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Review Essay

Local Histories, Broader Implications

Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition

Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon, editors

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. 260 pages. \$22.95 (paper).

A new anthology from the University of Pittsburgh Press Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture will be of interest to historians of American composition pedagogy and practice. *Local Histories* locates the archives of composition-rhetoric from the 1840s to the late 1960s in liberal arts colleges, normal schools, the junior college movement, and Lincoln University, the first of the so-called Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). An assemblage of loosely related, yet interleaved archival studies, *Local Histories* enlarges, challenges, and poses alternative readings to a unified historiography of composition-rhetoric, if such a unified history is presumed to persist. Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon collect essays from composition historians, many of whom currently teach at the institutions that they study. These readers/writers of the archives recognize that “all historical work . . . is provisional, partial—fragments we shore against our ruin,” as Robert Connors writes and Gretchen Flesher Moon cites in the epigraph to the first chapter (1). The word “partial” should be understood in two senses—as incomplete, as well as interested and constructed. Historians, these essayists

insist, are always interested participants in the narratives that they construct and deploy.

The aim of the volume, while leveraged on somewhat disparate sources, is nevertheless broad and unified, involving, as Patricia Donahue writes in the closing chapter, “a reexamination of prevailing ideas about disciplinary formation, development, and transmission” (221–22). The most enduring prevailing idea is “the Harvard narrative” with its “English A” born circa 1874. English A has been regarded as the reputed “prototype for the required freshman course that within fifteen years would be the standard at almost every college in America” (Connors 11). As Donahue points out, the Harvard myth is not only a genesis story; it is also an academic evolutionary narrative. The course, its texts, and its progenitors spread even as they mutated the gospel of composition across national curricula. The Harvard narrative is such an “entrenched . . . ‘always already’” (222) of disciplinary history that it necessarily runs through (and counter to) many of the installments in the anthology. Here, the Harvard story is challenged, resituated, and complicated by alternative, local histories; yet it persists as their Other, just as they have “always already” been its Other, or so the essays suggest.

The contributors to *Local Histories*, we are told, are third-generation composition historians, inheritors of the work of Albert A. Kitzhaber, the “grandfather” (largely responsible for initiating the Harvard narrative) and of the second-generation historians, who include Katherine H. Adams, James Berlin, John Brereton, Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen Carr, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, Wallace Douglas, S. Michael Halloran, Winifred Horner, Nan Johnson, Susan Miller, James J. Murphy, Stephen North, David R. Russell, Mariolina Salvatori, and Donald Stewart. The “grandchildren” of composition history (13) pay homage to their forebears, sometimes validating, sometimes rejecting, but always revising their findings. Excavating archival documents that include curricular and extracurricular student writing, class notebooks, course syllabi, catalogs, unpublished lectures, instructors’ and administrators’ published essays, speeches, yearbooks, and more, the contributors attempt to reconstruct the practices often obscured by composition theories and texts. The first four chapters of the anthology study composition in liberal arts colleges; the second four study normal schools in the Midwest and Massachusetts; the remaining chapters focus on the junior college movement and an HBCU. The final chapter by Donahue is a retrospective on the book and composition historiography as a whole. The chapters are also arranged roughly in chronological order, tracing composition from the mid-nineteenth century through the late

1960s, or through the four phases that Connors identifies in *Composition-Rhetoric*: Early American, Postwar, Consolidation, and Modern (8–15).

Following a married adult, female student writer (Mahala Pearson Jay) through Antioch College from 1853, Kathleen A. Welsch is interested in the *uses* made by teachers and especially students of a “seemingly unproductive pedagogy” consisting of “rigid rules and expectations” (16). Welsch argues that Mahala’s texts do not represent the personal as a mere product of pedagogy, or as resistance to it, but rather as active engagement that depended upon *belief* in the kind of moral education propounded. The distinction between product and believer is a subtle one, but Welsch’s study does complicate the received notion that pedagogies are hegemonies that must either dominate or be resisted by student writers.

In their study of composition at Lafayette College, Patricia Donahue and Bianca Falbo do more than other contributions to the collection to debunk the “official” Harvard narrative. At the same time, they contribute to the history of the broader category of English studies in America. Locating in the 1858–59 Lafayette catalog a course called English Composition predating the composition course at Harvard (1874) by nearly twenty years, Falbo and Donahue simultaneously announce and resist “a ‘Eureka’ moment” (41); wisely, they refuse to replace one origin myth with another. Instead, they offer plausible reasons for the disappearance of English Composition at Lafayette from composition history. Finally, Lafayette betrays distortions in the narratology of English studies and the career of Francis A. March; both histories are marked by the privileging of literature over writing. To counter these distortions, they argue that “any claims about the origin of literature as distinct from composition are suspect . . . the history of English is, indeed, a story of reading *and* writing (53, emphasis in original). Their recuperation of Lafayette and Francis A. March for composition serves a broader revisionism of English studies.

Contributors such as Julie Garbus on Vida Scudder at Wellesley College, Jeffrey L. Hoogveen on Lincoln University, Beth Ann Rothermel on Massachusetts State Normal School, and Patrice Gray on Fitchburg Normal School offer tales of resistance to curricular and pedagogical objectives aimed at ranking and “normalizing” students along a hierarchy that placed research universities, their students, and male teachers at the top. Of particular interest to this reader is the story of Lincoln University, the first of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCUs have received scant if any attention in composition history prior to Hoogveen’s essay. As a teacher at an HBCU, I see in

Hoogeveen's study of composition at Lincoln the kind of nuanced interpretation required for such complex pedagogical situations. He notes an ironic convergence of the composition-rhetoric "correctness" movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Correctness at Lincoln, he argues, must be read within the broader context of an (albeit paternalistic) impulse to improve the efficacy of civil rights advocacy by student writers and speakers. This interpretation provides important lessons for those of us teaching composition at HBCUs, who promote student-centered teaching aimed at democratization, yet are nevertheless faced with curricular administrative and departmental demands to enforce "correctness." Hoogeveen's case study also offers an important revision of internalist histories of composition such as that proposed by Susan Miller in *Textual Carnivals*, where she argues that "the novelty of composition has no obvious sources in larger political changes in the 1960s and 1970s . . . current composition has more to do with movements within its origin" (142–43). Such is the risk run by macro-histories.

While several of the above-mentioned chapters find hopeful student/teacher resistance to oppressive pedagogies and curricula, others pose alternative renderings of educational movements generally regarded as democratic. Kenneth Lindblom, Will Banks, and Risë Quay offer the story of Abbie Reynolds at Illinois State Normal School, whose epistolary relationship with her brother John reveals a vision of Albert Stetson's pedagogy quite at odds with the more progressive version gleaned from his published essays. This reading tells a convincing story of Abbie's eroding confidence as a writer, due to the military strictures of correctness imposed by Stetson. This counter-reading, in which Abbie sees herself as "improving backwards" (112), also posits an alternative to the narrative offered by Kathryn Fitzgerald that composition's democratic impulses may "have precedent in the normal schools" (Fitzgerald 225). Similarly, in his study of the junior college movement as initiated by William Rainey Harper, William DeGenaro counters the claims for the "community" college as a democratic institution, paying attention to Rainey Harper's larger goal as an educational innovator of ranking junior colleges, as well as their students and faculty, beneath those of the model research university, the University of Chicago, his real pride and joy.

Local Histories thus narrates necessarily discontinuous, fragmentary, and often contradictory documentary evidence. As Jean Ferguson Carr, one of the series editors, notes in the afterword, such archival research "confirms what was speculation or assumption; counters prejudices and reopens foreclosures"

(238). Foreclosures are reopened here by providing micro-histories that examine uses made of texts, interactions of students with teachers and their pedagogies, extracurricular writing and speaking done by students and encouraged (or discouraged) by administrators and teachers, and marks and remarks nearly erased by broader historical studies. It offers compositionists glimpses of formerly unseen opportunities and thus possibilities for their own contemporary practices.

Works Cited

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