Transcript of

"Rhetorical History 2.0: Toward a Digital Transgender Archive"

K.J. Rawson
College of the Holy Cross
kjrawson@holycross.edu
www.kjrawson.net

Abstract

This 20-minute video essay sets out to explore how the digital age is changing the nature of rhetorical history. Focused on online transgender-related historical materials, this video argues that online spaces can provide alternative and innovative mechanisms for preserving, accessing, and creating history while helping to broaden more traditional notions of rhetorical history and archives.

Title Slide: Rhetorical History 2.0: Toward a Digital Transgender Archive; K.J. Rawson; College of the Holy Cross

Video: Clip from "Dear Dad, Love Maria."

Narration: The environment for historical materials related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people is rapidly shifting. As the internet continues to change the way that we conduct historical research, our very notions of history and what counts as historical are evolving.

Video: Screencast of "The National Archives Experience Digital Vaults," fades to background.

Narration: In this video essay, my goal is to explore online historical artifacts—where we find them, what they look like, and how they challenge us to test the boundaries of what constitutes history. While most traditional historical research in rhetorical studies is rooted in material archives, I want to begin thinking through the ways that archives may be developed and used in cyberspace.

Slide: Historians of rhetoric should carefully consider the context of digital historical materials. We should strive to include born-digital materials in our repertoire of historical artifacts.

Narration: The overall argument that I am building toward here is that historians of rhetoric should carefully consider the context of digital historical materials and we should strive to include born-digital materials in our repertoire of historical artifacts.

Music: "The Message Hip Hop Instrumental."

Video: Series of screenshots of websites related to transgender history. Screencast of *SFGate* "Cross dressing in the 20th century" photo gallery, fades to background.

Narration: My focus throughout this essay is on online transgender history, which I am framing here as a type of case study. The implicit argument that motivates this approach is that accounts of transgender lives and experiences cannot only be found in traditional archives and in non-digital spaces. As many scholars have noted, the archive is primarily a mechanism of power.

Slide: "...the archive is primarily the product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status." (20)

Narration: Achille Mbembe summarizes this point very usefully when he writes, "...the archive is primarily the product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others

are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status" (20).

Video: Screenshots of queer archives websites.

Narration: As queer archives have emerged to intentionally collect materials related to LGBT people, the archive as a status has been used with intentional political force.

Slide: Whose history is being archived? What histories are deemed unarchivable?

Narration: Yet the same concerns that catalyzed the initial establishment of queer archives are still relevant today: whose history is being archived? What histories are deemed unarchivable?

Video: Series of screenshots of websites related to transgender history.

Narration: By seeking out the sites where transgender history is being produced and transmitted digitally, I am continuing to push these questions in order to account for a broader range of transgender experiences and to continue to challenge our fundamental notions about what constitutes an archive and what counts as history. I refer to this as a case study because these same arguments could also be made about other communities and identities to help destabilize where we find history, what it looks like, who gets to produce it and how we use it.

Video: Screencast of author.

Narration: In using this non-traditional format of a video essay, I am hoping to capture the ways that our research is rooted in very particular moments in history. I am trying to account for the impacts of the present moment, the minute-to-minute influences that shape our research.

Video: Screencast of author juxtaposed with a series of screenshots of websites related to knowledge production in digital environments.

Narration: This video essay is a research performance and meta-commentary on the ways and means of knowledge construction and production in digital environments. While most historical researchers still use the internet as a means to find what we assume to be more authentic historical materials within a traditional archive, online spaces can provide alternative and innovative mechanisms for preserving, accessing, and even creating history.

Video: Screencast of author juxtaposed with opening a browser and navigating to Google.

Narration: So where should we begin our exploration of the rich historical archive of the internet? With Google, of course! While this may seem like a rather pedestrian way to begin a serious research project, internet users often overlook the ways that search engines such as Google direct our research process in imperceptible but influential ways.

Video: Screencast of author juxtaposed with Google search session.

Narration: As I begin searching with the phrase "transgender history," you'll notice that Google uses autofill to suggest some matches including the amusing hit "transgender miss universe." In a recent article, Janine Solberg points out that Google searches are impacted by things such as the geographic location where we are searching from, autocomplete, and previous search history (62-63).

Slide: How are they impacting our research?

Narration: While Google users may be increasingly familiar with these aspects of the search engine, we should ask: how are they impacting our research?

Video: Screencast of Google change of location.

Narration: What this illustrates is the myriad ways that our positionality and our own history is deeply intertwined with the digital technologies we are using—further evidence that we are always embodied researchers, even in digital space.

Video: Screencast of Google search suggestions and navigation to suggested sites, fades to background.

Narration: Though more difficult to track, Google's autocomplete feature, formulated by an algorithm including geographic location, previous search history, and most popular hits, nudges us to select one of the options provided. These nudges suggest a rhetoric of decision-making that sends us down particular research pathways, which are increasingly influenced by search engines themselves.

Slide: "Understanding historical research as kairotic means seeing chance not as an inconvenient but inevitable disruption of our carefully prepared methods but as an integral component of those methods." (Christa J. Olson "Introduction: Practicing Histories" 2)

Narration: Christa Olson's argument that historical research hinges upon *kairos* seems particularly animated here, encouraging us to treat chance and opportunity as integral components of our digital historical research methods (2).

Music: "Memories - Hip Hop Instrumental."

Video: Author's photographs from archival research.

Narration: So if we want to push past this surface level, realizing that we're really tying to find authentic historical artifacts online, where would we look?

Video: Screencasts of browsing the websites of the GLBT Historical Society, the Transgender Center, and the Transgender Archives.

Narration: A first step might be to research trusted, established archives to determine if they have digitized any of their materials. While most established LGBT archives are making attempts to digitize some historical artifacts, there is still very little that can be accessed online and even less that relates to transgender experiences in particular. One example is the GLBT Historical Society's "Gayback Machine," which shows how digitizing attempts are being made, but they are still quite nascent. Another example is the Houston-based Transgender Center Library & Archive, which maintains a blog where they sporadically post about some of their collection. Finally, there are university-based collections such as the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, whose website has several images that may lure potential researchers.

Slide: How do we encounter these artifacts differently in digital space? Will our interpretations and uses of these artifacts be different than if we encountered them in a traditional archive? Has the nature of the historical artifact changed by virtue of being digitized?

Narration: Encounters with traditional archival materials in digital spaces should prompt a range of questions: How do we encounter these artifacts differently in digital space? Will our interpretations and uses of these artifacts be different than if we encountered them in a traditional archive? Has the nature of the historical artifact changed by virtue of being digitized?

Video: Screencast of a website showcasing archival material juxtaposed with author's photograph.

Narration: The most obvious impact of digitization is that it shifts the context for historical materials. All archiving requires a profound recontextualization of historical artifacts because most materials collected in an archive are not created there, nor are they created in order to be archived. Digitization highlights the impacts of such recontextualization because it seems far more dramatic for most historical materials.

Video: Screencast of a website displaying Hedy Jo Star Clothing.

Narration: For example, consider the digital context of the Hedy Jo Star clothing. In a traditional archive, we'd expect to find this carefully wrapped in tissue paper in an acid free box, which we would have found through using a search engine and a finding aid. But online, we are offered very different metadata and historical information about this artifact: it is "vintage designer clothing," and we can learn about Hedy Jo Star from the digitized newspaper linked below. There are comments on the bottom, which opens up space for an online, asynchronous conversation, which is a significant departure from a more traditional archival encounter. The clothing then gathers significance through this digital context and we learn information about it that we may not learn, or we might learn in a different way, if we were visiting the archive in person.

Video: Clip from YouTube video of Lou Sullivan titled "No Regrets."

Narration: A second example is a collection of videos of Lou Sullivan posted by the GLBT Historical Society on YouTube. When an analog artifact is digitized and recontextualized on a site like YouTube, it becomes rhetorically animated in a new way.

Video: Screencast of YouTube website showing context of Sullivan video.

Narration: The Sullivan video is associated with linked videos on the right of the screen—some that are clearly related but most seem completely off. What do the Super Bowl Bound Packers have to do with Lou Sullivan? Perhaps the trans lingo of binding and packers is somehow making the connection?

Video: Screencast of browsing GLBT Historical Society YouTube channel.

Narration: My point is that surrounding information in digital collections becomes a type of metadata, which induces us to form expectations and interpretations and persuades us to follow research pathways. Unlike an interpretive context that an archive might offer—such as juxtaposition with related historical materials, detailed finding aids, and even the VHS tape as itself a marker of the past—the YouTube search interface dehistoricizes artifacts and flattens the time that separates this footage from more recent videos. The archival principle of provenance is shattered by the YouTube access practices, which are determined by invisible algorithms constantly suggesting videos that are related and videos that you may also like. While YouTube may be an archive in the most basic sense of collecting, preserving and making videos accessible, it lacks conventional archival infrastructure and provenance is whittled down to channels and accounts.

Video: Screencast of browsing comments on a Lou Sullivan video on YouTube.

Narration: But at the same time, YouTube offers many important benefits as well—interconnectivity, user-generated content, connections across time, wider accessibility, and space for dialogue.

Video: Screenshot of YouTube data and screencast of Bill Endres video on "Potentials for 3D in the Study of Manuscripts," fades to background.

Narration: What this means for rhetoricians is that as sites such as YouTube continue to amass vast amounts of material relevant for our interests in rhetorical history and as new technologies change the way we interact with historical materials, the archive's function as a status is changing.

Slide: "The technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event." (Jacques Derrida *Archive Fever* 17)

Narration: As Derrida observed in *Archive Fever:* "The technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event" (17).

Video: Screencast of browsing the John Peel digital archive.

Narration: While Derrida seems to share Mbembe's concern with what materials are archivable, the larger point that Derrida offers is that as digital technologies provide new mechanisms for archiving, such technologies will simultaneously change the production and interpretation of history. As we become increasingly attuned to our digital productions, it becomes clearer that the judgment and selection involved in traditional archiving is shifting from the archivist to the researcher as we wade through the tremendous amounts of materials available to us and learn to use these new technologies that facilitate archiving archives.

Video: Clip from YouTube video, "Transgender Center TG History Tour."

Narration: With historical videos that are posted to YouTube, the impacts of digitization are mostly related to context, but in some cases the process of digitizing analog materials can result in a dramatic shift in the very nature of those materials. To stay focused on YouTube, let's look at a tour posted by The Houston Transgender Center Library & Archive. What's so interesting about this tour is that they have used video technology to showcase analog materials, which creates a new and hybrid artifact. The digitization process has intertwined traditional historical objects, a video taken at a particular historical moment, and an explanatory narrative that unfolds in the captions, all while dramatic classical music plays in the background. As rhetoricians we might be interested in the complexity of such an object because of the production, circulation, and effects of these different artifacts produced at different moments in time and combined through digitization into a single object.

Music: "The Message Hip Hop Instrumental."

Slide: Born-digital materials.

Narration: Perhaps even more pressing than our need to examine the impacts of digital contexts and the digitizing of historical materials is the critical attention we should be paying to born-digital materials.

Video: Screencast of browsing Alexander and Rhodes' web article on *Enculturation*.

Narration: Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes recently published a webtext in which they argue, building upon Charles Morris's work, that a queer response to archival silence can be increasingly found in online archives. But what constitutes an online archive?

Video: Screencast of browsing Cornell University Library website.

Narration: While traditional archives are building their digital presence, as I have already mentioned, they cannot be relied upon as the sole source of digital historical materials.

Video: Screenshot of Queer Voices.

Narration: In online environments, queer voices that can fill those archival silences can be found in abundance.

Video: Screencast of "The National Archives Experience Digital Vaults," fades to background.

Slide: How do we determine which digital materials should be considered archival or historical at all?

Narration: But without the authenticity that established archives lend to digital artifacts, we are left with a challenging question: how do we determine which digital materials should be considered archival or historical at all?

Video: Screenshot of *The Journal of American History*.

Slide: "...we should begin to consider media not simply the *medium* by which we interact and communicate with others, but in a quite literal sense a *place*." (Thomas Rickert 252)

Narration: One way to begin answering this question is to engage Thomas Rickert's argument that, "...we should begin to consider media not simply the *medium* by which we interact and communicate with others, but in a quite literal sense a *place"* (252).

Video: Screenshots of transgender-related digital content and websites.

Narration: The close examination of the place of digital materials that Rickert advocates would lend itself to a deeper understanding of the ways that rhetorical invention is evoked by particular sites of digital production and circulation.

Video: Screencast of browsing FTM transition website and YouTube channel.

Narration: Within the sizable corner of the web dedicated to transgender narratives, it becomes clear that a dialectic between the rhetorical goals of a particular author and the invention catalyzed by the digital media tool itself creates a digital place of community identity formation. For example, many digital transgender productions share the goals of documenting a person's gendered experiences and sharing those experiences with others. This FTM transition blog is an example of a highly developed site that illustrates this dual desire to both document the author's experiences transitioning from female to male and also to share those experiences with a broader audience. YouTube has countless videos that serve a similar purpose.

Video: Screenshots of transgender-related websites.

Narration: And there are also sites such as LiveJournal and Susan's Place where trans people support active community forums and resource pages. These examples of blogs, videos, and online forums and groups can be easily identifiable as history because their purpose is, at least in part, to create a historical record of transgender experience. They transcend the particular medium in which they are created and share a similar catalyst for rhetorical invention.

Video: Audio clip and screencast of browsing "Trans-Ponder" podcast.

Video: Screenshots of transgender-related websites.

Narration: Such digital transgender culture is a growing part of transgender lives and without including it in our histories we would be ignoring a major site of historical production.

Video: Screencast of browsing LA Transgender Film Festival website.

Narration: While I don't believe that digital content is entirely replacing analog materials, it's clear that there has been an ongoing shift in balance and that has important implications for rhetoricians.

Slide: "...the archive is primarily the product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is **fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection**, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but **a status**." (20)

Video: Screencasts of browsing Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media and searching Urban Dictionary.

Narration: To recall Mbembe's argument that any archival initiative involves selection and exclusion, that any archive is a status, it's an easy jump to imagine that cyberspace could be the ideal democratizing solution: anyone can create content and make it publicly available and institutional process is not required to deem something worthy of preservation. The old guard of analog, status-based archivability may be faltering. But, there are great complexities inherent in digital preservation and important critiques of such utopian visions of the Internet.

Video: Screencast of browsing Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives.

Narration: Yet the point remains that websites that feature user-related content facilitate the production and distribution of personal narratives and community knowledges without the same filtering system as a traditional archive.

Video: Screencast of browsing transgender comic website.

Narration: By intentionally seeking out born-digital materials, we can enrich our rhetorical histories with artifacts that might be deemed unarchivable by a more traditional archive, or worse, considered unworthy of the historical record.

Music: "Memories - Hip Hop Instrumental."

Video: Screenshots of transgender-related websites and screencast of browsing a trans blog.

Narration: While I have been developing an argument that we readily embrace born-digital materials as part of our repertoire of historical artifacts, the major challenge in this approach is how we determine which born-digital materials might be relevant for our interests in rhetorical history. The materials that I have discussed thus far— blogs, forums, websites, and vlogs—might all be readily accepted as worthy of inclusion because their authorship and purpose, while debatable, are still verifiable to an extent. But what about artifacts that flirt with the line between fact and fiction (which is a common dilemma in cyberspace)?

Video: Clip of "Dear Dad, Love Maria" juxtaposed with screencast of research on filmmaker.

Narration: This essay began with a clip from an animated film titled "Dear Dad, Love Maria," which was created by Vince Mascoli and it was disseminated online and screened at a number of film festivals. Some quick research on the film reveals that Mascoli identifies as transgender and in the process of exploring that identity "found that a lot of things were being untold." Mascoli thus offers this film as a corrective, as a queer way to break historical silences. Mascoli goes on to explain that, "I always set out to make a film about a person growing up who happens to be trans. I didn't want it to be about being trans. I would have to make too many assumptions there. I thought if I could tell some of my story, then that would bring my truth to it. I also included some traits of stories I read on transblogs."

Music: "The Message Hip Hop Instrumental."

Narration: Truthful representations of transgender identity, for Mascoli, cannot be offered from a single person's perspective, but through a mashup and blending of many people's experiences.

Video: Clips of three YouTube videos, shown simultaneously.

Narration: I want to highlight this point of departure from traditional historical narratives as a particular opportunity that born-digital materials can offer our rhetorical histories because of the innovative ways that people are engaging with historical representation through digital technologies. By utilizing artistic creativity, digital technologies, and a refigured sense of how we come to represent experience and identity, Mascoli's film challenges traditional and analog standards of authenticity. This film pushes the boundaries of what transgender history is supposed to look like. The lesson this offers for rhetorical historians is that by intentionally including born-digital artifacts into our histories we can also push the boundaries of where we find rhetorical histories and what they are supposed to look like.

Slide: "we are still negotiating multiple and contested understandings of what constitutes the history of rhetoric [and] how to study it…" (Agnew, Gries, and Stuckey 110)

Narration: In their introduction to the third Octalog, Lois Agnew, Laurie Gries, and Zosha Stuckey note that while all three Octalogs share a similar call for uncovering and recovering neglected or hidden histories, they observe that "we are still negotiating multiple and

contested understandings of what constitutes the history of rhetoric [and] how to study it…" (110).

Video: Screencast of desktop with multiple windows showcasing range of transgender-related digital materials.

Slide: ~The constitution of the history of rhetoric should include born-digital artifacts. ~How we study the history of rhetoric should negotiate the new and shifting terrain of digital contexts.

Narration: This video essay attempts to speak to both of these points by arguing that the constitution of the history of rhetoric should include born-digital artifacts and how we study the history of rhetoric should negotiate the new and shifting terrain of digital contexts. The digital age and increasingly complex means of representing identity provide us with an opportunity to continue the field's important work of expanding what counts as history and what constitutes an archive.

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