back corner of my scholarly mind, the project yoking popular rhetoric, gender, and rhetorical space slowly developed. The most tangible fact that this project was being nurtured somewhere in my mind was that I continued to collect historical materials. Only now, I collected in categories. My archival method had evolved definitively; earlier, I stumbled unknowingly into collecting in categories I had framed without noticing it. Now, I quite consciously collected in particular genres, primarily letter-writing manuals, elocution texts, parlor rhetoric manuals, and anthologies of readings for performance. The archive was filling up with popular rhetoric handbooks. At the same time but still less intensely, I began to amass more material on nineteenth-century cultural attitudes toward women's rhetorical education and any gendered rhetoric materials I came across. As I sought out rhetoric manuals

marketed to the general public, I found texts like *The Ellen Terry's Ladies Reciter* (1884), a volume compiled in the name of that great lady of the Shakespearean theater and claiming to be a "Proper book to put into the hands of schoolgirls, sweethearts, wives and daughters" (iv). This cross-over text that was both popular and gendered was interesting. "Where there was one manual like this, there must be another," I reasoned. From then on, I was on the lookout for rhetoric manuals that were aimed at one gender or the other, and I found several. Through incremental recalibrations of what I sought and what I collected, the gap closed slowly between the popular rhetoric collection and the gender and rhetoric collection within my ever-expanding archive.

At this point in my story, collecting archival material had become a heuristic act. Collecting had become as important to my ability to imagine a historical problem as the close study of texts, background reading, or the review of existing scholarship. The determinate dialectic between the material and the intellectual imagination blended the roles of collector and archivist irrevocably, making the act of collecting historical material an inquiry laden with tendency. It might seem too simple to say that acts of collecting and the formation of the collection epistemologically constructed the argument I would eventually make about the gendered struggle in American culture over rhetorical space. Yet, the historical evidence, continually shaped by framed collecting, would eventually provide an intellectual hologram for the project, an insight hovering above the archive waiting to be seen.

Through tumultuous and challenging times in my life, I never stopped collecting. Every antique mall, antiquarian bookstore, and second-hand whatnot shop in my path was an opportunity to look for books and any trace of the popular uses of rhetoric. While others on the tour of William T. Sherman's boyhood home in Lancaster, Ohio, were listening attentively to the tour guide describe the famous general's early life, I was leaning as close as possible to the only bookcase in the historic residence to see if a copy of Ebenezer Porter's *Rhetorical Reader* (1848) or Albert Cogswell's *Gentlemen's Perfect Letter Writer* (1877) might be spied through the smoky-glass case supposedly holding Sherman's original library. Somewhat like a dedicated birder, I diligently recorded such sightings in small, unexpected archives: historic residences, historical societies, even the "libraries" of old inns claiming to have historical relevance. I carefully filed my notes as if I were adding the literal texts to my archive. The imperative of collecting was by now a constant intellectual habit.

One cold, snowy day (possibly 1996), a huge billboard advertising the antique mall that "had everything" enticed me off Interstate 71 despite worsening blizzard conditions. I drove away an hour later with a copy of *The American Orator* (1901), a parlor rhetoric text that included photographs I would later use in *Gender*

and *Rhetorical Space* to illustrate the limitations of "feminine" rhetorical performances. I had no idea that winter day exactly how *The American Orator* would figure in my developing theory of gendered rhetorical space; I was only exalted to have "new stuff" in my hands. Smiling all the way up the icy on-ramp headed south to Columbus, I bore the volume home in triumph. Collecting efforts like these, too numerous to count, sustained an enterprise of scholarly research even when few words got down on the page. My sense of the domain and ideology of parlor rhetoric deepened as my archive of popular treatises grew, and folders bulged with copies of elocution manuals and letter-writing guides. Collecting was thinking: thinking was collecting.

My new collections of letter writing texts, elocution texts, and popular rhetoric manuals expanded the original pile of leftovers into a substantial new wing of my archive. Instead of a half-dozen examples of these genres of texts, I had accumulated dozens. The depth and range of these new collections now extended my holdings in nineteenth-century rhetoric materials beyond that of many formal archives and rare-book rooms. I was visiting my own archive more often.

While I never missed the opportunity to collect popular manuals or what struck me as gendered materials, I still had not made the intellectual connection between my interest in how rhetorical pedagogy was marketed to the general public and the gendered bias I had identified in parlor rhetorics like *The American Orator*. Had I forgotten once again why I was identifying the sources I was so assiduously compiling? What was I missing? Why weren't the collections fitting together?

I was determined to figure out the Big Picture of my developing argument. What *had* I collected? What could it tell me? I took everything out of the archive shelves and made piles on the floor, one pile for each genre I had been collecting: a pile of elocution manuals, a pile of letter-writing texts, a pile of parlor rhetoric texts, a pile of encyclopedias that treated letter writing, a small stack of conduct manuals that included advice on letters. I set up all these collections in stacks in a wide circle, like the outside rim of a large wheel. I made signs for each stack with black magic marker on yellow, lined paper: Elocution! Letter Writing! Encyclopedias! Conduct Manuals! Parlor Rhetoric! I stared and stared, around the rim of signs, around the wheel of stacks. With astonishment, I realized there was no center to my wheel. All the stacks seemed to be pointing inward to something. What was it? I placed a blank sheet of yellow paper in the center. What was the stack that was not there? What was the hub of the wheel? I stood in the center of the wheel on the blank paper and turned slowly, looking at all the stacks of books and signs on the rim and then, quite simply, I saw it. I realized with a rush of adrenalin that all the stacks represented historical evidence of the same phenomena: *types of rhetorical pedagogy that inscribe women into gendered rhetorical spaces!* There was the argument for the whole book right on the floor, all points

on the wheel pointing to the center: gendered rhetorical space. I made the sign immediately and placed it in the center of the wheel.

The wheel experiment revealed that the coherent argument linking popular rhetorical education to gendered rhetorical roles was in the material of the archive all along, embedded in the hardback copies and the aging, brown pages, in the framing, in the forgotten rationale for collecting. I left the wheel on the floor for a couple of days. Finally, I had to move the material out of harm's way so I made a sketch of it with the center now filled in, "Gendered Rhetorical Space," and taped it to the wall above my computer under the title "Archival Wheel."

I looked at all the "collections" in my archive with new eyes. Traces of gendered formulations of rhetorical behavior seemed to be everywhere! I felt very much like a kid who had been looking at one of those playful drawings of the farmyard with the tricky direction: "Find the light bulb in the farmyard." Of course, once one *sees* the light bulb skillfully sketched into the top of the barn door, one simply can not *stop* seeing it! In exactly this way, I saw the whole archive anew with just that kind of "oh, my gosh" clarity. The Archival Wheel was a dramatic example of the heuristic force of the archival, and it set me on yet another phase of collecting as invention.

The recognition of the intellectual architecture of the Archival Wheel created new archival impulses and shifted my methods of collecting evidence. The wheel had revealed an interrelated system of prescriptive rhetorical treatises working in concert to constrain women's rhetorical choices and spaces. That system was obviously a dynamic one, one sustained by cultural energy and discourses. What were the cultural conditions and values that set this system in motion and sustained it? How could I trace the everyday influence of that system? To answer these questions, I started collecting a greater range of cultural materials. Hoping to be able to document the ubiquitous nature of cultural discourses converging upon rhetorical practices and space as a sites for limiting women's choices, I kept the image of the archival wheel constantly in mind.

Locating books long out of circulation but still in the stacks across the river in the repository of the OSU Library, I recalled, examined, and copied dozens of collections of the "masterpieces" of American oratory published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This material allowed me to track the extent to which women speakers were written out of the canon of American public speaking. I added extensive holdings in periodical literature to the archive, collecting issues of *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Peterson's Ladies National Magazine*, *The Ladies Repository*, *The Ladies Companion*, *Educational Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Scribner's Monthly* that focused on the topics of women's education and women's roles. Biographical and autobiographical accounts of the careers of "famous" American women such as Mary Earhart's *Eminent Women of the Age*

(1868) and Mary A. Livermore's *The Story of My Life or the Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Years* (1897) started appearing on the archive shelves as I concentrated on collecting evidence of how women who did achieve prominence as public speakers handled the cultural pressure to conform to traditional roles.

The collection of such texts took me well beyond the arc of the archive I compiled during my earlier work on nineteenth-century academic rhetoric. Although I did collect supporting cultural materials for that study, those materials were generically traditional: rhetoric treatises and discussions of the role of rhetoric in education. In collecting an archive for the developing project on gender and rhetorical space, I had already exceeded the perimeters of that original archival impulse by extending generic categories of "rhetorical text" to include sources of rhetorical instruction published under other generic headings such as "parlor entertainment" and "conduct." With the goal of accounting for nature and effects of multiple venues of prescriptive rhetorical education in cultural motion (the archival wheel), I now focused even more attention on collecting cultural materials that charted a new rubric for *where* evidence of rhetorical theory and practices could be located. Inevitably, my definitions of what can be called "the rhetorical" shifted as well.

I now knew that the sources of gendered rhetorical education were multiple, formal, informal, academic, popular, blatant, and subtle. Intensifying my search for cultural evidence of the problem of rhetorical education and gendered rhetorical space, I began to collect artifacts of material culture, a category of evidence that I could not have imagined seeking as a novice archivist.

In *Gender and Rhetorical Space*, I used several illustrations to convey the embodied rhetorical limitations that nineteenth-century middle-class women were encouraged to see as virtues. Prominent among these illustrations was "Dear Millie," a drawing from the front cover of a nineteenth-century advertising circular that would become the featured visual in the chapter on letter writing. More important, "Dear Millie" became the prototype for the kind of artifact of material culture that would become increasingly important to my research and to the configuration of the archive:

On the cover of *The Shelby Dry Goods Herald*, a sales catalogue published locally in Shelby, Ohio in 1883, a fashionably dressed, middle-class young woman holds up a letter in one hand and an envelope in the other as if she had just opened a letter that had brought her good news. Simulated handwriting on the letter and envelope lends realism to this engraved line-drawing in which the smiling woman looks directly out into the reader's eyes. The drawing fills most of the space of this 8-by-11 catalog bearing the title *The Shelby Dry Goods Herald*. (Johnson 77)



Figure 19. "Dear Millie," *Shelby Dry Goods Herald*, 1883.

I found Millie smiling from the cover of *The Shelby Dry Goods Herald* in a box of ephemera on the counter of one of my favorite used-book shops three blocks from my house. I stopped in to see if I could find yet *another* nineteenth-century encyclopedia. Amusing myself with some desultory browsing, I flipped through a box of odds and ends, something I did not usually do. Ephemera had not yet gotten my collecting attention. When I saw Millie, I knew at first sight that the troublesome letter-writing chapter I had been struggling with had just fallen into place and that my archival process had changed permanently.

Call it luck? I called it fate. Collecting "Dear Millie" was a turning point in my archivist autobiography. Sightings of rhetoric texts in the bookcases of facsimile

nineteenth-century libraries and homes and imagining parlor rhetoric texts as common "sideboard" texts in American homes had come close to conjuring the reality of use I so wanted to understand about the place of rhetoric in American life. Holding the tattered catalogue cover of *The Shelby Dry Goods Herald* in my hands and looking at Millie waving her opened letter, I grasped for the first time the complete ordinariness and power of rhetorical protocol in the lives of the women I was studying.

"Dear Millie" revealed the synergy between rhetorical forms and the material texture of everyday life; that revelation now shapes how I recognize and collect artifacts of rhetorical culture. This has become my guiding question: *What does this everyday artifact tell us about how rhetorical genres and values are put in place and upheld?* By deploying this question, a wider arc of cultural inscriptions dictating whose words matter in American culture has become obvious. I continue to look for nineteenth-century materials but have extended my collecting to twentieth-century artifacts that will allow me to continue to explore the complex rhetorical problem of whose words are valued in American culture and why. Recent additions to the archive reveal evidence of the inscription of rhetorical culture by everyday materials: a 1901 postcard photograph of President William McKinley addressing a large crowd at the Pan American Exposition bearing the caption, "The last words of President McKinley's address, Pan American Exposition"; a copy of the *Banner Program* Chautauqua (1912), emblazoned with the Chautauqua goals, "Recreation, Education, Development, Free Speech, Honest Convictions"; *My Hero Book* (1947), an elementary schoolbook highlighting the lives of "Great Men," which provides the full text of "The Gettysburg Address" as the first selection (Diemer 7); and an issue of *National Geographic* (August 1965) covering the career and funeral of Winston Churchill and commemorating Churchill's death with a tear-out, plastic LP recording of Churchill's speeches capturing "the sound of living history" (199). Ephemera, schoolbooks, magazines, records, and more are quickly filling new cardboard boxes in the archive and messily piling up in stacks that are slipping onto the floor. My life as an archivist thus far encourages me to anticipate that another Archival Wheel might soon be forming!

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