

Archival Research as Institutional Critique

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Abstract: Through a critical reading of early 20th century records from the archives of the Southern Baptist Church, this essay interrogates church leaders' claims that the evangelical institution of marriage is a permanent policy, universally applicable to all, and stable across centuries of church teachings. The author argues that institutional rhetorics (IR) as a subfield must resist such universalizing claims made by organizational leaders and instead push for definitions of institutions that expose their unstable shifts across contexts. In doing so, archival research is thus articulated as a performance of institutional critique that has the potential to disrupt, unsettle, and delegitimize the meaning-making power of organizations and the identificatory connections they offer to audiences. In this case study inspired by the volunteer work of Church Clarity, archival research toward institutional critique holds church leaders accountable for their violent rhetorics of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: institutional critique, rhetorics of gender and sexuality, archival research, evangelical marriage

Introduction

Ever-increasing threats against the local LGBTQIA2 community in the city where I taught at the time of conducting this research (Louisville, KY.) have wrought even more undue violence: already in 2023, the Kentucky State Senate passed a bill that endangers the lives and wellbeing of queer and trans students; community programming has been continually canceled in response to DHS domestic terrorism alerts; and the removal of a transgender woman from a school-sponsored fraternity event through verbal and physical harassment has resulted in the "Silent Wars" standoff between students and administration at the University of Louisville, where I conduct this research project. In my last five years serving as a volunteer archivist for Church Clarity, an organization that scores the accessibility of Protestant Christian churches' policies on gender and sexuality, I have deeply engaged with the evangelical messaging that has long fueled the ongoing national debates over how queer and trans people are permitted to exist and participate in American society, and that continues to implement violence in cities like Louisville.

In my position at Church Clarity, I have read, analyzed, and repurposed thousands of church policies on marriage, which we volunteers often use as evidence of a church's affirming or non-affirming status (i.e., listing the levels of spiritual participation that are extended to

or rescinded from queer and trans members). In this process, I was struck by how often church leaders appealed to their own *institutionality*, or the illusion of their permanence, stability, or universality across millennia, and this argument is regularly used by evangelical leaders as a violent rhetoric that attempts to justify homophobia and transphobia in our communities. The Southern Baptist Church (or SBC), for example, has long served as a key resource for churches who seek to recirculate this argument by providing pre-written policy language. Sometimes, they argue that marriage is universal because it was divinely created—God’s “first institution” and his “basic unit of society,” later by “reaffirmed” by Christ—“rather than simply a human social construct” (“On Covenant Marriage”; “Resolution on Homosexual Marriage”; “On ‘same sex Marriage’”). In other policies, they claim it’s the church who has remained unwavering on the definition of marriage to maintain “a healthy society” (“Resolution on Protecting...”). These policies are remarkably influential, as I have personally witnessed how their phrasing is recycled and spread across marriage policies of at least hundreds of different evangelical denominations.

Rooted in 18th and 19th century revival events that “refocused” Protestantism around “personal conversion and piety, and mobilized adherents to social action and proselytizing” (Cope & Ringer 107), evangelicalism is not a specific denomination but a marker of a Christianity that is strictly adherent to the Bible as “the ultimate authority on all matters” (Camper 410)—and enforces a rigid genre set of possible interpretations that is almost always inflected by conservative politics. On gender and sexuality, evangelicals frequently prescribe a fundamentalist “bad rhetoric,” in Sharon Crowley’s terms, imposing “unities that transcend temporal and local contexts” and limiting any “available alternatives” outside of the marriage of one cisgender man and one cisgender woman (130). Such appeals to stasis, or the devolution of rhetorical capacities, are intended to “[constrict . . .] the role of the rhetor” who “is given less agency” to respond to pastoral teachings or attempt to make sense of scripture on their own (Amorose 137), which is traditionally afforded to evangelicals through “a conversion experience that brings the believer into a relationship with God” but severely restricted in how members are permitted to express their gender and sexual identities (Mannon 143). The only path typically provided to queer and trans Christians who seek membership in an evangelical setting is to violently conform to the cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous marriage institution as it is written, or secondarily to permanent celibacy and/or detransition, through whatever means necessary.

Personal narratives collected by Church Clarity volunteers have demonstrated that church leaders hide under the veil of universalizing claims provided by marriage policies (e.g., “marriage has always been defined as...”) that enable them to skirt the responsibility of mounting a defense to counterarguments and even to modify (those supposedly universal) definitions as exigencies, contexts, and organizational needs shift over time. Using Church Clarity’s archival training and resources, I unearth multiple versions of marriage policies from one influential evangelical denomination (the SBC) in an effort to expose the definitional shifts that occur when appeals to institutionality govern what can be said: In other words, I ask, how are institutions like evangelical

marriage changed over time by organizational leaders, and how are these changes deployed as a rhetoric that exploits their own supposed institutionality? In the CFP for this special issue, the co-editors remind us that “it’s important to understand how these systems developed in order to properly understand the backlash that has been created to keep these systems in place.” I echo their reminder and emphasize here that tracing the SBC’s historical development not only aids us in understanding their organizational processes but also provides tactical practitioners with the evidence they need to challenge abuses of power and hold them publicly accountable. Thus, archival research is posited as a performance of institutional critique that disrupts and unsettles the meaning-making power of organizational fields like the evangelical church.

Although “hard to change,” institutions are “changeable,” Porter, et al. write, because they are “rhetorically constructed human designs” that are structured by “rhetorical systems,” or “processes of decision making” (610-611, 625). As the rules, norms, and beliefs that describe reality and determine legitimate actions, institutions are malleable genres, sedimented over time, that have been continually adapted and reused to respond to recurring situations in an organization. The origins of evangelical institutions can sometimes be traced to and through lineages of archival records and multimodal ephemera. Buried in digital traces, Church Clarity volunteers enable institutional critique by unearthing, exposing, distributing, and revising marriage policies and their various roots, ending the violent cycle of “affective inheritances” that are reintroduced by each invocation of the policy against a queer or trans member (Ahmed). As Stoler reminds us, “to understand an archive one needs to understand the institutions it served” because it can expose “taxonomies in the making” (Stoler 88, 91). In this case, archival research performs institutional critique by revealing the definitional labor of maintaining marriage as it is currently understood.

Church documents demonstrate SBC leaders’ efforts to transform one public (Southern Baptists) into the public (America and its territories, and ever-expanding beyond it). In this essay, I follow Church Clarity’s example of transforming archival research into institutional critique by reading a variety of church documents (convention proceedings, committee reports, public resolutions, sermons, presidential addresses, and pastor’s conference press packets) that span over a century. I identify just one (of many possible periods) in 20th century SBC history in which leaders rhetorically refit the marriage institution to serve different policy needs and organizational goals. This essay is not a complete history of the SBC’s teachings on gender and sexuality, but an interrogation of how institutions continually change so that an organization may retain its legitimacy to make meaning in certain arenas of our lives. I draw from artifacts in the Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives (SBHLA), which is a settler archive, meaning that the marriage institution (and the many other institutions it serves) are rhetorically imbricated with both the history and the presence of colonialism. Marriage was and is a key mechanism for Baptist missionaries to impose Western frameworks of being (gendered and sexed) and sold to and enforced upon new members as a Christian practice that would elevate one’s status to a legitimate American citizen. In doing so, they manipulate audiences by presenting genres like marriage policies as a priori realities, so

that they appear unchangeable and universally applicable—in other words, they were here before us, and they will be here after us. Rather than renaturalizing the marriage institution as a pre-existing given (e.g., “the SBC has always defined marriage as between one man and one woman”), I challenge how institutionality itself is deployed as a rhetoric, and I invite other rhetoric and writing studies scholars to reconsider their archival research as both rhetorical recovery and an intervention in present-day argumentation.

Marriage in the City: The Home Missions Board up to 1912

Marriage is the SBC’s weapon of domestic imperialism and evangelism. Because the American home represents the “achievements and imperatives of civilization,” other homes and living spaces were often targeted as a space in which missionaries could assimilate non-believers (Simonsen 12). Marriage was the path to religious conversion from other faiths to a Baptist practice of Christianity, and the reconstruction of the home shaped gender and sexual identities and expressions, thus facilitating an association with the ideal of nationhood. This violent work was not only facilitated by material force, but also required “the public work of writers, artists, anthropologists, bureaucrats, and reformers” in “literary, legal, and aesthetic” arenas (Simonsen 3). Long before the turn of the twentieth century, “bad housekeeping” had become a symbol of racial and thus religious “inferiority” (Simonsen 3). In this section, I demonstrate how SBC marriage policies are but one tool of many that disseminated, legitimized, and maintained oppressive hierarchical understandings of normative gender and sexuality, garnering their institutional status, before the next section where I trace the cycle of change that the genre underwent.

Dating back to 1845, the SBC’s annual convention, which still meets today, is a gathering of the denomination’s highest-ranking leaders to discuss the organization’s missions, agendas, policies, budgets, and public-facing and political concerns—all of which undergo continual revision. While the meeting itself is insular, it often has ripple effects in its own community of Nashville, TN., even today. For example, its Nashville Statement on gender and sexuality in 2017 was rebuked by the mayor of Nashville (Schmidt), and it once caused the city’s first COVID cluster after gathering restrictions were lifted (Kelman & Meyer). Throughout the busy two days of the convention, certain pastors are selected to give sermons on the hot topics of the time or elected to serve on governing committees, and delegates known as “messengers” travel from SBC churches from every region of the country and around the world to report on their activities and observations over the last year, which are then used to inform the next round of agenda setting and topic invention for sermons and educational materials.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, SBC leaders installed and perfected a cycle through which committees, reports, resolutions, and motions all reflected the shifting values and exigencies that they agreed to prioritize for the remainder of each year until they met again at the next convention. Policy changes appear most often in the form of the report-resolution-motion

genre cycle, which is not unique to the SBC and long predates the SBC's founding in various legal and corporate contexts. In reading the archival records of conventions, I found that leaders use these gatherings to elect subcommittees to research particular concerns, such as alcohol or gambling, and those subcommittees spend the next year traveling to churches and discussing issues with pastors and collecting data related to that concern. At the next year's convention, their findings will influence the writing and publication of a resolution clarifying the SBC's stance related to that concern. If the resolution is not considered enough of an action, leaders will pass a motion to take a specific action, and often, that action may be to fund more research from that committee, which restarts the cycle.

For nearly every majorly debated (and often minor or non-existent) political issue in American history post-1845, the SBC published a resolution detailing their stance on the matter. As I read through documents across three centuries, I kept my own personal list anytime I noticed an SBC writer invoking a moral panic, which I define as an anxiety presented for the purpose of persuading the reader through fear or threat. They are affective arguments that help rhetors to frame some broad entity (society, Christianity, civilization, etc.) as always under severe risk. Sometimes, these anxieties are real events that should concern everyone living at the time, some are social trends that are exaggerated for persuasive effect, and others are entirely fictive and born of bigotry. I share the list below in alphabetical order, with the warning that its contents range from humorous to grim, to demonstrate that no issue is considered outside of the purview of SBC's authority:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Automobiles ● Child labor ● Child marriages ● Dancing ● Divorce laws ● Divorce ranches ● Immigration ● Industrialization ● Kinsey's studies on sexuality ● Marriage market towns ● Motion pictures ● Nudist colonies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Popular fiction ● Population increases ● Racetrack gambling, especially the Kentucky Derby ● Rum-running ships ● Syphilis ● Urban centers ● Wage labor ● Watergate ● Whiskey traffic ● White slavery ● Working on the Sabbath

Clearly, the SBC envisions itself as America's protector from what it considers to be moral decay, and this is most evident in the committee now generally recognized as its public policy arm: what is today called the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. Prior to 1913, though, it was primarily its missionary wing, known at the time by its first name, the Home Missions Board. With Arizona's inclusion as a U.S. state in 1912 as the last territory before Alaska and Hawaii, the evangelical mission was determined to Christianize the peoples of the land that had been

acquired through colonial expanse, as well as the newly arriving immigrants in increasingly urban American cities. This colonial project was not necessarily focused on new land acquisition and state expansion but with the erasure and transformation of other cultures on lands that were already owned, or “the Homeland” (1912 proceedings 34).

At the 1912 Southern Baptist Convention, the Home Missions Board reported on its findings from the last year and unsurprisingly targeted parenting as its great concern. Having previously created a subcommittee on “Cities,” which “increase rapidly in size,” and “Foreigners,” who “multiply rapidly on our streets,” the report’s concerns ranged from industry and urbanization to the “virgin territory” of the Southwest, “her dazzling mineral wealth,” and the Native tribes that resided there (1912 proceedings 29, 35). What the two spaces have in common for the Home Missions Board is that both are in “the kingdom of Christ” and thus need “winning the lost, and training them to win other lost” (1912 proceedings 31). In response, they clarify that the primary task of the Board is “to Christianize the sons and daughters of the Homeland and develop and conserve their sacred energies for the conquest of the world” (1912 proceedings 34). Additionally, they redefine Home Missions as “Christian patriotism organized for action, and engaged in the sacred business of enthroning Christ in the homes of the Homeland” (1912 proceedings 34). This move unites religion and nation as embedded projects and prioritizes the family “home” as the mechanism through which the two become one.

In each space of the “city” and the “territory,” marriage panics are invoked, yet in different ways. Southern cities are depicted as once-ideal spaces for humble farmers to trade goods who now face a “teeming and crowded population in the poorer districts,” in large part due to “foreigners who have never known a pure Christianity, and have not lived according to the holy ideals of our American Christian civilization” (1912 proceedings 30). Because immigrants were believed to “[carry] the taint of its low standards of life and morals,” cities are thus understood to pose multiple threats to evangelical marriage (1912 proceedings 30):

It shows itself in the amazing multiplication of cheap forms of amusement, which solicit the young to spend their evenings outside the family circle and amidst glare, glitter and excitement; provide along with the things that amuse, and which in themselves might be harmless, suggestions by means of words, attitudes and pictured scenes, that stimulate frivolous, violent and lustful emotions; and tend to produce an impulsive and excitable populace, that will reason little and put emotion in the place of conscience...

(1912 proceedings 29-30)

The Home Missions Board presents the entertainment provided by increasingly diverse cities as a slippery slope from “amusement” to “perverted thoughts” (1912 proceedings 29-30). They question how “strong and godly families” can maintain themselves in such environments, while

also charging them to resist the allure of “fragrant suburbs” where many Christians had escaped (1912 proceedings 30). Instead, they charge Baptist families to take up the evangelical mission: to remain amidst the “temptations, perils and tragedies of the weakened and deteriorated communities” and convert them to Christianity by providing a strong moral example through marriage (1912 proceedings 30). In the city, marriage is seen as both under threat by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration—all of which the SBC opposed at the time of the policy’s recomposition—but marriage is also presented as the firm foundation of the religion and the most powerful tool for fighting these supposed social problems.

In contrast to the city, younger states further West are imagined to be suddenly overflowing with Native American and Mexican communities, who are framed as “multiplied thousands of alien folks now offer themselves to the molding of true religion” (1912 proceedings 35). Evangelical missionaries to Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico are encouraged to fight liquor traffic and federal laws that restrict their behavior, such as attempts to ban teachers from wearing “religious garb” in “Indian mission” schools (1912 proceedings 74, 85). While the Home Missions Board doubted their ability to counteract the entertainment of the city, it’s the lack of attractions in the Southwest that make its current residents seem more amenable to religious conversion, so long as they can keep the focus on education and putting more prohibition laws in place.

Their edict, “We must evangelize our schools and educationalize our churches” that their mission out West is/was settler colonial, which I use to imply that colonialism cannot be reduced to the *event* of land theft, such as the Oklahoman “Sooners” who illegally jump-started the Land Run of 1889, but to refer to colonialism as an ongoing structural campaign that has the permanent cultural erasure and transformation of Native communities as its long-term end goal (1912 proceedings 33). Wolfe defines settler colonialism not as “an isolated event” but as a “structuring principle [...] across time” (399). He uses the “logic of elimination” to explicate the transition from Native removal to Native assimilation, which works within “the colonial rule of law” to eliminate non-dominant ways of knowing and being (Wolfe 399). Christian missions are one core faction of the larger program to establish material and ideological control, and this is seen in how the Home Mission Board prioritizes the institution of marriage as the foundation of settler society, or the “holy ideals of our American Christian civilization” (1912 proceedings 30).

What we see in the 1912 Home Missions Board report is the annual (re)setting of an agenda that has long been in place. As “stabilized-for-now” actions, genres are consistently adapted over time to serve social and institutional needs (Schryer 200). The report genre, which influences future actions/genres like missions, sermons, motions, and resolutions, is crucial to sustain the evangelical institution of marriage. The report accomplishes this sustenance by reanimating the definition of marriage’s primary exigencies according to whichever social “ills” the SBC is targeting that year. At the same time, marriage’s institutional qualities are exploited to further promote the Home Mission Board’s activities, as seen in how marriage is the basis for arguing that missions

are necessary in the first place. In this case, the Board invokes colonial hierarchies predicated on onto-epistemic racism to keep the appearance that the institution of marriage is under threat, while also invoking its strength as a “cure” for a rapidly expanding colony. Through this cycle, marriage plays one part in legitimizing and funding a vision of coloniality that “has been imported, expanded, and disputed for 500 years and counting” (Cushman, et al. 10).

Marriage Under the Influence: Reinventing Home Missions as Social Service (1913-1920)

At the 1913 SBC annual meeting, the Home Missions Board was reborn as the Social Service Commission. The change was only made possible by *the complete rehauling of the evangelical institution of marriage*. Though this move was not overt, it regardless helped to install and perfect a generic “report-motion-resolution” cycle in which marriage’s appearance of institutionality not only sells the idea that marriage is an institution but also provides leaders a moral platform to take action against any supposed threat that may weaken the marriage “institution.” Up to 1912, marriage had been defined as the SBC’s cornerstone of a “civil” settler society and deployed as a violent tool to enforce Christianity and its restrictions onto all genders and sexualities of all peoples everywhere. Marriage was a mechanism through which the idea of a Christian nation was sold to communities where missionaries traveled.

However, after the Home Missions Board’s anxieties about the liquor traffic increased, marriage was entirely redefined and resold to SBC stakeholders as under threat in a new and different way: drunken and under the influence of liquor. In response to the popularity of whiskey, the Board’s campaign shifted from crafting marriage as a strong moral example that would spread and populate (more marriage = good), to actually preventing marriages from happening and increasing the amount of restrictions placed on legal marriages (more marriage = bad). Marriage was recrafted as a tool to wage a legal war against the federal government and influence liquor laws without blatantly violating their supposed values for separation of church and state.

To argue for the transformation of Home Missions into Social Service, the 1913 report began to pin other social ills to “whiskey traffic,” from “white slavery” to “child labor,” specifically blaming industry titans like John D. Rockefeller (1913 proceedings 75). Defending the “Homeland” now encompassed more than just converting Native and immigrant souls by enrolling them in marriage preparation, the motion broadened the purview of the committee: “Whereas” liquor and other social problems threaten the marriage institution, “be it resolved that” Social Service will address “such wrongs which curse society today, and call loudly for our help” (1913 proceedings 75). By the following year, the committee was able to articulate the primary concern that brought together all of their concerns under the umbrella of Social Service (even though it uses the term “institution”—a rule, norm, or belief—in the way that I would define the term “organization”—the group of people who enforce that rule):

As a social institution embodying the divine ideal and responsible for its fulfillment in all the sections and activities of human life, the Church imposes its standards upon all other social institutions: (1) The family it protects by insisting upon the single standard of purity and health, and by maintaining everywhere Christ's limitation of divorce.

(1914 proceedings 37)

New to this rebranded definition of marriage is a focus on "purity and health." In the Home Missions Board era, marriage was an inherently strong moral example to nonbelievers, and the only threats to strong marriages were entertaining temptations that would distract from participation in the family unit. In the Social Service era, we see new categories for marriages introduced: marriages that start with hasty, drunk decisions; marriages that involve "impure" participants (meaning those who have contracted an STD); or marriages that end in divorce.

In the years leading up to the federal enactment of prohibition in 1920, the Social Service Commission used temperance as a moral panic that drastically amplified their missions efforts in all other areas that they were already actively evangelizing, and the urgent shift in tone is clear in the new reports from 1914-1919. "Unrestricted immigration" remains a "DANGER to American institutions" (1914 proceedings 307). Commending themselves for the success of converting the "Five Civilized Tribes" to Baptist doctrine, they charge missionaries with converting who they believed to be the remaining half of the "330,000 Indians in the United States," specifically focusing on "wild" but "wealthy" tribes like the Pawnee (1914 proceedings 307). Missionaries were given the singular goal of abolishing the space of the "saloon" before it could replace the church as the "social center" for the "Indian," who "is still our ward" (1915 proceedings 82-83; 1919 proceedings 78).

Interestingly, though, marriage was rapidly returned to its previous form as soon as the 18th amendment banned the sale of liquor in 1920 and the committee celebrated the abolition of the saloon. The celebration comes with a grim reminder of the importance of marriage, without which "the very foundations of our social order crumble," and how it is continually threatened by the entertainment forms found in urban areas, matching the organizational rhetoric of marriage prior to the rising popularity of whiskey (1920 proceedings 124). Replacing alcohol as the primary threat is the film industry:

The motion picture, as now conducted, is undoubtedly another cause that contributes to this sad condition [...] Nearly every film put upon the screen contains somewhere evil suggestion, calculated at first to bring the blush of modesty and virtue to the cheek and then to remove it and bring in its stead the flush of passion and the blanching purpose

to do wrong. Many of the films are based on the “eternal triangle” and the suggestions of disregard if not open breach of the marital relation.

(1920 proceedings 126)

Even though they are mocked by local newspapers for their disdain of cinema, the committee remained committed to enacting stronger censorship laws, as well as divorce laws and stricter legal requirements for pre-marital STD testing, as evident in the next few years of reports.

Many reports, which inform the “Whereas” statement, result in the publication of resolutions, which inform the “Resolved” statement, and that clarify and promote the stance of the SBC. The cycle of presenting reports and passing resolutions repeats itself throughout the 1920s and 1930s, regenerating and fixating on a new moral panic each time a new social trend emerges. Dance halls replace movie theaters, and so on. In each iteration, marriage serves as the seemingly unending and unchanging institution, always the foundation of a civil society, and always under threat of moral decay. Its rhetorical leverage here is its appearance of institutionality: the SBC can target and attack whatever it desires because it is protected under the guise of that ever-permanent marriage institution. The generic cycle enables the SBC to sustain a rotating agenda while spreading their missions efforts into increasingly broad public arenas: from churches to schools, Eastern to Western states, state to federal legislation, and global missions efforts.

Conclusion

In rhetoric and writing studies, the archive has served as a site of institutional critique by assisting projects that deconstruct identities and rebuild communities. For example, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn are a site for retroactivist efforts to “compose and appropriate versions of the past toward present identification and politics” (Bessette 3). Violent representations of the past are denaturalized and remixed to “co-opt, challenge, modify, and replace these versions of the past with complex, experiential, and queer compositions” (Bessette 11). However, where Bessette and the LHA productively deploy archival records to foster connections across the past and present, recreating old and new possibilities for (dis)identification, this essay follows the lead of our volunteer work at Church Clarity to use archives to challenge claims and hold church leaders accountable for what they say—deconstructing any possibility of (dis)identificatory connections. Through a rhetorical analysis of SBC archival records, potential religious trauma of queer and trans members is reduced and in some cases prevented altogether by intervening in arguments that church leaders are actively making today, forcing policymakers to answer for recycled fallacies of institutionality.

Instituting a particular vision of reality and projecting it onto non-believers was not and is not easy work for SBC leaders, who seek to establish and maintain onto-epistemic hierarchies that

typify and sort members into categories of existence with an ascribed set of acceptable behaviors or styles of inhabiting the world. García defines settler archives like the SBHLA as those that were “invented and placed strategically to help attune the world to both ideal representations of knowledge, understanding, and humanity and to the promises of salvation, progress, and development” (125). Specifically, they make possible one’s “humanization only by their conversion to Christianity, civilization, and/or modernization” (García 125). He argues that it is the rhetorician’s task to unravel how church-settlers have “used language to disseminate and sell ideas rhetorically,” how such ideas have traveled through the crafting of various institutions, “economic, authorial, political, and knowledge,” and how such institutions have established “structural logics of management” and “control” that persist today (García 124). Envisioning our own archival research as institutional critique affords feminist and queer coalitions like Church Clarity the opportunity to disrupt the “affective inheritances” of contemporary arguments. In this case, the “histories of thought and activism that precede us” are actually violent institutionalized genres that are continuing to enact religious trauma by repeatedly “[moving] through moments of reinvention” (Ahmed 47-8; Cram 15). Archival research is one method of performing institutional critique and is a vital option for coalitions who have access and/or means to trace the archival records of organizations. If it is the archival rhetor’s task to investigate how ideas have been disseminated and sold through language and action, then it is the institutional rhetor’s task to shine a light on what/who is excluded when organizations circulate rhetorical appeals to their own permanence, stability, or universality—to expose, delegitimize, and unmake the visions of reality installed through their institutions.

Institutional rhetorics (IR), then, is not just a subfield that studies how groups of people persuade each other to act, but is also a study of the generic processes of institutionalization that help certain rhetorics stick around and others dissipate. Skinnell recently argued that too many rhetorical studies of institutions define them solely based on the context of the academic study and apply no other substantial definition. Here, I adopt a definition of institutions as the rules, norms, and beliefs that describe reality and determine legitimate actions in an organization, which is largely influenced by organizational theorists (Alvesson; Barley and Tolbert; Brown, et al.). This definition can be adopted by other studies of genres that travel in organizations and that are continually reused often enough that they become institutionalized in that organization’s stock of acceptable knowledge. This move opens IR scholars to new questions that we should be asking, such as: How are claims to institutionality also rhetorical? What happens to its members when an organization calls a genre an “institution?” What are the material and ideological conditions of working with and living in an organization that universalizes its genres as “institutions?” There are real consequences often felt by an organization’s most vulnerable members. How leaders sell this idea, not just once but many times throughout one’s life, as a necessary requirement for successful participation in a particular organization is of great importance. I seek to push IR scholarship to be able to account for the social context at the moment in which a particular genre is institutionalized, as well as account for the genre’s ability to remain institutionalized in an organizational field over long periods of time, reappearing in many new and recurring contexts.

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