

**Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies**, by Patricia Suzanne Sullivan. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. 188 pp.

*Reviewed by Dan Martin, University of Central Florida*

Patricia Sullivan's *Experimental Writing in Composition* dissects the intersections between aesthetics, experimental writing, dialectics, and composition pedagogy. Examining a range of pedagogical texts and arguments for using alternative forms in composition like "mixed genres, fragmented texts, collages, experiments in grammar, and multimodal forms"(1), *Experimental Writing* teases out, analyzes, and comments on how theories of aesthetics (with a specific focus on the avant-garde) impact composition pedagogy. Special consideration is given to the avant-garde and its relationship to experimental writing because of the similarities between the arguments avant-gardists use to validate their work as an art form and the arguments composition scholars use to validate alternative writing as an art form. In this text Sullivan digs deep into alternative writing theory and pedagogy, providing a thorough examination of how aesthetics and dialectics have shaped experimental discourses and how dialectics have impacted the development and application of composition pedagogy within specific social and historical contexts. Her definition of dialectics is rooted in *dissoi logoi*, a concept from classical rhetoric where one side of an argument attempts to establish itself as the dominant side while arguing against the opposing side. Sullivan argues that dialectics contain tensions that seep into aesthetic theories and composition pedagogies, forcing the reshaping of both.

The first section of Sullivan's text comprehensively historicizes experimental writing pedagogy and theory in composition. The second section examines the collage form as a potential balance between academic writing (argument papers, research proposals, and rhetorical analysis essays) and experimental writing. Beneath Sullivan's analyses and comparisons of pedagogies, aesthetics, dialectics, and experimental discourses are fragments of broader and familiar questions about teaching composition: Should composition teach academic forms, or allow students to explore experimental forms? Should, or can there be a balance between academic discourse and alternative writing? Does the experimental have to disrupt the traditional? Sullivan suggests that teachers and students work to develop and adopt pedagogies for teaching and evaluating experimental writing—an idea reiterated throughout *Experimental Writing*—but she "does not argue for teaching experimental writing in composition classrooms; nor do I explain how to teach such texts" (2). I wanted to review this book because I needed a resource to combat my own struggles moving

between traditional and experimental forms. Balancing the use of academic and experimental forms in the classroom is difficult because, as Sullivan argues, truly experimental writing requires composition teachers and students to take risks in the classroom if they want to build better composition pedagogy.

Chapter one examines competing expressivist arguments for using alternative writing pedagogy from Winston Weathers to Peter Elbow. Sullivan begins this chapter with a lengthy explication of Weathers' *Alternative Rhetoric* where we learn that experimental writing is heavily grounded in expressivism—a composition theory that sees all individuals as artists and catalysts for liberating themselves from institutional usurpation. Expressivist concerns for using experimental writing in composition contain similar dialectical concerns echoed by avant-garde artists. For example, students trying to achieve expressive freedom through the use of experimental forms in art or writing often struggle with an intense desire to gain individual autonomy while yearning to be part of the larger social collective. This leads Sullivan to contend that examining aesthetics like the avant-garde may help combat similar dialectical struggles in composition. Sullivan argues that the “histories, theories, and critiques of avant-garde art [and other aesthetics] can help composition and aesthetic scholars think through dialectics of the individual and the institution” (17–18). Her unique methodology for using aesthetics as a lens to examine alternative composition theory opens up new possibilities for aesthetic scholars to engage composition work and to gain insight into how aesthetics can serve as a catalyst for overcoming dialectical conflicts within composition. Aesthetics like the avant-garde provide a blue print for how to validate art in culture and how to disrupt traditional notions of art. Composition scholars can use this blueprint (histories, theories, and critiques) of aesthetics to think about how to use and validate experimental writing in composition. Therefore the arguments and approaches that aesthetic scholars and artists have used to address dialectical concerns may be of value to composition scholars.

Chapter two analyzes views of alternative discourses from Geoffrey Sirc to Terry Myers Zawacki, and scrutinizes limitations in arguments that politicize experimental writing. This chapter outlines how avant-garde artists have defined their work historically, exposing the deep-seeded roots of avant-garde theory and its indirect connectivity to experimental writing. This chapter also identifies a variety of expressivist arguments for using experimental writing in composition. Sullivan ends this chapter advocating that teachers should be more introspective of how they blend alternative writing theory into composition assignments, evaluating standards, and pedagogies. In chapter three, “The Crisis of Judgment in Composition: Evaluating Experimental Student Writing,” Sullivan examines methods and arguments for how to evaluate alternative writing more closely. Her main concern in this chapter is how to situate experimental

writing within firmly established, long-standing, institutional evaluation standards for traditional writing. This chapter examines several arguments for how to evaluate experimental writing from Elizabeth Rankin to Ronald A. DePeter. Abandoning traditional criteria to grade alternative writing can be perilous for teachers; giving up their credibility to make evaluative judgments can leave teachers without the authority necessary to provide adequate and useful feedback on student work. Sullivan terms this experience “evaluative paralysis” and suggests using Lyotard’s theory of “marrying...prudence and imagination” to argue that teachers can use their experiences, education, and intuition to invent new criteria to evaluate experimental writing that is highly reflective of student discourse, opinions, and input (98). This leads Sullivan to claim that arguments for how to evaluate experimental writing in composition are both a response to the difficulties teachers have evaluating experimental writing and a creator of a problematic situation (or “crisis”) in composition that begins when teachers abandon their evaluation standards, limiting their authority in the classroom.

Chapter four, “Collage: Pedagogies, Aesthetics, and Reading Students’ Texts,” analyzes the aesthetics within pedagogies for teaching collage and highlights several different arguments for teaching collage in composition from Tristan Tzara’s to Betsy Nies, noting that some pedagogical approaches to collage are more disruptive to academic forms than other approaches. Composition teachers will appreciate the extensive analysis and historical overview of collage theory and collage pedagogy in this chapter, and they will find several examples of collage pedagogy, collage forms, and standards for evaluating collage. Sullivan applies concepts for evaluating alternative writing from chapter three to the evaluation of her own students’ collages. Readers may infer after reading this chapter that collage provides the best opportunity to bridge aesthetics, art, and writing together, but Sullivan is not completely convinced that collage is capable of providing a balanced and critical lens for commenting on social and political concerns because most collage pedagogies place extremely different values on the use and evaluation of collage in composition. However, Sullivan proclaims that a student collage text “cracks open my pedagogy and puts my criteria for evaluating their writing on the table for discussion” (146). “It is this pedagogical use of the collage,” she notes, “which I see as one of the most valuable uses of experimental writing in the classroom” (130). Collage pedagogies provide a space for students and teachers to work through creating and evaluating experimental writing together.

Chapter five is a postscript on multimodal composition where we learn that arguments for teaching multimodal and collage forms have failed to escape the same “dialectical tensions of avant-garde aesthetics and contemporary composition pedagogies” (147). In this very brief chapter, Sullivan continues to examine

how composition addresses dialectical tensions within three popular texts for teaching multimodal compositions: Cynthia Selfe's *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, Jeff Rice's *The Rhetoric of Cool*, and Anne Wysocki's *Writing New Media*. These texts argue for the value of multimodal forms in composition; however, Rice, Selfe, and Wysocki represent different extremes in this argument. Selfe invites the use of academic literacies and multimodal forms even though she argues against the superiority of print literacies, while scholars like Rice argue against the use of academic literacies with multimodal forms. Ultimately this chapter, like the entire book, argues that we cannot separate composition pedagogy from the technologic and aesthetic principles that are bound to mass culture. Sullivan does not claim that aesthetics like the avant-garde are directly responsible for experimental writing in composition; nor does she argue that there is a direct correlation between the two. She also stops shy of claiming that we can learn something valuable for composition from aesthetics, but she never wavers from her main argument in this text that the teaching of composition should focus on experimental writing just as much as academic writing. Perhaps the most useful aspect of this text is the critical space it provides for composition teachers and scholars to think about experimental and traditional writing together.

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