Resistance and the Writing Teacher

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The academic community interprets "resistant" student behaviors—and resistance in general—through a variety of critical and ideological lenses. The picture we see depends dramatically upon which of these lens(es) we look through, and, in the final analysis, writing teachers must be aware of several different lenses and the view seen through them if we are to construct an informed, effective position in relation to resistant behaviors. I wish to explore the potentialities of this position by mapping three important critical perspectives taken toward student resistance: that of the "traditional" teacher/administrator, that of the student, and that of the writing teacher. Read individually, each of these perspectives offers compelling, useful strategies for understanding and responding to student resistance (and for constructing our own resistant projects). Taken together, however, these perspectives appear profoundly distrustful and contradictory of one another, with the assumptions of one making impossible any adherence to the others' tenets. By critically reading each of these orientations, by challenging the implacability of their assumptions and by questioning the mutual exclusivity those assumptions imply, I hope to recast them as cooperative elements of a system that is enriched rather than undermined by the variety of views it embraces. Such a project, I hope, allows writing teachers to see themselves, their supervisors, their colleagues, and their students within a broader context in which resistance, reproduction, and strategic cultural change can be (and is constantly being) enacted from multiple positions and perspectives.

Opposition, Resistance and "The Creative Power for Good":
Defining Terms

A clear use of the term "resistance" requires, given its involved history in resistance theory, some preliminary definition which narrows the word's connotative field. I would like to follow here the example of Henry Giroux, whose categories of accommodation, opposition, and resistance have been usefully adapted by Compositionists.1 Briefly, summarizing Giroux, resistant behaviors can be divided into two categories: those which are merely "oppositional" and those which are truly "resistant." Oppositional behavior "suppresses social contradictions while simultaneously merging with, rather than challenging, the logic of ideological domination"; thus, such behavior falls "not
under the category of resistance but under its opposite, i.e., accommodation and conformism" (109). Resistance, on the other hand, embodies a distinct "critical function" and carries with it the "potential to speak to the radical possibilities embedded in its own logic and to the interests contained in the object of its expression" (109). In other words, oppositional behaviors are empty constructs that reify rather than resist dominant ideologies; resistant behaviors challenge those dominant ideologies with self-aware logic and creativity.

Giroux's terminology allows us to articulate two important and critically different categories into which Compositionists have placed resistant behaviors. For the purposes of this discussion, Giroux's lexicon of resistance will be adapted as follows: "Opposition" will denote behaviors and strategies that are regarded as resistant in a negative sense, while "resistance" will be taken to signify behaviors and strategies that are seen as resistant in a positive sense. When referring to opposition and resistance together as a genre of behaviors, not distinguishing between them, I will use the term "non-compliance," which (I hope) has a sufficiently neutral valence.

The case could be made that I have now introduced three more terms requiring some attention: "positive," "negative," and "neutral." Who defines what's positive or negative in relation to resistance? Giroux? Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and Dinesh D'Souza? While admitting to the problematic nature of these terms, I will defer addressing them for the moment in order to contemplate an even more precarious turn of phrase, and one upon which I will rely heavily: "the creative power for good." In my use of this phrase, I do not mean to convey any Romantic notion of creativity nor any Neo-Platonic sense of essential good; rather, I wish to suggest that our implicit assumptions about "creativity" and "goodness" offer us a window into the specific discursive positions we invest with the authority to wield such weighty signifiers—and, conversely, into the positions which are denied the semantic authority to make such meaning. I refer to a "creative power for good" on the premise that such a discursive authority, however vague and unarticulated, is frequently implied in the politics of our positions and theories, and that tracing the disposition of this authority is both an interesting and an important project. Throughout this essay, when I describe a position which is assumed to have or to exercise "the creative power for good," I am referring not to an essential characteristic but rather to a discursive process whereby the author of "creative and good" acts is able to name those acts as creative and good. Returning to "positive," "negative," and "neutral," then, I will suggest that a similar premise applies; s/he who holds the "creative power for good"—that is, the power to name one's own subject position in such a fashion—also holds the power to identify behaviors as resistant (positive), oppositional (negative), or merely non-compliant (neutral). This lexicon does not insist, of course, that a cohesive consensus exists prior to such identification, but rather that a certain degree of authority, of symbolic capital, must be possessed by the one doing the identifying.
Three Perspectives on Student Resistance

As James Britton notes, “We classify at our peril” (1). In attempting to classify perspectives on student resistance, I wish to acknowledge this peril at the outset. To suggest that there are only three perspectives on any type of student behavior would be laughably reductive; to explore even a single person’s perspective on something as richly complex as classroom resistance could be the project of a much longer discussion than this. My goal here is to map a rich discursive terrain by constructing interpretive categories which might help us negotiate this terrain with greater awareness, while recognizing that the categories which emerge from such a distillation are too reduced to fully contain any one of the complex and dynamic perspectives we inhabit as administrators, teachers and students.

If the pigeons seem restless and overly confined in their respective holes, the fault is entirely my own; but the confinement is temporary and, I hope, serves to illustrate an argument which works toward a general opening of intellectual space.

With this caveat in place, I would like to turn to the first position toward non-compliant behavior, one which discusses it as what Giroux would call “oppositional.” This position operates from the perspective of the generic or traditional teacher/administrator; invested, more so than other roles, with the maintenance and reproduction of tradition, it seeks strategies for delegitimizing and devaluing behaviors which represent non-compliance to that tradition, to traditional roles, or to the reproduction of traditional values. Articulations of such a position often evolve from pedagogical discussions about “discipline” or “conflicts” in the classroom; these discussions tend to situate non-compliance as a threat to the systematic progress of classroom activities. While this position generally flies in the face of postmodern politics and critical pedagogy, it is nonetheless defensible from the perspective of the practitioner charged with orchestrating the wide range of activities which constitute classroom learning and teaching. And even for the avid critical pedagogue, the metaphor of the orchestral conductor, perhaps, is not entirely inappropriate—whether one orchestrates a synchronous musical movement or the ideological individualism of improvisation, the role of the conductor is never really an insignificant one.

For a pronounced articulation of this position, I will turn to Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn’s handbook for composition teachers, The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing. They advise practical measures designed to empower the writing teacher; they argue that it is the teacher’s responsibility to maintain “meaningful progress” within the classroom and that teachers should take an active role in suppressing behaviors which, in their judgment, threaten that meaningful progress:

Rare is the classroom order problem that cannot be solved by serious words to the right person—in private. College students are anxious to prove their maturity and usually will not continue behavior that you have spoken to them about. If students are disruptive, ask them to see you and speak plainly to them about the problem they are causing you and the whole class. They will nearly always straighten out.
Occasionally—very occasionally—a truly disturbed student may appear in a class and resist all rationality, every effort to keep order and even to help. If you find one of these people in your class, go immediately for help from your program or department, and get the student out of your class if the disruptive behavior continues. (42)

While this passage by no means represents the sum total of Connors and Glenn’s perspective on student non-compliance, it does cast a traditional teacher/administrator perspective with great clarity. The message? Teachers should not tolerate non-compliant behavior; when it occurs, they should take steps to suppress it; if it persists, the offending student should be removed from the class. Connors and Glenn also make the Foucauldian observation that college students should desire to demonstrate their maturity, which in this context involves behavioral accommodation and conformism—a willingness to play on the same page, as it were, as the conductor, whether that page describes a specific score or an invitation to improvise.

In this excerpt, the authors appear to assume that the teaching institution (represented by the program or department administrator) and the teacher both exercise a creative power for good. The student, who is invited to benefit from this power for good, must follow behavioral guidelines in order to maintain her standing and her right to be present in the classroom. The teacher has responsibilities, too; however, the assumption is that it would be students who transgress and who thereby deprive their classmates of the beneficent effects of the classroom’s meaningful progress. This alignment of assumptions, as much as anything else, describes the politics of an “oppositional” reading of non-compliant behaviors.

On its own merits, and even removed from the more balanced rhetorical context within which Connors and Glenn place it, this perspective is an easy one for many of us to appreciate. As teachers, as members of an institution which serves student learning, we have a clear responsibility to intervene when the behavior of one student jeopardizes other students’ opportunities to learn. Virtually all of our pedagogies rely, to some extent, on the cooperation of our students; absent that cooperation, we fail to accomplish our pedagogical goals and we fail to meet our professional obligations in a meaningful way. The authority Connors and Glenn describe, then, is neither unduly transgressive nor necessarily oppressive; rather, it is the principle agreement between teacher and student upon which most pedagogical practice inevitably rests.

Without falsely dichotomizing theory and practice, I think we can reasonably claim that discussions of student non-compliance become more inclined to talk about resistance as they become more abstracted from teacherly practice. Whereas teachers’ handbooks (like Connors and Glenn’s) tend to discuss non-compliance as a behavior which impedes the flow of activities in the classroom, more theoretical or philosophical approaches tend to deconstruct non-compliant behavior and to cast it in a positive light. In moving to a discussion of approaches which explore non-compliance as generally resistant rather than oppositional, I would like to consider two articles separated by a span of 20
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years—Jerry Farber’s landmark essay “The Student as Nigger” (1967) and Robert Brooke’s influential “Underlife and Writing Instruction” (1987). Each of these pieces looks favorably upon non-compliance, each romanticizing student non-compliance as a sign that something is in fact going right in the classroom. And yet, each rests upon extraordinarily different assumptions about the position of the writing teacher in relation to student resistance.

Farber wrote “The Student as Nigger” in 1967 and it was originally published in *The Los Angeles Free Press.* Since that time it has been republished or anthologized hundreds of times and has been the subject of debate in government assemblies in the U.S. and abroad (13-4). Parents have written enraged letters, circling every obscene word; teachers have been fired on the spot for asking their students to read the piece. Why such a hullabaloo? Farber’s article proved exceptionable on numerous grounds—his profanity, his sexualization of the student/teacher relationship, his anti-establishment exhortations which seemed anarchic to many readers. But what was genuinely dangerous about “The Student as Nigger” was its valorization of student non-compliance; written in the language of students, it appealed to them to resist what Farber perceived to be an overwhelmingly oppressive educational system:

A student at Cal State [Los Angeles, where Farber taught at the time] is expected to know his place. He calls a faculty member “Sir” or “Doctor” or “Professor”—and he smiles and shuffles some as he stands outside the professor’s office waiting for permission to enter. The faculty tell him what courses to take . . . ; they tell him what to read, what to write, and, frequently, where to set the margins on his typewriter. They tell him what’s true and what isn’t. Some teachers insist that they encourage dissent but they’re almost always jiving and every student knows it. Tell the man what he wants to hear or he’ll fail your ass out of the course. (91)

What strikes me about this passage, and about Farber’s entire argument, is the portrait it paints of the college professor. College professors, Farber writes, are “short on balls”; they allow themselves to be “screwed regularly and vigorously” by their employers without fighting back; it seems to Farber that “the tenured security of a teaching job attracts timid persons and, furthermore, that teaching, like police work, pulls in persons who are unsure of themselves and need weapons and the other external trappings of authority” (94-5). Student resistance is valorized, then, not simply because it is non-compliant, nor because there is some essential virtue to non-compliance, but because there exists on the part of college professors (and most everyone else involved in education) an outright systematic effort to oppress students and such an effort damn well deserves to be resisted. What dismays Farber most is that “students take it” without resisting; they come to him asking if they should fold their essay and put their names in the upper right hand corner, and it makes him “want to cry and kiss them and caress their poor tortured heads” (92). Students may have “immense unused power” to resist, Farber argues, but by and large—sadly—they fail to use it (100). Farber’s assumptions neatly invert those of the “oppositional” perspective; both the teacher and the teaching institution here are construed as agents of gross
transgression, and the creative power for good lies entirely with the student (who, alas, rarely knows how to exercise that power successfully).

Unlike Farber, who positions both the college professor and the teaching institution as enemies of the student, Brooke offers hope that at least one variety of college teacher, the teacher of writing, struggles on the same side as the student. Brooke studies non-compliant student behaviors in the Freshman English course as an indication that "the identities which may be developing for students in writing classrooms are more powerful for real academic success than the traditional identity of the successful student" (141-2). In "Underlife and Writing Instruction," Brooke adapts sociologist Erving Goffman’s articulations of the "underlife" concept to demonstrate how student resistance in the writing classroom can often be construed as a normal, productive, and creative attempt to convey an identity which is more complex than the organizational role associated with studendthood. Behaviors which teachers frequently take to be frivolously oppositional (such as writing notes in class, making cryptic comments to their peers, etc.) are, Brooke contends, useful acts of resistance to the limitations placed upon them by their organizational role; like the behaviors Goffman observed in mental institutions, these manifestations of underlife work actively to free the participant from the straightjackets of expected thought and action. What’s more, Brooke argues, composition pedagogy should and does foster this process of "undercut[ting] the traditional roles of the American educational system in order to substitute more complex identities in their place" (141). Brooke cites a number of prominent scholars, including Adrienne Rich and Mike Rose, who have made this point; after reviewing their arguments, he concludes that

these writing teachers feel themselves to be after something different from what the traditional education system produces—instead of traditional "good students," they want students who will come to see themselves as unique, productive writers with influence on their environment. (149)

Brooke is making an important distinction here between the college writing teacher and the college, between the college writing teacher and other college teachers; like Greg Myers, he believes that "our interests [as teachers of composition] are not the same as those of the institutions that employ us" (qtd. in Brooke 149). He argues, in other words, that the writing instructor is uniquely an ally in the student’s ongoing struggle against the institution and its various representatives. In Brooke’s view, the student is not alone in her fight against institutional oppression; she shares the creative power for good with her writing teacher.

Like Connors and Glenn, both Farber and Brooke make arguments which are inviting and believable. Farber’s stance appeals to us, perhaps, because we have most of us experienced the kinds of asinine teacherly and administrative behavior he so lavishly indicts; moreover, as a unique audience for students’ stories, we have heard enough to know that the academy Farber criticized in the 1960s is still very much with us in the 1990s. And, as a result of this same
relationship with students and their stories, we find Brooke’s argument equally amenable. Our immediate goals for our students are different, are more “transgressive” (in the positive, culturally revising sense) than those of colleagues in other departments; our praxis has been subjected to more productive critique—our praxis is, after all, what gives our discipline its meaning and its mandate; the skills we help students to hone are powerful and transformative. From the perspectives of students, for whom we harbor a particular empathy, and from our own perspectives as teachers of writing, each of these discussions proves useful and empowering.

Counterpoint and Context: Rigorous Doubting and the Deepening of Perspectives

My purpose so far has been to articulate three different perspectives on non-compliant student behavior and to demonstrate that each of these perspectives makes assumptions about the creative power for good which differ in important ways. The following table sums up these assumptions:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective on Student Non-Compliance:</th>
<th>Creative Powers for Good:</th>
<th>Transgressors/Oppressors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional:</td>
<td>institution, teachers</td>
<td>students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant 1 (Farber):</td>
<td>students</td>
<td>institution, all teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant 2 (Brooke):</td>
<td>students, writing teachers</td>
<td>institution, non-writing teachers</td>
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Each of these perspectives seems viable as a description of a specific position or genre of positions within the larger system—the position of the traditional teacher/administrator, the student, and the writing teacher, respectively. And each of these perspectives strikes me as powerful and useful for proprietors of the position to which it pertains. We may even find ourselves in at least partial agreement with all of these perspectives simultaneously, despite their overt contradictions. For example, having inhabited the organizational role of student for the majority of my life, and now as one whose vocation involves helping students articulate their own unique stories, I relish Farber’s critique of an academy which does in many ways operate oppressively. Specifically in my work as a writing teacher, I am inspired by Brooke’s insights into the symbiosis I enjoy with my students. In all my teacherly and administrative roles, I am empowered by Connors and Glenn’s assumption that I have a right to expect cooperative behavior—compliance—from my students.

I would like to suggest, however, that none of these perspectives, as I have described them, can alone support the full complexity of non-compliant student behavior. In each perspective, an assumption is made about where a creative
power for good resides; in each case, one or more locations (student, teacher, and/or institution) is essentialized as enjoying the privilege of that creative power. The reverse is equally true: one or more locations is essentialized as a transgressor or oppressor and denied the possibility of exercising a creative power for good. The result of these assumptions? Three highly agreeable discourses based upon mutually disagreeable (and arguably mutually exclusive) tenets. To agree with all three positions at once, as I am suggesting we should be able to do, requires an uncomfortable ideological limberness.

It seems to me that we arrive at this impasse because we tend to construct theoretical frameworks which uncritically privilege one or more perspectives—what Brooke (following Goffman) calls organizational roles. Such privileging tends to imply a claim that these roles have essential qualities, including an essential authority to define what is right, to decide what should be valued, to exercise a creative power for good. However, these claims invariably prove difficult to maintain when they are subjected to a process of rigorous doubting. I’d like to illustrate this difficulty by critically testing in turn the claims that a creative power for good resides essentially in the traditional teacher/administrator, the student, and the writing teacher—not as a way of negating each of the perspectives presented above, but rather as a necessary part of the process of understanding and affirming both their contentions and their contradictions.

**The Institution: Teachers and Administrators**

The culturally conservative mission of the university has been critiqued so thoroughly, over such broad expanses of time that to extensively relive past reviews would be a more ambitious project than present purposes warrant. However, I would suggest that one particular genre of critique—that which studies education as a vehicle for the wholesale reproduction of culture, warts and all—strikes at the heart of postsecondary education’s moral imperative, at what I’ve been calling its creative power to accomplish good. It is in light of this type of critique, I think, that many non-compliant student behaviors begin to look very plausibly like resistance rather than opposition—resistance to a system which intentionally and brazenly reduplicates patterns of cultural injustice.

One of the most cogent of these critiques is that offered by Pierre Bourdieu, whose work, following that of Lukacs, Gramsci and Althusser, has explored the culturally reproductive nature of education. Bourdieu argues that cultural reproduction is the primary function of the educational system, which reproduces itself even as it reproduces culture. In fact, given its primacy in this role, Bourdieu claims, the educational system enjoys a unique “monopoly over its own reproduction” (123). The endless cycle through which the educational system re-creates itself in its own image, and cultural systems wholesale in the process, has long been argued by Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to involve the re-creation of social relations from which some economic classes obtain access to power (derived from the symbolic capital granted them by their
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educational status) while other economic classes are blocked from such access. The process begins, Bourdieu and Passeron suggest,

in the first years of schooling when the understanding and use of language are the major points of leverage for teachers’ assessments, [and it] never ceases to be felt: style is always taken into account, implicitly or explicitly, at every level of the educational system. . . . (73)

The upshot, of course, “is that the educational mortality rate can only increase as one moves towards the classes most distant from scholarly language” (73). And, according to Bourdieu and Passeron, the bad news doesn’t stop there. Even in times of expanding admissions, when the prevailing view is that access to higher education is becoming more egalitarian, the traditional patterns of access may still retain their hold.5

Bourdieu and Passeron’s argument, though constructed around data which is now more than 20 years old, has aged with troubling grace and has explanatory power even beyond the Marxist paradigm in which it is grounded. What they observed in 1960s France about the relationship between class status and educational achievement can be demonstrated with equal facility by tracking racial distributions in U.S. postsecondary institutions over the past 15 years. Following an era of affirmative action and broad efforts toward a more egalitarian academe during these years, and despite an increase in university enrollment at all levels, members of the nation’s largest minority population—African Americans—represented a smaller proportion of bachelor’s, master’s, and professional degree recipients in 1992 than they did in 1981. Significantly, this proportion languishes at less than half the proportion represented by African Americans in the general population (Otuya 4; “Vital Signs” 7: 53). These trends derive, in part, from the failure of universities to retain African American students through graduation at the same rate as white students. Among freshmen entering the 302 NCAA Division I institutions between 1985 and 1988, graduation rates (percentage of students who earn a degree in six years) for white students exceeded that for African American students by 58 percent (“Vital Signs” 4: 52). Imbalances like these result, as they did in Bourdieu and Passeron’s France 20 years ago, in radically uneven distributions of the cultural and symbolic capital dispensed through higher education: white U.S. citizens over the age of 25 are nearly twice as likely as their African American counterparts to have a college degree (Otuya 4; “Vital Signs” 5: 43).

The news from specific academic communities, including that of English Studies, is worse still. In our own departments, “in 1993 only 18 African Americans earned Ph.D.’s in American or English literature—less than 2 percent of all doctorates earned in these fields” (Benjamin 79). And matters are even more extreme for some graduate programs in the hard sciences, where in 1994 not a single African American earned a doctorate in geometry, logic, computing theory, nuclear physics, elementary particles, nuclear chemistry, geophysics, oceanography, and biophysics combined; by comparison, 333 doctoral degrees
were awarded to whites in these disciplines during the same year ("Vital Signs" 8:51). While certain racial/ethnic groups, particularly Asian American groups, advanced prominently during the past 15 years, the regression of African Americans in higher education is emblematic of the culturally reproductive processes Bourdieu and Passeron describe.

Bourdieu’s insights into the self-reproductive processes of higher education enjoy similar statistical validation within the ranks of professional academics. According to Adalberto Aguirre, Jr., U.S. “postsecondary education institutions have been deliberately slow in permitting the entry of minority persons into their faculty ranks” (63). In his analysis of ethnic/racial representation among full-time instructional staff at U.S. colleges and universities, Aguirre found that the disproportionate representation of white males failed to diminish substantially during a decade of affirmative action; white males represented 70.0 percent of the faculty population in 1990, down a mere five percent from the 1980 level. Overall, minority representation among faculty increased only two percent, from nine percent in 1980 to 11 percent in 1990, despite remarkable gains among Asian American groups (64). Minority representation among full-time postsecondary instructional staff, then, remains far below the proportion constituted by minority groups in the general population.

All of this serves to trouble perspectives which construe non-compliance on the part of students as invariably “oppositional.” This evidence would tend to support an argument that many students rightfully refuse to comply with an educational system which attempts to situate them in their culture according to their economic background, race, or gender instead of their interests, desires, and aptitudes. When we, as teachers and administrators, remove non-compliant students from our classrooms, we may be transgressing their efforts to communicate reasonable objections to an educational process which baldly fails to serve their interests. We need not accept that we always and inevitably fail in this way, nor that there is never a time when student non-compliance is unambiguously oppositional; rather, I am suggesting that our roles are complicated, that we play a significant part in processes whose outcome runs counter to many of our most cherished professional goals, that we should not perceive ourselves as enjoying an essential creative power for good.

The Student
If the educational institution is predisposed to serve its own interests and the interests of cultural reproduction over those of its students, it does not automatically follow that the non-compliant student is always acting to counter the imbalances stacked against her. Practical experience tells us as much, of course; teachers at all levels must deal with behavior which they rightfully perceive as destructive to themselves, their class, and even to the student whose behavior is at issue. However, if we are to believe Farber—and his argument is compelling, even abstracted from its fraught historical context—we would do well to base critiques of student non-compliance on experiences other than that of the traditional teacher/administrator, on experiences more congenial to the perspective of the non-compliant student.
To critique the perspective adopted above by Farber, then, I shall return to Giroux's discussion of resistance. Giroux, an advocate of student resistance who criticizes the "traditional perspective" for the "reductionist behavioral terms" by which it generally defines students, nevertheless worries that discussions of resistance "have not adequately conceptualized the genesis of the conditions that promote and reinforce contradictory modes of resistance and struggle" on the part of students (49, 102; my emphasis). Giroux goes on to describe these contradictory modes, to describe how forces of domination which are themselves often contradictory create "a range of oppositional behaviors" (102).

Put simply, not all oppositional behavior has "radical significance," nor is all oppositional behavior rooted in a reaction to authority and domination. The point here is that there have been too few attempts by educational theorists to understand how subordinate groups embody and express a combination of reactionary and progressive ideologies, ideologies that both underlie the structure of social domination and contain the logic necessary to overcome it. Above and beyond the questionable interests and ideologies that fuel various forms of resistance there is also the point that oppositional behavior may not be simply a reaction to powerlessness, but instead it might be an expression of power that is fueled by and reproduces the most powerful grammar of domination. Thus resistance may on one level be the simple appropriation and display of power, and as such it may manifest itself through the interests and discourse of the worst aspects of capitalist rationality. (103)

Giroux's point here adds an important cautionary gloss to Farber's compassionate articulation of the plight of postsecondary students and to Brooke's analysis of student underlife. Students who have been "oppressed" by the educational system all their lives come to college not merely as victims of that oppressive process but as bodies upon which the whole array of cultural values has been inscribed. Ironically, the students who select/are selected for higher education are the students who have been most successfully inscribed by their previous schooling. Therefore, their non-compliance may be a response to a recognition that they have been oppressed, a reading consistent with the sympathies of Farber and Brooke, but it may at the same time be enacted in such a way that the non-compliant behavior itself asserts a set of cultural values which tend to reinscribe the social imbalances which oppress them.

Giroux's analysis and our own experiences as teachers, I believe, should leave us concluding two things: First, that the student whose educational experiences have been consistently oppressive and limiting may choose not to comply with oppression and limitation when he senses it; in varying ways, the students Brooke observed made just such a choice. (We are free to agree or disagree with Farber's and Brooke's arguments that this non-compliance generally works toward radically significant ends.) And second, that in some instances these non-compliant behaviors will reflect rather than creatively resist the oppressive forces to which they are reacting.
Anyone who teaches writing should want to agree with Brooke's assertion that the teacher of writing is uniquely engaged with his students in a collaborative project of resistance, to the extent that "resistance," a potent ideological signifier, can be taken in the lexically naïve guise I have proposed for it above. We ought rightly to feel, I think, a singular responsibility to the freshmen who pass through our classrooms; we have the opportunity to facilitate the development of discursive strategies which allow them to perceive and think about their world in new, more powerful ways. We ought rightly to feel, as Brooke suggests, that our own teaching can itself be a site of resistance.

And yet, we should also acknowledge that, as keepers of a gate through which nearly every would-be college graduate must pass, we represent a singularly powerful tool for cultural reproduction. Our institutions challenge us to teach conventions of discourse, patterns and possibilities of discourse usage, strategies used by others to make discourse work on us. At the end of the term, we certify with grades from A to F our students' discursive "competence." In doing so, we exercise judgment on a body of linguistic attributes that are largely developed before our students ever enter our classroom—some of which, when measured against the academic contrivance of Standard Written English, are distributed in predictable disproportion amongst different demographic groups. If we accept the problematic nature of that task while simultaneously accepting the institutional mandate to evaluate our students' discursive competence (including the necessity of failing students whose competence—usually measured against the shibboleth of SWE—does not meet an institutional standard), we allow ourselves to become an instrumental tool in the process of cultural reproduction, warts and all. I will contend below that we should embrace our role in that process (while not being unrepulsed or unconcerned about the reinscription of acute, intractable cultural inequities); for the moment, however, I would simply observe that, since we are implicated by our very presence as academic gatekeepers, we should be harder pressed that perhaps we are to feel exclusively self righteous about our posture in relation to student resistance.

One could further argue that the progressive pedagogies employed by composition teachers which attempt, as Brooke says, "to foster a particular identity or stance towards the world," play into this process of cultural reinscription as much as do the traditional pedagogies they replace (151). Paul Heilker's "Discipline and Punish and Process Paradigms" offers a number of disturbing illustrations of this possibility. Heilker uses Foucault's insights into the disciplinary production of docile bodies to demonstrate that many progressive pedagogies being used in composition classrooms employ advanced techniques of disciplinary subjugation. The popular technique of conducting class discussions in a circular configuration—an effort toward classroom decentering which Heilker calls the "emblem" of the process paradigm in composition—offers teachers Panopticon-like visual access to every student simultaneously. Heilker maintains that this circular arrangement of desks
allows composition teachers to “carry out a general and individual inspection of students’ production processes, observing, comparing, and classifying each student’s application and performance” (6). Other pedagogical strategies typical of the process paradigm, such as the use of peer writing groups, fare no better under the scrutiny of this critique. “The use of small groups,” Heilker contends, “does not increase the students’ power, but rather decreases their power and enhances the teacher’s domination of them by partitioning and pinning them down in smaller units, by giving the instructor more holds over their mass” (5). This economy of visibility, in Foucault’s terms, “assures the hold of the power that is exercised over [the disciplined subject]. . . . It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (187). Heilker’s criticism of the “decentered” classroom has interesting analogies when we turn to collaborative work in which students write together and then individually evaluate their own and their peers’ contribution to the group project; as evaluators of themselves and of one another, students are again “caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (Foucault 201).

Heilker’s critique of progressive pedagogical strategies is, I think, a compelling one, and it has recently been joined by another strong critique from the emerging literature of Men’s Studies. In a recent issue of College English, Connors (“Teaching and Learning as a Man”) and Lad Tobin (“The Personal Narratives of Adolescent Males”) each come to the conclusion that progressive pedagogies in composition are generally biased in favor of the way women interact, learn, and write; this bias, they argue, is coded in the way we act as teachers (whether we are male or female), the way we construct our classroom activities, and the way we evaluate student writing. Connors concludes that “the feminism within and the feminization of composition pedagogy that have become such powerful parts of composition studies today have not yet made much room for male students: and that “we need, for the first time, to confront gender issues wholly,” from both feminine and masculine gendered perspectives (156). Tobin interrogates his attitudes toward male students by sympathetically re-reading a male student’s essay—an essay which he had, upon first hearing it, resisted on account of its “self-congratulatory, vaguely anti-social, and stylistically Hemingwayesque” style. The essay was “embarrassingly male” and, Tobin decides, he read it with a learned predisposition to “resist [its] resistance” (158, 164).

To these interrogations of progressive pedagogies within the discipline of composition, I would like add a critique of the notion that we might teach our way out of our role as reproducers of the dominant culture. Many composition teachers and scholars have proposed course designs which purport to accomplish this, and many more (including myself) design our courses and even our career paths with this among our explicit goals. Though many examples can be found in the literature, I will refer here only to two essays which describe such courses. The first, James Berlin’s “Composition and Cultural Studies,” describes a group of composition courses organized “around an examination of the
cultural codes, the social semiotics, that are working themselves out in shaping consciousness in our students" (50). Berlin wants "students to begin to understand that language is never innocent, instead constituting a terrain of ideological battle" (51). Joseph Harris and Jay Rosen, in "Teaching Writing as Cultural Criticism," describe an equally ambitious course which attempts to teach discourse as a site of struggle by examining mass media. "Our point," they write, "is that we can help students change the stances they take toward the media by altering the circumstances in which they interpret its discourses—by bringing TV out of the living room and into the classroom" (65).

I sympathize with both of these arguments. Both have been influential in my own thought and teaching. I question, however, the extent of our influence, the extent to which critical pedagogy can successfully reach many students on a level where an enduring revision of cultural values might occur. As I have argued above, students who make it as far as the university generally constitute the most successfully inscribed subset of the college-age population. There are exceptions, even major genres of exceptions—especially in community colleges and adult education programs. And there is no coincidence in the fact that many trail-blazing practitioners/theoreticians of critical pedagogy have constructed their own praxis and theories within the context of these exceptional genres; Paulo Freire and Ira Shor are notable examples. But what happens when the students in our classrooms perceive that they have a vested interest in the culture which, arguably, the institution pays us to reproduce? What happens when the non-compliance we face is wholly conservative, largely (if not self-critically) invested in the social imbalances our critical pedagogies target as unjust? C.H. Knoblauch has put the questions this way:

> The issue . . . seems to go beyond tactics to a question of the real plausibility of liberatory teaching in circumstances where there is a powerful self-interest, rooted in class advantage, that works actively, if not consciously, against critical reflectiveness. What do my students have to gain from a scrutiny of values and conditions that work to insure their privilege? Why should they struggle with the troubling self-awareness that one course aims to create when the culture of the university as a whole reassures them of their entitlements? (19)

Knoblauch, I think, has defined a central dilemma here—namely, that universities with large majority-group populations attract students who feel peculiarly entitled to advantages which critical pedagogues argue should be more equally distributed (although we are, admittedly, less than explicit in most cases about how that distribution should/does take place). I concur with Knoblauch’s conclusion that some of these students “are not prepared in school to recognize a dialectical relationship between states of belief and acts of reading, where two sets of meanings interact to produce altered understandings” of their culture and their values—even under the best of circumstances, even with the most insightful and compassionate teachers (like Berlin, Harris, and Rosen themselves) (18). But the issue is even more complicated than Knoblauch suggests. For the failure
Knoblauch describes is more than a failure of critical pedagogy, more than just a failure to revise cultural inequities harmful to oppressed minority or economic groups; it is simultaneously a failure to serve the needs of more than half of our majority-group, economically privileged students—that half which is either female, gay, lesbian, differently abled, etc. Add to this group the males who, as Connors, Tobin and others contend, are ill-served by even our most critically-informed pedagogies, and the argument begins to emerge that any student in a composition classroom might find legitimate grounds for resisting the project of his teacher.

If we accept the impracticality of inducing crucial revision of cultural values amongst a significant subset of majority-group students, if we ultimately exercise our gatekeeping role in such a way as to still more deeply inscribe those cultural values, and if we recognize the arguably severe shortcomings of our best pedagogies, we must then accept to some degree that our moral position within the institution is less exalted than we might wish. Our best praxis is vulnerable to the same lines of critique which have been so successful in disenfranchising the ages-old current-tradition; the results we achieve, in many ways, fail to serve the needs even of those students who feel wholly invested in wholesale cultural reproduction. Can we convincingly argue, then, that we have a peculiarly privileged mandate to serve our students and to invite revision of processes of cultural reproduction?

Confronting Contraries: A Way Out
Throughout this process of rigorous doubting, the claim is nowhere implied that any of these three perspectives toward non-compliant student behaviors fails to articulate an important, valid position. Just the opposite, in fact. The issue, I would argue, is not of any one perspective being wrong, but rather of each perspective being right, and of the rightness of these multiple, contrary positions existing simultaneously. What I have attempted to demonstrate thus far is that each of these perspectives (excerpted, in the case of Connors and Glenn, in a deliberately one-dimensional form) leaves out a crucial, self-critical component which allows for the existence and validity of each contrary perspective. It is this evenly applied critique, I am arguing, which enables each position to exist plausibly in relation to the others.

To represent the case a bit differently:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition A</th>
<th>Proposition B</th>
<th>Proposition C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student, as the primary object of a process of inscription and reproduction which is not voluntary, has a right to resist; she has the creative power for good.</td>
<td>The writing teacher who attempts to avoid reduplicating inequitable patterns of cultural reproduction is benefiting himself, his students, the institution, and society—even though he may be resisting them simultaneously, to some extent; he has the creative power for good.</td>
<td>The institution, as represented by all teachers (not just writing teachers) and administrators, can operate in such a way that it resists reduplicating inequitable patterns of cultural reproduction, even where its methods are arguably undemocratic from students' perspectives; the institution has the creative power for good.</td>
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**Corollary:**

But the student's resistance is sometimes demonstrably harmful to herself or to others, and therefore Propositions B and C can also be true.

But the writing teacher's methods, in and of themselves, parallel oppressive patterns of cultural reproduction and may discriminate predictably against certain processes of learning, and therefore Propositions A and C can also be true.

But the institution historically operates in a conservative manner, reproducing both democratic and undemocratic cultural patterns; and therefore Propositions A and B can also be true.

The importance of the self-critical corollaries to each proposition cannot be overestimated. If any constituency in the postsecondary institution exercises something like a creative power to accomplish good, it does so only when it avoids seeing itself as the lone proprietor of that power. If a writing program administrator implements policies in regard to student non-compliance which presume all student non-compliance to be oppositional, then she is not exercising a creative power for good; on the contrary, she is providing the grounds on which genuine student resistance might develop. If a writing teacher adopts a view of himself in which he represents his students' only ally in a struggle against the oppressive institution, he denies the likelihood of his own complicity in the oppression and the probability that others across the university, in other departments and in the administration, are equally invested and interested in avoiding the reproduction of unjust cultural patterns. And if students base their
non-compliance on a perception of the university resembling that articulated by Farber, they deny any possibility that higher education—however flawed, however oppressive—may offer them the opportunities for self-inspection, growth and complex catharses which so many in academe struggle so thoughtfully and sympathetically to facilitate.

The argument I am making here—namely, that by pairing postulates with critiques we may erase contraries which otherwise appear hopelessly conflicting—requires an admission which might be difficult for many of us to swallow. The admission is that cultural reproduction, far from being something we resist as teachers of writing, represents one of our primary goals. I contend that we should agree to this proposition up front, both to ourselves and to our students, and accept that such a project is entirely consistent with what we value as teachers of writing. Much of what we hope to see emerging in our students’ writing and behavior is evidenced all around us in the cultural fabric we inhabit: critical thought, compassion, self-examination, fairness, equity. We readily recognize these characteristics of our culture as being desirable, worthy of rigorous reproduction. Each of these characteristics has its own antithesis, and the antitheses are all around us in uncomfortable abundance as well. In attempting to reproduce positive theses at the expense of the negative antitheses, we construct our project as an active effort towards self-critical, self-aware cultural reproduction. Returning to Knoblauch’s analysis:

There is a tendency to assume that [postsecondary education’s] challenge is to overcome an inertial condition, but that assumption is false. Change, not stasis, is the condition of life: the instructional challenge, accordingly, is not to force open obstinately closed minds, but to intervene creatively in processes of change that are already underway, making use of the intellectual disequilibrium that the university can foster in the interest of learning. (20)

Again, Knoblauch’s point is a critical one. By envisioning critical pedagogy as an intervention in an ongoing, inexorable process of change, as opposed to an effort to create change where none existed, we allow ourselves the possibility of swimming along with the current even as we cross the river. Our process of advancing critically informed positions while simultaneously critiquing those positions permits us to invite the possibility that the river’s current—consisting, figuratively, of the energies of all those around us in our classrooms, our institutions, and our cultures—is energized at least in part by culturally reproductive energies of which we approve, and at least in part by resistant projects which parallel our own. We don’t have to swim directly upstream. In other words, we permit an acceptance of our roles as figures of some authority in the classroom, as institutional gatekeepers, as teachers who reinscribe important cultural values.

How convenient, one might argue, that this should be the outcome of the discussion—that the teacher/author should in the final analysis be making the case for conventional teacher-authority. And how tired, how hypocritical an argument that would be. But I would challenge that reading; I would charge the
reader to read in this concession (and so it is, genuinely, for many of us: a concession) all the self-critical subtexts which this discussion has attempted to delineate. If we as teachers cannot escape the authority which accompanies our organizational roles, we can neither escape (nor should we try to escape) our responsibility to recognize where that authority serves to reproduce cultural patterns we abhor. Our authority, we should candidly concede, is at once part of the problem and part of the solution; as we admit to its inevitability, we should accept, at the same time, the complexity of the fabric within which it is interwoven.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the distinction Giroux makes between oppositional and resistant behaviors, because I believe this distinction to be crucial to our understanding not only of student behaviors but of our own positions as teachers and administrators. What Giroux labels “radical significance,” the movements Brooke traces in composition’s underlife of “finding language to express other possibilities than those offered by the current sociopolitical climate” (149), the genre of behavior I have been calling “genuinely resistant,” all share a common element of critical self-awareness. The quality these constructs share, I believe, is an awareness of the self, the situation, and the procession from cause to effect which will be catalyzed by the resistant act. This critical self-awareness defines the boundary between what is mere opposition (the traditional teacher/administrator’s rejection of a new approach, the writing teacher’s ready-made pigeon-holing of the baseball-cap-wearing fratboy, the student’s diffident refusal to participate in a class activity) and that which intelligently and deliberately resists the reproduction of inequitable cultural/institutional patterns. Those who enact resistance, in this sense, are aware of their purpose and aware of the processes their resistance aims to initiate and the outcomes it aims to obstruct.

We would all agree, I suspect, that these resistant acts are inherently more interesting and valuable than their oppositional counterparts. We might also agree, however, that for resistance to be more than a quixotic joust at the windmills of uncritical cultural reproduction, they must have the power to make meaning and meaningful change for those who view the act from different, even hostile, perspectives. Self-awareness, then, is not enough. Resistant acts must have meaning which holds beyond the organizational role or personal paradigm of the one who resists; they must be made mutually relevant within a system of perspectives which invariably conflict with one another. I am contending that in order to accomplish effective resistance, then, we must first be willing to appreciate critiques of our own perspective and to appreciate the merits of perspectives which may seem quite distinct from and even contrary to ours. (How different a lesson is this, after all, than those which we hope our students will come to as they write their way through our college composition classes?) And, equally important, we must be ready to appreciate that acts of resistance are constantly being enacted from those different or contrary perspectives, that our resistance is part of a dynamic system in which all members are potential agents of reproduction, resistance, and cultural growth.
Given our organizational roles as writing teachers, how do we think of our classrooms when we envision such a system? We think of them, I would argue, as wildly possible places full of a cultural kinetic energy that can be harnessed in myriad ways, for myriad reasons, with myriad results. We strategize and set curricular goals based on what we want to happen and we imbue those goals with both resistant and reproductive elements. We ground our pedagogies in predictions of how that cultural energy-in-motion will play out and we design them in such a way that we might hope for our goals to be realized and to be made evident and acceptable to all members of the classroom community. We recognize that our classrooms will contain as many sites of motivation and resistance as there are students and teachers, and we try to be as discerning as possible in our respect for resistance and in our rejection of opposition. We try particularly hard to distinguish non-compliant behaviors from behaviors which simply enact creative motivations which are unexpected or different than our own. We assess the outcomes of both our reproductive and our resistant pedagogical projects, refining pedagogies and projects based on what we learn. We ask that our students similarly evaluate their own projects and progress. We ask that our administrators share in our resistant projects and we help them enact resistant projects when they initiate them. We resist administrative projects which are uncritically formulated or which take an oppositional stance to genuine resistance on the part of students or colleagues.

This litany is more than a pep talk, more than a pat on the back and an aphoristic advisement to “do the best we can.” These goals and practices, taken together, represent a strategy for enacting responsible, relativistic resistance within a larger context of cultural reproduction. They validate the authority to reject oppositional behaviors without succumbing to self-annihilation at the altars of tyranny and oppression. They reject mutual exclusivity without rejecting progressive pedagogy or cultural conservatism. The “best we can do,” I believe, is to see our own pedagogical actions for what they are—sincere attempts to contextually resist, not oppose, uncritical cultural reproduction, attempts which are never beyond critique and never enacted from an essential or solitary position of privilege within the academy.

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**Notes**

1See, for example, Geoffrey Chase’s “Accommodation, Resistance and the Politics of Student Writing” (14-15). In adapting this framework, I do not mean to endorse unequivocally the manner in which it has been used by resistance theorists within and without the discipline of Composition Studies. While I find the framework to be a useful one, one that provides a practicable language upon which conversations can be founded, I would caution that this language lends itself equally well to false binarization of issues and the occlusion (rather than demythologizing) of ideological undercurrents.
In fact, Connors and Glenn insist on the importance of communication between students and teachers as a means for avoiding conflict. This communication, I think, is central to developing the kind of contextual awareness which, I'm arguing, is so important.

See Farber's "Preface" to the Pocket Books edition of The Student as Nigger for some interesting discussion of the fuss caused by the essay over the years.

Brooke, following Goffman, defines non-compliant behaviors as contained and disruptive (cf. "Underlife" 143ff.). Brooke's two categories are markedly different than those set forth by Giroux. Brooke's category of "contained" underlife describes behavior which works "around the institution to assert the actor's difference from the assigned role, rather than working for the elimination of the institution" (143). This category most closely resembles the Girouxian category of opposition in that it enacts some form of non-compliance but fails to embody a radical significance. Brooke's second category, "disruptive" underlife, does imply radical significance, but its essential quality is rather the desired abandonment or radical alteration of the cultural/institutional system. By contrast, the lexical categories I am proposing allow for radical significance without a requisite quality of radical institutional revision. In other words, an action which might be appropriately termed "resistance" in the sense conveyed in this article might have as its goal revisions of cultural/institutional systems which are too moderate to qualify as "disruptive" underlife in Brooke's matrix. "Disruptive" underlife, then, describes a narrower band of action at the extreme end of a continuum which, in Giroux's terms, runs from opposition on the one end to radically-significant resistance on the other.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron: "Between 1961-62 and 1965-66, a period of growth in higher education [in France], often interpreted as a democratization of admissions, the structure of the distribution of educational opportunities relative to social class did indeed shift upwards, but it remained virtually unchanged in shape. . . . In other words, the increased enrollment of 18-20 year olds was distributed among the different social classes in proportions roughly equal to those defining the previous distribution of opportunities" (91-3).

Giroux's use of "resistance" in this passage is generic; that is, resistance for Giroux denotes behaviors which are oppositional as well as those which have radical significance. In this paper, I have adopted the term "non-compliance" to refer to these different behaviors generically.

The only aspect of this argument which I would consider in some ways "exclusive" to Composition derives from the ubiquity—verging on universality—of the writing requirement at the college level and the far-reaching interdisciplinarity of textual encoding and decoding. That is, a teacher of, say, Organic Chemistry might justifiably feel "uniquely engaged" with her students in important, culturally critical projects of resistance. As a significant keeper of the gates of the medical professions, an Organic Chemistry teacher whose pedagogical approach tended to provide the support necessary for non-traditional students to be successful could rightfully claim a significant stake in the critical revision of historically inequitable distributions of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital. See Jeff Smith's recent College English article for a more elaborate pursuit of this argument (especially pp. 308-9). For a more general and extremely elegant strategy for construing the projects of our colleagues in other disciplines, see Walvoord, et. al., In the Long Run, especially pp. 11-16.

For another persuasive and influential postmodern critique of the process movement, see Chapters 4 and 5 in Lester Faigley's Fragments of Rationality where the author argues, among other things, that process pedagogy has served "to occlude the criteria used to evaluate writing" (112).

Works Cited


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