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THE PROBLEMATIC OF EXPERIENCE:
 REDEFINING CRITICAL WORK IN
 ETHNOGRAPHY AND PEDAGOGY

Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner

This essay explores the convergence we see between projects in ethnographic research and composition pedagogy that emphasize the critical power of experience. Though their aims are usually described differently, both ethnographers and composition teachers confront similar ethical issues of representing the populations they work with and the changes that may arise from that work. Both thus face the challenge of negotiating differences and power. The course of these negotiations, we argue, depends on what *experience* is taken to mean and how it can be used.

Signs of this convergence between ethnography and composition pedagogy appear in both the shared ideals and the shared dilemmas reported in recent accounts and critiques of such projects. We have in mind those projects which attend to the politics of their research and teaching methods in pursuit of their commitment to socially emancipatory ends. Many ethnographers and teachers might see themselves as working for socially emancipatory ends (if defining these in different ways), and presumably all would be concerned with methodology. For us, however, critical ethnography and pedagogy approach methodology not strictly in terms of its efficiency in producing or transmitting knowledge to inform *subsequent* (social) practice but in terms of its effects *as* social practice. Critical ethnography and pedagogy thus reject the possibility of a politically neutral stance or practice before, during, and after contact between researchers and informants, or teachers and students.

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Instead, critical pedagogy and ethnography foreground questions regarding the ethics and politics of their own practices as well as those of traditional practices. These questions have centered on conflicts between a commitment to working toward socially emancipatory goals and a commitment to honor the experiences, needs, and desires of students or informants who may not share those goals. They point to a conflict between the difficulties posed for many readers by the highly self-reflective and theoretical discourse of critical ethnography and pedagogy and the commitment of these to an inclusive rhetoric. Such difficulties have led critics to challenge the credibility of the espoused commitments of critical pedagogy and ethnography to participatory democracy and social change.

At the heart of these dilemmas lies the problematic of experience: what it is, who represents it to whom to what ends, in what manner, and whether and how such representations change that experience. We argue that both critical ethnography and pedagogy need to redefine “experience” and its function for research and teaching, and that composition represents a particularly congenial site for conducting such work. After sketching current debate on the problematic of experience, we proceed by examining the strategies employed by critical ethnography and pedagogy in confronting that problematic and the implication of power relations in those strategies. We then show how dominant constructions of work interfere with research and teaching efforts to mobilize the critical power of experience for emancipatory goals. We argue that critical composition can help us redefine the meaning and use of experience and thus, the meaning of critical work, if we look for ways to build and constructively use a tension between our teaching and research practices.

I. THE PROBLEMATIC OF EXPERIENCE

In Kurt Spellmeyer’s recent critiques of “disembodied” theorizing and the “cultural studies” approach to critical pedagogy, he explores the relation between experience and discourse, criticizing the use of theory to displace and disparage “face-to-face encounters” with people in the everyday world (“Out” 427). As an alternative, he calls for “ethnographers of *experience*” who “find out how people actually *feel*” (“After Theory” 911). Such work, says Spellmeyer, can bring readers “closer to lived realities” (“Out” 430–31). Against the liberatory pretensions of critical pedagogy employing cultural studies theory, he asserts that “thought becomes liberating” through the disorientation such closeness to lived realities produces, “when experience outstrips the resources of discursive understanding” (“Out” 431).

Like Spellmeyer, critical ethnographic research and teaching are concerned with the subversive power of experience. However, Spellmeyer’s treatment of experience points to some of the dilemmas they face. Arguing against “the threadbare ideology of ‘the text’” and for “ordinary sensuous life” as the “ground of thought itself”

(“After Theory” 894), he asserts that “the body, and not language, is the source of the self and the doorway into the living world” (“After Theory” 908). This posits a polarized, hierarchical relation between experience and discourse (“text”), valorizing experience as both prior to and greater than discursive understanding.

This binary opposition between experience and language excludes language from the “wholeness in our immediate experience” and thus limits the “revolutionary” potential Spellmeyer sees in that experience by removing it from the social (“After Theory” 910). First among the limitations of this binary opposition is the category of “immediate”—i.e., unmediated—experience, what Spellmeyer elsewhere terms “ordinary sensuous life.” If immediate experience is imagined as self-evident, beyond the politics of representation, then experience is susceptible to the rhetoric of authenticity. Thus, we would argue instead that the call for an “ethnography of experience” needs to be accompanied by recognition of the difficulties practicing ethnographers have confronted in their attempts to write that experience: how and to what ends whose experience is mediated, and by whom. For the relation between experience and discourse is not polar and hierarchical but dialectical.

A failure to acknowledge that dialectical relation leads to the danger of one discourse speaking in the name of experience against other discourse. It dissolves the tension between experience and discourse and so evacuates experience of its social materiality: how the experience of “ordinary sensuous life” (including the experience of the body) is socially produced as both “ordinary” and “sensuous.” The experiences Spellmeyer invokes as exemplary of the immediate, unalienated pleasures of sensuous life—“watching leaves shake in the hot summer wind, listening to the sound of rain, tracing the smooth, wet curve of a child’s spine with the palm of a soapy hand”—pre-suppose a specific social and material location. Spellmeyer identifies these as pleasures which undifferentiated “people” get “from their most mundane involvements with the world” (“After Theory” 909). But an ethnography of these experiences would have to ask how they are experienced by people in different material social locations and in terms of the particular discursive understandings they give to them. Wouldn’t the experience of hot summer wind or the sound of rain depend for farmers on the crop situation at the moment? To what extent might such experiences outstrip an official discursive understanding of them as “pleasure”? This is not to deny the possibility of experiencing pleasure in sensuous life but to reflect on how such experience is produced.

We need, in short, to sustain the tension between experience and discursive understanding. Raymond Williams’s cultural materialist reading of “practical experience” illustrates how and why this tension is important for critical ethnography and pedagogy. Williams terms “practical” those experiences—thoughts and feelings—to which “received interpretations” or “fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize” (130). Williams is interested in “what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived” (131). He insists on the materiality

and sociality of *both* the “practical” and the “official” (or ideological), seeing the relations between the two as “exceptionally complex”:

[T]he actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. (131)

A failure to define that feeling and thinking as social represents an instance of what he elsewhere describes as the dominant’s seizure of the “ruling definition of the social.” In that seizure, there are areas of experience the dominant “is willing to ignore or dispense with: to assign as private or to specialize as aesthetic or to generalize as natural” (125). Once we recognize the social and material in those areas of experience, we can no longer treat feeling and thought, experience and discursivity in polarized and hierarchical relation to one another. Rather, we must approach “thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132).

In resisting structuralist determinist thought that traditionally views the social as monolithic and uniform and defines experience in terms of fixed social categories of class, race, or gender, some composition theorists have been reluctant to acknowledge the materiality and sociality of experience. For example, Spellmeyer insists that “culture is not destiny, institutions are not destiny, economics is not destiny, because the subject is always more than an ‘effect’” (“Out” 435). He defines that “more” as discrete from the social: against reductions of the subject to an effect of culture, institutions, and economic conditions, he poses “the uniqueness of *my* experience and *yours*” (“Out” 434). But this emphasis on the uniqueness of individual experience, as Williams reminds us, can only counter reductions of that experience when we refuse dominant views of individual experience as divorced from the social, a realm of private escape from rather than participation in the social. Otherwise, an emphasis on the uniqueness of individual experience offers little prospect for social agency or change, for what is experienced only individually as “unique” is likely to be of little social consequence.

Like Spellmeyer, Elspeth Probyn wants to counter the “eclipse of the category of experience” effected in structuralist and poststructuralist cultural studies. However, rather than treating experience as the opposite of the discursive, she argues along with Williams for a “theory and practice of signification which could entertain the centrality of experiences of and in the material world” (21). Probyn posits two ways of using experience: the ontological and the epistemological. At the ontological level, experience points to “the immediacy of *what is* and *what must be*,” the “felt facticity of material being” (5). It speaks of “a disjuncture between the articulated and the lived aspects of the social” (22). At an epistemological level, “experience impels an analysis of the relations formulated between the articulated and the lived” (22). Here, experience “can be used overtly to politicize the ontological” (16).

Experience thus carries the dual potential “to designate the various levels of the social and to point to possible sites for critical intervention” (26).

Probyn’s view of experience counters the tendency in certain versions of current cultural and feminist theory to either “reify the experiential for its own sake, or reject its potential out of hand” (4–5). It recognizes the ontological as crucial to the critical enterprise. But it also cautions that the force of the ontological is “impoverished” when experience in and of itself is taken as the sole criterion for speaking and the metaphysical key to interpretation (5, 20, 26). We read Probyn’s call for politicizing the ontological as suggesting that experience is historical and ongoing, constantly reconstituting itself. Thus, we can use experience not simply to affirm our state of being but to raise questions about that material being, to critique and bring about changes in the conditions of our existence and, in turn, to transform our experience.

We are interested in Probyn’s definition of the dual use of experience because it links “experience” with terms commonly absent in research and teaching. In this redefinition, the act of “telling” moves beyond that of “reflecting” the ontological to “reflecting on” it, to include “analyzing,” “designating,” “pointing.” The scene of “telling” is thus stretched beyond the past and present towards the future, and beyond the “personal” towards the social. If we interpret Probyn’s “critic”—the subject of experience—broadly to include the informant or student as well as the teacher researcher (26), then the act of “understanding” a particular form of experience—the dominant purpose of “telling”—extends to the act of “intervening.” It thus draws attention to the material consequences of discursive practices, raising interesting questions of how the unequal power relations between researchers and informants or teachers and students get negotiated when the ontological is politicized.

From the preceding discussion we can identify some of the terms and questions mapping the problematic of experience: How to acknowledge the social materiality of individual experience? How to sustain the critical tension between experience and language? How to define experience as ongoing and transformative rather than fixed and self-evident? How to politicize experience by making it work both ontologically and epistemologically? These questions recur in debates on the meaning and use of experience in critical ethnography and pedagogy. In the next two sections, we examine the ways in which diverse projects in critical ethnography and pedagogy confront such a problematic.

II. THE PROBLEMATIC OF EXPERIENCE IN ETHNOGRAPHY

In critical ethnography, new definitions of experience surface most frequently in those projects which reflect on the politics of cross-cultural representation. According to Janice Radway, we know about others because we have the power to distance them through our access to the means of representation (4; see also Bissex 17). Attention to the politics of representation has led critical ethnography to question both its

research methodologies and the textual forms in which its research is represented (Kirsch and Mortensen). This questioning is framed in terms not simply of accuracy and efficiency but of ethics and epistemology. Critical ethnographers' sensitivity to the asymmetrical power relations between researcher and informant has led to an ongoing concern with the politics of who is speaking about whom, to whom, where, when, and why, both in terms of how we represent experience and in terms of the lived, material consequences of such representations.

We identify three main lines of inquiry in critical ethnography. One line pursues the question of how to represent the experience *of* an other. This line of inquiry puts emphasis on the narrative character of cultural representation. It investigates the ways in which the researcher's subject position mediates how she interprets and presents the experiences of her informants. A second line of inquiry investigates how to represent experience *to* an other. This line of research treats experience as a lived, complex, and ongoing process rather than as a self-evident thing. It redefines the act of informing as an act of shaping—giving form to—experiences. Information is thus defined as a cross-cultural product formed through the interaction between informant and researcher and by the informant as well as the researcher. Informants and researchers are seen as negotiating difference and power at all stages of the research process. The third line of inquiry explores how to politicize experience with the aid of others. It emphasizes the material consequences of cross-cultural representation on the informant as well as researcher during and after the research. It draws attention to the epistemological as well as the ontological uses of experience: the ways in which the attempt to represent one's experience to an other opens up critical perspectives toward one's material being. In this line of inquiry, the act of informing is defined as an act of re-forming experience. The ethnographic project ceases to be purely hermeneutic, instead being understood as interventionist praxis (Simon and Diplo 201).

James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Allegory" addresses the problematic of representing the experience *of* an other. He argues that "[w]hatever else an ethnography does, it translates experience into text" by "bringing experience and discourse into writing" (115). Because ethnography is inevitably mediated by the often contradictory multiple positionalities of the researcher, researchers need to be self-reflexive about their discursive positions when interpreting and representing their informants' experience.

However, reflexivity on the researcher's subject positions during the act of textualizing experience does not by itself necessarily disrupt the researcher's objectification of informant experience. As Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie note, researcher self-reflexivity can result in nothing more than "facile statements" appearing at the beginning of research articles listing the author's subject positions (9). It risks

authorizing the researcher's privileged subject positions as biographically and sociologically determined necessary limitations (Probyn 27). Or it might result in what Sandra Harding calls an "add women and stir" approach to research so that the researcher's experience of marginality is used to essentialize differences (Kirsch and Ritchie 9–10). In fact, emphasis on the researcher's textual operations might displace attention from the negotiation of power in other aspects of the research, including the interaction between researcher and informants during fieldwork or the material effects textual selves have outside their discursive homes (Probyn 72).

Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* illustrates how some ethnographers have dealt with the question of how to represent experience to an other. Rabinow presents the informants as well as the researcher as composers of cultural representation:

The fact that all cultural facts are interpretations, and multivocal ones at that, is true both for the anthropologist and for his informant, the Other with whom he works. His informant—and the word is accurate—must interpret his own culture and that of the anthropologist. (151)

Rabinow depicts his informants as actively informing—giving form to—experience in ways which meet the researcher's questions and in ways which the researcher can understand (152–53). The informant must first learn to explicate his own culture and then to present it to an outsider "who shares few of his assumptions, and whose purpose and procedures are opaque" (152), an act involving a complex process of highlighting, identification, and analysis (38).

In Rabinow's account, experience is not some "rocks" to be picked up, shipped home and analyzed in the laboratory (150). It is restructured in the process of informing. Because the informants are often asked to view their life through new lenses, the act of informing can be profoundly difficult and trying, filled with ambiguities and strains. For example, when helping Rabinow determine the range of socio-economic variation in a village, one informant, Malik, had to do something he was not in the habit of doing: objectify his holdings by totaling up his possessions and making systematic and quantitative comparisons with his neighbors (117). In being forced to look at his life in an "objective" way, it became clear to Malik that although he had perceived and presented himself as a spiritual man of relative poverty, a detailed listing of his possessions indicated that he had been doing quite well economically in recent years (117). This confused and troubled him: he had internalized a certain self-image which was thrown into doubt by the perspective of "objective social science" (118). His naturalized self-knowledge or common sense world was destabilized.

We are interested in this moment in Rabinow's research because it depicts the informant as trying to grasp his lived experience against the dominant discursive understanding of cultures commonly identified as Moroccan vs. Western, village vs. scientific. Ethnographers take very different positions on the question of how to

interact with the informant at similar moments in their research. The emancipatory goals of feminist research demand that researchers set out not to only study and describe but also understand and change the conditions of the participants' social and political realities (Kirsch and Ritchie 20, 25). Thus, the interaction between this group of researchers and their informants would pursue how to sustain the tension between the ontological and epistemological uses of experience and how to help one another politicize experience. Informants like Malik would be urged to analyze the disjunction between their lived experience and diverse dominant discursive understandings of that experience and to consider possible avenues for critical intervention in it. However, as various feminist researchers have cautioned, the asymmetrical power relations between researcher and informants pose a whole range of new ethical dilemmas for such projects, requiring researchers to constantly revise their research methodologies instead of relying on generic solutions (Kirsch and Ritchie 20).

Rabinow himself argues that observation has to be the governing term for such moments since neither aid nor political activity was tenable in situations set up by his research in Morocco (79). Except perhaps for teaching English to the people in the village, he had nothing to “offer” the community: he could not increase agricultural production, cure their diseases, nor get them work (78). Nothing he could have done to aid the villagers, he argues, would have differed much from “the kind of blatant interference in their affairs for which we criticize A.I.D. programs” (78). Furthermore, all his activities were observed, reported, and distorted by various factions. If he had been organizing or advocating anti-government action, he would have been forced to leave the country or thrown into jail (78–79).

We read Rabinow to indicate that the question of whether and how to carry out one's emancipatory goals must be accompanied by consideration of the complex specific material, economic, and political conditions of research. Feminist researchers concur, arguing that critical researchers need to “learn to make professional judgments about the context, consequences, and potential benefits and drawbacks of their work” (Kirsch and Ritchie 17). We think that the challenges for interventionist practices are somewhat different in classrooms, where the social, material conditions include the goal of change—learning—built into the educational contract between teacher and student. The emphasis on having students tell their experiences and teachers comprehend them connects pedagogy with ethnography. However, the question of what happens to the “there”—the students and their experience—as a result of the telling is pushed to the forefront because of the teacher's commitment to bring change to the student. For composition classrooms, where critical thinking is often a central component of reading and writing instruction, the ontological and epistemological uses of experience can be built into the course.

But while the educational “contract” between teacher and student is understood to involve the production of change, it rarely offers explicit promises of change in

the direction of social emancipation or conversion to progressive political beliefs. Teachers committed to a critical pedagogy thus confront, as in some critical ethnography, the ethical dilemma of either working toward effecting such a change in students, some of whom appear to oppose it, or reinforcing through their teaching practices what they perceive to be ethically noxious social relations. In the next section, we examine the ways in which critical pedagogy has confronted this dilemma.

III. THE PROBLEMATIC OF EXPERIENCE IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Those objecting to critical pedagogy typically accuse it of attempting to impose a particular leftist ideological position on students against the needs and wishes of those students, and, ironically, in the name of freeing students from ideology. The issue is often posed in terms of whether teachers should define goals for their students or “let them set their own goals” (Bizzell 64). Jeff Smith, for example, argues that we are “ethically bound by students’ own aims, even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values. Our distrust of such values does not permit us to tell students what they ‘really’ want, or should want.” To do otherwise is “undemocratic at best, if not infantilizing and frankly oppressive” (317). Smith thus takes critical pedagogy to task for what he sees as its imposition of its political goals on students’ actual needs and desires and indeed for never inquiring about, or else disparaging, students’ own avowed commitments (303–4).

One common and obvious response to critics like Smith is that students’ “avowed commitments,” no less than teachers’, are ideological. Neither students nor teachers are free to choose what they want to do or to pursue those desires; rather those desires, the avenues for pursuing them, even their “needs” are socially produced. This is not to deny the reality of their experience of desires, needs, and commitments but to locate that experience in history as social and material. Smith unwittingly betrays an essentialized view of experience as he alternates between imagining people as autonomous agents and seeing them as determined entirely by social and material constraints. In his argument, college students appear, on the one hand, as already by definition an elite as a result of social stratification and yet, on the other, desiring to be an elite out of free will (302). Teachers are viewed either as bound by institutional rules to passively serve the needs of students or as free to “hire a hall, place an ad, and teach whatever they wish” (318). That most teachers have neither the time nor the money to afford any such thing is invisible to Smith; in imagining students as freely choosing their goals and teachers as free to pursue theirs (in rented halls), he locates teaching, like “studenting,” outside the realm of the material and social, which he otherwise insists on when warning teachers of their institutionally imposed obligations and reminding them of the students’ rights to their own commitments.

One challenge facing critical pedagogy is thus how to make visible the social materiality of the desires and needs students (and teachers) experience. A related challenge is how to articulate and shape experience, and to what ends, when teaching and researching. For example, how might teachers and students grasp what students want without the teacher prescribing what students “really” want or should want? Smith himself distrusts students’ own claims, claiming that students will tailor their remarks to mirror the teacher’s position (305). To get at what they “really” want, he uses their post-college careers in elite professions, on the remarkable assumption that what students really want is what they get, and they get what they want (305–6). For those of us who do not subscribe to the free market ideology underlying such a procedure, the question is more complicated. A pedagogy committed to honoring students’ experiences cannot dismiss out of hand their avowed desires and needs, even if these conflict with the political commitments of critical pedagogy. But it must also reject the assumption that such avowals are all there is to that experience. As one of us, Bruce Horner, has argued, we cannot deny that in some sense students do want to learn to produce what schools or society demand. But neither should we forget that those desires are not necessarily the full story—students may also want to change the demands society is placing on them, even to change who decides what is to be demanded of whom (510). Getting at the rest of this story would require acknowledging, again, the tension between experience and discourse. For there are the experiences to which dominant discourses “do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize. There are important mixed experiences, where the available meaning would convert part to all, or all to part” (Williams 130). Students’ “mixed” replies to questions about what they want reflect this tension between the readily available terms for their lives and their desire for something unnamed; they vacillate between brisk assertions of their desire for high-paying jobs and murmurings about “something more” than “just a job.” We also need to recognize the processual quality of experience. Desires, and one’s experience of desires, are neither fixed nor uniform but perpetually in flux and heterogeneous. The frequent vagueness of students’ (and others’) accounts of their aspirations speaks to just this fluctuation and heterogeneity. Critical pedagogues thus face the additional task of analyzing the social historical conditions shaping one’s experience (of desire) and exploring ways of transforming those conditions and thus that experience.

It is in its conception of how to politicize experience that critical pedagogy has been particularly vulnerable to critique. In some versions of critical pedagogy, the teacher’s reading of the students’ experience is offered as a truth that “unveils” the students’ false consciousness. In the preface to *Left Margins*, a collection of essays on critical pedagogy, Karen Fitts and Alan France describe the problem they face as

the general invisibility to students of the work of culture. Each semester, we have found ourselves plotting new pedagogical strategies to make students aware of the presence of ideology in their lives. . . . Too often, this mirage or nimbus [of culture]

seems to them to be, plainly and simply, “the truth,” or “nature,” or “just the way things are.” (ix)

Here Fitts and France aim to insert a counter-hegemonic discursive understanding of students’ experience of “the way things are” to replace dominant constructions of that experience. Similarly, Donaldo Macedo claims that teachers who resist theory rob students of “any possibility to develop the political clarity to understand the intricate and complex web of lies that function to reproduce the dominant ideology through traditional forms of literacy” (xiv). As Spellmeyer puts it in his review of *Left Margins*, what we have here is a kind of religion, in which “teachers must convince resistant students—the only people subject to their power, after all—that the paradigm [of cultural studies] is Truth itself, whereas the students’ own experience, insofar as it might deviate from that Truth, has to be a kind of illusion” (“Out” 427). Students’ experience is denied as an ideological construct, false consciousness to be removed by the teacher.

We see in this scenario the teacher’s own experience of knowing and being overwriting the students’ experience. This version of critical pedagogy fails to interrogate who is politicizing whose experience. This points to the need for those of us committed to contesting asymmetrical power relations to learn to make productive use of, rather than dismiss, the challenges students’ lived experience poses for the teachers’ discursive understanding of that experience. We need to involve the student as well as the teacher in politicizing the students’ experience. And we need to explore as well how to use the teacher’s own and others’ lived experience to problematize the teacher’s knowledge. In other words, the confrontation between the ontological and epistemological levels of experience needs to occur for both the teacher and the student.

For example, Henry Giroux defines critical pedagogy as “an attempt to alter experience in the interest of expanding the possibilities for human agency and social justice” (9). But in an account Giroux gives of his teaching, he exempts the teacher/critic’s experience from critical analysis and alteration. In that account, knowledge flows from the teacher to the students and intervenes in student experience alone. Even though he criticizes his own failings as a teacher, his theoretical knowledge remains for him unimpeachable; what need fixing are the techniques by which that knowledge is communicated (11). Having repaired those techniques, he finds that students were now “positioned . . . as cultural producers [able] to rewrite their own experiences and perceptions through an engagement with various texts, ideological positions, and theories. . . . [and] to learn from each other” (16). The possibility of Giroux rewriting his own “experience and perceptions” or learning from his students is not broached.

The same question of who is politicizing whose experience applies to the relations between theorists of critical pedagogy and the teachers they hope will learn from those theories. Macedo criticizes what he terms teachers’ pervasive

“anti-theory posture” or “theory phobia,” and Freire critiques what he calls “[t]he refusal of practitioners to engage in a theoretical reflection of their practice” (Macedo xiii, Freire xi). While we would agree on the need for practitioners to reflect on their practice and on the value of theoretical work, it would seem that theorists, too, need to reflect on their practice as theorists. But instead, the theory/practice binary—which Freire, Macedo, Giroux, and others are at pains to dismantle—is often reinstated in the practice of writing theory. The conflict in teachers’ experience of liberatory pedagogical theory as “disempowering” (see Macedo xiii) needs to be both acknowledged and investigated within the specific material conditions in which they confront that theory, as the site for teachers’ analysis and transformation of their experience and of that theory. Similarly, the theorists’ knowledge needs to be both recognized and problematized in the context of their own and others’ lived experiences. In other words, both the teachers’ ostensible “theory phobia” and the theorists’ apparent complacency about their theorizing need to be located in the realm of material and social relations. But such a relocation also involves redefining what we think of as our work, and what that work has to do with theory, teaching, and research.

IV. REDEFINING THE WORK OF CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND PEDAGOGY

In “Beyond the Personal,” Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie call for a new ethics of research which not only validates the experience of all participants and addresses issues of power but also directs its work toward liberatory ends. They urge researchers to view dissonance as an opportunity “to examine deeply held assumptions and to allow multiple voices to emerge in their research studies” (19). We think that this call applies as well to critical pedagogy, both in teacher-student and theorist-teacher engagements. In this section, we examine recent attempts in composition research and teaching to enact such an ethics. We see these projects as confronting three questions: how to use the critical power of experience to relocate the work of research and teaching in the realm of ongoing material life; how to make constructive use of the tension between research and teaching toward this end; and how to use the experience of the teacher/researcher in critical projects. These three questions are addressed in different ways in these projects. We analyze the differences to map out the possibilities and obstacles facing those of us committed to the emancipatory potential of teaching and research.

Traditionally, the work of research is located in the research text, the work of teaching within the limits of the course section or semester. However, if we define experience as material and ongoing, then we need to recognize that the work of research and teaching goes beyond such boundaries. In an essay introducing a volume of teacher research, Glenda Bissex notes that her own work and her work with

teacher-researchers has taught her to emphasize the research process as much as any reports emanating from that process. As she explains, “In traditional research the emphasis has been on results; in observational research the process *is* part of the result” (14). This shift in the conception of work (“result”) is in alignment with Kirsch and Ritchie’s call for “using research as ‘praxis’ to help those who participate with us in research to understand and change their situation” (25). (To this we’d add that this “help” should be two-directional.) Both arguments define the work of ethnography and teaching as ongoing and broader than institutional constructions of academic work. This work may well take place at the site of teaching and research, in the consciousness and material practices of all participants, both during and after the “completion” of any given project. Institutionalized understandings of academic work—codified in publication policies and definitions of “scholarship” used for awarding tenure and promotion—pose serious obstacles to recognizing such work *as* work. (Basic writing teachers’ difficulties arguing for recognition of the work they and their students achieve which cannot be quantified in numerical scores from exit examinations attest to such obstacles.) We urge teachers and researchers to explore ways of using the disjunction between how we experience our work and official discursive formulations of our work to critically analyze and intervene in the material conditions of that work.

Gail Stygall’s “Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault’s Author Function” illustrates the challenge facing critical projects aimed at re-working the participants’ lived experience. Stygall’s research uses Foucault’s notion of the author function to examine the ways in which the discursive practices of students and teachers of English construct basic writers (323). Her project breaks from traditional research in aiming to intervene directly in educational practice. Moreover, we see in the project a productive tension between research and teaching which opens up new possibilities for politicizing experience.

The tension between teaching and research is manifested in the multiple roles into which Stygall casts herself and the graduate students:

INFORMANT	RESEARCHER	AUDIENCE	PROJECT
basic writers	graduate students	Stygall	A
grad students	Stygall	Stygall’s readers	B
grad students	grad students/Stygall	grad students/Stygall	C

Stygall asked graduate students taking her seminar to correspond with basic writers at large urban universities in order to investigate their correspondents’ experiences of being so labeled (327). As Stygall points out in reflecting on the limitations of her project, this task positions the graduate students as researchers setting off to a strange land to bring back exotic knowledge *about* an Other (337). In this part of the research, which we call Project A (see chart), the experiences of the basic writers

serve solely as the object of study for the researchers. Along with this first task, Stygall also made clear to the graduate students that she would be reading, commenting on, and analyzing their correspondence (337). This part of the research, Project B, positions the graduate students as informants in relation to Stygall the researcher. Projects A and B thus aim primarily at gathering information, not at analyzing and politicizing it from the perspective of a critical present.

What for us sets Stygall's research off from most ethnographic research is Project C. In Project C, Stygall invited her graduate students to read and analyze the dynamics of the research to enhance their resistance to dominant academic conventions such as the "author function." As she explains, "I thought that my students and I could resist reconstructing our correspondents as 'basic writers' by becoming conscious of the discursive practices involved in doing so" (322). Stygall thus hopes to "use education to critique and change educational practice" (337), which aligns her teaching with critical pedagogy.

Project C complicates the role of the graduate student informants in Projects B and A by defining them as agents of critique and intervention. Stygall aims to bring this about during the research rather than expecting it to take place only in the subsequent teaching of those informed by her research report. It thus implicitly treats experience as lived, changing, and in process, rather than static and simply "out there." Information on the graduate students' experiences becomes an object of critical analysis for the graduate student informants as well as the researchers. That analysis serves as a means to critical intervention and change of the very experience under study. The role of the graduate students is no longer merely to yield knowledge *about* their experiences and practices but also to actively critique and change them (hence our chart's identification of the graduate students as not only the informants but also the researchers and audience for Project C).

We can see such critique emerging in some of the letters Stygall includes from the graduate students to the basic writers. Chris, for example, writes to Ron,

I wasn't sure if I should tell you I was a graduate student. I was afraid I would intimidate you and I didn't want to put any additional pressure on myself. It's hard enough to try to write an interesting letter to a stranger, particularly when two English professors get a copy of it for evaluation purposes. . . .

I'm sorry we were both coerced into writing to strangers but I am also convinced that of all the writing assignments I've had in college, this one could be the most fun. (333)

On the one hand, Chris comes across as anxious to speak from the positions of a teacher and researcher. She defends the value of the assignment and expresses concern not to intimidate Ron. On the other hand, her role as student and informant seems to have generated a critical perspective on the authority of a teacher/researcher. She depicts herself and Ron as being "both coerced into writing to strangers" for the "evaluation purposes" of "two English professors." We see Chris negotiating a

dissonance among her multiple roles as an informant, student, teacher, and researcher. This dissonance seems to have pushed her toward problematizing the experience of the teacher-researcher training she is receiving.

The challenge for teachers like Stygall interested in treating research as praxis is how to represent moments like these as evidence of work. In evaluating her project, Stygall states:

From the standpoint of the letters alone, we were not successful and I was responsible. But this is only to offer the evidence of a single course, in a single semester. When I look to see what that group of graduate students is doing now, I see a group committed to change, and most are still engaged in some way in work with basic writers. . . . Are these commitments based solely on the basis of this course? I would be foolish to make such a claim. But in this course, these students had the opportunity to rethink what was “natural” about basic writers and beginning that process of rethinking had later consequences. (337–38)

Stygall takes into consideration the material consequences of her teaching and research on the graduate students’ day-to-day practice after the course. She thus suggests that the work of teaching and research goes beyond the traditional frame of fieldwork and report (for ethnography) or coursework (for teaching). Our reading of Chris’s letters differs slightly from Stygall’s in suggesting that even in these letters there is evidence of critical work being achieved by the course. We wonder if that difference arises from the different ways we and Stygall live the tension between teaching and research. Our reading indicates our identification with the interests of the critical teacher. Writing in her article predominantly as a researcher, Stygall approaches these letters as data supporting her conclusion that teachers tend to “reinscribe the author function” (335), although she does see Chris as resisting some part of educational ideology (334).

This difference in interpretation raises the question of how the tension between teaching and research could be used constructively to help problematize the experience of critical teachers and researchers. When enacting and interpreting critical projects in research and teaching, how might we reflect, and reflect on, the tension we experience between the researcher’s desire to produce knowledge about the student and the teacher’s desire to bring about change in the student? How might we use that tension constructively during all stages of our research and teaching practices, including the design of assignments, comments on student writing, conduct of class discussions, and the writing of research reports? How might we use our experience of this tension to locate disjunctions between our theoretical understanding of critical pedagogy and research and how we live our theories materially? How might we use these disjunctions to conceive ways of transforming both our theory and our practice? Such activities could help critical pedagogy and ethnography to inform each other and further the politicization of the teacher/researcher’s own experience.

There is a tradition in critical pedagogy of using students' literacy experiences to overtly problematize their material being. Influenced by the work of theorists such as Freire and by theories of revision as a way of re-seeing, composition teachers have developed a wealth of teaching methods aimed at generating student literacy narratives that produce not only knowledge about but also critical consciousness of and changed practices in the shaping of students' literacy experiences. In "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives," Mary Soliday describes teaching practices aimed at helping the student move from merely "reporting the events" of her life to viewing them through "a critical and interpretive lens" (520). Her teaching starts with the distinction in writing between an earlier self and a present self conscious of living in time. She has students use this to experiment with ways of reinterpreting the past from the vantage point of a critical present (514–15). One student, Alisha, first reflects on her own use of English from the critical perspective she gains from reading Amy Tan. This leads her to realize that daily speech was stranger than she had thought (516–17). In later writings, Alisha rejects unproblematized assimilation, trying instead, Soliday says, to develop "a new sense of self that allows her to negotiate the complex demands of her cultural situation in mature ways" (518). In the writing classroom Soliday describes, the question of "what next?" is an integral part of "what happened."

We can see a similar effort to make critical use of experience in the students Tom Fox presents in chapter 4 of his *Social Uses of Writing*. The course Fox describes asked students to examine their own language use in order to promote tolerance of difference in language practices and alter those practices that work against their interests (6). Initially, one student, Mr. C, strongly resists any attempt to understand himself or his language use in terms of any social category, identifying himself as simply "me, and no one else but me" (75). In his subsequent writing, however, he investigates his own rejection of class labels as a strategy by which to evade his working-class background: "by making everything equal [by not recognizing differences in people]. . . . I could succeed by hard work and strive for the best" (80). Mr. C realizes that class exists for him on a concrete, experiential level, and that it matters in everyday interactions, including those in the classroom (88). This process of rethinking his class experience leads him to identify himself in his final paper as "from a lower middle class home. . . . just somewhere back in the pack" (80). With these actual changes in his present-day language use, he thus rewrites his literacy experience.

In "Reading and Writing Differences," one of us, Min-Zhan Lu, describes a course in which the students use reading and writing to transform themselves with the aid of others. Students analyze their personal experience not only for what it allows them to reach toward but also for what it might prevent them from reaching. Lu presents a sequence of reading and writing assignments asking students to examine their experiences with gender discrimination. They explore how these experiences could be used to make certain gendered meanings out of elements of a story

while simultaneously blinding them to issues of class, ethnicity, nationality, race, and sexual preference. The purpose of such assignments is to help students make critical use of their experience to reconceive themselves and their relations to others.

By asking students to rethink, and so revise, their literacy practices, these pedagogies aim at disrupting students' "normal" literacy experience in two ways: in students' understanding of their past experience, and in their subsequent (future) experience. Such pedagogies thus politicize experience, using it to instigate change in both consciousness and practice. However, in accounts like these of pedagogies engaging students in critical use of their experience, *teachers'* critical use of their own experience remains implicit. It is here that critical pedagogy might join critical ethnography in experimenting with ways of including the experience of the teacher/researcher in critical analysis and intervention. Furthermore, critical pedagogy rarely investigates the latent tension between teaching and research: between the desire to teach a particular understanding of literacy and the desire to learn about literacy from the students' lived experience, between the desire to change students' literacy experiences and the desire to grasp their existing experience. In our own teaching and writing on literacy we seldom use that tension constructively. Rather, the former tends to subdue the latter. This can lead to overwriting the students' literacy experience with our own. As Probyn has cautioned, in some forms of cultural studies, "the experiential context is a domain that remains separate from the critic—he or she must take it into account but is not necessarily implicated in it" (27). The lens of critical ethnography can help prevent this overwriting, focusing our attention on the operation of that tension between our teaching and research interests in our assignments, comments, student conferences, and class discussions. It could help us problematize our own lived experience with language and pedagogical theory in our teaching and research.

Ira Shor in *When Students Have Power* suggests both the importance of making explicit critical use of the teacher's experience and the power of dominant definitions of academic "work" to circumscribe such efforts. Shor describes his attempts to share power and authority with students in a course on "Utopias." These lead him to negotiate contracts with his students on class policies and to set up an "After Class Group" for critiquing each class meeting. While much of Shor's account is taken up with the rationale for engaging in such efforts and the limitations and benefits of techniques like after-class groups, it differs from many other accounts of critical pedagogy in two ways.

First, Shor is scrupulous in locating his course historically, in a specific time and place and conditions. We learn of the size and smell of his classroom, the hardness of the chairs, the architecture and history of the College of Staten Island, the economic and social turmoil of his students' lives. Shor uses such details to explore the link between lived conditions and the specific turns his course took, for him and his students. (For similar refusals to theorize pedagogy out of its material existence,

see Flannery; Grego and Thompson; Soliday, “From the Margins”; Duffey; Rodby; and Horner, all of whom insist on the historical and material site-specificity of teaching practices.)

Second, Shor critically examines his own lived experience. Noting, for example, that his experience of hegemony and that of his students are at odds, he acknowledges that he prefers his view of social reality; yet he does not simply speculate on how to convert the students to his view, conceding that “[p]erhaps everyday life is too complex for critical theory to explain it or for critical pedagogy to transform it” (103). In describing his response to his students’ attempt to make attendance at class meetings voluntary, he highlights the contradictions he experiences between his own political commitments and his professional interests:

how could I argue this awkward position, that they have to stay in class because I needed them more than they needed me? That I needed them to test my theories of transformational pedagogy, which they had little or no interest in? What right did this give me to require attendance, to compel it in a supposedly democratic process? . . .

How to be democratic and still require attendance? . . . But, how can I practice my vocation as a critical teacher and educational change-agent if the class disappears? (104, 105)

Shor thus places his experience and his theory in fruitful tension rather than using one either to overwrite or to authorize the other.

In addressing this tension, he developed the “After-Class Group” with his students. Initially, the group served to evaluate his teaching techniques, from the minutiae of whether he should repeat announcements to latecomers to difficulties understanding, liking, or even seeing the need for reading specific assigned texts (127, 130–31). Sometimes, the ACG turned into a mini-seminar for continuing class discussion. Instead of being perturbed by this shift in students’ use of the ACG Shor explores its sociality. He notes that this desire for small seminars, “a class luxury denied to the students I teach,” demonstrates that students are “obviously hungry for an intellectual intensity and intimacy which is hard to produce in the large classes of a mass college. . . . So, they use their authority to make the ACG a small class after the big class, as well as an evaluation process” (218).

While we applaud Shor’s reflections on the material sociality of his students’ strategies, we would argue that a fuller problematization of experience would have to engage students in such reflection. Students themselves could investigate the relation between their use of the ACG forum and the material conditioning of their educational experience. For example, when addressing the dis-ease they experienced with the course, students in the ACG demanded greater efficiency and results from the teacher and course and sought out individual bargains, such as procuring free informal mini-seminars from Shor. They developed “ultra-expectations” for the course and “surplus criticism” of the teacher, critiquing pedagogical techniques and the relative paucity of “results” from the class meetings. Engaging students in prob-

lematizing their experience of the course could involve analysis of the ways in which a consumerist model of education leads to expectations that the teacher deliver the goods to the students as buyers. Students could consider material historical constraints on the work of teaching and learning, including those Shor lists as “the lack of class time, inadequate student experience in democratic arts, prior habituation to unilateral authority, demands of current jobs and private lives, institutional limits on me” (149–50). Further, they could develop ways to alter such constraints rather than allowing these to dominate the work of the ACG.

Students in Shor’s class did express an interest in improving education, and some did group project reports on this topic. The methodologies of critical ethnography and pedagogy for problematizing experience might be employed to further such investigations. Forums such as the ACG could be used for just such engagement. In this way, ongoing course “evaluation” of specific pedagogical techniques could be integrated into the work of learning in the course. Evaluation would thus become a praxis addressing the disjunction between institutionalized understandings of teaching and learning, particular teachers’ and students’ understandings of these, and their lived experiences of education.

We began by noting the convergence between critical ethnography and pedagogy in their concern to make critical use of experience while attending to the politics of teaching and research. Critical ethnography faces the challenge of how to confront the material consequences of research on the lives of participants both during and after the research encounter. Critical pedagogy faces the challenge of how to engage students in turning a critical gaze on the teacher’s pedagogy and lived experience. And both face the challenge of locating the work of teaching and research in the realm of its ongoing materiality.

Compositionists might contribute to the efforts of critical pedagogy and ethnography to redefine the meaning and use of experience by exploiting the tension in our work between teaching and research. This would allow us to use the new interventions in one field, ethnography or pedagogy, to address the specific dilemmas faced by the other. Testing these openings against the particular material constraints of composition might help us to understand better the different constraints facing other kinds of ethnographic or pedagogical projects, and to locate sites for critical intervention in the conditions of critical work in all areas. It might also help us investigate and contest the specific material constraints grounding the division in composition between teaching and research. Finally, such critical work could contribute to undermining the hierarchical relations between not only researchers and teachers but also teachers and students, redefining the differences among these positions as fluid, and redeploying those differences for emancipatory aims. In short, our lived experience in working across teaching and research might be used to redefine the critical work of ethnography and pedagogy.

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