Queering Romantic Engagement in the Postal Age
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The purpose of education in the rhetorical tradition was to prepare such civic leaders. As an art of effective communication, then, the tradition of classical rhetoric gives primary emphasis to communication on public problems, problems that arise from our life in political communities. The many other sorts of problems that might be addressed through an art of communication—problems of . . . personal relationships . . . for example—are in the tradition of classical rhetoric subordinate.

S. Michael Halloran (1982)

To develop a history of rhetorical education that centers romantic epistolary rhetoric requires queer methodological moves. As Charles E. Morris III has urged, queer histories of rhetoric call for methodologies of “queer movement . . . mobilization and circulation of meanings that trouble sexual normalcy and its distinctions” (“Archival Queer” 147–48). This book’s history is methodologically queer in that I join queer as well as feminist scholars in troubling normative, hierarchical distinctions—between public and private, political and personal, civic and romantic—that often frame histories of Western rhetoric and rhetorical education. S. Michael Halloran has acknowledged this framing and its consequences. His history of nineteenth-century rhetorical education is forthright about the types of rhetorical concerns subordinated through a series of distinctions handed down from Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions: between the “public problems” of “political” life and the “other sorts of problems that might be addressed through an art of communication,” including “problems of . . . personal relationships” (94). Historiography directed by these normative distinctions occludes questions about how people teach, learn, and practice “an art of communication” for addressing problems of intimate relationships in general.
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and queer relationships in particular. In order to investigate rather than subordinate such questions, I queer the binary distinctions of public/private, political/personal, and civic/romantic.

In doing so, my historiography unsettles a close and enduring relationship between Western rhetoric and citizen education. The history of rhetoric may be understood, according to Arthur Walzer, “as a twenty-four-hundred-year reflection on citizen education” (“Teaching ‘Political Wisdom’” 113). In keeping with this history, the predominant concept of rhetorical education is that it prepares people for civic engagement, for active participation in the public discourse of political life (Atwill; Denman; Glenn; Hauser; Poulakis and Depew; Walker). As Karma R. Chávez’s reflections on the intellectual history of rhetoric underscore, this concept of rhetorical education is tied to “our field’s long standing investment in the normative formation of citizenship” (“Beyond Inclusion” 163). Operating in keeping with such an investment, “we issue a normative claim about what rhetoric does”: it “educates the citizenry and helps citizens promote their interests” (164).

Usually traced back to the classical Greek and Roman rhetorical theory of Isocrates and Cicero, this interest in civic instruction has been revived within histories of rhetorical education in the nineteenth-century United States. On the one hand, early histories of college-level instruction characterize the period by a shift away from the classical model of education. This shift involved downplaying public, political oratory and emphasizing private, individualistic modes of writing instead (Brereton; Connors, Composition; Halloran and Clark; Kitzhaber). On the other hand, more recent histories by Jessica Enoch, David Gold, Susan Kates, and Shirley Wilson Logan consider instruction at a wider range of pedagogical sites, both institutional and extracurricular. These historians show instead that, over the course of the century and especially after the Civil War, increasingly diverse groups of people did teach and learn spoken as well as written rhetoric in order to bring about social and political change. Such differing accounts of nineteenth-century rhetorical education productively point to its complexity, to an ongoing need to reexamine both what may constitute a site of rhetorical education and what its pedagogical purposes may be. Still, as much as historiographic practices have been reexamined in order to consider new pedagogical sites, civic engagement remains the framing term for investigations of rhetorical education.

An unfortunate effect of this long-term coupling of rhetorical education and civic engagement is the methodological marginalization of questions about other potential pedagogical purposes, especially those concerned with romantic and sexual life. Certainly historical discourses of sexuality have been examined by a number of queer rhetorics scholars including not only Morris but also Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, Jean Bessette, Thomas R. Dunn, Morris and
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K. J. Rawson, Lester C. Olson, Eric Darnell Pritchard, Erin J. Rand, and Rawson. Other scholars such as Alexander, Zan Meyer Gonçalves, Karen Kopelson, Harriet Malinowitz, Rhodes, and Stacey Waite have explored present-day queer pedagogies.\(^5\) But there has been no history of sexuality and rhetorical pedagogy (no queer history of rhetorical education) focused on the nineteenth-century United States. Indeed, this historiographic effect within the fields of rhetoric, communication, and composition mirrors the function of normative distinctions with respect to maintaining heteronormativity in the culture at large.

Addressing this problem, queer and feminist theorists show how operating according to normative distinctions oversimplifies the relationships between so-called public and private life. In fact, what gets deemed private holds political implications for the culture of a nation. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner proclaimed, “there is nothing more public than privacy” (547).\(^6\) The concept of privacy is itself public with respect to sexuality, and the figuring of sexuality as private is a political move with widespread significance for civic life at community and national levels. Crucial to heteronormativity in the United States, for instance, is how the presumptive distinction between private and public has been used to simultaneously obscure the relevance of sexuality to the nation and, at the same time, afford basic rights and responsibilities of citizenship on the basis of accordance with romantic and sexual norms (for example the public performance of legally sanctioned, monogamous and, until recently, opposite-sex marriage).\(^7\)

Where this sexualization of the nation is cloaked as private, questions of sexuality are deemed irrelevant to citizenship, to a national public, and to matters political, and yet so-called private romantic relations are mediated by public norms, political decisions, and laws.\(^8\)

Alongside greater acknowledgment of the relations between sexuality and nation, however, there is a need to recognize that what is of public and political significance is by no means limited to that which can be linked to questions of nation or citizenship. This need is especially exigent in the field of rhetorical studies where, as Chávez has pointed out, the entwining of rhetoric with citizenship “is so ubiquitous as to be taken for granted” (“Beyond Inclusion” 163).\(^9\) In keeping with this ubiquity, national citizenship functions as a normative frame for engagement, such that rhetorical practices become defined, whether explicitly or implicitly, as practices of civic engagement. Countering this normative frame requires not simply that rhetoric become “more inclusive”—in this case, including queer rhetorical practices within histories of rhetorical education for civic engagement—but that “we imagine alternatives to the citizenship discourses that [have] oriented our discipline’s history” (163)—that we imagine, in other words, alternate histories of rhetorical education that envision relations between intimate and political life without being oriented primarily or exclusively to citizenship. It is possible to realize the political, public, and even civic implications of
romantic life while understanding these terms as pointing to the power dynamics of not just national but collective life.

In order to attend to both romantic and civic life, my queer history advances a new concept of rhetorical education as serving a broader range of pedagogical purposes that involve not only civic engagement but also what I call “romantic engagement.” I define rhetorical education for romantic engagement as the teaching and learning of language practices for composing romantic relations. Within this definition, the term “composing” is used in a dual sense: people learn how to compose with language in order to participate in romantic relations, and this rhetorical practice simultaneously composes the romantic relations themselves. In this way, instruction and practice are rhetorically constitutive of romantic relations and even subjects. Moreover, while this concept of rhetorical education emphasizes romantic life, it does so with the understanding that the pedagogical shaping of romantic subjects is indeed a profoundly public process imbricated in civic life.

Of course, the shaping of subjects through pedagogy is already a primary concern animating histories of rhetorical education for civic engagement. As Jeffrey Walker argued, rhetoric may be understood “as a pedagogical tradition,” “an art of producing rhetors” (3, 223). In Walzer’s terms, “Historically rhetoric is a complete art for shaping students” (“Rhetoric” 124, my emphasis). Rhetorical education is a process of “acculturation,” in that instruction shapes “historically appropriate” citizen subjects (124); this “inevitable” acculturation both “limits” and “liberates” (132). In the words of Cheryl Glenn, “rhetorical education enables people to engage in and change American society—but not always” (viii). I share with Glenn and Walzer an interest in this dynamic tension within education that is culturally limiting but potentially liberating. Taking Walzer’s remarks further, toward a more complete understanding of the complete art, I consider how rhetorical education for romantic engagement acculturates where its instruction is heteronormative and liberates where it invites queer practices. I ask, how does instruction in language arts for participation in romantic relations shape historically appropriate, or heteronormative, romantic subjects? At the same time, how does it enable nonnormative, or queer, rhetorical practices and romantic relations?

**Genres for Romantic Epistolary Rhetoric**

The centerpiece for my investigation of these questions is the teaching and learning of romantic epistolary rhetoric. As readers might expect given this project’s emphasis on romantic instruction and practices, I define “rhetoric” in terms more Burkean than classical, such that rhetorical practices are symbolic actions by humans to not only influence each other but also create identifications and compose relationships. I use the term “epistolary” as typically defined, to mean of or relating to the epistle, or letter. As such, I emphasize rhetorical practices in
the form of the romantic letter genre, but I also attend to rhetorical practices in other genres that my archival research indicates were related to the romantic letter during the nineteenth century.

*Heteronormative Genre Instruction and Queer Practices*

In first focusing on education in romantic epistolary rhetoric that takes the form of the romantic letter, I treat rhetorical education for romantic engagement as an instance of genre instruction. Following rhetorical genre theorists, I conceive of genre as rhetorical and social action that emerges through repeated response to rhetorical situations that recur within broader cultural and historical contexts (Bakhtin; Bazerman; Devitt; C. Miller). As Carolyn Miller has theorized, this rhetorical and social action becomes “typified” through repetition, so that genres are “interpretable by means of conventions,” and generic purpose is “conventionalized social purpose” rather than “private or idiosyncratic” (151, 158, 161–62). Thus rhetorical education teaches “not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends” but, “more importantly, what ends we may have” (165); it teaches “not just forms” but “forms of life, ways of being” (Bazerman 19).

Through such rhetorical instruction, popular letter-writing manuals taught not only the genre or form of the romantic letter but also heteronormative ends and even ways of being. Following Berlant and Warner, I use the term “heteronormativity” to refer to processes of normalizing heterosexual romantic relations. This normalization of heterosexuality presumes that it is coherent as a sexuality and treats it as the privileged sexuality; it is characterized primarily by the commonsense understanding, however implicit, that this so-called heterosexuality is natural, that it is just plain right.

Instruction in romantic epistolary rhetoric was heteronormative because manuals modeled the conventions for gendered epistolary address in ways that naturalized exclusively opposite-sex relations between writers and readers.

However, there is more to heteronormativity than the naturalizing of opposite-sex relations, and heterosexuality is not synonymous with heteronormativity. Rather, particular forms of heterosexual coupling are normalized in accordance with historically and culturally specific notions of “propriety” with respect to relationship development (Berlant and Warner 548). Opposite-sex relations that are normative develop in keeping with what Jack Halberstam called “straight time”—a normative temporality for when and how people proceed from one stage of relationship and life to the next (*Queer Time*). In a nineteenth-century version of “straight time,” manuals taught heteronormative genre conventions for not only epistolary address but also letter pacing and rhetorical purpose. This genre instruction normalized opposite-sex relations that were characterized by the exercise of restraint, with letter writers moving slowly and carefully from the courtship stage to engagement as directed by a marriage telos.
While manual instruction in the romantic-letter genre was predominantly heteronormative, this same instruction was also subject to nonnormative practices. Even as genres are normative, they are also “changeable, flexible, and plastic” (Bakhtin 80). Learners are not entirely constrained by genre conventions, as they “may . . . combine different genres or may ‘violate’ the norms of an existing genre” (Devitt 579–80). In keeping with this understanding of generic flexibility, my analysis of manual pedagogy identifies the subtle ways that instruction in genre conventions was predisposed to nonnormative violations, challenges, and adaptations with what Kate Thomas has called “queer effect” (37). I use the phrase to refer to the potential effects of genre instruction that subvert the very conventions emphasized by that instruction. In the case of letter-writing manuals, they taught conventions with “queer effect” in that their instruction in invention strategies for copying and adapting model letters made the genre susceptible to gender-crossing address, unrestrained outbreaks, and queer repurposing. In this sense, even as manual pedagogy taught heteronormative conventions, its queer effects reflected what Halberstam theorizes as “the queer art of failure.” The predominantly heteronormative pedagogy failed insofar as learners developed rhetorical practices to artfully “resist mastery” and instead accomplish queer ends (Queer Art 11).

Whereas my analysis of letter-writing manuals anticipates the potential for queer effects and failures, my research on romantic epistolary rhetoric identifies actual queer practices by learners Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus. As is often the case, only Brown’s half of the romantic correspondence with Primus is extant, so the main primary materials I examine are Brown’s letters to Primus, along with notations that Primus made on the envelopes. It is crucial to clarify that my research does not “recover” Brown and Primus as LGBTQ-identified rhetors; nor do I ascribe any sexual identities to them. Informed by queer theory, queer historiography, and queer rhetorics scholarship, I understand Brown and Primus’s romantic epistolary exchange and relations as “queer” not in keeping with present-day categories of sexual identity—such as bisexual, lesbian, or heterosexual—which are generally understood as having emerged after the period under study. Rather, I use the term “queer” in reference to nonnormative or unconventional practices (Alexander and Rhodes, “Queer Rhetoric”). Instead of framing Brown and Primus as queer women, I characterize their romantic epistolary practices as queer insofar as they subverted the genre conventions and cultural norms taught by nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals. In teaching genre conventions for romantic epistolary address, for instance, manuals embedded a culturally normative conception of romantic relations as between a man and woman. By addressing romantic epistolary rhetoric to each other, Brown and Primus obviously defied the genre conventions taught, but their queer rhetorical practices do not make them queer-identified. As in this example, what I mainly
define as queer are *relational and rhetorical practices that were nonnormative within the context of nineteenth-century manual instruction in cultural norms and genre conventions.*

Moving forward with this first definition of queer practices, I also want to clarify that I do not use “queer” as an interchangeable term for “same-sex.” Although what makes Brown and Primus’s practices queer includes their composing of same-sex romantic epistolary address, their practices were nonnormative in still other ways that were not limited to writers in exclusively same-sex relations. Again, manuals not only taught norms and conventions for opposite-sex epistolary address but also instructed that normative letters proceeded slowly and cautiously from courtship to proposal to marriage. Any letter writers, regardless of sex or gender, could participate in the queer rhetorical practice of composing nonnormative epistolary rhetoric that was rushed, uncoupled, or not in pursuit of a marriage *telos.* I highlight exactly these kinds of “queer effect”—that is, the ways manual instruction offered at least some resources for rhetors who resisted mastery of the widely taught genre conventions in order to compose nonnormative romantic relations, whether same-sex or not. As I acknowledge that all queer practices are not same-sex practices, I understand that doing so may raise concerns for readers. Some readers are likely hesitant about uses of the term “queer” that, in seeming to stray too far from same-sex romantic and sexual life, become emptied of significance. I share similar concerns. Therefore, even as I characterize a broader cultural context that included a range of potentially queer practices, my research focuses largely on rhetors who did participate in same-sex relations.

*Epistolary Address, Exchange, and Genre-Queer Practices*

This distinction between “same-sex” and “queer” is key to the secondary definition of queer rhetorical practices that operates in my analysis of college student Albert Dodd’s epistolary rhetoric. Unfortunately, none of Dodd’s romantic letters are extant. But in his commonplace book turned diary, he wrote about his romantic epistolary exchanges with other men and women. In addition, within his poetry album, he addressed epistolary rhetoric to his romantic interests. In terms of the first definition of queer that I offered earlier, Dodd’s rhetorical practices were queer insofar as he defied the cultural norms and genre conventions taught by nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals. For instance, Dodd’s diary writing about his romantic epistolary rhetoric suggests that he queerly defied conventions by exchanging romantic letters with other men, as well as writing romantic letters to both men and women that did not pursue marriage. But there is a second way Dodd’s practices were queer: he composed his romantic relations by transgressing not only normative boundaries of gender and sexuality but also conventional boundaries of genre. Dodd’s rhetorical practices crossed generic
boundaries between the commonplace book and diary, between the diary and diary writing about romantic epistolary address, and between romantic address in letters, poetry, and epistle verse. Such practices were what Dodd himself termed “odd” and “queer,” even where he addressed women (Apr. 1836).

Along with Dodd’s own characterization, I engage with theories of epistolary address, epistolary exchange, and genre-queer writing in order to account for how his rhetoric was both epistolary and queer. In analyzing Dodd’s practices within a broad network of other genres related to the letter, I am informed by Suzanne B. Spring’s notion of “epistolary logic” (“Seemingly Uncouth Forms” 638). Spring has described early-nineteenth-century student writing that resembled features of the letter genre even when it did not take the form of a letter. She characterized these “complex generic hybrids” as operating according to an “epistolary logic” insofar as “address and exchange are central aspects” (633, 638). I understand Dodd’s rhetoric across generic boundaries as operating according to this logic: as taking the form of multiple genres other than the letter, yet framed by address to and exchange with the romantic interests who were his audiences.16

I also understand Dodd’s romantic epistolary rhetoric across a network of genres related to the letter as “genre-queer.” Scholarship on genre and queerness, much like that on gender and queerness, takes interest in practices that transgress normative categories and the reductive binaries and boundaries often associated with those categories.17 Along these lines, Kazim Ali has refashioned the term “gender-queer” to theorize “genre-queer” texts. Genre-queer texts are those “whose genre is unto themselves, whose whole texts live with bodies ungenred as genderqueer bodies, take their own gender unto themselves, neither accepting one category or another” (36).18 However, “cross-genre” or “mixed-genre” texts are not necessarily genre-queer: “even to move from one form of writing to another is not transgressive in the purest sense—you are still stuck in a sense of separation between genres, as in gender binaries” (36). I characterize Dodd’s multigenre romantic epistolary rhetoric as genre-queer because he did not simply move from one genre to another but did so with a critical awareness that refused to pin down generic separations. My second definition of queer refers, then, to rhetorical practices that were unconventional in their transgressions of generic boundaries while pursuing nonnormative romantic relations.

In this second definition of queer, the reference to pursuing nonnormative romantic relations is central. While my approach to queerness is expansive, I do not go so far as to argue that any generically unconventional rhetorical practice is queer.19 Again, my archival research intentionally focuses on primary materials composed by people who participated in nonnormative romantic relations that included but were not limited to same-sex relations. What Dodd, Brown, and Primus have in common across their different kinds of queer rhetorical practice
is that they composed within cultural contexts and rhetorical situations that ren-

dered their romantic relations nonnormative and called for unconventional uses 
of the genres available.

**Romantic Letters as Epistolary Rhetoric**

This project’s focus on romantic epistolary rhetoric not only challenges predomi-
nant conceptions of rhetorical education but also complicates commonplace 
understandings of the romantic letter. As Carol Poster has explained, letters 
are often and inaccurately assumed to be “products of unconstrained personal 
creativity resulting from an untutored and spontaneous overflowing of language 
or emotion” (“Introduction” 1). Romantic letters in particular are presumed to 
be natural and unstudied expressions of heartfelt love. Perhaps because of this 
presumption, even historians of rhetoric, communication, and composition who 
study letter-writing instruction have yet to explore how it shaped specifically ro-

mantic letters, relations, and subjects in the nineteenth-century United States.20 

In turning attention to the romantic subgenre, I understand the so-called lan-
guage of the heart not simply as an unstudied and natural expression of feeling 
but as a rhetorically taught, learned, and crafted practice (*Fashionable American 
Letter Writer* iii).

That romantic letters are more often understood as unstudied is evident 
throughout histories of romantic and intimate life. Many of these histories 
draw on romantic letters as primary sources but downplay or even ignore how 
instruction through manuals may have influenced letter-writing practices. Karen 
Lystra’s history of nineteenth-century romantic love is an especially suggestive 
instance, because she has raised the “obvious question” about the “availability of 
model love letters in letter-writers and etiquette manuals” and “the originality 
and reliability of love letters as scholarly sources” (13). Lystra asked, “How much 
did native-born middle-class [opposite-sex] correspondents rely upon standard-
ized book copy?” But she answered, “probably very little” (13–14). Certainly there 
were letter writers who relied “very little” on “the standardized book copy” of 
model romantic letters in manuals. Indeed, in Brown, Primus, and Dodd’s extant 
writing, there is no evidence they consulted letter-writing manuals. But they did 
learn romantic epistolary rhetoric through their study of other kinds of texts; 
even those writers who did not copy their romantic letters from manual models 
were still, in one way or another, learners. Moreover, the widespread publication 
and popularity of manuals offering instruction in romantic-letter writing indi-
cates it was taught. Romantic letters were far from unstudied, in other words. 
They were taught and learned through the rhetorical education for romantic 
engagement of manuals as well as other means.

These romantic letters were not natural expressions of feeling and affection 
but rhetorically crafted writing. That romantic letters are more commonly
treated as natural expressions is also evident throughout popular as well as scholarly histories of intimate life. Of course historians rely fundamentally on letters (and diaries) as evidence of past romantic relations. As explained by Lystra, letters “provide as genuine a record as possible of feelings, behaviors, and judgments as they occurred in romantic relations” (4–5). The idea that letters offer “genuine” records may be especially seductive for historians of sexuality who study those relations met with denial or outright hostility within both their contemporary moment and later historiographic and archival practices. As Patrick Paul Garlinger has maintained, “The association of letter writing with intimate secrets and sexuality has motivated . . . critics to investigate authentic letter correspondence for evidence of homoerotic and homosexual relationships” (ix, my emphasis). Such investigation becomes misdirected, however, when Lystra’s “as genuine as possible” becomes, simply, “genuine”—when letters are approached as “authentic . . . evidence” of romantic feeling, desire, and even sexual identity within a given period—when letters are read as mere transcriptions that transparently reflect feelings and relations from the past.

I instead read romantic letters as epistolary rhetoric that, however heartfelt, was crafted. There are precedents for understanding romantic communication as rhetorical. Kenneth Burke, in expanding rhetoric to include not only persuasion but also identification, conceived of the “rhetoric of courtship” as a form of identification (208–09). He defined the rhetoric of courtship as “the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement” (208). Burke was interested in forms of courtship both literal and metaphorical, both romantic and social. I join Burke in understanding romantic communication as a form of rhetoric, one with intimate as well as social dimensions.

But I also want to emphasize: to assert that romantic letters are rhetorically crafted is not to suggest they are necessarily crafted in inauthentic ways. This point matters because of rhetoric’s other connection to courtship—because of how rhetoric itself gets dismissed precisely for its association with seduction. This dismissal can be traced to Plato, for whom the differences between dialectic and rhetoric were analogous to those between a search for true love and a deceptive craft of flattery and seduction. Plato’s association of rhetoric with seduction has been accepted, rejected, and celebrated by scholars across the humanities. In Catherine Bates’s history of the rhetoric of courtship in Elizabethan language and literature, for instance, rhetoric by definition consists of “flattering, dissembling, deceitful, and tactical discursive strategies” (9). But manuals from the nineteenth-century United States actually defined the language of the heart against the potential for romantic letters to be used toward dangerously seductive ends (Halttunen; Hewitt; Zaczek). Moreover, as in the story of Eliza’s love letters, warnings about the dangers of deceptive letters circulated not only in manuals but throughout the culture. While I insist that romantic letters were rhetorically
crafted, then, I am not implying they were deceptively seductive (though they certainly could be). Instead, manuals represented romantic epistolary rhetoric as a crafted practice that, while not necessarily coming naturally, could be learned.

This book thus alternates between considering how language practices for romantic engagement were taught and learned through rhetorical instruction and how they were crafted through rhetorical practice. Whereas my analysis of letter-writing manuals focuses on instruction in the romantic letter genre, I also anticipate potential uses of this instruction by learners participating in queer romantic relations. And, whereas my archival research on Addie Brown, Rebecca Primus, and Albert Dodd examines their rhetorical practices, I focus on them as learners. Romantic letter writing is approached as epistolary rhetoric—as a crafted rhetorical practice that is taught and learned through rhetorical education for romantic engagement.

**Education, Gender, and Sexuality in the Postal Age**

My studies of romantic epistolary rhetoric by Brown and Primus (1859–68) and Dodd (1836–38) locate this history across the mid-nineteenth century, but in a baggy sense that includes the period before, during, and after the Civil War (elsewhere termed “Victorian America”). So, although I examine manuals spanning the nineteenth century (1807–97), I focus primarily on books printed between the 1830s and the 1870s. The midcentury is rich for my study of rhetorical education for romantic engagement because, in addition to being a time of profound national change, the period is significant as what David Henkin termed “the postal age” in his book by the same name. This period is marked by a democratization of the post, as the ability to send and receive letters through the mail became more accessible. Already the national postal service had expanded with the Post Office Act of 1792. But infrastructure was improved in the 1820s and 1830s, and, with the Postal Acts of 1845 and 1851, the post came into “popular” use by “a critical mass of Americans” (Henkin 3, 9). While practices of sending and receiving letters became available to those who previously could not afford postage, such practices were also facilitated by a broader democratization of literacy through common schools (Decker 11). Situated across the postal age, my book considers rhetorical education and practice at a time when both postal services and literacy instruction became more widely available in the United States, particularly in the New England region. In fact, the extensive correspondence written and mailed by Brown, an African American woman employed as a domestic, probably could not have existed prior to the postal age. Letter-writing manuals also became more affordable because they were often purchased via the mail. In addition, there were other important shifts during the postal age with respect to education, gender, and sexuality.
Letter-Writing Instruction during Rhetoric’s Period of Decline

Historians of rhetoric generally understand the postal age as a period of decline for college-level instruction in service of civic engagement. While much of my research examines “extracurricular” teaching and learning, this narrative of decline is important because of how letter-writing instruction has been implicated in it. At the onset of the century, college-level rhetorical education remained classically oriented to the public discourse of political life. Facilitated by broader shifts in higher education, however, this form of instruction declined during the second half of the century. With colleges and universities increasingly emphasizing specialization, disciplinarity, and research, rhetoric was demoted from its central place in the curriculum. The emphasis on oral delivery dwindled as the importance of print culture grew; the writing assignments that gradually replaced recitations and exhibitions were more individualized, less concerned with overtly political questions, and less likely to be addressed to audiences beyond tutors, teachers, and classmates.30

In part, it is this increasing emphasis on written as opposed to oral rhetoric that implicates epistolary instruction in the decline of rhetorical education. Epistolary rhetoric for business and personal (but not romantic) purposes was a standard subject of study in college-level rhetorical education. It was covered in rhetorical treatises and, later in the century, in composition textbooks. On the one hand, this inclusion of letter writing within rhetorical education was merely a continuation of the classical tradition of epistolary rhetoric, from Cicero’s letters to the medieval *ars dictaminis* to Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.31 On the other hand, letter writing’s ubiquity within college-level education was a particularly nineteenth-century function of the rise in writing instruction. For example, Albert Kitzhaber characterized the decline of rhetorical education as marked by “the appearance of specific instructions in [textbooks] for the writing of such things as letters” (207–08). John Brereton, in describing the late nineteenth-century shift away from publicly delivered speeches to relatively private writing, cited as an example “such mundane subjects as letters,” asserting that the “amount of space that texts, particularly handbooks, devoted to letter writing . . . indicated the presence of a new type of student” (438).

As this reference to “a new type of student” suggests, epistolary instruction has also been associated with the decline of rhetoric in terms of increasing enrollments of students who did not previously have access to higher education. More men as well as women gained access to institutions of higher education.32 The types of individualized attention and occasions for public speaking that had characterized rhetorical education for civic engagement at elite institutions earlier in the century became practically impossible, because each tutor or professor was
responsible for a greater number of students. Amid these shifts, letter writing was “considered an appropriate educational practice as education aimed to reach a broader segment of society” (Gage 202). Epistolary instruction played a role, in other words, in the broader project of democratic education, of teaching increasingly diverse groups of people to be rhetorically active through letter writing for business and personal life.

Given the simultaneous democratization of higher education and the decline of rhetorical education for civic engagement, the mid-nineteenth century is an ideal period for investigating rhetorical education for romantic engagement in its complexity. But my project does not merely confirm existing historical narratives of democratization or decline. I do not develop another linear argument consisting of claims about changes over the course of the period, for instance by associating a decline in oratorical instruction and civic engagement with a rise in letter-writing instruction and romantic engagement. Instead, I examine multiple instances of instruction and practice, including both the letter-writing manuals that reached people without access to higher education and the classically modeled rhetorical education of institutions such as Washington College and Yale, where Albert Dodd studied. This approach allows me to flesh out a textured understanding of how diverse people learned and practiced romantic epistolary rhetoric, even before the late-century peak of the shift away from rhetorical education for civic engagement.

**Gender, Letters, and Nineteenth-Century Women’s Rhetoric**

The postal age is also noteworthy as a period in which the letter was often associated with women’s rhetoric. Books and periodicals made direct claims about letter writing being a woman’s “positive duty,” “especially feminine,” and the “one species of writing which seems to belong appropriately to the lady” (Mahoney 411, 415). These claims took on real significance because of the restrictions nineteenth-century women faced as rhetors. Even with education and literacy increasingly democratized, women’s access to college-level rhetorical training was limited, as were traditional opportunities for public speaking via the pulpit, bar, and assembly. Within this context of limitations, epistolary rhetoric was understood as a genre through which it was suitable for women to address at least some audiences. Letter-writing instruction via home manuals was vital, therefore, to women’s rhetoric.

Not surprisingly, then, epistolary instruction has been widely studied by feminist rhetoricians, who explore how it constrained (white middle- and upper-class) women’s rhetorical participation, limiting it to a private, domestic sphere. As Jane Donawerth has explained, letter writing, conversation, and reading aloud—but not speeches and essays—were the forms of rhetorical practice culturally
sanctioned as appropriate for women (“Nineteenth-Century United States” 16). Nan Johnson’s analysis of letter-writing manuals shows how subgenres of letters were gendered: while both women and men were taught to write familiar and romantic letters, women were not taught to write letters with “agency in arenas of public or professional opinion” (Gender and Rhetorical Space 81). Other scholars have considered how epistolary instruction enabled women’s rhetoric, providing a training ground for entry into public discourse (Gring-Pemble; Mahoney; Spring “Meditation”). Even as letter-writing manuals instantiated those constraints limiting nineteenth-century women’s rhetoric, some women were able to use the epistolary genre to advance political positions precisely because of the presumption that letters were relatively personal or private and thus suitable forms of expression for women.

While the letter is often associated with women’s rhetoric, men were also trained to compose epistolary rhetoric. In fact, as Mary Favret has argued, it is a “fiction” of nineteenth-century letters that they are feminine (as well as private and romantic). So, whereas studies of nineteenth-century epistolary rhetoric tend to focus on women like the character Eliza, whose story I opened with, my history intentionally includes rhetors like Horace. In analyzing manuals, I consider how both women and men were taught the cultural norms and genre conventions for romantic epistolary rhetoric. And, as will be clear in my analysis of Albert Dodd’s romantic epistolary rhetoric, he took an avid interest in romantic letter writing and other genre-queer epistolary practices. In these ways, my archival research on romantic engagement during the postal age challenges long-standing associations between women and letters—between women and romantic letters in particular—while turning to questions of sexuality.

**Same-Sex Romantic Friendships before Sexual Identity Categories**

The nineteenth century was marked by significant changes in the organization of same-sex romantic relationships, particularly late in the century. Following Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality, it is generally understood that categories of sexual identity, such as “homosexual,” emerged in the West with the rise of sexological discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This dominant historiographic account of the emergence of sexual identity categories has been complicated, because it overemphasizes simple models of historical succession and ignores the significance of racial categories. What remains powerful, however, is the distinction between present-day understandings of sexuality as a category of identity (what people are) and earlier practices (what people did). Again, it is in keeping with this distinction that my research explores queer epistolary practices rather than “homosexual,” gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer identities.
While I do not approach midcentury same-sex romantic relations as suggestive of a particular sexual identity, they have been characterized as consisting of historically specific relational practices, namely those of “romantic friendship.” Historians widely debate the features of these so-called romantic friendships. Especially in their early scholarship on romantic friendships between women, Lillian Faderman and Carol Smith-Rosenberg argued that, prior to the late nineteenth-century invention of sexual identity, romantic friendships were socially acceptable and nonsexual. While this early conception of same-sex romantic friendship continues to be cited, it too has been widely challenged. Complicating accounts in which the early and mid-nineteenth century was described as “a ‘golden age’ of romantic friendship,” scholars have described instead “a period of contentious struggle,” during which same-sex relations were pathologized even before late in the century (Diggs 321). These scholars have also argued that it is a mistake to presume all same-sex relations during the period were necessarily nonsexual.

Of particular interest to my queer history of romantic epistolary rhetoric, disagreement about whether same-sex romantic friendships were sexual usually turns on how diaries and especially letters are interpreted. As Marylynn Diggs has pointed out, where Faderman argued that women probably did not act on their love through sex, she “cites as evidence the dearth of explicit references to sex between women in correspondence or diaries, ignoring the similar lack of such discussions of heterosexual sex” (337 n. 2). Indeed, histories of heterosexual or opposite-sex relations also grapple with questions about how to interpret the romantic affections expressed in nineteenth-century letters, about how to extrapolate information about erotic and sexual behavior from the highly sentimental and often cloaked language of the period. Nor are such questions irrelevant in histories focused on same-sex relations and romantic letters between men. Morris’s work on the friendship between Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed makes clear, for instance, that debates about how to understand their relationship center around the available letters between the men, around how the sentiments expressed in those letters are interpreted and whether they are read as suggestive of physical contact and orgasm (“My Old Kentucky Homo”).

Similar questions arise about the nature of the romantic relations between Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus and between Albert Dodd and other men. I acknowledge such questions where relevant. But my goal is not to read Brown, Primus, and Dodd’s epistolary rhetoric in search of evidence that proves the nature of their romantic, erotic, or sexual relations. Rather, I focus on what their writing suggests regarding their rhetorical education and practices for romantic engagement—what the writing suggests, in other words, about how they learned to use romantic epistolary rhetoric to compose their queer relations.
As my queer history of epistolary instruction and practice moves from the story of Eliza’s love letters to letter-writing manuals, from Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus’s correspondence to Albert Dodd’s genre-queer epistolary rhetoric, I expand on histories of rhetorical education by considering not only civic but also romantic engagement. Methodologically queering binary distinctions between public and private life, my archival research turns historiographic attention to romantic engagement while exploring its civic implications within instruction and practice.

Letter-writing manuals treated the romantic subgenre of epistolary rhetoric as apart from civic life. However, insofar as these manuals were widely circulating books, romantic epistolary instruction was a public concern. The public instruction through manuals, by teaching what was considered appropriate within the culture at large, shaped not only romantic letters but also romantic relations and even citizen subjects. In contrast with this popular extracurricular instruction, Albert Dodd’s formal rhetorical training at Washington College and at Yale was classically oriented. His position as an upper-class white man meant he had full access to rights of citizenship as well as those forms of public speaking and political participation imagined by a classically modeled rhetorical education. While this education prepared him for an expected career in law and politics, Dodd also transferred what he learned as a college student to develop genre-queer practices for composing romantic relations. Unlike Dodd, Brown and Primus were not granted full rights of citizenship in basic ways: as African Americans and as women, they were legally barred from voting; as women, they were denied many other rights unless secured through marriage to men. But, even in the face of limits on their full civic participation, these women repurposed the romantic letter genre to explicitly political ends. In the same letters that composed the women’s romantic relationship, they commented on political figures, electoral politics, voting rights, and especially racial politics.

This expanded view of rhetorical education for romantic and civic engagement positions scholars of rhetoric not only to queer our own histories but to contribute to interdisciplinary histories of sexuality. In understanding the romantic letter as epistolary rhetoric—as a genre rhetorically learned and crafted in relation to other genres—we may nuance approaches to reading romantic letters and other intimate texts as evidence of romantic friendships, erotic practices, and sexual identities from the past. Nor is this question of how romantic life gets composed via rhetorical practice and education limited to the postal age. Diverse groups of learners—including those who take and teach undergraduate and
graduate courses in rhetoric, communication, and composition—continue to shape and be shaped by public and politically weighted pedagogies that instruct us in multimodal and digital technologies for composing our romantic, erotic, and sexual selves and interactions. Ultimately, *Queering Romantic Engagement in the Postal Age: A Rhetorical Education* demonstrates how such pedagogies have long played a culturally significant role in inventing both civic and romantic life.