

Hawk, Byron. *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. (ISBN: 9780822959731)

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Provoked by Byron Hawk's decision to recast "vitalism" in *Composition*, I was initially concerned that he had perhaps reached too far into the obscure in his attempts to get after complexity and thereby generate a "counter-history" capable of redressing acts of discursive disambiguation that have comprised a field seeking academic validation. But Hawk's examination of vitalism in *Composition* productively rethinks earlier cartographies. He critiques some of the field's dominant taxonomies even as he values many of the rhetorical moves animating them, and in this way, Hawk avoids antagonism and instead works historiographically to shape an invitational alternative reading of the field, its emergence, and its potential.

Hawk's counter-history emerges from a reading of Richard Young's commendable efforts to infuse the nascent field with a greater appreciation for Rhetoric as well as cartographic methods that might articulate the discipline qua discipline (21). Hawk argues that early mapping efforts, such as those put forward by James Berlin, Paul Kameen, and Richard Young have been laudable, necessary, and capable of comprising the sustaining energies that generate(d) and maintain a dynamic field such as ours (12-13). However, Hawk correctly worries the problematic nature of historical mapping, and he does so by reanimating key terms that have been deployed with less-than-ideal concern for the complexity of their semiotic potential.

Hawk's work expansively and rigorously rethinks the uptake of various terms and particular moves to disambiguate them. His counter-history emboldens us in our efforts to more carefully craft our sense of who we are and what we are about within the field of *Composition*, particularly as we are experiencing, theorizing, and teaching from an understanding of the ways in which "technology

alters the historical and rhetorical contexts in which life operates” (7). The care with which Hawk carries out his project makes believing in the value of a rich, expansive, and complexly vital Composition a seriously viable prospect.

In order to craft his more complex history, Hawk uncovers early misreadings that generate unviable assumptions upon which many of our field’s centralizing concepts are formed. By reconsidering and revaluing an early misrecognition of “vitalism,” Hawk finds potential to gesture toward a more productively generative sense of the field. For Hawk, all are welcome: both little-read and long-neglected (Hal Rivers Weidner’s unpublished dissertation, *Three Models of Rhetoric: Traditional, Mechanical, and Vital*) as well as historically prominent textual moves that sought to describe or shape our disciplinary identity (i.e., James Berlin’s “The Rhetoric of Romanticism” and “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class”; Richard Young’s “Arts, Crafts, Gifts and Knacks” and “Paradigms and Problems”; Paul Kameen’s “Reworking the Rhetoric of Composition”) (2, 7). Whereas early efforts were after the kind of disciplinary identity that signifies power, permanence, and the teachable, Hawk’s critique is after emergence, complexity, and unpredictability (168-171). At its core, Hawk’s book is about rescuing ambiguity as a way of opening new lines of flight that resist stasis, misinterpretation, and misuse. And while “rescuing ambiguity” feels expansive and maybe even a bit lightweight in ways that might invite skepticism regarding method, Hawk is deadly meticulous and rigorous in tracing his argument—perhaps, at times, at the expense of style. Still.

From the outset, Hawk honors the centralization of complexity within Composition; note the title, *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*. Hawk explains that his method for building this counter-history hinges upon his ability to revalue “vitalism” and the theories and practices it describes. Hawk wants to reanimate vitalism and argues that it has for too long suffered at the hands of what he calls a “rhetoric of exclusion” (16) including exclusion from his very title. Initially, I

worried about this omission because semantics are at issue; Hawk is himself concerned with naming and its powerful, often deleterious effects upon our abilities to experience disciplinarity as dynamic, expansive, and resistant to stasis. However, I can easily imagine that Hawk evades naming “vitalism” as a move to resist an anticipated reaction to its historically complicated meanings (anti-science, irrational, mysticism); in this way, I move beyond my initial concerns as I recognize the nature of Hawk’s rhetorical choice. And although I continue to wonder about the semantic omission, I find that the work is so meticulous and careful in its attempts to retrace vitalism’s misreadings and their uptake that I find myself in the midst of a very different Composition, a Composition that feels like the one I know, the field in which I work, where Hawk’s “complex vitalisms” exist as “subgenres” desiring difference rather than conformity and stasis (273).

How does Hawk help us to move beyond early readings of vitalism? Why is a fresh analysis necessary? As Hawk explains, Richard Young’s attempts to promote New Rhetorics beyond Current-Traditional Rhetorics hinged upon a reading of vitalism found in Hal Rivers Weidner’s unpublished dissertation. Using Coleridge as the fulcrum through which he conflated vitalism with Romanticism, Young, following Weidner, dismissed both in his attempts to shape versions of rhetorical invention that moved beyond notions of individual genius or mystical inspiration. He was after what could be taught (22-23), and although the Berthoff/Lauer debates had sufficiently complicated questions regarding the teachability of individual genius or creativity or inspiration, leaving much open to discussion (16-17), Young seemed determined to press ahead. Composition, if it were to be a viable discipline, needed to be about the teachable, not about the mystically unknowable, and especially not about the question of creativity if “creative genius” were left up to debate (22-23). So situated, Hawk’s retelling of the story surfaces a desire for disciplinarity that came at the expense of complexity and (ironically) the precision that evolves from understanding a term when viewed in its fullest complexity. For Young, “vitalism” and

the many associated terms (i.e., “creativity,” “expressivism,” “genius”) was simply too weak to be enlisted in the effort to solidify disciplinary identity (28-29).

Working to address not only Young’s but other historical disambiguating moves that have shaped our history, Hawk endeavors to argue that vitalism via Coleridge is not accurately defined as a wholly negative “mysticism.” He explains that Berlin “interprets Coleridge’s method in terms of dialectical methods and turns it toward what will become social-epistemic rhetoric.” But this reconfiguration simultaneously erases vitalism, which Berlin aligns with current-traditional rhetoric, via Young (8). Ultimately, however, Berlin distances himself (and the field) from Coleridge altogether because of the associations with Hegelian dialectics that would foreground language and ideology over “vitalist or bodily epistemologies” (8). Situating himself within a complex vitalist paradigm that value bodies and ecologies, Hawk rethinks Coleridge’s theories of writing as a way of righting the misreadings of vitalism that were deployed in efforts to distance New Rhetorics from Old Romanticism. From his efforts and reading “vitalism” through the lens of works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henri Bergson, and Giles Deleuze, Hawk emerges with three historical categorizations of vitalism (oppositional, investigative, and complex), finding that “complex vitalisms” (associated with Deleuze) articulate versions of rhetorical invention that describe much of our work in Composition. For Hawk, complex vitalisms more accurately describe the work of Composition within “network culture” and help us to move beyond static versions of the field and instead to recognize “the importance of ecology and immersion” (164). For, as Hawk explains, vitalism in its many iterations is essentially after the question of life, emergence, and potential. For Hawk, Composition is best viewed as a kind of living matrix, and our work is to ensure the viability of its multiple assemblages. At its best, our work can be characterized by its concern for creating optimal “life” conditions:

As the primary principle underlying vitalism, the question of life . . . cuts across categories, paradigms, authors, and texts, opening them to various combinations—all of which are potentially valuable if the conditions of possibility set the rules for their emergence (274).

It is this expansive, (complexly) vital version of a field that Hawk imagines when he attempts to create his counter-history, and we are left wondering about our efforts at history-making, power, and oppression, moving far away from our narrow focus on the teachable as we gesture more hopefully toward the emergent and the possible.

Counter-History is breathtaking in its ambition and scope, and the work of reviewing this book has been educational, reanimating, and just plain daunting. Impressively rich and complexly precise, ironically (due to its rigor) Hawk's book provides a dynamic counter-history that both addresses the problems of history-building even as it offers a complex and potential-laden alternative vision of the field and its work. For new students of Composition as well as long-time members of the field, Hawk's counter-history is necessary reading, complicating our history, making way for appreciably nuanced readings of the field, and generating new lines of inquiry in the complex present.