New Directions in Revisionist Histories of Composition

In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools, edited by Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2015. 232 pp.

Microhistories of Composition, edited by Bruce McComiskey. Logan: Utah State UP, 2016. 336 pp.

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These titles initially caught our attention because we have both been working on historical projects situated outside the traditional composition classroom. Liane has been studying the rhetorical practices of women settlement house workers in the 1890s, while Anne has been studying letters written by dictionary users to Merriam-Webster, Inc., in the 1960s. Though we are focusing on different sites and time periods, we both are curious about how local or "small" histories contribute to broader understandings of composition. We are hardly alone in this interest: as the introductions to both edited collections explain, early histories of the field constructed grand narratives that created a sense of coherent, uniform disciplinary development (McComiskey 8-9; Ostergaard and Wood 2-3). These early histories were typically based on practices at elite and flagship universities that primarily served white, male, upper-class students; the disciplinary origin story focusing on English A at Harvard is a typical example. More recent histories have revised, challenged, and expanded the grand narratives by exploring the experience of writers in a range of institutional—and sometimes nonacademic—contexts. Editors Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood and Bruce McComiskey point to David Gold's *Rhetoric at the Margins*, Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon's *Local Histories*, Jaqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream,* and Jessica Enoch's *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, among many others, as histories that have taken this revisionary turn.

In the Archives of Composition and *Microhistories of Composition* continue the work of complicating grand narratives and opening up new possibilities for approaches, methodologies, and sites of study. With a few exceptions, *Microhistories* focuses on revising composition histories in the latter half of the twentieth century, leaving early disciplinary history and recent events off the table. Meanwhile, *In the Archives* casts a wider temporal net, considering subjects from the early nineteenth century through the late twentieth century. Together, these collections offer a more comprehensive, yet still complex, story of disciplinary origins and growth.

In the introduction to *In the Archives*, Ostergaard and Wood make a compelling case for including secondary schools in the histories of composition and rhetoric. Far more students attended—and therefore received writing instruction at—public high schools than elite universities (3-4). First-year composition courses both respond to and shape high school writing instruction, a process of reciprocal influence perhaps most evident in normal schools, where many secondary teachers both wrote and learned to teach writing. The structure of *In the Archives* reflects the interdependent relationships among these kinds of institutions: the first section focuses on high schools; the middle section, which serves as a bridge between the other two sections, focuses on normal schools; and the last section looks more broadly at the relationship between secondary and post-secondary writing.

At first glance, the collection seems to chart a course away from high school and toward college-level composition. But individual chapters are quick to complicate this linear progression; Wood's opening chapter, for instance, examines how students in a Kansas City, Missouri, high school "contributed to and benefitted" from what Connors has called "composition-rhetoric" (29). Together, the four chapters of the first section show how including secondary schools in histories of composition can broaden college-level compositionists' understandings of writing education. The other chapters take readers from the Albuquerque Indian School in the 1800s to a suburban Kansas high school in the 1970s. For Anne, the section's range was a useful reminder of the variety and potential richness of high school writing; in her day-to-day teaching and administrative work, she has found it all too easy to view secondary writing instruction solely as preparation for standardized testing. However, chapters like Candace Epps-Robertson's, which examines the language arts program at the Prince Edward Free School, challenge casual dismissals of high school writing. Following *Brown v. Board of Education,* Prince Edward County, Virginia, chose to close its public schools rather than desegregate them. The Free School Association created schools for students, most of them African American, who had been denied access to public education in the county. By examining administrative documents, such as a school handbook and curricular bulletins, Epps-Robertson shows how the traditional skills-based curriculum of the Free School's Moton High School was radical within its context.

If the first section of *In the Archives* feels like it is covering new, fresh ground with the focus on high schools, the second section on normal schools will feel more familiar to readers of other archival studies. Ostergaard and Wood position their collection as seeking to "continue [the] project" of Donahue and Moon's *Local Histories* (2). Individual chapters accomplish this through the use of unexplored archives as well the destabilization of disciplinary beliefs, particularly about the uniformity of the field's development. Elaine Hays's

chapter on Elizabeth City State Normal University in particular seems to work toward the expansion of "the institutional contexts where we construct our disciplinary histories" (2). If normal schools are to be included in the scope of composition histories, Hays argues, "We must not ignore the teaching and learning of composition at African American normal schools under segregated conditions" (149). Conversely, Ostergaard's chapter on Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) and Beth Ann Rothermel's chapter on Westfield State Normal School look at institutions that are also featured in *Local Histories.* While the institutions are the same, Ostergaard and Rothermel show that going beyond a first look is fruitful. Ostergaard's chapter on June Rose Colby at ISNU, for instance, covers different ground than Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, and Risë Quay's chapter about grammar instruction at the school in *Local Histories*, ultimately shedding new light on broader disciplinary tensions between composition and literature. Cumulatively, the chapters in the second section of Ostergaard and Wood's collection add evidence that normal schools are rich sites for research.

The chapters in the third section revisit well-trod territory in composition histories: textbooks, nineteenth-century Harvard, and the changing relationship between research and instruction in the early 1960s. But the routes contributors take into these subjects add new layers. For instance, Edward J. Comstock's chapter focuses on students' self-reports to the Harvard English Faculty Committee, which was tasked with assessing the effectiveness of English A. In their self-reports, students describe learning to write before Harvard and reflect on writing daily themes. Reading about theme-writing in other histories, Anne had assumed it was a tiresome chore. Therefore, she was surprised to read student comments like, "'Daily themes are beautiful practice'" (196) and "'That day is lost on which I write no daily theme'" (196). Of course, not all students wrote so glowingly of theme writing, and Comstock explores the complex motivations that may have led students to embrace the practice. But he, like the authors of the other chapters in this section (and, indeed, the writers in *Microhistories*), uses archival materials to complicate—and humanize—stories readers may have thought they already knew.

Shifting the focus to the mid-twentieth century, *Microhistories* revises previous histories of composition toward the goal of complicating readers' understanding of the local sites, exigencies, and bodies of knowledge from which the discipline emerged. In the introduction, McComiskey describes microhistory as a "methodological middle ground" that seeks to balance between the grand narratives of social history and the decontextualized nature of cultural history (15). McComiskey also instructs readers unfamiliar with microhistory about key concepts that enable contributors to toggle between individual cases and broader disciplinary narratives. Of special importance is

the concept of the "exceptional normal," or "a particular case in history that is exceptional from the perspective of social history but may reveal a hidden normal from the perspective of cultural history," which several authors in the collection make use of to introduce their case studies (19). Through a comprehensive discussion of the microhistorical approach, McComiskey makes a persuasive case that it is a fitting antidote to early disciplinary histories that "treated the discipline as if it were a unified body of knowledge and practices that evolved almost predictably in dialectical response to broad historical and social pressures" (24).

The promise of the microhistorical methodology to add complexity to grand narratives is realized in the subsequent chapters. The collection has no formal section breaks, though in the first part of the book, chapters take a range of texts as their main objects of study. These texts include published work, archival material, and conference artifacts. In the second part, chapters have different objects of study: figures in the field, both known and unknown. This arrangement makes a cumulative argument that microhistory is a methodology suited to sites of inquiry that have an individual text, archive, event, or figure at their core.

The authors historicizing texts in the first part of the book use microhistorical analysis to multiply the origins of and exigencies for the formation of the discipline. For example, Annie S. Mendenhall resituates two publications from 1963: Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer's *Research in Written Composition* (*RWC*) and Albert R. Kitzhaber's *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* (*TTT*). Reading against the narrative that these texts were representative of a watershed moment in 1963 in which the discipline articulated a writing research agenda, Mendenhall argues that these texts were responding to a national interest in funding English research because many had the "hope that education in English, like science and math, could contribute to national advancement during the Space Race era" (42). Thus, through recontextualization, Mendenhall shows *RWC* and *TTT* to be responses to mundane economic forces rather than a concerted effort to create a research agenda for the field.

In the second half of the book, authors (re)introduce readers to teachers, researchers and administrators whose stories have not been definitively told in previous histories. Neal Lerner, for example, positions Roger Garrison, one of several scholars responsible for introducing the field to teaching writing as a process, as a "normal exception," or someone who "has been largely forgotten" in composition history (219). By recovering Garrison's story, Lerner argues for "critically remembering," a call to be thoughtful and intentional in choosing who we remember, cite, and acknowledge as our forebears (232). Lerner argues that Garrison, while not remembered in well-known histories or cited

in composition scholarship, had far-reaching influence through his teaching of hundreds of community college instructors in an annual summer writing seminar. Conversely, Brian Gogan revises the field's well-known positioning of Ken Macrorie in the "expressivist" camp by recovering Macrorie's sustained efforts to support students' public writing. Gogan's chapter—and many others in the latter section of this collection—do the work of complicating the use of individual figures to represent disciplinary movements and ideas.

As we read through these books together, we regularly exchanged notes and observations, and we met several times to discuss our ideas and impressions. We agreed early on that both collections open up new sites for research—and that writers in both collections made convincing cases for why those sites might add to our evolving understanding of composition. Moving away from grand narratives and toward local histories introduces the possibility that some histories might be so far afield they can no longer be called histories of composition. But none of the subjects covered in these collections reaches this point. In response to *In the Archives*, Liane observed that high school is not just another kind of institution to add to composition history; it is *the* institution through which most people have come into contact with composition. Compared with *In the Archives, Microhistories* offers more obvious links between the chapters and more mainstream aspects of disciplinary history, which makes sense given that the microhistorical approach is attuned to macro perspectives. But even chapters on subjects outside of conventional histories felt relevant, expanding while revising. For example, Liane noted that Louise Wetherbee Phelps' chapter on the 1979 Ottawa conference pushes against the narrative that the history of composition is about American college composition by revealing its transnational connections.

As we read these texts, we noticed that authors in each collection were positioning more well-known histories as resources for inventing new questions and starting conversations. In *Microhistories*, David Stock explicitly illustrates this use of previous histories as "generative sites for local historical work" by noticing a misattribution in James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* and following up on it to recover the story of Warren Taylor, a professor of English at Oberlin whose career traces a shift from composition to the humanities (215). Authors contributing to *In the Archives* foreground their smaller histories while acknowledging more well-known narratives. In her study of high school student Pat Huyett's diary, for example, Jane Greer positions her analysis to add another layer of texture to conceptions of the 1966 Dartmouth Conference where participants negotiated an American interest in teaching English as a literary canon and a British interest in putting students' needs at the center of the curriculum. Greer, keeping Huyett's diary entries as the focal point of the

chapter, adds a student's lived experience to further understand the implications of the 1966 Dartmouth Conference.

While authors writing in *In the Archives* were often recognizing well-known disciplinary narratives, several authors taking a microhistorical approach took this recognition a step further by including an account of themselves and their motives for complicating grand narratives. This self-reflexivity made stronger connections between the micro and macro levels of individual histories. For example, Kelly Ritter, a current journal editor, brings "insider knowledge" and "field experience" to her argument that analysis of journal editors' archives offers a new perspective of the role journals played in shaping the disciplinary identities of composition and literature (93). Ritter contextualizes previous journal editors' reports within their rhetorical situations that include the time and workload constraints the editors faced when reviewing manuscripts. By including these constraints, Ritter shows previous editors were responding to "practical" as well as "intellectual" problems when crafting journals to respond to disciplinary concerns (110).

With *Microhistories* drawing our attention to the relationship between specific sites of research (a text, an archive, a person) and previous "grander" narratives, we saw the potential for individual chapters in both collections to work well as longer, more fully textured studies that could draw more interconnections between the local research site and the larger frame. For example, Liane imagined several interconnections that could be made in a longer version of Wood's essay in *In the Archives*, a comparison between high school students' persuasive discourse and the popular rhetoric textbooks that these students may (or may not) have read as emblematic of a shift to composition-rhetoric. This essay could expand to include, for example, a broader "social history" that examined students' arguments within the bigger shift to composition-rhetoric locally and nationally, as well as more interconnections between students' arguments and the teaching and learning practices within the classroom that may give readers a sense of how students moved between writing arguments and reading textbooks. Similarly, in *Microhistories*, we found ourselves interested in knowing more about the connections between James T. Zebroski's rereading of Donald Bateman and Frank Zidonis's studies and the macro narrative this rereading complicated. Zebroski argues that, contrary to the discipline's appropriation of the Bateman-Zidonis studies as making the case for teaching grammar, the studies instead made the case for inviting students to inquire into language. While we appreciated the thorough rereading of these studies, we could imagine this argument making its significance more strongly felt through a broader tracing of the Bateman-Zidonis studies' impact on the field's approach to grammar instruction.

As writers of histories ourselves, we were also interested in how the archival material writers accessed shaped their chapters. Rothermel, writing about Westfield State Normal School in *In the Archives*, notes that the student writing she examined provides "fragmentary glimpses" of how students constructed their emerging teacher identities (144). "Fragmentary glimpses" is an apt description of what we hear from students in many of the chapters in *In the Archives*, as the writers attempt to recover voices of marginalized student writers. In her chapter on the Albuquerque Indian School (AIS), Whitney Myers draws on a range of nontraditional sources to reconstruct writing education from a closed school with an archive "destroyed by fire, flood, and toxic mold" (42). Invoking feminist historiographic strategies of working with traces and remnants, Myers looks to yearbook blurbs, entries in a school literary journal, and sample assignments in a textbook written by a teacher familiar with the school to recreate aspects of writing education at AIS. As readers, we often found ourselves wanting to hear more student voices in Myers' and other chapters, which speaks to how effectively the authors worked with what fragments they were able to access. If anything, the collection points to new sites for exploration; as Liane noted, *In the Archives* sets a precedent for other high school newspapers, yearbooks, and class publications to be considered as potential materials for study.

Materials play a different role in *Microhistories*: rather than actively recovering traces, the writers are often working with texts to challenge a dominant narrative. There are some absences and moments of reconstruction, such as the broken links and missing issue of *CCC Online* in Douglas Eyman and Cheryl E. Ball's chapter on a multi-journal special issue on electronic publication. More often than not, however, the chapters in *Microhistories* complicate a presence rather than recover an absence, and that may be a function of who was often at the center of chapters: journal editors, published scholars, and teacher who left substantial texts behind, even if they were not widely known figures in the field. Like *In the Archives, Microhistories* introduced us to materials we had never considered before, like journal editors' reports and conference proceedings. But in our preliminary notes on *Microhistories*, we never mentioned students, something we might not have noticed if we had not been reading this collection alongside *In the Archives*. We were left wondering how a microhistorical approach might work with more student-centered subjects.

Both collections complicate our understandings of composition and both open up new possibilities for historical research. However, the materials and approaches they use end up constructing different kinds of revisionist histories—and different pictures of composition. Overall these books would make good models for composition researchers writing revisionist histories, as well

as for teachers seeking to provide students with an expansive understanding of disciplinary origins.

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