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January 2016

Review of In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools, Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood

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Recommended Citation

Ryan Skinnell. "Review of In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools, Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood" *Rhetoric Review* (2016): 270-272.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2016.1179080>

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Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood. *In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2015. ix-xiv + 235 pages. \$27.95 paperback.

For the past several years, closing in on a decade, rhetoric and composition historians have turned more and more to local, archival histories as a way of revealing complexities that complicate the field's prevailing historical record. Keeping with this tradition, Lori Ostergaard and Henrietta Rix Wood's *In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools* collects eleven studies that extend the field's local, archival investigations to high schools and normal schools—institutions that “employed the majority of teachers and trained the majority of students from 1839 to 1969 in the United States,” but which have not received enough critical attention (2). In keeping with the premise that rhetoric and writing specialists should uncover and recover high schools and normal schools, the book is organized into three sections: four chapters about high schools, four chapters about normal schools, and three chapters under the heading “Building Secondary-Postsecondary Connections.” These sections are bookended by a Foreword by Kelly Ritter and the editors' introduction and an Afterword by Jessica Enoch. Given their pioneering research in local histories, Ritter's and Enoch's remarks are well-positioned to frame the contributions of the main chapters.

In Ostergaard and Wood's introduction, they set out a series of goals for the collection, including, “exposing new archives of composition and rhetoric, challenging disciplinary beliefs, revising research methods, and questioning assumptions that the field has evolved uniformly” (2). In efforts to expose new archives and question assumptions about the uniform development of the field, this collection succeeds admirably. In particular, chapters by Whitney Myers,

Candace Epps-Robertson, Melissa Ianetta, Beth Ann Rothermel, Elaine Hays, Nancy Myers, and Curtis Mason invite readers to think through complexities comprised by heretofore largely unconsidered historical subjects—an off-reservation Indian boarding school, a post-*Brown v. Board* African-American free school association, the first state-run teacher training institution in the US, the first co-ed public normal school, an early publicly-funded Black normal school, an early female textbook author, and one of the first and most influential Project English sites, respectively.

Some of these studies—specifically Epps-Robertson’s fascinating discussion of efforts to educate African-American youth when white citizens shut down public schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia to avoid integration—introduced me to historical events I knew nothing about. Others (including Epps-Robertson’s, Myers’s, and Mason’s) introduced me to scholarship in our field with which I have been woefully unacquainted. And still others offered in-depth investigations of subjects that may be vaguely recognizable to historians, but which are not especially well-known. In each case, the authors add nuance to the field’s collected histories, in some cases by forging new paths and in other cases by closely examining topics that merit further investigation.

Likewise, the other four chapters—by Henrietta Rix Wood, Jane Greer, Lori Ostergaard, and Edward Comstock—add important nuances to the historical record, though they do not rely on originators or exemplars to do so. Wood studies textbooks and student writing at a small Kansas City (Mo.) high school in the first decades of the 20th century; Greer unearths the diary of a 15-year-old high school student writing in the most volatile part of the 1960s education revolutions; Ostergaard studies arguments for dissociating literature and composition at Illinois State Normal at the turn of the 20th century; and Comstock looks at the emergent disciplining

functions of writing instruction in the late 19th century. These studies, like the others, take readers to new locales and invite us to try on unfamiliar perspectives.

This collection makes clear just how varied the historical record is when one looks closely and carefully. Some of the authors ask us to see familiar things in new places; some ask us to see differently as a result of looking in new places; and some use those different visions to ask us to re-see ourselves. Taken individually, I found the ones that did the latter to be the most engaging. But one of this book's central contributions is the connection between chapters—read together, each chapter reflects and inflects the others in really important ways. Because of how the chapters align and diverge, this book is most successful in exposing new archives and raising important questions about the uniform development of the field. Consequently, it adds a useful (and as Enoch argues, entertaining) wrinkle to more broadly drawn histories—the field's so-called “dominant narratives”—and to the field's growing collection of local, archival histories.

Although I have generally positive things to say about *In the Archives of Composition*, I think this book has limitations worth noting because, as I point out below, they highlight wider limitations of local, archival histories that specialists need to be more sensitive to. One important limitation of this book is that by foregrounding the local historical angle, some of the chapters in *In the Archives of Composition* downplay what is revolutionary about the research. That is, what is most radical in this book is not about high schools and normal schools, or even challenging disciplinary beliefs and revising research methods. What is radical, rather, is how in trying to do those things, what is revealed is that rhetoric and composition historians have routinely misread and/or misunderstood Indigenous, Black, and other student experiences. As some of the chapters powerfully, if implicitly, suggest, recovery projects do not ensure equal consideration in the historical record. Even when we have studied underrepresented populations or overlooked sites

of literacy instruction, the authors in this collection demonstrate repeatedly that we (and I count myself among this group) have not always done so conscientiously. Again, taken together, the chapters in *In the Archives of Composition* call our attention to our own unfortunate tendencies, habits, and trends (for instance, citation habits).

The “local, archival” limitations of *In the Archives of Composition* also point to issues that vastly exceed this book, including some constraints of local, archival history itself. When such histories first started appearing in the mid-2000s, they represented a relatively novel approach in rhetoric and composition. These kinds of intensely focused histories have been instrumental in introducing new perspectives to the field, and as they proliferated, historians have become increasingly aware of the need to justify their work by adding new directions, perspectives, and considerations. *In the Archives of Composition*, for instance, is predicated on the relative novelty of high schools and normal schools. But in order to make that expansion productive, such additives are often couched in familiar terms. Which is to say, making local, archival histories intelligible often results in historians set out to find evidence of themselves—predecessors that inform who we are today.

In so doing, the tendency is to reaffirm what we value in the current moment by finding new, exciting, groundbreaking examples of how our forebears facilitated action, supported social justice, believed in teaching complex composition courses, valued student-centered pedagogy, and so on. These types of studies then provide new justifications for who we think we are rather than inviting readers to see a new set of data in order to challenge established beliefs. This tendency is recognizable in many, though not all, of the chapters in this book, and it is highlighted by the proximity of those chapters that call attention to the limits of the current moment.

The tendency to reaffirm what we believe also points to another serious—and related—limitation, which is a tendency not to contextualize local, archival research in thorough non-disciplinary historical contexts. To give one example, in *In the Archives of Composition*, readers get only the sketchiest history of normal schools, despite the fact that their emergence and decline was among the most hotly debated issues in the period covered by the book. In *The American State Normal School: An Instrument of Great Good*, which a number of contributors cite, Christine A. Ogren demonstrates that normal schools were patently not colleges and universities. Gradually normals were all but driven out of existence—most eventually transformed into colleges and universities—and this happened during a period (the mid-1920s) covered by chapters in *In the Archives of Composition*. Regrettably, there is no mention of it, despite the fact that this process might seriously alter the conclusions being drawn.

The larger normal school context offers just one example of how major historical processes—including such monumental occurrences as the initiation of public education in America and compulsory education laws—are deemphasized or bypassed in pursuit of adding nuance to our disciplinary histories. These limitations do not diminish *In the Archives of Composition*'s aim of drawing attention to high schools and normal schools as significant sites of investigation, nor do they invalidate the book's contributions to the field. But they do point to concerns—about methods, methodology, and consequence(s) of research—that historians need to grapple with as we seek out historical subjects. As Ritter proposes, readers can and should read *In the Archives of Composition* with interest. Historians can and should also read this book as a reminder of the substantial advantages and the undeniable limits of local, archival history.

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