

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Rethinking Recovery Work: New Directions in Feminist Histories of Rhetoric

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Sarah Singer

Jack, Jordynn. *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks*. Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: U of Illinois P, 2014. Print. 320 pages.

Jensen, Robin E. *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2010. Print. 264 pages.

Koerber, Amy. *Breast or Bottle?: Contemporary Controversies in Infant-Feeding Policy and Practice*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2013. Print. 192 pages.

As we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Coalition of Women/Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, historians of feminist rhetoric are shifting away from some of the formative traditions of feminist recovery work. K.J. Rawson has prompted us to consider how scholars have recovered women's rhetorics hetero and gender-normatively, without interrogating the very definition of "woman." Heather Brandstetter has urged us to question our beliefs about what and who should be recovered in her ongoing project about the history of selling sex in Wallace, Idaho. Jessica Enoch and Jean Bessette have clarified how historians of feminist rhetoric might use methods and tools from the digital humanities to extend archival research practices ("Meaningful"). Even some scholars who pioneered these formative traditions have called for historiographers to extend their investigations to include contemporary women, since "they too may be forgotten" and may gain broader interdisciplinary appeal (Enoch, "Feminist"). Such a shift—especially the move to situate feminist histories of rhetoric in the present—engages with new questions about access, materiality, and the purpose of historiography that have emerged from more than thirty years of experimentation.

Three recent book-length studies both reclaim and rethink these concerns about the politics and practice of feminist rhetorical historiography. Jordynn Jack's *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (2014); Robin E. Jensen's *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924*

(2010); and Amy Koerber's *Breast or Bottle?: Contemporary Controversies in Infant-Feeding Policy and Practice* (2013) use feminist approaches to trace the rhetorical histories of three contemporary issues: the diagnosis, treatment, and production of knowledge about autism; the ambiguous discourses used to teach and discuss sex education; and the evolving (and highly rhetorical) public policy discourses that have shifted beliefs about the health benefits of breastfeeding. These texts present three main themes. The first theme, the continued practice of not speaking for others, reflects the strength and value of established feminist historiographic research traditions. To ensure that they do not gloss over or misrepresent the nuances of others' language and ideas, even when the narratives are racist or classist, Jack, Jensen, and Koerber carefully enmesh quotations from Autistic<sup>1</sup> individuals, nineteenth- and twentieth-century health reformers, and women who breastfeed.

The other two themes, recovering gendered everyday rhetorical practices in light of the present and applying multi-genre and mixed methods approaches, represent the next generation of feminist historiographic study. Sarah Hallenbeck (2012) argues for a "feminist-materialist" approach to rhetoric that prioritizes networked relations among rhetors instead of discretely recovering women. She asserts that this shift in perspective allows feminist rhetorical historiographers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of "how gender differences and norms become naturalized, enhanced, or diminished" in everyday practices (25). Since health issues affect large populations, it becomes all the more critical to study patterns in aggregate, without focusing on any one individual or any one specific approach. These authors likely take up multi-genre and mixed methods for the same reasons. Their analyses of scientific journal articles, health policies, posters from WWI, memoirs, self-help guides, YouTube videos, and more are put in conversation with interviews, focus group data, and dialogue from online forums to produce a more comprehensive understanding of these historical and contemporary controversies. Together, looking at the language of others, studying gendered everyday practices, and employing multi-genre and mixed methods moves the field forward by helping us better understand how power is gained, lost, and redistributed, and through what available means of persuasion.

Health, science, and medicine is one cluster in which everyday discourses about gender are produced and reified, making it a particularly salient area of focus for feminist rhetorical historiographers. Jack, Jensen, and Koerber are neither the first nor the only scholars to use feminist rhetorical methods to

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1 Following the rhetorical choices of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, I choose to capitalize the word Autistic when it is used to describe individual and group identities.

investigate questions about these topics. Since at least the 1980s, feminist theorists have publicly critiqued science and objectivity. Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body* (1987; 1992; 2001), Londa Schiebinger's *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (1993; 2004), and Susan Merrill Squier's *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth Century Visions of Reproductive Technologies* (1994) are three early examples of this work. So much has followed. Mary M. Lay (2000) and Susan Wells (2001) were among the first scholars to employ feminist rhetorical methods to examine health, science, and medicine-related texts, films, speeches, posters, and other material objects. The range of related publications since then (including Marika Seigel's *The Rhetoric of Pregnancy* and Wendy Hayden's *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*, both of which were reviewed in earlier issues of *Peitho*) suggests that this is an established direction for future research. These feminist rhetorical studies of health, science, and medicine challenge us to consider how arguments about power, sex, gender, and other categories of identity are produced in everyday discourses, in effect disrupting the authority of more "legitimate," ostensibly more powerful, rhetorics that are portrayed as stable and ahistorical.

## The Continued Practice of Not Speaking for Others

Jack, Jensen, and Koerber continue the feminist rhetorical tradition of not speaking for others by intentionally making space for language used by research participants, health seekers, clinicians, and healthcare advocates. In an effort to shift the hierarchies implicit in most research endeavors, feminist scholars have long worked to examine research subjects in ways that reflect their extraordinary yet imperfect identities and experiences. While feminist scientists have recruited women and underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities to participate in clinical trials, feminist rhetoricians have recovered speeches, diaries, letters, instructional manuals, and other rhetorics written by and for women, people of color, people with disabilities, and people whose sex and gender identities disrupt hetero and gender-normative binaries. Crucially, although feminist rhetoricians use rhetorical and other modes of analysis to interpret these materials—and thus have opportunities to refigure rhetors' original language—they resist. Preserving language can be a deeply painful reminder of past and present cultural wrongdoing. It can also be a technique for honoring the carefully crafted rhetorical choices made by particular communities. Since Jack, Jensen, and Koerber work to recover gendered everyday practices in the past and present, their research calls for special attention to both of these possibilities. Their determination to speak respectfully about but not *for* the groups they study elevates expectations for ethical research in future interdisciplinary rhetorical scholarship.

Jack is explicit about her intention to prioritize the voices of individuals from the Autistic community, noting that “whenever possible I have sought to incorporate perspectives of [A]utistic people throughout the text, while also striving not to give the impression that there is a single, agreed-upon stance of the ‘[A]utistic community’ on any one issue” (30). Despite her attention to a diverse group of autism stakeholders (ranging from Autistic individuals to the doctors who diagnosed them), she consistently maintains this framework throughout the monograph. In Chapter 5, Jack studies blogs, internet forums, and memoirs to “better understand how [A]utistic individuals use and adapt gender discourses as tools for self-understanding” (184). For example, Jack reports that one person describes themselves as a “monogamous genderqueer bisexual happily living in a straight marriage who generally feels like a gay man in a woman’s body” (197). By bringing in the language of Autistic individuals, Jack both supports her claim that Autistic individuals invent nontraditional sex and gender discourses that disrupt traditional binaries and pays them respect by not paraphrasing their explanations of their identities.

In a similar fashion, Jensen supports her argument about racist, classist, and ableist sex education discourse through her readings of U.S. government campaigns such as “Fit to Win” (Chapter 3) as well as “Keeping Fit: An Exhibit for Young Men and Boys”; “Youth and Life: An Exhibit for Girls and Young Women”; and “Keeping Fit: For Negro Boys and Young Men” (Chapter 5). Jensen captures language and overarching concepts from films, poster series, and other ephemera to argue that, even though these “separate but equal” campaigns aimed to close the health disparities gap, they reaffirmed “common assumptions about traditional gender roles and racial hierarchies” (117). For example, Jensen analyzes a pamphlet that refers to individuals suffering from syphilis as “loony,” “poor half-wits” who were forced “behind the gates of one of these nut-farms” (75); this language was used to scare white soldiers into remaining abstinent during deployment. In another instance, Jensen includes the phrase “colored clandestine prostitutes,” which was one of the ways that the Committee on Training Camp Activities referred to African American women who, based on racist and gendered stereotypes, were thought to have exceptionally high rates of venereal disease (80). Jensen argues that the committee’s main concern was that these women could spread diseases to (supposedly) blameless white male soldiers, not helping the women get treatment or health education. These language choices reinforce the notion that sex education in the Progressive Era focused on the health and wellbeing of white men, thereby limiting access to key healthcare information for women and men of color.

Although Koerber includes language directly drawn from infant feeding policies and recommendations, she prioritizes language from interviews in her monograph. In Chapter 3, Koerber quotes from both a phone interview

with Dr. Lawrence Gartner, the chair of the committee that wrote the 1997 *American Academy of Pediatrics* policy statement on infant feeding (60), and Jackie, a La Leche leader and one of Koerber's qualitative research participants (70). The inclusion of these diverse perspectives allows readers to better understand how infant feeding policies have been shaped rhetorically and how they challenged traditional medical authorities in public contexts. Koerber does not risk mischaracterizing the ideas of her interviewees by paraphrasing them, even when they reveal information that complicates her claims. For instance, Koerber quotes four women's discussions of "breastfeeding failure" in Chapter 5 even though two women's stories do not fully support her argument that rhetorical and material circumstances prevent women from breastfeeding. Koerber also weaves in her personal perspective as a pro-breastfeeding advocate. This choice necessarily complicates the boundaries of "objectivity," a standard that is still prized in some mixed methods research studies, but it allows Koerber to engage more openly with the language and ideas of her participants.

More broadly, the continued practice of not speaking for others in recovery work suggests that the field of feminist rhetorical historiography is maintaining some key founding principles despite other methodological and theoretical shifts.

## **Recovering Gendered Everyday Rhetorical Practices in Light of the Present**

Jack, Jensen, and Koerber locate their projects historically, but they justify their relevance by centering them within current social debates. Positioning their work as a response to contemporary controversies allows these authors to draw upon both contemporary and historical resources, thereby extending the reach of their arguments beyond feminist rhetoric scholars to historians of medicine, public policy experts, and health educators. Moreover, Jack, Jensen, and Koerber recover individuals from the past in their studies, but they only highlight them in the process of recovering gendered practices. This is a transition from the well-established feminist historiographic tradition of recovering women rhetors.

Jack takes a historical and rhetorical approach to examining "scientific and popular rhetorics about autism" (16). She opens her monograph by identifying autism as a contemporary controversy and historicizes it as part of her analysis: "Given the gaps in scientific knowledge about autism, this controversy entails more than just arguments about scientific facts, but stories as well: stories about children affected, about parents struggling to come to terms with a diagnosis, about [A]utistic individuals and their lives" (1-2). In Chapters

1 and 2, Jack traces the history of the topoi—rhetorical commonplaces—that helped authenticate two opposing female characters that have played significant roles in autism discourse. Jack argues that the “Refrigerator Mother” character, whose stoic, distant personality and lack of affection supposedly caused her child’s autism (33), and later, the “Mother Warrior,” the tirelessly aggressive parent who will do anything to save her child from autism (65), were both culturally created in their particular historical moments. To support a case for these characters, Jack recovers evidence from Margarethe Ribble’s 1920s books and articles about “bad mothering” (38), as well as other 1950s childrearing books (43), early “autism memoirs” such as *The Seige* (50), sixteenth-century midwifery texts (68), *Mothering* magazine (70), [Parenting.com](#) advice boards, testimonies to U.S. government committees (73), [Amazon.com](#) reviews (85), and more. Jack also examines the history of autism itself: its discovery, name, and diagnostic characteristics (16-24). She pays close attention to how practitioners needed to distinguish autism from “feeblemindedness” in order to keep at-risk children from being sterilized or euthanized. This often meant qualifying descriptions of Autistic individuals with middle and upper class modifiers, such as dress, demeanor, cleanliness, and explanations of the parents’ white-collar professions. Jack’s history situates autism as a classed, raced, and gendered condition, helping readers understand why such stereotypes remain prominent today.

Koerber relies on rhetorical history as an underlying analytical tool in her monograph because it “requires us to view current controversies as they are unfolding in a situation that still contains important elements from the past” (8). In Chapter 1, she connects the scientific and social histories of infant feeding practices through an analysis of three topoi: “breastfeeding as foundation in the mid-twentieth century,” “breastfeeding as the norm in the late twentieth century,” and “formula as risky in the early twenty-first century” (13). In Chapter 2, Koerber grounds her work historically in a study of fifty-nine scientific and medical journal articles about infant feeding practices published between 1940 and 2005, some of which she discovered through archival research at the Pediatric Historical Archive of the American Academy of Pediatrics (33). This chronological literature review critiques the shifting metaphors about the science of the immunoprotective qualities of human milk, which began as a “hierarchical-machine” metaphor and became a “complex-systems” metaphor (35). Similarly, in Chapter 3, Koerber dissects three American Academy of Pediatrics policy statements about infant feeding that were released in 1982, 1997, and 2005, and she considers how these policies might have impacted women’s embodied experiences with infant feeding in Chapter 5. Like Jack and Jensen, Koerber contends that her analysis “tells a story of scientific ‘progress’ that is

not about rhetoric, science, or medicine, but about the complex intersections among these domains" (48).

Jensen's guiding research questions situate her study in the present. She states her aim to investigate the history of sex education debates, the individuals and organizations that took part in these debates, how these debates circulated in public discourse and experience, and, most significantly, the reasons why "the United States made so little progress in keeping residents free of disease and informed about sex" (xii). Jensen's recovery of pamphlets, films, posters, and notes from public speeches housed at the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota and special collections libraries at University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Illinois Archives in Urbana-Champaign suggests that our twenty-first century public sex education practices have not developed extensively beyond their earlier counterparts, since most are still driven by ambiguous language practices (160). Although Jensen features three main women rhetors in her monograph—Margaret Sanger (Chapter 1), Dr. Ella Flagg Young (Chapter 2), and Dr. Rachele Slobodinsky Yarros (Chapter 4)—she primarily recovers how they took up gendered rhetorical practices that enabled them to speak publicly about sex education. For example, although only "representations" of Yarros's speeches still exist, Jensen uses existing archives to develop a compelling argument about how Young and Yarros leveraged their identities as women and their professional training (as an educator and physician) to discuss sex without vague metaphors in public speeches, newspaper articles, and health education curricula. Some of their practices, such as sharing stories about fraternities, sex, and sexually transmitted diseases with male and female audiences (106) and separating boys and girls during sex education lessons so that they could ask questions more freely (46-47), are still used today. Jensen's work illuminates how the rhetorical strategies of less politically powerful rhetors enabled them to change health, science, and medical discourse, as well as reform gendered expectations.

## The Use of Mixed and Multi-Genre Methods

Jack, Jensen, and Koerber's monographs uniquely engage feminist rhetorical practice by using multiple, multi-genre, and interdisciplinary methods for conducting research.<sup>2</sup> Social scientists and digital scholars have historically combined diverse research methods, but Jack, Jensen, and Koerber chart

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2 Social science researchers often incorporate "mixed methods," an approach that involves "multi-level perspectives," "exploring the meaning and level of constructs," and "cultural influences" (National Institutes of Health 4).

new territory by applying these methods to feminist rhetorical historiography. Their novel insights suggest that, in order to write about the histories of health, science, and medicine, scholars must engage with professional literature in those fields, which seems to necessitate a different approach to historical research. Also, since Jack, Jensen, and Koerber aim to recover gendered everyday practices instead of particular historical figures, they are prompted to use new combinations of research methods, such as exploring and participating in online forums, blogs, interviews, focus groups, and cultural critique. In these cases, using varied research methods reveals how gender functions as a form of social power and authority in health, science, and medical discourses.

Jack employs rhetorical analysis to reveal how, using stock character personas derived from cultural topoi, different individuals engage and shift scientific and public rhetorics of autism. She draws on research from feminist science studies and disability studies as well as cultural and rhetorical studies of medicine to illuminate the many facets of autism as it is typically understood: a medical condition, disability, and way of being, thinking, and seeing the world (24). Importantly, Jack balances medicalized discourses about autism with accounts by Autistic individuals and community authorities (i.e. Jenny McCarthy and similar advocates). In turn, when she defines autism in the introduction, Jack includes scientific, psychiatric, neurodiverse, biomedical, and historical and cultural definitions (7-12). Since most studies of autism prioritize one of these perspectives, Jack's interdisciplinary and multi-genre work provides thoughtful synthesis that merits additional study by autism researchers across disciplines.

The benefits of Jack's multi-genre method are particularly clear in Chapter 4. To explain the topos of the "autism dad," Jack uses a range of resources, including autobiographical writing by autism dads, blog posts from *The Thinking Mom's Revolution*, [About.com](#) articles, scientific studies, findings from Gloria Moss's *Gender, Design, and Marketing*, a dissertation by an autism researcher, and twenty brochures from autism agencies that she coded for visual features (175). These seemingly disparate genres stemming from seemingly unrelated discourse communities reveal how many authorities shape knowledge about autism simultaneously. Multi-genre research allows Jack to achieve her goal: to illuminate "public debates about theories concerning autism: what it is, what causes it, and how it affects people's lives" (26).

Along with multiple genres, Koerber uses multiple methods to study the evolution of the rhetoric of infant feeding practices. In her introduction, Koerber calls her monograph a "kairology," a concept coined by Judy Segal to describe a rhetorical history that connects significant moments of rhetorical opportunity, particularly in medicine (3). Taking a "recursive approach" to her kairology, Koerber works to "combine what is best from the textual analysis



studies and the ethnographic studies, from the humanities and the social sciences, providing a picture of current U.S. breastfeeding practices that is unique in its interdisciplinary orientation and its multifaceted methodological approach" (147). Koerber contends that this method ensures that she achieves effective sampling in her study, which combines rhetorical analysis and interviews (9). Although Koerber primarily isolates these methods (focusing on rhetorical history in Chapter 2, rhetorical and textual analysis in Chapter 3, interviews in Chapter 5, etc.), she risks a less seamless argumentative flow in pursuit of a diversity of angles and voices only made possible through mixed methods research. Koerber is explicit about her work with an interdisciplinary research team, through which she interviewed mothers "without any specialized expertise in infant feeding" (9, 107). She pairs this data with interviews with a range of breastfeeding advocates, including health professionals and La Leche League volunteers, for a more comprehensive analysis. Koerber is guided by the social science research methods of "purposeful sampling" and "theoretical sampling," which enrich her human and material archives, and through which she identifies patterns and trends.

Jensen's research method, which she calls an "organic approach to criticism," enables her to combine close reading and "broader critical-cultural interpretation" to study the rhetoric of sex education contextually, accounting for the "historical, political and sociological variables from which it emerges" (xviii). For Jensen, this means that she considers how "text" and "context" come together to illuminate language choices ("applied aspects of rhetoric") and to impact speeches, school board decisions, public health campaigns, and guidelines for health education as well as the visual rhetoric of sex education campaign materials. She also layers on an intersectional approach. Jensen does not provide a specific definition of intersectionality or an intersectional approach to frame this method, but she footnotes Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>3</sup> and Kathy Davis,<sup>4</sup> two well-known intersectionality theorists who argue that identity is situated, historical, simultaneous, and individually and group-oriented. She contends that such an intersectional approach allows her to study the everyday rhetorics of women rhetors fully in the context of their lived experiences, in which they were sexed, gendered, classed, raced, and identified by other

3 See Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford law review* (1991): 1241-1299.

4 See Davis, Kathy. "Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful." *Feminist theory* 9.1 (2008): 67-85.

elements of difference (xix). Jensen theorizes intersectionality in the context of singular people, for instance: “[Yarro’s] intersectionality also helped her to understand, speak on behalf of, and better serve others with intersectional identities who were in need of access to health information” (xix). Future studies might expand on Jensen’s work to call greater attention to “resulting intersections of subordination” as they affect larger social groups (xix). Ultimately, Jensen’s study suggests “different discourses, communication formations, and research questions demand that critics use diverse lenses for analysis” (xviii).

## **Conclusion: Recovering the Present**

Jack, Jensen, and Koerber’s monographs demonstrate that feminist rhetoricians can use historiography to better understand health, science, and medical issues in the present. I believe, however, that these texts entreat budding scholars to take up two remaining challenges in future research projects: 1) extending feminist rhetoric beyond English and Communication Studies scholars, and 2) bridging disciplinary gaps between rhetoric, health, science, and medicine. Although Koerber, Jack, and Jensen’s careful analyses of health, science, and medical discourse would probably provide useful texture for recent quantitative studies about infant feeding, autism, and sex education, it is not clear how far their work will span. Jensen’s book won the 2015 National Communication Association Distinguished Book award, which “recognizes research that has made, or offers the promise of making, a significant contribution to scholarship in Health Communication theory, research, and/or practice” (“Distinguished Book in Health Communication”). Health communication is a cornerstone of many scholarly communities, so it is conceivable that exceptional scholarly work in this area might be of interest to clinicians, medical journalists, health writers, communication scholars, and others. Also, since the publication of her monograph, Jensen has published about the rhetoric of sex education in a range of social science, health education, and qualitative research journals,<sup>5</sup> greatly widening the audience of her research. Likewise, Jack’s monograph won the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America book award, which evaluated the book’s “engaging style or readability,” “potential to promote rhetoric among scholars from other fields,” and “potential to promote the general public’s understanding of rhetoric” (“Awards”); the book’s selection is indicative of its expected interdisciplinary appeal. Such movement seems promising, though we need to wait a number of years before we can make a comprehensive assessment.

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5 Some examples include *AIDS Patient Care & STDs* (2007), *Qualitative Research* (2010 and forthcoming), and *Sex Roles* (2010).

On a similar note, feminist rhetorical histories of health, science, and medicine may gain a broader appeal with the rise of interdisciplinary research groups. Koerber's focus group data, which she gathered collaboratively with scholars from the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Anita Thigpen Perry School of Nursing, serves as an exciting example of how rhetoricians can work with scholars from other fields to enhance research in rhetoric as well as health, science, and medicine. Jack recently became the co-director of an interdisciplinary lab called the HHIVE: Health and Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Venue for Exploration, which aims to "[link] the humanities and health sciences through student-center research projects, innovative curricula, and public engagement" ("About"). Mixed methods and multi-genre studies, such as the three discussed in this review, that focus on gendered everyday rhetorics challenge feminist historians of rhetoric to broaden and complicate their research aims and engage in complex but necessary interdisciplinary collaborations.

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