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# Commentary on: Michael C. Souders' "*Khôra*, invention, deconstruction and the space of complete surprise"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is my greatest privilege commenting on Professor Souders' deconstructive work on rhetorical and argumentative invention at this occasion. The work is indeed well-informed and ambitious; I also had a lot of pleasure and fun reading it.

Reading through the paper, what I find particularly notable and refreshing is two-fold. First, he reminds us that "argumentative invention lies in a between-ness of arguer and audience." While this may sound obvious and self-evident to most students of rhetoric and argument, it is not necessarily so when it comes to the characterization, understanding and interpretation of invention current in our field. To borrow O'Keefe's (1982) classic distinction, in discussing invention many of us seem to privilege argument<sub>1</sub> over argument<sub>2</sub>. In other words, assuming that the "making of argument" is the most paradigmatic case of arguing, we generally expect (and do so rightly) invention to be completed or finished (with the help of dialectics or *topoi*) *before* we start "having of argument," namely *prior to* our engagement in argumentative interaction with others. Given this, the paper works as a fresh reminder to many of us: For arguers, invention is not (just) a "prep" or "homework," i.e., the necessary precondition for persuading audience by making argument; it is also what that takes place at the very moment of having argument with their interlocutors, whether (a)live, dead, real, potential, or imaginary.

Second, drawing on the work of such scholars as Derrida and Caputo, Professor Souders introduces us to the notion of *khôra*, a place of non-place where rhetorical invention takes place "as [our] language fails to operate in the way we want." He tells us that our everyday experience is full of eventful surprises and that "[t]hese small inventions—the moment when we bump against the limit of language or ideas—are signals.... of the idea of the 'newness.' Every small surprise, every event of everyday invention wherein something is made new by the *difference* of language is linked back the possibility of a 'new' itself—a possibility that lies within the potential of language as well as within its limit." While students of argument are well-accustomed to, and are rather actively engaged in, the study of a "big surprise" or "accident," e.g., a rhetorical crisis that "does not so much 'invite' discourse as defy it" (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981, p. 273), to the best of my knowledge, not many of us in the field seem to seriously attend to these smaller inventions that Professor Souders highlights, namely, idiomatic surprises and events inherent in our everyday

language use. Again, at least to people like me, the paper offers a fresh perspective on rhetorical invention in this regard. He assures us not to be so super-defensive and –apologetic about what we (fail to) do in the name of invention, namely, our effort/failure to create and say something original, unique and new.

## 2. *KHÔRA*, *TOPOI* AND ARCHIVE

Wishing to more fully appreciate and further extend the deconstructive move Professor Souders made, in the remainder of this commentary, I would like to pursue and share with you some of my own personal concerns and interest regarding how we should go about the notion of rhetorical and argumentative invention in our times.

In the first place, I am interested in hearing more about Professor Souders' take on the concept of *topoi* and, by extension, of what Derrida and Foucault call "archive," in relation of his deconstruction of invention. As he correctly observes, students of rhetoric and argument are "overburdened by the history of studies in invention." And provided that "the concept of topics [has] occupied a central place in theories of rhetoric and invention" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 578), we cannot but (and feel obliged to) talk about *topoi* whenever we discuss invention just as others do in the field. "Whether as a storehouse of clichés and aphorisms, a procedure for uncovering warrants, a method for discovering things to say about a specific topic, or a concept with interpretive value, topics or commonplaces remain interest to rhetorical scholars" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 589).

Speaking more specifically, I think I am posing a couple of related questions here. First has to do with the issue of "parasite/supplement." Is "bastard reasoning" in *khôra* parasitic to the topical system where no surprise is a norm when it comes to rhetorical invention? Or, just as Derrida's (1977) "[d]ifférance,... the most 'event-ridden' utterance" (p. 19) is, is it this very event of language that enables us to genuinely proceed and invent something "new," making the topical system rather supplementary to it? If I am reading the paper correctly, what Professor Souders has proposed therein is not a "radical criticism": It is a "supplement, not a replacement," of what we know about invention. At the same time, I wonder if there is any possibility that his deconstruction of the "spatial metaphor" could replace *topoi* with *khôra* both in the theory and practice of rhetorical argumentation. Namely, does the highlighting on these "small inventions" we encounter and are engaged in everyday have a potential to reconfigure or partially alter our theoretical discourse about *topoi*? If not, what is the status of these small inventions? Are they supposed to remain "merely accidental" hence cause "no damage" to the topical system of invention?

This is precisely where the second set of my questions or concerns kicks in. More often than not, I feel as if my everyday operation were within a certain system; whatever I do and say becomes connected or becomes part of a larger formation of discourses and deeds that allows little, if not no, event-hood of event. To me at least, that system has (almost) become what Derrida and Foucault call "archive." For Foucault, archive is not merely a library but "the system of discursivity that

establishes the possibility of what can be said” (Manoff, 2004, p. 18). Writing of the “topo-nomological” function of archive, Derrida (1995) further states:

As is the case for the Latin *archivum* or *archium*..., the meaning of “archive,” its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or represent the law. On account to their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house... that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians.... They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law; they call the law and call on or impose the law. (p. 2; also see Lane, 2003)

This is particularly true when it comes to our engagement in rhetoric and argumentation through electric media. In the age of the Internet and digital media, most of what we say are first saved, then cached and finally archived. “The constant and ever-present archivization of one’s self places extraordinary value in the past or what has happened or will happen and then be done with, so it must be remembered and then re-remembered and re-archived... [A] blog can be deleted but someone could have a file or screen shot of the blog, or have printed it off, etc.” (Sloan, 2012). Derrida (1995) thus writes about our modern-day archive against the backdrop of the technological advancement and the “geo-techno-logic shocks” it has caused (p.16). He notes that this “archival earthquake” has drastically transformed the nature of communication and of production of knowledge “in its very event,” for

the archive... is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past... [T]he technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (pp. 16-17)

I am concerned that this sort of archive, our modern-day topical system, is ever expanding and as inclusive as ever. And I wonder if Professor Souders’ deconstruction of invention and the idea of *khôra* can help alleviate my concern, empowering me to resist the ever increasing “archontic power [that] gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification” (Derrida, 1995, p. 3) of all that occur in the sphere of linguistic communication.

### 3. INVENTION AS *MIMESIS*

And, yet, there is one more thing. There were times in our history when rhetorical and argumentative invention had little to do with the discursive production of something new, unique and original. From an ancient Greek city-state of Athens through the Middle-Ages and the Renaissance (c.f., Clark, 1956; Gilbert, 1936), rhetorical education valued what is called *mimesis* and orators were trained in the art of imitation. In the words of Henry Peacham, the pseudonym used by two

English Renaissance writers, *mimesis* “is an imitation of speech whereby the Orator counterfaitech not onely what one said, but also his vtterance, pronunciation and gesture, imitating euery thing as it was, which is alwaies well performed, and naturally represented in an apt and skilful actor” (quoted in Plett, 2005, p. 271).

More specifically, students of rhetoric know that *mimesis* is integral to, and plays an indispensable role in, rhetorical invention at least in two senses. First it helps rhetors craft and produce good discourse. In the words of Leff (1997), imitation “is not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It is a complex process that allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production” (p.201). Second, and perhaps more important, invention is not just about the crafting of good discourse; it is rather or also the nurturing and cultivation of human character, i.e., the invention of Cicero’s and Quintilian’s “good wo/man who speaks well.” Indeed, such idea of rhetoric and pedagogical ideal, or what ancient Greeks called *paideia*, have very little to do with the narrow conception of invention, i.e., discovering or producing something new, unique and original. “The general Greek idea, that education is the process by which the whole man is shaped, is enunciated independently of Plato, and variously expounded in such imagery as ‘model’ or ‘pattern,’... ‘stamp,’... ‘imitate’” (Jaeger, 1944, p. 64).

As the most successful teacher of rhetoric in classical Athens, Isocrates is arguably the most significant champion of *paideia*. Isocrates was deeply skeptical of dialogue and dialectics, the method of teaching that Plato, his archrival, professed. For him, such “gymnastic of mind” can hardly be entitled “philosophy”; it is at best a “preparation for philosophy” (p. 333), where he reserved the term “philosophy” for what he himself practiced, i.e., the teaching of rhetorical eloquence. He spoke thus:

I consider that the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not exist... But I do hold that people can become better and worthier if they conceive an ambition to speak well, if they become possessed of the desire to be able to persuade their hearers.... [T]he power to speak well and think right will reward the man who approaches the art of discourse with love of wisdom and love of honour. Furthermore, mark you, the man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honourable name among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good rapture than when spoken by men who live under a cloud... Therefore, the stronger a man’s desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honourable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens. (pp. 337-339)

More importantly, neither through dialectics nor written manuals, his only method of teaching and of invention was through imitation. Unlike Aristotle and others, he left no theoretical treatises on rhetoric. What he left is only the text of his own speeches. Isocrates “clings to the principle of *imitation* established by his predecessors... for all his great speeches were meant to be ‘models’ in which his pupils could study the precepts of his art” (Jaeger, 1944, p. 65, italics in original).

It is clear by now that the idea of invention as new, unique, and original, i.e., what we can call “invention-as-innovation,” is relatively new; it is hardly the one and

only meaning assigned to that term. Drawing of the work of René Girard, our own Isocrates and a modern-day champion of imitation, Vandenberg (2011) states that the birth of the Romantic Movement and the rise of science and technology are two key factors that contributed to the emergence of invention-as-innovation and the decline of invention-as-imitation. Muckelbauer (2003) also writes that imitation, once the most celebrated and popular approach to rhetorical invention and teaching, was a victim of “the institutional emergence of romantic subjectivity, an ethos that emphasized creativity, originality, and genius” (p. 62).

And it is at this point that I would like to go back to Professor Souders paper. While I agree that “we remain overburdened by the history of studies in invention and more particularly in the history of ideas themselves,” I also find some of these (past) studies and discourses about invention refreshing and quite liberating. In other words, the concept of invention has a “usable tradition”; the argument from its history deconstructs itself (c.f., Cox, 1990). As Professor Souders has Derrida say, the “[p]roblem of rhetoric—particular of the possibility of naming—is... no mere side issues.” And *mimesis* is the name that gives us another reason that we do not have to be so apologetic or defensive about what we do as/about invention. Perhaps, students of rhetoric should acknowledge, as McGee and Lyne (1987) suggest, that the way they argue about rhetoric and the term they use to name it will “in part determine what will be counted as an increment of the ‘knowledge’ they are supposed to produce and preserve” (p. 382). Or, perhaps we students of rhetoric rather owe our big apology to invention itself, not because we fail to discover something new or create something original but because we have not paid serious attention to its history?

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious by now that, in this commentary, what I attempted is nothing original or unique. I have to say that there is little, if not no, original or unique about what I have said. In the first place, I did not “originate” this discourse; I was merely responding and reacting to what Professor Souders wrote. Second, what I have given to you here is based upon and largely informed by what others have already said and written about invention.

Do I have to be apologetic? I hope not.

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