Changing Research Methods, Changing History: A Reflection on Language, Location, and Archive

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This essay reflects on the research methods the author employed to write three Chicana teachers into the history of rhetorical education. Her reflections ultimately push beyond her experience to explore how scholars can continue to research and investigate the pedagogies composed by and for marginalized populations at non-elite institutions. In taking up this work, however, she also exposes a number of unarticulated assumptions at the heart of historiographic practice that subtly shape research activities and prevent the diversification and expansion of research, writing, and thinking.

["When we resist primacy, traditional paradigms for seeing and valuing participation, even in composition studies, are inadequate. They obviously miss the experiences and achievements of many, and they privilege by this process the viewpoints and the interpretations of the officialized few, whether they are acknowledged as prime or not. The challenge then is to broaden the research base, the inquiry base, the knowledge base from which interpretive frameworks can be drawn, not simply to say that we know we don’t know but to do the work of finding out. We need methodologies for seeing the gaps in our knowledge and for generating the research that can help us fill those gaps.

—Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams, “History in the Spaces Left,” 1999 (582-3)

We do not at all mean that our children should not be taught the [English] language of the land that they live in, since it is the means that will enable them to communicate directly with their neighbors, and that will equip them to appreciate their rights. What we simply meant to say was that we ought not disregard the [Spanish] language, because it is the official stamp of the race and of the people.

—Jovita Idar, “The Mexican Children in Texas,” 1911 (1)

Over ten years ago, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams called scholars in the field to take up two interrelated tasks. The first was to counter officialized disciplinary narratives by composing histories of Rhetoric and Composition that account for marginalized rather than enfranchised students and teachers, as well as nontraditional rather than elite writing programs and pedagogies. The second was to articulate the research methods and methodologies that enable this kind of critical work.

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to come into being. Given the number of histories published over the last
decade, the first call has been (and continues to be) answered, with schol-
ars such as Anne Ruggles Gere, David Gold (Rhetoric), Susan Jarratt, Susan
Kates, Shirley Wilson Logan (Liberating), Kelly Ritter, Lucille Schultz, and
Stephen Schneider composing studies that enrich, expand, and complicate
understandings of writing instruction in the United States.\footnote{1} In terms of
Royster and Williams’s second call, however, there has not been as vocifer-
ous a response. While scholars have surely discussed larger issues of his-
toriographic method and methodology, we have not spent as much time
articulating and analyzing the \textit{particular} research strategies that allow us
to tell a “reconfigured, more fully textured story” of our field’s past (Royster
and Williams 581).\footnote{2}

This essay takes up this latter challenge by identifying and reflecting on
the research methods I used to write three teachers, Jovita Idar, Marta Peña,
and Leonor Villegas de Magnón, into the history of rhetorical education.
In the fourth chapter of \textit{Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching
African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911}, I
analyze the pedagogical arguments these women made through the pages
of \textit{La Crónica}, a turn-of-the-century, Spanish-language newspaper serving
Laredo, Texas, that was owned and operated by Idar and her family. As the
epigraph above indicates, Idar and her colleagues used the press to call for
educational practices that embraced the Spanish language, asserted cultural
knowledge, and reformulated civic duties. Their educational articles taught
readers to envision themselves as active agents who could promote Mexican
cultural traditions while negotiating the realities of their increasingly Anglo
and discriminatory Texas society. In assessing their work, I argue that Idar,
Peña, and Villegas offered their readers a resistant rhetorical education by
providing them with the discursive skills as well as the civic and cultural
knowledge necessary not just to participate in, but also to re-shape their
Laredo, Texas community. Thus, I use the chapter in my book to claim that
because these women composed such revolutionary pedagogical practices
inside the pages of \textit{La Crónica}, their work should revise our understandings
of how rhetorical education has occurred in this country.

In this article, I shift my scholarly emphasis to meditate on the research
methods that enabled me to write about these teachers and trouble dominant
narratives of rhetorical education. It is important to note that my focus in
this essay is on methods rather than methodology. Gesa Kirsch and Patricia
Sullivan identify the distinction between these terms, writing that while
methodology concerns itself with the “underlying theory and analysis of how
research does or should proceed,” methods are the “techniques or ways of
proceeding in gathering evidence” (2). Of course, it is almost impossible to
separate completely these two concepts—our theory surely informs the ways
we choose to gather evidence and vice versa. But in focusing attention on
method, we gain insight on the specific practices that enable us to produce a research project: the work of “locat[ing] and using primary materials [. . . and] achieving access to information” (L’Epplattenier, “Opinion” 69). As Barbara L’Epplattenier explains, “methods make the invisible work of historical research visible” (69). By making research methods visible, we attain a clearer sense of what historians are and are not doing when they compose their narratives. And, through this atomistic view, we have the opportunity to assess the practices that open up and close down historiographic possibilities, learning more about the methodological thruways and roadblocks that allow for and prevent alternative histories to be composed.

This meditation on my research methods ultimately aims to “broaden the research base, the inquiry base, the knowledge base from which interpretive frameworks can be drawn,” so that scholars in the field can continue to compose histories that center on marginalized populations and non-elite institutions (Royster and Williams 581). To do this work, I use the major sections of the essay to reflect on the three research methods that I believe distinguished my work: choosing a Spanish-language newspaper as a primary text; locating a history of rhetorical education at the border city of Laredo, Texas; and conducting research at the Webb County Historical Foundation, a small community archive in Laredo. As I make these reflections, I consider how each method brings to light a number of unarticulated assumptions that lie at the heart of traditional historiographic methods. These assumptions not only stand at the center of much historiographic work, but also have the potential to stand in the way of historiographic exploration and revision. My work here, then, is to interrogate these assumptions, suggesting new ways to gather and assess historiographic evidence.

**Primary Texts en Español**

The road that led me to choose *La Crónica* as a primary text was a bumpy and circuitous one. As a doctoral student at Penn State University, I embarked on a dissertation project that examined the work of female teachers at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1912, the teaching profession had become an “Adamless Eden,” and I was interested in learning more about the pedagogical practices of all of these “Eves” (Bardeen 18). More specifically, I wanted to interrogate the historiographic “fact” that the female teacher was an innocuous nurturer disinterested in the politics of education. So I began my research by looking to moments of conflict when teachers had to address questions of gender, race, culture, and power. The Mexican Revolution was one such moment. This period, I believed, could enable me to explore how teachers living on the Texas-Mexico border responded not just to the influx of Mexican immigrants to Texas, but also to the questions of nation, citizenship, culture, politics, and language that arrived with them.
Thus, I began my research by reading secondary materials about Mexican education in Texas, searching for references and footnotes that would lead to the field-specific artifacts valued by scholars in Rhetoric and Composition Studies such as textbooks, pedagogical materials, and collections of student papers. Time and again I came up with nothing. Disheartened, I felt as if my work was only reifying the “myth of Mexican indifference” that Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. writes about: the idea that “Mexican Americans have not really cared for education or else they have failed to appreciate its importance and benefit to their community in particular and to the society at large” (xvi). Wanting to challenge this myth, I turned to other secondary materials, this time looking for texts that addressed more general themes of Mexican political activity. Finally, I got my lead when I came across Jose Limón’s 1974 essay “El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911: A Precursor to Chicanismo.” In this article, Limón refers to the Spanish-language newspaper La Crónica as a “remarkable newspaper” that not only was dedicated to the “industrial, moral, and intellectual development” of Mexican people living in Texas, but also was concerned with the particular problem of educational discrimination in the state’s public schools (87, 88). Limón referenced the fact that the Idar family owned the press, with daughter Jovita Idar serving as an editor and contributor.

Eager to learn more about the educational agenda of the newspaper and Idar’s involvement in it, I requested the microfilm of the newspaper through interlibrary loan. Once I received the microfilm, a quick skim of its contents assured me that this was no dead end. On page after page, La Crónica printed articles in which writers spoke out against school discrimination and offered arguments for change. It railed against Americanization programs that enforced the English language and Anglo culture. It publicized Laredo’s escuelitas, the small, community-run schools often headed by female teachers that offered bilingual and bicultural education. And it functioned as an educational space itself, using its pages to teach readers about language, cultural, and civic issues. It did not take long for me to realize that I should pursue this text further, so I embarked on the rewarding and labor-intensive task of translating over 60 articles from the newspaper and focusing attention on the three teachers, Idar, Peña, and Villegas, whose pedagogical arguments spoke significantly to pressing questions about language, literacy, culture, and civic participation that circulate in the field today.4

The rewards in choosing La Crónica as a primary text prompt us to consider an obvious yet unarticulated research method central to our field’s historiographic work. Scholars who compose histories that investigate writing and rhetorical instruction in the U.S. certainly consult a wide range of primary materials. While more traditional or “curricular” histories rely on lecture notes, course descriptions, department meeting minutes, and so on, “extracurricular” histories—histories of those spaces outside the university
where writing and rhetorical instruction occurs—place under examination a different, more varied collection of materials, such as conduct books, club papers, newspapers, and parlor rhetorics (see Gere, “Kitchen”). In consulting an ever-widening range of materials, historians continually redefine what “counts” as a resource that could provide insight to past practice. It is important to note, however, that with few exceptions these texts have one thing in common: they are all written in English. Because of this singular focus on primary texts written in English, our investigations into the history of rhetoric and writing instruction have so far only told one part of a much larger story.

Bruce Horner and John Trimbur write that the field of Composition has consistently enforced a “unidirectional monolingual language policy” through the teaching of writing in English only (607). My work with La Crónica reveals that this univocal monolingual language policy also directs our research practices. Stories like those of the teachers in my study are often not told because we focus our research efforts on texts written in English. Further investigations of Spanish-language newspapers alone would most likely confirm my contention that the implicit and expected monolingualism of our field’s research methods necessarily limit our understandings of the history of language and rhetorical instruction. For, even though the pedagogical work of Idar, Peña, and Villegas was exemplary, it was not extraordinary. There are certainly more texts like La Crónica to be studied.

As Herminio Rios and Guadelupe Castillo have found, prior to 1940 there were 372 Spanish-language newspapers published in the southwest region that includes Arizona, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, and California (Cortés 248). This number does not take into account those presses created in Spanish-speaking enclaves in cities such as Chicago, New York, Tampa, and Miami, or those newspapers published after 1940 and especially during the 1960s that Spanish-speaking students composed at both the high school and college levels (253). Scholars such as Carlos Cortés, Félix Gutiérrez, Doris Meyer, and América Rodriguez have pinpointed the various functions of these publications. While some were more accommodationist and simply translated Anglo news for Spanish-speaking readers, others, like La Crónica, espoused a more bicultural and activist stance, speaking out as defenders of the community and as agitators against Anglo discrimination. This latter group often worked as “preservers of Chicano history and culture, maintainers and enforcers of language, and strengtheners of Chicano pride” (Cortés 255). As Meyer explains, by taking on the “unofficial role of public forum and community bulletin board,” revolutionary newspapers often became sites “where aggrieved citizens could speak out” (406). In terms of the use and regard for the Spanish (and English) language, Cortés outlines the differing positions these presses adopted—positions that reflect their political and cultural investments:
Some use only traditional Spanish; others champion the use of variations of Chicano Spanish or even bilingual writing that integrates Spanish and English words, sometimes within the same sentence and particularly in poetry. English-language Chicano publications have sometimes functioned as instruments of social activism, cultural reflection, and historical preservation, yet they obviously have contributed little to Spanish language usage in the United States. (255)

As a field, then, we might turn our attention to newspapers such as *El Mexicano, La República, La Voz de América, El Mercurio de Nueva York, La Prensa, La Opinión, Las Novedades, Vida Obrera, La Luz, El Obrero, La Mujer Moderna, La Voz de la Mujer,* and *El Progreso.* And these selections are just the beginning since I’ve only catalogued here Spanish-language presses. Presses published in other languages and by other cultural communities would likely yield similar results. Even so, by investigating just these Spanish-language publications and choosing them as primary texts for historiographic investigation, we would not only enrich our understanding of how Spanish-speaking communities addressed educational debates, but we would also be able to place college writing and rhetoric instruction in a broader context.

In recent years, scholars such as Horner, Trimbur, Paul Matsuda, and Amy Zenger have worked to establish how and why English-language instruction gained prominence in the U.S. university system. For example, Horner and Trimbur investigate the “protracted struggle” (597) that eventually positioned English as the *lingua franca* of the university through a drastic reduction in attention to classical languages and the “territorializ[ation]” of modern languages like French, German, and Spanish to “separate departments where students encountered [these languages] as texts to be read, not living languages to be written or spoken” (602). Matsuda extends this conversation, arguing that since its inception, the first-year composition course has functioned as a site of “linguistic containment, quarantining from the rest of higher education students who have not yet been socialized into the dominant linguistic practices” (641). And Zenger’s study of student themes at Harvard explains how “required writing, reading, and critiquing” in English was a “means of negotiating a racially inflected identity: speaker of English as the mother tongue” (333).

These studies are revealing in that they chronicle how the composition classroom and the university became sites primarily invested in English-language instruction. However, placed in a broader context and in conversation with educational debates waged in non-English-language publications like *La Crónica,* this university initiative gains a different nuance: we can understand it as one voice in a multi-vocal and multilingual conversation about language instruction in the United States. Right at the moment when English became the dominant language of the university, *La Crónica* contributors were speaking out against Americanization cam-
campaigns that pinpointed English instruction as a vital part of their programs. Indeed, this broader view allows us to see that instruction in English at the college level did not “merely emerge by default to fill the vacuum left by the classical languages” (Zenger 338). Instead, this shift in university priorities worked in concert with a nationwide Americanization movement that greatly affected educational initiatives at all levels both inside and outside the university.

Thus, choosing non-English language documents as primary texts for historiographic exploration has the potential to reap significant rewards. In terms of research methods, though, the choice requires that we do the difficult work of adding a new “tool to the historians’ trade” (Ferreira-Buckley 582). As a field, we need to gain greater proficiency in languages other than English. It would only make sense that if we want to learn more about those who spoke to their communities about alternative, non-English language pedagogies or those who advocated for bicultural and bilingual education, we would need to consult texts written in the languages of those writers and their communities.

Of course, for many, studying non-English language texts is not easy; therefore, institutional support would help scholars to add this tool to their trade. For instance, individual departments or national institutions such as NCTE or CCCC might consider offering grants that would assist researchers in translating materials. Graduate courses might focus attention on the “ethnic press” as part of Rhetoric and Composition’s extracurricular history. Graduate programs might encourage study in translation courses, comparative literature departments, and other modern language departments. And they might also take language requirements more seriously. As Doug Steward writes, the language requirement has become little more than a hoop to jump through because few English departments stress research in foreign languages (209-10). Rhetoric and Composition programs in particular might re-see this requirement as an opportunity for graduate students to translate educational texts and extracurricular materials that could give insight to alternative pedagogical practices or educational debates. By creating these opportunities for researchers, and especially for graduate students, our field would put scholars in the position to broaden the selection of primary texts we are able to consult and, accordingly, deepen and diversify the histories we produce.

**Historiographic Locations**

As scholars such as Gesa Kirsch and Christine Sutherland have made clear, going “on location” and actually visiting the places and spaces where historical subjects lived and wrote is an “invaluable” scholarly experience and research method (Kirsch, “Being” 20). For although we can never go
back to the moment of inquiry and see what our subjects saw, the process of inhabiting their same spaces and places allows us to get “into closer touch” with their worlds, enabling us to piece the historiographic puzzle together more effectively and efficiently (Sutherland 29).

Kirsch and Sutherland’s assessments of this research practice certainly resonates with my own. While reading La Crónica articles in Penn State’s microfilm room—almost 1,800 miles from Laredo—I continually encountered references to Nuevo Laredo, Laredo’s sister city on the Mexican side of the border; contributors frequently mentioned the Rio Grande, and they consistently wrote of their travels from Texas to Mexico and back again. Looking at Laredo’s location on the map, I could see that since the city was a border town, it would make sense that Mexico and cities on the other side of the border would figure into La Crónica writers’ contributions. These references, however, gained new meaning once I traveled to Laredo and saw the city and its location with my own eyes.

The moment I arrived in Laredo, I realized that Mexico, Nuevo Laredo, and the Rio Grande were not just sites that were close by or in the same general vicinity. Mexico is a physical presence that is visible from Laredo’s city center: the border, the river, and Nuevo Laredo are all within eyesight of Laredo’s streets. Being there and assessing Laredo’s proximity to Mexico enabled me to understand not only what contributors were referring to but also why these references were so persistent: one could not live in Laredo without acknowledging the presence of Mexico and its border. Simple as it might seem, this observation crystallized understandings about geographic locations that have the potential to expand and challenge our historiographic work.

When researching writing programs and pedagogies from the past, historians often take into account a number of variables that might have affected the way instruction was conducted. We consider the classed, raced, cultured, and gendered status of teachers and students; we assess their use of and access to textbooks and other pedagogical materials; and we reflect on the educational, social, and political climate of the moment. We often do not, however, consider how geographic location inflects pedagogical practice.

Walking the streets of Laredo helped me realize how important a role location can play in pedagogical production; living on the border of Texas and Mexico shaped every aspect of Idar’s, Peña’s, and Villegas’s work. Just as they and their readers crossed and re-crossed the Río Grande, their pedagogies borrowed and built from both Mexican and American worlds. Ultimately, though, these women’s teaching practices were not an even mixture of national and cultural imperatives; instead they were distinctive of and individual to the particular border space in which they lived. For instance, while they argued for their rights as U.S. citizens, they taught readers about Mexican citizen-
ship and culture. And as they rejected English-Only instruction, they did not advocate for Spanish-only instruction but called instead for bilingual and bicultural education in Texas schools. It was because Idar, Peña, and Villegas wrote and taught in what Gloria Anzaldúa defines as the “b”orderlands—the “actual physical borderland” or geographic space where cultures meet—that they created complex pedagogical practices distinguished by powerful and unique cultural and civic negotiations (19).

Nedra Reynolds and Vorris Nunley have convincingly argued that “rhetorical scholarship has undertheorized how spatiality, the politics and poetics of space, mediate rhetorical performances” (Nunley 222). Given my work in Laredo and with Idar, Peña, and Villegas, I extend this claim, adding that historical scholarship in the field has undertheorized how spatiality and geography have affected pedagogical practice. Heidemarie Weidner’s research counts as one exception. In her investigation of nineteenth-century composition instruction at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, she writes that because Butler was “situated at what was then the western frontier [. . .] it differed greatly from the eastern schools” (60):

Less inflexible, more convinced of the necessity to adapt to rapid changes brought on by a growing western expansion [, . . . educators] found it easier to choose curricular change, a decision which resulted in a dynamic, community-centered and practical education. (60)

Here, we see that by attending to questions of location, Weidner can offer a fuller explanation of why Butler’s program developed as it did. Thus, the research practice of going “on location” does more than allow us to do the important work of making sense of oblique references or experiencing, in some small way, the worlds of our historical subjects. It also gives us the opportunity us to ask larger questions about how the geographic location of the educational site affected the pedagogy produced there.

This awareness of the ways place interanimates pedagogy prompts consideration of another research method: that of choosing a historiographic location. Certainly, Royster and Williams along with Gere have articulated the value of relocating historical studies outside the campuses of prestigious universities, and scholars have in great numbers proven this point true by examining pedagogies produced in Historically Black Colleges, labor colleges, women’s colleges, and normal schools as well as parlors, kitchen tables, and rented rooms. Locating my research on the borderlands of Texas and Mexico, however, made me realize that our frame of reference regarding location needs to get incrementally larger because our histories of rhetoric and writing instruction are often situated within a specific and unarticulated terrain. We not only often situate histories at university sites, but we often locate them in the Northeast corner of the United States.
Figure 1 confirms this point, demonstrating that our disciplinary field is not an abstract one. Out of 70 histories surveyed, scholars have conducted research at 126 curricular and extracurricular sites. Of this total number, 71 historiographic locations are situated along the Northeastern seaboard of the U.S., with an additional 11 studies based at the University of Michigan. Forty-five studies are located outside the “hotbed” of Rhetoric and Composition, with only three engaging work in the Southwest region of North America (see Appendix for the studies I consulted to compose the map).

In creating this map I am not arguing that important and groundbreaking research on marginalized students and teachers cannot happen when scholars situate study in the Northeast, but I am asserting that our field’s historiographic understandings have the potential to be enriched if we looked beyond this region. For, if place does indeed inform pedagogy, our histories of writing instruction are eclipsed when we, by and large, only locate our work in one geographic area. Moreover, since as a field we have committed ourselves to exploring contact zones, metaphorical “B”orderlands, transnational as well as multicultural agendas, we might consider how situating our study at actual borderlands like those of Laredo might invigorate our contemporary pedagogical questions, enabling us to learn more about how historical figures living in these spaces taught and learned about rhetoric and writing as well as cultural and civic engagement. By situating our research...
at new locations, then, we would adopt research methods that challenge disciplinary boundaries and reinforce our theoretical agendas.

As we take up this work, however, we should be critical of our methodological stance and especially of the metaphors we use to conceptualize our research. Reynolds explains that “spatial metaphors” carry with them “certain consequences” (27) in that they often “reflect and construct accepted ways of knowing” (5). Therefore, we should not see this attention to geographic location as an invitation to adopt a colonialist mentality and define our practice as one of exploring new frontiers or examining untouched places. Instead, our prerogative would be to question the boundaries and borders of our disciplinary field, approaching historiographic study with these questions in mind: Where do we implicitly argue that rhetoric and composition happens? What spaces does our field deem worth studying? How might other places and spaces complicate our understanding of writing and rhetorical instruction? By asking and answering these questions, we would come closer to realizing James Murphy’s contention that “the place where one stands will have a great influence on what the historian’s lever can move” (5). Location matters. Not only does our choice of location condition who and what we’re able to see and study, but location itself also inflects the aims and interests of teachers and students, having the potential to act as a major factor in the overarching pedagogical project.

The Community Archive

Most historiographic research is not complete without a visit to an archive. Thus, I complemented my translations of La Crónica and my trip to Laredo with a visit to the Webb County Heritage Foundation (WCHF) to conduct the archival research that would deepen my understanding of Idar, Peña, and Villegas’s work. I was especially hopeful that research at this archive would be successful because, in terms of my secondary and primary research, I had found little information about the women in my study besides a small number of scholarly articles on the Idar family and Villegas as well as the republication of Villegas’s autobiography, The Rebel. Additionally, these women’s names were all but absent from records at major research institutions such as the Library of Congress or the archives at the University of Texas. My hope, then, was that the WCHF, a local, community archive, would contain rich turn-of-the-twentieth-century materials about these women, their teachings, La Crónica, and life in Laredo that would allow me to recover these teachers’ forgotten voices and bring their words to “full volume” (Logan, “Introduction” xi). What I found shifted my thinking about the conventional ways scholars of rhetoric and composition discuss their approaches to and work in the archive.
In my research at the WCHF, I certainly found compelling materials that made it possible for me to advance an argument about the revolutionary teaching practices of Ídar, Peña, and Villegas. Just as interesting as these findings, however, was my realization that although these women were missing from our scholarly conversations, they were not forgotten inside the city of Laredo. When I entered the WCHF and inquired about Ídar, Peña, and Villegas, the archivist did not immediately bring out turn-of-the-twentieth-century documents. Rather, she presented me with recent newspaper clippings, public service announcements, and exhibit promotions that the Foundation itself had produced about Ídar and Villegas.9

For instance, in 1992, the WCHF published a series of biographical sketches entitled “Celebration of our Heritage: Important Women in Webb County’s History” for the city’s local newspaper, the Laredo Morning Times, and both Ídar and Villegas were featured in the series. In Ídar’s segment, community members learned that she was both a local teacher who “did not have enough text books, or benches or chairs, and on cold days no heat” (“Jovita” 8D) and a community activist who participated in the first Mexican Congress, El Primer Congreso Mexicanista; began a feminist organization, La Liga Feminista Mexicanista;10 and formed, with Villegas, Cruz Blanca (“The White Cross”), which offered nursing aid to soldiers fighting in the Mexican Revolution. Similarly, in Villegas’s installment, the Foundation defined her as a teacher and a political revolutionary—a woman who wrote “fiery speeches” in support of Mexican leader Francisco Madero (“Leonor” 5D).

The WCHF did not just use this series to educate the community about the historical significance of Ídar and Villegas. As it informed readers about important women in Laredo’s past, it also linked these figures to influential women in Laredo’s present-day community.

The women of Webb County have many times been forgotten in their contribution to the betterment of life in Webb County. Many [w]omen today contribute to the educational wealth and richness of Webb County. This article is dedicated to the 3 women who helped provide the material for this article who are contributing daily to the betterment of hundreds of Laredoans. They are Rose Trevino, Texas Archeological Steward; Dr. Norma Cantu, Laredo State University; and Prof. Lucy Cardenas, Laredo Junior College. (“Jovita” 8D)

In addition to this 1992 series on important Webb County women both past and present, the WCHF also celebrated the work of Villegas six years later by creating a photo exhibit of her kindergarten students and inviting Clara Lomas, Chicana scholar and editor of Villegas’s autobiography, to speak at the event. The Foundation once again used this opportunity to connect community members to the history it presented. As one article in the Laredo Weekly Times explains, “Many Laredoans are sure to find themselves, a
dear friend, or relative among these memorable photographs” (“Heritage Foundation Slates” 6D).

This effort to encourage community members to connect to and take part in their local history is even more pronounced in other Foundation events and programs. For instance, the WCHF works with local schools and universities to support an oral history project in which students interview community members and then contribute the interviews to the archive. It sponsored a “Save Our Story” campaign which “encourage[d] Laredo, Webb County, and border residents to bring forward their old photographs, documents, letters, maps, and artifacts to be assessed by staff with the possible option of loan or gift to the Webb County Heritage Foundation” (Heritage Register 8). And, it also awards the “President of the Rio Grande Scholarship,” a $500 scholarship to students who produce essays on their family history.

The innovative work of the WCHF, and other archives like it, calls us to think about how we conceive of both ourselves as researchers and our research methods when conducting work at local, community archives as opposed to large, research institutions. In initial histories of Composition, James Berlin, Robert Connors (Composition), Sharon Crowley, John Brereton, and Albert Kitzhaber consistently consulted resources in university libraries such as those at Harvard, Yale, Iowa, and Michigan. “Our” archives were special collections at these sites, which preserved “those rarest and most valuable of data, actual student writings, teacher records, unprinted notes and pedagogical materials, and ephemera that writing courses have generated but rarely kept” (Connors, “Dreams” 225). As Connors explains in “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology,” the conventional archival practice at these sites is one in which the researcher enters the archive with a specific question in mind and pursues this question, in many ways, like a hunter or a detective.

Connors first equates the researcher with the hunter, writing that she goes to the archive because of a “human instinct to make sense of things [. . . . She] enter[s] that jungle because there is something to track” (226). As the detective, the researcher searches for “inert archival materials” (225) and “dusty mass[es] of past records” (227) to find clues that might offer evidence concerning the mysteries of the past. Once this hunter/detective tracks down her prey or discovers her clues, she activates these materials in ways that help scholars of rhetoric and composition understand who we are and why we teach the way we do. The purpose of working in the archive and writing our history, Connors explains, is for us to tell “stories about the tribe to make the tribe real. [. . .] [W]e are telling the stories of our fathers and mothers, and we are legitimating ourselves through legitimating them” (234).
Such archival practices might make sense for a researcher working in a university archive that holds materials directly related to rhetoric and composition instruction. However, as scholars investigate alternative sites for instruction that often occurred outside university classrooms, they have expanded the range of archives they visit, turning their attention to smaller, local archives like the WCHF as a means to locate materials that would enhance their research. Researching at these archives requires different kinds of approaches than those scholars have used in more traditional archival settings.

My experiences at the WCHF suggest that we might first, as with the historiographic locations, recast the metaphors we use to define our practice in the archive. Seeing the WCHF as an unexplored jungle in need of taming or a crime scene where the researcher-detective discovers clues to a mystery might condition us to ignore the important civic and communal work of archives like the WCHF. The WCHF certainly functions as a place for historic preservation, but it also serves a site for communal involvement and civic engagement. The WCHF is an archive alive with contributions that community members compose, and it is a place where public memory in Laredo is constantly created and re-created. Moreover, the WCHF is not simply a library where scholars can research and compose histories of rhetoric and writing instruction. The WCHF is itself an extracurricular educational space: one of its objectives is to teach the community about its history while also connecting its past to Laredo’s present and future. Therefore, as researchers continue to visit local and community archives like the WCHF, it is important that we avoid seeing ourselves as detectives or hunters. We might instead recognize that we are often outsiders to these communities whose members have leveraged very different arguments from these archives and about the figures we study.

This understanding of the work that happens in archives like the WCHF should especially inform the ways we see and “reclaim” figures like Idar, Peña, and Villegas. Through our historiography, we might indeed pinpoint women like these as foremothers whose voices we want to bring to full volume as a means to enrich our knowledge of past iterations of rhetorical education. But we also need to be cognizant of the fact that as teachers of rhetoric and composition, we are not their direct descendents; these women are not figures like Gertrude Buck, Mina Shaughnessy, or Anne Berthoff. Rather, we must appreciate the fact that through the interpretive work of the WCHF, Idar and Villegas are mothers of different lineages; they have been identified as part of a long line of female leaders in the community that continues from 1911 into the present moment. We might be “telling stories of the rhetoric and composition tribe” when we write the work of Idar, Peña, and Villegas into our disciplinary histories, but we should also
not forget what other stories women like these are part of and what other kinds of significance they hold.

Reflecting critically on both the metaphors we use to define archival work and the ways we conceive our historical subjects ultimately helps us acknowledge that archives like the WCHF are not “our” archives. These are not spaces like Harvard’s holdings of student papers, the Richard Beal collection at the Universities of New Hampshire and Rhode Island, or the Rhetoric and Composition Sound Archives at Texas Christian University. Because they are not “our” archives, scholars need to consider how their role as researchers means they do more than write about their subjects in ethical, respectful, and accurate ways. Researching in spaces other than those we might deem as our own means that we have special responsibilities in terms of the work we do there.

One responsibility of working in the community archive is that we learn not just about the figures relevant to our study but also about the archive itself and the function it serves inside its community: How and why have community members created and shaped the archive? What are its priorities and objectives? What kinds of arguments do archivists and community members create from the historical materials held in the archive? How do figures important to rhetoric and composition “figure into” their community’s history and public memory? In answering these questions it does not mean that we paralyze ourselves from conducting our research, but it does mean that we don’t just take materials and run.

The challenge of working in the community archive is that we look up from our own research and see the other kinds of work being done in and through the archive. As my experiences at the WCHF make clear, this kind of archive often takes up important communal, civic, and activist work. It is our objective as researchers to learn about this work and to see how our scholarship could reinforce or contribute to these initiatives. Such archival practices underscore and extend the point Royster makes in Traces of a Stream when she writes that “whatever knowledge accrued” through our research should be “presented and represented within th[e] community,” making it possible for communal “participation and response” (274). It is the responsibility of the researcher that she “speak and interpret with the community, not just for the community, or about the community” (275). By speaking with archivists about the communal and civic goals of their archive, we elaborate on what counts as a research method. In addition to accessing and retrieving information, we must also see as viable and important the acts of sharing our research and writing with archivists, listening to them, and learning more about what the information we retrieve says not just about our history but about their community’s past, present, and future.


**New Methods, New Histories**

Recent discussions about research methods offer sage advice and important information to scholars interested in conducting historiographic study. From Katherine Tirabassi, Wendy Sharer, Sammie Morris, and Shirley Rose, we learn about the archivist’s work and the “organizing principles that govern the construction, maintenance, and investigation of an archival collection” (Tirabassi 171). From Chris Warnick, we learn how to negotiate the various finding aids that might lead to promising primary resources. From Lynée Gaillet, we learn about funding opportunities that enable scholars to go “on location.” And from David Gold we learn how to “embrace” and make the best use of serendipitous moments in the archive (see “Accidental”).

My work in this essay contributes to and extends this conversation by considering how our investment in articulating research methods might be combined with the field’s dedicated interest in composing alternative histories of rhetoric and writing instruction. In combining these interests, I see that we have an opportunity to, in the words of Royster and Williams, “see the gaps in our knowledge” and “generate the research that can help us fill those gaps” (581). But rethinking the language of primary texts, the location where we situate our research, and the practices we use to conduct archival research at local archives is just a start. The goal here is to invite others to the conversation so that we can continue to create new opportunities for listening to new voices and learning about new pedagogies because by changing our methods we change our histories.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Notes**

1 See also Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Fletcher Moon’s collection, *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*.

2 For broad-based discussions of historiography in Rhetoric and Composition, see Octalog I and II, Anne Ruggles Gere (“Kitchen”), and Victor Vitanza. For specific discussions of archival methods and methodologies, see Barbara L’Eplattenier (“Opinion” and “Questioning”); Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch; Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan; Alexis Ramsey et al.; Wendy Sharer; Barbara Biesecker; Charles E. Morris II; and the 1999 special issue of *College English*, *Archivists with an Attitude*.

3 This is not to say that there were no Mexican people living in the borderlands before this time. The region has been populated by Mexican people for hundreds of years. It was only because of the Texas Revolution of 1836 and the annexation of Texas to the United States that Mexican citizens became Americans when the border “literally migrated” over them (Zavella 77). The Revolution
years are exigent for study because of the pressing questions and concerns having to do with political turmoil, war, poverty, immigration, and citizenship that teachers had to contend with.

4 My thanks goes to Penn State University and the University of New Hampshire for funding the work of three fantastic translators, Lisa Lawson, Malena Florin, and Raquel Moran Tellez, who aided me in reading and transcribing these materials.

5 My focus here is on histories of Rhetoric and Composition in the U.S. Surely, histories of rhetoric rely on texts composed in languages other than English. I would contend, however, that these histories focus primarily on texts written in Latin, Greek, and other European languages and rarely consult those written in languages emerging from North and South America. Susan Romano’s article “Tlaltelolco: The Grammatical-Rhetorical Indios of Colonial Mexico” serves as one exception.

6 For a recent study of Mexican women journalists in Mexico, see also Cristina D. Ramírez, “Forging a Mestiza Rhetoric.”

7 Félix Gutiérrez provides a number of bibliographic resources that point researchers to archives that hold Spanish-language publications. See “Spanish-Language Newspaper Holdings” in the Barker Texas History Collection, University of Texas at Austin; Michael Randall, “Chicano Studies Serials Holdings at UCLA,” University of California at Los Angeles Library; and Ricardo Chabrán, “Listing of 143 Chicano Publications on Microfilm,” Chicano Studies Library, University of California at Berkeley (67). In addition, Ramón Gutiérrez’s “The UCLA Bibliographic Survey of Mexican-American Literary Culture, 1821-1945: An Overview” would also be helpful in conducting this kind of research.

8 In Feminist Rhetorical Theories, Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin explain the difference between Anzaldúa’s borderlands and Borderlands: “Written lowercase, the word refers to a geographic site—the ‘actual southwest borderlands or any borderlands between two cultures.’ When she capitalizes it, however, she is using it as a ‘metaphor, not actuality’ to refer to a state that exists whenever cultural differences exist, whether those cultures involve physical differences such as race, class, or gender, or differences that are less tangible—psychological, social, or cultural” (106).

9 Unfortunately, I was unable to find any secondary materials on Marta Peña. The only information I have about her life and work was culled through the contributions she made to La Crónica and references to her work as a teacher in the same newspaper.

10 To learn more about Idar’s feminist investments as well as those of other Laredo women, see Jessica Enoch, “Para la Mujer: Defining a Chicana Feminist Rhetoric at the Turn of the Century.”

Works Cited


Donahue and Moon 58-76.

**Appendix: Historiographic Locations**


* Wellesley College: Wellesley, MA 02481
*Mount Holyoke: South Hadley, MA 01075

*U of Michigan: Ann Arbor, MI 48109

*Yale U: New Haven, CT 06510

*Cornell U: Ithaca, NY 14853

*U of Iowa: Iowa City, IA 52242-7700
*Harvard U: Cambridge, MA 02139
*Yale U: New Haven, CT 06510
*Princeton U: Princeton, NJ 08544
*U of Michigan: Ann Arbor, MI 48109

*Harvard U: Cambridge, MA 02139
*Amherst College: Amherst, MA 01003

*Joliet Junior College: Joliet, IL 60432

*Andover Theological Seminary: Andover, MA 01810

*Captain Cook, HI 96704
Donahue, Patricia, and Bianca Falbo. “(The Teaching of) Reading and Writing at Lafayette College.” Donahue and Moon 38-57.

*Lafayette College: Easton, PA 18042

*Harvard U: Cambridge, MA 02139

*Carlisle, PA 17013
*Laredo, TX 78040

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*Platteville, WI 53818-3099
Garbus, Julie. “Vida Scudder in the Classroom and in the Archives.” Donahue and Moon 77-93.

*Wellesley College: Wellesley, MA 02481

*City U of New York: New York, NY 10019

*Texas Woman's U: Denton, TX 76204
*Wiley College: Marshall, TX 75670

*East Texas Normal College: Commerce, TX 75428

*Fitchburg Normal College: Fitchburg, MA 01420

*People's College: Fort Scott, KS 66701

*Illinois State Normal U: Normal, IL 61790

*Andover Theological Seminary: Andover, MA 01810

*Bryn Mawr College: Bryn Mawr, PA 19010

*Lincoln U: Lincoln, PA 19352

*Fisk U: Nashville, TN 37208
*Atlanta U: Atlanta, GA 30301
*Howard U: Washington DC 20059


*U of Toronto: Toronto, ON, Canada M4B 1B3
*Dalhousie U: Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 4R2
*McGill U: Montreal, QC, Canada H3A 2T5


Lindblom, Kenneth, William Banks, and Risë Quay. “Mid-Nineteenth Century Writing Instruction at Illinois State University.” Donahue and Moon 94-114.


Rothermel, Beth Ann. “‘Our Life’s Work’: Rhetorical Preparation and Teacher Training at a Massachusetts State Normal School, 1839-1929.” Donahue and Moon 134-158.


Weidner, Heidemarie Z. “A Chair ‘Perpetually Filled by a Female Professor’: Rhetoric and Composition Instruction at Nineteenth-Century Butler University.” Donahue and Moon 58-76.


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