

Akin to a method Elizabeth Yakel calls “pearl growing” (*Working in the Archives*, 2009), I have developed my research in layers around a central concern: the grain of sand. For me, that grain represents *identification* (Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*): how we as social actors form a sense of ourselves by aligning with (becoming “consubstantial” with) aspects of our material conditions. Primarily I am concerned with how class consciousness is formed, reformed, and performed. I recover the voices of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and in so doing, I have sought to contribute to the “public turn” in rhetoric and composition by focusing on working-class subjects in social movements and community literacy programs. As labor historian James R. Barrett (2017) writes, my rhetorical historiography approaches subjects “from the bottom up and the inside out.”

My interest in working-class identity formation emerged not only from my lived experience, but also from my dissertation project on the rhetoric of William Stetson Kennedy (1916–2011), a little-known nonfiction author, journalist, activist, spy, and educator. I had read about Kennedy in Levitt and Dubner’s *Freakonomics* (2009), and then discovered my university housed a portion of his papers. Those aware of Kennedy know him as folklorist with the Federal Writer’s Project and infiltrator of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups. As I discovered, few know of Kennedy’s participation in early civil rights and labor action as Editorial Director for the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC); thus, this period (1943–47) became the focus of my project. Specifically, I examine how Kennedy practiced and taught three literacies through his writings. Kennedy enacted alphabetic, civic, and critical literacies to help audiences grasp and enact agency—i.e., using language to gain knowledge and take action.

This project allowed me to explore two of the central questions in my work: 1) How do subjects gain agency through language?; and 2) How do literacies employ theory and practice? These questions exemplify binaries that many literacy studies scholars (e.g., Graff, Brandt, Rose, Stuckey) have explored: subject-object and theory-practice. I am inspired by Paulo Freire’s dialectic of *praxis*: the interplay of “action and reflection.”

My current project, *Inside Agitator: A Rhetorical Biography of Stetson Kennedy*, expands upon the dissertation by analyzing writings spanning more than seven decades of Kennedy’s work for social change. The rhetorical biography genre has emerged in recent years in both communication studies and rhetoric and composition as a way of examining the intellectual development and impact of an important individual or group. As in the dissertation, I use critical theory as a tool to analyze findings from archival and field research. My purpose is to assess the nature and impact of Kennedy’s writings in culture and education, environmental conservation, peace, civil rights, and labor. Other scholars have written rhetorical biographies of Fannie Lou Hamer (Brooks, 2014), Eugene Debs (Brommel, 1978), Malcolm X (Terrill, 2004), and Emma Goldman (Solomon, 1987). To date, no comprehensive scholarly treatment of Kennedy has been published. Four presses have expressed interest in this monograph, which I hope to complete in time to coincide with the release of a documentary from Spark Media called *Klandestine Man*, as well as a major motion picture in early stages of production (I am a consultant on both projects).

Layers of history, literacy, subjectivity, labor, and ideology resonate in other projects. In “The Celsus Library at Ephesus: Literacy and Hegemony in the Eastern Roman Empire,” published in *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* (2013), I use site observation, artifact analysis, Marxist thought, and literacy theory to argue that forms of ancient, everyday literacies were spatially, visually, and socio-economically nuanced. “Stetson Kennedy and the CIO-PAC: Labor Education for Civic Literacy,” published in *Journal of Labor and Society* (2018), performs a rhetorical analysis of Kennedy’s labor writings in order to redefine civic literacy as “the knowledge, agency, and actions of engaged citizens.” Based on Kennedy’s work, I maintain that civic literacy exhibits six characteristics, answering the “5W1H” of workers enacting citizenship: who, what, where, when, why, and how. The editor of *South Atlantic Review* invited me to guest edit a special issue on “Political Literature.” For this 2018 issue, I selected eight manuscripts that cover a range of approaches, genres, times, and places—each speaking to our political zeitgeist. In 2016, Routledge published a new addition to the famous Landmark Essay series. Lynée Lewis Gaillet, Don Gammill, Jr. and I curated nineteen influential essays spanning three decades of archival theory and method. *On Archival Research* showcases works arranged both thematically and chronologically; these foundational selections show the progression of archival theory in our field. Most recently, special collections librarian Greg Schmidt and I wrote a chapter for Graban and Hayden’s *Teaching Rhetoric and Composition through the Archives*, forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press. In this essay, Greg and I describe our first-year writing course that invites students to explore the archives in order to practice primary methods and develop argument-based research based on campus or community cultures.

My research endeavors have greatly informed my teaching. For example, I have developed undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetorical theory and practice that center on arguments about the prison-industrial complex and New Deal-era Southern sharecroppers. In addition, my upper-level public writing course pairs students with community organizations; the students practice design thinking principles and theories of publics and counterpublics (Arendt, Dewey, Habermas, Fraser, Asen, and Warner) to craft materials that aim to meet organizational goals. I look forward to continuing to use my emerging knowledge to enrich other courses, such as a newly-approved service course I designed, Writing in Law and Justice.

I close by briefly describing two future projects. The first is a book on the rhetoric of product labels. Using literacy studies, object-oriented ontology, onomastics, and rhetorical analysis, I want to delve into the history, theory, and practice behind the branding of products and the design of consumer labels. My initial research suggests that legislation mandating these labels stemmed from grassroots activism, and that because people read this genre daily, there is much we can learn about vernacular literacies by looking at how users navigate the messages of these mini mobile texts.

I have also been gathering a team of professionals to create a federally-funded grant program that would teach hard and soft job skills to underserved rural youth in eastern Alabama. This

partnership involves Tuskegee University and several non-profits. Grants from the US Department of Justice and/or Department of Agriculture would enable us to design with the community a space and a set of resources to help young adults thrive in an increasingly technological world. These resources might include a community garden, tutoring, classes, Toastmaster-style speaking events, study abroads, outings to cultural activities, and collecting oral histories from senior residents. This grant project, in particular, would encompass the various layers of my research into a lustrous pearl.