

Proposal Abstract

This presentation explores what might be learned by developing methods of self-archiving by triangulating narrative inquiry, autoethnography and historiography. What can autoethnography and narrative inquiry gain from a lens of historiography? What new methodological configuration might move closer to Royster and Kirsch's practices of critical imagination and strategic contemplation? I build from two interrelated applications to explore these questions. First, the project of archiving and analyzing journals from my adolescence as a means of grappling with the incoherence of self and subjectivity. The second is a historiographical project centering the works of Simone de Beauvoir. It considers the histories that have been written in her canonization, pushing against these histories through critical recoveries of her journals, letters, and autobiographical writing. Ultimately, the two projects aim to understand how methods of self-archiving might bring insights to embodied orientations in archival work, seeing the recovery of self and subject ethical feminist methodological practice.

Attunement: Auto-Narrative-Historiography as Embodied Orientation toward Archives

In the summer of 2008, right after I graduated college and before I moved to China for what was to be one year and slowly slid into six, I read all of Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographies -- totaling nearly 2,000 pages (1,982 to be exact). I'd read many of the existentialists through my minor in philosophy, and was initially intrigued, as many young philosophy students are, by Sartre and Beauvoir's "non-traditional" relationship. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the first volume of her autobiographies, was available at my local library and I devoured it under the large, lilted oak tree at a cafe in town. From there, one volume after another, I entered Beauvoir's life, wondering both how someone could write so well about themselves (my journals of the time betray the fact that I was trying and failing) and also what her purpose was in this expansive, life-long project. I've always loved and read memoirs, autobiographies, collected essays, but I'd never -- and still have never -- found another writer who approaches the composition of their life story so comprehensively.

As many others have experienced and expressed in living Beauvoir's life vicariously through her words, those autobiographies changed how I thought of myself and what I imagined to be possible. bell hooks writes that Beauvoir's "life, her work, was vital to my survival and personal growth, for she was the one female intellectual, thinker-writer who has lived fully the life of the mind as I had wanted to live" (hooks in Musset and Wilkerson's *Beauvoir and Western Thought: From Plato to Butler* 231). Because I've brought Beauvoir with me to my doctoral life, I'm in regular attendance at Simone de Beauvoir conferences, and there too share these quiet but profound moments of gratitude and appreciation for the gift that Beauvoir gave in opening her life so fully to the world, to generations of young people who worry about how to make their own life, to make like their own.

Bitly for this paper -- <http://bit.ly/FemRhet19Conklin>

In many ways, Beauvoir's published works function as their own archive. Certainly, there is still much more to be read and discovered, housed in "actual" archives and things still unknown and unseen. Take, for example, the 2018 sale of Beauvoir's letters to filmmaker Claude Lanzmann (who she had a 7-year relationship with) to Yale University. In her writing intended for publication, Beauvoir wrote across a multitude of genres (novels, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, literary/philosophical/cultural critique, etc). In writing published posthumously, by Sylvie LeBon de Beauvoir, Beauvoir's adopted daughter and executor, we now have also her journals as a philosophy student, her letters held for publication after death, and other pieces of ephemera that together are building these increasingly complex, ambiguous, and at times incoherent interpretations of who she was and what she believed.

I may have been drawn to Beauvoir and her writerly life because I have yearned for the same, although remain mostly directionless about what kind of writer to be (outside of what is squeezed from me in the name of this degree). I have volumes of my own journals, word documents, google files, blogs started and abandoned. Revisiting those spaces of my self, I see in brief moments the ways in which the narrative I carry around, like a summary on the book jacket of my life, are not always supported by what's in my archives. I find that the self splits, fractures, fissures in ways that do not lend themselves well to cohesion. If coherence is the ability for something to be understood at its most distant/macro view (think for example of the Gestalt of an impressionist painting), then I'm considering how all of the minute (in)cohesions of individual strokes come to form this overall picture -- if it might not just be a feat of interpretive perception that we fill in and make sense of something that was never really there, at least not on its own terms.

I've wanted to understand Beauvoir on her own terms, but the more I learn the fuzzier the knowing becomes, the more particulated the picture is. What happens when you get to a point in the theorization of subjectivity where you realize you can't understand *yourself* on your own terms. What then can be hoped for knowing someone else, someone who died a month before you were born and whose legacy is accessible to you only through her own writing and tales told to you (in scholarship, in person) by those who were fortunate to exist at the same time on the same planet.

Stemming from this context, the driving questions for me in this moment are: How might attending to the archives of the self enhance historical and archival research practices? How might attunements to self enhance the gradients of specificity in historical and historiographical analysis? Essentially, I want to understand how methods of self-archiving might bring insights to embodied orientations in archival work, seeing the recovery and (re)articulation of self as an ethical feminist methodological practice.

Toward this general project of archiving and historiography, I use a new materialist loom to weave together historiography, autoethnography, and narrative inquiry/narratology to begin to articulate what I see as a methodology for archival attunement, in both self and other.

Bitly for this paper -- <http://bit.ly/FemRhet19Conklin>

I'm thinking about archival attunement as an extension of Royster and Kirsch's feminist rhetorical practices of **strategic contemplation** and **critical imagination**, and a loose application of Rickert's notion of **rhetorical attunement**. Of attunement, Rickert explains that it:

- Takes place at multiple levels, consciousness being but one
- Is not static -- "it is always ongoing, and achievement or some sense of harmony or synchronicity would, on this account, be fleeting" (*Ambient Rhetoric* 8)
- Includes the "countless modalities of responsiveness" to how the world comes to be (*Ambient Rhetoric* 8-9)

There is a critical reflexivity here, between attunements to the self and attunements to the subject and materiality of one's research. Of course feminist epistemological practices have long rejected the "disembodied view from nowhere" in favor of careful attention to subjectivity and embodiment in the research process. The feminist researcher does not view themselves as a tool capable of objective measurement, description, prediction -- but rather as an integral part of the subjective processes of coming to know. All of the approaches and methods presents in Royster and Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* exemplify what it looks like to embody feminist theory and epistemology in one's research agenda and practices.

For Royster and Kirsch, "critical imagination centers on enabling and enhancing the quality of thinking processes, and strategic contemplation centers on being willing to go a step further to use a fuller spectrum of these critical resources in the scholarly production process" (87). In this way the two strategies work together, and I'd argue that these strategies help to make visible attunement in the research process. The point I'd like to make here is that these processes must include a critical reflexivity -- when working with archival pieces and trying to form a narrative from figments and fragments, the researcher must be *attuned* to their own narrative processes. In the same way that our political beliefs have the tendency to bend our readings and interpretations, the way we weave the narrative of the self influences the way we weave other narratives. But how can we come to understand the ways in which we shape our own narratives and how that might influence the way we are likely to interpret archival fragments?

I see potential in drawing from historiography, autoethnography, and narratology. These three approaches make sense in terms of feminist epistemologies, and projects using each of these approaches in markedly feminist ways of course already exist within the discipline. However, I'm thinking through how the three in combination might provide more nuanced insights.

Historiography is about interpretation -- what do we do with the things and stories of the past, and can we see the layers of sedimented meaning that have come from prior interpretations.

Autoethnography is about connection -- how do we connect ourselves and our life experiences to the “larger” forces of the social, political, economic, cultural...and so on.

Narrative inquiry/ narratology is about meaning -- how do we use stories and the act of *storying* to imbue our lives and their contexts with meaning.

When we consider our own lives as an interplay of interpretation, situatedness (connection) and meaning and we might imagine that these amount to something similar to a trichromatic theory of color -- but rather for subjectivity as it arises out of the materiality of text.

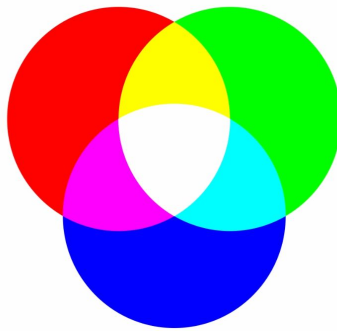


Image description: Three overlapping circles of equal size. The top left is red, the top right is green, the bottom is blue. In the overlapping space between red and green is yellow. In the overlapping space between green and blue is a light blue/teal. In the overlapping space between blue and red is purple. The middle of the circle where all of the colors overlap is white.

This image helps to think about how “tacking in,” to use Royster and Kirsch’s concept, at various overlapping points of these different methodologies provides a new interpretation, viewpoint, or to continue the analogy -- hue. A more realistic image for the shifting nature of subjective interpretation might look like this:

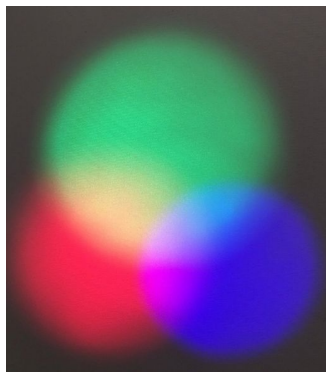


Image description: Similar to the first image of three overlapping circles, but this image uses real project light to create the effect. The boundaries between each “circle” are blurred and it is difficult to tell where each color precisely begins and ends. Even the outer edges of the circle fade into the back, rather than having clearly demarcated outlines.

As I try to understand myself and how my story of myself, my narrative, and my shifting historiography built from the archives of self, I can easily see the gaps within my own understanding of the self. These then enable a new level of nuance and criticality in the work I do with Beauvoir, or how I might situate myself in any other archive -- especially those archival projects seeking to understand another’s subjectivity. I cannot never again read Beauvoir the same way I read it under that lilting oak tree the summer before embarking on my “adult” life, and I can’t read myself the same way either. Our orientations to archives, of self and other, are ambiently attuned to the overlapping qualities of narrative, history, and story. Accepting this, and working from this position, seems a promising avenue for new methodologies in feminist research.

My project is still mostly questions, and I seek any feedback or ideas you might have. I’ll leave it here to open the floor for an engaging Q&A on all of our presentations.