Changes

Comment on Dale Jacobs’s review of Lynn Z. Bloom’s Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration

I’m pleased that Dale Jacobs found Composition Studies as a Creative Art valuable as “an important way of making knowledge and understanding ourselves in relation to the world around us, including to our discipline and our institution(s).” I’m glad he acknowledges my explicit “argument throughout the collection that narration is an important form of knowledge,” and that he likes the fact that I “narrate [my] experience and then move on to theorize [it] in productive ways that neither essentialize [that] experience as universal nor downplay it as isolated and particular to [me]” (CS 30.1, 134-35). I’ve found, for the very reasons that Deborah Tannen explicates so cogently in The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue (1988), that it’s a lot more fun to tell true stories, and hear them, to employ humor and satire in one’s cause, than to try to convince readers through fusillades from the heavy artillery, and it’s clear that Professor Jacobs appreciates my preferred mode(s) of discourse.

Thus to reply to his caveats in cold print rather than over warm food (my preferred way of resolving differences) would seem to provoke argument where I sense none is intended. Nevertheless, at the invitation of Editor Vandenberg, I’ll engage in dialogue by addressing Jacobs’s criticisms here. Why didn’t I revise the pieces published in Composition Studies as a Creative Art (1998), asks the reviewer, to bring them up to date? During the thirty whole days the Utah State University Press editor gave me to transform the nineteen separate published articles into a book, I did in fact revise two, finished one work in progress, and wrote the Introduction and Afterword (along with preparing 350 pages of typescript, double checking every quotation, eliminating duplications . . .).

Ten of the unrevised pieces, published between 1995-98, were sufficiently up-to-date when the book went to press. (No author can anticipate the aging effects of a four year lag between publication and review.) In fact, the only two pieces published before 1990 were a poem (1974) and a case history for Mike Rose’s When a Writer Can’t Write (1985)—neither of which could be revised. It did not seem necessary to emend the satires (“I Want a Writing Director,” 1992; “Initiation Rites, Initiation Rights,” 1991) as long as the conditions they addressed hadn’t changed—and alas, they hadn’t. Although my real life is full of resolve to make changes for the better, I didn’t want to revise my autobiographical
pieces; I said what I meant in “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice” (1990) and “Teaching College English as a Woman” (1992). Moreover, to have added scholarly analysis as Jacobs suggests would have meant grafting analytic argument onto a taut narrative body; where would it go?

That leaves “Creative Nonfiction, Is There Any Other Kind?” (1991), which needs revision, although some elements were covered in later pieces, and “Why Don’t We Write What We Teach? And Publish It?” (1990), which I did revise extensively. Nevertheless, Professor Jacobs’ claims that by dismissing trendy critical jargon in that piece I threw out the theory with the bath water. I don’t “dislike . . . theoretical positions,” as he asserts, and I don’t avoid “full engagement with important ideas.” Not so, as he himself recognizes in his commentary about the book in general.

That I do, however, refuse to write or condone trendy critical jargon—is a matter of ethics as well as aesthetics; Benjamin Spock and Strunk and White are my stylistic mentors, and for identical reasons. Research for Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical (1974) taught me to write—as Spock did in Baby and Child Care—as if life itself depended on it. If the writing is not clear, someone could die. It’s that simple, and that profound—as the lessons of September 11, 2001 remind us all over again. It is very possible to be philosophical and theoretical in accessible language, the language of an inclusive democratic stance, rather than adopting exclusive impenetrable jargon, both “unreadable” and “unwriteable,” that “reinforces an elite caste system within our profession” and violates all the principles of good writing that we teach our students (see Susan Peck MacDonald, “The Literary Argument and Its Discursive Conventions,” The Writing Scholar, v. 3, 1990, pp. 58-59). Mary Jane Dickerson (whose clotted language I criticize in that chapter) herself told me, over coffee and dessert, that she had originally written her article “On Writing Autobiography” (for JAC 1989) in the characteristically engaging autobiographical mode that she—and I—both prefer but that Gary Olson, the JAC editor, said he wouldn’t publish it unless she employed a theoretical frame. So she did. I would add, however, that since my critique of that style was published (JAC 1990) I’ve read another 1,500 or so autobiographies, and autobiographers’ commentaries on their work. Even theorists such as Cathy Davidson, Alice Kaplan, Edward Said, Jane Tompkins, Marianna Torgovnick don’t use critical jargon in such writing—although they often interpret their lives through the theoretical lens that dominates their criticism.

On issues of class, Professor Jacobs and I are greater agreement than he acknowledges in his critique of “Freshman Composition as a Middle Class Enterprise.” My analysis throughout that essay is largely descriptive—of such academic values as “self-reliance, responsibility” (consider our stance on plagiarism), and “punctuality” (and late papers)—rather than legislative. Nevertheless, I do think that “schools
can also be sites of resistance”—and should be, as in fact I argue throughout the “Critical Thinking” and “Conclusion” to this essay. In accord with Freire, Rose, Trimbur and a host of others, I conclude that “as teachers we, like our students, are citizens of the world; all of us have an ethical as well as a cultural obligation to respect the worlds’ multiple ways of living and of speaking” (53). That is worth elaborating—as in fact I have done in professional articles and in every textbook I write. Since space limitations here prevent further demonstration of my status as a tenured radical, far more liberal than most of my undergraduate students, I hereby invite Professor Jacobs to discuss this over a home-cooked meal. What’s your pleasure—Italian, French, Moroccan, Chinese, Thai, Indian? Dessert, however, will be blueberry pie.

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