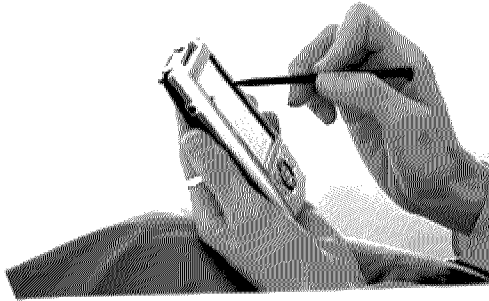


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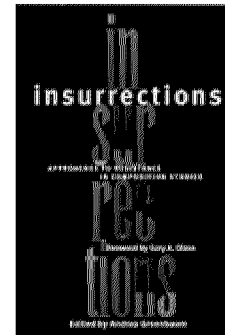


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Book Reviews

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Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies, edited by Andrea Greenbaum, with a foreword by Gary A. Olson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 198 pages.

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When we were both teaching writing courses at a university in Philadelphia, in the early 1990's, my friend Betsy had a tag for a particularly recalcitrant group of students. She called them *The Dugout*, a tight row of baseball-cap-wearing young men who lined the back wall of one of her classrooms, joking amongst themselves and paying only minimal attention to her or to the class. Most people who taught in the Freshman Humanities sequence had similar experiences, myself included, but that particular class—though not even mine—sticks in my memory as the quintessential example of at least one variety of student resistance.

I twin this with a memory, from the same period, of stalking out of one of my writing classes because the students hadn't done the reading. I remember the way my feeling of righteous anger began to ebb as I got feedback from other teachers, many of whom seemed to think that this had been a heroic statement of some sort, when, to me, it felt more like an admission of impotence and failure. Call this act counter-resistance.

Our relationships with our students—individually and collectively—with our institutions, and even with our “teaching selves,” are often complicated and vexed. For the past twenty years or so, compositionists have been developing a vocabulary and a theoretical framework around issues of resistance in the classroom which help flesh out and thus help us begin to respond to some of these problems.

Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies, edited by Andrea Greenbaum, is a collection of essays on this topic that helps further elucidate this set of issues. The collection is broken down into four sections: “Theorizing Resistance,” “Race and the Politics of Literacy,” “Technology and Rhetoric,” and “Toward a Pedagogy of Resistance.” Each contains two or three essays. These are bracketed up front by a foreword by Gary A. Olson and an introduction by the editor, and by an afterword by Dale Bauer.

Particularly cogent are the theory pieces in the first section, John Trimbur's “Resistance as a Tragic Trope” and Elizabeth Flynn's “Strategic, Counter-Strategic, and Reactive Resistance.” Trimbur carefully contextualizes and problematizes the history and the multiple uses of the word “resistance,” which is a good place to start in a collection like this, summing up:

The task for radical teachers is to help students understand the sources of resistance and opposition in the tragic disorder and

suffering of class society, as well as the consequences of refusal, withdrawal, and counter-identities. Most of all, it is not a matter of calling on alienated students to believe in the system—even the radical teacher's version of it—but of helping them manage a tragic sense of the social order that refuses to accept either its claims or their own alienation. (14)

Flynn lays out a compelling taxonomy of her own distinctions between *varieties* of student resistance, which, by virtue of its position near the front of the book, becomes a useful lens for reading a number of the other pieces. The core of her argument is found in one of her early paragraphs:

I will argue here that it is useful to make distinctions among three different types of resistance: the first involves planned and positive action in opposition to oppression, which I will call "strategic resistance"; the second involves resistance that deliberately disrupts liberatory practices, which I will call "counter-strategic resistance"; and the third involves resistance that is a spontaneous and emotional reaction that may have multiple and conflicting motivations and effects, which I will call "reactive resistance." I will then describe how strategic and reactive resistance can play themselves out in the feminist classroom. It might initially seem as if strategic resistance is desirable and reactive resistance undesirable. I will make clear, however, that reactive resistance can sometimes be productive rather than destructive. I do not mean to suggest that the three types of resistance I identify here can always be clearly delineated. Often, their boundaries blur; their identities also shift from context to context. It is nevertheless useful to name them, if only provisionally, because doing so can help clarify how resistance can be destructive or useful in classroom contexts. (18)

In his foreword, which is a bit more problematic, Olson situates resistance theory as a sub-discipline of critical literacy, and the volume under consideration as a shot in what he suggests "undoubtedly will come to be known as 'the new theory wars.'" He points to a number of alleged villains and ills:

Given the vigor with which a powerful handful in composition (Jim Sledd calls them "boss compositionists") are struggling desperately to set back our disciplinary clock, we simply must continue and intensify the valuable and empowering work we have been doing for twenty years. *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies* serves as a major statement that theoretical scholarship and work in critical literacy will continue to enrich our pedagogies and our understandings of the workings of discourse. Not merely a thorough examination of resistance, this book is itself an enactment of resistance—resistance against unthinking expressivism, against the growing anti-intellectualism in the field, and against those boss compositionists who have a vested interest in the status quo and who dread theoretical challenges to it. I'm certain that *Insurrections* will inspire many of us to carry on this important work. (xii)

Theory is important work, and *Insurrections* takes its readers in a number of interesting and useful directions. But Olson's penultimate sentence yokes together a series of assertions that beg further attention and interrogation. To take the last first, Sledd's use of the phrase "boss compositionists" seems misapplied here. In his original meaning, one of the strongest criticisms of this group was not their *opposition* to theory but their putative desire to monopolize it; not a struggle to set back the disciplinary clock, but to move forward without taking everyone in the field with them. Here's Sledd, writing in *JAC*, on this very topic:

A further irritant is the arrogance of the newly risen compositionists, who are full of praise for themselves and their freshly bedoctored students but contemptuous of mere "practitioners," the teachers who do the work that the compositionists theorize about. The current attempt to solve John Fisher's old problem is to keep composition in departments devoted primarily to literature, to placate the boss compositionists by admitting them to the worshipful company of privileged researchers, but still to assign the actual teaching of writing to the contingent workers and teaching assistants. With that solution the compositionists are apparently content, since it marks the literary establishment's acceptance of their claims to share the glory. (274-75)

Regarding Olson's middle assertion, I suspect that many or most compositionists would more likely locate the "growing anti-intellectualism" *outside*, rather than within, the field. The discipline is under increasing pressure (as, indeed, it has been since its genesis) in regard to such issues as standards, testing, and conformity to norms—whether of race, gender, or class (the very issues which often engender discussions of resistance)—but this is most often either political or administrative pressure that comes from beyond the classroom, the writing center, or the comp folk, whether we are situated inside or outside of English Departments.

Finally, the reference to "unthinking expressivism" strikes a discordant note; in a related vein, in the paragraph just before the one cited, Olson refers to the "attempt to drag composition back to its expressivist roots" as "a direct assault . . . on a two-decade-long tradition of substantive theoretical scholarship." To object to expressivism is fair game—we need not all agree. To make it the binary opposite of substantive theoretical scholarship is off base.

One of the values of this collection is that it points up, from multiple perspectives, that resistance can be both a good and a bad thing—a phenomenon we should neither reflexively valorize nor vilify—and that it can as often be resident in teachers as in students.

We might see this as tied to Lad Tobin's observation—in an essay published in the collection *To Compose: Teaching Writing in High School and College*—that, 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.

Albany, NY

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