



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification by Bruce Lincoln

Joseph Harris

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grams can discover the "content/writing connections" among the members of their faculty (ii).

Several of the essays in this collection, most notably those by anthropologist Alton L. Becker and composition scholars Barbara Couture and Richard W. Bailey, explore the possibilities of such connections. But the rest of the essays underscore *difference*, the "differences in teachers' approaches to writing, originating from their unique field-specific perspectives as well as from faculty's individual viewpoints" (iii).

Morris's comments on each essay cannot erase the idiosyncrasies that exist among these individuals who have presumably agreed to work together. For example, chemist Thomas Dunn contends that "conceptual thinking and the representation of that thinking in writing are not necessarily the same thing" (46); art historian Rudolf Arnheim believes that drafts encourage sloppy approximations when the goal is "utmost fidelity" (11); and philosopher Jack M. Meiland insists on "an argumentative structure that is basic to rational thinking in Western culture" (103).

Such assertions, as the authors of the Michigan chapter no doubt suspect, make it difficult to introduce faculty to prevailing WAC theories. But in a modest way, Morris's collection of clashing opinions provides its own tacit theory about what makes WAC work. Instead of reform and control, WAC administrators need apperception and respect. They need to clarify for themselves and for others their theories of writing and learning, and then develop an appreciation for the theories of those down the hall and across the quad that will be unalterably different. If faculty and students are encouraged to understand and accept the differences across the disciplines and among themselves, WAC will not only be around but will form the ground of American education.

Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification, Bruce Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 238 pages).

Reviewed by Joseph Harris, University of Pittsburgh

On the jacket of Bruce Lincoln's new book are photos of the exhumed corpse of a Spanish nun, a Duchamp readymade, and Brutus Beefcake, a wrestler on TV. Pretty radical. But while the rest of the book fails to live up to the hip eclecticism of its cover, it does succeed in collecting an engaging and quirky set of examples of how discourse gets used in building and unbuilding communities.

Lincoln is a historian of religions, and so much of what he studies under the name of "discourse" is a far cry from the usual concerns of composition teachers and theorists: myths, rituals, legends, magic, scriptures, performances, sports, political insurgencies, and even forms of massacre. Such discourses hold power, Lincoln argues, to the degree they arouse feelings of kinship (or estrangement) among the members of a group. Myth is a charged form of history, a retelling of events that invokes a sense of common purpose and belonging. (One thinks of the uncanny ease with which Reagan called up a particular version of Americanism.) To become part of such a discourse, then, is to do more than simply learn a code, it is also to share in a set of beliefs, values, and affinities, to join in an ongoing project.

In *Discourse and the Construction of Society* Lincoln brings together essays written over a span of ten years and on a wide range of topics—from the imagery of Iranian end-of-the-world prophecies to the layout of Celtic banquet halls to the iconography of All-Star Wrestling—so as a whole the book offers less a sustained argument than a loose

set of examples of a certain approach to cultural criticism. This is not entirely a flaw. Rather, after so much recent theorizing on the relations of language and power, it is useful to look at some specific instances of how the two have been intertwined. Lincoln is particularly interested in how forms of discourse usually seen as retrograde—myth, ritual, taxonomy—can be put to subversive use by dissenting groups in society. And so among the most striking pieces in *Discourse* are his rereading of a Swazi ritual of kingship as an implicit criticism of British colonial rule, and of the display of the disinterred bodies of priests and nuns by leftist forces in the Spanish Civil War as an attempt to fully show the corruption of the society they were attacking.

The most serious failing of *Discourse* is stylistic. Lincoln knows how to pick a subject—massacres, exhumations, eating clubs, TV wrestling, and the like. But his prose stays cautious, scholarly, stolid, burdened with notes and diagrams. One way of putting the problem is to say that I can't imagine asking an intelligent undergraduate to read Lincoln—and not because it would be too hard but because it would be too little fun. Reading *Discourse* made me wish for more critics like Barthes, Burke, or Eco—writers who not only cross disciplinary borders but who step outside of the confines of the purely academic as well.

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