Response Essays

Once More Unto the Historiographic Breach: A Response to Rebecca Brittenham

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The underlying argument in this article is really just a professional plea for more revisionist histories in composition, for accounts that rake up that settled past and reopen to further question the assumptions it makes possible, for accounts that resituate our professional history in a richer political and cultural spectrum.

—Rebecca Brittenham

This is just an old white guy writing about even older white guys.

—A student in my rhetoric course

This is really . . . whiny.

—That same student, on feminist rhetorical historiography

My first response to Rebecca Brittenham's "professional plea" was, I confess, downright sixties-ish: "Yes! Down with the settled past, closed inquiries, and poorer political and cultural spectrums! Up with raking, reopening, resituating!" I was—and am—excited by her approach to doing history, and I appreciate her rereading of the 1960s, and specifically the pedagogy of "happenings," through the lens of a variety of cultural and institutional documents, including a JFK speech, *The National Interest and the Teaching of English*, The Port Huron Statement, pamphlets from student groups, and so on. I learned a lot, both from what Brittenham says and from how she says it. But most of all, as a reader and a writer of our field's history, and as a believer in the principles of

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revisionist historiography, I wanted to be down with the historiographical revolution. And yet, I find myself having trouble sustaining passion for this call for *more* revisionist history. Why? Three reasons: we already have too much revisionist history in rhetoric and composition; professional practice in our field doesn’t offer much guidance in how to *enact* it responsibly; and my students routinely insist on placing themselves—and, more to the point, me—securely on the horns of some pretty vexing historiographical dilemmas. What’s a revisionist to do?

In the end, reading and thinking about Brittenham’s interesting essay leads me, appropriately enough, to a *revisioned* “professional plea”—not for *more* revisionist histories, but for *better* revisionist historiography. Here goes.

**Of Revolutions Long Time Gone**

I have witnessed rock ‘n’ roll dances at the CCCC convention; I know the “patchouli scent” of the 1960s lingers in our profession. I also believe that we compositionists are as inclined toward self-delusion as anyone when it comes to our role in battling social ills. At the same time, Brittenham’s suggestion that the field’s left-leaning tendencies are attributable to fealty to a cultural revolution “long time gone” seems to me shortsighted. While it’s true, as Brittenham reminds us repeatedly, that our *disciplinary* origins can be traced to a time when generally leftist/leftish “social and cultural politics” were in the air, our much longer *institutional* and *intellectual* histories teach us that rhetoric and composition teachers and administrators have long struggled with and for “progressive” visions of their work. Historians of rhetoric tell us that rhetoric teachers (from classical times on) have often considered themselves (and have been considered by others) to be social subversives in their attempts to foster an active, participatory citizenry. We also know that many early twentieth-century composition teachers—often inspired by the educational philosophy of John Dewey or by Fred Newton Scott and Gertrude Buck—similarly sought to place their work in the service of expanding democracy in the face of the bureaucratization and, yes, the corporatization of higher education (see Berlin; Gallagher).

In fact, revisionist historiographers in rhetoric and composition have long looked to our intellectual and institutional roots for sustenance of our left-leaning social visions. My larger point is that far from settling for “well-trodden histories,” the field has generated a vigorous subfield of revisionist historiography. (Brittenham doesn’t cite any historians, other than James Berlin, who so settle; in fact, she cites several—including
Sharon Crowley, Stephen North, and Richard Ohmann—who have produced the kind of revisionist history she has in mind.) In addition to the few scholars cited in Brittenham’s essay, an incomplete list of those working in this subfield would include Kathleen Boardman, Melody Bowdon, John Brereton, Xin Liu Gale, Keith Gilyard, Anne Gere, Cheryl Glenn, Bruce Horner, Susan Jarratt, James Kastely, Andrea Lunsford, Steven Mailloux, Richard Miller, Susan Miller, Thomas Miller, Charles Paine, Malea Powell, Joy Ritchie, Mary Rosner, Victor Villanueva, Victor Vitanza, and Lynn Worsham. With the publication of Octalog II in 1997, this subfield established a traceable historical trajectory (Octalog I took place at the 1988 CCCC convention; see Brooks). In fact, so active is this subfield that it has produced something like a sub-subfield: reclaiming sophistic rhetoric. And these efforts have in turn generated a historiographic methodology marked by multidisciplinary inquiry, a rejection of simple teleologies, and self-reflexive openness to multiple causality (Jarratt 12).

These general ideas about “doing history,” in fact, are widely held in the field today. At the least, as any graduate student facing oral exams can tell you, insistence on traditional, singular, linear, “official” narratives is hardly the coin of the historiographical realm these days. On the contrary, statements such as the following are not unusual:

[This book is designed] to explore the concept of transformation itself as a historiographical trope that enables constructions of the past that are skeptical of teleological assumptions about its relation to the present. We explore this concept in the hope of developing narratives of the history of rhetorical theory and practice in nineteenth-century America that assert neither decline nor progress. Reminding us of Burke’s motto that always “it’s more complicated than that”... a historiography of transformation commits us to histories that acknowledge losses and gains while tempering the impulse to assign praise or blame. (Clark and Halloran 5)

In fact, I would argue that these “sophistic” historiographical principles—whether inspired by the sophists, Kenneth Burke, or Michel Foucault—have become so commonplace in our field that they have come to be taken for granted. A few years ago, when I was in graduate school, a professor asked me to cut down on the self-reflexive material—the “self-conscious use of probable arguments”—in my project because “we all know” that any claims to truth in rhetoric and composition are (yawn) partial, situated, and contingent. Later, a reviewer of my book manuscript—which explores the historical relationships between progressive
education and the teaching of writing—similarly asked me to condense or cut the historiography because “we’ve” known for a long time that history is a constructed narrative rather than an objective record of events. Responses like this sometimes make me wonder if perhaps this revolution—the historiographic one—is “long time gone.”

**Revisioning Professional Practice**

Yet, as revisionist historiography itself teaches, as Brittenham usefully points out, and as my students continually remind me, it is precisely when ideas and practices come to seem obvious, taken for granted, that we should begin to worry. Robert Connors understood this, and he urged us to be skeptical of revisionist historiography. Specifically, he worried that revisionist histories of our field would “conform to one or another of the currently popular theoretical/critical stances,” sacrificing fidelity to facts for political currency (21).

While Connors was surely right that revisionists run the risk of finding only what they want to find, it seems to me that “traditional” historians are all the more likely to do so, laboring as they do under the delusion that “the” historical narrative is “just there,” waiting to be found and shared with the world. Perhaps even more important than this familiar idea, however, is the recognition that vacating the historiographic ground would mean ceding it to revisionists such as Diane Ravitch, whose *Left Back* demonstrates clearly that the academic left has hardly cornered the market on heavy-handed history-as-polemic. (In fact, Ravitch cleverly scores extra points by “bravely” positioning herself *against* the academic left, championing a purportedly unpopular, traditionalist stance.) This is not the place to launch a critique of Ravitch’s tome; however, it is worth noting in passing that Ravitch *does* in fact practice an especially insidious form of revisionist historiography. Her method is simple: paint all “progressives” with the same wide brush (insisting that whatever “conflicts” emerge are *internal*, rather than evidence of multiple movements: external control versus teacher autonomy, standardized testing versus classroom projects, vocational training versus creative arts, social efficiency versus expanded democracy); pose a (conveniently) never-fully-realized-but-far-better alternative (“the academic curriculum”); “prove” that no reform (and all reforms, remember, are “progressive”) has changed the world; and point to a few “underdog” defenders of the neglected tradition, thus sealing your case for the one thing that hasn’t been tried but that surely will work. Although Ravitch would no doubt scoff at the term, this is just the kind of revisionism Connors should have
been worried about. I don't believe, however, that the lesson here is that we need to abandon revisionism; on the contrary, Ravitch's work should help us to see not only the dangers of revisionist history, but also the necessity of it. Instead of condemning revisionism root and branch—as Connors would have us do—we should recognize instead that it is only corrupt forms of revisionist history that we need to refuse. That is, rather than abandoning revisionism—or, alternatively, simply producing more revisionist history—we need better revisionist historiography.

Producing better revisionist historiography will mean not allowing our enthusiasm for revisionism to outstrip our ability or our willingness to confront the tough questions it poses for us. Jacqueline Royster and Jean Williams, for instance, point out that while influential historians in rhetoric and composition often "acknowledge that they do not intend their narratives to be definitive . . . they also do not permit their own group identity or the politics of location to have visibility or consequence inside their narratives" (565). In other words, while historians may nod toward partiality and contingency, they nonetheless tend to operate within "the dominant field of vision," thus naturalizing their narratives (565). Importantly, no one—not the writer, and not the readers—needs to believe, much less assert, that this is the only story to tell, or that this is the only way to tell the story, in order for it to function as an "officialized" narrative. Therefore, mere acknowledgment of the principles of revisionist historiography is not enough; at issue here is how we enact this work. But according to Royster and Williams, our professional practice provides little guidance for that latter task.

Perhaps this explains why Brittenham's essay, while championing revisionist history, provides little help in reading it as such. It is true that Brittenham (usefully, I would add) takes issue with Berlin's taxonomic "set of distinctions," but this is not the same thing as placing one's historical work in sustained dialogue with "settled history." Perhaps the most interesting historiographical claim in this essay is that we see in our field "an artificial split between a radical past and a normative present." (I am particularly interested in this notion because I have argued that our field tends toward something like the opposite: a "progressive" teleology that has us moving ever leftward.) However, the essay presents little of what might pass as evidence that we in fact experience this rift or that, if we do, it is a product of our alleged struggles to hold on to the 1960s. Instead, we get the interesting but largely unsupported claim that we are, for all intents and purposes, stuck in that bygone era. This trip back to the sixties is well worth making, to be sure, and Brittenham draws usefully
on an atypical range of cultural and institutional texts to build her history, but readers would be hard-pressed to glean from this essay principles for revisionist historiography. (Indeed, even the general principles of "sophistic historiography" would not help much, as there is little attention here to the situatedness of the project, the potential disruptions in the historical trajectory being posed, or the possibility of what Jarratt calls "multiple causality.")

I want to be clear here: I am not saying that any of this makes Brittenham a bad historian or a poor historiographer. My point is that our professional practice—however committed in theory to revisionist historiography—is not particularly helpful in working out the responsibilities and challenges of that work. Indeed, I have struggled with these very questions in my own writing. In early drafts of my book, I qualified every historical assertion with an autobiographical one: "I'm just a middle-class, heterosexual, white guy, but..." In effect, I effectively self-effaced myself out of existence. Ironically, the effect of this narrative stance was to place the emphasis on me as the imperfect but really-very-earnest-and-humble storyteller, rather than on the historical material I was working to recover.

I cannot say that I arrived at any particularly revolutionary "solution" to this dilemma. I did revise out material that seemed merely confessional, apologetic, or otherwise self-serving (see Cushman and Monberg on this danger). At the same time, I tried to point to what my narrative left out or left unexamined and to explain why I made the choices I did (without apologizing for them). But I still worry that, in the end, I was not able to extricate my narrative from "the dominant field of vision," thus allowing it to function as a naturalized story. At any rate, what the experience did make plain for me—especially when I placed it next to my students' crabby but thoroughly rhetorical responses to the rhetorical histories we read together—was the need for collective dialogue in our field about just what revisionist historiography entails.

(Really) Rhetorical Questions
In fact, for all our historiographic sophistication, I would suggest that we are experiencing something not entirely dissimilar to what my rhetoric students experienced when they found themselves perplexed by the rhetorical histories they were reading. In the first instance, they demanded a self-reflexive accounting by the historian who presented a traditional, linear, allegedly "objective" narrative of classical rhetoric. In the second instance, they mistrusted the feminist historiographers be-
cause they had strong “agendas.” To be sure, I was disappointed when many of my students greeted the latter with derision and—as one student’s use of the term “whiny” suggests—condescension. Yet, this response, when placed against their reaction to the earlier text, prompted a series of very useful, if frustrating, conversations that hinged on questions like these: How much do we need to know about a historian and his or her biases and agendas? Is it enough simply to admit or confess that our knowledge is partial, limited, and situated? Is it enough to nod toward what we haven’t written about, what is beyond our field of vision or our ideological dispositions? Or should we lay out our political affiliations in significant detail? Must we offer extended biography? How much? Where do we draw the line? Is there a danger that reflexivity will become merely self-serving? Is there a danger that we’ll end up not really able to assert anything? Should we, like Clark and Halloran (quoted above), avoid “praise and blame,” or would that amount to abdicating our responsibility as historians? Is there the contrary danger that we will find only what we want to find in order to confirm our prior theories?

To follow a single line of thought, consider Royster and Williams’ suggestion that we ought to admit into professional practice a self-conscious treatment of historians’ “group identity” and “the politics of location.” Although they wouldn’t use this language, my students lead me to formulate questions like these: Of what would such a treatment consist? Which aspects of our identity would we need to lay bare? Assuming that we couldn’t treat all aspects of our fragmented subjectivities, which ones could we safely ignore? And how would that treatment avoid the kinds of potential pitfalls I have pointed to here? Even a practice as simple as acknowledging what we are not writing about is fraught: Could we possibly list all of the things we’re not writing about? Or should we choose only certain more “important” omissions or elisions? If so, how would we make this determination?

I don’t mean to suggest that revisionist historiography is an untenable proposition; in fact, I take these to be rhetorical questions in the real, rather than colloquial, sense: as writers and readers engaged in conversations with one another, we can develop answers to these questions, even if the answers themselves are partial and provisional. We cannot celebrate our self-reflexivity and refusal to accede to naive teleologies at the expense of confronting head-on the implications of these rhetorical practices. If we do, we will be stifled by the necessary but disturbing vexations posed by revisionist historiography. Our archive will continue to grow, but we will be unsure about what to do with it (Brereton). And
the important revisionist work that has begun on, for instance, nineteenth- 
and early twentieth-century African American contributions to composi-
tion and literacy studies (Gilyard; Logan; Royster and Williams), or the 
role of feminism in rhetoric and composition (the essays in Jarratt and 
Worsham; Ritchie and Boardman), or composition's complicity in the 
aademic subjugation of knowledges and histories of people of color 
(Powell; Villanueva) will remain delayed, contained, or marginalized in 
the histories of our field.

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