Donahue, Patricia, and Gretchen F. Moon, eds. *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

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I have to start with a confession: I often find that one of my motives for conducting archival research is to prove other people wrong. In a mix of academic gamesmanship and agonistic argument, I crave that "Aha!" moment when the contents of a dusty cardboard box will reveal some sort of counter to prevailing notions about the history of teaching writing. Do you think that early writing centers were all dreary places filled with disgruntled students staring at grammar worksheets? Wait until you see this! Or, do you think that complaints about students' preparation for college are something new? How about this quote!

In a strong way, then, my archival research is driven by the supposed surety of the present and the ways history is often used to justify present actions or future directions. In the words of Robert Connors, "Seldom does anyone plunge cold into the Archive without something to look for, something they're hoping to find, hoping to see proof of" ("Dreams and Play" 22). I have spent enough time in archives to know how partial the documentary record will always be, and how the narratives created by those records are by no means the only story, never any definite "proof."

For the editors and contributors to *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), the master narrative to prove wrong is the idea that the history of first-year English can be traced to the efforts at Harvard University in the late nineteenth century. For co-editor Gretchen Flesher Moon, the reach of the Harvard origins narrative is pervasive and, ultimately, unproductive: "Composition's almost universal common feature–the first-year composition course–has encouraged the discipline to think of its history as the history of that course only, a history commonly believed to have begun at

Harvard" (3). Here, for example, is how the Harvard origins story is told by Karen Spear to start her article "Controversy and Consensus in Freshman Writing," which appeared not in a journal specific to composition studies but in *The Review of Higher Education* in 1997:

> Freshman writing, or English A as it was called, became a required course at Harvard College in 1900. Harvard was the first college in the nation to require a writing course, and freshman writing was for many years the only required course in the curriculum. (319)

The one source that Spear cites in this retelling is David Russell's history of writing across the curriculum. Russell, however, made no such claim for first rights but was instead arguing that we need to expand our understanding of what it meant for students to learn to write by looking beyond first-year composition's history, beyond the story of English A.

An origins story is key to the formation of our collective identity as writing teachers and as members of a disciplinary community. However, when authors get it wrong or close off the myriad stops and starts that characterized teaching writing in higher education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the result is unfortunate. As a counter to that tendency, the "local histories" in this collection are intended, in Moon's words, "to tease out several potential alternative histories" (3), histories that "connect to, disconnect from, comment upon, and contradict one another in many ways, ways that resist the construction of a unified narrative of the discipline" (3).

While such cacophonous narratives would offer a certain kind of reading experience, in my view these essays are instead quite unified in their reaction to the Harvard origins story. The reminders of that story and its limitations are frequent, and the major purveyors of that story–Albert Kitzhaber, James Berlin, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley and John Brereton–figure prominently in this collection. Still, I couldn't help but wonder

how these narratives would read if they had ignored Harvard altogether. In other words, by striving not to be defined by the master narrative of composition's origins, the contributors and editors invoke that narrative so often that the result is, well, the domination of the Harvard narrative. In a sense, the reasons for Harvard's prominence in the late nineteenth century that John Brereton describes serve as a reminder why the reach of that prominence has been so long:

> Harvard was one of the largest and certainly the most respected of American colleges. . . . Its football team was dominant, its professors were eminent, its president was the most famous educational leader in the nation. It cast a shadow over the college scene as no American university ever has, before or since. And Harvard went about composition, like everything else, in a big way. ("Introduction" 11)

That shadow is certainly cast over many of these contributions. In her concluding chapter, co-editor Patricia Donahue tells us that "[t]hose chapters in this collection that refer to the Harvard narrative do so not to eradicate it, or to offer a replacement, but to situate it within an expanded analytical framework as one of many possible sites of pedagogical innovation" (223). Yet by simply invoking the shorthand "Harvard narrative," Donahue lets the domination of that story continue in a way, just as many contributors do.

That is not to say that the contributors to this collection do not offer interesting, compelling, and richly researched histories about the teaching of writing in American higher education. The authors introduce readers to close examinations of institutions, students, and/or faculty involved in the enterprise of writing. From Kathleen Welsch we learn about Mahala Pearson Jay, who as a student at Antioch College in the mid-nineteenth century, engaged in writing tasks that strove to balance the demands of the assignment, her sense of identity, and cultural and academic

expectations. From Patricia Donahue and Bianca Falbo we learn about required composition classes at Lafayette College, a history that predates Harvard's similar actions by some thirty years. Through tracing the work of Lafayette's Francis March, Donahue and Falbo remind us that student writing can be found in literature classes and that the intertwining of reading and writing offer key opportunities for future archival studies. From Heidemarie Weidner, we are introduced to Butler University's Catherine Merrill, Demia Butler Chair of English from 1869 to 1883, and Harriet Noble, Demia Butler Chair from 1883 to 1895. These two remarkable educators influenced generations of students largely through the innovative ways they had students write and engage with subject matter. From Julie Garbus, we learn about Vida Scudder, English Professor at Wellesley College from 1887 to 1927, and this history speaks in fascinating ways to the role of educators as public intellectuals and the limits and consequences of that role back on campus. From Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, and Rise Quay, we are offered a view of the teaching of writing at Illinois State Normal school in the mid-19th century. This view largely comes from letters written by Abbie Ripley Reynolds and her brother John Reynolds, letters that attest to a narrative that runs counter to notions of normal schools as populist incubators. Instead, the authors conclude that "evidence at ISNU suggests another disheartening institutional co-optation of democratic sentiment" (96). From Kathryn Fitzgerald, we are offered a Normal School history of Platteville (WI) Normal School near the turn of the twentieth century. Based on her interpretation of forty-four papers written by seniors in 1898, Fitzgerald concludes that students seemed largely constrained by the acceptable genres for their writing, and as a result, "the genres also discursively constrained access to diverse subject positions and silenced the perspectives they could have imparted" (133). From Beth Ann Rothermel, the Westfield (MA) State Normal School over the period 1839 to 1929 offered a far more empowering experience to its students. Study of oral presentation, debate, and writing "aimed not just to expand

students' mental powers . . . it prepared the future teacher to foster learning, win respect, and achieve moral influence among her pupils" (135). However, this rich environment was challenged in the early twentieth century when the Massachusetts State Board of Education regularized a normal school rhetoric curriculum based largely on correctness. Still, according to Rothermel, Westfield State continued to offer students "a wider array of discourse practices, including oral and written argument, than state and school officials demanded" (153).

Another Massachusetts Normal School history is traced by Patrice Gray, who describes the teaching of writing at Fitchburg State Normal around the turn of the twentieth century. Gray's history demonstrates the complex situation Normal Schools found themselves in trying to balance an emphasis on "practical" curricula, a need to prepare future teachers to transmit cultural values, and a desire for students to study the liberal arts and become empowered through such study. Next, from William DeGenaro we are offered an alternative reading of the influence of the University of Chicago's President William Rainey Harper, often depicted as a key figure in creating the two-year college as "democracy's college." While DeGenaro does not reveal previously unknown archival evidence to support his claims, he does offer a thorough reading of existing narratives about Harper and the origins of two-year colleges, concluding that rather than populist in intent, Harper saw two-year colleges as a means to assert the elite standing of four-year institutions. In DeGenaro's words, "Harper's ideology put limitations on what higher education can be for its many constituents" (198). Finally, Jeffrey Hoogeveen takes readers into much more recent times, tracing the creation of the writing program at Lincoln University, an historically black institution that struggled to balance an "activist agenda" in the late 1960s with the emphasis in writing classes on student correctness and adherence to linguistic norms. Hoogeven offers particular insight into two key influences at Lincoln, ones to be attended to in any investigation of future histories of our field: "The role played by students in institutional and pedagogical

transformation . . . becomes obvious when the emergence of a particular writing program is carefully scrutinized. Furthermore, consideration of a particular writing program may also provide evidence of the role played by non-English faculty in the establishment of a writing curriculum" (217-18).

Rather than just offer counter narratives to the dominant Harvard origins story, then, these careful descriptions of "local histories" attest to the complexity of teaching writing in higher education, whether in the mid-nineteenth century or now. Situating one student's or one faculty member's or one writing program's or one institution's efforts within the social and cultural contexts of its era reveals the ways that literacy practices have always been intertwined with myriad cultural values, educational goals, and, so often, prevailing ideologies. Contributors to *Local Histories* are to be commended for this effort and for countering the first generation histories of our field that have offered broad characterizations of all writing classrooms as "current traditional" or elitist training grounds. The use of the past as a sort of bogeyman against which to contrast future efforts is a far too commonplace move in our field, a move that attempts to assert a disciplinary identity based on misunderstanding. Historians Wolf Lepenies and Peter Weingart note that disciplinary histories "serve the function of legitimation" (xv) of that discipline. Legitimizing based on erroneous or incomplete history, however, builds the flimsiest sort of foundation for future efforts. This collection joins other recent efforts–such as Robin Varnum's *Fencing with Words*, Thomas Master's *Practicing Writing*, and Barbara L'Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo's *Histories of Writing Program Administration*–as key works to expand what we know about the history of teaching writing in American higher education.

The contributors and editors are also to be commended for what this collection offers readers on the necessity for conducting archival research. The dominance of the Harvard origins narrative is, in part, testament to the sheer volume of Harvard's documentary evidence and its long-standing efforts to archive its work (Brereton, personal communication). The contributions to

Local Histories, however, attest to the archival evidence to be found in many of our institutions, evidence of individual origin narratives that will hopefully put to rest claims for the notion of English A at Harvard as the start of it all.

The contributors to this volume also do the readers a valuable service by often making visible the processes and challenges of conducting archival research. In addition to listing the particular archival documents they used and where and how they found them, contributors frequently remind readers of the limits and opportunities to be found in archival research. Tracking down the perfect match for a single assignment–student's essay (and hopefully multiple drafts), instructor's assignment sheet, and course description–is nearly impossible, given the relative lack of priority given to archiving student-produced work or pedagogical materials more generally (or in the case of Vida Scudder at Wellesley, the erasure of evidence when she destroyed her teaching records rather than turn them over to college archivists [Garbus 91]). Thus, one student's letters about her writing class experience or one class's response to a single assignment or one institution's course catalogs cannot help but be partial evidence, leading to a partial understanding of those histories. But that partiality does not mean these histories are not interesting, provocative, and motivating for future research efforts. For this, too, I commend the editors and contributors to *Local Histories*, and am reminded that these particular histories, rather than definitive narratives, are instead seeds for future narratives of our field's histories, a growth of disciplinary identity that is rich and nuanced.

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