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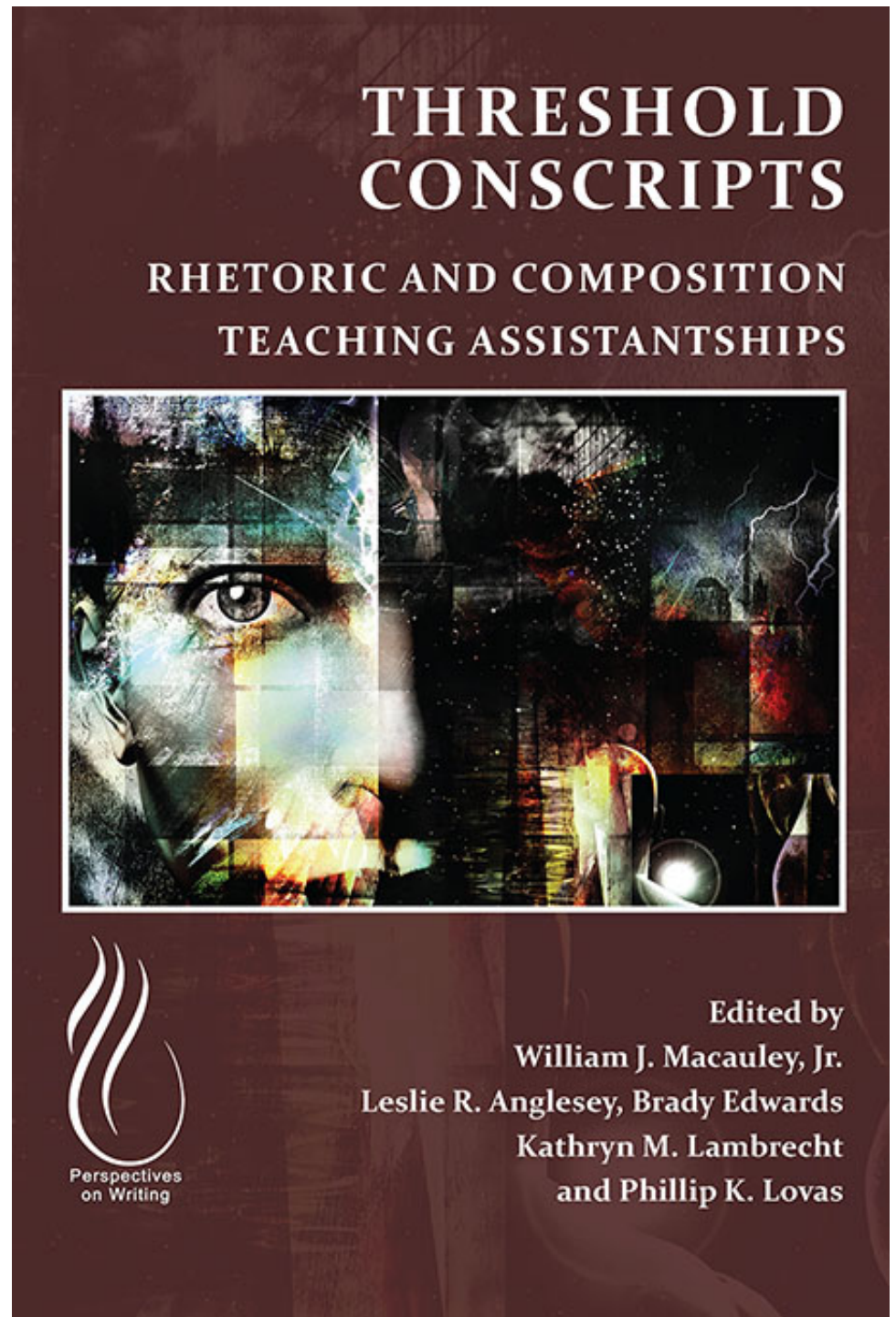
Review of William Macauley, Jr., Leslie R. Anglesey, Brady Edwards, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, and Phillip K. Lovas's *Threshold Conscripts: Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantships*

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Macauley, William Jr., Leslie R. Anglesey, Brady Edwards, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, and Phillip K. Lovas. *Threshold Conscripts: Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantships*. The

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I came to *Threshold Conscripts: Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantships*—as I think many of us would—with vivid memories of my first semester teaching first-year writing. I felt some panic and anxiety, of course, at the very idea of a teaching role, but I was also struggling to reconcile the *conflicting* roles I carried. As Laura R. Micciche puts it in the Foreword to this collection, I was “not-quite teacher and not-quite student,” but was, nevertheless, asked to take on the important role of introducing students to college-level writing (xii). The anxieties and learning moments brought about by these intersecting identities make graduate student instructors of composition a rich and vital population to study, and yet as this collection consistently argues, the field of Writing Studies needs more scholarship examining their experiences. It is this gap that *Threshold Conscripts*, edited by William Macauley, Jr., Leslie R. Anglesey, Brady Edwards, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, and Phillip K. Lovas, addresses in its collective works that closely analyze the lived experiences of graduate



RCTAs (rhetoric and composition teaching assistants) as they attempt to balance their multiple roles as teachers and students. [\[1\]](#)

Much of the existing work in Writing Studies on RCTAs is concerned with either (a) the design and implementation of the teaching practicum that RCTAs take prior to or during their teaching, (b) larger institutional or programmatic issues in Writing Studies graduate instructor pedagogy, or (c) studies of RCTAs from a deficit perspective. This is certainly not to say that there are *no* notable works on RCTA experiences—such excellent work as Jessica Restaino’s *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground*, Dylan Dryer’s “At a Mirror, Darkly: The Imagined Undergraduate Writers of Ten Novice Composition Instructors,” and Good and Warshauer’s *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teaching Writing* all come to mind, for example—but the discipline certainly could benefit from even more theorization of these experiences. *Threshold Conscripts* does the important work of continuing to address that gap.

Threshold Conscripts is organized into four sections, all of which represent different aspects of the RCTAship:

- Section One: “Approaching the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship”
- Section Two: “Inhabiting the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship”
- Section Three: “Transcending the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship”
- Section Four: “Graduate TAs Program Profiles”

Section One, “Approaching the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship,” includes work on what happens when TAs enter their TAs program and what diverse perspectives and identities they bring with them as they “approach” the RCTAship. Section Two, “Inhabiting the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship,” explores what happens as RCTAs “inhabit” their roles and gain new or different teaching experiences. Section Three, “Transcending the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship” includes works that discuss what “transcending” issues RCTAs are experiencing outside of the classroom context. Section Four, “Graduate TAs Program Profiles,” shares, in detail, the structures and curricula of ten successful TAs program profiles in light of scholarship and TA education recommendations discussed in previous chapters.

This collection also includes narratives from RCTAs that are situated between themes explored

in longer chapters, creating connections between RCTA first-hand experiences and theories argued in the scholarship. Narratives focus on such themes as intersections of identity and professional roles (Budhathoki, Chapwell, Frandsen, Horton, Lee), balancing self-care with teaching and academic responsibilities (Boyett, Gellis, Lonelodge), transitions between thresholds (Friess, Marine, Schering, Topping), fostering community in TAs (Sansbury), and dealing with geographical displacement (Kupsch). Giving voice to RCTAs lends credibility and authenticity to this collection, and readers will enjoy hearing relatable personal stories directly from the population this book examines so closely. Between narratives written by RCTAs, the longer scholarship chapters explore many significant themes in RCTA research.

The collection begins with William J. Macauley, Jr.'s Introduction: "Begin As You Intend to Finish': Considering the Multiple Liminalities and Thresholds of RCTAs." Macauley's Introduction is effective in its discussion of the collection's justification, including that current studies of RCTAs rarely place voices of RCTAs at the forefront. Macauley also states that the collection acknowledges the nuances of the complications, pressures, and learning moments that TAs experience instead of reducing that experience to a linear timeline where TAs go from novice graduate student teachers to expert professionals (9). Macauley also explains the meaning behind the collection's title, *Threshold Conscripts*. "Threshold" reflects the concept that RCTAs are at a threshold moment, "crossing the threshold into their graduate programs and, potentially, their professional lives" (6). The editors chose "Conscripts" because RCTAs "are conscripts in the sense that they are making a significant time commitment in exchange for the opportunities they believe they will have during and after grad school" (6).

Rachel Gramer's "Putting Learning First: Challenges and Possibilities for New Writing Teacher Research" argues for a closer examination of NWTs' learning experiences through "learner-centered research devoted to newcomers' deep learning and development" (40). This approach differs from past studies of NWTs (new writing teachers) that have primarily focused on practicum teacher training on a wider curricular, programmatic, and institutional level (40). To foster this kind of "learner-centered" research on NWTs, Gramer proposes using methodologies stemming from learning theories. Gramer highlights four principles that she believes are essential to researching the learning experiences of NWTs from Susan A. Ambrose et al.'s *How Learning Works*: "prior knowledge, motivation, mastery, and course climate" (46). Gramer puts these theories into context by relating them to the experiences of Nigel, a participant NWT in a year-long research study Gramer conducts. Gramer's chapter presents an effective and practical methodology for how Writing Studies scholars can place

NWTs, as nuanced subjects, at the forefront of their research studies.

Another notable chapter in this section includes “Coming to Teaching: Moving Beyond a Blank-Slate Model of Developing Pedagogical Expertise” by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Rob Cole, Amanda May, and Katelyn Stark. This chapter works against the “blank slate” assumption dominantly held in prior RCTA research: that RCTAs come to a practicum with no teaching background. Instead of embracing the fact that RCTAs are at multiple thresholds and using that liminality as a chance to reflect on the identities and learning/teaching experiences RCTAs bring with them, Yancey et al. argue that practica tend to see RCTA preparation as proceeding in a “neatly linear trajectory” from novice to expert (116). Yancey et. al then share three narratives from doctoral students that discuss their experiences in the context of three terms: “(1) liminality; 2) prior knowledge, practices and experiences; and 3) teaching assistants” (116). Yancey et. al conclude from these narratives that TAs’ prior experiences need to be “tapped,” as it allows for TAs to “reflect upon and theorize it” in their teaching development, and end with some practical suggestions for TA education (117).

Heading up the collection’s next section, “Inhabiting the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship,” is Leslie R. Anglesey’s “‘Survival is Insufficient’: Reimagining TA Orientation as a Meaningful Threshold Boundary.” Anglesey’s chapter centers on the fact that TA trainings and orientations are often only designed for survival (if one is to endure their first semester as a TA, one must learn what one can to make it through) and frequently based on “disseminating lore” (183). Such orientations tend to position TAs as passive recipients of teaching lore instead of active participants in conversations meant to help them conceptualize their teaching philosophies. Instead, Anglesey suggests, orientations should be “reframed” to support TAs as “liminal beings at threshold boundaries” so TAs can build upon their awareness of those identities in their teaching roles (169).

Soha Youssef in “International Teaching Assistants’ Needs and Undergraduate Native English-Speaking Students’ Expectations: Meaning Negotiation as a Rhetorical Strategy” examines the (often overlooked) experiences of TAs who are international students (ITAs) and what it is like to teach students who are NESSs (native English-speaking students). As the teacher of an ITA-preparation course, Youssef conducts a mixed-methods study with her ITAs and their NESSs, examining such themes as the needs of ITAs, what NESSs expect from ITAs, and how “ITAs’ needs align with undergraduate NESSs’ needs and expectations” (241). Youssef’s findings indicate that ITAs need more interaction with undergraduate NESSs outside of the classroom

context and more opportunities to learn about and practice slang “during interactions with NESSs,” while NESSs want more of a sense of rapport with their ITAs (261). Like Das et. al’s chapter “Integrating the Marginalized and the Mainstream” and Melba Velez Ortiz’s “Anti Colonialist Listening as Writing Pedagogy” (discussed below), Youssef’s chapter represents much-needed scholarship on TAs from diverse, underrepresented groups.

The next section, “Transcending the Rhetoric and Composition Teaching Assistantship,” includes Courtney Adams Wooten’s “The Pursuit of (Un)Happiness in Composition and Rhetoric TAs’ Experiences.” Wooten focuses on the emotional labor that TAs take on as they navigate their practicum and teach their first courses. Wooten studies five TAs using interviews and writing collections in their first semester, examining their levels and concepts of happiness and unhappiness, discovering themes like identity crises and disconnections between what they expect from their students and what students think they expect (301–302). Wooten proposes using “theories of happiness” (290) to examine a TAs’ effectiveness in creating adequate support for TAs, and that “writing programs put TAs’ affective experiences at the center (or at least centered them more) of their work” (308).

The last chapter in the third section of the collection is “Integrating the Marginalized and the Mainstream: Women of Color Graduate Instructors’ Experience with Identity, Difference, and Belonging” by Meghalee Das, Michelle Flahive, Jiaxin Zhang, and Michael J. Faris. Das et. al begin their chapter by naming a gap in scholarship on the experiences of TAs belonging to marginalized and diverse identity categories. Das et. al’s chapter addresses this gap in its study of three graduate instructors, Michelle, Meghalee, and Jiaxin, who are also chapter co-authors. Michelle, Meghalee and Jiaxin write their own narratives, focusing on the themes of “relationship-building practices” (Michelle), “identity and identification” (Meghalee), and “calling out microaggressions” (Jiaxin) (Das et. al 370–379). Das et. al conclude the chapter with a call for writing programs to use the concept of “differential belonging” to “make space to normalize discussions of graduate instructor positionality and privilege as they relate to teacher-student relationships in teacher preparation and mentorship” (380).

Finally, in the section “Graduate TAs’ Program Profiles,” the collection concludes with an account of several example practices and curricular designs for RCTA teaching preparation, professionalization, and mentorship. These program profiles are quite detailed and include not only RCTA programs but disciplinary TA program design as well as innovative methods that allow RCTAs to customize their own professionalization. These profiles would be helpful for

administrators, faculty, or graduate students looking for examples of how the theories in this collection are put into practice.

One small area of critique I would like to mention is that even more emphasis could have been placed upon involving RCTAs in the writing of the longer scholarship chapters. While several chapters did incorporate RCTA writing, like Das et al.'s chapter, more of this collaborative work is important if we are to fully embrace the fact that RCTAs' voices and perspectives are essential to this conversation. I do acknowledge, however, that this collaboration can be difficult from a practical and material perspective, and the effort to include RCTA voices in this collection at all is admirable. Graduate students do not typically have much extra time (or compensation) for scholarship outside of their programmatic studies and teaching responsibilities, after all. This critique is small when compared to the importance of this body of work in contributing to conversations around the detailed experiences, threshold moments, and intersectional identities of RCTAs.

Threshold Conscripts is essential reading for current RCTAs, for faculty looking to improve upon their current practices, for those implementing a new RCTA practicum, for those making their graduate seminars more attentive to the experiences of RCTAs, or for administrators who are looking to revise their programs in light of the training, preparation and support RCTAs are looking for. It is an invaluable addition to the scholarship on RCTAs that Writing Studies needs—work that explores the role of an RCTA as the nuanced, complicated, and diverse one that it is.

On a personal level, I related to this collection as a past graduate teaching assistant myself (as far away as that feels now) and as a current mentor of graduate students. After reading this, I now feel more prepared to support my graduate students as they navigate their coursework and first semesters of teaching.

Notes

[1] For clarification, graduate student instructors of composition are referred to using a diverse array of terms in this collection—all of them representing different categories of instructional expertise and identity markers. Some of these include TAs (teaching assistants), RCTAs (rhetoric and composition teaching assistants), NWTs (new writing teachers), GTIs (graduate teaching instructors), GTAs (graduate teaching assistants), and ITAs (international teaching

assistants).

Works Cited

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