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Review Essay

PLAYING IN TRAFFIC:
CULTURAL STUDIES AND
COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY


We think that this is a propitious time to review the place of cultural studies in writing pedagogy because cultural studies is an increasingly influential element in composition studies at a time when the new abolitionist movement questions the viability of composition itself. The four books we discuss here represent a range of issues in cultural studies and writing: pedagogical, institutional, theoretical, and practical. At one extreme, Diane Penrod’s Miss Grundy Doesn’t Teach

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Here Anymore collects fourteen essays by writing teachers discussing how they use popular culture materials to encourage students to critique and resist the dominant culture around them. As Penrod explains in her introduction, she sought work by junior faculty members—new assistant professors, graduate teaching assistants, adjuncts, and lecturers—with the stated expectation that they would be more open to radical practice and less prejudiced against popular culture. These essays offer useful insights and examples for a pedagogy based on popular culture, but in their enthusiasm for this pedagogical practice, the essays risk falling into the pattern Judith Williamson describes as the “banality” of much cultural studies: “left-wing academics . . . picking out strands of ‘subversion’ in every piece of pop culture from Street Style to Soap Opera” (14-15). By contrast Linda Brodkey’s Writing in Designated Areas Only details the administrative and institutional hostility to such pedagogical practices. Her professional auto-ethnography articulates the political issues surrounding the classrooms described in Penrod’s book and recounts the difficulties and possibilities of such a pedagogy within the essentially conservative, modernist institution of the university. Amitava Kumar’s Class Issues collects essays by a number of prominent critics who theorize “the strategies and goals of a progressive academic project” in an attempt to understand the classroom as a place to open discussion of the class conflicts in our culture and to make teaching a practice of social change (3). Finally, the new third edition of Diana George and John Trimbur’s textbook Reading Culture represents what seems the best tradition of cultural studies readers within writing pedagogy.

The notion of a writing pedagogy based on cultural studies is neither an altogether new conjunction of interests, nor a natural or straightforward one. Contemporary cultural studies grew out of the early work of British Marxists such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall who explored the implications of Williams’ battle cry that “culture is ordinary.” This led to studies of popular culture, of working class literacy and style, of education and media studies as ways of exploring how social actors experience the culture which they both live in and shape through their actions. It is, as Meaghan Morris writes, “a humane and optimistic discourse, trying to derive its values from materials and conditions already available to people” (25). Cultural studies examines the ways people construct identity and negotiate their social relationships through the social practices in which they participate. Citing Mica Nava and Stuart Hall, Morris nicely articulates the enabling theses of cultural studies this way:

Consumers are not “cultural dopes” [as Frankfurt school critical theory argued] but active, critical users of mass culture; consumption practices cannot be derived from or reduced to a mirror of production; consumer practice is “far more than just
economic activity: it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity. Like Sexuality, it consists of a multiplicity of fragmented and contradictory discourses.” (21-22)

These theses counter Marx’s credo in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that people make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing. Rather than being cultural dopes or happy robots subject to historical ideologies which operate “behind their backs,” people are social agents with a degree of understanding of how social practices work and how they promote particular interests. The consumption practices of social actors, and we would add social practices in general, are not passively determined by economic structures, but are themselves part of the contestatory production of culture. As theorists like Michel de Certeau argue, social agents use cultural products to their own ends as they produce their lives. This understanding of social practices makes it possible to see consumption as a second stage in producing culture in what can, though it need not be, a fragmented but also an oppositional cultural space. Finally, to see consumption practices, or any engagement with public culture for that matter, as merely economic activity excludes the way affect and desire are played out in popular culture and in our daily practices. As Lawrence Grossberg argues in his analysis of American rock and roll, identity is constructed through affective interpellation. Once we recognize that affect motivates ideological identification, this “opens up the possibility of investigating, not only the different sites of investment (anchoring) and identification, but also the different modes of such investments” in popular culture forms and practices (Grossberg 84).

This theoretical and empirical work in cultural studies entered composition pedagogy through its affiliations with the liberatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the work in critical pedagogy by scholars such as Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Peter McLaren, and bell hooks. Both movements share an interest in emancipatory social practice, in understanding schooling as part of an ideological apparatus, and in developing pedagogies that value students’ culture and recognize their social identity and integrity. This is not, however, an unproblematic project. As hooks explains, “The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. Many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding. They do not usually come away from my class talking about how much they enjoyed the experience” (78). As a theoretical and pedagogical practice, a cultural studies writing pedagogy disrupts both the traditional subject and object of composition; students become social agents engaged in divergent, sometimes oppositional social practices, and classrooms, as in the *Miss Grundy* collection, take up the materials of popular culture through which these social agents construct their lives. As Geoffrey Sirc points out in
his meditation on the history and politics of punk rock and of composition, compositionists have often become “victims of our own drive to coherence, in bondage to our own fantasy of absolutes” (24). He warns that “that dangerous impulse—to become our worst nightmare, to forget to remember the politics of boredom—is always present in CCCC” (25). A cultural studies writing classroom might question not only the dominant ideologies of our culture, but also resist the easy reproduction of a composition pedagogy marked by disciplinary coherence and the all-too-frequent student boredom it can engender.

Taken together, the four books we review set out the central concerns and the persistent difficulties facing a writing pedagogy derived from contemporary work in cultural studies, or perhaps we should say they argue for a redefinition of writing pedagogy as a cultural practice. These four books do not define a cultural studies writing pedagogy, but they do mark out the shape of the terrain. Together they allow us to explore an essential question about this pedagogy: how can we construct a teaching practice that advances the theoretical goals of cultural studies while remaining practical within university classrooms? This question necessitates other inquiries. First, how do we theorize the various resistances in a cultural studies classes—the project of resistance against dominant injustices that teachers would encourage? the tension between the teacher’s radical pedagogy and the students’ expectations and desires? conflicts between the teacher’s politics and that of most universities? Another matter for a cultural studies writing pedagogy concerns what Dale Jacobs, writing in Composition Studies a year ago, calls the all too-easy-slide from emancipation to manipulation within critical pedagogy. In critiquing much recent work in critical pedagogy he quotes Freire from Pedagogy of Hope: “What is ethically required of progressive educators is that, consistent with their democratic dream, they respect the educands, and therefore never manipulate them” (44). Perhaps in discussing the four books under consideration here, we can imagine a topography that will escape manipulation and negotiate a route between banality and boredom.

Teaching in the Safety Zone

If these concerns lead us into dangerous territory, the initial question about a pedagogy that advances the theoretical goals of cultural studies seems less likely to be marked with such sites as Bunyan’s Slough of Despond. The contributors to Miss Grundy, for example, are nothing if not sanguine about the prospects for discovering a quick and direct route to resistance against hegemony, a kind of pedagogical Northwest passage. In the preface to the collection Penrod notes three purposes for “a writing pedagogy rooted in cultural criticism”:

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First, the topics covered in cultural studies show students in very real terms that their knowledge of themselves and of their worlds is socially-constructed . . . Second, the college writing classroom becomes the site where students engage in questioning the language of institutional rhetoric and the power and conflict inherent in institutional discourses. Third, writing emerges as the activity where students practice the kinds of interrogation and investigation that encourage a democratic cultural literacy shared by multiple constituents rather than an exclusionary cultural literacy legitimated by “authorities.” (viii)

*Miss Grundy* is based on the idea, sometimes stated and sometimes implied, that focusing a composition class on an examination of popular culture enables the process of cultural criticism by presenting students with materials with which they are already familiar. Moreover, several of the contributors exhibit a clear concern with conveying to their students Giroux’s insights about the ways in which a technologically-based mass culture driven by capitalism creates postmodern reality. A few examples will serve to illustrate this theme. Lynn Burley, who is clearly interested in helping students become sensitive to the manipulations of the mass media, describes using advertisements in her first-year composition class—most notably, magazine layouts for women’s lingerie—to encourage students to identify the content and the effect of cultural codes. Rich Lane asks students to think about competing versions of “teen ideology” expressed in music videos (109). Sanford Tweedie prompts students to conduct ethnographically-inspired studies of their own viewing habits to help him decide whether he should allow television in his home. His goal? To “denaturalize” the act of willingly and regularly becoming a spectator of mass-produced entertainment (36). Other writers, although also interested in the way popular culture constitutes reality, take an even more complex approach to their courses, often drawing on de Certeau’s vision of the tactics individuals deploy as they create temporary and shifting spaces for themselves within and between the regulating forces that constitute social life. W.F. Garrett-Petts and Jeffrey Maxson discuss the way their students appropriate technology for their own uses, finding a way to convey meaning with images and in formats that aren’t considered conventional academic genres. All this is very interesting and may even work to construct the happy scenario Penrod describes:

From teaching this [graduate composition] course, I learned that timely cultural objects establish frames of reference and expand student understanding. These items expose students to how groups, individuals and ideas are categorized by society. Because of students’ everyday connections to popular items, they have a knowledge base from which to work. As the class begins to
question the contexts in which the artifact appears, instructors begin to notice students questioning the status quo, challenging official knowledge, and expanding inquiry into writing assignments beyond normative views. (8)

The pedagogical narratives Penrod and company offer describe a classroom in which students recognize, critique, and resist dominant culture as they realize the contestatory potential of popular culture forms. This pedagogical narrative repeats the “banal” celebration of popular culture as the site of resistance which dominated cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s. As Mike Hill points out in “Cultural Studies by Default,” his contribution to Class Issues, by 1993 cultural critics had written over 10,000 articles on Madonna, the Material Girl, all part of what he calls “the current brand of cultural populism being served up as decoded resistance in the CS [Cultural Studies] section of a Barnes and Noble superstore near you” (153). This celebratory invocation of the vox populus spawned a whole generation of articles that Meaghan Morris parodically describes as following the formula: “there are ‘the dominant classes’ (exerting hegemonic force) and ‘the people’ (making their own meanings and constructing their own culture ‘within, and sometimes against’ the culture provided for them)” (22). Morris’ point is not that this analytic trope is theoretically inaccurate or politically suspect or that the cultural studies project is bankrupt, but that the ubiquity of the trope tends to reduce the complexity of cultural activity and limit our understanding of cultural interaction. She suggests that we begin to address this inadequacy by theorizing not only the social “place” of everyday people, but also of our own disciplinary discourse that constructs and deploys the popular as a site of resistance.

Morris’ call for a disciplinary self-analysis articulates a basic assumption of cultural studies, one that must become operational for compositionists. In her contribution to Miss Grundy, Kristi Yager offers one strategy for self-critique when she suggests that composition researchers often organize their classroom narratives around tropes that reproduce the divorce in traditional ethnography between “objective” observations and “subjective” experiences. As a result, “teacher-researchers tend to make themselves the focus of an ostensible study of ‘others’ by using a narrative design that contradicts the underlying philosophy of their research methodology” (44). This tendency shows up clearly, Yager says, when teachers appear in their own research accounts as “heroes.” And if this is true for researchers attempting to build knowledge, it is also true for teachers reporting on the efforts to enact theory. The result of (and the evidence for) this tendency shows up in the narrative pattern that essay after essay follows in the Penrod collection, a trope that, admittedly, seems nearly inevitable given the conventions of anecdotal writing about pedagogical practice. Those
conventions are, after all, not much different from the ones Gene Wilder encounters when, in playing the title role in the film *Young Frankenstein*, he descends to his notorious grandfather’s study and discovers a cobwebbed journal titled “How I Did It.”

In the hero trope that characterizes the anthology, empowered students leave class cognizant of the ways culture in general and language in particular shape perceptions of reality. When student reactions to the proceedings are reported, they’re often lumped in summaries that reflect an oddly anonymous and uniform set of experiences. Students’ reactions tend to be abstracted and generalized. Students may be pictured as briefly resistant to the teacher’s guidance, but they almost always end up cheerfully cooperative. Many articles in the Penrod collection do include at least paraphrased comments from individual students, but the over-riding representation of student response is reserved for the writer/teacher. The hero trope is a natural and effective narrative strategy, but, as Morris points in the case of cultural studies, its ubiquity reduces the range and complexity of the cultural interactions and students’ responses in the classroom.

One way to refine this popular narrative is to theorize the subjectivity and cultural place of the students who come to our classes. As Suzanne Clark points out, students’ resistance to the radical pedagogy of cultural studies comes from complex social and economic positionings. She also notes that “[s]tudent resistance is not purely personal; it is also political. To the extent that the school functions as Althusser saw it, as an ideological state apparatus, teaching can be viewed as a powerful activity generating not only psychological resistances but resistances connected to the social and political ‘unconscious’ as well” (132).

Clark states the problem clearly. Unfortunately, an equally straightforward solution to the problems of authority and manipulation, of power and conflicting desires is not possible; the complexity and contradictions in our culture preclude one. The best we can do here is to echo Giroux when he suggests that a cultural studies pedagogy must make both teachers and students responsible for theorizing and contextualizing their positions. This means that teachers must come clean about their aims and explore with their students the social and institutional conditions within which they all work in order to ensure the authority and structure of the classroom “rendered visible as an ethical, political, and social construct” (Giroux 163). This task is important, but there is a danger that it can seem at once too easy and too difficult. Too easy in that it might tempt some of us to assume that one Giroux-style first-day confessional session might be enough to excavate the genealogy of authority in the classroom. Too difficult in that it seems to require that structures of authority that are constituted outside the classroom somehow be neutralized within the classroom.
Teaching in the Panopticon

As the author-base of Miss Grundy indicates, integrating cultural studies and composition in the college classroom is often undertaken covertly by graduate students and junior professors. Covertly, in the sense that they are purposely teaching in the blindspots of their department or university, knowing that more conservative faculty might accuse them of “bringing politics into the classroom.” Covertly, also because there is still a nervous and playful (yet earnest) sense of experimentation in culturally aware composition pedagogy.

Linda Brodkey’s Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only speaks to one experience of bringing cultural studies composition out of the blind spots and into light as the basis for the institutionally mandated composition course at the University of Texas at Austin, and the conservative backlash that resulted in the cancellation of the course plan. The book is a “meta-auto-ethnography”—a collection and meditation upon some of Brodkey’s auto-ethnographic articles, conference papers, and lectures, as well as student papers from a graduate seminar she regularly teaches in ethnographies of literacy. The first section of the book collects seven previously published papers which span ten years of Brodkey’s philosophical development. All deal with themes of writing and literacy, but as Brodkey explains, there is a chronological change in her critical approach. In her earlier work she favored a structural and linguistic analysis which was later supplanted by a social and post-structuralist critique. The papers and lectures in the second section were mostly written after the contentious cancellation of the “Writing About Difference” course at UT-Austin. As public presentations, these pieces on cultural studies, difference, and writing pedagogy can be seen as speaking back to that series of events and forward to the future of left pedagogy and institutions. The final section of Brodkey’s book focuses on teaching, with two papers on the writing about difference course and several ethnographies of literacy by graduate students. These auto-ethnographies, in the self-reflexive tradition of postmodern ethnographies, required students to “cast their personal experience in a cultural frame” (210). And as extensions of Brodkey’s own methodology and cultural critique, these papers are entertaining and illuminating examples of personal deconstructions of institutional models of literacy. The underlying narrative that emerges through the book is the history of a scholarly career that has long been in tension with the institutional strictures/structures of academia. The book explores that tension with sections revisiting publications, lectures, and teaching as both institutionally situated texts and sites for resistance. As such, Brodkey’s book explores the institutional context in which the Miss Grundy authors work.
The story of disciplinarity and institutional constraint that Brodkey tells is a sobering contrast to the optimistic view of resistance found in *Miss Grundy*. Brodkey's institutional history balances *Miss Grundy* and some of the cultural studies projects that Meaghan Morris criticizes as always reading brave resistance in the most hegemonic conditions (Pangloss meets Horkheimer and Adorno—the best thing always happens in the worst of all possible worlds). It brings us back to the question of how to negotiate the conflict between teachers' radical politics and the university as a conservative institution. For those who are interested in institutionally practical cultural studies pedagogies, Brodkey's book reads like both a cautionary tale and an intelligence report: "This is where I come from. This is what I tried to do. This is why and how I did it. This is how the institution reacted." And in that sense, this account of her experiences institutionalizing resistant thinking is valuable reading for those who want to do similar things.

Apart from the historical narrative inherent in the text, Brodkey also critiques institutional and dominant ideologies and practices through the lens of literacy. She probes common meanings of literacy and the dangerous cultural work done by those definitions: who are the haves and have-nots, who can be taught, why some don't want to learn, why some fail, why illiterates are dangerous to society. By reexamining what we can mean by literacy (i.e., literacies of difference, dominant and resistant literacies, multiple literacies), she attempts to de-fetishize the "illiterate" and shine light on the hegemonic structures inherent in the way we teach reading and writing. Brodkey takes ownership of the "failure" that is too easily attributed to students who don't measure up to "standards":

That far too many who *could* do not learn to read and write suggests that they fail to see anything of value in most definitions of literacy. And when I think about some of the reasons given for teaching reading and writing, I too begin to wonder what is in it for most people. The sad fact is that in too many quarters literacy is defined as reading, and reading as a matter of learning to comprehend and then follow instructions. Need I say that writing enters into this definition of literacy only as a measure of a reader's comprehension of instructions. (4)

For Brodkey, this understanding of literacy as "following orders" does not constitute an attractive offer for many of our students. She calls for a reexamination of the way we teach, such that literacy can be equated with democracy and political equity instead of adherence to and regurgitation of dominant ideas. Her critique of traditional literacy extends Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's concept of "symbolic violence" in which a pedagogy presents an ideological formation such as "literacy" without
revealing its partiality. Such symbolic violence usually favors dominant cultural interests and excludes others as unimaginable. As Brodkey points out, traditional notions of literacy also have the effect of excluding many of our students: “Education is not likely to make literacy an offer even worth considering unless we begin to think more about how to represent writing and reading as discursive [i.e., social and political] practices and less about them as a set of skills or abilities or competencies that ‘we’ have and ‘they’ want, to be taught by ‘us’ and learned by ‘them’” (5).

In short, we need to uncloak for ourselves and with our students the ways in which classroom practices serve specific political positions and how these ways of understanding the world have been naturalized to appear apolitical and right. Brodkey suggests that students need to be conversant with multiple discourses (dialects, literacies) and subjectivities. These students need to be comfortable writing and speaking back to the instructions and (con)texts that are presented to them as right and natural just as they should be comfortable writing back to those presented as bad or controversial.

In the essay from which the title of the book is taken, Brodkey humorously and with stinging accuracy describes the composition classroom where all assignments are variations of “What I Did on My Summer Vacation,” and where students identify and reinforce their (social) class positions and/or aspirations. Anticipating Sirc’s comments on the pedagogy of boredom, she writes, “While it seems to take longer in some cases than in others, composition instruction appears to have succeeded best at establishing in most people a lifelong aversion to writing” (135). Brodkey’s greatest imperative in this text is to move classrooms beyond being punctuation police states where students are measured against middle class exemplars.

But this teaching is a struggle on all fronts, since everyone involved is implicated in the institution. After reading a section of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed that discussed the indoctrination accomplished through the banking model of education, one of Greg’s students remarked “It’s awful that things like that go on in Russia, but I’m glad I live in a free country where that would never happen.” This provided a wonderfully teachable moment, but for every articulated comment Greg knew there were thousands of unquestioned ideological tangles below the surface. The three of us writing here teach at a land grant university in a state consistently near the bottom of per capita income levels, where students desperately want to buy into the American dream and claw their way into the middle class. Our students are even squeamish about writing back to authors in the margins of the texts because it means they get less money when they sell their books back at the end of the semester. The students who arguably need critical literacy the most are more often interested in conformity. We teach in an American University—a bastion of middle class culture and values—which is highly

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concerned at the moment with outcome numbers that justify funding for our salaries and photocopies, and occasionally for travel. We teach something our students resist and our university, as Brodkey explains, is uncomfortable with.

**Teaching in Traffic**

The first maps of the New World depicted the known territories surrounded by a dangerous, uncharted “No Man’s Land.” In this spirit, we’ll call the terrain which stretches between the classroom narratives in *Miss Grundy* and Brodkey’s intelligence report “Teaching in Traffic.” We borrow this metaphor from Mike Hill’s essay in Amitava Kumar’s *Class Issues*, where “teaching in traffic” works as a synecdoche for the twenty-one essays in the book and for a cultural studies pedagogy in general. The urban classroom in which Hill and his students talk amid the sounds of traffic—horns, sirens, auto alarms, jackhammers—constitutes “the material conditions for, as it were, producing materialist work” (115). Hill’s point in this lucid and astute essay is that in order to understand what cultural studies has become in American universities, we must read it against the material and political conditions of that university system. Hill defines cultural studies as “a way of seeking [what Ross Chambers calls] the ‘ occulted context[s]’ within which otherwise mystifying processes (the determination of cultural value, the formation of human relationships) operate” (148). But this definition also describes his attempt (and those of other contributors to *Class Issues*) to explain the mystifying process through which cultural studies has become both an occulted culture of esoteric theory produced by tenured theorists, and an engaged classroom practice carried out, largely but not exclusively, by a poorly compensated academic underclass. In the current context of shrinking academic employment and increasing reliance on non-tenured faculty, Hill and other contributors want to rethink the practice of cultural studies. “And how,” he asks, “does the strained combination of producing would-be theory czars and an academic underclass relate to the hailing of teaching and political activism as the primary features that distinguish real CS [cultural studies] from theory’s ambivalent infatuation with contemporary popular culture?” (150).

Many of the essays collected in *Class Issues* explore the history of cultural studies or examine the institutional politics within which it occurs and attempt to theorize cultural studies as a social and professional practice. In doing so, they step back into the disciplinary self-consciousness that Morris and other critics call for, and they offer readers valuable reflections of how, why, and to what effect we do our pedagogical work. Many of these essays discuss the economic situation of teachers and students and the instrumental ideology of universities increasingly affiliated with corporate sponsors and
their goals. Jeffrey Williams, for example, describes the way universities have renegotiated the pedagogical contract in response to political and corporate influence so that “the state and present redrawing of the public franchise stipulate our material, pedagogical contract, bluntly effecting a speedup, that fewer of us process more students, and that we overtly play an instrumental role in the manufacture and distribution of human resources” (300-01). At its sharpest, this critique produces Carol Stabile’s forceful argument for “[a] fairly simple, albeit controversial, premise: capitalist education is organized and has a purpose, which is held in place by a number of other institutions and their ideologies. . . . The ongoing privatization of public institutions and its logic of obedience to the dictates of the market, however, signal an intensification of already existing features of U.S. education” (209).

Both essays echo Richard Ohmann’s classic argument from English in America that the university serves the most powerful political and economic interests in society, that there is, finally, no effective separation between the university and the business world. Neither Williams or Stabile take this as a fatal situation, but they do argue that a radical pedagogy’s possibility for cultural agency must be contextualized and that we must “think critically about these limits” (Stabile 211).

Other essays in the collection seem to enact the disjunction Hill describes within cultural studies. Rachel Buff and Jason Loviglio narrate two turbulent classroom scenes in which they and their students grapple with difficult issues of race, gender, and political speech. The authors engage each other in a dialogue about their teaching and articulate possibilities for opening up classrooms rather than declaring victory. At the opposite extreme, Neil Larsen’s argument that the insufficiencies of contemporary students leave “Theory at the Vanishing Point,” will anger many compositionists; his essay seems to enact the frustration of the “theory czar” faced with students from our collective popular culture. He reviews the history of cultural studies and recognizes the way it has sometimes fetishized theory. He concludes that “we had better stop poring over Adorno and Lacan, accept our own pop-cultural pleasures and identities as central to our intellectual practice, and get our theoretical hands dirty” (83). Theory must both guide and grow out of our pedagogy. So far so good. Yet when Larsen turns to what he sees as the potential crisis in “the existing social order” brought on by the intellectual poverty of our culture, his language will give many writing teachers pause: “We teach, increasingly, in an intellectual environment in which there is often no apparent way of mediating our own ‘theoretical’ culture with the ‘dumbed-down,’ instrumentalized, consumerist culture of students except on the level of the most rudimentary learning—how to read, write, and think” (85). If Larsen’s description of the distance between the “theorized” culture of the
academic and the “dumbed-down,” consumerist culture of students seems harsh, his critique of popular culture is not unprecedented in cultural studies. Cultural studies has always valued working class culture, but it never dictated that critics ignore that culture’s failings. To this end, in Class Issues Mike Hill quotes Raymond Williams’ anguished remarks: “When you recognize in yourself the ties that still bind, you cannot be satisfied with the old formula: Enlightened minority, degraded mass. You know how bad most ‘popular culture’ is, but you also know that the irruption of the ‘swinish multitude’ ... is the coming relative power of your own people” (152).

Yet as teachers of rhetoric and writing, from graduate seminars to first year composition, at a land grant university populated mostly by working class students who are the first in their families to attend college, we can’t but balk at the seeming disregard for “the most rudimentary learning—how to read, write, and think.” Such a notion of cultural studies has moved a great distance from the idea of literacy and cultural work in which early cultural studies emerged and from the current work of compositionists, many of whom are the academic underclass to which Hill refers. In this incarnation, cultural studies becomes irrelevant to most of us who teach in American universities. If we need to recognize the material conditions within which we work, we also need to recognize the material conditions that bring our students to our classrooms—the students who want to claw their way into the American dream and are afraid to mark their books—and we need to change our pedagogy accordingly.

The remainder of the essays in this collection alternate between presenting theoretically refined arguments about the progress of cultural theory and describing how teachers struggle to demystify history, class, race, and gender. Thus Alan Wald engagingly describes his teaching career as a struggle to construct courses in which students can confront the social history of class in America, and Gayatri Spivak describes a course in transnational feminism. By contrast, Judith Halberstam traces the intricate developments of queer theory and its uneven relation to feminism. These essays are not directly connected with the pedagogical work of cultural studies compositionists, but they do offer useful materials and quick surveys of current debates and strains in cultural studies.

Rusty’s in the Club

In many ways the most practical of the books we are reviewing is John Trimbur and Diana George’s new edition of Reading Culture, a reader with an unobtrusive but powerful rhetorical apparatus. The authors’ prefatory comments reflect the basic cultural studies positions articulated in the other books we have discussed: “Reading Culture assumes that students are already immersed in a wealth of cultural data and that their experiences of
everyday life can usefully be brought to attention as material for reflection and deliberation" (xxv). This commitment to everyday culture and its importance, and this belief that students can articulate their place within it, guides the selection and organization of the readings that discuss such standard cultural studies issues as style, images, public space, storytelling, work, schooling, generations, history, and multiculturalism in America. If the other books we have reviewed here provide a theoretical and institutional compass and topographical map, Trimbur and George offer abundant and interesting materials that allow teachers to chart their own courses.

With the encouragement of Trimbur and George’s work before us, we close with two anecdotes that capture our sense of the current situation for cultural studies writing pedagogy, one taken from Meaghan Morris, the other an old Gary Larsen “Far Side” cartoon. Morris relies heavily on de Certeau’s Practice of Everyday Life to understand the ways ordinary people use the mass media as part of their mundane activities. She argues that the basic strategy of de Certeau’s project is an incessant movement between a polemological and a utopian space, a dichotomy similar to the contrast between Brodkey’s institutional report and Penrod’s celebratory narratives. For Morris, the polemological is summed up in de Certeau’s reference to the popular sentiment: “They always fuck us over” (qtd. in Morris 27). But this fatalism is usually accompanied by the popular belief that miracles do happen. We’d like to replace this polemological/utopian pair with an equally double-edged image from Larsen’s Far Side. In the cartoon, a mongrel dog zips adroitly between speeding cars across a four-lane road. The mongrel hops triumphantly onto the sidewalk with a wagging grin and joins a group of dogs who have been watching his adventure. As he does so, they shout, “Hey, Rusty’s in the club.” This cartoon captures the way many of us feel darting through the cross traffic of institutional and students’ expectations, and the exuberance and sometimes naïve enthusiasm of left pedagogy. Some get flattened. Some get swept away. But for those who reach the other side of the street, upon reflection, it seems the only way to teach.

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