I have to admit to a bit of discomfort while reading Raúl Sánchez’s *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*. That discomfort comes from a suspicion that, though Sánchez may not have nailed the problem with the sometimes over-theorizing of composition on the head, he has come close enough that those of us who are drawn to theory the way others are drawn to chocolate should feel a tad uncomfortable. As the word “function” in Sánchez’s title suggests, he is not so much interested in an overview, history, or even theory of composition theory, as he is in how theory functions in composition. Since *Of Grammatology*, “function” has indicated the what-something-actually-does hidden behind stated purposes and goals, the implicit lurking behind the explicit. Revealing that hidden function is, at best, an exercise in one-upmanship—unless one wishes to launch a fifth column attack against that theory.

In consequence, *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies* is not so much a book of theory as it is a manifesto. And both its strengths and weaknesses flow from Sánchez’s tendency toward the broad gesture one might expect from that genre. Sánchez argues—sometimes vehemently, often with frustration—for a break with current theories of composition that have tied composition to hermeneutics. Sánchez argues that the interpretive goal of hermeneutics focuses not on the text, but “something else” (20) behind the text. And thus, theories of composition are tainted by hermeneutics because they approach writing as representational. In contrast to the Enlightenment concept of representational, where writing represents the world, in hermeneutic theories, writing represents a something else that turns out to be the hermeneutic system itself. In a neat tautology, hermeneutics looks at writing and sees evidence that the system it has constructed is, in fact, there. Sánchez, holding firm to the post-structuralist orthodoxy that writing represents nothing more than itself, or more writing, argues that any theory that seeks what is beyond writing is suspect.

Thus, hermeneutics has created “a stable body of knowledge” that is naturalized through its analysis of writing (20). Sánchez would reduce the (tautological) hermeneutic circle formed by knowledge to “a title, a name, given to valued collections of statements, always and only after the (f)act of their production” (180). In this reversed causality, theory is itself a “function [or effect] of writing” (3), and thus has nothing to say about writing. Not only is knowledge actually an effect (along with the autonomous subject), but the
very assumption that there is a something else we might call knowledge that is discoverable through hermeneutics is an illusion that is simply a “product of writing” (35).

Since, for Sánchez, writing is the starting point for composition studies, at a moment when other rhetoricians are seeking increased interdisciplinary connections, Sánchez argues for a narrowing of the disciplinary purview of composition, insisting that “Writing is almost exclusively our field’s term, in ways that discourse, language, and signification are not” (10). In a nod to Saussure, Sánchez suggests we limit “our objects of study” to “writing and [the] writing subject” (77), a call that may at first seem limiting. However, the apparent limitations of the study of the writing itself, which Sánchez refers to as the “(f)act of writing” is deceptive (97). Just as Saussure’s limitation of his field of study eventually flowered into semiotics, Sánchez’s limitation has the potential to blossom into new theories that conceptualize writing as something, rather than use writing as a tool to explore something else, however theoretically interesting that something else might be.

Claims that anti-foundationalist theory is itself foundational are not new—one only has to think back to Stanley Fish’s “theory hope.” Neither are calls for a break with past theories. Such calls have come from theorists as diverse as Sharon Crowley and Victor Vitanza. We might even define post-process as a call for a break with process and the hegemonic, read logocentric, baggage of progressivism that might cling to process. In that light, Sánchez’s call is simply one of many. Sánchez, however, goes a step farther, and insists that we must break not only with thoroughly discredited current-traditional and suspicious process pedagogies, but with a wide range of theoretical approaches to composition often identified under the umbrella terms of social-epistemic and post-structuralist pedagogies.

In his own theorizing, Sánchez often convolutes social-epistemic and post-structuralist rhetorics, which causes him to choose an interesting starting place for theory, by which he usually means post-structuralist/social-epistemic theorizing. While others have started with Nietzsche, Heidegger, the Sophists, (Alistair MacIntyre even started with the Scots Humanists), Sánchez starts with James Berlin. He chooses Berlin because through Berlin, Althusser’s Marxist theories enter Composition Studies and sublimate rhetoric to ideology through the reification of the socially constructed subject. If ideology is given precedent over writing—which for Sánchez means that writing serves ideology and is simply a recorder of ideology—then composition theory becomes the hermeneutic study of the way writing reproduces ideology, and writing is reduced to a “notation system of experience” (47). Thus, Sánchez critiques Berlin’s use of writing “to do other work,” specifically interpretation, the work of literary studies, “an act of reception, not production” (68). If, however, we reverse causality, and see
writing as an act of production, writing would produce ideology, rather than the other way around.

Unfortunately, Sánchez’s rejection of hermeneutics requires that, rather than entering into a dialogue with Berlin, or even critiquing Berlin, we set him aside, silence him—a strategy I find not simply unconvincing, but suspect. If, as Sánchez argues, the act of writing produces theory, then knowledge is just as fluid, situated, and open to revision (or Bakhtinian revoicing), as writing itself. Consequently, I would dearly love for Sánchez to read Berlin’s writing as fluid, situated, open to revision/revoicing—rather than fixed, universal, as what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to as “uncompromising and irreducible philosophical oppositions” (510), which require rejection.

Just as I find Sánchez’s treatment of Berlin problematic, I am less than enthusiastic when Sánchez argues that rhetoric should be set aside as a category simply because it is entangled with hermeneutics. Even though he argues that Composition Studies is itself entangled with hermeneutics, he insists that we can revive composition. Rhetoric, he argues, must be set aside, with no explanation of the difference between the two that would preclude one but not the other. Interestingly enough, (traditional) rhetoricians have made similar calls for composition to focus on writing rather than interpretation, such as Thomas P. Miller’s call to teach rhetoric as a “productive art” rather than a “critical art” (84).

To set aside rhetoric as a category, which Sánchez advises, simply because we do not have “a distilled, agreed-upon, and sufficiently precise articulation” of the term, may reveal the politics that underlies his own epistemology. Sánchez demurs because, even should a clear definition of rhetoric be arrived at, there would simply be “more debate” (90). However, this debate is itself a function of Burke’s Parlor, of academic methodology, a methodology that has been, and will continue to be, hermeneutic. And this debate is what Sanchez would cut off.

Sánchez is seeking a purer, pre-Berlin, post-structuralism that harkens back to Derrida, and does not sublimate writing to ideology, a post-structuralism that, while it might not be totally devoid of politics, would not write writing and the writing subject as nothing more than the product of discourse. Thus, despite the theoretical focus on the subject, because the subject has been theorized as a passive product, “the writing subject . . . has [actually] remained relatively untouched, untheorized” (95). Sánchez’s goal is to re-theorize the subject, and the possibility of re-theorizing makes the last few pages of The Function of Theory in Composition Studies tantalizing, even while that re-theorizing remains a distant goal. Sánchez himself does not take that next step, the necessary step he has been arguing for, and theorize the writing subject of the (f)act of writing. He asks the right question: “how might writing be described so as not to take the
subject as an unproblematic departure?” (99). But he does not answer it. Yet, this is the very question at the heart of theorizing writing, a question that he argues previous theories have not tackled. I would that this very short book (exactly one hundred pages, not including Notes and Works Cited) had been a hundred pages longer, and that he had tackled that question. I might not have agreed with his conclusions. But I suspect I would have found them intriguing—and worthy of more debate.

Edinburg, TX

**WORKS CITED**


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Although the push for female suffrage is often seen as the highpoint of 20th century women’s activism, women’s enfranchisement did not result in masses of women voting at the polls. Instead, the dreaded “women’s vote” failed to materialize, and women’s voices and concerns remained muted within the political sphere. This was due in great part to the fact that women didn’t have significant access and clout to participate in the established political system. Wendy Sharer’s new book *Vote and Voice: Women’s Organization and Political Literacy, 1915-1930* examines how two women’s groups—the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the League of Women Voters (LWV)—worked to challenge the structures of political discourse in the decades after the 19th Amendment passed. Sharer’s book is a carefully researched, well-documented, comprehensive analysis of the “larger processes of persuasions” in order to “provide a broad view of the types of literate practices the organizations used to influence the worlds around them” (10). Grounded