

Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric, edited by Michelle Ballif. Carbondale: SIUP, 2013. 238 pp.

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Billig itself as an attempt to rewrite and retheorize Victor A. Vitanza's 1994 volume of essays *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*, Michelle Ballif's new collection *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric* takes on an overdue sequel project in rhetorical historiography (2). To be certain, Ballif's effort to tap the *kairotic* moment of Vitanza's influential collection has an expansive set of shoes to fill. Vitanza's book emerged from a 1989 conference on the theoretical and methodological considerations underwriting the construction of rhetorical history, and it energized both the emerging field of historiography within rhetoric and composition studies and rhetorical histories themselves. The good news is that Ballif, and the impressive list of contributors she has assembled—Sharon Crowley, Jessica Enoch, Richard Leo Enos, G. L. Ercolini, Pat J. Gehrke, Debra Hawhee, Byron Hawk, Steven Mailloux, LuMing Mao, Charles E. Morris III, Christa J. Olson, K. J. Rawson, Jane S. Sutton, and Vitanza himself—successfully accomplish their primary task of reprioritizing methodological and theoretical questions through the collaborative writing of rhetorical history. Through the productive dissonance generated by the volume's diverse array of methodologies, interventions, and example histories, it also moves in directions that would have seemed impossible in the mid-nineties, presenting innovative and in some cases radically inclusive approaches. Some of the most auspicious of these were developed in response to recent debates on the archive, globalization, and queer historiographies. But *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric* also opens wholly original questions, such as what is the appropriate scale of a rhetorical history (Hawhee; Olson), and what does it mean to think of rhetorical history with the future in mind (Ercolini; Gehrke)? Through its embrace of rhetorical history's disorder, Ballif's collection at once provides models for how to represent suppressed and marginalized archives as well as occasions for reevaluating the cultural meaning of writing histories of all kinds.

Like Vitanza's earlier book, the essays in Ballif's collection have been carefully curated to produce rich, unexpected conversations with one another (e.g., as the book's jacket material indicates, one reviewer has called the collection "a lively Symposium that recalls Plato's"). One of the most important features of *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric* is thus the reader's experience of discovering resonance and dissonance across the various essays of the collection. Consider, for instance, how Richard Leo Enos' reminder to question textual authority in the first essay of the collection ("Theory, Validity, and

the Historiography of Classical Rhetoric: A Discussion of Archaeological Rhetoric”) fits into the volume at large when taken as the collection’s classical figurehead. As Enos explains, fetishizing the authority of a text is a surefire way to limit one’s vision when it comes to reconstructing Homeric rhetoric. While postmodern rhetoricians regularly acknowledge the limitations of the text, historians of classical rhetoric, in Enos’s perception, forget that accurate representation of a particular rhetorical paradigm requires looking beyond the text to the physical and cognitive evidence of archaeological discoveries, which illustrate much about the “mentality of the time”—in this case, Ancient Greece (13–14). At first glance, Enos’s proscription feels determined by the specific content of his own canonical project of rhetorical history, and hardly a general (let alone radical) principle for historiography. Enos, it seems, simply presents a method for accurately reconstructing the rhetoric of a time and place to which we have access mainly through artifacts and transcriptions of oral texts. But as one proceeds across the volume, it becomes clear that *all* of the essays in *Theorizing Histories*—even those engaging marginalized and suppressed rhetorics—provide strategies for getting beyond content analysis to questions of rhetorical situation, which are only readable when texts are considered in their larger historical contexts, and which must also take into account the position and agenda of the observer. The essays in the first half of the volume, especially, tend to follow this arc: they begin by representing their particular content—Homeric rhetoric, Jesuit rhetorical practices (Mailloux), the rhetoric of the Dao (Mao), alternative women’s rhetorics (Enoch), queer archives (Morris; Rawson)—and end by proposing a general principle for how the rhetorical historian ought to approach similar archives. Significantly, these principles emerge organically from the specific projects at hand, rather than deductively or as imposed upon their content. On their own, the methodologies presented in many of the essays in Ballif’s collection could seem limited to their specialized historical fields. Presented together, however, Ballif cultivates occasions for finding mutual reinforcement in unexpected places.

The most powerful chapters of the collection are those that deal most explicitly with historically marginalized, non-Western, and alternative rhetorics. LuMing Mao, for instance, shows how it is impossible to analyze the rhetoric of the *Daodejing* without learning from it, without recognizing that stable terms in the Dao are always collapsing into their opposite. To effectively represent such a rhetoric, one must cultivate an “art of recontextualization,” which involves explicitly “recognizing how the conditions of the present can influence the act of representation and even perpetuate the existing power imbalances” (47). Similarly, Jessica Enoch proposes in “Releasing Hold: Feminist Historiography without the Tradition” that we approach the archive as not just an instrument to “recover women,” but as a “site that creates and shapes public memories for

and about women” (65); archives *structure* history as well as preserve it, and a rhetorical history must take these functions into account.

By far the most provocative historiographic method in the volume, however, appears in the chapter “Queer Archives/Archival Queers” by Charles E. Morris III and K. J. Rawson, which presents the queer archive as an especially important site for rhetorical history, as well as the possibility of becoming an “archival queer” in the writing of all rhetorical history. In Morris and Rawson’s view, the massive split between the historian’s view of the archive as a body of documents to be explored and the cultural theorist’s view of the archive as metaphor has distracted us from considering alternative (e.g., queer) archives as “sites of rhetorical invention” (78). In our own time, when dubious heteronormative standards are no longer taken for granted, historians have an obligation to “[s]eek out affective relationships with the past” (79), with a keen eye to whether those relationships are positive or negative, a matter of “identification” or “disidentification” (80–81). How the historian relates to the past affectively, and not just objectively or rationally, is made a priority in this essay, and not only for those dealing with queer archives. Like all of the most striking essays in this collection, Morris and Rawson’s take their specific approach to the archives with which they work, and present it to the reader as a universally applicable theoretical possibility.

Admittedly, and somewhat counterintuitively, the chapters of the study that might be identified as the most closely aligned with poststructuralist “high theory”—mainly the later chapters of the book—fall somewhat flat. This may be simply because they follow such a remarkable set of organic theoretical proposals, ground in the mill of their respective archives. Yet the possibility that high theory has gone a little stale is something of which the collection is aware, especially in Sharon Crowley’s “Afterword,” which reflects on the volume at large. Crowley explains, “Theory did not go away—this collection is rife with it . . . What is missing is the old fervor” (190). Surely it is intriguing to think of the possible implications of applying complexity theory to rhetorical history (Hawk), and a pleasure to follow the deconstructive flights of Jane S. Sutton and also Ballif herself as they explore, respectively, the figure of the “nose” of rhetoric in Aristotle (and beyond) and the possibility of “hauntological” rhetorics. This collection is at its best, however, in the essays that approach messy, incomplete, marginal archives; legitimately learn how to read them on their own terms; and thus present new, original lessons in methodology.

The greatest impact of Ballif’s collection, then, may be how it challenges our notion of what constitutes “theory” in the first place. Most readers will pick up *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric* expecting to witness new applications of canonical theorists, or new explanations of how existing theories can be useful. These moves do occur in the volume, but its most compelling moments

demonstrate how marginalized and nontraditional archives can dictate new, portable methodologies for writing rhetorical history.

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Works Cited

Vitanza, Victor. *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*. 1994. Carbondale: SIUP, 2013. Print.

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