
Reviewed by Mary Ann Cain, Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne

I wanted to read Amy Lee’s book less because of the “critical pedagogies” in the title and more because of the subtitle, “Teaching Writing as Revision.” My desire may imply a bias that I hope to touch upon later in this review. But for now, I’ll start by saying that the terms critical and expressive have come to represent a binary opposition that, for a long time, I have found disturbing, mainly because the terms are often assumed to be neutral, not the product of an interested perspective, a particular “gaze.” Few who are labeled expressivist would claim that title for themselves these days, especially given the criticisms now attached to it. Nonetheless, I refer to these terms in this review not because I regard them as unproblematic, but because Amy Lee’s book, while defining the differences along some of the now-familiar binaries, also raises questions with the agonistic relations into which they are generally cast. In her book, such oppositions provide useful guideposts rather than strictly polarized positions. Her discussions about writing pedagogy ultimately point beyond these differences even while insisting upon clear distinctions in how each “reads” the classroom.

To engage both the discourses and the classroom practices that these discourses inform and that inform them is a much-welcomed, even needed contribution not only to the history, traditions, and literature on critical pedagogy, but also to rethinking theory-practice relations. Lee insists upon reimaging critical pedagogy as “not a linear process of thinking and then doing, but rather a recursive one . . . . also constituted by reflection and action” (9). While such a reimagining is not new within the contexts of the teacher-researcher movement (see Cathy Fleischer, Dixie Goswami, and Ruth Ray), it is valuable insofar as critical pedagogy still casts theory as the hero that, if not saves, then at least empowers, teachers and students.

Lee also argues for reconsidering the role of reading in writing pedagogies, not only in the classroom but in classroom narratives represented in scholarly work: “[T]urning the text of our teaching into something more complicated than the familiar genres of classroom narrative—heroic quest story or confessional narrative—requires not only new forms for representing our work in the classroom but also new ways of
reading” (10). She takes a decidedly feminist stance, eschewing strictly agonistic relations between one school of thought and its practices and another towards greater reciprocity in reading “between and among” pedagogies. Here Lee echoes feminist theorist Luce Irigaray’s call to complicate the binary oppositions of categorical thought by inquiring into what is “among and between” them, thus complicating the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes so much intellectual debate as it attempts to “overpower” pre-existing ideas in favor of new ones:

Rather than continuing to argue for one specific pedagogy over another, we might begin, as this text has attempted to do, to consider the conversations that take place between and among pedagogies. . . . Seemingly, then, there is some common ground where we can work to synthesize these theories in practice as a means of utilizing their respective strengths and trying to be aware of and responsive to their potential limitations for individual students and situations. (273)

However, before continuing to summarize what this book is about, it might be helpful to say what it is not about, since its focus on finding common ground between expressivist and critical pedagogies may imply, for instance, a revisiting of the expressivist-social constructivist debates of the 1990s a la Elbow and Bartholomae. (Elbow is mentioned as an expressivist, mainly because Lee’s classroom narrative is situated at UMass Amherst where, she says, expressivist discourse dominated the freshman writing curriculum; Bartholomae isn’t even cited). In other words, Lee isn’t trying to “bridge a gap” between two (otherwise) antagonistic positions as much as she is trying to enact engagement “between and among” them in her practice. She is clear to distinguish the differences that each theoretical perspective brings to bear upon one’s reading of the classroom, and she finds that expressivist theories come up short: “How texts imagine, impact upon, represent others, and how texts are ‘written’ by readers, is ignored or glossed over in this romanticized vision of writing” (275).

But critical pedagogies have their own limitations, namely that such discourses silence rather than engage the complexities of pedagogy, implying a fixed, rather than fluid and dynamic view of the political ends it strives for. Lee looks for intersections between the two discourses; it is only through such reciprocation that the limits of any perspective can be articulated and then re-visioned. Engagement and synthesis do not, however, add up to what Ann Berthoff has criticized as “recipe-swapping” but instead move between and among theoretical perspectives for the sake of better understanding how pedagogies are enacted and towards what ends.

This book is also not another book about “how to” become a critical teacher. Ira Shor’s 1996 book, When Students Have Power: Negotiating
Authority in a Critical Pedagogy (which borrows partly from teacher-research movement narratives, with a nod towards feminist theories concerning embodiment), tells the semester-long story of a class about Utopia taught in the bowels of a classroom building where even the clock is broken. Shor reveals his “vulnerabilities” through “cross-generic writing and an openly subjective voice” to tell the “vexations of this strange experiment in critical teaching,” yet it is clear that Shor (and perhaps also critical pedagogy) is the hero of the book. Critical pedagogy is portrayed as work that is painful and excruciating, yet exhilarating. Whatever doubts he might have had in the process are presumed to be more than worth the outcome. Lee’s book, in contrast, is aimed at bringing uncertainty and ambiguity into the conversation about critical pedagogy. The confidence projected by practitioners such as Shor stems more from a hegemonic view of theory-practice relations than from the kind of critical reflection and action that Lee promotes as central to her pedagogy, which necessarily entails uncertainty and a kind of restless character of dialectical inquiry.

Nor is this book typical of pedagogical reflections such as Robert P. Yagelski’s CCC article, “The Ambivalence of Reflection,” in which he questions why doubt and uncertainty seem to figure so prominently in critical pedagogy. If Lee’s narrative aims to remove herself as the central “I/eye” of the discussion and instead present her students as, if not equal partners, certainly collaborators in the process of critical inquiry, Yagelski centers upon himself and the question of how to, in Zen terms, “deny” the self who is the teacher. Thus, Lee’s narrative situates her reflections in dialogue with those of her students rather than as outside of or away from the classroom. The “hero” of the book, then, is not Amy Lee as the master(ful) teacher nor the students as empowered subjects, but the processes of coming into awareness and the re- visioning of prior assumptions about the “real.”

Lee’s book has made me retrace the binary oppositions that have shaped prior discussions of critical pedagogy. On one hand there is the confidence, or “theory hope,” as Wendy Bishop has called it, of empowering students through critical pedagogy. On the other hand, there are vigorous calls to ambiguity and uncertainty as generative, an inevitable part of a larger process of learning and exchange between subjects (teachers and students), as per Elizabeth Ellsworth. In her 1997 book, Getting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction, Nancy Welch comes to similar conclusions about uncertainty as a kind of “restlessness” that generates new questions and reformulations of previous ways of constructing reality. Welch draws from feminist philosopher and theorist Michele LeDoeuff as well as feminist psychoanalysis more than the critical pedagogy that Lee is critiquing, and thus would seem to fall well outside the
conversation that Lee has engaged about critical pedagogy. Yet Welch’s and Lee’s projects intersect in important ways; as Welch writes, “[W]e can think dialectically about the oppositions of individual and society: expressivism and social constructionism” (11). Both writers identify revision as a central concept in their work, and both use this process—pedagogy term to stand for not only rewriting texts but reimagining social relations and the choices one faces in a “composing” the “real.” What both exact in their texts is not simply the “what” of this process, or even the “why,” but more importantly how this happens in the context of specific pedagogical moments that are necessarily partial and limited, but potentially generative. Such limits—the uncertainties and gaps in their representations—must be not merely acknowledged (as per Shor) but engaged as meaningful for the questions they raise when read in relation to other pedagogies. Questions become as important as the answers; problemposing, not just problem-solving, becomes a reciprocal activity similar to Freire’s dialectic of action-reflection.

The fact that Lee’s book comes at a much later moment in the history of basic writing instruction is important because, unlike predecessors such as Shaughnessy and Bartholomae, she seems to regard the existence of basic writing as a given. As I noted in a previous Composition Studies article, both Shaughnessy and Bartholomae may have cast theory as the “hero” of basic writing in part to appease campus administrations that otherwise saw no hope in the “rescue” project of basic writing curricula. They constructed their positions as defensive—at least towards outsiders who were skeptical of basic writing’s merits. For Shaughnessy, Cartesian science would save the day, while for Bartholomae, critical theory became basic writing’s hero. Lee’s book actually made me forget for long stretches that the class she describes was, in fact, a basic writing class. Perhaps this is a sign of how basic writing has become less embattled, more accepted, at least at some schools because of these prior “rescues.” But perhaps Lee has simply chosen to recast the rescue project in a different relationship between writing and the university, one in which students enter a “contact zone” (after Mary Louise Pratt) where they contend with the apparent contradictions between self and other, the individual and the social, the private and the public. Have these narratives of heroic intervention somehow made it possible for teachers like Lee to claim a more hopeful, less embattled vision of basic writing and writers? Or is there still some of the heroic tale lingering in her own classroom narrative? Or perhaps the question is how could there not be, given this legacy of heroic intervention as the rationale for basic writing’s very existence?

Lee’s book satisfies a desire for a different kind of teacher narrative, a desire expressed by Knoblauch and Brannon, Yagelski, and myself,
among others, one in which the “failures” are part of the story and that teaching as a subject is portrayed as “less an effort of heroic intervention and more a process of mediation between students and their discursive choices” (Cain 14). She complicates the discourses of both expressive and critical pedagogies, keeping us “restless” (to borrow from Welch) and from forming a fixed concept of critical pedagogy or “successful” teaching. Her story engages what Elizabeth Ellsworth has claimed that critical pedagogy has long denied, namely “the issues of trust, risk, and the operations of fear and desire around such issues as identity and politics in the classroom” (qtd. in Lee 109). For Lee, the implications of various pedagogical moments provide generative materials for her and her students’ reflections. We see how she engages her own doubts and fears about whether and how to use her authority as a teacher, what that authority means in relation to particular students and the complexities of identity that challenge easy answers. She doesn’t claim to know whether she came up with the “right” answer in these situations but rather encourages us to pay attention to how she constructed her choices in the situation and whether, upon reflection, she might, indeed, think of other choices in the future. What she asks of her students is what she asks of herself: to revision the choices and the consequences therein.

Earlier in this review I indicated a bias for the term revision in Lee’s title that drew me to read the book. For a long time, it seemed that such process-oriented terms could be used only under highly regulated conditions, and usually with many caveats about process pedagogies and their expressivist (or worse yet, objectivist) implications. Thus as one who teaches not only composition but also creative writing (much of which is in the form of lower-division general education requirements), it has seemed like a difficult, if not impossible task, to come to terms with such guardedness about what have been in many ways pedagogically useful concepts. Furthermore, compositionists have struck up antagonisms about not only the process terms that creative writing teachers often use, but also formalist terms such as voice that structure so much of the pedagogical discourse of creative writing (although Ira Shor used it without flinching to describe his own narrative.) It wasn’t quite as much trouble to exchange these terms for others in composition courses (even though students still wrote drafts and worked on revisions), but in creative writing I couldn’t see any way around them. Instead, I tried to work through them, trying to piece together some kind of context that would allow them, in another sense, to help illuminate all the intricate choices implied in such actions. Amy Lee’s book, then, makes it easier for me to reflect upon how I teach both creative writing and composition because revision—of texts, of social relationships, of identities, choices, and their consequences—is a hinge between the two.
worlds that have been often been pitted against each other, as binary opposites, or in some cases as “merely” expressivist soulmates.

My lingering questions about this book have to do with the choices Lee has made in how she represents herself as the one teacher in a classroom of many students. As Robert Yagelski, Ira Shor, and other compositionists, as well as feminist teachers such as Elizabeth Ellsworth have noted, uncertainty and ambiguity can be personally exhausting, not only for the doubts they raise, but for the personal and professional risks they sometimes require. For all that compositionists emphasize collective work and collaboration in classrooms, it strikes me as peculiar that our teaching narratives focus on teacher relations with students or other pedagogical texts, but rarely with colleagues in their own departments or universities. In this regard, Lee’s book, like other teacher narratives, still implies a kind of teacher-hero, the singular “one” among the many “others.” The emphasis, like many critical pedagogy texts, is on work, struggle, and difficulty more than (the presumably “romantic”) play, harmony, and ease, despite occasional references to enjoying and joking with her students. (Her narrative does, however, contain a brief reference to a group of teachers at SUNY-Albany who struggled to work with and through their differences to generate conversations that supported each other’s teaching.)

I mention this “silence” in Lee’s and other such texts to call attention to the limits of these stories and to use them as a step towards rethinking the choices we make as teachers. More often than not, we construct our collaborations with students as individual choices we make as teachers rather than choices that are shaped by any number of other considerations, not the least of which are our colleagues. These choices are more complicated than even good texts like Lee’s might suggest. What kinds of choices do graduate assistants and part-time, faculty have when “choosing” to engage the ambiguities and embrace the “failures” as the starting point for reflection, especially if other teachers read those “failures” as shortcomings on the part of the teacher? What kinds of choices do even tenure-track and tenured faculty have when they choose to take such risks, and student evaluations are the main measure by which their “success” as teachers is determined by other faculty members, administrators, students, and the public as “consumers”? Robert Yagelski speaks of the difficulties in reading such evaluations, and part of that difficulty is in how we are read by and how we read others who share our identities as teachers.

I hope this book helps us seek further revisionings where we can begin to reread our own stories in light of our collective identities as teachers. Books such as Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert’s Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age show how it is possible to engage in critical questioning towards a more collective sense of purpose for
the work that writing can and does do in and beyond the classroom. I also am reminded of four artist-teachers whose work with at-risk youth I followed for six months, work I found emotionally exhausting; working collectively made it possible to construct generative questions in the midst of such uncertainty and even despair towards a fluid and dynamic sense of common purpose. Now that we are finally at a point in our professional history where we can risk telling stories of “failure”—or at least uncertainty, ambiguity, and perhaps, at times, exhaustion—we may be poised to “revision” the singular teacher in light of these new stories towards greater understanding our of “individual” choices in light of the collective purposes that Lee so aptly describes among and between herself and her students.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Dale Jacobs, University of Windsor

In early January, I began reading Lynn Bloom’s *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. It was a review that I had agreed to do months earlier, but that had been pushed back by the usual day-to-day concerns—teaching,