

## Book Review

**Sullivan, Patricia Suzanne. *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012. 188 pp. \$24.95 [paper].**

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Patricia Suzanne Sullivan's *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies* explores the relationship between avant-garde aesthetics and experimental writing pedagogies in first-year composition. She argues that by considering the aesthetics of avant-garde artists, their reception by artistic institutions, composition's own relationship to experimental texts, and the evaluative expectations and experiences that composition instructors bring to student writing, those working in rhetoric and composition might come to see that experimental work in the classroom does not necessarily do the ideological work that one might expect—namely, experimental work cannot (or does not) always encourage students to break away from traditional, academic prose. She ends with a postscript evaluating the ways in which multimodal (or multimedia) compositions complicate this relationship to aesthetics and evaluation.

Sullivan's varied use of examples from avant-garde art, commonly assigned composition readers like David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writing*, Robert Scholes, Nancy Comley, and Gregory Ulmer's *Text Book: Writing Through Literature*,

and discussions of foundational composition pedagogies such as expressionism, support her argument of the sometimes difficult and not always successful work of the experimental text.

Sullivan applies avant-garde theories to the relationship between composition pedagogy and the dialectics that drive much of current composition pedagogy; she looks specifically to the relationships between academia and the “real world,” tradition and innovation, freedom and constraint, and, especially, the individual and society. These different dialectics are all at play in the composition classroom. Sullivan demonstrates how strains of experimental writing pedagogies synthesize and/or challenge these dialectics. A question that seems to be at the heart of the text, though never explicitly written, shows the tension between not only the dialectics but also the classroom experience: Do students have and enact more agency when they complete experimental writing or do they simply emulate the examples they are shown, further supporting constraint and tradition in academic writing?

Sullivan explains that three major schools of thought support most experimental writing pedagogies: expressivist, revolutionary, and multicultural. In each of these pedagogies, aesthetics play a different role; the student in an expressivist classroom is seen as an individual artist with complete agency who is encouraged to, in the name of the theory, express his or her thoughts and emotions through writing. Those instructors who assign experimental writing out of a desire for revolution within the academic environment or a growing appreciation for multiculturalism and a diversity of experiences encourage writers to challenge cultural or institutional norms through their writing. All three schools argue that the aesthetics of experimental writing are such that it cannot be or resemble traditional, academic prose. So, students who are uncomfortable *expressing* their ideas in traditional prose, can use alternative methods to relay their ideas;

similarly, academic prose hinders change, and thus these new forms of writing revolutionize the academy.

Sullivan's text does not explain how to teach experimental writing, but rather it is a theoretical examination of the ways in which avant-garde aesthetics might change our understanding of experimental writing. The book can be divided into two major sections: the first two chapters focus on the dialectics mentioned above, and the third and fourth chapters consider how evaluation affects instructors' use of experimental writing. The short postscript looks to current and future uses of multimedia or multimodal texts, the new experimental text of the composition classroom, and argues that the aesthetic challenges of the collage, one of the original experimental texts, mimic those of the multimodal composition. Ultimately, Sullivan's book suggests that the pedagogical theories supporting experimental writing are just as diverse as the writing itself.

In the largely theoretical first half of the monograph, Sullivan explores the relationship between aesthetics and expressivism, drawing largely from Peter Elbow's work and Winston Weathers's *An Alternative Style: Options in Composition*, Wendy Bishop's *Elements of Alternative Style*, and David Starkey's *Teaching Writing Creatively*. Each of these composition texts encourages students to draw from themselves and embrace originality; they also present to students different types of experimental writing: collages, lists, montages, fragments, and fractured narratives, for instance. Sullivan uses these examples to demonstrate the tension at work in the dialectical relationships that challenge individuality. In many ways, the relationship between expressivism and experimental writing highlights the student's desire to find her or his own voice. This section, and especially Chapter 2, also addresses the politics of avant-garde

theories, specifically in relation to those writings that work towards multicultural and revolutionary results. Where individuality was highlighted in expressivist pedagogies, challenging institutional structures is more important for the avant-gardist. Associating avant-garde art with Italian fascism in the twentieth-century, Sullivan reminds readers that avant-garde art and politics have a rocky relationship with progressive ideologies, those that seem to drive experimental writing in composition programs. It is when the politics of avant-garde art meet the expectations and desires of the composition classroom, that the tension is revealed: avant-garde does not necessarily mean or guarantee “freedom of expression” in the same way that some expressivist pedagogues desire. A particularly useful example of this is Tristan Tzara’s instruction set “To Make a Dadaist Poem” where a poem is constructed completely at random by drawing words out of a bag (107-108).

The second section of *Experimental Writing* includes slightly more practice-based discussions, though those discussions remain grounded in aesthetics and the dialectics. Using the collage as the primary experimental text for her discussion, Sullivan explains an important complication of experimental writing in the composition classroom: evaluation. She notes that many instructors who assign collages remain uncertain about how to evaluate the projects once students complete them, Sullivan names this phenomenon “the crisis of evaluation.” In Chapter 4, “Collage: Pedagogies, Aesthetics, and Reading Students’ Texts,” Sullivan outlines the reasons instructors introduce the collage: as a new method of literacy education or a reflection on the relationship between education and writing, as an alternative to traditional research papers, as one way, in Peter Elbow’s words, to help “weak writers to produce strong finished texts,” or as a history. She then provides readings of her own student’s collages, as both a way to complicate

*how* instructors read collages and as a problematization of the agency actually given to students in the classroom. Sullivan's postscript maintains a discussion of the classroom offering ruminations on multimodal composition's entrance into experimental writing, arguing that the same tensions—innovation and tradition, the academic and the everyday—exist in the pedagogies of new media and multimodal compositions.

Sullivan does not advocate including experimental writing in the composition classroom. In her introduction she quickly explains what her book does and does not do: "I do not argue for teaching experimental writing in composition classrooms; nor do I aim to explain how to teach such texts....Instead, I use aesthetic theories, particularly those of various avant-gardes, to critically examine" the experimental pedagogies (2). Despite these research goals, which she holds to, her own readings give readers a sense of what experimental texts might look like in the classroom and are some of the strongest parts of the book. Sullivan's readings of her own students' texts show the difficulties a reader/evaluator encounters when she must approach a new genre and when the reading experience does not always match the preconceived notions of that genre—for either the reader or the writer. These readings match well with her desire to not encourage or discourage experimental writing but rather to evaluate the pedagogies in play and whether the ideals of those pedagogies actually hold in the classroom. Her discussion of postmodern and multimodal texts certainly provide readers with additional ways to think about the collage and experimental writing, and the aesthetic theories introduced in the opening chapters of the *Experimental Writing* are just as appropriate for these new types of communication as they are for the originally constructed experiments in the composition classroom. The aesthetic theories are well researched and explained, and the contextualization of

those theories in relation to more familiar composition theories, like expressivism, makes aesthetics more familiar to the composition classroom.

Though the discussion of aesthetics is contextualized, Sullivan's attention to expressivism often outweighs her discussions of the multicultural and revolutionary possibilities and uses of experimental writing. The connections to avant-garde art, its revolutionary potential, and the subsequent adoption of those styles by the establishment are noted, but the connection between composition and these avant-garde theories is not always clear, as it is in the expressivist discussion. An extended discussion of the multicultural and revolutionary pedagogies may be linked with the rather short discussion in the postscript of multimodal writing. Though the book's blurb promises a discussion of aesthetics and multimodal composition, the postscript provides a glimpse of the future, and a possible second project rather than an extended discussion of the aesthetics of the multimodal composition.

On the whole, Sullivan accomplishes what she set out to do: she provides a history of aesthetics in the twentieth century and demonstrates how those aesthetics have influenced composition studies and the assignments in the composition classroom. She offers readers an idea of what these assignments might look like, providing them with the names of textbooks that would enable them to incorporate these writing practices into their own classroom, but does not pass judgment on the efficacy of experimental writing; rather, she lets the reader determine what the value or disincentive to these forms of writing might be in their own classroom. In providing readers with both the history of experimental writing and aesthetic theories that help explain how to evaluate these genres, Sullivan gives composition instructors a better sense of what is possible and at the same time tracks composition's changes over last 50 years.