Reviews

*Rhetoric and Composition As Intellectual Work*

*Gary A. Olson, ed.*
Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. 246 pp. $25.00 (paper).
ISBN 0809324334.

Gary Olson’s *Rhetoric and Composition As Intellectual Work* brings together two sets of essays—one arguing for composition as an academic discipline and the other offering sketches of what scholarship in that discipline might look like. It is a big-name collection. The first group includes essays by Olson, Jasper Neel, Jan Swearingen, and Charles Bazerman. While their tone varies—Neel and Swearingen are meditative; Olson and Bazerman, polemical—each makes a case for composition as a research field as well as a teaching subject. The second group of essays develops this argument for a discipline through a series of examples, as leading scholars offer overviews of emerging lines of inquiry or snapshots of particular research projects. The sorts of work singled out are, for the most part, historical and theoretical. The quality of writing is high, even when the arguments are familiar: Olson agitating for ideological critique, Thomas Kent explaining paralogic rhetoric, Cindy Selfe urging attentiveness to technology, Victor Vitanza discoursing playfully about sophistics, Stephen Mailloux insisting that theory really does have consequences, Susan Miller and Susan Wells digging around in the archives—there is an eponymous...
quality to many of the essays, a sense that one of their functions is to lend names to modes of work in the field. Of course, if this volume gets used, as I suspect it will, by graduate students looking to orient themselves as scholars, to gain a quick sense of what a Neel or Miller or Vitanza does, of what she or he stands for, then perhaps this sense of familiarity, of typicality, will prove a virtue.

But if many of the essays feel predictable, the aim of the volume is both more ambitious and troubling. In his introduction, Olson asserts that “composition should be an intellectual as well as a service discipline” (xii). While Olson makes it clear that he is not arguing against teaching per se but, rather, against a view of the field as one “devoted solely to improving writing pedagogy” (xvi), his phrasing distances intellectual work from service and associates it with discipline. I see two reasons to question this move.

The first has to do with where the new discipline of composition gets located in the academy. Most of the essays in Rhetoric and Composition describe scholarly projects that fit in quite well with the interests of graduate programs in English or cultural studies. The subdivisions of the book reinforce this emphasis with three sections devoted to historical, ideological, and philosophical inquiry, and a fourth on new directions that includes essays on body studies, material rhetorics, and the social effects of technology. A preponderance of the contributors are senior professors of English, and many of the chapters seem addressed to students in a graduate seminar, intended as an introduction to this or that scholarly subfield. There are exceptions: Bazerman includes research on teaching in his overview of the field; Keith Gilyard and John Trimbur speak directly to the concerns of writing teachers in their pieces on language politics and typography; and Tom Fox writes the best essay I have ever read on administration as activism. But for the most part, Rhetoric and Composition As Intellectual Work showcases the sort of research that helps one get tenure in English, which many compositionists still hope and need to do.

But we shouldn’t let the colonial sway that English holds over composition limit how we imagine the intellectual scope of our field. People working in composition include not only critics and historians but also ethnographers, linguists, educational researchers, teacher developers, journalists, and creative writers—who are trained not only in graduate programs in English but also in education, linguistics, rhetoric, ESL, psychology, and communications. Their research takes place not only in archives and libraries but also in classrooms,
literacy centers, workplaces, and communities. Unfortunately, little of this wider-ranging work is represented in *Rhetoric and Composition*, which instead offers a more insular and bookish view of composition as a humanities subfield.

This leads to my second and deeper concern. Tom Fox writes the only essay in the volume that does not focus on textual scholarship. He is interested instead in how compositionists can try to reform the programs and departments they work in. In “Working Against the State,” Fox traces how he and his colleagues struggled to resist having the academic fates of basic writers at their college determined by a regressive standardized test, concluding that

> Eliminating the test . . . was one of the most demanding and difficult things I have done. It was much more difficult (and maybe more time consuming) than writing a book . . . . [But] there is not much recognition for such work in the field. (98)

I admire the attempts of Fox and others in our field to reclaim the value of work that too often gets dismissed as mere service: teaching and tutoring beginning undergraduates, running writing programs and centers, mentoring new teachers. I see such efforts to broaden our view of intellectual work as connected to our defining interest in the writing of ordinary people, and I believe that these two democratic impulses give work in composition much of its intellectual and political edge. And so I was encouraged when the MLA, in its 1996 report on *Making Faculty Work Visible*, urged the profession to view teaching, scholarship, and service not as different kinds but as varying sites of intellectual work. I am thus worried by moves to reassociate intellectual work in composition with more traditional conceptions of scholarship.

In a recent review of *The Writing Program Administrator As Theorist*, Gary Olson argues against what he calls a “disturbing trend in the discipline” (499) to blur key terms and categories describing our work, arguing that “teaching is not research; it can draw on research and apply research and confirm or discredit research results, but it’s not coextensive with or identical to research” (500). Well, he’s right, in a limited sense. Teaching isn’t research, but there are kinds of intellectual work that have more practical impact and interest than most “research.” I am drawn to composition precisely because it values teaching and service, because it defines *intellectual* in far more expansive ways than most disciplines. The essays collected by Olson in *Rhetoric and Composition* demonstrate that our field has achieved the status of a conventional academic discipline. It remains to be seen what the impact of this discipline will be on the intellectual work of teaching writing.
"Many top colleges fear that their students lack basic composition skills," warns a recent article ominously titled “Why Johnny Can’t Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton” (Bartlett). Blithely ignoring decades of scholarship in composition studies on the history of postsecondary writing instruction, the article unwittingly treats readers to a recapitulation of familiar myths about a crisis in college student writing. The “crisis,” signaled by a smattering of anecdotal evidence, is presented as undeniable, new, and a harbinger of worse to come: the trend, we are warned, “isn’t limited to top-ranked colleges” (Bartlett, A39).

Mary Soliday’s book The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education is useful both in its critique of such myths and in the direction it offers to compositionists in the inevitable battles they endure over remediation and writing instruction prompted by the power of such myths. Key to Soliday’s argument is a distinction between a politics of access, focused on institutional concerns that shape the conditions for who teaches whom where, and a politics of language, focused on disciplinary and curricular matters of how and what the students in our classrooms are taught and why. While careful not to dismiss the importance of either, her emphasis throughout much of the book is with correcting neglect of the former. Her work is thus aligned with a recent shift in composition scholarship to more materialist perspectives on writing, the teaching of writing, and remediation (for example, Canagarajah; Fox, Defending; Shor; and Sternglass).
Soliday pursues her materialist bent by placing recent “crises” over remedial writing instruction in the context of more than a century of remedial efforts at U.S. colleges and universities. Drawing on past scholarship in the history of U.S. higher education and on archival research at her own institution, the City College of the City University of New York (CUNY), Soliday demonstrates that “remedial English has always been with us in various forms” (22) and that “news” like that cited above is simply déjà vu all over again. She undermines the common association of remedial programs with students of color by pairing the constancy of remediation in postsecondary schools with the consistent dominance of the white middle-class students in these schools, demonstrating that most efforts at remediation have been directed not at “new” students bringing “new” needs but at white middle-class students. She develops her analysis of the politics of access by tracing how institutions have used remediation as a means to meet enrollment needs while maintaining or pursuing particular institutional missions. Changes in both the internal and external stratification of postsecondary schools, she shows, account for changes in remedial programs in higher education generally as well as in specific institutions and types of institutions. For example, within the space of one year, the City College English department shifted from publicly declaring one-fourth of its freshmen to be in need of remedial writing instruction to abolishing its composition requirement and reducing the teaching load of its faculty from four to three courses. This shift cannot be explained by changes in the needs of its student population, which remained stable. Rather, as documents of the department’s deliberations show, the change was instituted to enable the department to meet the rapidly increasing demand for courses in English electives and to give faculty more time for research to accommodate changes in the school’s mission from teaching to research (53–57).

To illustrate differences between disciplinary politics aimed at curricula and institutional politics of access, Soliday offers in chapter 3 a revisionist account of the legacy of Mina Shaughnessy, focusing largely on her unpublished work as a CUNY administrator. Readers should resist the temptation to be distracted from Soliday’s insights on the politics of access here by her decision to frame this part of her analysis in terms of Shaughnessy’s reputation. Soliday’s nominal thesis that Shaughnessy’s unpublished administrative work might form a legacy to anyone outside CUNY is ultimately tangential to her analysis of how institutional politics of access operate. While her analysis might have been better served by making more use of the growing literature on how writing program administrators and others have engaged those politics (literature
to which Soliday’s own past writings have contributed), Soliday nonetheless succeeds in providing a useful critique of the exclusive focus of much composition scholarship on curricular reforms, showing how this focus risks ceding crucial decisions about who teaches whom to institutions and restricting what compositionists imagine and work toward as possible or worthy of challenge. Soliday does recognize the legitimacy of composition scholars’ critiques of what and how writing is taught, but she also argues persuasively that we need to devote attention as well to who gets taught, by whom, where, and under what conditions. For example, are all populations given the opportunity for not just a college education but a liberal arts education with full-time, trained instructors rather than being shunted off to cool their ambitions and expectations in strictly vocational programs taught ad hoc. At Soliday’s own City College, for example, she observes that the proportion of writing courses taught by full-time teachers dropped from 100 percent in 1971 to 10 percent in the early 1990s, while class sizes increased from between eighteen and twenty-three per section in 1971 to twenty-seven per section by 1976 (100). As Soliday reminds us, such structural changes in access to the classroom affect the work of the classroom in ways at least as powerful as the specific curricular theories that inform the teaching within it. For this reason, we need to attend to the forces shaping access to the classroom and the conditions for learning within it.

In calling attention to such forces, Soliday is arguing for the importance of class relations, a concern particularly relevant in light of recent attacks on remedial writing instruction and the increasing gap between wealthy and poor. Tellingly, as Soliday shows, arguments supporting the 1990s abolition of remediation at CUNY by James Traub, Heather Mac Donald, and their ilk ignore class altogether (or redefine class as culture), explaining student difficulties purely in terms of cultural difference. Traub, for example, argues that remedial students do poorly because they are part of a cultural underclass, alien and hostile to the academy. But as Soliday observes, such arguments neatly eclipse the significant role played by material differences of class, exacerbated by the privatizing of school costs, in putting college access and academic success out of the reach of many students. Despite their significant flaws, such arguments, Soliday holds, have an ideological appeal to middle class parents concerned about threats to the value of their children’s college degrees posed by open access, hence the sway these arguments have had among conservatives and neoliberals alike.

The appeal of such arguments is not adequately answered by those invoking a discourse of student need to defend remedial programs. As Soliday
warns, this discourse not only perpetuates the redefinition of economic needs in terms of cultural needs invoked by the image of the underclass, but it also encourages the belief that students themselves bring nothing to the universities. Remediation is represented as a “gift” to them, but a gift members of the middle class are increasingly told and believe (as they themselves are squeezed financially) that institutions cannot afford and that will, in any event, be wasted on a culturally alien group. In her final chapter, Soliday repudiates the discourse of student need, showing how students use writing to contribute knowledge about how cultures and individuals translate across borders in a pedagogy of “translation.” Such a pedagogy promises both to enrich and question traditional institutional goals of composition courses while countering dominant beliefs in the educational ideal of unambiguous cultural assimilation. But Soliday explains that pedagogies that honor the cultural and linguistic hybridity produced in students’ writing should not be equated with the achievement of educational parity. Returning to the themes of her earlier chapters, she notes how the last two decades have seen a growth in the rhetoric of diversity and multiculturalism at colleges and universities that coincides ironically with greater selectivity in their admissions, leading her to question the extent to which border pedagogies, including her own, can constitute reform and resistance to such institutional practices.

In “Proceeding with Caution,” Thomas Fox warns, “though our theory is social, composition’s focus on the classroom pulls us the other way, towards idiosyncrasy, individual students and their successes, ‘good’ days in single classrooms” (569). Soliday’s *Politics of Remediation* pulls us back, repeatedly, to the social, reminding us of the ways in which social institutions shape the seemingly idiosyncratic nature of what happens in “our” classrooms. If this seems a distraction from what many in composition have come to view as our “proper” concerns, Soliday clarifies that it is a distraction we simply cannot afford to forego, and it is one that, pursued vigorously, can help us extend the reach of our work beyond the disciplinary conceptions of composition to reform those institutions that have done so much to define, and limit, our work and our students.

**Works Cited**


Canagarajah, A. Suresh. “‘Nondiscursive’ Requirements in Academic Publishing, Material Resources of Periphery Scholars, and the Politics of Knowledge...
George Hillocks, Jr.'s, *The Testing Trap* carefully constructs research on writing assessment, filling an enormous gap in our literature: proof that current nationwide trends in assessment may do more harm than good in improving students’ abilities to write. While many voices have promoted new forms of assessment and practices, we have lacked a powerful study that elicits reform among parents and legislators—those who drive national assessments. Despite research that has contested traditional thinking on writing, the latest enactment of nationwide testing every year in grades three through eight (tests linked to federal money) underscores our field’s inability to be heard. *The Testing Trap* not only exposes the dissonance between best practices and legislated assessment, it not only offers for those of us who do faculty development in school systems forceful evidence for promoting best practices, but a careful reading challenges every teacher of writing to examine those external forces to which they themselves may have fallen victim: mandated assessment, the blame-game (if only they would teach writing in the fill-in-the-blank grade), and assumptions about collaborating with a political system that drives assessment.

Hillocks states that the “central problem of testing is knowing whether a test does what its proponents claim it does or not. . . . Does a test of writing indicate how well a student may be able to write in any given situation? . . . Can it provide useful measures of how well schools are doing in educating our young
people?” (5). Of course not, we say, but the point is “States with assessment programs believe they can” (5). “The Politics of Mandatory Assessment” (ch. 1) carefully deconstructs the major recommendations of A Nation at Risk, exposing the disconnect between the level of proficiency required and the absence of recommendations for achieving them. “Such recommendations are crucial but also probably the most difficult to implement because they demand changing the character of teaching that has gone on in American classrooms for over a century” (3). It is a struggle engaged in by the National Writing Project, by members of NCTE and CCCC, but as Hillocks effectively demonstrates, it is an endless battle when the mandates from states determine what should be taught without appropriate planning and resources for how it is taught.

In pursuit of answering the major question of The Testing Trap—“Do the kinds of teaching encouraged by the different state assessments . . . encourage the kind of thinking” that produces thoughtful, critical writing (9)—Hillocks focuses on five state assessment processes. After laying out the quantitative and qualitative methodology used in his study, Hillocks provides a clear examination of the “Foundation of Testing” (ch. 3) used in Texas, Illinois, New York and of portfolio assessments in Kentucky and Oregon. “Clearly, tests are constructed by people with different knowledge and sets of beliefs about what writing is and what counts as a test of writing” (34), and Hillocks points out that too often policy makers “set the initial parameters for testing: what should be tested, what kinds of tests [are] to be administered, and [decide] what grade levels to be tested” (50).

These detailed examinations also provide useful tools for teachers working with legislators on state assessment and serve as a methodology for any university, secondary, or elementary teacher looking at what they do in the classroom: What prompts do I give? How does the assessment tool used accurately reflect what students need to know? What are my assumptions about what students (should) know and the expectations that drive my assessment? The logic and data in this section also move readers to ask what state expectations are embedded in their own classroom practices and what personal frustrations with their teaching derive from a legacy of student writing motivated by testing.

Several chapter headings point to familiar problems across the country: “High Stakes and Mediocrity in Texas” (ch. 5) and “Locking in Formulaic Writing: The Case of Illinois” (ch. 7). However, the five different state assessments scrutinized provide data so clearly interpreted that teachers in any district or
university can adapt the methodology or findings to their own local processes. For example, Hillocks examines the “reformed” testing in New York; finding prompts that might elicit a demonstration of critical thinking, he discovers instead “a great chasm exists between the expectations we see in the language of the prompts and criteria and the reality of their application as seen in the benchmark papers” (151). The data from Oregon’s portfolio assessment show a closer connect between criteria and writing programs but also uncover an absence of training to help teachers meet Oregon’s complex standards (177). Finally, Hillocks details for us not only a thoughtful expression of standards in Kentucky but also assessment that responds to writing across the curriculum, avoids the formulaic, and “treats writing as a meaningful and serious pursuit . . . Every state has much to learn from what Kentucky has accomplished” (188).

To set the stage for his cross-state study, Hillocks begins with a telling examination of George W. Bush’s 1999 talk The Future of Educational Reform, carefully pointing to the speaker’s assumptions, the offering of a quick fix through proficiency exams, the claim that yearly testing will “leave no child behind” (9–12). The analysis echoes throughout the study which follows, articulating the resulting problems when “the testing system becomes the knowledge base for the teaching of writing,” when “the knowledge base becomes even more restricted by administrative directives indicating what should be taught, how long, and in what order,” when “many administrators tend to see what needs to be taught in more strictly test-oriented, formulaic terms” (102). The attempt to level the educational playing field for all children is to be congratulated, but

Although one goal of state testing may be to decrease the achievement gap in order to leave no child behind, the state testing program has a powerful effect on increasing the gap by restricting what students are allowed to learn in many of the poorer districts. (102)

Closing the gap is possible as Hillocks demonstrates in his description of Chicago high school teacher Ms. Sarah Levine’s classroom where the emphasis on “thinking through very complex problems, using evidence to support a position, and showing how that evidence did indeed support the position,” produced engaged, motivated writers, communicators, critical thinkers (8). Perhaps if President Bush and other legislators and administrators, well intentioned though they may be, had the benefit of Ms. Levine’s teaching and assessment, the gaps so evident in their logic would have prevented them and
the nation from getting caught in *The Testing Trap*. This book is a must read for every teacher, parent, and policy maker.

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**An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa**

Philippe-Joseph Salazar  

The overthrow of apartheid in South Africa is one of the great stories of the late-twentieth century. Beginning with a strike wave in the early 1970s and the Soweto uprising in 1976, antiapartheid forces gathered in the 1980s around a program of struggle for social justice in a nonracial democratic South Africa. The result, as history shows, was the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, a period of negotiation, and eventually the first truly democratic elections in South Africa. Mandela’s election as South Africa’s president in 1994 and the new, progressive national constitution of 1998 marked for many the transformation of South Africa from a reactionary racist regime to a vibrant multiracial and multicultural polity that embodies the best hopes for radical democracy in the postmodern era.

Philippe-Joseph Salazar’s *An African Athens* is a remarkably acute rhetorical study of what is entailed in these historic changes. As Salazar says, “South Africa can be seen as a postmodern analogy of ancient Athens”—a polity where democracy was “won at the negotiating table and also won every day in public deliberation” (xviii, xix). For North American readers, it is crucial to understand that before 1994 there was, properly speaking, no nation or national culture in South Africa, only the divide-and-conquer colonial rule of the Dutch and British. Then, after 1948, an apartheid state was created whose racialist scheme of “separate development” relegated Africans (people formerly classified as “colored”) and Indians to designated neighborhoods, townships, workers’ hostels, and homelands. For Salazar, the task facing South African rhetors, accordingly, is one of nation building—of providing compelling grounds to overcome this divisive legacy, to make the new South African nation an incorporative reality, and to stage public deliberation as a meaningful activity for ordinary citizens to participate in the life of the polis.
As Salazar notes, South Africa is not only a “laboratory for democracy” in an era of global politics, it also provides a “test case for the relevance of rhetorical studies in a postmodern democracy” (xix). Salazar draws on a wide range of rhetorical performances: the religious and political oratory of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, the new constitution of South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, advertising and the mass media, sports, and the symbolic geographies of public space, including town planning and the establishment of Robben Island (where Mandela and others were imprisoned) as a national monument and museum. For Salazar, the ubiquity of rhetorical deliberation marks the emergence of South Africa from “a culture of secrecy into democratic openness,” where “‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ became the new tropes by which state and public officeholders began measuring their newly acquired rhetoric” (1).

We can see signs of this transition, for example, in Salazar’s chapter on Desmond Tutu, where Salazar begins by contrasting Tutu’s “Rainbow Nation” of all South Africans to the apartheid regime’s Population Registration Act of 1950 that codified the racial classification of South Africans into separate groups. According to Salazar, Tutu’s funeral oration for Chris Hani, the Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party, murdered in 1993, amounts not only to traditional epideictic rhetoric that praises the assassinated leader but also to a political metanoia, a transformation of the audience into a Pauline ekklesia, a community of believers. After introducing the speech and recounting Hani’s biography, Tutu presents a series of calls (“We demand” and “We want”) to which the 100,000 gathered in a Soweto soccer stadium respond, “Now.” In Salazar’s analysis, Tutu’s epideictic oratory forges a “rhetorical link” between speaker and audience, and the fiction of nation becomes a reality precisely to the extent it is performed in the intermingling of the orator’s and the people’s voices.

Salazar’s notion of nation building as a performative, rhetorical action pervades An African Athens and should hold great interest for North American rhetoricians. His analyses, it is worth noting, are inflected by what Salazar calls the French school of rhetoric studies, a relatively new intellectual development whose influence is largely limited currently to Europe. Salazar, the founder and present director of the Centre for Rhetoric Studies at University of Cape Town, was a student of the well-known theorists Barthes, Levinas, and Althusser, but he draws on work that may be unfamiliar in North America, such as Barbara Cassin’s distinction between homologia and homonoia—the
“concord of words” and the “concord of minds”—to denote a crucial tension in the rhetoric of democratic deliberation. For example, Salazar shows how Mandela, in his first speech to the new parliament, addressed this gap between words (with their magical capacity to produce “political verbiage” that creates the “semblance of agreement”) and the persistent realities of difference in the South African polity. To bring “plurality to unity,” Mandela moves his listeners through three rhetorical positions Salazar draws from Cassin: from pseudos (the false nation of apartheid) to plasma (a poetic fiction that offers “communality” and a “scenario for reality”) to historia (the nation born from an eloquence that nullifies the lies of the past).

Salazar’s study of the new South Africa as a “laboratory for democracy” makes a powerful case for the relevance of rhetorical studies. But it also raises a series of further political and rhetorical questions. For one thing, there is more to be said, I think, about the rhetoric of nonracial politics in the struggle against apartheid and the transition to democracy that would require looking at the influence of the South African Communist Party, the militant trade union movement, and other left formations. Perhaps more significantly, An African Athens is itself accented by a rhetoric of “transformation” that has been called into question by radical activists and critics in South Africa. In a key chapter on presidential rhetoric, Salazar considers how Mandela’s “performative presidency” has turned into the “African Renaissance” of his successor Thabo Mbeki. What is not so apparent, however, is the accompanying shift from the populist rhetoric and redistributive economics of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of 1994 to the neo-liberal orthodoxy of privatization and structural adjustment in the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) program of 1998. From this perspective, the South African transformation appears to be something more like normalization within the global economic order, and Mandela, Mbeki, and other African National Congress leaders’ argument that “There is no alternative” (or TINA, as it’s been called), as well as the left’s arguments against normalization, would make another key “test case for the relevance of rhetorical studies” in an era of globalization.

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Writing and Revising the Disciplines

Jonathan Monroe

In the late 1980s Frank Lentriccia assumed the editorship of the South Atlantic Review with an inaugural issue devoted to the scholarship of his colleagues at Duke. Predictably, Lentriccia was criticized for this institutional favoritism. But there really were remarkable things going on at Duke at the time. In the volume under review here, Jonathan Monroe collects essays written by senior scholars from a range of disciplines at Cornell. Monroe writes that his purpose is to “make explicit and further increase th[e] level of self-awareness, at Cornell and elsewhere, about the diverse writing practices in which scholars engage across the disciplines, often, if not typically, without manifest awareness of the discursive frames, conventions, and constraints that shape the writing fields, or fields of writing, each discipline necessarily cultivates” (5). In doing so, Monroe also presents a cross section of the work associated with Cornell’s Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines that he founded and directs. Partly a celebration of writing in the disciplines, partly a display of the remarkable faculty at Cornell, partly a promotion for the work of the Knight Institute, this collection contains chapters ranging from a professional autobiography that tells the story of disciplinary prejudice to subtle rhetorical analyses of disciplinary discourse. For readers outside rhetoric and composition, this book might indeed increase awareness of the variation in disciplinary writing. For readers in rhetoric and composition, the diversity of writing practices across disciplines is hardly news. That said, many of the essays offer useful disciplinary histories and a few—notably those by Jonathan Culler, Dominick LaCapra, and Ronald Breiger—provide powerful readings of the discursive practices of their disciplines.

There is not a sustained argument in this book, no theoretical proposition or research agenda that scholars in rhetoric and composition will identify. Rather, the book collects responses to the two kinds of questions with which Monroe prompted contributors. The first set of questions is variations on a theme: “How would you describe your entry and development within the field of writing you represent” (3)? These prompts solicit professional autobiographies that focus on specific research papers that converted the writer to the pleasures of writing or, more interestingly, on writing that represents the writer’s particular relation to the discipline. The autobiographical sections in...
these chapters reflect those moments in writing-in-the-disciplines work that is more celebratory than critical or theoretical. And many of these essays might be useful to undergraduates in writing-intensive courses. But these autobiographies also include moments of disciplinary insight presented in compelling first-person narratives. Thus Isaac Kramnick begins “Writing Politics” with an imitation of James Joyce, “Our Writer as a Young Man,” in which he tells the story of his struggle to write about government in a language accessible to nonscholarly audiences. Along the way, Kramnick contrasts the writing of political science in the first and second halves of the twentieth century and argues for a revival of earlier practice when “political scientists had seen the academic study of politics as having a public purpose outside the academy” (83). He concludes this call for scholarship as the work of the public intellectual with a passage that recalls Michael Halloran’s work on nineteenth-century American rhetoric: “Lost today is the early nineteenth-century American conviction that political scholarship is not just an intellectual exercise but an important service to a self-governing people, scholarship which speaks to the public square as well as to university quadrangles” (88).

Monroe’s second set of questions to contributors asks about the style and history of disciplinary discourse. These questions solicit analyses of individual texts but also some sophisticated explorations of the relation of disciplinary style to theoretical constructs. The textual analyses have widely varied relevance to readers in rhetoric and composition. The first two chapters on physics and chemistry, for example, argue for a change in scientific discourse “reviving the personal, the emotional, the stylistic core of the struggle to discover and create the molecular world” (48). These chapters focus on the difficulty of intervening in a scientific style that prohibits personal pronouns, and they argue against the assumption that “objectivity requires inhumanity” (24). This is not news to readers in our field, but having a Nobel Prize winner criticize the sterility of scientific prose could be very useful pedagogically. By contrast, the chapters by Breiger in sociology, Culler in literary criticism, and LaCapra in history contain sophisticated analysis and rhetorical theorizing. All three essays are contributions to rhetorical scholarship and would be useful additions to syllabi in English and rhetoric. I plan, for example, to use Culler’s rhetorical history of literary criticism in my undergraduate course in literary theory. More importantly, Culler’s analysis of how the stylistic form of criticism encodes ideological positioning would be useful to faculty and graduate students interested in the rhetorical analysis of disciplinary discourse. And LaCapra’s essay, a chapter from his recent book Writing History, Writing Trauma is a brilliant reflec-
tion not only on historiography but, more generally, on the challenge posed by the radical constructionist argument that history is always only a story, that it is a stylistic performance with little referentiality. In writing about the Holocaust, that most difficult of subjects for “post-postmodern” historiography, LaCapra struggles to preserve the “aboutness” of history. His notion of a discursive “middle voice,” borrowed from an early essay by Roland Barthes, is a theoretically and rhetorically sophisticated attempt to write history while avoiding the discursive closure characteristic of the “self-sufficient research model, of which positivism is the extreme form” (145). LaCapra is grappling here with the difficulty of writing engaged and committed scholarship within the post-postmodern era. His argument speaks to contemporary work in feminist and post-Marxist scholarship in rhetoric and composition to construct what Theresa Ebert has called a “resistant” postmodernism and what Patti Lather referred to as work “with/in” the postmodern. More recently, Patricia Sullivan and James Porter have written about critical research practices in rhetoric and their attempt to make postmodern theory accommodate empirical research. LaCapra’s chapter moves this rhetorical exploration forward in ways that will benefit all of us.

In the midst of analyses like LaCapra’s and Culler’s, the book’s biggest failing is what it does not contain. This is an easy and perennial charge against edited collections, but it is significant in this study of disciplinary discourse and its politics. In the final chapter, Hunter Rawlings, the president of Cornell, lauds the humanities and their cultural critique in this “age of money” in academics. He argues that the humanities have “opened our eyes to formerly marginalized cultures and led to the development of gender studies and ethnic studies” (189). Yet these marginalized cultures and the radical discursive style they often enact are not represented in this collection. Monroe notes that only one of the nine chapters in the collection is written by a woman, and he laments that he has “felt the absence” of the two other proposed chapters written by women on linguistics and women’s studies. Nevertheless, dubious identity politics aside, in a book titled Writing and Revising the Disciplines, no nondominant voice is present. The absence of radical disciplinary and cultural practice from this collection documents in ways that individual chapters cannot the very real resistance to change and to radical rhetorical performance that still characterizes academic culture.

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