in the context of conferencing with students over their writing, what we are often striving for is a kind of productive tension, a balance between agreement and disagreement. “To be effective,” Tobin counsels, “conference teachers must monitor the tension created within and between these relationships and strive to keep the tension at a productive level—for the students and for themselves” (99).

In her afterword, “Resisting the Politics of Insurrection,” Dale Bauer focuses on resistance on the teaching side of the equation:

[A]s these essays in Insurrections already suggest, we are always “resisting academics,” ever in the process of accommodating and refusing the systems we create. The question is not whether there is a good or bad resistance, an authentic or allowed counterhegemony, but whether the institutions in which we work allow differing values instead of a singular value, whether it allows resistance in the first place. In arguing our resistance, we should [sic] use the language of vocation—of our calling—or even the language of accounting that many of us despise most? Or is it time to launch an aggressive defense of the liberal arts as a critical force in the culture? Would the language of passion, commitment, ethics, or morals communicate what we need to say? (187)

Bauer does not answer this quandary for us. Nor should she, I would argue. As is true of the best pieces in this collection, she instead poses and frames for us some of the important questions.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Fiona Glade, California State University, Sacramento

In the penultimate moment of his argument, as he leads into his concluding chapter, Joe Marshall Hardin writes,
Composition is precisely situated at a significant point of contestation within the changes that now confront the academy. Issues of content, purpose, value and authority confront the department with new and imposing challenges, but they also present the department with a way to make the academy, and especially the study of rhetorical production and reception, more relevant and more likely to have an impact on mainstream culture. (96)

These words ring particularly true for many of us who are witnessing enormous changes in our departments and programs recently, underlining not only the pain that can accompany such change, but also the potential for growth that can arise from various local forms of contestation that we experience as writing specialists. In the current higher education climate, many of us are becoming a lot more intimate than we might have hoped with the effects of the corporatization of higher education: budget cuts that lead to the so-called streamlining of our programs, larger class sizes, exploitation of many of our colleagues. Don’t be disheartened! Offering neither a dogmatic indictment of change nor a superficial quick-fix for the problems many compositionists are facing at their institutions, Hardin engages some of the major debates of Composition Studies—of, perhaps, English Studies in general—by showing how scholar-teachers, administrators, and students themselves might approach a vision of composition that foregrounds the production and consumption of textual matter as real work.

Following one of the crucial tenets of critical pedagogy by consistently examining his own representative location as a scholar-teacher, Hardin jumps into the fray with this book to examine not only the usefulness but also the appropriateness of teaching critical pedagogy and resistance in the field of Composition Studies. He provides a caveat early on that this is most decidedly not a book that aims to deliver “programmatic advice on how to implement” (9) critical and resistance pedagogies in the classroom; rather, his focus is to examine ways in which “we theorize the writing classroom” (9). Indeed, Hardin pulls selectively, yet pertinently from both postcolonial and poststructuralist theory in formulating ways to empower students through the teaching of writing. However, he also contextualizes such theorizing firmly within the field of composition, with the result that this book provides a much-needed and timely commentary on the current state of the field: Hardin’s book is a like a breath of fresh air to a contemporary and ongoing debate that has become stale and, perhaps, somewhat dogmatically enacted in administrative, instructional, and even public forums.

Hardin’s five chapters move from his justification for the necessity of critical pedagogy and resistance theory in the teaching of composition, through a fairly detailed and comprehensive bibliographic history of resistance theories in the U.S., to an important discussion of the ethical concerns involved in writing instruction generally, and to an explanation of the important ways in which resistance theories might move the “goals for writing instruction beyond its traditional service and acculturative roles” (79). In his final chapter, “Resistance,
Emancipation, and Hybridity,” Hardin takes to task the ways in which Composition Studies has historically perceived and enacted the notions of students’ emancipation and liberation. He outlines a critical pedagogy that remains consistent with the aims and methods of Freire yet has been recontextualized for the U.S. to address the specific concerns of the college composition course.

Situating himself firmly and explicitly among the baby-boomer generation, Hardin begins by historicizing the debate—one that continues to flourish—surrounding whether or not critical pedagogy and resistance theory belong in the composition classroom. Defining the teaching of resistance as critical activity that promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of ideological values as they are encountered in text, and as rhetorical production that is informed by a conscious understanding of the links between language and ideology, between rhetorical production and the inscription of values, and between linguistic and textual representation and power, he argues that the articulation of student voices should be a primary goal in our theorizing of composition, but that this can only happen when students are permitted to inscribe their own values within the “rhetoric and conventions of academic and cultural discourses” (5). In chapter 2, “Reproduction and Resistance,” in addition to tracing the historiographies of reproduction theories and resistance theories, along with their institutional relationships to cultural studies and composition studies, Hardin shows how students have been confined within an acculturative educational paradigm that has required compliance to dominant discourses and therefore denied students any critical examination of or opportunity to “accept or reject” (44) the values inherent in those discourses. He points out, too, that the academy has built-in mechanisms for incorporating and co-opting resistance: it “has too often expanded to contain the activity of resistance” (54) by presenting the appearance of valuing student narrative writing and other, more personal writings when, in fact, these writings are often used simply as a tokenistic prelude to the formal academic writing that is actually valued and rewarded in material ways in the classroom. Hardin might, perhaps, have carried his critique further here, to mention a larger body of work that addresses the specificities of particular challenges to the status quo. The work of Geneva Smitherman, Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, Sonia Nieto, and others has offered explicit analyses of ways in which dominant discourse tokenizes and appropriates the discourses of specific historically marginalized groups in the academy. Similarly, the 1984 CCC’s “Statement on Students’ Right to Their Own Language” would have been worth more than a passing mention: like Hardin’s project in this book, the CCC’s Statement—which has too long waited for broad and sincere application in the quotidian practices of our field—is a counterhegemonic project that addresses directly and explicitly the need for increased self-reflection in our teaching and in our theorizing. Such a move from theory to practice—praxis—is the guiding force of Hardin’s book.

With the goal of “challenging the power structure of traditional classroom activities” (79), Hardin moves beyond current discussion of critical
literacy to politicize the material practices and products of classroom power: as he indicates, “every discursive utterance and convention is always persuasive of some ideological value and that meaning is forever contingent on the materiality of rhetorical production and reception” (63). As such, he incorporates an examination of the ethics of writing instruction, building upon James Porter’s definition of ethics as always contextually grounded, as, in fact, generative. Hardin propounds the usefulness of postmodern theories not only in informing our ethical choices, but also in broadening the field’s conceptions of how ethical choices necessarily inform routine practices surrounding “the inequalities and imbalances of power relations” (68)—racism, sexism, heterosexism, linguicism, classism, and so on. He argues further that a postmodern theory of ethics, enacted in composition, has the potential to inscribe a critical metanarrative that eschews the absolute while disrupting the “ideological fixity” (73) that fosters an acculturative pedagogy. In other words, he explains that critical pedagogy and the teaching of resistance is not simply the leftist project that opponents would claim; rather, it is the only method of teaching by which students actually have any choice about what to think. In this way, Hardin provides a way to discuss writing instruction that could be useful to students not only in preparing for the job market, but also in personal growth and self-exploration.

Hardin’s argument addresses the central questions about goals and visions that the field must face if it is to thrive in the current pro-corporate, anti-intellectual climate: rather than arguing from the physis approach, becoming mired in the hackneyed binaried positions of politicized writing instruction versus acculturative writing instruction, he assumes a nomos position, pointing out that many perspectives on critical pedagogy in the U.S. academy have been asking the wrong questions about how effective writing happens—indeed, about what even constitutes effective writing. He succeeds in demonstrating how an ethics-based, self-reflective writing classroom paradigm would help all of our students prepare for their chosen goals by teaching students to see their own potential not only as consumers of texts, but also as worthy producers of texts that matter, of texts that have material effects on the world. While Hardin does stop short of engaging in an explicit interrogation of whiteness, of the Eurocentric—and Eurocratic!—assumptions that currently drive our field, his monograph is tantamount to a call for such an interrogation. For these kinds of changes to begin, as Hardin indicates, our sociological imagination as a field will need to expand. Composition studies has already gained something more than a foothold as the purveyor of more than simply service to other disciplines. And if we are ever, really, to move beyond this suspect position, at most institutions, to establish ourselves as a discipline whose work encompasses the nature of writing as learning, then Hardin’s words must certainly be read as an important—and heartening—mandate in that movement.

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