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BOOK REVIEWS

# Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan. The Teaching Archive: A New History of Literary Study

## Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 315 pp.

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As I read Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive*, I kept thinking about my experience sorting through about a dozen boxes that my father-in-law, an emeritus professor of comparative literature, had stored in his office. It was a re-immersion into a bygone era of the academic humanities, the heyday of critical theory, to which he had been a contributor. I sorted through documents representing several stages in the production of peer-reviewed articles: type-written and then word-processor-generated manuscript drafts, with notes toward revision; correspondence with editors, reader reports, offprints. I found syllabi that were little more than reading lists, without the codified learning objectives and the required statements about technology requirements and intellectual dishonesty that characterize the genre today. There were stacks upon stacks of photocopied articles and chapters. I consigned almost all of it to the recycling bin, reducing the records of a fifty-year career to several folders.

That's the fate for the bulk of the documentation of academic practice, of which only a tiny percentage can end up in the sort of special collections that furnished Buurma and Heffernan with their archive. "If it were possible to assemble the true, impossible teaching archive," they write, "all the syllabuses, handouts, reading lists, lecture notes, student papers, and exams ever made—it would constitute a much larger and more interesting record than the famous monographs and seminal articles that usually represent the history of literary study" (p. 2). So much paper. The problem is, teaching material is so often treated as ephemera, making it challenging to investigate the role of teaching in the development of a discipline. Yet Buurma and Heffernan, by analyzing archives of prominent literary scholars who had the atypical habit of documenting their teaching, elaborate an understanding of the classroom as a site for the generation rather than the reception of ideas and methods. They counter the view that innovation disseminates from graduate faculty at elite universities to classrooms at regional institutions, expansion programs, and community colleges. Instead, they "make the case that the opposite is true" (p. 3).

It may be more accurate to say that the opposite is *also* true: with their relatively slender, carefully curated archive, Buurma and Heffernan are more successful in complicating the top-down, inside-out model of disciplinary formation than in upending

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it altogether. Their case studies are brilliantly effective, however, in demonstrating the value of an outside-in approach, reconstructing, for example, how T. S. Eliot's working-class students at the University of London extension school contributed to shaping the modern canon, and how the Native American poet and critic Simon Ortiz influentially conceived of Native American literature as a field of study during the 1970s through courses at tribal and community colleges. Again and again, they show how the teaching archive disrupts literary scholars' received understandings of Americans' disciplinary history and chronology. For instance, we learn that the New Critic Cleanth Brooks and his students at the University of Michigan in the 1940s repeatedly stepped outside the bounds of the formalist orthodoxy he helped to establish, and that Josephine Miles's work teaching freshman English at Berkeley in the 1940s and 1950s shaped her "groundbreaking quantitative scholarship" (p. 158).

Historians might question how well *The Teaching Archive*'s diverse sampling of case studies of pedagogical contributions to literary scholarship—depending upon the happenstance of archival preservation, and spanning about seven decades, two countries, and a variety of kinds of institutions—supports broad generalizations about "literary study" in higher education in the United Kingdom and the United States during the twentieth century. And although this book should be of interest to education historians, especially because it illuminates English studies, a relatively marginalized topic within that field, Buurma and Heffernan are not historians. Rather, they are literary scholars like me, presenting, as their subtitle suggests, a history of our profession from a "new" vantage point. As such, they are intervening in a subfield represented most prominently by Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), and, most recently, Guillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (2022). Implicitly, *The Teaching Archive* is a feminist reframing of this topic. It not only revises disciplinary history by highlighting scholars such as Edith Rickert, whose crowd-sourcing classroom experiments with stylistics in *New Methods for the Study of Literature* (1928) have been overshadowed by I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment* (1929); it also emphasizes aspects of academic labor that are more often associated with women, namely pedagogy and collaboration. Its point of view is the classroom rather than the critic's study, and it investigates the dynamic, collaborative conditions of what constitutes the majority of scholarly work—that of teachers interacting with students.

It's also a showcase for the authors' own collaboration. "We have written every line of this book together," they write in a prefatory statement entitled "On Authorship" (p. ix). I often stopped at individual sentences, and wondered about how the authors worked them out together. For example, I noted the use of anaphora in their description of the idealized literature classroom during the midcentury era of New Criticism: "a place at once professional and open to a public, a place that reconciled opposing tensions, a place in which aesthetic experience could be experienced as both rarefied and accessible" (p. 135). One can read such alternating syntax as an integration of two voices. Brilliantly written, *The Teaching Archive* makes a great case for the recognition of collaborative authorship in the evaluation of humanities scholarship.

Even that reference to evaluation is predicated on the contemporary promotion and tenure system in which scholarship is considered as a separate and more important

category than teaching. The retrospective conclusion, "The Past We Need Now," is the chapter of *The Teaching Archive* that draws most directly on the work of education historians, calling for a reintegration of teaching and scholarship in response to the "large-scale institutional changes" (p. 209) that have reshaped higher education since the mid-twentieth century, especially the privatization of public research universities and the casualization of academic labor. The effect of these changes, for the humanities, has been to "pull research and teaching apart." This widening fissure leaves the academic humanities increasingly vulnerable to obsolescence. Because why, the thinking goes, pay arcane specialists who don't particularly know how to teach to deliver courses that students, as future employees, don't especially need? Restoring the memory of a tradition in which "research and teaching were woven together" (p. 209), the authors propose, is a first step toward reviving literary study as a collective endeavor and a public good.

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## Tara A. Bynum. *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America*

### Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2023. 184 pp.

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Tara Bynum's maxim, "Black living matters," propels her taut and compelling study, *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America,* although the work doesn't lead to an examination of reader-response criticism or cultural history, as might be expected from the title (p. 133). Instead, this book lays out a series of adroit readings of the works of Phillis Wheatley, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and David Walker, four early Black writers who all, as Bynum argues, found space in their rage, their passions, and their devotions to frame their work and their lives with love—indeed, they framed their work with good feeling despite the privations of living while enslaved or nominally free.

These four readings are deeply informed by history, of course, and most particularly, by the ways it can fail us. Bynum's coda to the book, "Reading Pleasures: Looking for Arbour/Obour/Orbour," for example, is not an afterthought but instead one of the most compelling sections of the book, where she walks readers through the steps and stakes of tracking down the scant archival information about Wheatley's close friend, correspondent, and sometime sales agent, a woman identified as Arbour Tanner in some

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