Reader Response

“The Wasteland Grows”; Or, What is “Cultural Studies for Composition” and Why Must We Always Speak Good of It?: ParaResponse to Julie Drew

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In her summary of what she heard me say as a plenary speaker at the Research Network Forum at the CCCC convention in 1998, Julie Drew writes: “Victor Vitanza dismissed what he calls ‘cultural studies’ as leading to ‘cynicism and fascism,’ and to viewing students as both ‘objects’ and ‘products’ in his rather polemical address....” (411). Drew explains her motivation for writing: “Some scholars are beginning... to question the usefulness of cultural studies for composition”; and, “I contend that the professional and intellectual standing of both Susan Miller and Victor Vitanza[both of whom question “cultural studies and composition”] suggests a greater potential for persuading others in the field than might be assumed for two less accomplished individuals” (412; 427n.3).

When I delivered the paper “The Wasteland Grows,” I heard myself suggest the following and in three parts.¹ In my opening statement, I said: (1) I want to question, or have you question, in the name of “making knowledge” (doing research), whether or not teaching students cultural studies and other similar studies makes them seek for a better world that is obtainable. I want to suggest to you, on the contrary, that cultural studies may lead only to cynicism. Maybe for the most part producing several generations of students who will have become cynics—more cynical than
cynical. Hypercynical! Transcynical! (2) As a basis for the above suggestion, I examined the claim that Peter Sloterdijk makes in *The Critique of Cynical Reason*—namely, that the stripping away of false consciousness leads to "enlightened false consciousness" and then to cynicism. Marx wrote in *Capital I*: "they [the masses] do this [bring their products and value together] without being aware of it" (166-67). In my plenary address, I stated: *The basic assumption [Marx makes along with Freud et al.] is that if the masses only knew [what] they did or [that they] are doing it, they would stop it!*

In a parallel manner and for heuristic purposes, I suggested that teachers of cultural studies attempt to get their students to engage in a rational critique of what they and others do so that they might see they are hailed to act against their best interests. I suggested, given the logic that prevails, that this seeing and awareness should prompt the students to see what they are doing and to cease engaging in a fetishistic practice. What Sloterdijk (3-8) and Slavoj Žižek (30-33) suggest, however, is that after a long and arduous instruction, "they [some of the masses, students, or patients] know very well [can now see] what they are doing, but still, they are doing it." Or, "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it." In other words, they remain "fetishist in practice." ²

Sloterdijk goes on to argue that historically enlightened false consciousness leads not to liberation but to fascism. I stated: *Chapter 4 [of Critique]—"After the Unmaskings: Cynical Twilight. Sketches for the Self-repudiation of the Ethos of Enlightenment"—is a devastating critique, in which Sloterdijk uses reason contrareason on his way to unfolding "The Weimar Symptom: Models of Consciousness in German Modernity."

I then made the following Call For Research (after all, I was addressing the RNF): *this is what I would openly suggest that cultural studies researchers—that is, you who are theorists and practitioners and others—DO: Not only teach the basic principles of critiquing the culture at all levels (I am not calling for the abolition of cultural studies!) but also and more so be vigilant now about the effects such teaching has on your students and consequently on the rest of us. On the Social fabric. (Part of our grossest national product is cynicism!) But you will have to be more than just vigilant, right? You who are researchers. What I would have you do is engage in a series of longitudinal studies, following, tracking your students, to see what they will have learned in terms of your teaching them cultural studies. The primary questions in such a study would have to be: do the students ever stop thinking and practicing racism, sexism, classism, age-ism; do they ever stop thinking and practicing their homophobia and self-hatred, etc.; or, do they, in taking on an understanding of false consciousness in your "class"rooms, only become more cynical in their acts of violence against other human beings and themselves? In other words, do they know such thinking and acting are wrong but do it anyway?*
Finally, (3), I reported an incident: Let me close on a pleasant yet ever-haunting memory in the form of an anecdote that would be an antidote: I will never forget the honesty—the brute and raw honesty—of Jim Berlin, when, at the Marxist Literary Group at CMU, he delivered a paper questioning his success as a teacher of social liberation. He reported on a student who fully understood how he was being manipulated by the media machine, understood how he had become an object in the mediascape, but nonetheless continued cynically to purchase the products that were the object of his media-driven desire. Yes, the student was but an object purchasing objects! After all, when everything was said and undone, the student desired some thing to believe in and to believe for him. Jim cited this example so as to turn it into a question for the audience—namely, how might we take this and other similar students to the other side of what we might deem social liberation? The audience that Jim addressed that evening at the MLG, however, was silent in response to his question! I was on the same panel with Jim. Though we had not planned antithetical positions, I attempted to break the silence by raising the counter-question of whether we who taught cultural studies, etc., were producing a generation of cynics, as I have once again attempted to ask here today. Yet there was only more silence. There before us: Gawking Silence! I asked the RNF audience not to be complicit in the silence. My final statement was: I would humbly call for major research efforts to determine the success or failure—and longitudinally—of whether cultural-studies theorists and pedagogues are socially liberating students or producing but cynics or, worse, producing liberated students who are but incipient cynics. Producing but wastelands within them and their own children and students. And on and on geometrically. Virulently. For those who wish to do their homework—scholarly research—I have placed my plenary address on the Web. 1 I have corrected two typos and added a bibliography; I made no other changes.

For those who are interested in reception—how the audience received this particular address shortly after being delivered and then for the next three days of the CCCC convention—I can report that the reception, of course, was mixed. The discussion at RNF never addressed my call for research. In fact, the discussion went pretty much nowhere, though I tried to make a distinction between banal strategies and fatal strategies (Baudrillard) in dealing with social problems. As I pointed out at RNF, this whole issue that I raise requires much time and discussion and an openness to, as well as the risk of, transference (as the conditions for the possibility of community) before we can even begin to hear each other. It takes a long time and special tactics to turn a Gestalt switch in someone’s disciplinary mind. It takes a willingness to give up the idea of disciplinarity and punishment.

After RNF and during the CCCC convention, the intermittent comments and discussions were typical, which I will relate as ranging from both rude epithets and rhetorical-accusatory questions being tossed at me to a willingness to discuss with me the question of cultural
studies and cynicism. I do understand the rudeness as a deflection and as a sign of fear and perhaps denial of disciplinary doubt or misrecognition, which compulsively leads to acts of punishment. So many people have their professional disciplinary identities tied up with the big business of Composition and Cultural Studies. How could they rest easy when hearing someone say that their methods of production and commodification might be harmful to their student-customers? I agree with Bill Readings's assessment in *The University in Ruins* that Cultural Studies is one more brand name that a community of theorists take much stock in and have much invested in (90). Even if, cynically.

As I have suggested, there was really no time at RNF, nor is there time or space here, but I am willing to engage and discuss with my colleagues these or other issues and the various descriptions and arguments that I have yet to put forth and in great detail in an extended forum. I would be most amenable to discussions either in print or in seminar or both and repeatedly over extended periods of time. I would hope that the cultural studies and composition theorists and teachers would consider my offer as a collegial challenge to interrogate *What is called Cultural Studies* and its relationships with composition studies. What are we to think when Drew, explaining her motivation, writes, "Some scholars are beginning . . . to question the usefulness of cultural studies for composition" (412). So we have to ask not only, "What is cultural studies and composition?" but also, "Why must we always speak good of it"? I would think that there is great hope in questioning any and everything that we do in the name of "cultural studies for composition." Is this not, after all, what cultural studies is all about? Should we not, as theorists and teachers, engage in perpetual exchange of self-critique? Did not Uncle Marx teach us the value of self-critique? And especially critique of each other? I would think of such an exchange not as oppositional but as exceeding the oppositional. I am not referring to a *them* and an *us*, but to that which would exceed them: call it, a paratactic aggregation, a name for a community that does not yet exist in our field. I am not naive enough to think that just naming such a community is enough to call it into existence.

We might go a little further to make possible such a community: we might begin questioning, as Drew suggests, the very conditions for the possibilities of critique. I can think of no other question that is more important to our field, as we move into the next millennium, than the question of the effectiveness of cultural studies, composition, and production. In questioning, however, we must be prepared to realize that the conditions of the Symbolic (the economy that determines all things written, thought, spoken, emoted, acted by way of the Negative) make all things by way of the impossible. The economy at work and play in the conditions for the possibilities of critique, therefore, is a restricted one (Bataille). It makes critique in a community possible by way of the impossible, by ways
of exclusion. It is a critical expenditure with reserves, without any
notion of exuberance. If we continue to accept this condition—in the name
of discipline and punishment, in the name of recognition for others and
ourselves in the name of propriety—what may remain to us and our students
are ever-growing wastelands of cynicism. Of course, everything that each
of us knows in terms of the conditions of knowing denies everything that I
have said and am now saying as being unreasonable. While reason can be
pervasive, we for some reason cannot be. But if we would change the
condition of possibilities, what would be expected of us is an ingenious
attitude yet unleashed on our disingenuous disciplinary (critical) thinking
and teaching. If we conclude that we cannot change the conditions, then we
are but left with, in our final paradoxical defense—but it is not necessarily
an evil thing to be Left with—fatal strategies.

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Notes

1 My title is from Friedrich Nietzsche, as quoted and responded to and
elaborated on by Martin Heidegger in What is Called Thinking? The full quote is
built incrementally and meditated on by Heidegger in his attempt to follow
Nietzsche's hope of delivering people from the Thinking that would redeem the past
(history) by way of revenge. For Nietzsche, What is called Thinking in Cultural
Studies? would be a reactionary thinking weighed down by the spirit of gravity.
2 I have previously and extensively used Sloterdijk and Žižek in my discussions
of writing histories of rhetoric. In his dissertation (UTA, spring 2000), Thomas
Rickert explores more fully than I have in the RNF paper and in this response the
importance of Sloterdijk and especially Žižek for rethinking composition studies.
3 Go to http://www.uta.edu/english/V/berlin/papers.html
4 Indeed, this is a layered, fused sentence in a contrapuntal composition.
5 I am presently teaching a seminar, "Rhetoric, Poetics, and The New Economy,"
that deals with many of the issues raised here. For a fuller discussion go to http://
www.uta.edu/english/V/rpne/

Works Cited


Drew, Julie. "(Teaching) Writing: Composition, Cultural Studies, Production."


Sloterdijk, Peter. Critique of Cynical Reason. Trans. Michael Eldred. Minneapolis: