Richard Boyd’s “Reading Student Resistance” and his earlier *JAC* article “Imitate Me; Don’t Imitate Me” have convinced me that René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire may have much to teach us about the dynamics of composition. Both articles offer an impressive analysis of imitation as a moment of coercion and “double bind” for students and teacher.

In my view, Boyd’s most significant insight concerns the reciprocal nature of resistance in teacher-student interaction. Students resist teachers’ attempts to set learning agendas for them, while teachers resist these same students because of the implied alternative agendas in students’ resistance. We teachers are every bit as involved in such resistance as our students. I confess—with a bit of embarrassment—that I saw myself in Boyd’s description of his own defensive response to a teaching assistant who wrote to him asking, “Why don’t you do your job and show us how we’re supposed to teach writing?” Like Boyd, I’ve had teaching assistants write such things to me. I too have often responded with two-page tomes to a TA’s few lines of resistance. Like him, I realize that these long responses are “ultimately intended as persuasive and not dialogic” and that in writing them I am resisting their perspective as strongly as they are resisting mine.

Boyd’s use of Girard’s theory of mimetic desire helps me to see part of this reciprocal resistance more clearly. As teachers, we do place TA’s in a “double bind” of “imitate me; don’t imitate me,” asking them to imitate us by considering the big questions about how writing instruction
functions in American society, but getting threatened when they imitate us by asking those same questions about the structures of our own classrooms. Both of Boyd’s articles show rather clearly that such double binds are part of many of our pedagogies. (He specifically cites the critical and liberatory pedagogies of Paulo Friere, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor; the academic socialization pedagogies of David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell; and the writing workshop pedagogies of Lad Tobin and myself.) In all these contexts, Boyd indicates that imitation is never a simple pedagogical moment but is always wrapped up with student resistance and the classroom struggle over power and authority. At present, his work ends with an open question about that resistance and struggle: maybe these elements are foundational for learning and we can’t escape them; or, maybe we can “write a new tale of resistance” that unites teacher and students in the examination of social relations we “too often take for granted.”

Following Boyd’s lead, I’ve turned to Girard’s texts. Locating Boyd’s insights about reciprocal resistance in the context of Girard’s larger theory of mimetic desire raises a set of additional questions, ones that I hope Boyd (or another scholar) will work out for all of us in composition. In this response essay, I’d like to point the way toward such research, first, by providing a somewhat fuller sketch of Girard’s theory and the place of imitation within it, and then by speculating about some questions Girard’s theory raises for composition.

Rene Girard’s Three Moments
As I read Girard’s theory (and I confess I have only just begun to encounter it), the double bind of “imitate me; don’t imitate me” is actually identified as the first of three foundational moments in human culture. I suspect that analyzing composition teaching in relation to all three moments will prove insightful for our field. Girard, after all, saw himself as an anthropologist, a historian, a literary critic, and a Christian apologist. His theory attempts to explain the origin of human culture in violence, and it posits identification with the victims of violence as the means of spiritual rejuvenation. If he’s right about the almost universal scope of his theory, then it ought to apply equally to something as foundational as human growth into language and literacy. If his critics are correct—and he seems to be criticized most often by feminists, who find him androcentric, and by postcolonial anthropologists, who find him orientalist—then examining the gaps and silences in his theory may also prove revealing.

Girard posits a first moment of mimetic rivalry that founds human
culture, the unfortunate but necessary by-product of which is violence. In the second moment, human society develops scapegoating rituals to manage this necessary violence and preserve human culture. This state of affairs necessitates the third moment: renunciative identification with the victim (which, for Girard, is the redeeming force of the Christian gospels). These three moments are interconnected, and together they point to the reversal of scapegoating as the “most important” moment in human history (Williams, *Girard Reader* 266). Let me sketch these moments a bit more fully, even though I recognize a complete description isn’t possible in just a few pages.

In Girard’s view, imitation and mimetic desire are fundamental to human learning. To learn, we have to imitate—first, the behaviors of adults around us, and then the desires of those same adults. Girard explicitly claims that imitation is the primary preconscious moment and that desire is a learned extension of imitation. He argues explicitly with Freud (who saw desire as primary and imitation as the extension). According to Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, the male child desires the mother but finds he can’t have her because the father is already there. As a consequence, the child represses his desire and imitates the father, thereby attaining socially sanctioned sexuality. Girard reinterprets Freud’s theory and argues that it isn’t desire that comes first but imitation: the male child wants to be like Dad, identifies with Dad, and wants both to act like Dad and desire what Dad desires. As Girard puts it, imitation of the model involves appropriating as one’s own desire that which the model Other desires. Only after he begins imitating Dad does the child develop a desire for the mother—along with, of course, an appropriated desire for all sorts of other things, from shaving equipment and power tools to a passion for football and a desire to avoid brussel sprouts. Girard points out that starting with imitation allows us to bypass Freud’s bizarre oedipal readings of sexuality and to focus instead on the culturally constructed nature of all desire (*Violence*). Imitation and mimetic desire are thus building blocks of human culture. Throughout human society, most adults foster such imitation and identification: fathers want their sons to be “chips off the old block.” Girard suggests, in fact, that without imitation much human learning cannot take place.

But a necessary by-product of imitative desire is mimetic rivalry, and this rivalry is the source and explanation of the reciprocal resistance that Boyd analyzes. At some point, the child’s attempts to imitate brings him or her into conflict with the adult, and instead of being master and disciple the two are suddenly in competition—a competition that, in Girard’s
view, necessarily breeds violence. This violence may take a variety of forms, from minor flashes of temper to real bloodshed. Sometimes adults respond to this competition in ways that intend to protect the child (as when adults tell Junior, "No, you can't run the power lawnmower even if Dad does!"). Sometimes adults respond to the libidinal tension that Freud describes (as when Mom and Dad put Junior to bed for a nap so they can have some time alone and thereby thwart Junior's desire to have all of Mommy's attention). Sometimes the response is full-scale parental violence, as in the myths Girard loves to cite: the Greek myth of Cronos eating his children and the New Testament story of King Herod slaughtering all the innocents in order to circumvent the birth of the future King of the Jews. In all these cases (even when mythic rage is not present), what the child experiences is the necessary violence of mimetic rivalry. Junior's feelings are hurt; maybe he is spanked or otherwise punished; he is told "No." Dad, for all his good intentions, is equally wrapped up in mimetic rivalry. The child has become an obstacle for him: before Dad can mow the lawn, Junior has to be put safely out of the way; before he can even talk with his spouse, he must endure the interpersonal minefield of getting Junior through the tantrum and down for a nap. Mimetic rivalry, says Girard, inevitably generates competition and violence, even in the best of families (or in any other human culture). Mimetic rivalry creates the double bind, the "imitate me; don't imitate me" moment in which the model Other both wants the attention and adoration of the learner but also wants the learner to fail (or at least to fall short of the performance of the model Other). This moment requires some form of violence to resolve it; furthermore, Girard insists that mimetic rivalry, left unchecked, will escalate to bloodshed.

In Girard's view, this first moment of mimetic desire and rivalry creates in human culture the need to manage violence. Thus, Girard's second moment, scapegoating, occurs. If we assume (as he does) that all this mimetic activity happens preconsciously, and that the human psyche of imitator and imitated is full of desire and violence, then human culture can only be protected by some sort of release mechanism for violence. The scapegoat is, Girard argues, the necessary result of such preconscious violence. The creation of a scapegoat provides an outlet for the violence generated by mimetic rivalry, and blaming and even killing the scapegoat thus reduces tension and restores social order. As in the example above, Mom and Dad might deal with mimetic rivalry by coming to see Junior as "bad" in some way and scapegoat him for family tension by sending him to see a child psychologist to get pumped full of Ritalin. Or (as in
Freud’s myth in *Totem and Taboo*, a book Girard repeatedly reinterpreted), maybe all the brothers in a family will eventually scapegoat their father as the source of their trials and actually or symbolically do the old man in. Girard’s books—*Violence and the Sacred, The Scapegoat,* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*—involve long meditations on the place of scapegoat rituals in myth and in ritual from many cultures. In all cases, he sees the preconscious social process of a mimetic rivalry as creating a scapegoat who can be blamed for the inherent tensions, and the killing of the scapegoat as both releasing the tension and restoring the social order. The scapegoat is thus a necessary and inevitable part of human culture, created by the force of mimetic rivalry. It’s a necessary second moment.

Now, in Girard’s view, the violence of the scapegoat moment equally necessitates the redemptive force of Christianity. In response to the originary violence of mimetic rivalry, God creates the renunciative identification with the victim that is the core of Christianity. The scapegoat, after all, isn’t real; it’s a construct of human culture. Junior isn’t really a “bad” child; the father isn’t really responsible for the ills of all the brothers. Whoever gets forced into the role of scapegoat in whatever corner of human society isn’t really responsible; the role of scapegoat is just generated by the workings of mimetic rivalry. So human society needs some new mechanism that can break us out of the (preconscious) pattern of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating and that can instead focus us on the real issues (which involve how to live and structure society in righteous symbiosis with available creation). As Girard argues, the action of Christ—through total identification with the victim, even to the point of death—provides this corrective: it teaches us to sympathize with the scapegoat, to see the foolishness of our competitive ways, and (in time) to change the nature of world and society. Girard argues that the Christian gospels teach us that God is on the scapegoat’s side. They challenge us to root out the preconscious effects of mimetic rivalry, to identify with the victims instead of scapegoating them, and to attempt to form new social relations. This third moment of renunciative identification is thus a direct response to the first two moments, indicating that the violence spawned by the mimesis necessary to culture isn’t the ultimate end for humanity. For us, living after many centuries of human culture, the three moments of mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, and renunciative identification are structurally interconnected and provide the endless texture of human life. Together, they form Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. A full application of his theory to any element of culture—whether literature, film, world
religions, the fashion industry, or even the composition classroom—would involve the articulation of the structural relations between these three moments. He insists on their interconnection.

Of course, even while Girard himself insists on the necessary interrelation of these moments, scholars using Girard have wrestled with other directions that his ideas might take. In *The Violence Mythos*, Barbara Whitmer, for instance, wonders if Girard’s notion of mimetic rivalry is only half the story, a “basic mistrust” approach to human origins that ought to be supplemented by a corresponding “basic trust” approach—an idea which, if developed, might necessitate a revision of Girard’s first moment. Paul Dumouchel speculates on the impossibility of Girard’s second moment, the scapegoating mechanism, as a general theory of culture, since the terms used for analysis seem to have to be altered in order to apply them in each cross-cultural setting. In “René Girard without the Cross?” James Williams wonders if the mimetic theory absolutely needs Christianity to arrive at a moment like renunciative identification. Obviously, there is much to investigate here, both in exploring such nuanced reconsiderations and in applying wholesale Girard’s theories to explain diverse cultural phenomena.

**Speculations for Composition Studies**

Girard’s far-reaching theory is, of course, much more complex than this short summary would suggest. Yet, I think his three moments (and other scholars’ extensions of his work) may give us the tools with which to examine the work of composition. Let me suggest some of the questions that I see generated by Girard’s theories as they might apply to our field.

First, Girard’s root insight—the necessary place of imitation in human learning and the equally necessary violence it produces through mimetic rivalry—suggests the kind of work compositionists must do at both the practical and theoretical levels. At a practical level, the concepts of imitation and mimetic rivalry suggest a way of questioning the activity of any given discourse community and its written language behaviors. In any community, for instance, who are the model Others that aspiring members imitate? What are the behaviors of those model Others that are most imitated? What are the desired objects of the model Others, and how do they become desired objects for disciples? What are the forms of violence—the “don’t imitate me” messages—that this particular community spawns? I suspect that such research questions might provide real insight into a variety of specific communities. Could we, for instance, examine the rhetoric of peer review reports for our major journals to
discern what sort of texts are recommended to aspiring scholars as model Others and to describe what sort of violences we professionals use against those who imitate us, thereby fostering relations of mimetic rivalry? Could we try to figure out, for any given teacher of first-year composition, what relationship of imitation and mimetic rivalry that teacher holds to the model texts she or he assigns students and how that imitation and rivalry affect the grading process? Do these relationships change from teacher to teacher even when those teachers all assign the same textbooks in the same institution?

Girard’s concepts also seem to be worth investigating at a theoretical level. He repeatedly claims that mimetic rivalry is obvious, but I wonder if his feminist and postcolonial critics aren’t seeing something equally obvious. Is it always the case that imitation breeds rivalry? Or is this dynamic in fact a feature of western patriarchal culture? Can we imagine cases in which imitator and model Other don’t come into competition? Girard seems to assume, much as Darwin and Marx did, that once the imitator takes on the desires of the model Other the resources that are desired become scarce (for instance, there’s never enough maternal attention to go around). Is such scarcity inevitable? I wonder about this scarcity model especially as it pertains to language development. William Stafford calls writing “one of the great, free human activities” and claims it is available to all (19). Is Stafford correct and language development is a form of mimesis in which there are enough resources for all who enter? Or is Girard correct and here too we’ll find rivalry?

Second, Girard’s notion of the preconscious pressure toward scapegoating is one of the most important and provocative aspects of his theory. I suspect that if we look we will find that scapegoating, in the sense he describes, is a constant feature of writing communities and writing classrooms. Since reading Girard, for example, I’ve spent some time trying to list the reasons why students are presumed to need first-year composition, and I’ve tried to envision how Girard might imagine each one as a scapegoat created by mimetic rivalry. A faculty member from another department calls me up, outraged that English composition isn’t doing its job, and cites spelling errors and misplaced commas as evidence. Is scapegoating occurring here in response to rivalry between academic departments? Or could the strong belief that there is such a thing as general academic writing and the corollary belief that students do it badly also be forms of scapegoating that make students victims of mimetic rivalry over the structure of argumentation? In the analysis and assessment of individual writing programs, will Girard’s concepts of rivalry and scapegoating
help us explain how small group response functions, how students and teachers respond to the tensions inherent in critical pedagogy, or how the norming process works while reading placement portfolios? Girard is well aware that his concept of scapegoating took shape in part as a consequence of reading Jacques Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy.” Perhaps at a theoretical level our field is ready for a book like Jasper Neel’s *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, but one that adds Girard’s theory of mimetic rivalry to the analysis of writing in western culture.

Third, I am not sure I’m comfortable with Girard’s effort to encourage everyone to accept the truth of the Christian gospels, but I am curious about his move to renunciative identification as a possible moment in the creation of new social relations. I wonder, for example, how many of our major approaches to composition instruction have something like this moment in mind. Boyd’s essay “Reading Student Resistance,” for example, seems to locate such renunciative identification in several of the pedagogical moves that we make in our profession (though he is working explicitly with the first of Girard’s three moments). Isn’t there an element of renunciative identification in the Freirean moment that Boyd identifies in his own teaching of the early 1980s, a moment when he was convinced that he could and would be the “ally” of students in a mutual struggle for “liberation from the structures of oppression”? Is there a moment of renunciative identification in his descriptions of Ira Shor’s *When Students Have Power* and James Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* as pedagogical innovations that disturb those “hierarchies established by and organized around mimetic desire”? In these cases, aren’t composition teachers trying to reform culture in the ways that Girard identifies? That is, aren’t they making visible the ways that the scapegoating process of mimetic rivalry has always been arbitrary and unjust, making possible other ways of imagining identification that may allow a renewal of human culture?

Finally, I also see potential in the provocative questions raised by scholars who seek to revise Girard’s ideas. As I read about mimetic rivalry, I kept thinking of Tobin’s analysis in *Writing Relationships* of male students’ competition and of the analysis of female learners’ “connected knowing” in the now-dated *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al.). I wondered, in short, how to make sense of mimetic rivalry in terms of gender. As I read about scapegoating and the renunciative identification of Christianity, I kept thinking of the strong case that Victor Villanueva makes for the scapegoating violence of Christian rhetoric in the conquest of New World peoples and of Harriet
Malinowiz’s efforts to enact, from a position other than Christianity, a pedagogy of identification with gay and lesbian students. I wondered how composition teachers might extend the cross-cultural critique of the scapegoat mechanism or of the necessary place of Christianity in this theory.

As these brief comments make clear, I am only just beginning to explore how Girard’s work might enrich our field, but I’ve seen enough to be intrigued by the possibilities. I am indebted to Boyd for calling my attention to Girard’s work and for suggesting that we employ it as a means of clarifying the teaching of writing. I suspect that engagement with the whole of Girard’s theory will repay our attention. Boyd’s explorations are truly insightful. They point us in useful directions.

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Works Cited


I grew up with stickers—a kind of burr common in west Texas, light brown and about the size of a pea with pointed barbs. A single stickweed plant was wildly extravagant in its production so that if you were outside playing and fell on one, you became coated with stickers. Pulling them out of your clothes was a tedious process that often resulted in pricked fingers.

For those of us who don’t fit neatly—if at all—into the category of Other, reading Sue Hum’s “‘Yes, We Eat Dog Back Home’: Contrasting Disciplinary Discourse and Praxis on Diversity” might be like falling into a bed of stickers. We might experience some pain, curse and fume a bit, but quickly find ways to free ourselves from the barbs. Hum asserts that even though inclusion and diversity have come to hold positions of importance in composition and rhetoric, there has been no major paradigm shift; instead, diversity has simply been assimilated into the discipline’s superstructure, creating a normative pluralism that preserves “traditional wisdom while disseminating new knowledge” (575). Thus, the revolutionary force of multiculturalism has been coopted and contained, rendered safe and nontoxic.