



Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition, Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon, eds. *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan, eds.

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That being said, I cannot but reiterate the quality of the work within this book. Hawhee provides a thorough, well-constructed piece of scholarship in the form of *Moving Bodies*.

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Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon, eds. *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. ix–xiii + 260 pages. \$25.95 paperback.

Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan, eds. *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008. 192 pages. \$35.00 paperback.

In early summer 2005, while looking through the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW) archives for information about the English department’s decision in late 1969, at the height of antiwar and civil rights protests, to abolish English 102, the second semester of its required Freshman English course, two graduate students and I came across a fall 1969 syllabus for English 101, the first semester of the course, which had by then been remedialized by the department. The syllabus was subtitled “Special Section for Black Americans” and its instructor was listed as “Burr Angle.” The section was designed to provide phonological and syntactic help with “standard English” for students struggling with “dialect interference.” We later found a memo from April 1970, in which the same Burr Angle looked back on the course, deeming it a failure. The students, it turned out, were perfectly capable of speaking and writing standard English; the problem was that they lacked confidence to do so. What most struck us about the memo, however, was the humility of the writer, reflecting on his shortcomings as a teacher and mistakes as a course designer.

We surmised that Angle, like most of the Freshman English instructors at UW in the 1960s, was a graduate teaching assistant (TA) from the English department. And since we were interviewing former TAs from that time, we thought it might be useful to locate him and ask about English 101. The name was distinctive, and we were sure we’d find him at a college or university somewhere, teaching writing, literature, or linguistics. In fact, there was no professor

anywhere by that name. There *was* a Burr Angle who had written books on building plastic model ships and radio-control model boats, but there was no contact information. The UW alumni office, meanwhile, had no useful information, and I wasn't sure how much time and effort we could expend in the search. After all, we had plenty of other people to talk to; and English 101 wasn't even the main topic of our research.

But the name stuck in my head, and the special syllabus “for Black Americans” continued to intrigue me. I remember riding my bike home one afternoon that summer and whispering to myself, “Burr Angle, where are you?”

Then, one morning at the end of June, I was home, drinking coffee and reading the *Wisconsin State Journal*, when my attention was drawn to a story on the front page of the local section. There, above the fold, was a photo of a man wearing a safety vest and standing on a street corner in downtown Madison. The caption described him as “a retiree who bikes all over town,” and the story was about how he had taken to counting the number of people driving while talking on their cell phones. But it was the man's name—Burr Angle—that nearly took my breath away. Burr Angle?!? Had he been under my nose the whole time? Soon, Burr and I were meeting, and he became a key informant in our study of UW's Freshman English program in the 1960s.

I tell this story because it encapsulates for me some of the more salient—and surprising—truths about investigating the past: that often the most interesting historical questions emerge from our own local worlds, that central to answering such questions are the primary “texts” stored all around us, that serendipity plays a key role in finding and interpreting those texts, that such work can be both thrilling and exasperating, and that the payoff is potentially huge: contributions to a field's understanding of itself, enhanced awareness about a community's past and increased knowledge of self, family, and world.

Composition, it seems, is in the midst of an archival turn. Increasing numbers of scholars are trying to understand writing, writing instruction, and the field itself by looking at the past. But the past they are looking at is not the proverbial foreign country, separate from and independent of us, but a past that is present in traces all around, in the *archives* that are part of our everyday lives. Importantly, those archives are increasingly written and read by ordinary people, who are finding there not a dead History enshrined behind glass but living histories open and accessible to all.

This turn to the archives, to local history, is something that compositionists have a real stake in, not only because learning about our own history, in all its diversity and complexity, has been so important to understanding who we are but also because, as writing teachers, we should be committed to helping *everybody* write their histories and thereby take greater control of their lives and communities.

The surge of interest in archival research is evident in these two books, which together comprise thirty-three essays from thirty-five scholars, none of whom (as far as I can tell) identifies as a professional historian. The number of writers involved, the range of topics examined, the variety of sources and methods used, the power of the studies—all suggest that we have entered an exciting time for writing history, which is here more subversive, fun, important, difficult, and accessible than any of us imagined when we were in graduate school.

Despite their shared foci and common commitments, the two books differ markedly. Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon's edited volume *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition* is the more integrated scholarly intervention, an impressively coherent collection of studies written by comp-rhet scholars working in a different university or college archive, together offering an alternative history of the field, particularly of its "originary moment" in the nineteenth century.

It's a stunning achievement—and long overdue. If, as John Brereton once wrote, "[H]istorians of composition have created the single most impressive body of knowledge about any discipline in higher education" that knowledge has been dominated by a single story, the so-called "Harvard narrative," which locates the birth of our field in an elite, all-male university, on the east coast, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in the midst of a literacy crisis stoked by an emerging professional-managerial class (*Origins* xiv). This book does more to dislodge that narrative from our disciplinary self-consciousness than any other project of its kind. By looking at previously neglected sites of writing instruction, the authors "extend, challenge, complicate, and thereby enrich" the narrative that the field has told itself (3).

Whole worlds of the academy are opened up here: The essays illuminate writing instruction at Ohio's Oberlin and Antioch Colleges in the 1850s, Pennsylvania's Lafayette College in the second half of the nineteenth century, Indiana's Butler University in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Massachusetts's Wellesley College at the same time, Illinois State Normal University in the mid-nineteenth century, Wisconsin's Platteville Normal School in 1898, Massachusetts's Westfield State and Fitchburg Normal Schools from 1839–1929 and 1895–1910, respectively, junior colleges at the turn of the twentieth century, and Pennsylvania's historically black Lincoln University in the 1960s and 1970s.

The evidence examined includes the usual textbooks and academic journals but also course catalogs, lecture notes, private letters, campus newspapers, the records of literary and debating societies, the minutes of faculty committees, and graduation speeches. But especially prominent are student essays, including the extraordinary set of papers written by Oberlin/Antioch student Mahala Pearson

Jay in the 1850s, the remarkable collection of forty-four essays written by the class of 1898 at Platteville Normal School, and graduation essays from students at Westfield State and Fitchburg Normal Schools. These essays give us the most complex, most detailed, and richest understanding of student writing in US colleges and universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that we've ever had.

The combined effect complicates the Harvard narrative, though it doesn't completely dispel the dreary story of nineteenth- and twentieth-century composition instruction that we're used to. Kathryn Fitzgerald's notion of centripetal and centrifugal forces (borrowed from Bakhtin) is a good frame for viewing the discipline's role in student writing development. Centripetal forces assimilate students toward "the standard subject positions" while centrifugal forces accommodate "new subject positions" (119). It is fairly clear that school writing, nearly everywhere and at all times, has had a tendency to direct students toward dominant interests. This volume of essays doesn't contradict that view.

Take the late nineteenth-century student essays from Platteville Normal School, papers written on the fiftieth anniversary of Wisconsin statehood and celebrating that state's achievements. According to Fitzgerald, the "centripetal force of the epideictic genre . . . pulls these writers to a center where language itself is flattened to a single vocabulary and theme" (123). Other researchers in the book come to similarly sober conclusions about the writing they find: Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, and Risë Quay argue that in the nineteenth century, "accuracy in punctuation, spelling, grammar, and enunciation became a fetish" at Illinois State Normal University (104). And William DeGenaro corrects the myth that junior colleges have been immune to hegemonic pressures, presenting schools like Joliet Junior College in the early twentieth century not as "democracy's college" but as part of a concerted effort to disparage the first two years of higher education and privilege the last two. Even at historically black Lincoln University after 1969, Jeffrey Hoogeveen finds a "discourse of correctness" that sat uneasily with the school's new post-civil rights mission.

But peeking out here and there are alternatives to the story of repression and control. With Kathleen Welsh we see a serious college student, Mahala Pearson Jay, on the mid nineteenth-century frontier, deploying the commonplace discourse of school but in the service of "serious mental activity rather than mere preoccupation with correctness" (17). With Patricia Donahue and Bianca Falbo, we see professor Francis A. March of Lafayette College, the "father" of English literary study in the United States, developing a pedagogy that integrates reading *and* writing in all courses and in the service of genuine inquiry. Even in the Platteville papers, there is centrifugal movement. In some essays, for example, students resist the laudatory posture, bemoaning the loss of wilderness that

accompanied Wisconsin's march to civilization and expressing outrage over the Black Hawk massacre of the 1830s. As for the normal schools, Beth Ann Rothermel argues that for almost a century, Westfield State "supported a curriculum offering female students access to a richer understanding of rhetorical theory and practice than more elite institutions of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries" (154).

What is most heartening here, though, is the fact of the research itself, which comes out of locations still somewhat invisible in our discipline. This volume opens a space for those non-elite institutions and their students as well as for their archives, which can help us revise, reverse, and complicate our received narratives.

It's the other volume, though, that has the most to say about the *process* of archival research. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan's edited volume *Beyond the Archive: Research as a Lived Process* is a loose collection of brief essays on a wide range of topics, a book much more personal, prospective, and self-reflective than the volume described above.

Except for David Gold's account of studying the history of composition at institutions underrepresented by traditional disciplinary histories, these pieces look at writing in sites other than educational institutions and among subjects other than teachers and students. Most of the essays, in fact, are intensely personal, research here often beginning with "materials hidden under the beds and in the attics of friends and family" (55). Yet the best among these do more than just relate personal anecdotes; they interpenetrate the local and global, the particular and general, the unique and universal, in complex, compelling ways.

For example, the involvement of her grandmother in a local YWCA group led Wendy Sharer to study postsuffrage political activism from the 1920s to the 1960s, usually thought to be a low period in the women's movement. Similarly, Ronald Stockton originally wanted to write about a graveyard in his Illinois hometown as a gift for his parents, but his "biography" of the site turned into a multiyear research project, resulting in a privately printed book coauthored with a local historian, as well as statistical analyses of death on the nineteenth-century frontier, which appeared in a scholarly journal. There are other examples here of research beginning at home: Ralph Eubanks, for example, writes of how he became interested in the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which kept detailed records on civil rights activists in that state, when he discovers his parents' names in its files.

Perhaps the most moving story of "familiar" research here is Gail Okawa's account of her journey to learn about her grandfather, an internee in a US Department of Justice concentration camp for Japanese resident aliens during World War II. Okawa not only learns about her grandfather but is also able to use his story to

tell the stories of other detainees and help the Japanese community in Hawai'i recover its history.

Malea Powell's essay on Native American history is perhaps the best example here of how such research can illuminate the historical power of writing itself. In the archives Powell finds evidence of the "word wars" that have inflicted so much damage on native peoples in this country: "the laws and treaties that authorized brutality and genocide in all of the Americas, the forced learning of English at the hands of missionaries and in boarding schools, the continuing devaluation of the oral for the written (or the virtual), and the continuing ignorance of most U.S. citizens about the story of colonization and of imperialism and its continuing consequences" (116). The essay also exemplifies how painful such research can be. Here's Powell writing about a visit to the Native American Reference Collection of the Saint Louis University Law Library, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs deposited thousands of documents from 1840 to 1948:

On the fourth day, I stood on the steps of the library in dread. My joints ached with the osteoarthritis-mimicking symptoms of stress; my knees creaked up the stairs; my shoulders already slumped at the prospect of entering what now seemed an icy cell in which I was to be tormented by the words on the microfilm reader's screen, by the material force that those words recollected, represented, produced, and replicated on the bodies of Native peoples—mine included. (117–18)

It is the "lived process" of archival work—the joy, the grief, the serendipity, the passion, the responsibility—that this volume communicates so well.

As useful as each of these books is on its own, together they reconstitute historical "research" in our field. If the first volume helps us reimagine the history of writing, the second helps us resee the writing of history. Combined, they can inspire graduate students to join the next generation of composition historians and undergraduate students to write about their own histories.

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