

Book Review—*Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy*,
by Iris D. Ruiz

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Where are PoC in the theoretical realm, the realm of the unmarginalized, the realm of the serious, structural conversations, such as research methodology and Composition Studies history that ultimately influences the way Composition gets taught and talked about?

*PoC influence the ways the field changes, evolves, grows, and gets reconceived. Where are PoC in Composition's History? Are they there implicitly?
No. They are invisible.*

—Iris D. Ruiz

In *Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy*, Iris Ruiz critiques the lack of representation, inclusion, and contributions of people of color (PoC) as students and scholars in the late 19th century. This marginalization has created gaps within the field's history, and improvement towards providing platforms and support for minority scholarship continues to be minimal. In her introduction, Ruiz shares a compelling personal narrative of what it means to be a Latina Compositionist as a graduate student, scholar, and instructor. The lack of representation and limited number of Latinas and Latino Compositionists meant constantly being on the search for people who looked like her (i.e. mentors, publishers, authors, academics), and for the theoretical contributions of PoC to the growing scholarship of Composition Studies whose focus was not on “linguistic diversity issues such as English as a Second Language (ESL), translanguaging, [and] Generation 1.5” (3). Her narrative sets the tone for the need to critique and address the visibility and contributions of underrepresented groups in Composition history; it also underlies her advocacy for a critical historiographic pedagogy to be implemented within the composition classroom. A critical historiographic pedagogy encourages and challenges students to analyze the process of social inclusion and exclusion, power structures, and representation within mainstream historical narratives. To further this point, Ruiz frames her argument on the lack of representation and inclusion within Composition Studies scholarship as an ongoing problem, in part because of the color blindness and post-racism ideologies that often follow students of color. Ruiz acknowledges prominent scholars of color, but her call for occupying academic spaces requires more than recruitment from underrepresented groups. There is a call for diversity within the field, yet there is still a disconnect between the outcomes of the call and the number of scholars of color that lead the helm and/or are prominently visible.

In chapters one through four, Ruiz combines a post-structural understanding with critical post-positivist theory and critical race theory to complete a historical comparative analysis of the

pedagogical changes that occurred within Composition Studies during the late 19th century. Ruiz synthesizes mainstream historiographies of Composition by John Brereton, James Berlin, Albert Kitzhaber, and Richard Ohmann, among others, to outline a persistent representation of the “egalitarian” (96) university. Kitzhaber’s historical study of the field of composition and rhetoric portrays the second half of the 19th century as “transitional” (47). This is significant because Ruiz supplements Kitzhaber’s historical study with the narratives of Brereton, Berlin, and Ohmann to introduce the shift from classical rhetorical training to the German model, focused on scientific research, that led to the development of the first-year composition course and current-traditional rhetoric.

Through Berlin and Ohmann’s accounts, Ruiz traces the influence of current-traditional, expressivist, and social constructionist theories on the reevaluation of the practice of rhetoric, pedagogy, development of a writing curriculum, and students’ agency. In the 1980s, Berlin’s revival of rhetoric led to a shift from the current-traditional model towards an epistemic position, which opened up conversations on discourses being “ideological and entangled in power relations” (30). Ruiz frames the multidisciplinary critiques of Susan Miller, Sharon Crowley, and Lynn Bloom as being primarily focused on the development of the middle-class, arguing that both Crowley and Bloom note that “[c]omposition’s continuity of purpose is and always has been to create and maintain a hegemonic middle class” (53). This version of Composition history poses a problem because it continues to marginalize the voices and contributions of PoCs and depicts a “racial and culturally blind version of Composition pedagogy” (55). Ruiz reinforces this sentiment throughout the book, but Chapter Three is the catalyst for “who benefits from this type of rhetoric and, at the same time, who is excluded” (52). In chapters five through seven, Ruiz concentrates on the challenges new students brought with them to the writing classroom and how this led to reevaluating traditional writing models. The emphasis on race enables a better understanding of “the absence of African Americans in educational institutions and, thus, represents the difficulty of finding a textual presence in written histories of Composition. Such a viewpoint is consistent with the aims of critical race theory” (81). Critical race theory structures Ruiz’s counter-narratives by providing a more contested version of history.

The focus on the African-American and Mexican-American contributions during the civil rights era connects Composition’s past to the educational reforms of the Reconstructive era. Ruiz shifts her focus to the Midwest, South, and the Southwest, with particular attention to California and Texas, to find the histories of more inclusive educational opportunities that typically are not included in Composition histories. She points to educational history and the formation of a normal school (i.e. response to a unified educational institution and students’ learning process vs textbooks) as an alternative location and population for Composition Studies history. According to Ruiz, “being an oppositional critic is conceptualized as beginning after the educational field’s response to the Civil Rights Movement, which undoubtedly affected the practice and theory of Composition” (85). In particular, she focuses on the death of MLK, the Black Movement, and the Chicano Studies Movement and how they influenced students’ cultural pride and the development of multicultural curriculums. Ruiz uses Chicano Studies and Black Studies programs during the civil rights era as

turning points and examples that reflect the outcomes of including “new histories” in institutions of higher education (149). The emergence of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) in the 1990s sparked debate on traditional multicultural pedagogies and how effective they were when accommodating students of color. Ruiz uses the civil rights movements and rise of HSIs to critique the pedagogical approaches of multicultural theories and offers a meaningful intervention in the field by promoting a pedagogy centered on critical historiography.

In chapters eight through ten, Ruiz delves more into the implications of using a critical historiography approach when teaching writing. For Ruiz, a critical historiography pedagogy does not “solely concentrate upon differences between populations of people, as is common with many multicultural writing curricula which center on identity politics” (162). Rather, a critical historiography pedagogy uses memoria to encourage and produce a “universal learning experience that does not solely concentrate on the victimized status of minorities” (163). A pedagogy centered on critical historiography is a universalist multicultural pedagogy; it challenges multicultural curricula by being more inclusive and more critical of the methods used to teach multicultural content. For example, a critical reading of histories (i.e. questioning the purpose and writing process of history) furthers and enriches students’ development of rhetorical skills when discussing the social conditions that shaped the construction of historical narratives (167). An instructor assigns a diverse set of readings to analyze the process of social inclusion and exclusion, power structures, and sense of representation and belonging within contested histories. For minorities, this is an opportunity to see how and what alternative versions of history and rhetorics influence their overall writing process. An example of this can be found in Chapter 9, where Ruiz discusses her use of Guatemala as a site for critical historiography to critique the deficit and homogenous narrative of Latinos. According to Ruiz,

While the content is important, the way the content is presented, taught, and negotiated is even more important. This is because the goal of a universalist multicultural pedagogy is for all students to benefit from critically analyzing both multicultural and minority texts which concentrate on their experiences. Those experiences are always seen as socially and historically located. Thus, looking at minority experiences from a critical historical standpoint is one way to critically analyze the current status of minority populations in the U.S.A. (171)

In her ten-week course, Ruiz includes a diverse list of readings, such as the letters of Hernán Cortés, texts on manifest destiny, and several others for students to reflect on. Ruiz is transparent when she discusses the obstacles when implementing a pedagogy centered on critical historiography.

While Ruiz cannot disassociate from her *Latinidad*, she acknowledges the affordances and constraints of her positionality as a woman of color, explaining how she maintains her credibility as an instructor by establishing boundaries, remaining objective, and reducing political bias by not revealing her political associations. Yet she notes that conflict is inevitable because students are challenged to move past their comfort zones, and her “pedagogical focus” has at times been “overlooked because of [her] colored body and association to the class material” (177). She shares a moment when a disgruntled student contested a grade, alleging that it was motivated by personal

and political bias. The issue was resolved with Ruiz providing documentation that disproved personal and political bias against the student, and she asserts that students have responded favorably to her approach to using a critical historiography within the classroom. Ruiz concludes her argument by commenting on how a “historiographic method can provide students with the critical analytical tools needed to analyze current social problems of inequality as well as to combat feelings of inadequacy or alienation from mainstream academic culture” (196). Ultimately, Ruiz is an advocate and renders the invisible visible through a critical historiographic pedagogy.

Ruiz has written a refreshing and much needed contribution to the history of Composition Studies, filling in some of the historical gaps of PoC contributions that have been omitted by the field. The book not only makes PoC visible and increases representation of Latinos but is a valuable resource for graduate students and composition instructors. Ruiz unfolds a critical historiographic pedagogy where students engage in self-discovery of what is included and excluded in history as it relates to writing. This student-centered approach encourages discussion on the power and linguistic structures that influence the publication of a historical narrative. This self-discovery benefits students, and it is also a vehicle for positive cultural recovery and healing for PoC scholars and writing practitioners.

But as many other “colored” Compositionists have admitted, academics of color struggle against assumptions about our qualifications, confront others who feel we have no right to be in the academy, and are consistently caught up in a battle to prove ourselves worthy, to show our loyalty, never letting our guard down for a second. This experience provides another reason why adhering to universalist justifications for multicultural pedagogy is important. The benefits have to accrue for all students, not just a select few.

—Iris D. Ruiz

Works Cited

Ruiz, Iris. *Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Print.