Whole Lotta Resistin' Goin' On

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I enjoyed reading both Joe Hardin’s Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance Theory in Composition and Andrea Greenbaum’s Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies. Both volumes wrestle visibly with the idea of resistance—even with the term itself—in ways that can enrich our thinking and teaching about composition. Hardin and all of the authors of the essays collected in Greenbaum’s book prompt us to examine resistance in ways that can better prepare us for the experiences we and our students have in our composition classes. After reading both books, after rereading Composition and Resistance to recall things those authors had said, and after being reminded by Alan
France that resistance in this context "most commonly refers to a general opposition to authority, a student's opposition to pedagogical authority, and, especially, a writer's opposition to discursive conventions" (206), I am beginning to sense the dawn of a subdiscipline: "compositance." There's so much talk, exploration, criticism, definition, historiography, and anthologizing of resistance in connection to composition studies that it's now difficult for me to take the resistance out of composition. As John Trimbur writes in the lead essay to *Insurrections*, "Resistance is one of those things that once you start to see it, you can't stop finding more and more instances" (5). Indeed, Trimbur lists six examples of resistance that students may experience, ranging from resistance to school itself to resistance to parents and their influence. Particularly unsettling is Trimbur's remark about resistance to teachers and classroom practices. Referring to a comment that C.H. Knoblauch made in *Composition and Resistance*, Trimbur writes that this kind of resistance can be "heartbreaking, in part because it reminds teachers that students may well believe, from the perspective of class advantage, that they have little to gain from 'critical reflectiveness' or 'troubling self-awareness'" (5).

The question of what is to be "gained" from resistance, resistance theory, and resistance pedagogy is itself a troubling one. I recall Stephen North's warning note in his essay in *Composition and Resistance*: "It's very easy to simply replace one hegemony with another. That is, in order to create what it calls critical consciousness, the discourses of the Left may—for all I know, must—go beyond simply pointing out the interestedness of the discourses they oppose, to posit their own visionary privilege, their own insistent framing of what is 'real'" (134).

Still, these days it's not easy to talk about resistance. For one thing, the term itself is so loaded, so evocative of events and actions whose links to composition may be only that one can write compositions about them. Trimbur writes in *Insurrections* that "to utter the term 'resistance' was to call up a whole history of its denominations—in psychoanalysis, immunology, education, Foucauldian critical theory, cultural studies, feminism, and traditions of left-wing politics" (9). I suppose we could map these various models of resistance onto composition studies, but such analogies—immunology, for instance—run the risk of transforming the participants into bugs. Along with Ellen Strenski, I think of electrical current and resistance. In her *Insurrections* chapter, she proposes an analogy between electronic circuitry and the flow of curricular decisions within the university (94–98). For Strenski, computer technology be-
comes the site of a battle between faculty who are resistant or reluctant to investigate the ways in which technology might further develop critical thinking, and administrators whose embrace of new technology seems to put them in the arms of corporations. Perhaps this means that administrators are resisting those faculty who welcome what the new technology can add to the work of critical consciousness-raising. Faculty who resist the new technology may be doing so out of concern for a sense of primacy in the instructional model. With all this resistance going on around the issue of technology, Strenski wonders whether the accumulated power—the coil-sprung energies—might place all participants in "collective peril."

On the political front, I think of resistance movements aimed at liberating oppressed people from tyrannical regimes—people whose lives are threatened daily. It would, of course, be the height of arrogance for compositionists to profess, for example, that the teaching of composition protects people from night raids by murderous regimes, and no one I can think of suggests such a thing. Still, as Trimbur points out, "resistance" has become a "tragic trope" in a "double sense, for it names both the experience of disorder and suffering that makes resistance necessary in the first place and the consequences that follow acts of resistance" (13). I think of the kind of resistance that we can no longer pretend we are capable of maintaining in response to acts of mass destruction. And although I co-edited a book entitled Composition and Resistance, I am less confident now, ten years later, that either students or their teachers are particularly well positioned to take up the challenge of putting up resistance to institutional, political, ideological and/or social forces that work to dehumanize individuals and communities. And yet, Hardin reminds us that critical pedagogies employing resistance theories have "nevertheless offered compositionists the possibility that work in the writing classroom might be used to mount a counteraction to the acculturative and normative mission of the academy" (42). More simply, he says that writing is "always an activity of resistance" (113). It's hard to get away from resistance, and since at least 1988 or so, when Geoffrey Chase's article, "Accommodation, Resistance, and the Politics of Student Writing" appeared in College Composition and Communication, it's been hard to talk about composition without quickly qualifying much of the discussion with talk of one or another form or model of resistance. Composistance.

Resistance pedagogy is not limited, however, to the teaching of resistance to any and all established institutional practices and/or ideolo-
gies. Hardin writes, "I resist the idea that compositionists must turn away from pedagogies that openly address how language promotes ideology or constructs knowledge. Compositionists cannot be afraid to teach students to express their own values and ideas in the rhetoric of academic, cultural, or disciplinary discourses and to resist the unthinking acceptance of the values these discourses promote" (9). That's a tall order—to teach students to write the discourses of the academy and/or the dominant culture while also teaching them to resist accepting the values inherent in those discourses. To his credit, Hardin aims not to provide a how-to discussion of the implementation of critical pedagogy but, rather, a genuinely interesting guided tour of what North might have called resistance theory's "house of lore." One thread of that tour is the exploration of three pedagogical positions or approaches to teaching composition most commonly found in English studies: "that which constructs English studies as the aesthetic arbiter of cultural value, that which constructs English studies as a service institution of social and academic acculturation, and that which attempts to resist both the aesthetic and acculturative nature of English studies" (23). It is the third pedagogical approach that Hardin ultimately embraces, a pedagogy designed to "emphasize student authority and to de-emphasize the liberatory aspects of critical work" (8).

How will we know we've taught resistance? Donna Singleton once asked if resistance is "the same thing as taking a critical look at things" (42). Her question speaks to the issue Hardin's book foregrounds: the connection between critical pedagogy and resistance theory. Hardin suggests that "Teaching resistance requires only two specific outcomes: one, that students learn to resist the uncritical acceptance of cultural representations and institutional practices by interrogating rhetoric to uncover its motives and values; and two, that students learn to produce text that uses rhetoric and convention to give voice to their own values and positions" (7).

Is it possible, then, to reconsider resistance and "resistance theories" in such a way as to revitalize at least a commitment from educators to develop active pedagogies designed to empower students? There are a lot of things our students already resist—and this may be good. One thing we might not want them to resist is us—at least not too much, at least if we are not positioning ourselves as absolute institutional authorities. If we are doing that, then according to many of the writers in Insurrections we should encourage students to find ways to resist us, our discourses, and our role as institutional hegemony reinforcers. Of course, if any of us
really believe we are ultimate authorities, we are not likely to teach anyone to resist us; what would be the point? So, teachers of resistance must already believe that our own "subject positions" within the university (or school) are determined by the intersections and interactions of power lines over which we ourselves may have little control (Hardin 6). Hardin's interesting study has at its heart a clear modus operandi: "teaching resistance as a part of writing instruction is, in fact, an ethical and necessary activity" (5). Why? Perhaps Greenbaum provides an answer in her introductory remarks to Insurrections: "The rhetoric of resistance is the rhetoric of possibility—that which is not, but may which someday come to be" (xvii). I take this to mean that the rhetoric of resistance is, then, the things we say about types of actions that don't (yet) exist.

So, we will have to go back to square one to understand what we mean when we talk about "resistance" in the context of the everyday work of people who teach and learn composition. Twenty years ago, Don Byrd wrote, "Sometimes the only way to read exactly what you want is to write it." Explaining his own motives for writing Opening Spaces, Hardin says, "I have never seen a clear articulation of the relationships among modern aesthetics, reproductive theories of education, resistance theory, and postmodern ethics in one place" (9). At least one challenge for me in considering Hardin's book for this discussion was to determine whether Opening Spaces provides that clear articulation. As I said at the outset, I enjoyed reading Opening Spaces. (Is my enjoyment relevant? I think so, because in this case, what I appreciate most about Hardin's book is the visible working out of what, in the end, is a reasonably accessible, if not entirely unfamiliar, argument for a dynamic approach to composition.) Hardin writes in his introduction that Opening Spaces "is, above all, a book about how we theorize the writing class" (9). As for clear articulations, there are quite a few of them. This, however, is not one of them: "Instead of proposing a universalized idea of critique and resistance, critical scholars might emphasize the open and unformulated nature of an always empty and always deferred critical discursive ground, where students' and teachers' individual values and identities can be worked out in the intersubjectivity and intertextuality of postmodern notions of discourse and in the act of writing" (111). I kept reading this passage, thinking, on the one hand, that I understand it but, on the other, that I don't know what it means. How would I go about emphasizing the "open and unformulated nature of an always empty and always deferred critical discursive ground?" Would I be able to orchestrate the working out of my
values and my identity—along with those of my students—in “the intersubjectivity and intertextuality of postmodern notions of discourse and in the act of writing?”

As I said, I think I understand this, but I don’t connect these words with things I know how to do. Without being glib, I found myself resisting this statement of what critical scholarship and pedagogy must do. Ninety-nine pages earlier, however, Hardin’s argument seems quite clear: “The role of classroom writing instruction in the current ‘culture crisis’ should be threefold: to further politicize the teaching of academic rhetoric, canon, genres, conventions, and methods; to make those forms and conventions available sites for student articulation; and to make the critical position of author a realistic possibility for students” (12). Between these two remarks, then, Hardin conducts an incisive discussion that ranges from the “crisis” in English studies brought on by debates about what constitutes appropriate subject matter, to a radical proposal to move away from the idea of “emancipatory” pedagogy—so adored throughout the late 1980s and 1990s—and toward a pedagogy of writing as mediation. Hardin suggests that every instance of writing represents a new presence, a “new voice in the political din” (111). Educators from James Berlin to Stanley Aronowitz to J. Elspeth Stuckey to Geneva Smitherman have all foregrounded the value—and necessity—of finding ways to empower students to challenge power structures. To be completely candid, one of the reasons that I read Hardin with pleasure is that he reviews many of the pedagogical positions I find invigorating and humane. When he writes that it is no longer adequate—or appropriate—to consider as a sufficient goal “the production of an aesthetically enlightened or vocationally skilled graduate,” I nod my head in agreement (80). At the same time, I also envision writing programs and English departments throughout the country that would consider aesthetic enlightenment and vocational skills to be perfectly worthy goals of any academic institution. They would resist a pedagogy of resistance if it destabilizes the possibility of tangible, measurable outcomes of instruction.

What other factors “resist” even our best efforts to teach “resistance”? The list is substantial: the distraction industry of popular culture (it’s hard to resist the constant power of advertising, for example, that creates the illusion that all is well and that the only thing worth resisting is an inclination to save money rather than spend it); institutional constraints (it’s fine to encourage students to question and challenge the “normative mission of the college,” but the risks for doing so include
instructors not being reappointed or tenured and students not receiving grades and letters of reference from those who disapprove of such "liberatory" practices); a sense of urgency to get out of the university and into the working world (students may feel far more compelled to comply with institutional demands that allow them to graduate quickly and efficiently so they can enter the job market most immediately); the current political climate (the resurgence of nationalism and patriotism is lately matched with renewed support and approval of the government, even as the government is openly undermining constitutional rights in its campaign to wage "war on terrorism").

I'd like to suggest here that the reality of contemporary higher education—perhaps all school-based learning—is that there does not seem to be a move toward resistance, but rather the opposite. In schools and universities throughout the United States, there is a visible (and sometimes audible) push toward increased testing, outcomes assessment measures, greater intervention by accrediting agencies, public ranking systems (some of which are mainly consumerist ploys, as in the case of U.S. News and World Report's rankings of top colleges), and the encroachment of private corporate industry on curriculum development. Hardin cautions that although he believes "few administrators and fewer scholars and teachers want to ... turn the academy over to the direction of corporate interests," the academic institution will be forced increasingly to "justify its activities to the interests of corporate, government, and mainstream culture" (85). Mere opposition to these developments would, according to Hardin, simply reinforce at least one of the influences of "the hegemony of dominant ideology," that of "a perpetual dialogue of left versus right, individual versus society, and politics versus aesthetics" (113). Instead, Hardin proposes a pedagogy of "hybridity"—teaching students to see their writing as "an intervention into academic and cultural discourse . . . that participates actively in the hegemonic struggle that constitutes the culture of social democracy" (112).

In keeping with such goals, Greenbaum's collection offers a number of analyses of resistance as it actually plays out in a variety of classroom experiences. Insurrections begins with a Foreword by Gary Olson, and ends with an Afterword by Dale Bauer. The rest of the book is divided into four sections: "Theorizing Resistance," "Race and the Politics of Literacy," "Technology and Rhetoric," and "Toward a Pedagogy of Resistance." The last section ends, interestingly, with an essay by Bruce Horner that questions many of the basic assumptions of a pedagogy of resistance. Following nine essays on topics as diverse as resistance-as-
tragic-trope to resistance-as-electronic-circuit-metaphor, Horner's essay serves to remind us not to get carried away with visions of an all-resistance pedagogy. In his intriguing Marxist analysis of the economy of composition instruction, Horner cautions that we must be careful about misplacing our resistance(s). In his view, resistance is most appropriate when it is directed against "institutional evaluations of the work we perform... that recognize only the immediate exchange-value of what is produced, neglecting the potential use-value of the work for the students, faculty, the institution, and the community at large" (176).

In his brief remarks, and setting the tone for the anthology, Olson decries what he perceives as a mounting, concerted effort by "boss compositionists" (a favorite expression of James Sledd's) to "set back our disciplinary clock." Olson perceives that this conservative effort is an attempt to "drag composition back to its expressivist roots" and a "debilitating preoccupation with individual psychology, 'genius,' 'talent,' and 'creativity'" (xii). The job of composition resistance fighters, then, is to lead the field away from this "unthinking expressivism" and "toward a recognition of how and why dominant discourse enacts a kind of violence on many of us, particularly women, minorities, and members of other groups who do not share fully, if at all, in the privileges that society reserves for the few" (xii). I am not sure, by his use of "us," specifically which kinds of discursive violence Olson feels have been enacted, but I certainly am in support of any work to raise consciousness about acts of violence so that we may respond to them in an effort to prevent suffering. Not all the essays in Insurrections take the position that resistance pedagogy must disallow expressivism, personal psychology, or other vestiges of what Olson suggests may come to be called "the new theory wars" (xii). For instance, Stephen Brown's fascinating chapter details his work with students on the Athabascan Indian Reservation in Alaska and provides an eloquent portrait of the ways in which his native students experience crises in both individual psychology and creativity as well as cultural alienation and confusion. But most of the essays do, as Olson predicts, serve to bring further intensity to the "valuable and empowering work" composition scholars have been doing for decades.

For example, Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson present a compelling case for reexamining not only the 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution (which they call "one of our most important statements related to concerns of grammar"), but also the relationships
between that resolution, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and what they call "AAVE's role in a creative, intellectually engaging, persuasive, and at times revolutionary discourse" (39). Gilyard and Richardson summarize the results of their research study of four basic writing classes taught over two years at two different universities. All four classes were designed around the African American rhetorical tradition, and Gilyard and Richardson conclude that by making that tradition the "centerpiece of attempts to teach academic prose to African American students, especially those characterized as basic writers, we believe that we increase the likelihood that they will develop into careful, competent, critical practitioners of the written word" (50). They argue, then, for resisting the inclination to "correct" African American Vernacular English out of concern that AAVE cannot lead to critical thinking and writing. On the contrary, they find that composition courses that foreground African American rhetorical traditions encourage African American students (perhaps all students) to recognize the importance of "strong, critical Black voices in dialogue with each other and the larger community, resulting—potentially at least—in better political possibilities" (50).

In an essay that revisits the position that critical pedagogy and liberatory practice are intertwined, Elizabeth Flynn offers three categories of resistance as a useful way for educators to recognize the experiences students have in a writing class. Strategic resistance is "planned and positive action in opposition to oppression"; counter-strategic resistance "deliberately disrupts liberatory practices"; and reactive resistance is a "spontaneous and emotional reaction that may have multiple and conflicting motivations and effects" (18). Into this last category, we may put all sorts of examples of noncompliant behavior, outbursts (Kathleen Dixon's term as quoted in Flynn), spontaneous debate and/or contention, and so on.

In his contribution, Tom Fox tells us that the "main reason that 'resistance' is imprecise is that the contexts in which it is used 'resist' restriction" (76). For Fox, "resistance" can be reinvested with meaning when it is, for example, understood as his African American students understand it: "resistance to the various and multiple means of maintaining white supremacy" (76). In one of the more dramatic passages in the book, Fox writes, "The best pedagogy of race is an in-your-face-anti-deficit theory, one that makes sure that African American contributions to intellectual history are palpable presences, obvious shoulders for students of color to stand on." Among the forms of resistance such a
pedagogy would demand, according to Fox, is resistance to white supremacy: "Resisting white supremacy is a collective responsibility that requires alliances across racial boundaries" (79).

I am going to resist any inclination to provide a brief paragraph about each essay in *Insurrections*—for several reasons. First, Dale Bauer's Afterword does a wonderful job not only of summarizing some of the key positions taken up by the authors in the book, but also of analyzing the common threads among those writings. She notes that the authors have all struggled mightily to interrogate the possible meanings of "resistance" and that, collectively, they provide an interesting compound understanding of the concept. It is "romantic . . . historic . . . narrative . . . radical . . . anti-racist . . . mythic . . . moral . . . tragic . . . heroic . . . class-inflected . . . gendered . . . racialized . . . agonistic" (185). Second, the essays are all very much worth reading, whereas evaluative blurbs about them may not be. Third, in the space I have left, I want to add one cautionary note and then one note on a strength found in both books.

The cautionary note arises for me out of a remark in Strenski's essay in *Insurrections*. Referring to computers and the new technologies, she writes, "If we do not assert this claim and our professional right to make it, then others will gladly take our place: librarians . . . on the one hand, and computer scientists . . . on the other. To these others will go the spoils, that is, the FTEs and other campus resources now following information technology as institutions scramble to integrate it into the curriculum, and we will have missed our chance to shape the development of these tools for humanistic use, perhaps even to ensure our own enduring professional presence on campus" (90–91). I am not at all disturbed by what Strenski has to say about the need for compositionists to play a significant role in the design of college curricula using information technology; indeed, I think she is right. Instead, what her remark reminds me to say is that resistance theory and resistance pedagogy can start to look and feel—well—irresistible. And that's what I want to be cautious about. Precisely because the term "resistance" is so loaded with potential energies, energies that are not always or predictably healthy, I would not want to resituate all of composition within the resistance paradigm. I guess I am now suggesting that composition not slide so unresistingly into composistance.

That said, I want to close with a note on the very real strength of both books and all the writers therein. All of the authors offer deeply respectful discussions on the importance of the work that students do and on the impact that composition teachers can and do have on the lives of those
students. From Joe Marshall Hardin’s impressively comprehensive history of politics of critical pedagogy to Andrea Greenbaum’s community of authors who add such rich texture to considerations of resistance, I would expect readers will come away with a renewed sense of how desperately important our work as educators continues to be.

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Notes

1. Byrd’s letter came in response to one from me in which I’d asked, “Why do you, why does anyone, write poetry?” I’d struggled with this question in earnest for years and found myself wondering why anyone would write something that the vast majority of contemporary readers seemed to resist even looking at, let alone reading with care and interest. Byrd wrote ten “reasons” for why he writes poems. Reason #7 was the following: “Because I was chosen to be one of the monks whose task it is to try to keep learning & language a little bit alive during this DARK AGE.” This has always struck me as a statement made in direct resistance to those people and institutional imperatives that would substitute for “learning & language” the easier pickings of television, popular culture, or even bodies of information whose disciplinary lines are arbitrarily drawn and rigidly enforced.

Works Cited


The Heuristic Potential of *Rhetoric Reclaimed*:
Toward Imagining a Techné of Dialogical Arrangement

Michael Kleine

Although the canon of invention can be understood as a kind of techné, especially when it serves an enabling function as new discourse and knowledge are produced, it is invention as a heuristic strategy, not techné as a value, that has been the focus of many contemporary compositionists. The publication of Janet Atwill’s *Rhetoric Reclaimed* in 1998, however, has served to powerfully recuperate and supplement an important conversation among the Greek sophists, one in which the notion of techné emerged not only as a rhetorical strategy, but also as a way of being and as an attitude about knowledge. In the following pages, I will note the importance of Atwill’s book and suggest that attention to techné can enlarge our understanding of rhetoric in general and the theorizing and teaching of cooperative approaches to writing in particular. Moreover, I will attempt to show that *Rhetoric Reclaimed* has heuristic potential to help compositionists imagine and teach formal strategies for arranging written dialogical discourse. Such imagining and teaching seem especially challenging for those of us who are interested in the problem of inscribing dialogue (a practice that ordinarily relies on conversational interchange) in written discourse (an extended text that is advanced as authored monologue).

From the outset, I hope that my writing will reflect a commitment to another value that informs Atwill’s work, especially the last chapter: