
Reviewed by Valerie Balester, Texas A&M University

If you think you know the history of rhetoric, think again. You may be deluded. In fact, if you think you can teach the history of rhetoric, you may, like I did after reading this book, decide you need to start all over again, that what you in fact know is a very tiny sliver of the world’s traditions. Much of the last thirty years of scholarship has recovered women rhetoricians within the framework of Western and European traditions from classical Greece to modern America, but has yet to consider seriously rhetorics of other traditions. Damián Baca begins to chart these new territories for us with Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing. Reading the book is much like taking a journey, both spatially and temporally. You may have a vague sense that Mesoamerican civilization before the conquistadors was sophisticated and that it was trampled upon by Cortez and his ilk. However, unless you have read widely in the history of the pre-1630 Mesoamerican civilizations, you may also believe they were preliterate, or that they were destroyed and erased by conquest. In fact, theirs is a story of adaptation and survival through syncretism—a slow process of melding cultures. Baca argues that Mesoamerican civilizations can point the way to a twenty-first-century re-reading of literacy, rhetorical history, and composition practice. Using Gloria Anzaldúa’s concepts of borderlands, contact zones, and new mestiz@ consciousness, he re-configures the territory of rhetoric.

In his first chapter, Baca outlines his main arguments and previews the upcoming chapters. The cross-cultural contact between the Spanish from the Iberian Peninsula and the American Indians (including North America, Mesoamerica, and the Caribbean) in the late-fifteenth century resulted in a hybrid, or mestiz, culture. Mestiz culture has been marked by adaptive resistance to erasure and assimilation, as expressed in part by expressive culture, including performance, art, and writing, often in combination. The rhetoric of mestiz@ culture is not simply persuasive. It is epistemic, a way to convey, preserve, and express cultural norms and identity; it mediates between cultures. When we shift our definitions of literacy to include practices outside the alphabetic version and beyond academic prose, to include, for example, the performances that accompanied texts or to include pictographic or mural representations, we approach a consciousness that will help us navigate and understand literacy in the twenty-first century. So, for example, Baca explains in chapter 4 the power of the pictographic script, its ability to convey multiple and complex culturally embedded meanings, or the
ritualistic and ceremonial means by which official discourse was presented and conveyed (poetry, prayer, oration, script). In the opening chapter, Baca also explains the word *mestiz@*. The addition of @ makes the term gender inclusive, although it may take you a few chapters to become accustomed to the new convention. I advise you to get used to a bit of discomfort. It will be worth it. This read will take you to decidedly new places.

One of those places is the Mesoamerican civilization of the Olmec, in the tropical lowlands of Mexico from about 1300 BCE, some 3,300 years ago. Chapters 2 and 3 critically review much of the literature on mestiz@ history, myth, and culture, providing a rich historical perspective on Mesoamerican/Indian literacy education and practices, all the while making the argument for a “new consciousness” based on more than simple alphabetic literacy. Baca describes how, for example, the Olmec literacy was grounded in calendars and glyphic inscriptions, the meaning of which remains somewhat mysterious. A little known literacy practice of the Inca civilization that flourished between 1200 CE through the conquest of the 1530s were the color-coded knotted cords, or *khipu*, used to convey information. The Mayan civilization of the Yucatán perfected hieroglyphic scripts (as well as calendars, astronomy, and architecture). The word “Mexican” is from the Aztec, or *Cuczúa-Mexica* (“Me-shee-kah”) civilization, whose great city of Tenochtitlán boasted 300,000 inhabitants and a complex architecture and civic/political/economic structure by the time of conquest. They used pictographic forms of literacy that recorded their origin myths, royal lineages, and business. This civilization, ruled by Moctezuma, survives most strongly in mestiz@ identity through cultural practices never entirely erased despite centuries of oppression. Chapter 3, “A Brief History, From Mexicatl to Chican@,” traces their influence all the way to the Chican@ movement of the twentieth century.

Besides a geographical re-examination, Baca invites us to reconsider alphabetic and academic literacy by looking back to the history of Mesoamerican writing practices that encompassed picture, symbol, and performance. He makes a connection to multimedia and new literacy, both in the sense of genre and in the way it can and should contest the binaries of dominant historical narratives through its play with doubling, twinning, and pairing. He does this in part by analyzing, especially in chapters 4 and 5, modern-day mestiz@ texts such as the 2000 *Codex Espangliensis: from Columbus to the Border Partol*, the work of three artists, an illustrator, a graphic designer, and a performance artist. (I recommend you check it out online at movingpartspress.com.) Chapter 5 brings visual rhetoric into the argument, with special attention to how cultures gradually adapted and merged and transgressed borders through works such as Frederico Virgil’s mural at the Barelas-Albuquerque’s National Hispanic Cultural Center, *The Genesis of the Rio Grande*. The reading Baca gives of the mural clarifies how Mesoamerican culture has survived, adapted, and resisted assimilation, in living color.
In chapters 6 and 7, Baca makes two challenges, one to the history of rhetoric as it is commonly found in the curriculum of higher education, and another that I personally found even more intriguing, the challenge to our writing pedagogy. In the classroom, he pushes us to read culture—including music, dance, painting, and writing—with an eye to how cultures are enacted in these works. He calls for a more deeply critical reading of texts (and I include here many kinds of texts) within a cultural context—not simply a Western cultural context. Mestiz@ texts are particularly instructive in that they provide a study of survival, having continually adapted and crossed between Western and Mesoamerican rhetorical practices. Some of the texts that best illustrate this adaptive strategy are not what we have, in rhetorical studies, always acknowledged as text—pictographs, hieroglyphs, codex writing, frescos, and ceremonial dance—and these are forms still being produced by mestiz@ rhetoricians.

In many college classrooms, these texts are invisible, as are the writers and artists who produce them. While composition classes can be constructed to accomplish assimilation, thus erasing these texts, reading (or seeing or hearing) them makes us confront their makers’ resistance, subversion, and adaptation—often geared at survival.

Baca implies, but does not cover in depth, the need to re-imagine the production of texts by students in classrooms. Naturally, we want to approach students of mestiz@ backgrounds with a respect for the rhetorical traditions of their ancestors. We want to help them reclaim those rhetorics, to correct some of the violence of school histories that ignore them or treat them as preliterate barbarians who were bettered by having been conquered by a more “advanced” civilization. We just as urgently need to educate European/Anglo students about this history and about the other versions of rhetoric that exist in the Americas (the Asian, Non-mestiz@ Native American, and African American as well). By importing Anzaldúa’s new mestiz@ consciousness, Baca suggests we can reach students as rhetoricians and writers in a whole new way. Writing is not simply following a set of conventions devised in seventeenth century England, not simply about the persuasive tactics devised in the Greco-Roman era. Rhetoric in the twenty-first century has to be more to survive as a subject of study. It has to take a clue from the survival tactics used by mestiz@ cultures. Moving into multimedia, entertaining different varieties of language, incorporating electronic voice or music into productions are all elements of rhetoric and “writing” that belong in our classes. Just as important is allowing texts to critique and challenge the master narratives of our culture, making space for new texts.

As Baca constructs it, it is a two-step process: revise our rhetorical history and recover what we have lost. The losses include the many students not currently being served by our education system, their ways of being,
doing, knowing, and communicating. It is a wholly new understanding of American rhetoric.

At some points reading, I got the panicked feeling of ineptitude. But then I looked again at the pedagogical project Baca advocates—he stresses exploring new territories together with students, making a map, redefining and redrawing boundaries—he suggests that rhetoric is not a set of strategies and terms and dates of great masters to memorize but a dynamic practice: “Mestiza consciousness potentially reveals a new politics of teaching that no longer privileges speaking, writing, and thinking within a single language controlled by the conventions of scholarly prose” (29). It’s a project we cannot afford to ignore.

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*The Future of Invention*, though published in 2008, may serve as particularly poignant now, at a time when plagiarism appears to be at its peak, digital composing wonders how to invent, and recycled pastiche stands in for new and innovative. The question of invention sits upon compositionists’ lips, yet the performance found in Muckelbauer’s work does not take these issues up explicitly; rather, he artfully asks us to look at our image of invention and complicate the tendency of its negative movement—its very insistence upon negating in order to create anew. Still, Muckelbauer does not so easily lay his argument out for us, for it is precisely in his style of engagement with the reader that he performs what he is simultaneously explaining: an orientation toward affirmative invention. Muckelbauer, rather than arguing with his sources or with invention prior, engages the scholarship in an affirmative sense.

Therefore, this work proves to be particularly difficult to review (as it doesn’t seem to be reviewed in any other journals) because Muckelbauer is asking us to orient ourselves differently within composing practices. He stoutly tells us that the argument, including his own, need no longer be the most important aspect to scholarship, rather it is our style of engagement, our ways of responding to problems in the first place, that may need the most attention (Introduction). Nevertheless, I will attempt to package his argument for you here, but to do so is to betray his performance and the performativity necessary in his “affirmative” sense of change.