

Reviews



Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique, Bruce Horner
(Albany: State U of New York P, 2000. 308 pages).

Reviewed by Dennis A. Lynch, Michigan Technological University

Bruce Horner wields a materialist critique like a powerful weed-whacker, taking down much of the brush that has grown in the fields of composition during the last thirty years—or so it might feel to some readers. His book, *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, is at once an extension of the aims of liberatory pedagogy, a critical history of composition studies, and a potentially unsettling examination of the material bases of our scholarship, pedagogies, and programs. At a time when the field is multiply articulated to Marxisms, critical theories, rhetorics, feminisms, postcolonialisms, and innumerable versions of cultural studies, Horner's use of the term *work* resonates across otherwise disparate approaches to writing instruction and invites us to consider the specific, local, and material effects of these approaches on students, teachers, administrators, and institutions.

The book is divided into six chapters—"Work," "Students," "Politics," "Academic," "Tradition," and "Writing"—after the fashion of Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and Joseph Harris' *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. The book borrows more than its structure from Williams, though. It analyzes Williams' notion of material culture (and his specific blend of Marxism and cultural studies) and Anthony Giddens' notions of structure and agency as the basis of a critical examination of what has been said with, and about, these particular key words. The book also has filial links to the methodology of "action research" (as found in the work of James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey Grabill, Libby Miles, and Ellen Cushman), and especially to the goal of finding a (sometimes sneaky) path through the tricky dynamics of institutional life.

Horner weaves two basic arguments through the six chapters: that there is a strong tendency among all concerned (teachers, students, administrators, parents, civic activists, business people) to commodify the work we do, to treat it as though it were a product to be exchanged or consumed; and that there is an equally strong (and often related) tendency to treat the effects of pedagogical decisions (course and program design, institutional policies, and so on) as “inevitable, intended functions” of forms, systems, and structures, rather than as historically contingent (intended, unintended, partially intended) effects of human decision-making efforts. Horner then uses these two basic arguments to provocatively interpret and reinterpret a whole range of issues and events, from debates over expressivist pedagogy, the University of Texas’ proposed English 306 course, and the mainstreaming of basic writers, to debates over unionization, the Wyoming Resolution, and “the new abolitionism.” He warns readers early on that the journey through our professional past that he takes us on will not be neat and linear. With each new key term, the work starts again, and quite often we find ourselves returning to a subject (service-learning or politics in the classroom) from a different angle, and with slightly different results.

In most cases, Horner resists taking sides in the debates he examines. When he does take sides, he does not do so to settle any one debate but rather to show how both sides are prone to abstraction—to drifting away from actually existing circumstances and complex material conditions. Before discussing where Horner’s “materialist critique” takes us, I will outline the six chapters and then examine one chapter (“Students”) in order to illustrate the unexpected twists Horner gives certain issues.

It is not difficult to see why Horner begins with “Work” and ends with “Writing,” since writing is the focus of our work. Also, the word *work* nicely problematizes, without settling, our status and identities as teachers and scholars of composition studies (Is all of our work “intellectual”? What is our “real” work—scholarship, teaching, or administration?). Horner distinguishes three ways we tend to talk about our work and then uses all three (playing one off the other) to keep issues from losing their complexity: work as paid employment, work as textual production (scholarship, papers), and work as the concrete activities of teaching. The argument the chapter develops is one that recurs in various guises throughout the book: if we are to address the material conditions of our work, we need to resist the forces that divide and separate the complex weave that is our work-life. We need “to articulate the interpenetration” of scholarship, teaching, and learning “as constitutive of our work.”

Crucial to what follows is the idea that our work is multiply bound up with the work students do and that we need to design teaching and research projects that involve students actively (and that call into question their “role” as students). Horner does not claim that this idea is new or special, only that sometimes we overlook the dynamics of the field that force distinctions between those kinds of work, isolating them and valuing some at the expense of others. His critique targets those dynamics and their worst effects.

We then move in the book from “Work” to “Students” because our work begins with students. The field often struggles to keep student work at the “center,” but at the very least all composition pedagogies have to contend with the imperative to begin where students are rather than where we believe they ought to be. The chapter examines how students get “represented,” especially in the literature, and Horner argues that we should represent students “as above all else workers, working on themselves, Composition, the academy, and the social generally.” This plea sets the tone for examining specific pedagogies—practical, collaborative, contact-zone, critical, and so on—with regard to how they position students and figure student work. Not surprisingly, all pedagogies turn out to be susceptible to forces that reify student writing, and when they succumb to those forces, they blind us to writing as a social and material phenomenon and to the possibilities (especially for counter-hegemonic work) located in and around writing so conceived.

We next move to “Politics,” because if our work begins with students it surely does not end there; we eventually run smack into politics: the politics of power (empowerment/agendas), of literacy (whose language?), of reading (canon wars), of research (permissions), and of programs (WAC, WID, service-learning). After distinguishing three general definitions of politics, Horner identifies different political strata based on the three characterizations of our work mentioned above: work, scholarship (the profession), and teaching (pedagogy). The argument he makes should sound familiar: the politics of pedagogy must be understood in terms of “the relations between both the pedagogy and the contingencies of its enactment,” and the debate over the politics of composition should be responsive to “the ways in which the ‘politics’ of the profession, the politics of pedagogy, and the politics of work intersect.” Distinctions, we learn, may be useful when making arguments, but they indicate fissures in our working conditions that people can unjustly exploit. (And Horner’s operating definition of ideology, we learn, is the successful substitution of part for whole.)

We then move on to “Academic” because the academy is where we work, academic work is what students struggle with, and the academy is where politics gets played out. This middle chapter is the longest in the book, and it is where most of the deep ambivalences that Horner faces and that mark his work emerge. Questioning our commitment to what is “academic,” he shows how complex our professional identities have become. Like the other key terms, *academic* has a web of meanings but tends to get reduced to one or another of its partial manifestations. Most egregiously, it usually gets reduced to its “official” articulations (in *curricula vitae* and mission statements) at the expense of so much else that is or can be thought of as academic. Sandwiched in between “Politics” and “Traditional,” this chapter cannot avoid asking what counts as academic. If, as Horner argues, the local is our ground and focus and we cannot productively engage issues such as “service-learning” and “the new abolitionism” anywhere but where such proposals are being enacted, then what are the implications of this for our research and scholarship (past and future)? Horner discusses these issues in the last two chapters but lays the groundwork for the discussion in this chapter.

Why the next chapter is “traditional” may not seem clear at first, but Horner soon straightens us out. *Traditional* is not exactly a key term around which compositionists can be expected to rally, and thus it provides a good testing ground for Horner’s project. What Horner (quoting Anthony Giddens) says about the concept “tradition” could well be said about each of the key terms: “We should not cede tradition to the conservatives!” His argument is straightforward: if we treat tradition traditionally, we will not see in it anything dynamic, anything we might use as compositionists to better our working conditions. We instead must try to find in our tradition hints of alternative traditions and “mobilize existing residual values and conditions for alternative work.” Horner admits that trying to harness tradition to nontraditional ends can backfire; it requires vigilance and an eye for unexpected opportunities. It might even require fighting our own ingrained tastes and inclinations, as when he suggests that we might “mobilize the clash between sentimental public memories of traditional composition teaching and existing conditions.”

As we have seen, each chapter problematizes its basic concept and addresses a range of issues and research in the field from the vantage point offered by the key term (as a site for holding onto our work as a whole). What my quick sketch of the chapters fails to show, however, is the care with which Horner treats his colleagues and the debates that have shaped the field. It fails to show, as well, how he positions us to see those debates,

and what happens to him and to us in the process. The chapter “Students”—specifically the subsection on Marguerite Helmers and Mike Rose—provides a case in point: as we turn one corner in the discussion, and then another and another, the issue becomes less whose position is correct and more a question of what specific investments we have in the dispute.

Helmers and Rose have both argued that we tend to depict students in terms of “lack” (lacking creativity, lacking cognitive skills, lacking enlightenment) and that such depictions draw their force from theories (cognitive, political) that serve, inadvertently or not, to “draw attention away from the actual writing in which students engage.” Horner takes the time to work through Helmers’ and Rose’s arguments with characteristic care. But then he stops, not to criticize Helmers and Rose, whose work he continues to appreciate, but to point out a limitation in the way they frame their work, a limitation to which we are all susceptible. In Horner’s words, “I should be clear that I agree with Helmers on both the inescapability of representation and the value of engaging in such critiques. But efforts directed solely at challenging the accuracy and ethics of representations of students retain a view of the work of Composition as itself operating outside the material social process, and thus leave unchallenged the commodification of that work.”

Note the movement of Horner’s thinking. Helmers and Rose thoughtfully argue that too much scholarship in the field theorizes students’ lack, and they then do the right thing by turning our attention back to students, their writing, their histories with writing, and the locations of their writing. They turn us away, not from theory per se, but from constructions that objectify students for the sake of making them interchangeable and making pedagogies transportable. So what goes wrong, according to Horner? Helmers’ and Rose’s frameworks of analysis subtly shift from the complex matter of student existence, located in specific institutions, to the more generalizable questions of accuracy and ethics. No sooner has their attention turned to actual students and students’ work, then off it goes again into more abstract matters, matters that more easily transport across institutional boundaries. What causes this subtle shift? Presumably the inexorable forces within the chosen medium of communication (the published article or book)—that is, Helmers’ and Rose’s compromise with professionalization and the commodification of our work that professionalization entails.

Here then is an instance in which the problem of what counts as academic (re)surfaces—and in which Horner’s own tricky stance be-

comes manifest. Horner is skeptical about the professionalization of composition, but he acknowledges that people in the field continue to go forward with it due “both to the hegemonic force of professionalism and to the apparent paucity of alternatives to embracing it.” Horner’s wager is that, without turning our backs on professionalism, we can find “alternatives to embracing it,” alternatives that have been hidden from view by the forces we have been charting. The alternatives he discusses in “Tradition” are writing programs such as those at Amherst and MTU, and the “resistant” scholarship of William Coles and David Bartholomae. If the wager seems to be to professionalize, with a difference, what exactly does this mean? Horner’s examples suggest the need for more shared projects (Amherst being a nicely developed example), pedagogies that suggest possibilities but do not prescribe forms (Coles’ and Bartholomae’s work enjoy this feature), and an effort to stop making published scholarship do more than it can do or is suited for (Horner’s critique of the binds that critical ethnography can get into provides a case in point).

What makes this dimension of Horner’s argument practical is the fact that he has abandoned the narrative of frustration and the fantasy of guarantees. On the one hand, his commitment to critical pedagogy and his passion for social improvement is everywhere evident, no more so than in his choice of theoretical frame. Left behind, though, are the usual stories of frustration (not the frustrations themselves) with students, student work, English departments, the academy, and the pace of social change. Also left behind is the related fantasy of guarantees, especially the guarantee that the proper pedagogy in and of itself (by virtue of its form) will ensure predictable outcomes. In place of frustration and guarantees, Horner offers a narrative of shared projects in which more emphasis is put on programs and strategic thinking. As he observes, “compositionists are beginning to reimagine, and re-present, pedagogies as strategic responses to specific situations rather than in more commodified forms.” What might keep Horner’s wager from being practical? Its own fantasy, the fantasy of “recuperating wholeness”: the hope that we can make tradition in composition “a site of resistance, a means of recuperating the wholeness of our work with both the academic and the non-academic.”

I earlier compared Horner’s theoretical vision to a weed-whacker, in part because his materialist critique may seem to some to “settle” disputes by cutting them off at the trunk—by showing them to exist only as the product of unintended reifications, abstractions, and commodifications of our lives, social relations, professional identities, programs, course outcomes, students, students’ writing, and so on. But this impression derives

mostly from the necessarily repetitive nature of Horner’s project, especially given his starting point: our embeddedness in thickly layered contexts, at once densely material (budgets, class sizes), historical (tradition, fraught with hegemony), and social (relations of power)—all of which are so easily elided through the two processes mentioned above: commodification and the functionalist fallacy.

Horner is trying to do something quite extraordinary. He is trying to loosen our ties to certain positions within the debates that have so occupied us for many years without “dissolving” them or suggesting they are “empty,” and yet he is nevertheless suggesting that the debates, as scholarly debates taking place mainly in scholarly forums, may be prone to certain forms of “abstraction,” turning us away from our material conditions (even when those material conditions were what gave rise to the debates). Thus, what he says about Helmers and Rose applies to subsequent discussions of the literature of the field—namely, that although such discussions have been thoughtful, well intentioned, and productive (and admitting that they are now a part of our material history), the more they calcify into positions, tie us to our (professional) identities, and channel our allegiances and passions, the more they risk blinding us to the fuller complex social and material realities that are always in excess of our pedagogical theories, representations (especially of students), and other official accounts of our work (such as tenure guidelines and stated outcomes).

Horner performs quite a high-wire act: he validates what is good in our field (in teaching, scholarship, and administration), while calling into question the trajectory of many of our debates without dismissing those debates, especially insofar as they now constitute our collective past and present. But where does this high-wire act leave us? I see three answers: gently disengaged from our scholarly debates as debates, but not from what matters to us in those debates; more apt to strategize our programs and pedagogies than to neatly describe them and their idealized effects; and quicker to define our research projects along the lines of “action research”—as projects that do something and that blur the lines between the academic and the nonacademic, between teaching, research (“our” work) and the work students do, and between all of that and administration. In other words, we are more likely to design research as “shared projects” with multiple possible outcomes and different kinds of usefulness (official and not so official).

If the only thing Horner had done in *Terms of Work for Composition* were to provocatively compare the words *work* and *writing*, we should be

happy, but he has done much more and has shown us that more needs to be done. Given the book's broad aims and scope, reaching as it does not only across our field but across all aspects of our work-lives, it seems important to attend carefully to the demands being made on us, especially the demand to "recuperate the wholeness of our work." Horner points us in this direction. Can we pull it off? Ah, what glorious laborious days we have ahead.



Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language, Stephen Parks (Urbana: NCTE, 2000. 353 pages).

Reviewed by Donald Lazere, California Polytechnic State University

Stephen Parks' subtitle does not do justice to the range of issues he addresses or to the importance of his book for English studies. Beyond tracing the history of CCCC's controversial 1974 pamphlet "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL), Parks argues that SRTOL was a highly compromised expression of the progressive political and educational movements of its time and that factors similar to those that limited its scope must still be overcome today. The intensity of political events that unavoidably impinged on English studies in the sixties and early seventies is gone, but Parks makes a convincing case that there is a greater long-term danger to all humanistic education today in the unrelenting pressures toward economic downsizing, corporate control, and privatization of schools at all levels. He laments the fact that the most prominent political organization of academics today is the conservative, corporate-friendly National Association of Scholars. Parks' ultimate cause is to make composition studies a more active counterforce to the corporatizing of American society and education. Among his proposals is that CCCC "focus its efforts on analyzing the interrelationship among economic, racial, and gender structures" and offer "concrete strategies to engage composition scholars in working for broad-based social justice that goes beyond classroom and university practices."

SRTOL evolved out of the black liberation and New Left movements of the sixties, so Parks must initially reconstruct a large part of the separate and intertwined histories of those movements; he then traces SRTOL's introduction, implementation, and ultimate transformation in CCCC. Parks in turn frames this sequence within the history of English studies in

the sixties and its tenuous relation to progressive political movements nationally. (His viewpoint on the depoliticizing tendencies of professional disciplines owes much to the work of Richard Ohmann, whose foreword to this book notes aptly that it "restores politics to the history of composition studies.")

In the beginning was the Civil Rights movement, superseded in the mid-sixties by advocates of Black Power such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and the Black Panthers. The integrationist politics of the early phase of the Civil Rights movement did not place strong emphasis on black English versus standard English or on the related issues of minority cultural identity. However, as the American Black Power movement arose and allied itself with movements for colonial liberation in Africa, "the image of black English also became recoded in terms of anti-imperialism. The image of an African-based black English changed from one of cultural integration to one of African alliances, economic empowerment, and black nationalism."

Leaders of the Black Power movement, however, were divided over the relative importance of black dialect in a radical critique of capitalist class injustice and imperialism. Speaking as president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Carmichael understood the retention of black English to be a "form of resistance" by African Americans to "the economic oppression being perpetuated on them by the 'speakers of Standard English.'" By contrast, the Black Panthers' "liberation schools" emphasized critical literacy, presumably in standard English, for the purpose of political consciousness that transcended black nationalism. One teacher described assignments in an elementary school such as "choosing articles and writing about them or giving them an oral report about an event that happened in the world. . . . Their work shows that they can relate to what is happening to them and other poor people in the world. Some of the children who can't even write, try because they understand that we are there to help each other." As Parks observes, "While connections are indirectly made to other countries, African cultural heritage is not seen as the common bond. The ethnicity paradigm's attempt to define black English has been left behind. Instead, what is created is an image of the student (even the very young student) as recognizing through their writing and engagement with written materials the extent to which a common economic oppression links them with other individuals around the world; 'Africa' has been subsumed under the language of socialism." Here, then, was one origin of later divisions between those leftists (whose cause Parks supports) who would subsume racial politics into a broader