

Review

Donahue, Patricia, and Gretchen Flesher Moon, eds. *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*. Foreword by Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori. Afterword by Jean Ferguson Carr. U of Pittsburgh P, 2007.

Brad E. Lucas

The twelve projects that compose *Local Histories* exemplify the benefits of an edited collection: each thought-provoking piece is a useful contribution to the discipline, but taken together, they provide a compelling vision for historiography and show how scholars working at different sites—with limited materials—can rewrite the larger narratives that have dominated the field for decades. This collection stands out as an exemplary text for archival researchers, but it is also an important resource for WPAs to rethink the field's origin stories and consider what archival contributions a program might generate for posterity. Part of the collection's appeal stems from its origins in a CCCC Special Interest Group established to address the particular concerns of small colleges—a gathering of teacher-scholars who mobilized their research ideas into two large projects: a special issue of *Composition Studies* (2004) guest edited by Tom Amorose and Paul Hanstedt, and this collection, part of the Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.

Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, in her introductory piece appropriately titled "(This is not a) Foreword," explains that the projects represented in *Local Histories* "resist straightforward summary" (ix), which, of course, makes this review especially challenging, but I think Gretchen Flesher Moon introduces these projects soundly by explaining that the contributors "weave documents from teachers and students over the warp of the official record" (11). Indeed, the archival contributions here both supplement and challenge the work of Albert Kitzhaber—as well as scholars like Robert Connors and John Brereton who built on his seminal work. More importantly, perhaps, is the collection's general aim to challenge the dominance

of Harvard and other prestigious schools in the creation stories of modern composition. With these discoveries, some WPAs may need to update the notes used for addressing graduate students, new composition faculty, and other administrators.

In challenging our standard histories, the collection prompts us to redirect our collective attention to the Midwest, to the working class and normal schools, and to the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. In her contribution, for example, Kathleen A. Welsch highlights the differences between Harvard and the sensibilities of Midwestern students who sought higher education to fulfill life goals and improve their social class standing. Illustrating the work of two married students who attended Antioch College (Yellow Springs, OH) in the 1850s, Welsch documents their experiences and written essays to imagine how textbooks—vital for the initial histories of composition—were actually used in the classroom. Similarly, in their work with materials from Lafayette College (Easton, PA), Patricia Donahue and Bianca Falbo reveal that English Composition courses existed in 1858, nearly two decades before Subject A was introduced at Harvard. However, neither of these essays aims simply to rewrite the extant histories of the field. Donahue and Falbo, for instance, use one student's journal to show how reading and writing were interrelated in the curriculum sponsored by Lafayette's renowned philologist, Francis A. March, showing that March was not only the so-called "father" of English literary study," but also a dedicated teacher of writing, an "early compositionist" (39).

The sequence of the essays in *Local Histories* is bound to entice readers with the steady progression of other such discoveries. Through her study of Butler University (Indianapolis, IN), Heidemarie Z. Weidner urges us to seek answers about composition history in smaller institutions, revealing the early—and regular—presence of writing across the curriculum, assignments requiring multiple drafts with substantive revisions, student peer evaluation, and teachers holding conferences with individual students. Here, too, the aims of the project are manifold. Weidner showcases the contributions of Catherine Merrill, the first person to hold the Demia Butler Chair: a professorship established in the 1870s solely for women. Merrill assigned writing tasks for oral presentations, and she emphasized practice through daily writing exercises—years before Barrett Wendell's "daily themes." Fortunately, Merrill (and the other contributors) refrain from the agonistic discourse of trumping earlier work with these discoveries. Instead, these scholars seem to know that, with archival inquiry, our origin stories about composition's nascent practices will continue to change.

Rather than follow a strictly regional or chronological progression, *Local Histories* follows the path of pioneering women by taking us into Julie Gar-

bus's study of Progressive Era practices at Wellesley College (Wellesley, MA), focusing on the forty-year career of Vida Scudder—a woman whose anti-conservative pedagogy encouraged students to promote social change. Scudder, Garbus argues, offered the first course in the U.S. that connected literary study with socialist thought (78). Here, too, the archival work focuses on several areas likely to interest WPA readers. For example, pre-1900 composition pedagogy at Wellesley required students to participate in one-on-one conferences and encouraged students to write in multiple genres for multiple audiences. Furthermore, writing instruction was part of *every* year of instruction, culminating in a senior-year course in writing across the curriculum (82-83). Garbus's project offers a good example of the benefits of archival approaches that evaluate a broad range of writing instruction and related courses, not simply the first-year course in composition.

In the four essays that follow, contributors study normal schools and their various practices in early higher education. Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, and Risé Quay begin by offering Illinois State Normal School (Normal, IL) in contrast to the Wisconsin normal schools represented in earlier work by Kathryn Fitzgerald ("Rediscovered"). Lindblom, Banks, and Quay derive most of their findings through epistolary evidence: letters from the 1860s by two siblings who write about their painful experiences with a draconian spelling curriculum. In the school's required spelling course, students were tested daily on 25 spelling words and were allowed *one* mistake before failing the course, which they would then have to re-take to graduate. Not surprisingly, this gate-keeping course usually took five attempts to pass, but the hurdle was an ongoing threat: if spelling errors resurfaced in other classes, students would have to begin the cycle anew (101). While the account of this militaristic spelling curriculum is astonishing, the letters chronicle the expected detrimental effects, revealing how young students enter college enthused with language practices, only to have the written word become a vehicle for discipline and despair. And while Lindblom, Banks, and Quay offer a counter-narrative to Fitzgerald's earlier work, in the essay that follows, Fitzgerald herself returns to her data, the 44 student papers written in 1898 at Platteville Normal School (WI). Not only demonstrating that archival sources can be put to multiple uses for new performances, Fitzgerald also shows how students worked within and against genre constraints, particularly in terms of the discursive influences of the male-dominated culture surrounding Platteville at the turn of the century.

The two following essays focus on normal schools in Massachusetts, institutions that can complicate the educational landscape in the state that

hosts Harvard. Beth Ann Rothermel focuses on Westfield State Normal School, tracing the mid-nineteenth-century rise of the public normals and their mission of only training teachers, but not providing them with the same sort of education found in other colleges and universities. Rothermel shows how scholarship based on only official records might support the typical, or expected, narrative of the decline of rhetorical education, but other archival materials (notebooks, yearbooks, course descriptions) reveal that faculty indeed worked diligently to offer a fairly progressive rhetorical education for future teachers—not mere training in curriculum delivery. Then, Patrice K. Gray takes us to Fitchburg Normal School, opened in 1895 amidst a perceived literacy crisis in the area. This school was given a similarly narrow mission, with constraints, to train elementary school teachers in controlling their classrooms and providing standard forms of instruction. Due to the literacy crisis in Fitchburg, remediation was a concern, followed by an insistence on competence that could be assessed through one-shot writing tasks. One positive byproduct of such practices was an archival collection of 400 essays, student “performance pieces” that allow Gray to imagine pedagogical practices from an array of students’ references to their teachers (169). This study reveals a variety of approaches that faculty encouraged their students to take. Some students identified their own paper topics and determined what research would constitute their work, whereas other students chose to find connections between the literature they studied and their lives on campus.

At this point, readers are likely to think that the collection privileges the ephemeral or individualistic archival materials: the letter, diary, student paper, teacher journal. I would have appreciated visual representations of these artifacts, even a few, simply to provide a glimpse into the archives, and more discussion of methodology would have highlighted the discoveries that can be teased out from small treasures. Some scholars, like Garbus, do note the difficulties of archival work (e.g., Vida Scudder burned much of the material that documented her teaching practices), but most of the methodological issues are given short attention or relegated to end-notes. Fortunately, none of the contributors overstate their claims based on the—often scant—evidence that they work with. In the penultimate essay, William DeGenaro offers a study of William Rainey Harper’s contributions to higher education. However, DeGenaro works only with published materials, and his contribution is particularly noteworthy because poorly circulated, locally published, and out-of-print publications seem to be given scant attention in archival work—compared to the more cherished artifacts that more directly connect human hands to the printed page. With attention to the institutional development of the junior college, DeGenaro’s project is

markedly different in focus and scope, but nonetheless interesting in its telling of Harper's design of a two-tiered system for the University of Chicago, a "Junior College" for freshman and sophomores that would feed into and serve the "Senior College" for juniors and seniors (a model later exported to California and elsewhere). The instantiation of gate-keeping systems like this, coupled with the series of essays on normal schools, makes for a compelling case for further archival work to complement—and challenge—the range of composition's origin stories.

Similar to DeGenaro's essay, Jeffrey L. Hooegeven's work appears at first glance to be an outlier for its focus on activism in Lincoln University (PA) during the Vietnam era. It's a unique study, a form of archival-institutional critique in which curricular shifts are linked to both local and larger political and cultural influences—ones that contain enough residual sway in the present era to blur boundaries between archival and qualitative-ethnographic research. In an intriguing reconstruction of the shift in writing curriculum at Lincoln, Hooegeven documents the rise of student-faculty political alliances (primarily regarding civil rights) with a concomitant, and apparently reactionary, shift in writing pedagogy to focus on surface correctness and grammar. Given the attention to the sequence of essays in *Local Histories*, I can't help but see the final study in this collection serving as a cautionary tale for all of us in our historical and administrative work: not only that continued attention to our deep past might reveal knowledge of our most esteemed and enduring practices, but also that writing about recent events on our own campuses may be just as "archival" (and similarly limited by a paucity of evidence). Moreover, such work will likely remind WPA readers that many problems we want to banish to the past are simply in abeyance because we continue to remember what has come before us.

Local Histories is the product of talented scholars with a deep investment not only in their own work, but in promoting of vision of archival and historical study that should direct the field's future research. The challenges to the dominant histories of composition are important contributions, discoveries that deserve attention not only for their historical import, but also because the essays in the collection are so well crafted. For busy administrators, this is a collection that can be read in small doses, enjoyed for the narratives within, and remembered for the ongoing struggles that they represent.

WORK CITED

Fitzgerald, Kathryn. "A Rediscovered Tradition: European Pedagogy and Composition in Nineteenth-Century Midwestern Normal Schools." *College Composition and Communication* 53 (2001): 224-50.