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In recent years, scholars have complicated and challenged nineteenth-century decline narratives, investigating sites beyond the elite eastern colleges where the field’s origins have typically been studied. David Gold’s book contributes to these revisionist efforts by exploring the rhetorical training students received at three types of institutions that historians have previously overlooked. All located in Texas, the institutions include Wiley College, a private, African American liberal arts school in Marshall; Texas Woman’s University, a public women’s college in Denton; and East Texas Normal College, a private teacher-training school in Commerce. The three main chapters of the book are based on in-depth case studies of each school, and demonstrate the variety and complexity of rhetorical training during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The book echoes and extends the revisionist work of Susan Kates’s Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education: 1885-1937, which similarly examines rhetorical instruction at three institutions previously ignored by historians during roughly the same period. Like Kates’s study, Gold’s analysis investigates three schools that provided rhetorical training differing in significant ways from that offered at more traditional institutions and that served students typically denied access to the more elite schools during this period. In his study, Gold delineates his argument in five chapters. In the preface and introduction, Gold situates his research within the field, defines his historiographic approach, and sets forth key arguments addressed in the book. Some of these claims include questioning Berlin’s taxonomies and the related tendency to use this epistemological framework to characterize pedagogical methods; resisting persistent nineteenth-century decline narratives to provide more complex histories; looking beyond English departments and composition courses to recover the field’s history; and demonstrating connections to the past that could enrich current pedagogy, particularly instruction related to diverse students. In addition, Gold advocates for institutional microhistories to complement narrative with broader scopes. Gold draws on historian Giovanni Levi’s definition of microhistory as “essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material. . . . The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved” (7). According to Gold, small-scale investigations can serve to question and inform broader histories. In addition, both types of histories are important in illuminating the field’s past. Each of the three central chapters emphasizes these recurring themes while providing a detailed investigation of the institution under consideration. The concluding chapter examines the study’s implications in terms of issues facing the field today.

Chapter 1, “Integrating Traditions at a Private Black College,” examines the teaching practices of Melvin B. Tolson, an African American poet and civil rights supporter, who in 1935 led Wiley College’s debate team to victory against the national champions, the University of Southern California. (Recently, Tolson’s story has gained public acclaim through the 2007 film, The Great Debaters, which stars actor/director Denzel Washington as Tolson and showcases Wiley’s famous debate team.) Although Gold provides background on the 1873 school’s founding by the Methodist Episcopal Church, he focuses on the period when Tolson was at Wiley (1923-1947), specifically demonstrating how Tolson’s teaching practices blended classical, current-traditional, social epistemic, activist, and African American rhetoric “to produce a pedagogy that was at once conservative, progressive, and radical, inspiring his students to academic achievement and social action” (9). While Tolson emphasized a prescriptive approach to writing instruction and an agonistic, disciplinary teaching style, his former students still revere him and his efforts to improve their lives. For Gold, this situation reveals the limitations of Berlin’s categories and the problems with the tendency to view them as distinct, separate entities. The chapter also questions the related tendency to make direct connections between ideology and pedagogy based on these taxonomies (i.e., current-traditional
practices have been viewed as largely positivist and upholding the dominant ideology). These tendencies have led scholars to overlook the potential benefits of authoritarian, prescriptivist, or confrontational teaching practices, and the possibility that some teachers like Tolson successfully integrated conservative and radical teaching strategies to serve particular student populations.

The focus shifts to an investigation of Texas Woman’s University in Chapter 2, “Balancing Tensions at a Public Women’s University.” More specifically, in his examination of the period from 1901 through World War II, Gold underscores the influence of clubwomen on the school’s development and the significance of the vocational and literary training that women received. According to Gold, “Texas clubwomen mixed conservative and progressive social, religious, and political ideals,” and these tensions were evident in the school’s curriculum (81). In its first fifty years, Texas Woman’s University combined liberal arts with home economics and vocational training; this combination was viewed as enhancing women’s economic and political opportunities. In addition, through their efforts to promote the school, clubwomen provided significant models of activism that encouraged students’ civic engagement. The chapter also highlights the public emphasis and significance of instruction in reading, writing, and speaking in both curricular and extracurricular activities, including literary and debating societies, speech and drama clubs, and school publications. Gold’s analysis demonstrates the complexity of generalizing about rhetorical instruction, which was not limited to the English Department; the departments of elocution and reading provided rhetorical instruction too.

Chapter 3, “Challenging Orthodoxies at a Rural Normal College,” examines the efforts of William Leonidas Mayo, the founder of East Texas Normal College, a private teacher-training school in rural, northeast Texas. Covering from the establishment of the college in 1889 until Mayo’s death in 1917, the chapter explains that the school served a student population historians have long ignored: white, rural students of limited income. Like the other institutions investigated, East Texas Normal College’s rhetorical education resists traditional taxonomies and scholars’ attempts to link ideology and pedagogical practice. The chapter provides an overview of normal schools and the alternative intellectual tradition that they drew upon, highlighting their democratic, community-oriented emphasis. It also discusses Mayo’s background and the forces that shaped his educational philosophy, including his perception of traditional liberal arts colleges as elitist and backwards. The majority of the chapter focuses on four significant aspects of Mayo’s instruction: his stress on community, oral training for teachers, “learning by doing,” and prescriptive grammar. Gold notes that Mayo, like other normal school educators, highlighted public performance as an integral part of teacher training. Mayo encouraged this focus through an emphasis on discussion and debate in the classroom. It was also promoted through school literary societies and debate clubs, as well as through drama-related activities and commencement addresses. Furthermore, Gold discusses Mayo’s focus on discipline, which sometimes included physically disciplining students and extended to language instruction. Despite his prescriptive approach, Mayo underscored the importance of student interest, of respecting their abilities, and of encouraging them to succeed.

In his conclusion, Gold compares the faculty at the three schools, reiterating key differences in their perception of a traditional liberal arts education, while still emphasizing their various similarities. Although power and authority in the classroom were not viewed as critically in the past as they are today, Gold asserts that teachers like Tolson and Mayo were not unsophisticated in their pedagogical approach. While both stressed traditional prescriptive grammar, they still “saw their work as radical” (153). Gold discusses several significant implications of his study, particularly the need for more personal contact with our students as well as the need to acknowledge that “the main reason students attend college” is to enhance their professional outlook (155). While all might not agree with Gold’s claim, he clarifies that recognizing students’ economic concerns does not mean that we neglect objectives long associated with rhetoric and a liberal arts education, “but that we demonstrate their practical value” (156). According to Gold, if we desire to cause any change in our students’ thinking, “we must seek to accommodate them as well as liberate them” (156).
Although Gold’s historical treatment of the different institutions is rich, there are a few places where readers may want to hear more. For instance, Gold explains that Texas Woman’s University was designed for “white girls” and that it was “a racially segregated school in a racially segregated state” (106). He also notes that “racial stereotypes of the day” occasionally appeared in the student newspaper/literary magazine and that an autobiography of one of the school’s deans is “literally filled with dialect jokes and ‘mammy’ stories” (107). While it is true, as Gold emphasizes, that the complexities and tensions between white and black women, and their efforts to attain educational opportunities merits further study, it might have been interesting for Gold to examine how these complexities specifically played out at Texas Woman’s University.

Overall, *Rhetoric at the Margins* has much to offer readers. A strength of the book is its thoughtful analysis of various archival sources, including student essays and newspapers, catalogs and course descriptions, and interviews and oral histories. The book’s thoughtful analysis of various archival sources—including student essays and newspapers, school catalogues, course descriptions, and oral histories—is strong and relevant. The emphasis on the importance of microhistories for investigating the field’s histories is also significant, but it is Gold’s challenge of Berlin’s taxonomies and insistence that scholars must resist tendencies to simplistically connect ideology and pedagogy that really stand out. Such small-scale investigations are valuable because they reveal the diversity of pedagogical practices during this period. As Gold stresses throughout the book, connections between pedagogy and ideology are much more complex than traditional taxonomies suggest. A highly engaging book, *Rhetoric at the Margins* should appeal to those interested in the different institutions investigated, alternative sites of rhetorical education, and the history of rhetoric and composition during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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